

Race and the Struggle for Cinematic Meaning: Film Production, Censorship, and African American
Reception, 1940-1960

by

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To My Family

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List of Abbreviations

AMPAS-Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

AFI-American Film Institute

MSBMPC-Maryland State Board of Motion Picture Censors

NAACP-National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

NYMPD-New York Motion Picture Division

ODFC-Ohio Division of Film Censorship

OHS-Ohio Historical Society

PCA-Production Code Administration

SRC-Studio Relations Committee

VDMPC-Virginia Division of Motion Picture Censorship

UA-United Artists

USC-University of Southern California

ABSTRACT

Race and the Struggle for Cinematic Meaning: Film Production, Censorship, and African American
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Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, this dissertation traces the discursive channels for creating racial meaning in cinema, starting with reception and moving backward to production. I explore individuals and institutions that shaped Black representations in widely various films exhibited in the U.S. between 1940-1960, focusing on controversy that altered cinematic discourses relating to racial justice. I grant sustained attention to the role of Black audiences, film producers, industry self-regulation, state censorship, and exhibitors who ran Black movie theaters. In examining cultural context, I illustrate the differing cultural production processes and resonances of racial signification in independent and major studio features, as well as in shorts known as "Soundies." Chapters 1 and 2 shed new light on patterns of Black response to spaces of exhibition and to films viewers linked with civil rights, by using a unique combination of oral histories from Richmond, VA, Baltimore, MD, and New York, NY and Black press sources. Chapter 3 examines state censorship, considered one of the most pernicious forms of cinematic restraint. I explore censorship's racial politics in the North, South and in a Border state. Chapter 4 studies the racial politics of industry

self-regulation through the Studio Relations Committee and the Production Code Administration, focusing specifically on self-regulation of the word “nigger,” Black stereotypes, lynching, social equality, and miscegenation. Chapter 5 investigates the role of film producers in *pre-emptive* censorship by assessing how Darryl F. Zanuck, Fox’s production head, acted as both agent and constraint upon the “miscegenation” film, *Pinky*, and *No Way Out*, one of the first race riot films. I conclude the project by tracing, from “encoding” to “decoding,” the textual history of *The Well*, a forgotten but historically-important film dealing with race riots that was independently produced by white men Harry and Leo Popkin. I demonstrate how their cultural knowledge of Black life and loose directorial style encouraged actor and audience participation in determining meaning and, subsequently, galvanized countervailing forces of censorship and Black reception. This dissertation shows the value of historicizing the cinema by exploring moments—and spaces—of reception, censorship and production that richly contributed to film’s meaning structures.

Introduction

In his groundbreaking article, “Encoding/Decoding,” cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall radically changed received notions of the media transmission of messages.¹ His major intervention was to alter and adapt communication studies models premised on the linear sender/message/receiver structure. He suggested the importance of cultural and discursive structures—what he terms “frameworks of knowledge”—that both precede and follow the moments of producer “encoding” and receiver “decoding” of mediated message and that are vitally important to making discourse meaningful. In this “continuous” discursive circuit, not only does the audience draw upon “codes” and languages in the form of cultural and local contexts and other media consumed, but the producers also work within a set of frameworks and discourses dictated by their institutional contexts, frameworks that include assumptions about consumers and their own backgrounds.

In building on Hall’s refined model—one that expands and complicates our notion of production and reception—this dissertation explores the role of the American cinema in “producing” meaning about race in the 1940s and 1950s. Specifically, I look at how the kinds of things that the American cinema could say about race were both liberated and constrained in the mid-twentieth century by various forces and individuals during this particularly important era in the development of Black racial identity and African American subjectivity. I also explore the relationship of individuals

¹ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” in *Culture Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-138.

and institutions involved in the processes that create films' racial meanings for contemporary audiences.² These individuals range from Black audience members to producers of films, from "independent" production firms to major Hollywood studios, from state censorship boards to the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (later renamed the Motion Picture Association of America), the film industry's most influential and prestigious "self-regulatory" organization.

New work on African American film reception and spectatorial critique published in the last fifteen years has expanded greatly our understanding of the dynamics and the historical patterns of Black reception and response—a cultural history that is as important to understanding the cinema as the images themselves.³ My study contributes to this reception scholarship and this historical excavation by exploring African American reception in ways different from those offered in prior studies. Namely, I study Black reception in tandem with the (white) forces of institutional and state-level constraint that limited cinematic expressions of race, often in attempts to limit the possibilities of Black spectatorship and response. As Matthew Bernstein has argued, reception and censorship are usefully studied together because, in their combination, we often see the "breakdown" of "the usual oppositions between competing cultural institutions (producers and reformers) in order to emphasize instead the fragmentation and struggles within each broadly defined group."⁴ What is needed, then, is a detailed understanding of how forces of constraint and forces of agency in the cinema work to

² Matthew Bernstein uses this phrase to discuss the forces of agency and constraint that shape the social problem film in Matthew Bernstein, "Institutions and Individuals: *Riot in Cell Block 11*," *Velvet Light Trap* 28 (Fall 1991): 3-31.

³ See Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001). Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). See also Dan Streible, "A History of the Boxing Film, 1894-1915: Social Control and Social Reform in the Progressive Era," *Film History* 3 vol. 3 (1989): 235-57. Jacqueline Bobo, "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers," in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deidre Pribram, 90-109. Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," in *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988), 66-76.

⁴ Matthew Bernstein, "A Tale of Three Cities: The Banning of *Scarlet Street*," in *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, ed. Matthew Bernstein (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 158.

mutually define and produce cultural meanings and resonances that contribute to cultural perceptions of African Americans. These mutually informing, if often oppositional forces, are important to understanding film history because when it comes to the question of African American representation, it is historically true that politicized African Americans responding to film were often aware of and engaged with white censors who would seek to limit Black representation and spectatorship. These interracial contestations over cinematic meaning are also important to African American history because, as Charlene Regester has noted, these struggles were often a microcosm for broader power struggles over African American rights⁵—particularly the right to see and be seen—to be recognized and heard—that infused and underlined the political struggles for civil rights during the 1940s and 1950s and those waged in the decade following.

I begin my study with an exploration of audience “decoding” because although the moment of “encoding” that occurs in the development and filming a screenplay is *the* point of production of the celluloid product, it is not the exclusive site where *ideas and concepts* that structure racial representations in Hollywood film are produced.⁶ The vast majority of cinematic explorations of audience reception begin with film production and discuss reception last, a valuable sequencing of cultural events but one which minimizes, implicitly, the role of decoding in the creation of cinematic meaning. Indeed as Hall notes, mass mediated messages have to pass through language—and I would add popular constructions not of the filmmaker’s making—to become meaningful discourse—to be decoded by audiences.⁷ Hollywood feature films about race were made primarily by whites, but many

⁵ Charlene Regester, “Black Films, White Censors: Oscar Micheaux Confronts Censorship in New York, Virginia, and Chicago,” *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, ed. Francis Couvares (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1996), 159.

⁶ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 129-30. Hall notes “circulation and reception...are reincorporated, via a number of skewed and structured ‘feedbacks,’ into the production process itself.” (130).

⁷ *Ibid*, 130.

of these ideas and concerns— about lynching, passing, racial equality and segregation—were discussed and refined first in the Black community and through African American forms of cultural production. It is historically important for us to understand how these concepts are re-received, in cinematic form by the communities in which they were first honed. In this introduction, I will explore briefly the social history of “racial problems”—those social and economic constraints that greatly effected Black lives—as a background for exploring the cinematic depictions of the race problem. Then I will provide a rationale for combining analysis of production, censorship and reception. Finally I will provide an outline for the chapters that follow.

A Brief Social History of African American “Problems” in the 1940s and 1950s

This study covers the period from 1940-1960. I do spend time referencing films and social context of the 1930s as a way to explain the emergence of racial logics that dominate in the following two decades. I focus on the 1940s and 1950s not only because it is a vastly understudied moment in Black cultural production and film history, but because of the fact that it was a watershed era in Black identity formation and the evolution of a working understanding of “race” in U.S. society. I also made this choice, in part, because the WWII and postwar era have received less concentrated scholarly attention in terms of questions of African American film representation and reception than the silent era, even though representations of race were arguably more widespread and various during the 1940s and 1950s.⁸

⁸ This era has received short shrift perhaps because it precedes the explosion of African American images in the 1970s. Many studies that cover a larger period in African American representation include reference to the 1940s and 1950s, but more work focusing on this pivotal era is needed. Those works that focus exclusively on cinematic representation and reception in this era are: Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black* (New York: Oxford, 1993); Baldwin, James, *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay* (New York: Dial Press, 1976); Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); James Netsby, *Black Images in American Films, 1896-1954: The Interplay Between Civil Rights and Film Culture* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982). For examples of important works that include analysis of this era, see: Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2004); James A. Snead, *White Screens, Black Image:*

Studies of African American cultural history as well as the cinema reveal that 1940s and early 1950s engendered substantial shifts in both African American experience and consciousness and in film industry structure and praxis. We have only begun to appreciate the mutual effects of these shifts. If traditional civil rights historiography suggested that the movement began in the late 1950s at the earliest and extended into the 1960s, tapering off in the 1970s, more contemporary analyses of the movement suggest a reconceptualization of this timeline, arguing that the movement began much earlier. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall notes that “the movement’s meaning has been distorted and reified by a New Right bent on reversing its gains” and that a “more robust, progressive and *truer* story—the story of a ‘long civil rights movement’ that began in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s, [and] was intimately tied to ‘the rise and fall of the New Deal Order’,” needs to be told.⁹ According to Hall, the long civil rights movement “accelerated during World War II [,] stretched far beyond the South,” and “was continuously and ferociously contested.” It is this “long civil rights movement,” one both Northern and Southern in character, that I intend to explore with regards its relationship with film and cinematic “spectatorship.” Jacquelyn Hall’s study joins with a number of cultural analyses appearing in recent years that have questioned the “boom” theory of history of the civil rights movement¹⁰ and have pointed to the 1940s and early 1950s as “the forgotten years of the

Hollywood From the Dark Side (New York: Routledge, 1994); Jesse Rhines, *Black Film, White Money* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Daniel Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975); Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Duke, 2001); Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). These important works all also address the 1940s. Both Anna Everett and Judith Weisenfeld shed important light on the 1940s’ racial politics of reception but neither addresses the 1950s.

⁹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005), 1235.

¹⁰ See Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) and Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004). Important also among these studies are Matthew Countryman’s *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), which not only explores a period in history generally considered to be “pre-civil

Negro Revolution.”¹¹ These studies have importantly point out that ideological interests are sometimes unwittingly served by the historiographical separation of earlier struggles for Black American equality and humanity from “the Civil Rights Movement”: by suggesting that African Americans had only been fighting since the late 1950s for their rights, we not only isolate “The Movement” from the civil rights struggles that surrounded it and ignore a lineage of Black struggle but we make the unforgivably slow American systems of justice seem fairer and more responsive than they were in historical fact. In abandoning the “boom theory” of history we find evidence much earlier of strategies of organizing and of rhetorical articulation that created the foundation and building blocks for the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Where the “boom” theory suggests that we must study the moments of fruition and of the most intense and visible manifestations of change in order to understand its history, these later historical inquiries have sought to understand causal links in earlier struggles.

As Patricia Sullivan has argued, the 1930s and 1940s saw important changes in U.S. racial politics, even in the South—the place where change was arguably the slowest in coming: the first major Southern NAACP court victory in school desegregation was in 1938. This legislative campaign for full desegregation would continue throughout the 1940s and 1950s and into the 1970s.¹² In January 1941, nearly a year before Pearl Harbor, A. Phillip Randolph, a union man, a New Yorker, and the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, organized a massive March on Washington

rights” but also *Northern* rather than Southern struggles for freedom. See also Tom Segrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). Glenn Feldman, ed. *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

¹¹ Richard M. Dalfiume, “The ‘Forgotten Years’ of the Negro Revolution,” *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 1. (Jun, 1968): 90-106. See also Harvard Sitkoff, “Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War,” *The Journal of American History* 58, no. 3. (Dec, 1971): 661-681.

¹² Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1996), 5, 97. In the lawsuit, Missouri’s all-white state law school was forced to admit Lloyd Gaines.

(called the March on Washington Movement or MOWM) for civil rights and the end of discrimination in National Defense and the American Armed Forces. This struggle had empowering resonances on the coming struggle in the 1950s and 1960s. The march was ultimately halted—Randolph importantly chose the word “postponed”—just before the President issued of Executive Order 8802. This order, which purportedly desegregated the armed forces, actually did very little to stem discrimination in the military and was, according to historian Daniel Kryder, “another example of the president’s familiar use of tactical parries aimed at co-opting protest movements.”¹³ However, the work of the MOWM and the March on Washington Committee (MOWC) outlasted the protest, as the group became a watchdog organization over the emerging Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). Although American in focus, the March was clearly influenced by the international imagination stirred by world events but already quite active in Black intellectual circles.¹⁴

The mass mobilization the march had engendered also had broader subjective and ideological effects on African Americans: the MOWM’s status as a separatist, working class, “mass” movement as well as its ability to orchestrate simultaneous mass dissemination of civil rights rhetoric and masses of working class co-laborers, announced the arrival of an important Black political power of national proportions. Its strong national attack on Jim Crow and the successes yielded by the call for a march roused Black civil rights consciousness and a sense of the potential for change in the 1940s.

¹³ Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State During World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 85. See also Jack Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 140-148.

¹⁴ See Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle For Civil Rights in Postwar New York* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.

Apart from this explicit political action, war- and postwar- era shifts in African American consciousness and subjectivity emerged as a by-product of physical movement and war-forced migrations. Nearly one million African Americans served in segregated armed forces, many “re-migrating” temporarily to the South for training, and thereupon receiving the brunt of the South’s racist backlash against the icon of the Black soldier in uniform.¹⁵ In addition, according to Henry Louis Gates, so many Southern Blacks moved North and from rural locales to Southern cities to gain employment in the defense plants that this movement became the most substantial internal migration in American history.¹⁶ The movement motif of the war and postwar years had an effect on Black subjectivity. Continued migrations, shifts in status engendered by “equal” interpellation into the state’s wartime industrial apparatus, personal or vicarious movement to foreign shores where certain kinds of African American acceptance were more forthcoming, and shifts in the U.S.’s state rhetoric to emphasize “democracy” and “equality” over and against Hitler’s racist Nazism, changed African American self-conception and expectations for treatment in America.

Because of this wartime movement—physical, status-bound, legal, and subjective—African Americans returning from the war and coming to the end of war production felt increasingly the tether of inequity and discrimination upon Black personhood. Even scholars who note the U.S. government’s spirit of inclusion, one rhetorically directed with unprecedented specificity towards African Americans, verify also that the war years highlighted the areas where discrimination was

¹⁵ Patricia Sullivan suggests that “920,000 black men and women served in the segregated armed forces during World War II; 80% of black troops were trained in the South.” She details a number of instances of violence against Black soldiers during the early stages of the war. In March 1941, “the body of Private Felix Hall, from Montgomery Alabama, was found hanging from a tree in a wooded section of Fort Benning, Georgia.” Black soldiers were also killed by Military and local police and bus drivers in several Southern locales. (*Days of Hope*, 136).

¹⁶ Patricia Sullivan describes this movement in *Days of Hope*, 134. She cites Gates, *Colored People*, 84-5.

rife.¹⁷ The threat of lynching was palpable during the war years and was precipitated by causes as frighteningly diverse as African American voting drives, Black children playing with white children, and “looking wrong,” either at whites or to white eyes (this was particularly a problem for African Americans in uniform).¹⁸ According to the 1947 *Negro Yearbook*, there were fifteen documented lynchings and forty-three documented attempted lynchings during the war: all of those lynched during these years were African Americans.¹⁹ Another twenty-eight lynching attempts were made in 1946.²⁰ Although it is assumed that lynching was almost entirely a Southern problem, of all the lynchings from 1882-1946, a full 17.2 percent took place outside of the South, a statistically significant and by no means negligible proportion.²¹

Also in the midst of the war for democracy there occurred what were arguably the nation’s worst cluster of race riots. On February 28, 1942, a group of 200 angry whites armed with baseball bats protested the opening of Detroit’s integrated Sojourner Truth Housing Project in order to physically prevent African Americans from moving in. This armed “picketing” turned, not surprisingly, to violence. On May 25, 1943, at the height of wartime industrial production, a pay

¹⁷ Sullivan, Dalfiume, and Sitkoff in the aforementioned works, all acknowledge these dueling force in their work on the emergent civil rights era.

¹⁸ According to the Van Nuys anti-lynching bill, lynching was defined as “any assemblage of three or more persons which shall exercise or attempt to exercise by physical violence and without authority of law any power of correction or punishing over any citizen or citizens or other person or persons in the custody of any peace officer or suspected of, charged with, or convicted of the commission of any offense, with the purpose or consequence of preventing the apprehension or trial or punishment by law of such citizen or citizens, person or persons shall constitute a ‘mob’ within the meaning of this Act. Any such violence by a mob which results in the death or maiming of the victim or victims thereof shall constitute ‘lynching’ within the meaning of this Act: Provided, however, That ‘lynching’ shall not be deemed to include violence occurring between members of groups of law-breakers such as are commonly designated as gangsters or racketeers, nor violence occurring during the course of picketing or boycotting or any incident connected with any ‘labor dispute.’” Jessie P. Guzman and W. Hardin Hughes, “Lynching—Crime,” in *The Negro Yearbook* (Atlanta, GA: Foote and Davies Press, 1947), 303. This legal definition of a mob was one the Federal Government could not formally legalize. It is important also to note that criminal gangs are not considered a mob.

¹⁹ Jessie Parkhurst Guzman, ed. *The Negro Yearbook: A Review of Events Affecting Negro Life, 1941-1946* (Alabama: Department of Records and Research Tuskegee Institute, 1947), 307.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 309.

²¹ *Ibid.*

increase for African Americans prompted white workers at the Alabama Drydock and Shipbuilding Company in Mobile to riot. The summer months of 1943 were by far the most tumultuous: not only was there race rioting in early June in Los Angeles, California (a disturbance now known as the Zoot Suit riots), but interracial fighting also broke out in late June in Beaumont, Texas, where the population had swelled because of war industry work, and an alleged rape by an African American man caused whites to riot after their lynching plans were circumvented by the fact that conflicting stories led to no arrest. June's Detroit riots and August's Harlem riots, well described in other scholarly accounts, were arguably the worst of the war era.²² While in each of these riots, African Americans were disproportionately victims, it is important to note that many of these riots started as attempts to lynch or dominate African Americans but ended with African Americans fighting back in acts of retaliation that historians have linked to the coming civil rights protests.²³

The link between criminalization, Black demonization and racial oppression that can be clearly seen today, was also evident in the 1940s and 1950s. Although "crime" was an area of American culture less obviously linked to civil rights violations than segregation or lynching, warped definitions of crime and criminality and the "railroading" of Black Americans by the criminal justice system powerfully taxed Black community life.²⁴ In 1944, of 38,880 imprisoned people, 11,354 (or 29.2 percent) of these were African Americans, while African Americans made up only one tenth of the nation's overall population.²⁵ In 1945, well over half of prisoners executed for their crimes were

²² See Max Arthur Herman, *Fighting in the Streets: Ethnic Succession and Urban Unrest in Twentieth Century America* (New York: P. Lang, 2005); Alfred McClung Lee and Norman D. Humphrey, *Race Riot, Detroit 1943* (New York, Octagon Books, 1968). See also Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 11.

²³ See Dominic J. Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977).

²⁴ Walter White used this term in his speech regarding the unfair imprisonment of the Scottsboro Boys. See "Protest at Executions. Speakers Here Say Eight Negroes in Alabama Were 'Railroaded,'" *New York Times*, June 29, 1931.

²⁵ Guzman, ed. *The Negro Yearbook*, 313. The African American population of the U.S. is given as 9.8 percent in 1920, and the same for 1950. *Ibid.*, 1.

African American: of 117 prisoners executed, seventy-five were African Americans.²⁶ Of the 117 executed, twenty-six (four white and twenty-two Black) were executed for rape. The majority of these, Black and white, were under the age of 30.²⁷ Although relatively sure of its figures, *The Negro Yearbook* was careful to note that a number of towns still engaged in the unimaginable practices of having local sheriffs perform executions, and these numbers were harder to attain.²⁸ Reports of police brutality and murder were also widespread in both the Black press and NAACP sources. Obvious as well was the fact that for African Americans discrimination in housing, public accommodations, and schooling was not only legislated in the South and West, but maintained through de facto praxis and local level legal structures such as restrictive covenants. These racial issues and “social problems,” both residual and spectacular in nature, shaped African American experience at this time in a structural way.

In this dissertation, I begin to explore how the cultural and political shifts of this era changed African American spectatorship, the intermediary process of censorship and the cinematic strategies for representing African Americans. Changes in African American spectatorial practices were motivated not only by the increasing prominence of Black stars like Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, and Harry Belafonte in Hollywood films, but by changes in African American conditions and subjectivity. The “long civil rights movement” motivated spectatorial changes that effected—and sometimes interrupted—Black encounters with the cinematic apparatus. We may also speculate that responses to films may have sometimes motivated African American “looking” in the direction of civil rights themes. The period produced a number of engaged public and semi-public discourses between censors and African American organizations, most prominently about the meanings of

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 314.

Hollywood's racial representations. Fundamental to this was the issue what could or should be shown on screen. These social engagements over screened dramas demonstrate the interlocked nature of not only spectator and screen, but from spectator to spectating community, between spectator and censor, and between spectator and film industry. In addition, these discourses represent a series of intense screen-mediated civil rights struggles by African Americans, not only for cinematic representation, but to define what the Black public image would mean.

Production, Censorship, and Reception

In structuring my dissertation, I have focused on the relationship between production, censorship, and reception. How do we define these three key terms? Why is it important to study these simultaneously in relation to the question of African American representation and reception? Is to study them together just a “more sites of discourse the merrier” approach? Why have I chosen these specific sites to better understand the process of encoding and decoding?²⁹

In my consideration of production, I am examining films across the spectrum of American production practices across the 1940s and 1950s. Although I focus on film productions of the 1940s and 1950s, I also study films of the 1930s that laid the groundwork for future representational practices. To that end, I engage with a sample of films ranging from mainstream major studio films to independent productions and B-films to short musical films known as “Soundies.” My filmography grew throughout the project as the censors' records and my interviewees indicated the need to consider films that are not in the traditional compendium of African American film history.³⁰

²⁹ In her groundbreaking cultural analysis of the films of Douglas Sirk, Barbara Klinger also examines films from moments of cultural “encoding” to “decoding.” But Klinger chooses different discursive sites for analysis than I do—focusing on exploitation, star publicity, academic criticism, and newspaper reviews. Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

³⁰ My criteria for film selection was different in each chapter based on the methods employed. In those chapters where I assess viewer responses, I use viewer's memories of film to guide my discussion. I also had a list of films I showed viewers that depicted African Americans or dealt with political themes topically linked to Black American experience. I generated

Overall, in this project I wanted to give place to some films whose impact on the history of film (and of Black reception and film censorship more specifically) has been forgotten or neglected. While we are all familiar with Hollywood commercial theatrical film, which often foregrounds familiar stars and genres and has highly conventionalized modes of representation that impact the presentation of race, equally important and yet overlooked have been independents, B-films, and Soundies, especially since this less distinguished set of films was frequently shown in Black theaters. Also understudied are those “Race films” of the 1940s and 1950s. “Race films” were those films, dating back to the silent era, produced primarily for African American consumption and with all-Black casts. These films, as Jane Gaines has inferred, defy easy racial definition, as they are often made by whites but with all-Black casts and for Black audience consumption.³¹ Also under-examined are the Soundies—“three minute black-and-white films designed to be shown on Panorams, coin-operated film jukes found in nightclubs, bars, restaurants, and other public places.”³² Roughly 1,800 were made from

this list based on my examination of films with African American themes and images from the American Film Institute (AFI) Catalogue. In Chapter 3, where I explore state censorship, my selection of films was based on those films that boards censored or viewed as controversial. In Chapter 4, where I explore industry self-regulation, I again resorted to AFI Catalogue to find out those films that were on those topics of relevance to African American historical experience. I strove to include both major and minor films in my search of the PCA files. In Chapter 5, I choose *Pinky* and *No Way Out* because both were strongly influenced by Zanuck, who was the studio head best connected with the NAACP and the one who appears to have wrestled most consistently with how to approach racial issues in a mainstream way in order to trouble viewers in a calculated and containable way. *Pinky* was among the most evocative, if strained, representations of miscegenation of the era and *No Way Out* was certainly among the first films, if it was not the first, to tackle the issue of race riots. I chose *The Well* because of its instructive, if exceptional, African American representation and its compelling history of Black reception and white censorship.

³¹ Gaines aptly defines race films using Geraldyn Dismond’s definition of the films as stemming from Hollywood’s lack of attention to the features of African American life that were screenworthy. According to Dismond, Black, interracial and white owned corporations producing black cast films all “have the same motive, namely, to present Negro film about and for Negroes, showing them not as fools and servants, but as human beings with the same emotions, desires and weaknesses as other people’s; and to share in the profits of this great industry.” (See Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movie in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3. This definition, as you will notice, subdivides the term into three kinds of race film producers. In my analysis in chapter three I focus on the Popkins as an example of a Negro and white corporation, where creative interests and control were shared.

³² Richard Harrington, “Soundies’ Collection Preserves ‘40s Stars, Style” *Washington Post*, June 8, 2007, WE35.

1940 to 1947 and a startling number of these featured Black performers, sometimes performing with whites.³³

In this dissertation, I will also historically and culturally analyze a number of independent films. The term “independent” films could technically include films made with high or low budgets, and by Hollywood insiders to outsiders status (think for example of *Island in the Sun* (1957), which was produced “independently” by Darryl Zanuck, but with some of the highest production values the industry could offer at the time).³⁴ However, I define “independent films” specifically as those *produced* by a company or organization *other than* the “big five studios” that were vertically integrated before 1948 (Twentieth Century-Fox, RKO, Warners, Loew’s/MGM, and Paramount) or little three Hollywood majors (Columbia, Universal, and United Artists—although United Artists was not a production company but rather a distribution outfit). That is, I explore “off-Hollywood” independent films. These independent productions are sometimes *distributed* by major industry players, such as Samuel Goldwyn and, as Tino Balio has shown, United Artists.³⁵ The study will also cover B-films. Although some independent films could be considered B-films because of their limited budgets, I define B-films as those films produced by the *major* studios with lower budgets and production values than A-products.³⁶

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 4.

³⁵ Balio’s study of United Artists is an important and groundbreaking exploration of Independent Cinema in the period I explore here. As he shows, UA, which financed and distributed films, made possible many productions that challenged the studio’s streamlined vision. They also were among the first inside Hollywood to exploit and utilize the place for independents provided by the fall of the studio system in the 1950s. See Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company that Changed the Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 6.

³⁶ See Lea Jacobs, “The B Film and the Problem of Cultural Distinction,” *Screen* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 1-13. As Jacobs has shown, the term “B-film” has been defined in a number of ways by different scholars and according to various film- and exhibition-based characteristics: cost of production, cost of exploitation, time taken for production, stars used, profitability, and quality have all been features used to define B-film status. See also Richard Vincent, *Financial Characteristics of Selected ‘B’ Film Productions of Albert J. Cohen, 1951-7* (New York: Arno, 1980), 9. (He cites Steve Broidy, “Interview” *King of the Bs* eds. Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn [New York: EP Dutton, 1975], 274.) It is interesting to

While previous scholars have defined “African American representations” as those that include *visibly* African American characters, my exploration expands this term to include those films that included African American *themes*. That is, I will focus on cinematic representation of civil rights issues pertinent to African Americans, even in instances where there are no identifiably Black people in a film. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam discuss the politics of Black absence in Hollywood texts by reference to a kind of “haunting” of these texts by “submerged ethnicities.”³⁷ Most of the films of this era dealing with African American political themes were never focalized through African American characters, in part because those in charge of industry self-regulation were leery of making these films with direct reference to African Americans.³⁸ Examples of films that obliquely reference African Americans include *Storm Warning* (1951), which focused on the Klan but had no African Americans, *Fury* (1936), which focused on mob violence but only included marginal African American characters, and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), which deals with a legal lynching but explored this theme through a white protagonist, though one Black prisoner figures prominently in certain chain gang scenes. When a film makes reference to issues such as lynching, “legal lynchings” in the criminal justice system, discrimination, segregation, miscegenation, colorism, or other themes disproportionately pertinent to Black life, I consider them to have themes that African Americans could recognize and relate to as a part of their broader frames of cultural knowledge. This does not mean that other marginalized groups could not identify with these themes, nor are these themes the only ones relevant to African American life. However, they were some of the central themes in African American politics, as I have shown in the periodization above. Of course, my

note that, according to various B-film producers, B-films used more original film material than non-B products, which suggests that the B-film was often a source of invention.

³⁷ Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 220-221.

³⁸ Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood*, 137-40.

inclusion of these films with African American themes *without* African American images is not meant to celebrate or excuse producers who avoided representation of African Americans in these films, but rather to recoup the historically clear relationship between these films and the African Americans absent in them.

Censorship is another key concept in this dissertation. As Francis Couvares has written, censorship has been defined as strictly as to include only legally-mandate cutting and banning of films by the state, and as loosely as to include any “adverse” criticism or a tendency towards “fault finding.”³⁹ At least through 1951, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, hereafter) condemned *all* acts of censorship, even defining boycotts as a form of censorship. They claim that censorship is only constitutional when requisitioned by a jury in a legal trial.⁴⁰ According to other, less legally-based philosophical traditions, censorship is present in the milieu of repression that can surround textual production. As Freud reminds us, censorship does not have to be externally manifested but can operate, even, on the level of the unconscious, a concept that is useful in understanding forms of censorship closer to the realm of production and to the author.⁴¹ In the instance of self-censorship, repression becomes an environment of restraint, an airborne cultural condition. It is internalized. Instrumentalizing fear to produce reticence, environments produced by censorship lead to the filtering of articulation—dissembling, re-editing, and diffusing meaning.

Censorship is enforced relationally, even if it primarily affects texts. Whether an act qualifies as censorship depends, in great measure, on the nature of the relationship between the one who is

³⁹ Francis Couvares, “Introduction,” in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, (Washington: Smithsonian, 1996), 10-11.

⁴⁰ See “Pressure Group Censorship—The Policy of the American Civil Liberties Union,” Nov 1951, ACLU Collection Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library. Princeton University, Princeton, NJ. Box 762, folder 6.

⁴¹ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 254-5.

being censored and the censor.⁴² Can one be censored if one freely agrees to change one's expression? It is also contingent upon the historical vantage point from which one perceives these textual changes. Although many scholars argue that industry self-regulation was not censorship—and indeed, studios did submit voluntarily to this system, many screenwriters claimed that it was censorship. In addition, definitions of censorship are constantly shaped and reshaped by the shifting perception of the “opposing” roles of “Censor” and “Artist” (or in the case of the film industry “Censor” and “Corporation”) in society more generally.

Helen Freshwater reminds us that censorship was meted out not only on the basis of morality but implicitly also questions what constitutes the public and private, which raises our curiosity about whether racial censorship was in some sense motivated by struggles to maintain certain forms of privacy, especially for the white South who wanted to be left alone concerning their racial politics. It also raises the question of whether segregation itself does not act in some ways as a form of censorship of racialized bodies from white space and white view.⁴³ Criticism and scholarly thought about censorship has been further complicated by Foucauldian redefinitions—even reversals—of traditional conceptions of the process. Foucault has suggested that repression, and by extension censorship, is actually productive of the very discourses that the repressive agents seek to short-circuit. However, the question remains as to whether this is equally true all the time, and whether, in this substitutionary productivity, some things do not get lost or systematically omitted.⁴⁴ I am interested in the relationship, one that seems particularly relevant in the African American case, between

⁴² Ibid., 254.

⁴³ Helen Freshwater, “Towards a Redefinition of Censorship,” in *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, ed. Beate Muller (New York: Rodope, 2004), 228.

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality vol. 1* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1990), 17-48.

ensorship and what Thomas Cripps has described as structuring absences, that is, patterns of omission that have effected narrative meanings.⁴⁵

African American reception, as I define it, is not one thing only, but instead a fabric of discourses that shape the meanings of texts, some pushing away from one another along lines of class, visible intra-racial difference such as skin color and phenotype, and gender (among others). For example, as I will show, the NAACP saw (and used) film in a manner quite different than that of working class spectators. In my discussion of Black reception, I use “Black” and “African American” interchangeably to refer to those either born in (or decisively formed by) America who are descended from Africa. I capitalize both of these terms because both are identity categories and cultural “names” that people apply to themselves.

My conception of African American reception (especially as it interacts with censorship) is influenced by literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism, one that I apply not only to the internal dynamics of a text but also to the interplay between a text and its reception. Bakhtin highlights the interactive nature of communication, as a way to account for the various ideological pulls and resonances inside a given text. This notion of the communication process as interactive is a useful one for understanding film reception—and one that further disrupts the “sender-receiver” model. According to Bakhtin, “utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another...Every utterance must be regarded primarily as a *response* to preceding utterances of the given sphere.”⁴⁶ This has profound implications for challenging the boundary line between text and context—which is transgressed and perhaps

⁴⁵ Thomas Cripps, “The Absent Presence in American Civil War Films,” in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 4 (1994): 367-376.

⁴⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and other late Essays* eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas, 2004), 91. (Original Emphasis).

undone by the fact that the utterances that most powerfully frame a text's meanings (reviews, censorship, and other types of reception) transcend textual bounds. Bakhtin's notion of dialogism also has the potential to topple the hierarchy that has traditionally marked studies of mass media. Although studies of ideology in mass media have tended to privilege the (broadcast) text (i.e. a film or radio program), according to Bakhtin's model, it is not the reach of a given utterance that makes it powerful, but rather the extent to which it is reflective of and imbricated with other voices within its sphere. Thus, the voices of respondents are as important to the dialogue as the voices of producers. Also, even the voices of the powerful (and of the broadcast text itself) contain within them what Bakhtin refers to as "echoes and reverberations of other utterances." In this model, the voices of the powerful and the marginalized are submitted to producing—and reproducing—one another—to a certain kind of constructive, inflected mimesis and interplay. Although Bakhtin wrote mostly about how dialogism affected the novel, his point that the boundaries of the text cannot be fixed and that the author's every utterance is derived from previous utterances that stand outside the text has tremendous potential to enrich our understanding of film reception.⁴⁷ It demonstrates how all utterances, both those inside the text and those that surround and explicate it, are sociologically entangled with one another in decisive ways that *mutually* constitute meaning. Reception is a set of utterances produced by viewers as an imagined "discursive exchange" with a cinematic text and its authors. The transmission of the cinematic utterance to the receiver always vitally changes the "original," intended meanings. In what follows, I focus mostly on reception that occurred after the

⁴⁷ As Bakhtin suggests, *meaning* is borne (and born) not only in discourse but dialogical engagement. As he states it: "our thought itself—philosophical, scientific, and artistic—is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought." Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 94.

release of a film, although, as was the case with both *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), public reaction and reception can predate the actual release of the film.⁴⁸

Film spectatorship and film reception have been treated as qualitatively different ways of understanding film viewing. Studies of spectatorship have tended to emphasize the textual structures that create an “ideal” viewer who understands the text as the filmmakers intended.⁴⁹ Thus, the “spectator” has tended to be an idealized or theorized positionality taken up by individuals to facilitate their relationship to the text or cinematic apparatus. Film reception, on the other hand, has been defined historically or sociologically with reference to the actual responses of viewers to texts (and their contexts).⁵⁰ However, African American approaches to film reception have generally minimized the boundary lines between spectatorship and reception, noting that theories of spectatorship ought to be informed by the historical reality of reception in relationship to racial identity.⁵¹ Accordingly, I see the two terms as essentially linked. I see spectatorship as being defined by *patterns* of reception in addition to the structural guideposts and viewing positions proffered by the film itself. Thus, I mobilize the term “spectatorship,” even though I do not focus on textual analysis but rather on historical viewers. I see spectatorship as being defined by conscious patterns of reception that extend beyond the text.

⁴⁸ On *Gone with the Wind*, see Leonard Leff, “‘Gone With the Wind’ and Hollywood’s Racial Politics,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 284, No. 6 (December 1999): 106-114. Thomas Cripps also notes that negative Black reception of *The Birth of a Nation* in certain areas of the country predated the release of the film in those areas. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* (New York: Oxford, 1977), 41-69.

⁴⁹ See the essays contained in Linda Williams, *Viewing Positions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994). Nick Browne, “The Spectator-in-the-Text: The Rhetoric of Stagecoach,” in *Movies and Methods vol. II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press), 458-475.

⁵⁰ See Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Cultural Reception*. Alan Bodger, trans. (New York: Routledge, 1994). Jackie Stacey, *Stargazing* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁵¹ See Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 93-113; Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance,” *Black American Cinema*, Manthia Diawara, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 214. Diawara comments here that Black spectatorial resistance is often built upon reference to “an alternative account based on Afro-American historical experience.” bell hook uses conversations with African American women as the basis for her theoretical elaborations in “The Oppositional Gaze,” in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 247-264,

Why must we unite discussion of production, censorship, and reception? While I believe that more sources and evidence of public response always stands to enrich our understanding of specific film productions in their representation of race, I think there is something particularly powerful about the relationship between production, censorship, and reception that has only begun to be explored with regards to race.

The first reason for uniting these various “stages” of textual articulation is theoretical. Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” model suggests that in order to understand textual meaning, we cannot focus solely on the message itself, but must also explore the processes through which it passes—and through which meaning is accrued. That is, he suggests that a complete circuit—complete with an understanding of the shared discursive grounds upon which this signification takes place and through which meaning is actually constituted—is the only way we can fully appreciate the signifying mechanisms of a mass mediated text.⁵² In this process, meaning is not simply passed from producer to viewer, but textual material is moved (Hall says “translated”) into the realms of public discourse and social practice, a point reiterated by Manthia Diawara.⁵³ Production, reception, and censorship are intensely interlinked sites of discursive meaning production.⁵⁴ In Bakhtinian terms, the act of censors saying “no” to a certain utterance is a counter-utterance that contains part of the original censored utterance in it. In order to understand the meaning of cinematic works, we must understand better how they interlock with “spoken” discourses—internal to and outside of them—discourses that includes both censorship and reception.

⁵² Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128.

⁵³ Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance,” *Black American Cinema*, Manthia Diawara, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 214.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

The second reason to combine analyses of production, censorship, and reception is historical: the reality is that these forces *were* imbricated and directly in dialogue during the era under study. For example, as I will show, the NAACP not only informed the *production* of *No Way Out*, but gave it a positive reception and actively fought against its censorship. True as well is the fact that the discursive *battles* that mark these different “stages” of textuality are also an important part of the history of these texts and of the broader history of discursive struggles over the meaning and definition of the terms (and conditions) of “race,” “Black,” and “white.” Cinematic meaning was an important part of the racial culture wars that characterized both North and South during the postwar period and leading up to “boom” of the civil rights movement. Both progressive racial change and racist white backlash for reversion to the “status quo” were played out in these censorship and reception struggles. While the assigned meanings won or lost in these textual battles are not permanent, I believe something can be learned from the process about textual interpretation as social practice and about the historical meaning of specific texts.

Another important reason for linking censorship, production, and reception is that these forces themselves are ultimately not entirely distinguishable; that is, censorship can be considered a type of reception, and producers both act as censors and themselves are charged with receiving and responding to public reaction to their films. In some senses censorship would seem an opposite force from reception and production. Reception and production reputedly multiply channels of meaning. Censorship, purportedly, closes down avenues of meaning. I am following recent scholarship that adapts Foucault, by suggesting that conscious censorship, like unconscious repression, can be productive. As my work will show, some authoritative readings or reception (for example, those authored by the national NAACP) may have operated to shut down channels of non-official Black

meanings, while certain forms of “censorship,” particularly those authored by industry self-regulators, in some instances relied upon the existence of various channels of meaning that would facilitate often widely variant readings of the texts in question by social groups that openly opposed one another. Both censors and producers had a built in “sense” of the public and engaged in the practice of projecting and predicting how the public will receive a film. This further entwines these three forces. Finally, as we shall see in Chapter 4, where I discuss industry self-regulation, as well as Chapter 5 and 6, where I discuss production, producers often acted as both censors and “respondents.” They were regularly called on be “respondents” to the public’s reaction to their film, answering back through future production practices and through personal correspondence, the state and local censors and various racial publics who had problems with their on-screen representations. Producers also act as “preemptive” censors, limiting the racial articulations in their own films.

The final reason why production, censorship, and reception need to be linked is because such a study allows us to explore the embroiled, if ostensibly dichotomous, racial and ethnic groups that participated in cultural production. It allows us to see and appreciate the role and relationship of both the “low” and “high” positions—the powerful and the disempowered—in textual production and meaning-making. Producers and censors were most often white people empowered by the state or industry to create untroubling images of race relations, while those receiving films in the Black community, by contrast, were often among the under-empowered seeking representations of self that countered official narratives of race with material that showed the way that race operated for Black folk. This racial characterization of production, reception and censorship is, of course, not without exceptions. Although it would seem that African American reception always, by definition, came from African Americans, responses from *interracial* organizations like the NAACP and the National

Negro Congress challenge this. There were also a few African American censors and a few African American representatives who consulted the state censors and film producers, although, for the most part, the opinions offered by these token Black censors and consultants were at the mercy of the white majority and were only heeded if they passed the test of harmonizing with *state* and *industry* concerns. This relative consistency of the racial divide in power over images, barring the exceptions I have noted, led to culturally informed modes of articulation and response. Most typically, these were concerns about maintaining control over the Black population, a group that was (perhaps always) seen by censors as becoming increasingly agitated. Because censors, producers and Black “receivers” typically saw films—and certainly saw civil rights questions—differently, it is important to understand how their battles over scene inclusion and over textual meanings came to define these texts and played out in relationship to other civic battles for civil rights. Studies that focus exclusively on white or African American cinematic discourses miss the vital interchange (one that implicitly admits interracial connection) between Blacks and whites, an interchange that is, in some senses, was the definitive place where the racial stakes and terms of these texts were decided.

In Chapter 1, I focus attention on the under-explored relationship between the film exhibitor and the Black spectator. Using histories of exhibition and oral history interviews I conducted with ninety-four predominantly working-class African American movie-goers, I explore the ways in which local theater racialization facilitated or frustrated Black spectatorial vision. In focusing on the exhibitor as a potential agent for influencing the racial meanings of film and becoming mediator between Hollywood and local Black spectator, I explore the subjective implications of the cultural environment of the Black movie house and the civil rights oriented modes of spectator address it often fostered in the 1940s and 1950s.

Oral history is an important part of my methodology. The interviews cited in this, and the following, chapter come from my oral history project exploring African American responses to the movies of the 1940s and 1950s. The rationale for this oral history project was to build a Black intellectual history of the cinema that included those Black working class movie goers that have often been left unrepresented in discussions of Black reception. I interviewed ninety-four seniors, thirty of whom were men and who ranged from fifty-five to ninety-six years in age. My respondents had a range of occupations, including professional mover, worker at a bag factory/farmer, day worker, lab worker, shop clerk, nurse's assistant, beautician, pharmacist, Reverend/factory worker, etc. Of all my respondents, the vast majority who reported their professions had working class jobs and many respondents changed their jobs quite frequently throughout the course of their lives.

I confined my interviews to three locales, Baltimore, MD, Richmond, VA and New York, NY so I could perform cross-regional comparisons of Black spectatorship and film responses. Each of these locales, I felt, represented the unique identity of the geographical regions in which they were located. Baltimore, the city I chose to represent urban existence in a border state, had been formed in many ways by its liminal status in the Civil War between the Confederacy and the Union. Into the present era, it has had as one of my respondents noted, the peculiar status of being considered "The North" by "Black people" while "white people consider[ed]" it "the South." New York city, especially Harlem where I conducted my interviews, in many ways represented the quintessential Black urban and Northern experience. Although Richmond was in the Upper South, its legacy as having been the seat of the Confederacy during the Civil War can still be felt on its streets, especially on Monument Avenue where statues of Robert E. Lee and Arthur Ashe invoke competing stories

and histories of the city and its racial past and where, as I shall show, the 1950s highway building and slum clearance significantly changed the city's racial topography and experience of African American.

In Chapter 2, I return to these oral histories of Black reception, examining African American reading strategies. In an attempt to expand our history of the Black imagination, I examine the ways that African Americans spectators who went to the movies during the 1940s and 1950s describe the relationship between civil rights, their lives, and the films of that era. This provides strong evidence of the ways that the process of decoding has been historically informed by “against the grain” readings. These readings linked even films lacking strong civil rights themes with emergent concepts of civil rights on the grounds of a cultural logic largely unanticipated by Hollywood producers. I argue that in this process, the act of (remembered) viewing was a moment of relative agency in the production of racial meaning, as it severed white-produced cinematic images from their narrative moorings and reunited them with a Black imagination.

But if the moment of reception was one of agency for viewers, I ask, what were those forces that constraint that limited textual articulations of race? Chapters 3, 4, and 5 address the ways that civic or governmental censorship and industrial regulation operated both as constraints and as productive, even creative forces for shaping racial meaning. In Chapter 3, I explore the racial censorship of films at the state level, in the North, South, and in a Border state. I implicitly question the notion that censorship was centrally concerned exclusively and simplistically with sexuality by discussing the racial politics of censorship. In this analysis, I explore the textual and spectatorial implications of the overall process of censorship as well as its effects on specific texts. The themes I assess include lynching, “miscegenation,” racial epithets, race riots and mob violence, and “legal lynchings” of African Americans in the penal system. I also examine the extent to which, following

the Supreme Court's *Burstyn v. Wilson* decision (which cast doubt on the legality of state and municipal censorship), censor boards worked to demonstrate that they were censoring according to community standards by consulting members of the community in their censorship decisions, including members of racial and ethnic minority groups.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I examine the coexistence of repressive practices and creative forces at the level of film industry production, assessing the industry's role in both limiting and generating oblique strategies for the representation of African American themes and images. In Chapter 4, I focus on "official" industry self-regulation through the Studio Relations Committee and the Production Code Administration. After 1930, the industry was guided in these efforts by the Production Code, industry-adopted rules for representing moral and social issues, whose only racial prohibitions were on white slavery and Black/white miscegenation. Ruth Vasey has shown that the industry also regulated film content according to what the Motion Picture Producers and Directors Association (MPPDA) called "industry policy."⁵⁵ Included under industry policy were issues that did not come under the Code but that the film industry believed filmmakers needed to avoid in order to protect the industry from outside attack. In my exploration of the files of the Production Code Administration and its predecessor, the Studio Relations Committee, I found that racial industry policy, not the Code, was the element that most often prompted racially-based industry-self-censorship. It generally limited African American representation, if sometimes out of deference to African American audience members and even Black civil rights organizations. Industry self-censorship also involved complex negotiations that anticipated and answered reactions of organized

⁵⁵ Ruth Vasey, "Beyond Sex and Violence: 'Industry Policy' and the Regulation of Hollywood Movies, 1922-1939," in *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, ed. Matthew Bernstein (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 102-29.

groups and individuals interested in questions of race. These included censorship boards, Church groups, and minority organizations (such as the NAACP), among others.

Chapter 5 deals with the role of the producer in *studio* self-censorship. Focusing on a single producer, Darryl F. Zanuck who was production head at 20th Century Fox from the early 1930s through the mid 1950s, this analysis makes clear both the conservative forces of constraint, and more progressive desire for “realist” representation of racial relations in the United States. I explore Zanuck’s decisive role as producer of the racial problem films, *Pinky* and *No Way Out*. Through his script revisions, Zanuck developed a strategy of articulating what had been censored racial concepts—race riots and miscegenation. Zanuck also constrained their expression, however. Zanuck’s textual shyness in depicting race was based on his fiscal concern, the limitations of own his cultural perspective, his sense of what constituted entertainment, and sense of the (white) audience.

In looking at *Pinky* and *No Way Out*, two of the most widely viewed racial problem films of the turn of mid-century, I explore the “racial problem film,” a derivative of the social problem film which has been defined by Peter Roffman, Jim Purdy, Russell Campbell, and John Hill.⁵⁶ Although writing about the British social problem film, Hill has in many ways provided the most effective definition of this “genre.” I emphasize different elements of these films than Hill, however. Hill argues that the social problem film is based, first and foremost, on the preconfigured, highly synthetic construction of a “social problem.”⁵⁷ Hill suggests the social problem film’s function is to frame these narratives and problems as understandable and solvable, and to imagine potential resolutions to the

⁵⁶ Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981). Russell Campbell, “Three Films of Darryl F. Zanuck,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 31, no.1, (Winter 1978): 49-74. John Hill, “The British Social Problem Film: ‘Violent Playground’ and ‘Sapphire,’” *Screen* (Feb 1985): 34-48.

⁵⁷ John Hill, “The British ‘Social Problem Film,’” 35.

concerns they raise.⁵⁸ Hill suggests that three resolutions predominate: rehabilitation, punishment, and destruction of the offender.⁵⁹

But as Hill seems to begin to argue, the social (and specifically racial) problem films' tendency to *seek* resolutions is always undermined by the very *positing* of the problem itself—by its utterance as an unstable question or proposition.⁶⁰ The instability of the racial problem film is further evidenced in its typical hesitance in diagnosing the problem on which the films center. Is the problem (white) prejudice? (Black) Passing? Interracial misunderstandings? The one-drop rule? Lack of social grace or insensitivity? The South? The mere existence of race? The presence of Black people . . . or of racist white people? Or the persistence of structural and institutional racial inequality? The lack of knowledge and authority—the vulnerable feeling out of issues of race—and the impulse toward self-examination and even white guilt upon which the genre rests is *palpable* in these films and what makes the whiteness of the producers “visible.”⁶¹ However limited the progressive results of these films, their cultural productivity lies in the fact that as an unstable discourse of race, they stir up more questions than they can ever fully resolve. This is further revealed in the complexity of their audience reception and institutional censorship (including everything from the NAACP to state and local censors), which I also briefly explore in Chapter 5, bringing together these three strands of analysis.

Chapter 6 analyzes the production, censorship and reception of *The Well* (1951), an independent “interracial” film, featuring Black actors and produced by the independent producer/director team of Harry and Leo Popkin. The film takes a different approach to the racial problem film. Loren Miller, a little known but very insightful Black writer, indicated in 1938 that

⁵⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Note Hill's discussion of the reference to the Notting Hill race riots in *Sapphire* (1959). Ibid., 47.

⁶¹ See Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Dyer suggests that whiteness often signifies “neutrality” (47) and “invisibility,” (9).

what was missing from Hollywood representations in the 1930s was not “positive” representations but the sincere, genuine drive to “tell the truth” about “Jim Crow.”⁶² Miller stated, “The truth is that every time any Negro steps outside the black belt of his home town to buy a hot dog, select a school for his child, ride a train, look for a job or get married, divorced or buried, he runs into the problems arising out of his Jim Crow status in society.”⁶³ Any producer of films needed to pay heed to these daily truths of race in the United States, Miller argued: “He has to deal with them and he has to indicate in his pictures whether he believes existing racial relations are justifiable or unjustifiable. The dilemma impels him to take a propagandistic stand either one way or another.”⁶⁴

In some ways, *The Well* heeded Miller’s call, if some years after the call was made. The initiative and risks taken by individual producers warrants more recognition when considering advances in the representation of race relations.⁶⁵ In their story about how concern that a five-year-old Black girl has been kidnapped by a white man produces race riots in an integrated 1950s town, Harry and Leo Popkin mobilized stylistic realism, African American and white collective memory, and entertainment value during an era in which inter-racial representations, though more prevalent on American screens, continued to depict race along conventional and conservative lines. In my analysis, I explore the ways that *The Well* acted as an alternative and a departure from these tropes. I argue that its sophisticated and complex textual strategies gave it an affective resonance that was nearly universally praised—if for very different reasons—by the industry, white critics, and African American critics and political figures.

⁶² Loren Miller, “Negro Films Must Tell the Truth,” *Daily Worker*, May 5, 1938.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ For an articulation of this argument see Catherine Benamou, *It’s All True: Orson Welles’ Pan-American Odyssey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 147.

In my conclusion, I will explore the ways that production, censorship and African American reception can enrich our understanding of cinema's cultural meaningfulness around race in the 1940s and 1950s. This is no insignificant issue because, quite simply, a firmer historical understanding of how racially-concerned texts were affected by censorship and received *on the ground* sheds important light not only on the texts themselves, but on the industry and social context that informed these texts. It also, most importantly, sheds light on the cinema's social significance. The meaning of a film has too often been ascribed to producers' or directors' intentions rather than how a text actually was received. In fact meaning is constituted by histories of constraint and alteration and viewers' own reading practices as well as producer/director intentionality. Accordingly, in this dissertation, my examination reveals the relational and dialogical aspects of the cinema—the ways that the cinema operated through a series of culturally informed negotiations and as the extension of (often heated) conversations between members of “the public” and “the industry” about how to represent some of the most racially controversial subjects of these decades. In the next chapter, I will explore the unique role of the exhibitor—and exhibition spaces—in mediating spectatorial readings and engagement with the cinematic apparatus, highlighting how some exhibitors extended the agency of African Americans in reading Hollywood films against the grain and according to an emergent Black consciousness.

Chapter 1:
**Theaters of Engagement, Spaces of Hope: Local Exhibitor Agency and Black Cinematic Experience,
1940-1960**

Historical reception studies—and particularly studies of African American film reception—have been methodologically challenged by a paucity of sources and the reality that evidence of viewer response is fleeting and hard to grasp.¹ Even if responses are possible to capture, interpretation is confounded by the fact that all relevant contexts are not. What tools do we then employ to better understand viewers' responses to film? If, as film theorists have increasingly reminded us, the text's own coordinates for spectatorial alignment (i.e. subject positions) do not determine viewer response, then what does? Do we, as reception scholars, use our own theoretical paradigms for interpretation, i.e. ideological analysis, critique of patriarchy, or theories of racial oppression and white supremacy? Or do we turn to the interpretive strategies suggested by the viewers themselves—perhaps believing those who say they only went to the movies for entertainment? Or, alternatively, do we turn to a broader historical context for moviegoing—for example, the Great Depression or World War II—to explain reception?

Scholars have depended on a variety of analytical tools to explain and contextualize reception and spectatorship partly based on what they have wanted to know about viewing. But the

¹ African American reception studies are numerous. See bell hook's "The Oppositional Gaze," in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 247-264, which uses conversations with African American women as the basis for her theoretical elaborations. As a result of the difficulty of capturing African American reception, such studies have been increasingly nuanced in their methodological design. See Robin Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York: Garland, 1998), 263-279, where she explains in depth her complex and compelling methodology.

most radically immediate context has remained among the most under-considered influences on histories of reception and theories of spectatorship: the theater itself—the very space that cojoins viewer and film narrative—and a space that has a narrative of its own.²

Janet Staiger has suggested that one of the ways that we can understand reception is through explaining cinematic viewing through context. Generally, reception has been explained with reference to a variety of other mediated discourses, including the press, direct correspondence with the industry, and even interviews, but rarely is reference made to the space of exhibition and its role in shaping reception. Jacqueline Bobo, who studies African American women's reception, uses interview data as the basis for her analysis without detailed analysis of the spaces of exhibition. Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence have done important groundbreaking analysis of the racial politics of spaces of exhibition. Bowser and Spence look particularly at the community practices of viewing, giving great insight into the class dimensions of Black film exhibition and its impact on audiences in the early twentieth century during film's silent era. Jacqueline Stewart's account of Black reception in the silent era gives more detailed information about the exhibitors themselves and the contracts they

² Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: NYU, 2000), 18-19. Jacqueline Bobo, "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers," in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Verso, 1988), 90-109. Jacqueline Bobo is an African American women's reception scholar who uses interview data as the basis for her analysis without detailed analysis of the spaces of exhibition. Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000). Dan Streible, "The Harlem Theater: Black Film Exhibition in Austin, TX: 1920-1973," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1990), 222-224. Dan Streible, in an excellent and groundbreaking analysis of the Black exhibition practices, explored how a single African American movie house in Texas designed its programmes and how it was affected by the system of runs. He pointed out as well how theater owners pursued different strategies for booking films, using the same "low-level" product (comprised of B-films, reissued or final run A films, independent films, and foreign films) as the basis for programs. Although he does not connect these to questions of reception, he does establish the last run status of the Black theater in Austin, TX and the centrality of this theater in the Black community in Austin, as it was "one of Austin's most visible and stable Black-owned businesses." See also Dan Streible, "A History of the Boxing Film, 1894-1915: Social Control and Social Reform in the Progressive Era," *Film History*, 3:3 (1989): 235-57 where he deals with the racial politics of exhibition. Gregory Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institutional Press, 1995). Gregory Waller also grounds and centers his discussion of local spectatorship in an analysis of exhibition.

built with their patrons/spectators. While there have been countless studies on both exhibition and reception, topics that are considered frequently enough to constitute subfields of film studies, far too few projects have appraised the conjunction of exhibition and viewer reception and the impact of theater environs on film reception. This is because reception studies have largely focused on individual texts, while exhibition studies, on the other hand, have focused on the industry and not the viewer experience.

But if cinema is a relational medium, the industry has historically expressed this relational aspect nowhere so much as through the theaters themselves, where the viewer not only met with the film and, in an imaginary sense, with film's characters but also with the movie house staff, who were often a neighborhood presence as common as the candy man. Without careful analysis of the impact of the place of the theater on the experience of reception, we lose a sense of the local contexts that operated as experiential, indeed phenomenal, "portals" and provided the physical and optical framework for reception. Recently, scholars have pointed out the phenomenological immediacy and structuring importance of "place" in defining vision, subjectivity's visual and aural components, and cinema spectatorship.³ While my work does not explicitly draw from phenomenological theories posed by Merleau Ponty, Stanley Cavell, and Andre Bazin, it is driven, still, by the phenomenological impulse to ask what really mattered to viewing and what 'came before' (both immediately preceding and optically 'laying over') the text, influencing textual meaning for viewers.⁴ Like phenomenological

³ Jonathan Crary, "Modernizing Vision," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997), 26-7. Vanessa Schwartz, "Cinematic Spectatorship Before the Apparatus: The Public Taste for Reality in Fin-de-Siecle Paris" in *Viewing Positions*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997), 87.

⁴ For more on phenomenology as a theoretical model for understanding the cinema see Dudley Andrew, "The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology in Film Studies" in *Movies and Methods Vol. II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press), 625-632, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962). Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema, Vol. 1* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1967), 125-143. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). Phenomenology has long been linked to the cinematic, perhaps because of the cinema's tendency to turn the everyday into the epic.

modes of inquiry, my study comes away from conceptions of cinematic viewing that focus solely on the control wielded by the apparatus (ones that presuppose the text, or ideology, or some other structural constraint as determinative of viewer experience) and points out that experience is made up of both structural constraint and fluidity.

These scholars who study early cinema did not have the option of discussing reception with viewers who saw the films almost a century ago. Since it is possible to still gather information about the meanings of theatrical space to viewer reception for the 1950s from oral history interviews, I employ this method in this project. Building on theories of phenomenology in the cinema, this chapter focuses on the role of the movie house in shaping Black spectators' cinematic expectations both of the films shown onscreen and of their inclusion in the "cinematic apparatus"—that is, the technical and ideological means by which the cinema communicates.⁵ Focusing on Baltimore (a border city), New York (a Northern city), and Richmond (a Southern city), I ask how a spectrum of racialized movie house arrangements and spectator-industry relations in theatres framed and shaped Black spectatorship. How did these theatres and exhibitors solicit the attention of, or in some cases, exclude or marginalize Black spectators? What was the effect of these exhibition practices on spectators' textual reading?

In my study, rather than performing separate analyses of Baltimore, Richmond, and New York, I fold together responses from various locales in order to get a better picture of the phenomenon I am describing (i.e. the racialized movie house or a particular protest strategy). This chapter deals centrally with questions of space—both the graphic space of newspapers and the

⁵ See Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia 1986), 286-298. The apparatus is both the literal and the ideological means through which the cinema communicates. Literally, the cinema uses a projector, screen (presumably also theatrical space), camera, film stock, "montage" (and implicitly cutting/editing tools), and scenario to communicate. But these literal/technical elements are infused with ideological purposes that shape and create meaning.

geographic space of the theater—as sites of cinematic inscription. It joins with an increasing number of studies of geography that attempt to map the meanings of space in African American experience.⁶ The spatial analysis of African American experience is particularly apropos in the period of the 1950s. When resources were “flying” to the privileged margins of the suburbs, urban African Americans found that one resource they still had was space.

My examination also joins with recent scholarship underscoring the fundamental but overlooked centrality of the exhibitor in contributing to—even designing—cinematic experience. For example, Kathryn Fuller’s sensitive and careful analysis of the spatial layout of theaters and film programmes has uncovered aspects of the important relationship between exhibitor and viewer—a relationship sealed through visits to the theater and the exhibitor’s projected presence onto the streets and neighborhoods through advertisements. According to Fuller, exhibitors influenced the meanings of cinema not only through their choice of films but also by engineering “atmosphere” around individual films through lobby displays. In the silent era, Fuller argues, itinerant exhibitors created “an emotional structure from the jumble of images in their performances, carefully orchestrating the program.”⁷

Manthia Diawara, bell hooks, and Jacqueline Bobo have challenged traditional apparatus theory—and the revisions to it offered by feminist film theorists—by suggesting the ways that it has

⁶ There have been a number of new works that have centralized questions of geography, place, and space in an attempt to understand African American experience. See for example, Joe W. Trotter with Earl Lewis and Tera W. Hunter, eds., *African American Urban Experience: Perspectives from the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Manning Marable, *Living Black History: How Re-imagining the African-American Past Can Remake America’s Racial Future* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006). Thadious Davis (*Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994]), for example, openly addresses in her historical biography of Harlem Renaissance author Nella Larsen the paucity and indeterminacy of sources that confront historians of the novelist’s life, and uses her spheres of activity and an analysis of the institutional spaces through which the novelist passed to reconstruct her life. See her chapter on Larsen’s experiences in the Normal School, (51-69). In addition, see Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place* (Boston: MIT Press, 1995). In it she gives a persuasive account of the various meanings of space for the definition of culture and analyses the vernacular uses of working class space.

⁷ Kathryn Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 12.

failed to account for (1) actual viewing practices and the reality of screen-viewer relations, and (2) the subaltern spectatorial gaze. Basing her research on African American reception data, hooks theorizes that “identifying with neither the phallogentric gaze nor the construction of white woman as lack, critical Black female spectators construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation.”⁸ Jacqueline Bobo has likewise suggested that the notion of textual subjectivity cannot be defined singularly: “it would be too easy . . . to categorize Black women’s reactions to film as an example of ‘false consciousness’.” Instead, she uses Michel Pecheux’s notion of *interdiscourse*—that is, “the space, the specific moment when subjects bring their histories to bear on meaning production in a text,” as a way to understand Black women’s reception in a more grounded way.⁹ These important textual theories—which posit the alterity of Black viewership—could bear extension to the realm of the physical theatrical experience. However marginalized from traditional studies of cinematic subjectivity and textuality, Black spectatorial responses to and within the theatrical space have always themselves been a part of the text—they have always been a part of the dialogical life of textual meaning. Diawara’s work implicitly lays the groundwork for contextually-based explorations of Black spectatorship by suggesting that “spectatorial resistance” is often expressed with reference to viewers’ real historical experiences.¹⁰ How, then, might the viewers’ experience or physical encounter with the space that holds the text mold and shape viewing? Does “spectatorship” involve textual concerns most centrally with all spectators regardless of race or film’s racial address?

⁸ bell hooks, *Real to Reel: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 208.

⁹ Jacqueline Bobo, “Black Women as Cultural Readers” in *Female Spectators Looking at Film and Television*, ed. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), 101-2.

¹⁰ Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance,” in *Black American Cinema*, Manthia Diawara, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 214.

While these critiques of apparatus theory are needed, we must avoid throwing out the baby with the bathwater; we must cull previous engagements with the apparatus for its discoveries in order to appreciate what tools they contain that can be applied to the project of understanding Black viewership. Film theorist Christian Metz, in *The Imaginary Signifier*, lucidly argues that the theater acts as part of the apparatus itself; for Metz, the auditorium is a crucial element of not only the physical and institutional but the psychological dynamics of the cinema.¹¹ Following Metz, we might question how racial ideology was communicated through the *theatrical* mechanisms of the apparatus. Ben Hall's dramatic descriptions of the experience of the movie palace do more than document the existence of these houses that sprang up in the 1910s and 1920s—they resurrect the mood and feeling they produced. Through a vivid retelling of the architectural effects of cinematic space on spectators, Hall accentuates the importance of theatrical design for creating a feeling of grandness and for framing cinematic “looking.”¹² The “amalgamation of a series of pleasurable stimuli” that the movie theater offered to whites were largely unavailable to Black patrons who were not privileged viewers in segregated, predominantly white theaters.

The movie house itself was especially important in holding together cinematic experience in an era where exhibitors would run films continuously—without concrete start and end times. This caused the onscreen narratives to lack the hold imposed by narrative contingency that they have

¹¹ Christian Metz states: “There are two cones in the auditorium: one ending on the screen and starting both in the projection box and in the spectator’s vision in so far as it is projective and one starting from the screen and ‘deposited’ in the spectator’s perception in so far as it is introjective (on the retina, a second screen).” Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Indiana UP: Bloomington, 1977), 50.

¹² Ben Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Golden Age of Movie Palaces* (New York: Clarkson M. Potter Press, 1961). The impact of exhibition conditions is actually most forcefully rendered by Bosley Crowther in the foreword where he states that “the total effect of a motion picture is conditioned to a greater or lesser extent by the environment in which it is shown . . . the ‘chemistry’ . . . of [a film’s] emanations is subtly changed by the surrounding atmosphere. Further, the run of movie-going, the pleasure that is derived from the experience of spending a few hours in a movie theatre, includes a lot more than the experience of simply observing a film. It is the amalgamation of a series of pleasurable stimuli—the initial anticipation, the warmth of companionship, the congeniality of the surroundings, the freedom to use and partake of the facilities of the auditorium, the feeling of elegance” (foreword—pages unnumbered).

come to have in the contemporary era. Hall looks into the structure of the space of the theaters themselves for the residue of the spectacle that occurred within and around them, suggesting the theater holds cinematic pleasures of its own. This same sort of close reading of space and creative intellectual labor could be usefully wrought to describe and theoretically figure the phenomenological effect of segregation (and other forms of racialization) on Black movie-going.

Despite the existence of research (and theory) confirming the vital role of exhibition in spectatorship and reception, the relationship between Black exhibition practices, theatrical space, and Black audiences in the 1940s and 1950s have remained under-examined. This paucity of scholarship is particularly problematic because it was also during this period that theaters catering to African Americans, already on the increase in the late 1930s, were at their most profitable as a by-product of white flight from the inner city and disproportionate African American attendance.¹³ Although recently a number of scholars have made important contributions to our understanding of the links between Black film spectatorship and theatrical exhibition, much of this work is outside of the period considered in this study.¹⁴ For example, Charlene Register also theorizes the meanings of segregation

¹³ Douglas Gomery suggests that movie theaters “turned” Black with neighborhood shifts as early as the 1930s. Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 161. According to *Motion Picture Herald*, the number of Black movie houses increased by 67 percent between 1937 and 1939. (“Negroes Movie-Conscious Support 430 Film Houses,” *Motion Picture Herald*, Feb 24, 1942, 33) Gomery suggests that the Black movie house reached its acme in the postwar period when postwar prosperity and disproportionate Black attendance rates combined to make African American movie theaters disproportionately profitable (162). Gomery also notes that in 1954, a “terrible year for the movie theater business in the U.S., many observed that Black-only theaters were experiencing gains at the Box office, not losses. Whites were fleeing to the suburbs and abandoning urban theaters while Blacks remained city dwellers and began to frequent former movie palaces” (164). Detailed analysis of the effects of this sociological shift on movie-going has not yet been attempted.

¹⁴ Mary Carbine, “‘The Finest Outside the Loop’: Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago’s Black Metropolis, 1905–1928,” *Camera Obscura* 23 (May 1990): 8-41; Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself*, 51-119. Strible, “Harlem Theater, 221-236. Laura Baker, “Screening Race: Responses to Theater Violence At *New Jack City* and *Boyz n the Hood*,” *Velvet Light Trap* 44 (1999): 4-19. Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 155-186. April Diane Allen, “The Social Importance of a Small-Town Theater: A Case Study of the Pulaski Theatre, Pulaski, Virginia” (PhD diss., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2004). In this work, Allen suggests that African Americans persisted in their separate space in a segregated theater despite the shifting of segregation laws because they had developed a relationship with this particular place. More in-depth analysis of the ideological resonances of segregation on spectatorship is needed.

on the practice of Black cinematic viewing. Although she focuses on the silent era, her commentary stands to be considered for its relevance in the cinematic context of the 1940s and 1950s. She provocatively suggests:

Black spectators confined to the balcony or other remote areas of the theatre were far removed from the screen. Due to the distance from the screen, their sightlines were not the same as those [whites] seated in lower rows or closer seats. . . . Seeing the pictures from a distance—a distance that was further complicated by the marginalization they likely endured within the context of the film—leads one to question how they compensated for such reductions in the viewing experience, how they negotiated these distant images, and how they internalized these distortions.¹⁵

I give less attention to viewer-screen relations and more to the host of activities that occurred in and around the theater that constituted a crucial part of Black spectatorship. But my work follows Regester's in attempting to answer the important question of the effects and implications of both separation from whites and marginalized "distance" from the screen—however this distance was figured—on Black modes of spectatorship in movie houses that were internally segregated.

Scholarship on film industry exhibition in the 1940s and 1950s has interpreted too little the effects of racialized space on reception. One important exception is exhibition historian Douglas Gomery's groundbreaking book chapter on African American theaters. Gomery's main objective is to trace the history of the Black movie house from the silent era, but he also suggests the important relationship between motion picture theaters and the struggle for civil rights. He points out the clearly inferior industry status of Black movie houses by observing that Black movie houses "occupied the final runs in the area, showing films seen months, sometimes years, earlier by white audiences in the same city."¹⁶ In pointing out this fact, Gomery unearths a cinematic reality that is important to

¹⁵ Charlene Regester, "From the Buzzard's Roost: Black Movie-going in Durham and Other North Carolina Cities during the Early Period of American Cinema," *Film History* 17 (2005): 114.

¹⁶ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 157. Dan Streible corroborates this point with reference strictly to theaters in Austin, TX (Streible, "Harlem Theater" 222-224), as does Ronald Haver, *David O. Selznick's Hollywood* (New York: Bonanza Books,

both industrial and cultural histories of the cinema. The delay in the exhibition of films to Black audiences must have had a tremendous effect on Black spectatorship, and the impact of this delay as an implementation and outgrowth of local or regional government sanctioned segregation has not been adequately studied. The delay signaled that African Americans were second class citizens not only in “public accommodations” and places of food service but also in the spaces explicitly designed for pleasure, amusement, and the “pursuit of happiness”; spaces that should have been open for desire. Even these spaces were not free but were framed by the lingering, atmospheric imputation of menial status. They were structured—crucially—by surveillance and social control for Black spectators, rather than the relationship between screen content and spectator. Even in movie houses catering only to African Americans, places which asserted the possibility of a redeemed otherness, the system of racial delay in film releases facilitated the maintenance of racial hierarchy, silently asserting through lag time that African Americans were worthy only of white hand-me-downs and reminding African Americans that separate was not equal but rather less and *later*.

The delay also must also have led to a gap in film knowledge between Black and white communities, facilitating a popular cultural divide that lent validity to the notion of racially separate social spheres. In a popular cultural milieu and cinematic industrial system where symbolic and monetary value was placed on “newness,” this delay not only left African Americans out of step with current national trends in cultural production but also gave them access only to devalued cinematic left-overs. Publicity events that first-run white movie houses hosted were most often not open to

1980), 361. An article in E.B. Rea’s column *Encores and Echoes* notes an exception to this policy in the case of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (*Baltimore Afro-American*, May 3, 1947), where the film was exhibited shortly after its debut in the white theaters.

Black community members and marked, de facto, “white only.”¹⁷ Dan Streible notes that as late as 1959 (and despite the success of *Brown v. Board*), the first-run Texas Interstate theater chain was instructed to alert potential Black patrons that “this theater does not cater to Negroes at this time.”¹⁸ While exclusion may or may not have been the intent of what we might call “the racial system of runs,” its logic and felt effects were institutionally racist, and also had the de facto consequence of making African American film experience deeply regionalized.¹⁹

Even though less obviously so, it is clear that this cinematic system of racial hierarchy was challenged by the creativity of white and Black exhibitors who owned Black movie houses. Although Gomery rightfully identifies the imputed disparagement and systematic discrimination of these disparities, African American historians have revealed that sometimes people of color have used the insignificant and liminal social standing of Black-designated physically run down, “inconsequential” spaces—from the Church to the speakeasy—as a foothold for vernacular self-determination, pleasure, and hope.²⁰ We need to keep this in mind as we explore African American uses of “final run” theaters.

Although segregation’s logic mobilized the idea of a separate African American nation as a hegemonic bargaining chip, this hegemonic concession had a number of effects unintended by its

¹⁷ Matthew Bernstein, “Selznick’s March: *Gone With the Wind* Comes to White Atlanta,” *Atlanta History* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 7-33.

¹⁸ Streible, “Harlem Theater,” 231.

¹⁹ Arthur Knight also suggests the regional character of film reception, one based on differing theatrical conditions and venues in varying towns in his “Movies and the Racial Divide” in *American Cinema of the 1950s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Murray Pomerance (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 226-230.

²⁰ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). See also Delores Hayden’s *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 1995. Hayden discusses the history of vernacular public and space. Hayden mobilizes Lefebvre’s concept of “counter-space” to discuss how people of color have used space in ways that “challenge . . . reproduction of social relations” (36). She discusses, as well, the ways in which place memory and vernacular space, even *negative* place memories that occur in vernacular spaces, are an important part of urban history and should be considered in preservation efforts and other efforts to record the history of place. She cites the importance of oral history in reconstructing these place memories (46-49), as I do here.

architects.²¹ It was a system which, in its fixation on maintaining the color line, often neglected to notice what was actually happening on either side of it. In Gomery's analysis of the effects of theater segregation, his cross-racial comparison and industry-centered approach obscure the nuances of redemptive local exhibition practices that sometimes mitigated the effects of segregation and made the all-Black movie house a socially important institution in the Black community and a safe place to "read" cinematic texts. As Jacqueline Stewart has demonstrated, African Americans often reappropriated even white-owned theatrical spaces, reworking their meanings just as they renegotiated the terms of spectatorship for screen content not made for them.²² My work also expands on Gomery's analysis. Gomery leaves unanswered many questions about the relationship between exhibition and Black spectatorship: What distinguished Black cinematic programs from white ones? Who were the exhibitors who ran Black movie houses and, perhaps most importantly, what was the creative impact of their artistic and industrial hand in molding Black spectatorial looking and hearing? Answers to these questions hold many of the keys to understanding the relationship between the audience and the exhibitor.

An important part of what I explore is how African American theaters—through advertising, spatial design, and exhibitor/community relations—hosted an array of experiences that deserve to be considered a part of the histories and theories of cinematic experience. Black theaters represented a small percent of industry profit during the period from 1940-1960, and from what I could discover,

²¹ See William H. Chafe Raymond Gavins and Robert Korstad, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York: New Press, in association with Lyndhurst Books of the Center for Documentary Studies of Duke University. Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co., 2001). The editors describe African American life under segregation as a "rich, complicated, heroic, and ultimately ambiguous" (xxiii-xxiv), and state that in addition to the demeaning aspects of segregation, there was "transcendence and purposefulness—defining a goal, reaching out to achieve it, using whatever means available to secure the victory at hand. And there was also a community—church people in the North ready to stand in solidarity and support, congregants in the South ready to use the primary institution they controlled and shaped to deliver on a promise and keep intact a dream" (xxiv).

²² Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 155-186.

the studio-owned theater chains owned very few Black movie houses.²³ Nevertheless these theaters were the most consistent way that African Americans came in contact with the cinema; they constitute the architectural optic and apparatus through which their cinematic vision was honed and the cultural/institutional filter most immediate to their cinematic encounter. These theaters deserve greater attention in our emerging historical understanding of African American reception and viewing practices in the 1940s and 1950s, when cinematic visionings were notably being themselves reshaped, as the industry faced the decline after 1946 as the result of the competition of television and foreign films. This chapter brings to the history of exhibition and reception the voices of spectators who occupied theatrical spaces and an analysis of those aspects of the practice of exhibition that greatly influenced spectatorship.

Regional Contextualization

In order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between Black spectatorship and spaces of exhibition, it is necessary to contextualize these cinematic venues in the urban spaces in which they were situated. Although “race” operates as concept and category on an institutional and political level, it is felt, dialectically, most keenly at the local level. The local is where racial identity comes into practice and is tested—where racial meanings are made and solidified. Accordingly, some

²³ Whether the studios owned or operated theaters that African Americans frequented was difficult to discover, but it appears that they did. The *International Motion Picture Almanac, 1951 Edition* (New York: Quigley Publications, 1951) lists all the theatrical venues in the country and marks with an asterisk those theaters that “catered to Black patrons.” Although more research would be needed to determine whether or not there were studio-owned neighborhood theaters in the North that catered to Black audiences, it is clear from my research that both Fox and Paramount had affiliated theaters that catered to African Americans in the South and Midwest (for Fox see page 445; for Paramount, see for example Georgia Theater Company, which was an affiliate [see page 447], and Wilby Kincey Theatres [see page 478], both of which owned theaters that “catered to Negroes”). More difficult to determine is how the *Almanac* is defining the term “cater”: does this mean theaters that merely allowed Blacks in on a segregated basis or those that catered *exclusively* to African Americans? It should be noted that Dan Streible’s account of Black exhibition conflicts on this point, suggesting that, nationally, Black movie houses were not owned by “regional or national chains, nor by affiliated circuits” but rather “operated independently” (Streible, “Harlem Theater,” 222). Whether studios owned Black theaters in the Northeast is even more difficult to discover because a number of theater owners seem to have refused to categorize their theaters according to race (see for example, 477. All of the theaters owned by Wax theatres were African American venues but are not labeled that way in the *Almanac* of 1951).

background indicators are needed to contextualize the theatrical racial politics of theatrical exhibition.

Although the numbers of Black Richmond inhabitants grew throughout the decades of the first half of the century, African Americans remained at about 40 percent of the population in this medium sized Southern city.²⁴ As we will see in later chapters, the state of Virginia had a number of laws legally segregating the populace. Richmond had its own segregation ordinances as well.²⁵ These ordinances worked to create a highly concentrated Black community, different from those in other southern cities like Atlanta where African Americans were more diffused, spatially. Analysis of Richmond census data indicates the rise of a Black middle class during the period under examination.²⁶

In Baltimore, racial demographic changes also occurred in the period I analyze. Baltimore city's African American population grew by more than 25 percent during the 1940s, due in large part to war industry work.²⁷ Although in 1940, 85 percent of Black females earning a wage were working as domestics, during the war, the numbers of professionals and technicians in Baltimore (chiefly

²⁴ Richmond had an overall population of 193,042 in 1940, of which 61,336 were African American and an overall population of 219,958 in 1960 of which 92,331 were African Americans. See Christopher Silver and John Moeser, *The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1968* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1984), 28.

²⁵ See Chris Silver, *Twentieth Century Richmond: Planning, Politics and Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 185.

²⁶ The number of non-white female professional, technical, and kindred workers increased from 999 in 1950 to 1,739 in 1960. The number of non-white male professionals increased from 545 to 795, a much smaller increase. United States Census. Richmond, Virginia vol. 1950 Table 76-“Age of Employed Persons by Occupation, Color and Sex for the State and for Standard metropolitan areas, 1950.” Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952. See also United States Census. Richmond, Virginia vol., 1960 “Table 122- Occupation of the experienced civilian labor force by color of the employed by race and class of worker and of persons not in labor force with work experience by sex , for the state and for standard metropolitan statistical areas of 250,000 or more, 1960.” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962.

²⁷ W. Edward Orser, *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmonson Village Story* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 49.

nurses and teachers) grew five-fold, providing the springboard for the rapid growth of a Black middle class, a demographic change that would have greatly affected cinematic spectatorship.²⁸

Baltimore and Richmond were similar in that both cities underwent massive “Urban Renewal” projects in the mid 1950s—projects which greatly altered the city’s sightlines and African American lives. The slum clearance and highway building efforts in Richmond wiped out nearly all of the city’s most famous Black neighborhood and the place where Bill Bojangles Robinson had lived, Jackson Ward. This led to massive displacements.²⁹ It also changed the urban topography of Richmond and the spaces through which spectators would move every day. If we consider that cinematic spectatorship and attention was shaped by the urban mode of looking and experience, as Jonathan Crary and others have indicated was the case at the turn of the 20th century, then perhaps we need to pursue specific analysis of the spectatorial and phenomenological modes inspired by urban space at midcentury in the wake of “renewal” and “sprawl.”³⁰

New York’s African American population rose substantially in the 1940s, as Martha Biondi has shown.³¹ However, the multi-ethnic nature of New York and its sheer size make it substantially different from the two other cities under study here. The Black middle class also grew in the 1940s in New York. The move from semi-skilled to skilled labor was substantial during this era.³² Conversations with Black spectators in New York also revealed their greater access to the movies than those in Richmond and Baltimore. The sheer number and variety of movies they had seen indicated a greater access.

²⁸ See Sherry Ortner, *Baltimore: The Building of an American City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), 363-5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Jonathan Crary “Modernizing Vision,” in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, Linda Williams, ed. (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1997), 23-4.

³¹ She notes that the black population rose from 458,000 in 1940 to 547,000 in 1945 and 700,000 in 1948 due to war industry work. (Martha Biondi, “The Struggle for Black Equality in New York,” dissertation, Columbia University, 1997, 15)

³² *Ibid.*, 16-17.

An understanding of the theatrical venues available to Black residents in each of these locales is important to my analysis. In Baltimore, according to my respondents, there were lily-white theaters, all-Black theaters, and internally-segregated theaters for much of the period under study. In Richmond, where theaters were segregated by law until the late 1950s, these same three conditions were in effect. In New York, where equality was mandated by law, there were no explicitly segregated venues but defacto residential segregation worked to create all-Black and lily-white viewing environments in some areas of the city, according to my respondents. It is also important to note that some of my respondents reported that there was discrimination by way of higher ticket prices for people of color at downtown movie houses in New York City. New York was the only locale in my study where integrated theaters proliferated, a fact which greatly effected spectatorship and perhaps encouraged African Americans to attend the movies in greater numbers.

Exhibitors, Local Consumer “Hailing,” and Black Spectatorship

In addition to making their theaters welcoming, exhibitors also exercised pivotal authority over spectator experience. As I will discuss below, exhibitors set the cinematic tone, from viewers’ first encounters with a film to their final viewing: they controlled the programming of films; they controlled the look and atmosphere of the space of the theater; they controlled the advance meanings of films through advertising. Some exhibitors who ran Black movie houses went so far as to conduct opinion research on their African American clientele, as I will discuss later. In many senses, those in charge of exhibition at Black movie houses (including both theater owners and managers) acted as local agents in shifting and shaping cinematic meaning and tailoring the films they rented for a local audience they knew well.

Three central exhibitor practices were important for shaping Black spectatorship: (1) advertising, (2) theatrical decoration (which had both a permanent, structural component and was also shifted according to the ad campaigns for particular films), and (3) cinematic programming (i.e. choice and sequencing of films). Theater decoration for each film has historically been poorly documented and many of the records of this important activity have been lost. However, advertisements for films and specifics of film programming give us a sense of how these exhibitors addressed Black viewers.

By looking at local theater advertisements we can get a sense of the aesthetic sensibility and the set of visual motifs that may have been mapped onto the spaces of exhibition. These advertisements acted as an initial contract and communication between local exhibitor and local moviegoer about what would be offered on screen. However, they also worked as instructions to patrons on how to view what was to come: reading these ads, potential spectators would make not just decisions about what films to see but decisions about what a narrative meant, decisions they would carry with them through the viewing of the film, prompting certain readings of the text itself. Narrative interpretation and decoding of films, thus, began before seeing the film—with the first encounter with the advertising. Unlike the studio-authored press books that were nationally disseminated to exhibitors, local exhibitor advertising could play to a local sensibility and act as a local instance of what Althusser has termed *interpellation* or *hailing*.³³ The following examination will explore exhibitors' selection and advertising of films with attention to how these practices may have altered spectator interpretation of select films and African American reception of the movies on the

³³ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* ed. (New York: London Review Press, 1971), 173-4. This is local "hailing" in the sense that the exhibitors are calling people according to social categories. Advertising is the most literal form of hailing because it calls viewers to buy—in Althusser's terms, it "recruits" them. Also, in the case of cinematic advertising it hails them to "come" (to the theater).

local level. Following this, and using both oral history interviews and newspaper research, I will explore the racialized space of the theater (in its various regional iterations as Black movie house, internally-segregated movie house, thoroughly integrated movie house, and “lily-white” movie house) examining the effects of these various kinds of theatrical racializations on Black film spectatorship from 1940-1960 in New York, Baltimore, and Richmond.

Film Programming and African American Spectatorship in Baltimore

If you were to turn to the pages of the film trade publication *Film Daily* or *Film Daily Yearbook*, you would probably get the impression that the most important pictures of 1948 were George Stevens’ *I Remember Mama*, John Huston’s *Treasure of Sierra Madre*, Laurence Olivet’s *Hamlet*, and Henry Hathaway’s *Call 777 Northside*—films which won Academy Awards and other critical honors.³⁴ However, upon opening the pages of the local edition of the Baltimore or Richmond *Afro American*³⁵ or the *New York Age* or even *Ebony* magazine,³⁶ an entirely different picture of—and critical rubric for—the cinema comes into relief. According to *Ebony*, some of the most important pictures of

³⁴ These were some of the ten best films chosen for 1948 by the *Film Daily* Poll of Critics. Jack Alicoate, ed., *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York, NY: The Film Daily Press, 1951), 145. Quigley’s *Films in America 1929-1969* (New York: Golden Press, 1970), 169-175, lists *Johnny Belinda*, *I Remember Mama*, *Key Largo*, *Hamlet*, *The Red Shoes*, *Red River*, *Day of Wrath*, *The Snake Pit*, *Paisan*, and *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* to represent the year.

³⁵ In this chapter I will refer to the *Baltimore Afro-American* either as the *Afro* or *Baltimore-Afro American*. I always indicate when I am referring to the *Richmond Afro-American*.

³⁶ Throughout the course of the late 1940s, *Ebony* began to “scoop” and outstrip the “local” Black newspapers (which actually had always served a national function, as their consistently high national distribution rates show [Negro Yearbook of 1946 suggests that only 41 of 98 Black newspapers had no out of state circulation and all had a combined average out of state circulation of 356,079, with a total circulation of 1,809,060. Jessie Parkhurst Guzman, ed., *Negro Yearbook* (Alabama: Department of Records and Research of Tuskegee Institute, 1947), 388-9, in terms of their knowledge and insider status regarding films. Although in some ways they were not in competition (*Ebony* was published monthly and the Black newspapers were often published twice a week with a weekly National edition), they were in reality in some significant competition for Black media-designated dollars. In terms of film, although *Ebony* had a significantly less opinionated (and almost never named) set of reviewers, they nevertheless did significant research on upcoming films and got both the visual and political scoop on emerging films with any sort of Black theme. It seems they were given greater access to the studios than the Black newspapers, as they had access to preview screenings (as their review of the earlier version of *No Way Out* evidences) and also access to the film sets (as evidenced by the fact that they published more production images than the Black newspapers did). This follows the trend of decline of the Black newspapers during the 1940s and 1950s and the rise of the national Black magazine, one fueled, ironically, by Charles Johnson’s ability to attract mainstream (white) advertising (and mainstream advertising dollars).

1947 were Walter Colmes' independently produced *The Burning Cross* (a Klan expose), Tony Patton's *The Peanut Man* (a feature length film on George Washington Carver), and Phil Karlson's *Black Gold* (which deals with racism). In 1948 *Ebony* highlighted Frank Borzage's *Moonrise* (which deals with public hangings and criminalization), Howard Hawks' *A Song is Born* (starring Danny Kaye and featuring Louis Armstrong and Buck and Bubbles, the film depicts racial integration achieved through symbolic musical harmony), Alberto Latuadda's *Senza Pieta* (which depicts an intimate friendship between an Italian prostitute and an African American soldier). In 1950 the magazine focused on Joseph Losey's *The Lawless* (dealing with lynching in a neo-realist style), Joseph Mankeiwicz's *No Way Out* (dealing with race riots), Mark Robson's *Bright Victory* (depicting Black soldiers and interracial tension and friendship), and Alfred Green's *The Jackie Robinson Story* (which deals with the racial integration of professional baseball).

The perceptual and evaluative difference in choosing the year's best cinematic picks speaks not only to divergence in critical standards (and perhaps differing senses of what movies are *for*) but also to variance in racial exposure to film; a vastly different type of film fare was cast on the screens of the Black movie houses nationwide. This was because the selection of films was a task for which the local Black movie house exhibitors (most of whom were not studio-affiliated but linked to independent chains) had always been responsible.³⁷ This selection process greatly affected the cinematic perspective and spectatorial positioning not only of Black journalists, who publicly commented on them, but of Black filmgoers more broadly. Among those films selected by Black theater owners and critics alike in the 1940s and 1950s were the racial problem films, which arguably

³⁷ I define the Black movie house to include both neighborhood theaters that were all-Black and centralized movie houses that were for specified as catering to Black patrons. The term Black movie house is not meant to include white houses with designated space for African Americans, but movie houses which, while they often did not bar whites, were predominantly Black either de facto or de jure.

constitute what Herman Grey terms a moment of emergence of “Blackness” in the dominant cinematic discourse.³⁸ In Black movie houses, the Black-oriented films produced by major studios in this era were integrated with theatrical programming designed and tailored for African American viewership by white theater owners who had a vested interest in thinking from an African American perspective. Promoted through the pages of the Black press, these films (and reviews) highlighted a different angle on the cinema, sorting and rating Hollywood productions according not only to Black presence, but also to racial-political relevance. Film fare chosen by African American movie house owners and programmers was confined to those films for which they could bid, and these films were, for the most part, not booked in their first-run. However, within the constraint of lack of access to films, these movie house owners were free to book local “hits,” building on *thematic* concerns of relevance to regular spectators rather than booking films on the basis of their newness. Within the realm of films available, these exhibitors strategically chose a variety of films dealing with themes relevant to African American life and centralizing minority (and specifically Black) experience. Movie selection was an important part of cultivating a Black spectatorial vision. The films selected would create a steady diet of images for African American viewers that would carry ideological effects along with entertainment value. Exhibitors had to bid for pictures that they thought would produce a positive response in their clientele as entertainment and that they would be interested in seeing. Furthermore, in Black movie houses, booking was actually managed on an on-demand basis: shows were held over as long as audiences were interested in them. This practice of holding films beyond

³⁸ See Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness”* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1995), 1-13.

their initial booking added to the need for theaters to be responsive and attentive to audience desires.³⁹

From the vantage point of our current moment, many of the Black films of the 1940s seem lackluster because of their poor production quality. But this deficiency is due in part to the absent sense of “liveness” exhibitors provided through the string of experiences and encounters with text and narrative through local advertising and ballyhoo.⁴⁰ The locally interpellative resonance of the Black movie house with the texts—the call and response between them—made these spaces formative of localized reception and spectatorship and may have compensated for apparent dimensional deficits in the text.

Because their film product was limited to a mix of B-films produced by the majors, independent, and foreign films; subsequent run films; and rereleases, Black movie house exhibitors creatively employed the double bill to create a richer set of possible meanings through *combination* than a single film would have elicited alone. For example, capitalizing on the theme of resistance, The Harlem theater in Baltimore showed, in tandem, *The Battle of Apache Creek* (1952), which depicted victorious Native Americans, and *The Dead End Kids' Mobtown* (1941), which showed the triumph of a group of down trodden, trouble-making, urban, white ethnic kids.⁴¹ Although these films were from vastly different moments, through a sort of collage programming, the theater owners primed, if unconsciously, counter-ideological and “resistant” reading strategies by linking a set of films that shared the theme of resistance.

³⁹ Robert Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, D.C.: An Illustrated History of Parlors, Palaces, and Multiplexes in the Metropolitan Area, 1894-1997* (Jefferson, N.C: MacFarland and Company Publishers, 1999), 299.

⁴⁰ Jane Gaines has pointed to the centrality of this mode of viewer experience of the theatrical space in her “From Elephants to Lux Soap: The Programming and ‘Flow’ of Early Motion Picture Exploitation,” *Velvet Light Trap* 25 (Spring 1990): 30-37.

⁴¹ Advertisement, *Baltimore Afro American*, April 29, 1952, 7.

In addition, although the “imperfect” films that made up standard Black movie-house fare were often inferior in gloss-factor and overall quality to Hollywood’s “A” product, these films nevertheless exploited their relative freedom from studio control and mainstreaming (many of them went without a PCA seal) to explore themes (including racial issues) and scenes that were neglected by big-budget Hollywood.⁴² For example, as I discuss in Chapter 6, *The Well* (1951), like many other independent films, contained images of African Americans and race relations that were more complicated and condemnatory of white racism than the studio system typically allowed.⁴³

Black movie house exhibitors repeatedly ran Black films (that is, films with all-Black casts) in addition to films that would key into Black politics and experience, bringing them back for command performances.⁴⁴ They clearly made savvy choices, mobilizing what Janet Staiger referred to cinematic “product differentiation.”⁴⁵ Based on my limited analysis of the programmes offered in Baltimore, MD, it seems clear that Black movie house exhibitors wanted to show films that dealt with racial themes, especially those relevant to Black life. For example, in the city of Baltimore, in November of 1959, there was at least one African American oriented film playing in a theater every single week (and most weeks there were two or three) at one of the city’s seventeen movie houses catering to African Americans. There was also considerable variety of films: titles for November included prominently *Tamango* (1958), *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), *Go Man Go* (1954), *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956), *The Defiant Ones* (1958), and *Sapphire* (1959). In October, there were Black-oriented films for four out of the five weeks of the month printed in the *Afro-American* newspaper, and the films hailed

⁴² Thomas Cripps suggests this in his *Making Movies Black* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 221.

⁴³ An example of a B-film that explored these themes is *Storm Warning* (1951) produced by Warner Brothers about the Klan, which I will discuss at greater length in chapter 3.

⁴⁴ Certain films were so frequently rerun that they appear to have operated as “fillers” or “programmers” when there was nothing else to be shown.

⁴⁵ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristen Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 99.

from two decades, including *Pinky* (1949), *No Way Out* (1950), *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959), and *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959). Although other audience demographics were probably served by this fare, teens were clearly among those that exhibitors wanted to draw, as evidenced by the spate of late 1950s non-studio teen films, including *High School Big Shot* (1959), *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956), *Let's Rock* (1958), and *Beat Generation* (1959). Because Black movie house owners and film programmers did not have access to the newest films, their programming could be organized thematically rather than by release date. These independent movie house programmes in many ways were more flexible and, within the limited confines of what was available, these movie house owners could exercise a higher degree of choice and personal and local taste than first run theaters, which had tremendous pressure to show the newest films. More detailed analysis of the content of these films and others shown in Black movie houses will yield more information about how exhibitors engineered thematic content to speak to Black spectatorial interests and life experiences, but this analysis is beyond the scope of the current project. The fact that these films were shown— and repeatedly—does indicate the desire of owners of Black movie houses to appeal to African Americans using African American themes. Designing their film programming to provide material (images, narrative threads, and action) of interest for African Americans, these theaters tailored the cinema, within the extent of their limited bidding power, to clear a channel and make a comfortable space for the eyes of Black spectators.



Figure 1- Baltimore Afro-American June 24, 1950

Centralizing Blackness: Local Exhibitor Advertising and Priming Black Spectatorship

Universal's *Imitation of Life* (Stahl, 1934) was in a sense a tale with two stories. First, it told the story of a white mother's struggle to care for and relate to her growing child even as the necessity and desire to work took her away from the home. The second story told of a Black mother also faced with the desire to understand her child who, born with exceedingly light skin, claims whiteness rather than Blackness. But the advertising for *Imitation of Life*, which appeared in the *Baltimore Afro American* in 1950 at its re-release engagement at the Harlem theater, tells nothing of the first story. Instead, it takes up the voice of the Black daughter in the second storyline, proclaiming: "You don't know how it feels to look white and be black!" The graphic, likewise, centralizes the drama's African American characters and storyline. A hand-drawn sketch of a crease-browed Louise Beavers as the Black mother, Delilah, looms large in the background, while a sketch of a light-skinned Black

woman, presumably Peola (Freda Washington), turning dramaturgically away from her mother with hand *raised* towards her, takes the active foreground. By contrast, making a static cameo in the ad is Claudette Colbert, whose photograph peeks into the ad's space from the far right, without even a full face shot. Colbert's marginalization is further accented by the fact that the ad bills her as appearing in "Louise Beavers Imitation of Life." Above this graphic, as if to confirm its near complete discounting of the story involving the white family, reads the bold proclamation, "still the greatest *race* drama of our times" (emphasis added).

This example shows how advertising in the Black press was an important way for exhibitors to communicate with Black audience members about the racial relevance of what was showing on the screens of Black movie houses to the American racial realities (of segregation and racial hierarchy) that African Americans knew well and could relate to in their own lives. Exhibitors explicitly stated that they purposefully "revised" film ads "to give proper attention to Negro stars" neglected by the Hollywood studios.⁴⁶

I am suggesting that local exhibitor advertising did more—Black movie house ads primed Black film spectators to a particular reading of the texts they advertised, opening up channels of spectatorship that Hollywood contained, minimized and sometimes closed. My study of the *Baltimore Afro-American's* film ads from 1940-1960 shows that these ads became not only a place where the "personality," specialty, and stylistic flare of each Black movie house was visualized, but also a place where Hollywood narratives were retooled in order to suggest readings to Black audiences. Using materials supplied by the distributor as well as their own graphic materials, these exhibitors used techniques of collage to alter the significance of certain white images and to magnify (often literally)

⁴⁶ Clark Davis, booker for Lichtman Theaters, letter to Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, March 1, 1943, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

the size and importance of Black images and roles. While the content of studio-produced advertisements was often designed primarily for white audiences, these exhibitors took on the effort to make accessible and alluring to African Americans movies and advertisements not made with them in mind. These ads demonstrate an affirming, pro-Black aesthetic that thrived even under the imposed humiliations of the system of segregation. In altering these advertisements, exhibitors from African American movie houses paved the way to an alternative set of readings of these films, readings that centralized African American narrative presence, Black masculinity, and African American female beauty—among other elements often omitted in Hollywood’s narratives. By utilizing what Susan Ohmer has called the “image context” for the on-screen narratives—that is, the images not explicitly on screen but which surround and lend meaning to the screen images—these ads reworked the meanings of Hollywood narratives for a specific localized Black audience.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Many previous studies of advertising have focused on its ideological effect rather than its priming spectatorship and expectations for specific films. See for example Susan Ohmer, “Female Spectatorship and Women’s Magazines: Hollywood, *Good Housekeeping*, and WWII,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 25 (Spring 1990): 51-68. Mary Beth Haralovich, “Advertising and Heterosexuality,” *Screen* 23, 2 (July/August 1982): 50-60. Diana Waldman, “From Midnight to Marriage Vows,” *Wide Angle* 6, no. 2, (1984): 40-48.

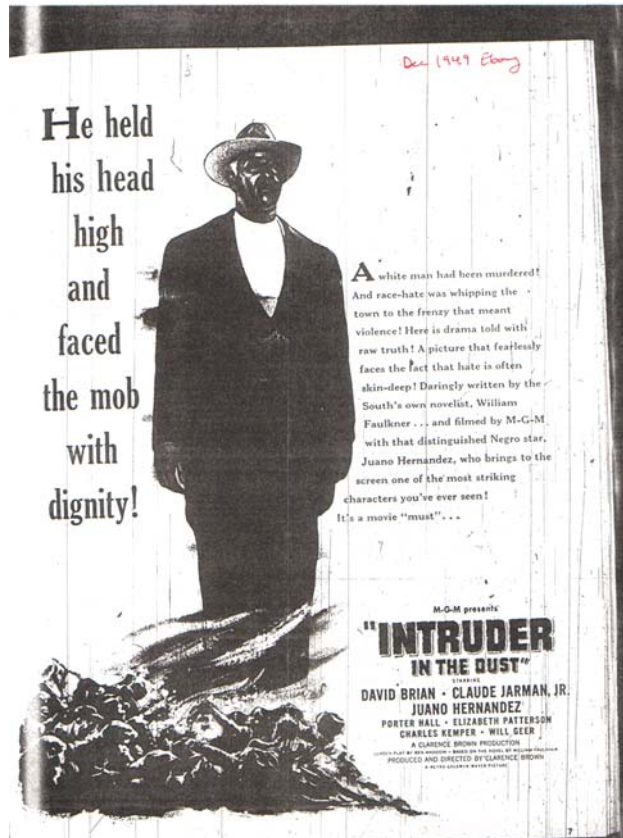


Figure 2-Ebony Magazine December, 1949.

In the 1920s and 1930s, studios generally did not buy advertising space in the Black press, leaving the task of advertising to African Americans to the local, largely independent exhibitors. Douglas Gomery suggests that in the 1960s, Hollywood began to prepare ad campaigns for African Americans. My research suggests that not only did studios begin creating separate, racially-differentiated ad campaigns earlier than the 1960s, but that even before then, Black movie house exhibitors shifted ad material to appeal to Black audiences and represent Black voice and identity.⁴⁸

As early as 1949, with the rise of national Black magazines like *Ebony*, *Negro Digest*, *Tan Confessions*,

⁴⁸ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 165-6. Randy Gue's work on "cultural difference" in advertising in Atlanta in the 1930s, suggests that local theater advertising with an African American focus dated back at least to the Depression era. See "It Seems that Everything Looks Good Nowadays, as Long as it is in the Flesh and Brownskin: The Assertion of Cultural Difference at Atlanta's 81 Theatre, 1934-1937," *Film History* 8 (1996):208-218.

and *Jet*, Black focused advertisements had become a regular part of studio practice. They led Black audiences to bring to the theater very different film expectations, thus stretching these films' meanings and structures by exploiting the medium's polysemic qualities for marketing purposes and for Black pleasure. Take, for example, the advertisement for 20th Century Fox's *Broken Arrow* (1950). The film tells the story of a white man, Tom Jeffords (James Stewart), who, in advocating for peace between Native Americans and whites, falls in love with a Native American girl. He lives with her tribe and ultimately marries her. The advertisement in *Ebony* was tailored to Black interest in integration, reading "Nothing can change our love—neither the color of your skin, nor mine." The ad also foregrounded an endorsement of the film by NAACP executive secretary Walter White.⁴⁹ Similar advertising strategies were used for *Intruder in the Dust* (1949) and *Home of the Brave* (1949). In national press campaigns, Pressbooks for films with interracial casts also commonly featured "an African American page," or one specifically labeled "for special audiences," that contained ideas and images that would help theater owners to advertise these films to African American audiences.⁵⁰ Some evidence exists of studio-authored, Black-centered advertisements as early as the mid-1940s; the 1945 re-release of *Imitation of Life* was accompanied by an African American-oriented trailer that featured Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington.⁵¹

However, Black movie house advertisers continually took this marketing one step further, using artistic license to visually "reauthor" the story, thereby manipulating audience expectation to place greater emphasis on certain scenes featuring Black actors who were stars to the African

⁴⁹ *Broken Arrow* advertisement, *Ebony*, Sept 1950, 3.

⁵⁰ There were racially specific advertising angles in the pressbooks for MGM's *Intruder in the Dust*, Fox's *Pinky and No Way Out*, and UA's *Home of the Brave*. These often featured a special page with press photographs of major Black stars, quotes from major Black figures about the film, as well as "retellings" of the film's narrative from a Black vantage point. These pressbooks are available at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (hereafter cited as AMPAS), Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, California.

⁵¹ This trailer precedes the 1998 VHS version of the 1934 film.

American community. They also emphasized themes central to Black life and, most importantly, culturally specific accenture, vernacular, and reasoning.



Figure 3-Ebony Magazine July 1949



Figure 4-No Way Out (1950) Pressbook (Twentieth Century-Fox)

The studio-produced advertising campaigns for a number of films with racial themes of this era seemed to play down “the racial angle,” perhaps to accommodate widespread white racial bias that the studios called “Southern” or to “surprise” white viewers with the racial angle.⁵² For example, the press book and poster graphic for *No Way Out* (sample pictured above) contained very few images of African Americans, even though the film depicted race riots and gave a near starring role to Sidney

⁵² See Thomas Cripps, “Myth of the Southern Box office,” in *The Black Experience in America*, eds. James Curtis & Lewis Gould (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970).

Poitier, playing a Black doctor who is the first to integrate at an all-white hospital. However, the Harlem theater developed an ad campaign in which Sidney Poitier was not only pictured, but was prominent in each and every ad. Likewise, most of the studio-produced graphics for MGM's *Edge of the City* (1957), a film which featured Sidney Poitier, did not contain images of him. Instead, the white romance plot was the angle promoted in most of the pressbook's advertisements. In the exhibitor retooling of the ad for the *Afro* newspaper, though, Sidney Poitier became, again, the central figure. In these large ads, which sometimes took up the majority of the page in the entertainment section, not only were Black stars the focus, but exhibitors emphasized "African American perspectives" on the narrative, promoting Black subject positions in film viewing.

Detailed analysis of these ads exposes the manner in which they guided spectator's attention and opened up an optical and thematic framework for reading the film. The ad for Fox's *No Way Out* (1950) (see Figure 5) used the technique of cutting photographs (one frequently used in the Black press's collage-filled entertainment pages), to stencil a jagged edge around the image of Sidney Poitier and Richard Widmark. The advertisement, unlike those provided by the distributors, also prepares the viewer for the racism of Johnny Biddle (Richard Widmark), with the caption, one referring to Black people, coming from Widmark's mouth, "When they're down—kick 'em...and keep them there." These lines are not taken from the script but were most likely authored by the ad's designer, an elaboration of the script that links Widmark's racist character to the segregationist rhetoric of the era parroted here.

Richard WIDMARK

"I'm Gonna Kill You Slow..."

COURAGEOUS!

POWERFUL!

ELECTRIFYING!

OUTSPOKEN!

...an ADULT Entertainment that challenges you to experience the emotions of others.

no way out

EXCELLENT!

with **GREAT! LINDA DARNELL** **VIVID!**

BEAUTIFUL! **SIDNEY POITIER** **STIMULATING!**

"When they're down-kick 'em... and keep them there..."

POIGNANT!

IS IT A CRIME TO BE A NEGRO?

DOTS JOHNSON

THE PICTURE... THAT TOOK GUTS TO PRODUCE!

Figure 5-Baltimore Afro-American December 28, 1950

Using the aesthetics of the comic strip to keep audiences interested in the ad, as well as a variety of typefaces to provide layered visual effects and the feeling of multiple “spaces” in the graphic, this ad not only introduces and stimulates audience interest in the film’s themes, but actually begins to allow audiences to “take up” and engage with racially provocative aspects of the narrative. Using lines of dialogue purportedly from the film, and borrowing still photos from three separate scenes as well as publicity photos of individual stars, it brings these scenes to life across its vertical plane. This ad also centralizes characters entirely omitted from the distributor’s advertisement; Sidney Poitier is not the only focal point of the ad’s midsection but shares the spotlight with his Black female costar, Mildred Joanne Smith, who is labeled “beautiful” by the advertiser. Smith was entirely omitted from ad campaigns engineered for and in the white press, which focused exclusively on Linda Darnell. The ad also raises questions that the film itself shies away from, making up for Hollywood’s muted and equivocal approach to extremely important racial themes and questions; the film’s advertisement significantly positions under Poitier’s image the question: “is it a crime to be a Negro?”—a question that is entirely absent in the pressbook and that the film never directly asks but which audience members can now bring to the film as a frame for their reading and experience of it.

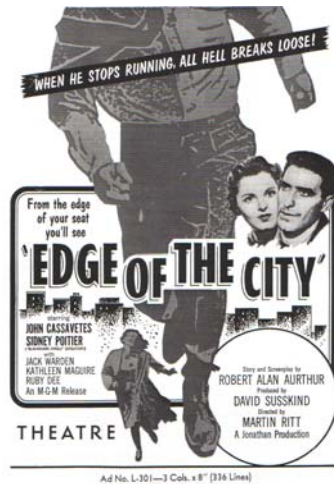


Figure 6 -Edge of the City (1957) Pressbook (MGM)

Likewise, the MGM distributor pressbook for *Edge of the City* (1957), another film which featured Sidney Poitier, also gave scant coverage to the “Negro angle,” neglecting to show any African Americans in the poster art and relegating discussion of Black themes to the “special audiences” page (see Figure 6). The exhibitors from Baltimore’s Met theater, however, played up Sidney Poitier’s presence in the plot rather obviously and somewhat ominously, promising an action-filled conflict between him and a white man (see Figure 7). The top of the ad shows a man’s legs running; beneath the text reads, “A man makes a choice . . . Either he runs away or he fights! There’s no halfway on the savage waterfront that exists like a world apart at the Edge of the City.” This line, one present in the distributor-produced advertisements, was probably intended by the distributors to refer to John Cassavete’s character, Alex, who has gone AWOL. Instead, the Met theater’s ad team sets up viewer expectation for the final scenes of *Edge of the City*, where, using a hook as his weapon, Poitier fights a racist white man, Jack Warden (Charles Malik), to the death. Beneath this is the image of an enlarged gloved hand holding a hook, which is entangled around (or *through*) the proportionally smaller image of the body of a man. This figure is turned away from us. But parallel to him and opposing him on

the left side of the ad is a close-up shot of Sidney Poitier, in costume, directly addressing the viewer. If we imagine the gloved hand to be Poitier's, as the ad encourages us to do, then Poitier has a dual presence here—imaged as both smiling, close-up face and fighting hand. By contrast, the ad shows no images of white star, John Cassavetes's face. It would be entirely easy for the reader to imagine that the lines in the ad's copy refer to Sidney Poitier's character, a reading that would have primed its African American spectators to look forward to the final scenes of the film, where Sidney Poitier does indeed finally stand up to the white bully. John Cassavetes is mentioned nowhere in the copy: instead, the ad insists, the film is “starring SIDNEY POITIER star of ‘Blackboard Jungle’ and RUBY DEE.” In the time between seeing the ad and seeing the film, African Americans film watchers could imagine the possibility that the plot centered on Poitier rather than Cassavetes.

Figure 7-Baltimore Afro-American March 30, 1957

WE'LL FORMER...
 (Small, mostly illegible text)

**'Lucky'
 forecast**
 (Small, mostly illegible text)

ROOSEVELT
 512 West Middle St.
 On Our Giant Screen

SUN MON-TUES WEDS THURS FRI

HENRY FONDA

IN
**"THE WRONG
 MAN"**

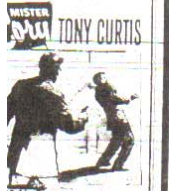


ED. One Day Only APR 3

TONY CURTIS
 IN
**"SQUARE
 JUNGLE"**

PLUS
 JEFF CHANDLER
 IN
**"YANKEE
 PASHA"**

WEDS-FRI-SAT APR 4-5-6

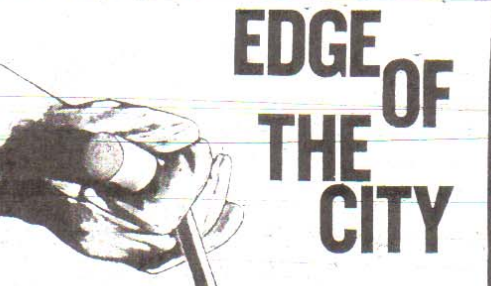


5 CARTOONS

MET NORTH & PENNA. NOW PLAYING
 La. 3-3700



A man makes a choice...
 Either he runs away or he fights!
 There's no halfway on the savage
 waterfront that exists like a
 world apart at the



Filmed where it happened on New York's teeming docks



starring **SIDNEY POITIER**
 Star of "Blackboard Jungle"
 AND **RUBY DEE** AN M.G.M. RELEASE

★ ALSO ON SAME PROGRAM ★

Eddie Fisher · Debbie Reynolds

BUNDLE OF JOY

Adolphe Menjou · Tommy Noonan

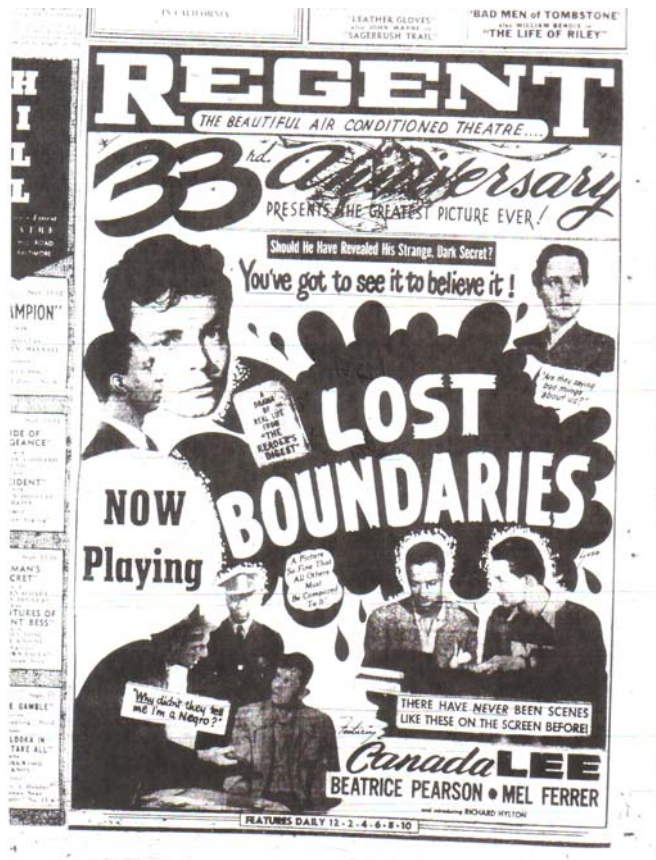


Figure 8-Baltimore Afro-American September 10, 1959

Exhibitor-authored film ads from Black movie houses played up the racial integration angle deemphasized by the studio distributors in their race-safe, white Southern-friendly ad campaigns. For example, the studio advertising campaign for *Lost Boundaries* (1949), distributed by Film Classics, had played up a “shock of Blackness” approach—one emphasized also in *Pinky*, showing the young son of the light-skinned Black family, staring, traumatized and horrified, at his (Black?) hands—looking perhaps for the stain of Black blood. The film was advertised by the Regent theater in a vastly different manner: it showed two images of Blacks and whites together. But the ad goes even farther creating, via collage, a third image uniting and even overlapping African American and white players, thus increasing the film’s integrationist, interracial appeal. For additional effect, and perhaps playing

up the film's subtle horror motifs, the film's ad appears to be splashed in blood, graphically representing the Black blood that is the central "problem" of the film. But neither the moment of discovery of Black blood nor the white-skinned Black character are emphasized in the Regent's ad. Also, this film ad, like the one for *No Way Out*, highlights the Black feminine subject position more than the studio distributor advertising did. Note, for example, that the Black woman's voice (in an advertiser-invented internal monologue) is represented in the right hand corner of the ad where she queries "Are they saying bad things about us?" The prevalence of characters' internal monologue in the Regent's film advertising is noteworthy. In emphasizing internal monologue, these ads not only framed the films in terms of Black voice, but played up those angles the studio had chosen to leave as subtext; in this case, the integrationist angle. This integrationist, African American-centered advertising motif is evident also in the *Baltimore Afro-American* ad for the film *The Kid from Cleveland* (1949), a film distributed by Republic, one that including baseball legend Satchel Paige. It takes as its primary image what looks like a homemade still image of Paige and a young white fan.

In Mary Beth Haralovich's study of studio posters from the 1930s and 1940s, 96 percent of those posters sampled used images of heterosexual romance as the "narrative enigma" to stir audience interest. This, she found, was true even when the films advertised did not center on romance (she uses the example of *Moby Dick* [Bacon, 1930]).⁵³ In my study of the *Afro-American's* film ads, this heterosexual romance motif was very rare. More often, these ads centralized Black masculinity, but also included female voice and perspective.

⁵³ Mary Beth Haralovich, "Advertising Heterosexuality," *Screen* 23, no. 2 (July/Aug 1982): 52.

URGENT
MUSICAL

At the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper, several Black Tenors and Pages to D minor and for the first time, "Belafonte's mom in GE offering" ... "Belafonte's mom in GE offering" ... "Belafonte's mom in GE offering" ...

HARLEM **STARTING Wednesday!**
A STORY OF TEEN-AGE MURDER THAT WILL START YOU TALKING AND THINKING!

M-G-M presents TRIAL

A KISS IN THE DARK - A SCREAM - A PRETTY TEEN-AGER THE VICTIM!
Did 16-year-old Angel Cervera commit the crime of passion that shocked the nation?

STARRING
GLENN FORD • JUANO HERNANDEZ
ARTHUR BORNHIVEL
JOHN KENNEDY • MCGUIRE • HODIAK

SAM'S TV SPECIAL
Call SAM to replace your 17" picture tube only \$24. Includes installation and one year guarantee. SA 7-3978

Figure 9-Baltimore Afro-American November 5, 1955

For example, the *Afro's* ad for the 1955 MGM film, *Trial* (a courtroom drama where a Mexican-American youth, Angel, is nearly lynched by a white mob upon suspicion of his murdering a white girl whom he admits to kissing), focused on Afro-Puerto Rican actor Juano Hernandez's powerful role as the judge who saves the Mexican-American boy's life. In the ad, Hernandez is so much the emphasis that Glenn Ford, the star who receives the most screen time and lines, is not even pictured. And in the written copy, Hernandez is given equal billing with Glenn Ford. Again here we see the graphic motif of presenting actor head shots underlined by dramatic copy, verifying African American presence in the diegesis and beginning to tell the film's story from an African American perspective. The advertisement's final frame, however, emphasizes the perspective of Angel's mother, played by Katy Jurado (who appears twice in the advertisement) rather than Glenn Ford's character or even Juano Hernandez's. Perhaps this emphasis given to Jurado was due to the fact that in

addition to her A-film role in *High Noon* (1952), where she played the old flame of the film's protagonist, she had starred in a number of B-Westerns that had played at Black movie houses, thus increasing audience identification with her. Perhaps this advertising angle was also due to the desire to draw mothers—even specifically mothers of color—through the Jurado character. The ad's final caption further emphasizes the mother's subject position, reading: "Where ever the frantic mother turned, another 'friend' turned into another enemy." These ads centralized Black masculinity but also gave women of color *voice*.

The *Afro*'s advertisement for Universal Pictures' *Red Ball Express* (1952) gave spectators the opportunity to read the film through the heroism of the Black soldiers who become, through the visual in the ad, the film's center-point. By contrast, ads in the white press pictures *only* Raymond Chandler and none of the African American characters. It even presents a romance angle: the copy reads "even in war's holocaust, they found love's waiting arms!" The ads for the Harlem theater clearly primed African American readers to look for these African American characters, and carried over the theme of heroizing Black servicemen from the Baltimore *Afro*'s front pages.

ANNE BAXTER DALE ROBERTSON MIRIAM HOPKINS
 LES VEGES QUARTET
 MUSIC BY THE MAD MEN OF SWING
 Also 2nd BIG HIT!

HARLEM
HELD OVER
THE RED BALL EXPRESS
 THE NEVER-BEFORE-TOLD STORY OF THE ARMY'S DEVIL DRIVERS!

Starring
 JEFF CHANDLER SIONNY POITIER
 MURRAY JOHNSON ROBERT DAVIS

HITS 2
 Finders Keepers

Figure 10-Baltimore Afro-American April 29, 1952

★ Late Shows Tonite!
HEROIC HOLIDAY HIT!

270 MILES OF BOMBS, BULLETS AND FLAMING BEDLAM...
 to carry the ammo and gas to Patton's tanks!

THE RED BALL EXPRESS

Even in war's hottest they found love's waiting arms!

Starring
 Jeff CHANDLER · Alex NICOL
 Judith BRAUN · Charles DRAKE
 JACQUELINE BYAL · SIONNY POITIER · WEN O'BRIEN

Plus
TODAY'S GREAT RODEO RIDERS vs. THE LAST OF THE WILD HORSES!

Filmed at the world's leading Rodeast
 • PHOENIX
 • CHETENNE
 • CALGARY
 • PINDLITON

Starring
 John LUND
 Scott BRADY
 Joyce HOLDEN
 Chill WILLS

'BRONCO BUSTER'
 in Technicolor

RITZ
 5214 Wilshire Boulevard
 W.L. 1221
 Opens Daily 6:15

UNITED ARTISTS
 DOWNTOWN • 9th & Broadway • Rt. 7 4311
 • Direction FANCHON & MARCO
PARAMOUNT Hollywood
 Hollywood & Highland • ME. 3263

Display Ad
 May 29, 1952
 Los Angeles Times
 pg B6

Figure 11-White advertising for Red Ball Express

The advertisements also prompted readings that troubled the notion of subaltern subservience and the ideology of Black docility by encouraging African Americans to identify with marginalized people engaged in fighting against those forces that oppress them. In featuring B-action films that focused on prison riots, Native American revolt and African American confrontationalism, these film fare, aided by the film ads, gave way to new Black spectatorial possibilities. The Harlem Theater prominently advertised the 1952 Universal film, *Battle at Apache Pass*, a sequel to the Jimmy Stewart hit, *Broken Arrow* (1950), which had received positive Black press coverage and reviews. *Broken Arrow* was hailed in the Black press because of its apparent sanctioning of the miscegenation theme (if only when it involved Native Americans and whites), its depiction of discrimination, and because of the rarity of its humane depiction (of many but not all) of its Native American characters.⁵⁴ The advertisement for the sequel not only prominently displayed the Native American characters, but also plastered their names over top of the ad, drawing ocular attention to “Geronimo!” and “Cochise!” In addition, the ad includes the following line: “As enemies they fought! As BLOOD BROTHERS they hurled their HATE AGAINST THE US CAVALRY!” (original emphasis—see Fig 12). These narratives certainly emphasized the concept of cross-tribal blood brotherhood, but they also capitalized on the oft-rumored presence of “Indian” blood in Black families, a link that would draw African American interest and spectatorship on the basis of connection to the Indians rather than the white men in the Western. Ironically, this ad also ignored the history of African American involvement in the Cavalry. Some of the film ads also toyed with the theme of closeness between Black men and white women; the ad for MGM’s *Glory Alley* (1952) not only prominently featured Louis Armstrong, but placed his horn perilously close to Leslie Caron’s hips.

⁵⁴ See Brian Henderson, “*The Searchers*: An American Dilemma,” *Film Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (Winter, 1980-1981): 9-23.

Figure 12- Baltimore Afro-American April 29, 1952



Figure 13- Baltimore Afro-American July 15, 1952



Sometimes the advertisers spent little time focusing on the question of narrative, instead focusing directly on the star, as Anna Everett has shown was common practice for the Black press's film reviewers more generally:⁵⁵ for example, the advertisement for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1960) in the *Afro* is supported by a loud press shot that reads: "Archie Moore is a Movie star now!" The title of the film is buried in the bottom right-hand corner. In the *Baltimore Afro's* March 14, 1959 ad for a double feature (Warner Brothers' *Band of Angels* and MGM's *Edge of the City* [both 1957]),

⁵⁵ Everett, *Returning the Gaze*, 162-66.

the image of Sidney Poitier is removed from its marginal narrative position as a subplot and given centrality, both physically and thematically. Poitier's character is also given lines that he does not have in the film. In the ad, he tells white-looking Amantha, "You're the same color I am!" This line profoundly shifts our reading of the film and these characters. Not only does it give Poitier's character a narrative centrality to match the physical one in the ad's graphic, but it endows *his character* rather than Gable's with the power to name Amantha's racial identity and to "out" her as Black. Another ad for *Band of Angels*, one produced by the Royal theater, again emphasized this angle, giving Poitier and Black actress Carol Drake lines they did not have in the film—lines that tap into a Black perspective and positionality on the drama. In addition, the scene pictured, though minor in the film, prompts and primes Black audiences to read for this moment—and to read the overall film narrative according to the importance of this scene and the primacy of Poitier and Drake's characters.



Figure 14-Baltimore Afro-American July 2, 1960



Whites bracketed and framed and Black subjectivity centralized and layered over in this Ad from the Baltimore Afro American (Five Star Edition), Sept 14, 1957, p19

Figure 15-Baltimore Afro-American Sept 14, 1957

Placing these advertisements among news stories of civil rights, the exhibitors blended the reality of civil rights struggle with a locally promoted rendition of its cinematic imaginary. These ads not only centralized Black figures, aggrandizing smaller roles in ways that promoted Black stars and gave them the top billing the studios often denied them, but also primed African American spectators to read the films according to their interest in these Black stars and their increasingly prominent cinematic roles, a practice that was regularly reported in my interviews. Ultimately this practice encouraged African Americans, in viewing these films, to stress or emphasize the Black sub-narratives that became increasingly prevalent in 1940s and 1950s Hollywood films.

By introducing images and combinations of images not present in the advertising suggested by studio pressbooks, these local exhibitors created an optic for African American spectatorship that would greatly influence audience expectations. It is possible that these ads sometimes created disappointment because the role of African Americans in the film was less dynamic and powerful than in the ad. To simply claim these ads as “false advertising,” however, misses the point. These advertisements are a part of the film text itself and deserve to be considered a multi-dimensional extension and outward projection of its narrative space. In many ways, these ads both projected and fulfilled the promise themselves. Through them, African American spectators could enjoy another venue for African American stardom—in the image-filled para-textual film advertisement itself. They primed African American viewers to create viewing positions that were racially relevant, and built on the burgeoning promise rather than the actuality of a film’s racial representation.

In this way, as through the design of theater spaces and film programming, Black movie house exhibitors and their staff were able to affect the viewing position of African American spectators. Within these ads and among these pages (and in collusion with the overall expression of

the Black press more generally) lay a promise, an ideal vision and a hope for a mirroring presentation from the screen, one that would not only challenge the viewer but present a view of a better self and a better world. Although this was a hope that Hollywood films only ever hinted at, in the time between viewing the ad and watching the film, this hope lingered, full of possibility.

The Space of the Movie House in Black Memory

When I asked respondents in my interview-based study what they remembered about the movies, I did not expect to hear, “I used to scrub the marble steps and make the money and go to the movie.”⁵⁶ However unanticipated this response, it reminds us that movie-going is in some sense inextricably linked to a set of spatial, historical, and experiential contexts—the acts of labor, the body memory of inhabiting the spaces of exhibition, the strong collective memories of the movies—that belong to our understanding of Black spectatorship and must be included in them.⁵⁷ Among the strongest of these spatial memories of the movies are memories of being in the movie houses themselves and the practices of exhibition that imbued them with local meaning.

As Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence have suggested was true in the era of silent cinema, theaters were racialized in a variety of ways depending on the city, the region, and the prerogative of the owners.⁵⁸ They also distinguish between Black and white theater owners. Because there were no Black theater owners to my knowledge in the locales under exploration during my period of analysis. I do not make this distinction. Theaters fell into four categories: predominantly white theaters with designated “Black” space or show times (what I call “internally-segregated theaters”), white-only

⁵⁶ This exact phrase was used by a focus group respondent from the Winchester Senior Center in Baltimore. But the comment was echoed by 2 other respondents in Baltimore including Lillian Smith and Marion Bush (both interviewed by Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005). The fact that three respondents remembered this is a significant finding and suggests a relatively widespread practice.

⁵⁷ Edward S. Casey defines “body memory” in *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 146-181.

⁵⁸ See Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself*, 79-88, where they describe the various theatrical arrangements and African American responses to them.

theaters that completely barred African Americans (which I term, following Black press usage, “lily-white”), theaters that catered nearly exclusively to Black patrons (which I refer to as “Black theaters” or “all-Black theaters”), and integrated theaters (mostly Northern) where the seating of Blacks and whites was undifferentiated by law. In the following section, I examine how these four styles of movie house racialization impacted African American spectatorship.

Predominantly white, internally-segregated spaces of exhibition were often engineered to curtail Black pleasure and to *perform* racial hierarchies. They were designed to be spaces of social humiliation for African Americans, but did not always act as such, sometimes becoming spaces of dissent and disengagement and theaters of interpersonal conflict and spectacle. Part of this had to do with the dynamic nature of looking in theatrical spaces: not only were *looks* projected from spectators to screen and between fellow spectators, but often physical interaction occurred between spectators (and, in rare instances, between patron and screen, when patrons “talked back” or threw objects at the screen).⁵⁹ These interactions framed cinematic experience, subjectively positioning spectators with as great a force as the ideological content of the images themselves. Because the theatrical space of the cinema never became fully disengaged from its predecessor, the live theater (and some Black movie houses doubled as legitimate theatrical venues), the dramatic tensions that surrounded these spaces fostered a spectatorial collective. Anger at the screen, at other spectators and at the management sometimes supplanted screen action with social action in both “lily-white” and segregated movie houses. In locales where segregation was the rule, like Richmond and Baltimore, the high social dramatics of segregation, which spatially mark Black otherness and inferiority and white dominance

⁵⁹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure of Narrative Cinema,” in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell Press, 2000), 492-4.

and power, had a force of interpellation that has gone largely unexamined in analyses of African Americans (let alone white) experience at the movies.

In the case of Black movie houses, a number of dedicated theater owners devoted time and effort to carving out a positive and non-threatening theatrical experience for African Americans through the Black movie house.⁶⁰ Their efforts placed the all-Black movie house among those institutions in the Black community that cultivated dignity for African Americans, as many of these Black movie house owners labored to subvert racial hierarchies that marked “Negro” space as inferior. While they were clearly not revolutionaries, and their trade in some sense depended upon the maintenance of segregation, they endeavored to create and maintain equality for African Americans under the separate but equal legal paradigm, sometimes even going beyond traditional exhibitor public relations and becoming a part of the community. These Jewish exhibitors, like Abe Lichtman, who owned the Lichtman theater chain in the upper South, and the Hornstein family, which owned United theater chain (including the Harlem and Regent theaters) in Baltimore, did much to develop an alternative basis for the Black relationship to the screen through their alternative model of exhibition practices. This exhibitionary turn provided room for the growth and development of autonomous Black cinematic practice. But where these exhibitors failed to provide adequate entertainment on screen, Black spectators molded their own screen experiences, talking back to the screen and to each other, which allowed them to claim and more fully occupy these spaces and to create entertainment practices on the text’s margins.

As much as segregated exhibition sometimes became the basis for a relatively positive all-Black experience, the industry’s system of exhibition was clearly not designed to suit Black exhibitors

⁶⁰ Bowser and Spence suggest that these theaters provided an “inclusive experience,” unlike the exclusive experience had at the predominantly white movie houses. Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself*, 80.

or their patrons. As a rule, Black movie houses were *automatically* designated to subsequent run status and, as far as I could discover, very few of the studio-owned theaters were Black houses.⁶¹ Many Southern locales, but not Richmond, had no Black movie houses at all, and in these places African Americans were either denied access to movies or were given limited access at white theaters.

“Jim-Crowed” Theaters: Subjectivity, Protest, and the Cinematic Apparatus

According to Val Lewton, a producer at RKO and an uncredited story editor of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), Joseph Breen of the Production Code Administration would not allow David O. Selznick to use the word “nigger”⁶² in his film because of an explosive event, one which had occurred only a few years before: Lionel Barrymore had “inadvertently” uttered the word “nigger” in the film *Carolina* (1934) which caused “rank and file” African Americans to throw “bricks at the screen” in *multiple cities* (Chicago, Washington, Baltimore, New York, and Los Angeles), costing exhibitors money and frightening the upper echelons of the vertically integrated motion picture business.⁶³ Although this event was not reported in the newspaper and was perhaps kept under wraps by the studios themselves so as to avoid bad press and any repeat occurrences, the story nevertheless became a legend and an active part of decision-making about race at the level of studio production. Whether accurate or not, the story powerfully suggests the plausibility of African American deployment (symbolically and pragmatically) of protest at the site of exhibition as a weapon against Hollywood’s “inadvertent” racism. It also simultaneously reveals the film industry’s self-perceived vulnerability to Black consumers at the exhibition site—one most likely inlaid with racist assumptions. This section

⁶¹ *The International Motion Picture Almanac* for 1951 lists Paramount as having owned a handful of theaters catering to African Americans. The Georgia Theater chain, for example, a pre-Paramount decree Paramount affiliated chain, owned four Black theaters of their fifty total theaters. Charles S. Aaronson, ed. *International Motion Picture Almanac*, (New York: Quigley Publications, 1951), 447.

⁶² In this dissertation, I do use the word “nigger” rather than a euphemism in order to preserve historical accuracy. I apologize sincerely to those, including my interview subjects, who are offended or pained by the term.

⁶³ Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons, *Dame in the Kimono* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 95.

will consider practices, effects, and subversions of segregation in lily-white and internally-segregated movie houses.

Theoretically, the cinema provided a space of subjective interplay between screen character and viewer. How did the practices of Jim Crow—or Jim Crowed screen images—and the resulting failure to “hail” Black spectators disrupt the intended cinematic spectacle and viewing practices? In part, as my oral history interviews with older African Americans show, segregation made viewing markedly more distracted, causing viewers to have to break through a variety of social filters before they could engage with the on-screen spectacle. Segregation inscribed racial hierarchy onto space. Using space to racially objectify and dehumanize, it was designed to say “this place is what—is who—you are.” The films themselves may have interrupted this logic with images of other places, providing a space for escape from segregation’s logic. But even if the film temporarily disrupted this imputation, the overwhelming, grounded reality of the theater as socially segregated place threatened to overwhelm the power of the light-and-shadows images on screen. The theatrical space provided a competing narrative and spectacle, one which, for African Americans, centered on their culturally-imposed aberrance and uncomfortable stigmatic racial inferiority. While African Americans became acclimated to these racial indignities, and even found ways to read around them to provide enjoyment, these indignities nevertheless affected viewing.

Although none of my respondents remembered any protests that involved brick throwing, some remembered other, more everyday protest strategies that resisted segregated entertainment with “playful,” “infra-political” acts of confrontation that entertained the protesting viewer.⁶⁴ These acts of

⁶⁴ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), 183. These acts of resistance, which not only defied segregation but also mocked it, could be classed with what James Scott has called “infra-politics,” which, like infrared rays, are “invisible . . . in large part by design—a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.”

resistance would not interrupt the flow of “a good time” but would interrupt the narrative flowing from the screen and, with it, onscreen and in-house expressions of dominant power:

If somebody saw something they didn't like in the theaters [on screen], there was a lot of booing going on . . . booing and all was normal—but they didn't throw bricks. They would throw cups at each other, but not bricks. 'Cause you weren't going to tear up the screen 'cause it wasn't so easily fixed in the Black community. So you weren't going to tear up what you had to go back next week to see.⁶⁵

Sometimes strategies of resistance were geared towards segregation rather than the screen:

I was telling her: the Blacks used to go upstairs and the whites downstairs. They did that for a long time down there. Even into the 50s. They did that for a long time down there. Even in the Hippodrome. They had the Blacks upstairs and the whites downstairs. That's why we used to throw stuff down there. [laughs] Yeah, we used to throw stuff down there.⁶⁶

In addition to transgressions of segregation's line, some Baltimoreans developed more elaborate infra-political schemes for resisting segregation of entertainment spaces. Entrance requirements for white-only movie houses had a loophole in Baltimore: according to a number of my respondents, non-U.S. residents of African descent could get into white movie houses and sit among the whites without being barred by the management. One respondent reported that a group of African American students with whom she had attended college at Morgan used their fluency in Spanish to flout the color line by fooling a white exhibitor into letting them in at a white-only theater because he thought they were “Spanish,” an act that not only got them bragging rights in the college classroom, but also displayed their ability to transcend white systems of power.⁶⁷ In this instance, these African Americans resisted the

⁶⁵ Verna Kindle, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005.

⁶⁶ Mixed Gender Focus Group, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Sept 2005.

⁶⁷ The text of my interview with Mary Flannagan reads: “Back in '42. We had a group of young men . . . they were very fluent in the Spanish. They were all three different shades of Blacks. They went to the Hippodrome. Spoke Spanish to the

segregation of entertainment through their own creative and elaborative acts of performance, creating a new form of entertainment in their act. This shifted modes of spectatorship, turning the theater into a place of conquest, challenge, and subversion of white norms and placing subversive entertainment out of the segregation-imposed spectacle of Black otherness.

Even if African Americans could gain access to the theater, it was not always a site of pure entertainment or unconditional welcome, as it was for whites. For many African Americans whose presence was legally or customarily barred, their movement and choice limited, enjoyment was strained by the pattern of othering demonstrated by both onscreen and in-house evidences of Jim Crow. Many of my respondents downplayed the effects of segregation, assuring me that theater segregation was merely an extension of a segregated way of life—reassuring me “that’s just how it was” and “I never even thought about it.” Nevertheless, my interviews made it clear that Jim Crow did indeed affect Black moviegoers. African Americans who were true movie lovers were presented with a difficult choice: segregated, predominantly white movie houses with timely “special” (my respondents’ category) movies or no “special movies” at all:

You knew you were supposed to go up there [to the “colored” balcony] so you didn’t get all wound up. You went round there. But you paid over there—everybody paid at the same place, but you went round there. So it wasn’t a problem because you knew your place. And you couldn’t buy refreshments—they had refreshments there but we couldn’t buy them so you had to take them with you when you went in there. You

end, spoke nothing but Spanish the whole time they were there. They were able to come over and tell our class about whatever picture we weren’t able to get in to see. . . . But it was three of them that did break that barrier and nobody knew who they were but they thought they were three Spanish-speaking young men who just came over. And they [the theater managers] let them in. They couldn’t turn them away because they wasn’t speaking any English. They only spoke Spanish and it was good. Very good.” Interviewee Rachel Scott also mentioned a similar scenario in which a group of African American men hoaxed a lily-white movie theater owner by pretending to be from the continent of Africa. Dressing like “Africans” and arranging to be sent in a limousine, they were allowed in the movie house. According to interviewee Rachel Scott, they then wrote an expose for the newspaper, but I was unable to find this in the *Baltimore Afro-American*.

got with the program. You didn't try to change it and say "Well, why can't I—" No! You went round there and you went on upstairs.⁶⁸

Speaking in what was perhaps a parentally-mediated voice and intonation, this Baltimore woman addresses the "you" of the segregated Black collective. Her acquiescence to segregation is spoken with a pronounced air of determination—one which places a primacy on foreknowledge of the system—as a weapon against the psychic damage of theater segregation and a tool to make sense of it. However, there is an explosiveness even in this statement. Note for example the "No!" following her rendition of Black complaints: this "dialogue," evident in her speech, indicates the stress and effort of adhering to the system of segregation and the double-voiced, double consciousness segregation imposed.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the goal was to see the film, and this respondent, and many others like her, did so in spite of the policies meant to make them feel inferior and unwelcome.

A number of my respondents described the experience of theater segregation as a traumatic one that had a permanent effect on their perception of the movies. According to my interviewees, African Americans were often made to enter the theater via the back entrances, which not only demeaned them but sometimes exposed them to public safety hazards. This meant that in order to be entertained, African Americans had to overcome the stigma of public degradation and to navigate an assembly of threats:

Norma Scott: What I remember [is] that we had to enter the theater from the outside stair almost like a fire escape. Because Black people had to sit in the balcony and so that's the way Black people went in. . . . I was a little girl and I must have asked why and I imagine my parents told me why. And I don't know. I would have been somewhere—oh I would say five or six years old at the time. And that's what I remember about that.

⁶⁸ Laura Robinson, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Sept 2005.

⁶⁹ Double Consciousness is an important theoretical concept in the articulation of Black identity and philosophy developed by W.E. B. DuBois. DuBois defines double consciousness as African Americans' sense of "twoness"—the ability, one that is both blessing and curse, to see oneself through the eyes of white people—and with the entrapping, debasing white gaze. William Edward Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Cambridge: A.C. McClurg, 1903), 12.

ECS: You were with your parents?

Norma Scott: Yes. I was with my parents and I might even have been with the other couple with whom they were visiting. But I am not sure.

ECS: Do you remember them saying anything about—do you remember anything they said about segregation?

Norma Scott: I don't remember their exact words but I remember *knowing* and evidently because I asked the question I knew the reason why. I knew that we were going up that separate stair *outside the theater* which I knew that was not where you usually go. . . . And I was told it was because we were Negroes and Negroes had to go in *that* entrance to the theater and not the regular entrance.

ECS: I know it's kind of a ways back but do you remember how you felt at all?

Norma Scott: I remember that I knew it was a negative thing. I remember—I mean I have always remembered that scene. I can picture in my mind going up those stairs and it must have been evening because it—or night because it was dark. It was dark outside. And these steps as I said were open. And I remember that it was something—that it was a bad thing that we had to do this. I remember vividly sitting in segregated cars on the train. So the same kind of thing when I was going to Georgia to visit my grandmother. You know, so it's the same kind of feeling.⁷⁰

What we see in this quotation is that, although it is merely sensed, racial exclusion becomes a part of how this respondent experiences the movies—it is a layer over movie experience. This is clearly an intensely-remembered trauma for Mrs. Scott. Her experience is not a neutral one, but one tinged with shades of discomfort, wrong, and perhaps imperiled vulnerability that she cannot completely gather or understand but can unquestionably link to other scenarios of segregation.

Under Jim Crow, theater segregation offended African Americans and drew Black attention away from seeking connection with the screen and toward the vision-based systems of power that surrounded the screen, entrapping and othering them. The combination of racist, stereotypical images with racist seating and admission practices would have surely interrupted seamless concentration on the images and acted as another “filter” through which screen images were passed.

Segregation laws were ostensibly designed to prevent racial friction and to restrain commercial and social contact. Ultimately and most basically, though, legal history demonstrates that

⁷⁰ Norma Scott, interview with Ellen Scott, Baltimore, MD, private interview, Aug. 2005.

segregation laws were used to avert the humiliation imputed upon whites by being seated near African Americans who were assumed to be inferior.⁷¹ This was related to practices of screen censorship: segregation censored Black bodies (which, for whites, signified trouble) from white sightlines, creating white pleasure, if also white ignorance, by excision. The space of the segregated theatre became a part of cinema's technology for engineering white pleasure at the expense of Black choice, autonomy, and equality. Indeed, movie house managers and employees were given, through segregation, police power over their "guests," as disruption of segregation laws could lead to jail time and significant fines for both business owners and spectators.⁷² Although the theater may have been dark, the lobbies were lighted and were places of racial display and enforcement.

Not all African Americans withstood the degradation of theater segregation, however. Many took their protest to the streets, performing their displeasure and militant opposition to segregated viewing practices and to Jim Crow images. During this period, the NAACP launched a nationwide campaign to integrate theaters, and thus the theater became a racially contested space. The theater became a place where Black identity was reaffirmed through collective fight for freedom. As spectacle, in many instances, the screen could hardly compete with the entrance. Segregation also rendered complete suspension of disbelief untenable for African Americans, reminding them of the world outside the theater and the constraints that overwhelmed the narrative world. However, more research is needed to determine whether the dissonance between the sometimes-freedom of onscreen images and the strict segregationist regime of the theaters was a productive one.

More than ten years before the Supreme Court would begin to undo motion picture censorship with the 1952 *Burstyn v. Wilson* case, America's highest Court declared picketing not

⁷¹ Charles S. Magnum, *Legal Status of the Negro* (New York, New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1939.), 140, 187.

⁷² Magnum, *Legal Status of the Negro*, 183.

only a legal activity but one protected under the first Amendment's Free Speech clause.⁷³ Although up to that point picketing had been used primarily in labor disputes, local African American civil rights organizations began to use pickets as a part of boycott campaigns against not only segregated places of business, but racially biased film content that was an extension of Jim Crow's logic. One of my Baltimore respondents clearly articulated not only her anger at the screen images of Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen in *Gone with the Wind*, but also related it to her anger at white racist segregation:

BW1: Umm-hmm [yes]. I remember [Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen as maids]. I didn't like that. Even way back then. I didn't like that.

ECS: Why not? Tell me more about that.

BW1: Be[cause]—it's just like it is today. *Why do they* [i.e. white people] *think they are better than we are?* I'm telling you all the wrong stuff. But that's the way I see it really.

...

ECS: How would you compare it—was the movie theatre at St. Mary's? Was that a segregated theater?

BW1: Down there, yeah. You had to sit in the back. And before I would sit in the back I wouldn't sit down; I would leave. I was hateful like that.⁷⁴

Other respondents not only walked out in protest but protested with pickets: a number of Baltimore respondents mentioned the Northwood theater protests which were sponsored by the Congress on Racial Equality and began in 1953.⁷⁵ Northwood was an important and well-remembered segregation struggle in Baltimore. African Americans were particularly upset about being barred from the

⁷³ William H. Kinsey, "Constitutional Law: Labor Law: Recent Ramifications of the Application of Free Speech Doctrines to the Protection of Picketing," in *Michigan Law Review* 40, no. 8 (Jun. 1942): 1200-1213. *Burstyn v. Wilson* would strike down film censorship in 1952. Over ten years prior, picketing was legalized. *Thornhill v. Alabama* 310 U.S. 888, 60 S. Ct. (1940). The case deemed such picketing illegal only where "the clear danger of substantive evils arises under circumstances affording no opportunity to test the merit of ideas by competition for acceptance in the market of public opinion." In fact, this is an area where the NAACP and the ACLU came into conflict because the ACLU saw boycotting and picketing as coercive.

⁷⁴ Female interviewee, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Sept 2005.

⁷⁵ Northwood was also a site for early Black "suburbanization." Kimberleigh developers had built a "suburban development" geared towards African Americans in this area and continued to advertise in the development. (See *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 15, 1950, 17). Thus the continued segregation of Northwood shopping center seemed to deny African Americans not only the right to equality generally but specifically the right to suburbanize, thus denying specifically Black middle class rights.

shopping center as it stood very close to the campus of historically Black Morgan State University. Robin Kelley has noted that vernacular public spaces (like the city bus) can become “theaters” with “tremendous dramatic appeal” not only for actually transgressing the color line but also for airing anger about the wrongs of segregation.⁷⁶ However, historians have been slow to note the particular importance of actual theatrical venues—spaces already set up through the dramatic marquis and elaborate spatial design as “theatrical”—as conscience-stirring sites for launching both civil rights style and more vernacular forms of political activism. The Black press corroborates accounts of theater demonstrations, recording and reporting on Black theater customers picketing for both better representation and for freedom from discrimination. This picketing activity was not limited to the South: in 1941, Ohio’s Vanguard League, a community organization, forced Columbus’s “lily-white” theaters to shift their Jim Crow policies by filing nine legal suits against RKO and picketing the theater consistently.⁷⁷

Ridiculing images and humiliating restrictions on access to public amusements were a regular part of African American experience in the South—and, through latent discriminatory practices, also in the North. Eradicating these practices of discrimination was imperative for attaining African American freedom of mind, consciousness, and experience. As long as discrimination was allowed to exist, public life—even in the arena of public amusement—for African Americans involved *risk*. As long as law (or everyday practice) prohibited equal access and participation, theaters were about more than entertainment: they were also about politics.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Robin Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem: Black Working Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1, 107.

⁷⁷ “Lily-White Theaters Forced to Drop Ban,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 19, 1941, 13.

⁷⁸ In Virginia, segregation was *explicitly* called for in movie theaters, perhaps because of trouble following the Johnson Jeffries fights. See Magnum, *Legal Status of the Negro*, 57.

Demonstrations against film content covered a variety of issues but seem to have congealed around images so outmoded and overplayed that they had become stereotypical. In 1951, following a boycott in New York of a Broadway revival of the show, a group from South Carolina State College boycotted the reissued film *The Green Pastures* (1936).⁷⁹ Pickets also formed around *Gone with the Wind*'s showing in Baltimore, as indicated in the photo above. In addition to these content-based protests, the theater also became a site for African American political activity of another variety: organizing and recruiting. Theaters at times became a strategic site to target Black women for voting drives—a particularly contentious political activity in the South in this era.

Films with progressive racial themes could also serve an important role in integration efforts, as they highlighted those racial ironies that were a regular part of Black existence and also grounded Black arguments for civil rights. When these films were shown under segregated viewing conditions, African Americans and other groups picketed theaters where they were screened in order to draw attention to the ironic hypocrisy of showing a film pleading for racial tolerance on an unequal basis, evidencing another sight where civil rights mixed with the cinema. For example, in Austin, Texas, “fisticuffs broke out” when “pickets representing the ‘Young Austin Progressives’, formed a line in front of a local theater showing *Home of the Brave*.” Although the protestors’ placards praised the film,

⁷⁹ The boycott, led by Prof. George Smith of South Carolina State College, received so much attention that as far North as Baltimore showings of the film were halted. (“*Green Pastures* ‘Pulled’ by S.C. Theatre: Threat of Boycott Causes Withdrawal,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Mar 31, 1951). Bishop D. Ward Nichols, organizer of the New York protest, focused, in his published critique, not only on the depiction of African Americans, but specifically, on the relationship of African Americans to their God, calling the story a “shameful travesty on the folkways of a religion which never should have been written in the first place . . . a cigar-smokin’ Lawd, carrying on in the best ‘Amos n’ Andy’ tradition can only serve to perpetuate outmoded stereotypes of colored people *and their religion*.” (Italics mine) Bishop Ward likened the film to *The Miracle*, suggesting that if the Catholics could have *The Miracle* condemned, so too should African Americans be able to protest this religious travesty. (“Boycott ‘Green Pastures’ Bishop Nichols Urges,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Mar 31, 1951). [0]Although initial showings of the film had been positively received in the Black press and even among some religious leaders, in the incessant replaying of these images, a stereotype had been formed that stood to impede Black progress. As was the case with MGM’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* project, this film, which was praised by some African American critics in its first run, was perhaps guilty not so much of being inherently bad but of being untimely—becoming so much an icon that it obscured the movement of Black life, Black experience, and Black selfhood.

they condemned the practice of segregation. An unidentified soldier who took the side of those picketing was injured in the fight.⁸⁰ In addition, a headline in the *Pittsburgh Courier* that celebrated the fact that the policy of relegating African Americans to a section of the balcony had been suspended for *Pinky* used civil rights (or Civil War) language, proclaiming “‘Pinky’ Marches into Atlanta: Negroes Permitted to Sit in Entire Balcony for First Time”⁸¹ (italics mine). The *Pittsburgh Courier* also blasted Washington D.C.’s policy of theater segregation during the showing of *Home of the Brave* on its entertainment page.⁸² Although the content of these films was by no means *radically* progressive, they nevertheless became occasions for publicizing the irony of anti-democratic civil rights violations and for dramatizing outside the theater those racial inequities that seemed to be challenged on its screens.

The racial designation of theaters greatly in many ways determined the political dynamics of spectatorship. Black audience experience in movie houses differed by locale and by the conditions of local exhibition: those who lived in locales *without* a freestanding Black movie house were often subject to some of segregation’s worst abuses, including separate entrances and inferior accommodations. These architecturally imposed divisions acted as optical blinders for whites and limited Black access to the space of the movie house and psychologically limited Black spectators’ full participation in the event of moviegoing. For this reason, and in concert with other desegregation campaigns, the lily-white and segregated, predominantly white theaters became important “theaters of protest” against both negative African American images that segregated vision and made the cinema’s optical framework that encouraged a double consciousness in reading race.⁸³

⁸⁰ “Near Riot in Austin over Film,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug 13, 1949, 1.

⁸¹ *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov 26, 1949.

⁸² Billy Rowe, “Dee Cee House Books ‘Home of the Brave,’ Bars Race,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug 13, 1949, 13.

⁸³ William Edward Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Cambridge: A.C. McClurg, 1903), 12.

If the film itself operated as a medium of movement for spectators, seamlessly and effortlessly transporting viewers across space and time, the system of exhibition was much more grounded and reflective of local traditions and conditions. In the South, even in Virginia, the locale I studied most closely, movie theaters were specifically named in the segregation statute. This segregation was designed to limit Black mobility by submitting African Americans to racial scrutiny, making them the object of an entrapping gaze upon entry, and then whisking them “out of sight” (although perhaps not out of earshot).

One African American man from Virginia, where race relations and discriminatory practices seemed to be more intense, described how onscreen material mixed with offscreen happenings to shift spectatorial engagement:

Roy Battle: What they would do is have an upstairs for us. And you could go upstairs but they wouldn't let you go downstairs to mingle with the whites cause it may end up in a fight or something. But you could go upstairs . . . which was a good thing.

ECS: You think it was a good thing? [To be] separated at that time?

RB: At that time it was a good thing because someone [white] would say something to you. . . . So they kept us [African Americans] upstairs and they [white people] stayed downstairs. A lot of things on Broad street—The Roman, National, the Bijou—you could get in there and the whites couldn't go upstairs. Then we had to...then we had to behave ourselves. We couldn't go upstairs and throw nothing on them or nothing or you couldn't come no more . . . but it was a good thing because there wouldn't be no *picking*. See, if you had them mixed, somebody would probably pick at you from what they see in the movie. Say, “Uh-huh: that's you. Told you you wasn't no good. Black so-and-so, Black-this, Black-that.” But you don't got nobody [white] sitting next to you. You go in to see a movie, come in come out. And it's much better that way. So that was smart. That was a smart thing they did was keep us separated for those movies. Especially back then because most all those movies you had the Black people nothing but slaves, you know. Wasn't no voice; no nothing. So it was a good thing. Very educational. And movies back there and then. . . . Thank the good Lord the white people did that [separated white and Black] 'cause if they didn't there would have been a whole lot of people killed, Black and white.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Roy Battle, interview with Ellen Scott, Richmond Senior center, Richmond, VA, Sept 2005.

Before we write off this statement as merely an ideologically bound call for segregation—a sort of hegemonic consent of the governed—it is important to note *why* Mr. Battle calls for segregation. He cites specifically white “picking”—that is, inciting white racist comments, comments that he suggests might rile Black anger and produce Black on white violence that would, cataclysmically, end in race riots and death. Thus, Mr. Battle supports segregation in order to prevent Blacks from being further victimized. Although Mr. Battle reviles the violence he imagines in this scenario, he nevertheless clearly notes that both Blacks and whites would be killed, suggesting Black retaliation that might have been absent a generation before. Most crucially, it is the text of the movies themselves that becomes fodder for racists and the basis for interracial strife, thus rendering necessary segregated viewing: the movies corroborate and egg on white racism, in Battle’s “lay theory” formulation. Battle was among a small minority that reported preferring segregated viewing conditions, although, as I have noted, his preference was contingent upon the presence of white racism.

The landscape of African American theater attendance shifted, at least in Baltimore, in the 1950s, and these changes also indicate the racism of the system of exhibition, as a number of my respondents clearly articulated:

On Fayette street [you had] the Towne theaters. [One thing about it] The whites moved to the suburbs, so the Blacks took over, you know. Even when they had [a theater] down at the harbor. . . . I heard a guy was shot down there. They closed it down. Closed it down. And it had just opened. They said, we ain’t gonna have none of this down here. You know how it is downtown, you know. Closed it down. By that time most of the theater[s] had closed on the Avenue [Pennsylvania Avenue]. The Avenue had begun to fade. That’s why you find a lot of movies in the county now. I know a lot of Blacks go out there to these movies.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Joseph Stewart, interview with Ellen Scott, Southwest Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005.

Aware of the shifts in movie house policy as suburbanization shifted urban populations, this respondent highlights how even after the ending of official segregation, racism still undermined the availability of theaters and entertainment for Black spectators.

Even in places where African Americans had access to no theater at all there was recourse. Movement, whether through travel, visiting, or migration, was described by a number of my respondents as an option—and one that they took advantage of. While we associate poverty with lack of movement, during the 1940s and 1950s, poverty was often the impetus for movement closer to the urban areas where defense production—or, later, other forms of labor—were available. For example, Mary Lewis of Richmond stated that although she could not see certain films in Richmond, when she took a charter bus to New York booked by her Church, her limited horizons were expanded.⁸⁶ Similarly, Thelma C. Lee of Richmond stated that African Americans in Hopewell, Virginia traveled nine miles to Petersburg to attend a Black theater until she and her husband took up management of a Black theater in Hopewell.⁸⁷ Movement allowed Black entertainment seekers to transcend the local imposition of segregation and reminded them of the system’s spatial boundaries and limited hold, one that could be broken by travel, time, and space.

Black Spectatorship and Northern Integrated and Lily-White Theaters

Black spectatorship in racialized movie houses in the North was altogether different. African American New Yorkers had seen far more of the major mainstream Hollywood films than those respondents in Baltimore and most certainly Richmond. None of the Black spectators I interviewed from New York remembered segregation as a part of their movie going experience, although according to my research, a number of them referred to the reality of “discrimination”—even in

⁸⁶ Thelma C. Lee, interview with Ellen Scott, Richmond Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept 2005.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Harlem.⁸⁸ My research confirmed that several of New York City's downtown movie houses relegated African Americans to the balcony or marked up ticket prices for African Americans.⁸⁹ Segregated viewing was not legally enforced in New York, as it was in Virginia, but it was often a social practice with a force and logic stronger than the law.⁹⁰ As one respondent who lived in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York put it:

It was all integrated here. Yes, it was—New York: surely, it was! But it's interesting, when you think of the concept of integration and segregation: you always sat with your own people anyway. That's just the way it was. See, that was the difference: in the South you *could* not. Here, you *chose* not. Because we wanted to be with our friends. And yet I had white friends. [Where] I grew up . . . I had many white friends . . . but then when I came to Bed Stuy which was where my grandmother lived which was an African American neighborhood, then I would go to the movies with my friends—you didn't sit with the white people and you went to school with folks. And you'd say "Hey! [as a greeting] It's starting! Be quiet!" But we always had our own little area. And it was a difference. Choice is a wonderful thing.

Good Otherness: 'Race' Exhibition in Richmond and Baltimore

There was quite a difference in Black cinematic spectatorial experience in locales where there were autonomous Black theaters. Although the film fare was often markedly different (and inferior by industry standards) and the setting much less regal than in white theaters, African Americans

⁸⁸ Joseph Brade of Brooklyn Reported: "In 1940, there were restaurants—these two restaurants, I can't think of the name right now. There was one on the corner of 125th street and Lennox Ave. And there was one on 125th street—I can't think of the name now. They didn't allow Negroes in there. Prior to that, I just can't remember. But anyway they just didn't allow it. But anyway, when the guys came back from the war now, they didn't go for that. And remember the community itself was a hun~almost. Imma say 95~98 percent Black. But on 125th street, that was the commercial district. And all the guys like worked in these department stores like the management and stuff, they were white. The clerks were white so they catered to them. Do you understand that? That's it." Joseph Brade, interview with Ellen Scott, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct 2005.

⁸⁹ "Billy Rose Raps Theater Jim Crow of Negro Patrons on the Main Floor," *New York Amsterdam News*, Sept 27, 1947, 23.

⁹⁰ This was confirmed by my interviewees at the James Weldon Johnson Sr. Center in East Harlem:

ECS: What about the theaters? Were the theaters at all segregated in New York at any point?

V4: They mostly had neighborhood theaters.

ECS: Okay.

V4: That was the way that it was segregated there[0]. Now, you didn't go down to, say, the Paramount on 42nd Street because that was—well, expensive, and then you always waited until it came to your neighborhood because after it left the Paramount, it went to the Harlem Opera House and Alahambra up in Harlem[0].

ECS: So you would wait for it to come to your section of the city?

V4: Yeah, so that was a form of discrimination. (Focus Group interview at JWJ Senior Center, interview with Ellen Scott, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct 2005.)

could nevertheless count on a viewing experience where the reality and palpable boundary line of segregation was less *felt*, as the act of racial separation was not visibly performed. For some of my respondents, this form of segregation was the preferred mode of viewership—over and above integrated viewing with “better” movie fare. African American moviegoers from Baltimore generally expressed a sense that African American venues were far superior, although the spaces may not have been as grand as those in the white movie house:

Female respondent 1: No, we didn’t go to those theaters [white theaters]. . . . But it didn’t bother us really-

Male respondent 2: We had our *own* theaters.

Female respondent 1:—because we had our own theaters.

Female respondent 2: We didn’t even think about going there. To the white theater. It was mostly the whites come to *our* [movie] houses.⁹¹

According to many of my Black respondents, the movie houses were an important part of what “we had”—as a race—an important part of our cultural capital. Verna Kindle of Baltimore thought the Black movie houses were such a good experience that she regretted losing them:

‘Cause in the white theatres you had to behave yourself. You had to behave yourself or you would get kicked out. While in the Black movie theatres—you could really cut up. Usually you knew who was running the theatre. So they wouldn’t put you out. . . . Movies haven’t been no fun since integration took. When it was an all-Black movie theater, we had way more fun at the movie theater than you did after integration. ‘Cause it was more to the theater than just going to the movies . . .⁹²

Joseph Stewart of Baltimore underscored this experience in the Black movie house:

ECS: What was the experience of going to an all-Black theatre?

JS: Well you know how *we* are. . . . They raised so much hell in there. [laughs] If the movie was interesting, everybody was just concentrating on the movie but other than that—they wouldn’t give people a chance to hear the movie—guys with flashlights running up and down the aisle keeping order, keeping order.⁹³

⁹¹ Focus Group, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug 2005.

⁹² Verna Kindle, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005.

⁹³ Joseph Stewart, interview with Ellen Scott, Southwest Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005.

Although, as I have argued, Black moviehouse owners made strong efforts to make good choices among the B-, independent, and “aged” cinematic products they were systematically allotted, sometimes even these efforts resulted in programming uninteresting to Black spectators. Perhaps combating this lack of interest in screen content, viewers used the Black movie house as a site for creative elaboration and for offscreen off-shoots on theatrical drama.

Although most often owned by white Jews, the Black theater was still an important site, not so much because it was a particularly beautiful place, but rather because it provided African Americans with somewhere of their own to go for entertainment.⁹⁴ The cinema was of course an important venue for both African Americans and whites, but it served a somewhat different function for African Americans because it was one of the few places among white-owned businesses in segregated African American neighborhoods that, often, consciously eschewed racism. Jacqueline Stewart has written that “the relationship between actual and figurative ownership of Black Belt theatres [in Chicago] is one of the structuring tensions of Black film culture,” suggesting that Blacks claimed and figuratively owned theatres that were actually owned by whites.⁹⁵ This is something my interviews confirmed for the 1940s and 1950s: Although whites owned many Black theaters, these theaters *belonged* to the community. Located in the heart of the neighborhood, these theaters were a part of everyday, local experience for my respondents. Noting particularly the neighborly way that the

⁹⁴ When I asked a group of seniors from the Winchester Senior Center whom they identified with in a movie from back then, they could not come up with a single person and in fact did not remember identification being a part of why they went to the movies. Therefore I asked, “What did you love about the movies then if you didn’t identify? What was the joy of going to these movies?”

A: “I think back in that time, I think we enjoyed *just going*. I think it was just someplace to go. You know. We didn’t have many of those places to go to. It was just a way to get out the house and be somewhere. It wasn’t that I was trying to identify with nobody.

B: It was for recreational purposes.

C: I would go to keep from washing dishes. [laughs]”

(Winchester Senior Center focus group, interview with Ellen Scott, Baltimore, MD, July 2005.)

⁹⁵ She argues as well that theatrical exhibition often involved “genuine dialogue regarding the appropriateness of material and conditions for entertaining African Americans.” Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 181.

Black movie house manager turned a blind eye to the children entering without paying admission, my respondents underscored that Black personnel at the movie houses were part of what made the experience comfortable and, in a deeper sense of the word, *familiar*:

We used to go to the movies and the man had to know—he had to know all them children didn’t come in the front door. You didn’t come in the front door . . . slip in the side. So you just wait until [another kid came out the back door] and you go in. They [the theater manager] didn’t bother you. You could stay in there all day. [The value] was like two or three times what you get now.”⁹⁶

Some remembered well that these Black personnel allowed them to bring the whole family—even the baby—to the theater, allowing the movies, for better or worse, to become a family experience.⁹⁷ One Baltimore respondent, James Brown of the Senior Network Senior Center, remembered that his local movie theater allowed kids to work for their admission: “They used to have . . . ‘circulars’ and we could go especially [to] the Lafayette and the Carey and the Lennox and

⁹⁶ Verna Kindle, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005. This can be contrasted with my respondents’ fear-inspiring images of the owners and managers of the segregated movie theaters. This is what the seniors at Baltimore’s Winchester Senior center said:

“ECS: Was there ever anything that offended you in the movies? Anything that you thought that should not be publicized or I wish I had never seen that?

Woman 1: When they were calling all that names like “nigger” or whatever, that offended me. It really did. To me it did.

Woman 2: But in the way they would say it, you know.

[Many Assents.]

Made you feel like they *[inaudible]*.

[inaudible] never felt like anything, you know.

ECS: Did you ever complain to the box office person or anything like that?

Woman 1: No.

Woman 5: Did you want to get beat up if you came outside? You better not say nothing.

Woman 2: They wouldn’t let you back in there.

ECS: Okay.

Woman 2: They already got us sitting upstairs. “Now you gonna come down and complain?”

Woman 5: Then go back in there and they’d be sitting out there waiting on you too.

Woman 1: I don’t think we thought on that level. That’s the way it was and the way it was going to be at that time. We just accepted it. That’s what it was. You had to go to the bathroom on this side; they go to the bathroom on that side. We just had to accept it if we wanted to continue to go.” (Focus Group interview, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug 2005.)

⁹⁷ Verna Kindle (interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter senior center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005) and Fran Garcia (interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug 2005) in particular related the importance of the open door policy for crying babies in their discussion of the movie experience.

get the circular and pass them out and they would let you in for free.”⁹⁸ Unlike many other white-owned institutions in the Black community, the movie house acted as a space of cultural translation, a friendly institution, and often functioned, if de facto and not by design, to bridge the divide between Black and white worlds. Many of my respondents described, perhaps hyperbolically, their experience of seeing a white person in the movies as “the first white person” they “ever saw.”⁹⁹

Not all my respondents, however, were so positive about the Black movie house. David Scott of Baltimore, for example, recognized well that the experience of going to Black movie houses was hampered by a racist system of distribution:

Certain movies came to our section of town. And those were the ones you were interested in seeing—whether you wanted to be interested in them or not. . . . There was no such thing as first run movie theaters uptown [where African Americans lived], according to the people who distributed it. . . . If the same movie showed . . . uptown . . . then it would be 6 to 8 weeks later that they would show downtown than uptown.

Although opinions differed on how, the African American theater environment was viewed as markedly different from that of the white movie house, and this alterity powerfully shaped Black spectatorial practices and, by extension, modes of viewing.

Courtesy of Lichtman theaters: Exhibitor Agency in Black Theaters and Frustrating the Design of the Color Line

I have shown how local exhibitor advertisements shaped viewer expectations and the ways that the performance of theater segregation uniquely affected Black positionality with relationship to the screen. But in what other senses did exhibitors in Black theaters author and tailor theatrical

⁹⁸ James Brown, interview with Ellen Scott, Senior Network Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Nov. 2005. These circulars were incidentally the major way that African Americans reported hearing about the movies, although some respondents reported hearing about them through a friend or through “the *Afro*.” One woman remarked: “We would see that in the *Afro*...We couldn’t afford to get a newspaper at that time but Blacks would get an *Afro*.”

⁹⁹ This was mentioned by Laura Robinson in an interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug 2005.

experience to cater to Black patrons? This section explores exhibition from the perspective of the exhibitor, looking specifically at the work of Black theater owner (and white man) Abe Lichtman, owner of the Lichtman theater chain in the Upper South. Lichtman was one of the exhibitors who, with his employees, made the greatest effort to provide a positive and communal cinematic experience for African American clientele during the 1930s and 1940s. In many ways exceptional among owners of Black moviehouses, Lichtman was clearly in the business for more than his own financial gain. Lichtman's exhibition practices and business policies ruptured the binary that marked Black "inferior" and white "superior" by investing in Black spaces and by making every effort to bring to Black movie houses movies that Black spectators could in some way connect with, while also providing a place to discuss these films and high class entertainment events that marked his theaters as more than just neighborhood movie houses. Although Lichtman retired in 1946 and the District theater corporation took over operations, the height of Lichtman's theater business was in the early 1940s and thus falls within the period under study. Lichtman's industrial power was limited in longevity and in scope, but he and his staff nevertheless had a substantial effect on shaping Black viewership in the areas where he owned theaters. Although previous scholarship by Robert Headley has addressed Lichtman in the context of the broader exhibition landscape of Baltimore, exploring articles from the Black press and NAACP sources, my study reveals the effects of Lichtman on Black spectatorship and his relationship to the audience.

Lichtman worked within the highly limiting forces of capitalism and racist segregation, studying these limits closely and working to subvert their mastery over Black life. He ultimately used capitalistic business principles and the system of racial segregation to create a business that would both make money and provide new opportunities, and new vision, for African Americans. Born in

Wichita, Kansas, Lichtman moved east in 1895 and bought his first movie house in Brooklyn in 1923.¹⁰⁰ At the height of his career, Lichtman's theater holdings surged to 29 theaters, stretching from Maryland to North Carolina (including Washington and Virginia along the way). As such, they passed across an imagined line that separated Northern and Southern racial sensibilities. Driven by the racial ideology of Washington, D.C. (which acted as his hub), Lichtman's policies and practices of exhibition bridged Southern traditions of separate but equal with Northern traditions of Black autonomy. Lichtman's placement in the upper South made his business even more of a threat to Southern racial status quo, which insisted on separate and inferior conditions for African Americans.

An active participant in the Black community, Lichtman gave to the NAACP and, in 1940, started "Camp Lichtman," a summer camp for African American boys that was staffed almost entirely by African American counselors.¹⁰¹ Looking for business investments that would also provide opportunities for the race, he financially underwrote an all-Black basketball team (the Lichtman Bears) started in 1941 but, according to the *Afro*, gave complete managerial control to the team's managers, Ewell Conway and Harold Jackson.¹⁰² He even instituted a Black history shelf at the Gainsboro library in Roanoke.¹⁰³ But at the center of these activities were the movie houses that continually hosted a variety of exciting African American-centered events. He arranged press conferences for the Black press with stars like Lena Horne at his theaters;¹⁰⁴ he entertained Black

¹⁰⁰ "A.E. Lichtman Dies Here at 76; Former Theater Chain Owner," *Washington Post*, Aug 25, 1965, B7. Al Costello, "Basketball Bug Bites Lichtman via Bears and Now Lichtman Bites Basketball Bug," *The Washington Post* Mar 21, 1943, R4.

¹⁰¹ For detailed description of Lichtman's camp, see "Staff and Campers for New Camp Lichtman in PA," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 28, 1942, 17.

¹⁰² Louis Lautier, "Capital Spotlight," *Chicago Defender*, Jan 20, 1942, 4. See also, "Lichtman Dies," *Washington Post*, Aug 25, 1965, B7.

¹⁰³ "Gifts for Posterity," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Aug 29, 1942, 18.

¹⁰⁴ "Lena Horne Tells All to Scribes-She Likes Men," *Chicago Defender*, Nov 4, 1944, 2.

notables at gala premieres;¹⁰⁵ and he also hosted other gala affairs which brought the movies to life for his patrons, including, for example, a birthday party for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which Eleanor Roosevelt attended.¹⁰⁶ In all, Lichtman's practices greatly shaped spectatorship by reframing the Black movie house, transforming it from a last stop to a premiere location.¹⁰⁷ For example, Lichtman was able to secure a premier for *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) that predated premieres at most white theaters.¹⁰⁸

Lichtman's theaters were also venues for previewing controversial films, giving local African Americans firsthand access to film representations that concerned them. Showing an awareness of film's cultural politics, Lichtman gave rare space for African American cinematic discussions. At his "invitation-only" screenings (with communal critical assessment and political organizing to follow) for both *Tennessee Johnson* (1943) and a controversial Red Cross film that not only left untouched the issue of the Red Cross "segregating" Black blood but also depicted African American soldiers as clowns, he gave African American spectators a chance to process and think about Black representational politics.¹⁰⁹ Lichtman and his team additionally created film events that featured discussion about films they thought might have particular resonance among African Americans: the 1936 film, *Winterset*, one prominently dealing with injustices in the American penal system, was given

¹⁰⁵ "Henry Brown, Farmer' the U.S. Film is Released," *Chicago Defender*, Dec 12, 1942, 11. Louis Lautier, "Lautier Tells Thrilling Story of Maxwell Anderson's Drama," *Chicago Defender*, Jan 30, 1937, 6. "Gala Premiere Is Planned for 'This is the Army'," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Aug 14, 1943, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Charley Cherokee, "National Grapevine," *Chicago Defender*, Jan 31, 1942, 15.

¹⁰⁷ "Lena Horne Tells All to Scribes—She Likes Men," *Chicago Defender*, Nov 4, 1944, 2.

¹⁰⁸ According to the American Film Institute Catalogue (AFI), the New York premiere of *Cabin in the Sky* occurred on March 27th of 1943, but the film was not released generally until April 9, 1943. However, Lichtman was able to secure a booking of the film for March 25, 1943 at the Walker theater in Richmond, Virginia, making it the first colored theater in the country to show the film and, certainly, one of the first theaters in country as a whole to show the film, signaling another 'first' in the entertainment field (or at least in film distribution), as a Black theater was able to premiere a film before most white theaters ("Lichtman Theater First to Book 'Cabin' in Colored Houses," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Mar 20, 1943, 15).

¹⁰⁹ Charley Cherokee, "The National Grapevine," *Chicago Defender*, Mar 4, 1944, 13. Charley Cherokee, "The National Grapevine," *Chicago Defender*, Mar 6, 1943.

a private screening at the Booker T. theater in Washington, D.C., with the bourgeois addition of “cocktails and a discussion of the photoplay after the screening.”¹¹⁰ The fact that most Black theaters were independently owned, last-run neighborhood houses made Black cultural consumption of movies diffuse and disjointed, making collective response difficult to gauge. However, Lichtman’s premiere houses gave the African American cinematic experience both an upscale and collective character.

When it came to Black audiences, Abe Lichtman was both more of an insider and more of an outsider than NAACP executive secretary and film crusader Walter White. He knew the business better than White, but, as a white man, was still an outsider in Black circles. Nevertheless, he and his African American booker and general manager, Clark Davis, pioneered a film campaign that paralleled (and in some ways rivaled) white’s Hollywood campaign.¹¹¹ The Lichtman/Davis team wrote impassioned letters to six Hollywood film companies and one British film company on behalf of Black spectators, exhorting the studios, on the basis of the pair’s informal research and their experience as exhibitors, to improve their record in depicting the race.¹¹² Feeling that the concept of “better representations” was inherently flawed, Clark Davis argued instead for more inclusion of African American characters in Hollywood films. Davis wrote a letter to one of the Marx brothers in which he explained “that feature length comedies rarely were played in our theaters because they were not money makers.” But, Davis pointed out, when “colored players were included, we not only played these pictures but to big business as well.”¹¹³ This campaign for inclusion was based on

¹¹⁰Louis Lautier, “Lautier Tells Thrilling Story of Maxwell Anderson’s Drama,” *Chicago Defender*, Jan 30, 1937.

¹¹¹ In addition to his campaign in Hollywood, the NAACP files indicate White’s attention to questions of exhibition. For more on Walter White’s campaign in Hollywood, see Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 35-63.

¹¹²Louis Lautier, “Urge Hollywood to Give Race Big Parts,” *Chicago Defender*, Sept 12, 1936, 21.

¹¹³ Clark Davis, letter to Walter White, Mar 1, 1943, 3. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

business sense (more than political sensibilities) and on Black spectators' desires—what Davis termed the “consumer approach.” And it appears to have worked very well: not only did Davis receive a response from the Marx Brothers, but their following picture included at least fifty African American extras, “from six years old to sixty.”¹¹⁴ The name of the film was never specified by Davis. Davis encouraged Walter White to join him in pursuing the “consumer approach,” noting that next to box-office grosses, fan mail was the most important indicator of success in the industry's eyes. “What a tremendous lift it would be,” he told White, “if Lena Horne or her studio for example received even a thousand letters a week about her work.”¹¹⁵

The best evidence of Lichtman's concern about Black spectators is that he took the time to actually poll them on their reactions to films.¹¹⁶ Lichtman's campaigning in Hollywood was based not only on his observations but on amateur polling conducted with Black audiences. For example, when MGM released the controversial film *Tennessee Johnson* (1942), which depicted Reconstruction-era senator Thaddeus Stevens as a villain and Andrew Johnson, an unreconstructed white Southerner as a hero, Lichtman's team screened it for an impressively diverse “cross-section” of Black Washington residents, including three porters, two housewives, eight school teachers, two undertakers, four domestics, one laundry worker, one special police, two cab drivers, two war-time Defense recreation staff, one inventor, and four Howard University Professors, including African American cultural

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Davis to White, March 1, 1943, 2. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁶In addition to the polling described in what follows, Lichtman also followed closely the grosses of his film, attending to areas that tended to be of particular interest to African American theater goers. According to a 1943 analysis of grosses, the favorite stars were “1. Bette Davis 2. Humphrey Bogart 3. James Cagney 4. Clark Gable-Lana Turner (as a team) 5. Rochester 6. George Raft 7. Dorothy Lamour 8. Johnny Weismuller [AKA the Hungarian actor who played Tarzan] 9. Hattie McDaniel; 10. Lena Horne.” (“Pic Fans like Bette, Bogart,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Apr 10, 1943, 18.) The article also mentions that Raft had been a favorite last year, but fell from second to sixth due to “the scarcity of Raft features,” and suggested that Lena Horne was considered star potential as she “accounted for good grosses in *Panama Hattie* and recently in a test run for *Cabin in the Sky* proved a prize clicker with Ethel Waters.” (*Cabin*, the article mentions, was shown to twice as many customers as ever before packed houses in two weeks.) Among Western Stars, Wild Bill Elliot was number one and Charles Starrett, number two.

critic E. Franklin Frazier.¹¹⁷ Motivated by a clause in the exhibitor's contract that stipulated that a theater might eliminate from their schedule "pictures which might offend any race, creed, or religion," the screening was intended to democratically extend a voice to Black film spectators. Unwilling to speak for the Black community without input from *various* representatives, Lichtman management brought the film to the people to judge.¹¹⁸ Although the film was shown in order to gather audience response rather than to influence it, African American film booker Clark Davis' spoken "introduction" before the film's screening perhaps too clearly articulated his position; he was in favor of the film and not in favor of the "constant faultfinders" who drowned out the voice of "the great mass of understanding millions."¹¹⁹ Clark's speech could have certainly moved the test audience towards its overwhelming vote that the film *should* be shown. Only six of the sixty-eight returned responses of the invitees opted against the showing—among the dissenters was E. Franklin Frazier, who wrote a long letter to Lichtman lambasting the film:

You want to know whether I feel it should or should not be used for regular showing at your theaters. My reply is: What difference does it make? The masses of Negroes are ignorant just as the masses of whites and they are not concerned about the facts of history. In fact from the applause which I heard in a section of the audience, which witnessed the private screening, I am almost convinced that even supposedly educated Negroes have not sense enough to distinguish between moral values. . . . This picture is just another distortion and falsification of history designed to appeal to the moral hypocrisy of white America. This picture in a most hypocritical manner makes Johnson the representative of the idealism embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States and Stevens the villain of the play. Perhaps white America needs this form of hypocrisy to survive.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Davis to White, March 1, 1943, Enclosure in letter. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript reading room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁸ Clark Davis, "History and Entertainment," unpublished statement given before the screening of *Tennessee Johnson* at Lichtman theaters, Feb 22, 1943. Enclosure in letter (Clark Davis, letter to Walter White, March 1, 1943). Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript reading room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁹ Davis, "History and Entertainment," 3.

¹²⁰ E. Franklin Frazier, letter to Lichtman theaters, carbon copied and enclosed in letter to Walter White, Papers of the NAACP. In this letter Frazier lambasted the film. Davis, letter to White, March 1, 1943, enclosure: E. Franklin Frazier,

There is no report of Lichtman's response in the file nor was there any record of whether or not they opted to show the film. Nevertheless, the controversy demonstrates that Lichtman took his selection of movies seriously and the lengths to which he would go to avoid any offense of his patrons.

Lichtman obviously stopped short of challenging segregation in his all-Black movie houses. His businesses, of course, depended upon segregation. But in practice, he denied segregation's power within his space and designed a film-going experience that would validate African American spectators. Part of the way Lichtman achieved this effect was through enforcing genuine equality in his staffing, something which members of the Black community at large, and his regular patrons more specifically, both knew about and appreciated. Lichtman consistently hired African American staff—even Black projectionists in Virginia before the state would license them.¹²¹ Lichtman management positions also drew African American theatrical talent. For example, Jack Carter, former actor and star of Orson Welles's theatrical production *MacBeth* (1936) joined Lichtman's Washington D.C. managerial staff.¹²² The presence of stars of color as managerial staff ingeniously removed the dividing line between star and spectator, introducing to spectators the possibility of encounter with these famous figures at the movie houses. While I could not determine their precise duties, it is nevertheless clear that by employing stars in management jobs, Lichtman crucially put them in positions so as to use the show business knowledge that they brought with them. Lichtman's policy of hiring African Americans—not just for interaction with the patrons but for the behind the

letter to Lichtman Theatres, Feb 22, 1943. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript reading room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹²¹Louis R. Lautier, "Richmond Opens New Movie House," *Chicago Defender*, Jun 16, 1934, 9.

¹²²"Ex-Broadway Star Manages D.C. Theater," *Chicago Defender*, Aug 12 1941, 20. Rufas Bryars, supervisor of the Lichtman theater chain, also began his career in showbusiness as a "crooner," ("With Lichtman 15 Years," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Sept 19, 1942, 18).

scenes managerial and operational functions that were often reserved for whites—allowed African Americans the opportunity for career advancement in their own community.¹²³ Robert Headley, the foremost authority on mid-Atlantic exhibition, spoke with H. Graham Barbee, general manager of the Lichtman organization from 1941 to 1946. According to Barbee, the Lichtman organization hired wide and deep in the Black community:

We had 460 some employees in all the theaters and eleven of us were white. All of our supervisors...managers, projectionist, and stagehands were Black. . . . Fritz D. Hoffman . . . became the comptroller . . . Clark Davis as the booker. . . .The assistant booker was George Wheeler.”¹²⁴

Especially noted for his fairness in hiring, Lichtman’s Employee’s Beneficial Association offered employees “\$10 per week for 10 weeks when sick, use of the Lincoln Colonnade and Suburban Gardens twice each year as well as a large salary.”¹²⁵

These business practices were an important part of Lichtman’s relationship with his customers, and by extension the spectatorial gaze he hosted: because these theaters were in the middle of the Black community, the eyes of the community were upon them. Local authenticity, a characteristic enhanced by the hiring and good treatment of local Black staff, was therefore one of the major selling points for these theaters. Also, by providing well for his employees, Lichtman increased a sense of Black dignity and Black comfort in these theaters. These management and employment practices were well known in Black communities in Baltimore and Richmond because

¹²³ “Named to Board,” *Chicago Defender*, Jun 1, 1946, 9.

¹²⁴ Robert Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, D.C.: An Illustrated History of Parlors, Palaces, and Multiplexes in the Metropolitan Area, 1894-1997* (Jefferson, N.C: MacFarland and Company Publishers, 1999), 375 cf. 1. He has also done pioneering work on exhibition in Baltimore, in his *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004* (Jefferson, N.C.: MacFarland, 2006).

¹²⁵Headley, *Washington*, 198. The Lincoln Colonnade was a dance hall situated behind the Lincoln theater. The Suburban Gardens was the first amusement park within D.C. borders. It, unlike many other such venues, was open to African Americans.

the *Afro American* (both Baltimore and Richmond editions) published articles about them.¹²⁶ Black independent theaters, unlike Black independent stores, which tended to be smaller and require fewer staff members, provided many employment opportunities, as they often required more staff. These practices also challenged the implicit degradation of the color line and attempted to provide African Americans with the civil rights they deserved, if in a limited context. In addition, Lichtman's positive image in the Black community was shown by the fact that shortly after the 1943 riots, the *Baltimore Afro* reported that even though "it had been many days since colored patrons had darkened the doors of the so-called white theater in Richmond, . . . colored soldiers not only attended on Wednesday" at Lichtman's Richmond houses, "but also sat along with white soldiers and no one felt inferior or superior."¹²⁷ By treating both Black employees and Black patrons as civic equals to whites, Lichtman hailed Black subjects to his theaters by offering dignity. He helped to shift the subjective framework that under-girded Black spectatorship from one of inferiority to one of democracy. His practices encouraged the race pride that allowed African Americans to claim or reject the images they saw onscreen.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ No other theater owner that I could discover had as great a reputation and received as consistent coverage in the Black press as Lichtman. He is repeatedly mentioned not only in the *Baltimore Afro-American* but also in the *Chicago Defender*. The press was particularly interested because Lichtman gave African Americans the opportunity to hold professional, white collar positions and to attain Black middle class status working in their own communities, something the Black press was greatly supportive of. Perhaps the best examples of articles about his hiring practices are Louis R. Lautier, "Richmond Opens New Movie House," *Chicago Defender*, Jun 16, 1934, 9; "Reunion Speaker," George H. Clarke, city manager of the Lichtman theater Richmond Division, was slated to give a speech on "The Value of Business." ("Reunion Speaker," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Jun 11, 1938, 14); "500 Employes [sic] in Two States Hear Farewell by A. E. Lichtman, Theatre Head," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Mar 23, 1946, 19. That hiring practices were an important standard by which Black theaters were judged is evident. An article on the Cremen family theater chain (which owned the Carey and Lafayette) noted, "the Carey and Lafayette have contributed a great deal in entertainment in their respective communities and at the same time provided employment for a large number of persons throughout the twenty-nine years of their existence." (C. Cremen, Pioneer in Theater Field," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Sept 19, 1942, 18).

¹²⁷ "The Week," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Aug 28, 1943, 2. This quote also indicates that although Lichtman's theaters were catering to African Americans, whites attended them, perhaps because their fare, programming, and atmosphere were superior to other theaters.

¹²⁸ Lichtman also linked his theaters to African American culture through names of his entertainment venues. Although many Black theaters across the nation were named for Booker T. Washington and Abraham Lincoln and even George

District Theaters, the exhibitor that bought out the Lichtman theater chain after Lichtman's retirement, maintained not only Lichtman's personnel but also his fight for race equity. They did so most notably through fighting against racism in the system of clearances (a temporary shelving of films between subsequent runs). The system of clearances had been designed to keep the best movie products from moving too quickly from first run venues to independently owned and small chain second and third run venues. After the 1948 Paramount Decrees declared that "clearances" should only be enforced between theaters in competition with one another, a number of Black theaters protested their second-run status to the motion picture distributing companies, on the grounds that the theaters' high-quality and lack of competition with more elaborate white movie houses qualified them as first-run houses. In a smartly worded and well thought out letter, District Theaters' Morton Gerber used segregation—and what he describes as the theater's "Black-only" de facto standing—against the producers as a wedge into first-run status, better films for Black audiences, and an end to separate and patently unequal booking:

As you know, all of the first run downtown theaters in the City of Washington operate on a policy of strict segregation, admitting only white patrons and excluding prospective colored patrons. The patronage of the Booker T. theater is exclusively colored. No attempt is made to attract white patronage to this theater. Our main media advertising is through the Black press and with the exception of a directory ad in three of the daily downtown papers we use no other type of advertising which would attract white patronage. Hence there is no competition between the Booker T. theater and the first run downtown theaters in the City of Washington. . . . Therefore there is no justification for clearance in favor of one over the other."¹²⁹

Washington Carver, Lichtman brought more obscure historical Black figures to the fore and also some contemporary figures. Lichtman not only had a "Booker T." and a "Lincoln" theater but also "The Langston," "The Attucks," and, in Richmond, where this name meant something, a "Walker Theater," named for Maggie Walker, a Richmonder and the first African American woman to own a bank. Taking cues from Black culture, Lichtman reminded theatergoers of accomplished figures of Black history and also promoted and publicized these names wherever his theaters were listed, including in the white press.

¹²⁹ Morton Gerber of District Theaters, letter to Mr. Jerry Price of United Artists, Aug 22, 1949. Joining in this protest was Leo Brecher manager of the Apollo: "We hereby request that you quote us your terms for the Apollo theater, 251 West 125th street, Manhattan, for first run in its zone on all feature films which you may release or distribute henceforth. We are convinced that it would be of mutual advantage to play some of your pictures at the Apollo, which as you must

In addition to the advertising campaigns in the Black press similar to the ones I describe above, Lichtman Theater Company also pursued innovative radio ad campaigns, a practice that shows the company's attention to patterns in African American media consumption. Lichtman theaters developed these radio campaigns for their films in concert with distributors, but they were ultimately generated by Bill Hoyle, Lichtman's advertising and publicity manager.

Radio was of course an incredibly important medium for the African American community—not only for entertainment but also for news and information. Local, relevant, and relatively autonomous African American-produced radio programs proliferated long before African Americans had access to production in television, film, or integrated print sources. In addition, radio was cost-effective: working class African Americans listeners had access to local radio programs at a higher level than they had to more cost-intensive media. Lichtman used Black radio listenership to draw African Americans to his theaters. For example, in his letter to Paul Lazarus, head of the United Artists' advertising department, Hoyle of Lichtman theaters explained the importance of the radio to the Lichtman's advertising efforts: "You might be interested to know that on our 'Behind the Rising Sun' [film advertising] campaign, we used a total of 80 one minute spots, and two fifteen-minute programs. Our brief research here shows that this was possibly the largest radio coverage used by any local theater on a single picture."¹³⁰ Through these innovative uses of radio, Lichtman formulated his advertising plan in ways that took as given already established modes of media use, a plan which showed both knowledge and respect for community practices.

know, is the foremost theater in Harlem. You must surely be aware by this time that we are legally entitled to an opportunity to negotiate in good faith and without discrimination in favor of any other theaters—'old customer,' circuit theater, or the like. Accordingly we trust that you will negotiate with us as to all future releases." (Leo Brecher, letter to Gradwell Sears, Aug 4, 1949). United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison Wisconsin.

¹³⁰ Bill Hoyle of Lichtman theaters, letter to Paul Lazarus of UA, Oct 21, 1943. United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison Wisconsin.

Beyond simple showmanship, Abe Lichtman designed a theater experience that mixed community participation with theatergoing, a practice that recognized that spectatorship is not static, and that Black institutions (best exemplified by the Black church) often become sites for the politics denied African Americans in the electoral realm or public sphere. Lichtman's theater policies grew out of a genuine relationship with the Black community, which, if driven by good business practice, was also infused by philanthropic fervor born of a sustained care and a realized desire to structure feasible opportunities and greater promise for African American patrons, staff and, more generally, the Black community members. According to Robert Headley, in Lichtman's description of how to run an orderly theater, the first tenet was, "Give the patron a theater he can feel proud of," an ideal that Lichtman seems to have actualized over and over again in the communities he served.¹³¹

Conclusion

As we have seen, a variety of racially specific factors shaped exhibition and, therein, Black spectatorship. The racial design of exhibition had a substantial effect on African American spectatorship. Integrated, segregated, and all-Black movie houses funneled and shaped, if with differing effects, Black vision not only of what was happening on screen but also of African American belonging in the arena of consumption of entertainment. Segregated or "lily-white" movie houses often became the site of, on the one hand, traumatic racialization, and on the other, important, entertainment-based, official and unofficial political activism. Completely integrated movie houses were rare, even in New York, where they were permitted by law. My study provides evidence that some African Americans chose to sit among other African Americans, relishing and exercising the freedom of choice. In the upper South and to a lesser extent in New York where these film houses were reportedly fewer in number, the Black movie house was an important place for priming racial

¹³¹ Headley, *Washington*, 162.

vision and for creating racialized spaces of entertainment and Black spectatorship. Although on one level Black movie houses harmonized with dominant ideology, hegemonically convincing Black spectators of the possibility of separate but equal amusements on and surrounding the screen, this does not detract from the historical importance of good faith efforts of some white exhibitors to make the Black movie house a place where Black spectators could find something they could claim. Likewise, for Black spectators, the Black movie house, through its reflection of community values and its para-textual advertisement, projected the promise of Black equality, articulating Black centrality and Black value as a counter-ideology to much of what Hollywood projected in its films.

Each of these arenas of analysis also evidence a clear connection to civil rights. Local African American exhibitor advertisements graphically represented and emphasized pro-Black aesthetics that were often openly racially confrontational. Segregated and lily white movie houses (and those showing stereotypical screen fare) became the grounds for civil rights movement style protests in the early 1950s. Finally, Abe Lichtman's elaborate and careful design of the Black moviegoing experience operated as a tacit challenge to a separate and unequal film distribution system. These challenges, although microcosmic, had important local impact and intricate phenomenological effects, molding Black spectatorship in ways that mixed action with viewing and destabilized the cinematic contract.

Chapter 2:
Watching Movies, Imagining Equality: An Oral History of Civil Rights and Cinematic Interpretation, 1940 to 1960

Whatever form it assumes—offstage parody, dreams of violent revenge, millennial visions of a world turned upside down—this collective hidden transcript is essential to any dynamic view of power relations.
-James Campbell Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*¹

In the beginnings of his 2002 *Freedom Dreams*, Robin Kelley examines the vital yet underexplored relationship between Black imagination and Black politics. He states that “in the poetics of struggle and lived experiences, in the utterances of ordinary folks . . . we discover the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born.”² In a similar theoretical vein, social movement theorist Doug McAdam has suggested that in order for social movements to happen, not only must structural support and resources be present, but there must also be an intangible factor—one he terms “cognitive liberation”: “movement emergence,” he claims, “implies a transformation of consciousness within a significant segment of an aggrieved population.” This transformation occurs first in the symbolic realm, McAdams suggests. “By forcing a change in the *symbolic content of member/challenger relations* [italics mine], shifting political conditions supply a crucial impetus to the process of cognitive liberation.”³

For better or for worse, in the 1940s and 1950s, during Hollywood’s Classical era and the cinema’s “around the block” ubiquity, the cinema was one of the major cultural mechanisms for

¹ James Scott Campbell, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 9.

² Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 9.

³ Doug McAdams, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-197* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 49, 51.

stimulating imagination and also for projecting the possibility of change. Richard Wright and James Baldwin, two of Black America's most revolutionary native sons, centered some of their most powerful, introspective thinking around movies and cinematic experience, developing their own imagination of freedom, selfhood, and America in response to Hollywood's limited—and limiting—visions.⁴ However, for the most part, the “maps” for this African American cinematic thought have gone largely unrecorded, and the intellectual history of African American relationship to the movies has only begun to be written.⁵ In the following chapter, I want to give critical attention to the question of how cinematic production in the era of the civil rights movement's nascence interacted with Black thought and imaginings of the concepts and subjective movements underlying the civil rights movement. Specifically, I want to examine the relationship between what I will term here

⁴ Richard Wright put much time and effort into writing, acting in, and producing *Native Son*, a 1951 film which itself self-reflexively addresses the cinema as a culturally constructing force. Wright's biographer Michel Fabre describes the writer's “passion for film making” as extending beyond the *Native Son* project. Wright wrote two other screenplays on the heels of *Native Son*: *Freedom Train*, and a project concerning Toussaint L'Overture (Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun [New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973], 352-3). As far as I know, the project of systematically exploring these screenplays for their cinematic imagination has yet to be done and would provide fertile ground for exploration of the relationship between African Americans and the movies. James Baldwin, like Wright, also wrote several unproduced screenplays—one about Billie Holiday, as he relates in *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), a book that primarily explores the author's lingering, meaningful memories of the films from his youth.

⁵ A number of important and rich studies of African American reception have emerged in the last ten years. Those most similar to the oral history parts of my own are Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Robin Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York: Garland, 1998); and Jackie Stacey's *Stargazing* (New York: Routledge, 1994). While these works have been important models for me, they differ from mine in that they do not address the same population or the same films that I address. Jane Gaines, in her *Fire and Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Era*, also deals with questions of Black spectatorship, especially in her discussion of James Baldwin's strongly asserted physical identification with Bette Davis. (Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Era* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 24-51). See also Arthur Knight, “Star Dances: African American Constructions of Stardom, 1925-1960” in *Classical Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, Daniel Bernardi, ed. (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2001), 386-414. Knight adds keen theoretical insight into African American spectatorship by exploring the writings of a number of Black cultural producers, including Richard Wright and James Baldwin, on film. When he examines the picture of the man “sleeping with white pin ups,” he states that “we don't know” whether this man is “more like Bigger Thomas than James Baldwin” (396). Indeed, we cannot know. My study is designed to shed new light on the question of how average viewers felt about and saw the movies. Jacqueline Stewart's *Migrating to the Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Anna Everett's *Returning the Gaze* (Durham, N.C.: Duke, 2001), and Judith Weisenfeld's *Hollywood Be Thy Name* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) have created a foundation for our understanding and knowledge of the meaning and patterns of Black receptions of Hollywood films. What my study adds is a focus on oral history rather than press sources and other document-based historical materials to see what more we can ascertain about Black audience reception.

“cinematic civil rights consciousness” and the cinematic images that moved across the screen in the pre-civil-rights era, examining specifically how and where the cinema was woven into African American intellectual work and imagination around the concepts of integration, interracial relations, and justice.

Scholarly work on African American reception in the postwar/early civil rights era has focused on the NAACP and the Black press reviewers—those major organizations and institutions that mediated between Hollywood and the African American “masses” and who represented the race in the public sphere.⁶ This work has invigorated the field but has also raised many new questions. What do we—can we—know about “average” Black viewers and their perspectives? How did the movies appear from the vantage point of a perspective generated from the African American home, the Church, the Street, and “everyday” Black working class experiences? While I do not mean to suggest a binary distinction between “average” Black spectators and “politicized” Black spectators, it seems necessary to explore in greater depth the voices, cinematic memories, thought lives, and spectatorial experiences of those who, having no explicit political purpose, just went to the movies. Of course, lack of explicit political intention in these readings does not preclude “political” reading strategies (much less suggest that their readings had no politics). We might then ask: what evidence of emergent civil rights consciousness exists in this everyday mode of viewing? Were the movies a ground for the stirrings of an emergent political imaginary?

⁶ Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). In this work, Cripps explores African American reception and activism in Hollywood, primarily through analysis of the NAACP. Anna Everett’s important work, *Returning the Gaze* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pioneers analysis of the theoretical apparatus of the Black press, exploring with both historiographical and theoretical precision the various modes of reading that these press representatives created.

Defining Cinematic Civil Rights Consciousness

Recent work has suggested the important link between civil rights activities and the media, as television (and, before it, radio) became a staging ground for the spectacles of injustice that led to national and international reform of racist segregation policies.⁷ My oral history study suggests that the media, and specifically film, was important not only before the civil rights movement, but also in ways different from the civil rights media agendas promoted by major Black organizations and elite activists. Instead, average working and middle class readings were more abstractly linked to concepts of fairness, morality, and equality. I do not mean to suggest that the films I discuss here were “progressive” or “radical” in their content or intent, or even that they were attempting to deal with civil rights, to raise issues of constitutionality, or to prompt movement politics. Rather, I argue that through a series of modes of spectatorial engagement, including prominently “against-the-grain” readings, African American viewers teased elements out of these films that were pertinent to the civil rights agenda of the moment.⁸ “Against-the-grain” readings have various modalities and functions, both in the lives of viewers and to scholarly understandings of these cultural responses. I want to examine how these readings helped African American movie-goers to distill and articulate the concept of civil rights at a time when civil rights concerns were being increasingly raised in the most emotively charged of interpersonal local settings and, simultaneously, were being worked out at the

⁷ Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Savage theorizes and rigorously documents the centrality of radio to African American postwar struggles to define civil rights and the importance of discovering or creating “a new public narrative of race that could accommodate” Black claims to racial equality (17). Vanessa Murphee, *The Selling of Civil Rights: The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Murphee suggests that the civil rights movement used coolness, calmness, and the iconography of stasis to perform a (middle) classed-one-upmanship on rabid, wildly racist whites who challenged civil rights aims. Murphy notes the use of press releases as well as mass mailings early in SNCC’s campaign (28) and the courting of televisual attention in later moments (42). Mary Dudziac, *Cold War, Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Dudziac has suggested that *Brown v. Board of Education* was largely motivated by governmental concern that international bad publicity would compromise the position of the U.S. in the Cold War (101).

⁸ Louise Spence and Robert Stam, “Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction,” in *Film Theory and Criticism, Sixth Edition*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford Press, 2004), 890-1.

highest levels of government discourse, and in the erudite formal language of political speech and rhetoric.

“Against-the-grain” readings are defined by their relationship to ideology. According to Stam and Spence, these readings operate against the *ideological* and discursive current of a cinematic text, not just outside of the narrative or in opposition to certain privileged characters.⁹ In this chapter, I am interested not only in the relationship between audience “reading” and ideologically-informed cinematic text, but also in the variety of reading practices and their functions. That is, I am interested primarily in the text-as-read and put to use, as dissected and reconceived and put back together with a relevance personal to the reader. Proclaiming certain readings as counter-ideological often reifies the text as the center of ideology. It pulls away from the contexts that inform readership (and are a part of the “reading” itself). I view the text as operating for many of my respondents not as a solid, preconfigured architecture of meaning, but as light and shadow, suggestion, and “material” for textual renderings and insights of their own making. Most importantly, the text is also itself a “juncture,” providing an instance, space, and occasion for reconciliation between what one knows personally and what is the public “imagined”—between one’s own life and what is lived “out there” on the screen.

What do these average Black perspectives have to do with the civil rights movement itself? My argument is that civil rights consciousness—the mounting argument for civil rights and its burgeoning logical framework—predated large scale activism and that the movies helped to shape the contours of this consciousness. “Cinematic civil rights consciousness” occurs when viewer consciousness of either major civil rights issues (such as integration and racial equality) or major civil

⁹ Ibid., 890. Stam and Spence describe an against-the-grain reading as going “against-the-grain of the colonialist discourse.”

rights violations become linked to onscreen happenings. Cinema scholars have argued for the specificity of the scopic modes that accompanied the period at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one that engendered a specific *mode of viewing* inspired by encounters with the new urban landscape and its attractions.¹⁰ My analysis begins to explore the ways that the crucial and defining midcentury racial shifts operated as a watershed in Black subjectivity and viewing relations. Because the American imaginary is and has been linked to the movies, and because of the nationwide power of the form, African Americans in many instances contended with, responded to, and often overcame the depiction of Black lives and desires in the movies in order to develop a self-vision.

Methods

The interviews I cite below were part of a broader oral history study I conducted on African American cinematic experience in the 1940s and 1950s. Please see the methodological appendices attached for more information on the background and identity of respondents and on the research methods employed to gather these responses. Although I have already briefly described my methods and the identities of my respondents in Chapter 1, this methods section is designed to discuss some of the method-related questions inherent in oral historical research on the reception of specific films.

Oral histories of memories of film content—and by extension of the imagination—seem to me to pose a set of problems (and promises) that are not presented by oral histories of events. My method was based on the work of Jackie Stacey, who solicited letters from female fans of 1940s and 1950s cinema and used these letters as the basis for exploration of the responses of British women to Hollywood’s female stars of these decades.¹¹ Because I was not interested in fandom, soliciting letters

¹⁰ Vanessa Schwartz, “Cinematic Spectatorship before the Apparatus: The Public Taste for Reality in Fin-de-Siecle Paris,” in *Viewing Positions*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997), 87; Jonathan Crary, “Modernizing Vision” in *Viewing Positions*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997), 26-7.

¹¹ Jackie Stacey, *Stargazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59-61.

from moviegoers would probably not have generated the responses I most desired. The operation of Black cinematic critique was a crucial part of what I wanted to know, and it is difficult to get people to take the time to write about the things they did not enjoy. Therefore, I asked respondents about their experiences of going to the movies in the 1940s and 1950s and about their responses to films, actors, and narratives they encountered onscreen. While my interviews strictly addressed the period from 1940 to 1960, I did not limit conversations rigorously to my preconceived questions. Instead, as is common practice with oral history interviewing and specifically the open-ended questioning provided by Jackie Stacey, I allowed the respondents' areas of interest and self-generated perspectives to guide our conversations.¹² I made sure, however, that a core set of concerns were addressed in all interviews. My process of interpretation was guided by coding, and my method of coding was to mark and track every issue that was raised by more than one respondent. This method generated over 130 patterns. The civil rights consciousness concept emerged from a variety of codes that strongly suggested connection to themes and issues central to the African American movement for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s.

While there were regional differences among my respondents along other axes of inquiry (including, as we see in Chapter 1, experiences in the theater), interestingly, the area of cinematic civil rights consciousness were relatively consistent across locale.¹³ The goal of these interviews was one similar to Lawrence Levine's in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*: to create the basis for an intellectual history of popular culture that included Black working class responses.¹⁴ As I only present my findings about the intersections between civil rights and film, I only begin to explore this

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The only substantial difference across locale, as I will discuss in my section on *Gone with the Wind*, was in the sense of relationship to one's own history. New Yorkers consistently referenced slavery and the history of Black repression, while those in the South did not.

¹⁴ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford Press, 1978).

intellectual history and legacy in film reception among African American spectators. In several instances where Black press commentary underscores or accents similar thought patterns related to the same cinematic motifs or images, I weave them into my analysis (this is based on my research of Black press and cinematic response from 1940-1960 in *The Richmond Afro American*, *The People's Voice*, and *The Baltimore Afro American*). While I am aware that the press introduces its own forms of bias and was generally a “Black middle class” elite source (as it spoke to the literate), the coalescence of the responses of the writer-elite and “average” Black spectators, far from invalidating my findings about the working class, seemed to make them even more compelling. Just because these responses are not uniquely working class does not make them less the product or property of working class African American culture.

Although I pick up on patterns of Black reception, none of the patterns I discuss below represent a “majority” of responses. My interviewees’ responses to my questions (as well as their self-propelled topical interventions) made interviews widely variant. I was not centrally interested in quantitative data about reception, but rather in understanding two central things: first, responses to films or categories of films that might suggest new ways of understanding Black spectatorship, and second, areas of particular emphasis for respondents. To that end, I focus on prominent “chords” in my respondents’ discussions of civil rights themes in response to the movies. This is in keeping with the goal of the overall dissertation—to look not only at the most direct, dominant representations and evidence but also at the marginal—the thematically linked undertones within cinematic production, African American reception, and censorship. As Lani Guinier has shown, it is a trope of the political dominant to look always to the majority to define public culture, without giving voice to a fixed

minority.¹⁵ That this trope must be altered to provide accurate representation is as true in scholarly writing as it is in “politics-politics.” In exploring these undertones, we get not only a fuller and less didactic version of this history, but also a sense of the complex entanglements that mark cultural production.

Mediated by memory, misremembrance, reticence, interviewer dynamics, and a lack of standardization, the process of interviewing as well as interpretation was often as painstaking, awkward, and confusing as it was revealing. Oral history seems like the most authentic form of historical scholarship because it yields historical knowledge not available from other sources. Particularly in this case, oral history makes available the layered data manifested in inflection and direct expression about interviewee *opinion*, *perspective*, and *conceptualization*. Yet, the method’s apparent immediacy and authenticity also introduces new complications. When information is delivered through the mouths of people, our tendency is to take what is said at face value: this trust is in fact a part of a contract we must enter into in order to do good interviewing. It is only later that we apply the critical distance needed to properly analyze our “source.” Oral history practitioners also have to become, in some sense, experts at interpreting various kinds of mediation. Jackie Stacey notes the importance of recognizing the mediating effects of time on historical accuracy in the form of the lapses and elaborations of memory, changing of framing discourses, and changing perspectives of spectators.¹⁶ In understanding how African Americans thought about screen images of civil rights and those images onto which they mapped civil rights, it is important to remember that these

¹⁵ Lani Guinier, *Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy* (New York: Free Press, 2005). In the early pages Guinier writes, “Structuring decision making to allow the minority ‘a turn’ may be necessary to restore the reciprocity ideal when a fixed majority refuses to cooperate with the minority” (5).

¹⁶ Jackie Stacey, “Textual Obsessions: Methodology, History, and Researching Female Spectatorship,” *Screen* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1993), 272.

memories are funneled through the intervening history of the successes and failures of the movement.

The long lapse in time also made it difficult to determine when respondents had seen the films. Even when they had seen these films on their first release, it was difficult to know when and how subsequent viewings had flavored their original response. In order to counteract these effects, I designed my questionnaire with several memory-triggering questions at the beginning of the interview to help transport interviewees back, resituating them in the moment I was most interested in and in the “grooves” of memory associated with that time frame. Nevertheless, the problem of salience was still a persistent one, because respondents’ lives during the war and postwar years were crowded with much more pressing concerns about paychecks, family relationships, church life, and how to get by. I knew I was not going to get deep textual analysis in most instances. However, I determined that the places where some consistency emerged across interviews in the films, the stars, and genres mentioned reveal a culturally meaningful pattern.

Memory, especially reported memory, is selective, like textual readership, and its processes of assigning salience are telling about subjectivity and the logical structures that undergird it. Oral transmission can bring with it an even greater desire to be true to the history, as well as provide valuable historical information about the lived and embodied experience of history not often captured in written documents. I maintained and still maintain my faith that in interacting with audiences, researchers can discover modes of thought and logical patterns that indicate the “workings out” of ideology and resistance that can be discovered in no other way, a point revealed in the work of various reception scholars.¹⁷

¹⁷ Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985), 11.

While I broach questions of “ideology,” I am not limited to them. Most of the responses that came from my study participants cannot be read as plainly ideologically complicit but are, to use Stuart Hall’s term, “negotiated.”¹⁸ My resistance to completely embracing notions of ideology in moviegoers’ recollections stems from the “blanding” of the complexity of response through the standardizing mechanisms of ideological readings and the return to predetermined conclusions—either resistance or ideological duping that are often read into responses. This kind of ideological analysis has often lacked nuance to appreciate the complexity and multi-directionality of responses and has ultimately rooted both textual and interpreted meanings in the culture industries themselves. While we have the right to interpret the statements of our respondents, we often unknowingly lack the credentials to understand the cultural logics that govern reception and the mechanisms by which ideology takes root in media reception. While Marxist notions of ideology, specifically those with Frankfurt school roots, have done much to point out the lies that our culture tells about race, they have sometimes ignored, made light of, criticized, or misrecognized the culturally specific meanings and logics of audience response. As Jacqueline Bobo puts it, “the failure of some leftist academic and political theorists to acknowledge the ways in which a populace reacts to and uses popular cultural forms is in part responsible for the left’s not gaining the support and following of the people for whom it attempts to speak.”¹⁹

Rather than analyzing one film, genre, or star, I look for patterns across interviews where viewers’ utterances indicated a connection between the cinema and civil rights issues (i.e. integration, lynching, racial injustice in the criminal justice system, and equality). Along the way I assess the question of spectator identification (that is, modes of viewer connection to moving onscreen

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” in *Culture, Media, Language* Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, eds. (London: Hutchinson Press, 1980), 128.

¹⁹ Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995), 4-5.

“agents,” to use Staiger’s terminology).²⁰ I do this because identification is our best and most consistent measure of viewer connection to films and therefore should be linked to any discussion of spectatorship.²¹

There were six central areas where this cinematic civil rights consciousness appeared to emerge from my respondents’ comments. These areas fell into two overarching categories into which I subdivide the chapter: (I) readings that used film to interpret and imagine “integration,” and (II) readings that circulated around historical genres where race was a major factor (the Western and the Civil War film). Under the section on integration, I explore four response patterns. First, I explore the ways that African Americans related to the “racial problem” film, asking how these average viewers thought about films that were intended to say something about African American community issues. Second, I move into an examination of what appeared to be an alternative way to read the

²⁰ Janet Staiger, *The Perversity of Spectators* (New York: NYU, 2000), 34. For Christian Metz, cinematic meaning cannot be made without some form of identification, which is why Metz develops the concept of primary identification, suggesting that when character-level identification is absent, another form of identification—i.e. identification with the act of seeing itself—dominates. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 45-49.

²¹ Scholarship on identification has hailed from various traditions, and thus definitions of identification have been somewhat variable. Early feminist film theory focused solely on identification’s links to gender and sexuality but nevertheless laid the groundwork for our understanding of spectator-screen relations. (See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Anne Kaplan (New York: Oxford Press, 2000), 38-9.) But Gaylyn Studlar and other feminist scholars following Mulvey have pointed to alternative modes of cinematic identification available to marginalized viewers—those outside of the phallogentric gaze. Gaylyn Studlar, “Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema,” in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Anne Kaplan (New York: Oxford Press, 2000), 218-220. Cognitivists more recently have suggested new directions for our notions of identification, first and most importantly by naming various modes of identification that operate among viewers—emotional, empathic, sympathetic, perceptual identification. Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). More recently, African American scholars have further extended the notion of identification in explorations of African American cinematic engagement. Manthia Diawara, in “Spectatorship and Resistance,” suggests that the character of Gus in *Birth of a Nation* caused an initial strain to African American identification and links this to an (ensuing?) pattern of absence of the pleasure of identification among African American spectators. Diawara suggests that often what mediates or “interrupts” the force of identification is in part the poor, non-verisimilar representation of Blackness (subjectively, he argues, but we might also argue *physically*): rather than being designed as sites of Black identification, Black characters are situated “primarily for the pleasure of white spectators.” Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance” in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (London: Routledge, 1993), 216. bell hooks has also explored this area. Stretching our understanding of the “the gaze” beyond the binary (and exclusively gendered) relational paradigm set up by Mulvey, hooks uses postcolonial theory to situate looking relations within an institutional and cultural context. bell hooks, *Black Looks* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116.

Black-victimizing—sometimes horror-driven—racial problem film, exploring the African American interracial imaginary (one that that emphasized fluidity, possibility, and shift in racial meanings, definitions, and behaviors).²² This alternative and counterpart to white imaginings and plans for integration emerged particularly in respondents' comments about *Pinky* (1949) and *Lost Boundaries* (1948). The third response pattern I explore reveals the relationship between Black actors and questions of civil rights. Specifically, I analyze how Black viewer responses to the images (and the truncated narratives) of maids and butlers in the 1940s and into the 1950s differed from their responses to Sidney Poitier. To conclude this section of the chapter, I explore the response of my interviewees to the frequently re-released (and, among those I spoke to, often conflated) 1934 and 1959 film versions of *Imitation of Life*, where they authored critiques of the continued problems in the community that followed (and, some thought, resulted from) integration.

In part two of the chapter, I explore the civil rights themes viewers brought up around historical films dealing prominently with questions of race. First, my respondents' reactions to the 1940s phenomenon *Gone with the Wind*²³ is suggestive about Black responses to the Civil War epic and to Hollywood's retelling of historical narratives of the old South. Because the film came out and was frequently re-released at a time in the early 1940s when questions of civil rights and the old South were an increasingly active part of national discourse, the film had an interesting relationship to early civil rights struggles, one that has been documented in part by Leff and Simmons. Still, the

²² Miriam Petty has argued persuasively that *Pinky* uses tropes of the horror film. We also see some of these horror tropes in *Lost Boundaries*, for example, when the son in the family which is passing for white finally learns of his true African American status. This horror motif is even present in the film's advertising, where the son looks, horror-stricken, at his hands, for the stain of blackness. Racial status becomes a trap from which he cannot escape, despite the lightness of his skin. Miriam Petty, "Passing For Horror: Race, Fear, and Elia Kazan's *Pinky*," *Genders* 40, (2004), unpaginated.

²³ *Gone with the Wind* was officially released in December 1939 but had a theatrical release in most locales in 1940. It was played throughout the 1940s (Mildred Martin, "Gone With the Wind Has Phila. Debut," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan 19, 1940, 19). Preliminary research suggests that it was consistently shown throughout the 1940s through subsequent runs and re-releases.

relationship of average spectators to these debates has not been explored.²⁴ Second, I explore how the Western film (and “the range” specifically) emerged as a place where African Americans, casting their lot more with the Indians than with the white men (in an against-the-grain reading),²⁵ could imagine white defeat and meditate on freedom implied in the possibility of establishing an autonomous non-white nation in the United States. Although these areas of analysis are diffuse, they are based on patterns that emerged in the process of coding interviews for issues pertinent to civil rights.²⁶ The areas where respondents brought up the concepts of civil rights were counterintuitive in ways I thought justified further inquiry. Although it does not follow a single logic, the diffusion of Black discussions of civil rights itself raises important historical questions about Black spectatorship and racial change—questions to which I will return in the conclusion. Displaying various methods of spectatorial engagement with the screen (star discourse, genre, and narrative-centered analysis included), this study engages with a range of African American spectatorial patterns. As these examples show, both positive and negative images served to stir civil rights consciousness in African American spectatorship.

PART I: Cinematically-based Reception Narratives of Integration

Response Pattern 1: Not Our Problem: Black Spectators, Victimization, and the Racial Problem Film

In many senses, the historiography of feminist film theory, the branch of film theory arguably most concerned with issues of identification and spectatorship, has been marked by queries and questions regarding “visual pleasures” and, implicitly, its opposites. Laura Mulvey’s seminal

²⁴ Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons have made this argument in *Dame in the Kimono* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 79-108.

²⁵ Spence and Stam, “Colonialism, Racism, and Representation,” 890.

²⁶ I generated 130 codes for my interviews based on patterns I noted across the ninety-four interviews. Civil-rights-related issues was one of these codes.

article discussed the essentially patriarchal visual regime of the cinema and its entrapping effects on the female subject.²⁷ Subsequent work challenged the notion that women could not derive pleasure from these narratives. Jackie Stacey, for example, examines almost exclusively the pleasures created by female fans of the 1940s and 1950s cinema in England through various kinds of identification with female stars.²⁸ Less clear and receiving markedly less attention is the question of whether the strongest, most important, or most enduring forms of spectatorial engagement with the cinema are always—and with all groups—primarily formed through pleasure and whether these pleasurable relationships are always forged through what Stacey and others have described as “identification.”

African American spectatorship has often been interrupted or “flickered through” with double consciousness (that is, Black consciousness of entrapping white perceptions of African Americans). In this case, perhaps reference to the real is even more important to the viewing paradigm than pleasure per se. Perhaps, as Andre Bazin might suggest, the cinema’s power is not always in engineering pleasure but is sometimes in revelation itself—in the capacity and complexity with which this visual and aural medium represents and resonates truths about reality, or some aspects of “the real.”²⁹ Black interpretations of the cinema have often placed primacy on the value of cinematic realism, in all likelihood because African Americans have often been represented onscreen through hyperbolic (often comic) exaggeration.³⁰

²⁷ Mulvey states, referring to relations in the cinema, and in patriarchal culture more generally, “woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman.” Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Feminism in Film*, ed. E. Anne Kaplan (New York: Oxford, 2000), 35.

²⁸ Jackie Stacey, *Stargazing* (New York, Routledge, 1993).

²⁹ Andre Bazin suggests that what sets the cinema apart from other art forms is its “objective character” and its high threshold for reproducing reality, one particular to photography but one that the other visual arts lack. (*What Is Cinema*, vol. 1, (Berkeley: UC Press, 1974), 13.)

³⁰ Manthia Diawara, “Spectatorship and Resistance,” in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (London: Routledge, 1993). Robert Stam makes this argument about Image Studies in his article “Bakhtin, Polyphony and

From a contemporary standpoint it would seem ludicrous to argue that the racial problem films of the late 1940s and early 1950s were “realistic.” The fact that they contended with contemporaneous racial discourses and events that had occurred within ten years of their release aligned them, if not with the real, then with the *present*. These films also did three crucial things: they revealed with comparative candidness white discursive positions on race and white vulnerability around questions of race at the moment; they acted as a weathervane for the incremental progressive movements of majoritarian white racial conceptions; and they began the attempt to move Black representation from the realm of the white fantasies of benign Black servitude toward the realm of a more collectively held real, using historically-bound representational strategies for communicating realism. Both the successes and the failures of these films in invoking a sense of the racial real that could facilitate a constructive interracial imaginary are instructive about the function and representational regime of race in the era and laid the foundations for the studio’s African American representational strategies of the 1960s and 1970s during the Blaxploitation era.

For the NAACP, the racial problem films were a welcome shift, whether they were scrupulously realist or not. *No Way Out* (1950), one of the first of the studio racial problem films, was praised by the organization. The film centered on Black doctor Luther Brooks (played by Sidney Poitier) and his relationship with a rabidly racist white patient (Ray Biddle, played by Richard Widmark) whose brother, Johnny, died under Brooks’s care. The Biddle family insists that Brooks murdered Johnny, leading to a race riot. In response to the film, Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, wrote:

I imagine that some, and possibly a number of persons may object to the film because it tells the truth without sugar coating. I strongly disagree with them.

Ethnic/Racial Representation,” in *Unspeakable Images*, ed. Lester Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 252.

Having investigated more than forty lynchings and twelve race riots, I know from first-hand experience that the violence of the human emotions on both sides of the racial fence is *exactly as it is pictured* in “No Way Out.” The *courage* which Twentieth Century Fox has demonstrated in making “No Way Out” indicates a maturation of the moving picture industry and establishes an example which I profoundly hope that others will have the *courage* to follow.³¹ [my italics]

While White’s response does not indicate that he derived, directly, *pleasure* from these images, it does indicate a certain *gratification*, as communication scholars might put it, and even a sort of received justification and affirmation provided by the film’s “realism.” It indicates a sense of justice produced by the fact that an ideologically-repressed reality of social experience, namely white brutality against African Americans—one that the NAACP was trying to make public—had finally been revealed and articulated in what the NAACP saw as a courageous new way. For Walter White, this sense of the real was linked with the accurate representation of white brutality, a depiction that, he conceived, was apt to sway public opinion about the nefariousness of its perpetrators.³² In another instance, White had deemed Twentieth Century Fox’s short film *They Call Him Cooperation* (1943) “a little wishy-washy” because it neglected to show the brutality experienced by the film’s protagonist, African American insurance agent Charles Clinton Spaulding, when he was beaten by a white clerk for buying a soda from a store in a building he owned.³³ White seems to have connected with these

³¹ Walter White, letter to Malcolm (Mike) Ross of Twentieth Century Fox, July 26, 1950. NAACP Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

³² The NAACP had an instrumentalist approach to the cinema, but the model of instrumentalism was somewhat different than the type held by the censors: censors were afraid that viewers would directly copy what they saw on screen. The NAACP considered that images could negatively (or positively) affect public opinion and lead to changes in legal practice.

³³ White wrote Zanuck: “Two or three years ago, on a very hot summer day, Mr. Spaulding went into a store in a building which he owns in Durham. He sought to buy a bottle of Coca Cola to quench his thirst. The young white southern clerk beat Mr. Spaulding so unmercifully that he required hospital treatment. I think it might be well to consider [in the film] the conclusion of this episode to show the fortitude of Mr. Spaulding as well as the . . . difficulties which a successful [Black] businessman encounters in the South. Many Americans have no notion of this.” (Walter White [as “Secretary”], letter to Jason Joy, July 22, 1943. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.) In another instance, after being invited by Louis De Rochemont to see a rough cut of his film, *Lost Boundaries* (1948), White proclaimed, “I found my eyes wet with tears three or four times as the picture was being run. . . . In both ‘Lost Boundaries’ and ‘Home of the Brave’ honest pictures about Negroes have been made and thereby not only America

films' potential as social drama (perhaps primed by the Broadway plays to which he compares them). They do not constitute "pure entertainment," but represent an historically important break with traditional Black representation for White. More than providing merely an accurate replication of reality, these images seemed to have provided a new positionality, an overall moral focus on racial injustice and violence.

The NAACP's response of indirect gratification rather than pleasure characterized one strand of Black reception of these films, but many of my oral history respondents had quite another. First and importantly, many viewers disavowed seeing (*or even hearing of*) many of the African American themed films on the long list I showed them.³⁴ Many respondents claimed that they had not played in Black theaters, but when I looked more closely into the newspaper advertisements, it was clear that they *had* played at African American theaters, although I cannot verify that they played at every Black neighborhood theater.³⁵ The lack of availability of these films for my respondents may

but peoples all over the earth can now gain a new perspective on the American Negro instead of the false, fantastic and fatally derogatory portrayals of most of the movie of the past." (Walter White, "Do Race Pictures Denote New Hollywood Attitude?" *Chicago Defender*, Aug 20, 1949, 7.)

³⁴ I used a list of films (with dates included) and some posters to prompt response. The films I asked them about were *Imitation of Life* (1934), *Black Legion* (1937), *One Mile from Heaven* (1937), *The Duke is Tops* (1938), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Gang War* (1940), *Tobacco Road* (1941), *In This Our Life* (1942), *Ox Bow Incident* (1942), *Bataan* (1943), *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Crash Dive* (1943), *Beale Street Mama* (1946), *Body and Soul* (1947), *The Burning Cross* (1947), *Crossfire* (1947), *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), *Hi-De-Ho* (1947), *The Betrayal* (1948), *The Quiet One* (1948), *Lost Boundaries* (1948), *Home of the Brave* (1949), *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), *Pinky* (1949), *No Way Out* (1950), *Bright Victory* (1951), *Harlem Globetrotters* (1951), *Native Son* (1951), *The Well* (1951), *Bright Road* (1953), *Carmen Jones* (1954), *Go Man Go!* (1954), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Band of Angels* (1957), *Edge of the City* (1957), *Island in the Sun* (1957), *Anna Lucasta* (1959), *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959), and *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959). I also had a list of male and female stars, including their major films. I included *Imitation of Life* (1934) because I had a suspicion that the film was re-released in Black movie houses in the 1940s, a suspicion that my research confirmed.

³⁵ Not much secondary research was available about the programmes for Black neighborhood theaters. Further research is needed on this topic. The most authoritative source on Motion Picture exhibition is Robert Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006). Headley lists the Goldfield theater (202-3), the Poplar Theater (372), and the Rio (439-40), three African American theaters whose showings did not get published in *The Baltimore Afro-American* and whose cinematic programmes cannot be verified. The previous chapter, however, well documents films dealing with segregation, integration, as well as lynching and other civil rights violations at the Harlem and other African American movie houses.

have resulted from the fact that these films sometimes played for shorter runs and during the weekdays rather than on the weekend.

Second, a number of my respondents actually disliked films dealing directly with civil rights concerns. When I asked about the films by theme (mentioning integration, lynching, or chain gangs, specifically), respondents seemed to prefer not to talk about these issues or the films that centralized them. Respondents would change the subject or look away or seem shocked that I raised the question. There was almost an eerie silence on the issue: the silence of taboo, perhaps.

When I pressed the issue, viewers provided a number of reasons for their distaste and disidentification with these films. For a number of them, “integration movies” (a subset of the racial problem film dealing specifically with what happens during the process of integration) strained credibility and resonance with viewers’ notions of “the real,” in part, they explained, because they predated or extended permanently beyond spectators’ personal experience with white people and with integration at the time of viewing and were therefore seen as irrelevant. For example, one Baltimore woman told me that she did not enjoy the film *Pinky*, in which the title character passes for white at a Northern nursing school, but then, after having fallen in love with a white doctor, returns to her Southern home and is forced by her grandmother to care for the Southern white woman (Ms. Em) for whom her grandmother does the wash. Pinky eventually befriends Ms. Em, and after her death, Ms. Em leaves Pinky her house, causing a stir in the white community. My respondent remembered disliking the film because although it dealt with race, frustratingly, it “didn’t deal with anything with *my* background. I mean [in the film] they were dealing with the Black and the white. And I didn’t have anything to relate to that. . . . I *was* in an all Black environment.” Another set of respondents disliked (or did not see) films dealing with integration because they did not feel they

were addressed to African Americans. One respondent, for example, indicated that she did not need to see *Pinky* or other films dealing with race relations because they were “for white people. We knew about segregation already. We lived it.”³⁶

But the most common reason why my respondents disliked these racially traumatic films was that they were painful to watch. The following is an excerpt from my interview with Thomas Turner, 71, of Baltimore:

EC: What other films dealing with race do you remember? Dealing with racial themes like maybe even lynching or chain gangs—

TT: ~Oh, gee. [winces] Those types of movies I really didn’t like to see.

ECS: You didn’t like them?

TT: No, because it was too hurting. It hurt. Even though a lot of them is true. Even today it kind of bothers me but I do watch them. But I can’t remember any from years ago. Don’t remember seeing them. I can’t place them. Maybe I don’t want to remember. I don’t know. Yeah. I can’t think of one by title.³⁷

Although Mr. Turner seems to admit the social value of these images by calling them “true,” his sense of the social responsibility of these films does not overcome his pain in seeing them.

Anger was another important and particularly well-articulated pattern among my interviewees in response to cinematic representations of integration (with their attendant racial abuses like lynching, racial epithet use, and other racial violence). The general practice of making African Americans the object and *victim* of horror caused a significant cluster of respondents to say

³⁶ This phenomenon of what we might term “realistic overload” resonates with the response that Jacqueline Bobo described one of her respondents having to Terry McMillan’s book *Disappearing Acts*. One of her respondents said “I don’t need to read it. Between *Disappearing Acts* and *Mama*, shit, I’ve lived it. So really I don’t need to read it.” (Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, 19). These responses recenter African American women’s experiences as the foundation for African American cultural expression and suggest that if one has already witnessed such events in one’s own life, seeing them has less importance or impact. Although there is no direct “identification” in the pleasurable sense, *over-identification* is implied. Some people also failed to obediently decode Darryl F. Zanuck’s message in this racial problem film: Zanuck had intended to communicate that “this is the story of how and why [Pinky] as an individual, finally decided to be herself, a Negress,” (Darryl Zanuck, note to Dudley Nichols, November 1, 1948. Twentieth Century Fox Collection. Doheny Library. USC. Los Angeles, CA.) but Mr. William Hankin of Baltimore suggested that after showing a woman who had passed in the North the film was ultimately about how African Americans had to know their place. (William Hankin, interview with Ellen Scott, Baltimore, MD, Nov. 2005).

³⁷ Thomas Turner, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005.

they would not go to movies that depicted either integration or civil rights *abuses* because they made their “blood pressure go up”³⁸ or were “too aggravating,”³⁹ and therein ceased to be worth valuable entertainment dollars.⁴⁰ Louise Johnson of the Senior Network Senior Center in Baltimore said:

[There was a] Black person in the movies . . . and they did something and they were lynched or hung, or something like that, that used to really make you mad. You wanted to go somewhere and beat up somebody [laughs]. . . . People responded to it, yes. Because you would have some terrible movies. You know, like, they had hanging people from trees and men getting lynched for looking at the white women and all this kind of stuff. It really made you angry. . . . They weren’t going to get *my* money. I didn’t want to see it. But even now I don’t look at movies with racial overtones.⁴¹

Coining the phrase “terrible movies,” movies that unlike the horror genre did not have the escape valve of fantasy, Ms. Johnson indicated clearly the displeasure—and anger—that these realist images produced. Louise Johnson was not alone among my respondents in indicating a near boycott-level displeasure at such lynching films, films that were often viewed to promote and draw attention to the very racial violence they were supposed to condemn. Perhaps unsettled by how these cultural realities were being mobilized (and by whom), my respondents did not connect with the films that contained

³⁸ When I asked a group of New York seniors in a focus group at Gaylord White Senior Center if they remembered “films dealing with racial integration that came up at that time,” one woman stated that she remembered them as coming after the 1940s: “W1: But they made me angry. I didn’t like them.

ECS: You didn’t go?

W1: I didn’t like them. (inaudible)

ECS: It wasn’t entertaining.

W1: No they weren’t entertaining. So even right now I don’t watch them. Because they make my blood pressure go up.

ECS: So if somebody would invite you, you would say?

W1: No.” (Gaylord White Senior Center focus group interview, interview with Ellen Scott, New York, NY, Oct. 2005).

³⁹ Barbara Christian and Joyce Hubbard of Richmond’s Linwood Robinson Senior Center made this comment. (Barbara Christian and Joyce Hubbard, interview with Ellen Scott, Linwood Robinson Senior Center, Richmond VA, Sept. 2005.) Although they did not want me to tape the interview, I took copious notes on the encounter. I asked about films dealing with integration. They said that (1) “they make you hate white folks so bad” and (2) that they didn’t look at them because they were too aggravating. They specifically mentioned *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) and *Malcolm X* (1992) in this discussion. They also mentioned *Four Little Girls* (1997) and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967).

⁴⁰ For instance, when I asked Geneva Barksdale of Baltimore if she remembered “any films about lynching or anything like that?,” she said, “No ‘cause I didn’t like the sound of those films and I would never go see that.

ECS: So it was more about entertainment.

Ms. Barksdale: Right. I didn’t like anything about lynching or anything like that. I didn’t like that too much. Something funny—not something like people getting killed or anything like that.” Geneva Barksdale, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

⁴¹ Louise Johnson, interview with Ellen Scott, Senior Network, Baltimore, MD, Nov. 2005.

these images and shuddered at the images themselves. Although one respondent admitted these images were “true,” most did not directly compare them to reality.⁴² While they may have helped white audiences to understand the systematic racial bias most African Americans already knew all too well by community if not personal experience, they did not cause the majority of Black spectators to enjoy their cinematic experience or to “learn” more about the world (an important and consistently mentioned reason why my respondents frequented the cinema). While for the NAACP, these films dealing with Black trauma of various sorts operated as a confirmation and an admission of white guilt, for those outside of the organization’s elite leadership, these films operated as a painful rehashing, one that, in addition to being a stinging reminder of the reality of racial hate and violence, did not seem to produce material change.

What the films did produce was something else entirely: anger—and specifically anger and resentment at white racism. They had the ability to produce autonomous thought about race that defied the logic of both oppositionality and dominant readings: this thinking followed a legible pattern that was largely defined not by narrative, but by personal and communal experience. And although these films were not pleasurable, they did have the power to *stir* my respondents and to promote thinking about race. On numerous occasions, thinking about these films—even merely seeing the ads—led to complicated discussions about race.⁴³ Because of the historical context, these

⁴² Thomas Turner, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005.

⁴³ In response to *The Ox Bow Incident*, for example, Mr. Joseph Nichols of New York said: “I’ve seen [it].

ECS: What did you think of it?

JN: I think it was terrible. I think it was horrible. I think it was a horrible misunderstanding. And people came to kill. They didn’t care[0].

ECS: They didn’t care if they made a mistake?

JN: A lot of people spent time in a correctional facility just because they had a record.

ECS: Still the case, I bet.

JN: Still is. Still is. I’ve been in New York for 50 years and they picked me up on two bum raps. Yeah two bum raps. Kid standing on the corner. But I was working. I came to use the telephone to call my boss to see if I was working. This was

films, although they did not produce pleasure or a strong sense of verisimilitude, did create linkages with and reflection on racial issues. The image, thus, was neither compared to reality nor taken on given narrative terms, but was instead an abstract signifier of the racial dynamics the screen could not dare represent in its frame.

There was some indication that *non-Hollywood* films dealing with racial problems were viewed differently by my respondents, although the extent and nuance of this difference would have to be researched further to confirm. Several of my respondents had seen foreign films from the 1940s and 1950s and keenly remembered them as alternatives to and improvements upon Hollywood's treatment of "the race problem." They even became sites of identification for viewers. One male respondent remembered the French *I Spit on Your Graves* (1959) and another male respondent mentioned the British *Sapphire* (1959)⁴⁴ as exceptional in their depiction of Black people and racial

on Sunday. And I came back from lunch and the man told me, 'Don't move.' 'Don't move? What do you mean don't move?' And the man told me, 'Don't move,' and they said, 'Get over there,' and said, 'You did that.'

ECS: Oh my goodness. But they didn't convict you, right?

JN: No I wasn't convicted." (Joseph Nichols, interview with Ellen Scott, East River Senior Center, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.) This conversation stemmed from looking at a poster for the *Ox Bow Incident*, which shows the linkage in Black memory between wrongful imprisonment, criminalization, and lynching. It also suggests that films, even those not dealing with race directly, were read as relevant by Black spectators.

⁴⁴ Michel Gast's *I Spit on Your Graves* (1959) is based on the novel first published in 1948 by French author Boris Vian (London: Canongate Crime, 2001). Vian wrote the novel, which became a bestseller in France, under the pseudonym "Vernon Sullivan." According to the dust jacket, Sullivan was an African American writing the story as an autobiography. The story itself concerns a light-skinned African American man (Joe Grant) whose brother is killed in the South because he is in love with a white woman and proposes marriage to her. Grant, having moved to Trenton after his brother's death, enacts his revenge on the white race by passing for white and committing serial transgressive acts of miscegenation. Eventually, Joe and the white mistress with whom he finally falls in love are shot down by a white mob who has discovered Joe's true identity. The film's revolutionary potential tames itself in Joe's decision to fall in love with one of the white women whom he is purposely victimizing, and we cannot help but feel the film's final notes and Joe's strategy of revenge to be one that ultimately forgets and represses his brother rather than fighting for him. We lose all sense of Joe's brother, to the film's own artistic peril. However, in terms of Black spectatorship, the film offered powerful scenes of Black sorrow at the ubiquity of death and of Black male aggression, self-possession, and power, through the Black-identified body of Joe Grant. What is more, the film's early lynching scenes cannot be overcome by the later narrative of heterosexual (if miscegenetic) "settling down" that seek to contain them. Basil Dearden's *Sapphire* deals with the investigation of the murder of the title character, a Black woman who has been passing for white and who was engaged to a white man. Transgressively, the film suggests that the white man knew she was Black and decided to stay with her anyway. The film depicts, with considerable and striking clarity, the existence of a Black Jamaican presence in London (one marked by internal stratifications). It reveals this community by introducing us to the light-skinned Black woman's former Black boyfriends, one of the owning class and one of the working class. Also, the film gives significant attention to

issues. That any respondents even remembered these two films, neither of which are currently commercially available in the U.S., is noteworthy. But the precision of their memory of these films, was strong evidence of the distinct impact they had. A gentleman from New York stated at first that “all you’d see is a servant or somebody in the movies. ‘Cause the movies weren’t stories that are actually true but it’s based on the way things are in the movie.”⁴⁵ After a pause, however, he remembered *Sapphire* as an exception and began to describe the film. William Wilson of the Winchester Senior Center in Baltimore picked *I Spit on Your Grave* as the *only film* he could remember that “really” dealt with issues related to integration.⁴⁶ While both films still showed the horrors visited on African Americans by integration, both also suggested the possibility of hope. *I Spit on Your Grave* was in essence a Black revenge narrative showing Black transgression of antimiscegenation laws and mores, and *Sapphire* presented rare views not available in most Hollywood films of African American equality in the eyes of the law and evasion of the assumption of guilt. Although Black consciousness was not created by these two films, it was perhaps stirred, even echoed, by them and by the depiction of interracial exchange expanded beyond stereotypes and “terminal narratives” of Black doom typical of Hollywood mainstream productions.

the very interesting Black woman who is *Sapphire*’s former best friend, a knowing and beautiful brown-skinned Jamaican nurse, who, although hurt at being cut off by the *Sapphire*, also seems appropriately indifferent to her former friend, not wanting a friend who denigrates her by passing for white. The film also depicts, with an interesting complexity, the existence of mixed racial environments in London, as we see in the scene in which the detective visits a community center. These spaces are not only presented but their limits and insincerities are critiqued by those minorities who inhabit them. In terms of spectatorship, although two men of African descent are accused in the film, the film ultimately reveals that they are not the culprits, a fact that may have provided a brand of spectatorial relief for Black people watching the film not dissimilar from that produced by films like *In this our Life* (1942). But because we assume for so long that a Black man has committed the crime, this assumption has a sort of narrative residue for us: it is difficult to undo the guilt we have attached to these men when it is revealed in the last minutes of the film that *Sapphire* has been killed by a white woman, the sister of the man to whom the dead girl was engaged. Also, while the guilt is not placed on an African American character, the culprit is ultimately revealed to be an irrational, semi-hysterical white mother in an ending which fails to trouble the film’s solid white patriarchal core, manifested in its white police force.

⁴⁵ Male Respondent, Focus group, James Weldon Johnson Senior Center, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

⁴⁶ William Wilson, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

Reception studies often judge audience engagement with texts by measuring their identification or resonance with them. With a few exceptions, African Americans in my study did not report identifying with whites or Blacks in films about integration or civil rights violations. However, generally speaking, they did not report identifying (in standard ways) with *anyone* in *any* movie.⁴⁷ A few of my respondents did appear to “take up” the narrative of the racial problem films as grounds for standard identification. But the same films which had reminded NAACP leader Walter White of the truths of Black history worked in these instances to increase identification with white people or to instruct viewers in white power and authority. These moments of identification showed a pattern of submission to white textual and extra-textual authority. They did not appear to increase solidarity or identification with onscreen African Americans in ways that might produce political mobilization. For example, Roy Battle of the Richmond Senior Center, suggested that he went to integration movies not to see the reality of Black people on the screen but rather as a way to try to understand white people better:

That was a natural thing—for us to go to see those movies about integration. Yes, that’s the movies we’d run to. Sit in there and try to bring on a better understanding. It did. . . . Well, when you go in there and see this and see that. And then that make you have different respect for white people. You said, “Well, all of them not bad. There’s just one or two that’s mean nasty, spoiled it. Look how good

⁴⁷I asked everyone I interviewed about identification, using a number of probes (Did you ever think, “That’s me up there? Or that person is like me?” Or “I’ve been in that situation?” Or did you ever connect with an actor or character?). I included prompts that touched on character identification, identification with actors, situations, narratives, and entire films. However, with a few exceptions, analyzed below, very few of my respondents seem to have identified with anything or anyone they saw onscreen. We might explain this lack of “normative” screen engagement in several ways. It points towards a coldness resulting from Hollywood’s refusal to depict realities known to these respondents: “That was Hollywood, and this is Baltimore,” as Verna Kindle, age 60, of Baltimore’s Waxter center put it—Hollywood failed to render certain local and national racial knowledge sets that were meaningful to them. Latent also in many of the interviews was the notion that to believe in Hollywood’s drama, no matter how much “realism” the studios mustered in their stylistic articulation, was “to be had”—to be gullible. It may also have resulted from a tendency of the industry to present films and film stars as glamorous and spectacular rather than as average and regular during this era. Whatever the reason, very few of my respondents seem to have identified with Hollywood characters. My respondents strongly claimed that movies were just entertainment and seem to have reacted even to dramas rendered with extreme sincerity with a distance and detachment from characters we might be inclined to associate with vaudevillian spectatorship or spectatorship of some medium less driven by an intended emotional verisimilitude.

they [Black and white people in the movie] got along.” . . . See, movies brought us together and we had a better understanding, quicker.⁴⁸

Although he argued that films brought him a better understanding of white people by increasing his sympathy for whites, it also caused him to believe that the race problem was reducible to an evil few whites, rather than a pervasive institutional force, an *intention* Twentieth Century Fox producer Darryl Zanuck had discussed with concern in script conferences for *No Way Out*.⁴⁹ However, even in his ideologically-complicit reading, Battle defined the terms of his relationship with the movies: he went in to find understanding and sympathy for white people (a purpose probably not intended by producers) and he found it. As the cinema was not addressed to African Americans, he saw these films as a place to get an insider’s perspective on white views of race. Although he did not attempt to use this understanding for resistance, this is nevertheless a smart and sophisticated way to use these films. His statement suggests that in marginalizing African American screen characters, Hollywood unwittingly over-exposed white people, allowing them to be scrutinized by African Americans. The reading by Mr. Battle corroborates what I showed in Chapter 1—that the studios were most interested in aiming these films at whites rather than African Americans (thus necessitating creative

⁴⁸ Ray Battle, interview with Ellen Scott, Richmond Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005.

⁴⁹ Darryl Zanuck, memo to Samuel Lessers, Feb. 1, 1949, 2. Twentieth Century Fox Collection. Doheny Library. University of Southern California. Los Angeles, CA. Zanuck seems to have been a bit unsure about how to depict Ray Biddle. In this memo Zanuck wrote, “Ray, who is the character who expressed the most violent anti-Negro feeling, happens to be a moronic, sadistic criminal, the very thing which we avoided in *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947). In *Gentleman’s Agreement*, the anti-Semites were nice, average people—people who did not realize that they were anti-Semitic,” a statement that suggests he was troubled by this insinuation. However, he followed this line with the statement that although he disliked the rabidity of Ray’s racism, he still desired that the bulk of anti-Black sentiment be vested in one character: “If we are going to actually reveal and demonstrate our theme to an audience, the bulk of anti-Negroism should be vested in *a character* whom we can watch throughout the picture in the hope that somewhere along the line he will change or learn something” [my italics]. Thus although Zanuck seems to have wanted to avoid suggesting that racism was vested solely in a *psychotic* character, his second statement still indicates that he preferred to have racism funneled through a single character. Russell Campbell also suggests that “the strategy of investing sociopolitical argumentation with entertainment value by focusing on the personal drama of someone caught up in the conflict was frequently enunciated by Zanuck, and it may be compared with the reportage journalism common in the thirties” (Russell Campbell, “The Ideology of the Social Consciousness Movie: Three Films of Darryl Zanuck,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* [Winter 1978], 61).

intervention by Black exhibitors to draw Black audiences). These African American respondents seem to have correctly decoded these messages as not addressed to them but to have made use of them anyway.

Another respondent, Thomas Turner of Baltimore, also argued that he “learned something” from integration movies. However, the films prompted him, as they had Battle, not towards critique but towards habituation to white norms. Turner, who was from the North, argued that the depiction of Southern segregation in film “prepared” him for the kinds of racial realities he would suffer in the South while he was there for military training.⁵⁰ In both instances, my respondents read the racial problem films for their warnings rather than for their articulation of potential harmony. Engagement with these films, for my respondents, often prompted acceptance of white repression and encouraged Black negotiation with ideologically mainstream narratives of interracial relations.

The anger and lack of desire to see American, white-produced civil- rights-themed films from the 1940s and 1950s—the same films promoted by the NAACP—suggests that cinematic civil rights consciousness in my respondents did not flourish in response to white-authored depictions of civil rights violations, as it had with the NAACP. Russell Campbell has suggested that the social problem film “forms part of the liberal branch of bourgeois ideology,” one that had its roots in Victorian sentimentality, by way, I would suggest and add, of Progressive reform.⁵¹ Perhaps these working class respondents, unlike the NAACP, were unable to join with (and perhaps were resentful of) this white liberal spirit. With the exceptions noted above, my study participants generally did not identify with whites in racial problem films and seem to have been reaffirmed instead in their Black identity,

⁵⁰ Thomas Turner, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

⁵¹ Campbell, “The Ideology of the Social Consciousness Movie: Three Films of Darryl Zanuck,” 60.

although they did not identify with Black characters (in the repressed, humble postures they assumed onscreen).⁵²

These results reveal a dissonance between the NAACP responses to films on political themes and the responses of average Black spectators, thus suggesting a multiplicity of spectatorial positionings and resultant film receptions within Black communities. Although Black looking in the racial problem film was like white female looking in Classical Hollywood cinema, a spectatorship built on victimization and entrapment in a “dominant” controlling gaze, this unpleasant looking was not without effect, even among those African Americans in my study who seemed leery of them. These films, although incomplete and sometimes even inaccurate in their projections of integration, did elicit some powerful and articulate responses to instances of real world racism my respondents discussed in their wake. Thus, although these images were not Brechtian in intent, their effect, in social context, was to foster productive disengagement of the sort Brecht desired and to promote a growing consciousness of America’s—and Hollywood’s wrongs—and African Americans’ rights.⁵³

If these racial problem films were intended by their makers to bridge the gap between Black and white spectators, or even merely to address Black spectators (a premise that some of the studio pressbooks seem to suggest), my study indicates they failed to do so, as their narrative terrors—or inaccuracies—met with disinterest and disengagement by an entertainment-seeking Black movie-going

⁵² Stam and Spence, for example, argue that Latin Americans, upon seeing Hollywood depictions of Latin Americans, simply laughed at these images, which suggests that perhaps the viewers, upon seeing films that falsely depicted their culture, were moved not towards greater identification with these images but rather, the laughter suggests, noticed the dissonance between themselves—their culture, and the onscreen depictions. Stam and Spence, “Colonialism, Racism and Representation,” 890. Opposing the pitiable Black victims in the racial problem film (and often also the white liberal hero) is the honest (if rabid) white racist. This racist character is often the onscreen object of conversion (think for example of Tony Curtis in *The Defiant Ones*). Interestingly, in my study some of the African Americans I spoke with identified more with this figure in his honesty than they did with the bendable idealist white liberal hero. William Wilson, interview with Ellen Scott, Baltimore, MD, Aug 2005.

⁵³ Brecht points to the importance of epic theater’s ability to “turn the spectator into an observer” and in so doing “arousing his capacity for action.” (John Willet, ed. *Brecht on Theatre: Development of an Aesthetic* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1964], 37.)

public. Although none of my respondents explicitly mentioned it, white authorship and the escapist and stereotypical spectatorial frame created by previous Hollywood fare may have made even Hollywood's most purportedly earnest attempts to render the tragedies and promises of interracial interaction seem naïve and suspect.

Response Pattern 2: The Black Interracial Imaginary: Courageous Whites, Surprising Racial Moves and the Shift from Double to Interracial Consciousness

Figure 16-Baltimore Afro-American Nov 29, 1952



Fig 17-Chicago Defender August 11, 1951, p1

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, several events signaled a public emergence—a sort of “coming out”—of interracialism. In 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first African American player to join a major league baseball team. In October 1949, Lena Horne and her husband Lennie Hayton revealed their interracial marriage, which they had kept secret since 1947, a story that made headline

news in *The New York Age*.⁵⁴ Also in 1949, Walter White, head of the 1940s' most vocal American civil rights organization, revealed that he had married white journalist Poppy Cannon.⁵⁵ By the end of 1952, the Black press had revealed the marriage of actress and singer Pearl Bailey to white drummer Louie Bellson.⁵⁶ President Harry Truman was a white Southerner who pursued an active, if ultimately limited, civil rights agenda. Although this agenda was largely based on an effort to command Northern Black and white liberal votes, it helped shift public culture and stirred up among surprised African Americans promise of new racial directions.

Figure 18-Judy Garland and Sugar Ray Robinson dance together in Paris. Chicago Defender April 11, 1951.



Meanwhile, at the movies, a number of films dealt with both integration and miscegenation. Independently produced but widely distributed, *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950) borrowed tropes of both newsreel and television documentary styles to tell the story of Robinson's "ascent" into the all-white Major leagues, but also gave rare views of the bitter effects of segregation, making palpable the

⁵⁴ "Names Lena Horne in Mixed Marriage," *New York Age*, Oct. 22, 1949, 1. (Front page headline.)

⁵⁵ "Walter White gives lowdown," *New York Age*, Oct. 1, 1949, 3.

⁵⁶ "Pearl Bailey Nervous as she says 'I Will,'" *Baltimore Afro*, November 29, 1952.

racist backlash suffered by the amiable ball player.⁵⁷ Also in 1949, censorial bans in Atlanta and Memphis on the RD-DR film *Lost Boundaries*, which dealt with the phenomenon of Blacks passing for white, made headline news in *The Pittsburgh Courier*.⁵⁸

More important than the individual films dealing with interracial issues was the confluence and imbrication of their arrival on the popular cultural scene—their clustering. Each of these cinematic events gave meaning and confirmation to the others. In New York, while the all-Black cast of the social problem play *Anna Lucasta* was playing on stage and shifting meanings of the racial problem, *Intruder in the Dust*, *Pinky*, and *Lost Boundaries* enjoyed simultaneous runs at the Mayfair, The Rivoli, and the Loews Victoria respectively.⁵⁹ These promising signs of the times coexisted with a Black press discourse on the horrors of failed interracial contact (lynching, discrimination, and the brutality of white police officers among others). Yet Black narratives and counter-narratives of interracial mixing served an important function in undergirding Black hope in the prospect of integration.

Perhaps equally important to the verbal discourse in these newspapers was the shifting public iconography that accompanied it. Pictures documenting remarkable acts of intimacy and unprecedented physical contact between Blacks and whites lined the pages of the Black press and became, to Black journalists and cultural critics, cultural *news* (as the photos above indicate). While Judy Garland dancing with Sugar Ray Robinson may not seem like “news,” the cultural shift that these photographic signs indicated it *was*. Where segregation suggested white indignity, humiliation,

⁵⁷ The films of this era also drew on this theme of living across racial lines, although few dealt directly with miscegenation: *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), *Home of the Brave* (1949), *Pinky* (1950), *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), *The Well* (1951), *Broken Arrow* (1950), *Native Son* (1950), *Bright Victory* (1951), *No Way Out* (1950), and *Lost Boundaries* (1948) (as well as a number of foreign films) made interracial relations their major theme, and *Cry the Beloved Country* (1950) and *Body and Soul* (1947) dealt with these as “minor chords” in their dramas.

⁵⁸ “We don’t take that kind of Picture! Atlanta, Memphis ban *Lost Boundaries*,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 27, 1949, 1. National Edition.

⁵⁹ *New York Age*, November 26, 1949, 20-21.

and fear at Black proximity, these pictures were documentary evidence of the possibility of physically reaching across the color line, a possibility that opened up Black interracial imaginings in a variety of productive ways. There is, however, significant evidence that African American ideas about integration varied from white ideas. It is these imaginings that I want to focus on here by looking at Black press and working class interracial discourses and the question of interracial promise.

The questions, troubles, promises, and logical complications raised in the late 1940s and early 1950s of racial self-identification, and (for both Blacks and whites) identifying the character of racial “others,” prompted significant upheaval and discussion in the Black community about race’s meanings and its ramifications. Many of these discussions circulated around happenings in the highly visual, photographically-bound realm of the film world (where race could presumably be seen and therefore tested) and by cinematic articulations of race. In *The Baltimore Afro American*, pop cultural transgressions of the color line were not limited by the white racial logics that governed their diegetic explorations in the white press. In *The Afro*, the iconography of race in this era seems to have moved increasingly from a relatively exclusive focus on the “race man and woman” to imagining the possibility of becoming interracially engaged subjects, through interracial romance (which signaled lifelong and profound interracial commitment) and various permutations of “brotherly” integration.

There has been much scholarly work built upon Dubois’ “double consciousness,”⁶⁰ which posits that African Americans see themselves both through their own eyes and through white eyes which debase them. This configuration of Black self-vision neglects the fact that whites have always

⁶⁰ As Dubois famously put it, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Cambridge: A.C. McClurg, 1903), 12. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford Press, 1977), 6. J. Ronald Green, “Two-ness’ in the Style of Oscar Micheaux” in *Black American Cinema* ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 26-48.

seen African Americans with both admiration and derision, as Eric Lott has challenged us to see.⁶¹ In addition, too little attention has gone toward analyzing other ways that African Americans see themselves, especially in their relationship to white people. Accordingly, an historical exploration of alternative racial hierarchies, logics, and formations imagined and authored by African Americans—ones other than Dubois’ tragic double consciousness—seems necessary.

African Americans have historically been forced to understand race on white terms—according to white “public transcripts” of race.⁶² As racialized subjects they also sometimes have known the system of race (its pores, fissures, and shifting points) better than whites. And as travelers of this racial terrain, one that unracialized whites did not have to traverse, in many ways African American have historically known it best. They also knew that “race” *changed*. They knew it because they were largely the “identity migrants” forced to move as racial definitions changed. Since the progressive era, whiteness had been built on the notion of scientifically reducible, historically reified and culturally fixed racial identities, but African Americans knew race was not a stable category. Rather, it was one that shifted with shifting institutional and national ideologies and social needs. It is of interest, then, to understand more about how African Americans imagined race, and particularly, the 1940s and 1950s, an era that hosted a series of racial shifts, how interracial relations and a Black interracial imaginary related to the cinema. The African Americans I spoke with (as well as the Black press that commented on films when they were first released) demonstrated imaginative exploration of the meanings of race, some of it utopian, some of it grounded in reality.

I define “interracial imaginary” as African- American-authored descriptions, musings, and imaginings around interracial interaction. Black attention to changes, fissures, and new patterns in

⁶¹ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford, 1995).

⁶² James Campbell Scott uses this term in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), x.

racial definitions and racial practice provided the basis for imagining racial change, which was marked by an openness to racial configurations and happenings not supported by dominant racial understandings, and to combinations, mutations and evolutions of status quo racial paradigms. This Black interracial imagination bares the mark of the local, the non-dominant, and the hidden transcripts of race that varied from established white definitions. It was revealed in racial stories told not according to the official transcript, but instead capturing “the rest” of race’s meanings, those that fell outside of status quo logics: race as lived. Interracial imaginings often were revealed in my interviews around racial surprise and pleasantly shifted respondents’ understandings of race’s logic and experiential operation, reassuring them, refreshingly, that race did not always operate as it “should.” In these moments, often catalyzed by the cinema but clearly a part of a broader phenomenon of visual culture, African American interviewees and many of the Black press journalists did not altogether do away with the concept of race, as some scholars have suggested is necessary for complete liberation, but reimagined it using a set of vernacular cultural rules, ones in which (inter-cultural) exchange, equality and recognition of trans-racial humanity predominated.⁶³ Rather than an integrationist paradigm that relied upon one-way assimilationist transmission (and receipt) of culture from white to Black, the interracial imaginary noticed and sometimes authored other multi-directional avenues for exchange that went beyond the stiff, national, political rhetoric of integration and explored its local, interpersonal, and flexible meanings. The interracial imaginary was most clearly active in moments where my respondents noticed genuine exchange that stood against

⁶³ Paul Gilroy has suggested the need to do away with essentialist and reifying nationalist tendencies inherent in the concept of race. See Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11-53. For more on race’s various definitions, functions and fissures, see Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press), 2000; Susan Gubar, *Racechanges* (New York: Oxford, 1997). This concept is loosely based on the work of Susan Gubar and Gayle Wald, who have added to our understanding of racial liminality powerful readings of interracial (and “cross-racial”) representation in art, film, and music. Their work, however, is based primarily on textual readings and on white racial needs and not on detailed analysis of African American counter-cultural production, reception, and interpretation of white “race changes” or passing.

the tide of the times, offering the promise of something better, something new—recompense, retribution, redistribution of power, social, and interpersonal repositioning. What was celebrated in these moments was not only a Black “us” and an acknowledgement of what we could do and had done, but also those white people who lived courageously beyond their race and could be incorporated into an idealized Black collective—who would be welcome in the brave new world of equality African Americans imagined. While these moments stood alongside a firm recognition of the persistence of racial hierarchies and systematic, race-based oppression, my respondents nevertheless recognized and enjoyed the possibility of something different and “new.”

For my respondents, and also for the Black press, much of this thinking occurred around the imaginary of the cinema. Specifically citing the release of *Pinky* (1949) and *Lost Boundaries* (1949) and re-release of *Imitation of Life* (1934) (as well as Black-authored perspectives on passing, such as James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*), Dan Burley, entertainment columnist for the Black newspaper *The New York Age*, wrote a series of exposé-style articles detailing “the startling fact that thousands of whites, not only in New York” but throughout the country “are making a life of being Negroes.”⁶⁴ Viewing these attempts at passing as more than just expressions of white misappropriation of culture, Burley explicitly linked these reverse cultural assimilations and racial transgressions to white “penance” for historical oppressions of African Americans and an absence of sanctioned channels for white remorse. He suggested that white people passing for Black were motivated by the fact that “their sense of fundamental fairplay [has been] outraged by what has been taking place in America.”⁶⁵ Seeking to atone for the “white supremacist orgies” of the lynch mob, these whites, Burley argued, “come to think that if they themselves suffer the trials and tribulations of

⁶⁴ Dan Burley, “Whites ‘Pass’ for Negro,” *New York Age*, Sept. 24, 1949, 17.

⁶⁵ Consequently, he explained, they seek “identity with the ‘underdog’ Negro as a means for penance for the sins of their ancestors who enslaved Black men and women.” *Ibid.*, 3.

being Negro they are making their own 'widows mite' contribution against white supremacy."⁶⁶

Burley also linked the racial confusion implied in the issue of Black passing (for white) pictured in the movies to the "passing on" of systems of racial categorization and domination.⁶⁷ Also in 1949, the year of the release of *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries*, and paralleling their interracial narratives, the African American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* featured a short story called "Vacant Seat," a story that also imagined transgression of the color line, interestingly, on an urban bus, a site that would in the coming years become a symbolic, mobile, and very public "ground" for racialization, segregation, and interracial contestation. The narrative of "The Vacant Seat" and a similar later short story published by *The Courier* called "The Hen and the Blonde," both authored by African American men, suggests that the bus was, sometimes, a space for interracial flirtation, real human interchange, and interracial imaginings.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷ Burley stated, "The inability to promptly identify persons as to whether they are pure white or pure Black is a governing factor in the failure of the rabidly anti-Negro crackers and Negrophobes, both north and south [sic], to lead a pogrom of extermination of Negroes as Hitler storm troopers did with the Jews in Germany." (Ibid.) In this article Burley uses as opening a scenario that seems to have been borrowed from *Pinky*, although he reverses it. In Burley's opening, a woman who appears to be a fair-skinned African American screams out that she is a white woman when she is attacked by a Black man, thus attracting police attention. In *Pinky*, the title character, when she gets in a scuffle with African Americans Rozelia and Jake, is mistaken by police as white, but when it is discovered that she is Black, she receives the same rough treatment as the other two African Americans.

⁶⁸ In "Vacant Seat," a Black woman, with whom none of the other white bus riders want to sit (presumably because of her race), meets a white man who chooses to sit next to her, and a romantic flirtation ensues. *The Pittsburgh Courier* also analyzed passing narratives in their news section, highlighting the confluence between the realm of the real and the imagined, with the same fluid interracial imaginary, one that could envision reverse transgression of the color line. These stories crucially imagine that both Black women and Black men will be able to cross the color line with equal ease under integration, a supposition that has failed to be borne out. A story entitled "An American Dilemma: White or Negro? Court to Rule on Baby's Race" raised the question of legal racial status of biracial children. It explored the case of a young girl from Buffalo, NY, whose parents (father, African American and mother, white) wanted her to be brought up in a Black neighborhood. Her white grandparents wanted her to live with them among white people. When asked by the judge whether she would raise the child as white, the grandmother said, "I will raise her just as she is." ("White or Negro? Court to Rule on Baby's race," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sept. 5, 1949). *Ebony* also ran stories that featured the novelty of whites "passing under" into Black culture. For example, in December of 1946, they published a lengthy story about Mezz Mezzrow, a white jazz musician who repeatedly passed for Black ("Case History of an Ex-White man," December 1946, *Ebony*, 10-16). In addition, they published several stories on whites attending Black colleges and being admitted to Black fraternities: "Negro Frat Admits 'White Brother'," *Ebony*, Oct. 1946, 24-27. The Johnson Publishing company even included ads in *The Baltimore Afro* for *Jet* magazine on the basis of interracial relationships. One said nothing more than "Negro women with White husbands," using the graphic of the faces to advertise for the magazine. More evidence of this



Figure 19-Pittsburgh Courier July 22, 1949

Similar counter-ideological narratives of race were present in my oral histories. Narratives of reverse integration (i.e. whites passing for or opting to be among Blacks), for example, were told with some pride and enjoyment, as the following narrative, told by a Baltimore woman from a focus group at the Waxter Senior center, indicates:

I went to the Eastern shore one time when I was young, say about fourteen. . . . And we went to a movie theater. . . . I wasn't used to going to a theater with the Black

interracial curiosity is evident in stories in *The Baltimore Afro American*, and this was a definite theme in my analysis of the Black press. For example, in *The Baltimore Afro*, a story entitled "White Soldiers Pleased with Korean Integration" (Ralph Matthews, *Baltimore Afro-American*, Dec. 25, 1951, 13) gave information about the responses of whites to the first integrated experiences in combat. These courageous whites articulated something other than the racism spouted by their "lily white" counterparts. One white sergeant, who had grown up in Arlington, Virginia and had been raised where Blacks were "kept off in ghettos," not allowed "in theaters," and were "forced to ride on the back of buses and trains," "drawled" that before his war experience he "just began to accept the belief that colored people were inferior and would let it go at that so when I was assigned to an all colored unit I reacted accordingly. But now I know that all that was superficial. There was nothing wrong with the men. They trouble was with me so I began to make friends and now I consider some of the fellows here my best pals."

and the white. . . . And my aunt said “We, you know, we have to sit up in the balcony.” We had to sit up in the balcony. . . . And I was shocked. . . . I was not used to going to the movies and have to sit in the balcony because at *our* movies, we used to sit anywhere we want. And then I never went downtown to the Hippodrome [a white theater] because that was *out*. . . . But up on the Ave., we didn’t have too many problems ‘cause Pennsylvania Ave. had all the night clubs. And we would go up on PA Ave. Now the white people would come up there in Cadillacs to the clubs *we* had. Didn’t they?

Yeah.

They would come up to the clubs and then we had to go to the theater. . . . So really, all in all, I never felt as though I missed anything, I think. Because like I said, we had everything we need right in the area where we lived. So I didn’t worry about going to the Hippodrome or going to the—you know, the movies where the whites were.

I quote at length here to show the speaker’s contrasts between her experience of segregation on the Eastern shore and her experience of choice *and* reverse integration in Baltimore.⁶⁹ She describes white privileging of African American venues and the infiltration of culturally envious whites into prized predominantly Black entertainment spaces. Integration on Black terms in the Black imaginary often rendered Black spaces desirable and Black people the majority.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Eastern Shore was a place noted by a number of my respondents for its racism. The most recent lynchings in Maryland state history took place on the Eastern Shore. The 1931 lynching of Matthew Williams and the 1933 lynching of George Armwood are described in greater depth by Sherrilyn A. Ifill, *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-First Century* (Boston : Beacon Press, 2007), 8. Ifill suggests that many of the lynchers saw this as a more legitimate, less formalized mode of enacting justice and demonstrated this by dragging their victims onto the Courthouse lawn to be killed.

⁷⁰ Another narrative of interracial contact, one that participated in shifting conceptualizations of the white South, emphasized the viability of Black victory in racial disputes with whites. For example, Richmond resident Lois Johnson told the story of her aunt, a land owner in Gloucester County, Virginia. Not knowing who owned the land, a group of Ku Klux Klan members decided to hold a meeting on her property. When her aunt’s daughter found out about it, she took a gun and climbed up on a telephone pole to wait until the KKK members were all assembled. She then began shooting at the Klan members from on high, scaring them off her land and out of town. When I asked her whether there were any repercussions for the shooter, Ms. Johnson replied, “No! Uhnt-uh! They were on *her* land! On her mother’s land!” Drawing on a powerful and rich visual iconography and occurring in our conversation about the movies, this story also relies on a series of reversals: not only is it the African Americans who own land and lay in wait for the *Klan* in this scenario, but it was also a Black *woman*, not a man, who owned the land and who fired the gunshots that scared the Klan out of town. This narrative fixed Black *female* power and legal ownership as the law of the land rather than allowing the Klan’s transgressions to get the final word. Ms. Johnson related in conclusion, “It took them like ten minutes to clear that lot, and we haven’t had a Ku Klux Klan meeting in Gloucester since.” In the eyes of this African American woman, as was true with many of my respondents, interracial interactions—even interracial strife and confrontation—held the promise of Black victory and Black power in this time of racial flux. Similarly, in *The Baltimore Afro-American*, a narrative of the unfortunate acquittal of a trigger-happy sheriff was told with accompanying visual iconography that seemed to reverse the

For my respondents, the movies were crucial in facilitating exploration and imagining of interracial relations and specifically transgressions of the color line. While she did not like films about integration (because she said they made her hate white people), respondent Barbara Christian did enjoy what she called “interracial films” (i.e. mixed-cast films) in the 1950s because, as she put it, she saw Black people enough everyday.⁷¹ For her, to see a mixed cast film was something new, something novel. For Betty Anne Phillips of Baltimore, *Pinky* provided interracial excitement and interest but not because of its plot: “It was this movie I had to go see! Jeanne Crain was in it—she was this white woman. She actually performed like she was Black. ‘Why would she want to do that?’ . . . It took a lot of guts. At the time you didn’t realize how much it would have had have taken for her to play that role.”⁷² Jacqueline Bobo, in “The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers,” suggests that “alternative reading comes from something in the work that strikes the viewer as amiss, that appears ‘strange.’” When the text is made strange—subverted—the viewer “may then bring other viewpoints to bear on the watching of a film and may see things other than what the filmmakers intended.”⁷³ In this instance, it was the act of racial transgression—a white mainstream Hollywood star who tries to play Black *or be* Black!—that strikes Ms. Phillips as strange and “exciting.” Using the term “guts,” one frequently used in the advertising of films dealing with controversial racial themes of the era,⁷⁴ Ms. Phillips admires the strange courage of Jeanne Crain, and seemingly also the interracial

verdict in depicting the downtrodden, disheveled sheriff. (Lois Johnson, interview with Ellen Scott, Richmond Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005).

⁷¹ Barbara Christian, interview with Ellen Scott, Linwood Robinson Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005. She withheld her age.

⁷² Betty Anne Phillips, interview with Ellen Scott, Senior Network senior center, Baltimore, MD, Nov. 2005. This sentiment was also present in the Black Press. *The Pittsburgh Courier* for example ran a story stating, “Stars of Anti-bias Play Are Attacked in Dee Cee.” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug 13, 1949, 18.

⁷³ Jacqueline Bobo, “The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers,” in *Female Spectators Looking at Film and Television*, Deidre Pribram, ed. (Verso: London, 1988), 96.

⁷⁴ *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950) and *Home of the Brave* (1949) use the word “guts” in the advertisements in their studio pressbooks.

possibilities such courage implicitly suggested. Ms. Phillips sought to identify with and understand the white *actress* rather than any particular racial theme in the movie; indeed, this is what she remembers to have prompted her decision to see the film. From Ms. Phillip's perspective, transracial identification goes both ways; the movie facilitated both Crain's interest in her, as a Black woman, and her interest in Crain, as the white actress choosing to explore Black life. Ms. Phillips also seemed to identify with Crain because of the negative criticism that taking the role—and her racial transgression—is presumed to have prompted. This criticism perhaps worked to heighten Crain's imagined association with the African American community, as Ms. Phillips imagined it caused Crain to be racially shunned by whites: "But I can imagine it must have caused a lot of criticism. 'Cause you had a white woman that was Black—you know what I'm saying: she was mixed. And that always made an impression on me. That always made an impression on me." In addition to voicing compassionate understanding of the racist backlash these film roles may have generated for Crain, Ms. Phillips's quote also demonstrates the subversive confusion caused by the film's various racial ambiguities, one that implicitly challenged the logic of segregation: is it that Pinky is Black but she looks white or that she is white but has Black parentage? Or is Pinky, as Ms. Phillips finally concludes here, somehow "mixed?"

Although the practice of Black characters being played by whites was generally reviled by Black actors and audiences alike because it robbed African American actors of important roles, it may have, for some Black spectators, introduced pleasurable confusion, blurring racial identity and causing racial slippage that undermined the fixity of the legislated binary between Black and white.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ For evidence of the trouble Black audiences and actors had with the practice of whites playing roles intended for Blacks, see for example Lillian Scott, "Whites Given Roles Calling For Negroes," *Chicago Defender*, Mar 19, 1949, 1. Walter White also testifies to the ubiquity of this criticism among African American viewers: Walter White, "Do Race Pictures Denote New Hollywood Attitude?" *Chicago Defender*, Aug 20, 1949, 7.

Although a number of representatives of the Black and labor presses criticized *Pinky* for not dealing head-on with prejudice and, in other ways, insulting African Americans,⁷⁶ for Billy Rowe, of *The Pittsburgh Courier*, the film precipitated leaps of the racial imagination of the sort I have been describing:

As we have had many discussions about Hollywood's insistence of casting a white artists in a role designed for a Negro, I know exactly how you feel about that. Notwithstanding, as the picture moved on to its conclusion, *I lost track* [my italics] of Miss Crain's rightful identity and *to me* she was 'Pinky Johnson' a girl who was colored because she wanted to be. She played her role so convincingly.⁷⁷

In this quote, Rowe points toward both the racial ambiguity that the film prompts through its casting and plot and towards the eventual resolution of this confusion through Crain's performative *possession* of Blackness, one which caused him to lose track of the actor's "rightful" racial identity. Rowe responded like Ms. Phillips and in ways quite the opposite of the intended casting effects.⁷⁸ He began to identify Crain with Black people rather than reading her onscreen racial identity through her whiteness in the ways that audiences had been expected to do in plays like *Othello* and in minstrel and postminstrel Blackface performances. Rather than seeing her "true" whiteness beneath the costume, as the producers most certainly intended to preserve the racial status quo, Rowe imagined instead that what *seemed* white was (at least partly) Black, a reading that harmonized with Black

⁷⁶ Lena Brown, "Pinky Bares Greed Prejudice: Fails to Tell story of Why She Is 'White,'" *Amsterdam News*, Oct. 10, 1949. "Pinky—Offensive Film on Negro Rights theme," *Hotel and Club Voice*, Oct. 18, 1949 (Labor periodical); Marjorie McKenzie, "Movies about Negroes Can be Dangerous if Not Trained on Prejudice," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 29, 1949. McKenzie argued that "against the real big problems in our lives as Negroes, passing is a minor drama. Before we need movies about the edges of the race problem in America, we need to explore the heart of the matter and move towards solutions. America will profit from guidance out of the dilemma not further indoctrination in its horror. Solutions are being reached and their success makes exciting, heart-warming stories." She noted that the only reason for *Pinky*, who had been "long treated as a human being, to bury herself in a backwoods Delta locale" would be some particular quirk in her own personality.

⁷⁷ Billy Rowe, "Billy Rowe's Notebook" *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 23, 1949.

⁷⁸ Jason Joy continually reiterated to the Breen Office that *Pinky* would be played by a white woman (Jason Joy, letter to Joseph I. Breen, March 2, 1949, 2) to downplay the suggestion of miscegenation through casting techniques. PCA File, AMPAS Archives, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, California.

experience under the one drop rule. But Rowe does more than read Pinky's racial Blackness according to the narrative. He reads her race *differently* at *different moments* of the film: he envisions her with an overlapping and inter-penetrating racial gaze—one that evidences a certain pleasurable “two-ness” in his looking at this liminal figure—a weaving in and out of character-level Blackness and “real” whiteness. This optical race flipping operated as challenge itself to the segregation of the color line and in this way may have achieved a greater symbolic “interracial” effect than if Pinky had been played by a Black woman. This flipping effect is eventually resolved in favor of Blackness: to Rowe and Ms. Phillips, Crain became Black by her own declaration and choice—because she wanted to be—and in the process showed a racial courage uncommon to whites—one that validated the Black race by “choosing” it. This agentic decision for Blackness both suggested the value of Blackness and disrupted racial labeling practices that condoned the society's decision to inscribe racial categories onto phenotype and skin tone.

In my interviews, the Black interracial imaginary often emerged in defensive re-readings of images other African Americans considered demeaning, and is linked therein to what Ien Ang called the “ideology of populism.”⁷⁹ For example, Mr. Benson of the Hamilton Grange Senior Center in New York redemptively read Shirley Temple/Bojangle's film *The Little Colonel* (1935):⁸⁰

Respondent 1: What was your opinion of Shirley Temple's films with Bojangles?
Raymond Benson: I thought they were fascinating. Because the racial tensions were so great at those times and Shirley Temple was a little white girl. And she took to him.—Like she called him—ah—“Daddy” or something like that—it was an affectionate name.⁸¹ But I imagine it offended a lot of white people in those days for her to have affection for him being a Black man. . . .

⁷⁹ Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas* (London: Methuen, 1985), 111-15. Ang describes the ideology of populism as one that “invokes something like an ‘individual right of determination’ and betrays a certain allergy to aesthetic standards determined from on high.” (113).

⁸⁰ The term “redemptive reading” was coined by media scholar Charlotte Brundson in “Text and Audience,” in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter (London: Routledge, 1989), 116-129.

⁸¹ In the film, Shirley Temple actually calls him ‘Uncle’ a term that was commonly used with elderly servant types (à la Uncle Tom from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*).

Respondent 1: But didn't they show him as porter or . . . ?

Raymond Benson: No, they didn't show him as a porter. He was always an entertainer. And Shirley was dancing right along with him.⁸²

[0]Not only is Mr. Benson reading *Bojangles* extra-narratively as authority here, but he interprets the moment of interracial contact, and specifically the moment of interracial verbal endearment, as one of racial transgression with “fascinating” and pleasurable imaginative possibilities. Mr. Benson suggests that Bill Robinson was the leader in these interracial interactions with Temple—that “she danced . . . with *him*” [emphasis added]. Second, he reads racial transgression into Shirley Temple’s reference to Robinson by an unmistakable term of parental endearment. This response demonstrates that among those who had experienced the rigidity of the color line, there was a rejoicing in (and defense of) cinematic moments of fluidity, shift, and change in the realm of the racial, whether these transgressions were sexual or bore the mark of non-sexual forms of intimacy.

While previous scholarship by Gayle Wald and Susan Gubar has described the logic and cultural work achieved by reverse passing narratives, my research suggests that African Americans had an important stake in (and built cultural production around) this concept.⁸³ Although my respondents sometimes feared and condemned cinema’s dominant “racial problem” narrative of interracial strife (i.e. lynchings, systematic racial injustice, and white brutality), during the late 1940s and early 1950s, in the moment of the emergence of a cultural cycle of interracial interest, these study participants (along with a number of Black press critics) nevertheless imagined a hope of racial parity which included white penance, white submission, and alternative, more idealized forms of interracial contact and exchange.

⁸² Raymond Benson, interview with Ellen Scott, Hamilton Grange Senior center, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

⁸³ Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000). Gubar, *Racechanges* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

Response Pattern 3: From Caste to Class: Labor, Civil Rights and Relating to Those Actors Among Us

African Americans also engaged with the screen by forging connections with Black actors widely publicized and billed as stars in the Black press, even if many were by no means stars in terms of their billing in studio advertisements, much less their pay. Although at first glance it may have appeared to some that Blacks merely played maids and butlers, these Black screen presences were complex: they had a distinctly polysemic quality, and sometimes their onscreen characters, largely domestics, inadvertently reflected the relegation of African Americans to service jobs in the U.S. Miriam Petty, in work covering the 1930s and 40s, has elaborated the complex and taxing task of Black screen actors, noting, in particular, variant interpretations (and functions) of these actors among Black and white audiences.⁸⁴ Although these Hollywood actors were not stars by dint of studio construction of their image, the Black press nevertheless did designate them as such. In the following analysis, and despite the use of the term “star” by many of the respondents, I will label these African Americans “actors” (rather than “stars”) to avoid confusion with studio constructed stars.

Donald Bogle’s work has highlighted that African Americans in Hollywood functioned as “auteurs” (or authors) over their onscreen image and that this was a major draw for African American viewers.⁸⁵ Both Black press film reviews, as Anna Everett has demonstrated, and Black press film advertising, as I have shown in Chapter 1, further demonstrate the appeal provided by Black movie

⁸⁴ Miriam Petty, 'Doubtful Glory': 1930s Hollywood and the African-American Actor as Star" (PhD diss. Emory University, 2004), 15. Petty analyzes the careers of Louise Beavers, Lincoln 'Stepin Fetchit' Perry, Paul Robeson, Fredi Washington, paying attention to the extra-filmic discourses, particularly those captured in the Black press, that molded the stars's public reception.

⁸⁵ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 36-38.

actors for Black viewers.⁸⁶ Although the roles were less than satisfactory, the performance, these reviewers argued, *had* to be seen. However, my research suggests that among actual moviegoers, not all African American actors were regarded with equal excitement and praise.

How did African American oral history respondents relate to Black actors of the silver screen in the 1940s and 1950s? And how and where did this relationship connect to questions of civil rights? Those African Americans I interviewed strongly identified with African American actors in the 1940s and 1950s, but not as we might expect. They did not relate to these actors exclusively through their characters or the narrative scenarios in which they were shown on screen, but rather according to the back (stage) story, often told with a relished vernacular flavor, of their meteoric rise to success, one elaborated in the Black press and perpetuated through the grapevine of African American social discourse. Although the African Americans in my study mentioned liking many white actors as well, I found a distinct form of connection to Black actors among my respondents.⁸⁷ Anna Everett has noted that Black press “articles make it clear that black writers and spectators delighted in the experience of watching authentic black bodies on the screen and that they exhibited ‘an interest in players as ‘real persons’.”⁸⁸ Numerous respondents, both those from New York and those from Baltimore, discussed Black actors in terms of a direct, interpersonal connection to them, a link that was often made through family members.

⁸⁶ Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 162-6.

⁸⁷ All told, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, George Raft, and Edward G. Robinson were the most mentioned and emphasized white stars in my study. Interestingly, none of these stars have blonde hair and blue eyes. There is also something alternative about these stars as well. These women were not the traditional pin-ups, and neither Bette Davis nor Joan Crawford embody traditional glamour ideals. In addition, the roles that they played were often rebellious and represented a challenge to the system, Humphrey Bogart and George Raft through their gangster roles and Clark Gable through both his role as Southern Rebel (and rebel against the South) in *Gone with the Wind*, and in his overall brash carriage. Although it would be difficult to pin down the alterity of these figures, it is important to note that it was *off-white* rather than glamour pin-ups that seem to have been the most-loved white stars for my respondents.

⁸⁸ Everett, *Returning the Gaze*, 162.

However, the most significant manner in which my respondents identified with African Americans actors was through their similarity in racial caste and specifically their shared identity as “laborers.” This connection allowed African American spectators to both identify with the (arguably marginal) success wrought by the talent of these figures in their jobs and to figure their success as a communally-shared form of freedom. In many ways the onscreen role acted as a portal, ushering these fans into a “casual” identification with those in the entertainment world. My respondents understood Black actors’ roles and studio-mandated intertextual personae (as shiftless, mugging maids and butlers) in historical context. They read these stars not as timeless glamour gods but as average people, almost “folk heroes,” confined, as were my respondents themselves, by the racial requirements and realities of the day. Take, for example, New Yorker Raymond Benson’s comments about Sidney Poitier:

You could see how great he was cause look at the time he came along. He didn’t have the benefits these people have today. He played right along with white women and all even though it was a no-no in those days. He—the only way a Black guy made it he had to be a butler or a comedian but he, Sidney Poitier, broke that barrier. He became a star—a regular top notch star. Like he played the greatest parts with Katherine Hepburn [in] *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*.⁸⁹

Emphasizing Sidney Poitier’s ability to succeed—even to gain a measure of professional equality—in a field whose public nature made Black success even more taboo, Mr. Benson uses the language of success (“he . . . broke that barrier”). Most pointedly, African Americans in my study identified with onscreen African Americans through the shared narrative of struggle and labor.⁹⁰ For some respondents, watching Black actors reaffirmed a sense of the equality of African Americans. For example, Loretta Johnson of New York, herself an actress, stated, “It was a lily white world out there

⁸⁹ Raymond Benson, interview with Ellen Scott, Hamilton Grange Senior center, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

⁹⁰ The propensity of my respondents to have felt a linked fate and intimacy with these actors may have been linked to another phenomenon in my study—the tendency of respondents to report having met these Black actors.

in Hollywood, you know. All you ever saw was everybody was white so you figured that we didn't have the talent. Soon as I saw it [an African American actor onscreen], I said 'Oh, we got it! We got it!'" This identification was not an "idealized," distanced, or glamorized form of identification—it was based on a care and sense of belonging felt with these folks. As Ms. Johnson put it "I have seen all the moves of Hattie McDaniel and I loved Ethel Waters. . . . we really *loved* those people." Mrs. Boyd of the Linwood Robinson Senior Center was even more emphatic in her praise of Hattie McDaniel: "I loved her. . . . I just loved to hear her talk, and she told you want you wanted to know." Sometimes this rugged identification "got people through" tough times. When asked about who he would go to see at the movies, David Scott, who reported that he did not identify with any films or film stars, said "Well, when Joe Louis was fighting . . . it was shown also at the movies." When I asked him why he liked Joe Louis he answered without hesitation: "He was the Black hope. And not only that—he did it! That was the thing about it—he did it. He carried us, I guess, through the late '30s and '40s and gave us something to yell and scream about in front of the radio whereas we did not have anything else." Stardom thus functioned in an intimate, culturally specific way, as an outgrowth of a shared struggle among African Americans.

Response pattern 3A: Those Who Labor Onscreen: Against Mammyism But For the Day Workers:⁹¹

"It is true that there are many Negro servants in America, but if the majority of them were of the Hollywood variety, they would not be employed long. . . . Hollywood has distorted and made viciously laughable for years the role of Black domestics in America." Langston Hughes⁹²

⁹¹ "Day worker" or "days worker" was a term used by my respondents and confirmed by outside scholarship on African American history and culture. It refers to those African American women who worked as domestics doing various chores, but did not sleep at the homes of their white employers, managing instead to maintain some degree of autonomy because they came out from under the shadow of whiteness *daily* to live with and care for their own families. For a more complete scholarly account of the sociological and cultural importance of "day work" in African American communities in this era, see Elizabeth Lewis-Clark's *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity and the Great Migration* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994) and Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family Among Black Female Domestic Servants* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994).

“No one is or should be naïve enough to think that we object to maid or butler roles when they are a part of normal, integral situations and are convincing characters. . . . What we . . . object to is the stereotype servant with his bowed head, ridiculous dialect and idiotic, brainless stupidity.”-Fred Washington⁹³

One important distinction between these Black responses and the organizational responses of the NAACP and National Negro Congress was that local Black spectators were often less critical of Black film actors. The figure of the domestic worker in Hollywood film sparked a politicized campaign by the NAACP’s middle class, masculine leadership to expand Hollywood’s renderings of race to include doctors and business owners. But during the late 1930s and into the 1940s, domestic work was a demographically provable reality (if an oppression-laden one) of African American existence in the United States.⁹⁴ More research into the reactions of African Americans to the figure of the domestic in Hollywood film during the era when African American women were disproportionately employed as domestics is sorely needed. Although my respondents critiqued Hollywood for its racism, they generally saw Black actors, even onscreen “mammies,” in a positive light. Donald Bogle and other scholars note the value of seeing the Mammy domestic not only through the lens of stereotype but through various other lenses (of actor-level repossession of the role, of camp, and of biography). These extra-textual approaches appreciate the ways that differences between African American actors’ performance style as well as the context of these representations necessarily challenges us to attend to nuanced “signifying” upon the role as written.⁹⁵

⁹² Langston Hughes, “Hollywood’s Ridiculous Stereotype Program Allows Great Negro Talent to Remain Idle,” *Chicago Defender*, May 16, 1953, 11.

⁹³ Fredi Washington, “Headlines and Footlights,” *The People’s Voice*, Aug 5, 1944, 22.

⁹⁴ In 1940 over half (54.4 percent) of African American women in the labor force were listed as “servants” by the U.S. Census (See Thornton, *Across the Boundaries*, Black16). In 1960, 60 percent of African American women in the workforce were domestics, 37 percent in private households and 23 percent in other service. (See Thornton, *Across the Boundaries*, 86).

⁹⁵ See, for example, Pamela Robertson Wojcik, “Mae West’s Maids: Race, ‘Authenticity,’ and the Discourse of Camp,” in *Hop on Pop*, ed. Henry Jenkins, et al. (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).

These characterizations must also be examined for the kind of work and service they actually historically provided for the Black community, who read them against-the-grain of Hollywood's expectations and often of the narratives that contained these roles, if in ways that ultimately fell short of challenging racial hierarchies. In my study, respondents repeatedly reported offense at the "slow," "silly," or "plantation, backwards movement"⁹⁶ in these performances and of the exaggerated facial characteristics (the "big eyes, looking real Black . . . and the teeth")⁹⁷ that characterized African American screen presence. However, some study participants recognized that servant roles were "reflective" of Black experience (as Betty Anne Phillips put it, "that's how it was: Black folks worked for white folks").⁹⁸ My respondents made considerable differentiation between characterizations of maids and butlers by different actors, which suggests a nuanced set of reading strategies were applied to servants portrayed onscreen.⁹⁹ They clearly recognized that the maid and butler roles were a peculiar alchemy of director mandate and actor prerogative.

Many of the respondents I spoke to *recognized* the vague similarity between these onscreen maids and the figure of the "day worker" but stopped there: they could not identify with Hollywood depictions—not with the distorted uniform and carriage of these women, much less their caricatured disposition. James Brown of Baltimore said his grandmother, a day worker, had "worked for the white folks and then came home and cooked for her family" and even managed to "cook for church one day a week."¹⁰⁰ Ms. Lillian Smith of Baltimore remembered keenly the day worker as a community icon, one she would see out her window if she woke up in the wee hours of the morning.

⁹⁶ Stuart "The Robin" Fabre, interview with Ellen Scott, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

⁹⁷ Winchester Focus Group 2, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

⁹⁸ Betty Anne Phillips, interview with Ellen Scott, Senior Network, Baltimore, MD, Nov. 2005.

⁹⁹ A number of African American stars, including Hattie McDaniel and Bill Robinson, were not critiqued for their style of characterization but were frequently recognized for their accomplishments and what they had done with the role given.

¹⁰⁰ Senior Network focus group, interview with Ellen Scott, Senior Network, Baltimore, MD, Nov. 2005.

She contrasted this community figure with the maids played in Hollywood. While Hattie McDaniel and maids in the movies “usually . . . had their head tied up with something and whatever they had on was down to their ankles,” Ms. Smith remembered, “I knew some of them who were working for dues [hesitantly] . . . at that time and I could relate to that. . . . At the time people in my neighborhood—I would see them going to work and they had the *colored* uniforms.”¹⁰¹

The cinematic depiction of the maid and mammy from slavery (one repeated in an era where more and more Black female domestics were moving towards day work) produced not only “disrecognition” in respondents but also, plainly, anger that white racist attitudes had changed so little.¹⁰² A female respondent from the Winchester Senior Center in Baltimore, who herself had done domestic work, stated clearly regarding Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen’s roles in *Gone with the Wind*, “I remember. I didn’t like that. Even way back then. I didn’t like that. . . . It’s just like it is today. *Why* do they think they’re better than we are?”¹⁰³ Another woman, Louise Johnson of Baltimore’s Senior Network, also stated her opposition with an indignant rhetorical question posed against *Gone with the Wind*: “Hattie McDaniel—it was a great role for her but she was just a maid and there was very little of interest to it, too. That really bugged me in a movie. That... ‘cause she was Black—she had to call [a *kid*] ‘Miss’—‘Miss this’ ‘Miss that.’ You know, who are *they*? That used to burn

¹⁰¹Robin Kelley notes the importance of this the difference in dress between day workers and those “living in” in his “We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working Class Opposition in the South,” *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (June 1999), 99. Interestingly, these two respondents examined the shift in depictions of domestics over the course of time. In addition, it is interesting to note that a number of the respondents exalted Hattie McDaniel’s role as Mammy over other maids played at the time. To give one example among others, Ms. Lillian Smith noted: “I think I was probably impressed with *Gone with the Wind* for the simple reason that it had Hattie McDaniel. . . . And it was the first time that one of us had really attempted a role like that and I think I always[0] remember her.”

¹⁰² Two of my respondents, Lillian Smith and James Brown of Baltimore, mentioned what I term “figural” identification with the day worker, suggesting that their grandmothers or fellow community members did domestic work for white folks, but both also strongly criticized Hollywood’s treatment of Black maids. James Brown even went as far as to suggest that Hollywood depicted white maids with more realism than Black maids.

¹⁰³ Female Respondent 1, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

me up.”¹⁰⁴ By inadvertently presenting the reality of white racism, specifically articulated as white ignorance of and disrespect for the contributions and value of the Black maid, Hollywood film depiction of women “in service” reminded some African American movie-goers of common white attitudes towards Blacks and, in doing so, provoked Black spectatorial anger toward films that entertained white audiences by justifying Black subservience. Although these African American respondents did not *identify* with the day worker as the character Mammy, these films did rouse racial sensibilities in my respondents, causing them to more strongly identify as Black, as they knew that these films performatively articulated a claim about Black inferiority that pertained to them by extension. Film depictions of maids and butlers were, thus, often something to be “overcome” like other forms of racism (one respondent even compared these depictions to the word “nigger”) rather than enjoyed.¹⁰⁵ But in the case of a number of my respondents, the anger and critique that these supposed “reflections” produced ended up prompting an offscreen dialogue that featured dissent, recognition of reality by contrast with the screen, and that explicitly, verbally, righted onscreen wrongs.

¹⁰⁴ Senior Network Focus Group, interview with Ellen Scott, Senior Network senior center, Baltimore, MD, Nov. 2005.

¹⁰⁵ For example, when I asked Calvin Vaughn, “What did you think about how the majority of African Americans were depicted at that time [during the 1940s and 1950s]?” he answered, “I think a whole lot of them. It didn’t stop them from acting or getting jobs. . . .

ECS: So you didn’t feel personally offended by those images. You[0] didn’t say, “That’s me they are denigrating”?

Mr. Vaughn: No. I never did. Even when I went overseas with the army, in GA—I took my training in GA[0]. And coming from Atlanta and he [his commanding officer] told me to go one way and my friend [a white man] to go the other way. And I never even got offended about that really. ‘Cause I never try to let nothing like that bother me. Like one time I had a police call me “nigger.” He said “Get out the street, nigger.” I didn’t say nothing to him. It might have hurt me a little bit back then but I didn’t let it get the best of me. Just like them movies. I didn’t let them get the best of me[0].

ECS: Did it make it harder for you to be entertained by it?

Mr. Vaughn: It might have been hurtful. When that part came up it might have took effect right then but then it moves on to something else. And then I just blank it out unless I am going to see the movie again. And then I might worry about it again. But . . . I am not going to let something like that worry me too much. It might worry me but am not going to let it take effect and make me do something I don’t want to do. ‘Cause I knew that wasn’t the whole movie. (Calvin Vaughn, interview with Ellen Scott, Southwest Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005.)

As I mentioned earlier, most of my respondents did not consider this insulting depiction of the domestic, butler, or day worker to be the responsibility of the actors.¹⁰⁶ Much of the spectatorial patience with and forgiveness of the stars for their “demeaning” roles stemmed from respondents’ recognition that Hollywood’s racism was something that actors had to negotiate in order to stay in “the business,” just as my respondents had to deal with racism in order to move ahead in their own jobs. These viewers saw African American performers as fellow laborers and, more than identifying with their onscreen roles, identified with their struggle (one perhaps implicit in their limited screen roles) to survive in a white world. Richard Dyer has described the phenomenon of star as laborer, suggesting that critical “discourses of star labour [sic] do not simply report the work of film performance but also regulate hierarchies and power relationships between performers determined by judgments of artistic legitimacy.” However, in Dyer’s account, it appears that spectators and critics view star labor by contrastive measure with their own labor.¹⁰⁷ While this was sometimes true of my respondent’s reaction to white stars, quite the opposite was true with my respondent’s reactions to Black actors.

In the case of Black actors, it was the struggle—a struggle for equality and civil rights in employment—that was the most evocative point of connection for the African American moviegoers I interviewed. As Joseph Brade of New York put it, Black actors “were not entertaining to please themselves or their normal audience. They were good entertainers. The maids—the shuffling—those were the only jobs they could get. So they played the part.”¹⁰⁸ Cinematic serfdom was the price of

¹⁰⁶ Certain stars were critiqued more strongly than others. For example, Steppin Fetchitt (who was referred to with near ubiquity among my respondents by the more dignified name of “Steppin Fletcher”) was one of the figures who became typically associated as a cipher and example of white racism, rather than a character in his own right. Bill Robinson (a Richmond native) was seen in a much more positive light and, despite my own tendencies to find fault in his mugging, was typically identified as an enjoyable artist by my respondents.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 194-6.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph Brade, interview with Ellen Scott, Abyssinian Senior Center, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

crossover success. Numerous respondents suggested that African American actors played poor roles because of a financial need. Mr. Joseph Brade noted, “There was another one called Steppin Fletcher [sic]. And that was his pay. *That was his steady pay.* And in order to get it he had to act as if he was, you know, bowing and bending.”¹⁰⁹ Loretta Johnson of New York voiced her support for and identification with Black actors, who had to struggle like the rest of Black folks for recognition:

[I didn’t care for] Steppin Fletcher [sic] and some of the others. I never did care for that Blackface thing either. I found it degrading. But then I guess . . . you realize this was their field and they wanted to get into it. So, I guess this is the way that they had to break—break into it. I guess somebody had to take the role or you had to do what you had to do. . . . Some people that [are] judgmental [say], “Uncle Tom! Uncle Tom!” I told my daughter, “People say we were Uncle Toms but I say you don’t realize that it took more courage for a Black person to portray these roles *or to do what he had to do to maintain his family.* . . . It’s not because he wanted to do it and I’m sure it’s degrading but I think it took more courage to do this.”¹¹⁰

Mr. Calvin Vaughn of Baltimore echoed this economic reading. When I asked him what he thought about how African Americans were depicted, he pointed out that demeaning roles “didn’t stop them from acting or getting jobs. I think they didn’t really like what they were doing. But everybody wants a job, wants some money.” He continued, putting himself in the position of the Black actor, “you figure it is going to get better. And it did get better. They didn’t just give up like some people did—like, ‘I am not going to do this ‘cause I can’t get this kind of job.’ Can’t do that—don’t give up. It paid off.” The analogy to other work—other jobs—in this statement illuminates the logic of Mr. Vaughn’s statement and demonstrates the ways that actors were viewed by many Black respondents as laborers, trying to do what they could to get by and persevering in spite of the demeaning nature of their work. His repeated use of the term “job” highlights the fact that he considered acting as a form of employment rather than on a fame-based framework.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Loretta Johnson, interview with Ellen Scott, Abyssinian Senior Center, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

Although my respondents understood the actors' financial motivation, the lowest standard of characterization they would tolerate from Black actors shifted after the Second World War as "dignified images," and with them civil rights concerns, came more sharply into relief. Mr. Joseph Brade emphasized the financial pressures that faced Black entertainers, but also the shifting pressures and self-conception of Black audiences:

Steppin Fletcher [sic] and all those entertainers like that: they were at the bottom. But when they realized that the average guys coming back from the war didn't go for their types of entertainment, they had to turn around. . . . [Acting] was their job—that was their source of income. They had commands. And to ask a person to give up their source of income for the good of everybody else, that was hard to do.¹¹¹

Black soldiers in the audience, Mr. Brade suggested, precipitated a change in the treatment of African American characterization onscreen. Seniors in a focus group at James Weldon Johnson Senior Center in Harlem also mentioned financial motivations. They referred to a lack of "work" in Hollywood for Black actors, and specifically, in this case, Steppin Fetchitt, a star who, unlike Bojangles Robinson and Rochester, was mentioned with absolute consistency as an icon of the demeaned status of Blacks in America. One of my female respondents from the James Weldon Johnson Senior center in New York recounted: "If he [Fetchitt/Fletcher] acted sensible, he would have never got the part. He had to act stupid. . . . He was a very brilliant person. . . . But he couldn't show it or he would have got no work."¹¹² This opinion was also shared by my respondents in Virginia. Mrs. Rosa Boyd of Richmond made clear the limitations placed on McDaniel and other "starving artist" Black actors who were relegated to maid's roles: "Well if that's the only thing you could get [as a role] and she wanted to work so *she could eat* [my italics], then she had to take it."¹¹³

¹¹¹ Joseph Brade, interview with Ellen Scott, Oct. 2005.

¹¹² James Weldon, Johnson Senior Center focus group, interview with Ellen Scott, James Weldon Johnson senior Center, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

¹¹³ Focus Group interview, interview with Ellen Scott, Linwood Robinson Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Oct. 2005.

This “reading” of Black actors as laborers seriously dedicated to their profession and as providers with families dependent on their ability to secure jobs and therefore to please white people, demonstrates the link between the Black actor’s plight and the plight of the average African American worker. If the African American spectators sometimes saw a similarity between what they had to do and what the actors had to do to gain employment, perhaps, conversely, African American working class spectators saw themselves as having to do the job of actors in their workplace—as having to perform a role for their employers. Perhaps African American working class spectators identified with Black actors because *they too* were required to play a role—as Paul Lawrence Dunbar put it— to “wear the mask that grins and lies,” at their jobs.¹¹⁴ In either case, my research showed that, at least in the case of these respondents, the connection between Black actor and Black audience was channeled through a sense of linked fate and common experience in the racial caste system of 1940s and 50s America. That Black working class respondents’ sense of what Richard Dyer has called a “just like me” connection to stars was made through labor is an important finding.

¹¹⁴ In probably his most famous poem, Dunbar writes, “We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, / This debt we pay to human guile; / With torn and broken hearts we smile, / And mouth with myriad subtleties. / Why should the world know otherwise, / In counting all our tears and sighs? / Nay, let them only see us, while / We wear the mask. / We smile, but O great Christ, our cries / To thee from tortured souls arise. / We sing but oh the clay is vile / Beneath our feet, and long the mile; / But let the world dream otherwise, / We wear the mask!” Herbert Woodward Martin, ed., *Paul Laurence Dunbar, Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 54. In a similar vein, James Campbell Scott suggests that public transcripts of power relations are marked by a kind of acting and performance: “The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear.” James Scott Campbell, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 4. Campbell’s analysis provides an important framework for understanding hidden or subversive Black political action. He highlights as well the dramaturgical aspects of both the public transcripts and the upsetting of these master narratives. Richard Dyer also expresses the “life-as-theater” analogy as important to development of star-viewer connections (Dyer, *Stars*, 20-1).

Response pattern 3B: Just Like You Could Be: Sidney Poitier, the Model of the Integrated Black Middle Class Subject and Civil Rights Discourse

Richard Dyer has suggested that styles of acting performance conform to historically specific industrial codes.¹¹⁵ During the 1940s and 1950s, the racial problem film cycle arguably worked to stretch African American characterization from typed images to more humanized, multifaceted characterizations. Certain stars seemed to exist upon a pivot point of this historical shift in characterization and therein elicited a particularly powerful audience reaction, largely because of the historical juncture in which they existed and which they personified. Sidney Poitier stood at such a juncture. He was the first African American Hollywood star who was, virtually from the beginning of his screen career, the name above the title and a box office draw that earned a film's success. Various other scholars have pointed to the compromised ideological work done *for whites* or *dominant viewership* by Poitier's calm and cool characterizations in the early 1960s with the rise of civil rights.¹¹⁶ Poitier's intertextual persona has been seen by many scholars as a white authored version of how African Americans should act under integration.

To the extent that Poitier replaced Robeson as the crossover star and reigning representative of on-screen Black masculinity, he does represent a depoliticization of Black male stardom., but I challenge the notion that this is all he was. Most previous work neglects to recognize that Poitier's cinematic debut occurred in 1950, a full ten years before the films he is most famous for. Although Poitier did not technically get star billing in the credits on his first film, *No Way Out* (1950), major

¹¹⁵ Dyer, *Stars*, 90-1. Dyer has also done important work on Robeson, which pointed towards the varying meanings of the same "phenomena, Paul Robeson," in Black and white discourses on the man. Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martins, 1986), 70.

¹¹⁶ Ed Guerrero offers this critique of Poitier, suggesting that the omissions and irrelevance in his characterizations in some sense led to the outrageousness of Blaxploitation. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 69-80. See also Andrea Levine, "Sidney Poitier's Civil Rights: Rewriting the Mystique of White Womanhood in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *In the Heat of the Night*," *American Literature* 73, no. 2 (2001), 365-386.

roles followed rapidly: Poitier had prominent roles in eight films: *Cry the Beloved Country* (1951), *Red Ball Express* (1952), *Go Man Go* (1954), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Edge of the City* (1957), *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *Mark of the Hawk* (1958) and *Porgy and Bess* (1959), many of them dealing with interracial themes, all before 1960. In the 1950s, and especially early in the decade, Poitier's cool and yet angst-filled intertextual screen persona would indeed have been cutting edge—and markedly less out of step with the tenor of civil rights activities concurrent with his films than it would in the 1960s. It is therefore Poitier's films of the 1950s that I inquired about in my study.

Poitier represented qualities that were pleasing to both Black and white audiences: for Black audiences, Poitier showed strong poise, a challenge to white assumptions and even direct confrontation of white racism.¹¹⁷ Perhaps more importantly, his positional “elevation” expressed more than words could say—and made vocal protestations unnecessary: Poitier's characters existed in a Black, middle class, integrated, insider position that appeared to insulate them from insult. As an icon of his own success, Poitier's Luther Brooks (of *No Way Out* [1950]), for example, could enjoy the luxury of silence in the face of white challenge. If Poitier's characters were unprecedentedly confrontational, however, they also reassured white audiences that even angry confrontation did not need to produce change outside of the elevation of a single token West Indian Black man.¹¹⁸ In addition, it is notable that, along with a rise in vocal—sometimes even physical—confrontations between Poitier's characters and white men, came an increase in actions that accentuated his humbling. Note for example the scene in *No Way Out* (1950), one the cinematography and music

¹¹⁷ Richard Dyer argues that in the case of Robeson, “black and white discourses on blackness seem to be valuing the same things.” Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 79.

¹¹⁸ Donald Bogle—in his detailed intertextual analyses of Poitier's style of characterization in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*—suggests that “for the mass white audiences, Sidney Poitier was a black man who had met their standards” (175). His characters “were amenable and pliant”—Bogle even links them to the Toms of prior generations (176). Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Film* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

centralize and dramatize, where a white woman spits on Poitier. The importance of Poitier's performance in this scene will be addressed at greater length in Chapter 5. Despite this, one characteristic of Poitier's that respondents clearly enjoyed neither editing nor scenario could alter: his defiant *remove*.

Where Robeson's physical frame alone had spoken of power, Poitier's defiance was consistently contained in the realm of verbal discourse: at least in his early films, all of his fiery angst and bitterness was rendered through proud but West-Indian-accented speech. Equal to and imbricated with his bitterness was his vulnerability.¹¹⁹ Poitier's allotted screen time consistently required him to interact with whites in ways that gave little window into a separate Black subjectivity. The moments that held the most promise and suggestiveness of his deeper revolutionary sensibility were his moments of "cool" *remove*—moments where it is clear that his characters know more than they are saying (think for example of his defiant rendition of the song "Long Gone"—one written by W.C. Handy—in *The Defiant Ones*).¹²⁰

When I asked two of my most avid (and historically knowledgeable) filmgoers (Harold Gollop and Stuart 'The Robin' Fabre, both of New York) about which movies signaled the greatest shift in representation, they both pointed to *No Way Out*. According to Harold Gollop, Poitier was the main attraction and source of the perceived shift represented in these films. He was distinct because "he had the opportunity to play a doctor, see, and that was like an elevation, because he didn't have to play a gangster or a singer . . . or a guy working on a truck or moving or something like

¹¹⁹ Poitier had the ability to utter bitter angry words in a way that simultaneously backed away from violent confrontation: the narrowing of his voice and his intense, pointed glare were counterbalanced by the softening and quickening of his voice. His narrowed glare also was always directed at a specific, provoking character and cinematography studiously avoided direct address that would implicate the audience. Before one knew it, Poitier's eruptions were over and nothing much had changed . . . or had it? Poitier's characters' words were threatening in a prophetic, condemning way, but without the direct threat of violence.

¹²⁰ The song represents Poitier's character's connection to a Black collective (and to Black cultural production) not represented in the film's narrative.

that.” Speaking through a voice of spectatorial identification, he said, “*You* [i.e. the Black collective] got a chance to have a profession [my italics].”¹²¹ Like other Black stars, Sidney Poitier was an object of identification because of his extra-diegetic narrative of work-related success, but unlike earlier stars, Poitier’s diegetic persona also held the resonance of this offscreen ascent and generated pleasurable audience engagement.

Poitier was also one of the Black stars that my respondents admitted identifying with, and although only one interviewee responded to my identification question with reference to Poitier,¹²² the reality of my respondents’ connection with him—and the fact that they gained something vicariously through his onscreen presence—seemed obvious in their description of him. Many respondents described Poitier’s screen persona with a sort of reverie and pride. Mr. Calvin Vaughn of Baltimore’s Southwest Senior center stated: “He was a real cool guy then. I don’t care what picture he played in, it seemed like he was cool and he done a good job.”¹²³ Disregarding the narrative framework of the film and neglecting to even mention the plot, Vaughn focuses in this statement on Poitier’s cinematic presence and intertextually built persona. Seniors at the Winchester senior center in Baltimore also appreciated similar elements of Poitier’s persona:

V1: I just loved him. He was so cool.

V2: I liked the way he portrayed himself as a real gentleman.

V3: Very intelligent.

V2: That’s what made it what it was. Because in the old pictures, he was a perfect gentleman.

¹²¹ Harold Gollop, Abyssinian Senior Center, Harlem New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

¹²² Some of my respondents actually reported the opposite: they described the difficulty of relating to Poitier: “We didn’t connect with him because he was a good actor and all, but he had an accent. Black folks don’t have accents” (Senior Network). Some of his roles were described as perhaps too cutting edge even for the Black community. One respondent, Calvin Vaughn, remembered that protests were sounded in the Black community because of the use of the word “nigger” in one of Poitier’s films (probably *No Way Out*).

¹²³ Calvin Vaughn, interview with Ellen Scott, Southwest Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, July 2005.

V2: And they [whites] had to come around to him because that's who he was.¹²⁴

Looking beyond the question of role to the quality of the characterization, my respondents here appreciate Poitier's poised gentlemanly quality as well as his edgy coolness. In these statements, "cool" refers to more than just "hipness" but rather to a sort of calmness—an ability to keep oneself collected and calm in spite of provocation. That it was the coolness of Poitier rather than his anger that became the grounds for identification would seem an ideologically complicit choice. But for my respondents, Poitier's gentlemanly quality seemed to secure him in the ranks with whites and acted as confirmation of his integration. His winning screen persona, power to surmount white-imposed boundaries and overcome white stereotypical notions of Blackness seemed to connote a kind of Black possibility, if not Black power. The strength of his character, and of his self-possession, stood in contrast to the portrayals of maids and butlers that immediately preceded and in some cases surrounded him, as we would see later in films like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Some respondents still recognized studio limitations placed on Poitier's characters.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, demonstrating a King-like stalwartness, pacifism, and respectability, Poitier, many respondents held, had qualities that would win over the whites he encountered without causing him to compromise himself. This impressive balance seemed to have a staying power that revolution lacked.

We might consider that studios may have seen in Poitier's calm and cool pose a powerful way to both sate Black audiences and to reassure whites. The Black audience members I talked with, though, saw his coolness, his solid resolve, not as a repression of political angst but as representation

¹²⁴ Winchester Senior Center-Focus Group 2-Baltimore, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

¹²⁵ For example, James Brown of the Senior Network in Baltimore described the 1973 Poitier film: "He was a surgeon or something but he met a woman that was a transplant from some country. And they fell in love and did all the things that you usually see other people do, riding horses or boating or whatever. He wound up with a terrible illness. [laughter] You look at this and say why can't we. . . . [Laughter] You look at them differently now. When we look back [, we think,] 'Where you going with this?'"

of his ability to be himself in a variety of different kinds of difficult situations—and especially in integrated environments. The image he presented was one that many of my respondents could respect and one similar to the white heroes, like Clark Gable, whom they admired from yesteryear. Although Poitier was no revolutionary, his strong and fiery characterization seemed always to embody a latent and contained revolutionary potential (one we see realized, at least in part, in *Something of Value* [Richard Brooks, 1957] and *Band of Angels* [Raoul Walsh, 1957]) that was enjoyable, accessible, and culturally legible to my respondents.

Many respondents also used the work paradigm, one already operationalized in their discussions of the depictions of Black domestics in film, as a way to read Sidney Poitier's promising public ascent into the ranks of the most prestigious Hollywood actors. Reading the performance style and display of character as more important to the community than the textual and narrative characterization, my respondents emphasized the importance of Black professionalism, a quality many seemed to hope and suggest they shared with the great actor. In describing actors Sidney Poitier and Lena Horne, Lillian Smith of Baltimore remarked:

They were strong enough to—I think they stood their ground and they would not accept a slave-type of an image. . . . They [those in the African American community] had a great deal of respect for Sidney Poitier. It was because of the way he presented himself. If you apply for a position, [whether you will get] it depends on how you present yourself. . . . And I think that had a lot to do with it. I think they set a goal for themselves as individuals and they said, “If I get this, I’ll get respect. But if I have to get this by being on my knees, I am going to let this go.” And then: they [Horne and Poitier] were talented.¹²⁶

Particularly at stake in this comment is the fact that these actors projected an image that could get respect, one that seemed to communicate to many African Americans the emergence of a Black public character apparently free of stereotype, and with it, the immanence of change. This shift was

¹²⁶ Mrs. Lillian Smith, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

crucially linked to civil rights primarily through integration: in my study, African Americans imagined the possibility that being the perfect race “gentleman” would help to smooth over the difficulties that integration wrought.

Many people described Poitier almost more as a commodity than as an interpersonal source of identification. For example, Thomas Turner of Baltimore stated: “Sidney Poitier was one of our best actors—One of our best Black actors, and he was in a lot of great roles.” Here his repeated use of “our” operates to claim Poitier almost as cultural capital more than a ground for subjective identification. However, if Poitier was, in some respondents’ view, as distant as a commodity, he was one that raised the value of African American identity in the public eye.

This tendency to read Poitier intertextually extended beyond analysis of his screen persona with some respondents. For example, Joseph Brade not only read Poitier intertextually but in terms of his offscreen *political* activities—comparing Sidney Poitier to Harry Belafonte (to whom he attributed a more powerful political influence) in terms of their activism. Delores Glover even associated Poitier with Black power, stating that the struggle for Black roles “went along with Black power. People like Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte . . . started pushing those things, too.”

In rare instances, the pleasure of relating to Poitier was narrative, but often even these narrative pleasures took on racial overtones: for example, when I asked William Blount of New York (who declined to have his voice tape recorded) what *The Defiant Ones* was about, he described the movie as the one where Poitier and Tony Curtis were fighting each other. It was good, he said, in that day to see a Black man beat up a white man. Even the fact that they became friends in the end seemed to him “realistic.” Here Poitier’s assertive, masculine fight against a white racist becomes the basis for appreciation of his screen presence.

Although my respondents were generally positive about Poitier, I think it important that they remembered very little about the actual roles that he played and remembered more his intertextual presence and his “role” in Hollywood’s movie making business. Sidney Poitier embodied a restraint that, while it stood against the revolutionary strains of the civil rights movement, was in keeping with its more nonviolent iterations. For many, this restrained response also stood for “an everyman’s” attitude of indifference, pride, and independence from whites that would mark an idealized Black subjectivity in the wake of civil rights struggles. Unlike “the Mammy” and “the Butler” figures, African Americans in my study appreciated the cultural work of not only the role that Poitier played but also of *how* he played it. His method of characterization showed the way towards a post-civil-rights stylized angst towards whites that was powerful in altering, among some African Americans, the possibilities for acceptable African American presence in public discourse.

Black actors also stood for the possibility of middle class life—Poitier, through his onscreen and offscreen success and, to a lesser extent, those who played maid and butler characters through their offscreen financial status. In seeming to have mastered the class barriers that set African Americans perpetually beneath whites, they offered a sort of token hope of success and, by extension, a savor of freedom. If they reinforced the class system with displays of wealth and power, their challenge to racial caste made them, in another sense, heroes, if ideologically complicit ones. Interestingly, very few people related to Poitier on the basis of his look or sound. Rather, their racial identification with him was based on an assumed shared experience, solidified perhaps through his phenotype and his skin tone. African American spectators I spoke with described Poitier with a kind of reverie and familiarity that bespoke his importance to the Black imagination of that time. Although by no means an ideology-free version of freedom, identification with “Sidney” on various

levels allowed many African American spectators in my study to begin to feel a measure of the euphoria of his peace, his cool resentments towards whites, and his financial and social success.

Response Pattern 4: “While You’re Movin’ Up, Don’t Forget Mom”: Imitation of Life, the Politics of the Black Domestic Sphere, and Discovering the Limitations of Civil Rights

The film versions of Fanny Hurst’s 1933 novel¹²⁷ *Imitation of Life* (made in 1934 and 1959) tell the story of two women—one Black, one white—both of whom have complicated emotional relationships with their daughters. The complications, though, have different sources for the Black mother than for the white one. The white woman (named “Bea” in the first film and “Laura” in the second) rises up from poverty and obscurity to become rich, powerful and well-known. In the first film version, Bea’s ascent is based on a fortune made on a pancake recipe created by the Black woman, Delilah, who is Bea’s servant and “friend.”¹²⁸ Because of her success, the white woman is unable to properly care for her child, Jessie, or replace her dead husband with a proper male suitor, and therefore Bea and Jessie unwittingly fall for the same man. The Black woman’s struggles are (purportedly) quite different and not work-related or romantic: her child (named “Peola” in the first film and “Sarah Jane” in the second) looks white and incessantly tries to pass as white. The ungrateful white-like child in many ways stands in for (and obscures) the ungrateful white culture that oppresses the Black mother. Much of the condemnation and guilt for neglect of the Black mother falls on the Black daughter. The Black child, rather than the white woman who exploits her mother, is the sin of the film. Peola’s status as “sin” permeated the popular discourse on the film, as at least

¹²⁷ Fanny Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1933).

¹²⁸ In the first film, the part of Peola, the Black daughter, is played by Fredi Washington, the part of the Black mother, Delilah, is played by Louise Beavers, the white mother is played by Claudette Colbert, and the white daughter, Jessie, by Rochelle Hudson. In the 1959 version, directed by Douglas Sirk, the Black daughter is named Sarah Jane Johnson and is played by white actress Susan Kohner, the part of the Black mother, called Annie Johnson, is played by Juanita Moore. The part of the white mother, Laura Meredith, is played by Lana Turner, and the white daughter, Susie Meredith, by Sandra Dee.

one white reviewer commented upon her beauty and rebelliousness and her wily, coy unwillingness to be “the repressed” of the film. An unnamed reviewer for the *Literary Digest* opined that

the real story, the narrative switch is merely hinted at, never really contemplated, is that of the beautiful and rebellious daughter of the loyal negro friend. She is light skinned, sensitive, tempestuous. She grows bitterly indignant when she sees that the white girl with whom she has been reared is getting all the fine things of life while she is subjected to humiliation and unhappiness. Obviously she is the most interesting person in the cast.”¹²⁹

The *Imitation of Life* narrative leaves open a number of interpretive avenues that might link it to civil rights themes. In the Black press, for example, the 1934 version was largely critiqued according to the expectations of Black viewers who were aware of both the civil rights struggles waged within the Black community and of the reality of motivations for Black interactions with whites (and specifically for “passing”). An examination of the Black press responses to the film contained in the Tuskegee Institute News Clipping file, although not exhaustive, suggests that most African American reviewers did not like the film but used it as a basis for a productive critique.¹³⁰ It reveals that many reviewers saw the 1934 film’s poorly drawn Black characters as stemming from the logic of discrimination and as embodying the kind of elliptical, unaccountable motivations that undergirded white claims that African Americans should be denied civil rights.

The Christian Recorder, an African American newspaper published out of Philadelphia, noted in particular that “the docility of Aunt [sic] Delilah, the leading character, cannot be found to-day in

¹²⁹ The reviewer argues that the smallness of Peola’s role stems from a sort of producer-level discipline of the character. While Delilah “knows her place, the daughter is too bitter and lacking in resignation for them [the producers]. Thereupon they scold her for breaking her mother’s heart” (*Literary Digest* 118 (Dec. 8, 1934): 31).

¹³⁰ The Tuskegee Institute News Clippings file, for a long time one of the only and still the most comprehensive and one of the best indexes of the coverage of African American topics in print media, unfortunately does not include page numbers on the articles it contains. To find the referenced articles, consult the *Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File*. [microform]. 1899-1966, Tuskegee Institute, Ala.: Division of Behavioral Science Research, Carver Research Foundation, [Sanford N.C. : Microfilming Corporation of America, 1981] 252 reels. See the section labeled “Theatrical Individuals, Troupes, etc, 1912-1939” (reel 241). Though the clipping file indicates that many Black reviewers were critical of *Imitation of Life* the file is not exhaustive and there may well have been other, more positive, readings of the film.

the modern Negro of intelligence.”¹³¹ Peola reinforced the linked suppositions of Black stupidity and white supremacy. She was a problem because, in the critic’s experience, “the Negro who is light enough to want to be white is usually clever enough to be white,” and “the deification of white and the insinuation that Negroes want to be white is propaganda which appeals to the self-conceit of white people.”¹³² Finally, the critic censured the depiction of Black religion in the film’s final scenes at Delilah’s funeral: “Many older people get a thrill out of it because it brings back pleasant memories of innocent days, but insofar as it is the characterization of the religion of the Negro, it is only a caricature.”¹³³ Rev. Horace White of Ohio, who read the book *and* saw the movie, decided to critique the film from the pulpit of his African American church. *The Chicago Defender* included the text of his critique, which also followed along social justice lines, claiming that “Peola was unrealistic, a myth. There are no such Negroes who would give up wealth and respect simply to be a white cashier,” and that, in the film’s warped logic, Delilah “is subservient because she wants to be and not because of the white man. Such psychology shows that the Negro is unfit for proving his right to American citizenship.” He also argued that the film showed only “the white man’s concept of social equality.”¹³⁴ Rooting his supposition of the film’s affront to civil rights not in its depictions of interracial interactions but rather in its racist depictions of Black psychology, Rev. White condemned the film. Interestingly none of these Black Christian reviewers suggested that it was a “sin” to pass (as Delilah does and as Pinky’s mother figure, Dicey Johnson [Ethel Waters], would reiterate in *Pinky*), but instead rooted their critique in whites’ poor understanding of African Americans.

¹³¹ *Imitation of Life*, *Christian Recorder*, Mar 28, 1935, (Tuskegee Clipping file).

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ “*Imitation of Life*,” *Christian Recorder*, Mar 28, 1935. Interestingly, and to my surprise, there was a significant response to *Imitation of Life* among African American Christians. Judith Weisenfeld has recently pointed to the importance of African American religious readings of films—even films that were only marginally religious in nature (she analyzes *Lost Boundaries*, for example). Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name*, 355-400.

¹³⁴ “Minister Raps *Imitation of Life* [sic] as Subtle Propaganda,” *Chicago Defender*, Jan 26, 1935 (Tuskegee Clipping file).

Black students from Oberlin College critiqued the film's depiction of the relationship between Black women, highlighting offensive inaccuracies in the rendering of interactions between Black mothers and daughters. These students were so upset with *Imitation's* depiction that they went beyond simply critiquing the film and protested its being shown on campus to both college officials and the local theater managers and in an open letter published in *The New York Age*. In a beautiful, reflective response to the film, Shirley Graham, one of the bothered Oberlin students, wrote,

Where in all the world will you find a Black mother so stupid, so blind to the welfare of her child that she will thus utterly throw away her future and her happiness? We're proud of our mothers. We see them, stretching back of us, a long line of deep bosomed, proud, Black women who have given of the last ounce of their strength and being that we might come into the full share of manhood and womanhood.¹³⁵

Responding to the film's heavily symbolic blocking motifs, which situated Delilah and Peola in the basement of the white woman's house, she continued, saying that Black mothers "never taught us to accept a 'basement' standard."¹³⁶ The writer also critiqued the lack of realism in Black characters' motivations that suggested a fictionalized Black awe for whites: "nor do we care to try to explain [to fellow white college students why] a colored girl in the City of New York (where the picture is laid) and who (we are led to suppose) is well supplied with funds, [is] spending her evenings hanging around a basement staircase trying to catch a glimpse of the 'white folks' party. Imagine such a thing in New York!"¹³⁷

¹³⁵ "Oberlin Students Turn Thumbs Down on Showing of *Imitation of Life*," *New York Age*, Mar 9, 1935 (Tuskegee Clipping file).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*



Figure 20 Amsterdam News Feb. 20, 1937 (both photos)

Although broadly critical of the unrealistic treatment of African Americans in the film, the Black press reviewers I read did not blame this inaccuracy on Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington. In fact, Louise Beavers was given a chance to defend herself in the *New Amsterdam News* (NY) and was pictured in a five shot photo spread (of which two of the photos are copied here) with a glamor—indeed beauty—that gave the lie to her frumpy role.¹³⁸

The critique of lack of realism in these readings would appear to be separate from civil rights concerns. But the reviewers were actually criticizing the reification of the myth of illogical Black motivations, social inferiority, and the obliteration of Black history—aspects of the film, which to them acted to justify white racism and denial of civil rights.

Among my oral history respondents, *Imitation of Life* was by far the best-remembered film dealing with race of the New Deal and Civil Rights eras. For the most part, respondents were unsure

¹³⁸ Louise Beavers responded to critique by informing readers that she was not from the South but from Cincinnati, Ohio by way of California. She answered back negative responses to *Imitation of Life* by stating, “I have no objection to playing the so-called Aunt Jemima roles because they are period plays. I am an actress and interpret characters as they are written. . . . There are plenty of scripts which I personally do not agree with but can I be personally responsible for what a Hollywood writer puts into his story? . . . While I might interpret roles of ignorant people at times I have heard it said that it takes intelligence to do such a part.” Roi Ottley, “Louise Beavers Strongly Defends Aunt Jemima Roles Given to Her,” *New Amsterdam News*, Feb 20, 1937 (Tuskegee Clipping file).

whether they had seen the first or the second film, although the central racial themes of the film, the emotive dynamics of the scenes that were salient to them, and films' implications for Black women were etched in their minds with extreme clarity. The mother/daughter narrative dynamics that were most interesting to them are present in *both* films. For the purposes of this study and because my respondents did not differentiate between the two narratives, I will generally refer to "the *Imitation of Life* narrative," a term encompassing both films, rather than to the two films separately.

Traditional civil rights issues were the basis of critique of the *Imitation of Life* narrative for a number of my oral history respondents. One female respondent from New York specifically mentioned that Delilah/Annie was "exploited," although she did not specify by whom. Mr. Robert Clement of Virginia suggested that the film showed truths about "the color barrier," truths he himself had experienced as a soldier in the segregated army during World War II.¹³⁹ One of my respondents even linked the *Imitation of Life* narrative to civil rights in more abstract ways: Verna Kindle of Baltimore read the *iconography* of civil rights into the 1959 *Imitation of Life*. Describing the scene of Delilah/Annie's funeral as one of the most important moments in films "of that period," she verbally juxtaposed the Black woman's casket to the coffin at Emmett Till's funeral, both icons of Black struggle and unfair, untimely death.¹⁴⁰ Notably, as was the case with Black press reviewers, none of my respondents mentioned the white story line.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ When I asked Robert Clemens of Virginia what he liked about the film, he remarked: "Well that oughtta show about the color barrier. See her mother was Black and she was white[0]. . . . In a way that helped—well it was kinda related to most of the stuff then when they had[0] segregation. Here we had like the bus station: whites go in the front[0], Blacks go round the side . . . that's something I never liked. When I came out of service, it was still going on." Robert Clemens, interview with Ellen Scott, Linwood Robinson Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005.

¹⁴⁰ ECS: Do you have any favorite scenes or moments from a movie that you remember?

VK: From that period? The casket of the mother in *Imitation of Life*.

ECS: Why did you like that scene? Or why was that meaningful to you?

VK: 'Cause when I see that, even today, I start breaking down crying—that's when the emotional floodgates—'cause it was just an emotional thing. It was just emotional—the casket—it just like summed up everything.

ECS: Summed up her relationship to her daughter?

But most of my respondents did not read the narrative of *Imitation of Life* according to “traditional” civil rights grievances (i.e. discrimination, exploitation of domestics, lack of social equality), but rather according to questions and issues of racial integration, a theme not directly expressed in the film but, perhaps, implied. They read the films’ depiction of passing as a reference to integration, and thus assessed the film according to a number of gendered “problems” that integration had caused for African Americans—absences and vacuums it brought to Black women’s lives. What emerged over and over again in conversations about the *Imitation of Life* narrative was a cultural concern about those issues of injustice that the legally-focused movement had failed to address, but that were important to achieving and living a full and qualitative equality. Most pressing, these respondents were concerned about Black rights to shape the destiny of Black children.

Although the film was seen in the moment of origins of the civil- rights movement, the memories of it were filtered through post-civil- rights awareness of some of the troubling changes that integration had wrought. In the perception of many of my respondents, integration was a force that took Black children over to the “other side,” where resources were greater, but in the process made them strangers, travelers in a weary land, and in some regards, transitional subjects, homeless and

VK: It summed up the whole movie. It just compacted it down and put it in a nutshell for me. It was like, ‘Nothing’s really changed. You’re dead and gone and it’s still the same.’ It was just the casket—it was an emotional time[0].” A few moments later she stated: “I think at that time what bothered me most was the lynching of Emmett Till . . . ‘cause I remember seeing a picture in a magazine my father tried to hide from me of Emmett Till. I don’t know if you remember . . . but the picture of his body laying in the casket. That was the most horrible thing I had ever seen in my life and I just thought they should make something out of it. Show the South—I had never been to the South at that time—they need to make a movie about that. Go down South and show about these ugly people in these ugly homes that do such ugly things. ‘Cause to me they all had to be ugly.” (Verna Kindle, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005)

¹⁴¹ In Richmond, Virginia, in 1959 and at the height of the school integration crisis, white reviewers did not mention the Black story line. They described the film as the story of “a woman too engrossed in her career to assume parental responsibilities and her daughter grows up filled with loneliness.” The paper also mentions none of the Black characters or actors in the review. (Alton Williams “Fanny [sic] Hurst is Back in the Spotlight” *Richmond News Leader*, March 14, 1959, p18A.)

without one community. For many of the women in my study, identifying both implicitly with Delilah/Annie and with the cultural valuation of motherhood, integration had caused Black children to (as Delilah put it) “pass away from” Black mothers, rendering these Black children bicultural translators at their most successful.¹⁴² While the right to know one’s children was not an issue of civil rights in the traditional sense, these Black women knew, like everyone else, that the Constitution included that intangible right to “life” and the “pursuit of happiness”—cultural and experiential rights they did not have equal access to and which proved that despite *legislative* civil rights gains in the 1950s, all things—especially in the domestic sphere—were not equal.¹⁴³

The narrative of *Imitation of Life* obliquely and unintentionally spoke to the lingering problems of integration and Black mothers’ sadness (and anger) at losing access to and influence over their “integrated children” and grandchildren. Where Black mothers (and Black women in general) had been seen by Hollywood through the eyes of service, in *Imitation of Life*, Black female servitude is shown as a form of martyrdom. For the first extended time in a movie, all Hollywood’s technological powers were put behind the message that a Black woman had been somehow wronged. This was a moment of screened material becoming “more than just a question of discourse” but rather a “matter of acknowledging one’s existence.”¹⁴⁴ Literary scholar Barbara Christian’s statement on Black women’s literature is applicable here. She states, “It has to do with giving consolation to oneself that one does exist. . . . This literature helps me to know that I am not hallucinating. Because much of

¹⁴² Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1933), 300.

¹⁴³ Tony Kushner has artistically rendered this concept in his recent play about a Black female domestic in Louisiana, *Caroline or Change* in the song “I’m Gonna Make Me a Law.”

¹⁴⁴ Jacqueline Bobo uses this quote from scholar Barbara Christian in her “Black Women as Cultural Readers” in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. Deidre Pribam (New York: Verso, 1988), 106.

one's life from the point of a Black woman could be seen as an hallucination from what society tells you."¹⁴⁵ For these Black women, the film was taken as an acknowledgement of Black female suffering.

For many of the interviewees, *Imitation of Life*'s emotionally moving passing narrative became easily merged with integration. Their readings substituted or wisely "confused" the film's narrative of Black racial passing with integration.¹⁴⁶ Cecilia Walker of the Southwest Senior Center in Baltimore, who specifically said she saw both versions of the film, remembered the emotional core of the story involving scenes of struggle between the Black mother and daughter:

Imitation of Life. When we saw it in the movie, it was sad. It made you cry at the end because we didn't know that she would turn against the person who raised her, sent her out to school, and saw that she got everything. And then when she [the Black mother] saw that she [the Black daughter] was sick and her mother was taking her her raincoat . . . that was when she found out that she [the daughter, passed for white] . . . that was very sad . . .¹⁴⁷

Ms. Walker first discusses *Imitation* as a tragic, maternal melodrama, one that literally produced tears—tears of surprise and disappointment at the daughter.¹⁴⁸ The tears mark identification with the Black mother, who, having given all for her child, is still rejected by her, in part *because* of her sacrifice, something that Black parents during integration could perhaps relate to. But when I asked about what she thought about Peola/Sarah Jane passing, Ms. Walker was not solely angry with the race-conscious child but tried to understand her and the constraints that motivated passing:

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ George Lipsitz notes the importance of this sort of "wisdom-laden" confusion or re-reading of dominant culture in his analysis of the humor of early ethnic television programs. His comments underscore the fact that this slippage often contains a "sense of unintentional insight" that carries an experiential "wisdom" of its own. (George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," *Cultural Anthropology* 1, no.4 (Nov 1986), 371.

¹⁴⁷ Ms. Cecilia Walker, interview with Ellen Scott, Southwest Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Sept. 2005.

¹⁴⁸ For more on the maternal melodrama, see Linda Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother: Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama," in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Anne Kaplan (New York: Oxford, 2000), 479-500. Williams highlights the ambivalence of the spectator with regards to the tragic melodramatic outcomes for the mother. She states, "The divided female spectator identifies with the woman whose very triumph is often in her own victimization, but she also criticizes the price of a transcendent 'eradication' which the victim-hero must pay . . . the maternal melodrama presents a recognizable picture of woman's ambivalent position under patriarchy that has been an important source of realistic reflections of women's lives" (499-500).

What did I think about her passing? Well, at one respect, I see her passing for white 'cause she could get more. And the second was: don't forget where you came from. I know she would get more because of the color of her skin and move up higher. But while you moving up—don't forget mom. Help her up there. So, 'Why you need her?' Because she born you. That's the only thing about it that would, kind of like, make you mad—for her to do her mom like that. It's okay for her to do what she wanted to do. But remember where you came from. You know, it says the Lord sits high, looks low. Well, that's the way I think people should look at life. If you can pass for it and get some of this stuff, that's the only way you could do it. But don't degrade mom. . . . *If I was a parent at the time of integration*. . . . and I knew the way of the world and how it was treating you, I would stay on the back burner. But still, don't treat me like I'm nobody.¹⁴⁹

Ms. Walker not only begins to talk about her anger at how the Black daughter “did her mom,” but she also shifts her mode of address. While she had previously spoken of the film’s characters in the third person, in the middle part of the quotation, she begins directly addressing the Black daughter in the second person. In the latter parts of her utterance, Ms. Walker even begins to enter into an imagined argument with the Black daughter, signaling the strength of this respondent’s connection to the narrative and the power of her own moral position on the topic. Rather than simply telling me what she thought about passing, Ms. Walker, here, resorts to cultural values held in the Black community (such as “don’t forget where you came from,” “the Lord sits high and looks low,” and “don’t degrade mom”), using these absolute cultural values and directives to corroborate her own position on the daughter’s “ignorance” towards her mother. At the end of the quotation, Ms. Walker makes it clear that, for her, the narrative speaks to the difficulties caused by *integration*, and not passing: in a moment of slippage, she articulates the trouble that Black mothers have relating to children—who, like Peola, have gone into the white world and trust white institutions more than their own homes and mothers—but she labels this integration. Much to the chagrin of Black spectator Ms. Walker, Peola trusts white culture, even though she is not a part of it, more than her own flesh

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

and blood. Putting herself in the position of the mother, Ms. Walker sees Peola's childlike racial blindness as a sort of ideological duping and states that, although it would be all right for the daughter to take part in *integration*, she should not completely forget or disregard the mother who has made it possible for her to be where she is or "where you came from." What is clear from this quote is the sort of existential, spatial confusion caused by assimilative models of the one-way, Black exodus model of integration. It is the erasure, forgetting, and neglect of the unacceptable shameful (Black) mother (one often required in the melodrama) that diverges (intentionally?) from cultural values and thus becomes a problem for Ms. Walker. Her view of passing and of integration then was funneled through the daughter's treatment of the mother.

Was this reference to integration, so clear in the quote above, just a slip of the tongue in the case of this one respondent? The use of the term integration does not appear to have been anomalous, because Ms. Walker was only one of many respondents who took for granted that the *Imitation of Life* narrative was about racial *integration*. Mary Lewis, of Richmond, even went as far as to call Peola an "integrated child," noting that *Imitation of Life*'s Black mother had an "integrated child" but "didn't want to claim it," in a statement that perhaps referred to Delilah's disapproval of Peola's passing. She even repeated this conflation of passing with integration: "And now people get proud of their integrated children. Very proud."¹⁵⁰ Ms. Lillian Smith, of the Waxter Senior Center in Baltimore, also saw *Imitation of Life* as really dealing with questions of integration, emphasizing in her reading the films' classroom scene, in which Peola/Sarah Jane experiences racial trauma when her mother comes into her all-white classroom and exposes that she is not white, as she has allowed her teacher and fellow classmates to believe. Ms. Smith implicitly read this scene, one in which Black presence in an all-white classroom is a central factor, in comparison to her own memories of

¹⁵⁰ Ms. Mary D. Lewis, interview with Ellen Scott, Richmond Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005.

integration. When I asked Ms. Smith whether she liked the film, she replied, with an unintended pun: “I remember having mixed feelings. I guess at the time—in the beginning, before integration came about . . . we were content to be in our schools.”¹⁵¹ Although the film never mentions school integration, Ms. Smith (like a number of the other Black women respondents I talked to) linked the film to it, using the reading as a springboard to discuss issues of integration that were the prominent context at the time.

Some of my oral history respondents were forgiving of the fictional light-skinned Black daughter, who crossed over the color line and left her mother behind, suggesting that integration itself, rather than the Black child, was to blame. Speaking for the community, one female respondent suggested: “We were mad at the girl at first. But then when her mother died, we felt sorry for her, you know, because she had missed out on her mother—missed out on a lot of things by pretending to be white.”¹⁵² This respondent suggests that not only was Peola/Sarah Jane “missing out” on her mom, but on being Black—on the (unshown) Black community. One woman even reported identifying with Peola/Sarah Jane, as she herself was light-skinned and had come from a biracial family:

You know I could identify with both [mother and daughter]. . . . I could see why the girl did what she did, but I also could also see why the mother felt the disappointment that she felt. So I could see both sides and it didn’t make either one right or wrong. It just meant to me it was two sides to every story.¹⁵³

Others, however, were less forgiving of the daughter: “Her mother just loved her to death. She was just so mean. I wanted to hit her. . . . She was ashamed of her mother.”¹⁵⁴ Here again, intergenerational hurt caused by lack of recognition of Black mothers by Black daughters became the

¹⁵¹ Mrs. Lillian Smith, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

¹⁵² Winchester Senior Center-Focus Group 2-Baltimore, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

¹⁵³ Verna Kindle, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

¹⁵⁴ Female respondent, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

center of discourse, and this respondent takes on almost a motherly tone in her desire to discipline (i.e. “hit”) the child. One woman from a focus group at the Senior Network senior center in Baltimore related this integration story to the current generational divide between Black parents and their children: “I think that’s relevant today. The way we see children interacting with their parents. You could show that right now.”¹⁵⁵ The daughter’s treatment of her mother struck a cultural and personal chord for many of my respondents, as it offended the communal value of respect for one’s parents, indicating that while Black children’s access to white culture was in one sense a privilege, in many ways it was also a curse. When I asked one woman at the King Tower Senior Center in New York the open ended question of whether *anything* in *any* film ever offended her, she quickly responded, “The way that . . . the daughter treats her mother in *Imitation of Life*. . . I didn’t like that. She raised her. And birthed her. That offended me. ‘Cause I don’t care who the mother was—that was her mother! And I think they exploited her. And then once the mother died she was talking about boo-hooing. I don’t want to hear that.”

While *Imitation of Life* prompted the mention of a few traditional civil rights issues (such as exploitation of Black women, the iconography of the Emmett Till killing and discussion of the color line), it was primarily the area of Black female subjectivity that was an issue in my study. This area, left unhealed by civil rights legislation and the incomplete achievement of equality—most notably, the troubled generation gap—became the focal point in the reception of the film and a point of in-group, narrative focus for my respondents. The fact that integration had left Black mothers on one side of

¹⁵⁵ This reading was echoed in a reading by a female member of the Senior Network focus group: “I liked *Imitation of Life*, for one. And the reason I liked it I think was to show the kids—really Black kids—that even though they were light-skinned, they were still Black and they [Black mothers] were still their parents’. And they still should respect them[0]. And you are just as good as they are even though you’re Black. That’s my interpretation. That’s my opinion. Every time *Imitation* comes on I watch it. . . . I can see that little girl going away and disowning her mother and going away and then coming back at the last minute. And she should have been there to take care of her mother when she was sick. Instead of running off because she wanted to be white[0]. I never wanted to be white, I just wanted the advantages they had.” (Senior Network Focus Group, interview with Ellen Scott, Senior Network senior center, Baltimore, MD, Nov. 2005)

the color line and Black daughters on the other emerged as the most consistent basis for discussion of the *Imitation of Life* narrative. Respondents also strongly identified with the Black mother figure, the figure most “left behind” by the passing/integration, which may indicate that they did not see themselves as either part or beneficiary of integration. Almost none of my respondents even mentioned the white woman and her daughter, and none could remember the substance of the main white story line, which suggests that they, in some ways, read the film against-the-grain and according to their own interests. These responses evidenced a cinematic civil rights consciousness that looked for justice and equality outside of the legal paradigm which heralded integration and into the domestic sphere to which these viewers belonged.

Part II: Responding to the Racial-Historical Film through Civil Rights Critique
Response Pattern 5: Epic Folly: The Politics of Laughter, the Reversal of Humiliation and Sounding the Utterance of “I Don’t Give a Damn”¹⁵⁶

Set, as it is, in “slave days” and premiering well before the 1960s boom of civil rights activity, it would seem at first that *Gone with the Wind* (1939) has no relationship to civil rights. Unlike *So Red the Rose*, another plantation epic I will discuss in Chapter 4, *Gone with the Wind* did not even show a slave rebellion. But while the film did not present African Americans seeking political action, it did mobilize and re-invoke the concept and imagined locale of “the Old [white] South,” one that was central to the civil rights discourse of the late 1930s, and indeed of the civil rights struggles that would follow in the ‘40s, ‘50s and ‘60s. “The South” stood for so much in the public discourse on civil rights that its depiction in *Gone with the Wind* became the basis for early emergent civil rights

¹⁵⁶ There were four ways that people related to *Gone with the Wind* in my study: (1) Through the actors Hattie McDaniel (who was seen as having a good role and playing her part well) and the actor Butterfly McQueen (who was consistently criticized [this was true in my interview with Gloria Praez, an interview with two men from the Hamilton Grange Senior Center in New York, and a woman at the Winchester Senior Center in Baltimore]); (2) through the actor Clark Gable (some even called the film “Clark Gable’s *Gone with the Wind*” or some variation on this); (3) through the phrase “I don’t give a damn;” and (4) through discussions of slavery (this was primarily in New York and among middle class African Americans). Here I discuss the implications of the phrase, “I don’t give a damn,” especially as it was used by my respondents.

organizing around film (as Leff and Simmons' article on the film clearly shows).¹⁵⁷ My study indicates that it also became a basis for early civil rights articulations at the level of individual, ostensibly non-political, viewers.

While the viewers I talked to did not claim offense, dislike, or disidentification with *Gone with the Wind*, the film became a site for the infra-political response of "inappropriate" (and ultimately highly critical) laughter. The lack of explicit politics of this response fits the definition of infra-politics suggested by James Scott Campbell,¹⁵⁸ betraying a sort of political unconscious and acting as a wedge separating oneself from the (white) other. What interested me about these vocal (but not verbal) ridiculing responses was that their creative, incisive and interpersonal political elements were simultaneously and disarmingly *improvisational* and immediate in ways that seemed "natural" and "off-the-cuff," a trope that may be more generally characteristic of infra-political utterance. This was important because they seemed to hold a brand of untaught politics—an on-the-ground, widely held, common-sense logic of resistance. *Gone with the Wind* therefore provides an illustration of reading practices that not only varied from Hollywood's prescribed, suggested readings and flourished without standard identification, but which also created a sort of triumphant amusement.

The film itself was inscribed with the historical imprint of various civil rights struggles contemporary with its production, struggles that it attempted to both address and keep at bay. *Gone with the Wind* stood at the door of a new era in the South, coming at a moment when the emergence of a (racially) New South seemed immanent.¹⁵⁹ In the film, however, was inscribed with a ripe

¹⁵⁷ Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons, "Gone With the Wind and Hollywood's Racial Politics," *Atlantic Monthly* 284, no. 6, 106-114.

¹⁵⁸ James Campbell Scott uses this term in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 189.

¹⁵⁹ For a fuller description of the efforts to reconstruct the old South in the 1930s and 1940s see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1996) and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1990).

nostalgia beckoning backward for the Old South. Because of *Gone with the Wind's* particular conjunctural positioning at the dawn of a new decade, one that many hoped would bring a radically reconstructed identity for the South, the film was perhaps subject to a greater level of shift in meaning—a sort of “meaning fatigue”—over the course of the war, during which it was consistently rescreened in major cities and during which many of my respondents probably saw the film.¹⁶⁰

Leff and Simmons have shown that *Gone with the Wind* was intentionally authored to placate Black criticism and to engender a positive Black reception. The film was the product of studio negotiation with a variety of racial extremes—forces that combined to form an aural core—one which, if not democratically weighted, pointed to multiple textual positionings, keeping open many reading channels.¹⁶¹ As a concession to African Americans, the Klan, though not defeated in the course of the narrative, was only obliquely mentioned and never by name, and the word “nigger” was entirely omitted (according to Leff and Simmons, this was a change that Black actress Butterfly McQueen herself fought for).¹⁶² The film still largely ignored the real brutality of slavery and focalized the Civil War narrative through the white owning class.¹⁶³ For those who saw the film during the Second World War in the initial or in subsequent runs of its first release, or even in the years

¹⁶⁰ Although it is difficult to tell from my interviews when the respondents saw the film, it is possible and even likely that some of the respondents saw it in its first run.

¹⁶¹ Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons have made this argument in *Dame in the Kimono*, 79-108. *Gone with the Wind's* status as reassertion and reevaluation of the Old Southern ways—ways which implicitly included the abasement and enslavement of African Americans—also earned the film significant protests by the National Negro Congress, a group well-invested via Southern youth councils and other organizations in the viability of Communist and other progressive efforts to reform the system of tenant farming that had replaced the plantation system and continued to keep African Americans in slave-like conditions. (For more on the Southern Youth Councils, see Kelly, *Hammer and Hoe*, 195-219. Even with all of its marketing appeal to African Americans, even with the Academy Award going to Hattie McDaniel, *Gone with the Wind's* historical and cultural placement, as well as its particular status as “traditional” (one not dissimilar to Disney’s epic *Song of the South* (1946)), made it vulnerable to a certain kind of “meaning fatigue” over the course of the 1940s and 1950s: that is, its originally constructed meanings were so shifted and warped during the course of the first decade of its existence that the film’s cultural and social meanings as professed by African Americans and other adherents to civil rights were altered.

¹⁶² Leff and Simmons, *Dame in the Kimono*, 95.

¹⁶³ Ella Shohat describes well Gerard Genette’s concept of focalization in her “Ethnicities-in-Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema,” in *Unspeakable Images* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 225-6.

following the war, the film would therefore have been read against or in conversation with the rhetoric of the War for Democracy.

Although *Gone with the Wind* did not deal expressly with civil rights themes, my interviewees used a reading strategy to “decode” the epic of the Old (racist) South film that was in line with civil rights styles of engagement. The film was marketed as a major epic drama with serious implications: not only did it depict the deadliest war on American soil but it depicted it with high drama. African American respondents in my study, however, consistently read *Gone with the Wind* as camp and comedy, playing up the use of the word “damn” in the film and demonstrating an aloofness towards the characters whose scandalous lives became fodder for humorous extra-textual elaboration rather than serious emotional reflection. In short, my respondents looked on the film with confrontational laughter. Where Hollywood had inscribed “epic,” my respondents read “long” (commenting between laughs “did you know, that was one of the *longest* movies ever made,”¹⁶⁴ and suggesting that the film was so long that no one could be expected to watch the whole thing)¹⁶⁵; where Hollywood had inscribed “dramatic,” my respondents read “humorously scandalous.” In what follows I explore these readings as symptomatic of respondents’ disdain for the Old white South. While it may be argued that whites may have just as readily read the line “I don’t give a damn” as humorous, this does not seem to have been the case. Helen Taylor’s comprehensive book-length study of responses to *Gone with the Wind* among white British fans addresses the line “I don’t give a damn,” but never states that it was read as humor by her respondents, suggesting that laughter at the line was not a predominant response, at least among the white fans she surveyed. Even supposing white viewers had a similar response of laughter and some might argue that the film makes fun of Scarlett, it does not follow that

¹⁶⁴ Raymond Benson, interview with Ellen Scott, Hamilton Grange Senior Center, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

¹⁶⁵ Focus group (Artists), interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

Black and white viewers were laughing for the same reasons. The following four responses are representative of the reactions of those I interviewed:

Focus group 1-Baltimore: “Well, if you want to know what I liked about the love stories—like one of my favorite stories was *Gone with the Wind* with Clark Gable. When he said, “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn.” [Laughs] Remember that? You remember Clark Gable saying, “Frankly my dear I don’t give a damn?”¹⁶⁶

Winchester Focus Group 1, Baltimore: “But I liked Clarke Gable. ‘Cause, he told her, ‘Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn.’ [Laughter—*loud* laughter] . . . She was trying to get back in after she done did so much dirt, you know.”¹⁶⁷

Susie Kee, Richmond: “Who played in the one where Clark Gable says, ‘Frankly my dear I don’t give a damn?’ [Laughs] Who was that?

ECS: *Gone with the Wind*.

Kee: There was a Black woman in there, wasn’t it?

ECS: Yes. That was Hattie McDaniel.¹⁶⁸

Robert Clements, Richmond: “What is that movie’s name?—the one that said, “I don’t give a damn about this?”¹⁶⁹

In each of these cases, Clark Gable, Scarlett O’Hara, and the film are subordinated to a single, preeminently salient phrase, “I don’t give a damn,” one that is met with laughter or

¹⁶⁶ Focus group, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

¹⁶⁷ Focus Group 2, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

¹⁶⁸ Susie Kee, interview with Ellen Scott, Richmond Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005.

¹⁶⁹ Robert Clements, interview with Ellen Scott, Linwood Robinson Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005. In addition to these comments, several of my respondents had a negative reaction to the cursing in the film. One female respondent from the Winchester Senior Center in Baltimore said she liked *Gone with the Wind*, “except for the end. I didn’t like the way it ended. What he said and gone away . . . I didn’t like that.

ECS: Why not?

Female Respondent: It seemed sad to me—I cried. That and I didn’t like the way that some of them were acting really. I guess they talked like that. But *we* didn’t. Not at home. I was born and raised in Maryland—the state of Maryland. I guess it was because we went to school—we went to elementary school every day. Went to church and Sunday school every Sunday.” (Female Respondent, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005). At a focus group at the Senior Network in Baltimore, the cursing was described in this way: “I remember my aunts talking about and my mother talking about—I was going in ‘39. Talking about *Gone with the Wind*, and it was taboo. Children couldn’t know anything about *Gone with the Wind*.

W1: Uh-huh. ‘Cause it was too grown.

W2: And they cursed in it.” (Focus group, interview with Ellen Scott, Senior Network, Baltimore, MD, Nov. 2005).

amusement in each case.¹⁷⁰ But what specifically are these respondents laughing at? My respondents seemed to be laughing at the use of the curse word “damn,” but also at Gable’s irreverent tone (an irreverence that they themselves played out again in the recitation). They also seemed amused by Rhett’s coldness towards Scarlett’s romantic advances, an indifference towards the character that may have mirrored and resonated with their own. While anyone, white or Black, might turn his phrase into a point of comedy, it is *the way* that the African Americans in my study talked about these lines that I am arguing had a particular cultural logic and an important resonance to Black spectatorship in this era.

While it seems clear that they are laughing at the epithet and at Scarlett (notice one respondent even mentions Scarlett “trying to get back in after she done all that dirt”), are they laughing, too, at Rhett? It seemed pretty clear that they were not. They seemed to be laughing with Rhett—identifying with (or at least rooting for) Rhett through their laughter at the embarrassing situation he made for Scarlett through his words. Rhett was played by Gable, who was easily among the favorite movie stars of those I interviewed. The temporary positional identification with Rhett may have been enhanced by prior relationship and by his dignified treatment of Mammy (Hattie McDaniel), whom he seems to regard with relative equality. With his final words to Scarlett, Rhett not only insults Scarlett but refuses to give her *attention*, the attention white women so often got from white men and that was a structured part of the regime of the Old (white) South. With these words, Rhett renders Scarlett, whose grandness is a visually signaled by her wide southern hats and dresses, small.

¹⁷⁰ This is a phrase that created some controversy between Selznick and the Breen office. According to Leff and Simmons, Breen finally allowed him to use the word, “damn.” *Gone with the Wind* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA. See also Leff and Simmons, *Dame in the Kimono*, 79-108.

Gable's statement also unintentionally plays on the sorts of irreverent humor that would have had cultural cache in the Black community: it is similar to African American humor. The brand of humor in the line is dismissive and demonstrates the disidentification of the speaker with the "other" he describes. In the rehearsals and recitations of the line by my respondents (southern drawl giving new curve, inflection and emphasis to the word "damn"), I heard aurally revealed (and saw embodied) the attitude—the sting—that they received, read, and responsively enjoyed in the line. The performance of the line by my respondents showed me that, as they read the text, Rhett was "dissing" and dismissing Scarlett: telling her about herself. As people did so often when playing the dozens, Rhett had coolly shut Scarlett down. That this verbal interchange occurred within white Southern culture, a culture in which "Southern hospitality" required the seamless appearance of refinement, etiquette, social graces, is extremely relevant: to put this style of vulgar humor, which was not only "frank" but also openly profane, in the mouth of a white Southern gentleman was a disarming surprise, mini-scandal, and even reversal. It is notable also that the African Americans in my study connected to the film through an *aural* (and thus endlessly utterable) articulation and one that signaled disidentification with all that was visibly epic that had come before. Not one of my respondents mentioned the visual aspects of the film so consistently mentioned by the white British fans in Taylor's text. It was this "speakerly" moment of "talking back" that most delighted my respondents and allowed the film to be read, at least in memory, as one long joke, allowing the laugh to get the final word.¹⁷¹ As is often the case with "camp," it is only upon the backdrop of an intense

¹⁷¹ Henry Louis Gates describes the importance of speakerly signification in African American cultural production and vernacular in his *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford, 1988). In it he suggests that "'signifying' is a 'technique of indirect argument or persuasion,' 'a language of implication,'" not unlike that which I encountered in these interviews. He calls signifying "the rubric for various sorts of playful language games, some aimed at reconstituting the subject while others are aimed at demystifying the subject" (54). In either event, signification which includes "Black rhetorical tropes" such as "marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens," dissembles or "wreaks havoc on the Signified" (52).

high seriousness that the humorous elements come into relief: the humorousness of the line is premised on all the (white) drama that has come before and every elaborate, overdone, wasted detail (of the dramatic score and costuming) serves to enrich the “set up” for the joke.

What is more, this moment provided a laugh at the expense (and the exposure) of whiteness—at a moment of its naked opacity and in all of its privileged glory.¹⁷² It provided a laugh not at racial humor, but a laugh at a white lady’s expense. In laughing at Scarlett, these viewers were laughing not only at a white woman, but also at the humiliation of a slave owner, a slave driver, a manipulator, and at a woman being put in her place. The fact that a film like *Gone with the Wind*—a serious epic—was reduced by Black spectators to laughing at a curse word—is a move we might label “campy.” These respondents do “against-the-grain” readings, readings that take advantage of the openness of the text and that take the text lightly—laughing at the film in all its high seriousness.¹⁷³ By discussing the film in this way and regarding it as comic, they *reduce* this film, cutting its implications to size.

The respondents also seem to be laughing at the surprise and delight of textual reversal. I think it is significant that they were not only enjoying a film with such little narrative closure but were also emphasizing the very moment of jagged narrative severance itself. This reading strategy was not only counter-narrative, but in some senses flouted the narrative completely, and rejected the intended identification with the white heroine’s triumphs and tribulations in the Civil War and Reconstruction era.

¹⁷² Richard Dyer suggests that the power of whiteness is maintained in part through its invisibility and transparency. Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 44-5.

¹⁷³ Stam and Spence, “Colonialism, Racism and Representation,” 890.

But the “I don’t give a damn” speech was not the only racially-based laugh my respondents got from *Gone with the Wind*. Mr. William Hankin, a civil rights activist in Baltimore, saw other humorous scenes in the film:

My all-time favorite in the ‘40s . . . *Gone with the Wind*.¹⁷⁴ I will never—I will never ever forget. . . . I was drafted into the military and I was in my training camp . . . and most days I used to sit in the movies and the movie that opened was *Gone with the Wind*. When the movie opened, I can remember the opening scene. The opening scene there is a silhouette. There’s a mule and these brothers behind that plow and all the sudden one of them says, “Quitting time! Quitting time!” The brother says, “You don’t say it’s quitting time. *Ise* the boss. *I* say its quittin’ time. [loudly to others] Quittin’ time!” I must have laughed the whole movie. I thought: “That’s hysterical.”¹⁷⁵

Mr. Hankin not only reads the film as humorous, but also describes *Gone with the Wind* as one of his favorite films. Hankin also repeatedly mentions the privileged narrative placement of the scene he describes: he mentions that it was at the “opening scene” of the film, a telling misremembrance and meaningful reordering that gives this scene primacy. This humorous interchange is one where the laughter was not at Black dialect, Black characters or Black people but at an actual joke told for comic effect by one African American to another. It was a joke that in many sense left white people out. In Hankin’s mind, the joke framed the narrative and set the tone for the film, allowing the pursuit of laughter to become the interpretive lens through which he read the entire work. In fact, he reports having “laughed the whole [2.5 hour!] movie” over this brief scene, the only one he mentioned, and thus the most salient for him, from the film.

This reading magnifies the importance of the African American scenes in the film. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what he found funny in these lines or why they led him to call this his

¹⁷⁴ The film premiered in Atlanta in December of 1939. However, even many white theaters had not booked the film until the March of 1940. Many Black theaters would have gotten the film later than this, which substantiates this respondent’s memory that the film was seen in the 1940s.

¹⁷⁵ William Hankin, interview with Ellen Scott, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

favorite movie. Perhaps these lines prompted a moment of shared in-group humor among Black audience members in the theater. Perhaps, for him (as was true of my other respondents), these entertainment outings to the movies *had to* include laughter to be worth their expense, and he therefore appreciated having something—even these small lines—to laugh about. It is significant, too, that the humor here is about roles: the center of the joke is the question “who is the boss?,” a question that should have had a clear answer during slavery (i.e. the white master) but which here, through the guise of humor and play, is cast in the shadow of doubt. Removed from intense, serious identification with the narrative happenings of the film and its depictions of African Americans, Hankin, like those in my study who responded to the “I don’t give a damn” speech, identifies a certain lightness in *Gone with the Wind* that allows him to read it in ways that rendered the film both entertaining and, despite its depiction of slavery, unthreatening.

In a Philadelphia interview I conducted in 2001 that centered on *Gone with the Wind*, a Black woman who had been a domestic and a childcare worker for most of her life read the entire film through contagious laughter over the line, “I don’t know nothing about birthin’ no babies,” a line spoken by Prissy (Butterfly McQueen) to her “mistress” Melanie (Olivia De Havilland). The moment in the film is one where Black deception significantly undermines white power. In it, according to Mrs. Pugh, Prissy told Scarlett that “she [Prissy] would help her [Scarlett] birth the baby so [Scarlett] did not get a midwife and then, when the time came, [Prissy] said she ‘didn’t know nothing about birthin’ no babies!’ (laughter).”¹⁷⁶ While some whites may have read the line in terms of Prissy’s (stereotypically-aligned) ignorance, for this African American childcare worker, the line held subversive significance because of the disruption caused by Prissy’s joke or deception.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Evelyn Pugh, interview with Ellen Scott, West Philadelphia Senior Center, May 2001.

¹⁷⁷ This was also the subject of humor for my Baltimore respondents from a focus group at the Winchester Senior Center.

Laughter, in all three of the examples cited above, undermines the text and shifts its social and historical implications. As a presumably involuntary response, laughter has more power than any spoken critique: it can achieve a greater derisive, othering effect than words could without actually *saying* anything—without the commitment and risk of verbalization. This mode of reading is “aberrant” or “against-the-grain” and fundamentally relies on low levels of identification with character or narrative, but it is more than simply against-the-grain of ideology: by alternately reducing, magnifying, and omitting certain elements of the plot, these respondents made meanings from the film that made it useful as both entertainment and critique. Further, what is “identified with” or, better put, fully emotively possessed by my respondents in place of character identification is their own form of entertainment—the laugh itself—a vernacularly produced response to the text rather than the text itself. Whether ignoring textual intricacies and laughing at the epic white lady or magnifying the intricacies of the text and laughing at the intra-cultural humor by Black characters with Black characters, laughter became a way to defy the text and its protagonists and by extension, the South, while still getting entertainment value out of the text. In fact, the parody may not have merely maintained entertainment value, but have actually *added* entertainment value to the “long” text by enriching it with communally shared reaction and creative, spontaneous personal innovation wrought by the very intensity that the epic qualities were trying to turn towards seriousness.

Stam and Spence state that Latin American viewers laughed, presumably in misrecognition, at the use and misuse of Spanish presented in a Spanish version of *Dracula*.¹⁷⁸ In my study, viewers laughed not at the images of “themselves” but rather at their *other*, at the very protagonist empowered

¹⁷⁸ They were laughing at the Spanish version of the film made concurrently with the 1931 Bela Lugosi film. According to Stam and Spence it “mingles Cuban Argentine, Chilean, Mexican, and Peninsular Spanish in a linguistic hodge-podge that struck Latin American viewers as quite ludicrous.” Stam and Spence, “Colonialism, Racism, and Representation,” 890-1.

by the text: thus, their laughter was confrontational. The laughter of my respondents was also based on a verbal comeback whose logic they could recognize and appreciate. The laughter was not at the lack of reality of the depiction (as it is in the case Stam and Spence outline), but the disarming promise of reality that the text brings by seeming to parody and short-circuit its own epic narrative elaborations of the Old South. The utterance of “damn,” which stood hinged at odds with the overwrought white romantic narrative grandeur of the text itself seemed to most excite and delight my respondents. Thus, while the laughter that Stam suggests is, like the laughter I describe in my first example here, laughter produced by disengagement, my respondents’ laughter was not completely disengaged but instead invested in—banked on—a set of verbally-exacted power and role reversals not present in the scenario they suggest.

Also, part of this disidentification is built into the text. *Scarlett* is by no means unproblematic by the text, and we might even suggest that Selznick’s text breaks with the ideological tradition of the old Southern epic by rendering a version of white womanhood that is open to condemnation (one that is also present in Bette Davis’ *Jezebel* [1938] and *In This Our Life* [1942]). The polysemic film encourages us to condemn Scarlett’s selfishness but to admire her energy, grit, and determination. None of this admiration, however, was present in the commentary of my respondents. Thus these respondents seem to have hijacked the polysemic qualities of the text for their own purposes. We might even suggest that the text condemns (at least partly) Scarlett as representative of the New South (thus confirming the validity of the Old South). Still, this does not alter the text’s racial politics: if Scarlett represents the New South, she would not have represented to Black spectators a radically reconstructed South. Her character suggests that the New South has not changed in its adherence to a repressive system but only in that it now lacks gentility. Indeed, she is

among the most repressive of slave owners in the film: her entitlement and selfishness lead her to aggravate Mammy and the other enslaved African Americans, and she is also shown using a chain gang for labor after the Civil War's end. If we agree that Scarlett is the highly flawed protagonist, then African American readings of the film that celebrated Scarlett's comeuppance—even along racial lines—cannot be claimed to be completely against-the-grain. Instead they operate specifically by capitalizing on a studio-authored ambiguity within “proper” or “standard” readings, causing them to speak to an African American cultural logic (in this case, Black humor) that exists outside of Hollywood's understanding and anticipation. These readings also magnified the subtext, picking up on (and personalizing) under-emphasized elements of the story. While not entirely resisting or “opposing” the text-as-designed, these readings used the text to speak to non-cinematic discourses opposed to the ideology of white supremacy and Southern white right, amplifying for closer analysis those elements that seemed curiously relevant, that had the spark of the real, and that seemed to break with “long” held textual tradition.

Some New York respondents, however, thought that laughter was an inappropriate response to *Gone with the Wind*, but not because they identified with any of the onscreen characters:

I don't think there is nothing funny about it. To me, the fact that these [white] people had so many riches on the back of slaves . . . I didn't see nothing admirable about the whole things. Especially Scarlett O'Hara. . . . Now you had a lot of Black people talking about “Ooo, she lost her plantation!” And all these Black slaves working and it was on their backs [that the plantation was built].

ECS: *You mean in the movie or watching the movie people said, “Oh she lost her plantation”?*

V4 (male): In the movies—you know like a lot of people, even though you know in the story people said “Ohhh that's so sad, she lost her plantation.” I missed something. What about all them slaves that didn't have no home? [Those] relatives and daughters sold down South?

ECS: *They didn't own themselves, let alone a plantation.*

V4 (male): And you feeling sorry for someone—

V1 (female): The master was the father of some of those children and he'd sell them for more money. I read that. . . . Got big money for them and they was his children! How could you sell your own children?¹⁷⁹

Rather than laughing at the moment of textual aberrance—at the something not quite right and even scandalous in *Scarlett*, these New Yorkers, directly referencing the historical truth of slavery, broke with ideology, using different, perhaps more exact, tools than laughter to critique the text. In both cases, however, my respondents were guided by the logic and sense that something was amiss and therefore the text was invalid. While humor was eschewed by the New York respondents, what is evident instead is a strong disidentification with the inhumanity of actual, historical white slave-owners in the deep South (an inhumanity the film effaced). These viewers also cultivated an identification with enslaved people, and the historical Black community writ large, even though they are cinematically muted in *Gone with the Wind*. This identification produced a righteous disgust and disbelief at the wrongs of slavery. By focusing on the horror and tragedy of the narrative of Black suffering and of white oppression, this quote suggests that *Gone with the Wind* told an irrelevant story of the South—an unrepresentative one—and that it played into the same old narrative system of effacing the dark underbelly of the Old South and slavery. Although the *style* of disidentification appeared to vary by region, respondent disidentification with the narrative and with the protagonist—one similar to Manthia Diawara's notion of "Resistant" Black spectatorship—provides a handle on cinematic material.¹⁸⁰ This handle allows these viewers to hold *Gone with the Wind* at enough of a distance to be able to criticize and give stylized responses to the very textual system that has visually and narratively rendered them "the Other."

¹⁷⁹ JWJ Senior Center focus group, interview with Ellen Scott, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

¹⁸⁰ Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" in *Black American Cinema*, Manthia Diawara, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 211-220. Regional differentiation in response to the film *Gone with the Wind* suggests the existence of various styles of "resistant spectatorship."

Response Pattern 6A: Cultural compassions: The African American-Native American Connection and the Ideal of Justice on the Range

The Western genre also was an important, if unexpected, site for developing emerging cinematic civil rights consciousness. The Western was the genre most consistently shown on the screens of Black movie houses, according to my respondents. In part because of the genre's tendency for action (but also because of the content, racial politics, and situations presented in these films), my respondents enjoyed and connected with the Western. However, my respondents also read the Western for its marginal characters (with whom they identified) and for its imputed philosophy.

The Black press discourse on the 1950s Westerns evidences reading strategies that avoided typical identification with the white Western hero. Native American/white miscegenation narratives held the promise of increasing equality and freedom for some members of the Black press. They were symbols of an impending democratic order and contained the rhetoric of equality that would seem to ignite this new American spirit of togetherness. They provided a freedom from the color lines that crossed both the imaginary and the highly practical realms of Black life and provided a space for the exploration of not only desire for exotic (Native American and Mexican) women, but also the possibility of successful interracial interaction. Although this sort of miscegenation also visually erased Black men, whose contestation and displacement of white authority was at the center of miscegenation dystopia, African American reviewers read Black cultural politics into these narratives. For example, African American readings of *Broken Arrow* (1950) in *The Pittsburgh Courier* were explicitly political. One unnamed reviewer called the film "a powerful pitch for equality among men." He also focuses his discussion on the Native American Chief, Cochise (Jeff Chandler), rather than Jeffords (Jimmy Stewart), the film's white protagonist. Cochise, as he saw it, "helps demonstrate the passions which arise in members of oppressed minorities." Perhaps identifying with Cochise

rendered the film not so much about miscegenation as about the idea of freedom from discrimination. The reviewer also discussed (and presented a still photograph from) what he referred to as the film's "mob scenes," scenes which the writer likened to "some of the more disgraceful incidents in the history of Dixie." The reviewer noted that General O. O. Howard, a Christian who had founded the Freedman's Bureau (and was founder of Howard University) played a crucial role in the film's narrative. Reading the contemporary and historically relevant African American motif of Southern mob violence and "the history of Dixie" into the plot, and clearly identifying with the Indians, this reviewer found various points of entry and moments that reflected his own experience.¹⁸¹ Billy Rowe, another *Courier* representative, examined the film in context of "atomic war, the breaking down of inter-racial relations by prejudices, discriminations and the denial of human rights," elements that he said made the picture "timely."¹⁸² Rowe went on to note that the fact that the film showed the "marriage of the star and the leading Indian lady, only proved the extent to which the film has been allowed to go in its preachment for equality."¹⁸³ Perhaps for African American spectators, the displacement of miscegenation away from the Black/white racial paradigm in these "Native" miscegenation narratives provided freedom to envision miscegenation without having to consider lynching.¹⁸⁴

In the entire oral history component of my study, the most consistent site of identification reported by my Black women respondents was with Native Americans (referred to by my respondents as "Indians") in Western films. In identifying with Native Americans, viewers read the text against-

¹⁸¹ "Adventure in Equality," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 8, 1950, 21.

¹⁸² Billy Rowe "Cowboys, Indians Drama Bases Theme on Real Democracy," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 1, 1950, 20.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ For a reading of a Western film as a miscegenation narrative, see Brian Henderson "The Searchers": An American Dilemma, *Film Quarterly* 34, No. 2. (Winter, 1980-1981): 9-23. Although Henderson does not acknowledge the historical context of the American Indian Movement as another possible source of contention in the film, his reading of *The Searchers* as grappling with the concurrent outcry over the Brown decisions and school integration efforts is nevertheless compelling.

the-grain and their cinematic engagement ran counter to the identificatory structures to which the text is predisposed. Take, for example, the following discussion of identification with the Western:

ECS: Were there any characters you ever saw in the movies that you really identified with? You said—that's my story up there? That person is representing me on the screen?

[Long Pause]

V3: I remember little boys and men, seeing the cowboy pictures and always wanting to be cowboys.

ECS: You watched a lot of westerns. Did you ever feel like you identified with the women in the Westerns?

V3: Well, the women were strong women. They were strong women. I guess you might.

V2: Roy Rogers and Dale Evans.

V1: I identified with the Indians.

ECS: Tell me about that. Why?

V1: . . . I think it was the way they dressed and looked out for each other and the way they would ride their horses. You know, it was a shame that they were being killed. And I liked it because my grandmother was part Indian—the one who had thirteen children. So I thought that was really awful, what they did. Trying to get their land. Shooting the buffalo. You know the shoot 'em up. 'No no no!' [Here she clasps her hands and pretends to be a cowering "Indian" figure].¹⁸⁵

Identification in this exchange is of a layered character and four indicators of identification are evident. Not only did the final respondent in this quote identify with the physical attributes of Native Americans (specifically their dress) as well as their historical plight, but she linked her ancestry to Native Americans, noting that her family was part Indian, thus imagining a blood kinship to them. Consequently, in identifying with Native Americans, she was in a sense identifying with her own people. She also perceives an in-group, communal connection in "Indian" culture: reading deeply into what was, in most Westerns, a very limited depiction of Native American life, she specifically cites the fact that Native Americans looked out for one another. She mentions this attribute as one

¹⁸⁵ Waxter focus group, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005. Identification with Native Americans follows vaguely the pattern outlined by Stam and Spence in their aforementioned article in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 890-1, although identification, in most instances in my study, was not with the *victory* Native Americans, as Stam and Spence describe, but rather with the *plight* of Native Americans.

that made the identification with them pleasurable. She also seems to explicitly disidentify with the white men (“I think it’s awful what they did”), mentioning not only that they attacked Native Americans but also the buffalo. Finally, here, this respondent actually *acts out* Native American responses to white violence, imitating their cowering response and literally performing her identification with them by standing in for them within the space of our interview.

This identification with the plight of Native Americans was shared by other respondents. Interviewees Barbara Christian and Joyce Hubbard, of Richmond’s Linwood Robinson Senior Center, also indicated that they read the Western with particular attention to the treatment of the “Indians.” They marked the similarity between how the whites treated the Native American tribes and African Americans. Sometimes readers highlighted those instances when the Native Americans defeated whites as their favorite moments in the Western films they saw. The majority of New Yorkers in my study reported shame at having hated—and even cheered for the conquest of—“the Indians” in the movies as children. Joseph Brade even proudly reported identifying with the Indians in the film *Custer’s Last Stand* (1936), a film the eighty-one-year-old man could conceivably have seen in the year of its initial release. He reported that his favorite part in the Western was

when the Indians wiped out Custer. . . . That was a highlight for me. Because they were supposed to be the bad guys then but then I realized that they were not the bad guys. They beat—that was one of the few films that the Indians won totally—there were no “ifs” and “ands” about it: They won! And that made me real proud. Especially as I got older and realized that they were the good guys protecting their land that was being taken.¹⁸⁶

There was some evidence of regional and gendered variation in these responses. While many New Yorkers tended to report anger at Hollywood for perpetuating the white supremacist myth of the West and even reported personal embarrassment at uncritically rooting for the downfall of the Native

¹⁸⁶ Joseph Brade, interview with Ellen Scott, Abyssinian Senior Center, Harlem, New York, NY, Oct. 2005.

Americans as children, many Southern Black women reported identification with Indians in the same period. Whether this was a response to marginalization at the time, or perhaps a strategy to retroactively redeem their relationship with the racist genre (or neither), is unclear.

Not only did the Indians appear to be a primary source of enjoyment in these films but some women (in separate interviews) went as far as to call the films “Indian pictures” rather than Westerns.¹⁸⁷ While the origins of this concept are not clear, the “Indian pictures” nevertheless constituted a vernacular genre within the Black community.¹⁸⁸

Native Americans were not just a point of interest and identification for African Americans, they actually drew Black spectators to the movies. Some respondents reported going to the Western solely to see Native American characters, with particular reference to (and affinity for) the character Tonto:

V1: But like I said back in them days you go to the movies like the rawhide Westerns and the buffalos and the—

V2: Indians.—

V1: Indians. The best one was *Cheyenne* [1947]. When that came to the movies—oh Lord, people went crazy.

ECS: What did they do?

V1: ‘Cause they had the one named Tonto.

V2: Everybody went to see Tonto.

V3: *The Lone Ranger*.

ECS: Did people like Tonto?

V3: Yes. He was the Indian scout.

V1: I used to like Tonto.¹⁸⁹

In this focus group, not only did multiple respondents chime in to talk about “the Indians” but one respondent even makes the surprising statement that “everyone went to see Tonto”—that Tonto had

¹⁸⁷ Mrs. Rosa Boyd, Focus Group, interview with Ellen Scott, Linwood Robinson Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005; Mrs. Barbara Christian, Mrs. Hubbard, pair interview, interview with Ellen Scott, Linwood Robinson Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005; all of Richmond Virginia’s Linwood Robinson Senior center made this reference.

¹⁸⁸ It is conceivable that the reference may have stemmed from a marketing strategy for these pictures engineered by local Black movie house owners rather than from African American Spectators themselves.

¹⁸⁹ Baltimore Waxter center focus group, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

the drawing power of a star in segregated African American communities. Tonto was also identified in these statements not just as in Indian but as an Indian *scout*—someone with definite skills. Verna Kindle, another respondent from Baltimore’s Waxter Senior Center, also mentioned Tonto:

Ms. Verna Kindle: But I always liked the Indian. . . .
ECS: Why?
Ms. Verna Kindle: Because Tonto represents something different. I thought he was the cool one.¹⁹⁰

Recognizing alterity as a link to coolness, it is Tonto’s marginality and difference itself that became the basis of identification for Ms. Kindle.

Tonto was not the only “Indian” character with star power. One (female) respondent even went as far as to fix on an Indian character (or the white actor who played him) as a love interest:

Female Respondent 1: I loved that man—he played Cochise—not John Wayne. I liked Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, Gene Autry the singing Cowboy. . . .
ECS: Why didn’t you like John Wayne?
Female Respondent 1: I just didn’t care for him. . . You know the Indian . . .
Female respondent 2: He was in *The Lone Ranger*?
Female Respondent 1: Oh no.
ECS: He was Geronimo and Cochise?
Female Respondent 1: Oh he was good looking!
ECS: He played Cochise?
Female Respondent 1: He died. They killed him. . . . He was good looking.
ECS: Who else did you think was good looking of the stars back in those days?
Female Respondent 1: I even used to love the one who played German all the time. He played a German in war time. Oh he was—
ECS: What was his name?
Female Respondent 1: He played a German.¹⁹¹

As the above quote suggests, this respondent completely resisted even the suggestion of desire for the WASPy male love interests constructed as center of the text (like John Wayne whom she explicitly mentions disliking). Instead, she describes desire for marginal heroes or “bad guys” who were either

¹⁹⁰ Verna Kindle, interview with Ellen Scott, Waxter Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Aug. 2005.

¹⁹¹ Female Respondent, Interview with Ellen Scott, King Tower Senior Center, New York, NY, Sept. 2005.

bronzed or “off-white” men.¹⁹² Through these readings, and playing up difference within whiteness, this respondent may have been unconsciously resisting white male dominance or simply enjoying an exoticized whiteness. This covering over of whiteness with accent and bronze makeup may have destabilized its normalcy, rendering it opaque. Whatever the source of her enjoyment of white men playing other races, her readings ran against-the-grain, breaking the clear normative channels of proscribed spectatorial engagement and reading into the characters she describes qualities not privileged by the text. This reading points to an important phenomenon common to these readings of Native Americans: a magnification of certain characters, or episodes, out of proportion to their presence in the text.

Why do these respondents identify with Native Americans? In part because, populating the most consistently shown genre for African American movie houses, those onscreen characters came closest to representing that “something different” that was characteristic also of Black life: unlike the white protagonist so often seen onscreen, for African Americans the Native Americans were a group that had the attraction of being both “other” and “like me” at the same time. Perhaps they also represented a form of racialized alterity that was militant and promising, and were dignified by the text as tenable, worthy adversaries. While the extent to which identification with the Indians was also a part of white viewing practices cannot be ascertained from this data, it is clear, nevertheless, that African Americans, and particularly African American women, identified with Native Americans in

¹⁹² I am using the term “off-white” in the manner coined by Diana Negra (*Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Stardom* [Routledge, 2001]) where she uses it to refer to those “border agents’ such as white ethnic stars whose qualified whiteness can trouble the security of a white identity whose power has historically derived from its status as the normative unnamed” (5). Although Negra talks only about white women stars, we might question how racialization worked to simultaneously feminize and, on the other hand, provide a brute masculinity for a star like Jeff Chandler. In either case, this respondent is intrigued by those white actors whose roles trouble whiteness. Other ethnically off-white stars were mentioned by respondents: Sonja Henne was mentioned by two Baltimore respondents (Rachel Scott and Laura Robinson, both of Baltimore) as a favorite star.

ways that de-centered whiteness and sometimes did so directly on the basis of their identification with suffering oppression.

Response Pattern 6B: Distilling Justice, Sensing Right: Black Readings of the “Message” of the Western

In addition to identifying with Native Americans, a number of my respondents reported another kind of engagement with the Westerns that is important to understanding their connection of the genre to civil rights. Scholars, particularly cultural studies scholars, have long worried about the ideological effects and implications of the cinema. A number of Native American scholars have pointed to the Western as being a particularly problematic genre in that these films tend to both demonize and marginalize Native Americans and present colonialist whites as heroic.¹⁹³ In recent years, new scholarship has suggested that other readings potentially disrupt the ideological and explicitly racist meanings of the Western.¹⁹⁴ In my study, a number of respondents discussed the Western in terms of its ideological message, critiquing in retrospect the genre’s racism against minorities. But in no case did my viewers seem to have retained belief in the Indian villainy and white heroism that many Western films narratively suggested. We might want to think, therefore,

¹⁹³ See Ward Churchill’s *Fantasies of the Master Race* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998). It explores the ways that literature has been used historically by colonizers as a way to capture and reformulate the identities of the colonized in ways that assert the dominance of the culture of the colonizers and legitimize the process of colonization. He explores the ways that the intellectual mechanisms behind colonization, if differently manifested, persist today in the form of problematic, objectifying, and essentializing discussions of the Native American in the academy, literature, and film.

¹⁹⁴ See, for example, Charles Ramirez Berg, “Margin as Center: the Multicultural Dynamics of John Ford Westerns,” in *John Ford Made Westerns*, eds. Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001). While Berg admits the racist stereotyping of Ford’s Western films, he suggests that counterbalancing it “is a richly textured multicultural vision that is nuanced in comparison with the broad strokes that characterized much of classical Hollywood’s ethnic representation,” and offers that Ford’s Westerns are full of ethnics (or those with a sort of ethnic status or positionality) in the sense that Ella Shohat has used the term “ethnics,” that is, those who are “disenfranchised outsiders” (Berg, 75). Further examination is needed to determine the extent to which other Westerns, particularly the B-Westerns many African Americans were continually exposed to, contain a “foothold” for this kind of reading practice, one that while not operating “against-the-grain” of the text (as Berg suggests that this privileging of marginality is actually a product of auteurial design) still operates against the *ideological* grain of status quo notions of hierarchy and racial status by privileging the margins.

about the ways that films' ideological effects and messages are sometimes mitigated by audience recourse to more reliable historical sources.¹⁹⁵

Some respondents did not offer historical readings of the films and instead read the films of the Western genre for their philosophy. This is where I found the most powerful links between civil rights principles and themes and the Western. The best examples of this reading strategy came from three men who were raised in the South. Roy Battle of Richmond, VA stated:

ECS: Tell me, when I say the word "movies" what first comes to mind?

Roy Battle: Oh, mostly cowboys. That's what we used to have a lot. I used to go to the cowboy movies. We had one down—we had two of them on Broad street. The Booker T. and they had another one down there on Broad street. I used to go to. And I loved them cowboys. Back there then, that was the thing—Young men and those cowboys.

ECS: Why did people like the cowboy movies? What was it about them?

Roy Battle: It was about life and the way they lived back there. And it was about doing for yourself and how to do. You can get a lot of lessons for yourself from movies. Be self-supporting. And that's what I was—self-supporting.¹⁹⁶

For Mr. Battle, the Western films were not only valuable for their content but for the principles they communicated: Mr. Battle suggests the Western films were about "life"—a description of the Western that differed from that offered by most of my respondents, who appreciated the form for its escape value. He also distills from the Western an individualistic ethos that taught him something about how to make it in America, particularly the importance of self-sufficiency, a self-sufficiency with which he could identify and put into practice. In addition, the Western also gave Mr. Battle a keen sense of wrong and right and of the consequences that came with wrong. He continued

Mr. Roy Battle: I like movies that's about something. And you got them Westerns: they are about something. . . . They always got tough with one another and [got] rid of the bad people. And the good people overpowered the bad all the time. And that sort of a phrase . . . keep you in line and to show you: if you doing wrong, you gonna end up wrong but if you're doing right, right will follow right. The movies: the message that you see. That's right. You can't do a whole lot of wrong and go to

¹⁹⁵ For more on historically-based reading practice, see Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship," 214.

¹⁹⁶ Roy Battle, interview with Ellen Scott, Linwood Robinson Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Oct. 2005.

the movies and act like them people when you doing wrong cause it will catch up with you.

ECS: So you saw it as a kind of a moral. There are a lot of morals and messages with it.

Mr. Roy Battle: Yeah. . . . Education and morals and entertaining . . . all of that.¹⁹⁷

In this second quotation, Mr. Battle emphasizes the importance of the Western's morality as a part of the meaning of these films.

Robert Clement of Virginia, on the other hand, distilled a different message from the Western, one which was instructive about equality:

ECS: You said you liked the Westerns. Can you tell me a little bit about why you liked the Westerns? What it was about them that attracted you?

Mr. Robert Clement: Most of them remind me more of . . . what they oughta have here. *Everybody had a equal chance* [my italics]. Everybody carried a gun. If you get yours out first, I go. I get mine out first, you go. But *that was an equal chance* [my italics] but now you don't have a chance to do nothing and I don't see now. That people of their own race is killing each other. We don't realize that. You understand what I'm saying. They killing their own race off but most of that stuff is coming from what the white man brought in and what the Black people is using.¹⁹⁸

Contrasting the Western with contemporary equality and linking discussions of contemporary race relations with the equality of the frontier-life (which perhaps seemed "race free"), Mr. Clements articulates the Western value system as ideal and uses it to critique contemporary values, contemporary killing, and contemporary race relations. Although he entirely effaces, as the films did, racial injustice that informed the winning of the West, he isolates the logic of equality as one that could still operate today, and perhaps should, in contemporary race relations.

Mr. William Hankin, a former civil rights leader in Baltimore, took this reading of Western justice even further:

ECS: How did film affect your sense of justice?

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Robert Clements, interview with Ellen Scott, Linwood Robinson Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Oct. 2005.

Mr. Hankin: Not so much racially. Sometimes you're getting the result you don't want by the mode of something. Thinking for example about *the sense of justice on the range* [my italics]. This is fair—that is fair. I don't expect the area has ever been explored but do you understand where I am going?

ECS: Yes.

Mr. Hankin: It's not intended. You have your [inaudible] over here that says "wait a minute if that ain't fair—then this ain't fair either." I think that could be very well where these ideas come from. I mean the books and the stories [too]. . . . And [they, Hollywood] never intended that in the sense of calling Black people to understand their convictions and their lives. Never thought about it. It could be very well where a lot of it came from. You started seeing what the pictures say is fair, and then what you [white people, representatives of authority] do over here is not. Similar situation is not fair—something wrong with that. How many times someone come from a different environment—different exposure and they bring in different ideas! And it's the ideas that count. . . . But [movies teach that] good will always conquer evil. Good comes out in the end. People see that and ingest that and say, "If you apply that to this situation [in the Western] . . . [it applies here too]"¹⁹⁹

Here Mr. Hankin suggests that appraising what was just and unjust for white people on the range, African American spectators may have begun to see, although not by Hollywood's design, the faulty standard of justice that was being used for them—and the racial double standard white America held concerning justice. In noticing the disparity between white justice—fairness—on the cinematic range and Black treatment off the range and off the screen, they may have begun to realize white hypocrisy, a realization that kindled their sense of justice. Unlike the racial problem film, which is arguably less about racial justice than about racial morality and which did not feature action, the Western actually *enacted* justice, rehearsing its principles as de facto law and as their narrative center. This, Hankin suggests, may have inadvertently encouraged African Americans *to seek* justice.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that among individual moviegoers who lacked a specific political motivation, a civil-rights-conscious film reception spread beyond the bounds of the overtly political and ended up being played out in complex ways around transracial identification with Native

¹⁹⁹ William Hankin, interview with Ellen Scott, Baltimore, MD, Nov. 2005.

Americans, disidentification and dissociation from white narratives of the South, as well as ambivalent musings around the issues of integration and civil rights violations. Although very few of my respondents fondly remembered films dealing with civil rights issues, many spoke about the movies in ways that obliquely linked average Hollywood fare (and sometimes genres and films with plainly retrogressive race politics) to the concepts of justice and freedom that were central to struggles for civil rights. In general, African Americans in my study did not identify with the racial problem film in its depiction of civil rights because of their sense that these films were either too (painfully) relevant or not relevant enough. Their use of a strategy of representation that included victimization of African Americans may have worked against Black identification. Yet, some evidence does suggest that foreign or independent film representing civil rights issues had a stronger impact and more favorable response. Also, specific stars or films (for example, Sidney Poitier, *Imitation of Life*, and the casting of *Pinky*), some of which were only loosely related to civil rights questions, were used by respondents to raise and complicate the issues of integration. Perhaps it was safer to examine these issues at some distance or with some recourse to hope. Because working class African Americans in my study identified with actors-as-laborers, the figure of Sidney Poitier became a site of imaginative characteriological elaboration around the struggle for and hope of success for successful integration, because he demonstrated ways that one could act in integrated settings.

In many ways, the prospect of integration, as framed in National (white) discourse, forced the binary question to African Americans: do we want to assimilate or stay with our own? The interracial imaginary suggests that many African Americans boldly imagined that integration could go the other way, or that some of the power and authority that whites held would be shared and the terms of cultural definition redistributed. This “third option” involved the broadening of the

definition of integration to include other choices. In addition, the Black interracial imaginary catalyzed by films like *Pinky* provided sites of hope and reimagination of Black/white interracial interactions.

If the casting of *Pinky* stirred up interracial hope, the reception of *Imitation of Life*, *Pinky*, and *Lost Boundaries* pointed to the melodramatic and tragic consequences of integration in the domestic sphere, especially for Black women. In some cases, this may have caused viewers to revile integration itself or to blame other (younger) Black women for the problems that oppression had caused. In most cases, however, it caused male and female respondents to reveal complicated attitudes about integration and its potential consequences on the Black communities it affected.

Historical genres of the Western and the Civil War epic, although they did not deal with integration, were also read by respondents in ways that emphasized the margins. The Western provided opportunities for projective identification with non-white characters in a race war and provided room to imagine a space, in America but as yet uncharted, where equality and true self-sufficiency could reign. On the other hand, the Civil War epic *Gone with the Wind*, which was racist by omission, provided no viable site for identification for my respondents and thus became a source of critical and confrontational laughter. Instances of disidentification, comparable to Brechtian distancing, were also important in motivating Black political consciousness, as both laughter at *Gone with the Wind* and anger at Hollywood depictions of maids and lynching showed.

While, of course, this study does not prove that these images prompted civil rights actions on the part of these same spectators, it does not intend to. Instead, what I have wanted to suggest are some of the ways that African American thought and conceptualization interpenetrated with the imaginary of the cinema, occasionally using films as a basis for imagining justice and freedom—two

central aims of the modern civil rights movement—in the era when the movement was only beginning to take center stage, but when its logical foundations and early manifestations were already in play. Despite the lack of traceable connection between these ideas and the movement itself, these dialogics of film and response may have had a role, however limited in the symbolic “cognitive liberation” Doug McAdam theorized. What is more, I have argued that many of these screen happenings, from *Gone with the Wind* to Sidney Poitier’s intertextual persona, actually stood at an historical juncture that brought to public light (and often made newsworthy) the connection of these screen images to emerging civil rights paradigms, and either the differences or similarities between Hollywood’s depictions of race relations, those lived, and those called for by civil rights activists. In this sense, although these readings bear something in common with the theoretical notion of “against-the-grain” readings, they are, as I have shown, historically specific and situated. While the absence of interview data from other eras precludes comparison with “against-the-grain” or, as Stuart Hall might have it, “oppositional” readings in other moments that would verify the historically specific accenture of these pre-civil- rights readings, my interview work participates in the task of making more locally and historically specific the notion of reading against-the-grain, adding credence to the concept but also increasing specificity.²⁰⁰ What is important about these readings is not just that they went against producers’ intentions (which, as I have noted, was only sometimes true), but how my respondents put them to use—how and where they were grafted into a larger imaginary that involved civil rights ideas and issues. Although these films were by no means central to their understanding of civil rights, they nevertheless allowed respondents to think and speak about taboo civil rights issues and to raise imaginative questions about justice, equality, and the meanings of integration that may not have been safe or acceptable to discuss elsewhere. These respondents did not simply read against-the-grain, they

²⁰⁰ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 138.

used and applied the material in the films in ways that were probably unanticipated by their producers, but were culturally logical within their own framework. Sometimes, also, as in the case of Black press responses to *Imitation of Life*, cinematic response was not purely “against-the-grain” but adopted a mode closer to open critique.

What is historically specific about these pre-civil- rights against-the-grain readings is that they congealed around questions, images, and films that pertained to civil rights issues—integration, lynching, and civil rights gains and losses in the domestic sphere, and other concerns; that they sometimes were openly confrontational of icons of the white political opposition to Blacks (i.e. Scarlett O’Hara); and that they occurred during the moment under study when these civil rights questions were nationally in play. While I did not identify new forms of screen relations or reception in this chapter, I did begin the work of uncovering how average working and middle class audiences reacted to certain pivotal cinematic texts and intertexts of the early civil rights era.

The notion of “against-the-grain” reading predates scholarly access to the Production Code Administration files and therefore does not take into account what Lea Jacobs and Ruth Vasey have revealed to be a wide variety of spectatorial possibilities and readings intentionally *built into* texts.²⁰¹ It also does not take into account what information we have about producers’ intentions. It seems clear that some of the readings of my respondents did not go against-the-grain of Hollywood’s intentions but sometimes went *with* the grain of the ideology presented in the text (as for example, in the case of Sidney Poitier or the jokes exchanged by Black characters in *Gone with the Wind*), if from reasons specific to the historical and cultural logic of African American culture and in ways that distorted, by magnification, elements that the text made small. In these cases, however, the logic of magnification

²⁰¹ See Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997), 112-3, and Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 112.

of Black characters remained a major part of Black responses. However, we would err in assuming that the readings that go “with the grain” are always ideologically complicit—or that they produce behaviors or ways of thinking that are ideologically bound; more study of the application of readings that solidifies their meanings is needed. Since texts (and the intended meanings of them) are not “pure” ideology but, like audience responses, endlessly negotiated, sometimes these “with the grain” readings (for example, in the case of Sidney Poitier’s self-authored staunchness) are themselves operating against ideological power outside the text’s regime.

Also, sometimes the subversion of the intended meanings seemed to have come about not because the audience was reading in any aberrant way but because African Americans were not the intended audience, and thus the ways the messages passed through the lens of culturally-accented reading practices took on a logic that was beyond the comprehension or imagination of the creators or censors of the image: that is, the positionality of the readers rather than a consciously oppositional stance is what made these reading strategies “different,” surprising, and worthy of historical note. It is the status of the reading as “translated—transformed, again—into social practice” that makes these meanings important to our understanding of African American reading practices in this period.²⁰² Civil rights readings that went against what we might imagine to be the grain of the text challenge us to re-imagine the ways that emergent civil rights issues related to the cinema during this era

²⁰² Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 128.

Chapter 3:
State Censorship, Politics, and the Struggle over African American Representation, 1930-1960

Tired, perhaps, of writing articles lauding the latest of Hollywood's circumscribed depictions of African Americans, a *Baltimore Afro-American* article of 1946 instead tallied "Binford's Score," that is, the number of films censored by the notorious Memphis city censor Lloyd T. Binford. It listed *Brewster's Millions* (1945), *The Southerner* (1945), *Dillinger* (1945), and *The Negro Sailor* (1945) as films banned and *Broadway Rhythm* (1944), *Sensations of 1945* (1944), *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), *Pillow to Post* (1945), and *The Sailor Takes a Wife* (1946) as films mutilated. The year of the War's end was an active one for Binford as further evidenced by the fact that he even banned from city screens re-released films that seemed more threatening in the postwar moment, including *Dead End* (1937), a story about white ethnic youth in New York City and *Imitation of Life* (1934). The article in the *Baltimore Afro* alerted readers that according to Binford, "no white man can tip his hat to a colored one, no colored man can protest against suspected adultery"¹—not in any film shown in Memphis. This *Baltimore Afro* article was not the only one to comment on the phenomenon of "Jim Crow" censorship. The Black press continually kept tabs on these instances of local censorship based on race, counting them among other evidence of the ubiquity of Jim Crow in all segments of Southern life, including entertainment. But the Black press recorded and recognized that censorship was not only meted out by Southern censors but was also built into the films themselves. In a 1945 article entitled "Hollywood Couldn't Retard Anne Brown's Sex Appeal," a *Chicago Defender* scribe noted that in *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), Hollywood had deliberately marred Brown's looks with burnt cork

¹ "Rochester Riles Cut Out of New Film; Lena Horne Tabooed for Past Two Years," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Feb. 9, 1946.

because “The Solid South [original capitalization] and many ‘Nordics’ up north do not care to see a beauteous colored girl as light skinned as Anne Brown stealing shows.”²

My study showed that Black knowledge of racial censorship and awareness of Hollywood self-regulation was keen. Even some of my oral history respondents remembered film censorship as an aspect of their movie-going experience. When I asked Roy Battle of Richmond, VA whether he remembered ever hearing about film censorship, he said:

RB: Yeah. Friends, they’d say: “Man, they cut that movie.”

ECS: What kind of movies were cut? Do you remember any patterns with that?

RB: Well, when they first started out with the Blacks entertaining the whites: they were very careful about that. Certain movies they wouldn’t put in . . . certain places because it would upset individuals. See, we’re all not alike. And [if a film let you] see a Black man kiss a white woman . . . somebody may say something and start a fight. So they tried to eliminate all that. Eliminate as much as you can. And they did a wonderful job of it.³

Thelma C. Lee, also of Richmond, who managed a theater outside of Richmond in Hopewell, VA, admitted her own exhibitor film censorship of films dealing with racial themes. When asked how her audiences responded to the depiction of lynching in films, she stated, “We didn’t pick movies like that. Movies like that ran at certain times and most of them ran in Richmond and they would just run for like two days or five days. . . . People would go see them between a three- or five- day period, ‘cause they knew [those films] weren’t going to stay there.”⁴ African American respondents in my study differentiated between racial censorship and censorship based on religion, the latter of which they often supported. Some praised *religiously-based* film censorship for its role in enforcing purity in the cinema, something many Black moviegoers felt was missing from contemporary film representations. The reception data I gathered hinted

² “Hollywood Couldn’t Retard Anne Browns’ Sex Appeal,” *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 11, 1945.

³ Mary Lewis reiterated this point stating: “ML: A lot of them when they came South, they cut the movies. ECS: Why do you think they did that? ML: I guess they did that because they didn’t want to have too much—I will put it simple: feelings.” In order to circumvent this censorship, Mary Lewis stated that she would go to New York on the Church bus to see films and shows there that were not as severely censored along racial lines. Mary Lewis, interview with Ellen Scott, Richmond Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005. Fran Garcia of Baltimore also emphasized the racial censorship of films. Fran Garcia, interview with Ellen Scott, Winchester Senior Center, Baltimore, MD, Sept. 2005.

⁴ Thelma C. Lee, interview with Ellen Scott, Richmond Senior Center, Richmond, VA, Sept. 2005.

that some people saw the censors as monitoring the factual nature and historicity of screen representation as an extension of censor's ideological arbitration. James Brown of Baltimore, for example, stated his desire for continued censorship because "we need someone to keep facts straight," a statement that highlights the powerful, if never explicitly acknowledged, ideological work done by censors.⁵

Up to this point, I have analyzed the meaning of cinema's African American images primarily by looking at African American reception and exhibitor's framing of the image. Yet this analysis begs the question: what were the forces that constrained limited and texts' meanings and made reading "against-the-grain" necessary? And if many of the racial images projected on the screen were limited, as my respondents claimed, what was the source of these limitations? Were these limitations intentional? If so, what did they intend to do? In the following three chapters, I will explore the regulation and censorship of racial images. In keeping with the overall theme of exploring the effects of film on racial discourse surrounding civil rights issues, in these pages I explore regulation as it occurred at four levels: (1) state censorship, (2) exhibitor censorship, (3) the Production Code Administration's regulation of scripts, and (4) self-regulation by studio executives and producers. These censorship struggles are fundamentally and historically linked to African American reception in that many of the organizations—the Black press and Black civil rights organizations—that were most involved with defining Black reception and representation corresponded with censor boards, protested censorship, and attempted to shape censorial treatments of race.

Studies of censorship often tend to focus on issues of sexuality and violence, which is understandable because these were central issues that concerned those Progressive era reformers who initiated film censorship in the United States. Yet even these early censorship struggles were informed by issues other than sex and violence. We also mustn't forget that even the regulation of sex and violence was

⁵ He was speaking specifically of keeping the facts straight regarding how ministers behave in the Black community. He suggested that many films showed Black ministers as "shysters and trying to get over on people" a depiction that he read as "just another attack on us as a people and the family." James Brown, interview with Ellen Scott, Senior Network, Baltimore Maryland, Oct 2005.

never purely about these concerns but was motivated by desire to regulate behavior and therein was inflected with broader social concerns—particularly concerns about vulnerable or volatile social groups. Lee Grieveson, J. Douglas Smith, and Charlene Regester, among others scholars, have noted that government censorship of the movies, which dated back as early as 1908, was also engaged with regulating screen representations of race.⁶ Indeed, it was simultaneous concern about sexuality *and* race that motivated the most significant and large scale act of early censorship: the *Federal* restriction on the movement of the Jack Johnson films. While previous work has well-illuminated the racial history of early film censorship, less attention has gone to censorship at the moment of emergence of the civil rights movement—a moment that was no less—and arguably substantially more—influenced by the cultural struggles that over race. Moreover, very few of these censorship studies analyzing race, and few censorship studies in general, compare the censorship of particular issues or themes across state and regional lines.⁷ In this chapter, looking trans-regionally and over a thirty year period, I explore the various racial logics of state film censorship. I ask, what was the racial logic of state censors’ changes or deletions? How did struggles over the state censorship of race (particularly on African American themes) coincide with regional and national concerns and discourses about race and civil rights? By examining the racial logic that governed censorship, I hope to clarify the various consequences and intents of state racial censorship—and also its effect on the racial texts modified and their Black spectators. I ask specifically: why did political censors eliminate racial material?

⁶ Lee Grieveson, *Policing the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Charlene Regester, “Black Films, White Censors” in Francis Couvares, *Movie Censorship and American Culture* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1996), 159-186; J. Douglas Smith, “Patrolling the Borders of Race: Motion Picture Censorship and Jim Crow in Virginia, 1922-1932,” *Historical Journal of Radio, Film and Television* 21, no. 3 (Aug 2001): 273. My examination of the Legislative Journal for the State of Pennsylvania suggests that the Jack Johnson fight films were the original censorship concern in the state. See “An Act to Prevent the Exhibition of Moving Pictures or Motion Pictures or Other Pictures of Prize Fights, Prize Fighting, Boxing Matches, Pugilistic Contests or Any Indecent or Immoral Pictures within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.” (*Pennsylvania Legislative Journal of the House*, Jan. 24, 1911), 104. This act did not pass, but later a modified version did pass, creating the Pennsylvania Board of Motion Picture Censorship. This was the first state level legislation regarding motion picture censorship in the country.

⁷ Charlene Regester’s analysis of the censorship of Oscar Micheaux’s films in “Black Films, White Censors” does take regional variation into account and is formative in the design of this study. Charlene Regester, “Black Films, White Censors: Oscar Micheaux Confronts Censorship in New York, Virginia, and Chicago” in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, ed. Francis Couvares (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1996), 159-186.

What was the effect on the text? When, if ever, did African American concerns enter into censors' decision-making process? How did censorship of specific films and overall patterns of censorship of racial justice affect the racial meanings of films? What do these events and actions tell us about state censorship of film and about shifting local, state, and regional meanings of race?

Although the local censor boards received more attention in the Black press, state censor boards also shaped the meanings of Hollywood "production" of racial themes. Although often conflated, the differences between state and local censors were notable. Not only did state censors have the power to cut and ban films, but the threat of state censorship was enough to cause the industry to self-censor. State censors also had the power to create a regionally accented cinema, by systematically eliminating certain kinds of images, and in this way to affect spectatorship in their state. An in depth and systematic study of the racial excisions of multiple state boards and their methods of dealing with race has not been attempted. Though arguably more pernicious as government censors, the local boards (like those in Memphis, Atlanta, and Chicago) differed from the state censors in that they did not have as great a responsibility to align themselves with state politics and policies as local censors.⁸ What is needed is more attention to how states, too, operated albeit with greater administrative poise, to perpetuate—and sometimes trouble—state racial politics and the state's racial status quo.

I choose for analysis, then, three state boards of censorship, one Northern (New York Motion Picture Division), one Southern (Virginia Division of Motion Picture Censorship), and one from a border state (Maryland State Board of Motion Picture Censorship). While these states were not as flagrantly segregationist as Memphis's Binford or even the Atlanta censors (led by Mrs. Alfonso Richardson and later Christine Smith), state censors nevertheless exercised systematic control over all film content—including

⁸ Important new work by Whitney Straub has demonstrated the methodical madness of Lloyd T. Binford's censorship in Memphis. Whitney Straub, "White, Black and Banned all Over," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3, (Spring 2007), 685. See also Pat Murdock, "The Lone 'Lady Censor': Christine Smith Gilliam and the Demise of Film Censorship in Atlanta," *Atlanta History* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 68-86.

racial representation—not only in their entire state but often over the entire distribution area, which extended outside of state bounds. Because of their extensive reach, their methods and models for censoring race need to be addressed.

In this chapter, I will focus on the cutting, banning, and the process of deliberation required for films that either pictured African Americans or were thematically linked to social and political problems that African Americans faced. The chapter covers the years 1930 through 1960, but state records were incomplete for certain years in several locales, as I describe in my methods section below. Specifically, I will address, within each region, the censorship of films that touched on lynching, racial epithets, miscegenation, the racial injustice of the penal system, and Race films, the latter of which, although past their prime in the 1940s, were still crucial articulations of Black life and were submitted regularly for censorship, which evidences their continued distribution. Existing documentation from these states indicates different areas of emphasis: some states had more of a problem with racial epithets, for example, and others show no evidence of having excised such offensive words from films. Thus, the emphasis given to each racial theme varies by state according to the boards' emphasis—or at least the emphasis suggested by their records. I should be clear that the majority of cinematic excisions based on race in *all* of the states I examined were of images of “natives”—particularly natives dancing or with breasts or genitalia exposed—rather than of African Americans. The display of native bodies was an area of incredible contention and massive censorial activity for these boards. However, it is a separate area of study, worthy of more complete examination than I could possibly render here and will not, therefore, be covered in this chapter.

Method for Examining Censorship

The strength of the following analysis is its reliance upon a compiling of the complete available records of film eliminations and rejections in three states (New York, Maryland, and Virginia) from 1930 to 1960. These records of excisions include cuts applied to Hollywood, foreign, independent, newsreel, and

short film productions. I couple this with qualitative assessments of the records of the state censorship boards in Virginia and Maryland. These board records include records of censor's conferences and correspondence with the studios and with outside consultants, board minutes, personnel files, and reports of the inspectors assigned to make sure no illegal prints were being exhibited). I was not able to perform the analysis of these supporting documents in New York and rely solely on New York's records of scene and dialogue eliminations and film rejections. The chapter is organized by region and then by thematic concerns of censors, moving from the North, to the South (where exhibitor censorship was frequent), and concluding with censorship in a Border state.

Because New York is in many ways an exceptional Northern state, I added to my discussion of New York censorship an analysis of state racial censorship in Ohio and Pennsylvania to give a more representative picture of Northern censorship. I did not, though, perform an exhaustive analysis of all eliminations and rejections of African-American-themed images in Pennsylvania, although analysis of rejections from 1945-1952 in Ohio was possible.⁹

It is very important to note, also, that complete records of excision and rejection in Virginia and Maryland were available only from 1945 to 1960. Some indication of racial excisions earlier than that period is provided by the Maryland board's file of "Analysis Charts for Feature Films" (index cards which recorded the themes of films, how they were reviewed in the press, who from the board reviewed the films, what other censorship boards did with the films, and what excisions to the film were required by the Maryland board), although this file is also incomplete. Indication of excisions and rejections before 1945 in Virginia is given by the board's correspondences and memos.¹⁰ To give some sense of racial censorship in

⁹ Pennsylvania discarded 200 cubic feet of their censorship materials a number of years ago, and this made systematic examination of the racial politics of the board infeasible. Systematic study of Ohio's censorship policy was outside of the scope of this project.

¹⁰ It may have been possible to discern which films required excision before this time by looking at the ledger of films received which had a column to indicate the films that required censorship and the board's action taken (i.e. rejection, elimination, etc),

the states and at the times where there is not complete documentation, I discuss important and telling case studies of individual films that generated racial controversy. I selected films for analysis in this chapter on the basis of the presence of films in the records of the boards but I also privilege those films that are currently available because these allowed me to appraise the effects of deletions on spectatorship. In this chapter, I both analyze films and generate a sense of the overall policy and politics of these boards based on knowledge of the complete set of their deletions.

The Process of State Censorship

In order to give a sense of the politics of censorship, we must first gain a clearer understanding of the process by which states censored films.¹¹ Although the details of the system varied slightly from state to state, creating a composite portrait of the process of state censorship is possible and apropos for the purposes of this chapter.¹² In states with censorship, distributors were required by law to submit all films (usually with the exception of inoffensive educational films and newsreels) to a censorship board administered by the state government for review and licensing. The distributor was charged a fee for licensing of all films. If a film's content violated the state's censorship statute, state censors generally had two official options: they could require the deletion of scenes, dialogue, or "views" (their term) in a film, or they could entirely ban the film. The censors also employed several unofficial actions, which involved markedly less paper work and are therefore harder to track: several of the boards punitively caused delay in the release of films by withholding their censorship decision or adopting a "wait and see" policy. Boards could also unofficially ask film producers to withdraw their film and revise it, which they frequently did with the major Hollywood studio films.

but it would not have been possible to determine the content of the board's excisions in these states before this time because complete records of the board's minutes in Maryland and of deletions in Virginia were not available before 1945.

¹¹ For a more complete rendering of the legal history of state censorship, see Neville Hunning, *Film Censors and the Law* (London: Allen and Unwin Press, 1967). See also Richard Randall, *Censorship of the Movies: The Social and Political Control of a Mass Medium* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968).

¹² For more information on the process of state censorship, see Ira H. Carmen, *Movies, Censorship and the Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966).

State censors largely corresponded with film distributors and with a group of local industry employees known as local “film agents” rather than directly with film production companies.¹³ After having made required deletions, the distributors were sent a seal to affix to the prints. But, the role of the state in censoring films did not stop with the film’s distribution; most censor boards hired or voluntarily appointed inspectors that would visit local theaters to make sure that the required deletions had been applied and that no films were being shown in local theaters for which seals had not been granted.¹⁴

Ten state censorship boards were legally empowered to censor films during all or most of the period from 1930-1960, but only seven of these were active: Pennsylvania (established in 1913), Ohio (established in 1913), Kansas (established in 1913), Maryland (established in 1916), New York (established in 1921), Virginia (established in 1922), and Massachusetts (established in 1922).¹⁵ These censor boards were administrative units of various sorts: although all were formed by law, they operated under the supervision of various parts of the state bureaucracy, ranging from the attorney general’s office to the governor’s office to the Board of Education. In addition to being guided in their censorship decisions by the legal statute that created the board, many of these boards established “standards”—guidelines for the practice of censorship. Although most of these censor boards were not formed in response to concerns

¹³ Most of the films with racial material in Maryland and Richmond happen to have been handled by M.E. McDonald of the McDonald-Burns film booking agency. However, I believe that McDonald handled much of the booking for the region—not just booking for racially-oriented films.

¹⁴ In Maryland, violations were relatively frequent (out of roughly 400 inspections per month, usually there were around 25 violations) and were treated in various ways. If a film that had not been submitted to the board was shown and the exhibitor seemed not to know about censorship laws, a copy of the law was sent and the film showing had to be immediately halted. Typically, the film agent and distribution company were also contacted and an explanation was required of them for not submitting the film, but no legal action was taken. If a film which had received approval was exhibited without the required scenes cut, as happened in the case of *The Outlaw* (1947), the board would contact the film company and effectively confiscate the film until the legally required changes were made. It was illegal for a film to be shown without a seal in the state of Maryland. These sorts of violations were handled usually by letter.

¹⁵ Massachusetts’ statute did not bar exhibition of films on Sunday (commonly known as “Blue laws”) but rather required state censorship of films shown on “the Lord’s day.” Since the weekends were prime times for film exhibition, all films risked being shown on the Lord’s Day, and it appears film companies submitted all prints for censorship. According to Neville Hunning, the statute which created the Connecticut board was repealed in 1927 and replaced with an entertainment tax law (covered by Hunning on page 187-9); the Florida law stipulated that only those films approved by the National Board of Review could be shown in the state (189); and the Louisiana law (191-192) was never enforced.

about race, they all dealt with issues of race in the course of their practice, and many of them explicitly mentioned race in their laws or standards.¹⁶

Thinking about Censorship

Although the current legally and socially acceptable position on government censorship is that it is very rarely permissible (only perhaps in the case of obscenity) because it infringes on free expression, in order to understand the historical moment before the courts rendered film censorship largely illegal, we need to attenuate our contemporary proclivity to revile censorship. In the 1930s, 1940s, and even after the 1952 Miracle Decision made censorship illegal based on the perceived “sacrilege” of a film image, censorship was not only an available tool to alter cinematic representations, but was an active part of public discourse.¹⁷ Just what kind of a tool it was—and how this tool operated to alter representations of race and their readings—is of importance.

Although from one perspective, censorship caused omission of certain ideas and concepts, from another perspective we can see that texts are always censored on one level or another. From this perspective, censorship is a repressive force that pushed producers to create a more publicly acceptable form for expressing controversial ideas. Calls for censorship were often calls for textual negotiation and for the power, legitimate or illegitimate, of the censor over filmic expression. Censorship, in this view, was not entirely destructive; tough and deeply held ideas could withstand the discursive countercurrents of the process of public discourse—a process of creative refinement that included censorship but never entirely omitted the idea being censored. Because censorship could not unauthor an idea, some remnant of the idea remained. Banning an idea would seem to limit the public expression of that idea. However, in a public

¹⁶ Kansas prohibits the ridicule of the races in their law. Maryland and Pennsylvania also prohibit racial ridicule as a part of their standards. See Jack Alicoate, ed. *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York: Film Daily Publishing Co, 1921), 191-217.

¹⁷ Garth Jowett, “A Significant Medium for the Communication of Ideas: The Miracle Decision and the Decline of Motion Picture Censorship, 1952-1968,” in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, Francis Couvares, ed. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1996), 258-76.

sphere that included newspapers that actively critiqued censorship, the sensational act of banning only served to further the representation of an idea by diffusing it to new media—to newspapers and magazines which discussed banned material.

Whether we like it or not, censorship was a tool for the restraint of film during the 1940s and 1950s, albeit one that lacked the sophistication and subtlety that characterizes regulation achieved under the rubric of public relations adopted by the studios. Although the give and take of public relations adopted by the industry was more subtle than the state-engineered system of overt “textual discipline,” which dramatically sets up the censors against the moviemakers as defenders of public morality, it does not follow that censorship was more effective in shifting public texts. Censorship, like public relations, was a tool to coerce—the latter by means of force and the former by means of coaxing—shifts in these texts and in modes of expression. The difference between the two was—and is—largely one of tone and relationship.

Also, in the last years of state censorship, at a time when censors themselves were being subjected, quite ironically, to a sort of silencing, governmental systems of censorship increasingly adopted public relations tools and developed modes of negotiation with the industry. As Sydney Traub, the head of the Maryland State Board of Motion Picture Censors, put it:

During the year numerous conferences were held with applicants for the licensing of films and, whenever possible, suggestions were offered for the revision thereof, in order that conflict with the Maryland Statute might be avoided. This approach to the task of censoring pictures is important to the producing companies and to the public and cannot be ascertained by any statistical record.¹⁸

State censorship, like industry self-censorship, had a public relations modality that took the hard edge off of censorship.

Censors of the Progressive era had often been self-styled moral crusaders and cultural regulators interested in forwarding their social causes through censorship of motion pictures, a disturbing medium

¹⁸ Sydney Traub, Maryland Board of Censors, Thirty-Fourth Annual Report, 1949-1950, Aug. 31, 1950, 1, MSBMPC Records, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

that was equally accessible to children and adults, the poor as well as the affluent. But by the 1950s censors, were for the most part public servants of a less zealous—or at least pioneering—nature. Many of these late censors had been appointed directly from other state bureaucratic positions. They were not as interested in pushing the cause of censorship as in smoothly enforcing preexisting laws, and sometimes also in adapting film censorship to fit into the emerging political and judicial framework that sought to restrain it. Where censors of previous eras had used censorship and protest to publicly discredit the film industry, most often for the censor of the 1950s in this changed public climate, it was in their interest to *avoid* such public attention. Censorship under these conditions took on quite different meanings, as I will show.

In addition, any assessment of the justice of political censorship of film content related to race must take into account the systems of power under which censorship operates and the broader racial ideologies each act of censorship seeks to reinforce. The call for complete freedom from censorship—and much more, the steady achievement of this goal—has veiled the many ways in which regulation operates, shifting from public function to one privately operated without the public accountability to which government functionaries are regularly subjected. We see all too clearly in our current environment of media deregulation that cinematic innovation, though freed in some ways, is also perhaps more limited, less inspired, and markedly less free in different ways now- that it is ultimately at the mercy of financial interests rather than social ones. Censorship was, in one view, that last great moment of media industry public accountability—to the state or any outside, unaffiliated interests—except, of course, for “the public.”

Censorship, though, is still linked to the status quo and to tradition in that it is essentially a conservative process—wary of the new and willing to sacrifice freedom for protection. State film censorship in the 1940s and 1950s operated through this conservative process as a force mediating, influencing, and shaping film’s meanings in the United States. Instances of white censorship of Black images often operated strangely in tandem with positive Black reception: white censorship often signaled to African Americans the

power a representation would have had for stirring Black consciousness and disrupting white status quo notions of race. It is clear that the Black press sources and the NAACP saw white censorship, and the assumed negative white reception it appeared to predict, as a pernicious threat to perceived civil rights gains that were happening in reality, but were being taken away by media representations.

Struggles for control over meanings and interpretations are central to any ideological project. My analysis tells the story of struggles for the articulation and control of textual meanings around issues of African American culture during the 1940s and 1950s. These struggles were waged alternately by the African Americans whose lived experience was the basis for screen representations and whose bodies were often present in screen representation, and by the white state authorities whose job it was to determine and maintain ideological law and order. In the course of these battles, the tool of censorship was used both by repressor and by repressed as means of securing control over ideas potentially unleashed by representations.

Although often understood in the context of film censorship, racial censorship needs to be understood in terms of broader forces of racial power and domination. We must properly root acts of censorship in these broader systems of racial repression to which they are logically linked. This entails regarding as different those acts of “censorship” that arise from groups traditionally marginalized and without state power or industrial prerogatives.¹⁹ In other words, we must understand how individual acts of censorship relate to power in order to judge properly their ideological effects. For example, as I will show in Chapter 4, the NAACP sometimes worked to censor representations, most famously in the case of *The Birth of a Nation*. While I do not think it possible to merely exempt the NAACP from being considered censors

¹⁹ Francis Couvares suggests that even the efforts of “progressive” and “good censors” often had “unintended and baneful results.” But Couvares’s examination of the effects of these struggles does not appreciate their long term effect: because of Black calls for censorship of *The Birth of a Nation*, many boards attempted to regulate Black images in ways that would make viewership enjoyable for Black spectators. In addition, we might consider that the struggle over *The Birth of a Nation* produced Hollywood fear of a Black audience, on which ground the NAACP made bids for producer-level influence in the early 1940s. In this connection, I argue with the notion Francis Couvares suggests in “The Good Censors” that African American censorship through the NAACP was as pernicious as white censorship because its purposes, relationship to power, and institutional affiliations were quite different. “Poor man’s” or backdoor censorship takes on different intonation and, as my work on the NAACP demonstrates, actually acted as substitution for power over production. Francis Couvares, “The Good Censors: Race, Sex and Censorship in the Early Cinema,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7, no. 2 (1994): 233.

because they are African American, the case of the NAACP significantly complicates any understanding of censorship that would see it as *always* on the side of dominant power. We certainly need to distinguish between the NAACP's struggle for self-representation and other forms of censorship which were racist in intent—designed to extend and corroborate other forms of repression (including segregation). When in the hands of those without access to the power of production, sometimes censorship can operate more like critique and/or as “door jams” to open the way for new forms or avenues for creative production. Simply put—we need to move away from a stereotypical “ACLU” position which condemns all forms of censorship. Even if we end up concluding that censorship had a stifling effect in a particular instance, we need to understand why and how it operated microcosmically in tandem with other forms and forces of constraint/restraint, agency/artistry, and repression/oppression. We need also to understand censorship's complex relationship to the broader forces—“repression,” “oppression,” and “omission” being the major ones—under which it is most often subsumed. These broader forces—forces to which censorship is linked—operate not only on texts and their creators, but on masses of people through institutions of power. Censorship sometimes becomes the tool of those without dominant power, in this case those without white racial status, to substitute for their lack of power over their own image.

Because I study censorship boards whose members were, as far as I have determined, entirely white, I also, by extension, study whiteness. But I want to resist isolating my notion of whiteness from Blackness (not to mention Black people) in ways that unwittingly replicate ideological activity that I mean to critique. By sidelining questions of Blackness, Black experience, and Black bids for institutional and creative power, many studies of whiteness have neglected to notice the mutual constitutive of Blackness and whiteness as racial categories. I do not mean to suggest that whiteness is only synonymous with white censorship, that white censors reflected white reception or even that all white censors were the same. Indeed, as in the case of Maryland, state censorship operated differently based on the region in which it took place as well as the

ethnicity of the censors. The censors' whiteness does not preclude the existence of other positionalities within whiteness—some of which, as in the case of white Jewish exhibitors who ran and owned Black movie houses—found themselves squarely at odds with these white censors. But the fact is that state censorship was overwhelmingly white. I want to draw attention to how protection of racial categories was policed by the state through film censorship that racially tailored films to fit the status quo.

Institutionally speaking, censorship often elaborates and expands on the very thing eliminated, either through discussion or through alternative forms of representation. While the ACLU has done a good job of convincing us of the perniciously repressive potential of censorship, I do not assume that all state censorship was either repressively racist or that all state censorship across locales operated with the same power, even if its motifs, actions, and patterns of repression are often quite similar: particularly in the case of the microcosm of individual states we might expect, I have found considerable variation in the meanings, operations, and forces of censorship, resulting from both the particular shape of bureaucratic mechanics in the individual states as well as the regional identity and definitions of race that the state government provided. Although the concept of state censorship may seem destructive, we must still articulate and address the question of whether there are instances where acts of censorship are not only appropriate, but can actually aid in the forces of free expression or alleviate the effects of unfreedom, oppression, and omission.

We should, as the Black press did at the time, see white censorship of progressive or controversial racial images as merely a layer in a broader discursive struggle for power over the meanings and cultural operations of race. This broader process of repression and struggle for power over race included industrial segregation of the film industry (through segregation of movie houses and of industry hiring) and the selective inclusion of racially controversial or unconventional cinematic images and dialogue (as I will

discuss in the case of Darryl Zanuck's films).²⁰ It was just this sort of discussion about industrial repression of the creativity and free expression of its own artists that shifted the balance of power in the sports industry by introducing the concept of free agency.²¹ This argument has been articulated most powerfully by Jon Lewis in his work on the industrial benefits of censorship for the standardization and authorization of the film industry's most elite products and producers.²² While entirely separating the industrial side from the creative side is not only untenable but, in analysis, unrealistic, it is clear nevertheless that the industry's drive towards profit often stifled the individual artistic expression and, most importantly, the variety of types of expression.

As I will argue over the course of the following three chapters, the movie industry itself repressed the free expression of ideas, though never entire films: because throughout the course of the 1950s and after the *Burstyn v. Wilson* Supreme Court case (which called in to question the constitutional validity of all government censorship of the movies), power came to reside increasingly with the industry and not with the government, the industry had more power than government to repress. The industry's power to repress was by no means as direct or legally binding as the state censors', but it should not be ignored. While the industry positioned itself in many court cases as the representative of free expression, and while the ACLU promoted the conception of state censorship as a repressive governmental force, the industry was never the innocent conduit and channel of expression that it positioned itself to be. Both the industry and the state repressed films, but the industry did so more often and with greater effectiveness than the government censors.

²⁰ For more on employment discrimination, see Jesse Algernon Rhines, *Black Film/White Money* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 79-87.

²¹ The discussion on free agency in sports has been perhaps corrupted by overemphasis on fiscal concerns rather than with creative imagining of what freer expression of baseball talent would look like.

²² Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hardcore: How the Struggle Over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). Industrial repression of artists can be seen not only in the movie industry, but also in other major cultural industries which harness artistic and creative cultural production to audiences and fans. In music, of course, artists have often been reduced to receiving small upfront payment for contracts which bind them exploitatively to sorts of cultural production geared towards an abstract and highly industrially mediated sense of audience desires; in baseball, the industry faced Supreme Court challenges to its dominating harnessing of creative expression through struggles for free agency.

Government censors lacked the financial power of the industry, and they operated as community representatives who were the financial underdogs in these match-ups. Nevertheless, the state not only was involved in repression of films, but often represented repressive interests, including white racists, in their meting out of censorship. In examining film censorship, this chapter and the following two interrogate the role of the states and of the industry in repressing cinematic representations of African American themes and images. In doing so, these chapters draw some implicit comparisons between the various sources of censorship and the control of cinematic meanings, but they also emphasize the ways that the industrially-based censorship operated more efficiently, more quietly, and more effectively than the other forms of repression. Explicit forms of repression are often performative and theatrical in that they *show* their repressive hand, but these forms are often not nearly as internally effective as more implicit forms.²³

Foucault has argued that repression is productive.²⁴ This argument has been applied to studies of cinematic censorship.²⁵ However, when Foucault wrote about repression, he was writing about repression of sexuality. The question remains to be answered: does racial repression operate in the same way—as productive? And if racial repression is productive, what, in terms of the cinema, does it produce? With the repression of sexuality in the cinema, a hint of the sexual material repressed is always tantalizingly retained in the text—to the audience’s pleasure. I will contend, following Thomas Cripps, that even if racial censorship can be argued to be productive, the driving force behind this censorship (on the state, industry, and production level) was not like the titillating sexual repression that was itself pleasurable, but rather a paranoid, denial-driven omission, an historical fantasy premised on suspension of disbelief, and a sort of

²³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1990), 17-48. As Foucault has pointed out, it also operates as a mechanism for a discursive re-siphoning of material repressed. However, the weight of Foucault’s emphasis in his writings on the repressive hypothesis have fallen less on the side of assessment of textual effects and more on the subjectivities of the censors: censorship is not only vaguely productive, but, I would venture to extend his theory, renders the censors, in a sense, producers. In addition, and in ways that we might not have anticipated, censorship actually generated discussion, controversy, and genuine conversation about the very things that it was meant to suppress. Thomas Cripps, “The Absent Presence in American Civil War Films,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 14, no. 4: 367 - 376.

²⁵ See, for example, Dana Polan *Power and Paranoia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Lee Grieveson, *Policing the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.)

amnesic forgetting. This substitution replaced historical truths with those that fit a pleasurable and idyllic white American ideal of the past.²⁶ This racial repression was based not only on forgetting one's desire and disciplining self, but upon forgetting (racial) *others* and disciplining them: it was repression of the *other* and not the self. The implications of this kind of repression are quite different and need to be more thoroughly explored. Where sexual repression involved the sublimation of pleasure to produce sexual discipline or moral order, racial repression involved the sublimation of the history of oppression. The process of forgetting and repression has always involved the elaboration of fantasy, falsity, or dreams. We see this most clearly in the narratives of the Old South like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Belle Starr* (1942), and *Band of Angels* (1957). The effort to maintain amnesia about the history of racial oppression has often involved the productive industrial mechanisms of the cinema, but the power and desire to unmake this amnesia (and to produce a rendering of truth) has likewise always been right at hand, present (if subverted) in the very powerful fantasies that please. This tension is present in the following examples I will give of racial censorship from 1930 to 1960.

Moving Past Miscegenation

Some of the previous work on race and cinematic regulation in this era has focused primarily on questions of miscegenation.²⁷ As Robin Kelley has suggested, the specter of miscegenation often served financial interests and the broader interests of power.²⁸ Certainly at the beginning of the African American civil rights movement, the success of white/Black interracial marriages and of mixed-race social environments, and even platonic homosocial bonds amongst Blacks and whites, bothered status quo racial

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Susan Courtney's analysis of miscegenation in the Production Code Administration explores the dialectic of desire and repulsion that governed the American focus on this fantasy. Susan Courtney, *Fantasies of Miscegenation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Likewise, Melissa Ooten's groundbreaking analysis of white censorship in Virginia focuses on issues of miscegenation, although it also does give some coverage to issues of the Klan. Melissa Ooten, "Screen Strife: Race, Gender, and Movie Censorship in the New South, 1922–1965," (PhD diss. The College of William and Mary, 2005.)

²⁸ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 79.

ideology and threatened to give weight to arguments for integration. It was the physical proximity—the intimacy more than the sexual act itself—and the confusing and entwined nature of Black and white social relationships that threatened the racial, and therefore civic, order.

While focus on cinematic representation of miscegenation can do much to expose the white fantasy as lie, it does little to expand our perspective on Black racial (or interracial) imaginings. Although miscegenation was a core issue for those who most strongly identified as “white,” it was not a core issue for most of those defined as Black and therefore cannot be argued to be at the center of any American racial ideology that includes African Americans. While miscegenation remains a timeless issue for white racist discourse (and therefore for Black people as well), issues such as lynching, integration, and discrimination were more central to African Americans. Attention to these issues gets us closer to understanding the racial ideology of the 1940s and 1950s and demonstrates crucial links between American politics, African American experience, and cinematic representation. In other words, miscegenation has often been a fetish, distracting us from the real issue, that is, the politics that will change Black lives. These political issues, sometimes even more than interracial sexuality, often became the subject of the most vociferous debates between state censors and African American state residents.

A Changing Institution: State Censorship in the Years Before and after Burstyn v. Wilson

Two major national events greatly influenced the practice and perception of state censorship in the 1940s and 1950s: WWII, which, as Garth Jowett has suggested, raised new political concerns in censorship, and the 1952 *Burstyn v. Wilson* Supreme Court decision, which limited the grounds on which films could be censored by the states.²⁹ In the 1940s, state censorship had stabilized into a relatively predictable institutionalized force, but, by the 1950s, when censorship was under as much fire as, if not more than, the

²⁹ Garth Jowett, *Film: the Democratic Art* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976), 293-332. On the *Burstyn v. Wilson* decision, see Garth Jowett, “A Significant Medium for the Communication of Ideas: The Miracle Decision and the Decline of Motion Picture Censorship, 1952-1968,” in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, ed. Francis Couvares (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1996), 258-76.

industry (with the recent Paramount decrees) from the courts, censors no longer seemed to represent dominant interest nor could they un-self-consciously act as the authority they had been. Although these state censors often had the same moral fervor of their predecessors, the context had undoubtedly changed. This, combined with the Nazi atrocities, which included both book burnings and their uncensorable horrible acts of killing, changed the way the public regarded censorship and, in turn, caused censors to function very differently than they had before the war. Most importantly, these censors often showed unstable and internally divergent sets of state-level responses to emergent racial liberalism in films.

If state censorship boards had initially been forged in the fiery rhetoric of Progressivism, by the 1950s, especially because of the decreasing legal power of state censorship, the institution had become a very different thing than it was in the 1930s or the 1940s. These changes must shift how we judge and apprise these censors and their practice of censorship. By the 1950s, the heightened fervor for censorship that had given birth to these boards had died down, and censors had become a well-oiled part of the state government bureaucracy: life as a censor was no longer accompanied by moral crusading but rather was characterized by long days in the screening room.³⁰ Censors made a decent salary and, in most locales, government appointees moved in or out of censorship offices with administration changes, which meant that the personality and character of the board changed with the administration. Although they worked in private and rarely made deletions public, these censors were continually remarked upon in the press as articles about their more controversial decisions were inevitable.³¹ It is difficult to generalize across decades

³⁰ By the 1950s, they had become state bureaucrats, and there is even evidence that some viewed their job in a campy, self-aware manner[0]. See Stanley Frank's "Headaches of a Movie Censor," *Baltimore (Eve.) Sun*, Sept. 27, 1947, where Helen Tingley of Maryland notes, "The headaches of a censor's life are not inconsistencies or tricky interpretations of policy. Endless clichés and corny situations are what gets you down. . . . I'm fed up with juvenile stars, particularly when cast as band leaders, with old guys and dames who try to act cute, and with crazy scientists who make apes out of men, or vice versa. . . . I've seen so many Westerns that I'll whinny if you hold up a bag of oats."

³¹ The *Baltimore Sun* index, for example, includes a number of articles about censorship each year. Controversy over *Hitler Beast of Berlin* (1939) was covered in *The Sun* ("Hitler Beast of Berlin," Nov. 14, 1939, 26); *The Outlaw* was discussed in 1947 in "United Artists Corp. Appeals the Outlaw," *Baltimore (Morning) Sun*, Jul. 17, 1947, 11; the controversial film *Polish Land* was discussed in "Polish Land," *Baltimore (Morning) Sun*, Jun. 2, 1949, 24; as was *The Bicycle Thief*, "The Bicycle Thief," *Baltimore (Morning) Sun*, Apr. 5, 1950, 38.

and locales, but most of the men and women who were state censors in the 1950s seem not to have aspired to the job, and the position was often a stepping stone or simply one of many public offices held by the individual.

While censorship was no longer structured according to the same Progressivist moral logic of the 1920s and 1930s, censors nevertheless continued to consider their work necessary, although they justified their necessity in terms of “the law” rather than “good morals.” Indeed, it was often the censors themselves who fought for the continued existence of these boards. Despite the *Burstyn v. Wilson* decision, which suggested that censors could no longer use “sacrilege” as a ground for censorship, all of the censor boards I examined continued to censor films throughout the 1950s. They often saw their job as defending the spectators of the state from foreign and independent films, which often did not have a MPAA Seal of approval, and from those MPAA sanctioned films that had slipped through the cracks. Some bitterness is evident in the statement of Sydney Traub of the Maryland state board, in his comments to the governor in 1952:

Critics of censorship harp on the fact that Hollywood has its own production code [sic] which, they claim, amply protects the public, particularly children against the showing of indecent pictures. The true situation is that certain Hollywood companies, faced with intense competition within their own ranks, in addition to the scare of television, have been recently deviating from the code . . . on the ground that . . . a new code should be adopted which will enable them to get away from producing what Mr. Samuel Goldwyn has termed “pollyanna and fairy tale pictures.”³²

In response to an article in *Box Office* in March of 1953, Edna Carroll of the Pennsylvania state board of censors corrected the falsely diminutive picture of censorship the periodical presented: “You are either naïve or uninformed when you report that forty states get along without censorship. . . . Of the approximately 17,000 theaters in the United States, less than 5,000 are without some form of official

³² Sydney Traub, “Annual Report to the Governor,” Aug. 31, 1952, 6.

ensorship.”³³ Carroll also contested, as had Traub, the notion that censorship was no longer needed, arguing that the “so called ‘self-discipline’ of the industry covers only those organizations participating in the Motion Picture Association. By actual statistics, some thirty percent of the product reaching us has no previous censorship,” referring to the foreign, independent films the board analyzed.³⁴ What is more, as Black/white racial relations became an increasing concern in the nation as a whole, racial representation became an increasing concern in the post-Burstyn era.

Northern Censorship

Although it has been necessary to lay some groundwork in terms of theorizing censorship and discussing censorship in this period, I will now assess the racial censorship of the boards under study. Four Northern states had active state censorship boards: Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts.³⁵ In the sections that follow, I ask: what was the basis for racial deletions in Northern states and how, if at all, did it differ from Southern states? What sorts of civil-rights-style struggles played out between African Americans and Northern (white) State censor boards? And what affect did censorship have on the audience’s, white or Black, experience?

Censorship of Racial Images with Emphasis on African Americans in New York, 1930-1960

New York’s film censorship statute was enacted on May 14, 1921.³⁶ It established the New York Motion Picture Division (which I will also refer to as the NYMPD), a board which was housed in the

³³ Edna J. Carroll, letter to James M. Jerauld, editor of *Box Office*, Mar. 27, 1953.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁵ Studies on Massachusetts censorship are few. The records of the Production Code Administration indicate a few telling excisions on the basis of racial themes and images. In the film *The Well* (1951), Massachusetts eliminated the word “nigger” a total of seven times at the behest of the Massachusetts board. This was—crucially—their only elimination to a film with many and varied references to race and racism and which depicted race riots. In addition, Massachusetts required deletion of the word “nigger” in the film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and called the producers/distributors of *The Burning Cross* (1947) to excise the tarring and feathering scene in order to exhibit the film in Massachusetts. *The Burning Cross* and *Blackboard Jungle* PCA files. Margaret Herrick Library. AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA.

³⁶ Neville Hunning, *Film Censors and the Law* (London: George Allen and Unwin Press, 1967), 182.

Department of Education. Censorship decisions could be appealed to the Regents of the University of New York, the group that appointed the censor board members.³⁷ The NYMPD was guided by no other standards of censorship than the statute itself, which stipulated that “no motion picture will be licensed or a permit granted for its exhibition within the state of New York, which may be classified or any part thereof as obscene, indecent, immoral, inhuman, sacrilegious, or which is of such character that its exhibition would tend to corrupt morals or incite to crime.”³⁸ But how did New York interpret this provision? In order to assess the textual and spectatorial effects of New York’s censorship, we must examine their patterns of excision. According to exhaustive analysis of eliminations of the board, a variety of issues prompted concerns of the NYMPD from 1930 to 1960, including a number of areas of racial concern and controversy.

The Censorship of Miscegenation in New York, 1930-1940:

In the 1930s, New York was concerned about miscegenation—not only its visual representation but also its verbal suggestion in the cinema. For example, from Oscar Micheaux’s *Birthright* (1939), the NYMPD required the deletion of the following sexually suggestive line between a Black character and a white character: “It was that Sam Awkright who did it. He wanted her to . . .’ (Sam Awkright is a white man).”³⁹ Eliminations of verbal indicators of Black/white attraction were not rare: in a 1934 Warner Brothers film called *I’ve Got Your Number*, when a white man said to Louise Beavers, “Aww Chrystal—ain’t my luck ever gonna change?,” the board eliminated her reply “What do you think?,” specifically stating “(Chrystal is a colored girl).”⁴⁰ As this cut shows, deletions of miscegenation did not have to be based on *narratives* of miscegenation, but only on suggestions of desire.

³⁷ Hunning, *Film Censors and the Law*, 183.

³⁸ Jack Alicoate, ed., *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York: Film Daily Press, 1957), 996.

³⁹ This and all of the following records of elimination, unless otherwise noted, were gathered from the NYMPD: Elimination Bulletins. Microfilm collection. New York State Archives, Albany, New York.

⁴⁰ Elimination Bulletin, *I’ve Got Your Number*, Jan. 24, 1934. NYMPD Records. New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

From the *Youth of Russia* (1934), distributed by the Russian company Artkino films, the New York board eliminated the line “Of course, Chong Lee and I are going to be married.’ (Chinese girl and Negro),” one where a Black man forcefully articulates his intention to marry an Asian woman.⁴¹ Although this film is no longer extant, perhaps for the NYMPD, Chinese women were similar enough to white women for this marriage to constitute miscegenation. Or perhaps Black male desire for (and marriage to) any non-Black woman was considered illicit. In Oscar Micheaux’s *Daughter of the Congo* (1930), a reference to passing, a practice that opened the door and set the stage for miscegenation based on white ignorance, was cut, with the effect of lessening the flavor of miscegenation and transgression of the color line. New York censors called for excision of the line: “You should be ashamed passing yourself off as a white man” and the race-troubling response: “There are thousands of Negroes doing the same thing.”⁴² Finally, in the film *The Flame of Love* (1930), the NYMPD required the distributor to cut the word “colored” from the line “I am not in the habit of hating colored people,” a line which was used to refer to Chinese people, perhaps indicating censor discomfort with the conflation of African Americans (who were, of course, typically referred to as colored) and Chinese.⁴³

Miscegenation had different meaning for state boards than it did for Hollywood’s Studio Relations Committee (1927-1934), and later the Production Code Administration (1934-1968), for whom the term miscegenation applied exclusively to any representation of “Black/white sex relations.”⁴⁴ Concern about miscegenation for the NYMPD was not limited to interracial contact between Blacks and whites, but was evident also in white interactions with various other racial groups.

⁴¹ Elimination Bulletin, *Youth of Russia*, Sept. 27, 1934. Microfilm Collection. NYMPD Records. Microfilm Collection. New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁴² Elimination Bulletin, *Daughter of the Congo*, Apr. 7, 1930. NYMPD Records. Microfilm Collection. New York State Archives, Albany, NY. The board cited the reasons for all its excisions to the film as “will tend to corrupt morals”, “will tend to incite to crime”, and “indecent.” It is unclear which of these was associated with the reference to passing.

⁴³ Elimination Bulletin, *Flame of Love*, Aug. 26, 1930. NYMPD Records. Microfilm Collection. New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁴⁴ See Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, 467 and 469.

In several instances, the problem of the board with native/white interracial contact had specifically to do with white men sexually overwhelming dark women. MGM's 1934 *Laughing Boy*, according to its American Film Institute catalogue entry, centers on Lily, a Native American woman who is repeatedly forced into sexual contact with white men. The NYMPD's eliminations surrounded sexual content but, in effect, worked to alter the film's racial meanings as well. The board required elimination of the phrase "white men" in the following lines Lily uttered to a fellow Native American: "You are as bad as the white men." They also cut her later line, "They'll pay, those white men, for what they done to me."⁴⁵ But why would they eliminate the term "white men?" These excisions, which center on *race* rather than sexuality, indicate that lines of dialogue that "called out" whiteness, and particularly those that, as in this example, refer to someone's racial identity in a sentence that condemns them, were censorable in New York.⁴⁶ They not only made whiteness obvious but associated whiteness with a certain brand of oppressive villainy. The Board also specifically mentioned race in its elimination order for *Massacre* (1933), a film which depicted white-inflicted horrors perpetrated against Native Americans on a reservation and one that Thomas Doherty has called "the best example of the privileged racial status of the Native American in pre-code Hollywood."⁴⁷ In this instance, again, the NYMPD deleted an interracial rape scene involving a white man and a Native American woman, eliminating "all views of white man beckoning to young Indian girl to leave scene of father's funeral service (before rape)" and the "view of young Indian girl struggling against white man's attack" on the grounds that it was inhuman, indecent, immoral and would tend to incite to crime.⁴⁸ White men's inhumanity, particularly when expressed towards people of color, it seems, was continually

⁴⁵ Elimination Bulletin, *Laughing Boy*, Apr. 4, 1934. NYMPD Records. New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁴⁶ Apparently, the PCA eliminations were confined to concern about the depiction of the Indian Agents.

⁴⁷ Doherty also notes that *The New York Mirror* said the film proved that "large scale injustice is still the most inflammatory and exciting story material." And *The New York Herald Tribune* called the film "the most vigorous assault upon American injustice that the films have produced since *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*." Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 262-67.

⁴⁸ Elimination Bulletin *Massacre*, Dec. 27, 1933. NYMPD Records. New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

subject to elimination by the board. While it is difficult to tell if these scenes were eliminated based on the depiction of interracial lust or of *rape*, the fact that the board continually mentions the race of the participants indicates their attention to race in the scene.

Elimination orders indicated what censors wanted removed from films directly, but the detailed wording in them often also served a pedagogical/disciplinary function; it indicated what they found problematic in the scene, revealing how they read these sequences. That these orders explicitly mention race gives important insight into censors' readings of the scenes as racially charged. In addition, when the NYMPD required cuts not of single "views" but of the "entire scene," this was a severe action with probable complicating effects on the diegesis and may have indicated censors' desire to remove all traces of these narratives.

Eliminations Based on Racial Offense in New York: Brutality and Racial Epithets, 1930-1940

Although the eliminations discussed above indicate the racial conservatism of the board, a number of the excisions along lines of race may well have worked to eliminate some "stereotypes" of people of color and to minimize offense to them.⁴⁹ The New York board required cuts of brutal scenes in the tropical and jungle films in the 1930s. These cuts did away with brutality enacted upon native characters on the grounds that these scenes were "inhuman." But the brutality in these films was not only inhuman but may have worked to dehumanize Black and Brown "natives." It certainly reduced already strained identification with these characters, robbing them of dignity even in death and contributing to the sense of doom and

⁴⁹ Race was specifically mentioned in these brutality-based excisions, signaling censor attention to questions of race. In *Shadows of the Orient* (1935) (elimination order dated Sept. 22, 1937), the board required the distributor to "eliminate man pulling lever and view of Chinese falling from plane;" from *Beyond Bengal* (1934, Showmen's Pictures, Inc.) the NYMPD required distributors to eliminate "all views of native boys where they are attacked by crocodiles" (elimination order dated Mar. 23, 1934); from *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932) "all close and distinct view of native Safari being lowered into torture pit and close and distinct views of gorilla attacking after being lowered into torture pit" were eliminated (elimination order dated Mar. 8, 1932); and from *Jungle Gigolo*, the "view of tiger attacking man in field and mauling his body" had to be eliminated (elimination order dated April 6, 1933). These changes suggest that the prohibition on brutality had (perhaps unintended) the effect of reversing the doom of characters of color.

narrative expendability that surrounded them.⁵⁰ Although the NYMPD almost certainly eliminated these scenes as a part of their established norms of eliminating film violence, because many Hollywood films showed such brutality towards these natives, the effect of deleting these scenes would have altered audience perceptions of these natives and their life outcomes. It is important also that the NYMPD consistently referred to race in these elimination orders, a fact which signaled their attention to the workings of race in these deleted scenes.

In the 1930s, the NYMPD had a policy, too, of excising racial epithets from films—words that, in the sound era, may have had an additional sting as inflection was now audible. From Harold Auten’s 1934 film *Loyalties*, and the 1934 Amkino film *Miracles*, the New York Board required omission of the term “damned Jew.”⁵¹ The number of racial epithets in mainstream films distributed by major film companies is very high. According to the NYMPD, the Universal film *Destination Unknown* (1933) also required excision of the term “Wop.”⁵² The NYMPD required the line “you were too good to live in my dance hall but not too good to live with a bunch of chinks” to be cut from *The Law of the Tong* (1931).⁵³ While these lines

⁵⁰ New Yorkers were not allowed to see in *Beyond Bengal*, “all views of native boys where they are attacked by crocodiles, allowing in reel 5 two views of boy’s body in crocodiles’ mouth while boy is trying to kill him, and allowing in Reel 6 one view of Ali’s body in crocodile’s mouth before he is rescued.” Also, in the film *Jungle Gigolo*, the board required elimination of views of “view of elephant stamping on dead body of girl.”

⁵¹ Elimination Bulletin, *Miracles*, Oct. 18, 1934. Elimination Bulletin, *Loyalties*, Sept. 18, 1934. Microfilm Collection. New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁵² Elimination Bulletin, *Destination Unknown*, March 15, 1933. NYMPD Records. New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁵³ Elimination Bulletin, *Law of the Tong*, Nov. 5, 1931. From *Gunsmoke* (Paramount, 1931) censors excised the word “Chinks” (elimination bulletin dated Feb. 4, 1931). *Trails of the Golden West* could not show characters saying the word “nigger” (Jan. 31, 1930, Cosmos Film Service). The distributor of *Black Cargo of the South Seas* (1929) was also required to eliminate the line “I’m not saving niggers’ souls,” (elimination bulletin dated May 2, 1929). *Desert Vultures* (1930), one of the last silent Westerns, had to remove of the word “Chinks” from its inter-titles. The Russian film *Cain and Artem* (1929) had to go without the later portion of the line “the laws are for decent folks—not for Jews,” as well as the term “Sheeny,” and “distinct view of man kicking Jew when he demanded pay” and the words “you let your hand touch a dirty Jew” (elimination bulletin dated Apr. 12, 1930). The grounds for elimination stated were not only that the film would “tend to incite to crime” but also that it was “sacrilegious.” One of the most frequently excised racial motifs seems to have been derogatory reference to Chinese people, which most often showed up in films distributed by one of two Russian film distributors, Amkino or Armenkino. In the Russian film *China Express* (1929), the Board required elimination of “distinct view of white man wiping hand on trousers, after shaking hands with Chinese General;” and subtitles “The Chinese are barbarians but we will educate them,” substituting “but we will educate them.” They also required “miscegenetic” deletions taking out “distinct views of man overpowering girl (3)” and “all views of leering face of white overseer as he watches attack on girl.” Interestingly, the censors’ words contained epithets in this case; from reel two, the board required deletion of a “coolie” who was “choking white overseer, killing him” (Elimination bulletin dated Feb. 13, 1930). NYMPD

often may have produced no major reaction in characters onscreen, in the 1930s, the NYMPD's definition of incite to crime included not only extended sequences of interracial contact that suggested violence, but words that might incite violence or offense in spectators; the elimination bulletins from films where racial epithets were removed specifically stated that the removal was based upon censors' presumption that the film would "incite to crime." This more sensitive definition of "incitation" recognized the sociological resonance of epithetical terms in the space of the theater rather than focusing on their diegetic context. Just who would commit the crime—offended ethnics or parties whose own racism was spurred by the film's racial epithets—cannot easily be deduced. While these words may have been excised in an effort to eliminate the threat posed to the state by angry white ethnics and people of color, they nevertheless probably lessened racial offense as well, and perhaps made spectatorship more pleasurable, but certainly lessened the racial/ethnic implications of film-going.

Censorship of Race films in New York, 1930-1940

Race films that were set in an African American milieu could not avoid interpellating African Americans according to race. A number of African American films (that is, films made with all-Black cast and usually by filmmakers outside of the Hollywood studio system) were subject to myriad eliminations in New York, although the material excised was ostensibly non-racial. Many of the films of Oscar Micheaux, for example, were censored, although the board most often excised from his films images we might call illicit, those dealing with crime or sexuality, and not those that explicitly referred to race in ways that might make whites uncomfortable.⁵⁴ Jazz films were also made a target. Indecent Black dancing was cut out of

Records. New York State Archives, Albany, NY. It may be that these films were deleted for political reasons, as they were Communist propaganda films.

⁵⁴ From *Easy Street* (1930) (elimination bulletin dated Jul. 23, 1930) the board eliminated verbal statements indicating an extramarital sexual relationship as well as views of an electric chair and details of a crime. It stated its reasons for deletion for the entire film rather than each cut, saying the film would "incite to crime" and "corrupt morals." *Daughter of the Congo* (1930) (elimination bulletin dated Apr. 7, 1930), *Swing* (1938) (elimination bulletin dated May 27, 1938), *Birthright* (1939) (elimination bulletin dated May 27, 1938), *Underworld* (1937) (elimination bulletin dated March 10, 1937) and *Harlem After Midnight* (1934)

Cab Calloway's Paramount produced short, *Jitterbug Party* (1935), as well as an MGM short called *What Price Jazz?* (1934).⁵⁵ Crucially, the board attended to Black vernacular English in their deletions. The New York board removed "coded" phrases in African American vernacular that seemed sexually suggestive. For example, from Micheaux's *Harlem After Midnight* (1934), the board excised the phrase "Is she is or is she ain't?" a line from a popular song used here to question the fidelity of the female lead.⁵⁶ Although the rest of the eliminations from the film indicate that the NYMPD's major problem with the film had to do with prostitution, in this instance, dialogue coded through African American popular cultural vernacular, perhaps one with a local meaning now lost, was specifically targeted for deletion. The board thought it understood and should remove it.

Although racial censorship in 1930s New York seems to have had the partial goal of pleasing (or at least appeasing) audience members of color, the sum effect of these deletions is not clear. Because many of these films are lost, we cannot say definitively whether these censorship policies disrupted Hollywood's ideology or whether their lack of epithets and miscegenation, interrupted Black spectator's sense of realism. It is also difficult to discern the NYMPD's reasons for excision of racial epithets; it may have been designed also in part to decrease hate for the onscreen speaker rather than to avoid offense to the African American hearer. It is arguable, however, that while decreasing the feeling of racism and erasing its screen evidence, these deletions also reduced the power of film images to hail Black audiences according to race.

Racial Censorship in New York, 1940-1960

In the early 1940s, the NYMPD almost completely ceased requiring excisions to films with African American film content. Out of the 1,617 films from which eliminations were required between 1940 and 1960, a mere twenty films dealing with African Americans required eliminations, and none of these

(elimination bulletin dated Apr. 24, 1934). The board cut mentions of the words "chippie" and "broad." NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁵⁵ Elimination Bulletin *What Price Jazz?*, May 17, 1934. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁵⁶ Elimination Bulletin *Harlem After Midnight*, Apr. 24, 1934. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

eliminations were of anything explicitly racial; all were related to sexuality. Nine of these twenty films were Race films, a high number given the low numbers of these films produced. According to a 1942 article in *Motion Picture Herald*, “Negro Production Companies” produced only about twelve films per year.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, state censors required cuts from as many as seventeen new and rereleased Black feature films in a single year.⁵⁸

After previewing Spencer Williams’ *Go Down Death!* (1944) and Ted Toddy’s *Voo Doo Devil Drums* (1945), the NYMPD called for the elimination of scenes with nudity or breast exposure.⁵⁹ Black dancing was also watched closely and eliminated by the board. In Todd Toddy’s *One Round Jones* (1946) and Bell Pictures’s *Swanee Showboat* (1940), entire dance scenes were expunged.⁶⁰ The board also called for the removal of dance scenes from *Harlem Follies* (1950).⁶¹ Mabel Lee, an African American dancer, who was a star of a number of “Soundie” short films, was also adjudged unsuitable for New York audiences, as the board excised her dance from *Ebony Parade* (1947), actually naming her in the elimination bulletin.⁶² The board also called for the deletion of scenes suggesting prostitution and which featured bathroom humor (“When you gotta go, you gotta go!”) in Spencer Williams’ *The Blood of Jesus* (1941).⁶³

⁵⁷ “Negroes Movie-Conscious; Support 430 Film Houses,” *Motion Picture Herald*, Jan. 24, 1942, 33. I place “Negro” in quotes because many of these film companies were owned by whites, although the films produced featured Black casts.

⁵⁸ According to the records for Maryland for 1947, the censors required eliminations in the following films: *Murder on Lenox Avenue* (see MSBMPC minutes for Jan. 10, 1947), *Toot That Trumpet* (see MSBMPC minutes for Jan. 10, 1947), *Chicago After Dark* (see MSBMPC minutes Mar. 3, 1947), *Paradise in Harlem* (see MSBMPC minutes for Mar. 21, 1947), *Bronze Venus* (rerelease, see MSBMPC minutes for Apr. 18, 1947), *Dirty Gertie from Harlem* (see MSBMPC minutes for Jul. 18, 1947), *Fight that Ghost* (see MSBMPC minutes for Aug. 22, 1947), *Hi De Ho* (MSBMPC minutes for Aug. 22, 1947), *Juke Joint* (see MSBMPC minutes for Aug. 29 1947), *Swanee Show Boat* (see MSBMPC minutes for Aug. 29, 1947), *That Man of Mine* (see MSBMPC minutes for Aug. 29, 1947), *Gang War* (see MSBMPC minutes for Sept. 19, 1947), *St. Louis Blues* (see MSBMPC minutes for Sept. 16, 1947), *Jivin’ in Be-bop* (see MSBMPC minutes for Oct. 10, 1947), *The Dreamer* (see MSBMPC minutes for Nov. 7, 1947), *Reet Petite and Gone* (see MSBMPC minutes for Nov. 14, 1947).

⁵⁹ Elimination Bulletin, *Go Down Death!*, Jun. 18, 1947. Elimination Bulletin, *Voo Doo Devils Drums* June 26, 1945. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁶⁰ Elimination Bulletin, *One Round Jones*, Jul. 26, 1945; Elimination Bulletin *Swanee Showboat* (1940), April 20, 1948. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁶¹ Elimination Bulletin, *Harlem Follies*, May 23, 1950. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁶² Elimination Bulletin, *Ebony Parade*, Jun. 18, 1947. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁶³ Elimination Bulletin, *The Blood of Jesus*, Apr. 8, 1941. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

Sophisticated, coded, multilayered wisecracks and jokes in Race films' dialogue were still censored in New York during the 1940s and 1950s. From *Boarding House Blues* (1948), the Division excised the scatological wordplay in the line "Sometimes I wish I was a dog and he was a tree! I'd get even."⁶⁴ Racial epithets also remained grounds for excision in New York, but the raw number of these deletions during this period was drastically reduced: the only two epithet deletions I discovered were from foreign films. One was from the German film *The Trial* (1952), where the board removed the words "dirty Jew."⁶⁵ From the film *Una Mujer Del Oriente* (1949), the Board took out the statement "you dirty brown son of a . . .," which was a prelude to a curse-word and also contained the seemingly racially derogatory phrase "dirty brown."⁶⁶ The NYMPD's deletion of the word "nigger" ceased almost entirely. Notably missing as well in New York's excision for 1940-1960 are any cuts based on depictions of miscegenation between any two races. The sole exception was the Mexican film *La Mulata De Cordoba* (1946), which was entirely banned on racial grounds.⁶⁷

We can tell much about the shifting policy of the NYMPD by the films that were *not* censored: *Pinky* (1949), *Lost Boundaries* (1948), *The Burning Cross* (1947), *No Way Out* (1950), and *The Well* (1951), all films with controversial racial themes, passed the board without any elimination at all. Exhaustive examination of all of the cuts made to films in New York in the period under study suggests a number of possibilities for the shift in New York's censorship practices around race in the 1940-1960 time period. The New York Board, aware of impending shifts in the legality of censorship in the postwar era, may have intuited that racially-based censorship, even when designed to prevent crime, would not much longer be

⁶⁴ Elimination Bulletin, *Boarding House Blues*, Sept. 27, 1948. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁶⁵ Elimination Bulletin, *Trial* (German), Feb. 26, 1952. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁶⁶ Elimination Bulletin, *Mujer del Oriente*, Mar. 4, 1949. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁶⁷ For a brief description of the censors' response to the film see Raymond J. Haberski, Jr., *Freedom to Offend: How New York Remade Movie Culture* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 32-33. The film was censored on the grounds that it "would tend to deepen, intensify and extend racial hatreds and in no particular way is any attempt made to point toward a solution." This was quite different from the racial problem film, which *did* attempt to solve the race problem.

acceptable under the law. It is also possible that the standardization of self-regulation brought about by the institutional mainstreaming of the PCA through the late 1930s and early 1940s may have decreased New York's need to attend to racial issues because the PCA's script-altering process routinely called for the excision of racial epithets. The shift may also have been prompted by changes in the sources and content of films. Since the Russian films, produced by Artkino and Amkino, that abounded with racial epithets (especially the term "chink") stopped appearing in the records of elimination between 1940 and 1960, it is possible that many films no longer carelessly used epithets, but now included these terms only when the narrative itself contained sustained examination of the problems with the use of the word.⁶⁸

In addition, we must remember that, although eliminations are an important measure of the board's action on various pictures, they cannot tell us about the conferences and negotiations that occurred unofficially. Perhaps racial excisions of African American film content were a part of the unofficial censorship process in New York. It is unclear exactly why the number of excisions of African American representation decreased in the 1940s and 1950s—both those offensive to people of color and those that would potentially offend whites with traditional racist sensibilities (against miscegenation and social equality). What is clear is that an inundation of films of foreign descent, particularly from Mexico, that contained material that the board found offensive may have forced the board to attend to various issues pertaining to sexuality.

The Telling Anomalies of *Native Son* and *Latuko*: the Banning of Lynching, Miscegenation, and Black Speech and Bodies in Post-1940 New York

We should not forget that the board had the ability to keep a film from being shown in the state, and the two films the NYMPD banned based on their Black representation indicate that race was still a concern for the board, even if their racial concerns had shifted with the changing social tides after 1940.

⁶⁸ From a testimonial by David Paletz; Michael Noonan; Bart Pirosh; Max Laemmle; Shan Sayles in *Film Quarterly* called "The Exhibitors," *Film Quarterly* 19, no. 2. (Winter, 1965-1966): 34-5. It is clear that Amkino continued to distribute Russian films into the 1960s—and even became the primary distributor for these films.

The board attempted to ban both *Native Son* (1950) and *Latuko* (1952), although the ban of *Native Son* was ultimately rescinded.

Latuko was a documentary film that showed, among other things, a Sudanese initiation rite that included naturalized Black male nudity. The question of why the board decided to ban the film rather than just cut the offensive scenes—particularly given the buzz surrounding the film’s Black male nudity and offers for commercial distribution of the documentary—is an important one and one worthy of further study. But because the film does not deal with African Americans, I will not examine it in depth in this chapter.

More pertinent to the concerns of this dissertation is the banning of *Native Son*. What was it that made the film so controversial that it became the only African American film banned during the period? And can we consider the reason for the ban “racial”? Richard Wright’s *Native Son* was first published in 1940 as a book and was the first novel by an African American to become a part of the book-of-the-month club. It was adapted in 1941 (by Wright and Paul Green) into a stage play, one which ran in New York—and even toured the country—with its share of both controversy and success. According to his biographer, Wright decided to have the book made into a film in 1949, and chose the director (Pierre Chenal) and Argentinean Sono-films production company himself.⁶⁹ In film as in book form, *Native Son* was, for all intents and purposes, Black-authored, thus making it one of a handful of Black independent films of the 1950s. The film did not attain a PCA seal and it was given a “Condemned” rating by the Legion of Decency. It also has the distinction of being the most universally censored Black-white interracial film during the period from 1940-1960, one banned in Kansas and Ohio and requiring eliminations in all other states for which it applied for a license (including Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, and the province of Ontario). The film is important in the history of New York censorship because NYMPD’s cuts of the

⁶⁹ Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 336.

film permanently altered it; the copy of the film reproduced for mass distribution does not contain all the elements described in the elimination order.

The film tells the story of Bigger Thomas, an African American youth who lives in the heart of Chicago's Southside Black ghetto. Bereft of opportunities for work and trapped in a cramped one-room shack with his mother and siblings, Bigger takes a job as a chauffeur for Mr. Dalton, whose first name is never revealed (Nicholas Joy), the owner of the tenement in which he resides. On his first day, his boss tells him to drive his daughter, Mary (Jean Wallace), to the library, but Mary has other plans. She and her boyfriend, leftist labor leader Jan Erlone (Gene Michael), force Bigger to take them to "Ernie's," a night club on the Southside. Bigger's girlfriend, Bessie Mears (Willa Pearl Curtiss), is singing at the club. When the night is over, and after Jan has been dropped off, an intoxicated Mary asks Bigger to carry her up to her room. Bigger is afraid and protests that if anyone finds him there, they will kill him. Nevertheless, he does it. He and Mary kiss, but while they are kissing, Mary's blind mother enters the room looking for Mary. Blind with fear, in order to silence Mary, Bigger puts a pillow over her face, unwittingly suffocating her. Blinded by fear at what he has done, he then takes her body to the basement and burns it to remove all traces of the crime. The police chief, Britten (George Rigaud), assuming that what he calls "n-ggers" are not smart enough to plan such a killing, insists that Jan has kidnapped the girl. Eventually a reporter figures out Bigger's guilt. Bigger runs from police, hiding with Bessie in an old abandoned tenement. Plagued by bad dreams of his father's lynching in the South and his own probable demise, Bigger mistakenly thinks he sees Bessie turning him in while she has really gone to get him a sweater. Deluded by fear, he kills her, too. Police eventually find Bigger. A trial ensues and he is sentenced to death. The film ends with the line, "I hope this doesn't happen to another black boy," and with the camera tracking back from an image of Bigger lamenting on the bed of a prison cot, spirituals swelling on the soundtrack, the night before his execution.

The NYMPD initially banned the film, but upon appeal, wrote an order requiring six single spaced pages worth of eliminations to the film. The board removed scenes that made clearer the miscegenation element, especially the part “where Mary caresses Bigger's hair,” and after Bigger deposits Mary on the bed, they called for elimination of “all scenes where he is shown bending over her. This will cut sequence to point where he recoils against wall when her blind mother enters room.”⁷⁰ The board refused to even discuss what happened in the course of this scene in their elimination order.



Figure 21—Photo used in Michel Fabre’s *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, reveals what the censored cut doesn’t—the kiss between Bigger and Mary.

New York censors also removed racially-charged language from *Native Son*, using a provision that had previously been used to reduce offense to people of color to reduce the racially inciting potential of the film, at the expense of racial realism. In addition to excising some uses of the word “nigger,” the NYMPD required elimination of an exceedingly large number of references to white characters as “white,” perhaps under the racial epithets policy I described earlier.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Elimination Bulletin, *Native Son*, Apr. 30, 1951. NYMPD Records, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁷¹ If, as Richard Dyer and George Lipsitz have suggested, whiteness thrives on invisibility, then the mere mention of whiteness—and Black character’s description of it as a point of difference—is potentially threatening.

A number of the board's eliminations also had to do with the question of lynching. From Bigger's description of his dead father, the board excised any mention that he had been "lynched." The board also eliminated detailed verbal descriptions of (and incitements toward) lynching by a crowd of whites who watch while Bigger, in a visual allusion to *King Kong* (1933) and the film's only real action sequence, climbs on top of a water tower with his shirt removed. New York required removal of the following three statements that referred to lynching: "It will be a hot time in the old town tonight," (an allusion to the Chicago fire and the history of lynching), "Don't waste money on a nigger, shoot him" (during the sequence where police blast Bigger with a fire hose), and, finally:

Down south where I come from we don't waste time trying a nigger, we just lynch them. Yeah spending a quarter million dollars to try him in a fine building like that—and who pays for it? You and me—all of us'll pay. Lynch him. . . . Treat him like he did the girl. Burn him.⁷²

These lines were eliminated not only because they incite to crime, but also because they demonstrate the virulence of white racism. Their removal would have lessened the Black audience's access to representation of the racial injustice of lynching but also could have averted white lynchers.

The excisions from the film's court scene were, according to Wright, the most damaging to the film's meaning.⁷³ Initially these scenes showed the white race-traitor Jan Erlone and Bigger's lawyer, Max (Don Dean) admitting white injustice towards African Americans as the race problem and placing responsibility for Bigger's crime on themselves and the state.

But can we verify the New York board's reason for these deletions to this important 1950s articulation of African American subjectivity? A February 27, 1951 conference with the film's representative rendered startlingly clear the Board's three-fold objection to *Native Son*: all of the objections pertained to questions of politics and race and not morality. First, the board intensely disliked the suggestion that Jan

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Wright described the state censorship of this scene as "the cut that did the greatest damage . . . the trial is shown with arms waving and mouths moving but nothing is heard." Fabre, *Richard Wright*, 348.

(and his “political party,” i.e. Communists) were the best solution offered to solve the race problem. That the board pointed out “that [these] underlying parts would fall into the category of ‘subversiveness’” in an American political milieu where Senator McCarthy’s ascendancy was firmly established is unsurprising but notable.⁷⁴

The second issue was with a lack of compensating moral values. The NYMPD was particularly concerned that the film was not hard enough on Bigger, who, in their memos, the board repeatedly called “the murderer,” (clearly they did not see Mary’s death as an accident). Although the film is clear that Bigger is not to blame, the NYMPD read the film differently, perhaps generating their reading on the basis of the body of racial representations it was more used to seeing in mainstream Hollywood films. The board stated that “there were two murders committed, the first unpremeditated and the second premeditated, concerning which the murderer showed no remorse and blamed the crime on the attitude of society toward the Negro race.”⁷⁵ Bigger’s racially sensational “murder,” the censors seemed to suggest, could not be blamed on societal attitudes—at least not in movies to be shown in New York state. This would have been too much a threat to law and order. Third, and most importantly, they censored the film because they disagreed with its claims about racial injustice: they opined that “throughout the picture, there was a complete disregard for the law and the distinct impression that the Negro in our society was unable to secure an even break.”⁷⁶ Not only did Bigger blame his crimes on white society, but the film seemed to corroborate this supposition. The fact that *Native Son* showed how America rendered Black life expendable through a racially unjust system could not be tolerated by New York censors, no matter how true to life it was.

⁷⁴ “Native Son,” Memo for the Files, Mar. 8, 1951: State of New York Education Department Motion Picture Division, Signed Hugh M. Flick. NYMPD Collection, New York State Archives, Albany, NY. As a part of his defense, Max Rosenberg of distribution company Classic Films assured the board that Wright had “disavowed any connection with the Communists. His statement of denunciation had been printed and attested to,” that Mr. Wright “had no desire whatsoever to strengthen or endorse the Communist philosophy,” and that “the film had already been banned behind the Iron Curtain.”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

The censorship of the film *Native Son* largely dampened the film's racial politics, rendering it more of a crime story and a muted love plot than an exploration of racial oppression. Since, because of censorship, the film could not say the words white and Black, the dialogue lost much of its racial realism and its hard hitting critique of whiteness. In the year before *The Miracle* decision challenged the notion that films were not "speech," *Native Son's* censorship suggests that it was exactly the spoken and received messages of film that were sometimes the basis for censor boards' decisions.

Despite its censorship, certain of the film's more intrinsic critiques of Hollywood film and racist white America could not be so easily removed. First, the film's authentic and relevant sonic signifiers that were not explicitly politically charged were retained: the film's soundtrack featured Katherine Dunham vocalists who would have been recognized by Black spectators. Second, *Native Son* (1951) provided a narrative twist and visual jolt by using Bigger to alter the image of the Black chauffeur who was so often rendered servile and stupid by Hollywood films. Bigger not only shows human motivational complexity, but is vocally anti-white, miscegenation-minded, and ultimately capable of killing. This was a powerful narrative subversion that censors could not alter. Bessie Mears, a character not present in the novel, seems also to have been an invention specifically made to critique and answer back the cinema's depictions of African Americans. The character of Bessie—named, most likely, after Bessie Smith—elaborated and critiqued the other role that African Americans were so frequently called to play in Hollywood: that of the static entertainer.⁷⁷ Third, and perhaps most importantly, Chenal's cinematographic subversion of the noir aesthetic stood as a symbolic, *color-coded* condemnation of the systematic injustices against African Americans. The film is thematically linked to noir in its focus on despair, the "low" element of life, and both social and physical darkness. Its use of voice-over and cityscapes in the early parts of the film bears an uncanny resemblance to those of *Call Northside 777* (1948)—which was also set in Chicago—and *The Naked*

⁷⁷ For more on the static entertainer, see Richard Dyer, "The Colour of Entertainment," *Sight and Sound* 5, no. 11 (1995: Nov.): 28-33.

City (1948). But in setting its actions in a tenement, the film took noir's implications farther than Hollywood dared making it more of a *film gris* than a film noir.⁷⁸ Manthia Diawara has argued that in the 1990s, Black directors confronted with the questions surrounding ethnicity and crisis of American cities "appropriated the style of film noir . . . to create the possibility for the emergence of new and urbanized Black images on the screen."⁷⁹ Wright's *Native Son* is an example of a film that did so in the era of film noir's popularity. Although linked to noir, aesthetically and thematically, the film's darkness is deeper and more complete than Hollywood noir, sometimes visually obscuring the very focal point of its most evocative scenes to a very different viewer effect—frustrating rather than expressionistically dramatizing vision (see Figure above).⁸⁰ Rather than operating in a stylized darkness and light, this film operates in a near complete darkness—one which obfuscates—and renders Black—rather than merely obscuring. But was this darkness

⁷⁸ For more on *film gris* and its cinematographic effects and cultural meanings, see Thom Anderson, "Red Hollywood" in *Literature and the Visual Arts in Contemporary Society*, eds. Suzanne Ferguson and Barbara Groseclose (Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press, 1985), 141-196. See also Charles Mayland, "Film Gris: Crime, Critique and Cold War Culture in 1951," *Film Criticism* 26, no. 3 (2002): 30. According to Thom Anderson, who coined the term, the genre *film gris* is constituted both aesthetically and thematically. Aesthetically these films were marked by their "drabness, grayness," features, he notes, often associated with communism in this era, and by the fact that they were photographed in black-and-white. According to Anderson, these films "implicate the . . . system of capitalism" with their images, "often in the guise of an exposé on crime." Anderson, "Red Hollywood," 187. These films also point to the "unreality of the American dream," a theme which is obvious in the continual failure Bigger's attempts (both legal and illicit) to defy odds become successful. In Wright's figuration, pursuit of the American Dream for Black men gives birth to an African American Nightmare—one that includes not only lack of success but the denial of civil rights and a tragic, often torturous end, as both Bigger's death and his father's demonstrate. However, in some ways *Native Son* exceeds the frustrations and insecurities of even the *film gris*. Anderson notes that in *film gris* "there is a sense of exhilaration in the work itself, as if the filmmakers felt liberated by the knowledge that this critique could finally be expressed openly." (Ibid.) None of this excitement is evident in *Native Son*, which is marked, from start to finish, by a sense of desprivation and nihilism. *Native Son* also exceeds *film gris* in its depiction of lynching. Rather than seeing lynching as a metaphor for the Blacklist, which is how Anderson suggests Hollywood white Leftists viewed it, Wright connects lynching to African American culture and history and to narratives of miscegenation that have historically prompted it. Although *Native Son* ultimately despairs of the notion of the possibility of Black spectatorial identification, making it unilaterally uncomfortable, Wright's film shakes both Black and white audiences out of the spell cast by their cinematic expectations (in some of the same ways Micheaux did) and develops a strong, racially-based critique of capitalism and of *Blackness as social condition*. Wright even goes as far as to aesthetically figure low-tech and low budget as a marker of disadvantage that the audience can feel.

⁷⁹ Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Towards a New Realism in Black Cinema," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993), 262.

⁸⁰ James Snead has suggested that "the almost universal assumption that high production values are the premise of good filmmaking tends to work against Blacks more forcefully than whites." He suggest that it is assumed that because these films are good "despite its technique not because of . . . 'visual recodings' of old stereotyped images of Black skin on screen." James Snead, *White Screen/Black Image: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 126. In the case of *Native Son*, we need to see how the visual lack (rendered here as darkness—even Blackness) critically employed as commentary to position the film apart from Hollywood.

merely the result of technological inadequacy or the degradation of the time-worn print? Not only would this conclusion amount to technological determinism but it also would ignore *Native Son*'s scenes of Mary Dalton, who is shot to perfection in Hollywood noir style. These scenes stand in high contrast to the bleak darkened noir aesthetics of the other scenes and with the aesthetic strategies used to capture Bessie Mears. Dalton is meant to be the Hollywood glamour queen and noir spider woman and the camera flawlessly renders her such.



Figure 22-Bessie fades into the darkness of a night darker than noir in *Native Son* (1950)

Instead of naturalizing racially-conscious Black speech, as in the original film, the censored film marginalizes this racial speech, subjects it to scrutiny, and ultimately morally and socially condemns it. As such the voice of Wright, and of the Black community he attempts to invoke, was cut off by the New York censors for Black and white audiences in the state. By cutting Black speech, the board removed the single most powerful Black signifier in the text. But the maintenance of a “Blackened noir” aesthetic—one that implicitly critiqued and mobilized Hollywood’s technique, and one that stood against Hollywood’s pristine, clear cut, and ultimately scrupulously engineered noir varnish—allowed *Native Son* to maintain remnants of its incisive Black edge.

Native Son was in many senses an important and telling anomaly of racial enforcement based on African American content for the New York board, which had generally ceased such racial action by 1940. Although New York had censored films on a clearly racial basis, it seems that they sometimes, at least, censored films in ways that would provide for more pleasurable viewing for people of color and in ways that

would decrease the racial articulation of these films. It is clear as well that issues of racial politics were a part of the board's considerations, as the banning of *Native Son* suggests. Overall, New York's policy of eliminating various kinds of references to race would have decreased the film's ability to interpellate according to race. This examination also reveals that as Northern censor board, the NYMPD attended both to racially liberal and racially conservative interests.

Regulating screen representations of African Americans in Ohio

The NYMPD decreased their racial censorship activities during the 1940s and 1950s, but other Northern boards, including Pennsylvania and Ohio, required eliminations on a racial basis in this era. As I note in the introduction to this chapter, it was not possible to look exhaustively at excisions and rejections in Ohio, but I will examine at some length the patterns of excision suggested by case files. I will address social equality, miscegenation, and lynching, but will not look at racial epithets or injustice in the penal system because films dealing with these themes were not present in the files I reviewed.⁸¹

The Ohio Division of Film Censorship (ODFC, hereafter), formed in 1913, originally consisted of three members and was under the authority of the Industrial Commission of Ohio.⁸² Ohio made legal history through the 1915 *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* decision in which the Supreme Court affirmed the validity of state motion picture censorship, on the grounds that films were neither art nor press, but a "business pure and simple," the decision that set the precedent for the validity of state and local censorship.⁸³ In 1921, the ODFC's responsibilities were subsumed by the State's

⁸¹ There was only limited evidence of the excision of racial epithets in Ohio. *No Way Out*, which contained over thirty uses of the word "nigger" and other racial epithets, was not considered offensive to Ohio on this basis. *The Well* was approved without cuts as well in Ohio. Bernie Kamber, Office Rushgram to Bernie Kamber, Feb. 19, 1952, verifies the cut-free passage of the film. See also Jesse Slingfield, letter to Ben Rockmore, UA legal department, May 10, 1955. Bernard Kamber, memo "In Re: Ohio Censorship 'The Well'" to W.J. Heineman, et al. Feb. 11, 1952. Box 27, Folder 2. Series 3A, United Artists Collection. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁸² Neville Hunning, *Film Censors and the Law*, 177.

⁸³ The decision was the *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* (1915) 236 US 230.

Department of Education, whose director was allotted final power over its censorship duties.⁸⁴ The board's provision mandating censorship—the statute under which the board operated—was distinct from other state censor boards in two ways. It allowed that “the Board of Censors may work in conjunction with any censor board or boards of legal status of other states as a censor congress and the action of such congress in approving . . . films shall be considered as the action of the board.”⁸⁵ Ohio's film censorship statute was in some ways the most stringent of the boards under study. Rather than listing qualities that would prompt elimination, it stated that “only those films that are moral, educational, or amusing and harmless in character shall be passed and approved.”⁸⁶ The board was finally abolished as a result of a 1954 State-level legal decision involving the film *M*, where the Justices indicated that the statute forming the board was unconstitutional and would need to be revised if censorship would be continued in the state.⁸⁷ No such revision ever passed the legislature.

Ohio's process of review and appeal was similar to that of other boards. With particularly difficult decisions, the board often called upon an Advisory board made up of three unpaid appointees of the Governor who could reverse the decision of the board.⁸⁸ While they did not conference with members of the public, members of the ODFC did regularly consult other state boards of censorship that had received copies of films sooner (as the examples of *Blackboard Jungle* [1955], *The Burning Cross* [1947], and *The Well*

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ These standards were written very early and may well have been obsolete by the end of the period I examine here. In addition to these published standards, I was also able to find some notes in the board's records that indicate some later standards for excision. Although these are undated, the author mentions the films *Madame Curie* (1943), *Wilson* (1944), and *Valley of Decision* (1945), which would date the document sometime after 1945. The standards for judging films are listed as Appendix one at the close of this chapter.

⁸⁷ Carmen, *Movie Censorship and the Law*, 130.

⁸⁸ Hunning, *Film Censors and the Law*, 177-8. According to Hunning, this board was provided for in the original act that created the board. It was to be made up of “three members appointed by the Governor who serve without salary during his pleasure; their function was to ‘assist and advise’ the Department of Education in the examination and censorship of motion picture films.”

[1951] indicate) and kept copious records of the decisions of other boards and censoring organizations.⁸⁹

In addition to the censorship law that created the board, the ODFC was guided by “standards” established some time before 1926. This set of standards, while by no means tantamount to law, was regularly published in *The Film Daily Yearbook*, which was a resource for filmmakers and the industry. Ohio’s censorship standards fell under four headings: “Sex,” “Violence and Crime,” “Respect for social institutions,” and “Subtitles.” Aside from scenes “based upon white slavery,” which were to be eliminated, the board’s only explicitly racial provision came under “Respect for social institutions” and stated: “National, racial, and class hatred should not be fostered.”⁹⁰ Miscegenation, lynching/mob violence, racial injustice in the penal system, and racial epithets were not specifically prohibited, although a number of the general prohibitions on sex, crimes, and violence could have been used to limit these representations. Later board standards were recorded in the board’s files (See Appendix 2).

How were these standards interpreted by the ODFC? As we shall see, the racial deletions in the 1930s suggest that the board often made deletions for reasons other—and far more racially conservative—than those indicated in the standards.

Social Equality on Ohio Screens

As early as 1935, the board rejected a film called *Harlem Sketches* (no longer extant) directed by Leslie Bain. According to *The Chicago Defender*, the film was a documentary that showed “a real cross-section of Harlem life” during the depression, revealing “Harlem tenements and gathering places . . . living quarters, vacant lots where children gathered, the Salvation Army station, the lines before the relief headquarters, religious revivals and dance halls” and was presented to the Mayor’s Investigating Committee as evidence for

⁸⁹ Ohio kept careful records of the decisions of other film censorship boards from 1939-1955 in their files, which are now available under State Archives Series 97. Records also indicate that they often contacted other boards to find out their decisions on a particular film (I will examine below the examples of *Storm Warning* and I examine elsewhere *The Burning Cross* (1947). ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH.

⁹⁰ Jack Alicoate, ed., *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York: Film Daily Press, 1925), 350-1.

conditions precipitating the Harlem Riots.⁹¹ It also joined images of dilapidated living conditions with sequences depicting demonstrations led by Communist organizer James N. Ford.⁹² In Ohio the film was entirely banned for “showing Negroes of Harlem banded together in groups carrying banners displaying Communistic ideas” because, the board stated, it “advocates equal social rights for Negroes.”⁹³ These reasons are clearly outside the parameters set up by the standards roughly a decade earlier.

Race Films in Ohio

Unlike New York, which licensed most of Micheaux’s films with some eliminations, the ODFC rejected outright three Micheaux films: *Within Our Gates* (1920), *Temptation* (1936), and *Underworld* (1937), although I could find no explicit reasons for the rejections. The Harry Popkin-produced, all-Black feature *Gang War* (1940), which sensitively portrayed a Black gangster, also went unseen in Ohio, as did the 1941 Race film, *Murder on Lenox Avenue*, both of which the board rejected. Although these films did prominently display violence, drunkenness, and suggestive dancing, they nevertheless also displayed African American political sensibilities and expressed various cultural realities that may have been seen as threatening. In Arthur Dreiffus’s *Murder on Lenox Avenue*, for example, three of the major characters (Pa, his daughter Ola, and her husband Greg) are struggling for political autonomy over their neighborhood. During the course of the film, Ola and Greg go to the South to fight for racial equality there, but eventually come back North to help their Father fight for racial unity.⁹⁴

Additional evidence of Ohio’s stringent stance on racial representation is the fact that on their list of “Producers and Distributors of Questionable Films” were both Sack Amusements, a distributing

⁹¹ “Show Movies of Riots in New York to Prove Who Was at Fault,” *Chicago Defender*, Apr. 20, 1935, 1.

⁹² “Film and Photo League Filmography,” compiled by Russell Campbell and William Alexander, *Jump Cut*, no. 14 (1977): 33.

⁹³ ODFC records, Ohio State Archives, Rejected films, Series 1518. *Harlem Sketches* (16 mm), submitted by Garrison film distribution Inc., New York City. Maker Vanguard Prods. Reels-1, Rejected Aug. 26, 1935. Cert. 283. “Reason for Rejection: Showing Negroes of Harlem banded together in groups carrying banners displaying Communistic ideas. Advocates equal social rights for Negroes.”

⁹⁴ *The Murder on Lenox Ave* (1941) dealt with a number of under-explored issues in African American life, including Black immigration and the struggle for Black political control over Black neighborhoods. *Murder on Lenox Avenue*, American Film Institute, Catalogue entry.

company that distributed exclusively Race films, and Micheaux, one of the most important and prolific Black film producers (and distributors) of the late 1930s and early 1940s. The Ohio board does not seem to have shared New York's concern about epithets, as there is no record of eliminations required that indicates the excision of epithets.⁹⁵ Still, the fact that race was a continual and motivating concern for censorship in Ohio is evidenced in the fact that out of 45 films rejected between 1945 and 1951, six (or 13 percent) were either Black films or dealt with racial themes, a high figure given the overall small number of Race films produced each year.

Ohio Censors and “Naturalized” Miscegenation

Images connoting miscegenation were censorable in Ohio (as it was in New York)—but not, it seems, in mainstream Hollywood films that depicted this theme. *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries* did not trouble the Ohio censors and passed without any deletions.⁹⁶ On the other hand, *Native Son* (1951) was entirely banned in Ohio, a decision the distributor fought in a losing battle that took him all the way to the State Supreme Court. In addition, the Italian *Senza Pietà* (*Without Pity*) (1948) and the British *Pools of London* (1951) were initially *banned* in Ohio on (inter-)racial grounds. What was so different about these films that they troubled the state censors?

⁹⁵ Ohio, however, often waited until other censor boards had made their decision about films before they required excisions. Therefore many of the prints they received may have epithets already excised.

⁹⁶ *Lost Boundaries*, Censor Slip (Date Received: 6/13/49-Returned 7/15/49) ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH. According to the censors' slip, the film was screened twice and the board *did* make note of the fact that the film was a “white and negro cast” film.



Figure 23-*Senza Pietà* (1948)

Senza Pietà, a Neo-realist film made by Alberto Latuadda and written by Federico Fellini, naturalized images of “miscegenation” and affirmingly portrayed African American men involved in

miscegenetic relationships. Set in Livorno, Italy, the film explores the intimate (vaguely romantic) connection between an African American soldier, Jerry (John Kitzmiller), and a poor Italian girl, Angela (Carla De Poggio), who, as a victim of the desperation of war-torn Italy, is trapped into a life of prostitution.¹ The relationship between the two entirely recasts the miscegenation narrative by showing Jerry, the African American soldier, as the Italian prostitute's salvation. Not only are the two continually brought together by cinematic "fate," but their close physical contact is left unmoralized by the camera or the narrative. Indeed, what is striking about the film is the casual nature of the interracial bond. It is precisely the candid ease of this connection—its marked lack of drama—that set the film apart from Hollywood's representations of interracial affection. Jerry and Angela are also only two among a host of Black and white interracial couples in the film. In addition, the film imagines the possibility of an interracial relationship as pure and redemptive, one linked visually with the Church.

The story follows Angela's descent into prostitution and frames her pure and genuine connection with Jerry as her only *relief* from the tortures of her life of sex slavery. The story challenged stereotypical miscegenation narratives, showing Jerry as "opposite" of the sexual underworld that degrades Angela and resisting even the appearance of a miscegenetic rape narrative: it is Angela who makes the first romantic move, but when Jerry seems to propose marriage (claiming "we could live and be so happy together") and Angela refuses, the two go on as friends.

Pool of London, distributed by Universal and directed by Basil Dearden (who would later direct the racial problem film *Sapphire* [1959]), is the story of two sailors, one white and one Black, who work on a cargo ship that docks in London. The white sailor, a white American named Dan

¹ Although Neo-realist films had difficulty in the Italian box office because of their focus on miseries of the war era, they were critically acclaimed and sometimes had themes appealing not only to white Americans but also African Americans. *Senza Pietà* is one such film which featured African American soldiers.

MacDonald (Bonar Colleano) who has been paid to illegally transport something on his employer's ship, gets embroiled in a heist that ends in the death of a man. His Black friend Johnny (Earl Cameron), meanwhile, meets a kind and generous white female ticket-taker at the local theater, and the two spend their evenings together. Johnny eventually gets drawn into the murder plot as well when Dan, not knowing the value of what he is transporting, gives the item to Johnny. The film, in vein similar to *Senza Pietà*, suggested the possible, pure, and viable interracial love, although it never fulfills its promise. It also showed openly a representation of an egalitarian interracial friendship.²

In response to *Senza Pietà*, the Ohio board, maybe lacking a reception rubric for the film's Neo-realist visual and narrative technique, called together an outside audience to see how audiences would react. For the most part, this audience agreed on the board's reading of the film: they called for either a ban in toto or serious eliminations because of the film's depiction of the U.S. military (here represented through Jerry, predominantly) and its depiction of Italian women (as prostitutes). The U.S. Army, as one respondent claimed, was depicted as "corrupt and incapable [of] controll[ing] crime."³ While it is clear that their complaint of army corruption is based upon the actions of the Black soldiers, why did they perceive them to be corrupt? Perhaps because Jerry unwittingly takes a bribe during the picture and is then handed over to the authorities? While it is possible to read corruption into this scene, it is ironic that Jerry is clearly one of the least corrupt of the film's characters. Another respondent was disturbed not with the racial component, but with the film's overall "feeling." She complained that the film should be banned "because the power of suggestion of

² Indication of the censorship of *Pool of London* (Distributed by Universal) is given in United Artists' memo from Bernard Kamber to W.J. Heineman et al. (dated Feb. 11, 1952, in "Re: Ohio censorship of The Well").

³ See Controversial Film File on *Without Pity*. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH. "Questionnaire-Censorship" respondent Leo H. B. Malone, Nov. 2, 1950.

the film of all that is bad is overwhelming.”⁴ Another respondent mentioned explicitly *Senza Pietà*’s racial angle, stating that the film “incites and irritates adjustments of race relations.”⁵

The distributor’s response to the board indicates that he felt the banning was racially-based; the distributor, E.J. Stutz of Realart Pictures of Cleveland, orchestrated a private showing with local progressive civic leaders to demonstrate positive reception and synthesize a “civil rights” response to the banning of the film.⁶ The screening included a number of local civic groups as well as everyday citizens. Civic representatives included members of the local Community relations board and the municipal court of Cleveland. A representative of at least one civil rights group was included as well: Henry Crawford of the American Council on Human Relations was invited. One respondent, the president of a watch-making school, John H. Sears, said “If we have grown up, I don’t see any harm in showing this film. We talk democracy but act something else. A good picture. Well acted.”

The list of eliminations proffered by the *distributor* to get the ban lifted was made up almost entirely of racial material: they eliminated an imprisoned Black soldier’s mention of his near lynching in the South, a view of a “white girl [Angela] resting on Negro’s shoulder,” while telling him that she is “tired” and “Negro’s dialogue: Angela, darling,” as well as “scene of Negro kissing girl’s hand” and corresponding dialogue “Oh, God, we could live and be so happy together.”⁷ Miscegenation clearly was an issue for the board, and how it was positively portrayed in some foreign films—with counter-ideological narrative structures that sanctioned, even glorified (if ultimately rendering chaste) interracial relationships—could have been even more disturbing to the censors.

⁴ See Controversial Film File on *Without Pity*. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH. “Questionnaire-Censorship” respondent Mildred A. Buckel, Nov. 2, 1950.

⁵ See Controversial Film File on *Without Pity*. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH. “Questionnaire-Censorship” respondent Fred Slayer, Nov. 2, 1950.

⁶ See Controversial Film File on *Without Pity*. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH.

⁷ Eliminations enclosed in letter from E.J. Stutz to Susannah Warfield, Jan. 10, 1951. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH.

Pool of London was initially entirely banned by Ohio. Upon appeal to Dr. Clyde Hissong, the film was approved with elimination of “the scene on tram where Johnny and Pat are jostled toward each other, showing their romantic attraction to each other.” The board also excised expressions of racism prescribing that: “where Owner [sic] of ‘Dive’ [bar] throws Johnny, the negro [sic] boy out, of ‘Dive[,]’ eliminate remark by him—‘They’re all the same.’”⁸ The complete banning and elimination of these films seems to have been intended to limit the troubling, naturalized images of interracial contact that the films showed and the views of America they offered. If these films offered African Americans the powerful, imaginatively-stirring option of seeing themselves “in translation,” the censorship—and more specifically *banning*—of these foreign films dealing with Blacks shut off access to these channels and limited Black cinematic imaginative possibilities.

Lynching and Mob Violence in Ohio

A surprising number of films dealing with the Klan and mob violence had censorship trouble in the Northern state of Ohio. *The Burning Cross* (1947), *Storm Warning* (1951), and *Try and Get Me* (1950), all 1940 and early 1950s films, each received a negative reaction from censors in Ohio because of how they depicted lynching. Looking at the crime from a government censor’s perspective, Klan lynching of African Americans was not only a usurpation of state power but a crime that reveled in seizing the power of punishment. Lynching relied upon the dual power of visibility and brutality, using the first to heighten the second. Onscreen lynching had the power of mass mediating that visibility—one that censors recognized, appropriately, to be dangerous. The crime also raised the specter of the “race problem” and therefore had clear racial connotations, as African Americans were disproportionately the victims of lynching.

⁸ Censors’ Slip, *Pool of London*. Date received Oct. 15, 1951, Date returned Oct. 26 1951. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH.

Because the racist *The Birth of a Nation* was the first cinematic rendering of the story of the Klan and of lynching, and because the film engendered such a powerful response and so many calls for censorship from Black and liberal white spectators, subsequent censorship decisions (and indeed censor's official standards) regarding the topic of lynching were often extremely conservative. The Ohio board rejected *The Birth of a Nation* in its initial run and continually denied applications for rerelease. Unfortunately, films about the Klan that, unlike *The Birth of a Nation*, were condemnatory of the organization and of mob violence were subject to extreme scrutiny by Ohio censors and to banning or extreme eliminations. What was the basis for this later censorship of liberal images of lynching? Was the board attempting to avoid offending the Klan or those taken by the Klan spirit, or were they instead trying to avoid any "racial incitation," stemming even from liberal sources? Closer analysis of the individual cases in Ohio is necessary.

The Burning Cross (1947), an anti-Klan film that showed an entire African American family being burned to death by the Klan, was initially banned in Ohio. The film contained a frank, condemnatory portrait of the Klan as an organization linked to the Confederacy. It explicitly referenced the contemporary issue of Black voting rights. It also sympathetically rendered a Black WWII veteran father, whose five-year-old son watches as the entire family is burned to death by white reactionaries. This, the ODFC concluded, might inflame what the board called "Militant Minorities." They issued this statement:

To the people who are not near the minority problem, this film will undoubtedly produce a high emotional reaction. On the other hand, members of minority groups wear an entirely different color of glasses and must see the picture in terms of their historical backgrounds, past experiences and present problems. Many minority groups are undoubtedly feeling the pressure of invisible control. Some members of such groups may so ally themselves with the 'underdog' that they might find in the picture a pattern for militant leadership. We have no evidence that such would be the case, but there is a possibility of militant minority group members of an

audience harboring such an idea and waiting for psychological stimulus to move aggressively “for the new day for his minority group” with consequent violence.⁹

Although the board’s rejection was eventually rescinded upon appeal, the board still eliminated the scene of the African American family being lynched. In response to the banning of the film, the NAACP’s legal staff fought on behalf of the film in Virginia and lent verbal support to efforts to counteract the banning in Ohio.¹⁰



Figure 24-In the powerful film *The Burning Cross* (1947), the home owned by Charlie West (Joel Fluellen) and his wife (Madie Norman) is overrun by Klan members. In the drama that follows the events pictured in this photograph, the KKK burns down the home, killing the three members of the family pictured here in one of the most direct depictions of lynching since *The Birth of a Nation*. The film juxtaposed the Klan’s actions with

⁹ Memorandum concerning Reactions to the *Burning Cross*, undated, 2. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH.

¹⁰ See Ray Hughes, letter to Walter White, Nov. 19, 1947, and reply, Madison Jones, letter to Ray Hughes, Dec. 9, 1947. On banning on Virginia see Walter White, memo to Madison Jones, Oct. 3, 1947. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Charlie's war heroism, as a photograph of West in uniform—one prominently placed in mise-en-scene—signals strongly

Warner Brothers' anti-Klan film *Storm Warning* (1950) also had censorship trouble in Ohio. The script was written by Richard Brooks, who wrote in a similarly hardboiled style *Key Largo* (1948) and *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). Analysis of the plot and ideological content of the film will allow us to begin to see why the film was censored. Although the film avoided central issues about the Klan, its omissions were obvious. Like many B-films, *Storm Warning* is a generic hybrid, with surprising and sometimes incongruous casting: it is a strongly anti-Klan picture with noir aesthetics and a "witness" plot. It is important that the film mobilizes a particularly *noir* visual style to tell the story of Klan violence and its effects on a single family—a single *white* family. Although it was originally Director Stuart Heisler's wish to have Lauren Bacall for the role, Ginger Rogers plays the lead, Marsha Mitchell, a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, New York model, who—while on a business trip—stops over to visit her sister, Lucy (Doris Day), who lives in a small Southern town with her new husband, Hank (who Marsha has never met).¹¹ Something is amiss from the moment Marsha arrives; the town is immediately marked by noir lighting and getting darker. As Marsha passes through the streets, shopkeepers are hurriedly shutting down their stores and townspeople scurry home in fear. Marsha, although increasingly worried after she fails to secure a cab, keeps walking towards the recreation center where she will meet her sister. While alone on the dark, deserted streets of this small town, she witnesses the lynching of a white man who is dragged a few feet from the courthouse and, when he tries to escape, is shot in the back. Remaining undetected, she sees the faces of the culprits who have

¹¹ On the Lauren Bacall-Ginger Rogers switch, see John L. Scott, "Many Roles Appeal to Ginger Rogers," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 5, 1950, D1.

temporarily removed their hoods.¹² After they have gone, she runs, frightened, from the scene of the crime. When she meets Lucy, Marsha tells her what happened. Lucy is somewhat surprised—not to say shocked—but deduces that the victim must have been the Northern reporter writing an expose on the Klan. When the two go home, Marsha meets Lucy’s husband for the first time and is stunned to find that he is one of the Klansmen she saw murder the reporter. When questioned by the district attorney about the crime, after some hesitation, she admits that she witnessed the crime. She is subpoenaed in the inquest by white Southern “race-traitor” and District Attorney Burt Rainey (Ronald Reagan) and by her own conscience (and, we also feel, her desire to see the culprits captured). Resultantly, the Klan kidnaps Marsha in order to prevent her giving testimony against them in the killing of the reporter. In the climactic final scene, and under the banner of a fiery Cross, the Klansmen whip Marsha on the head and face and accuse her of being an “outsider,” “busy-body” and “defying the Klan.” Pregnant Lucy is accidentally shot by her husband Hank, who intends to shoot Marsha to keep her from revealing his identity to the DA. When Lucy is shot, the Klanmembers (who include women and children) flee. The film ends with Marhsa kneeling with the wounded Lucy in her arms and the DA at her side. The camera pulls back to reveal the burning cross, whose embers are fading as its top half dramatically falls to the ground.

Noir, whose drama was so often centered in the slick, rhythmically-lit concrete of the city, casts its shadow of bleak darkness on the small town. Noir’s darkness becomes a concrete symbol rather than an aesthetic mood—one linked to the film’s admittedly still implicit political statements. In *Storm Warning*, noir symbolizes the determined lack of knowing of the townspeople—it is the darkness of a blinded eye. The set becomes more and more noirish, strange, and foreign, as each

¹² The lynching is rendered here as a shooting, although the icon of the lyncher’s rope is present and repeatedly referred to throughout the film.

shop owner turns out the lights and as the courthouse lights of the courthouse are finally extinguished, symbolically leaving the Klan to operate under cover of darkness and secrecy.

While the film purportedly operates as both drama and critical exposé of the Klan, it also contains three of the most glaring historical and social inaccuracies that characterized the Klan's portrayal in Hollywood film. First, as was true in Humphrey Bogart's *Black Legion* (1937), *Storm Warning* suggests that the Klan is some sort of "racket" primarily designed for the financial gain of its leaders rather than an extremist and ideologically driven terrorist organization stemming from the "Black codes" of the slavery era, whose design was to create racial law and order, maintain segregation, and to oppress African Americans. Second, the film refuses to accurately depict the symbolic violence actually perpetrated by the Klan: it neglects to actually show or even hint at the torture of lynching, although the (unused) lyncher's rope becomes a key piece of evidence in convicting the Klan leader. In this case, the killing of the defenselessness of the victim is rendered by his being shot in the back. None of the violent tactics of lynching, however, are actually shown here. Third, and linked to the other omissions, is that the film refuses to connect the Klan to "the race problem," suggesting instead that the victims of the Klan are white, and almost entirely omitting African Americans from the film. Despite the narrative omission of African Americans, they nevertheless become a "structuring absence" here and are marginally referred to in several ways. In an early draft of the script, the scriptwriters included the word "nigger," which was removed at the PCA's request (although the context of the usage and the PCA's underlying reason for the deletion is unclear from the PCA file).¹³ Although there is no Black victim in the film, it is important that the

¹³ Joseph Breen, letter to Warner Brothers, Nov. 8, 1949. PCA analysis chart, dated Feb. 6, 1950. *Storm Warning* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA. The PCA also seems to have been somewhat concerned about the film's depiction of the race problem, as their analysis chart noted the two aforementioned "Negro pedestrians" and listed

film's only African American extras are present in the scene of the "lynching," a fact that is noted in the PCA's file on the film. They stand, loitering conspicuously, at the bus station under a neon sign that beams "Rock Point." It is important that this (partial and momentary) encounter with African American men occurs at night—first because it fully situates the men in the film's darkest noir moments, linking them to noir's connotative system. Second, this scene allows for deniability of any racial content, and even perhaps of the racial identity of these men—so dark is the scene that it could be argued that there are no Black men in the film at all.¹⁴ Marsha/Ginger Rogers even turns to look at them (note her profile in still #2) as she enters the bus station and they also look after her. Although, under cover of night the film renders them nearly indistinct from the white men and women that surround them, in this pivotal scene these men nevertheless work to situate African Americans even more as structuring absence in the film.

them as "incidental" and "straight." They also list the film as a "social problem film" and suggest that the film has an ending that is "unhappy . . . more or less."

¹⁴ Deniability was an important PCA promoted tactic for articulating sensitive material, according to PCA scholars Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 111-113 and Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman film, 1928-1942* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 118.



Figure 25-Standing under the Rock Point sign, two African American men have a brief cameo in *Storm Warning* (1951), something the PCA noted in its Film Analysis chart on the film.

Other small evidences of African American presence are relegated to the sonic realm. The sound system in the recreation center plays jazz music, which the owner disparagingly refers to as “jungle music.” This mention not only sonically reveals the Black presence the film elides, but also, because of the (veiled) anti-Black sentiment of the owner, discloses the white racism the film fails directly to address. In addition, the film structures in Black absence by referring to the Klan by name and indicting organized Southern racism: by setting the film in the South and featuring the Klan, the film almost renders African Americanness conspicuous by its absence.

In addition to these indictments, it clear from the start that it is Marsha’s status as *witness*, and not her racial, social, or political status, that has gained the ire of the Klan. Because neither Marsha nor the reporter “lynched” for his exposes are the organization’s *intended* target, we begin to speculate about the real political targets of the Klan and what the group finds to do when they don’t have frail blonde

women or reporters to pick on. We might even say that noir itself helps to structure Black absence in the text, diffusing its repressed omitted realities into the abstract, but saturated, visual aesthetic.

In lieu of African Americans, in *Storm Warning* it is noticeably white women—and more precisely bleach blondes—who are victimized by the Klan, an important narrative twist that operates as both substitution and reversal. It is important that the film's female “hero” Marsha is a strong-willed, wiley, and righteous woman—but also a blonde one with a small and frail frame—one who is employed as a model, one constantly subject to male looking. Rogers' physical form performs two subversions: first, her knowledge and strength seems to contradict her physical frailty, and second, her frailty transports the iconography of the “Little Sister” scenario from *Birth of a Nation* into a film narrative that condemns the Klan for harming those very people the organization was purportedly intended to help: white women. The film's most tragic “peripheral” victim of the Klan is also a white blonde woman—cast as *the* quintessential 1950s white female domestic ideal: the innocent Doris Day, whose accidental death at the hands of her own husband in the film points out the Klan's threat to the family and to “their own kind,” i.e. other white folk. Rather than the victims of the Klan being the dark and the alien, it is the Klan members themselves who bear the mark of “darkness”: Hank, Lucy's husband (played by Steve Cochran) is the darkest character in the film, with dusky hair and skin tone.

On the other hand, although both Lucy and Marsha are white, the differences between the two are appreciable. Marsha is coded as physically and materially “other” quite clearly: her dress (which she has “borrowed” from her boss's clothing samples) and her distinct New York accent and savvy give her away. But neither her dress nor her accent are the sole source of her “otherness.” Instead it is her powerful and assertive—near masculine—autonomy and knowingness that mark her:

Marsha has not only mobility but an apparent freedom of movement lacked by men in the narrative. It is Marsha who opts to stop to see her sister, leaving her male counterpart behind. It is also Marsha who, when unable to secure a cab, continues to move about the town by means of her own two feet and her confident urban gait. Marsha's mobility is contrasted throughout with her sister's stasis. Although her mobility is temporarily stopped by the Klan and by the white men that restrain her, Marsha is ultimately not a domestic woman. Her mobility and sight link her to yet another generic tradition: Marsha is the "final girl" of this horrific Southern *noir*; she shows all the toughness and raw determination of contemporary horror's final girl.¹⁵ In each scene where she is confronted with questions (from the district attorney and others) about the Klan, we expect her to recoil in fear, but each time she confronts her questioners with the truth. Unlike Hitchcock's "man who knew too much," Marsha does not run from those she accuses, nor does she curse the sight that has entrapped her. Instead, Marsha holds to her vision and the knowledge it produces. In a number of scenes, her penetrating *look* is the center of the film's meaning structure: the look she gives marks her unflinching disgust with the Klan and her suspicious knowingness about the white evil of the Klan that the film fails to address.¹⁶ Simultaneously, without her vision, the film would be without meaning. The final scene, in which the Klan attacks her, completes the substitution by replacing racism with literal and figurative woman-bashing. In a profoundly anti-feminist move, the Klan, by whipping her face, mars her beauty and simultaneously the earning potential that is the key to her mobility.

¹⁵ Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 35, 40. According to Clover, Final Girls "not only fight back but do so with ferocity, even kill the killer," (37).

¹⁶ *The Chicago Tribune* suggested that "unfortunately the story requires Miss Rogers to be recklessly outspoken at a time when her words are an invitation to murder," (Feb. 9, 1951).

Her status as looker—on-looker—gestures beyond her own victimization. A woman who had spent her career giving men “knowing” looks, in this film, Roger’s knowingness gestures towards the African Americans the film effaces, taking on new depth and social purpose. She, like Adams, is as much a spectator as a victim, and her eyes tell us that she knows something about who the real victims are. In fact, her performance nearly derails the film’s narrative. It is difficult for us to maintain a sense of suspense, because she is not afraid and we can therefore not be afraid for her. That something seen in her steely, righteous, condemning eyes convinces us that nothing will happen to her because she is the vital witness and the film’s ocular center.

The PCA had passed *Storm Warning* with some suggested cuts to the depiction of Hank’s brutality both in the mob scene and in an original scene in which Hank beats (literally punching) his wife.¹⁷ *Storm Warning* was a particular problem in Ohio not only because of its depiction of Hank’s “coming on” to Marsha, but also because of its depiction of the Klan.¹⁸ It is telling that the board, who quite often sought advice from other censors, first looked South for its censorship advice, seeking the decision of Sydney Traub, chairman of the Maryland State Board of Motion Picture Censorship, who reported that he had not yet seen it.¹⁹ On August 22, 1950, Susannah Warfield, supervisor of the Ohio board, telegraphed A.S. Howson of Warner Brothers, indicating that they

¹⁷ For instance, Breen wrote to Warner Brothers, “Page 103: Again we must urge you to exercise extreme care to avoid unacceptable brutality in this scene where Hank is shown brutalizing his wife. We think it inadvisable to have him actually punch her; he should merely shove and push her and generally rough her up.” (Breen to Warner Brothers, Feb. 6, 1950). From the PCA file, it appears that Adams’ lynching was originally supposed to be much more brutal but the PCA advised against this. *Storm Warning* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA.

¹⁸ Breen wrote, “The scene of the mob beating Adams must be handled with extreme care, to avoid unacceptable brutality. The action should not be unduly prolonged nor overly vicious.” Breen to Warner Brothers, Nov. 8, 1949. *Storm Warning* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA.

¹⁹ Sidney Traub, telegram Susannah M. Warfield, Aug. 22, 1950. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH.

were “deeply concerned over Klan picture STORM WARNING.”²⁰ Warfield followed up with more detail: “It is such an unusual picture, that frankly, we just do not know what this reaction would be.”²¹ Because the film was not slated for release until 1951, the Ohio board returned it to the company until a point closer to the release, quite obviously hoping they would alter the film. In a letter to Hugh Flick of the New York board, Warfield penned, “As to the nature of this picture, it is *anti-Klan* in its treatment,” perhaps to contrast the film to the notoriously censored *The Birth of a Nation*. But, despite this, Warfield worried that it was “very violent and emotionally stirring in some of its sequences. We feel doubt as to the timeliness of this picture and our chief concern is what public reaction will be.”²² Perhaps her concern about the timeliness of the film was linked to an article included in the board file from *The Columbus Star* with the headline “Klan Chief Pinched in S. Carolina Cop Killing.”²³ Perhaps intuiting or having witnessed the impending changes in racial mood, and perhaps still retaining memories of the negative public reactions the board received to another Klan film (*The Burning Cross* [1947]) or perhaps simply out of deference to white racism, the board had trepidations about the film’s release, finally wiring Warner Brothers to approve *Storm Warning* for a “trial showing” and with “the understanding the picture will be recalled at any time for re-screening if we become in any way doubtful of our decision.”²⁴ Utilizing the technique frequently enacted by the censor boards of issuing a “provisional seal,” the Ohio board reminded Warner Brothers of its prerogative to withdraw the film and reiterated its strongly held, vaguely racial, concerns over its content.

²⁰ Susannah Warfield, letter to A.S. Howson, Aug. 22, 1950. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Susannah Warfield, letter to Hugh Flick, Sept. 1, 1950. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH.

²³ “Klan Chief Pinched in S. Carolina Cop Killing,” *Columbus Star*, Sept. 9, 1950

²⁴ Susannah Warfield, letter to Albert Howson, Jan. 4, 1951. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH.

Ultimately, the Ohio board required the elimination of lines of dialogue and looks in Hank's attempted seduction of Marsha.²⁵ They also eliminated the violence of the Klan, reducing the most disturbing scene that marks the film's climax, where our protagonist Marsha's face is repeatedly flogged, to a single "flash" of the final whip stroke to minimize effect, but still suggest the action.²⁶



Figure 26-Marsha is whipped in the face by the anti-feminist Klan, *Storm Warning* (1951)

The initial death of the reporter, one with a marked absence of brutality strikingly uncharacteristic of a lynching, however, was left intact. These eliminations not only reduced the brutality of the film, but also, perhaps unintentionally, the strange implication that the Klan's victims were usually blonde white women. In the 1950s, an era in which, as Susan Courtney shows, white women were often disparaged in cinematic narratives because they tended "only to exacerbate crises of white masculinity with emergent identities of their own," *Storm Warning* seems to have taken the white woman's side, revealing repressive white men as "the problem" and centralizing the white

²⁵ Susannah Warfield, letter to Albert S. Howson, Dec. 29, 1950. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH. "Where Hank returns to his home and stands looking through glass in door, eliminate scenes of Marsha, not completely clothed, as she is being viewed by Hank, off scene. In following sequences between Hank and Marsha within the house, eliminate the following lines of dialog by him—Hank: "A guy oughter [sic] be friendly with his wife's sister." And "Aw, you wouldn't mind that. You know, they say that what one sister goes for, the other goes for too." They also eliminated all flogging, "with the exception of final stroke." (See *Storm Warning* Censors' Slip Date received Dec. 14, 1950, Returned Jan. 6, 1951) OHS Archives Series 1596. Earlier deletions included the removal of the following sadistic lines while Hank attempts to rape Marsha: "Hank: Don't worry. There's nothing to worry about. What Lucy doesn't know won't hurt her. Marsha: Ohh, you make me sick to my stomach! (gasping continues behind following speech) Hank: Don't give me that stuff. You know what it's all about. A girl like you's been around, you know what it's all about. Marsha: You're hurting me. Hank: Some women like to be hurt (gasping continues behind following speech)." Sadism would be linked to racism in *No Way Out*, as well.

²⁶ Ibid.

woman's look.²⁷ Even with a film which studiously avoided censorship by displacing lynching from its usual victims, the Ohio board still cut the film in ways that diminished the impact of its violence and by extension the strength of its statement about the Klan.

ODFC files indicate that the board was extremely conservative about the cinematic depictions of racially charged issues like mob violence (*Storm Warning*, *The Sound of Fury*, *The Well*, *The Burning Cross*), miscegenation (*Senza Pietà*, *Pool of London*), and social equality (*Harlem Sketches*) and that the board had a general concern with films made by African American producers. The tactics of delay and the procedural nuisance of censorship brought about financial losses to the distributor and also damaged the "timeliness" of the films' meanings. These delays, deletions, and bannings have political intent, but they also bring spectatorial effects. Both Black and white spectators, thus, received films with racial meanings after their contemporary significance had become timeworn.

The censorship of naturalized miscegenation would have contributed to a racist convention of condemning Black-white couples. The board streamlined films that distinguished themselves by presenting non-normative portraits of African American and white relations. While these films were by no means politically revolutionary in their depictions of race, they disrupted the Black image paradigms typical of many Hollywood films. The elimination of scenes of lynching violence in *Storm Warning* is indicative of an overall muting of lynching violence. While this was most likely intended to protect viewers from being exposed to brutality, it had the effect not only of incrementally softening the overall film's depiction of the Klan, but also of decreasing viewers' phenomenological response—their sense of sympathy with the victims of the Klan. Although it would be necessary to trace other racial issues (like racial epithets) in order to get a complete sense of racial censorship in Ohio, this study has shown that the Ohio board often censored films in ways designed to please

²⁷ Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*, 202.

white racial conventions and that effectively, if not always intentionally, hindered the creation of a politicized Black spectatorial consciousness.

The ODFC censored films according to racial content on a comparatively large variety of themes—even some clearly outside of those prescribed in its standards. Their censorship of racial plot elements, like their statute itself, was conservative. The fact that they did not censor racial epithets but did censor miscegenation, lynching, Race films, and social equality suggests that the board was more conservative than New York. *Storm Warning* demonstrates that even in a Klan film where the racial element had all but been removed, the board feared the political implications of Klan films and the potential impact of condemning the organization.

Too Much More than a Musical: The Censorship of Soundies in Pennsylvania

Censorship in Ohio was conservative in censoring racially controversial themes like lynching and miscegenation. Racial state censorship in Pennsylvania demonstrates the tendency of Northern state censors to ban material without political or terrorist undertones, i.e. musical films.

Pennsylvania's censorship statute that allowed such excisions was signed into law in 1911, although the board was not created until 1913.²⁸ The board's staff, consisting of three members, was controlled by government appointment.²⁹ Unfortunately, Pennsylvania's censorship practices around African American representation are difficult to discern as most of the board's records have been lost. Nevertheless, it seems clear from examination of their remaining files that the board did censor films along racial lines, as indicated by both previous work on the topic and my own research of the

²⁸ Neville Hunning, *Film Censors and the Law*, 166.

²⁹ Richard Saylor, "Dr. Ellis Paxon Oberholtzer and the Early Years of the Pennsylvania State Board of Censors," *Film History* 16, no. 2 (2004).

board's records of excision.³⁰ While records are too spotty for us to ascertain the consistency of the board's policies on cinematic images pertaining to racial issues, it is clear that at least in one instance the Pennsylvania board did make a deletion on the basis of films with inflammatory racial material, as their banning of *Strange Victory* (1948) and their lengthy list of eliminations to *Native Son* (1951) suggests.³¹ They did not make deletions on the basis of miscegenation, if the censorship of the controversial *Blonde Captive* (1930) is any indication.³² Finally, they did not make deletions on the basis of epithets, although a few cases do suggest that they were more generally interested in avoiding offense to people of (non-white) races when complaints arose.³³

Although many of the Pennsylvania board's records are not extant, the Pennsylvania State Archives do contain what appears to be a complete record of excisions required from "Soundies" short films. Soundies were roughly three minute, 16mm films of musical performances, not unlike music videos, many of which featured performances by African American musicians and dancers, and sometimes, also interracial musical and dance sequences. Production of the machines on which the Soundies were shown was put to a halt by war shortages, and therein the medium met with its demise

³⁰ See Maurice Tauber, "A Study of Motion Picture Censorship in Pennsylvania" (PhD diss., Temple University, 1939), 124.

³¹ *Strange Victory*, a film *gris* documentary, narrated by Muriel Smith, that dealt with the adverse treatment of minorities in the United States after WWII, was entirely condemned by the board because the board considered its "narrative . . . inflammatory" and that the film "tends to debase or corrupt morals." Elimination Order, *Strange Victory*, Reviewed June 29, 1949. Elimination Order, Revised print of *Native Son (Negro) [sic]*, Reviewed Aug. 21, 1951. Pennsylvania State Board of Censors Records. Pennsylvania State Archives. Harrisburg, PA.

³² See undated elimination requisition for *Blonde Captive*. Pennsylvania State Board of Censors, elimination Bulletin. Harrisburg, PA.

³³ In the case of the film *Thunder Rock* of 1945, the board deleted the bracketed words, which were blasphemous, but left uncensored the rest of the sentence, which contained racial epithets: "You've got me all wrong. I'm no crusader. All a Chinaman means to me is 'Did he starch my shirt when I told him not to.' Japs, Chinks [I don't give a damn]." In response to a letter of complaint about an apparent anti-Black joke in the film *Cleopatra* (1934), Edna Carroll, board chairperson, responded: "You may be certain it is ever the purpose of this board to defend the rights of every race, creed, nationality and religion and we did not permit the exhibition of material that would be offensive to any." (Mrs. Edna R. Carroll, letter to John E. Walhern, Dec. 22, 1952)

by the end of the 1940s. Nevertheless, at their height, they caused significant trouble for the censors in various states.³⁴

Soundies could be played on a free-standing, coin-operated screen about the size of a large television that was usually housed in local bars, drug stores, hotel lobbies, and soda shops.³⁵ As Amy Herzog has suggested, “the novelty of the Soundies appears to be tied to the unusual format of the medium. . . . The Soundie required a new kind of image, one not dictated by narrative but by the affectivity of song.”³⁶ The Soundies also featured African American musicians and dancers who, in the rare instances in which they appeared in Hollywood films, were often marginalized from the film’s action and narrative. As Arthur Knight has demonstrated, short films were an important representational space for African Americans.³⁷ Detailed statistics on the placement of Soundie machines is beyond the scope of this project and perhaps prohibitively difficult to find. It is difficult, therefore, to say definitively how many African American spectators viewed the Soundies. But it is clear that these films offered a distinct appeal to African Americans, one markedly different even than Race films with musical content.

The Soundies’ producers had a difficult time with censors, not only because their films were short (and, therefore, could not afford many cuts), but because the films were—much like their contemporary counterpart the music video—set to music, and thus any excisions could disrupt the

³⁴ Just keeping track of Soundies’ numerous releases was difficult. In Maryland, the board of censors wrote to the governor that “unless the Board anticipated their innovation and arranged monies to take care of the additional functions which the Board would inherit by their advent into the state, the board would be unable to properly function.” George Mitchell, chairman of the Maryland State Board of Censors, letter to Hon. Governor Herbert R. O’Conor, June 19, 1941.

³⁵ Maurice Terenzio, Scott MacGillivray and Ted Okuda, *The Soundies Distributing Corporation of America: A History and Filmography of Their “Jukebox” Musical Films of the 1940s* (Jefferson, N.C.: MacFarland, 1991).

³⁶ Amy Herzog, “Discordant Visions: The Peculiar Musical Images of the Soundies Jukebox Film,” *American Music* 22, no. 1. (Spring, 2004): 27-39.

³⁷ Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 195-230.

musical flow as well as visual continuity. Because these films were so modally different from Hollywood films, even Black musicals, and because so little scholarly attention has been paid to their content, I will give a brief description of their iconography and technique in order to provide a better sense of how the censorship of these films altered Black cinematic articulations.

“The Soundies,” which often featured African American artists and sometimes, as I will show, contained racially-controversial themes, were a problem for censors in all the states I explored.³⁸ Because the Pennsylvania board most often simply banned an entire “Soundies release” (a one song unit) rather than requiring excisions of “views” or “scenes” whose content might tell us something about censors’ concerns, it is difficult to ascertain the exact source of the problems the censors had with Soundies.

Soundies, Black Women, and the Communicative Gaze

The Soundies were an important cinematic venue for African American cultural production and for the national transmission of the stage presence of African American musical talent. Importantly, the Soundies gave place to expressions, though still veiled, of African American heterosexual interplay and flirtation so often absent in mainstream Hollywood films and studiously downplayed in the studio’s Black-cast films. In these music routines, African American men not only co-opted center stage, but the spectator’s eye was also focused upon African American women. These young Black women surrounded the Black male stars at every side, swinging their legs on the piano, sitting in the audience, singing with their male co-stars, and “hailing” them from backstage space.

³⁸ The Maryland State Board of Censor’s George Mitchell wrote to Governor O’Connor on Jun. 19, 1941, saying, “unless the board anticipated their innovation and arrange for monies to take care of the additional functions which the Board would inherit by their advent into the state, the board would be unable to properly function” with the additional work required by the Soundies. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.



Figure 27-Soundie for the Louis Armstrong song “Brother Bill” performed by the Jubilaires (date unknown).

As such they existed somewhere between the diegesis and those spaces marked ‘backstage.’ They also responded to the music with dance and sometimes with expressive faces that noted their individualized responses to the monologue or story presented in the song.



Figure 28-“Scotch Boogie”-performed by Pat Flowers, directed by William Forrest Crouch (date unknown).

These films glamorized the image of the young, urbane, Black female, rendering her sophisticated. Although she was often silent, her silence was not expressionless, but rather powerful. For example, in the Soundie short “I Know What You Puttin’ Down,” starring Louis Jordan, it is the African American woman with whom he shares center stage who, in many senses, becomes the visual center-point of the film’s “drama.” This Black woman fills the silences with expressive and evocative facial and body language to accompany Louis Jordan’s song, in which he describes his knowledge of her date with another man. As we see in the frame captures below, first she laughs it off and then,

when Jordan’s song delivers detail about her rendezvous, she is, first, struck with surprise and concerned. She then gives Jordan a series of defiant, coy and flirtatious looks, all of which are narrative driven and free of stereotype. Not only does this film feature a Black romantic narrative, but it shows prolonged instances of naturalized Black acting rendered in close-up.³⁹



Figure 29-Soundie for Louis Jordan’s “I Know What You Puttin’ Down” (date unknown)

The African American women pictured in Soundies were largely light-skinned, a fact which reveals both the colorism of these productions that equated beauty with conventional “white” characteristics, but, simultaneously, their transgressive quality. The films were transgressive because African American women of this color and sexual appeal were rarely pictured onscreen; the “white-

³⁹ This song was deleted in Maryland, where it was included in a longer film comprised of performances of Louis Jordan songs, called *Reet, Petite and Gone*. See Maryland Board of Censors, Nov. 14, 1947. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

likeness” of these women so threatened the white eyes that beheld them that they were deemed too distracting and dangerous to racial perceptions to be included routinely in Hollywood films. Many light-skinned African American women who went to Hollywood were told to pass for white because they would never get a job in the movies as Black women. Still, they *were* Black women. And although they had light skin, as the Soundies clearly showed, they were not trying to pass for white. In these films, these women could escape the tragic-mulatto framework, complete with the frustrated narrative trajectory heralded by their skin and played out endlessly in films like *Pinky* (1949), *Lost Boundaries* (1948), and *One Mile From Heaven* (1937). Although they sometimes became the “femmes fatales” and divas of the Black male narratives in these songs, they are happy, satisfied, mobile, and free. They are looked at by the camera and by their male counterparts in multiple ways, but most often with an appreciative, intimate, encouraging, admiring, and empowering, rather than purely erotic, gaze. Captured in long sustained close-ups, these women never flinch. They attract Black men’s communicative gaze, using it for encouragement to sustain their energies, but also strongly return the gaze. They are aware of it and yet playing with it—refusing to submit to become only its objects. They often become gazers themselves.



Figure 30-Ida James shows she can look, too, as she eyes a trumpet player in view of Cole in the Soundie for Nat King Cole and Ida James “Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby?” (year unknown)

The latter is demonstrated in the Soundie with Nat King Cole and Ida James, the latter of whom, much to Cole's chagrin, looks at another man while he sings to her "Is you is, or is you ain't my baby?" Without unduly restrictive narrative framework and with loose direction, in these films, African American women got to improvisationally perform a version of their own being rather than a scripted role and to invent their own expressive movement, making the most of their moments in the spotlight.

The Soundies were also a contained articulation of a variety of racially motivated songs with veiled racial meanings: for example, the Soundie film of the song "Brother Bill" (written by Louis Armstrong and performed by the Jubilaires) depicts African American men in full hunting gear, including shot guns. The song's lyrics (given here in footnote) relay a story about a pair of men ("me" and "Brother Bill") who go hunting:

Well me and brother Bill went a huntin'
Away up in the Eastern Maine
The reason why We went up there,
We though we could catch some game
Me and brother bill were hunting
Way in the middle of the night
We shot something like a grizzly bear
And the doggone thing turned white

Chorus:
We dropped that gun
And away I run
Bill said "boy what's the matter with you?"
If he'd known like me he'd've run some too
I ran so fast they say
They couldn't catch me all day.
The way I run across that field
they couldn't catch me in an automobile

My brother Bill he got so excited he really took a shot at me
That bullet whizzled by my ear and sizzled into a tree
I run so fast I was exhausted

My feets were striking the ground.
I said 'Look here feets do your stuff, cause I'm Alabama bound.' ⁴⁰

Shooting at something he thought was a Grizzly bear, the singer becomes frightened when it turns out the creature he has shot is “white.” The chorus tells how he “dropped that gun” and runs away from someone now trying to catch him. In these lyrics, the stereotypical image of the Black man running in fear is mobilized—even emphasized (the song even includes the phrase “feets do your stuff”)—but it is also contextualized in the framework of having shot something white—perhaps, we are clearly meant to infer, a white person. The running (and the phrase) thus take on a social meaning and Black fear, a real social reason. Although the song discusses Black fear, it also emphasizes the fact that the singer evades capture by those people who have begun to run after him (“they couldn’t catch me all day”)—the singer even claims to have outrun “an automobile.” Blending stereotypy with social commentary, this song puts into practice the Black tradition of signifying; the lyrics could fly under the radar of many white listeners, but be readily understood by Black listeners who would know exactly why running was in order. Perhaps more impressive than the aural component is the visual: this Soundie is not only sung by Black men but pictures *armed* Black men. Although both the singing and the casual hunting costumes decrease the militant implications of African Americans with guns, this Soundie is nevertheless a rare instance where African Americans, outside of uniform, are shown armed on the screen.

In addition to their non-standard narratives, these short performances also gave audiences a clear, close-up view of the Black musical stars they so often heard on the radio and on race records. Some wonderful and careful camera work is evident in the Soundies: with many oblique/impossible

⁴⁰ Brother Bill lyrics: '61 Louis Armstrong Music, ASCAP.

angles giving us an idealized and stylized view (similar to those on *American Bandstand*) that get us closer to the action and allow us to take a variety of privileged vantage points.



Figure 31-Soundie for “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore” performed by the Delta Rhythm Boys (date unknown)

The solid, contagious, and impressive authorial stylization and the expressive power of the African Americans pictured in the Soundies stood greatly at odds with Hollywood’s perception of Blackness in both the racial problem film and the plantation film where African Americans were so often featured. The image available to both Black and white spectators in these films was of Black competency, leisure, happiness, success, entertaining-class style and at moments, freedom.

While the Soundies were not exclusively “Black films” (and were not apparently produced by African Americans), they very often featured all-Black musical groups and sometimes interracial musical groups. The Soundies, like so many other independent films, were not standardized and did not fit the pattern of Hollywood conventions. Thus, they were subject to the censors’ scissors, which attempted to standardize as well as remoralize them according to white or mainstream moral norms.



Figure 32-Light-skinned women not passing for white in the Cab Calloway Soundie for the song “Georgia , Virginia, and Caroline” (date unknown)

In Pennsylvania, a great number of the Soundies the censors objected to prominently featured African American artists: Louis Jordan’s “Down, Down, Down” was ordered entirely deleted, deleted, deleted. The songs lyrics referred to going up and down in an elevator in a department store to different ladies’ departments—including the underwear department. This shopping trip (and the idea of a Black man on ladies’ floors of a white, if integrated, department store) was offensive to censors, most likely on racial as well as “moral” (sexual) grounds. In this short, although Jordan and his band did not touch any women (Black or white) and did not even share the same space with them, through their lyrics and in the song’s imaginary, they figuratively reached for ladies undergarments, and the censors objected.

A Soundies feature called “Chatter” which featured Cook Brown and the Sepia Steppers, also was modified by the board. “Coal Mine Boogie,” “Chicken Shack Shuffle,” “Baby Don’t Go Way from Me,” all featuring African American singer and dancer Mabel Lee, were also subject to censorship.

The *interracial* Soundie “Lazybones,” which featured African American Dorothy Dandridge and white Hoagy Charmichael, also required eliminations. In most cases, there is no direct mention

of the reasons for excision, although one does mention indecent exposure. But, judging by the boards' other deletions, it was most likely the perceived sexuality in the dances and the songs to which the board objected. These films' light-skinned African American women protagonists may also have given the impression of miscegenation (See Figure 32 above—"Georgia, Virginia and Caroline"). Even though censors may not have explicitly considered these to be "racial" excisions, nor did they probably consider the excised material racially inciting, the overall effect of these deletions was to disrupt the flow of African American cultural production through one of its most autonomous venues. They eliminated a venue where not only was African American cultural production appreciated but where the reality of a multi-colored African American population could be perceived and where the complexity and joys of the relationship between Black men and women could be appreciated.

Outside of the Soundies, for many Black-cast films elimination was ostensibly based on morality. As we have seen in Ohio, Black producers Spencer Williams and Ted Toddy were continually excised by state censors because Black cultural production did not fit standards of morality held by whites. Ramona Curry discusses the censorship of Mae West, who spoke and even moved in ways that implied and manifested sexuality influenced by African American vaudeville performers.⁴¹ Examination here of the censor board materials suggests that in addition to censoring Mae West, state censors also censored the Black singers and dancers from whom she appropriated her style and for much the same reason: sexual frankness in the delivery and content of song lyrics as well as heterosexual playfulness and flirtation bothered censors. Accordingly, these scenes were removed, robbing African American spectators of a vital source of cultural production with unique

⁴¹ Ramona Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

depictions of heterosexual romance, strong and beautiful Black women and *naturalized* African American talent.

Understanding Northern Censorship

This section has shown that some very intense debates about filmic racial representation and sustained efforts at censorship occurred outside the South and in some of the most liberal Northern states. Perhaps this is due to the social history of racism in the North. Although civil rights historiography and narratives of white racism and oppression have tended to focus attention on the South, recent work has broadened this approach by examining the patterns of white racism and the logic of racial hierarchies in the North. Work by Matthew Countryman and Tom Sugrue, among others, has highlighted not only the prevalence of anti-Black sentiment in the North (sentiment which led to red-lining and other systematically racist practices), but also the shortcomings of white liberalism, based as it often was on pity rather than a well-developed notion of equality.⁴²

Analysis of the history of race relations in the Northeast reveals that even militant anti-Black sentiment was a regular part of the structure and experience of Northern life for African Americans. Although, of course, Klan activity is not the only measure of racism, it is notable that the Ku Klux Klan proliferated in the 1920s not only in the South but also in the North. Buffalo, New York, for

⁴² Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). Tom Sugrue, *Origins of Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998). Tom Sugrue and Mike Davis suggest that Northern (and Western) racism undermined non-white access to civil rights, often through more covert but nevertheless profoundly effective means through Neighborhood Associations. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London: Pimlico, 1998). For reasons that were purportedly “economic,” these organizations pushed African Americans out of the already limited postwar housing market. Matthew Countryman points towards the ways that Northern civil rights struggles battled not only against overt racism, but also against the ideology of white liberalism which, while granting Blacks a modicum of dignity, never overcame the notion of Black inferiority.

example, had nearly 2,000 Klan members,⁴³ Pennsylvania had 260,000 Klan members in the state,⁴⁴ and Youngstown, Ohio was reported to have a whopping 10,000 members in 1924, although the official roles listed only 2,420.⁴⁵ While these figures were gathered at the height of the Klan's popularity and not during the period under study, they nevertheless suggest that anti-Black sentiment was a historical reality in the North with a probable legacy in the 1940s and 1950s. Ohio seems to have been particularly active in censorship along racial lines, a fact which perhaps stems from the history of violence in the state, as evidenced by the Springfield riots, riots about which many of the town's white residents were entirely unrepentant and which reiterated the racial hierarchy of the Ohio state capital.⁴⁶

Those films (like *The Burning Cross*, *No Way Out*, *The Well*, *Storm Warning*, and *Senza Pietà*) with definite racial themes—and with independent or foreign producers—were often banned by the Northern boards. Although not all of these films were circulated in the South (the distributors of *Senza Pietà* never applied for a permit in Virginia), evidence suggests that white Northerners often took over where Southern censors left off. Even where there is little evidence of spiteful or conscious intent to disrupt African American themes or African American cultural expression, the elimination of lynching and of “immoral” African American movement and lyrics in the Soundies had the affect of altering, shifting, and limiting screen expressions relevant to Black life. It is clear, also, that, at

⁴³ Sean Lay, *The Hooded Knights of Niagara: The Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo, New York* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 85.

⁴⁴ Emerson Loucks, *The Ku Klux Klan in Pennsylvania* (New York: The Telegraph Press, 1936), 31.

⁴⁵ William D. Jenkins, *Steel Valley Klan* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1990), 81.

⁴⁶ James L. Crouthamel, “The Springfield Race Riot of 1908,” *The Journal of Negro History* 45, no. 3. (July 1960), 164-181. According to Crouthamel, white residents of the birthplace of Lincoln said of the Black residents, “Abe Lincoln brought them to Springfield and we will drive them out.” The rioters and the perpetrators of the mob violence were, in this case, exclusively white. Looting, burning of property, and lynchings were all carried out by white citizens. African Americans did not retaliate.

least in New York, racial epithets were continually deleted from films, a fact that may have been linked to a concern about the civic outcomes of offending Black and ethnic spectators.

Using sanctioned tactics of elimination and secondary tactics of screening delays and provisional seals, it seems clear that Northern censors, like their Southern counterparts, put strain on African American cultural producers and in many cases eliminated valuable but controversial cultural expressions, especially those that gave “undo” attention to racial oppression or portrayed race in ways that challenged white status quo. While in some cases this strain was not consciously intended, the censors nevertheless drew their standards largely from a racial ideology which did not understand screen racism as immoral or undemocratic, but rather as a potential danger to public safety because racially offended people might riot.

The concern of Northern boards over perceived political issues like miscegenation demonstrates that these issues were a problem outside the South as well as in it. These excisions could have had varying effects: the elimination of lynching may have worked to the praise of some Black spectators who saw movies as a refuge from such harsh realities. For others, like the NAACP and for those interested in seeing realist treatments of Black oppression on screen, eliminating lynching may have detracted from the film’s potential to educate about a severe national problem pertaining to race. It may have also prevented Black community recognition of horrific visualizations of racially motivated murder. Censors took away the freedom of choice to see these films or racially-centered parts thereof. The banning of some Black Soundies (which contained Black music and dance that was provocative on many levels) would have, of course, also robbed African American spectators of relevant images and opportunities to connect with the unique visualization of urbane, sophisticated African Americans that these short films brought to the screen.

This study joins with earlier histories of Northern racism in suggesting that film censorship bore the mark of the North's "invisible" color line, avoiding depiction of themes deemed "racial" (usually meaning either racist or pro-Black) so as to avoid stirring up racial feelings and perhaps more dangerously stirring up sensible, rhetorical opposition to status quo definitions of white and Black identity.

Southern State Censorship: Virginia, 1930-1960⁴⁷

Virginia was the only Southern state censor board (at least on the Eastern seaboard) that consistently censored films.⁴⁸ The state passed its censorship law in 1922, which stated that unless the film submitted to them was "obscene, indecent, immoral, inhuman or , , , of such a character that its exhibition would tend to corrupt morals, or incite to crime," the board should issue it a license.⁴⁹ The statute mandated that the Virginia Board of Censors (renamed in 1925 the Virginia Division of Motion Picture Censorship) was to consist of three members with equal powers and that a majority of censors concurring on suggested eliminations constituted the basis for censorship. The members of the board were appointed by the attorney general in Virginia (as opposed to the governor as in Maryland or the Board of Regents as in New York), which arguably made it more imperative that the board's decisions harmonize with the state's legal paradigms.

⁴⁷ Research for this portion of the chapter came from exhaustive examination of eliminations and rejections for the years from 1945 to 1960, which were the years available at the State archives. Exhaustive records of elimination for the years 1930-1945 were not available although there were exhaustive records of rejections for this period.

⁴⁸ Florida had state censorship, but their statute instructed them to make all the same cuts as were made by the New York board. See Neville Hunning, *Film Censors and the Law*, 189.

⁴⁹ Division of Motion Picture Censorship. 1930 Virginia Censorship Laws, effective Jun. 17, 1930. (Richmond: David Bottom, Superintendent of Public Printing, 1930).

What do the biographies of the board members tell us about their racial politics?⁵⁰ During the period under study, board members hailed from a variety of backgrounds, but were often from white political families of Virginia, and, as Ira Carmen has shown, were mostly Southern Democrats.⁵¹ We do know that at least one of the Board members, Mrs. Russell Ferguson Wagers, who was on the Board from 1948 until the Division was abolished in 1966, was a member of the racially conservative organization the Daughters of the Confederacy.⁵²

Although the Virginia Division of Motion Picture Censorship (VDMPC) was the most active state censorship board in the South,⁵³ the board, based on my calculations, only censored 236 films between January 1945 and December 1960, compared with roughly 526 eliminations and 36 rejections in Maryland and at least⁵⁴ 1,305 films requiring elimination and 112 rejected in New York. In an interview with film scholar Ira Carmen, board members Mrs. Lollie Whitehead and Mrs. Russell Ferguson Wagers affirmed that *all* films shown in Virginia were prescreened by the board.⁵⁵ Perhaps the low number of deletions indicates that a smaller number of films were exhibited in Virginia. It could also be that Virginia exhibitors tended to gravitate towards films that censors would approve of. Although an exhaustive list of excisions and rejections is only available from 1945, numerical and qualitative analysis of these excisions (as well as individual cases from earlier periods) makes clear some interesting patterns of racial censorship in Virginia.

⁵⁰ An exhaustive search of the index of *The Richmond News Leader* and *The Richmond Times Dispatch* for articles on censorship and for specific censors' names turned up little information on the overall political and social leanings of the board members, as articles focused on their employment history.

⁵¹ Ira Carmen, *Movies, Censorship, and the Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 176

⁵² On her involvement in Daughters of the Confederacy, see "Mrs. Russell Ferguson Wagers Named Motion Picture Censor," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Dec. 30, 1949. On her tenure with the board, see "Mrs. Ned A. Wagers Film Censor Dies," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, Mar. 30, 1969, 60.

⁵³ I am not counting here the local boards in Atlanta, GA and Memphis, TN whose eliminations, because of their location in distribution centers, may have affected the prints sent to neighboring cities and even states, as was the case in Detroit.

⁵⁴ The board's records of elimination and rejection appear to be incomplete for certain years.

⁵⁵ Carmen, *Movies, Censorship and the Law*, 287.

Racism was legally mandated by the state of Virginia. State laws, which segregated public accommodations, schools, and *specifically* theaters, prohibited miscegenation and even required certificates of racial composition for all those without a birth certificate on file in the state.⁵⁶ However, the Virginia board was a “weak” censorial power by comparison with other states. The PCA did not even keep consistent tabs on Virginia as it did other state censor boards, perhaps because the VDMPC did not exercise censorship control over a large populace. Threatened by the press’s and the Supreme Court’s mounting disdain for censorship, the period of the 1950s was one of declining *official* power for the VDFC, one marked by fewer public battles (in the courts or in the press) over censorship than occurred in other states.

Even as censorship became more restricted in other states, though, Virginia seems to have continued to censor on racial grounds, defining racial intermixing of various types as “obscenity.” After meeting with the board, a journalist from *The Roanoke Times* suggested that “the women [of the board] are free to supply their own definition of obscenity.”⁵⁷ “It’s something you feel,” said one board member.⁵⁸ Also, to counteract the Supreme Court’s externally-imposed limitations of state power, Virginia pioneered judicially subversive, unofficial forms of censorship to continue to censor according to the state’s racist agenda.

Virginia’s Racial Censorship in the 1930s

In the 1930s, the VDMPC made a number of deletions to films that give evidence of the board’s racial ideology and their unique set of censorship practices. Not only did the board use the strategy of

⁵⁶ See Pauli Murray, *States’ Law on Race and Color* (Cincinnati: Women’s Division of Christian Service, 1951), 461-490. See also, Walter Wadlington, “The Loving Case: Virginia’s Anti-Miscegenation Statute in Historical Perspective” *Virginia Law Review* 52, no. 7. (Nov. 1966), 1189-1223, which includes a history of anti-miscegenation legislation in Virginia.

⁵⁷ Photostat copy of typewritten article found in “Controversial Film File,” Box 54, folder 102. Folder Labeled “Roanoke Times.” VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

scene, view, and dialogue deletion to maintain a racially hierarchical cinematic vision on the state's screens, but they also used other methods, such as segregated viewing orders and delayed seals of approval to secure stratified racial conditions on and surrounding the screen. Although systematic analysis of 1930 to 1944 is not possible from the extant records, a few available cases from this period suggest interesting themes that reveal, in part, the logic of racial deletions and suggest the overall pattern of Virginia's racial censorship.

Interracial contact (whether sexual or not) was a recurrent source of concern and as such was continually censored by the board from the 1930s through the 1950s. Although, as I will show, the board's later barring of these images was erratic, alternative forms of censorship, such as exhibitor no-bids, may have replaced court-threatened tactics of eliminations or rejections. Exhibitor no-bids were those instances where all exhibitors in an area exercised their option not to bid on a picture, effectually shutting it out of a territory.

In the 1930s, before court challenges to censorship, the board rejected, in toto, Oscar Micheaux's *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) on the grounds that "any case where Negroes would try to associate with the whites in Virginia would incite to crime [sic]."⁵⁹ State censors usually used the incitement provision when film scenes were particularly graphic in their depiction of a crime or when they could be considered to inflame some (vulnerable) population to criminal or violent action.

Therefore the use of incitement in the case of a film that showed (inter)racial passing, seems to have

⁵⁹ Box 56, folder 5, General Correspondence and Controversial Film File 'The Veiled Aristocrat[0] [sic].'" The board stated: "this picture is refused in toto because the Division considered "it unfair to the Colored and its exhibition will prove unsatisfactory to them. Further more, should there be any attempt on the part of the Negro [sic] to try to associate with the White [sic] in Virginia, should an attempt would incite to crime. The Division is unanimous in rejecting the picture as it is an unfair index of conditions in the State." Three elements are clear in this statement: first, the state's rights provincialist position taken by the board, which desires only films that reflect conditions in the state; second, the racial paternalism of the board, which lead off the statement with their profession of desire to please Black audiences. Third, we see couched in the middle, the board's defensive threatening of African Americans desiring "to associate" with whites." VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

been a stretch of the intentions of the provision. But “incitement to crime” was not the only reason the VDMPC banned the film: the board also considered the ban in the “best interests” of African American viewers, offering that elements of the film “would prove unsatisfactory to them.”⁶⁰

Although the film is not extant, according to the American Film Institute (AFI) catalogue entry, the film did not show interracial love but perhaps something more transgressive: a Black female character, Rena (actress unknown), who was not raised to (in AFI’s words) “associate with colored people” and instead was integrated into white culture—a passing subject.⁶¹ Even if the film did not show miscegenation it begged the question: if Rena could only associate with whites, then who would she marry? The board also picked up on Micheaux’s critique of the African American community, one that was present in many of his films and that, as Charlene Regester has shown, was often reviled by African Americans as well.⁶² Accordingly they used this communal critique to divide the “good” African American spectators in Virginia from Micheaux, paternalistically sheltering Virginia Black spectators from the “moral” that passing was better.

The controversial British film *White Cargo* (1930) was also rejected, in toto, by the board for its portrayal of white male lust for (and, to use the Virginia board’s phrase, “ill-mated” marriage to) an African Black woman. The VDMPC also censored the film for showing a “negress [sic] putting forth meretricious efforts to ‘vamp’” a white man). The board first rejected the film, but later called for substantial eliminations and limited the film to white viewership, completely barring distribution to Negro theatres. It seems more than coincidental that *White Cargo*’s segregated banning occurred a few years after Virginia’s state miscegenation laws were tightened to allow only marriage of

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ *Veiled Aristocrat* (1932), American Film Institute, catalogue entry.

⁶² Regester, “Black Films, White Censors,” 177-180.

any white person to another who has “no trace whatsoever” of non-white blood.⁶³ It was also in recent years that Virginia formally codified the segregation of schools and “public halls and public places.”⁶⁴ Among Virginia’s segregation laws was even a specific prohibition on integrated movie theaters and places of entertainment, requiring strict segregation of all places of amusement that admitted both whites and Blacks.⁶⁵ Nineteen thirty also saw the passage of the first classification clauses, naming anyone with African heritage “Negro.”⁶⁶ Perhaps emboldened and ideologically strengthened by these recent pronouncements, in the 1930s, the board wrote copiously on its *White Cargo* decision and other racial deletions, proudly indicating its reasons and its racial/moral sensibilities.⁶⁷ According to the board, the film was an incitation to the crime of miscegenation, was “well calculated to cause friction between the two races,” and caused “revulsion” to whites and “humiliation” to Blacks.⁶⁸ The Board’s description indicates the safe and acceptable limits of interracial plots set in tropical locales:

The scene of this sombre but well acted photoplay is a rubber plantation in a desolate, miasmic section of Africa, where white men suffer alike from ennui and

⁶³ Pauli Murray, *States’ Laws on Race and Color* (Cincinnati: Women’s Division of Christian Service, 1950), 463, 480. This suggests that the law changed in 1924. But Walter Wadlington “The Loving Case: Virginia’s Anti-Miscegenation Statute in Historical Perspective,” *Virginia Law Review* 52, no. 7. (Nov., 1966), 1189-1223, suggests that the law was reaffirmed in 1930 but loosened to prohibit miscegenation with any one with “any ascertainable” Negro blood (1201). He cites VA Acts of Assembly 1930, ch. 85, at 96-97, as amended, VA. Code Ann. 1-14 (Supp 1964). As Charlene Register has revealed, the board specifically spoke of an earlier miscegenation law in their banning of Micheaux’s *House Behind the Cedars* (1925), a film where “a colored woman . . . masquerades as white” attracting a white suitor who “even after the woman has severed relations with the man . . . is pictured as still seeking her society, nor does his quest end until she has become the wife of a dark skinned suitor.” (Register, 178). The wording of these board’s deserves to be read symptomatically for its racist ideology. In this quote, their use of the term “masquerading” seems interesting because the very thing about passing is the realism of its performance—that it is nothing like a masquerade, because the mask is so complete and convincing. It suggests the board’s wish that passing was as easy to detect as Blackface, which was the real racial masquerade.

⁶⁴ Murray, *States’ Laws*, 463.

⁶⁵ Magnum, *Legal Status of the Negro*, 57. Murray, *State’s Laws*, 480. Murray lists the year of adoption for public school segregation as 1928 and public place segregation as 1926.

⁶⁶ “The History of Jim Crow: Inside the South,”

<http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/scripts/jimcrow/insidesouth.cgi?state=Virginia> (Jan 10, 2007).

⁶⁷ This was also true in New York, where the board wrote a lengthy reason for most every objection to a rejected film.

⁶⁸ *White Cargo*, Statement of Rejection, Jun. 19, 1930, Department of Law, Division of Motion Picture Censorship. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

‘sex starvation’ . . . deprived of the society of decent women of his own race, [our lead] becomes infatuated with a dissolute mulatto woman, whom he marries despite the warning of his associates. The union proves lamentable in every way.

These reasons for rejection were openly in line with the prevailing, legally mandated racial status quo in Virginia, one that could not tolerate miscegenation. However, they also indicate the spectatorial displeasure and disgust that miscegenation engendered. They demonstrated the board’s discomfort with the tropical locale when the plot centrally involved not only Black/white interracial love, but where so much attention was focused upon Black/white interracial marriage.⁶⁹ Although compensating moral values—providing retribution for immoral acts, by means of narrative ill-fate if not legal confinement—were often an issue for censor boards, it seems to have mattered little to the board that the ending for the lovers was unhappy. The depiction of the “vamping” may have mitigated the effects of this narrative end.

In the period from 1930 to 1939, there was also at least one excision made by the Virginia Division of Censorship based on cinematic representations of “social equality” (as distinct from miscegenation). Crucially, it occurred in what we might consider a “documentary” film. Among documentary images, the fight film was often among the most “free” as it lacked the rigorous editing and staged action of the newsreel. As late as 1935, the board rejected the fight film of Max Baer and Joe Louis (in which Louis was the victor), again because it might “incite to crime.” This seemingly indicates that, as Lee Greiveson has suggested was the case in the early century, the censor board

⁶⁹ All censor boards seem to have had trouble with tropical locales, however. They knew and intuited that directors would use these locales to show more skin, to show interracial lust, and to show extra-marital affections and thus, unilaterally in New York, Maryland, and Virginia, scenes showing lust or over-exposure in tropical islands were cut with extreme frequency.

assumed that African Americans would respond to Black fistic victories with criminal behavior that threatened racial law and order.⁷⁰

Racial Censorship in Virginia, 1945-1960

Out of the 239 films in which eliminations were required in Virginia from 1945 to 1960, nine percent of these were denied on the basis of concern about Black representation or Black spectators, a high number given the small number of films pertaining to African Americans that came out in a given year. Combining the films pertaining to African Americans with films pertaining to other non-white racial groups, the percentage banned in Virginia leaps to 16% between 1940 and 1960 (inclusive).

Race Film images in Virginia

Virginia emphasized questions of propriety in dance in films featuring African Americans. Forty-eight percent of the board's excisions of African American cinematic material were dance sequences which the board viewed as immoral. Only one of these sequences featured interracial dancing: the rest were of African Americans—mostly women—dancing in “indecent” ways. Black song lyrics were also a problem for the board, as thirteen percent of deletions of African American material were made on this basis. Physical exposure too troubled the board in films with African American themes and images (8 percent of deletions were made on this basis). Racial problems resulting from interracial contact were subject to censorial action by the board quite often (22 percent of the time that African American representation was at issue).

Analysis of the Excision of Racial Epithets in Virginia

⁷⁰ Application for License. *Max Baer v. Joe Louis Fight*, order processed on Sept. 8, 1935. (“General Correspondence and Controversial Film File,” Box 54, Folder 7). VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA. Lee Grieveson, *Policing the Cinema*, 127-8.

The Virginia Division also excised some racial epithets from films, although their reasoning for these excisions is not clear. The board seems to have allowed epithets in *No Way Out* (1950), but to have completely disallowed any use of epithets in *Native Son* (1950) and cut the term “Dirty Black Devils [sic]” (although not the word “nigger”) from *The Well* (1951).⁷¹ Although the Division originally banned *The Well*, its reasons for cutting the film give us some sense of the motivation for deleting epithets: the board considered that the film might “stir up racial feelings and cause unpleasant consequences.”⁷²

Case Studies of Virginia’s Racial Censorship from 1950 to 1960

After 1947, when Virginia’s banning of the independent film *The Burning Cross* was reversed by Judge Julien Gunn (a former Klansman), the Board of Censors was significantly quieter about racially-based eliminations and rejections. This case had demonstrated both public and court-level opposition to the Virginia State Board of Censors’ anti-Black racial censorship. However, four cases, *Island in the Sun* (1957), *Band of Angels* (1957), *I Spit on Your Graves* (1959), and *The Respectful Prostitute* (1952), demonstrate the racial logic of the board and its various techniques for censorship in the Post-Burstyn era. I will focus here on the 1950s exclusively because this is both the time of greatest constraint for censors’ power and the moment of what was called “Massive Resistance.”

Although Virginia is relatively close to the Mason-Dixon line and certainly cannot be considered the *Deep South*, Old Dominion nevertheless holds an important place in the history of the South and of white Southern intellectual thought and cultural production. As the seat of the Confederacy, Richmond has historically been, in many ways, self-consciously defensive of its white

⁷¹ It is not clear whether this term was already omitted from the print submitted to Virginia for censorship, as there was no dialogue continuity in the records.

⁷² Print Elimination Record, *The Well*, “General Correspondence and Controversial Film File,” Rejections. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

“Southernness” and eager to prove its alignment with the ideology of the states further South. If Virginia’s alignment with the South and with Southern ideology was evident during any historical period, it was certainly during the 1950s, when, under the leadership of Governor Thomas Stanley, the state led the South in its defense of anti-integration efforts known as “Massive Resistance.”⁷³ Using a state’s rights argument and the tactic of “Interposition,” which paid homage to the logic and rhetoric of secession mobilized during the Civil War, Governor Stanley led an attack on school desegregation designed to derail *Brown v. Board of Education*. From the beginning, media was centrally linked to the dramatic “last stand” Interposition struggle: journalist James Kilpatrick of *The Richmond News Leader* was influential not only in the propagation but in the authoring of the Interposition strategy.⁷⁴ While evidence suggests that Virginia’s film censors were predisposed to be supportive of racial state politics, these struggles occurred after the *Miracle* film censorship decisions (1952) had significantly reduced state censors power. They therefore occurred well after the point when the Virginia State Board of Censors could be *openly activist* in their fight against cinematic integration and its accompanying “Northern” ideology.⁷⁵ Hollywood and its output was clearly viewed by the board, irate citizens, and film reviewers as a part of the Northern attacks waged against the South and elicited backlash.⁷⁶ Ira Carmen notes that “the Supreme Court decisions of recent years have not led to one single change in Virginia law in [terms of censorship] nor have they even stimulated bringing a single law suit which would reach into either the federal courts or the Supreme

⁷³ See Robert A. Pratt, *The Color of Their Skin: Education and Race in Richmond, VA 1954-1989* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992). James Ely, *The Crisis of Conservative Virginia: The Byrd Organization and the Politics of Massive Resistance* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976).

⁷⁴ Pratt, *The Color of their Skin*, 5.

⁷⁵ Hunning, *Film Censors and the Law*, 208.

⁷⁶ See editorial, “Does Hollywood Hate the South?” *Richmond News Leader*, Oct. 3, 1958, 12. Edith Lindeman film review—*Kings Go Forth*. “Two Films Meet Resistance in the South,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, date not given. In *Kings Go Forth* censorship file, “General Correspondence and Controversial Films File.” VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

Court.”⁷⁷ Delaying exhibition and prolonging the appeal process was also a VDMPC tactic, as we will see later with regards to *The Well*. By delaying a picture’s release in Virginia, the VDMPC could significantly reduce its financial success.

Despite its diminished social and legal power in the 1950s, the Virginia Division took pains to make a number of eliminations of images considered interracial. In making these changes, they, like the state’s Interposition advocates, risked legal challenges by higher courts. For example, the board took a risk in blocking racially charged dialogue and the depiction of the Old South as racially immoral in the 1957 film *Band of Angels*. The film starred Yvonne DeCarlo as Amantha and Clark Gable as Louisiana slave owner Hamish Bond, and also featured Sidney Poitier as the educated enslaved man, Ra-Ru, and Juanita Moore (who would star in the 1959 *Imitation of Life*) as the house slave, Budge. *Band of Angels* was one of the first films to feature an African American woman (Carol Drake as Michele) in the part of a mulatto mistress (although the main character, Amantha, who is also a mulatto, is played by a white woman). The fact that *Band of Angels* was censored makes it clear that the board continued requiring race-based excisions, but it seems also to suggest that this racial censorship was practiced more on less controversial films where the board’s response would not be publicized.

Band of Angels tells the story of Amantha, the “white” Southern daughter of a plantation owner. She finds out, upon her father’s death, that she is part Black and is sold into slavery. Eventually, she is sold to an older, New Orleanean slave master, Hamish Bond, who treats her with some respect. The board struck dialogue from a scene where Amantha is “seduced”—and is threatened by a white slave handler on a boat headed to the Deep South. In a scene that borrows

⁷⁷ Carmen, *Movies, Censorship and the Law*, 166.

heavily from the iconography of *Showboat*, another film which centers on racial discovery of a tragic mulatta, the handler, Calloway (Ray Teal), attempts to rape Amantha. When she resists, he says: “Any more shenanigans an' I'm gonna chain you to a post down there with them hot-nature Blacks; (off)-an' ain't gonna care what happens to yuh. Just so they don't bruise yuh too bad, yuh hear? . . . I rather let them wear a couple o'hundred dollars worth off yuh than t' get a lot o'worriment.”⁷⁸ The excised verbal picture causes audiences to imagine brutal miscegenetic rape of a (liminally) Black woman played by a white actress and Black enslaved men played by Black actors (the latter specifically referred to by their race and as “hot natured”). On the level of the diegesis, the scene also suggests illicit relations (and the coercive lust) of the white slave handler for the enslaved Black woman. The scene is, in this sense, doubly miscegenetic, referencing miscegenation on both the level of casting and on the level of the narrative. The suggestion of the horror of white male rape of Black women under slavery seems to be at the heart of the reason for excision here, as similar lines were also cut from the dialogue of Budge, another female slave, whose earrings and other adornments mark her Jezebel status. Budge’s cut lines confirm the decrepitude of life as a Black slave-mistress:

Some fella buy you. An' what he do? What he den do? Maybe it won't be so bad. Maybe you git something you like outta it. One o' them Frenchy fellas in New Orleans. Maybe he buy you. You know what he'll do? He'll (whispering not distinct) (laughing) Den yuh get old and it don't matter. Don't matter whatcha done had. Sure can't take it away. (laughing) (off) (laughing).

It is conspicuous that Virginia required so many deletions in this film and was deafeningly silent on the multiply-miscegenetic *Island in the Sun*, which was released in the same year. Why would the Virginia Board have excised these specific scenes and images, especially when it did not excise images of miscegenation from *Island in the Sun*, which actually showed an African American actor embracing

⁷⁸ Print Elimination Record, *Band of Angels*, Aug. 5, 1957. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

a white actress? First, while *Island in the Sun* depicted unforced miscegenation, *Band of Angels* indicts the brutality of miscegenation under slavery and reveals that the instances of miscegenation most horrific were those that condemned Black women to sexual servitude and rape at the hands of white men; they may also have been seen as too sexually explicit concerning the horror of slavery for a Black woman. Overall, *Band of Angels* seems to counteract this condemnation of slavery by presenting Hamish Bond as a kind slave owner who respects—even genuinely loves—Amantha. Hamish also educates his darker-skinned male slave, Ra-Ru. Even so, the excised scenes and lines may have presented an ideologically subversive alternative to the film’s overall forgiving portrait of slavery and slave owners and traders. Some white Virginia viewers protested the board’s decision to release the film at all. One man sent an angry letter condemning the board’s decision to permit a film that shows “Sidney Poitier . . . slapping a white woman across the room in a tantrum of rage,” and noted that “your Division . . . does not appear to be co-operating in the least with Senator Byrd’s most commendable plan of Massive Resistance to integration.”⁷⁹ The letter’s author also included a pamphlet showing the visible evidence of the spread of miscegenation, including photographs from the popular press in which Blacks and whites were pictured together.

***Island in the Sun* (1957) Meets Massive Resistance and Censorial Silence in Virginia**

Darryl Zanuck’s independently produced *Island in the Sun* (1957), which the board did not censor, demonstrates the racial ideology—and the racist backlash—surrounding racial problem films. Like many of Zanuck’s films that featured African Americans (such as *Pinky* and *No Way Out*), *Island* tries to tackle a host of hot-button issues pertinent to questions of racial democracy (for example,

⁷⁹ Bruce Dunstan, letter to Lollie C. Whitehead, Sept. 3, 1957. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

political revolution or revolt and discrimination), but its central preoccupation is with race-mixing and its consequences.

The film tells the story of a group of white British citizens on an unnamed Caribbean island and their intermingling, social and professional, with various Native islanders. Max Fleury (James Mason), a restless aristocratic planter, thinks his wife is having an affair with Hillary Carson (Michael Rennie), another white male island resident. In a premeditated murder, Maxwell kills Carson, savagely strangling him. Meanwhile, Maxwell's sister Jocelyn (Joan Collins) falls in love with the governor's son, Euan (Stephen Boyd) who has been stationed in Egypt. Margot Seaton (Dorothy Dandridge), a Native Afro-Caribbean who works in a shop, is courted first by Afro-Caribbean labor leader David Boyeur (Harry Belafonte) and ultimately (and more ardently), by the white governor's aide Denis Archer (John Justin). Seaton and Archer eventually run away together to get married in England. In many ways, Seaton and Archer are the most successful, productive and honest couple in the film. The third love plot involves David Boyeur, whose long friendship with Mavis Norman (Joan Fontaine), a planter's daughter, leads him to have affection for her. However, he eventually decides that he must focus on politics, specifically gaining rights for Black islanders, rather than romantically pursuing a white woman. In the film's final chapters, it is revealed that Maxwell's father, Julian Fleury (Basil Sydney), had a Black grandmother, thus making Jocelyn's union with Euan miscegenetic and therefore improper—at least for a man of Euan's station. However, Jocelyn's mother, Silvia (Patricia Owens), reveals to her privately that Jocelyn is an illegitimate child, thus clearing up her racial identity and making the marriage permissible. Never do the film's characters actually kiss, however. Miscegenetic desire is rendered through music and dance, instead.

The film's actual representations of racial intermingling, muted and mild though they were, created quite a stir in Virginia during the period of Massive Resistance. The mere idea of the film at a juncture of Virginia history so strongly defined by state level opposition to integration made it a rallying point for white Southern backlash against integration. Because of its timing (and in spite of some clearly separatist narrative strains), the movie was read by many white Virginians as an "Integration Movie."⁸⁰ After the plot, and with its pictures of Belafonte and Joan Fontaine, were published in the Southern racist newsletters *The White Sentinel* and *The American Nationalist*, the VDMPC received over thirty letters, including six petitions, some with over forty names, in addition to several phone calls. Responses to the film's release by white Virginians varied from a controlled, legalistic anti-integrationist rhetoric to rabid anti-Black rage.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Mrs. Fred Laidy, Letter to Lollie C. Whitehead, Jul. 15, 1957. cc: Russell Wagers, Margaret Gregory, and Hon. J. Lindsay Almond. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

⁸¹ Randolph McPherson, letter to Virginia State Board of Moving Picture Censors, Aug. 9, 1957. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.



Figure 33-Island in the Sun made headlines in white racist press sources-Joan Fontaine was particularly targeted, as this American Nationalist publication sent to the VDMPC shows.

Citing imagined scenes where Harry Belafonte kisses his white co-star, one writer suggested that the board “put the ban” on *Island in the Sun* and “let our law department deal with the films in the same manner it is dealing with the rest of it,” *the rest of it* being integration.⁸²

Vitriolic calls for censorship came from organized groups of white-identified Virginia citizens. Most vocal were the Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Rights (DISSIR). But among the protestors were also two of the VDMPC’s own theater inspectors, and prominent state representatives, including Stuart E. Hallett, a member of the State’s Senate.⁸³ Virginia’s Attorney

⁸² Randolph McPherson, letter to the Board of Censors, Aug. 15, 1957. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

⁸³ Stuart E. Hallett, letter to Mrs. Margaret Gregory, Jun. 21, 1957. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

General, Lindsay J. Almond, who was spearheading the Interposition fight in the State courts, intervened in the censor's decision and had the board screen the film for a group comprised of his assistant, the judge of the Circuit Court of Richmond (to which film censorship decisions were appealed), and three officers of DSSIR. His report was that "while all the persons concerned agreed that it was a film portraying principles of which they did not approve, they could find no legal objection." Despite apparent misgivings, the group ultimately opted to read the film against the grain in their official stance; they stated that the film "illustrated great social problems which are created by integrated society and further strengthened the official position of the Commonwealth of Virginia disapproving the creation or existence of such a society in this state."⁸⁴

The brunt of the backlash was left for the board to handle. They issued a "form" letter to all those protesting the film's showing, one that subtly indicates their true feelings:

In viewing this picture in our official capacity in consideration of whether or not we would approve it, we were mindful in this instance, as in all others of the limitations imposed upon movie censorship by decisions rendered by the Supreme Court of the United States. It frequently occurs that, if we were left to our own judgment as individuals and could be guided solely by our individual concepts of propriety, movies which we feel compelled to approve under the law would not receive the approval of this Board.⁸⁵

This letter strongly suggests that if the court had allowed it, the VDMPC would have gone on censoring such images of miscegenation. Miscegenation, which seems to have been the board's primary motivation for censorship in the 1930s, was not censored in the film *Island in the Sun*, perhaps more because of legal struggles than any desire to see it shown in Virginia. Because of the rising Interposition struggle, the 1950s were clearly a time where the board wanted to censor racial

⁸⁴ J. Lindsay Almond, letter to Mrs. Amos R. Sweet, Jul. 22, 1957. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

⁸⁵ Lollie C. Whitehead, letter to Mrs. Amos Sweet, June 27, 1957. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

images. However, post-Burstyn, the VDMPC had to restrain itself from making egregious cuts that would not hold up in court. The film was also polysemic enough to be read as a condemnation of miscegenation, as the reading of Atty. General Lindsay Almond suggests.

Other Shades of Blackness: Southern Censorship of Foreign Films with Images of American Racial Disturbances and Violence

Independent films and foreign films, many of which were less polysemic, were also among those censored for their “obscene” depictions of African Americans. *J'irai Cracher sur Vos Tombes (I Spit on Your Graves, hereafter)* (1959), which not only dealt with the topic of miscegenation in the United States, but included direct and chilling images of lynching, and *La Putain Respectueuse (The Respectful Prostitute)* (1952), both French productions, were banned in toto by the VDMPC.⁸⁶ In addition to rejection, delay and a long appeals process were tactics the board used to avoid the stigma of official censorship. By delaying a picture, the company could significantly reduce its financial success. Crucially, both of these foreign films contained images that critiqued the South's racial politics and showed images connoting miscegenation and lynching in a frank manner uncharacteristic of Hollywood's racial depictions.

Also, the Virginia Motion Picture Division's policy of requiring a film representative to be physically present at an appealed film's showing unquestionably worked as a barrier for small budget non-Hollywood films, as we see in the case of the foreign film, *The Respectful Prostitute* (1952).⁸⁷ The film, based on a play by Jean-Paul Sartre, depicted a white Northern prostitute, Lizzy (Barbara Laage), who, after being hassled by a white man in a car of train reserved for whites, moves to the segregated

⁸⁶ *Black Like me* (1961), as well as both Shirley Clark's *Cool World* (1964) and *My Baby is Black (Les Laches Vivent d'Espoir)* (1965), were also rejected in Virginia. Conversely, no studio film dealing with race was banned or eliminated between 1960 and the end of the board's tenure in 1968.

⁸⁷ This film was renamed in Virginia *The Respectful Tramp* at the Board's behest. Ira Carmen's interviews with censors indicate that the renaming of films by censor boards was not uncommon.

Negro car. A white man, the drunken son of a Southern senator, follows her. After getting rough with her, he is challenged by one of the Black men in a neighboring seat. The senator's son kills the Black man. The police, who are in cahoots with the senator, pin the murder on the dead man's African American traveling companion, Sidney (Walter Bryant). The police attempt to get an affidavit from Lizzy certifying that the dead Black man and his accused murderer tried to sexually attack her. After significant coaxing from Senator Clarke (Marcel Herrand), the police, and the senator's other son, Fred (Ivan Desny) (who poses as a john and seduces her), she signs the affidavit. This causes a lynch mob to form "in her defense" and provokes racial violence and the attempted lynching of a number of Black men. When the desperate Sidney comes to Lizzy's house, she shelters him out of remorse and eventually decides to tell the truth. The film ends with her running with the accused to the safety of the jeep of the National Guardsmen. They have been brought in to restore order. She shouts: "He's innocent! I can prove it!" The film, which began on the racially-contested, mobile terrain, ends similarly in the National Guardsmen's jeep, another "racialized vehicle," and this motif of movement bears with the film's implicit link of the vagabond nature of both the prostitute's existence and the existence of marginalized African American accused. For all its instability, the film may have been too firm in its praise of the National Guard. In this contentious racial moment, the National Guard had a reputation in the South for impeding local custom and regional order because of its role in desegregation. This film promoted the National Guard as safe, stable, national presence by showing it as the salvation for both the African American man and the white prostitute, thus facilitating spectatorial relief at the escape of Lizzy and Sidney from a white Southern mob. This film and the modes of spectatorship it inspired were considered dangerous enough to ban in the intellectual capital of the South and the seat of the Confederacy.

Although the film clearly contained references to prostitution, this was not the reason that the film was banned in Virginia. According to the board, the film was banned because it “would tend to incite to violence,” a fact that would seem to suggest that the board read the film in terms of the racial violence in its early and later sequences.⁸⁸ The board first received an application from Times Film Corp., the distributor, on July 30, 1958. The film’s rejection was appealed on August 11, 1958, but because the board required a representative of the company be physically present for the appeal and the representative did not come, the film’s appeal was denied. The company reapplied on January 14, 1959. This time, the board consulted with the state attorney general, who advised: “The picture is, as you and the other members of your board have determined, one that is calculated to incite certain segments of the motion picture audiences to feelings of hatred and violence,” but still the attorney general found it “doubtful whether a rejection of the picture by your Board could be sustained in the Courts should an appeal be taken.”⁸⁹ In spite of this legal advice, and perhaps encouraged by the agreement of the attorney general with their view of the film’s inflammatory nature, the board again rejected the film—citing “a low moral theme throughout,” a justification that cast suspicion away from the racial reasons for ban.⁹⁰

In April of 1959, the film’s ban was appealed to the Richmond Circuit court and, by October 1959, Judge Hening, Jr. had agreed to take the case under consideration.⁹¹ The film case wasn’t heard until September 1960 and was eventually decided in February of 1961, almost three

⁸⁸ Print Elimination Record, Aug. 4, 1958. Newspapers also suggest this reason for deletion. Hugh Robertson of *The Richmond News Leader*, for example, suggests that “the censorship board’s action was not because the film was sexually provocative but rather because of its dealing with the race problem in the South” (*Richmond News Leader*, Feb. 25, 1961).

⁸⁹ Kenneth C. Patty, Assistant Attorney General, letter to Mrs. Russell F. Wagers, Feb. 5, 1959. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

⁹⁰ Mrs. Russell F. Wagers, letter to Mr. Felix J. Bilgrey, Feb. 6, 1959. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

⁹¹ Office Memo June 22, 1960, *Respectful Tramp* Case file. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

years after the initial application was filed. The defense attorney representing the film company, whose New York origins were mentioned in the newspapers, used an *anti-censorship* argument, proclaiming that “Virginia constitutional requirement” stated that “there can be no prior censorship in this state” rather than arguing against the “obscenity” of this particular film.⁹² Judge Hening disagreed with the film company attorney, basing his decision on the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling in another case involving Times Film Corp. (*Times v. City of Chicago*). That decision declared, using the precedent of *Near v. Minnesota*, that some forms of prior restraint were acceptable.⁹³ Although the Times company planned to appeal, they eventually dropped the appeal because the Virginia law included a clause limiting the time the distributor had a right to show a film after an application to the board had been submitted. The time would have expired before the case closed.⁹⁴ Although Times Film Corp. had submitted the film in 1958, by 1961, the film, censored for its racial content, was still banned in Virginia.

State censorship in the form of official rejection or punitive delay (when state courts might deem a film ultimately uncensorable) helped the Virginia State board to evade the U.S. high court’s prohibition on race-based censorship. Another important example of this is *I Spit on Your Graves*, whose local distributor, Audubon Films, also encountered insurmountable obstacles in its battle to overcome the VDMPC’s racially-based rejection. The film, based on a novel by white French author and jazz trumpeter Boris Vian, carried to the screen the thriller style that the novel had applied to the American “race problem.” As would be the case with the film’s 1978 namesake, the film coupled depiction of victimization with that of revenge.

⁹² “N.Y. Film Man Hits State Law,” *Richmond News Leader*, Sept. 12, 1960.

⁹³ Hugh Robertson, “Movie Ban Upheld by Judge Hening,” *Richmond News Leader*, Feb. 25, 1961.

⁹⁴ “Film Case Appeal Will Be Dropped,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, July 22, 1961.

I Spit on Your Graves showed lynching but with a *difference*. The early scenes of the film introduce us to Jimmie (uncredited), an African American boy—about 14 years old—who we see smiling and playing a harmonica with his older light-skinned brother, Joe Grant (Christian Marquand) on an industrial dock, somewhere in the South. In the following scenes, we see this same youth hanging from a tree, lynched for being in love with a white woman. Driven by the powerful if inexplicable logic of grief and revenge, a theme which James Baldwin rightfully claims the rest of the film fails to bear out, Joe gathers the body of his brother Jimmie and takes it to the Black section of town where he sets it aflame (see figures 32 and 33).⁹⁵ In these scenes, we as spectators have access to views of the lynched body, and a palpable presence and even intimacy with the dead that is absent in films like *Intruder in the Dust* (1949) and *Fury* (1936) where the lynched person miraculously survives. Unlike so many Hollywood films before, this film does not attempt to account for the inexplicable logic of the mob, nor does it exploit the action value of its violent acts of dehumanization. Rather, the film deals, if only briefly, with the reality much more central to Black experience of lynching: tragedy and disgust. It reveals the experience of standing in the wake of the dead, of handling dead bodies, being with the dead, of coping with the corporeal realities of death, giving viewers access to the attendant sense of loss. In presenting the body of the lynched one, effaced in previous film dramas, this film removes the lynched one from the space of the imaginary of horror and places him in the cold reality of immobile Black flesh: of lifelessness. By depicting the lynching as only a hanging (and not, apparently, a maiming), the film makes seeing its lynching victim possible and also denies lynching its spectacular value. enhancing in its stead its value for articulating mourning, sadness, and psychological trauma. The inexplicable, destructive act of burning the body, one that the victim's brother rather than the lynch mob enacts, presumably sets the town's Black quarters aflame, perhaps

⁹⁵ James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Delta/Random House, 2000), 38-40.

both literally and figuratively. It acts as a beginning to revenge and as a revolutionary sign of Joe's agentic transformation of his brother's body into fodder for his own rage. The rest of the film, Joe will use his lightness (both his light skin and his consequently easy mobility) to allure white women into acts of miscegenation, becoming a "serial miscegenator" as revenge for his brother's killing.



Figure 34 I Spit on Your Graves (1959)



Figure 35-I Spit on Your Graves (1959)

The film mixes up its historical iconography, juxtaposing a cacophony of American historical icons in ways that, while initially jarring for an American audience, are ultimately evocative. The African American sections of town appear more like slave quarters than like contemporary living conditions, but these ultimately give us a sense of the rural nature of the South. Mixing the

plantation iconography with the iconography of emergent Black power has a startling but simultaneously meaningful effect of morphing the racism of the past with the present.

Virginia banned the film in toto, rejecting it before the formal application had arrived at the office.⁹⁶ Why specifically might the Virginia board have opposed the film? Like *The Respectful Prostitute*, *I Spit on your Graves* condemned the South and Southern-style civil rights violations. The film also showed miscegenation, but a *kind* of miscegenation that was particularly subversive in its implication. As we shall see in the coming chapters, it was increasingly the *type* of miscegenation that mattered to censors and to the industry. *I Spit on Your Graves* featured surreptitious miscegenation—miscegenation by guile rather than by (white) choice. What is more, these acts of interracial sexuality show the supraracial power of the Black passing subject in the act of masquerade—rather than the typical tragic entrapment, discovery, and relegation to social smallness we see in films like *Imitation of Life*, *Lost Boundaries*, and *Pinky*. The film also had a distinctly rebellious flare—depicting as it did, the raw, sadistic, immoral power of emergent “white,” “youth culture,” depicted in the film through the gangs Joe encounters once he has gone North to Trenton. However, it was also, likely, the frank and counter-normative depiction of lynching that bothered the board because it, more than other depictions of lynching, condemned the *Southern* mob by its focus on the repercussions of lynching for Black people rather than on the errant mob psychology. By *blending* these various threatening themes and palpable images, the film came to epitomize the social problems that could not be shown on screen and to embody the censors’ worst nightmare. In Memphis, where the film was banned, and an exhibitor showed the film in defiance of the ban in order to challenge censorship, the board held the position that the film was “obscenity for obscenity’s sake. It was merely an appeal to prurient

⁹⁶ The reels had arrived before the application. Margaret Gregory, letter to S. Davis, Nov. 27, 1962. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

interest.”⁹⁷ In Virginia, all appeals were apparently unsuccessful. Although the board, when refusing a license purportedly gave the opportunity for appeal, in reality, it was prohibitively expensive for many independent distributors to secure effective legal representation and to make the repeat trips to the board of censorship that were required for the appeals process. Through their bannings, their eliminations, and their delays, the VDMPC greatly shifted the meanings of these films and altered the spectatorial possibilities open to Black spectators on racial issues of central importance.

When it came to the racial politics of film censorship in Virginia, this evidence suggests that the VDMPC was conservative throughout the period from 1930 to 1960. It deleted instances of miscegenation and social equality between Blacks and whites. Also, like local censors in the Deep South, it censored in ways that would protect the image of the South and the Confederacy (and by extension “whiteness”) with their racially-biased system of law and order.⁹⁸ The lack of censorship of *Island in the Sun* coupled with the numerous deletions in *Band of Angels* and the outright banning of *I Spit on Your Graves* and *The Respectful Prostitute* indicates that the VDMPC, sheltered by its close relationship to the Attorney General, continued to ban films that condemn the South’s cruel and unjust treatment of African Americans, well after the Burstyn decision of 1952 made the legality of censorship questionable. In the late 1940s, the VDMPC did not censor Hollywood’s racial problem films, like *Pinky*, *Lost Boundaries*, *Home of the Brave*, and *Intruder in the Dust*. The only exception to this was *No Way Out*.⁹⁹ Instead, the board continued to censor Race films, requiring deletions from *Lucky*

⁹⁷ Ira Carmen, *Movies, Censorship and the Law*, 310.

⁹⁸ Binford, for example, censored *The Southerner* because of its low depiction of the South. See “Rochester Riles Cut Out of New Film; Lena Horne Tabooed for Past Two Years,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Feb. 9, 1946.

⁹⁹ From *No Way Out*, the board required deletion of the following scenes: the “mother’s conversation with son and daughter in law where John leaves home presumably to take a walk. B) delete from then on until Dr. Brooks is called on the telephone in answer to former call [to Alderman]. At this time he warns them of the mob gathering c) following this phone call delete until the hospital receives Emergency Call to prepare for injured patients d) in hospital scene, delete act of woman spitting into Dr. Brook’s face and evidence thereof.” Print elimination record dated Aug. 24, 1950. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

Millinder and his Orchestra (1948), *Boarding House Blues* (1948), *The Joint is Jumpin* (1949), and *Harlem Follies* (1950). While the board may have felt they could not openly reject Hollywood's "race problem" films, they apparently had greater comfort in banning non-Hollywood material, as the instances of *I Spit on Your Graves* and *The Respectful Prostitute* and the Race films suggest. Although these excisions did not entirely erase all racially progressive material from the screen, they represent a significant reduction in the impact of those films with tramontane and provocative ways of projecting African American social problems.

Exhibitor No-Bids as a Form of Southern Censorship of Racial Themes

Although the number of overall excisions applied to films in Virginia in the years 1940 to 1960 is very low by comparison with other state boards, organized, if unpublicized, exhibitor boycotts of films with racial themes were effective in limiting the traffic of these films into Southern states for both Black and white moviegoers. From an industry perspective, films were chosen for exhibition on the basis of two things: the films the distributors offered and those exhibitors chose to bid on. Exhibitor no-bids were instances where all exhibitors in a given locale decided to pass on bidding on a certain film. In the South, these acted to prevent audiences from seeing racial content that did not harmonize with the local/regional status quo. As *Variety* noted in 1959, Southern theaters not only relied on censors removing material but effectively banned films they did not approve of by simply not booking them.¹⁰⁰

Primary source evidence of this practice of "no-bids" is difficult to find, since records of theater exhibitors and distributors are rarely archived. Some evidence exists, however, that shows that exhibitors did sometimes, in this sense, act as censors. In 1937, *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*

¹⁰⁰ "Q.T. Boycott of Negro Films," *Variety*, Mar. 25, 1949, 17.

published an exposé on the Motion Picture Theatre Owners Association in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee that revealed the Association did not book films that showed “social equality” between Blacks and whites. Following the logic that guided Memphis censor Lloyd T. Binford, one that looked not for evidence of miscegenation but rather for signs of political and social equality under the law, these theater owners told reporters: “We have had a lot of complaints and unless our people can be warned in advance against shows where Negroes step out of character among white people, I’m afraid we are going to have a state censor board in Mississippi.”¹⁰¹ Of particular issue for the theater owners mentioned in this article were two films. *One Mile From Heaven* (1937) was problematic in its depiction of racial relations. In this film, Flora Jackson (Freda Washington) “finds” and adopts Sunny (Joan Carroll), a blonde, white Shirley Temple-esque child, calling the girl her own. Because of Jackson’s lightness, many people assume the child is hers. The film thus gestures towards not only social equality between Black and white, but also implicitly asserts the incongruence between skin-color and racial identity. Exhibitors also rejected *Artists and Models* (1937), in which “social equality” was demonstrated through a mixed dance number. The problem here is actually one of passing for Black—Martha Raye performs a sexy (if deriding) dance in Blackface amongst all Black performers. Neither of these films involved interracial romance, but instead featured equal and intimate social interactions between Blacks and whites.

Another exposé on Southern exhibitor censorship appeared in *Variety* as late as 1959, again focusing on Mississippi. Although the *Variety* reporter found that Mississippi theater owners systematically opted not to “give play-dates to any motion picture dealing with racist themes,” exhibitors found objectionable racial material much less openly political than the *Variety* article

¹⁰¹ “Theatre Owners Rap Racial Trend in Cast,” *Commercial Appeal*, Oct. 5, 1937.

described; if a film showed Black actors, if it discussed blood and race, “however remote from the school desegregation issue, the film is not wanted in Mississippi.”¹⁰² It was reported that, in the case of *Anna Lucasta* (1959), the film’s stars Eartha Kitt and Sammy Davis, Jr. tried to overcome these barriers by writing directly to the exhibitors pleading that they remove them.¹⁰³ Although exhibitor no-bids were a form of censorship little recognized or even acknowledged outside of an occasional film industry or local report, it seems clear that when in effect, they were a powerful form of censorship, particularly in the South, as the case of *Anna Lucasta* suggests. Because it was hidden, this exhibitor censorship was potentially more insidious and powerful than the state boards, which practiced open, public censorship.

The South was not the only locale where exhibitors opted out of certain racially provocative films, thus effectively limiting their public circulation. In a 1939 article in the African American paper *The Philadelphia Tribune*, journalist Billy Rowe astutely observed that the British film *Big Fella* (1937) starring Paul Robeson had “too much ‘Social Equality’ for Broadway,” noting that this was the only Robeson film that the New York City premiere theatres had not shown. The British produced film featured a Black romantic pair (comprised of Robeson and Elizabeth Welch), presenting the two as apparent social equals with whites. Although this Broadway “banning” resulted in a Harlem premiere for the film at the Apollo theatre, Rowe still articulated his criticism against Broadway exhibitors’ racism.¹⁰⁴ In addition, several newspapers in the North made clear that, in certain cases, films with racial themes were released, but only to the areas surrounding the city and not in a city’s

¹⁰² “Q.T. Boycott of Negro Films,” *Variety*, Mar. 25, 1959, 17.

¹⁰³ “Sammy Davis, Kitt Ask Dixie Exhibs ‘Discuss’ Brush-Off of ‘Anna Lucasta,’” *Hollywood Reporter*, Jan. 19, 1960.

¹⁰⁴ Billy Rowe, “Too Much Racial Equality for Broadway,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 3, 1939. See also “Broadway Not Interested in Robeson Film ‘of Love,’” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 18, 1939, 10. *The Chicago Defender* article states: “Frankly admitting that the film carries too much racial equality Broadway managers flatly refused to book ‘Big Fella,’ the European picture starring Paul Robeson and as a result the Apollo theatre in Harlem became a first run house for one of the season’s finest flickers.”

major movie houses. In so doing, the purity of the white gaze was maintained. For example, Al Monroe of *The Chicago Defender* notes that *Native Son* (1950) played “on the outskirts of Chicago, unable to crash through for public view on some one of the many screens about the city.”¹⁰⁵ In addition, the Interracial Commission in Maryland mentioned that the Maryland State Board of Censors allowed *The Well* a permit but only insofar as it would be shown “in a few theatres in this city.”¹⁰⁶

In part because of its realism, Washington D.C. and Southern theaters barred “Americans All,” a *March of Time* newsreel production that showed anti-Black prejudice.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, downtown theaters in Philadelphia would not show “The Negro Soldier.”¹⁰⁸ Images, particularly of African American soldiers as equal patriots and active participants in the war effort, were problematic for exhibitors as they showed African Americans in unprecedented displays of dignity.¹⁰⁹ At the level of exhibition, censorship stripped the screen of these images, even at the time when, as Koppes and Black have shown, the U.S. government (through the Office of War Information which read and commented on Hollywood scripts) was actively attempting to use motion pictures to boost what

¹⁰⁵ “Artistry of Stars Won’t Balance the Price We Will Have to Pay for ‘Native Son’ Plays,” *Chicago Defender*, Jul. 21, 1951, 22.

¹⁰⁶ Annual Report of the Maryland Interracial Commission, 1952, 16. Enoch Pratt Free Library. Maryland Collection. Baltimore, MD.

¹⁰⁷ “Dee Cee and Southern Theaters Refuse to Show Tolerance Film,” *Washington Tribune*, Sept. 16, 1944.

¹⁰⁸ “Downtown Theatres Refuse to Show ‘The Negro Soldier,’” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jun. 3, 1944.

¹⁰⁹ George Roeder, Jr, corroborates this account of exhibitor censorship and suggests it is symptomatic of a wider set of practices of racial censorship engendered during the war era. According to Roeder, not only were the photos African Americans sent home stamped “for personal use—not for publication” but newsreels of the Detroit riots were stifled by a white man who owned a Black theater chain owner named Stark: “Stark, a white who owned several movie theaters with a largely Black clientele, also worked as a ‘racial liaison’ for the Office of Emergency Management. During the 1943 Detroit riots he expressed concern because All-American News, a company that made newsreels for theaters with predominantly Black clientele, had sent cameramen to Detroit. He hoped the company would not show their footage because that ‘would serve only to spread further disunity and racial prejudice throughout the entire country.’ Stark reported that he had talked to the company head, who assured him ‘that all material in the reels will be favorable rather than inflammatory.’ Stark added, ‘I feel I can control this to a large degree, since contracts for the newsreel service to theaters which I control personally will represent a large percentage of the total income possibilities of the project.’ He exaggerated his own economic power, but Stark’s position was consistent with that of others in government and business on whose support All-American depended. The company never ran a story on the Detroit riots.” See “Missing on the Home Front: Wartime Censorship and Postwar ignorance,” *National Forum* 75, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 25-30.

studies had shown to be sagging African American loyalty.¹¹⁰ Whether in the South or North, exhibitor no-bids worked effectively as censorship—detering viewership of films with controversial racial themes.

Censorship on the Border: Maryland Race Politics and the Policy of Negotiation

In Maryland, the racial ideology that predominated in state politics reflected the racial fissures and contradictions born of the state's placement on the border between the American North and South. The 1950s were particularly a moment of flux for Maryland state government because the state was in the process of making the decision to do away with legalized segregation. According to Charles Magnum, Public Accommodations legislation fell into three broad categories: mandated segregation (which is what we saw in the case of Virginia), mandated civil rights statutes (which is what states like Massachusetts and many of the Northern seaboard states had put into place), and states where no law specified public accommodations requirements (these states were supposed that guidance was provided by the Federal Constitution).¹¹¹ Although a border state, Maryland was technically below the Mason-Dixon line, and segregation separated public accommodations until 1951 when, under liberal Republican Governor Theodore McKeldin, many of the statutes segregating public accommodations were repealed.¹¹² Thereafter, although racially liberal legislation

¹¹⁰ Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black, "Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion Picture Propaganda in World War II" in *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, ed. Matthew Bernstein (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 130-156. According to Koppes and Black, "A survey carried out in early 1942 by the Office of Facts and Figures, a predecessor to OWI, asked Blacks whether they would better off under Japanese rule. Eighteen percent said the Japanese would treat them better; these Blacks believed 'the Japanese are also colored and, therefore, would not discriminate.' Thirty-one percent said treatment would be 'the same.' In short, nearly one half of respondents believed they would be at least as well off under Japanese rule. Only 28 percent believed they would be worse off," (132).

¹¹¹ Charles S. Magnum, *Legal Status of the Negro* (New Jersey: The Lawbook Exchange, 1940).

¹¹² C. Matthew Hill, "'We Live Not on What We Have': Reflections on the Birth of the Civil Rights Test Case Strategy," *National Black Law Journal* 19, Nat'l Black L.J., 175. See also, G. James Fleming, "Racial Integration in Education in Maryland," *The Journal of Negro Education* 25, no. 3 (Summer, 1956): 273-284. See also George C. Grant, "Desegregation in Maryland Since the Supreme Court Decision," *The Journal of Negro Education* 24, no. 3 (Summer 1955): 275-286, which gives a better portrait of Maryland before the desegregation decision. See also, "Inside Jim Crow," <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/scripts/jimcrow/insidesouth.cgi?state=Maryland>

marked the state's racial politics, concerns about miscegenation, stemming from increases in interracial contact in the wake of desegregation, were addressed in state legislation. As late as 1955 (and again in 1957), the state passed anti-miscegenation statutes and laws making it illegal for a white woman to conceive a mixed race child or for an African American to marry a white or Asian. These anti-miscegenation laws were not repealed until 1967.¹¹³ On the other hand, Theodore McKeldin ran in his second gubernatorial campaign on openly anti-segregationist lines, telling voters that he, unlike his opponent, racially intolerant Harry Clifton Byrd, a member of the political Virginia Byrd family,¹¹⁴ stood "for the law," a statement that led the Ku Klux Klan to burn a cross on his lawn.¹¹⁵

Given a sizable victory over Byrd, McKeldin pursued policies that were, for their time, relatively racially progressive, reconfiguring (and renaming) the Maryland Interracial Commission in 1951, and working actively for state level civil rights legislation.¹¹⁶ This Interracial Commission was influential in catalyzing the long sought for integration of the downtown Baltimore Ford theater.¹¹⁷

The Maryland statute that created the Maryland State Board of Motion Picture Censors (which I will hereafter refer to as MSBMPC) dates back to 1916.¹¹⁸ Complete records of excision for Maryland were available starting only at 1945, however, making it difficult to comment on the patterns of racial state censorship before that juncture. In keeping with state-level racial politics, Maryland censorship did not strictly follow the white supremacy, pro-Confederate policy of Virginia's

¹¹³"Inside Jim Crow,"<http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/scripts/jimcrow/insidesouth.cgi?state=Maryland>

¹¹⁴ "Curly Up," *Time Magazine*, Mar. 1936.

¹¹⁵ The verbal sparring between McKeldin and Byrd is given in "Desegregation Hot Spots," *Time Magazine*, Oct. 25, 1954, Digital archive (no pagination). The incident with the burning cross is given in "McKeldin's Fiery Cross Investigated," *Washington Post*, Oct. 8, 1957, A22.

¹¹⁶ *Civil War on Race Street*, 86. *Maryland Governors*, 288.

¹¹⁷ "Baltimore Theater Drops Jim Crow Policy," *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 16, 1952, 23. According to Robert Headley, this theater, which was located at 320 W. Fayette Street and operated from 1861-1964, was "built by and named after John T. Ford, who also operated the more famous Ford Theater in Washington." From 1942-1964, though, the theater was operated by Morris Mechanic. Robert Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004* (Jefferson, N.C.: MacFarland and Company, 2006), 278-9.

¹¹⁸ Neville Hunnings, *Film Censors and the Law*, 181.

board. The MSBMPC's activities and excisions, as well as the overall design and praxis of censorship in the state, reflect a conflicted racial ideology. Repression of progressive scenes and images (like those showing miscegenation) coexisted with liberal textual politics and practices in the board's history from 1940 to 1960. They simultaneously strove to include images of racial "others" in film and the voices of the Black populace in their decisions. However, they rigorously structured and controlled the terms of that inclusion so as not to damage age-old racial hierarchies. For example, the board had an African American film inspector, Sadie Dorsey (although she was paid less than the whites on staff).¹¹⁹ The board may also have had a Black film reviewer in its Baltimore office.¹²⁰ Still, the board also regularly asked local law enforcement officials to review films with interracial themes that they thought might incite Black spectators. Like McKeldin, with whom the board was regularly in contact (as they were required by law to report to him), the MSBMPC sought Black inclusion and a liberalizing of white produced images of Blacks without cost to the power base of whites or to white racial ideology.

¹¹⁹ Salaries are recorded in carbon copy in the governor's file. Dorsey made \$1,000 while all others made \$1,200 or \$1,500.

¹²⁰ Mr. William C. Wright, the Board's film reviewer in the 1940s and 1950s, may have been African American. He was asked to inspect Negro theatres in 1947 after Sadie Dorsey, Black film inspector, left her post (July 10, 1947). He is also relayed a message to the board from African American Rev. Ward D. Yerby (who is listed in *THE FIRST COLORED Professional, Clerical and Business Directory of Baltimore City 29th Annual Edition, 1941-1942 Volume 519*, Annapolis: Maryland State Archives, 12). Although Wright seems not to have been mentioned in association with any other of the Board's decisions, Wright repeatedly picked up on offensive uses of the word "nigger" in both *Phenix City Story* and *West of Zanzibar* and, the board's minutes record, reported these violations of censors' policy to the board. The film reviewer's job was to screen all films and to make "recommendations to the Board of Censors in reference to licensing pictures" on the basis of this as to what films should be reviewed. Job Description, "Motion Picture Reviewer," July 31, 1940. Governor's Papers, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD. This reviewer had administrative and suggestive power over films and would have been able to flag those elements that would be offensive to the board, a fact which may have led the board to be more sensitive to African American perspectives on film. *The Baltimore Afro-American's* entertainment columnist E.B. Rea also indicated that the Board had a colored member when he wrote about his shock that *The Well* would be cut because of its racial theme. "Encores and Echoes," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Nov. 10, 1951.

Racial Excisions and the Maryland Board, 1944-1960:¹²¹

Race was an important part of the MSBMPC's excisions; between 1945 and 1960, of the board's 1,069 actions with regard to film (eliminations, screenings, rescreenings, conferences, rejections, etc.), 122 (or roughly 11 percent) of the board's actions had to do with African Americans or Black/white interracial contact. This is not counting the many censored films that dealt with Mexican, Native Americans, or other ethnic or racial groups. The excisions from 1945 to 1960 in Maryland can be usefully grouped into two eras, pre- and post-1949. Before 1949, the vast majority of excisions of African American scenes, images, and dialogue were made on "Race films," which were not, with a few important exceptions, obviously political, nor did they deal with Black/white interracial contact. Instead the vast majority of these Black cast films were censored on the basis of their presentation of Black sexuality. After 1949, the MSBMPC's cutting and banning of Black cast films abated and the films censored by the board were films with interracial issues.

"Race films": White Definitions of Moral Propriety and African American Culture

There appears to have been no problems from 1945 to 1949 with the use of the word "nigger" in Maryland. No record of deletions of the word between 1945 and 1949 were found. Indeed, none of the board's deletions in this era explicitly mention African Americans or race. The vast majority of pre-1949 eliminations in Maryland were not, as might be expected, of any patently controversial racial material, but were rather of films that were racially marked, i.e., Black-cast Race films. Race films were censored at a much higher rate than white films. Maryland censorship of these films does not indicate the "liberal" trends we would later see when the board was under the chairmanship of Sydney Traub and, after him, Morton Goldstein.

¹²¹ Although in the case of the other censor boards I have analyzed there was substantial evidence of early racial deletions based records other than elimination orders, in Maryland even these supporting documents only provided evidence of substantial racial deletions dating back to 1944.

Over the course of four years—from 1945 to 1948 (after which Maryland censorship of Race films all but stopped)—thirty-two Black-cast films required excisions, which, according to the rate of production, is an extremely high number.¹²² Keeping in mind that censors could not possibly screen every minute of all the films they received, and due to the quantity of small deletions, it seems likely that the censor board kept a close watch on—perhaps even automatically screening—Black films. Perhaps it was the names of these films, names like *Dirty Gertie from Harlem* (1946), *One Round Jones* (1946), and *Juke Joint* (1947) that often connoted misbehavior or “hailed” mental images of crime or night club motifs that formed the basis for this censorial scrutiny.

Although the MSBMPC may have scrutinized Black films, Black filmmakers and distributors continually attempted to evade censorship, eschewing the pleasantries and efforts to curry favor that the major studios used. Black film distributors seem to have repeatedly resubmitted the same precensored versions of films—even after elimination orders had been meted out upon previous release.¹²³ This indicates that African American distributors were often seeking to circumvent censorship or hoping the board would miss those elements deemed censorable upon previous submission. This also forced the board to both consult their records about previous deletions and to rescreen these films each time that they came in to make sure that censorable elements were eliminated. In short, this tactic of incessant resubmission of uncensored prints for the MSBMPC’s review made more work for the board and increased the possibility of Black films escaping censorship.

¹²² “Negroes Movie-Conscious; Support 430 Film Houses,” *Motion Picture Herald*, Jan. 24, 1942, 33.

¹²³ Elimination orders presented years after a film’s first release call for the same deletions, indicating that cuts were not permanently made to the print, but that distributors tried to get previously omitted material passed by sending the complete, uncensored print to censors.

Recurrently appearing in the elimination files of the MSBMPC were Black producers Spencer Williams and Oscar Micheaux and the production company All-American News productions, which produced Black newsreels. Spencer Williams's films seem to have been more of a problem than Micheaux's, as most of the films the former produced suffered eliminations in Maryland. The board's records only go back to 1945, and most of Micheaux's films predated that, so determining the board's reactions to Micheaux's films is difficult, but his 1948 film *The Betrayal* did require special consultation with the state's attorney general.¹²⁴

Although the MSBMPC deletions from Race films between the years of 1945-1949 were purportedly non-racial, it is difficult to believe that the board members simply suspended their racial ideology for these films and, indeed, a number of patterns that point to racial judgments and assumptions are evident among these deletions. Black films in Maryland were repeatedly censored for physical exposure or nudity. Concern about exposure of the female body (of legs, breasts, etc.) was not, of course, limited to Black films;¹²⁵ from my examination, it is clear that the board's policy was to delete all instances of *close-ups* of exposure, which seems to suggest they sometimes allowed exposure at a distance. With Black films, however, little consideration was given to the overall logic of the film and its narrative meaning and moral outcome. Sometimes the MSBMPC eliminated exposure from films where such exposure was condemned by the narrative, and thus served a moral purpose. For example, Spencer Williams' religious film *Go Down Death* (1944) told of a preacher wrongfully slandered for sexual sin by a cadre of unloyal parishioners had compensating moral

¹²⁴ See board minutes, July 1, 1948. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, Md.

¹²⁵ In African American films, concern was about physical exposure of women's bodies in most cases. The only exception I found was the case of the Joe Louis v. Tony Galento fight film, released by Twentieth Century Fox/Sporting Club, where we enter "Galento's dressing room" and the boxer's "robe falls and sex is exposed." Board minutes, April 9, 1948. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, Md.

values. Leg exposure of one of the women involved in the set-up was cut from the film, even though this act was clearly frowned upon by the narrative itself.¹²⁶

In addition to disciplining the sexuality of the Black subject in front of the camera by “remedying” exposure, the censors also seem to have desired to discipline the camera itself. On two occasions, with regards to a Mantan Mooreland feature, *The Dreamer* (1948), and Cab Calloway’s *Hi-De-Ho* (1937), the board omitted camera movement that followed the lead of an illicit male gaze. Out of *Hi-De-Ho*, the board cut the “scene showing Cal Calloway looking down front of Minnie the Moocher’s dress and accompanying remark: ‘Sure I see something,’” and shortened “to a flash, scene showing exposure of Minnie’s Breast as she lies on the floor.”¹²⁷ It was onscreen Black male looking—especially when the camera followed this look, even when the look was directed at a Black female—that the board found dangerous. With regards to *The Dreamer* (which starred Mantan Moreland and Mabel Lee), the censors were again concerned about the camera’s (Black?) male gaze and cut “entire sequence of dancers coming from the beautifier machine where camera pans dancer’s thighs and breasts.”¹²⁸ From the film *Juke Joint* the censors insisted that “in keyhole scene, [the distributor] eliminate view of girl being whipped by her mother, showing her dress lifted and exposing her under garments.”¹²⁹ Although the board gave no explanation for these cuts, they appear to have been made on the grounds of indecency. While the cinema was arguably dominated by the male gaze, the African American male gaze nevertheless seems to have troubled those censors who imagined it.

¹²⁶ The leg exposure occurs in the scene where a preacher is set up for sexual scandal by a jealous parishioner. The board eliminated “scene where girl sits on corner of desk, while talking to preacher and pulls her dress up, showing her bare legs.” The leg exposure, which may have been excised out of deference to clergy, was not meant to titillate (as was sometimes the case with dance numbers in African American films), but had a clear narrative purpose for exposing the corruption of the women involved and the false accusation of the preacher. See board minutes, Jan. 2, 1948. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

¹²⁷ See Board minutes, Jan. 14, 1947. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

¹²⁸ See Board minutes Nov. 7, 1947. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

¹²⁹ *Juke Joint* (distr. Sack), Board minutes, Aug. 29, 1947. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

The vast majority of excisions to Black films came in the area of song and dance; fourteen of the African American films excised between 1945 and 1949 involved dance scenes.¹³⁰ In all of these, some portion of a song and dance number was omitted, and in many cases, the entire scene in which the musical number occurred was removed from the film. Another major point of excision was vernacular speech that the board thought contained sexual innuendo. In five cases this was the basis for excision. For example, in Soundies release PX-2589, in the subject "I do it bad and that ain't good," Maryland censors eliminated the following words from the "Negro girl's" song: "But when the fish are jumpin' . . . and Friday rolls along . . . my man and me, we ginsome and sin some, and then some" (original ellipsis). From *Go Down Death*, censors called for elimination of the "underscored dialogue, 'But you kids will have to admit that he is cute! And if he can stop being a preacher long enough, I may let him come up to see me sometime. Gee, but I could really go to town with that guy!'" The censors allowed the phrase "come up and see me sometime," one popularized by Mae West, but disallowed the following more vaguely sexual allusion, which suggests that censors sometimes missed—or allowed—certain sexually provocative dialogue, perhaps because they did not understand it.¹³¹

¹³⁰ *Murder on Lennox Ave*, Board minutes, Aug. 25, 1945; *Toot that Trumpet* (distr. Sack Amusements), Board minutes, May 9, 1945; *Romance on the Beat* (distr. All American Newsreels), Board minutes, May 24, 1946; *Bronze Venus* (Million Dollar), Board minutes, April 18, 1947; *Swanee Showboat* (Ajax), Board minutes, Aug. 29, 1947; *Jivin' in Bebop* (William Alexander), Board minutes, Oct. 10, 1947; *The Dreamer* (Astor Pictures), Board minutes, Nov. 7, 1947; *Ebony Parade* (R.M. Savini); *It Happened in Harlem* (All American Newsreel), Board minutes, Jan. 23, 1948; *Mantan Messes Up* (Toddy), Board minutes, June 11, 1948; *Blood of Jesus* (Amergo-Spencer Williams), Board minutes, July 6, 1945; *St. Louis Blues* (rerelease, RKO), Board minutes, Sept. 26, 1947; *Reet Petite and Gone* (Astor Pictures), Board minutes, Nov. 14, 1947; *Juke Joint* (distr. Sack), Board minutes, Aug. 29, 1947. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

¹³¹ The suggestion of African American sexuality was apparently an ensuing concern for the board in Maryland as they deleted the following from *Carmen Jones*: "R4 B In the sequence revealing Carmen and Joe illicitly living together in the same bedroom, eliminate all views of Joe blowing his breath on Carmen's bare toes immediately followed by his fervently kissing her bare leg almost to the knee. This will include the following dialogue: Carmen: 'Blow on 'em, Sugar. Make 'em dry faster.' Carmen: (as Joe's Leg kissing approaches her knee) 'You can turn the heat off now. Man that tickles . . . you are some harmonica player.' R5 A In the dialogue between Frankie and Carmen, eliminate the underscored words on Frankie's following line: 'Keep one man for de ride, one for the money.'" See minutes for Dec. 9, 1954. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

In at least two cases, the verbal material eliminated (in song or dialogue) contained a suggestion of miscegenation. For example, in *Fight that Ghost*, censors had problems with these lyrics: "A brown skin gal is the best gal after all. A yellow gal will throw you boy and that ain't all. Every night when you come home another mule is in the stall. Now the world will tell you, a brown skin gal is all right, because a yellow gal 25 years old will draw up like a little tripe." The excision from the song is apparently based on its sexually provocative nature, but it also may have raised the question of where "yellow skinned gals" came from. At the very least, it admitted color differentiation *within* the Black community that might trouble the notion of the color line. In addition, in the film *One Round Jones*, the following suggestive material, which alluded—comically—to both miscegenation and to adultery was excised: "Wife: 'You know that nice yellow [-haired] collector used to come to our house? Well, just before she was born, he chased me.' Husband: 'From the way she looks, he caught you.'" ¹³²

In general, violence typically was not excised by the board—indeed, only roughly sixty deletions were based on violence between the years of 1945 and 1949, while the vast majority were based on sexuality. Nevertheless, not only violence itself, but the mere threat of it was removed from Leo and Harry Popkins' Black cast film *Gang War* (1939) upon its rerelease in 1947. ¹³³ While the

¹³² In the Virginia state Board of Censors, the line read "Yellow-haired" but one of the two boards was apparently not quoting verbatim. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Record Center, Richmond, VA.

¹³³ Deletions for *Gang War* follow: "R-1 Scene shows Bill, one of the gangsters, shooting through window of café, after fist-fight. Eliminate scene showing Joey being hit by shot fired by Bill. R-3 In scene where Danny intimidates proprietor, eliminate the following dialogue: Prop: But I don't want a new machine. Danny: Then I'll have to convince you. Prop.: No you won't. I am convinced now. Eliminate all action in this scene showing Danny intimidating the proprietor with broken ketchup bottle. R-6 Eliminate entire scene showing Meade shooting man at pin ball game and accompanying dialogue, "Boys, we have got some exterminating to do." R-7 Dialogue cue Meade: You ain't going anywhere, Baron. Baron: Stammering and stuttering unintelligible speech, pleading with Meade for his life. Then Meade is shown shooting Baron and his aides. Eliminate all the action after the line "This is my party, Danny," thereby eliminating the actual killing of Meade and all firing of shots. Note: The following did not appear in this print and shall not appear in any print in Maryland: R-2 Scene where opposition mobsters take Meade and henchmen for ride in Meade's car at time when Meade is on way to Lou Baron's office. Eliminate: Scene where car drives into garage, all inference of shots being fired at opposition mobsters eliminated. R-5 Scene where Danny and henchmen walk into back room where men and playing cards and the shooting of these men altered as follows: Alteration does not show men playing cards but merely shows the gunmen waling into a room and shooting but does not show that any men might be the targets. Newspaper montage

board's pattern of elimination appeared non-racial, Black films were censored at a higher rate—even films with religious and moral themes. In addition, whether intentional or not, Black film distributors were disproportionately affected by censorship, as they had neither funds nor the staff to talk censors out of deletions that could only further strain the shoe-string financing that often characterized these operations.

Censor and Governor Concerns Over Documentary and “Historical” Images of Black-White Interracial Contact Before 1949

The unusual racial politics of Maryland were also demonstrated in the censorship—by both the Governor and the board—of racially-oriented newsreels and educational shorts. MSBMPC correspondence files indicate that, in some cases, it was not the censor board but the governor himself who prompted censorship. The first “historical” film with racial deletions I could find on record was the 1943 rerelease of *Birth of a Nation* (1915). *Birth of a Nation* was rereleased numerous times in Maryland without censorship, but seemed conspicuously present whenever racial strife was active. A clarion call for the white backlash movements, this film never failed to stir the NAACP's ire and it did so in 1943, in the year of the Detroit and Harlem riots.

The Maryland board conferenced with a number of groups in connection with the censorship and release of *Birth of a Nation*. From the governor's files, it appears that the conference was brought about by protests spearheaded by the CIO. Utilizing cultural power and government attention afforded by the recent riots and the more local harbinger of African American militancy—

shots which read as follows: LOCAL POLICE UNABLE TO STEM CRIMEWAVE Eliminated. CITIZENS IN TERROR AS LAW SEEMS POWERLESS Eliminated. Scene showing Bill (Baron Gangster) montage shot-intimidating proprietor of store, and then shooting thru doorway altered as follows: Scene now only shows Bill shooting through door and does not show proprietor at all during montage shot. R-5 Montage shot of night clubs. Entire montage scenes showing girl doing snake dance is eliminated. Jungle number altered and substituted by reel approved by Hay's office which shows comparatively little close-up and majority of shots of solo dancer are overhead crane shots.” MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

the Point Breeze conflict,¹³⁴ the local NAACP, CIO, and Urban League all protested the film's rerelease and called for its censorship, but the CIO led the fight against the film, negotiating directly with the board the conditions under which the film could be shown.¹³⁵ Owing to a particularly passionate plea by the Peerless Distributing company, the film's distributor, for freedom from censorship, or perhaps because of her own pride at negotiating a universally acceptable cuts for the film, the MSBMPC's chair, Helen Tingley, who would serve on the board from 1943-1948,¹³⁶ decidedly *avored* showing the film, if in drastically revised, maimed, and, if you will permit, castrated form. In consultation with the local NAACP, the local Urban League, and the local CIO, Tingley recut the film to please working class and Black audiences. In her recut version, the Klan was entirely eliminated from the picture. Tingley reported that after a screening at the Roxy, a white theater,¹³⁷ a screening attended by forty people, "mostly Negroes and the CIO," it was decided that the film could

¹³⁴ Sherry Ortner, a Baltimore historian, records that hiring of African Americans for skilled labor both at the Bethlehem Steel company's factory in Baltimore caused white laborers to strike and high interracial tensions among working class people. The "Point Breeze conflict," referred to specifically in letters from the censor board to the governor, was shorthand for a race-strike prompted by the Western Electric Company's interpretation of the federal Fair Employment policy. As a result of the FEPC the company made massive changes in hiring practices. The company, which had no Black employees at their Point Breeze plant, hired roughly 1,700 among their 7,000 employees. They also removed all white and colored signs from the toilets, causing white women workers to walk off the job and—a few days later—to organize a strike backed by the Point Breeze Employment Association, an organization to which African Americans, ironically, paid dues. The Employment Association, with a hallmark lack of precision and human understanding about the causes of riots, argued that these integrated working conditions themselves would produce "race riots" and "incidents." In this case, however, neither the War Labor Board nor the Black employees stood down: Five hundred Black employees crossed the picket lines. Sherry Ortner, *Baltimore: The Building of an American City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), 364-5.

¹³⁵ Randal Tyus, executive secretary Baltimore Branch NAACP, telegram to Governor Herbert R. O'Connor, Dec. 16, 1943. The Baltimore branch of the NAACP wrote a telegram to the Governor. An undated telegram from Dr. J.E.T. Camper, chairman of the Citizen Committee for Justice even went as far as to mention that the film would "precipitate riots." By December 18, 1943, Benjamin Hance of the Board of Censors was involved—and concerned. Hance wrote the Governor after having spoken to him on December 17, 1943. He said that regardless of the fact that the "records of the Board indicated that it was received in 1917 and 1931 and licensed in January, February, and March of 1940 and that revocation of the license might bring great publicity with this historical picture," nevertheless, "we feel it should not be exhibited at this time in view of the Point Breeze situation and other similar cases throughout the country after seeing the same." Hance, letter to Governor Herbert R. O'Connor, Dec. 18, 1943. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹³⁶ For Tingley's start date with the MSBMPC, see *Baltimore Sun* Clipping file, article dated July 9, 1967. Enoch Pratt Free Library. Maryland Collection. Baltimore, MD. Annual Reports suggest that she stopped activities with the board in 1948.

¹³⁷ According to the Board of Censors' records, the Roxy was located at 2239-41 E. Fayette Street, Baltimore Maryland. See list of Baltimore City theaters 1-31-44. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, Md.

be shown, with acceptable advertising, and with the last three reels of the film eliminated in their entirety from the picture (beginning with the point where Lincoln is shot).¹³⁸ With these eliminations, “there will be not even a hoof beat of a KKK horse,” Tingley reported.¹³⁹ Although the board had made deletions to please people of color and labor leaders, they did not do so proudly. These cuts were all achieved, it appears, very informally, so as to avoid publicity. Tingley even mentions that the exhibitor had agreed to cut the print themselves so that they would not have to officially print an elimination order.

Ultimately, however, Governor Herbert O’Conor (D) and Tingley decided to ban the film, at the bequest of the CIO leaders who had changed their minds. Again Tingley and the Governor O’Conor used the tactic of asking the exhibitor to “voluntarily” withdraw the film, to create the least publicity possible surrounding the withdrawal of the film.¹⁴⁰ The CIO, not the NAACP, made the most impassioned protest, because, they stated, “the Klan was against the unions,” although the film displays only the Klan’s violent and retributive ire for African Americans.¹⁴¹ Despite the

¹³⁸ The letter from Mrs. Tingley read, “Under the championship of Dr. Sidney Hollander, [the audience members] agreed to the showing of the picture with the elimination of the last 3 reels—or in the story—from the death of Lincoln to the end of the story. I understand that the negroes will formally request the Censor Board to order these eliminations as a precaution against the complete picture being shown at some other theater in Maryland.” Helen Tingley, letter to Governor O’Conor, Undated letter. File: “Motion Picture Censors [sic] Board (Birth of a Nation Controversy),” Governor’s Papers. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹³⁹ Ibid. Tingley went on, “Mr. Zeller, business manager of the Roslyn theater will cut the picture for the Jan 5th showing, as the result of the morning’s discussion. I am going to try to get him a good feature picture to build up his show—as a special reward.”

¹⁴⁰ Minimizing publicity is why Tingley tightened inspectors’ watch for the film. In an undated letter in the governor’s file, Helen Tingley wrote, “If we avoid a court case, we avoid the attendant publicity and the consequent flaring up of further racial antipathy.”

¹⁴¹ Tingley to Governor O’Connor, Undated letter written on “Sunday.” The CIO also wrote to the governor, stating: “‘Birth of a Nation’ vigorously demonstrates the rise of the Klu-Klux-Klan [sic] and its vicious attacks upon the Negro [sic] people. Recent outbreaks between Negroe [sic] and White people in cities all over the country have been a severe blow to the war effort. The creation of race hatred in the United States is a weapon used by Hitler. . . . Baltimore is one of these unfortunate cities where the slightest spark will touch off the dynamite between the Negroe [sic] and White population. The cause for the present strike at the Western Electric Company in Baltimore is definitely stirring race hatred amongst the Black and white races. We cannot afford to have other vital war plants in Maryland shut down because of racial disorders.” (William W. Essing, letter to Herbert R. O’Connor [sic], Dec. 20, 1943). Both Mrs. Helen Tingley (who wrote on December 15, 1943 that “there is some justice in the claim the CIO makes concerning the raising

unprecedented lack of NAACP influence in the records of discussion of this film and the final decision of the board, given the recent racially-charged labor disturbances, the local alliance of labor leaders and African Americans is noteworthy and politically important. It is important also that African Americans were heard by the state censors, in the wake of their local militant stand for their rights and the nationally resonant Detroit and Harlem riots. J. Harvey Kerns of the Urban League wrote to the governor, "As pointed out during the conference, the picture has in it certain elements which could well be the spark which would set off a conflagration of racial conflicts which would be disastrous to our entire state." Using the African American rhetoric that called for victory against anti-Democratic thinking both at home and abroad, he went on, neither "Baltimore nor the State of Maryland can afford to allow anything which might create disunity to happen at this time when the greatest unity and cooperation are necessary to achieve total victory."¹⁴² The case of *Birth of a Nation* in the year of the Detroit riots set the precedent for future inclusion of African American interests in discussion about racially-charged images. It is important to note that, in this case, both African Americans and the CIO went beyond the state censors and appealed to the governor himself, who ultimately orchestrated and oversaw what would be the first repression of the film in the state's history.

A year later, in 1944, Tingley sent a *Variety* newspaper clipping to Governor O'Connor.¹⁴³ It told of the excisions of African American scenes (showing Black troops in newsreels, and African American musicians in musicals) from films in Memphis. In the accompanying letter, Tingley wrote:

of the racial issue") and Benjamin Hance (who wrote, "Personally I hate to think I am abetting the desire of the CIO but must confess, think it right in the matter [sic]." on December 18, 1943) wrote to the governor that as much as they did not like the CIO's tactics, they concurred with the organization's statement about race relations. Governor's Papers. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁴² J. Harvey Kerns of the Baltimore Urban League, letter to Honorable Herbert R. O'Connor, Dec. 21, 1943. Governor's Papers. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁴³ O'Connor was the first Irish Catholic to hold the Governorship. He was governor from 1939-1947.

“In contrast with this hysterical attitude, the action of the Maryland Board in regard to the Birth of a Nation [sic], is noteworthy.”¹⁴⁴ Tingley was implying that Maryland censors, who had negotiated with the CIO, NAACP, and Urban League about the terms for releasing *The Birth of a Nation*, were much more racially progressive than the Memphis city film censors. In the same letter, the board also alerted the governor to *March of Time*'s series *Americans All*. The letter evidences an implied concern about social equality. The board had reviewed the previous week and had decided to pass without eliminations but felt the need to explain their decision to Governor O'Connor:

[It] deals first with the necessity for religious tolerance between Christians and Jews and later and in greater length with the necessity of 'human equalities' between the races. Its narrators carefully avoid the use of the phrase 'social equality', but social equality is implied in the film, showing classrooms with white and negro [sic] students. The issue skims the surface of this our greatest social problem but sketchy as it is, it may do an educational job with some bigoted individuals.¹⁴⁵

Accordingly, the board passed the film with no eliminations because, they said, with some relief, “the reel has nothing new to offer.”¹⁴⁶ Although the board was supportive of these short films that did not say social equality, the fact that they reported them to the governor indicates their concern over the films' racial potential.

No response by the governor is contained in the board or governor's papers, but the governor's skittishness over the race issue was also evidenced in discussions over the state's proposed promotion of the film shorts called *One Nation Indivisible* (1946). Although O'Connor did eventually sponsor these educational shorts, produced by the American Brotherhood of the National Conference for Christians and Jews, it was not without significant deliberation and concern about the Negro problem, as expressed in his correspondence with the Board. Board of Censors head

¹⁴⁴ Helen Tingley, letter to Governor Herbert R. O'Connor, July 24, 1944, 1. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Helen Tingley to O'Connor, July 24, 1944, 2. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

Tingley strongly assured governor aide Mr. Burbon that “the shorts (one minute each) are well done. They are restrained yet convincing and contain simple messages on religious tolerance which should be recognized by minority religious groups.”¹⁴⁷ But, she emphatically added, “they have no plea for *racial* tolerance—the negro question is not involved.”¹⁴⁸ Separating racial and religious interest became an important part of the state’s endorsement of these films.

These conversations about racial representation in the early 1940s demonstrate the board’s concerns about the potential of documentary images of interracial contact not only to motivate interracial strife, but also to create political problems for the governor and the state more broadly. The case of *The Birth of a Nation* also suggests the board’s willingness to bargain, however grudgingly, with labor and civil right’s organizations. The qualms over these films demonstrate a very different area of concern than the concerns over Black purity, morality, and the Black male gaze that were at issue in the board’s consideration of Race films. With the state sponsored short realist films, questions of audience perception of the state—and particularly of the state’s stance on the race problem—were of central and motivating concern. In the case of *The Birth of a Nation*, concern over Black and labor militancy was a key political motivation for racial censorship. In both the case of *Birth of a Nation* and the short films, as well as of African American films discussed in the previous section, it seems clear that the board’s role was to maintain racial conservatism on Maryland’s screens and to eliminate those racial images that might cause shock or controversy.

Maryland Racial Censorship after 1949

After 1949, there was an important shift in censorship in Maryland. Although local censor boards were often controlled by white Anglo Saxon Protestants, censorship in Maryland during the

¹⁴⁷ Helen Tingley, letter to Mr. Burboun of the governor’s office, dated “Tuesday.”

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

time from July 1, 1948 through 1960 was under the leadership of Jewish men: first, Sydney Traub, and succeeding him, Morton Goldstein. The consistent presence of Jewish leaders in film censorship efforts in Baltimore seems somewhat unique to Maryland and may have reflected Baltimore's own strong and vocal Orthodox Jewish community.¹⁴⁹ For example, the controversial and morally questionable film—*The Outlaw* (1948)—was reviewed by representatives not only from the Protestant and Catholic faiths, but also the Jewish faith.¹⁵⁰ In addition, the board invited a team of Jewish rabbis to give readings and censorship advice on *Marriage in the Shadows* (1949), one of the first postwar films to deal with the Holocaust.¹⁵¹ Maryland censors also held a conference with Jewish leaders to address the anti-Semitic elements in *Oliver Twist* (1948).¹⁵² The frequent consultation with Jewish leaders represents a significant departure from the assumption that censor boards were dominated by white Christian interests.¹⁵³

During this era, eliminations based on race shifted: concerns of the board about African American representation no longer focused solely on questions of sexual morality in Race films, but now focused on the textual and spectatorial trouble caused by interracial interaction. The board was particularly fastidious in its liberally motivated censorship of racial epithets. This was a moment of unprecedented emergence of Blackness (and interracial casts) in mainstream Hollywood filmmaking, a major racial problem film cycle: with the decline of the Black film industry, the majors began taking on African American subjects and themes with increasing frequency. Between May 1949 and

¹⁴⁹ Other states, including Ohio, consulted rabbis on moral questions.

¹⁵⁰ See board minutes, *The Outlaw*, Jan. 23 1947. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁵¹ See board minutes, May 25, 1949. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁵² See board minutes, June 13, 1951. MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁵³ The board even received a commendation from Leon Sachs, Executive Director of the Baltimore Jewish Council in 1951 for “the courtesies extended the Council” and “for rendering a ‘fine public service.’” They particularly mentioned the board’s “practices of acquainting interested groups of citizens with films that may be of special interest to them” which, they said, had “resulted in the promotion of harmony and better understanding in the community.” Board Minutes, Aug. 15, 1951. MSPBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

September 1952, there were a total of *eighteen* films dealing with interracial or inter-ethnic interactions censored by the Maryland board, many of these produced by majors as big budget first-run pictures.¹⁵⁴ By contrast, there were only four Black-cast films censored by the board during this time (*That Man of Mine* [1947], *Joint is Jumpin* [1949], *How 'Bout that Jive* [year unknown], and *The Big Fight* [year unknown]).

That said, there was a significant disparity in treatment of the non-major and major films dealing with race: the vast majority of those films dealing with race that were censored in Maryland in this period were non-Hollywood films. *Senza Pietà* (*Without Pity*), which was also banned in Ohio, was entirely rejected by the board but no reason was given. Two other films—both independently-produced mob violence films with a preproduction distribution deal from United Artists—were severely delayed in release (*The Well* by ten months and *Try and Get Me* [1950] by seven months).¹⁵⁵ This might be expected because non-Hollywood films were routinely subject to tighter state censorship because they were not always subject to Hollywood regulation under the Production Code. Only the major film companies were expected to voluntarily apply for a PCA seal. Independent companies could opt to apply for a seal (and, with it, a better chance at mainstream acceptance), but at some considerable expense.¹⁵⁶ These independent productions were important to

¹⁵⁴ This does not include films that were submitted to the board but not censored by them. It only includes those films that the board required eliminations from or rejected outright. *Blonde Captive* (1932) was rereleased, as was *Birth of a Nation*. It appears that the film distributors were making the most of this film cycle by recycling old pictures that raised the racial theme.

¹⁵⁵ On *The Well*, see the boards minutes from October 3, 1951, when the film was first reviewed, and the board's minutes for August 22, 1952, when the license was finally granted. For *Try and Get Me* (AKA *Sound of Fury*), see board minutes for November 30, 1950, when the film when the first invitee screening was set up and the board minutes for May 21, 1951, when the film elimination order was processed. MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁵⁶ It appears that the PCA charged non-member companies for PCA assessment and seal, although it is not clear exactly how this fee was assessed. However, a letter from Joe Breen to Harry Popkin (May 1, 1952) indicates a PCA complaint regarding "non-payment of fees" for the films *The Well* (\$1000), *The Second Woman* (\$1500), and *Champaign for Caesar*. *Champaign for Caesar* PCA File. Margaret Herrick Library. AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA. These prices may have been prohibitively expensive for non-major film companies who operated on very tight budgets.

developing constructions of race in the postwar era. They often challenged Hollywood's racial conventions and narrative strictures. However, because of the delays in release and censorship that these smaller films suffered, they had a significant disadvantage in exhibition added to an already substantial handicap in securing distribution.

In films like *Lost Boundaries* (1948) and *Pinky* (1949), the Maryland board did not see miscegenation as "censorable," but they did in Oscar Micheaux's 1948 *Betrayal*. This suggests that the separate racial status and particular censorial attention allotted to Black produced films had not entirely changed under Traub's reign as chairman. In fact, Traub was so alarmed by the film that he called upon the attorney general for "an interpretation of [the board's] powers in regard to the elimination of exploitation of [the] sociological problem [of miscegenation] upon the screen."¹⁵⁷ A representative of the attorney general's office not only spoke with Traub, but eventually exacted the eliminations himself, showing the close relationship between the board and the attorney general and also the delicacy of the issue.¹⁵⁸ Interestingly, however, the excisions had more to do with the question of passing than of miscegenation per se. In addition to eliminating sacrilegious references to the Deity, the board, under advisement of the attorney general, eliminated two sexual references. The first was the indecent suggestion in the line by film character, Preble: "Hello, Eden. How's your hammer hanging?" And the second, "He doesn't smoke, he hasn't kissed a woman in years, perhaps he's . . ." which suggested homosexuality. Most importantly, the board required the excision of the verbal recounting of the story of a light-skinned African American man passing for white in the military, one startlingly similar to the story told in *Lost Boundaries*, but with quite a different end:

¹⁵⁷ See board minutes, July 1, 1948. MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁵⁸ See board minutes, July 2, 1948. MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

Eden: When the War broke out, he was drafted and they put him in a colored regiment which he tried to get out of. His wealthy banker brothers tried too. The congressman tried.

Deborah: Then what happened?

Eden: They took the case to their Senators, who went all the way to the Secretary of War. But the War Department after looking at him—and his negro father, deduced he was a colored man and ordered him to remain in the colored regiment.

Confronted with having to go through the war as a colored man, he stood before a mirror in his tent one night, took a German Luger that he had acquired and blew his brains out.¹⁵⁹

I have noted that the Maryland board excised images of miscegenation only from foreign films. There was one exception. The board excised the lines connoting miscegenation from *No Way Out*. The board order, cited here verbatim, called for the elimination of Ray's words to Edie as he grabs her in the darkness of her apartment, in what is strongly coded as a rape scene: "Hello miss Johnson [sic]. We kept it dark in here because we thought you'd like it better if you couldn't tell we were white."¹⁶⁰ In addition, in the scene where Edie visits Ray in the hospital, the board deleted a line that ostensibly referred to doctor/patient touch but had miscegenetic undertones and included racial insults: "Would you like one [a Black doctor] putting his dirty Black hands all over you?" In addition, the phrase "suck around a white man" (spoken by Ray and referring to Edie or to Luther) was objected to by the PCA and removed by Maryland. Thus, like Ohio, the Maryland board censored texts containing miscegenation on an uneven and selective basis, but was more likely to censor its depiction in non-Hollywood films.

The only other films with miscegenation as a theme that the board appears to have censored during this era were *Italian* films: as previously mentioned, one of these, *Senza Pietà*

¹⁵⁹ See board minutes, Aug. 8, 1948. MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁶⁰ This is actually a mis-quote. In the film, Ray actually says, "Hello Mrs. Johnson," a line that suggests that Edie has married someone with the last name Johnson. See Board minutes, Aug. 30, 1950. MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

(also banned in Ohio), was entirely banned by the board. Also subject to excisions of lines of dialogue was *Angelo (Il Mulatto)* (1949), which told the story of Angelo, born of an extramarital relationship between an African American GI and a white, Italian woman whose husband was jailed at the time of conception. Finally, the rereleased Gigli film *Ave Maria* (1936) was subject to censorship because of a scene (that the board required cut) that very loosely suggested miscegenation. The scene in *Ave Maria* (see frame captures below) showed Claudette (Käthe von Nagy), a night club singer, having a dream referred to by censors as a “flash back of colored man seated next to white woman at table in cafe as he leans against her and puts his face practically against her face, while lighting another white girl's cigarette.”¹⁶¹

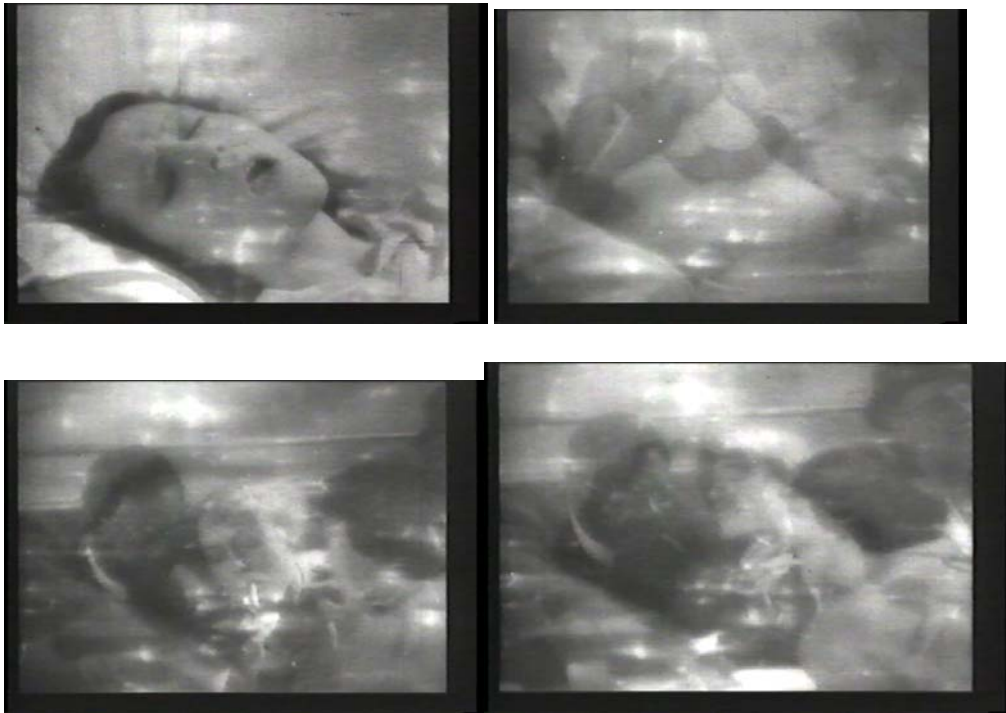


Figure 36-*Ave Maria* (1936)

¹⁶¹ See board minutes, March 7, 1951. MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

This scene, although foggy and muddled by superimposed images of the sleeping dreamer, was still strong enough stuff to give Traub offense. The scenes of the flashback were completely cut from the film. Each of these films figure the miscegenetic relationship as non-coercive and, in certain instances, also as pure and reconcilable. The MSBMPC's pattern of elimination regarding miscegenation suggest that when miscegenation was shown outside of Hollywood's careful veiling, and particularly when portrayed in foreign films or in unexpected places, the board cut the scenes where it was displayed or banned the entire film.

Race Riots and Mob Violence in Maryland, 1949-1960

Miscegenation, although it was systematically excised from many films, did not require nearly the time, effort, or deliberation that films showing race riots or mob violence. These were the films that required, by far, the most negotiation. The films that dealt with these themes were disproportionately independently produced—and these negotiations caused extreme delays to a number of the films: *No Way Out* (which was *not* independently produced but did depict riots) was delayed by three months (and even then received only a provisional license), *Try Get Me* (1950) by seven months, and *The Well* by ten months, as mentioned earlier. In *Try and Get Me*, a *film gris*, the board order called for excision of “all scenes of mob violence and lawlessness” outside of the courthouse in which a mob forms and breaks down the jailhouse door, subduing the sheriff and deputies;¹⁶² in *No Way Out*, all of the scenes of preparation for the riot—where the rioters break bottles and ready their whips and chains—and the worst of the violent riot shots were eliminated, but

¹⁶² See board minutes, May 29, 1951. MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD. Thom Anderson identifies *Try and Get Me* as a *film gris*, noting that it has one of the most “unrelenting and disturbing scenes of mob violence” he has “ever seen in a Hollywood movie,” one that featured a lynch mob “composed to implicate the audience” with its inclusion of college students and the marked absence of “liberals who might be counted on to dissuade the mob with a noble speech.” Thom Anderson, “Red Hollywood,” in *Literature and the Visual Arts in Contemporary Society*, eds. Suzanne Ferguson and Barbara Groseclose (Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press, 1985), 187-9.

I will discuss these deletions in greater depth in Chapter 5. For example, the board excised “scene disclosing negro [sic] mob creeping up on white mob preparing to attack the latter” and called distributors to “reduce the riot scene revealing the negro and white mobs attacking each other.” *The Well* and *Storm Warning* were withdrawn by the production company for “voluntary” re-editing and, therefore, it is difficult to tell what scenes the board decided had to be removed.

Deletion of Racial Epithets in Maryland 1945-1960

The single most frequent racially-motivated deletion pertaining to African Americans in the period from 1949-1960 was the word “nigger,” which was systematically deleted from eight films, including both films depicting riots (that punished the utterers and give the message that racism is wrong) and those films where the term was used casually—and without cataclysmic narrative results.¹⁶³ This was a complete turnaround from the period from 1945-1949 in which no racial epithets were deleted. During this later period, the Maryland board pushed for total excision of the term and not for selective plot-contingent inclusion (as the PCA did during this period), a stance which made them more like New York than Virginia.

The Maryland board required excision of the word in various forms of usage: in *Ave Maria*, they excised the phrase “we shouldn’t have to work like Niggers,”¹⁶⁴ one that emphasized racial hierarchy. In the Hollywood film, *Big Jim McClain* (1952), Maryland censors took out the italicized word in the following phrase: “That choppin’ cotton’s for white trash and *niggers*.”¹⁶⁵ The board also required excision of the word from Universal’s 1928 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, rereleased in 1954, and from

¹⁶³ The nine films were *Ave Maria* (1936, rereleased in 1951), *The Well* (1951), *Big Jim McClain* (1952), *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1928, rereleased 1954), *Bamboo Prison* (AKA *I was a Prisoner in Korea*, 1954), *West of Zanzibar* (1954), *Phenix City Story* (1955), *No Way Out* (1950), and *The Black Hand* (1950). From *The Black Hand*, the racial epithets excised applied to Italians: the board omitted the words “No Dagos. No Wops.” MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁶⁴ See board minutes, March 7, 1951. MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁶⁵ See board minutes, Sept. 4, 1952. MSPBMP Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

the race riot film *The Well*, which depicted African Americans as disproportionately victimized by mob violence.

The Maryland State Board of Motion Picture Censors did excise scenes, dialogue, and views on the basis of perceived racial controversy—even after 1952. However, their policy shifted from attempting to stifle cinematic representations of social equality to the more racially liberal policy of removing epithets from all films in an effort to please local non-white constituencies. In spite of this liberalism, the board nevertheless continued to repress images that connoted miscegenation, especially as they appeared in foreign films and Race films whose narratives did not conform to Hollywood's formulae and (white) American racial status quo. As the example of *No Way Out* also suggests, the board still maintained a fear of films inciting African Americans to violence. Policy concerns, first to avoid the Negro question in state-sanctioned films and then to approach it in racially-sensitive ways, coexisted with continued concerns about the morality of Race film images (and by extension, African American life) and with keeping miscegenation off the screen.

Conclusion: “We Would Like to Co-operate with You”: General Trends in Racial Censorship at the State Level

Over the course of the period from 1940 to 1960, although African-American-themed deletions were not the most numerous racial deletions, African American images required more deliberation, negotiation, and board time than any other racial issue or any other single issue. This was particularly true in the late 1940s and early to mid 1950s, when questions about civil rights—equal and integrated public accommodations and education—were coming to the forefront, especially in the Southern states and cities. Struggles over film censorship and film meanings were an active part of the state political struggles for civil rights, as the case of Virginia, especially, evidences. State censors also censored these images more because this was an era when both Hollywood and non-

Hollywood productions were broaching questions of African American identity. This fact signals that, although sex and violence are often considered the most important issue for film censors, race, culture, and otherness—questions of human relations—were as much at stake in the everyday practice of film censorship as sex or violence. It was most often when racial representation was combined with sex and/or violence that censors became most concerned—hence the scrutiny on miscegenation and race riots.

The films that most often combined sex, violence, and racial controversy were not those produced by Hollywood studios, but rather independent and foreign films. It seems that the Hollywood studios had achieved both a narrative style that could circumvent censorship and a “friendly” status with the boards through their public relations mechanisms—strategies not known, or not used, by independent and foreign film producers. B-products, foreign films, and independent films tended to shuck or toy with the studio system’s narrative framework, modes of telling, and visual styles, either by dint of their poor production values or strategically. As I will show in subsequent chapters, these films altered racial representation by more directly articulating the horror of white racism, denuding white racial power and its vulnerabilities, and exploring, if sometimes exploitatively, the systematic effects of racial discrimination. Some of these films had PCA seals and some did not.

With the PCA’s consistent monitoring and regulating of the major films released by the Hollywood studios belonging to the MPPDA (called the MPAA after 1945), state censors increasingly saw their job in the 1940s and 1950s as regulating and monitoring “other cinemas,” that is, the independently produced, poverty row, exploitation, and foreign films. Although censorship of films produced by the big-five and little-three Hollywood studios did occur, it was infrequent. As Charles

Brind, Counsel for the Motion Picture Producers Council put it, “Not more than 50% of the pictures [we view] have been subjected to consideration under the code. . . . We are receiving more and more foreign films containing different view [sic] of morality than are present in this country.”¹⁶⁶ Integral to this process was the regulation of signs of difference and otherness within films, measured as both difference from the Hollywood norm in theme or style of addressing themes as well as different, alternative, and foreign identities, cultures, and norms which often appeared largely unannounced and unexaggeratedly portrayed in these pictures.

Whatever the racial intent of the state censorship boards in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, Virginia, and Maryland, their cuts resulted in significant penalty to distributors and exhibitors of these films, as paid through the financial and logistical/bureaucratic burden of censorship.

What have we learned about the differences among the regions in terms of their censorship of racial issues? Apparently, at least one of the Northern boards was marginally more liberal than the Southern and Border state boards; NYMPD, which had always had a liberal element to its racial censorship policy, did not make deletions on the basis of African American content after 1952 and indeed stopped most racial deletions as of 1940. On the other hand, the two censor boards below the Mason-Dixon line, the MSBMPC and the VDMPC, *did* make deletions on the basis of race—even after the 1952 Miracle Decision, although Maryland altered its policy to include racially liberal censorship.

This study has revealed that although most boards did not follow their standards or guidelines strictly, many of the boards had their own particular hierarchy of racial concerns that governed film censorship. Although no clear and scrupulously consistent “policy” on the representation of racial themes like lynching and miscegenation was adopted by each board (which

¹⁶⁶ See PA Board of Censors.

suggests the films were censored on a case by case basis), it was clear that these boards did have their own state-mandated orientation towards each racial issue and that they censored accordingly.

Virginia seems to have excised images on the basis not only of Blackness but of dark depictions of *whiteness*: negative depictions of Confederacy were particularly problematic for the board. Maryland was particularly conscientious about the twin issues of racial epithets and racial violence. Ohio was concerned about powerful depictions of lynching, as the examples of *The Burning Cross* and *Storm Warning* suggest. And New York, at least in the 1930s, paid careful attention to “indecent” miscegenetic dialogue and “inciting” epithets.

For the most part, however, this examination has shown the similarity in racial enforcement by state censorship boards. Often Northern state censorship, especially in Ohio, was as perniciously racist as Southern censorship. In several instances, the North was actually more cautious in the depiction of racially intense images, perhaps because of the Detroit riots, which signaled the Northern trajectory of Black anger and heralded the coming of Northern civil rights struggles. The boards were similar in that they all frequently censored “Race films.” With the possible exception of Pennsylvania, all of the censor boards under study deleted scenes and dialogue suggesting miscegenation at some point between 1930 and 1960. Miscegenation was far from the only racial issue that these three boards broached—cinematic expression of racial justice and civil rights, as raised by issues such as lynching, race riots, and discrimination, were also removed from films. African American films seem to have, as Charlene Regester’s scholarship on Oscar Micheaux has suggested, been hampered by “morally motivated” censorship in both the North and the South. This study has shown that Black vernacular English was continually submitted to censorship by the boards and was a particular problem across the boards, indicating the controversy that surrounded sonic forms of racial

representation. Although putatively non-racial, as I have shown was the case with the Soundies, the deletion of dialogue, views, and sometimes entire songs was damaging to the expression of African American culture. These deletions also seem to have been unequally assigned to Race films and to have had particularly taxing effects on these lower budget films. Curiously, there were no deletions that appear to have been based on travesties of justice. Perhaps this is because Hollywood's own self-censorship organ had adequately weeded these out, or because many of the films that showed travesties of justice were in periods for which existing documentation was not available. We might also consider, though, that perhaps the concern about travesties of justice, which, as I will discuss in the following chapter, was a particular concern in the Production Code, may not have stemmed from deletions made by state censors but from some other source.

There was also a marked similarity in the censorship strategies of these boards, as well as the content removed; all boards seem to have excised cinematic material that was merely *suggestive* of racially controversial themes such as miscegenation and lynching—sometimes even eliminating verbal description of racially violent actions. Excisions such as these appear to have removed all traces of these representations. However, because the Hollywood system of representation interacted dynamically with the practices and policies of state censors, some producers, as we shall see in Chapters 5 and 6, were able to circumvent these censorship efforts by rendering their articulations of racial justice “*sensor-proof*,” a practice that required both capitulation to and circumvention of censorship.

As early censorship standards indicate, state censors—who were largely concerned with governance—wanted filmmakers to eliminate or reduce cinematic realism because it raised the powerful potential for *incitation*. Although none of the instances of state censorship of African

American images directly mentioned the term “incite,” ensuing concerns about the reaction of Black audiences are clearly evident in the case of *The Burning Cross* in Ohio and *The Birth of a Nation* in Maryland. Naturalistic presentations of interracial love in *Senza Pietà* and of racially relevant recent historical events—like race riots in *No Way Out*—demonstrate that realism was a concern, even as late as the 1950s, when it was used in the depiction of race.

From this analysis, it is clear that in the states where politics could be closely examined, the link between censorship and state racial politics was an underlying determinant of censors’ decision. Often censors’ racial excisions and bannings were not based on their standards, and even strained the intended meanings of the statutes under which the boards operated. Instead, they were based on an unspoken but pervasive American racial status quo, one which placed African Americans below whites and permitted, if sometimes silently, segregation and racial injustice. As a consequence, those films that did effectively challenge the dominant ideological status quo that worked to diffuse African American civil rights efforts were conformed, at best, to the most conservative of Hollywood norms—indeed, to the censors’ sense of what Hollywood should say and show. The censors operated in this way as a normalizing force on those films, both Hollywood and independent, that challenged the notion of cinema as safe entertainment.

The cutting and banning of both independently-produced and Hollywood films would have greatly affected Black spectatorship. The censoring of civil rights issues gave the impression that these issues were not of national—or local—importance and robbed Black spectators of the powerful space to consider and contend with these issues. The censoring of non-Hollywood films, such as *Senza Pietà* and *I Spit on Your Grave*, left unseen the contradictory and inconsistent nature of race that might have torn at the fabric of the age-old convention of African American inferiority. The censoring of *No Way*

Out left unseen Black retributive violence. Censorship of racial epithets lessened offense to African Americans. However, it also decreased cinema's racial realism and made Hollywood's own racism less palpable. Ironically, it probably decreased the possibility of cinema becoming a "mirror" and realizing force that would produce large scale political action (of the type produced by *Birth of a Nation*).

I have shown how state censorship limited the depiction of racial injustice and civil rights. To what extent, however, was the film industry itself to blame for these limitations? In the following chapter, I will assess the PCA's role in the production, repression, and containment of racial representation. While state regulation has often been labeled a site of arbitrary, pernicious, and powerful censorship, industry-artist censorship potentially had a more intense restraining impact on what cinema could say about race than did the local censor boards because of its intimacy with the mechanisms of production.

Chapter 4:
Hushing Race: Industry policy, the Production Code and Censorship of Racial Problems, 1930-1960

“The writers would say that we were godawful censors when we'd challenge their scripts. And we did lots of times. Well, as you say, as you know, that's where the bulk of the work was done.” -Albert Van Schmus, member of the Production Code Administration staff¹⁶⁷

State censorship played a crucial part in the public discourse on racial representation in film, as it had a powerful role in regionally shaping—by excision—racial representation. The voices of state censors also, as we shall see, strongly influenced industry self-censorship by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA)'s Production Code Administration (PCA) and its predecessor the Studio Relations Committee (SRC). Both the SRC and the PCA were vital in stabilizing and standardizing the thresholds and boundary limits of acceptable racial representations during the 1940s and 1950s when the formulas for cinematic representation of race were changing.

Ruth Vasey has suggested that industry self-censorship induced a “visual and narrative incoherence” arising from the “effacement and displacement of sensitive subjects,” one that “encouraged audiences to become active interpreters, obliging them to make their own sense of contradictory cinematic evidence.”¹⁶⁸ In this system, audiences “practiced at consuming” such Code-altered narratives, “were able to exercise considerable freedom in interpreting the condensed images on the screen,” using literary predecessors to deduce what had been left out of cinematic

¹⁶⁷ Barbara Hall, Oral History interview with Albert Van Schmus, Academy Oral History Program, Margaret Herrick Library. AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA.

¹⁶⁸ Lea Jacobs, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 127-8.

narratives.¹⁶⁹ But was this spectatorial pleasure at the flexibility of cinematic images equally available to African Americans so oft considered and constructed as the unsophisticated, “problem audience” by state and industry-self censors? Or did self-censorship opt also towards unpleasurable omission and contribute to the production of images unrecognizable to Black spectators? In this chapter, I assess the role of the SRC and PCA in shaping the depiction of racially charged themes, language, and images in film from 1930-1960. Although the bulk of my dissertation deals with the period from 1940-1960, I address the 1930s as a point of comparison and as a means to account for the shifts that occurred in this later period. In the main, I address two sets of questions: first, how did the SRC and then the PCA regulate the textual and presumed spectatorial effects of cinematic uses of the word “nigger,” and dramatizations of lynching, travesties of justice, “social equality” and miscegenation? While the scope of the dissertation does not permit exhaustive examination of MPPDA’s censorship files on all films dealing with these themes, I assess a sample of major and minor film productions that featured them.¹⁷⁰ The second question concerns the public relations function of the SRC and PCA but is one that has important textual effects: was there, I ask, a hierarchy of social groups that guided the SRC and, later, the PCA in their approaches to race? Most importantly, did the SRC and PCA treat African American and white Southern interests with some measure of equality or did they give weight to one of these two groups over the other in their suggested changes to films?

I begin the chapter with an analysis of the Production Code’s racial provisions and then proceed with an analysis of two of the arenas where the SRC and PCA appear to have made concessions to African American spectators—namely, suggesting elimination of the word “nigger” and

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ These are called the PCA files at the Margaret Herrick Library at the AMPAS where they are housed, but they include pre-PCA materials. This selection was drawn from the listings of American Film Institute catalogue, the most comprehensive index of American cinema, of films that showed African Americans or that dealt with the issues under examination (i.e. lynching, miscegenation, social equality, and discrimination). I chose films that seemed to contain particularly pronounced references to these themes.

an occasional encouragement to soften stereotypes. I follow this section with an analysis of the effects that the SRC and PCA's interpretations of Code provisions had on the depiction of issues of justice centrally pertinent to the social realities of African Americans: lynching, travesties of justice, and social equality. Although the Code did not explicitly prohibit depictions of these, was there a de facto racial effect—that is, an set of consistent if unintended tropes in cinematic production of films dealing with African Americans—produced by the Code? Finally, building on Susan Courtney's work on the Production Code Administration's effect on the depiction of miscegenation, I explore some instances where narratives of miscegenation involving Native women and white men were used to work through issues of Black/white miscegenation and racial equality using a strategy of distancing or displacement.

A Brief History of Industry Self-Regulation

The Studio Relations Committee (SRC) the was the self-regulatory wing of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the organization, which, among other things, was designed to handle public relations for the film industry.¹⁷¹ The SRC was directed by Jason Joy, until Joy left this post in 1932 to work for Twentieth Century-Fox's Public Relations department—a position he would hold until 1953. At the SRC, Joy was succeeded by James Wingate, former head of the New York Board of Censors, who would only hold the position until December 1933, when Breen took over.¹⁷² Although the SRC did advise film companies about how to alter their material to avoid censorship, several factors limited their effectiveness. First, according to Lea

¹⁷¹ Among the MPPDA's other functions were the overseeing the Advertising Code Administration, the Title Registration Bureau, the Motion Picture Export Association, The Community Relations Department, Technical Services department and the Educational Services Department. For details about these departments, see Jack Alicoate, ed. *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York: Film Daily Press, 1955), 993-989.

¹⁷² For information on Joy's retirement from Fox, see: "Studio Briefs," *Beverly Hills Times*, April 11, 1953, 11. For a detailed analysis of the Studio Relations committee's structure and activities, see Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 27-51. Jacobs suggests that Joy continued to correspond with Hays in 1932-3 and that Breen was also an active part of the Studio relations committee.

Jacobs, although the guidelines (known as the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls”) under which the SRC operated until March of 1930 when the Production Code went into effect were written in 1927, actual monitoring of scripts by the SRC did not begin until 1928.¹⁷³ Second and most importantly, the SRC lacked the power to levy sanctions against the studios who violated the SRC’s standards. Therefore as of 1929, more than half of the member companies simply ignored the SRC’s recommendations.¹⁷⁴ In addition, a number of calls for federal censorship, some as late as 1930, further endangered the industry’s livelihood and freedom from outside governmental control.¹⁷⁵

The Production Code was a response to these troubles. Several versions were drafted in 1929 by Catholic Daniel Lord and members of the MPPDA. The industry adopted an amalgamated version of these drafts in 1930.¹⁷⁶ But because the SRC had little power to enforce adherence to the Production Code, there was a need for a form of industrial self-censorship with the power to compel adherence.

The PCA was formed as an industry response to severe and costly criticism of screen representation on a variety of controversial topics by various public and private groups in late 1933/early 1934. Although it had been years since the last state censorship board had been created, by 1933, outside pressure groups were vocally arguing for more stringent censorship measures.

Organized and powerfully unified pressure from the Catholic Church and its laymen, alongside new

¹⁷³ Jacobs, *Wages of Sin*, 28. Jacobs notes that there were “no institutional mechanisms for the application of the ‘Don’ts and Be Carefuls’”; that is, the association did not regularly review original screenplays or completed features in this era.” She argues that it was not until 1928, when Joy moved from New York to Hollywood, that the organization began to review scripts and not until 1931 that script submission became “mandatory.” (28).

¹⁷⁴ Neville Hunning, *Film Censors and the Law* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), 156.

¹⁷⁵ John Sargent, “Self Regulation: the Motion Picture Production Code, 1930-1960,” (Ph.D diss., University of Michigan, 1963), 14.

¹⁷⁶ Gregory Black *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 39. Maltby, “Genesis of the Production Code,” 40. Indication of industry’s eagerness to please to “traditional moral interest” is indicated by Joy’s addition of prohibitions on liquor consumption and vulgarity to his draft of the Code. This may also have been a nod to censor boards, which were often also run by Church representatives and were often very concerned about use of liquor.

evidence about movie effects from social scientists, convinced the industry of the insufficiency of the SRC's modes of enforcement. This led the MPPDA to institute the far firmer, more empowered PCA in July of 1934.¹⁷⁷ From 1934 to 1967, as the force of textual limitation closest to the industry, the PCA had unprecedented power over image-based discourses on race. The PCA was originally headed by Joseph Breen, who was succeeded as director by Geoffrey Shurlock in 1954.

The PCA was charged with enforcing the Production Code, a set of moral and “policy” regulations adopted by the MPPDA in 1930.¹⁷⁸ The PCA had the strong sanction of denying its official seal to completed films, thus denying exhibition in MPPDA-member theaters. On July 3, 1934, they also imposed a financial sanction of \$25,000 for “liquidated damages.”¹⁷⁹ Jason Joy had begun reviewing scripts earlier, but the PCA instituted an established process for film approval that included a preliminary conference, written script approval, and continued conferences throughout production with regards to changed material.¹⁸⁰ Although Catholic interests were important in the formation of the Code,¹⁸¹ the state and local censor boards had always been a key impetus for film industry self-censorship.¹⁸² Again, although state censors often cared more—proportionately—about sexuality and violence, race was a consistent and complex *problem*, enigma, and point of controversy for state censors.

¹⁷⁷ Jacobs, *Wages of Sin*, 19.

¹⁷⁸ See Black, *Hollywood Censored*, 21-49 where he discusses the drafting of the Code. The policy element of this regulation is contained

¹⁷⁹ Hunning, *Film Censors*, 158.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁸¹ Black, *Hollywood Censored*, 37. Catholics were not only among the largest, most vocal, and best organized of Christian denominations but also, by and large, were an urban population, dwelling by consequence where most theaters were located.

¹⁸² Lea Jacobs, *Wages of Sin*, 32. Jacobs calls state censors boards “the single most important external actor confronting the MPPDA in the early thirties.” Indeed these boards were, unlike local censors or censor boards that were often more ad hoc, highly organized and buffeted by state level governmental backing. In addition to religion, science also seems to have had an important part to play in increasing calls for censorship as the Payne fund studies suggested effects of Motion Picture viewership on children. Although predating the Payne fund studies, the language of science seems to have even sneaked into early drafts of the Code (See Richard Maltby “Documents on the Genesis of the Production Code, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 15, no. 4 (March 1995): 39.

A Contract with Those Who Oppose us: the Production Code and its Racial Provisions

While the 1930 Production Code was quite similar to the 1927 “Don’ts and be Carefuls” that preceded it, the two documents were nevertheless different in a number of important particulars. For one, where the “Don’ts and be Carefuls” had simply listed topics and images to avoid, the Code under-girded these terse rules with an elaborated philosophy of the industry’s moral stance, demonstrating to various concerned publics and watchdog groups that the industry had gone beyond a formalistic legalism and was attuned to its higher moral calling. There was, however, a marked *lack* of elaboration of the racial tenets of the Production Code. In terms of race, the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” had included a prohibition on miscegenation, white slavery (i.e. kidnapping white and thus presumably pure women for illicit purposes), and “willful offense to the races.” The Code, on the other hand, had only two central racial provisions for most of its history, both coming under the MPDDA’s regulation of screen depictions of sex.¹⁸³ Under the Code’s “Particular Applications” section and in the subsection labeled “sex,” the Code stated: “5) white slavery shall not be treated 6) Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and Black races) is forbidden.”¹⁸⁴ The restraint placed on racial epithets (and offense to races more generally) was only officially a part of the Code for the last thirteen, rocky years of the document’s thirty-three year existence. The longstanding effacement of this stipulation is strange because state and local censorship boards generally included some provision—although they were worded in various ways—prohibiting offense to races,¹⁸⁵ creeds

¹⁸³ The Code underwent a variety of changes. For more information on these changes, see Sargent, “Self-regulation,” 222-223.

¹⁸⁴ See Maltby, “Documents,” 62.

¹⁸⁵ For more on the racial politics of the Code’s genesis, see Maltby, “Genesis of the Production Code,” 35, 36, 40, 51. According to these documents, the Thalberg Draft of the Code included the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” verbatim, as did the Joy Draft. Even Daniel Lord’s draft included under “National Feelings” that “the just rights, history and feelings of any national are entitled to consideration and respectful treatment,” (51). Not including white slavery, at least ten

and religion and the MPPDA's board of directors had desired its inclusion in the Code.¹⁸⁶ Still, the Code did not include any prohibition of racial offense until 1954, in spite of its appearance as the twelfth of the "Don'ts" on the MPPDA's list of Don'ts and be Carefuls, and the fact that the New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania Ohio and Maryland state censor boards forbade such offenses.¹⁸⁷ Film scholar Gregory Black's *Hollywood Censored* details the meeting of Daniel Lord, Martin Quigley, Will Hays, and Jason Joy to create the Code. But Black does not discuss the decision to leave the "epithets" provision out or the racial politics of the Code's genesis, which suggests that perhaps there was little discussion of racial issues present in the archival material documenting the Code's birth.¹⁸⁸ Susan Courtney, however, suggests that it was the MPPDA—not Daniel Lord and the Catholic contingency that inserted the miscegenation prohibition into the Code.¹⁸⁹

The question of why the Production Code itself was silent on issues of race (save the issues of miscegenation and white slavery) until the 1950s is an important one but difficult to answer with existing evidence. Perhaps the industry considered racial offense a less important issue at the

(Pennsylvania, Maryland, Houston, Kansas, Portland, Chicago, Memphis, Atlanta, Boston, New York) states and municipalities either explicitly mentioned race in their standards or legal codes or tacitly enforced racial standards. Among these Maryland, Kansas, Ohio and Pennsylvania, three of the strongest boards included prohibitions on offense to any "race" in their standards or statutes. See Jack Alicoate, ed. *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York: Film Daily Press, 1925), 349-357 and supplement with Jack Alicoate, ed. *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York: Film Daily Press, 1940) 687-9 for a more complete listing of standards of the boards.

¹⁸⁶ See Maltby, "Documents on the Genesis" He cites an Oct 4, 1929 meeting of the MPPDA Board of Directors in which a draft of the Code is offered which includes a prohibition on the "willful offense to any nation, race, or creed." Exhibitors also had the right to avoid film content on the basis of racial offense, according to Clark Davis of the Lichtman Theater chain. Clark Davis, letter to Walter White, Mar 1, 1943, 3. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

¹⁸⁷ See the PCA's "Don'ts and Be Carefuls," in Garth Jowett, *Film: the Democratic Art*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1976), 466-7. See the previous chapter where I show that the New York board of censors continually made cuts of racial epithets. Also see the PCA files on *The Well* and *Native Son* as an example of Massachusetts's propensity to eliminate the epithet "nigger." See Alicoate, *Film Daily Yearbook for 1925*, 349-355 for state and local censorship codes for Pennsylvania, Ohio and Maryland.

¹⁸⁸ Black, *Hollywood Censored*, 21-39.

¹⁸⁹ Courtney states that Geoffrey Shurlock recalled: "to Quigley's credit...he was absolutely infuriated all the time that I knew him with the original Code where it said that we could not treat a picture dealing with miscegenation. He thought it was outrageous and un-Christian. He was right, of course. But I could see why Will Hays and his staff put it in." Susan Courtney, "Hollywood's Fantasy of Miscegenation" (PhD Diss., University of California Berkeley, 1997), 228.

moment of the Code's drafting—or one distinctly removed from what the industry saw as the Code's chief goal: to ensure that the film industry could not be accused of degrading public morality. The provision may also have seemed to award special attention or special rights to people of color, attention that would have been reviled—and perhaps even protested—by racist whites.

The MPPDA often seems to have been driven by a desire to avert the crisis of the moment, and perhaps the Code's genesis was no exception. In 1930, the industry was in the midst of feverish and complex religious opposition to “immoral” film content accompanied by the absence of substantial racial outcry of the sort that had initially prompted state censors to include racial provisions (i.e. *The Birth of a Nation* and the independently produced Jack Johnson fight films). The result was the MPPDA may have simply sidelined inclusion of this less socially pressing principle in the Code. Whatever the reason, it is nevertheless important to our discussion to note that, at least on paper, the SRC went from a *complete* prohibition on “willful offense of any...race,” to *complete* silence on the issue—and implicitly a *complete* lack of official regulation of it.

A single but highly significant word of the Code was changed, it appears, in 1945, one which gave the PCA officials leave to regulate racial insults to African Americans in cinematic representations. Under its “National Feelings” subsection, the second provision had formerly stated “the history, institutions, and prominent people and citizenry of *other* nations shall be represented fairly.” (emphasis added). However, the *Film Daily Yearbooks* for 1946 and 1947 indicate a change in those years in the wording of this provision to “the history, institutions, and prominent people and citizenry of *all* nations shall be represented fairly,” a provision which now could be used to regulate representations of U.S. citizens.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Jack Alicoate, ed. *Film Daily Yearbook*, (New York: Film Daily Press, 1946), 847. Jack Alicoate, ed. *Film Daily Yearbook*, (New York: Film Daily Press, 1947), 828. There is no standard record of the Code with all of its changes and its official

Other than this, there were no significant *explicit* racial changes to the Code until 1954 (although as I will discuss changing provisions on crime may have had racial-political *effects*). Along with a number of other important changes in the design of industry self censorship in the 1940s and 1950s,¹⁹¹ there were drastic changes to the racial content of the Code in the mid-1950s. These changes indicate a shift in racial thinking in the industry—or at least in its public relations strategy. As I will show, they also prompted shifts in representation.¹⁹²

In 1954, a watershed year for the industry and for racial politics in the nation at large,¹⁹³ the anti-miscegenation clause was moved from being “forbidden” to the Code’s new “special subjects”

amendments. Previous scholarship on the Code, including Garth Jowett’s otherwise thorough account of film censorship, leaves the details of Code versions and changes unexamined. Jowett, *Film the Democratic Art*. Although the March 1995 special issue of *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* shows the changes in the *early* drafts of the Production Code, the scholarly work of tracking all individual changes has yet to be done.

¹⁹¹ In 1945, Will Hays retired as director of the MPPDA and Eric Johnston, former president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, took over. This shift signaled a new era in industry attitudes, tactics, and image for the organization and was marked by the industry’s increasing distance from the religiously defined moral concerns that Hays, “the protestant pope of Hollywood” had symbolized. Johnston’s first words to the press were “I think the Hays job has to be remodeled and changed.” (Sargent, *Self-regulation*, 117). Sargent claims that among Johnston’s changes was an increase in attention to foreign Box office (Ibid., 118). It was also Johnston who chose to give industry support and legal aid to *Pinky*, Fox’s film of a white woman trapped in a black body, banned in several municipalities. Johnston clearly chose the case because of its racial implications and vocally spoke out against undemocratic censors. Johnston also admitted and seemingly defended what Sargent calls “postwar liberality” in depictions of social subjects (Ibid., 125).

¹⁹² The changes were perhaps precipitated by the 1952 *Burstyn v. Wilson* Supreme Court decision which overturned the *Mutual* decision of 1915 and deemed that Motion Pictures were protected under the first Amendment. This decision resulted in a flood of challenges to state and local censor boards which at least suggested that legalized censorship would no longer be a major concern for the industry and thus arguably shifted the character of industry self-censorship. The industry of course still had to deal with pressure groups and with their public image. To completely back away from censorship may have made them seem disingenuous.

¹⁹³ In 1954, Breen stepped down as head of the PCA and was replaced by the British Geoffrey Shurlock, a change that perhaps precipitated this shift in the language of the Code. Will Hays died that year as well, although he had given over his post as head of the MPPDA in 1945 (*Beverly Hills Times*, March 10, 1954). According to Douglas Gomery, this was also a record bad year in mainstream box offices. It was also the year of the landmark, Supreme Court decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. More research into Shurlock’s strategy and role in shifting racial language and enforcement is necessary but beyond the scope and character of my project. It has been extremely hard to find out information about the PCA staff. Files for the organization were only made available in the late 1980s and even these have not produced a complete list of all PCA employees. Jacobs, *Wages of Sin*, 29. Although I attempted to find a pattern in terms of those assigned to films with racial issues, these films seem to have been handled with equal regularity by all the staff, as review assignments, at least initially, were based more on the prestige of the product than on a match between reviewer and thematic content.

category and was thereafter expressible “within the limits of good taste.”¹⁹⁴ It also appears to have been in 1954 that the PCA first introduced an explicit statement warning member companies of the dangers of racial epithets. With this provision, the PCA allowed itself to “take cognizance of the fact” that words like “Chink,...Nigger,...Wop” (capitalization original to text) were “obviously offensive” to patrons in the U.S. and “more particularly” to patrons in foreign countries.¹⁹⁵ In 1956, in another racial modification in Code content, the tenet prohibiting miscegenation, was entirely removed from the Code and the statement that “no picture shall be produced that tends to incite bigotry or hatred among peoples of differing races, religions, or national origins. The use of such offensive words as Chink, Dago, Greaser, Hunkie, Kike, Nigger, Spig, Wop, Yid *should be avoided*” was added.¹⁹⁶ (emphasis added) Although still not a prohibition on use of racial epithets, this was actually a strengthening of the 1954 epithets directive. The new directive prohibited “inciting” (an old censorship concept) but newly applied it to “bigotry.”¹⁹⁷

A number of the Production Code’s other tenets—those demanding compensating moral values, positive depiction of law enforcement, and restricting presentations of crime and violence—

¹⁹⁴ Jowett, *Film the Democratic Art*, 415.

¹⁹⁵ Section V (on Profanity) was joined with the former section on vulgarity and changed to include a number of new words. At the end of the section was appended the following: “In the administration of Section V of the Production Code, the Production Code Administration may take cognizance of the fact that the following words and phrases are obviously offensive to the patrons of motion pictures in the United States and more particularly to the patrons of motion pictures in foreign countries: Chink, Dago, Frog, Greaser, Hunkie, Kike, Nigger, Spig, Wop, Yid.” Jack Alicoate, *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York: Film Daily Press, 1955), 970. A slim selection of words and with an emphasis still placed on foreign interests, it is difficult to measure what the organization was trying to communicate with these changes, although it is clear that, in part, they were interested in decreasing offense to African Americans.

¹⁹⁶ The revisions not only in the tenets but also the placement of these racial code provisions is telling. Although in the 1954 version of the Code, this came under the heading “Profanity” by 1956, it came under “National Feelings” indicating the confluence of “race” and nationality, one that had long been denied in both industrial and state/ local film regulatory codes. See Sargent, “Self-Regulation” (appendix) for the 1956 version of the Code and Jack Alicoate, ed. *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York: Film Daily Press, 1960), 907-913. See also “Old Movie Taboos Eased in New Code For Film Industry,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1956, 1.

¹⁹⁷ The Code provisions were never strictly enforced and were always subject to interpretation—filmmakers did not begin with the Code and then write their stories, they began with their stories and then went to the PCA to see how they could get them made in ways that avoided censorship and industry ire. As such we can see these changes in the Code as public relations moves more than substantial changes in enforcement.

had enormous implications for “realist” and progressive renderings of America’s racial milieu and African American struggle and experience. As I suggested in the introduction, a number of major concerns constrained African American existence in the U.S.: among them were lynching, travesties of the criminal justice system, and discrimination or lack of social equality with whites (linked to the legal prohibitions on intermarriage that were an extension of the logic of discrimination). Although the Code did not have specific prohibitions on showing racial injustice, the depiction of racial injustice was surely hampered by the Code’s general restraints and its overall ideology.

One clear example of a censorable concept is lynching. The first of the Code’s three general principles mandated that “the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown on the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.” The third principle stated that “the law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.” Lynching, however, presented a particular conundrum, representing (as if often did) a crime on top of a crime—the criminal himself becoming a sympathetic victim by way of the lynchers’ brutal and unlawful attempt to take his/her life. If, as was often the case, the intended victim of the lynching was an accused criminal, the lynching itself confused social definitions of this individual, dangerously rousing sympathy for him/her by conflating the victim/perpetrator roles. The questions raised by this conflation could end in potential questions not only about the lynchers, but about the “just” system that accused these people.¹⁹⁸ Although it was very rarely true that the lynching victim actually committed the crime, it was nevertheless the case that lynching posed a potential threat. Lynching also involved torture and therefore challenged the Code’s prohibition on excessive brutality (contained in the Special

¹⁹⁸ It should be noted that in the “Reasons supporting Preamble of Code,” it is stated that “sympathy with a person who sins is not the same as sympathy with the sin or crime of which he is guilty.” (Alicoate, *Film Daily Yearbook for 1955*, 974.). Nevertheless the persistence of sympathy for someone who has committed a crime could certainly conceivably disrupt the tenet that “throughout, the audience feels sure that evil is wrong and good is right.” (Ibid.)

Regulations on Crime) and its admonition to treat brutality “within the limits of good taste” (Section XII of the Code).¹⁹⁹ Lynching had also long been among those elements prohibited in the standards of local and state boards of censorship and was likely part of what was intended by the Code’s limitations on brutality.²⁰⁰ As a result, the Code imposed de facto restraints upon depictions of lynching. The PCA files for films concerning lynching that I examined neither confirmed nor denied the PCA’s use of this logic, as the extant written records quite often provided no direct reason for limiting the depiction of lynching, other than concerns about local censorship and concern for the good of the industry.

The PCA also mandated restraint in the depiction of the criminal justice system which affected de facto limitation on the depiction of injustice in the legal system—another severe problem for representing the experiences of Black Americans. The Code, more than any individual censorship law or state standard, was a document supremely invested in upholding the honor of the law and of the legal system.²⁰¹ Reflecting the PCA’s verbal vigilance against cinematic justifications illegal behaviors, the latter portion of the Code explicitly stated “the courts of the land should not be presented as unjust. This does not mean that a single court may not be represented as unjust, much less that a single court official must not be presented this way. But the court system of the country

¹⁹⁹ Jack Alicoate, *Film Daily Yearbook for 1955*, 971.

²⁰⁰ See Fredrick Rex, *Motion Picture Censors’ and Reviewer’ Manual* (Hubbard Woods, Illinois: Home Circle Publishing, 1934), which contains a number of local and state censorship codes, statutes, and standards. This is available through the History of the Cinema microfilm collection. Chicago had a prohibition on “mob scenes for the purpose of riot, lynching or burning of a human being or for the purpose of liberating a prisoner or obstructing justice” (Ibid., 19), Maryland also had a prohibition on “harrowing death sequences, morbid presentations of insanity, executions and lynchings, burlesques of hanging.” (16), Portland had a prohibition on “torture scenes, exhibitions of murder, assassinations, hangings or other executions.” (24), Pennsylvania also stated that “gruesome or unduly distressing scenes will be disapproved these include...torture scenes, hangings, lynchings.” Alicoate, *Film Daily Yearbook for 1925*, 351.

²⁰¹ Not only did PCA add an addendum, in 1938, pertaining to “Special Regulations on Crime in Motion Pictures” but two of the three general principles upon which the entire Code was based, related to crime and the law. What is more, nearly half of the “Reasons Supporting Preamble of Code” related to the issue of crime. Perhaps this was because the Code was formulated in the moment when the industry was in a gangster film cycle that was a part of prompting the public outcry against the industry.

must not suffer as a result of this presentation.”²⁰² By disallowing the presentation of courts as systematically unjust, the Production Code severely limited the presentation of what Walter White and other Black organizations had identified as the discriminatory “railroading” of Black accused. In terms of the other two major racial themes I will explore (discrimination and social equality), there was no explicit Code provision that dealt with these. However, as we will see, the PCA did pass judgment and make suggestion on the basis of *unstated policy* on these racial issues.

Patterns of Enforcement

It is important to remember that the Code only ever operated as a set of guidelines for the PCA’s activities—not all of the PCA’s actions were based strictly on the letter of the Code. The Code document itself was, in many ways, a performance of self-repression and self-discipline for the audience of reformers, state legislators and state and local censors. Actual interpretation of the Code, although morally motivated, was based rather, on what Susan Courtney has called “an elaborate process of deliberation and precedent.”²⁰³ As Ruth Vasey has importantly suggested, in addition to the Code, there was another realm of PCA enforcement dubbed “industry policy”—an unpublished but nevertheless profoundly powerful area of industry self-regulation.²⁰⁴

If it was not the Code alone that guided industry self-censorship, what was it that did guide it? Although in 1956, under pressure to revamp the Code, the industry would claim the Code was

²⁰² Alicoate, *Film Daily Yearbook for 1955*, 974.

²⁰³ Courtney, “Hollywood Fantasies,” 233.

²⁰⁴ According to Vasey the Production Code constituted only the most conspicuous subsection of industry regulation.” Ruth Vasey, “Beyond Sex and Violence: ‘Industry Policy’ and the Regulation of Hollywood movies, 1922-1939” in *Controlling Hollywood*, ed. Matthew Bernstein (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999)102. Industry policy decisions were driven much more directly by the industry’s public relations and accountability with specific social groups outside the industry. Vasey notes that “technically, warnings issued relative to matters of industry policy and probably official censorship action were merely cautionary, whereas pronouncements relative to the Code were binding. In practice, however, the distinction was often lost.” (Ibid., 111) Vasey argues that it was in the realm of “industry policy” that the majority of the PCA’s depictions of foreigners were regulated, as well as touchy domestic issues. As this chapter shows, it was in the realm of industry policy that the majority of PCA’s race-based regulations were made.

made up of a combination of “policy” and “moral” concerns, this was only partly true.²⁰⁵ At least four distinct sets of interests informed the PCA’s enforcement policy: 1) state and local censors 2) general industry concerns about maintaining an image of prudence 3) pressure groups whose interests were clearly hierarchically considered and 4) the concerns of audience in general.²⁰⁶ Although the Code seemed a solid document, it was only ever a part of this broader policy of enforcement.

PCA’s Tools for Racial Analysis

How did the PCA track racial representations? The PCA gave substantive qualitative and quantitative analysis to character representations by race using an official analysis chart that acted as both interpretive tools for detailed textual analysis and, it seems, to organize, document, and solidify the organization’s official line or reading of a script.²⁰⁷ Across these charts we can observe not only how the PCA read film characters and story development but also how they decided to argue for a film if they were challenged on the film’s representation or message by an offended party.²⁰⁸ In

²⁰⁵ Sargent, “Self-regulation,” 168. In his analysis of the constantly changing industrial formulation of the Code, Sargent cites a 1956 MPAA press release which stated “The Production Code consists of two main elements: 1) the underlying moral principles 2) the provisions that deal with policy matters.” The release also suggested that quite the contrary from the pre-war, Progressive conceptualization of the Code, stated that the industry wanted to Code to be a “flexible, living document—not a dead hand laid on artistic and creative endeavor.” This was clearly post-Burstyn rhetoric.

²⁰⁶ The MPPDA kept, registered and statistically monitored all of the letters that they received. These letters are in a microfilm collection at the AMPAS.

²⁰⁷ For example, the PCA summary of *The Quiet One*, a story about juvenile delinquency, included prominently the appraisal that the film is “showing from life the multiple factors that must be present to produce a juvenile delinquent. In these, at worst the comics, radio and movies can only be mere incidents,” A reading clearly designed to serve the industry’s own interests.

²⁰⁸ For an excellent example of PCA use of the analysis chart for defense against claims of industry bias or racism, see the *Jackie Robinson Story* PCA file (Margaret Herrick Library. AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA.) In a letter that points to Hollywood’s shortcomings in showing what Robert Stam and Ella Shohat have called “ethnicities-in-relation.” Ella Shohat and Robert Stam *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 220-247. The Jersey City chapter of the John R. Longo Association wrote the their state senator Edwin Johnson and Alexander Smith (who forwarded the letter to MPAA) with a resolution complaining that while the *Jackie Robinson Story* “goes a long way toward making us understand the plight of Negroes and winning sympathetic support from White people towards this group and its right to advance in a decent world, it smears and libels Americans of Italian extraction.” (Samuel J. Russon, letter to Senator Alexander Smith, Aug 12, 1950. *Jackie Robinson Story* PCA file, Margaret Herrick library, AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA.) The MPAA responded to this complaint with statistics: “You will note...that of 116 individual Italian characters in feature pictures during 1948 and 1949, there were 78 sympathetic portrayals and 19 unsympathetic while the other 19 evoked mixed relations or no particular impact. About a year ago this same issues was raised by the United

assessing race, the PCA's analysis chart carefully mapped both "race" and "nationality" of characters, but limited the variables to which they attended. Rather than mapping characters according to whether they were stereotyped, they measured, instead, probable audience reaction to characters, specifically, whether they were sympathetic, unsympathetic or indifferent, likely because a prohibition on sympathetic depictions of criminals appeared in the Code.

This Likert scale-style analysis of characterization, combined with the narrow focus on race as a question of characterization, predisposed the organization to deal with racial issues in ways that focused on individual characterization rather than the story's overall treatment of racial themes. Outside the area of characterizations, the PCA chart included little other systematic tabulation of racial treatment, providing no systematic information on the overall treatment of racial themes in the plot.

The PCA, Industry Policy and Negotiating "Southern" and "Negro" Movie-Lobbyists

Thomas Cripps has argued that Hollywood used the claim that progressive (and even humane) racial characterization hurt Southern box office to substantiate its subordination of African Americans characters and to narrow the expression of racial issues on screen.²⁰⁹ It is true that, at least when it came to censor boards, the PCA had nearly as much to fear from the North as the

Italian-American League of New York...When we supplied Mr. Pope with accurate facts, he expressed his thanks to us for the many instances pointed out to him where we had changed the Italian names of unsympathetic characters in plays or novels adapted to the screen, and because we had frequently added sympathetic Italian characters to photoplay versions of stage plays and novels where an Italian was originally cast as a 'villain'...Hollywood has not, to use the language of the John R. Longo Association's resolution, 'persistently depicted Americans of Italian descent in a degrading and libelous light and characterized portrayals by those with obviously Italian names in unsavory roles'....In this connection I want to point out a specific provision in our Production Code, to which, as you know, our producers voluntarily subscribe. It is this 'The history, institutions, and prominent people and citizenry of all nations shall be represented fairly.' (Eric Johnson, letter to Hon. Edwin C. Johnson [cc: Jos. Breen], September 6, 1950) Highlighting the extent to which ethnic viewers saw America's racism being confirmed by films' unsympathetic or unreadable minority characterization, this incident also demonstrates the PCA's mode of handling racial/ethnic complaints, one facilitated by their record keeping regarding racial representations made possible by the analysis charts.

²⁰⁹ Cripps "The Myth of the Southern Box Office: A Factor in Racial Stereotyping in American Movies, 1920-1940," in *The Black Experience in America* ed. James Curtis and Lewis Gould (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), 116-144.

South in terms of racial conservatism. There is some indication from the PCA files that, at least when it came to the issue of social equality, it was neither individual censor boards nor Southern box office that concerned the PCA the most. The PCA knew well the Southern censors, such as Lloyd T. Binford in Memphis, Tennessee and Mrs. Alfonzo Richardson and Christine Gilliam and in Atlanta, Georgia. Breen and his associates were well aware of both the personal and political idiosyncrasies of these three censors and their typical patterns of excision: while they still posed a threat, they were calculable. It was not always the potential loss of the Southern box office that was a major concern, as film companies presenting films with serious racial content often simply factored out the Southern exhibitors for the films' first release.²¹⁰

Operating as a diplomatic institution and as a wing of the Motion Picture Association of America's *government*, the PCA may have worried about giving political offense to white opinion leaders, many of whom hailed from the South. Though the sources on this topic are limited, the correspondence with Richards appears to indicate that, at least in the late 1930s the organization was interested in pleasing those who were most often in positions of power and influence and who could have a widespread effect on national views of industry. Some sources indicate that, these were business interests or members of the press—fellow industry men, not spectators.²¹¹ As Thomas Cripps has shown, the white Southern box office yielded consistently smaller grosses than the Northern box

²¹⁰ See Darryl Zanuck, memo to Lesser Samuels cc: Philip Yordan on *No Way Out* Screenplay (Property #2420) draft 2, February 1, 1949. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA. He notes that with *No Way Out*, "we already know that we will lose about 3000 accounts in the South who will not play the picture under any circumstances."

²¹¹ E.V. Richards wrote to the PCA in 1937 indicating that continued depiction of social equality would cause the issue to "break out down south" and that they could "expect far reaching attacks upon the business of a mass formation of the Southern Press." (E.V. Richards, letter to Will Hays. Sept 3, 1937)

office, in terms of the film industry itself.²¹² But the white South held a particular and marked social importance. It was a region with a definable identity and a voice in the national public sphere.

Although African Americans were a topic, a problem and a subject frequently debated, actual African Americans did not enjoy, during the period under study, the Hollywood insider status that white “Southern” racists enjoyed.²¹³ Notwithstanding, the PCA’s treatment of African Americans and themes and issues clearly pertinent to Black American experience did evolve from 1930-1960 and was influenced, it seems, by those African Americans with whom the PCA was in regular contact. Overall, the concern over the Black perspective was somewhat shallow: the organization cared mostly to avoid offense to African Americans but did not do the proactive, affirmative work of helping elaborate African American representation. In general, but not without exception, the PCA acted as a force to uphold an imaginary status quo of race relations and inter-ethnic harmony premised on Black inferiority, depicting racial fantasies or solvable, contained racial strife on screen ignoring hard social realities off-screen.

By the late 1930s, however, evidence of an emergent African American lobby is evident in the Breen office files. Although these African Americans betrayed none of the ease or familiarity with the PCA that some nationally recognized white pressure groups like the Women Christian Temperance Union enjoyed, African Americans from both the NAACP and other less prominent organizations, had gone beyond talking back to the screen and were now speaking truth to power.²¹⁴ For example, two strongly argued letters from local African American groups appear in the PCA’s *Gone with the Wind* file, and extensive collaboration between Walter White’s NAACP and David O.

²¹² Thomas Cripps, “Negroes in Movies, Some Reconsiderations” *Negro American Literature Forum* 2, no. 1 (Spring, 1968): 7.

²¹³ The basis for a more in depth analysis of the Production Code’s treatment of African American lobbies may have been present in the “Negro file” which has been lost.

²¹⁴ Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons, *Dame in a Kimono* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 107.

Selznick, raised the volume on African American political voice in Hollywood. These groups had complained, not to their local theater manager—and not about a film that had already been released—but to the MPPDA and about a film that was still in the studio pipeline. This suggested that the PCA needed to find some way to manage African American lobbies as well. It is to the SRC and PCA's patterns of regulation related to African American interests we will turn first.

“By lip or by title”: the Word “nigger,” Verbal (mis)Representations and the Politics of “allowing use”

“The word 'nigger' is like a red flag in front of a bull, so far as the colored people of the United States are concerned. Mr. Breen pointed out to me, when I used the argument that we only had negroes calling other negroes 'niggers', that the intelligent negro might understand this subtlety and that he is certain that by dint of persuasion we could get one or another of the negro societies to endorse this view of the matter, but that no one could answer for the rank and file who threw bricks at the screen in Chicago, Washington, Baltimore, New York and Los Angeles when 'The House of Connolly' ['Carolina'] was shown and inadvertently Lionel Barrymore was allowed the use of the word 'nigger'.”

—Val Lewton to David O. Selznick

Regarding Use of the word “nigger” in Gone with the Wind

The word nigger to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull. Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter. Negroes do not like it in any book or play, whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race. The word nigger, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America.

—Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, 268

Although a relatively unknown film by today's standards (and as is true of so many of the once hailed cinematic epics of the old South, yet unreleased on video or DVD) *Carolina* (released in February 1934), arrived with an eruptive premiere in movie houses at about the same time that the PCA opened for business.²¹⁵ The stage play on which *Carolina* was based, “The House of Connelly,” was written by left-leaning playwright Paul Green (who in 1941 would co-write the play version of

²¹⁵ Ibid., 96. Leff and Simmons discovered the place of *Carolina* as a seminal moment in the history of Hollywood's racial offense. See also Leff's important article on the race politics in Hollywood. Leonard Leff, “Gone with the Wind and Hollywood's Racial Politics: Making *Gone with the Wind*,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 284, no. 6 (Dec 1999): 106-12.

Native Son with Richard Wright). Presented by the Federal Theater Project in 1931 and using the Stanislavski method, “Carolina” was an example of progressive “New Deal” artistic expression, which according to the *New York Times* not only pitted Old South against New, but also “concretely...aristocracy [against] the poor whites,” and featured a depiction of miscegenation that lambasted the South under slavery.²¹⁶ The play tells the story of the Connelly family which has lost much in the Civil War and seeks to rebuild its fortunes by marriage. Bob Connelly, an older war veteran, hopes his nephew, Will Connelly, will marry rich landowner Virginia Buchanan, but Will falls in love with a poor tenant farmer’s daughter. The play touched deeply, repeatedly, and *pivotal*ly on the question of miscegenation, suggesting that not only Bob but Will have had sexual relations with African American women. Will is even seduced during the course of the play by Essie, the Black cook. Will ultimately blames himself and white men in general for Southern miscegenation. Despite its liberal intention, apparently roused some of the most visceral African American protests recorded in cinema’s history on the grounds that it promoted hate speech. The anger was prompted by—or organized around—the use of the word “nigger” in the film, particularly Bob Connelly (Lionel Barrymore) stating to Will Connelly (Robert Young), “He’s got some niggers scratching a bit of ground and a nigger bossing the job.”²¹⁷ Questions remain about the narrative context and mounting diegetic and cinematic tensions that produced such a pronounced African American response to the film’s use of the term of racial denigration. Did it refer to a particularly well-elaborated or sympathetic African American film character? How—and with what venom—was the term uttered? Why did this particular usage generate such a powerful and unilateral “rank and file”

²¹⁶ J. Brooks Atkinson “The Play: Epic of the Old South,” *New York Times*, Sept. 29, 1931, 22.

²¹⁷ See the Censorship report for Ohio contained in the *Carolina* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

response?²¹⁸ It may be true that the exact textual context of the word did not matter to African American spectators. The word was so connected with the history of racism and so emblematically laden with the baggage of oppression that its utterance in any film stood outside of time and narrative continuity as a personal insult and affront to the hearts and souls of many hearers. As the MPPDA's²¹⁹ initial press release on the Code argues, the organization formed the Code largely due to the challenges raised the coming of *sound* to film.²²⁰ Among the industry's policies, an (ironically) silent provision was made for protection against verbal insults to African Americans—insults perhaps worsened by their newfound audibility and, at times, venomous vocalization.

During the film's production in 1933, although there was no prohibition on the use of epithets in the Code, the Studio Relations Committee (SRC) strongly advised Fox against the use of

²¹⁸ From the shooting script, it appears that the term was used between Will and Bob Connelly as they discussed, their new tenant, Tate, in their home. A bit of context from the shooting script: "Bob: You should have made him pay rent. Your mother needs money. We all need money. Will: I wish you had my headache! Bob (grumbling) I cant think why you let that Pennsylvania blue-belly come on the place. Will: Tate? He's a good farmer. Bob: Says he is. A Yankee will always tell you that. But he ain't done much to prove it. He's got a nigger scratching up a bit f ground. And a slip of a daughter trying to boss the nigger and look after two young brothers at the same time. Nobody's seen Tate do a hand's turn himself for two weeks or more. Will: The man's sick. Bob: How do you know? Will: The daughter told me." It appears that the term was not spoken directly to an African American in the scene. (Reginald Berkeley, Shooting Script for "Carolina" property 1325.2h, Fox Film Corp. Date 10/17/33, 13-14. University of Southern California, Cinema-Television Library, Twentieth Century Fox Collection, Los Angeles, CA) Although this scene does not seem particularly egregious in its racial insults, the overall film did contain a number of more insulting scenes, although it does not appear that these were removed. For example, on page 37 of the shooting script, Essie a "mulatto maid" says that she respects a southern General, Bob says: So you should Essie. He upheld the cause of your people when you were decent colored folks—before you were all turned into cheap black trash by those psalm singing northerners." In addition, when Black enslaved people talk back to the white tenant who tells them not to pick flowers from her yard, Will Connelly calls the "destructive thieving brutes"(Ibid., 57) and "wretched Negroes"(Ibid.,58), but never uses the word "nigger," thus pulling back on offense. In a humorous scene where it has been discovered that Scipio, an African American enslaved house servant has "tested" the liquor for a party the family is throwing, Bob calls him, a "black rascal." The film also retains much of the suggestion of miscegenation. Pages 37 and following of the shooting script, contain directions for Essie to "ogle" her slave master Bob when she tries to coax him into giving her a gift. It also contains scenes, perhaps played for comedy where Bob calls Essie "Black but comely, oh daughter of Jerusalem!" When his wife suggests that his manner is profane and calls the girl a "negro wench," Bob responds: "So was the queen of Sheba—yet Solomon in all his glory overcame his color prejudices." (Ibid. 38-9). This suggests that often, and perhaps especially with stage-tested material, the PCA was willing to allow mentions of miscegenation.

²¹⁹ The MPPDA's name was change in 1945 to the MPAA (the Motion Picture Association of America) when the organization passed into the hands of Eric Johnston.

²²⁰ The Code was originally called "Code to govern the Making of Talking, Synchronized and Silent Motion pictures" and the Hays Office's original press release that accompanied the official announcement of the Code was entitled: "Motion Picture Industry Formulates new Code made necessary by Sound." See Maltby, "Documents," 55, 59.

the word “nigger” in *Carolina*. Still the PCA finally granted a seal to the film with the word included. In SRC director James Wingate’s initial letter to the company, he advised Jason Joy, that he “replac[e] the word ‘niggers’ with some other term which will not be offensive to the colored race.”²²¹ This was, incidentally, a policy of the New York Motion Picture Division that Wingate had recently headed. He also mentioned that “the expression ‘Negro wench’ may be censorable,” although it is not clear whether for racial or sexual reasons (or both).²²² Nevertheless, the term, “inadvertently,” to use Val Lewton’s obfuscating phrase, ended up in the film. In an era in which the industry attempted to avoid film controversy, it may not be surprising that newspaper articles about these “rank and file” disturbances are difficult to locate: as I note in Chapter 1, the industry itself may have suppressed newspaper coverage of responses to avoid bad publicity.

Some corroboration of negative Black reception of the film is present in the SRC/PCA files. Although the film was passed by the SRC on January 11 of 1934, by March there seems to have been a problem. On March 2, well after the film’s release, Jason Joy wrote to the SRC regarding the use of the word “nigger.” Although Joy’s letter is missing from the file, Breen’s response indicates that there had been some sort of problem, as it was unusual for SRC correspondence about film content to extend past a film’s commercial release. On March 5, 1934, Breen wrote: "Dear Jason: I have your letter of March 2nd with reference to the use of the word "nigger" in your picture CAROLINA. I shall be glad to dive into this matter and will report back to you just what I am able to establish in the circumstances." Although the Ohio State board approved the film without eliminations on January 27, 1934, in May of that year, the Ohio censors *reconsidered* this decision, eliminating only, and

²²¹ James Wingate, letter to Jason Joy, October 25, 1933. *Carolina* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library. AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA.

²²² *Ibid.*

specifically, the word “nigger” from the film’s dialogue.²²³ The word “nigger” was also a point of concern when the film came up for re-issue in 1935. Breen wrote, with absolute language, "With reference to the picture CAROLINA, approval will be given for this picture only after you have eliminated the word ‘Nigger’ where ever it occurs in the picture. (Note: I think this has already been done in all the prints, but it will be necessary to check it.)"²²⁴ The scrupulous attention to this issue *after* the film’s release is evident in the fact that the MPPDA files also contain correspondence between Fox officials *giving proof* of the company’s checking of prints. A letter from Fox executive Harry Mersay to J.J. Gain, (apparently a branch manager for the studio) anxiously requested, “With regards to Carolina [sic] we are asking the branches to check on their prints, particularly reel #1 to *make sure* that the word, "Nigger" [sic] has been eliminated,"²²⁵ (italics mine). The Black press also made several references to Barrymore’s use of the term, suggesting an unhappy Black reception to the film. An article in the *Chicago Defender* reported that someone had sent a threatening letter to Fox executives protesting the use of the word “nigger” in the film and threatening to reveal private information about Fox executives gathered from their Black maids if the word was not changed; the letter supposedly was complete with signatures (which the article’s authors considered forged) by many Black notables including Duke Ellington.²²⁶

²²³ The text of the communication, as rendered on the elimination sheet stated: “We informed you on Jan 27th that the above production had been approved without eliminations by the Ohio censor board. Upon reconsideration the following eliminations have been made. Deletions:- Reel 1 Eliminate the word "nigger" whenever it occurs in dialogue spoken by Lionel Barrymore to Robert Young. This dialogue is in substance as follows: "He's got some niggers scratching a bit of ground and a nigger bossing the job.” *Carolina* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²²⁴ Joseph Breen, letter to John H. Gain, Aug. 22, 1935. *Carolina* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²²⁵ Harry A. Mersay , letter to Mr. J.J. Gain of the Fox film corp., Aug. 30, 1935. *Carolina* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²²⁶ The article begins with purposive and protective evasion stating “An open threat in a very abusive letter written to the Fox studio heads stating that very damaging things concerning the private lives of Hollywood figures can be learned from Colored help working in their families may, if resented, have... very derogatory effect,” and continues to describe a letter which, while probably forged, clearly could have scared studio executives. “HIT USE Of WORD "NIGGER" IN FOX

The case of *Carolina* is important because of its powerful evidence of Black reception (African Americans throwing bricks in five major cities suggests an organized strike or near ubiquity of offense). It is also important because the SRC *noted* Black reception: these justifiably angry responses were heard at the upper echelons of the industry and used as a basis for future policy decisions, as the quote from Lewton about *Gone with the Wind* clearly evidences. The example also evidences the inconsistency of the MPPDA's original treatment of the word: how could the word be "inadvertently" used on-screen by an actor in a major studio production? At some level, the use must have been purposeful. Lewton's language clues us in to the fact that the SRC, an organization with markedly weaker power than the PCA, probably neglected (or was unable to stop) use of the term. Perhaps the film also slipped between the cracks of SRC regime change: the film was submitted under Wingate's reign as SRC head, but was eventually passed by Breen, who started as head of the SRC in January of 1934 and may have considered the passage of the film with the epithet as one of his earliest mistakes.

Susan Courtney has demonstrated that the MPPDA often had considerable difficulty figuring out how to enforce the Code's miscegenation clause.²²⁷ The case of *Carolina* suggests a similar racial trouble, ambivalence, and clear lack of cultural knowledge surrounding the racial invective "nigger." This implies that sonic definitions of racial offense were often as nebulous for the PCA as visual ones. The *Carolina* incident is also important because, although it may not have been the first time the MPPDA suggested care in the use of the term, it was very likely what convinced the industry to strongly enforce and standardize a policy of requesting omission.

FILM OF THE SOUTH, "CAROLINA," *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 31, 1934, 9. See also John J. Erby, "What the People Say," *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 31, 1934, 14.

²²⁷ Susan Courtney, "Picturizing Race Hollywood's Censorship of Miscegenation and Production of Racial Visibility through *Imitation of Life*" *Genders* (Online) 27 1998. http://genders.org/g27/g27_pr.html [Date accessed-July 21, 2007]

It would be the case for the next twenty-five years that the PCA's clearest concession to the interests of Black spectators and Black political interests was their suggested omission of the word "nigger" (along with "shine," "darkie," "coon," and "jigaboo") from scripts.²²⁸ Vocal African Americans were a small and relatively marginalized lobby, placed as they were among various other groups that posed a greater "threat to the industry's political and economic interests," which was according to Lea Jacobs, the primary impetus for self-censorship.²²⁹

While the fact that the PCA made concessions to African Americans would seem to suggest the organization's racial liberalism, in fact, the racial politics of the omission of the word "nigger" were much more complicated. First, we must ask, why is it that the clearest concession to African Americans is not patently evident in the actual Code? This fact, on its own, is telling about the PCA's public stand on African American relations. Second, the PCA's suggested omission of the word "nigger" was seemingly not based on gentlemanly deference to a social equal but rather on the desire to avoid offending a group whose militancy and propensity for violence had (apparently) been proved (by response to *Carolina*). That is, *fear of violence, irrational response, and negative publicity* (rather than deference or a sense of true equality) sometimes appears to have been the impetus behind PCA's industry policy with regard to African Americans and the word "nigger" specifically. The omission of the word "nigger" also allowed the organization an easy way to argue that they were pleasing Black lobbyists without dealing with the much more complex concerns about African American representation that many of these lobbies held and voiced. Omitting the word "nigger" was a facile deletion—governed by a relatively facile racial logic—and was, quite literally, the least the PCA could do for African American patrons. The NAACP did not lobby the PCA because they did

²²⁸ See *Home of the Brave* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA; and *Song of the South* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²²⁹ Jacobs, *Wages of Sin*, 21.

not want to appear to be encouraging censorship. But other African American groups did contact the PCA regarding Black representations. For example, although the PCA had received a number of letters about *Gone with the Wind* from African American organizations concerned about the narrative's treatment of "democracy," its containing "race prejudice" and stereotypical Black images, the only answered letters in the PCA files concerned the use of racial epithets.²³⁰ In addition to acknowledging the function of the word "nigger" in distracting Black attention from other more grievous racial offenses in the cinema, we must assess whether the omission of the word "nigger" actually helped to eliminate offense. What were the words that replaced the word "nigger" and did they too cause the same sonically visceral, air of extra-diegetic offense?

Another characteristic of the PCA's treatment of the word "nigger" in these early years was that it was often accompanied (in nearly a tit-for-tat manner) with eliminations designed to please white Southerners, a group who the PCA saw, and who perhaps positioned themselves, in opposition to African American interests. For example, in the case of *Carolina*, although the SRC was concerned about use of the word "nigger," their original concern, evident in their earliest synopsis-review of the plot, was about the unsympathetic depiction of the Old white South. According to the AFI Catalogue, the Hays office would not let director Henry King use the title "House of Connelly" because of the play's original miscegenation theme. As an unidentified SRC script-reader with the initials E.B.B. wrote, "There may be, in a theme of this nature, certain references which would offend Southerners, such as a reference to the commingling of white and Negro blood. All of this could be rendered inoffensive for a motion picture by careful treatment."²³¹ Paul Green had specifically

²³⁰ Minnie Johnson (representing the Neighborhood Council of Washington D.C.), letter to Will Hays, May 12, 1939. Minnie Johnson (as representing the Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A.), letter to Will Hays, June 10, 1939.

²³¹ Undated plot synopsis of *Carolina*, written by EBB. *Carolina* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

designed this play to present the historical realities of the South. In this instance, what cast white southerners in a negative light were the truths of history, which out of deference, the PCA cautioned film companies to avoid.

Likewise, in the case of *So Red the Rose* (1935) another plantation, Civil War melodrama, PCA interest in authentic depiction of controversial African American motifs (here both the word “nigger” and slave rebellion) was consistently and conspicuously matched or exceeded by concerns about white Southern interests. The dominant story line in *So Red the Rose* follows a Southern family through the toil of the Civil War in which the sadness and loss of the slave-owners is the major theme. The story focused on the relationship between Duncan (Randolph Scott), a white Southern man, and his lover Valette (Margaret Sullavan), the daughter of a plantation owner. During the course of the film, Valette’s father, brother, and lover, in turn, all struggle with a decision about whether to go to war—but each for a different reason. All eventually fight for the Confederacy and several of them are killed in the fighting. On the homefront, the family mansion is overtaken by Union soldiers. By the film’s end, the family is reduced in circumstance but nevertheless the lovers are united. The film, like so many Civil War films dating back to *The Birth of a Nation*, chooses to subvert the race question at the heart of the conflict, favoring a focus on the equal, opposing, and apparently all-white forces of “the South” and “the North” and the question of whether (Civil) war is right or wrong.

But if the film suffered from some of *Gone with the Wind*’s flaws, the AFI entry on the film suggests that it also ostensibly presented slavery more realistically than would either *Gone with the Wind* or *Jezebel* (1938)—another Southern cataclysm tale, where it would be typhoid rather than the

Civil War that would wither its Southern men and catapult its New Southern women into positions of (dubiously moral) power.

In *So Red the Rose*, the clear depiction of the slaveowners' contention with their slaves and of the freeing of slaves, if focalized through the white plantation owners, troubled the "happy darkie" image that *Gone with the Wind* presents, primarily by giving a sense of the will of the enslaved people, and by suggesting that all was not well on the plantation. The film's scenes of slave rebellion were apparently extremely tame by contemporary standards. And although the specter of slave rebellions was raised, it operated as sort of an innoculative truth—one that the film, designed to protect white "Southern" pleasure, ultimately contains: eventually Valette is able to talk African American characters out of the rebellion by appealing to their service to her family since she was small. African Americans also unaccountably cheer when their masters go off to fight their liberators (although this cheering is conceivably the result of silently held hope for some other outcome than victory for the Southern plantation owners).²³²

During the film's production, the PCA struggled with the boldness of *So Red the Rose's* racial language and of scenes of Black rebellion. Breen wrote to Paramount:

On page sixteen, where William refers to the 'poor niggers without any sense' this should be changed as a matter of policy not to offend the colored race... The scene of three men hanging from the trees will be deleted by the political [i.e. state] censor boards...Page K-3: this expression "niggers" should be changed.²³³

²³² But if, as the New York Times suggested, *So Red the Rose* led viewers "into well-bred mourning for Stark Young's aristocrats of the old South," African American spectators did not join in the procession. In the *Chicago Defender*, the film reviews focused almost *exclusively* on one scene: the scene of African American rebellion in which Clarence Muse's character was protagonist. One article even said that Muse had used his actor-auteurist clout to change the part of the script that called for him to repent of his Nat-Turner-esque rebellion and kiss the hem of his slave mistresses' skirt, once again proving that Black actors' and activists' often used claims of offense—and the high drama milieu and energy of the set itself—to open up the door for Black artistry, cultural autonomy, and subtle, but important, revision.

²³³ Joseph Breen, letter to Paramount, May 28, 1935. *Carolina* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

In addition to omission of the word “nigger,” the PCA also suggested parallel changes to please white Southerners:

First, the fact that we have been having a great many complaints from the South regarding the excessive exhibition of mint julep drinking by representative Southern characters. There is quite a little of this shown in sequence A. We wish to caution you about it as a matter of policy.²³⁴

The PCA’s policy, then, included suggesting both the elision of racial epithets *and* the elimination of a much more trivial “offense” to white Southerners—the imputation that they drink mint juleps.

While the PCA may also have moved for the removal of this scene in order to reduce the number of drinking scenes, they specifically mention the potential of offending Southerners.

In the case of *So Red the Rose*, the PCA also did not want to offend the South by allowing one of the MPPDA’s members to show resistant or socially-equal African American behaviors, even though they occurred in the time of slavery and therefore could only be argued to have marginal relevance to contemporary racial relations:

On page G5 in Schipo's speech to Valette, "Let the white folks unhitch their own horses" and on page G17 the scene where the big negro bars her way should not be done in a manner that will be offensive to white people in the South.²³⁵

The episodes the PCA targeted demonstrate not only verbal rebellion or sassing, but also a physical barring of a white ladies’ way, suggesting physical violence and also possibly suggesting rape.

Although the PCA’s recommended changes speak to both Black and white interests, it is important to note that there is a disparity in the changes suggested to please these groups: Black slave rebellion, Breen reasoned, might be as offensive to white Southerners as stereotypes of the white South, and both “should” be toned down. In a desire to arrive at a conservative middle ground between these

²³⁴ Joseph Breen, letter to Paramount, July 2, 1935. *So Red the Rose* PCA File. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

two opposing interests, the PCA ended up participating in the reproduction of images of African American docility, and leaving omitted and under-expressed the history of African American rebellion—a representation that clearly could have led to questions about the injustice of Black experience under slavery.

What is more, it is not Black “racist,” anti-white actions but Black self assertion and struggle against oppression that the PCA considers “offensive” to whites. It may also be true that the PCA considered the use of the word “white folks” to be a sort of epithet, as the PCA’s concern about the white offense in the line “the white folks can unhitch their own horses,” May indicate. But Black use of the word “white” and white use of the word “nigger” had very different implications. The PCA never seems to have taken into account the possibility that African Americans might also be offended by the depiction of their docility and apparent happiness under the cruel treatment of slavery. In addition, this example implies that racial offense against whites, as white Southerners defined it and the PCA protected it, could be created by even small, gestures that deviated from white narratives of slavery. Such offense could raise the PCA’s red flags even if the film’s narrative eventually corrected it. In this sense, the PCA, at least in these two films, was more engaged with protecting whiteness than protecting and promoting Black interests.

On the other hand, the PCA’s strategy does seem to call for elaborate indirection and for the application of the principle of deniability. On occasion, the PCA even seems to have gone so far as to direct the actors in how to play their parts. Note that the PCA did not suggest to Paramount, the producer of *So Red the Rose*, that they entirely omit the demonstration of Black enslaved people challenging white slavemasters, but suggested instead alternatives for the “manner” in which these scenes were handled, connoting a softening and indirection.

The SRC also censured the use of the word “nigger” in 1934 in *Imitation of Life*, whose script was submitted in before the SRC became the PCA in July. It is not only the use of the word “nigger” but the fact that the SRC could not seem to find a way around using it that Lewis stresses in his letter:

to properly dramatize the emotions of the white-skinned negro girl and her mother, it would be necessary to leave untouched several sequences in which the term “nigger” is used in derision ... “Nigger” we feel would be objectionable even though it is put in the mouth of a colored person and refers always to one of her own race.²³⁶

The film’s use of the word “nigger” became additional provocation for SRC concern about what, as Susan Courtney has shown, was already a difficult text for the PCA to advise on due to its insinuation of miscegenation and the fact that the PCA had little precedent for addressing the issue in cinematic representation.²³⁷ The SRC’s suggestions in this case imply that they did not want even African Americans to use the word “nigger,” although allowance of Black use of the term was most often conditional. It is possible that the negative effect of the use of the word “nigger” was perhaps increased by the light skin of its utterer, actress Fredi Washington, and by her character’s clear and apparent hatred for her race, one that both mirrors and stands in for white racist hate. In the film, contrary to Fannie Hurst’s novel, both Peola’s racial hate is toned down and the word “nigger” is omitted: Peola is more *sad* than hateful in the film and what hate she does have is directed, as disgust, towards her clinging mother, thus rendering the story more a maternal melodrama than a racial problem film. Crucial to the toning down of the film’s racial elements is the omission of the word “nigger.”²³⁸

²³⁶ J.B. Lewis, letter to Joseph Breen, Apr. 3, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²³⁷ For the most detailed of Courtney’s analyses of the film, see Susan Courtney, “Picturizing Race.” [unpaginated].

²³⁸ Wingate, who apparently was consulted on the project although he had left the SRC in December 1933, wrote to Hays regarding the film, assuring him that Universal reps had advised him that they “would not use the word, ‘nigger’ with the

The PCA's unwritten policy calling for the removal of the word "nigger" was in some ways clearly progressive: it was designed to prevent offense to African Americans. In some ways, however, it was also a token concession, one that stood in the place of other more complex, desired changes that might have been more powerful in accommodating Black spectators and avoiding offense. In 1939, in association with the film production of *Gone with the Wind*, the word "nigger" was again a major issue.²³⁹ Here, as in the previous cases, the PCA requested the *complete* omission of the word: "We note, in several speeches throughout the script the use of the word 'nigger.' As we told you before, this word is highly offensive to Negroes throughout the United States and will be quite forcefully resented by them."²⁴⁰ Clearly out of step with African American culture and the admittedly complex politics of racial self-naming, the PCA went on: "We suggest that you find some other word—possibly the word 'darkie' in its stead."²⁴¹ In its attempts to balance the "Old South's" diction and ideological power to possessively and negatively name African Americans "niggers" in the film, the PCA even suggested that the term "Freedman," an official Yankee term, replace the word "nigger" in one sequence.²⁴² It is worth noting, though, that the PCA's emphasis lies squarely with concern over offense to African Americans and not about local or state censorship of the epithet.

The PCA had also received letters from two Black civic organizations, both located in Washington, with prescriptions for more wholistic changes to the spirit of Mitchell's racist novel.

possible exception of one or two places in the script, and there he will be fully protected. He intends to use the terms 'black'—'colored'—'darkie' and 'negro.'" James Wingate, letter to Will Hays, July 3, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library. AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²³⁹ Leff and Simmons, *Dame in the Kimono*, 95-100.

²⁴⁰ Joseph Breen, letter to David O. Selznick, Jan. 24, 1939 *Gone with the Wind* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² Here as it would in other, later films, the PCA suggested other, more descriptive term to stand in for racial epithets. For example, in *The Lawless*, the term "fruit tramps" is used consistently in place of more offensive terms to describe Mexicans. For African Americans, the PCA often suggested the substitution of the word "Negro" or "Colored" or simply suggested using some other term

The Moving Picture Committee of the Phyllis Wheatley branch of the YMCA, a “character building organization,” wrote with concern that the scene where Scarlett is attacked by a “freed Negro as she drives alone through the colored quarters might engender race hatred and prejudice in many people.” They also cited as hate-arousing the scenes where the plantation “help” are depicted as “lazy and shiftless.”²⁴³ While the producers did eventually shift both of these representations, it is not clear that they did so in response to these letters. What is more, they left in the film the flavor of a criminal African American presence: although they changed the race of the attacker from African American to white, there is an African American accomplice. While he does not himself touch Scarlett, he does hold her horse and eventually attack Big Sam (Everette Brown) who comes to rescue her. Thus the scene shows neither interracial rape nor interracial fighting, both of which could have been cut by state censors. The possibility of miscegenetic rape (one which had been a problem for Black spectators also in the “Gus” scene of *Birth of a Nation*) was explicitly questioned by organized African American spectators, as the letter cited above suggests. Another racially conscious group, the Neighborhood Councils of Washington went even further, suggesting, correctly, that Mitchell’s “story fails to show repentance for selling human beings as cattle, nor for poor food, clothing and shelter given [enslaved people] during their many years of slavery.” This was a powerful and African American centered reading of *Gone with the Wind* but one neither the studio nor the PCA heeded in the production.²⁴⁴

Although the PCA did allow and even encourage the use of the term “darkie” in *Gone with the Wind*, by 1946 and the end of World War II, the PCA had figured out that “darkie,” too, was

²⁴³ Minnie Johnson, Julia West Hamilton, Caroline B. Day, letter to Breen, Jun. 10, 1939. *Gone with the Wind* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁴⁴ Minnie L. Johnson (Chairman of Movie Study Committee) and Arthur O. Waller (You Street Neighborhood Council), letter to Mr. Will Hays, May 12, 1934. *Gone with the Wind* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

offensive and would ask Disney to eliminate the term from *Song of the South* (1946).²⁴⁵ But even though they caused the removal of the word “nigger” from *Gone with the Wind*, they were powerless to omit, root out, or reverse the racial oppression that was built into the naturalization of slavery. When it came to the issue of racism, the PCA was subject, if voluntarily so, to the ideological choices of the producers in ways that they were not when it came to issues of crime.

Racial Epithets in the Racial Problem Film (1949 through the Early 1960s)

Many of the scripts in the 1930s in which the word “nigger” was included dealt with slavery and plantation melodramas. But in the late 1940s, a very different kind of film would use the word “nigger.” If Hollywood films unthinkingly ignored or demeaned African Americans in the 1930s, by the late 1940s, racial representation had substantially shifted: independent and mainstream Hollywood films began to present intense racial themes through the guise of white liberalism, and scripts now *featured* the word “nigger”—as a way to defame its users and to call attention to racism. Significantly, one of the earliest films to use the term in this way was not produced by an MPPDA member studio, but was an independent film that applied for a Code seal.²⁴⁶ *The Burning Cross* (1947) placed the term “shine” (and the term “white” to connote honor and purity, used to condemn the film’s Italian American character Tony for pursuing “women...too white for the likes of you”) in the mouth of only its most villainous characters: Ku Klux Klan members.²⁴⁷ The PCA did not alter its

²⁴⁵ Joseph Breen, letter to Walt Disney, Aug. 1, 1944. The recommendation to completely remove the term did not come until their second letter, where Breen wrote, “It might be well from the standpoint of our negro patrons, to eliminate the expression ‘darkey’ where ever it appears in your dialogue.” The first letter is also of interest because it is framed entirely in terms of helping Disney to avoid offense to African Americans. See Joseph Breen, letter to Walt Disney, July 31, 1944.

²⁴⁶ As of 1935, non-MPPDA member companies could apply for a Code seal but they were not be held accountable to its economic sanctions. Hunning, *Film Censors*, 158.

²⁴⁷ Joseph Breen, letter to Walter Colmes, May 12, 1947. *Burning Cross* PCA File. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA. The PCA specifically asked for the elimination of the word “white,” alone in their letter asking that the word “good” be substituted. White used as a term of praise occurred in other films of this time. See for example *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), where David Huxley (Cary Grant) says “Mighty white of Mr. Peabody” when he thinks Peabody will give him \$1 million.

anti-epithet policy for *The Burning Cross*, but still required that the word “shine” be changed to a—perhaps sarcastically uttered—reference to a “colored gentleman”—a change the producers made.²⁴⁸

Indeed in the cutting continuity, there is no utterance of the word “nigger.”²⁴⁹

Once productions backed by the majors began using epithets in this way, the PCA policy did shift. The pivotal moment seems to have come with United Artists' *Home of the Brave* (1949). The film depicts the experience of a Black soldier during WWII who, after the war is over, still suffers from paralysis and amnesia. Private Peter Moss (James Edwards) is sent on a mission with a close childhood friend, Finch (Lloyd Bridges), Sergeant Mingo (Frank Lovejoy), Major Robinson (Douglas Dick), and T.J. (Steve Brodie), a racist who continually refers to Moss using epithets. Most disturbingly, Finch, who is white, nearly calls Moss the word “nigger” and is immediately after shot by Japanese. Moss feels responsible for Finch's eventual death—because he has survivor's guilt, not because he was angry enough to will his friend's death—and it is this guilt that has caused his paralysis. In the course of the film, the word “nigger” is used in a number of key instances as a signifier of racial trauma. In flashback, Moss describes that, as a child, he was called the word “nigger” and thus his most significant trauma is linked to the utterance of the term. At the end of the film, it is only after the doctor calls Moss the word “nigger” that Moss is driven, by his will to prove he is not inferior, to rise and walk for the first time since his racial trauma on the mission. Ultimately, the word “nigger” stands more for racial trauma than racial oppression or discrimination and prompts audience pity for Moss rather than anger at racism. Nevertheless, for its time, the film was progressive.

²⁴⁸ See the cutting continuity for *The Burning Cross*. Motion Picture and Television Reading Room. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Breen and producer George Glass of United Artists had an extended and weighty correspondence about the use of the word “nigger” in the film. While Breen argued that the term was offensive, Glass argued that the film needed the term because of its offense, at least in certain sequences. While Glass was willing to omit all racial epithets in other places, he argued that the scene where “Mossy,” the film’s racially beleaguered African American soldier, describes his experience of being called “Nigger” during high school was absolutely vital to the story’s meaning, psychological and motivational structure, and racial message:

Without this speech in strong form, there can be no rhyme or reason to the play script as a whole. Moreover...this is in accordance with the character, the theme or the story and... these experiences are directly responsible for the character's neuroses on which our entire story hangs...Should this speech be suspect, we not only would have no play—we would have no business.²⁵⁰

While evidence of psychological trauma was necessary, was the word “nigger” really indispensable? Did the entire plot really hinge on a word? And why did Glass and other white scriptwriters feel so passionately about using the term? While it is clear that the word did bring verbal realism, it represented a jolt of realism to a plot that was primarily expressionistically melodramatic. Perhaps Glass and other filmmakers relied too much on the charged term to represent the history of discrimination. In the case of this film, which began as a hit Broadway show, Glass managed to convince the PCA that the word was necessary, a landmark decision: after this, the PCA would regularly allow use of the word “nigger,” even repeated use of the term, in instances where it was used in a narrative where African Americans were sympathetically depicted. The decision both opened the door to more realism in the depiction of racial oppression and, simultaneously, in its limitedness,

²⁵⁰ George Glass, letter to Joseph Breen, Feb. 18, 1949. *Home of the Brave* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

over-stressed the term, making it the sole harbinger of racial discrimination.²⁵¹ It also opened the door for exploitation and abuse of the term in plots that used the term simply to stir up controversy.

As Breen's letter to Glass regarding *Home of the Brave* suggests, the word "nigger" could now be used—but only when the speaker was an unsympathetic character. Breen recognized and accepted, if reluctantly, United Artist's argument that these "derogatory references to Negroes...were essential to a proper telling of this story."²⁵² Nevertheless, Breen still "urged...the desirability of eliminating any such references possible. *While it is necessary that you build properly for the psychological climax, it is likewise important that you not offend by the quantity of insults*"[italics mine]. In addition, Breen wanted more condemnation to fall upon the users of the word: "We further suggest that it might be well for Mingo to back up a little more strongly Finch's condemnation of T.J."²⁵³ The PCA's selective omissions of some terms of racial derision and its allowance of others *with less historical baggage* demonstrates the nuanced nature of this new policy; although it generally disallows the word "nigger," it allowed the term "black boy." It also did not discourage Mossy's use the word "nigger" in reference to himself—or, more precisely, in reference to what others had called him in the past, a reference which was displaced and lacked immediacy.²⁵⁴

As it had done with *Song of the South*,²⁵⁵ in the case of *Home of the Brave*, PCA also admitted its own limitations, calling on the company to "get competent Negro opinion as to likely Negro

²⁵¹ This is particularly true, for example, in the case of *No Way Out* (1950), where the epithet is used over 30 times but virtually no other signs of racial discrimination are shown.

²⁵² Joseph Breen, letter to George Glass of Screenplays, Inc., Feb. 16, 1949. *Home of the Brave* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ The deletion letter read: "page 47: The words, "black boy" will be substituted for "jigaboo."" 3) Page 55: T.J.'s dialogue, "you yellow-belly shine-!" will be omitted 4) Page 57: After a rather extended discussion of Mossy's long speech on this page, in which he recounts his childhood insults, we rather reluctantly agreed that perhaps a speech as strong as this is necessary." Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Joseph Breen, letter to Walt Disney, Dec. 13, 1944. *Song of the South* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

reaction to this story.”²⁵⁶ There is some question, however, as to how these experts were used. Were they “insurance” against attacks or was this a good faith effort to include African American consultants? And could the elite African Americans often chosen by the PCA really represent a diversity of African American perspectives accurately? Whatever the intention, the use of Black consultants was a highly significant admission of lack of cultural knowledge by the industry self-censors, one that the organization would not have made in the 1930s, when they had not sought African American counsel and had done very little about the unsolicited advice they had received. The PCA also recognized the terms “Japs,” “Squints,” and “Nips” as “derogatory references” and the PCA asked that they be kept to “the barest minimum.”²⁵⁷ Glass again argued for these racially-charged references along lines of verisimilitude. He eventually kept them in the film, stating: “As we stand now, our [film’s] combat boys are awfully polite for men who are in a very grim war. I call your attention to your foreign expert [who] when in conversation with me not only thought highly of the substitution of the word ‘Nips’ but agreed to some reference to ‘the Japs’ as being essential for the story.”²⁵⁸ Racial experts in this instance offered Glass a way out of heeding the PCA’s epithet recommendation and, in turn, for producing a kind of realism. The use of experts, however, was a double edged sword: experts could suggest deletions as well.

Although the PCA was sure of the progressive intentions of the producers, some African Americans were more cynical about the possibility of reversing the implications of the term’s use and perhaps, too, about granting authority to the (white) studios to use it. Struggles between African Americans and the PCA about use of the word “nigger” are evident in the PCA files. Spearheading

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ George Glass, letter to Milt (surname unknown), Feb. 18, 1949. *Home of the Brave* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

efforts to have the word “nigger” censored from films was Baltimore writer Carl Murphy, who launched a national campaign for the elimination of the word “nigger” from all of public life.²⁵⁹ Murphy’s campaign was clearly the result of his own deep commitments and his unique purview of African American culture.²⁶⁰ Murphy was closer than NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White to the local NAACP branches. He was involved with the local Baltimore chapter, but as editor of the *Afro American*, Murphy was also regularly called to present a viewpoint originating outside of the NAACP’s perspective on entertainment, a perspective that was, under the influence of Walter White, often narrowly political. Attuned instead to the perspectives of the average Black spectators who bought his papers, Murphy felt under pressure to keep pace of trends in Black protest and Black cultural production.

The industry’s trend towards allowance of the word “nigger” reached its culmination with *No Way Out*, a film I discuss at length in Chapter 5, in which Sidney Poitier starred as Black doctor Luther Brooks. Brooks’ first days as a resident are disrupted when his right to be a doctor is challenged by two rabidly racist white criminals (Richard Widmark’s Ray Biddle and Dick Paxon’s Johnny Biddle) who arrive in the prison ward. When Johnny dies under Dr. Brooks’ care, Ray believes, erroneously, that Brooks maliciously performed malpractice on his brother because of Ray’s own race-baiting. In response, Ray attempts to orchestrate, from the hospital’s prison ward where he is still confined, a retaliatory attack on the African American section of town. But when African

²⁵⁹ *Pittsburgh Courier’s* staff had previously asked for deletions of epithets in the mid-1940s. Breen’s response, which the paper published, said: “the responsibility of the Production Code Administration of which I am the director, rests entirely upon the provisions which have been established by the industry, and which are set forth in the Production Code. For the most part, these concern...morals and morality. Such practices as those of using words which might be offensive to your group would not come within our responsibility” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, June 17, 1944). Not only did this response misrepresent the policy of suggesting out the word “nigger,” but it also made clear that Breen did not see the word “nigger” as immoral.

²⁶⁰ For more on Carl Murphy and his commitment to Baltimore’s Black political culture see Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892-1950* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

Americans heard of the coming attacks, they preemptively strike the whites. In the course of the film, Ray Biddle's racism is funneled almost entirely into use of the word "nigger" and other racial epithets. In response to *No Way Out*, Murphy along with the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), served the MPAA notice of the NNPA's anti-epithet resolution:

Racial Epithets have already been banned by voluntary agreement of the broadcasting systems, news services and major metropolitan dailies. The Negro Publishers Association wishes to hasten the day when they shall be prohibited on stage and screen. The Association protests the use of epithets in all motion pictures and particularly the excessive employment of these epithets in the motion picture *No Way Out*. This play is admirable in its intent to expose the effect of bigotry and racial prejudice. Its authors err in their belief that in order to make the villain thoroughly contemptible, he and others, on thirty-five different occasions utter indecent epithets applied to the colored race. Some of these terms...have never been heard or used by millions of Americans of both races. Their employment in the motion picture screens throughout the country builds up a vocabulary of undesirable expression which should not be spoken in decent society.²⁶¹

This response gives us a sense of the logic of African American middle-class opposition to the use of the term in films—even films with “admirable” racial messages. In a four page letter of response, the MPAA stated that “it is only with the idea, and hope, that such epithets will be shown to be so wrong, so unjust, and so un-American that their very presentation on the screen will greatly tend to discourage their use in American life.”²⁶² It was the desire to be “as forceful and dramatic” as possible that had motivated the inclusion and, they hastened to add “the use of these epithets has been clearly restricted to the unsympathetic characters” [original emphasis].²⁶³ They also pointed out the variability and lack of unity in Black positions on the film, noting that Walter White had approved

²⁶¹ Carl Murphy, letter to Eric Johnston, Oct. 20, 1950. *No Way Out* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁶² The letter available through the PCA file on *No Way Out* is unsigned but the initials JB-T are written in the corner, suggesting that it may have been written by Joseph Breen. Nov. 8, 1950. *No Way Out* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA. It was written however in response to the Oct. 20, 1950 letter sent to Eric Johnston by Carl Murphy.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

the use of the term in *No Way Out*. The PCA also used another strategy to deflect criticism in this case. They showed Murphy the negative criticism that they had received on the film from white racists, implicitly suggesting that if white racists were angered, then the film (and the industry) must be racially progressive.

But Murphy strongly rejoined: "I note what you said about Mr. Walter White. I am a member of the national Board of Directors of the NAACP, which hired Mr. White as its secretary, and I disagree with him thoroughly on this subject." Regarding the epithet, Murphy held his position strongly: "You and I both know of many expressions which are not permissible under any circumstances. We prefer to place racial epithets in that category. We feel playwrights and dramatists can and should achieve the desired effects by some other means."²⁶⁴ Suggesting that the Code's enforcers adopt the same sort of elaborate textual mechanisms for connoting discrimination that they had with other subjects like sexuality and violence, Murphy's letter would seem to offer a creative challenge to the PCA to enter into a contract with Black spectators by encouraging representation of discrimination and race hatred in a different, more elaborately coded way. However, the PCA seems to have attended little to Murphy's advice.

Murphy's response also raises the valid question of whether Hollywood could so suddenly earn the right to use the word. Their move towards inclusion of the word "nigger" was based not on shifts in African American cultural understandings of the word, but rather in changes in the filmmakers' use of the term—*white liberal filmmakers'* reappropriation. If neither the Black press nor Black audiences had control over the uses of that word and the definitions and proscriptions of

²⁶⁴ Carl Murphy, Vice President of the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association, letter to Eric Johnston, Nov. 15, 1950. *No Way Out* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

offense, then what kind of cultural or regulatory autonomy could they have even over their own self-definition?

Murphy was also influenced in his reading strategy by the kind of censorship control practiced in Maryland. Censors in Maryland rarely paid attention to diegetic context in suggesting epithet deletions; so, too, Murphy also ignored diegetic meanings in his campaign against the word “nigger.” In an era where support of film censorship was still legally sanctioned, Carl Murphy sought to control and usurp censors’ power to protect African Americans not only from defamation through imagery but from the powerfully felt impact of verbal scorn by means of a word. In addition, Murphy used the logic of morality to define racial epithets as dirty language. It is clear that the intentions of the liberal producers were noble and that they brought needed realism to the screen. However, this realism was often limited by the narrow and selective means of communicating discrimination. The word “nigger” often stood in for the reality of discrimination and its use, in producers’ minds, made other representations of the system of discrimination unnecessary. As the case of Murphy suggests, this representational strategy, however liberally motivated, was often unpleasurable to African American spectators whose broadened notions of Civil rights would include the right to be spectators (and consumers) without offense.

In the wake of Murphy’s strong dissent, the PCA walked cautiously with regard to use of the word. For example, in the following year Mark Robson’s *Bright Victory* (1951) employed the epithet again. *Bright Victory* depicts Larry (Arthur Kennedy), a white Southerner who is blinded in combat in WWII. In his spatial orientation class, Larry befriends another blind man, Joe (James Edwards). Although Larry does not know it, Joe is African American. On hearing that new men will be added to the class, Larry comments publicly to Joe that he “heard some of them were niggers,” thus

unwittingly alienating Joe. The remainder of the film follows Larry as he adjusts to blindness and gets engaged. But at the end of the film, Larry and Joe are reunited, on a train, and Joe tells Larry that he is no longer “sore” about his use of the word “nigger.” The film was passed with inclusion of the word, but the PCA suggested in two separate letters that even as few as two uses of the word could be objectionable: “the two uses of the word ‘niggers’ are likely to prove offensive and we seriously recommend that you substitute the word ‘Negroes’,”²⁶⁵ and “May we remind you again of the fact that the two uses of the word ‘niggers’ are likely to prove offensive.”²⁶⁶ The PCA seemed to take special interest and concern about the film’s suggestion that Sergeant Masterson, the highest ranking army official in the film, was racist. They urged Universal to eliminate the use of the word “nigger” by the army leader, calling for a rephrasing of Masterson's line “to read, ‘Maybe he thought you were colored, too’,” [original emphasis].²⁶⁷ Universal did make this second change. However, actions spoke louder than words: the PCA eventually gave the film a seal even without the elimination of the dramatically-framed use of the word “nigger.” The term “Darky” also appeared in a song on the film’s soundtrack, “Take me back to Old Virginny.” Although the PCA kept careful records of song words, they did not mention this in their suggested deletions, a move that suggests their lack of close attention to racial epithets.²⁶⁸ This elimination of the word “nigger” from *Bright Victory* suggests that the organization often eliminated the term in instances where the imputation of racism would hurt major American institutions rather than strictly in instances where African Americans would be offended. It also suggests that even a few uses of the term in a film were still a

²⁶⁵ Joseph Breen, letter to William Gordon, May 15, 1950. *Bright Victory* (working title *Lights Out*) PCA File Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁶⁶ Joseph Breen, letter to William Gordon, Jul. 29, 1950. *Bright Victory* (working title *Lights Out*) PCA File. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁶⁷ Breen, letters to Gordon. May 15, 1950 and Jul. 29, 1950.

²⁶⁸ William Gordon, letter to Joseph Breen, Aug. 4, 1950. *Bright Victory* (working title *Lights Out*) PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

problem for the PCA when not integral to the plot. In addition, it suggests that although the PCA may have strongly urged deletion of the word “nigger,” they were not willing, generally, to deny a film a seal if it contained the term.

In the 1955 teen film, *Blackboard Jungle* (which featured interracial juvenile gangs), the PCA found unacceptable elements of the script related to the sexual assault of a teacher by a student and the “overall viciousness and brutality” of the films’ violence.²⁶⁹ Racial and religious epithets were also a source of contention for the PCA: both the term “Dago” and “the expression ‘pope-lovers’” were removed. The PCA was particularly concerned about the use of the latter term, offensive to Catholics, as it “will undoubtedly give extreme offense to many people in the audience particularly in view of the fact that it is the one expression of this general nature in the picture which goes unchallenged or is accepted without condemnation.”²⁷⁰ These were a problem not only because of the potential for offense, but because of a lack of what the PCA termed elsewhere “compensating moral values.”²⁷¹ Curiously, however, the film’s use of the term “Spic” and the word “nigger” were not a problem for the PCA, as they occurred in a context where instruction against their use was strong and immediate. The *Blackboard Jungle* case suggests that the PCA might have allowed some of these offensive comments within a retributive narrative framework that would punish or challenge the speaker—much as miscegenation, for much of the PCA’s history, was sometimes allowed as long

²⁶⁹ *Blackboard Jungle* is about new school teacher and ex-serviceman Richard Dadier (Glenn Ford). Dadier’s first day reveals the extreme violence of the all male student body, which is made up largely of Latinos and working-class whites: one of the students attempts to rape a female co-worker, who Dadier severely beats. After being attacked (perhaps in retaliation) by a group of students, Dadier almost quits his job but is convinced by a former professor of the students’ need for good, dedicated teachers. Although one of the students actually begins writing anonymous letters to Dadier’s wife claiming he is being unfaithful, Dadier also figures out who is doing this and takes him to the principle. Ultimately both Miller and Dadier stay on at the school.

²⁷⁰ Joseph Breen, letter to Dore Schary, Sept. 20, 1954. *Blackboard Jungle* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

as it ended in tragedy. Condemning and punishing offensive behavior and utterances would allow the “moral” to remain clear and constitute adequate compensating moral values.

The 1959 film *Odds Against Tomorrow*, another racially liberal, independent film, one produced by Harry Belafonte, also came under the advisement of the PCA for its use of the word “nigger.” The film depicts a bank heist in which a white racist (Earl Slater played by Robert Ryan), a Black man (Johnny Ingram played by Harry Belafonte) and a non-racist white man (David Burke played by Ed Begley) join forces. Ingram at first rejects the idea of the heist but is eventually motivated to participate by his gambling debts which, he states, are the result of his trying to get by in a white world. Earl is motivated by the fact that he lives off of his girlfriend. During the heist, Burke dies and Ingram and Earl go after one another. When their fight takes them to an oil tanker, they shoot it. It explodes, killing them both. The film ends with the police trying to identify the charred bodies—ironically, they cannot tell the two racial antagonists apart. Here the PCA cited specifically “bad audience reaction” to the word “nigger,” although, again, the picture passed without elimination of the word.²⁷²

In some instances, the PCA’s epithet eliminations seemed to be rooted in a desire not to avoid African American offense but rather to avoid, specifically, offense that might stir up racial dissent. This concern about dissent was not limited to racial cases—the PCA feared bad publicity from everyone. They were particularly fearful of inspiring hatred for whites or ideas of integration among African Americans in the early 1960s. For example, in a letter to Roger Corman, producer of the Anti-Klan independent film, *Intruder* (1961), the PCA’s letter linked concerns about the film’s use of

²⁷² Joseph Breen, letter to Harbel Production Company, February 23, 1959. *Odds Against Tomorrow* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

the word “nigger” to concern about its progressive and potentially explosive message promoting integration. The film proposal was initially rejected by the PCA because, the letter recounted:

- 1) The repeated and offensive use of the word "nigger" and similar expressions. 2) The inflammatory nature of the story which could incite hatred toward white people on the part of negroes in the audience. With reference to the offensive use of the word "niggers" we note that it is used 43 times in this story. In our judgment we feel that it might be used a couple of times for characterization purpose. As you know, the Code specifically states that the use of the word "niggers" should be avoided because it is highly offensive to the negro race. Our concern regarding the inflammatory nature of the subject matter is based on a realization of the profound and highly explosive problem of integration which is seething in this country. There are so many imponderables in this situation involving friction between the law, inherited emotional patterns and justice, that we feel our industry should be prudent in the sense that we do not unwittingly complicate the problem.²⁷³

Perhaps, the seemingly progressive step by the PCA to avoid the word “nigger” on-screen was used to keep African Americans from challenging the racial status quo off-screen. As a result of these potentially negative industry implications, the PCA suggested reduction of the film’s number of racial insults, as they had in the case of *Home of the Brave*. This strategy of quantitative control was also used by the PCA in the case of violence, as Stephen Prince has shown.²⁷⁴ This approach allowed the PCA to present controversial material without overwhelming the audience.

The SRC and PCA’s policy of suggesting omission of the word “nigger” was progressive but not based on directives in the Code. Although the PCA originally adopted a policy of suggesting the complete deletion or replacement of the word “nigger” and other offensive epithets, they increasingly moved towards a policy of allowing selective usage of the term in films. The later policy had the effect of allowing for increased expression of racism in cinema without (presumably) overwhelming

²⁷³ Geoffrey M. Shurlock, letter to Roger Corman, July 3, 1961. *Intruder* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁷⁴ See Stephen Prince, *Classical Film Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 139.

Black spectators with repeated utterance of a term that reminded them of their oppression (and perhaps also of the film industry's whiteness). The word "nigger" was a concrete element of a script that could easily be removed and could be monitored and tracked by the PCA. The far more complicated question about the depiction of Black characters—one raised by Walter White and the NAACP—was a more difficult issue for the PCA. In the next section I will evaluate how the PCA dealt with the question of racial stereotypes.

The PCA Recognizes 'These Good People'

The PCA seems to have been aware of African American complaints about stereotype in films. Despite inconsistency with regard to enforcement, the PCA gave strict attention to the use of stereotypes in Disney's *Song of the South*, released in 1946, just after WWII. In particular, they worried about *Black leaders' responses* to the comedic stereotypes in the "scenes [that] show Negro groups singing happily":

It is the characterization of the individuals in these groups to which certain types of Negro leaders are most likely to take exception. It is recommended therefore that these groups not be played for comedy, that their clothes be plain and reasonably clean, rather than having them dressed in rags, and that the scenes depend upon the singing of the groups to hold audience interest, rather than funny business which is certain to be resented by some negroes.²⁷⁵

Clear in this quote is the PCA's awareness of the kinds—and nuances—of representations likely to produce offense. The mention and characterization here of Negro leaders seems to fit Walter White. As was so often the case, the PCA's modifications have the effect of playing down, but not entirely omitting, the racist tendencies of the film. In the PCA's mind, the only way to get *Song of the South*, a film in which broken English, strong dialect, and the motif of the "happy darky" predominated, across in a postwar society marked by rising African American esteem and militant social activism was

²⁷⁵ Joseph Breen, letter to Walt Disney, July 31, 1944. *Song of the South* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

to present the film as historical, therein justifying the stereotype by displacing it into the past (and implicitly suggesting that there was an era when African Americans behaved thus). This was the strategy and public relations advice PCA offered Disney, telling him to make sure that he took pains to “establish the fact that [Uncle Remus] and his kind belong to a bygone day.”²⁷⁶ By setting the film in the past and contrasting it with the present, the film might avoid contemporary, postwar Black complaints. This memo was written almost exactly one year after the Detroit riots, and in the same year as *The Negro Soldier*, a film overseen by Frank Capra and Stuart Heisler that would give an official gloss to positive representation of African Americans.

Again evidencing the pattern of dual concerns about “Southern” white interests and Black interests, the PCA’s letters to Disney regarding *Song of the South* also evidence some residual concern about white Southerners. The PCA again here altered African American self-expression and painful historical references to avoid offending the white-dominated South: “Part 9A: It is suggested that the underscored portion of Uncle Remus’ lines be eliminated, to avoid possible attacks by the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, the Mayor of Atlanta, and other civic groups. ‘Atlanta! Dat’s er mighty turble place. Dey sho ain’t nobody dar I wants ter see.’”²⁷⁷ The PCA strongly suggested that someone familiar with race issues be consulted with regards to the film. “These good people,” Breen wrote Disney of African Americans, “in recent months, have become most critical regarding the portrayal on the motion picture screen of the members of their race, and it will be well for you to take counsel with some responsible leaders among the negroes concerning this particular story.”²⁷⁸ According to the NAACP papers, Disney was indeed in contact with the NAACP. Disney even told White that he

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Breen, letter to Disney, August 1, 1944.

would “very much like to work with [the] organization on the treatment of this subject.”²⁷⁹ But this invitation was tempered by a lukewarm follow through that seemed to betray Disney’s half-hearted approach to African American spectators: Disney asked White whether the NAACP had a representative on the coast. He also offered a loose, non-committal inquiry, as to whether White “perhaps may have plans that would bring” him “out this way” rather than officially flying him out as a consultant.²⁸⁰ The increased criticism Breen feared from “these good people” was most likely gauged when the PCA head wrote to Walter White in February of that year regarding the acceptability of the use of the term “Darky,” probably out of concern over an earlier script draft of *Song of the South* itself.²⁸¹

That such a correspondence was initiated by Breen clearly shows that the PCA was beginning to take African American critiques into account with regards to industry policy; this further modifies Raymond Moley’s characterization of Breen as a man whose central focus was on enforcing the Code.²⁸² Walter White’s visit to Hollywood in 1942 announced the potential presence of a centralized and unified African American lobby in Hollywood. Breen had corresponded with White after the visit, and White had let Breen know of his desire to come back out to Hollywood, perhaps for an extended period of time to campaign for better images, a suggestion Breen strongly, if politely, counseled against. Breen suggested that White leave the handling of the Negro issue in the

²⁷⁹ Walt Disney, letter to Walter White, July 25, 1944. NAACP Collection, Library of Congress Manuscript Reading Room.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Joseph Breen, letter to Roy Wilkins, February 28, 1944. NAACP Collection, Library of Congress Manuscript Reading Room.

²⁸² There is very little of Breen’s voice, strongly represented in the chapter on the Code itself, in Moley’s chapter on “What is not in the Code,” which deals with industry policy. Raymond Moley, *The Hays Office* (New York: Ozer, 1971), 112-119.

hands of Darryl Zanuck.²⁸³ If White had insisted, he probably could have had more influence on the PCA. But White was concerned about appearing to be a censor and wanted instead to be an *advisor* or even a cultural producer in his own right. Accordingly, his letters to the PCA were few and his impact as a lobbyist for African Americans—with the PCA at least—remained nascent. Rather than consulting White, Breen brought in Francis Harmon, who had been a PCA employee and who was regularly consulted on films dealing with “the South” and African Americans (he was also consulted regarding *Pinky*) to advise Disney on *Song of the South*. Breen wrote to Disney:

Mr. Francis Harmon, who until he became the directing force of the War Activities Committee, was a member of the Production Code Administration and in charge of its work in New York, was kind enough to read this script [of *Song of the South*] at my request. Mr. Harmon hails from Mississippi and has lived for many years in the "deep South." He is highly intelligent and knows the so-called "Negro problem" thoroughly. I attached hereto a memorandum which he was good enough to prepare after reading your script, and which I pass along for your general information.²⁸⁴

Although the letter was not included in the PCA file, Disney seems not to have acted on the suggestion to tone down stereotypes and the memo was not enough to prevent the Production Code Administration from granting a seal.²⁸⁵

The Burning Cross (1947), a film dealing with the Klan, also drew the PCA’s attention—but not with regard to lynching. Instead, surprisingly, the PCA was concerned with the question of Black stereotypes. At first glance, this seems odd, as the film depicted an African American father and former serviceman fighting, in defiance of the Klan, for his right (and the future “birthright” of his

²⁸³ Joseph. Breen, letter to Walter White, Aug 3, 1942. Papers of the NAACP, Library of Congress Manuscript Reading Room. The letter read, in part: “In the face of Col. Zanuck’s activity in this regard, I think it would be best to let the situation stand as it is now. I do not think it is necessary for you to press the matter further. It is my judgment that you could not do better than Col. Zanuck has done[0]. In view of all the circumstances, I would suggest that it may not be necessary for you to follow through, at least for some months to come. Col Zanuck’s letter is certain to be very effective.”

²⁸⁴ Breen, letter to Disney, Aug 1, 1944.

²⁸⁵ Seal granted August 13, 1944. *Song of the South* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

son) to vote. But the dialogue spoken by African American characters (and white rural Southerners) in the film was originally slated to be completely rendered in broken English. Perhaps because the film dealt with African American themes and would have particular appeal to Black audiences (and also because it came on the heels of organized, interracial responses against *Song of the South*), the PCA required, very early in its letter to director Walter Colmes that keeping “in mind public reaction to a subject of this nature and especially sensitive reactions of various racial groups,” Colmes should take “care...to ensure that Negroes throughout the production will at no time be shown as too subservient and that their dialogue will be cleaned up so that the English will be grammatical.”²⁸⁶ Nevertheless, it seems strange that this film raised the eyebrows of the PCA when so many earlier plots depicting the plantation bliss of African American enslaved people did not. Was it the independent status of this film that prompted PCA scrutiny regarding its use of stereotypes? Or its probable popularity with African American audiences? Or had there been, with stereotypes, as with the word “nigger,” a shift wrought by the era? Although the PCA’s role in enforcing progressive racial politics of films was limited, had the industry considered African American complaints to be as important as the concerns of white Southerners, they may have altered stereotypical representations in more films.

The PCA seems to have missed exaggerated characterizations and stereotypes in *Gone with the Wind*, *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and *Stormy Weather* (1943). Their letters to filmmakers suggest little attention or concern for the nuances of framing or cinematic perspective that might have shifted these films’s Black representations from stereotypical to more humane, regardless of the fact that they clearly knew and understood Black reactions to stereotype. The inattention to the question of

²⁸⁶ Joseph Breen, letter to Walter Colmes, May 12, 1947. *The Burning Cross* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

stereotypes in these earlier cases was in part due to the particular moment in which these films were released. In the midst of the war, when images of fantasy were more acceptable because they took viewers' minds off of the war's atrocities, stereotype-bound flights of fancy may have seemed, to the studios, as potentially soothing fare for Blacks as well as whites. Besides, neither *Stormy Weather* (1943) nor *Cabin in the Sky* focus on Blacks "in service" to whites. Both, too, had been pre-tested on Broadway without undue negative Black reaction. However, more enforcement of this silent policy against stereotypes would have perhaps significantly decreased offense to African Americans.²⁸⁷

Much later, *Porgy and Bess* (1959) would produce industry-level concern about stereotypes, although these concerns may have emanated more from the producer, Samuel Goldwyn, than the PCA. Dorothy and DuBose Heywards' *Porgy and Bess* was a Black cast musical that started as a play and enjoyed several successful Broadway runs in 1935, 1942, 1943, and 1953. The 1959 film version, like its theatrical predecessors, told the story of Bess (Dorothy Dandridge), an attractive Black woman with a morally ambiguous past. She lives in the shantytown slum of the fictitious Cat Fish row, an all Black enclave. In the film, Porgy (Sidney Poitier), an African American man without the full use of his legs, tries to save Bess from her low-living, her dangerous boyfriend, Crown (Brock Peters), and her poor sense of self-worth. Ultimately, Porgy kills Crown. But when he is taken away by police for questioning, Sporting Life (Sammy Davis Jr.) tells Bess that Porgy is dead and lures her away to New York with "Happy Dust" (i.e. drugs). At the end of the film, in what is ultimately a migration narrative, Porgy, who has evaded police suspicion, sets off to find Bess, leaving Catfish row behind him.

²⁸⁷ For more on African American offense at Hollywood images see Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford, 1993). It would also be necessary to see whether the late 1940s also occasioned a shift in PCA attitudes towards maids and butlers which continued to be depicted, if alongside increasing representations of entertainers, in Hollywood films.

The PCA's major concerns about the film were that it showed: "1) [the] Openly living together of a cripple and a harlot 2) An illicit relationship between harlot and a murderer 3) The distribution and use of dope 4) Excessive Lustful kissing 5) Profanity 6) A murderer is not apprehended or punished in any way by the law."²⁸⁸ But in the late 1950s, when recognition of the civil rights movement had become more widespread, MGM reps and the PCA were primarily concerned about the fact that it was *African Americans* who were portrayed as immoral and any accompanying racial implications this might have. The PCA letter read: "Mr. McCarthy and the studio are very properly concerned with the possible reaction of Negroes to this story, inasmuch as it portrays them as superstitious and, in the case of the play itself, with a very low moral character. It was agreed that the Code changes indicated [taking out the 'dope angle' and having Porgy and Bess marry] would "help raise the general standard of the story and make it less sordid. However, the studio intends to get some good advice to make certain that there would be no serious public objection on the part of the organized Negro groups."²⁸⁹ As was the case with *Song of the South*, the Negro expert the studios consulted was unable to identify or prompt removal of those narrative points that would produce African American displeasure at this aged drama, as what Roy Wilkins called "a division among Negroes as to the value of this play" would seem to suggest.²⁹⁰

The PCA concern about stereotyped representations in *Song of the South* (1946) and *The Burning Cross* (1947) indicate that, particularly in the immediate postwar moment, the PCA "industry

²⁸⁸ The first PCA script reader, who may have disliked the play as he continually referred to Porgy as "a cripple" and Bess as a "harlot." PCA synopsis of play "Porgy and Bess," Oct. 10, 1935. *Porgy and Bess* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁸⁹ Geoffrey Shurlock, memo for the files, Nov. 7, 1951. *Porgy and Bess* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁹⁰ See Roy Wilkins, "Statement to Time Magazine by Roy Wilkins," Nov. 22, 1957. Papers of the NAACP. Library of Congress, Manuscript Reading Room.

policy” did include attention to organized African American public opinion and to shifts in Black desires regarding images of African Americans on screen.

Structuring Marginalization/Revealing Marginalization: African Americans, (In)justice, and the PCA

Thomas Cripps has argued that African Americans (and more particularly African American issues) were a structuring absence in American film representation.²⁹¹ In the 1940s and 1950s, this was even—and perhaps especially—true when it came to representations that concerned themes relevant to them. Although Hollywood rarely dealt directly and realistically with themes relevant to African American life and history, there were a number of Hollywood-produced films with African American themes—even if they conspicuously lacked African American stars, as such, or actors in featured roles. The inclusion of actual African Americans in these plots may have been too much racial realism for good business. Transposing these themes onto white protagonists, these films dealt with motifs—mostly horrific and tragic—central to African American life. As with the passing narratives of the late 1940s, they asked whites to identify with Black situations and problems through white actors, viewing white identification with African American actors as untenable. With these narratives, white spectators could consider and even identify with issues like lynching, chain gangs, and systematic injustice in the criminal justice system (all problems that historically disproportionately concerned African Americans) without having to broach “the Negro problem.”

Despite their lack of prominence, in these films, African Americans were included “on the margins” of the diegesis, sometimes with a large measure of conspicuousness. For example, in Frank Borzage’s *Moonrise* (1948), a film that became one of the twelve yearly picks for review in *Ebony*, African American actor Rex Ingram plays Mose, the best friend of the film’s criminalized protagonist,

²⁹¹ Thomas Cripps, “The Absent Presence in American Civil War Films” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no.4, (1994): 367 - 376.

Danny (Danny Hawkins), whose father was hung to death; in Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936), not only are there Black extras with speaking roles (a laundress and a bartender) but a Black shoeshine steals our attention in a crucial moment as he stands prominently above the crowd on his shoe shine stand while the angry white mob passes out of the tavern to lynch the film's white protagonist, Joe Wilson (Spencer Tracy); in *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), both segregation and the overabundance of African Americans on chain-gangs are briefly revealed through a number of close-up shots of African Americans coming from separate living quarters than white prisoners. We see later as a guard tallies prisoners on a chalk board, that these African Americans outnumber whites on the chain-gang and are destitute in ways similar to the white protagonist with whom we are positioned to identify; in *Storm Warning* (1951), as I discussed in Chapter 3, both African American extras and African American music are woven into the fabric of the text. These are African American undertones that, while "free" from the narrative, nevertheless cause the viewer to be reminded of African American absence.

Scenes of the type described above symbolically reference African Americans by cutting to "flashes" of their presence but could work on spectators in a variety of ways. They may prompt consideration of African Americans not present in the narrative or, conversely and more in keeping with ideological status quo, they may prompt viewer relief at the briefness of their reference to the troubling plight of African Americans. A third potential effect is that they could transfer sympathy from African Americans to the whites that stand in for them in the cinematic text, removing from the film, with dangerous ideological consequences, the painful reminder of the prevalence of racial injustice. For African Americans, these brief flashes of racial recognition may have operated as

moments of truthful revelation, to which historical and cultural narratives could be attached and upon which elaborative readings could be built in the manner we saw in Chapter 2.

Though this process of sublimation was centrally authored by individual studios and directors rather than the MPPDA, the industry self censors did have a part in the process of this transposition and in bringing to the screen issues central to African American life. Narratives of injustice that were connected to African American history could not easily be represented under the provisions of the Code, even when it was white actors who were shown on the screen. Because of the Code provisions requiring that sympathy not be thrown “against the law nor with the criminal as against those who punish him” and that “the courts of the land should not be presented as unjust,” it would be difficult for filmmakers to bring to the screen dramatizations of perpetually harsh disciplinary regimes of power, and demonization of the marginalized in the eyes of the law. This was made doubly difficult by local censorship laws that prevented the showing of lynchings and brutality, certain films which pointed to the Black experience and reality of criminalization,

The Social Problem of Racial Brutality: Lynching, the PCA and the Politics of Omission:

According to the American Film Institute, 152 films produced between 1930 and 1960 dealt with the subject of lynching. One hundred and eighteen of these were Westerns and many others of these were historical films.²⁹² In very few of these films, however, were the lynching victims Black, even though, at least since the 1880s, the vast majority of actual lynching victims in the U.S. were of African descent.²⁹³ The consistent distortion of history rendered by the omission of the racial tenor of lynching in the U.S. may have resulted from the long term effect of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915),

²⁹² Some, like the *Ox-Bow Incident*, linked the Western landscape and motifs with racial components (but not black centrality).

²⁹³ Jessie P. Guzman and W. Hardin Hughes, “Lynching—Crime,” in *The Negro Yearbook* (Atlanta, GA: Foote and Davies Press, 1947), 306-8.

which had raised Black ire by celebrating the lynching of a Black man, or from a desire to promote identification of a white-dominated audience with racially similar lynch victims is unclear. It may have reflected instead a desire to avoid revealing the “controversial” racist realities of this form of cruelty that were being debated on the floor of the House and Senate in anti-lynching bills in the 1930s and into the 1940s.

While most of these films sidelined the statistic that the vast majority of lynch victims in the United States were African Americans, two notable exceptions, *The Burning Cross* and *Intruder in the Dust*, actually depict African Americans as the victims (or intended victims) of lynching. In *Intruder in the Dust*, based on the novel by Southerner William Faulkner, the lynching actually never happens, although the prospect of lynching is the major source of tension for the film’s white Southern liberal characters as well as for the intended victim, a middle aged Black man. In the film, Lucas Beauchamp (Juano Hernandez) is an African American landowner accused of killing a poor white man, on the damning accusation of the man’s brother. A white Southern lawyer, his teenage nephew, a teenage African American and a dainty old woman join forces both to prove that Lucas is not responsible for the killing and to prevent his lynching. A film like *Intruder in the Dust* made the danger of lynching African Americans plausible, and made the potential victim sympathetic because he is innocent of the crime. These films made recognition of African Americans’ plight possible for Black spectators. In *The Burning Cross*, however, an entire African American family is actually killed for voting, a narrative point that stretched the boundaries of Hollywood depictions of lynching by showing African Americans and by linking lynching to contemporary political issues.

Lynching was, of course, an incredibly important, structuring occurrence in African American life during the first half of the twentieth century. During the 1930s, the NAACP devoted

much of its time and attention to an anti-lynching campaign. Due to the efforts of Southern senators, although anti-lynching legislation was repeatedly introduced in U.S. Congress, no federal lynching law was ever passed.²⁹⁴ During the 1940s, although the real number of lynchings had decreased, the importance of lynching as a social problem hit home for many African Americans. A number of those African Americans lynched during the 1940s were Black soldiers training to serve their country in the South; their mothers, as James Baldwin famously recognized, hoped that their soldier-sons would die in foreign theatres of war rather than being lynched in southern training camps on American soil.²⁹⁵ Some returning soldiers were even lynched after the war.

In popular culture, lynching *images* had almost as complex a history as the crime itself and were used to send competing political messages. On the one hand, postcards, pictographic memorabilia, and the very visual nature of the spectacle of lynching as torture were a part of the entertainment of lynching and the pleasure of the lynchers: such images operated to promote the act of cruel power and as an assertion of racial superiority. *Birth of a Nation* had used these visual paradigms to frame its depiction of lynching to positively portray its white agenda, proudly depicting not only the Klan regalia but also the dead Black body of Gus. On the other hand, the NAACP, and a number of plays of the 1930s, also mobilized the idea and *images* of lynching for entirely different

²⁹⁴ There were two major anti-lynching bills introduced in Congress: Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill (1935) and the Gavegan bill (1940), both of which were heavily supported by the NAACP. Please see Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks* (New York: Oxford, 1978), 268-297. See also Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

²⁹⁵ Patricia Sullivan notes this in *Days of Hope* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 137. Baldwin states: "Perhaps the best way to sum all this up is to say that the people I knew felt, mainly, a peculiar kind of relief when they knew their boys were being shipped out of the South to do battle overseas. It was, perhaps, like feeling that the most dangerous part of the journey had been passed and that now, even if death should come, it would come with honor and without the complicity of their countrymen. Such a death would be, in short, a fact with which one could hope to live." James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Beacon, 1955), 101.

ideological purposes, using them as a sign not of white power but of unjust Black subjugation.²⁹⁶

From a censorship perspective, lynching, like so many “racial problems,” was a layered issue: it was a demonstration of public lawlessness that state censors—concerned, as they were with governance—typically condemned. It was also a racially-aligned act of vigilantism visited upon those thought unworthy of constitutionally prescribed modes of justice. It was a crime masquerading as the people’s justice, designed to mark its victims as inferior and, even, subhuman.

John Stahl’s *Imitation of Life* raised significant issues for the SRC and newly established PCA on this topic. As Susan Courtney has pointed out, the most difficult issue for the MPPDA with *Imitation of Life* was how to avoid the implication or idea of miscegenation that accompanied fact of Fredi Washington/Peola’s light skin and lack of any visible signs of Blackness.²⁹⁷ I have also suggested above that the word “nigger” prompted SRC/PCA confusion about public acceptability. Yet there were some other the racial concerns present in the PCA *Imitation of Life* file about which there seems to have been no confusion at all. While miscegenation was clearly the major concern of the PCA with regards to *Imitation of Life*, the Breen office also stated several other racial concerns (including prejudice, lynching, and racial injustice). The original script for John Stahl’s *Imitation of Life* (1934) included a lynching narrative. This theme was prominently featured in the PCA’s

²⁹⁶ Walter White saw a number of these plays in the 1930s and kept information about them on file. See the NAACP files (see file for “Balance,” “The Awakening,” and “And yet they paused”). Library of Congress, Manuscript Reading Room. In addition, the NAACP itself sponsored African American cultural production around lynching, including “An art Commentary on lynching” at the Arthur U. Newton Gallery in New York, the Writers League Against Lynching organized in 1933 and active through 1938. Members included E. Franklin Frazier, Dorothy Parker and others.

²⁹⁷Susan Courtney has done an important analysis of the ambiguity present in the miscegenation narrative from *Imitation of Life*, shedding light on the ways that the film, and specifically the PCA’s response to the film, evidence “Hollywood’s ongoing cinematic participation in shaping cultural conceptions of the very meaning and location of racial identity, particularly as it is conceived of as a visible category[0].” Susan Courtney, “Picturizing Race,” unpaginated. Prince, *Classical Film Violence*; Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, 44. Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 111. As I have previously discussed, Susan Courtney, Ruth Vasey and Stephen Prince have pointed to the ways that the PCA, by prohibiting direct exposure of themes like sex, violence, and otherness, and, within these categories, immoral sexual relations, mobster violence, and foreign people, actually enriched cinematic representation by encouraging filmmakers to apply the power of suggestion to prompt the audience to imagine what was not shown.

correspondence on the film and arguably was at the heart of the industry's problem with it, as I will discuss below. This plot line was eventually dropped by Universal, after the PCA and the New York office offered significant and forceful discouragement, which may well have influenced the decision. The clear, unambiguous push for omission of racially-motivated lynching can, I think, genuinely be called censorship.

Though less frequently repeated in the correspondence, these issues were, nevertheless, quite important, and rendered emphatically as points of alarm. It seems that the New York office was concerned not with miscegenation in *Imitation of Life per se* but with the issue of anti-Black prejudice it raised. Staff member J.B. Lewis wrote to Breen: "the half-white, half-Black girl's desire to mix with whites constantly brings into sharp relief the prejudice against the Black race."²⁹⁸ As Lewis noted in his memo to Breen, not only was the flavor of prejudice (one strongly felt in the book) also present in the film's script, but the term "nigger" was used in derision and "at no time does Bea, the white woman, and her daughter give proper credit to the fortune which they have made on the Negro mother's recipe for flapjacks" a fact which clearly smacked of racial exploitation.²⁹⁹ These factors, combined with the fact that "the two Negroes continue to appear somewhat downtrodden throughout the plot," led Lewis to offer his "modest opinion that in some locales this picture would incite new racial prejudices and might lead in some instances, to open hostility."³⁰⁰ These memos suggest that it was the preponderance of racial issues—and more precisely the entangled aggregation of racial injustices—that was a problem, rather than miscegenation alone. They also suggest PCA concern about reception—about producing interracial hostilities—rather than with the Code's

²⁹⁸ J.B. Lewis, interoffice memo to Joseph Breen, March 10, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

miscegenation provision; they indicate the PCA's role in imagining, anticipating, and intuiting audience response and reception, even among African Americans. That this was a part of their considerations in judging a script at such an early stage in their development is worthy of note.

The PCA's internal correspondence also evidences a startlingly conservative concern not only about direct depictions of interracial contact, but about what Lewis vaguely called the "*suggested* intermingling of Blacks and whites." His concern seems strange because it is prompted not by overt depictions, but rather by vague *suggestion* of the type others have identified was the strategy the PCA often encouraged filmmakers to use to circumvent local censorship.³⁰¹ Lewis' comments are also separated from his quandaries about "miscegenation which is outlawed under the Code."³⁰² If he wasn't talking about miscegenation, than what did Lewis mean? It seems it is more *social* intermixing than miscegenation that troubled PCA staff.

Preeminent among Lewis' concerns was the fact that "the big dramatic punch of the picture describes the lust of a young negro boy who believes that a white girl has given him a 'come on' signal and who nearly gets lynched as a result."³⁰³ It is worth mentioning that according to the *Chicago Defender's* Harry Levette, the near lynching scene occurred when "Peola pretending to be white, accused a young colored man of attempting to flirt with her. Just as they have strung him up, she breaks down with remorse and screams, 'Don't, don't do it, I'm a n---r too.'³⁰⁴ In this scene, again, Peola becomes the scapegoat onto whom white racism is cast. But because Peola is not really white, she does not cause us to examine white racism. For the PCA, the lynching of the boy became the

³⁰¹ Lea Jacobs, *Wages of Sin*, 111.

³⁰² J.B. Lewis, interoffice memo to Joseph Breen, March 10, 1934. Imitation of Life PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ Harry Levette, "Hollywood Respects Stars' Word on What Is Offensive," *Chicago Defender*, Sept. 12, 1942, 20. It is important to note, however, that Levette credits Louise Beavers' complaints to the producers about the word "nigger" with the change in the scene.

basis for ensuing “problems” and the Agency and the MPPDA New York offices’ continual, censorial pushes for omission. It is significant that the MPPDA also called in a “Mr. McCarthy” who had not read the script but would act as a consultant “especially expert by reason of his experience with *The Birth of a Nation*” (arguably the first cinematic lynch drama).³⁰⁵ According to McKenzie of the New York office, McCarthy was “particularly definite in his statement with regard to the troubles such a picture will encounter-throughout the South in some of the border states, in many places in the North and in England, Australia, etc. The lynching scene would appear to be especially dangerous.”³⁰⁶ The studio changed the content of the lynching scene at least once, citing “technical reasons,” but as the organization shifted status from the SRC to the PCA, Breen’s resolve against its inclusion only seems to have strengthened.

In a subsequent letter, on July 20th, written after the film was already well into production, Breen noted:

We still feel that this picture is a dangerous one. It is our conviction that any picture which raises and elaborates such an inflammable racial question as that raised by this picture, is fraught with grave danger to the industry and hence is one which we, in the dispensation of our responsibilities under the Resolution for uniform interpretation of the Production Code, may be obliged to reject.³⁰⁷

By July 20th, Universal had still not elected to delete the sequence.³⁰⁸ Pressure against inclusion of the lynching scene mounted as the production continued. On July 27th, 1934, Breen again wrote:

We are still of the opinion that the lynching scene should not be included in the picture and we were happy to have you advise us that you were doubtful about

³⁰⁵ Maurice McKenzie, memo to Joseph Breen, April 3, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Joseph Breen, letter to Universal, July 20, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³⁰⁸ Joseph Breen, letter to Harry Zehner, July 20, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

including it. You also advised us that it would be shot in such a way that it could easily be lifted from the picture should it in our judgment offend the Code."³⁰⁹

In his correspondence with Hays, Breen stated his position even more clearly than he had with Universal, a move which suggests the New York office's adamancy on this point:

The danger point in this story is the handling of the "negro question" and we have had several conferences with the studio. They are going ahead with its production and are thoroughly aware of our fears in the matter. We have advised them definitely, however, that the element of lynching would, we believe, be entirely unsuitable for screen presentation, and that *we would not pass the picture if it were in.*³¹⁰ (emphasis added)

At least one of the reasons for the PCA's objections to this scene is made clear: "it deals with persons and situations (lynching scene, pretending to be white when Black, etc.) which would cause criticism or prevent exhibition in Southern states and possibly in some of the border states, as well as in many English colonies."³¹¹ Lynching was one of the "situations" that could raise the possibility of state, local—even international—censorship.

The PCA was particularly cautious because of Stahl's lack of attention to Southern race politics, as his focus was elsewhere. McKenzie wrote to Breen: "The director John Stahl seems to think that the script suggests a wow of a picture and while the company realizes that they may have some difficulty with the kind of a picture in this country, they feel that it is the kind of a picture which will clean up in Europe."³¹² Thus, as we see, there is considerable evidence in the PCA file on *Imitation of Life* that the PCA was concerned not only (or even primarily) with enforcing the Code's prohibition on miscegenation but more urgently with protecting the *industry* by avoiding offense to

³⁰⁹ Joseph Breen, letter to Harry Zehner, July 27, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³¹⁰ Joseph Breen, interoffice memo to Will Hays. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³¹¹ J.B. Lewis, interoffice memo to Joseph Breen, March 10, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³¹² McKenzie to Breen, April 3, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

hierarchical (and plainly racist) American racial traditions.³¹³ Miscegenation, although a point of considerable confusion for the PCA staff as Susan Courtney has shown,³¹⁴ could be dealt with elaboratively and by means of several strategies. In the case of *Imitation of Life*, these strategies included indirection, subtle condemnation, and marginalization of the Peola character. Therefore, when Wingate wrote Hays that miscegenation was “not the main theme of the story” and that *Imitation of Life* “appear[ed] to be a matter of policy more than of Code,” he most likely meant that these other issues—like lynching—raised policy questions that were more insurmountable for the MPPDA than the Code’s prohibition on miscegenation.³¹⁵

Two years later, *Fury*, a film directed by Fritz Lang *also* included a near lynching, but without reference to the race problem. In this instance, the PCA was more willing to show lynching, even if they were still cautious. According to their letters, the PCA altered *Fury* in such a way as to diminish the realism of the text largely because of probable deletion of “the details of committing a crime” by local and state censors. The representation of lynching, then, quite different from the case of *Imitation of Life*, was not in conflict with racial industry policy but rather potentially in conflict with local censors.

Detailed analysis of the revisions suggested by the PCA makes clear that in the case of *Fury* as

³¹³ PCA Memorandum for the Files, March 9, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA. The memo discusses a conference between high level PCA officials (Breen, Wingate and Auster) and the Henigson, Laemmle, Jr. and Zehner regarding the film. In it the writer reports “We pointed out that not only from the...point of view of the producer himself but also from the point of view of the industry as a whole, this was an extremely dangerous subject...not only in the south...but everywhere else.” This is one among many places where the PCA makes such an argument. In fact, it seems clear that these industry issues, ones that were arguably more important and at least perceived to be less manageable than the Code issues, were particularly frequent in the arena of race, as they also came up with *Pinky*. The Industry-based coercion was often stronger in tone and more drastic in the imagining of potential punishments relayed to producers than the “suggestions” used to guide screenwriters and directors through the PCA office.

³¹⁴ Courtney, “Hollywood Fantasies,” 269.

³¹⁵ James Wingate to Will Hays, June 26, 1934. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

opposed to *Imitation of Life*, the Breen office developed an elaborate strategy for cinematically articulating lynching. The PCA was pleased that they could claim that the film's overall message was "a preachment against mob violence,"³¹⁶ but stated "of primary importance is the handling of scenes which indicate the formation and action of a lynching mob and the riot caused by it. Great care must be taken with the handling of all these scenes, to establish the minimum detail necessary."³¹⁷ In spite of the PCA's insistence, Mayer did not rein Lang in on the explicitness of his approach to the violence of the lynching. Many of the PCA's suggestions were ignored. In fact, the PCA suggestions noted, in the second letter to the company, that they were aware that many of the changes they suggested had not been made. But Breen tended to repeat suggestions that he wanted filmmakers to make before the PCA would move the film toward PCA approval. On January 27, 1936, very close to the start of filming, the Breen office wrote again:

we recommend that the greatest possible care be exercised in shooting the scenes of the rioting of the mob and burning down of the jail. This is important. In its present state, the script suggests scenes that are to realistically shocking and unless these are materially toned down, it is more than likely that the political censor boards will mutilate these scenes unmercifully.³¹⁸

In accordance with patterns for "toning down" material typically used by the PCA, they suggest not only that the visual realism of *Fury* be diminished, but also the alternative strategy of shooting in long shot: "Scene 183 [a mob violence scene] is dangerous as now written from the standpoint of political censorship. We suggest that you protect yourselves against its deletion or that you shoot it in a long shot."³¹⁹ The PCA also offered specific suggestions that would help Lang and his team tone down the picture's most "censorable" scenes by *softening* the harshness and the detail of these scenes,

³¹⁶ Memorandum Re: "Mob Rule (MGM)," Aug. 21, 1936. Based on initial conference between PCA members Auster and Shurlock and Joseph Mankeiwitz before script was submitted.

³¹⁷ Joseph Breen, letter to LB Mayer, Aug. 26, 1935. *Fury* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³¹⁸ Joseph Breen, letter to L.B. Mayer, Jan. 27, 1936. *Fury* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³¹⁹ Joseph Breen, letter to Mayer, Jan. 26, 1936. *Fury* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

although the end of the scenes would still be narratively the same. For example, he asked for the excision of the scenes of children playing at the scene of the lynching and, although the PCA allowed cross cutting to images of the intended victim, Joe (Spencer Tracey) in his cell, they suggested that the shots revealing flames leaping up from the bottom of the frame were too horrifying. MGM, however, retained these shots.

The PCA seems to have required more deletions from lynching sequences than they did from other forms of violence: the PCA not only suggested leaving physical details of lynching unshown but even encouraged MGM to eliminate verbal statements that pertained to violence. While in other films, verbal descriptions instead of racial images were actually a form of indirection recommended by the PCA to obviate cuts by the censor boards, here the PCA encouraged leaving out the verbal incitement to lynching violence altogether (in the statement “burn ‘him up! Burn ‘im alive!”). They also wanted MGM to eliminate the mention of violence as communicated through the written word “nigger,” suggesting the extraction from the newspaper of the phrase “innocent man lynched. Burned alive by Mob” which they called “dangerous from the standpoint of political censorship... We suggest that for both inserts you shoot a protection shot in which the expression “Burned alive by mob” is deleted.” This elimination suggests that because lynching was a politically unstable topic, the PCA demanded conservative ways of representing this violence—even verbally—so as not to incur political censorship. Part of what made *Fury* passable is that it focused on mob psychology, never actually showing the lynching itself. In the final film, rather than seeing a lynching we see the mob commit a less violent crime—destruction of property. In denying visualization of lynching to an anti-lynching film, the visual power of lynching’s violence and its acts of brutality that were mobilized by the NAACP in their anti-lynching campaign were short-circuited by the movie

industry's policy. The final film, in part by the producer's design, but in part because of PCA mandates, focused much more heavily on the suspenseful build up to the lynching and on the mob, rather than on the lynching victim.

Despite the lack of African American centrality in the film, some Black press reviewers recognized the relevance of *Fury* to African American lives. Ben Davis, who wrote for both Communist and Black newspapers, for example, noted that although the film neglected to show lynching "against a background of race superiority poison, lynch terror and rape-frame ups against the Negro people" (and instead made the lynch atmosphere appear to be "engendered by the tongues of gossipy women"), one could not view the film "without immediately recalling the horrible lynchings of more than 5,000 Negroes in this country since the Civil War and without feeling the strong urge to do something about it."³²⁰ In tandem with plays dealing with lynching and Black injustice on the stage at that time, a film like *Fury* took on distinctly racial connotations and provided grounds for Black recognition.

While eliminating realism from violence may have been socially acceptable, even preferred, for those films that were depicting gratuitous violence without explicit social purposes, the rare filmic depiction of lynching carried with it political, historical, social and, of course, racial weight. In some ways, then, these deletions actually interfered with the social significance of the films whose very point was the extreme brutality of this form of violence. Aiming for something beyond mere thrill effects, films like *Fury* were brutal because the directors recognized a social purpose in showing and condemning brutality. While eliminating these elements from a gangster film might have decreased the horror of mobster violence, eliminating them from a film that was centrally about the dangers of mob violence would have had the consequence of decreasing the power of the film's social meaning.

³²⁰ Ben Davis, "Film Indictment of Lynching," *Daily Worker*, Jun. 9, 1936.

Although the PCA generally aimed to eliminate direct expressions of violence, Stephen Prince notes that, during WWII, “American and Allied soldiers might...be depicted as victims of graphic violence especially when that could help dramatize the difficulty and the importance of wartime effort and sacrifice.”³²¹ Although it is commonly understood that film censorship became more lenient during WWII, Prince argues that the PCA gave *even greater* license to films depicting the horrors of war. Prince’s analysis seems to suggest that although the PCA generally adhered to the strictures of local and state censors regarding violence, there were moments when more brutality served a particular—and important—ideological purpose. When it came to the depiction of African American lynchings, another important social cause, this clearly was thought to be not only too brutal but too political. The Federal Anti-lynching bills of 1935 and 1940 continued to be blocked by racist Southerners in Congress and failed to generate enough following among white liberal northerners to carry the day.³²² Like the representation of chain gangs, depicting lynching could seem too progressive a revelation of injustice to some white Americans—and too contentious a political issue—particularly in the South.

In addition to the problems of actual depiction came the problem of compensating moral values, which were raised in *They Won’t Forget* and the *Ox-Bow Incident*, both major films dealing with lynching. Although the issue with these films was increasingly not the depiction of lynching brutality, which the studios had learned to handle, but rather the fact that the lynchers most often got away with it. *They Won’t Forget*, for example, brought this problem to the attention of the Breen office:

As we wrote you on Jan 30, we are greatly concerned about scene 405, 408 in which it is indicated that a mob of masked men take Hale away from the office and lynch him, without anything being done about it. It is our belief that most censor boards would not permit the showing of successful *and unpunished* mob violence at the

³²¹ Stephen Prince, *Classical film Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Press, 2003), 159.

³²² See Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 268-297.

present time, in view of conditions generally. We believe therefore that if this element is to be retained at all in your picture it will be necessary to indicate definitely later on that this mob was punished for their crime. This indication could be quite brief, either in newspaper inserts or perhaps better still, covered by some line in Sybil's speech in scene 411. However it is done we believe it will be important that this point be made quite clear."³²³ [Italics mine]

This solution inexpensively and briefly addresses the needed punishment for crimes, although it did, like those often suggested by the PCA, strain realism.

Gone with the Wind also had significant problems with a depiction of lynching, in part because Margaret Mitchell's novel, like *Birth of a Nation* before it, valorized the Klan. David O. Selznick handled the problem of Klan lynching in *Gone with the Wind* in three ways: first, he had the Klan's actions happen off-screen, never showing audiences any visual identifier (such as a Klan robe or white hood) that would signal the Klan. Second, he provided on-screen reasons for never mentioning it directly, as I discuss below. Third, he obscured the racial identity of the lynched. The only reference to lynching is made in a lady's drawing room. The presence of union soldiers and Southern ladies mean the sordid details cannot be revealed more than to say the Southern white men are at a "political meeting." It is a union officer who mentions that men were killed in the "raid" and "burning" of the presumably Black shanty towns after Scarlett had been "attacked" there, and he is not sure of his facts. Although we slowly realize that the men discussed—who have gone to avenge the attack on this white woman—represent the beginnings of the Klan, there is no reference to the organization, no white costumes, no Black on-screen victims, and no white aggressors. This was combined with having a white shantytown man assault Scarlett. Thus, Selznick provided both an innocent and sophisticated reading of the scene's racial happenings: those who had read the book would know that the Klan was being referenced but the PCA and Selznick himself could argue that

³²³ Joseph Breen, letter to Jack Warner, March 20, 1937. *They Won't Forget* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

they never appeared in the film. Although this solution seems simple enough, this scene was a primary and original concern for Selznick (and African Americans upon hearing about the adaptation) and was the first racial issue that the producer broached in his preparation for the filming.³²⁴

The problem with films concerning themes of injustice (of which lynching narratives were a subset) was that their dark endings often left the culprit unpunished or suggested that the system of justice was corrupt, therein violating the Code. This is clearly exemplified in the PCA's letter on *They Won't Forget*, referenced above. In the case of *Ox Bow Incident* (1943), in their correspondence with Fox, the PCA was so adamant that some compensating moral values be shown that they made the unusual suggestion that the leader of the lynch party, former Confederate soldier Major Tetley, kill himself as a compensation for his crimes, a suggestion which Fox took up.³²⁵ This was a very surprising suggestion from the PCA, as the organization consistently disallowed suicides, as per the Code regulation prohibiting it.³²⁶ Thus, in this example, one immoral act (lynching) justified another (suicide). The PCA also stated that the fact that the sheriff condoned the lynching in the initial script would be "unacceptable...and will have to be changed" in the final film if the Code's mandate to positively portray law enforcement officials was to be protected.³²⁷ The PCA requirement that Tetley commit suicide could be read to indicate the strength of the PCA's condemnation of lynching—especially in the case of *The Ox-Bow Incident* where a person of color (a Mexican) is lynched for stealing cattle.

³²⁴ For Selznick's difficulty with the Klan scene, see Leff, "Gone with the Wind and Hollywood's Racial Politics," 107.

³²⁵ Joseph Breen, letter to Darryl Zanuck, Jun. 9, 1942. *The Ox-Bow Incident* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³²⁶ See the Appended version of the Code or *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York: Alicoate, 1955), 908. "Suicide as a solution of problems occurring in the development of screen drama, is to be discouraged unless absolutely necessary for the development of the plot, and shall never be justified, or glorified, or used specifically to defeat the ends of justice."

³²⁷ Joseph Breen, letter to Darryl Zanuck, May 5, 1942. *The Ox-Bow Incident* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

Lynching was a prevalent problem in African American life and history in the first half of the twentieth century. But as we have seen, realistic and historically accurate expression of this aspect of Black experience was limited by both policy and Code-related concerns of the PCA. The PCA did in some instances provide alternative strategies for representing this crime. But these strategies of indirection in some ways minimized the impact of the brutality of the crime and certainly minimized the impact of lynching on generations of African Americans, especially those living in the South.

Will there be mercy for the “guilty?”: Travesties of Justice and the PCA

Linked to the depiction of lynching was the depiction of legal lynchings or injustices in the criminal justice system. These depictions were in some sense *more* dangerous than depictions of illegal lynchings as they suggested that the government, the police, or the courts systematically denied African Americans rights, a reality that many African Americans can attest to. *Fury*, *They Won't Forget* and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* all depicted systematic injustice in the criminal justice system, often with a deep sense of doom and oppressive heaviness of tragedy. These films all were made and released in the 1930s, in the wake of the 1931 Scottsboro case that would be drawn out through the decade, finally being settled in 1938 with the acquittal of four of the nine. The Scottsboro case awakened a nation to civil rights abuses in the U.S. criminal justice system and mobilized the iconography of Black suffering in the press. *I Am a Fugitive*, and to a lesser extent, *Fury*, were hampered in their attempts at realism in depictions of injustice from the PCA/SRC's tendency to put the moral principle of not showing authorities in a bad light above realist expose.

With *I Am a Fugitive*, the overwhelming concern of the PCA was with Southern reaction, particularly because the film was based on a true story entitled *I am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang*, and because chain gang atrocities had recently been reported in Florida:

Southerners, who are over-sensitive on all matters pertaining to the manners and customs, will regard the story as an unfair indictment, deliberately brought against them. They of course have their side of the whole chain-gang situation and GA probably has its side in this particular case.... Southerners claim that in a country where there is a large Negro population the chain gang system--and even some of the worse abuses are necessary. Though to us these methods may seem barbarous relics of the Middle Ages, still from a business standpoint we ought to consider carefully whether we are willing to incur the anger of any large section by turning our medium of entertainment to anything which may be regarded as a wholesale indictment.³²⁸

This example shows clearly how the SRC's attempts to be "fair" to white southerners, appropriating their logic into censorship decisions, led to a business decision to steer clear of social criticism of the south. Although the film was prime material because it was "ripped from the headlines," SRC representative Jason Joy attempted to "soften" the institutional representation by distancing it from off-screen realities. He envisioned *Fugitive* as "a story of an individual brutalized by the system through the machinations of one man, with results comparable to those obtained in *Les Miserables* [sic]" a reading of the film which both detaches it from any sort of institutional critique and links the film to historical, Great Literature.³²⁹ Although *I am a Fugitive* dealt powerfully with the question of legal lynching and the destroying of a man's spirit through unfair imprisonment, it did not centrally focus on African Americans. In the scene where final admission of Black presence on the chain-gang is made, we see men being driven out of racially segregated quarters by prison guards. Although the prisoners come from different places, montage and blocking unite them, showing the same sorrow (and thus linked fate). These scenes also represent a break with cinematographic style. Although

³²⁸ Jason Joy, letter to Will Hays, Apr. 1, 1932. The SRC contrasted *I Am a Fugitive* with *Hell's Highway*, which they liked much better. Again here, there was SRC concern about localizing the abuses--both physically and historically. In *Hell's Highway*, Joy noted, "The company will not under any circumstances localize the story and the time will be presumably 1880 which gets away from the suggestion of a current problem. If they got what they would like to get into the picture--and this is a matter of ingenuity and ability--they will have a story of an individual brutalized by the system through the machinations of one man, with results comparable to those obtained in *Les Miserables*. In fact they have the Hugo character of Jean Val Jean much in mind."

³²⁹ Ibid.

more traditional styles of make up and lighting have been the norm in earlier sequences, in this sequence, shadowy lighting and a paucity of make-up give a documentary feel to the scenes, under-privileging our vision and marking a shift toward realism. LeRoy even points here to the possibility of integration through successful cooperation between our protagonist and an African American chain gang worker. Although African American presence was marginal—strategically distanced from the center of the narrative, nevertheless, a preponderance of signifiers of African American struggles were present and these would have informed and provided space for alternative readings.

Although the film was already racially tame, the PCA encouraged the producers to downplay the African American angle out of deference to the South. Because the film was already a veiled condemnation of the Southern system of justice, Joy wrote: "It might be desirable to reverse the number of white and Black prisoners, as it is the preponderance of Blacks makes the section unmistakably Southern" and thus might act as a condemnation of the South. If the PCA had a problem with African Americans being depicted at all in the film, how much greater would have been their concern if the protagonist had been African American? The PCA also had trouble with elements that were clearly racially marked and that linked the chain gang to the system of slavery that it replaced and that the film visually and phenomenologically mobilized: whipping scenes and other scenes of brutality were ordered toned down for a PCA seal. Ultimately these excisions followed a pattern of conservatism with regards to depictions of the South designed to soften the unmentioned, but clearly shown, racial implications of the story.

Fury drew PCA attention to its depiction of the unfairness of the courts, especially because of its lack of compensating moral values. In fact, it was one of the three main points Breen made about the film to its producers. After suggesting that the mob scenes should be handled without detail,

Breen suggested that, “care should be taken to establish that the actual kidnapers have been apprehended and punished” and “care should be taken that there be no travesty of justice or the courts and that the forces of law and order are not treated unfairly.”³³⁰ The image of these institutions, which had been historically marked by racism, were carefully protected at the expense of accurate depictions of the plight of those railroaded. Despite the SRC’s efforts to tame these racial depictions, it is clear that some African Americans saw the film’s racial implication and centrality to Black life. The *Chicago Defender* for example, took unusual interest in the film; they ran a four part serial telling the film’s story, while it was playing at the white movies and before it came to the Black movie houses.³³¹

They Won’t Forget was nearly rejected by the board because of its narrative nihilism: it depicted a conspiracy in which a corrupt judge, police force, and lawyers joined forces against the defendant. The lack of compensating moral values was a major factor in its near-rejection

A picture based upon this story would have to be rejected by us and it is our considered judgment that no political censor board anywhere would allow such a picture to be publicly exhibited. The story, as we read it, is basically the story of a stark perversion of justice. It is the story of the condemnation, under the law, of an innocent man, charged with murder, the conviction being brought about by a corrupt and dishonest police department, and a corrupt and dishonest lawyer (Foster). In addition, the script is marked by ... perjured witnesses, a corrupt and dishonest jury, brutalizing by the police, excessive brutality, and a suggestion of mob violence which leads to a lynching.

Against all this there is nothing in the picture to suggest anything like compensating moral values. While it may be argued that this sinister and inhuman activity is shown to be wrong, it is nevertheless, true that no one is punished. On the contrary; the dishonest district attorney succeeds in having himself elected to the United States Senate, while the honest and conscientious governor is the defeated

³³⁰ Joseph Breen, letter to LB Mayer, Aug. 26, 1935. *Fury* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³³¹Wilton Chalmers, "I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang"; A Story of Peonage Farms of Georgia, Which Was the Startling Experience of Robert Elliott Burns, Whose Expose of Prison Conditions Shocked the Civilized World CHAPTER I," *The Chicago Defender* Dec. 24, 1932, 11. According to the AFI Catalogue, the film premiered in New York on Nov. 19, 1932. Chapters followed on December 31 and January 7. There was even a follow up article that played up the social justice themes, extending them beyond the film’s narrow rubric. See Billy Ballyhoo, “You’ve Heard About Ga. Chaingangs, What About Georgia Jails?” *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 17, 1935, 11.

candidate; the dishonest police detective is elevated to a captaincy; and the perjuring witnesses and dishonest jurymen are permitted to go off scot free. Before anything like this story would be approved by us it will be necessary to show that the dishonest district attorney, the dishonest policeman, the crooked lawyer for Trumpo, the dishonest jurymen, and the perjured witnesses are all punished by the processes of law...and the brutalizing by the police must be deleted."³³²

The PCA's argument, although powerful from an industry perspective, missed the point: in real life, there were no compensating moral values.

What is more, the PCA was concerned with the continued theme of injustices of the criminal system. Accordingly, the PCA suggested a reduction of the number of such portrayals in the film—thereby, softening the censure of the criminal justice system. It is important to note here not only the content of the PCA deletions—and their focus specifically on “correcting” the injustices depicted in the story, a focus which raises the question of how a tale of large scale and systematic injustice could be properly told under PCA authority—but also the strength of their statements condemning such articulations in PCA pictures. In the letter regarding *They Won't Forget*, they repeated their prohibition various times. It is interesting as well, that, similar to the scenes showing lynching in *Imitation of Life*, the PCA instructed that the scenes of police brutality in *They Won't Forget* “*must be deleted*” [italics mine], an unqualified order from an Administration that typically gave suggestions. In a later conference with the PCA, they reached this solution:

Instead of indicating that there has been a serious perversion of justice, by way of collusion of the district attorney, Foster, the lawyer, and the jurymen, which results in the conviction for murder of an innocent man, the new version will remove this entirely. A new story is to be written, the basic point of which will be that the man will be convicted, honestly, on circumstantial evidence. This is important. Whereas in the present script the innocent man is convicted as a result of perversion of justice in the new script he will be convicted honestly upon circumstantial evidence.

³³² Joseph Breen, letter to Mr. Jack L. Warner, Jan. 20, 1937. *They Won't Forget* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

Again here the PCA indicates the importance of modifying depictions of systematic injustice by way of repeating their mandate against it. Nevertheless, the final scenes of the film do seem to indicate the *spirit* of injustice, felt here as a seething, latent undertone communicated most directly in the District Attorney's cavalier attitude. Although no deliberate plotting on his part causes Hale's demise, he is nevertheless thoroughly hated and viewed as a corrupt politician. This toning down works to the film's expressive advantage but damages the forthrightness of the original screenplay's depiction of systematic injustices that are the result of conspiracy. Although muted—or indirect—in its expression, the finished film still retains the power to unsettle audiences and to critique the institutions it depicts.

“Messegenation”: The South, the PCA, and Limiting Social Equality ³³³

While there was no Code provision preventing it, “social equality” (a term used variously to imply racial intimacy and equal social standing) between Blacks and whites was obviously a concern for the PCA, as evidenced in the correspondence with film companies and with “the public” on a number of films. What does “social equality” mean—especially in relationship to cinematic images? By exploring the industry's attempts to control representation of “social equality” in the films *Artists and Models* (1937), *Imitation of Life* (1934), and *The Spirit of Youth* (1937), we can begin to see what actions, cinematic framing strategies and types of characterizations were considered to define social equality during this period of time and within the confines of film industry self-regulation. Although this small number of films analyzed cannot completely indicate PCA policy on these issues, these examples nevertheless are suggestive about the industry approach to film content in light of this contentious Southern issue. While it appears that this concern was particularly vexing for the

³³³ Term used by Lloyd T. Binford in his writings on *No Way Out*, cited in Whitney Straub, “Black white and Banned All Over: Race Censorship and Obscenity in Postwar Memphis,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 694. He cites: Box 16, folder Fire and Police: Board of Censors, 1950, MSPL.

industry in the 1930s, as we shall see in the following chapter, it was also a concern in 1949 with Twentieth Century Fox's production of *Pinky*.

As mentioned above, in *Imitation of Life*, the PCA criticized the “social intermingling of the races.” This criticism may refer as much to the strong bond between Bea and Delilah, which is dependant upon stereotype and racial hierarchy, perhaps to avoid offending whites invested in the racial status quo. Susan Courtney has suggested that miscegenation of a different kind than that represented by Peola is implied in the relationship between the Black and white women, noting the intimate touch implied in the scene where Delilah rubs Bea's feet.³³⁴ Although white segregationists may not have read the film as directly representing miscegenation, they probably did notice the unusual familiarity—even intimacy—between Bea and Delilah and the strong Black family narrative which complicated and elaborated the representation of maids in other Hollywood films.

Although racist arguments against social equality often included concerns about miscegenation, they were broader than that, as the logic of the censorship of racist Memphis city censor Lloyd T. Binford indicates.³³⁵ Binford, who was head of the longstanding censorship board in

³³⁴ Susan Courtney, “Picturizing Race,” [unpaginated].

³³⁵ His eliminations to films were based not only on depictions of miscegenation and on the roles African Americans were given within film narratives, but also on the shift in the role of African Americans in American life. Any image that seemed to suggest integration or meaningful shift in African American roles in America could be cut. The number of socially prominent African Americans was increasing and Black people were visible and positively portrayed in the press, reaching the public stature of whites. Binford banned “Annie Get Your Gun” from the legitimate stage because the presence of an African American conductor was, to Binford, “social equality in action.” (*Baltimore Afro American Late City Edition*, Oct. 4, 1947, 17), and according to Whitney Straub “the negroes' parts looked too big.” Binford also removed Hazel Scott's part in *Rhapsody in Blue* (*Daily Worker*, Feb. 3, 1946). Binford in addition famously banned MPPDA member Hal Roach's 1947 short film “Curley” which featured the interracial group of youngsters known as “Our Gang.” Although Blacks were highly stereotyped in the film, Binford saw these images as dangerous because of the looming issue of school integration. United Artists attorneys and the MPPDA fought Binford tooth and nail in the courtroom. In 1948, he banned the Danny Kaye vehicle *A Song is Born*, which depicted musical integration, because he stated “there is no segregation.” As Straub points out, Binford was more concerned with films that showed naturalized Black-white contact than with social problem films that socially examined the possibility of race mixture. He also cut musical sequences from *Sensations of 1945* that featured Cab Calloway. Lena Horne's sequence was removed from *Broadway Rhapsody* (*Kansas City Call*, Jul. 21, 1944). *The Afro* also records that *Pillow to Post* lost its scenes featuring Louis Armstrong and Dorothy Dandridge and *The Sailor takes a Wife* was robbed of scenes starring Eddie Rochester Anderson at Binford's

this major Southern city, was emblematic of the kinds of reaction the PCA expected of the South. He entirely banned numerous films that contained African Americans acting as social equals—even when they did so in the role of servant.³³⁶ Even if his ultimate fear was miscegenation, something that most African Americans were not likely to partake in, he expressed this fear through preventing depictions of equal and integrated Black social interaction with whites, something that many African Americans did desire to make their own choice about. Binford was an extremist, but the logic of his racial excisions falls within Southern traditions and customs to which the PCA responded.

The 1937 film *Spirit of Youth*, an independently produced bio-pic about boxer Joe Louis, which employed actor and Black press columnist Clarence Muse as its supervisor, was submitted to the PCA for review and a seal of approval after production had already been completed. The film was red flagged by the initial script-readers at the Breen office, and given to Joe Breen himself for appraisal. The two flagged the film because it was “questionable from the standpoint of policy, because it shows, among other things, several scenes of a Black man, victorious in a number of fistic encounters with white men. JIB [Joseph Breen] raised the question with WHH [Will Hays] as to the

hand. Binford also had a problem with white ethnics as he banned *Dead End*, a film featuring the Dead End Kids, clipped films with interracial band scenes, and as in the case of *Brewster's Millions*, any film which depicted a black servant conversing with a white employer on a socially equal level, even if their was a clearly defined hierarchical relationship between them (*Baltimore Afro-American*, Feb. 9, 1946). In intensely local and presentist language, Binford claimed the film was “inimical to the friendly relations between the races now existing here.” He claimed also that the film “presents too much familiarity between the races...too much social equality and race mixture.” Miscegenation was not the issue in this film: there was virtually no contact in the film between black man and white women. The social equality fear was a fear for governance and status quo, daily black deference that had become central. Binford seemed to use these deletions not only to punish Hollywood for its humane treatment of blacks but also to resist and avoid—literally remove traces of evidence of—the fact that American culture was changing in the direction of greater equality.

³³⁶ For more on Binford's important role in backlash-driven World War II era repression of Black images, see Whitney Straub, “Black and White,” 5. Straub suggests that it was growing awareness of “growing black assertiveness” generated by the war which had “served as empowering experience for thousands of black soldiers” that was linked to the genesis of censorship practices. As Straub puts it in the wake of the 1943 Detroit riots, “when *Cabin in the Sky*...opened in Memphis that year, city leaders suddenly identified cinema as a potentially destabilizing force that needed to be controlled.” Straub gives good evidence that the county was abuzz with a sense of concern and fear of black uprising (5). Social equality was the name and term that Binford used to justify denying these films and the standard by which he judged racial representation.

advisability of our approving such a picture in view of the danger involved from the general standpoint of industry good and welfare.” As Breen put it: “the story, per se, is acceptable under the provisions of the Production Code. The only question involved is suggested by the angle of the Black man trouncing white opponents,” the very same issue that had led to a Federal ban being put on interstate commerce of the Jack Johnson fight films.³³⁷ After serious consideration and several lengthy discussions with Breen, Hays ultimately decided that “from the standpoint of industry policy, he saw no way in which this picture could be denied our certificate of approval on the basis of the suggestion of the Black-white phase of the story.”³³⁸ Even still, Hays himself wanted to see the final picture. Why was the PCA so concerned over this depiction of social equality in the ring? For one, interstate commerce involving boxing films would be officially banned by Federal law until 1940, although this law was not strictly enforced in its final years of existence. As Dan Streible has shown, this ban was put in place to stop the showing of the Jack Johnson fights.³³⁹

Even though the films’ depiction of Black fistic victory over whites would have been much more likely to anger whites than Blacks, Hays made it clear that it was Black reaction to the film he was worried about. Breen consulted not a white representative but Paul Williams, an African American architect considered a “friend of Mr. Hays” and a “Dr. Hudson,” who appears, from the meager evidence we have, to also have been African American. According to Breen’s report to Hays, both men assured him that the film would leave “little to be feared ...from the standpoint of the better elements among the negroes in this country.” They found the film “so thoroughly unobjectionable on the usual grounds” that they thought “it would help their people much, if this

³³⁷ Joseph Breen, Memo, undated. *Spirit of Youth* PCA File. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Dan Streible, “A History of the Boxing film, 1894-1915: Social Control and Social Reform in the Progressive Era” *Film History* 3 no. 3 (1989): 235-59.

story, glorifying a negro athlete could be distributed wide-spread.”³⁴⁰ But distribution “wide-spread” is exactly what, a few days later, the PCA would counsel the film’s producers against. Although the PCA did not deny the film its seal nor require cuts, which was says a lot given the fact that the film arrived on their doorstep *after* production, they nevertheless warned the associate producer, Edward Shanberg, about distributing the film in the South because of the film’s depiction of social equality:

you may run into serious difficulty in the distribution of this film, especially in a number of states in the south. The people in this territory are not likely to be disposed to look with favor on this kind of picture, and we respectfully suggest that you proceed with the greatest caution in your attempts to distribute it. May we say, also, it is most unfortunate, in our judgment that you used a white man to play the part of the punch drunk pugilist, who begs and received money from the negro manager. This is the kind of incident which causes wide-spread protest in all parts of the country.³⁴¹

The film’s depiction of social equality or *white* inferiority—if only in the boxing ring—raised the eyebrows of the PCA and convinced them of the need for censorship. It is notable also that they point to a scene in which a white man is shown to be begging an African American man for money—a sign that might be interpreted as indicating white racial inferiority *outside the ring*. As late as 1937, this example strongly suggests interracial encounters in the boxing ring—an original censorship concern, as the Jack Johnson fight films suggest—were still to be considered the basis for censorship and industry financial concern.³⁴²

Evidence from the PCA files implies that their caution around the cinematic depiction of social equality stemmed, at least in part, from fear of protests by the white Southern press. According

³⁴⁰ Joseph Breen, Memo for the files, Dec. 3, 1937. *Spirit of Youth* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³⁴¹ Joseph Breen, letter to Edward Shanberg, Dec. 7, 1937. *Spirit of Youth* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³⁴² For more on the fight films, see Lee Grieveson, *Policing the Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 121-150. Indeed, the governmental ban on interstate commerce involving boxing *fight* films—one provoked by the Jack Johnson fight films—was not lifted until 1940 (“Government Removes Ban On Fight Pictures,” *Chicago Defender* Jul. 13, 1940, 2).

to the AFI catalogue and to the AMPAS/PCA file on *Imitation of Life*, Dolph Franz, editor of the *Shreveport News*, wrote to Adolph Zukor complaining of an interracial dance sequence in Paramount's Jack Benny vehicle, *Artists and Models* (1937). Zukor, as head of Paramount, likely had little to do with the film. In a letter that reveals much about the Southern logic of social equality as it pertained to the movies, press, and publicity in general, Franz wrote:

Without wishing to appear in the role of an unkind or unfriendly critic, I will appreciate you granting me the privilege of expressing my protest against the *social equality tone* in the picture *Artists and Models*, which I understand was produced under your direction. I was dreadfully disappointed and displeased at the mixture of negroes with white persons in the specialty by Martha Raye that I could not get much enjoyment from it...For negroes and whites to be shown in social equality roles is offensive in this part of the country, where the races have nothing socially in common. It never fails to offend the white citizens of this section, and I have an idea that many negroes have the same feeling because my lifetime observation has been that representative negroes in the Southland wish none of the social equality ideas. Please do not get the impression that I am antagonistic to negroes. Rather, I am their friend. I feel certain representative negro citizens here will say that I am a genuine friend of the negroes, but, of course, they must stay in their place and not try any social equality plans. Our Newspaper, which has the same policy as most others throughout the South, will not publish negroes as Mr. and Mrs., nor will it publish negroes' pictures, but unfailingly it publishes worthwhile things they do...In the South there is a color line, and it always will be drawn, and when negroes and white persons act together there will always be a bad reaction."³⁴³ [Italics mine]

This quote gives us a window into the racial logic of Southern segregationist racism as it applied to the cinema and also indicates the hold of this logic on the press—the very mechanisms of dissemination upon which the studios would rely for their advertising. It is also worth noting that the scene Franz objects to contains no real evidence of interracial love at all and is actually a *blackface* (well, really more like *tan face*) dance number where Martha Raye, impersonating a *light-skinned* African American Harlemitte, dances in slightly exaggerated style—one with hints of both parody and

³⁴³ Dolph Frantz, letter to Adolph Zukor, Aug. 25, 1937. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA.

homage.³⁴⁴ The scene is important, however, in that it is a performance of blackness that (perhaps unwittingly) draws attention to racial liminality: where, as Michael Rogin has argued, traditional blackface performance had highlighted racial difference by exaggerating racial color with burnt cork in ways that reify the whiteness of the performer underneath, in performing as a light skinned African American, Raye points disconcertingly to the limit lines of race's visibility.³⁴⁵ This scene is likely, actually, to have caused as much trouble among African Americans as it did with racist whites, had it achieved wide-spread notice, as whites, because of its use of Blackface and stereotypes.

Franz's letter, by way of a local exhibitor E.V. Richards of the Saenger Theaters Corporation in New Orleans, made its way to the PCA. Richards also sent his observations to the industry. In his letter to the industry, he made his claims about Southern backlash against these films more sweeping and threatening to the industry, calling "attention to the feeling of resentment that is provoked in this part of the country by 'social equality' phases of these and some other pictures" and to the "increasing feeling of protest as the producers seem to becoming bolder or more thoughtless about placing whites and Negroes together in pictures" that these films engendered.³⁴⁶ But Richards seems to have had a different set of concerns, relating his criticism of the industry back to politics rather

³⁴⁴ According to the AFI catalogue entry for *Artists and Models*, Atlanta Censor Mrs. Alonzo Richardson also had a strong reaction against the film—as a Southern woman. Her perspective is also revealing about the logic of Southern racism but particularly illuminates that one of the problems the South had with social equality in films was that it implicitly imperiled white women. She wrote to Joe Breen on Aug. 31, 1937: "I am conferring with the manager and I believe we will cut Martha Raye's cabaret scene out entirely. This would be a matter of friendly consideration for Miss Raye as well as expedient for the theatre. For a white woman to act with negroes is a most certain offense to the south. For ANYONE to act in as obscene a manner as Miss Raye does, in this scene, would offend good taste anywhere, but, in the south, and with negroes, it will certainly be her finish. A very disgusted previewer remarked, 'She out-niggers the niggers.' Her postures, her dancing, her whole presentation of this scene is altogether disgusting and so it was agreed at the preview. In the south, white women can't act with negroes themselves on the same plane. There is a place for both in the pictures, and each in his proper place makes for real art; but such as Miss Raye's performance is nothing but disgusting. I am simply telling you the reaction to the picture as we previewed it and I believe the kind and wise thing will be to cut this scene out altogether. Maybe we are provincial, but a lady must be a lady and no one has a keener contempt for a white woman who descends to their level than the negro himself. One wiggle of Miss Raye's stomach condemned her."

³⁴⁵ Michael Rogin *Blackface, White noise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 45-70.

³⁴⁶ Letter to E.V. Richards, New Orleans, LA from Dolph Frantz of the Shreveport news. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

than miscegenation: “They [white Southerners] are anxious for any issue to divert from Roosevelt and we [the film industry] may be it unless you do something. This has been brewing for two or three years.”³⁴⁷ Fear of organized industrial reprisals against the film companies—especially at the site of exhibition—were at the root of the problem for Richards.

More shocking, perhaps, than the letters themselves is the MPPDA’s response: after having been contacted by the MPPDA’s New York office with these complaints from a theater owner and a newspaper man, Breen wrote to McKenzie of the New York office: “we have repeatedly warned the studios about the shooting of such scenes. Unfortunately, it is not usually set forth in the script that certain of the dancers are to be Negroes...I shall take this opportunity of again reminding the studios of the inherent difficulties in the shooting of such scenes.”³⁴⁸ These examples suggest the PCA’s careful consideration of and concern with pleasing Southern interests. They also demonstrate the intricacies of Southern racist attitudes about film content. But the example of *Artists and Models* also suggests that the PCA often left unmonitored racial representations in films where race was not a major theme. It seems clear that at least in some of these cases—as *Spirit of Youth* indicates—the PCA did not deny a seal to films showing social equality (or require many deletions on this basis) but rather simply warned companies about potential problems.

The PCA found social equality in a great variety of cinematic images, from sisterly bonds *Imitation of Life* to white inferiority (*Spirit of Youth*) to a (loving?) imitation of African American culture (*Artists and Models*). Often self-regulators’ descriptions of these representations evidence a *sensed* offense that cannot specifically be named—that is implicitly carried within the *mise-en-scène*

³⁴⁷ E.V. Richards, letter copied to Ben Piazza, Louis B. Mayer, Y.F. Freeman, Sidney R. Kent, Cecile B. DeMille, Will Hays. Sept. 3, 1937. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³⁴⁸ Joseph Breen, Inter-office memo to Maurice McKenzie. *Imitation of Life* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

and which has to be seen to be verified. In part this is because what the PCA was regulating were relationships—the terms of interracial contact, which, since racial identity is defined relationally, meant everything.

“The Promise of Miscegenation”³⁴⁹: Borderland/Island Geography, Model Miscegenation and Exoticism of the Liminal Racial Subject

Although I addressed miscegenation above, I want to now address an area where filmmakers may have attempted to circumvent censorship of miscegenation issues: through the depiction of interracial love between a white person and a “native,” non-Black person of color. As was the manner in the examples cited above, these films often inserted African Americans in the plot but not as romantic counterparts to a white people. This strategy was in some ways effective, but it pointed again to those undefined areas in the concept of race that were so troubling to the PCA. Although clearly defined in the Code as “sex relations between black and white races,” miscegenation had various racial interpretations. Olga Martin’s 1937 expose on the Production Code Administration’s practices contains a particularly revealing section on miscegenation:

The Production Code Administration in interpreting this regulation for the application to stories has regarded miscegenetic unions to be any sex relationship between white and black races, or in most cases sex union between the white and yellow races. The union of a member of the Polynesians and allied races of the Island groups with a member of the white race is not ordinarily considered a miscegenetic relationship, however. The union of a half-caste of white and Polynesian parentage with a white member would also be exempt from the ruling applying to miscegenation.³⁵⁰

Although Black/white miscegenation was entirely disallowed, both the definition of sex and the definition of “Black” were up for negotiation. The PCA’s policy of disallowing miscegenation may have increased the number of films dealing with questions of racial intermixing outside of the

³⁴⁹ This term is used by Thomas Doherty *Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 254.

³⁵⁰ Olga Martin, *Hollywood’s Movie Commandments* (New York: H. Wilson Company, 1937), 178.

Black/white paradigm that was so haunting in white American dystopian fantasies. On the Islands, American or British whites', who were crucially both physically removed from American soil and removed from their home countries' social order, fantasies of miscegenation, even with dark Asians and Islanders, could thrive. For white Americans, these films, which often featured Asian/White connections, not only did not trouble as profoundly the traditional miscegenation fears (that of a dark masculine capture and defiling of white womanhood), but built on another fantasy, more pleasurable for white men, of white male domination, one which could maintain the cinema's contract with patriarchy, colonialism, and with white male spectatorship.

Susan Courtney has suggested the acceptability of the Island fantasy of miscegenation narrative because it avoids the Black male entirely and lets the white male engage in domination.³⁵¹ I want to explore how these representations of miscegenation, built as they were to avoid censorship, sometimes became a site for explicit, if displaced, political discussion of American race relations. These films powerfully troubled the "remoteness" of the island fantasy, bringing miscegenation—and in many instances, the figure of Black equality—home to roost.³⁵² In what follows, I will focus centrally on a single film, *South Pacific* (1958) that powerfully troubled the Island fantasy with unconventional thoughts on Black-White American race relations, although I will refer also to several other limit texts that indicate the PCA's sensibilities about Island miscegenation. Susan Courtney has done an excellent and extended analysis of the racial politics of *Island in the Sun*. While she suggests that these types of narratives work hard to contain images of Black masculinity and femininity, she also suggests that these films were polysemic. Her work has demonstrated how this polysemy serves racial and gendered status quo. I would like to explore here how this polysemy may

³⁵¹ Susan Courtney, "Hollywood Fantasies," 133-4.

³⁵² Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*, 133-141 (see especially page 137).

have worked to unhinge and to question racial definitions and, through powerful if momentary images, labored to raise the scepter of the uncontainable call to racial conscience linked with the civil rights movement.

Linked in with questions about the acceptability of narratives of miscegenation in the 1950s and, perhaps too little explored, are important and effectual shifts in technologies of viewing during the 1950s. The optical shift, engendered not only by increasingly immersive cinematic technologies, designed—if not always effectively—to generate a sense of being “inside the screen,” significantly intensifying cinematic viewership. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, Technicolor itself provided new “information” about race through color. It provided the mechanism first for exoticising color difference, but also for presenting more dynamic contrast between Black and white skin. Dorothy Dandridge, Eartha Kitt, and others may have appeared white in Black and white film photography, but in Technicolor they were something more and other than Black: tanned, brownish, sun-touched.³⁵³ These films also showed suntanned white bodies, thus highlighting a lack of difference between Black and white.

In general, as Courtney has shown, the Island films were a place where miscegenation was acceptable—to the PCA, but not to state censors—because they most often featured white male protagonists who engaged in temporary love affairs with scantily-clad dark women, justifying their later abandonment of these women by their need to return home. The places where the island logic broke down and failed to be compelling to the PCA can contribute to our understanding of the PCA’s overall perspective on race. In many senses, because this form of miscegenation represented a racial shift and (perhaps more importantly, a gender reversal), it was an entirely different form of

³⁵³ Richard Dyer has done much work on the racial bias built into film stock. See Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997). We might consider here how Technicolor both increased the possibility for rendering race and also immediately subverted it to the sort of visual exoticism built into the early uses and extremities of the form.

racial articulation. While the PCA was not consistent in its stance on Asians-white love affairs,³⁵⁴ for filmmakers who wanted to avoid PCA complaints about depictions of sexuality that would be illegal on- or off-screen in various places in the United States, the Islands and the Old West became spaces where these could be imagined. Because of their symbolic remoteness from the contemporary urban and suburban reality, their geographical vagueness, their edenic ambiance, and the “pre-civilized” innocence of the near nudity of its racially ambiguous “suntanned” inhabitants, cross-racial interaction stood less of a chance of seriously threatening “the South,” or white masculinity more generally. It would be reductive to argue that these “native miscegenation fantasies” simply replaced the dystopian Black/white miscegenation narratives—that natives simply stood in for African Americans. The relationship was never that direct: instead it took on the characteristics of a sort of layering. Rather than representing only Native/White miscegenation, many of these films added on and mixed in questions about white/African American interracial politics and miscegenation, laying them over their native narratives and portraits of colonialism.

As PCA interpreted it, Native Americans, like Pacific islanders, were presumably not Black: *Apache Outpost* (aka *The Lost Outpost*) (1951), *Broken Arrow* (1950), and *Big Sky* (1952), *Last of the Mohicans* (1936) all of which depicted white/Indian interracial bonds, passed without raising miscegenation objections. Even *Duel in the Sun*, which experienced problems on almost every other censorship front, was not targeted by the PCA along miscegenation lines, even though Pearl, its sexualized female protagonist, is not only a “half-breed” Native American and but also is the lover of one of the major white characters, which made for two instances of race-mixing in the PCA sanctioned narrative.

³⁵⁴ There are numerous examples of PCA passage of scripts including white/Asian interracial love stories. *Shanghai* (1935), *The Bitter Tea of General Yang* (1933), *China Girl*[0] (1943), *King and I*[0] (1956), and *Japanese War Bride*[0] (1952) all managed to get away without troubling the miscegenation clause, according the AFI Catalogue.

We're not in Tahiti anymore: *Blonde Captive* (1932) and *White Cargo* (1942) Blackness and the limits of pleasurable exoticization

PCA responses to several films demonstrate that there were some limitations on acceptable race mixing, even in the island locale. The SRC eventually accepted a *Never the Twain Shall Meet* (1931) depicting interracial white/Polynesian romance because: "the father of the girl is white and he is the only one shown in the picture. The mother was a Polynesian queen and Polynesians are not black." Although, according to Joy, this last line was a "fact," it was one that had to be stated. The unseen status of the mother seems to work against the racial ambiguity of dark Polynesian skin to shift the film away from the taboo theme of miscegenation. Indeed, it is the very lack of social integration of the woman into Polynesian ways of life that works towards the film's goal of defining her as white. Reportedly, the *Tuttles of Tahiti's* screenwriter apparently changed the race of his character from Tahitian to Caucasian in order to suit the PCA's anti-miscegenation clause. There was some looseness even in the PCA's enforcement of the ban on Black/White mixing. Famously *Showboat*, which had already had tremendous success on stage (and whose action takes place itself on a sort of "no-man's land" on a ship), was able to circumvent censorship in both 1936 and 1958, in spite of the fact that it lent prominent attention to the tragic mulatta showgirl, Julie Laverne, who was played by Helen Morgan in 1936 and Ava Gardner in 1951. The film was also made in 1929, although I am unclear about whether it encountered censorship trouble at that time.

Although the island was generally a milieu in which miscegenation could flourish, *Blonde Captive* (1932) and *White Cargo* (1942), films from different eras in the regulation of motion pictures, demonstrate, respectively, the SRC's, and then the PCA's mentality and logic regarding these racial representations and the limits of the acceptability of this island fantasy. In *White Cargo*, Tondeleyo, the mixed race native woman, appears to be an exotically dressed white whose nearly constant

nighttime appearances made her racial status difficult to ascertain. She appears, at least at first, to be identified by the white character to be Black African. This raised a particular problem for the PCA:

Specifically we feel that the trick of holding back to the end of the picture the fact that Tondeleyo is not a negress, is in violation of at least the spirit of the Code clause covering miscegenation, and hence would make the finished picture unacceptable. This for the reason that for nine reels the whole flavor of the picture will be one of miscegenation and inasmuch as this is such a very questionable subject, we feel that the present treatment would not prove acceptable...We would like to venture the suggestion that, in order to make this story acceptable from the standpoint of the production code, as well as unobjectionable to audiences generally, it will be necessary to remove any flavor whatever of miscegenation, and to establish from the very beginning that Tondeleyo has no negro blood in her at all.³⁵⁵

Although racial ambiguity was in many senses the central pleasure of the island film, the presence of “negro blood” potentially ruined this pleasure and made it imperative to PCA officials that Tondeleyo’s real, non-Black racial identity be established early in the film. In a later letter on November 12, 1941, the PCA extended a stronger warning still, and offered another solution: “We strongly urge that there be no actual discussion of the alleged Negro blood in Tondeleyo. This we believe could be handled largely by inference, up to the point where you clear the matter up and indicate that she is white.”³⁵⁶ The final film reveals that Tondeleyo is not white but rather mixed Arab and white.³⁵⁷ Although the film company did change the racial status of Tondeleyo, they nevertheless leave us with the impression for much of the film that Tondeleyo is Black.

Another interesting case which ended up on the boundary line of the miscegenation provision was the Western Australian Expeditions’ *Blonde Captive* (1932). The film was a

³⁵⁵ Joseph Breen, letter to MGM, Oct. 15, 1941. *White Cargo* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³⁵⁶ Joseph Breen, letter to MGM, Nov. 12, 1941. *White Cargo* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³⁵⁷ This incidentally led the Palestinian government to eliminate “the scene where the four men are discussing Tondeleyo’s antecedents.” Censor elimination sheet. *White Cargo* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

documentary—a quasi-anthropological exploration of Aboriginal life. The film ended with some surprising and controversial sequences, according to one SRC reviewer:

the camera spots a young blond child in the midst of all of blacks. A few minutes later a bushman is seen wearing the undergarments of a white woman. This causes the explorers to trail the man to his cave and there they find a so-called white woman who declares herself to be the widow of a British sea captain whose ship had gone down. Cast ashore, she had been adopted by the tribe's men and later been mated with one of them. The explorer offered to take her back to civilization but the woman seemed perfectly content to remain with her spouse and child.³⁵⁸

Clearly a narrative of “going native,” the way the woman is discovered—through her uncommon child and her native husband’s (feminizing) use and abuse of her heavily significant undergarments—shows us that the film troubled typical miscegenation narratives with its gender reversals. But this SRC description also suggests that the film further subverted the colonialist gaze and ideology by showing the white woman’s desire to stay with a “Black” husband and family. In doing so, it presented the viability and attractiveness of a mixed family. It appears from the description that the film radically throws into question not only colonialist narratives, but also the logic of the film’s title (and perhaps by extension its existence): the title collapses in on itself because the woman is not a captive at all. This film prompted the SRC reviewer to view the woman’s whiteness as radically unstable: notice the reviewers’ hesitation to allow the woman to retain her status as “white woman;” he also refers to her here as a “so-called white woman” and uses the animalistic term “been mated with” to describe her bond with an Aborigine. At the very least, the SRC appears to have been torn about how to characterize this mixed relationship: notice the countervailing tension in the last sentence of the above quote where the reviewer refers—in apparent astonishment—to the white/”Black” relationship using marital terminology, calling the Aboriginal male the woman’s “spouse.”

³⁵⁸ Memo for the files, written by “R.E.P.,” Mar. 8, 1932. *Blonde Captive* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

In this particular case, the PCA would not grant a seal to the film: perhaps it was the undergarments or the white woman's complete surrender to the culture of the natives—or perhaps it was the documentary status, which bore the imprimatur of truth. It seems clear that the marketing of *Blonde Captive* became important in defining its racial meanings: the question of whether the Aboriginals were Black may have been settled in the affirmative because the leader of the expedition wrote this message which was displayed in lobbies of theaters showing the film: "I hereby certify that the story of a shipwrecked white woman rescued or adopted by Blacks is based on fact."³⁵⁹ These words, coupled with the exploitative and inaccurate title of the film—*Blonde Captive*—set up the racial tension and linked the film's pedestrian documentary story into an historical narrative of rape and capture as old as colonialism. Because the Aboriginal people are billed and marketed by exhibitors as Black, they would be read as Black by spectators and, therefore, the PCA could not approve the film.

What is clear is that the realm of the "tropics" became a realm for the testing of racial boundaries—a place where the spatial and organizational fluidity and the necessities imposed by lack and lust made acts that would be completely unthinkable in civilization absolutely necessary and *natural*. Whether that realm could pass the scrutiny of censors was obviously a more difficult enterprise than the act of imagining such a place.

A Tale of Two South Pacifics: Complicating the Racial Politics of the Island Miscegenation Narrative

Many of the narratives of the South Seas were not political or empowering but rather reversed miscegenation narratives to suit and please white men. The story of *South Pacific* challenged, if it did not entirely undo, this Native miscegenation narrative by raising the specter of Black presence. *South Pacific* (1958), as we know it, was not the first *South Pacific*. An earlier *South Pacific*

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

island tale, one that linked the island more exactly with the question of race and racial identity, was written by Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward (who with her husband Dubose Heyward had written *Porgy and Bess*). Debuting in 1943 on Broadway with Canada Lee in its leading role, this other “South Pacific” closed also in 1943. This version of *South Pacific* told the story of a torpedoed Black American seaman who finds himself on a South Pacific island. According to *Time*, “Sam is cynical and rancorous, indifferent to who wins the war, delighted that, because of his dark skin, he can pose as a native.”³⁶⁰ Sam passes for native and in this way avoids capture. His white fellow soldier, on the other hand, must hide inside all day in a boiling hot attic because of his skin color, which would signal his American identity and prompt capture. The play is populated by (transnational, transplanted) African Americans. Sam falls in love with a Black missionary woman and the two live happily together, teaching the native children. *Time Magazine* had this to say of the drama: “However familiar a type, the ill-used roughneck will remain a disquieting figure until society remolds him, a challenging subject until literature really plumbs his depths. *South Pacific* deserves respect for taking an unblinking look at Sam, gains in interest by portraying him in the teeth of war.”³⁶¹ Clearly Lee played the role in ways that resisted the reality of his transformation and clung to the reality of his claims of injustice. *Time* accused him of being “a plausible symbol, not a flesh-&-blood human being. Sam is made too articulate about what ails him and not convincing enough about why he alters.”³⁶² As Lee so often did, he used his role on stage—and his voice—to penetrate narrative constraints and to build by each warbling, angry unleashing of his voice a rhetoric strong enough to hold both anger and enduring hope in Black dreams deferred.

³⁶⁰ “New Plays in Manhattan,” *Time Magazine*, Jan 10, 1944.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Ibid.*

In 1948's stage version of *South Pacific*, with white people as leading protagonists and with music, Juanita Hall would stand in for Sam, but she would have to become a supporting character, a woman, and ugly and Tonkanese. She was there in all her New York City blackness but unrecognizable to the white eye, buried by costume and narrative layers that remake this Island fantasy with the idea of Black-on-white miscegenation. Echoing the earlier *South Pacific*, the new Rogers and Hammerstein musical was about miscegenation and discrimination. But it buries, hides and muffles the Black male voice.

Shortly after the 1958 film *South Pacific* begins, we are introduced to Joe Cable, a white American soldier from Philadelphia who is stationed in the South Pacific during WWII. After meeting Bloody Mary, a native trader, he is informed about a dangerous mission on which he and Emile De Becque, a French planter, will be sent. De Becque turns down the mission because he has fallen in love with an American (white Southern) navy nurse named Nellie and considers that he has too much to lose if the mission goes badly. To ease Joe's disappointment about not getting to go on the mission, his buddies invite him to Bali-hai, a neighboring island populated by natives. Here, he too gets romantically entangled; he falls for Bloody Mary's daughter, a native girl of roughly 16 years old. Meanwhile, back at the military post, Nellie learns that Emile was previously married to a native woman who gave him two mixed race children, and thereafter calls off their engagement. With Emile dejected and Joe struggling with his own racial intolerances, which will not allow him to consider a long term commitment to Liat, the two discuss—through song—the power of prejudice. Now free of the romantic entanglements that led him to hesitate in signing on for the dangerous mission, Emile decides to go on the mission. Joe is killed by enemy soldiers but while Emile is away,

Nellie learns to accept his interracial children and the film ends with Nellie sitting with the two children at the table and Emile coming home from war.

To its credit, the film does some significant things to trouble the native miscegenation narrative. First, it includes a single image of a single Black man among the army. Although this man looks away, he is nevertheless made a part of the spectacle of masculinity featured here in the film's first scenes.



Figure 37 South Pacific (1958)

Not only does it feature the song “You gotta be taught”³⁶³ (lyrics in footnote) but it also features Juanita Hall in the role of Bloody Mary. Although it is her rigorously Asian-ized daughter (Mary and Liat are the only two Islanders who wear the ubiquitous Asian cloth-buttoned shirt) rather than she herself who becomes embroiled in a love affair with the white “Lutellin” she calls “sexy,” it is nevertheless still Bloody Mary’s blood that mixes with his, her voice that prompts the relationship, speaking “happy talk” for her daughter.



Figure 38- In South Pacific (1958), casting suggested African American is like Asian is like white. Here light-skinned Liat is shown in stereotypical cloth-button shirt

Bloody Mary does not fit the island fantasy of miscegenation but profoundly troubles it. She is actually a Black woman (and, her press photos in the Black press show, a beautiful one). Therefore, she is a potential site of actor-identification for African Americans. She also transgresses gender roles typical to this fantasy film. She dresses like a man, talks to men, and engineers men’s romantic relationships with a cunning brashness. It is *Mary* who is the agent promoting interracial sexual contact, and it is she who establishes the grounds for its viability.

³⁶³ You've got to be taught; To hate and fear,; You've got to be taught; From year to year,; It's got to be drummed; In your dear little ear; You've got to be carefully taught,; You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,; And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade,; You've got to be carefully taught,; You've got to be taught before it's too late,; Before you are six or seven or eight,; To hate all the people your relatives hate,; You've got to be carefully taught!

The film also raises the question of Southern racism, importing it to the Pacific and forcing the audience to confront the racism of white southerners through one of the (many) protagonists. That in the 1958 film version, Nellie (Mitzi Gaynor) is still said to be from Little Rock, Arkansas, a place whose meaning shifted dramatically in the wake of the school integration crises of 1957, is a relatively brave narrative move by the filmmakers. Her racism, directed against the brown children of her love interest Emile (Rossano Brazzi), thus takes on additional American narrative significance, as does her eventual decision not only to mother but to *teach* these children (and also to be taught by them). The film also raises the specter of Northern racism by having the film's other protagonist, white *northern* Joe (John Kerr), be caught in his own racism. We see strains of white guilt—even white self-hate—in Joe's "you have to be taught." If unaware of his white privilege, which is expressed through his ability to command such a wife as Liat, he is nevertheless aware and struggling against his own white Philadelphia upbringing in this song. His palpable sarcasm and self-examination begin to question whiteness, but are quickly ended by his death.

The narrative of retrogressive, colonialist "native" miscegenation, one which covers over the Black/white miscegenation theme with fantasies of Asian exoticism, is still present and readable in this polysemic text: in my second reading, Juanita Hall is selling her Black/Tonkense daughter to the white man. She releases her daughter to Joe for his pleasure so, another song tells us, he can feel young again. The child is only 16. The profoundly troubling narrative of the brothel and of the white male's planned abandonment of Liat is anticipated by earlier island films, despite the introspective "you gotta be carefully taught." It is inscribed into the space in which Liat and Joe's liaison occurs and in how Mary gives and *shows* Liat to Joe. Besides, "You gotta be taught" wrongly figures Joe's parents and not his irresponsible behavior on the island, as the "race problem," thus

allowing American racism to act as scapegoat for white international intrigue and sexual exploitation. Joe's rejection of his parents' racism becomes a point of celebration for the film which then fails to properly interrogate the exoticizing and fundamentally hierarchical terms of his own interracial affections and relations.

The place where the film begins to redeem itself from this Native miscegenation narrative, and to become racially experimental is, unsurprisingly, in its visual expressivity and abstractions: but these too are about the possibility of pure mixing. The film's already exaggerated color scheme, one that makes white people look more orange than white (see above frame capture), is further dramatized and rendered symbolic in its musical sequences. The film points out in its early sequences that extremity of color will become a theme.



Figure 39-Color-tinting suggests that the problem of the color line will disappear in a Technicolor world, although Bali-Hai is still at a pleasurable (and segregated) distance from the soldier's island.

However, the racial implications of this extreme color palette become clear only when the filmmakers experiment with Technicolor, tinting entire frames for extended sequences purple, yellow, or green and thus “erasing” the color—the most significant racial marker—of the protagonists.



Figure 37-Color-tinting diminishes racial differences

Racial status had already been blurred by the film's casting (Cable looks like he could be Asian) and its Asian-ization of its islanders.

These sequences point out that color is relative and try to make easy its shifting. In these sequences, the deeply dyed screen renders everything purple (or blue or red) and forces us to “observe” the vocal register more closely, forcing spectators to inhabit the song and highlighting quite literally the mutuality of the protagonists we see. Who is Black, white, or Asian in a scene that is purple? It is difficult to determine, as Mary takes on the same skin tone as the bronzed white army that stands behind Cable, and Cable's Asian features render him almost as exotic as Mary. In the midst of this racial confusion, the film's tinting seems to suggest that we are all the same, in a sort of *Sesame Street* racial logic.

But what is obvious in the screen's darker, more narratively cloudy moments is that these characters, though sometimes couples in love, are not the same at all. Although Nellie (a white Southerner) and Emile (the French planter with two mixed race children) may live together, or even marry, their accents and voices will never be the same. Their romantic union, though not tragic, will be both a process of discovery and a strained disappointment that stands in uncomfortable relationship to the “island-as-a-paradise” stereotype. Neither narrative nor song can easily patch over or heal those racial tensions that erupt out of cultural differences. While displacing domestic issues

like school desegregation and discrimination into the island locale may have worked to avoid censorship and to raise, through casting, the disarming specter of Black presence in the pleasantly remote milieu of the island, the film's strategies for uniting races and cultures is hopelessly utopian in an era where fantasies of miscegenation were with the help of the civil rights movement turning to dreams of—and calls for—integration.

Conclusion:

Although in the case of violence and sexuality the PCA had an elaborative function, encouraging the transmission of difficult ideas through complex indirect representation, the PCA seems to have generally omitted, rather than elaborately restrained, representations of African American identity and African American experience. In this respect, the PCA acted in concert with the white status quo thinking that many American moviegoers probably preferred.

The PCA notably constrained several instances of stereotyping and, more consistently, suggested the elimination of the word “nigger,” out of respect for African American audiences in a show of political correctness and perhaps, in some instances, of apparent genuine concern for African American spectators and pressure groups. They also consistently suggested that the studios “conference” with African Americans about Black representation, a policy that would have had the effect of increasing Black input into Hollywood productions (although consultants may have been selected to back up the studio's versions of blackness and were sometimes ignores as in the case of Disney's *Song of the South*). In general, though, the PCA avoided racial topics that might challenge the racial status quo that was established in the South and kept prevalent outside its borders. Although the PCA sometimes adopted the position articulated by elite African Americans, their self-regulation of the depictions of African Americans and Black themes seem not to have been informed

by the same complexity as other topics like sex and violence. When it came to African American themes, the issue of compensating moral values impeded the depictions of lynching. If true censorship is the removal of the heart of an idea (as opposed to pushing for alternative means of expression), then we might argue that the PCA censored many images of lynching whose power lay in demonstrating, realistically, their brutality.

It is important to note the films that were *not* severely censored by the PCA based on the possibility of Southern offense or racial conservatism. *Intruder in the Dust* (1949) suggested the power of white Southern racism in showing lynching. The PCA's leniency with *The Burning Cross* (1947) in terms of its cinematic representation, which showed a KKK lynching of an entire Black family evidences the distance they had come with allowing controversial racial representations. The 1949 film *Pinky* as I will discuss in the following chapter, was approved by the PCA despite its unmistakable depiction of miscegenation.

Despite these important and groundbreaking exceptions, the PCA's racial policy was conservative and towed the line of the white racial status quo. While the NAACP desired realism, and postwar foreign films often portrayed African American/white contact with a neo-realist flair, the PCA desired that Hollywood producers minimize realism when it came to racial topics, a tactic which often obscured African American historical narratives and called for the omission of African American presence. Though the PCA sometimes elaborated scenes of lynch violence in ways that would help filmmakers evade censorship at the local level, they also minimized and toned down critiques of white systems of justice in Hollywood films like *They Won't Forget* and *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*.

The overall effects of the PCA's general racial policy upon the text (and by extension the spectator) are difficult to measure. More examination of a greater number of files would help affirm or nuance the account I have presented here. Nevertheless, the PCA did clearly alter African American representation. And their continual encouragement that producers keep in mind both the African American protest and the white southern protest, may have increased by extension the tendency of producers to render abstractly both white Southern and African American representation.³⁶⁴ This work suggests that the PCA was active in excising materials not explicitly referenced in the Code in order to protect white Southern, and sometimes African American, interests.

The PCA had an important influence on the development of an image based civil rights discourse in the 1930s-1960s. Although filmmakers clearly defined much of the cinematic discourse by what they chose as their film topics, the PCA, as I have shown, had a powerful influence on the images, narratives and sounds that could be projected from the screen. On the one hand, the PCA's industry policy with regards to the racist "South" made depictions of African American humanity very difficult. On the other hand, especially after WWII, the industry increasingly attended to African American interests, if they rigidly defined those interests in terms set forth by Walter White and ignored serious concerns emanating from Carl Murphy, Minnie Johnston and other African American civic leaders. My work on the word "nigger" and the politics of its use also suggests the centrality of the realm of the audible and dialogical for challenging (or perpetuating) the primacy and dominance of white visual regimes.

³⁶⁴ Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: Negro in the American film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford, 1977), 67. Thomas Cripps notes that "With the so called Hays Office self-censorship system, the studios abandoned black roles altogether rather than choose between the wrath of the NAACP or what they thought would be unsalable black heroes."

Chapter 5:
**Making Racial Democracy Safe for Hollywood: Darryl F. Zanuck, Studio Self-Regulation, and the
Limits of Racial Representation**

We must forge ahead. We're in danger of being left, like so many of our isolationists, with the group out from under us. We've got to move into new ground, break new trails. In short, we must play our part in the solution of the problems that torture the world. We must begin to deal realistically in film with the causes of wars and panics, with social upheavals and depression, with starvation and want and injustice and barbarism under whatever guise. That is why I call upon writers to lead the way—if they have something worthwhile to say, let them dress it in the glittering robes of entertainment and they will find a ready market. No producer who is worthy of the name will reject entertainment and without entertainment no propaganda film is worth a dime.¹ ~Darryl Zanuck

As Koppes and Black have shown in their study of African American representation and wartime morale, World War II made necessary an implicit argument for racial equality.² Koppes and Black suggest that both propaganda film and those Hollywood narrative films that dealt with African American issues were screened by the Office of War Information, who submitted comments to Hollywood studios suggesting certain changes to increase what one study showed to be perilously low African American morale and to encourage Black participation in the war effort by way of pleasing Black cinematic spectators. In many ways, the late 1940s and early 1950s tested the limits and drew the boundaries around arguments for integration, equality, and justice to keep these arguments from disrupting America's prevailing racial hierarchy. Many of the racially-oriented films of the late 1940s and early 1950s represent a participation in the lingering spirit of the war era's urgent call for racial

¹ Darryl Zanuck, "Do Writers Know Hollywood?: The Message Cannot Overtake the Technique," *Saturday Review of Literature*, (Oct 30, 1943): 12.

² Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black, "Blacks, Loyalty and Motion Picture Propaganda" in *Controlling Hollywood*, ed. Matthew Bernstein (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 130-5.

democracy and, simultaneously, an effort to contain this very spirit. This postwar Hollywood film cycle of racially contentious films sought to “resolve”—by repression or by remedy—the “racial problem,” however that may be defined.

One of the most important producers and creative minds engaged in this Hollywood project of articulating race at a pivotal turn in mid-century America was Darryl F. Zanuck. Zanuck was the head of production at Twentieth Century Fox from 1933 to 1956. Few major studio producers had as great an effect on the trajectory of Hollywood’s racial representation or were as personally and creatively invested in the project of bringing race to the screen.

Previous scholarly work on Zanuck has examined the history, finances, and structure of Twentieth Century Fox during his tenure there, but only a small number of these have addressed, in depth, the ideology and politics that shaped the processes of filmmaking as well as the ultimate screen product.³ Those that have paid attention to the question of politics have presented opposing views. George Custen’s biographically structured work on Zanuck gives a largely sympathetic portrait of the studio magnate and his artistic, political, and social vision as they were applied to production practices. Custen rightfully identifies Zanuck as one of the few Hollywood production heads whose studio not only regularly produced films that dealt with marginalized people but, because of Zanuck, regularly pushed for and engineered these controversial productions.⁴ Custen acknowledges, however, the compromised *racial* politics of Darryl Zanuck and the mainstreamed, standardized, and often formulaic set of solutions that marked racial representations in his productions. In the introduction to his biography, Custen states: “Although he might flirt with film as a soap box, in

³ For an economic history of Fox, see Aubrey Solomon, *Twentieth Century-Fox* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1988). For a history of Zanuck’s role at the studio, see Mel Gussow, *Don’t Say Yes until I Finish Talking* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980).

⁴ George Custen, *Twentieth Century’s Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 2.

most cases Zanuck avoided anything that might smack of social criticism unless he could dress it up as a love story...[C]riticism of postwar adjustments and feminism or ideology or racism, anti-Semitism, or labor exploitation was softened and personalized. American viewers came to see all problems as amendable to some centrist, individual solution rendered in these films”⁵

On the other hand, Russell Campbell’s account produces illuminating, symptomatic readings of the political ideology that undergirded three of Zanuck’s films, but attends little to Zanuck’s biography in relation to these productions. While Campbell ably reads Zanuck’s films according to their alignment with liberal ideology, he may judge them too much by their ideological constraints and too little by the powerfully evocative and unsettling questions that they pose.⁶ Because Campbell argues for the similarity in Zanuck’s strategies for approaching all marginalized people, he also does not separate out Zanuck’s racial representations his depiction of religious minorities and “the downtrodden,” leaving unexamined the nuanced differences between Zanuck’s treatment of Jews, White Oakies, and African Americans, groups that were central to some of his most famous films, but which had markedly different social standing in the U.S.⁷ Although Thomas Cripps does not explicitly focus on Zanuck as producer, specific analyses of the racial questions raised in Zanuck’s films is presented in Cripps’s analysis of the racial production politics of *Pinky* and *No Way Out* in *Making Movies Black*.⁸ However, Cripps’s coverage of many films and multiple forces

⁵ Custen, *Twentieth Century’s Fox*, 15. See also Custen’s discussion of *The Jazz Singer* (1928). Ibid., 97-113. But if these films were half-hearted as social criticism, they were among the only films of the era to attempt such critique—in many ways, for Black viewers in an era where the race film was dying out, these films were the closest the screen got to handling the idea of race respectfully.

⁶ Russell Campbell, “The Ideology of the Social Consciousness Movie: Three Films of Darryl F. Zanuck,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Winter 1978): 49-71.

⁷ Zanuck showed white Oakies in *Grapes of Wrath* (1940), Jewish people in *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), and African Americans in *Pinky* (1949) and *No Way Out* (1950).

⁸ Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 232-240, 246-9.

impacting the text leaves room for further analysis of the nuances, motivations and textual and spectatorial effects of these two racial problem films.

Filling the gaps left by these studies, and focusing specifically on the nuances of Zanuck's strategy for African American representation, I will look closely at Zanuck's involvement with racial problem films. What I want to highlight is that Zanuck's approach was ultimately *limited* for a number of reasons that I will explore in the following analysis. The precise nature of the representational and ideological limitations of Zanuck's approach to racial problem films involving African Americans in the postwar era is important to understanding not only these films but also their ultimate spectatorial effects. In examining the pre-production story conferences and negotiations concerning racial material, I will point to some of the ways that Zanuck's racial beliefs, notions of showmanship, and ideological limitations as production head led to (self-)censorship, restraint in characterization and selective omission that blunted the progressive racial politics of the films. I will focus my analysis specifically on the textual effects of Zanuck's changes—on characterization, on aesthetics, and on the presentation of racially themed material—as evidenced in the story conferences.

The opening epigram of this chapter is Darryl Zanuck's plea for realism and social relevancy in the cinema made to the Hollywood Writers' Mobilization. His comments capture the sentiment motivating the postwar cinematic "cycle" of racial message films that occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Zanuck, perhaps more than any other head of production during the studio era, demonstrated both the possibilities and limitations of liberalism. In 1945, while in a conference with President Harry Truman, Zanuck clearly articulated his idea for commercial, theatrical (fiction) film that could serve a definite social and political purpose more powerfully than any documentary. He

argued that “feature-length films of entertainment value will in their more indirect way be extremely valuable in putting across American ideas [because] audience interest in something with a story is far greater than a documentary.”⁹ While Zanuck’s idealism led him to make a number of films that challenged Hollywood studio’s racial status quo, his concerns about the reactions of white audiences and his focus on creating films that would offer these audiences a window into the experience of racialization were implicated in his self-censorship of two postwar film projects: *Pinky* (1949) and *No Way Out* (1950).

Thomas Schatz has demonstrated how, in the studio era, production heads shaped both the institutional system of film production and specific film content; he considers these men to be greatly undervalued in terms of their creative impact on the films whose production they oversaw.¹⁰ With more specific relevance to my argument, George Custer’s work makes it clear that Zanuck, who is not analyzed in Schatz’s book, had a great influence on Twentieth Century-Fox films, perhaps more than most production heads, particularly at the level of plot and story development.¹¹ While Zanuck may not have profoundly influenced all of the films he produced, he clearly influenced those films under examination here. Zanuck was personally interested in these two films, and he allotted relatively large budgets for them as prestige pictures.¹² Procedurally, Zanuck’s active and decisive involvement in the development of their racially-oriented plots is, by itself, clear and convincing

⁹ *Hollywood Reporter*, June 18, 1945.

¹⁰ Schatz notes: “the chief architects of a studio’s style were its executives.” Thomas Schatz, *Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 7. Schatz also notes that Frank Capra railed against this system, arguing that it limited cinematic products: “about six producers today pass on about 90 percent of the scripts and edit 90 percent of the pictures.” Frank Capra, “By Post From Mr. Capra. March 23, 1939 [letter date]” *New York Times*, April 2, 1939 (publication date), 134

¹¹ Custer, *Twentieth Century’s Fox*, 2.

¹² Prestige Pictures were defined by *Time Magazine* in 1937 as those pictures that “were intended primarily to stimulate self-respect rather than fill the purses of their makers.” *Time*, August 16, 1937. Zanuck purportedly spent a “record amount” on purchasing Lessers’s screenplay for *No Way Out*. “‘No Way Out’ at Rivoli: New View of Race Bias,” *Herald-Tribune*, Aug 13, 1950.

evidence of his desire to exercise intense supervisory control over films that would, as he told the *Saturday Review*, “move into new ground, break new trails.”¹³

There is strong evidence of Zanuck’s power over his studio’s cinematic product. First, Zanuck had a fundamental interest in script development, conducting weekly—sometimes daily—script meetings that frequently vastly changed the structure of the storyline of Fox films.¹⁴ Second, Zanuck was known to hire and fire script writers and directors based on his perception of whether or not they were carrying out his vision. Third, some sources suggest that in addition to his role in formulating scripts, his “auteurial hand” was evident in film editing as well; at times, he even contravened wishes of directors in his editing of films. As Phillip Dunne, screenwriter of *Pinky* reminisced: “In Darryl’s time, writers did not write scripts for directors, they wrote them for Darryl.”¹⁵

Matthew Bernstein rightly indicates skepticism about Custen’s claims regarding Zanuck’s influence on his own productions and the “culture of Hollywood.” As Bernstein notes, Custen claim that Zanuck affected “the studio system’s method of organizing production, its ideology of filmmaking, and its genres.”¹⁶ Whether or not he greatly influenced America, Zanuck clearly had the

¹³Zanuck, “Do Writers Know,” 12.

¹⁴This argument is made strongly by George Custen, whose book largely references Zanuck’s story conferences and interactions with writers. See, for example, his discussion of *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* and *Pinky*. Phillip Dunne, who worked with Zanuck on *Pinky*, suggested that “most directorial touches at least on Twentieth Century-Fox’s productions had been written into the script long before the director was assigned to the picture.” Phillip Dunne, “Darryl from A to Z,” *American Film* 9, no. 19 (July/August, 1984): 47, cited in Custen, *Twentieth Century’s Fox*, 16.

¹⁵See Campbell, “The Ideology of the Social Consciousness Movie,” 50. According to *American National Biography*, “Zanuck was ruthless in editing films, cutting out directors’ favorite touches if he felt they slowed the story. Director Joseph Mankiewicz complained to writer Philip Dunne after he had completed both *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949) and *All about Eve* (1950) that Zanuck had cut both films to incoherence, but Mankiewicz won Academy Awards for writing and directing both films.” Tom Stempel. “Zanuck, Darryl F.”; <http://www.anb.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/articles/18/18-01279.html>; *American National Biography Online* Feb. 2000. Access Date: Thu June 28 12:08:24 EDT 2007. See also Custen, *Twentieth Century’s Fox*, 16. More research would have to be done to determine Zanuck’s involvement with non-prestige pictures and B-films.

¹⁶Matthew Bernstein, book review of *Twentieth Century’s Fox* by George Custen. *Film Quarterly* 52, no. 4. (Summer, 1999), 61. Custen even makes such claims about Zanuck’s influence on America writ large. Custen suggests that Zanuck was

power of final say over Fox films and was actively involved in development of stories. It seems just as clear from many of the studio's films—including John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *How Green Was my Valley* (1941) and Preston Sturges' *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948)—that directorial influence was able to exist symbiotically with Zanuck's over-arching power. Custen does little to acknowledge this. He does, however, lead us to question how much of Twentieth Century-Fox's cinematic product during the Zanuck years was determined by the director. While the director may have controlled the overall aesthetic of the film, the direction of actors and the cinematography, Zanuck's tight control over story choice, script and editing seemed to leave the shape and moral of the story in his hands. Although he wanted ultimate control, Zanuck did not want all films to look or appear the same, but he did engineer a certain auteurial brand of his own, one that is palpable in his films. Variety in directorial vision could only help the company, as it demonstrated the wide range of talent and styles Zanuck had been able to attract and could put to use. But it did not lessen the overarching, if subtle, effect of the producer's hand in the cinematic process.

Building on this proof that in the case of Darryl Zanuck, the producer *was* such a powerful force in studio era cinematic production, I explore how this mode of power shaped two films, *Pinky* and *No Way Out*, in their depictions of racial themes and race relations. In many ways Zanuck's first "African American" film, *The Jazz Singer* (1928) was paradigmatic of the racial issues his films would suffer from: although blackness was present in them, white creative talent often stood in for and spoke selective meanings into blackness.

"the greatest and most influential producer in the history of Hollywood and by extension one of the most powerful men in America." While Custen may be right that Zanuck's high status and great wealth gave him corporate power and influence, Custen's implication that Zanuck had a decisive influence on American culture would be better proved (and perhaps challenged) by closer analysis of the cultural reception of his work.

Darryl Zanuck and Racial Representation

Why was this white gentile producer, who hailed from Nebraska, so interested in bringing controversial racial problems to the screen? Looking briefly at some biographical background will give us a better sense of his “encoding” strategies and practices in the making of *Pinky* and *No Way Out*. One answer to this question can be found in Zanuck’s relationship with Wendell Wilkie, former GOP presidential candidate and chairman of Twentieth Century-Fox’s board of directors and with Walter White, NAACP Executive secretary.¹⁷ Wilkie, who was known to be a racial liberal, in turn had a close relationship with White and with the NAACP; he even operated as the NAACP’s special counsel. This close alignment between Fox’s chairman of the board and the NAACP may have influenced Zanuck’s own racial politics towards increasing progressivism.¹⁸ Zanuck had not only welcomed but *hosted* White on his 1942 visit to Hollywood, facilitating a warm reception for the Executive Secretary among the other studio heads.¹⁹

White’s impact on Zanuck, both personal and political, went beyond the latter’s desire to understand African American political perspectives; it developed into an apparent fascination with the blonde-haired, blue-eyed ‘Black’ man called ‘White.’ Zanuck’s respect for and captivation with White found expression in the producer’s films: not only did White’s racial ideology seep into Zanuck’s own, but elements of White’s personal and professional life—most notably White’s story of passing as a white man, recorded in his 1948 autobiography—ended up repeatedly in the narratives of Zanuck’s films.²⁰ For example, Joe the Barber in *No Way Out* passes for white so he can spy on white

¹⁷ Custen notes that Zanuck’s story conferences and personal notes suggest that he wanted to model Woodrow Wilson’s characterization in Fox’s *Remember the Day* after Wilkie and used the film *Wilson* to promote Wilkie’s internationalist political rhetoric. Custen, *Twentieth Century’s Fox*, 268-9.

¹⁸ Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35-63.

²⁰ Walter White, *A Man Called White* (New York: Viking, 1948).

men planning to attack Negroes, a narrative twist that resembles White passing as a white man to gain membership in the Klan to expose the organization.²¹

Zanuck saw and understood the implications of the war years' anti-racist, democratic rhetoric. Zanuck's service in the Army Signal Corps involved producing documentaries and arguably informed the style of realism he cultivated in Fox's 1940s films.²² This work also reinforced Zanuck's sense of film as a purposeful medium—a means of political and ideological expression as well as entertainment. Zanuck's interest in race was developed, it seems out of a longstanding practice of using the screen to explore questions of “right and wrong” but he applied this screen morality to the questions of racism and discrimination raised by the war. Although Zanuck did not produce full-fledged message movies at Fox until *Grapes of Wrath* (1940), there were traces of the message movie—and its expressionistic approach to racial violence—in his 1937 film *Slave Ship*, one of the first films to examine the brutality of the slave trade.²³ The film shows evocative and moving images of the middle passage's repressive and horrific violence—against Black people. It ultimately subverts this violence to the romantic story line, and even has the nerve to end with the American Southern protagonists moving to Jamaica where they own a *plantation*, presumably using “peasant” rather than slave labor as slavery was abolished in 1833 in the British West Indies. In *Slave Ship*, as would be the case with so many other films under Zanuck's supervision, powerful, truth-telling depictions of racial injustice were held in uncomfortable tension and those that were highly retrograde, conservative and ultimately designed to restore audience pleasure. Even as he revealed some of the realities of racial

²¹ *No Way Out* Screenplay (2024) draft 4, 85.

²² George Custen suggests this, noting that Zanuck was “among the first studio heads to take his crews on location.” Custen, *Twentieth Century's Fox*, 2.

²³ The movie appeared at roughly the same time as Paramount's *Souls at Sea* which also depicted the abolition of the slave trade. But before these two films, the topic was very rarely the central concern of a major Hollywood film.

experience, he doubled back, hoping, perhaps with a singularly “Hollywood” narrative optimism, to have it both ways.

Zanuck’s concern with race and racial justice is evident in the embedded racial iconography in the earlier films over which he had creative control at Warner Brothers in the 1930s as well as his wartime dramas at Fox. As I explored in Chapter 4, in *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) either LeRoy or Zanuck had refused to ignore that African Americans had always been disproportionately imprisoned and assigned to chain-gang labor even though the PCA asked Zanuck not to show this so as to avoid offending the South. Twentieth Century-Fox’s 1943 Western, *The Ox Bow Incident*, focused on lynching. Although the lynch victims in the film are white and Mexican, the African American preacher, Mose, opposes the vigilantes with a lengthy speech that refers to the lynching of his brother. The leader of the lynch party is a former Confederate soldier whose uniform and stereotypical Southern home connect him more to the South and southern ways of thinking than to the Old West that is the film’s milieu. In *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), Zanuck took significant risks with the depiction of discrimination in the form of anti-Semitism. Zanuck’s desire to be both progressive and to shift racial paradigms was also evident in the Western film *Broken Arrow* (1950), which dedicated roughly equal screen time to white and Native American characters and experience and even employed members of the Apache tribe as extras. Zanuck’s oeuvre deserves to be more closely examined for the politics and intentions behind its racial articulations and specifically for its *embedding* of racial metaphors and themes, into narratives.

Detailed examination of the story conferences that went into the production of his studio’s most racially-charged films indicate that while Zanuck wanted to depict African American life with detail and accuracy, he was somewhat uncomfortable with these same representations and often

operated as a force of censorship, muting and “toning down” his studio’s own films. As a result, although his films were often designed to be “realist” (they were contemporary stories, with contemporary lingo), they often engaged in symbolic, elaborately calculated, and chronically open-ended representations of Black experience. Many of these representations were left open to audience interpretation. Zanuck was very concerned about audience reaction in his racial films, as the story conferences make clear. This was perhaps because Zanuck’s racial films were among his most socially and aesthetically challenging and experimental, and were also highly polysemic. These films had multi-character structures, and competing perspectives and sub-plotlines that challenged and perhaps strained audience-character alignment.

Shaping Pinky: the Possibility of Choice

Zanuck was clearly the creative person most invested in both Fox’s *Pinky* and *No Way Out* projects. Two script writers (Richard Hubler and Dudley Nichols) and a director (John Ford) were sacrificed in pursuit of Zanuck’s vision for *Pinky*. The film was based on the serialized novel *Quality* written by Cid Ricketts Sumner and published for popular consumption in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1945 before it was published in whole as a novel by Bantam in 1946.²⁴ Despite the considerable racial conservatism of the source material on which the film was based, Zanuck clearly saw something contemporary, cutting edge—even liberal—in *Pinky*.²⁵ Perhaps it was the narrative’s dialogism: it featured forthright conversation between characters who were “opposites”—a consistent feature in Zanuck’s talkers. *Pinky* is the story of the title character (Jeanne Crain), a very light-skinned African American woman who was raised by her washer-woman grandmother, “Aunt” Dicey Johnson (Ethel

²⁴ According to the NAACP, it was the first time *Ladies’ Home Journal* published a story with a Negro protagonist. Annette Peyser, memo to Walter White, “Danger: Propaganda!,” undated. Papers of the NAACP. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. See Cid Ricketts Sumner, *Ladies’ Home Journal* 62 (Dec. 1945): 17-19 and following weeks for serial. The first book version published by Bobbs-Merrill Company was released in 1946.

²⁵ For more on the scriptwriters, see Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, 232.

Waters), in the South but is sent to the North to receive training as a nurse. The film narrative begins when Pinky returns to the South, having finished her training. Upon her return, she surprises her grandmother, who initially mistakes her for one of the white women whose clothes she launders. Her grandmother is suspicious that Pinky stopped writing and perhaps also at her dress. Pinky admits to her grandmother that she passed for white in the North, for which her grandmother scolds her, admonishing her to pray to God for forgiveness. Pinky says she was glad when Dicey stopped sending her money, but Dicey insists that she never stopped and suggests that they ask Jake Waters (Fredrick O'Neal), presumably one of the only people in the shanty town who knows how to read and has facilitated communication between Pinky and her grandmother. When Pinky goes to town to get her money back from Jake, she is accosted by razor-toting Rozelia (Nina Mae McKinney), Jake's girlfriend, who accuses Pinky of stealing her money. The police get involved, assuming that Pinky is white, but Rozelia laughs, telling them that she is nothing but a colored girl, which occasions a slap from one of the officers. Pinky admits that she too is Black and the officers arrest her as well as Jake and Rozelia, although neither Jake nor Pinky have done anything wrong.

Miss Em (Ethel Barrymore), the owner of the former plantation house behind which Dicey's humble shack sits, suffers a series of heart attacks. Dicey coaxes Pinky into caring for the elderly white lady who the doctor says has little time to live. First, Dicey threatens Pinky if she doesn't help Miss Em. But what eventually convinces Pinky to do the job is that Miss Em once cared for her grandmother when she was ill. So it is out of loyalty to her grandmother that Pinky cares for Miss Em. At first, Pinky resents Miss Em, even loses her temper with her, complaining about whites' racial double standards and labeling Miss Em one of "you whites." Not long after Pinky begins nursing Miss Em, Tom Adams (William Lundigan), the white Doctor who Pinky fell in love with in

the North, comes to find Pinky (who he thinks is white) and to claim her as his bride. She tells him she is Black, but he persists in his affections. The two kiss and she promises to go away with him as soon as she is done caring for Miss Em.

Although Pinky's role is in some ways a service job, Pinky serves with neither servility nor the façade of happiness. She continually contradicts Miss Em and even talks back to her, repeatedly reminding her that she is "a *graduate* nurse," a mark of her true professionalism. Because of her forthrightness, Miss Em eventually takes to Pinky. The two develop what Zanuck called "a grudging affection" for one another and when Miss Em dies, she leaves her entire house to Pinky despite the young woman's racial identity, writing in her will that she "has confidence in the use to which [Pinky] will put this property."²⁶ Miss Em's cousin, Mrs. Melba Wooley (Evelyn Varden), contests the will, suggesting that Pinky drugged Miss Em and forced her to sign it. A trial ensues but Pinky wins. Tom Adams, who has returned from the North just before the trial, supports Pinky from afar in the courtroom, but after the trial, tells her he wants her to move with him to Colorado—to the West—to start over, suggesting Pinky's blackness will be a secret in her future life as his wife. Pinky, now thoroughly invested in realizing Miss Em's purposes for the house, tells Tom this plan will never work. Finally, in a scene that takes place in Miss Em's old bedroom, where the two talk, hovering around the bed—a scene where Tom and Pinky seem simultaneously at their closest and farthest away from consummating their relationship—, Pinky tells Tom to leave and not to come back, breaking off their relationship and her claims on whiteness. In the following scene, we see that Pinky has turned Miss Em's house into a training school for nurses, one over which she is apparently the headmistress.

²⁶"Conference on screenplay," Nov. 17, 1948. Doheny Library. Twentieth Century-Fox collection. University of Southern California. Los Angeles, CA.

Pinky was, in many ways, about the title character's *choice*; as Zanuck and script writer Phillip Dunne suggested repeatedly during the script's development, it was about whether she should live as white or Black (and also implicitly, Northern or Southern). The film was also about the audience's choice of how to see *Pinky*. Zanuck tested the racial boundaries of cinema's well-founded ability to create suspension of disbelief with *Pinky*, making her racial identity unclear: is she a "sexy" white woman as the first pages of the initial draft of the screenplay seem to render her? Is she one of Zanuck's paternalistic white liberal protagonists in a thin disguise? Is she Miss Em's heir and daughter in spirit? Or is she a self-determined Black professional woman who has decided resolutely for her people? Was *Pinky* a movie about "the adventures of a girl" or was it "the story of the Negro race"?²⁷ Activating such highly variant readings of the title character was a feat of cinematic creativity, but one that ultimately watered down what the film could show about postwar race relations and Black identity.

Pinky provides different narrative peaks, different readings of characters—and even different messages—to accommodate and entertain spectators with widely various ideological and political positions and cultural and entertainment histories. While cultural studies scholars, including John Fiske and Robert Allen, have importantly noted the propensity of readers to take from texts various readings based on the formation of a resistant popular culture, much less cultural studies work has gone into analysis of the *intended polysemy* that is built into film texts during production. This type of polysemy is very different in character because it is not essentially based in the same localized, consumer-end reading practices but rather on a fabricated vision of these practices produced by the

²⁷ Both quotes are from "Conference on Screenplay of 5-25-1948 with Mssrs. Zanuck, Dudley Nichols-MM," May 26, 1948. Doheny Library. Twentieth Century-Fox collection. University of Southern California. Los Angeles, CA.

industry elite.²⁸ In bringing the story to the screen, Zanuck wanted to appeal to the majority of the American audience who had no explicit interest in race or the race problem and, in doing so, invited white audiences to experience Blackness. On the other hand, he also presented the film in such a way that Black audiences could experience the satisfaction of seeing what Zanuck considered a balanced and sensitive representation of the race and of racial problems; at the heart of this racial experience in *Pinky* are the problems of segregation, lack of social equality, the restriction on Black ownership of land, and the absolute condemnation on interracial romance. Where Zanuck compromised is that neither *Pinky* nor the film seem to have a *memory*.²⁹ In light of her experience in the North, *Pinky* seemed to have forgotten what her life was like under segregation as well as how to connect with other Black people, and the film largely forgets or ignores the past of slavery, the threat of lynching that both the book and historical realities suggest *Pinky* would have faced if her case for lawful inheritance of the land had gone through, and the history of *Pinky*'s own mother that the book and original screenplays included.

The Production Code Administration and Pinky

First, I want to talk about the surprising permissiveness of the PCA, at least concerning *Pinky*'s bold depiction of miscegenation, so we do not confuse Zanuck's self-censorship for PCA censorship. "Social equality"—which had been a concern for the PCA during the 1930s—also emerged as a concern for *Pinky*. The film dealt with Black ownership of Southern property (and thus, racial equality in the eyes of the law), but also depicted an interracial love affair between a Black nurse,

²⁸ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989). See page 43-49 where Fiske defines the popular as resistant to the dominant. See also Robert Allen, "Audience-oriented Criticism" in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism* Robert Allen, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 102-3.

²⁹ This was actually prescribed in one of the story conferences. Zanuck notes "When *Pinky* returns to the south, she is almost like a white girl coming down there for the first time. Whatever she knew of the south as a child she has forgotten." "Conference on First draft Continuity of July 7, 1948, with Mssrs. Zanuck, Nichols," Sept. 20, 1948. Doheny Library. Twentieth Century-Fox collection. University of Southern California. Los Angeles, CA.

Pinky, and a white doctor, Tom. More importantly, the closest relationship in the film, and the film's focal point was the personal and professional bond between Pinky and Ms. Em, the old white Southern woman under her care. In one of the PCA's letters to Zanuck (one similar to their initial letter on *Imitation of Life*), Breen protested against interracial contact in a way that could be construed as restricting this homosocial relationship as well as Pinky's romantic one: "From the standpoint of general good and welfare, we strongly urge that you avoid physical contact between Negroes and whites throughout this picture. This, with the idea of avoiding audience offense in a number of sections of this country."³⁰ But the story made it impossible to avoid the kinds of physical contact that Breen desired to remove. Physical contact between Blacks and Whites occurred between Pinky and her white male love interest and also between Pinky and Ms. Em. In her role as a nurse, Pinky regularly touches, handles, and moves Miss Em. This physical care of her charge—amid their similar, hardnosed view of the world—results in an emotional intimacy between the two women. Medical touch, operationalized not only in Pinky but also in *Home of the Brave* (1949) and *No Way Out*, functioned to professionalize instances of intense, physical interracial contact. The PCA, however, may have been reacting to their fear that intimate social closeness, even when medically motivated in *Pinky*, would still have been considered offensive to many whites and contrary to the American racial status quo.. In spite of their difference in age, race and social standing, the two characters interact as social equals and the film posits their essential similarity. The film also included not one but two scenes where Pinky kisses the white doctor who she plainly and passionately loves—not to mention the fact that Pinky's own light skin would have raised, as it did in the case of *Imitation of Life*, the question of where such light skin came from. What is more, the film dealt directly with segregation

³⁰ Jason Joy, letter to Joseph Breen, Mar. 2, 1949. *Pinky* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

and discrimination. How did the film get away with this depiction of social equality and miscegenation?

Fox submitted story synopses for *Quality* to the PCA on February 25, 1948. When Geoffrey Shurlock and Stephen Jackson reviewed these in February, they flagged *Quality* as possibly offending “industry policy” and set it aside for MPAA head Eric Johnston who did not consider the issue of pressing importance and, as of the end of March, had still not given his official opinion on it.³¹ At that point Jackson, a PCA newcomer who was under pressure from Joy to deliver a decision on the film, called the New York office again for direction on how to proceed. Johnston was away due to a personal issue and was not to be disturbed, but both O’Hara and MPAA’s “resident Southerner” Francis Harmon indicated concern “from the perspective of industry policy.”³² In much the same way as the PCA had with *Imitation of Life* (1934), the MPAA professed profound concern about the Negro angle.

Harmon’s counsel is perhaps the best example of racial industry policy driven by national racial politics. The concern Harmon had for the industry regarded *Pinky*’s apparent alignment with a Civil rights agenda and not with miscegenation per se. Harmon warned Joy repeatedly of the dangers of the film, imagining disastrous scenarios in a series of phone conversations. But unlike the case of *Imitation of Life*, Harmon’s concern with *Pinky* was phrased in essentially political terms. A particular issue for Harmon was the upcoming election and the film’s potential insinuation that the industry was on the side of Truman.³³ Harmon, who relayed to Johnston his message to Joy in February of 1948, well before the November presidential elections, suggested that “the Governors of Southern

³¹ Johnston’s mother was ill. S.S.J., “Memo for the files,” Mar. 31, 1949. *Pinky* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

States...Georgia among others, are strongly opposed to President Truman's Civil rights Program and will probably send special messages to their respective legislatures."³⁴ Second, he suggested the "likelihood or danger...that new political censor boards might be established," either to spite the industry generally or specifically to prevent the film's showing (this would actually happen in Gelling, Texas).³⁵ "These boards would probably require a fee and constitute an [sic] harassment to the industry."³⁶ Harmon also referred "to the possibility of ascendancy to power of Mr. [Governor Eugene] Talmadge [of Georgia], and the coming to the fore of Ku-Klux activity," all as a backlash against the release of the film in this pivotal moment.³⁷ So great was Harmon's concern that he actually asked Jason Joy if, in distributing the film, the company might voluntarily by-pass areas where the film might cause trouble.³⁸ Without Johnston weighing in—and having given the warning of a lifetime—both Harmon and O'Hara ultimately decided not to direct Jackson to prohibit the film on the basis of the New York office's industry policy, but to leave the final decision up to the studio.

The allowance of the film's racial content may have resulted in part from a power struggle in the MPAA leadership. PCA scholars Leonard Leff and Gerold Simmons note that in 1947:

[Eric] Johnston had attempted to ease Breen into retirement, sending Quigley nominee Juvenile Court Judge Stephen S. Jackson, to join the Code Staff as heir apparent. When Breen departed for an extended vacation in Jamaica, Jackson floundered and the studios rebelled, demanding the former Code director's return. Breen came back stronger and louder than ever. After that Johnston avoided Hollywood and treated the Code office as an appendix, an organ he could do without.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ In this case, Theater Exhibitor W.L. Gelling, operator of the Paramount Theater in Marshall Texas, showed the film *Pinky* according to the unchanged distribution arrangements of Eastern Texas theaters, but in defiance of the town's censor board, which had been created to stop the film. See *Gelling v State* 247 S.W. 2d 95 (1952) and *Gelling v Texas* 343 U.S. 960 (1952).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ S.S.J., "Memo for the files," March 31, 1949. *Pinky* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

³⁹ Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons, *Dame in the Kimono* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 169. It was also at roughly this time that Johnston began more active pursuit and support of court cases that challenged state and local

It was *Jackson*, Eric Johnston's appointee, who had begun review of *Pinky* and who was responsible for giving initial approval to the film's miscegenation angle. In spite of Jackson's permissiveness, Joseph Breen was by no means going to allow miscegenation in a film without a fight. It was Breen who wrote Joy requesting that "physical contact between Negroes and whites" be eliminated from the picture. But, curiously, Breen did not discuss this question as a matter of Code but rather of "general good and welfare...with the idea of avoiding offense to audiences in a number of sections of the country."⁴⁰ This suggests that perhaps before the miscegenation clause of the Code was changed in 1954, the PCA had shifted its definitions of what constituted cinematic miscegenation (to include Black/white kissing and a white suitor proposing to a woman known to be Black) under the Code.⁴¹

But neither would Joy, an experienced industry censor who had previously led the MPPDA's staff under the SRC, easily relinquish ground he had already won under Jackson's leadership. Beginning his letter colloquially with "Dear Joe," Joy, emboldened perhaps both by his prior relationship with Breen and by the fact that Breen's letter indicated a change in enforcement of the Code, signaled that the studio was going to go ahead and make a film where there was not only Black/white physical contact but a Black/white love story.:

I think you were not as active as you are now when the book *QUALITY* was presented to the Production Code Administration. I know that my conversations were mostly with Judge [Stephen] Jackson. However we did present the book before we purchased it and, as you know, were urged by Judge Jackson, who, I think, had consulted Eric Johnston's office, to make the picture. At that time there was no suggestion that there should be no physical contact between various characters in the picture...If there is still any doubt in your mind about this, I wish you'd call me

motion picture censorship, as the MPAA's involvement with the Memphis *Curley* case suggests. Eric Johnston by way of MPAA lawyers would also come to the filmmaker's aid in *Pinky* censorship case *Gelling v. Texas*.

⁴⁰ Joseph Breen to Jason Joy, Feb 28, 1949. *Pinky* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

⁴¹ The fact that Breen did not make it a matter of the Code indicates that perhaps, also, the PCA had unofficially changed, at least in some regards, its treatment of miscegenation. More research would be necessary to see if the PCA enforced the miscegenation clause after this point.

and let me discuss it with you further because we sincerely believe that this is the proper way of handling this subject.⁴²

Perhaps to due to Jackson's initial allowance, Breen felt under some pressure to assent to the representation of miscegenation in the film.

Joy also gave a reading of the miscegenation angle that rendered it tragic, perhaps to appease Breen and avoid adhering to his suggested omission of interracial physical contact. Joy wrote,

I note that you suggest that there should be no physical contact between whites and negroes in the picture, but that you do not make it a Code matter...It is our intention, as indicated in the script to have many instances of physical contact between Dr. Chester [who would become Tom Adams in the film] and Pinky. We believe these contacts to be absolutely necessary to the power of the story, as it relates to these two unhappy people. But these contacts will be as tender and restrained as any that we've ever put on screen...Incidentally, you know of course that the actress who will play the part of Pinky will in fact be a white girl.⁴³

This quote is quite typical of Joy: he manages to be placating even while arguing that he will do precisely what he wants. In spite of the fact that the Code would completely prohibit Black/white sexual relations until its wording was changed in 1954, Joy still argued that Fox should be able to show it. In emphasizing the unhappiness of Pinky and Tom, Joy suggests that this interracial contact is doomed and implicitly punished. This hails back to a formula for depicting interracial romance that had been developed earlier, even if it had not been established for use in the depiction of Blacks/white romance, in films such as *Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) and *Madame Butterfly* (1935). Joy also noted that casting would, in any event, dispel the realism of these "interracial" love scenes. His comments suggest also that tenderness, as opposed to sensuality, was a representational strategy

⁴² Jason Joy, letter to Joseph Breen, March 2, 1949. *Pinky* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

⁴³ Ibid. PCA involvement in casting decisions of this sort was not new. For example, Susan Courtney has shown that in the case of *Showboat* (1935), Breen wrote to Universal that it would be fine to cast Paul Robeson as the Negro" with a white woman cast as his wife, but warned, "I think you should be extremely careful, however, not to indicate any physical contact between the white woman and the negro man for the reason that many people know Aunt Jemima is a white woman and might be repulsed by the sight of her being fondled by a man who is negro." Breen to Zehner, 17 Oct 1935. Cited in Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation* (Dissertation, University of California Berkeley, 1997), 170.

designed to lessen offense and produce multiple readings. *Pinky*'s plot does not end in tragedy though, and despite the casting, the interracial kissing scenes contain direct reference to Blackness. Either Zanuck's production team or director Elia Kazan inserted not one but five African American extras into the second scene where Pinky and her Dr. Thomas Adams kiss, one of them apparently the same child who Pinky recognizes as a younger version of herself as she stands at the gate of Miss Em's house.⁴⁴ This sign of Blackness—of Black presence—one only loosely, atmospherically connected to the scene's central action—makes us feel Black milieu in this act of miscegenation. Simultaneously, and with a countervailing tension, the presence of these Black actors makes us see this couple's difference from them. While existing documentation is not clear on why this character occurs in this scene, perhaps Fox planned to overcome the casting of Pinky as white by displacing her absent Blackness onto the Black extras in the scene.⁴⁵ The scene poses the question, "is Pinky a part of this world or not? Is she like these other African Americans or not?" leaving interpretation open to the audience.

⁴⁴ The original script had included a number of children—children that Pinky would serve as a nurse in the South and who the system of segregation had left in desperate need of medical care. But Zanuck wanted the African American children removed because he felt that they gave away the ending. He wrote: "when I eliminated the children it was a drastic but essential elimination due to the fact that it...eliminated all dramatic suspense because you knew from the very beginning that if she had sympathy and compassion for these children, eventually she would stick and serve them." Zanuck to Dunne, Jan 17, 1949. Doheny Library, Phillip Dunne Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

Dunne wrote in response that in eliminating the sick children from the scene of Chester's arrival, Zanuck had eliminated a "mood," into which we brought Chester [AKA John Adams] as a definite dramatic shock. I think we need a substitute here." Dunne, memo to Zanuck, Jan 18, 1949. Doheny Library, Phillip Dunne Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

The African American extras in the final cut of the film may have served as this sort of shock.

⁴⁵ Another potential reason for the inclusion of, at least, the Black child here was that Zanuck had removed angle concerning racial disparities in public health (another pressing social issue of African American life), one that had been threaded throughout the plot. Most importantly he had cut a young black disabled child named Tee-Joe from the script because he felt like they gave away the ending, making it obvious that the right thing to do was for Pinky to stay and help her community and thus lessening the audience's sense of Pinky's choice. The children in the film's final scenes were meant to confirm Pinky's mission. Perhaps in this scene the child also serves to function to highlight her choice between serving Black children and marrying a white man. Darryl Zanuck, memo to Phillip Dunne, Jan 17, 1949. Doheny Library, Phillip Dunne Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

Francis Harmon, a native of Paulding, Mississippi, gave a divided response to *Pinky*, which exemplifies the confused state of industry regulation at this time and the MPAA's overall befuddlement about how to represent race in light of cultural flux and dissonance in the nation's racial politics. On the record and when the film was first submitted, Harmon had responded more like Breen, providing an official perspective that was virulently alarmist. A year later—notably *after* the Truman election—Harmon, like Jackson, privately supported the production of *Pinky* and boldly prescribed bucking white Southern convention.⁴⁶ He even pushed Zanuck to have the film take a more controversial angle on the question of miscegenation: *Pinky* would be the off-spring of Miss Em's brother and thus the old woman's blood-relative and rightful heir. Harmon went as far as to send Zanuck an entire scene he had written in which *Pinky*'s father is revealed to be Ms. Em's brother, citing realism as the precipitating cause for such representation of miscegenation unflattering to whites: "To be true to life in the South, it seems to me that *Pinky* should be shown to be the daughter of one of 'Miss Em's' male relatives."⁴⁷ Harmon further suggested that the goal of such a representation would be to reveal that there is "a conflict in Southern life and thought around" the point that "Southern white people condone or tolerate 'social equality' on the level of vice while shouting to high heaven their opposition to 'social equality' on the level of virtue."⁴⁸ Harmon's scenes—which had Judge Walker ask Dicey questions under oath that revealed miscegenation (but which did not show romantic interracial acts—were meant to condemn the

⁴⁶ Although Harmon was from the South (Paulding, Mississippi), he had spent much time abroad, having served in WWI. He had been General Secretary of the YMCA. He worked for Hollywood studios from 1936 to 1952 and eventually ended up as a deacon of Riverside Community Church in New York (See "Harmon To Hollywood" *Time Magazine* (November 2, 1936) and Francis S. Harmon biography on the website for his papers at the Kautz Family YMCA archives (318 Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota, 222 21st Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455); <http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/html/ymca/yusa0020.phtml>).

⁴⁷ Francis Harmon, "Some comments and suggestions re *Pinky*," March 18, 1949. *Pinky* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

practice, at least “on the level of vice,” as a means to challenge Southern morality.⁴⁹ This move, while unprecedented by PCA standards, also served, as Thomas Cripps has shown, to alter Pinky’s trajectory away from Blackness by making her explicitly part white.⁵⁰

Zanuck backed away from Harmon’s suggestions. He responded to Harmon that he thought that the picture should deal with “tolerances” rather than the “*illicit* miscegenation angle.”⁵¹ Although the book had suggested miscegenation in Pinky’s family history, in Sumner’s original story it had been Pinky’s grandfather that was white, Sumner had been more subtle in her treatment of the issue.⁵² Harmon on the other hand scripted that the truth of miscegenation would be revealed in the public arena of a court. Zanuck stated that he had removed the most troubling references to miscegenation out of deference to African Americans, because “without exception [the Negro representatives we have consulted] have objected to the suggestion of miscegenation even to the slight phrase which is still in the picture in which Granny says, in effect, upon Pinky’s arrival, ‘I hope you haven’t gotten yourself in trouble as your mother did,’ or some such phrase.”⁵³

Zanuck’s hyperbolic statement about the Black reception of interracial love, however, conflicts with the evidence in the NAACP files. The files reveal that neither White nor any of the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Cripps notes that the illicit miscegenation angle was designed to soften the film’s “bold angle by giving Pinky a white relative.” Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, 355, endnote 57.

⁵¹ Darryl Zanuck, letter to Francis Harmon (cc: Joe Breen), March 30, 1949. *Pinky* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. Zanuck may have been responding to a note from Jane White which critiqued this part of the plot. In the January draft of the script, Granny says to Pinky: “Is you—is you—in trouble, honey? You’re your mother came home to me? Is you?” Jane White remarked: “Granny’s concern and anxiety over Pinky’s well-being is credible but I think the implication of pregnancy is unnecessary to the development of the story. I feel we should avoid what amounts to another stereotyped concept that all young Negro women ‘get into trouble.’ (Jane White, “Suggested changes and additions to Jan 12 1949 screenplay of *Pinky*,” Jan 28, 1949). Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

five NAACP reviewers of the July 7 script and the novel raised complaints about racial intermixing.⁵⁴

Actually, the MPAA, or at least staff member Harmon, took this opportunity to *push* for the depiction of miscegenation in defiance of the Production Code and of Southern conventions. In the interest of screen realism, the organization's response to *Pinky* shows an interesting, if momentary, shift in their policy. Their lack of enforcement of the code provision against on screen depictions of miscegenation provides further evidence of Zanuck's clear conservatism in approaching *Pinky* and African American representation.

The PCA's early conservative warnings may well have effected Zanuck's racial politics, though not regarding the miscegenation angle. In July 1948 and before the Truman election but after the MPAA's haranguing in March, Zanuck decided to drop the film's most political Black character, Arch Naughton, a character with clearly leftist—perhaps even Socialist leanings, and with him, most of its references to civil rights.⁵⁵ When it came to the question of miscegenation, as we shall see, although much of it remained in the plot, only certain scenarios were acceptable to Zanuck. Rather than showing *Pinky* (or her mother) as the product of miscegenation or, as Harmon suggested, showing miscegenation in a way that would condemn white Southerners for raping Black women, Zanuck restricted “social equality” to *Pinky*'s interaction with Miss Em and Tom and depicted miscegenation by choice instead of by force between two “white-skinned” Northerners (*Pinky* and Dr. Adams), thus displacing it from the South and removing its stain on Southern history. Outside of the issue of miscegenation, Zanuck's “editing” of the script removed many of its

⁵⁴ See Annette Peyser, “Danger—Propaganda!,” Memo to Walter White, undated, Jane White, Memo for the files, 1948. Poppy Cannon, letter to Walter White, undated. Roy Wilkins, memo to Walter White, Aug 5, 1948. Edna B. Kerin [noted only as EBK], memo to Walter White, undated. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁵ Campbell notes that *Grapes of Wrath* had to be toned down because of the overly Leftist political commentary in the source material. Campbell, “Ideology of the Social Consciousness Movie,” 634.

more socially progressive elements, leaving latent and undefined its commentary on segregation and the history of slavery, and muting the voices of African American male characters.

Doctoring the Story of a Nurse: Pinky's Story Conferences, Unofficial Industrial Censorship and the Disappearance of African American Vitality

Even though the PCA had removed the miscegenation restriction for *Pinky*, Zanuck did not take advantage of the opening to create a new path for Hollywood African American representation. If *Pinky* is restrained, it is unlikely that it was due primarily to PCA intervention; much of the restraint appears to have come from Zanuck himself. The story file is replete with evidence of Zanuck's doubts as well as his own efforts to limit the film's more progressive racial articulation.⁵⁶ Zanuck's conservatism may have been overdetermined by his choice of source material. While Walter White did not say outright that *Quality* was pulp fiction (which it was), he did complain to Zanuck that it contained outdated, outmoded representations of both Black and white Southerners. He was disappointed and that Zanuck's flagship racial problem film was not based on a more substantial piece of literature. Specifically, White wrote to Zanuck, "I honestly believe that there are several contemporary novels, plays and stories which would make much more accurate, dramatic, non-propaganda, and timely films than 'Quality.'"⁵⁷ According to White, the book, whose most central white Southern character was Miss Em, did not capture the emergent *liberal* white Southern thinking of the late 1940s. Although Sumner rendered her novel from the point of a Black woman—one whom the novelist clearly respected—the author also gave shaping and dominant authority to white plantation owner and gradualist, Ms. Em, who operates as a strikingly conservative voice of reason in

⁵⁶ Custen suggests that Zanuck was Dunne's "conservative devil's advocate" on the film, but there is little question that the film was taking more conservative directions as it came to fruition because of Zanuck's interjections. Custen, *Twentieth Century's Fox*, 300.

⁵⁷ Walter White, letter to Darryl Zanuck, Sept 5, 1948. Papers of the NAACP. Library of Congress Manuscript Reading Room. Washington D.C.

Pinky's tumultuous search for self and meaning. No young, racially progressive new Southern figures emerge. In addition, the book was primarily dialogue-driven with a paucity of descriptions. Nevertheless and in keeping with his view of entertainment value, Zanuck was adamant that the story not be turned into a "message" film but rather one that dealt with individual characters. Zanuck, likely perceiving the need to more fully divorce himself from the rigid and motivationally impaired Black stereotypes typical of Hollywood, focused on the film's characterization as ones that would have depth and power.⁵⁸ But this focus, in many instances, resulted in the removal of evidences and allusions to the broader *institutional* problems of racism that plagued America, and focused more exclusively on the psychological and personal struggles of Pinky. If the resolving Pinky's choice was the drama's quest, not solving America's racial problems, then the audience would not be as "mixed up" and could avoid the phenomenon of "not knowing what [or whom] to root for." Rather than rooting for the end of segregation, they could root for Pinky.⁵⁹ Zanuck exhibiting frustrations with Nichols, the screenwriter, told him that he planned to write on the cover of the second draft of the screenplay:

"THIS IS NOT A STORY ABOUT HOW TO SOLVE THE NEGRO PROBLEM IN THE SOUTH OR ANYWHERE ELSE. THIS IS NOT A STORY PARTICULARLY ABOUT RACE PROBLEMS, SEGREGATION OR DISCRIMINATION. THIS IS THE STORY ABOUT ONE PARTICULAR NEGRO GIRL WHO COULD EASILY PASS AS A WHITE AND WHO DID PASS FOR A WHILE. THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW AND WHY SHE, AS AN INDIVIDUAL FINALLY DECIDED TO BE HERSELF, A NEGRESS."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ See Conference with Mr. Zanuck on Screenplay of May 25, 1948, See also "Conference on First draft of Continuity," September 20, 1948 and Conference on Phillip Dunne's notes of November 30, 1948, all in Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA. All of these notes deal centrally with questions of characterization of Pinky, Arch and Jake, the film's most forward looking Black characters. Jake is forward looking in the novel, but not the film?

⁵⁹ Darryl Zanuck, letter to Dudley Nichols, November 1, 1948. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

⁶⁰ Ibid. (original capitalization and emphasis).

The differences between the script written by Dudley Nichols and the subsequent draft by Phillip Dunne demonstrate this transformation of the story and its characters to match Zanuck's vision. Indeed Dunne won Zanuck over in large part because he wanted to put "the conflict out of the arena of the town and the trial and [put] it into the arena of Pinkey's [sic] mind and heart."⁶¹ Zanuck awarded Dunne the project on the basis of his pitch, which was that his script would make this "[Pinky's] picture from beginning to end, her problem and her solution."⁶² Dunne's changes were relatively drastic in shifting the meanings of the original script. Zanuck was adamant that he wanted the story to focus not on the horrors of a certain place or institution but on the specific, personal and unique "adventures" of an individual Black woman. Nichols could not do it to Zanuck's satisfaction and Zanuck fired him.

The African American context and references to Black historical experience present in the novel were edited out of the film in the process of script doctoring and story conferencing. Although in many ways Sumner was more racially conservative than Zanuck, in others, her novel provided more markers of African American culture and history than Zanuck's finished film. As we read in the serial, the novel, and the first draft of the screenplay, Pinky's mother, who goes unmentioned in the film, had conceived Pinky out of wedlock during her time in the North. The novel's plot also deals with the Great Migration, a theme almost entirely missing from the film's final version. In the book (but also in the serial and screenplay), Pinky asks her grandmother:

"Who was my father?...At last [Granny] answered... "That something don't nobody know and won't nobody ever know. Your ma come home sick and nigh onto her time. She brung you into the world, a squally, pinky little mite...never a word about what-all happen when she was off and away." 'Away? Where had she been?'..."It

⁶¹ Ibid. Dunne's other major contribution during his pitch was to suggest that the romantic storyline between Pinky and Dr. Adams be extended.

⁶² Phillip Dunne, Memo to Darryl F. Zanuck, Oct 25, 1948. Doheny Library, Phillip Dunne Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

were Chicago, that much I know. Right after the other war, the one they call World War I. Lots of folks went north then. They went by the carload. Deetroit—that's where my sonny boy went—and Chicago and New York.”⁶³

This migrating mother is a key to understanding Pinky's character. The migration connects Pinky, who moves to the North, falls in love with a white man and then moves back South, as similar to her Black mother whose narrative may have followed a quite similar trajectory. This narrative revelation of Pinky's mother's part and path in the Great Migration also would have served to situate these African American characters in an historical context shared by many African American viewers, had it been included in the film. For Pinky, knowledge of her mother is key to understanding her own destiny. Sumner wrote of Pinky: “Her mother seemed nearer to her right now than this old woman [her grandmother, Aunt Dicey] who belonged to a yet more distant day.”⁶⁴ The fact that Pinky's mother was unmarried and bore a light-skinned child also suggests the possibility of a doubly shameful and silenced conception in that it could signify that her mother was raped by a white man, an act of forcible miscegenation that Pinky herself will nearly suffer in the film.

Quality and Hubler's original screenplay based on the book, also mentioned slavery, rendering it a foundation for the story. Not only does Pinky ask her grandmother what life was like during slavery, but when Pinky and Arch Naughton, a key Black character removed from the final screenplay, first come to Ms. Em's “big” house, Arch says: “What a tomb! Can you imagine what used to go on here in slavery days?”⁶⁵ His line serves to further complicate the identity and meaning of the physical space of the Plantation house, which has a particularly important part to play in Pinky's drama. It also may point to the unspeakable indignities imposed on African Americans in

⁶³ Cid Ricketts Sumner, *Quality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 28-9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁵ Pinky screenplay, (Property #2391), June 24, 1948, 100. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA

this and other plantation houses, including forced miscegenation.⁶⁶ Rooting the plot of *Pinky* in of both slavery and the Great Migration (and *Pinky*'s imagination about these) rendered these two historical realities important parts of the woman's story in *Pinky*'s search for herself and her attempt to understand her roots.

All of this material was cut from the later versions of the script by Zanuck's team. The narrative was shifted from its original emphasis on Black history that connected the narrative to the reality of Black oppression in the U.S. to the story of one individual. In altering the film, Zanuck removed channels for Black identification and Black spectatorship—changing the material to allow audiences to identify (and identify with) white Southern patriarchy (through Miss Em) as *Pinky*'s maternal influence rather than historically-contextualized African American womanhood which *Pinky*'s mother would have facilitated. Rather than linking *Pinky*'s contemporary indignities to the history of Black oppression, Zanuck and Dunne crafted a script where not time, place, or history was clearly defined—only region—and which could therefore accentuate the surprise and shock of indignities of Southern treatment of Blacks.

As I noted earlier, African American newspaper man, New Yorker, and Civil rights activist Arch Naughton, an important character in the novel, serial and first draft of the script, was also eventually entirely deleted from the story.⁶⁷ Naughton's character added a revolutionary edge and political intensity absent from the film and arguably from any prior African American representation on the Hollywood screen. In the script, Arch is described as a "rather handsome young Negro with

⁶⁶ There is a line that refers to slavery in the film: when she first returns to her grandmother's hut, *Pinky* says to Dicey, of Ms. Em's house, that it was "slave built, slave run, and run down ever since." This line, however, lacks the imaginative implications of Arch's mention of slavery I mention here in the text.

⁶⁷ Thomas Cripps has already discussed Arch's character but his discussion is not intended to draw out the nuances of Arch's character nor does it discuss this depiction in terms of Black masculine representation. In addition, by describing the scenes rather than providing dialogue, we get only a dim sense of their provocative nature. Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, 2324. The novel renders it clear that Arch is from New York. See Sumner, *Quality*, 186.

alert, intelligent, arrogant eyes, wearing a Black beret which gives him an alien look. There is more of command than invitation in his tone, however polite.”⁶⁸ With his extensive knowledge of Black civil rights and white behaviors, he offers Pinky wisdom on issues like voting rights and integration. He does all this in a tone that registered an unwillingness to bargain with whites. Portrayed strongly with both rage and bitterness at white people, Naughton could have been Hollywood’s first blaxploitation hero. In a style that we might liken to the characterization of Furious Styles in *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), Naughton educates Pinky, and by extension the viewer, as to the racial realities of the day.

They say ‘Go slow, go slow. Got to think about the white folks. Can’t do that. White folks wouldn’t stand for it.’ (eyes burning). Where has all that got us in the last eighty years? Nowhere! We’re going to take our stand now and fight it out. We’ve got all the principles of freedom and equality that we fought for in the last war back of us. We’re bound to win!

Pinky: You really believe that?

Arch: If I didn’t I’d shoot myself. Oh, I’m not working alone—we’ve got organization now, big organization! We’re going to get equality!⁶⁹

A profoundly political and genuinely discerning sense of the Black need for change, and even a nascent understanding of Black militancy can be seen here, even if the dialogue is perhaps, falsely, too bold. The script even features a conversation between Miss Em and Arch in which Arch takes an impassioned stand for civil rights, calling segregation “nothing more than an imposed system of degradation.”⁷⁰ Responding to Ms. Em’s insistence that “in two generations,” Black people could be free through gradualism, Arch says “that, Miss Em, is exactly what good people have been telling us since the days of Lincoln. The rights you talk about are guaranteed to everyone under the Constitution,” and “men have died before for this freedom and I would rather die than submit to

⁶⁸ *Pinky* screenplay, October 12, 1948, 57. NAACP Papers. Library of Congress Manuscript Reading Room, Washington D.C.

⁶⁹ *Pinky* screenplay, June 24, 1948, 63. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA

⁷⁰ *Pinky* screenplay, June 24, 1948, 105-106. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA

this humiliation.”⁷¹ Arch Naughton was a character with possibilities: he introduced not only Black realism to the studio screen but also a contemporary, strong Black male who was an intellectual and an activist.

Perhaps more revolutionary than this political portrayal of Arch, is the portrayal of the relationship between Pinky and Arch in the third draft of the script. It is clear that Pinky is *drawn* to Arch, that her destiny is entwined with the purposes of which he speaks and that she considers him a viable romantic suitor. The two spend an inordinate amount of time together. Most of all, the script shows that Arch has a knowledge of Pinky, an almost authorial relationship with her—he predicts her moods, her reasoning and tells her what she will do. Arch knows, without Pinky telling him, that she has fallen in love with a white man up North. Arch states: “You got scared of passing. Well, forget it. It was a stupid thing to begin with...Listen I’ll bet you anything the man you’re such a fool about is young, good-looking, just staring out in the world, not dry behind the ears—and absolutely blind to the hell you are going through.”⁷² This shows us that the two are connected and encourages us to want them to be together. Romantic tension between Arch and Pinky is obvious in the plotting of the script itself. Arch actually asks Pinky to leave town with him, a twist which suggests a future marriage. Arch represented, at his best moments, the progressive trajectory of the race and Pinky’s own future trajectory. This may have perhaps produced a conundrum for producers who may already have been thinking about the racial politics of casting: how could a white actress play alongside this dark figure in ways that did not suggest miscegenation?⁷³ Although the book describes

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid. 64.

⁷³ Additional evidence of his racial conservatism is that Zanuck repeatedly cast white actors to play non-white characters—Marlon Brando played Zapata in *Viva Zapata*, Jeanne Crain plays Pinky. He also, however, cast Black actors in non-black roles (Juanita Hall in *South Pacific* and Frank Silvera in *Viva Zapata*).

him as light-skinned, somehow it would not have worked for Arch, too, to have been played by a white man.

While Naughton initiates Pinky into the civil rights struggles that will come to define her life's mission, as the NAACP's staff noted, he was essentially flawed. He abuses his role as a reporter to serve what the film defines as dubious purposes (both his own aggrandizement and to get publicity for his cause. As a result, he nearly gets Pinky (and himself) lynched. This was true both in the book and in the early script drafts.⁷⁴ In a dramatic scene at the end of early drafts of the script, Naughton, predicting that Pinky will lose the trial, (ab)uses his role as a reporter for the Black press to prematurely blasts lying headlines, which according to the narrative, designed to stir up sectional divides and race hatred. These headlines condemn the Southern town for its race bias. In the courtroom, as he sits in support of Pinky, he inadvertently allows one of these newspapers to fall from his pocket, showing his carelessness. The paper is picked up by one of the many hostile whites who line the courtroom and passed around, producing snarls and angry murmurs arise against Pinky. When Arch discovers what has happened, he flees the courtroom in a cowardly act that leaves Pinky alone to face the white ire and maybe even a lynching party.⁷⁵

While the original script centered upon Pinky, it represented her various desires extrinsically through the characters of Arch Naughton and Miss Em. These two characters and not Pinky represented the poles upon which this talkative narrative hung. In the final film, the focus is, ironically, placed on the relationship between Pinky and whites: the white doctor who loves her and Miss Em her white benefactor. No significant challenge to the doctor's love interest or Ms. Em's

⁷⁴ This was true in both the book and many of the early script drafts. See for example, Sumner, *Quality*, 201-202. Pinky screenplay, (Property #2391), July 7, 1948, 158. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

⁷⁵ *Pinky* screenplay, July 7, 1948, 157-165.

support arises from the Black community in general or in a character like Arch. This decision most likely stems from the fact that Pinky was being played by a white woman. Any suggestion of miscegenation in the narrative may have appeared far less important and threatening to the audience and studios than miscegenation in casting, which was more tangibly “real.”

Faced with this dilemma, Zanuck opted towards omission. Zanuck and his team opted to “eliminate the character of Arch Naughton from the story and change the character of Pinky to incorporate therein some of Arch’s theories.”⁷⁶ The “militancy” in the film that Pinky inherits from the absent Arch Naughton character comes off as a cold and uppity distance. These qualities separate her from both Blacks and whites and perhaps also from audiences.⁷⁷ In the one scene where Pinky actually does critique white people, it is their view of *her*, not their treatment of African Americans that she critiques. Not her racism, but rather Ms. Em’s questioning of Pinky’s passing (and her insistence that Pinky have the raceless purity of being “addicted to the truth” about her identity) causes to Pinky explode at Ms. Em, saying:

What am I then? You tell me. You’re the ones who set the standards, you whites! You’re the ones who judge people by the color of their skins. By your own standards, the only one’s that matter to you, I am as white as you are. That’s why you all hate me. What shall I do? Dye my face? Grovel and shuffle? Say “yassum” and “no-um?” Marry some man like Jake Waters? Carry a razor in my stocking so I won’t upset you?⁷⁸

Although played by Crain with a flintiness and anger that borders on militancy, Pinky, like Peola in *Imitation of Life*, is more bitter (and self-hating) than militant. The timing of this speech, which is in the final film, and its containment to the private quarters of Miss Em (in place of its being projected

⁷⁶ “Conference on First Draft Continuity,” September 20, 1948. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

⁷⁷ The July draft of the script refers to Pinky’s “white nurse manner,” *Pinky* screenplay, July 7, 1948, 65. In another sequence “Chester,” who would become Adams, suggests that Pinky is a man-hater. *Pinky* screenplay, July 7, 1948, 53. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

⁷⁸ This is from the film itself. *Pinky* (1949).

into the public space of the courtroom or the store where Pinky is discriminated against) limits its militant power. Pinky's statements do more to contrast her with other Blacks (particularly Rozelia—who carries a razor in her stocking—and Jake) than to link her political concerns with theirs. Pinky complains about stereotypes here but the stereotypes that she describes are those the film itself employs, a fact which does damage to the film's own racial logic. Thus, nowhere in the film does Pinky's militancy or anger seem to foster or spring from any bond she has with African Americans. With the exception of mammy-like Granny, there is a marked absence of connection between Pinky and any African American, male or female, in her age group. Without Arch, the film lacks its militant spark and the only hope of a Black community we ever see in the film. There is no Black professional class with which Pinky can connect as equal. Even in the film's final scenes, we see little evidence that she has overcome her sense of superiority over those of a different class.

Zanuck's story conference notes also indicate that some of Arch's ideas would be grafted onto Jake, the literate but calculating African American man who facilitates the communication between Pinky and her illiterate Grandmother while Pinky is up North. Jake by no means fills in for Arch, though.



Figure 41 Courier-Journal Jan 29, 1949

Although some of the press publicity photos do seem to suggest Jake's attraction to Pinky, this implication is unsupported by the film's narrative and overall logic and what we sense most strongly is Pinky's disdain, even disgust with Jake. Jake is not a mulatto but rather a brownskinned Black man. Zanuck's script team decided that "Jake's feelings and attitude and dialogue should be patterned after that of Arch Naughton, tailored of course to fit Jake's mentality."⁷⁹ But they had already outlined Jake's "mentality" as woefully deficient: "He has read a good deal about the Negro problem but much of what he reads he either does not understand or he misinterprets. Nevertheless, he quotes from these books without having any real notion of what it is all about. They are just nice sounding words to him and he repeats them parrot-like."⁸⁰ This perverse reduction of the intellectual Black male character, Arch and his morphing into the criminal and unintelligent Jake and the white-like female character, Pinky, is a drastic change in the script. Although the character of Jake would end up being played by saavy New Yorker Fredrick O'Neal, who was responsible for much of the success of the play "Anna Lucasta," which features urbane African American life, all of Pinky's attraction to a Northern Black identity is lost here. In addition, Jake's savviness has limited applications. In the early screenplay drafts, we can sense Jake's evident excitement at the idea of freedom. At their meeting, Jake says to Pinky:

I'll tell you what's coming to us and what all we're going to get....We is going to get our share of jobs. We is going to get our share of relief when relief time come. We is going to get a new deal with po-lice and judges what we had a say in electing. WE is going to ride the cars for free...free moving, Ms. Pinky! No more Jim Crowing. Nor in the movies. Nor in the Schools. Nor in the eating places.

⁷⁹ "Conference on Phillip Dunne's notes of November 30, 1948," Nov 30, 1948. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

⁸⁰ "Conference on First Draft Continuity , September 20, 1948.

Nor nowhere. No more bowing and scraping and going in the back door. No more being looked down on and set apart.⁸¹

In the film, by contrast, Jake is shrewd rather than excited, and he applies his savviness only to understanding Pinky's love entanglements: the idea of freedom and the trajectory of the race is eliminated from his character. This was also a planned shift in the script. In a story conference the Zanuck-led writing team decided: "When [Jake] and Pinky first meet, he should not say: 'Is you satisfied, etc.' Nor should he elaborate on what the Negroes will get when they get their rights. He should quickly and shrewdly guess that the reason Pinky has returned home is because she got into an emotional jam with a white man up north."⁸² Zanuck amended Jake's character, at least in part because Michael Abel, one of the script's readers and another producer at Fox, did not:

quite understand the delineation of Jake's character. Apparently he is supposed to be a shifty, dishonest, low-class Negro, a sort of agitator. Yet his aims are those of intelligent democratic liberalism; of social security and socialized medicine...I recommend changing Jake's ideology to make him more of a rabble rouser, aiming at Negro control of the government, overthrow of existing authority and a life of indolence.⁸³

Seemingly affected by the binary racial opposition between the rank-and-file and the intelligent Negroes, Abel could not imagine that Jake could be both lower class and intelligent.

The only African American character who seems to have been left pretty much unchanged from the script to the screen was Aunt Dicey. Her close emotional contact with Pinky was perhaps justified by her evocation of the signs of Mammyism and the felt differences—in diction, costume, and skin tone—between these two "Black" women. These differences function to highlight the importance of studio's casting choices. In the final film, much of Ms. Em's retrograde racial

⁸¹ First draft Screenplay of May 25, 1948, 48.

Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA

⁸² "Conference on Phillip Dunne's notes of 11/30/48," November 30, 1948. Doheny Library, Phillip Dunne Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

⁸³ Michael Abel to Darryl Zanuck, Memo, Oct 15, 1948, 4. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA

gradualism is injected into Dicey, who tells Pinky, “I have learned that when there is something a white person doesn’t want you to have, you are better off trying not to have it.” Granny has learned accommodation and hopelessness as the lessons of racial oppression rather than anger and militancy (or anything in between).

In a virtually unprecedented move, Zanuck gave a draft of the script of *Pinky* to Walter White. Although the studio had always had pleasant relations with White, the consultation with White regarding *Pinky* was in some ways an experiment. White had previously reviewed a script of “They call him Cooperation,” which dealt with Black insurance agent Charles Spaulding, but that was only a short film, one with limited circulation. In the case of *Pinky*, the NAACP was given access to the script of what was to be a big-budget feature-film production. White disliked the July 7th 1948 script draft he read and felt let down by it: both the promise of Zanuck’s enthusiastic involvement in the project and the studio’s forthright but nuanced treatment of prejudice in *Gentleman’s Agreement* prompted White to expect more.⁸⁴

Specifically, White disliked the *Pinky* script for its lambasting of civil rights organizations and their use of publicity. It also collapsed the Black newspaper and the Black civil rights organization, two autonomous Black institutions, into one character with a single shallow viewpoint.⁸⁵ Rather than commit to changing these representations to present a more affirming portrait of civil rights, an angry Zanuck distanced himself from White and called the NAACP a “militant propagandist organization.”⁸⁶ He cited, among other things, his “responsibility to the stockholders” as reasons why

⁸⁴ Walter White, letter to Darryl Zanuck, Sept 5, 1948. Papers of the NAACP. Library of Congress Manuscript Reading Room, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Presciently detailing the very problems racially forthright political films would face, Zanuck suggested that “a motion picture embodying [a militant propagandistic] attitude, would not only never be made in Hollywood but, if by some miracle it were made, it would never get distribution and would be such a failure and cause so much trouble that it would set back for years the possibility of making significant films.” Zanuck, letter to Walter White, Sept. 21, 1948. Papers of

he could not make the film *White* and his film staff envisioned.⁸⁷ Zanuck's ten-page letter to White revealed much of Zanuck's own philosophy on racial filmmaking as well as the institutionalized limitations on bringing Hollywood's depiction of African Americans into era of heightened racial consciousness. Thus it marked the end of Fox's easy relationship with the NAACP, one which was ironically, but not coincidentally, timed with the emergence of the civil rights movement and the tapering off of wartime liberalism.⁸⁸ Zanuck asserted his continued and seemingly genuine aversion to "intolerance and racial prejudice."⁸⁹ But when it came to the changes the NAACP was suggesting (and perhaps also to White's more democratic, multiperspective strategy of addressing race), Zanuck began to invoke his "responsibilities," as well as his credentials as a liberal who has acted on his beliefs in the sphere of sometimes hostile public opinion:⁹⁰

I have stuck my neck out time and again, the most recent instances being, as you know, *Wilson* and *Gentleman's Agreement*. I have never hesitated to fight pressure groups or any individuals when I believed they were wrong, and nothing can dissuade me from making a motion picture which I believe should be made. Yet I come to the decision to make an important motion picture only after a careful balancing of my enthusiasm with my responsibilities—my responsibilities to the stockholders, to the public and to the truth as I see it, to the necessity of success and to many other things.⁹¹

In this "critical time," Zanuck continued, almost any film which was not an escape film is "called a propaganda film by people who, though not admirable, exert great influence and power."⁹² Non-escapist films thus required, according to Zanuck, "intelligent courage" in order to circumvent pressure and criticism and avoid public failure. Zanuck also inadvertently revealed his intended

the NAACP. Library of Congress. Manuscript Reading Room, Washington, D.C. This he said to critique *White*, not the industry.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 2. Zanuck reveals in the letter that he saw racial prejudice as rooted in "emotions not in the intellect, so it is the heart of our white majority that must be awakened to bring about change and amelioration."

⁸⁹ Ibid, 1.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, 2.

audience: “All it [Pinky] can hope to do, at its boldest, is to make the white majority experience emotionally the injustice and daily hurts suffered by colored people.”⁹³ Zanuck thus used the cinema to explore African American victimology, not activism. It was quite limited (indeed White scrawled “pity” next to this sentence on his copy of the letter), but it nevertheless embodies Zanuck’s overall approach to *Pinky*.⁹⁴ Although the character Arch had not been the center of the NAACP’s letters critiquing the film script, Zanuck structured Arch as “the problem” in his letter to the NAACP. Zanuck stated that, perhaps, in constructing Arch for the screen, the studio had possibly not “gotten far enough away from the novel itself.”⁹⁵ It seems Zanuck intuited that the NAACP was critiquing Arch and this is why Zanuck opted to omit the character.⁹⁶

Although the weight of the NAACP criticism had nothing to do with Arch, the omission of his character was the major shift that resulted from the conference. After the disagreement with the NAACP, Fox’s Joy and Dunne had suggested to officially consult Jane White, Walter White’s actress daughter, as “valuable insurance” in January 1949.⁹⁷ Story conferences reveal that many of her suggestions were heeded by the studio.⁹⁸ One important one was not, however. Jane White suggested quite early on in her revisions that “since the character of Arch Naughton has been deleted” there would be a “definite need for a dark-skinned Southern Negro to manifest the

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Walter White, letter to Darryl F. Zanuck, Sept 21, 1948, 2. Papers of the NAACP. Library of Congress Manuscript Reading Room, Washington D.C.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁹⁶ Indeed, some of the NAACP critique does point to NAACP problems with the character of Arch, but nowhere does the NAACP suggest that the character should be entirely removed. Some NAACP script reviewers even saw promise in Arch. Annette Peyser, who was on the legal staff of the NAACP, stated “Arch Naughton the journalist is intelligent and articulate in his statement of conditions and in his suggestion for action. He minces no words...but the author emasculates him by labeling him a publicity seeker and sensation monger.” Annette Peyser, Memo: “Danger Propaganda,” undated. Papers of the NAACP. Library of Congress Manuscript Reading Room, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁷ Jane White had starred in Lillian Hellman’s lynching stage play “Strange Fruit.” The play received very mixed reviews but Miss White was seen as a highlight. J. E. E. Saunders “Jane White Hailed in Quebec Premier of ‘Strange Fruit’” November 3, 1945, 1. See Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, 234.

⁹⁸ Phillip Dunne, memo to Zanuck, Jan 18, 1949. Doheny Library, Phillip Dunne Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

forthright militance that Arch possessed (without Arch's pomposity and arrogance)."⁹⁹ Although the character of Frank Canady (played by former footballer Kenny Washington) is present in the final film, he is married, entirely marginal to the plot. A married man, he assumes an extremely formal manner with Pinky. He fails to create romantic tension with her and has a solemn, forlorn, and preacherly way of discussing both his race and his mission to his people. Civil rights (and the issue of public health of African Americans) had been erased by Zanuck's interventions, from the film.

Even in spite of these warnings, Zanuck's deletions and shifts to the script were not entirely racially bashful. Indeed, in an early story conference with Nichols, Zanuck suggested the inclusion of a lynching scenario in which Pinky, on her way home from Ms. Em's, passes a young (18 year old) frightened African American boy on the road only to later be pulled out of bed by members of a lynch mob who claim that she is hiding this boy.¹⁰⁰

Zanuck also made tangible for audiences the lack of social restrictions that the twin forces of segregation and discrimination wrought without ever calling these forces by name. It is at moments where Pinky attempts the greatest symbolic and physical mobility that she experiences segregation's indignity and, adding quite literally injury to insult, is manhandled in ways not befitting a lady. When she goes to get the money she is rightfully owed from Jake, she is wrongfully arrested and thrown roughly into a police car. When she goes out for a walk to clear her head, she is (nearly) raped by two white men—a scene that suggests it is not safe for a Black woman to be out at night because of white men. Later in the film, when she is in town to buy a mourning veil for Miss Em's funeral, a local shopkeeper discriminates against her; when he finds out Pinky is not white, he charges her twice

⁹⁹ Zanuck attempted to objectively read Jane White's comments, seeing Jane White as the middle ground between her father and Dunne and himself. Jane White, "Suggested Changes and Additions to January 12, 1949 Screenplay of *Pinky*," Jan 28, 1949, 1. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁰⁰ "Conference on first draft of continuity of July 7, 1948," Sept 20, 1948, 2. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

as much. This scene was not in the original screenplay, but notes from the first story conference state that it was Zanuck who brought it back in from the book. It is this series of dramatic revelations, the production team made sure, that highlight the variability between Pinky's treatment before and after whites discover her Blackness.¹⁰¹

Perhaps the most powerful progressive elements of the film are captured in its small, subtle moments—its character and narrative detail. Judge Walker, for example, is a triumph of truth for the film: although he defends Pinky, both he and Doctor Joe fail to fully support her. Doctor Joe tells Pinky that she probably won't get the land without condemning this Southern practice of denying Black rights. Likewise, after the trial Judge Walker says "you got the land and you got justice but I doubt any other interests of this community have been served." Walker's statement, one which defines "this community" in white terms, works to reassert Southern segregation and to provide a southern viewing position for the film. While as Ella Shohat has noted, Hollywood films often made legal forces the center of morality, in *Pinky*, although the court decision redeems Southern systems of justice in one way, the last word is had by Judge Walker who equivocates about the meaning of the victory.¹⁰² The film also retained its New Southern ending—Pinky gets the land, showing that justice can prevail for a Black woman, even in the South. But the ending also serves to make the connection between land ownership and freedom. Even if Zanuck made this choice for the wrong reasons, this ending also serves both to suggest that heterosexual coupling is not the solution to all narrative

¹⁰¹ The progressive depictions of Pinky were motivated, in part, it seems, by reference to an international audience, one made increasingly important by the Cold War. Dunne noted that Cuban and Brazilian audiences would consider Pinky white "because their standard for mixed bloods is the reverse of ours." Dunne considered that even in England our convention is not clearly understood, as witnesses the puzzled reaction of the British to our segregation of colored troops during the war...in some parts of the world [our calling Pinky black] will cause us to be criticized, even laughed at." Phillip Dunne, memo to Darryl Zanuck, Feb 2, 1949. Doheny Library, Phillip Dunne Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA

¹⁰² "Ethnicities-in-Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema," in *Unspeakable Images*, ed. Lester Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 226.

problems *and* the acceptability of Black *female* land ownership. As producer Michael Abel, one of Zanuck's consultants on *Pinky*, noted days after Zanuck suggested bringing in a Black male love interest for *Pinky*, "we can reach no conventional solution. There can be no audience satisfaction in usual sense. I am convinced that anything we try to do along these lines will cheapen our picture and destroy its effectiveness. Our only hope is to create a greater satisfaction in the resolution of *Pinky's* character."¹⁰³ Zanuck, too, suggested that the lack of romantic closure actually worked to push the film to the realm of the "esthetic and philosophical," counting it among the film's virtues.¹⁰⁴

The film did seem to accomplish what for Hollywood, had been the impossible. It represented with relative accuracy and urgency a pressing and contemporary social problem for African Americans: the denial of the African American right to own property. Indeed, the motivating force of the second half of the film is not the question of *Pinky's* colorless Blackness but her African American struggle for legal rights and equality under the law, a struggle that would be waged, as it was in *Pinky*, in the nation's (and the South's) courtrooms for the next decade and a half in cases like *Brown v. Board of Education*. Only a year earlier, the 1948 Supreme Court case *Shelley v. Kramer* banned restrictive covenants—a problem not confined to the South. This case had announced the shifting regulatory standards of the nation with regards to that very issue of racial justice—land ownership—that *Pinky* implicitly raised. In addition to these legal questions, the story also hovered,

¹⁰³ Phillip Dunne, letter to Darryl Zanuck, Nov 19, 1948. Doheny Library, Phillip Dunne Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁰⁴ Zanuck, letter to Charles Einfeld of the New York office, Feb 10, 1949. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA. Zanuck noted: "She finds more than love; she finds a place for herself in the world where she can walk with dignity. Now I know that this can sound very esthetic and philosophical but I believe that we can pull it off so that the last scene will make an audience rise up out of their seats when they realize the she has found the answer and that the answer has brought her something she could never have in trying to pretend to be something she is not." This letter points to the experimental nature of the drama and also its open-endedness.

resonantly, around the question of Black self-determination, not only giving Pinky the racial choice, but also by having her stand up for her rights and her people.

In spite of Zanuck's rejection of ideas from African American consultants, the development of the *Pinky* scenario arguably represents the strongest documented instance of Black participation and collaboration in a major Hollywood production of the 1940s and 1950s. That it does stand as such demonstrates the relatively weak African American power in Hollywood. Black participation was by invitation only, and any suggestion made could be turned aside by recall to filmmaker's economic responsibilities. It shows, as well, the damaging effects of producer editing and censorship, editing which had industrial aims that often conflicted profoundly with progressive social ones. The film's patterns of omission, as well as the maintenance of traditional Black screen characters (through Aunt Dicey's Mammy-like character) and the inability to deal directly with pressing political issues central to African American life compromised the reach of the political messages and representational realism of *Pinky*. In many ways, Zanuck's historical omission of Black history and of civil rights discourse, as well as his omission of the character Arch Naughton, removed the political power and possibilities of the original film concept. Even if Zanuck did eventually replace these with Pinky's (lonely and hollow) self-discovery and self-possession, these motifs were blunted in their force. The visual motif of a close-up shot of our austere protagonist, dressed in nun-ish attire grasping—even embracing—a pole does remind us that, as Zanuck himself argued midway through script development: “our picture does not end on a note of complete satisfaction because our sexy and attractive leading lady ends up with a nursing home.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Original Emphasis. Darryl Zanuck, letter to Dudley Nichols, Oct 14, 1948. The first draft of the script was submitted in May of 1948. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA. The film would not be released until the following September/October.

The Censorship of Pinky

Although Zanuck's desire to create (white) entertainment muted *Pinky's* power as a commentary on 1940s racial politics, his "restraint" paid off handsomely for the studio: *Pinky* was among the highest grossing of Fox's pictures in 1949, grossing four million dollars.¹⁰⁶ It also managed to avoid censorship in most states with censor boards including Massachusetts, Maryland, Virginia, Ohio, and New York. *Pinky* was censored in Pennsylvania, where Edna Carroll objected to the depiction of rape: Carroll eliminated the scene in which she is menacingly approached by two white men who harass and nearly rape her as she walks down a lonely road. Pinky says: "Stop it! ... [She runs into the woods] First Loafer: Hey Al, give me that bottle. Come on back here gal. Come on back here Gal." Carroll also included a lengthy disclaimer, noting that the board was issuing the seal

with reluctance-not because of the theme but because of the inflammatory direction. We suggest you read the notice on the Certificate: 'the board reserves the right to revoke this Certificate' and advise that if this film causes real distress at any place or for any people in the state, we will feel privileged to the right to revoke the license."¹⁰⁷

The film also passed Christine Smith's Atlanta board of censors, a board that was notoriously racially-sensitive. Yet, in a veiled and vague statement, but one which echoed the logic of MPAA representative Francis Harmon, Smith remarked of *Pinky*: "I know this picture is going to be painful to a great many Southerners. It will make them squirm, but at the same time, it will make them realize how unlovely their attitudes are. However, I hope the public will understand and view this picture as entertainment which mirrors both the darker side and progressive side which all good entertainment should have." Smith identified neither the "unlovely" attitudes nor the "darker" and

¹⁰⁶ According to Aubrey Solomon, *Twentieth Century-Fox: A Corporate and Financial History* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1988), 222, 245. *Pinky* cost just under \$1.6 million to make and earned \$4.2 million in domestic rentals, the most of any film the studio made that year.

¹⁰⁷ *Pinky* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

“progressive” sides to which she referred.¹⁰⁸ Her statement, like the film itself, left racial politics ambiguous. Smith’s response may have elicited a sigh of relief from Zanuck. Perhaps there could not have been a more telling acceptance of *Pinky* from the white South. Smith suggests the film provided the enlightening of whites on the racial problem that was at the heart of Zanuck’s modest—if controversial aims. But while Zanuck’s gentle strategy worked on the censors of the white South better than less subtle cinematic approaches, like *I Spit on Your Grave* and *The Respectful Prostitute* which I discussed in Chapter 3, it was not nearly as effective in communicating the African American experience.

The film was (in)famously banned in Marshall, Texas where local theater owner W.L. Gelling persisted in showing *Pinky* in defiance of a local censor board that had been created to ban the film. The wording of the Marshall censorship decision was a local, white re-appropriation of anti-racist rhetoric; the board stated that it considered the film to be “prejudicial to the best interests of the citizens of the city of Marshall.” W. L. Gelling’s decision to exhibit the film was based more upon his decision to keep his job than to promote Civil rights, though: the management of the theater chain had not changed the film in response to the censor board’s order so, Gelling argued, he had no recourse but to show it. This case would make it to the Supreme Court where the justices, shortly after the *Miracle* Decision, would render a per curiam decision in favor of Gelling and against the Marshall censor board’s ruling, thus suggesting—but not explicitly stating—that *The Miracle* decision (*Burstyn v. Wilson*) limited censors’ power to eliminate cinematic “sacrilege” and cinematic images of social equality.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ For more on the banning of *Pinky* in Atlanta, see Margaret McGehee, “Disturbing the Peace: *Lost Boundaries*, *Pinky*, and Censorship in Atlanta, Georgia, 1949-1952,” *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 23-51.

¹⁰⁹ For more on the politics of the Supreme Court’s *Pinky* decision, see Cindy Patton, “White Racism/Black Signs: Censorship and Images of Race Relations,” *Journal of Communication* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 65.

The film was also banned in Birmingham, Alabama. Police Chief Floyd Eddins, who also operated as city censor, banned the film based on section 1213 of the city code, citing it as “indecent” and tending “to create race hatred among our people.”¹¹⁰ The indecency according to a statement by Eddins, was to be found in the film’s racial immorality:

it tends to corrupt the mind and to subvert respect for decency and morality in regards to the white and Negro races because it pictures a white medical doctor and a Negro trained nurse who have fallen in love. It also pictures the doctor embracing her and begging her to marry him regardless of her being a Negro which certainly is morally offensive to the races and tends to create a breach of the peace between the white and Negro races...under the law of this state, intermarriage between the white and Negro races is prohibited.¹¹¹

But miscegenation was not the only problem for Eddins. He mentioned also “court scenes depicted showing the attitude of the white race and the attitudes of the Black race with respect to each other that tends to create race hatred.” Although this second statement sheds little real light on the logic of censorship because Eddins does not say *what* these scenes are offending attitudes are or how they will create “hatred,” it does seem apparent that miscegenation *and* the Civil rights oriented “court scenes,” scenes which implicitly attacked the Southern system of justice and made it difficult for audiences to root for Pinky and against the greedy Mrs. Wooley, were the basis for censorship. The Birmingham theater manager Falkenburg did not challenge city censorship, as Gelling had, but stated instead: “We are under contract with the studios to show...Pinky. Chief Eddins has banned the picture. And a ban is a ban. From now on this is the producer’s problem. From now on this is the producer’s problem, and if anything is done it will be done by Twentieth Century-Fox and not the theater.”¹¹²

¹¹⁰ “Censorship Blacks Out Pinky Here: Its indecency Eddins Asserts, Tends to Create Race hatred,” *Birmingham Courier-Journal*, Jan 1, 1950.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

However, others disagreed with this local censorship, citing both the fact that “the role of the mulatto girl is played by Jeanne Crain. There are no love scenes between Negroes and whites in actuality.”¹¹³ Others still protested the censorship of the film suggesting that “the marriage is not consummated and consequently there is no conflict with Alabama miscegenation laws.”¹¹⁴

In a film that is centrally about choice— Black choice and audience choice—local and state censorship, at least in Birmingham, AL, Marshall, TX and the state of Pennsylvania, sought to remove this sense of choice. In the case of *Pinky*, producer restraint trumped progressive racial politics.

The Studio Racial Problem Film, Take Two: No Way Out, Race Riots, and Sadism

“The movie ‘No Way Out’ was released that week. Total space coverage given this film in the metropolitan press was 106 ½ inches...It is significant to note...that the film received more press space than any other single item or topic of a race relations nature reported during that week.”¹¹⁵ - Memorandum to Mr. White from NAACP director of Research and Information, Julia Baxter Sept 15, 1950.



Figure 42-No Way Out (1950) Pressbook

During the war, the PCA allowed more graphic violence in combat films in order to make more accessible the predicament of soldiers, but after the war, a host of industry- and film- critics began to

¹¹³ “Pinky,” *Birmingham Alabama News*, Jan 30, 1950.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ “Press Analysis of issues relating to or of interest to Negroes: Aug 11-17, 1950,” Memorandum to Mr. White from NAACP director of Research and Information, Julia Baxter Sept 15, 1950.

complain about the “sadism” of film images.¹¹⁶ In 1950, *No Way Out* raised the issue of race riots, becoming one of the first Hollywood films to directly depict a modern race riot. As a result, the depiction had to be handled with care, not only because political censors who thought the film might incite riot could cut the film, but also because average viewers might consider this content, if wrongly handled, offensive or frightening.¹¹⁷ Also, where *Pinky* had shied away from depictions of militant Black men, this film would not only depict a strong Black male character but would give audiences a Black man in a starring role (even if it denied him narrative centrality as protagonist).

The final film version of *No Way Out* tells the story both of Dr. Luther Brooks (Sidney Poitier), a new African American intern who works the night shift at a predominantly white urban hospital, and of his mentor, the Chief Resident named Dr. Daniel Wharton (Stephen McNally). The film begins on the first night of Brooks’ internship when he is assigned to the prison ward. Two white men, Ray (Richard Widmark) and Johnny Biddle (Dick Paxon), who have been shot while attempting a gas station hold up in the rain, are placed under Brooks’ care. Brooks immediately sees that Johnny is disoriented and suspects he might have a brain tumor. Johnny’s brother, Ray, who the officer calls “the King of Beaver Canal,” is extremely and vocally racist. In this scene, Ray continually racially insults Dr. Brooks and asks for a white doctor, taunting him even as he cares for his brother.

While Dr. Brooks is giving Johnny a spinal tap to see if his suspicions are correct—while Ray is looking on—Johnny dies. Ray accuses Dr. Brooks of intentionally killing Johnny because of his own “Negro baiting.” Dr. Brooks, who just before the Biddles entered the hospital revealed to Dr.

¹¹⁶ On wartime screen violence, see Stephen Prince, *Classical Hollywood Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Press, 2003), 150-1. On postwar complaints, see Garth Jowett, *Film: the Democratic Art* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976), 415. Walter Lippman, concerned with the effects of sadism, even commented that the PCA was “deluding itself if it thinks that ‘the sympathy of the audience’ is turned against evil by exhibiting the fullness of evil and by an ending in which the wicked man is punished. The sadistic scenes are far more compelling than the scenes of moral retribution.” Walter Lippman, “Today and Tomorrow. . .” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, Oct 5, 1954, 19.

¹¹⁷ The Maryland State Board of censors’ “Film Analysis cards for Feature Films” actually included “riots” as one of three areas of concern. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

Wharton that he is still unsure of himself, wants an autopsy to prove his innocence (and that his diagnosis was correct), but Ray, predictably, refuses. Dr. Brooks and Dr. Wharton pay a visit to the late Johnny's ex-wife, Edie (Linda Darnell) to see if she will give consent for Ray's autopsy but she is unsure. Edie, who is also Ray's former lover, goes to visit Ray in the hospital. He tries to convince her to rally the white people from Beaver Canal, a white underclass ghetto, to try to launch an attack on the Black community as revenge for Johnny's death. At first Edie resists Ray's pleas, but she is strangely drawn to the acerbic Ray and eventually, she assents.

The white men of Beaver Canal, led by Rocky (Bert Freed), who is a close friend of the Biddle boys, prepare for the riot. But before they can attack, a group of African Americans, led by Lefty (Dots Johnson), an orderly in the hospital where Dr. Brooks works, hears about the white plans to attack from a light-skinned Black barber named Joe who passes for white and spied upon the whites during their planning. In an effort to circumvent white violence upon Black homes, men of the African American community—under cover of night—ambush the white rioters while they are gathering weapons at the Beaver Canal junkyard. Dr. Brooks's brother-in-law John Brooks (Ossie Davis) is sanctioned by Brooks' mother (character unnamed, played by Maude Simmons), to become a part of the African American fighting force. The ambush is successful.

Meanwhile, Dr. Brooks continues his work at the hospital helping the riot victims until a white mother spits in his face, at which point he walks off the job. After some reflection, Dr. Brooks turns himself in for murder, in order to force an autopsy which proves Johnny did have a brain tumor. Ray, still convinced by his own race hate that Brooks killed Johnny, vows to kill Brooks. He and his deaf brother, George, capture Edie. After being cared for by Dr. Wharton's African American housekeeper Gladys (Amanda Randolph), she has softened in her racial attitudes and repented of the

violence she caused. Ray and George force Edie to set up a meeting with Dr. Brooks at the home of the vacationing Dr. Wharton. Ray then goes to the house to kill Dr. Brooks but Edie breaks away from her captor and tries to stop him. Eventually in the living room of Dr. Wharton's home, Ray shoots Brooks, but he survives.

Through the efforts of both director Joseph L. Mankiewicz and producer Darryl F. Zanuck, Twentieth Century Fox dealt with the film's potential racial threat to audiences by not directly showing much violent action or the effects of violence. They opted instead to diffuse both violence and sexuality into stylized sadism, blending it with both a romantic and racially-oriented narrative, to intensely strange effect. In doing so, they cut many of the film's moments of dialogical engagement about Civil rights as well as obscured the film's relationship to recent historical events to which it was thematically linked (most obviously, the Detroit Riots of 1943).

Producer self-regulation and articulation in No Way Out

Zanuck began production on *No Way Out* with story conferences in February of 1949.¹¹⁸ He had taken special precautions for the film, bringing on Malcolm Ross, former head of the Federal Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) as public relations man for the project. Ross stated that "to follow the true line of our country's destiny...we have got to learn to hate hate itself enough to do something about it."¹¹⁹ One of his earliest memos on the film called for "realism and guts" of the

¹¹⁸ Pre-production began before *Pinky*'s release in September/October 1949. The reviews of *Pinky* had noted that Zanuck had soft pedaled the race angle of the film.

¹¹⁹ "Former FEPC Head Is Now PRC for New Film," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 22, 1950, 20. The FEPC was the organization formed by President Roosevelt's Executive order 8802, prohibiting discrimination in the Federal branch of the government and defense industries. According to Daniel Kryder, the FEPC was designed to "receive and investigate" complaints of discrimination," typically by way of public hearing. Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State during WWII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 65.

manner seen in *Boomerang*, *Street with No Name*, and *Call Northside 777*.¹²⁰ If *Pinky* had lightened its treatment of racial issues by focusing on the marginal issue of passing and not dealing head on with racism, in *No Way Out*, aesthetically and thematically, Zanuck seems to have wanted to pull out the stops and heighten the intensity. Not only did he choose a script dealing with race riots and discrimination against an unmistakably Black protagonist, but he chose one where the raw effect of race hate was meant to be felt by audiences. Although Zanuck made several important progressive revisions to the script, ultimately he doubled back, conforming the film to a more conservative, less revelatory, cinematic racial liberalism. Zanuck's conservative anxiety pushed the depiction of riot scenes and the civil rights politics of the film towards the realm of suggestion and indirection rather than direct articulation. Episodic, equivocal, and ultimately symbolic in its representation of racial violence and dissent, this film limited racial depictions to overcome any possible censorship and, more generally, to avoid offending the racial status quo and the off-balance "equilibrium" of Black-white interracial politics.

First, it is important to note the progressive adjustments to the source material that Zanuck made in realizing the film. For one, he transformed Lesser Samuels's original screenplay to focus on an African American co-protagonist. Data gathered from story conferences reveals that Zanuck entirely shifted the film from focusing on the romance of the white doctor to a dual-protagonist structure which featured both Brooks and Wharton. Wharton was given not only a significant romantic storyline in the original screenplay but was also the focal point through which much of the racial tension was funneled. Zanuck was the one who engineered the script changes that left Dr. Wharton with limited screen time, but maintained his structurally important role in the final film.

¹²⁰ Darryl Zanuck, memo to Lesser Samuels cc: Philip Yordan on *No Way Out* Screenplay (Property #2420) draft 2, February 1, 1949. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

Although Zanuck had been defensive in his exchange with the NAACP about *Pinky*, he nevertheless was powerfully affected by it as his memos on *No Way Out* make clear. When White sent Zanuck his responses to the script of *Pinky*, he had enclosed responses of several staff members. Zanuck then answered White's letter, referencing the commentary provided by the other NAACP staffers. In this letter of reply, Zanuck quoted back White's words on several occasions, stating "you say that 'one ought to be able to take the position that *Pinky*, *Rozelia*, *Arch* and *Granny* are not types but individuals.' In my opinion that is precisely what they are—individuals."¹²¹ But in his memos to scriptwriters on *No Way Out*, Zanuck appropriated White's logic and told them: "I do not believe Luther's wife *Cora*. To me she is a Hollywood character. Tying her to showbusiness does not seem to me to belong in this picture at all."¹²² Zanuck, like White, was critiquing the one-dimensional nature of Black characterization. Likewise, Roy Wilkins's memo on *Pinky* sent to Zanuck had called *Granny*'s speech: "A variation of the theme that Black is inferior and white is superior. It does not matter that *Granny* undoubtedly believes this, being of that school. The point is that that philosophy is also a part of slavery days and should not be projected in a film for exhibition in 1948-9. When slavery really becomes history, and when we have ceased fighting the Civil War all over again in our search for interracial peace and justice, producers and writers can project the slavery philosophy in its proper perspective." Zanuck had clearly been affected by this argument because he quoted it in his letter to White, asking, incredulously: "It doesn't matter if *Granny* 'undoubtedly believes this'?"¹²³ At the time, Zanuck, for whom the logic of the *given* characters was crucial, could not understand Wilkins's questioning of why such a character, with such a philosophy, was chosen and what

¹²¹ Darryl Zanuck, letter to Walter White, September 21, 1948, 4. NAACP Collection Library of Congress. Manuscript Reading Room, Washington D.C.

¹²² Zanuck, memo to Lesser Samuels, February 1, 1949.

¹²³ Zanuck, letter to Walter White, September 21, 1948, 4.

ideological repercussions this might have in the contemporary moment. There is evidence, though, that Wilkins's approach may have influenced Zanuck's own. He had had time to mull over the logic of Wilkins's critique by the time he wrote this memo on the second draft of *No Way Out* in February of 1949. In this memo Zanuck firmly stood his ground with Samuels and Yordan that in the third draft of the script, they would have to change "the character of Luther, our leading role...I resent his bowing and scraping to Doctor Wharton."¹²⁴ Zanuck had seen the heart in Wilkins' critique of the problem of the racial stereotype of Black servility.

Although the message and mode of expression of racial problems were conservative in *No Way Out*, Zanuck was particularly concerned about accurate Black characterization and motivation. For example, he sniffed out insincerity and unreality in the early draft of the script in the depiction of Luther Brooks and demanded better development: "My first criticism is of the character Luther, our leading role. I have the impression that Luther is a weakling. I am disturbed about his being a doctor."¹²⁵ Much of this weakness was carried through in the film, but Zanuck did argue for a strengthening of the character.¹²⁶ Zanuck also argued that the film should include Luther's family, a directive that was complied with: "I would like to see us go into Luther's home. I would like to see how real Negroes in a metropolitan city live. I would like to see them as human beings. Perhaps Luther has a mother and a father; he is part of a family."¹²⁷ Zanuck's desire for realism here, although spoken in relatively essentialist terms, correlates to, I think, some of his conversations with White and to the NAACP's vision of positive Black representation. Finally, in *No Way Out* we get the family

¹²⁴ Zanuck, memo to Lesser Samuels, February 1, 1949.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 1.

¹²⁶ The PCA's analysis chart hinges on being able to assign motivations for characters' actions and being able to say whether a character is sympathetic or unsympathetic. The PCA saw Lefty as unsympathetic, but the mob as sympathetic. They also read some interesting class connotations in here: although a doctor, Poitier is listed as being of moderate means—perhaps because he lives with his family and is still in training.

¹²⁷ Zanuck, memo to Lesser Samuels February 1, 1949, 4.

and community connection absent in *Pinky*. In addition, the older mother figure, the elder Mrs. Brooks, in *No Way Out* is no “Aunt” Dicey: after John’s wife, Connie (Ruby Dee) protests her husband “going for a walk,” knowing he is going to meet Lefty, Mother Brooks firmly supports the son, saying “Go ahead...take your walk.” While it is unclear whether she does so out of deference to Black masculinity or out of support for the violent, if protective action, what is clear is that we have come a long way from Dicey’s logic that African Americans should avoid trouble with white folks by giving them what they want. Nevertheless, although the film pictured and even dwelt on the Black home, this space never becomes the center of the film’s action, just as Luther Brooks never becomes squarely its protagonist, most likely because Zanuck was unsure about the viability of a Black male star as central protagonist.

The film develops in audiences a strong “rooting interest” for Luther, as it had for *Pinky*, but we never firmly identify with Luther. We have a *distanced* rooting interest in him. We root for Luther’s success, but we are not aligned with him because his internal motivations are not clear enough to us to be compelling much less shared—his silent strength and even his dignity end up limiting audience intimacy with him. He is not approachable and he seems to lack personality. We watch Luther—and Luther becomes instrumental in the film’s narrative and message—but Zanuck’s protagonist—indeed most Hollywood protagonists—always had to *grow* and “learn something” from the plot.¹²⁸ Luther does not really grow. Although he is sympathetic, his thoughts and reactions are not enough like our own for identification to flourish and often his emotional reactions are more of a spectacle than any basis for identification. Although it is arguable that he gains self-assurance as a

¹²⁸ Ibid, 2. Zanuck liked his protagonists to be initiates—flexible and moldable. He states “Dr. Wharton should begin gradually to learn something.” Earlier in the memo he notes, “the bulk of anti-Negroism should be vested in a character whom we can watch throughout the picture in the hope that somewhere along the line he will change or learn something.”

doctor after Biddle's autopsy confirms his diagnosis, this professional growth without a parallel, on screen emotional one, serves to further fix Brooks as more than a doctor but less than a man. Especially since all of the ingredient are there for some sort of character growth—his promotion, a series of traumas—it is particularly conspicuous that the plot never hinges upon any change in him. Still, it would be facile to characterize this as a repetition of what Zanuck did with *Pinky*. *No Way Out* was both a more ambitious attempt at racial representation, because it depicted race riots and Black masculinity and ultimately a more restrained one.

Using textual and narrative strategies of equivocation, the film, although it dealt with some very important racial issues (including “prejudice” and race riots), nevertheless said very little about them and showed its audiences even less. The film does, in many ways, challenge Black oppression, but it does so without significantly risking the security of white power. This equivocation on crucial racial issues results not from any apparent desire to equivocate on Zanuck's part but rather from having reached the limits of what could be said—or at least what Zanuck and others had the vocabulary to say—on U.S. race relations within the Hollywood system in 1949, when the threat of state and local political censorship loomed over film as a discourse not yet protected by the First Amendment.

Early in script development, Zanuck took the stance, as he had also done in the case of *Pinky*, that the film ought *not* to be about a problem but about a person. “I visualize an exciting, violent story dealing with a very profound American problem. However never at any time do I want the problem to become bigger than the story.”¹²⁹ For this reason, Zanuck desired that the script team take care with the riot theme, because

¹²⁹ Zanuck, memo to Lesser Samuels, February 1, 1949.

We already know that we will lose about 3000 accounts in the South who will not play the picture under any circumstances. But it would be a terrible thing if we have something in the picture which would give the so-called white cities a chance to turn us down...It is fine to be courageous but we must also be sensible and not too courageous with other people's money.¹³⁰

Zanuck therefore suggested that the riot be on the scale of a barroom brawl or corner street fight, a directive that was not complied with. Zanuck's conservatism extended to the film's overall message as well. Quite shockingly, and in line with industry policy on the issue, Zanuck argued against social equality in the film: "This story argues for professional fairness and equality. It opposes prejudice and intolerance. It does not seek nor should it, for total social equality."¹³¹

While there was no militant Black dialogue such as had been in the early script drafts of *Pinky*, earlier drafts of the *No Way Out* script were more direct in their discussion of social problems and gave voice to white backlash against integration. But Zanuck cut much of this language very late in production—from the cutting continuity, draft eight of the script. This suggests that up until the final moments of filming the production, Zanuck was changing the script in ways that would make the film more racially centrist and less direct about issues that prompted white "hate"—issues like segregation. These drafts were more credible because they elaborated the logical structure that underlay race hatred rather than sensationally rendering it as a symbolic, violent act. In early script drafts, the reasons for white Beaver Canal's fear and hate are not unclear as they would be in the final film, but are linked directly to the real "issue" of integration. Draft four, for example, has African Americans moving into Beaver Canal, "coming up from the South by the carload," a clear link to the Great Migration. "Pretty soon," the script has one white man remark, "it won't be safe for

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹Ibid.

a white woman to walk the street.”¹³² In the final film, it is only the direct conflict between Ray Biddle and Brooks that is mentioned. Another source of contention, one which remains in the script although not as thoroughly emphasized, is that whites from Beaver Canal feel African Americans are getting an education “ahead” of them. “They’re grabbin’ up the earth, they ain’t satisfied shinin’ shoes and diggin’ ditches—they’re goin’ to college and becomin’ lawyers and doctors—they’re openin’ banks, runnin’ for Congress—pretty soon we’ll have a nigger President.”¹³³ This was an issue borrowed directly from contemporaneous headlines and the discourse on school integration in the Supreme Court.¹³⁴ But all this dialogue was removed from the film, as was any comparison between Black and white working class success spoken by any character but Ray. It is likely that having this white mob represent the questions that average white Americans were raising may have had the potential to insult the white audience.

There is also more of a dramatic and confrontational build up to the riots in this draft than there would be in the final film, one which featured more dialogue and threats exchanged between whites and Blacks. For example, Ray tells the white men, assembled to riot, that Lefty gave him twenty-four hours to get out of town, which intensifies the engagement between the two precipitating parties. In this version—but not in the final film—Luther also pays a personal visit to Beaver Canal, directly addressing the white mob in an impassioned plea to stop the violence. Due to an ensuing fascination with the narrative possibilities of racial passing and perhaps referring to Walter White’s autobiographical experience, the script writers also included, probably at Zanuck’s prompting, “Joe

¹³² *No Way Out*, Screenplay (Property #2420) draft 8, draft continuity, July 6, 1949, 1949, 57. Doheny Library, Twentieth Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ The NAACP established its legal defense fund in 1940. *Sweatt v. Painter* 339 U.S. 629 (1950) (which began in 1946), *Sipuel v. Board of Regents of Oklahoma*, 332 U.S. 631 (1948) and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* 339 U.S. 637 (1950) were all school segregation cases that reached the Supreme Court and that challenged the administration of “equal” educational provisions in their separate but equal schooling system.

the Barber” in this white mob. In the early drafts of the script, this pivotal Black character was actually shown on screen. The scriptwriters noted that “although his skin is white, [Joe’s] features are negroid.” He listens in on the white men’s attack plans and then reports them via phone to his African American friends.¹³⁵ In the final film, he is merely referred to by Lefty, thus siphoning the energy (and agency) for the riots through the film’s most confirmedly bitter character.

Zanuck’s changes to this draft, marked in red, were again conservative: he changed the dialogue of the white men of the mob, softening white hatred, making the rally into a place of discussion and dissent and adding in a countervailing voice of tolerance from one of the white men, who says, “You guys are nuts. What did the Niggers ever do to you? This is a personal thing with Ray.”¹³⁶ Zanuck also eliminated a few crucial lines including the complaint about Black migration noted “pretty soon it won’t be safe for a white woman to walk the streets” which referred to the possibility of Black miscegenetic rape.¹³⁷ He also eliminated a line where a white man identified that the American problem was not race but rather “greed and hate,” an important recognition for working class (or under-employed) people.¹³⁸ The effect was to abstract and diffuse the hate away from real world, contemporary racial issues. In *No Way Out* as in the *Ox Bow Incident*, Zanuck was always pushing towards discussion that provides multiple perspectives on a controversial action and a moderate core. Zanuck, here, softened these racist whites into the kind of teachable characters featured in *Gentleman’s Agreement*. His desire for moderation and realism also prompted concerns about the more extreme characterization of “Ray”:

Ray who is the character who expresses the most violent anti-Negro feeling happens to be a moronic, sadistic criminal, the very thing which we avoided in ‘Gentleman’s

¹³⁵ *No Way Out* Screenplay, July 6, 1949, 85.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* 84.

Agreement'...[where] the anti-Semites were nice, average people...Making Ray a hardened criminal to a certain extent destroys the premise of our picture because it seems to reveal that the purpose of our picture will be to show that only low, mean criminals like Ray harbor anti-Negro sentiment."¹³⁹

This quote evidences Zanuck's realism about the extent of racism in the United States, but for some reason, in spite of Zanuck's plea, this characterization of Ray remained—and reached hyperbolic, nearly caricatured levels. Zanuck's involvement in modification and censorship of the script then operated in the moderating mode of white liberalism, seeking more realistic characterizations of African Americans but not insisting on more revelatory thematic engagements with white racism.

While I do mean to criticize Zanuck for his lack of concern about the representation of African American social problems, it is clear that Zanuck's approach to race was neither flip nor unmeasured—in both of these films, the story conference notes reveal that Zanuck approached his Black representations with a studied and intellectual rigor and a sincere and honest desire for realism. Part of the answer for its muting and absence in *No Way Out* was Zanuck's process of story development itself, a process which was limited by Zanuck's instinctual and patterned modes of storytelling. With the exception of the residue of NAACP critique from *Pinky*, these representations seem to have arisen from little consultation with African Americans. Quite simply, Zanuck's knowledge of what an African American would do was limited by his cultural background. But it is appropriate, I think, to go even beyond this limitation in attributing a source to staid and shy nature of Zanuck's racial representation. As George Custen has shown, Zanuck was limited by his own affiliation with the system of production—by his supreme investment in the system. In the case of *No Way Out*, this overrode both his racial curiosities and convictions and his representational boldness.

¹³⁹ Zanuck, memo to Lesser Samuels, February 1, 1949.

The PCA, No Way Out, and “that inflammatory flavor”

Somewhat surprisingly, the inclusion of the word “nigger” does not seem to have been a big source of discussion or dissent in the making of *No Way Out*. The PCA uncharacteristically appears to have ignored the issue completely in the correspondence, although they likely broached it in conferences with the production team. Indeed, it was one of Zanuck’s script readers, Michael Abel, and not the PCA, who commented upon the use of the term, saying “too much is made of the word ‘nigger,’ thereby destroying its shock value and producing a sort of numbing effect upon the audience.” This was a sentiment at least one reviewer would share.¹⁴⁰

The PCA did offer an important warning to Zanuck about the film’s depiction of racial violence. Breen wrote that the film’s “inflammatory flavor,” particularly in the riot scenes, might be used by “dogmatic...Special Pleaders...for ulterior purposes.” While Breen noted the careful writing in the riot scenes, he still warned that Zanuck “ought to be most careful in the manner in which this part of the story is presented.”¹⁴¹ Most important to the question of readings of racial representations on screen is that the PCA emphasized that *presentation* was key, if the Production Code was to be followed, in lessening negative effects of the film in the depiction of racial violence.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Michael Abel, memo to Zanuck on *No Way Out* Screenplay (Property #2420) draft 8, July 11, 1949. For review, see Hollins Alpert, “No Way Out,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, September 2, 1950, 28-30.

¹⁴¹ Joe Breen, letter to Jason Joy, Oct 6, 1949, *No Way Out*, PCA File. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

¹⁴² Specifically, the PCA wanted to remove a scene where Dr. Brooks jabs Johnny with a needle (one which was removed from the film) and one which displays the preparation of broken bottles as weapons. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

*“Preemptive Censorship” and No Way Out’s race riots*¹⁴³

Although the extant PCA records do not show that the office asked for extensive changes to the script’s riot scenes or other racial representations, *No Way Out* shows evidence of having been modified in the process of production to fit a style of articulation consistent with a racialized version of the PCA’s “principle of deniability”—that is, the principle that films should only *suggest* controversial material rather than undeniably representing it.¹⁴⁴ For example, Zanuck and the film’s director Joe Mankiewicz show startlingly little of the actual riot. Much of the vaguely violent action and the name calling comes *before* the riot (during the preparation scenes) and what scenes of violence there are, are shown at a distance and in unnatural, highly stylized expressionistic light of the flare gun that is set off as the signal for African Americans to attack. The scene in which Black and white men are actually fighting is shot at a considerable distance to obscure the details of this action. Through these means, the Fox production team was able to *suggest* the riot without showing violence in detail. Cross-cutting white and Black “rioters,” the riot scene proper was marked by the extreme paucity of close-ups.¹⁴⁵ Indeed Zanuck managed to show a riot scene without showing any destruction of property, simply by having the riot occur in a junk yard. The team also avoided both direct display of violence and any hint of death. We know that white people have been hurt because

¹⁴³ This term is used by Catherine Benamou, *It’s All True: Orson Welles’s Pan-American Odyssey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 231). She uses it to describe the lack of financial backing given by the industry to Orson Welles for his film project *It’s All True* but I think the term is applicable here as well for describing censorship by a production head for industrial purposes.

¹⁴⁴ See Ruth Vasey and Lea Jacobs, who in their studies of the PCA both recognize the organization’s tendency to push for subtle and deniable representation.

¹⁴⁵ But even the preparation was cut from many screens by state censors under the nearly ubiquitous prohibitions on cinematic material that “incites to crime.” Ohio cut “153 feet in the reduction of the following scenes: Negro Preparation for the riot, White preparation for the riot in junk yard, Negroes congregating in alleys, actual riot” (Censors’ slip *No Way Out (Revised)* Date received 9-18-50, returned 9-23-50). A letter from Hettie Grey Baker of Twentieth Century-Fox, who screened the film with the Ohio board, indicates that the Board was especially concerned about Fox eliminating *Black* scenes of preparation; nowhere in Baker’s letter does she mention the white riot scenes being cut, but she prominently records that “We have greatly reduced the sequence showing the colored people preparing for the riot” (Hettie Grey Baker, letter to Miss Susannah Warfield, September 8, 1950) OHS Archives, Ohio Censorship Division Papers, Series 1596, Columbus, OH.

we see them in the hospital, but there is no confirmable evidence that anyone, white or Black, was killed. Thus, the consequences of racial violence are minimized.

Much of the effect of this violence is also rendered sonically rather than visually: women's screams stand in both for the violence and for the threat of miscegenation of the film's riot scenes. The attack by African Americans is sonically accompanied by the shouts of men and screams of women but no attack on a white woman is actually shown. Also the sound of the preparation for the riot becomes the primary sonic marker of physical disturbance. In the preparation scene, bottles are broken, whips are cracked; Rocky *pretends* to beat up a Black man, whipping a piece of scrap metal with a chain and saying "Take that you Black crud! How do you like that Black boy?" Edie, whose Black leather jacket in this scene further crystallizes the scene's sadist overtones, reacts strongly to this sonic spectacle: each time Rocky hits metal on metal she recoils, as if imagining the rehearsed violence. The expressionistic music combined with the tall pile of metal that the men mount to find weapons makes this nighttime scene feel like a bonfire, an allusion (perhaps to the KKK) that captures the overall eerie atmosphere of the scene.

Much of the violence of the scene is reflected in the dystopian, distorted atmosphere. Remnants of physical destruction dominate: piles of bricks, broken down buildings, and heaps of broken metal equipment make the Boot Hill junk yard look like a riot already hit. This post-riot look, sans actual violence, may have been another strategy to circumvent censorship. Also because no one we know very well or care about very much is shown in the scene during the violence, its psychological and emotive effects are reduced. In addition, no shots reveal physical contact between African Americans and white men in close up. Steven Prince has shown that violence was typically represented in very indirect ways during the Code era. But *No Way Out* suggests that in the case of

race riots, violence had to be displaced into a milieu—even a specific place—rather than direct, emotionally stirring or palpable violent action that would offend state or local censors who were concerned about inciting race riots, especially after the Detroit riots of 1943.

Zanuck provided “coverage” for the mob scenes as well, offering, within the final film version, a scene that would tell of the riot action without showing it. Zanuck included a phone call in which Dr. Brooks warns a local (African American?) Ward leader about the impending race riot as an alternative to actually showing riot violence, a move that would help to maintain narrative continuity if censors decided to cut all scenes of violence. Zanuck extended this protection against censorship by having Brooks *oppose* the violence: there is no expression of Black rage except for through the mob—Luther Brooks is a model of the Black restraint that would be demanded of middle class, integrated African Americans for their success, one that, as my respondents in Chapter 2 showed, became a powerful source of identification, if in ways unintended by Zanuck.

Zanuck’s *No Way Out* team also strategized about the use of racial epithets in the film: What makes the film’s use of the word “nigger” so strange is the rarity with which it is applied to anyone in particular. It is the floating signifier of the film—very rarely leveled against Luther Brooks or any other Black person. Rather than calling individual people “nigger,” the film’s racist white characters talk about “niggers” in the abstract, thus lessening the edge and abstracting the direction of the insult and relieving Brooks of the burden of having to respond. The word “nigger” becomes the subject not of an interracial exchange but instead a part of a white racist interracial imaginary and psychosis. Such generalizing renders the term unsustainable, a perversion of reality in the face of examples of African American accomplishment and moral character as exemplified by Dr. Brooks. Non-verbal racial hate in the film is likewise carefully contained. Upon first meeting Brooks, rather than spitting at him, the

film has Ray Biddle spit on the floor and then order Brooks, who he assumes to be a janitor, to mop it up, thus using two smaller, diffused insults to stand in for one larger one. The scene still shows Biddle's degradation of Brooks, but makes the insult less direct, showing less physical contact between the two. This indirection—and lack of punch—also makes the action less likely to be imitated by adolescent viewers, a consequence many of the censors worried so much about. Racism was also isolated by associating it with a particular locale in *No Way Out*. All the racists in the film seem to hail from Beaver Canal. Dr. Wharton even says to Edie, “Beaver Canal hates Negroes.” Even if the film suggests a white man might be “the problem” of the racial problem film, that same white man is its victim: it is for Biddle and his friends *not* Luther Brooks that there is “no way out,” as their poverty, and the imagery of white encirclement in the riot scene instruct us.

The multi-character, large cast also worked to diffuse the plot in such a way that it could be read in vastly different ways by different audiences.¹⁴⁶ Rather than creating an ancillary subplot involving African Americans, African Americans are integrated into the plot of *No Way Out*, although no one character in *No Way Out* operates as the protagonist. Instead, various highly nuanced characters, some with many lines and some with only a few, are available sources of identification. These hinge characters, like Gladys (Amanda Randolph), John Brooks, Lefty, and George Biddle, give us brief but evocative windows into other perspectives. They have small parts but they are substantial enough to be the basis for audience identification at various moments. Nevertheless, the proliferation of these characters decentralizes the identificatory structure of the film.

¹⁴⁶The theatrical trailer for the film stated that there were *seven* major performances in the film not to be missed—“seven new conceptions of dramatic portrayal which are the envy of the acting profession.” The seven listed, in the order and manner in which they were listed were Richard Widmark (“Ray Biddle”), Linda Darnell (“Edie”), Sidney Poitier (“Doctor Brooks”), Stephen McNally (“Wharton”), Mildred Joanne Smith (“Cora”), Harry Belaver (“The Deaf Mute”), and Sidney Ridges (“Moreland”).

No Way Out, through its focus on the racist Biddle brothers, Ray, Johnny and George, avoided reference to racism as a systematic, institutional or historical force and depicted it instead as a personal disease. Zanuck's film was polemically structured around two kinds of white people: "non-racist," well-meaning whites (i.e. Dr. Wharton) and extremely racist whites (the Biddles). Instead of gesturing towards the history and historical pattern of Black victimization that the cinema so often effaced, *No Way Out* avoided reference to racial history or past at all. It also avoided what might have been an evocative, meaning-shaping reference to racial unfairness uncovered during the Detroit riots. The film never effectively shows Black hurt, rage or resistance, and it effaces Black victimization. Through Dr. Brooks, it shows Black restraint and through Lefty, it shows impenetrable Black bitterness. Lefty, who could be the hero and leader of the resistance, is pitted against Dr. Brooks: he closes the elevator on an older white man, telling him to take the stairs so he can tell Dr. Brooks about the riot. He tells Dr. Brooks that the medical boards were made harder for him because he was Black and quibbles with him when Dr. Brooks says that they gave the same test to everyone. Most of all he is reduced consistently to white hate—this is all we know of him. It is Lefty who riots while Dr. Brooks, in literal (and cross-cut) simultaneity, operates on Ray's leg.

It is not surprising, then, that *No Way Out* fails to provide a militant African American as a point of identification. The film included a dualism, one that was to become a conventionalized Hollywood trope, in the characters Lefty and Luther. They mirror the studio system's characterization of the Black population as split between the "rank and file" and the "intelligent negroes." While Luther Brooks is the sensible one—the "intelligent negro"—Lefty is a rioter: his white scar defines him and consumes any kindness in his face. Accordingly, he becomes a caricature of the "rank and file."

Luther, on the other hand, even when physically provoked during a race riot, does not respond with violence or even protest, but simply disappears.

The scene where Luther walks off the job because a white woman (the mother of one of the Beaver Canal rioters) spits in his face is important for demonstrating the film's approach to race relations. Rather than Brooks giving a naturalized retaliatory response, the cinematography instead melodramatically frames him, focusing on the shock and stigma of the situation—and indeed of Luther himself. The presence of the white nurse and of Dr. Wharton interrupts our attention to Luther's own response with white interpretation of the spitting incident, as we cross-cut Luther's response with views of the nurse and Wharton, who stare, unblinkingly, at the spectacle of Luther's face, thus further accentuating his victimization and alterity.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ This nurse, around the same age as the mother who spits at Brooks, is also conspicuously included in the press photography depicting this scene.



Figure 43-Even press photographs retained the white nurse's presence, Chicago Defender Sept 2, 1950

Poitier plays the scene with implications of rage, however; it is significant that he does not brush the spit off with his fingers but with a fist.¹⁴⁸ For a few seconds, we wonder what he will do next with that fist. He resolves the gesture by tearing off his stethoscope, exiting the hospital and walking off into the wide, dark night.¹⁴⁹

This visual inscription of Brooks' reaction as psychological demonstrates how *No Way Out* stylistically blends noir and melodrama, two overtly expressionistic cinematic styles. Melodramatic

¹⁴⁸ Censors in Ohio noted the suggestiveness in this fist and cut it out of the film: "Reduce close up of saliva on Dr. Brooks' face to point where his hand starts to come up" (*No Way Out-Revised* Censor's slip, received 9-18-50, returned 9-23-50).

¹⁴⁹ Zanuck's script changes left the option open, however, that Brooks did get involved in the riot. Because he disappears, we are left to speculate about what he did after this incident. His wife says he did not come home until 2 or 3 and spent most of the night "walking," and tells us that when he came home he hated all white people. Although walking would suggest that he walked off his anger, "to take a walk" was the euphemism used by Luther's brother and mother to mean getting involved in the racial disturbance.

articulation appears in *No Way Out* in several key places, primarily in the music, in sustained close-up shots of obviously emoting faces, and in acting style. The musical score is, in my reading, excessive and abrupt. In a number of crucial scenes it also becomes *loud*, interfering with spectator attention. Music can operate in various ways in the cinema. Among its various cinematic functions, music can be harnessed to the suspenseful actions of a scene to heighten audience emotion (as is the case in the horror film for example) or be harnessed to characters emotions in ways that dramatize them. In *No Way Out*, music has the latter effect. Because most of the scenes in the film do not feature a musical score, the use of the dramatic strings in the score (which bear a striking similarity to the siren which is often a part of the diegetic sound) appears more pronounced. Combining the beating bass drum with the high strings, the sonic cacophony aurally inscribes the racial cacophony the scene refuses to directly show. This combined with Brooks' overly exaggerated facial expression and *lack of* confrontational response to his attacker, demonstrates how film uses melodrama as a method of evasion. It dramatizes the emotions of the characters, rendering them so excessive and obvious as to obscure naturalized audience identification with them. Thus characters become not so much people as symbols—performers of emotive excess. They cannot be—or we do not want to see them as—like us. They do not invite such a reading. Walter White even noted the film's use of music, writing in his notes on the film, that an unnamed playwright friend of his had argued that the film was “too melodramatic” that the “junkyard scene” was “sadist” and that the “score of the film whipped up emotion.”¹⁵⁰ Music thus arguably contributed to *No Way Out's* melodramatic effects. If, as Thomas Elsaesser has suggested, melodrama takes a “style as meaning” approach, one that projects onto the *mise-en-scene* the emotionality of its characters in ways that create a feeling too excessive to

¹⁵⁰ Undated notes written on paper with heading “Memo from Walter White,” 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. White argued that often those white who participated in riots *were* sadists.

correspond to a Bazinian realism, than we can characterize *No Way Out* as being melodramatic.¹⁵¹ I am not trying to argue that melodrama has no hint of realism, nor that it cannot produce real emotions in audiences. Rather I am arguing that in *No Way Out* the excessive attention paid to emotion disrupts its realist core—one with much more political potential than melodrama in this instance. Especially for African Americans, whose onscreen representations have been historically exaggerated, this melodramatic over-playing of roles keeps the film from full-filling its potential to serve the cultural needs of African Americans for images that touch on some reality they know and can relate to. The film focuses on the emotional universe of its characters. The melodramatic mode dominates in the scene in which the white woman spits on Brooks. It is harnessed to the psychological exploration of Brook's responses, but in this instance, melodrama works to so over-reveal the emotions of the characters that the film loses rhythm in the process. What is lost in the emphasis is a sense of narrative contingency, liveness, and emotional realism. In this scene, music, onscreen looking-relations, and cinematography combine to make it legible as melodrama. The film's use of the word "nigger" is also marked by a performative excess. Jackie Bratton has argued that 19th century melodrama was marked by "extreme and excessive speech," with which 20th Century viewers are often uncomfortable.¹⁵² The use of the word "nigger" in *No Way Out* can usefully be linked to this melodramatic trope.

Melodrama had also been an element in *Pinky* but in *No Way Out*, the excessive performances were much more pronounced. But why would Zanuck want to render race using the

¹⁵¹ See Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," in *Film Genre Reader II* Barry Keith Grant, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 368-378. See particularly page 368 where Elsaesser describe excessive mise-en-scene, one typically ascribed to the home but which in *No Way Out* is applied to Beaver Canal. Also, see 377-78 which explores the relationship between liberal ideology and the melodrama.

¹⁵² Jacky Bratton, "The Contending Discourses of Melodrama" in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* eds. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1994), 38.

tropes of melodrama? As Richard Maltby has argued, the melodrama often operated as a mode of containment of “the real.”¹⁵³ In the case of *No Way Out* which depicted riots, this realism could have produced censorship. Melodrama operates contain this threat—and others produced by race—by rendering race as a product of emotion—of affect. Race becomes superficial factor, rather than culturally or historically borne. It becomes either an obstacle to surmount or a trap from which to escape, and equalized with melodrama’s other obstacles in ways that degrade its complexity. Melodrama also allows these racial representations to be grafted into a realm of easy moral legibility. If Black audience’s pleasure in cinema, was in part, derived from a spark *recognition* produced by various kinds of realism, then the melodrama in *No Way Out* interrupts this pleasure by focusing on the grotesquely overdone. While the film had the potential to utilize its setting to produce contemporary, urban realism, it did not do so. At least in *No Way Out*, the melodramatic components which exist even in the riot scenes, pushes away from identification with the scenes and actions that were *too* real for status quo comfort, using formal elements of melodrama as a form of cultural and narrative evasion and to spectacularize Black victimization. While melodramatic forms of distancing worked to politically- and socially-subversive effects in the family melodramas of Douglas Sirk, distancing does not work to rupture ideology all the time.¹⁵⁴ When a text focuses on a politicized subject, as does *No Way Out*, the melodramatic tendency can have quite opposite effects. Distancing from politicized characters wrought by excessive cinematic signification, for example, could work with ideology and against Black spectatorial needs and desires.

¹⁵³ Richard Maltby, “The Social Evil, the Moral Order and the Melodramatic Imagination, 1890-1915,” in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* eds. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1994), 221. Maltby notes “a social order was being reinforced in the successful integration of a ‘real’ (in the form of topical subject-matter and recognizable setting) with the narrative conventions of melodrama.”

¹⁵⁴ For politics in Sirk, see Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” in *Film Genre Reader II* Barry Keith Grant, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 368-378. See also Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1981), 245-260.

In a moment where melodrama and realism were two starkly different cinematic choices with differing implications, meanings, and ideological consequences, the fact that Zanuck choose melodrama (and with it, a psychological focus) as the predominant mode of articulation is telling. It reveals the film's function as container (and at moments cathartic performer) of the issues that it presents rather than as vehicle for exploration of them. Often the film becomes, and quite likely wants to be, more about racial emotions than about racial politics. The film uses its high style (of both noir and melodrama) to equivocate about and dramatize race rather than to earnestly explore or reveal it in its political particulars. The balance of racial power and the logic of racial demonization (which was often applied to Black people) has been reversed in the film: White racists are demonized but not believably, and the blame has been put exclusively on white members of the criminal underclass.

This film wants to be about racism but instead it is about one thing (or maybe six): N-i-g-g-e-r. Unable to deal with the roots of racism, the film melodramatically revels in the shared experience of its verbal expression. The film grants that racism still exists, but gets too lost in the darkness of noir and the psychosis of the white underclass to explain its existence. The film hints that racism exists in the energy of Beaver Canal, but it cannot say the word "segregation." It can say "Nigger" but it cannot say segregation because it chooses safe melodramatic exploration (in emotionality) over controversial social explanation (in facts). While exploiting and even lambasting the white underclass as the root of racism, the film also, at root, projects its pity on Ray and Edie. It is Beaver Canal more than the African American community that has been hurt by segregation and it is Edie and Ray's dramatic relationship with racialized place rather than Doctor Brooks' that the film dramatizes. At moments we are even encouraged to sympathize with Beaver Canal Often it is the liminal Edie

Johnson who replaces Pinky Johnson as the center of the racialized narrative. Edie is the teachable character Zanuck wanted who “we can watch throughout the picture in the hope that somewhere along the line he will change or learn something.”¹⁵⁵ Edie, who wears Black, but is white. Edie, who has dark hair but a white face. Edie, who looks and sounds, much more than Jeanne Crain, like a mulatta. Edie, who even exposes the limitation of the medico-racial cinematic paradigm by coming to Doctor Wharton with a sickness that only Gladys can cure.

The other strange thing is the surprising centrality—even scenic *focalization*—through Richard Widmark, who belongs in the looney bin and not at the center of our movie. He is a man whose job it is to allow his mouth to hold [and occasionally spastically spit] the word “nigger.” He must hold this one long note until the picture ends without tiring of his own rowdy childishness, his spastic unmotivated wiggling, or his strawman’s stuffing. Richard Widmark cannot, should not, *dare* not do any acting in the movie because it would be much too dangerous for him and for the film if Ray Biddle were real, with a logical core as strong as his emotional one. No—Ray Biddle must be chained-and-spastic at the hospital, chained-and-spastic in Edie’s home, chained-and-spastic in Dr. Wharton’s home and *sick*. Even though the narrative sometimes wants us to feel with him—feel fear, abandonment, feel the spirit of unseen Beaver canal, this rage and racism cannot withstand the camera’s gaze and violently tears away audience identification. Biddle cannot dwell in his utterance of the word “nigger” as he says it, allowing this hate to saturate him—he says it and looks away. He cannot feel these lines because they are too dangerous—both for what they gesture towards and for the countless things that they stand in for that the film’s producers would have never considered revealing. These deep, untold racisms must be symbolically, melodramatically, plaintively uttered (through one word, six letters) and with all the self-conscious falsity of someone who is a villain—

¹⁵⁵ Zanuck, memo to Lesser Samuels, February 1, 1949.

knows himself to be a villain—but does not know why. Most importantly, Ray Biddle does not love his brother. He therefore has no heart, no motives, and no connection to anything but hate. We are outside of him, even if we can see his fear and identify with it. Ray Biddle is either a racial conundrum or a lie—an antagonist comparable to a Western villain, but not a flesh and blood man.

In *No Way Out* there are three characters who vie for centrality: Brooks, Ray Biddle, and finally Wharton, whose centrality was largely written out of the final script, but remains because his home becomes the place of integration. Ray Biddle is all of the film's emotion and a lot of its materiality—he is its lines. His words both sting and direct and with a psychotic protagonist, we are bound to get lost sometime or another. Luther Brooks is all of its precision and its restraint; he moves easily and hopefully and with youth here; however Wharton is all of its compassion and strength—he is our leader. His Black maid is married to keeping his house and he is married to his work. But the two co-habitate, cozily. The “social equality” between these two is something to behold—the way they share the frame, side by side, equally—she handing him his hat and saying “you’re going to be out all night.” She is not under-privileged by the camera, not angled out or condescended to. It is through their interracial “union” that Edie is reformed from her racism. The film treats Gladys and Dr. Wharton like an old married couple. Their home is the one imperiled by Ray's racial violence in the final scenes. The film then is not about racism. It is a melodramatic imagining of what racism must be like. It is not about “real life inhuman passions” but about the inappropriateness of its utterance.

At the same time, the film wants to be about miscegenation. It can't let go of the white woman, Edie—even though it is often about a Black man, Luther. The advertising focused on the white woman angle—the sexual angle. The film wants to connect Linda Darnell as Edie to the

Brooks/Wharton doctor unit. Edie lies on Wharton's couch and we know that she had slept over at his house, although he was not home. The film even seems to want to entangle Edie and Brooks. It is Edie who calls Brooks to tell him to go to Dr. Wharton's house. Dr. Brooks also goes to Edie's house to try to convince her about the autopsy. Finally it is Edie who spreads the rumor about Brooks killing Johnny. Much of Brooks' life and future is entangled with Edie's. But Brooks is running scared towards success and his Black wife. He has things to live for. He has righteousness and purity and, even, perhaps for the first time on screen in a major non-musical motion picture, young love.

The riot scenes in *No Way Out* era cemented an on-going relationship posited in this era in some Hollywood films between racial violence and youthful street gangs, between lynch mobs and mobsters. Here, the group of African American men who go out to defend their homes are referred to by Luther as "Lefty's gang" and are clothed mostly in suits and brimmed hats, and adorned with gold chains. *The Jackie Robinson Story* also depicted the racist anti-integrationist not as WASPS or Kluxers, but rather as suited Italian Americans—showing that, as Robert Stam and Ella Shohat have argued, Hollywood sometimes had trouble depicting ethnicities in relation. Lefty makes these riots seem premeditated and generated out of bitterness and rivalry more than self-defense. Although they are fomented by a white man's race-baiting, as Dr. Brooks has told the white Dr. Wharton, "there are Negroes who are pathological white-haters." The film positions Lefty as one of these. As the parallel of Ray Biddle, Lefty's leadership makes these scenes into gang violence scenes. His speech to the rioters refers not to defending Black homes but to how badly they are going to hurt white men. In this film, as in *West Side Story* (1961), the problem of interracial violence is depicted as a war between two equal and opposing gangs. But the main problem in America was not interracial gang violence.

There was no such equality between Blacks and whites as that imagined between the gangs in this film. By making the gangs equal, the film effaced racial hierarchy.¹⁵⁶

The relationship between racial violence and sexual sadism is realized and made palpable between Rocky and Edie. In one scene, Rocky attempts to hit on Edie. In the following scene of riot preparation, he says: “How you feelin’, baby? I feel good. Come on baby, you want to try it? You want to hit a nigger, baby? Hit a nigger! Hit a nigger!” These lines are not only strange to the ear, but motivationally incomprehensible. What Rocky is taking pleasure in with these lines is an idea so twisted as to be revolting and odd—perverse—and ultimately sadistic in ways that owe much to previous depictions of gang violence and perhaps to the public sadism of lynching. The way they are uttered is strangely playful as well. Rocky is smiling (not to say laughing) when he says them, mashocistically. The combination of “baby” and “nigger” here pulls this line in two incongruous directions—the line comes to be a sort of representation of miscegenation—and gesture toward the strange twisted power the Biddles and their cohorts get from using Edie as a tool against Brooks (on the phone and to foment the riots). It is not until the end of the scene where Edie spreads the word about Brooks “murdering” Johnny that we think of the Scottsboro case (where white women lied about being raped by Black men). And by that point, it is too late; we already feel for Edie’s pathetic lot. This does not change the fact that she has helplessly and desperately lied about a Black man in order to foment race-hate and white male violence. She has become the whitegirl Bigger talks about in *Native Son* and Bette Davis plays in *In this our life* (1942), the girl who is a danger to every Black man.

Twentieth Century Fox’s most damaging act of capitulation and censorship came last; they re-cut the film in order to appease racist and law-and-order minded white censors. To recoup their

¹⁵⁶ *The Defiant Ones* (1958) is another film which equalizes Black/White relations rendering ignoring historical inequities.

costs, Fox had to show the film. And to show it they had to cut it. In this case, the PCA was not as helpful as it had been with Pinky and Zanuck seems to have been unaware of what he could get away with. A full exploration of the film's censorship struggles is beyond the scope of this chapter. But it is clear from the files of the boards of censorship in Maryland and Ohio that Fox censorship representative and film editor Hettie Gray Baker withdrew the film and had it re-cut. The changes were not made only to selected prints but are retained in the contemporary DVD version. What makes it clear that such changes were made and were racially motivated is that, as I will describe below, the Baltimore NAACP and *Ebony* were given an advance screening of the version of the film that explicitly labeled the African American fighters in the "riot scene" WWII veterans (a fact that is only hinted at in the final film by the prominent flare gun in the riot).

Acting like a public relations man, Walter White loved the film—thought it was amazing. In a letter to the *Saturday Review*, he likened it to the experience of "real life inhuman passion."¹⁵⁷ He wondered what would have happened to the *Saturday Review*-er who said the film "lacked intelligence" and subtlety "if he had been with me when I investigated a lynching in Georgia some years ago of an eight month pregnant Negro mother who had committed the crime of crying out in her grief that her recently lynched husband was innocent."¹⁵⁸ But did he watch the same movie as the *Review*-er? The film, as shown, is not about this mother—it is not about Luther Brooks, it is not even about Sidney Poitier or any Black person subject to racial injustice—it is flatly about racial villainy, Ray Biddle, the word "nigger," and night. In isolated moments, it is about Black faces with white scars, being an elevator man, Black women who find something good and true in cooking or who love their husbands so much that they question the middle class life that keeps them apart at

¹⁵⁷ Walter White, unpublished letter to *Saturday Review of Literature*, September 20, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Library of Congress Manuscript Reading Room, Washington D.C.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

night. It is at times about those women, like Dr. Brooks' mother who have race pride enough to tell their children to go and fight against racism: sometimes it is Black women talking themselves into existence (by way of soliloquy, as SRL put it).¹⁵⁹ At moments it is the beginning of what *Raisin in the Sun* will come to be; sometimes it is even—as we see Edie's face turn from kind to plaintive—about Beaver Canal, a place that we mostly only see as junkyard in flare-light, and in Edie's pouting face and tough, defeated eyes. But a movie cannot be about all these things, fully. And in many senses it is the fractured nature of the film—its pushing away from any central theme and into countless emotional tangents—that makes it a narrative failure, an autopsy of racial antagonism with no lifeblood. All we can come back to, all that is emphasized, all that holds it together and all that we can really remember of the film is the word “nigger,” and that one thing is something the film's directors have found but know little about.

No Way Out in Public Discourse:
The Censorship of No Way Out:

In order to understand more clearly *No Way Out's* racial meanings, we must return to the various sites of agency and constraint I have outlined in previous chapters. I have argued that the production of *No Way Out* was tailored in such a way as to produce a film that was “open” and unspecific in its rendering of the riots and in its assessment of the causes for racial violence. But how did this openness affect the censorship of the film? It was the ambiguity of the film that provided for interracial culture wars over the film's meanings and that caused censors, as we shall see in the case of Maryland, to not only dampen the film's racial articulation but to cut the film to support their own racially-inflected interpretation of it.

¹⁵⁹ Hollins Alpert, review of *No Way Out*, 28-30. Alpert refers specifically to the soliloquy rendered by Cora Brooks.

A number of states and cities banned or required significant cuts to *No Way Out*, perhaps because of the build up and ad campaign around the film.¹⁶⁰ In Ohio, for example, Hettie Grey Baker, the correspondents with the Ohio State Censorship Division, sent numerous notes to quell fears and show evidence of successful and profitable runs.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, Ohio required relatively crude cuts: rather than cutting portions of scenes, they required instead that a 153 ft. block of footage be removed including all of the “Negro Preparation for riot. White preparation for riot in junkyard Negro Congregating in alleys. Actual riot.”¹⁶² Likewise Virginia eliminated all the riot preparation scenes from the point where John leaves home, presumably to take a walk, until Dr. Brooks makes a phone call alerting the authorities to the impending riots.¹⁶³ The phone call, one which Zanuck had apparently shot to cover himself against censorship, did save the film’s meaning. While significant power was taken out of the scene because the riots were not depicted, Brooks’ call, although framed as a warning, still communicates the African American strategy in the riots—that they would ambush Beaver Canal before the white folks could get to them, a strategy that is later confirmed victorious by the presence of multitudes of white men in the hospital. However, as cut, this scene renders Black victory as mere suggestion. Brooks’s retelling of the riot plans however present the African American fighters in a less than positive light. Rather than suggesting that the whites were a lynch party, Brooks says that “There is going to be trouble with Beaver Canal. They’re

¹⁶⁰ It is also important to note that not all of the censor boards actually had a problem with the film—only Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland required excision, the film was not banned anywhere, and Massachusetts, New York and Kansas approved the film without eliminations.

¹⁶¹ Hettie Grey Baker, note to Mrs. Warfield, Sept 6, 1950. “Detroit approved without cuts. Chicago with exactly the cuts we’re making in the revised version—only we are making *more!* Hettie Gray Baker, letter to Clyde Hissong, August 8, 1950; Hettie Gray Baker, letter to Susannah Warfield, Aug 17, 1950. Hettie Gray Baker, letter to Clyde Hissong, Aug 18, 1950. Hettie Gray Baker, telegram to Susannah Warfield, Sept 11, 1950. Baker also visited for the screening of the revised print on Sept 12, 1950, according to a board memo.

¹⁶² Censors’ Slip dated Sept 18, 1950. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society. Columbus, OH.

¹⁶³ Elimination order dated Aug 24, 1950. VDMPC Records. Library of Virginia. State Records Center. Richmond, VA.

coming over. Lefty Jones is getting his *gang* out.” (Italics mine) Referring to the group of Black men who are coming out to defend themselves and avoid attack on their homes as a pre-existing “gang” casts them more as a group of criminals than the last defense against a lynch mob.

The film was also banned in Boston by police because it “might cause trouble,” an act which was protested by the Anti-Defamation League, the NAACP, Freedom House, Metropolitan council of B’nai Brith, the Public Education Association, Citizens’ Planning and Housing Council and the Common council for American unity, all groups who saw the potential of the film to do good in terms of race relations.¹⁶⁴

The Maryland board has several conferences on the film to which they invited members of Baltimore’s Black community as censor’s consultants. Few of these representatives had objections when it was shown, except for the head of the Maryland Interracial Commission, Joseph P. Healey, who had unspecified objections to the riot scenes, and, although the records are not clear, perhaps one of the representatives of the Urban League.¹⁶⁵ The police on the other hand had a major problem with the riot scenes.¹⁶⁶ The board therefore on the suggestion of the police called for excision of all traces of the riot scenes, except for the scenes in the hospital during and after the riot. Immediately thereafter, Hettie Gray Baker withdrew the film for “resubmission in one or two weeks.” The local NAACP was outraged at the censors’ actions. Both Lillie Jackson and Carl Murphy contacted the board.¹⁶⁷ Although both were representatives of the same organization, they had quite

¹⁶⁴ “Seven Groups protest Chicago Ban on film ‘No Way Out,’” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Sept 2, 1950.

¹⁶⁵ See Analysis chart for feature films for “No Way Out. MSBMPC Records, State Archives of Maryland, Annapolis.

¹⁶⁶ See MSBMPC minutes for Aug 12, 1950, which state: “On viewing *No way out*, Chief inspector Joseph Willance, Baltimore Police Dept. and Captain W. H. Weber of the Maryland State Police advised the Board by letters dated August 12, 1950 and August 8, 1950 that the riot scenes and events leading thereto should be eliminated.” MSBMPC Records, State Archives of Maryland, Annapolis.

¹⁶⁷ For Murphy’s visit, see Board Minutes, Oct 18, 1950. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD. For Jackson’s protest, see undated “Statement of the Baltimore Branch concerning the showing of No Way Out,” Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

different aims for the film. Carl Murphy wanted the epithets taken out (out of deference for the ways these words have historically hurt Blacks). Lillie Jackson, having seen a spark of promise in the image of African Americans fighting back, wanted the riot scenes put back in. The riot scenes are a representation of Black resistance that the film has kept at bay in Poitier's character. As this reception of the censorship of *No Way Out* shows, the censorship of the film dampened and altered its racial meanings.

The case of *No Way Out* also raises some questions about the board's use and perhaps misuse of the Black consultants whose opinion they solicited. Although they brought in African American representatives, in this case, they did not listen to them but were rather deferred to the opinions of white state authorities—namely, the Attorney General and the Police—about probable Black reception. On October 4th, Baltimore Deputy Police Inspector Wallace, and Deputy Attorney General Harvey viewed the film (Wallace for a second time) and found the board's previous order unacceptable and their deletions incomplete. Therefore the board passed “a supplemental order on October 9, 1950, requiring full compliance not only with its original order, dated August 29, 1950, but the said supplemental order, the latter providing for additional eliminations of certain scenic matter and dialogue.”¹⁶⁸ Two days after this supplementary order was issued, Carl Murphy protested the board that the film should not be shown because the film “tends to debase and corrupt morals of the people by permitting language that is not decent for women and children to hear”¹⁶⁹ (he was referring to the epithets) but “the Board carefully considered the verbal protest, which Mr. Murphy

¹⁶⁸ See Board Minutes, Oct 4, 1950. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD. All of this was going on at the same time the board was corresponding with the other state boards about the outcome of the *Lost Boundaries* censorship case in Atlanta. See Board minutes Sept 6, 1950. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁶⁹ Sydney Traub, letter to Walter White, October 23, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

supplemented by a telegram to Governor Lane on the same day and thereupon determined to permit its licensing of the revised film to stand. The Chiefs of Police in Salisbury and Cambridge were requested to notify the Board of any disturbance that might arise in the exhibition of the film.”¹⁷⁰ The following day, in response to a telegram from Walter White protesting any bans at all, the board refused again to rescind their order. Thus, as we see, Maryland shifted their policy on the film to suit white government officials rather than (and often at the expense of) Black civic and civil rights organizers.

Maryland’s deletions from *No Way Out* were relatively extensive and ranged in focus from issues of sexuality,¹⁷¹ which were, as I suggest above, clearly a part of the film’s subtext—to miscegenation to profanity to racial violence.¹⁷² Although the board eliminated many epithets from the film, they did not delete them entirely, which was the substance of Murphy’s critique. Perhaps the overabundance of epithets (which Carl Murphy suggested occurred over 30 times in the film) helped the distributors to avoid having the word completely banned from the film, as censor boards were being increasingly moderate with the recent Supreme Court decisions. Notably, among the epithet eliminations, Maryland eliminated the statement by the Sheriff that the “boogies lowered the boom on Beaver Canal,” a statement which made law enforcement agents appear to be racist.¹⁷³ The racism of law enforcement officials was a major issue in Baltimore and one that Carl Murphy had

¹⁷⁰ See MSBMPC minutes, Oct 18, 1950. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁷¹ Most of the sexual material excised had to do with Edie’s extra-marital affair with her brother in law: “In taunting Edie as to her past relations [an extra-marital affair] with him white she was married to his brother, eliminate the following spoken lines by Ray, “it sounded good in the dark”; “you had other things on your mind.”; “What we did to Johnny we did together. He didn’t know it. It didn’t hurt him.” The overarching tone of coercion between Ray and Edie—his constant lewd and possessive manner with her is critiqued and excised here.

¹⁷² For text of film cuts see board minutes dated Aug 30, 1950. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

made news in the Black press, especially after he personally had been brutalized by a racist cop.¹⁷⁴ However, the board's overwhelming concern was with the scenes of preparation for the race riots.¹⁷⁵ They entirely omitted the line in which Rocky entices Edie to "hit a nigger!" and as well as Lefty "fomenting a negro [sic] mob attack on whites" (Italics mine). The censor's language in their eliminations of both of these scenes is telling, specifically the words "fomenting" and "negro mob" (and the absence of such language in their description of Rocky's encouragement of Edie's racial violence), tell us much about how they read the riots. They saw the riots not as based upon an attack on African Americans (or in terms of the history of attack on African Americans) but rather as an attack of Blacks on whites.

The board also eliminated "all views of saliva on side of negro doctor's face following white woman spitting on his face while at bedside of her son-casualty of the race riot."¹⁷⁶ This scene is important because as the only up close scene of white on Black racial violence in the film, since, as I note above the riots themselves were shot in long shot. It stands in symbolically for the other acts of racial violence that have gone before. It also shows "average people"—even older white mothers—as perpetrators of racial violence. The stunned gaze of the white nurse in the scene and her silence also underscore a sort of institutional complicity in Brooks' denigration as well as his status as "spectacle" in the hospital, one that earlier scenes suggested. Finally, it shows Brooks, our semi-protagonist, as a victim of racial violence for the first time in the film. Again, the board's deletions dampened the

¹⁷⁴Editor Sues Baltimore Cop For \$25,000," *Chicago Defender*, Jul 5, 1941, 4.

¹⁷⁵ They excised the following parts of the representation of the riot: "R4 Eliminate all views of the white mob in junk yard preparing to attack negroes to a point where Edie approaches Rocky. Eliminate all of the following lines of Rocky: "take that, you black crud. How do you like that black boy...You want to hit a nigger come on Baby hit a nigger. Hit a nigger!" R4 Prior to the flare being lighted, shorten scene disclosing negro mob creeping up on white mob preparing to attack the latter. Upon flare being lighted, reduce the riot scene revealing the negro and white mobs attacking each other." According to the elimination order printed in the MSBMPC Minutes of Aug 30, 1950.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

racial meanings of the text and caused them to support their own white, government-identified readings of the text.

Maryland Censor board head, Sydney Traub's illuminating correspondence with Walter White demonstrates his overall perspective on the film. Traub failed to see how the film was, as White had put it "emasculated" by the omission of the scenes in question: "the two central characters are not involved in the scenes that have either been eliminated or reduced. The general theme of the film has not been disturbed and I venture to say that those who have not seen the original version will not be able to detect the cutting that has taken place."¹⁷⁷ However for White, whose standard was not continuity, the film's meaning had been fundamentally altered because it was, indeed, the mob spirit itself, the lynch spirit that had made the film so powerful.

Although Traub had initially "issued a public statement saying that if the picture had been about Jews there would have been hundreds of protests because of the racial epithets,"¹⁷⁸ his attitude towards his NAACP film consultants changed drastically after his consultation with Maryland's Attorney General and the heads of the state and local police departments. After this meeting, Traub was of a conservative mindset that in many ways was shared among the censors who required changes to *No Way Out*—all of whom, regardless of location called for quite similar deletions: "I too deplore racial prejudice," he wrote Walter White, "and having been a soldier in both World Wars, I am equally mindful of the danger that can flow from such hatred. But I cannot see how you can hope to eradicate the disease by depicting violence by mobs in utter defiance of law and order."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Traub, letter to Walter White, Oct 24, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹⁷⁸ Clarence Mitchell, letter to Walter White, Oct 13, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹⁷⁹ Sydney Traub, letter to Walter White, Oct 30, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

The next line of Traub's letter shows that his censorship of the film was based in large part on his reading of the narrative of the film and specifically his frustration with Luther's actions, a frustration he took out on the film itself, cutting it with a savage punitiveness:

The unwarranted attack of the white mob upon the negro group could have easily been avoided by any member of the latter or by Dr. Luther Brooks calling the police,¹⁸⁰ but instead the negro group in mob-like fashion, took it upon itself to march through the streets to the assembly point of the white mob and as a consequence, reversed the attack that was to have been made upon it. Not only did this board regard those scenes and accompanying dialogue as being highly provocative and crime inciting, but so did Maryland State and Baltimore City Police Departments, in addition to members of the state Interracial Commission who strongly advised that the scenes in question be eliminated.¹⁸¹

Traub's reading here betrays his own perspective on the scene, one primed by his racial identity and his identity as representative of the state: it seems he ultimately deplores and resents Luther Brooks and strongly dis-identifies with him because he did not turn to law enforcement officials to solve his problem, but instead, calls a local Alderman (presumably African American) to circumvent the violence. Ultimately he uses representatives of the state, the police department as well as the Interracial Commission, to make his case.

II) African American Responses to *No Way Out*:

Walter White, on the other hand, saw the film differently and argued against its regulation. The different readings were partly based on the widely variant theories of both film effects and the causes of riots to which the two men adhered. For White, the film had to be shown in its entirety and not just because White deplored censorship. He wrote to Traub: "our basic point of disagreement, which I will be happy to come to Baltimore to discuss with you, if you wish, deals with

¹⁸⁰ Traub was right—rather than calling the police, Luther phones Alderman Thompkins, presumably a black Alderman telling him "I haven't called the police because its something you might handle without them" but to ensure that Brooks didn't seem to support the action, the filmmakers had Brooks reiterate "with or without the police you've got to stop them."

¹⁸¹ Sydney Traub, letter to Walter White, Oct 30, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

the broader issue of what the uncensored film attempts to point out, namely, that race hatred is a disease which, unless checked, can bring disaster to the democratic way of life.”¹⁸² For White, Ray Biddle was not a man but a symbol of the sorts of sadistic race hatred that White had known and experienced. He and other members of the NAACP cheered the film in large part because it depicted the exact sort of extreme raced *hatred* (not mere everyday racism), that American most needed to eradicate—the kind that led to the slaying of Black men and women—just the extreme kind that they regularly saw in their work. The film needed to show what NAACP staffer Edna B. Kerin had called “a lynch atmosphere” to call America to “wake up to the venomous race hate capable of inciting such violence.”¹⁸³

White, who also had first hand knowledge of international politics, read the film in terms of the international political situation. He stated that because the Korean war had revealed that “colored” nations of the world distrusted the US because of race politics, the film did the important work of showing that we were working on the race issue:

Today our nation is threatened not only by communism but by the distrust of the two-thirds of the people of the world who are colored because of the race prejudice here in the United States. To a large extent the future of democracy depends upon our closing the gap between protestations and practice of democracy. ‘No Way Out’ is of tremendous importance in opening the eyes and stirring the consciences of thoughtful Americans.¹⁸⁴

As White understood it, the film would do little to raise the possibility of riots—in fact by exposing prejudice, the film would do much to alter the conditions—namely racism—that were the underlying cause of riots. White also so completely believed that race riots were generally precipitated by whites

¹⁸² Walter White, letter to Sydney Traub, Oct 27, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹⁸³ Edna B. Kerin conversation, dictated by phone to Ed Harrison 8/22/50. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹⁸⁴ Walter White, letter to Sidney Hollander, Oct 20, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

(as his research and experience in investigating over a dozen riots had shown) and read the film in that way, while Traub just as basically conceived that Blacks were the cause of rioting. For White the importance of abating censorship hinged on maintaining the “powerful impact of the lesson which the film teaches.” He worried also that “picture makers will not carry on the progress we have made in recent years for fear of censor troubles.”¹⁸⁵ White saw the problems with the film, and even penned in his personal notes that he was pleasantly surprised, as he thought the film would “give evidence to those who say that the abolition of segregation and practice of decency will cause race riots. Was wrong!”¹⁸⁶ Instead the film “in contrast with previous additions of moving picture makers to showing the Negro only as a servant or a comic figure” showed Poitier “as a normal human being and especially showing the odds against which he has had to fight.”¹⁸⁷ For White, although there were problems with the film and although these “odds” were left vague, *No Way Out* was the best so far.¹⁸⁸

Differences in film reading practices and meaning making, not only between the local and the national NAACP but between different leaders of the Baltimore Branch became evident. The alternative readings offered by Lillie Jackson were even more at odds with Traub’s state-centered reading than were White’s and Murphy’s. For Jackson, the problem with the film was that without the African American violence, there was no retribution—as the censors might term it—no

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Undated memo for the files. See *No Way Out* folder. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹⁸⁷ Walter White, Letter to Mayor Hynes of Boston regarding banning of film in Boston, Sept 12, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹⁸⁸ In addition, White also wanted to regain Darryl Zanuck’s friendship after White’s criticism of *Pinky* had divided them. He wrote to friends Elizabeth and J. Waties Waring that attending the film was “special” because “Darryl Zanuck was infuriated because I did not like *Pinky* and said so in print.” Walter White, letter to Elizabeth and J. Waties Waring, July 21, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

compensating moral values—to punish the use of the word “nigger” (and the racial violence it implied). Jackson, closely reading the navy flare as a sign that these were WWII veterans stated:

One of the most important scenes in the picture is that in which young colored veterans of World War II having heard of the preparation of the white Beavertown gang to raid and destroy the colored community, organize the beat the white hoodlums to the punch. Instead of the colored people being attacked, driven out of their homes and raped, the white hoodlums were annihilated almost to a man! Instead of the hospital wards being filled with the intended colored victims, they overflow with the white mobsters, as a result of the colored veterans organized defense of their homes, their women and children.

Thus as the picture unfolds, the epithets and threats are shown to be the stimulating cause of the victorious battle by the colored veterans and justify the intense defense put up by them...

“The NAACP feels first of all that the deleted scenes should be restored so that the real impact of the picture will be maintained...However if the Board insists on eliminating these scenes showing the pre-riot preparation and the significant statement showing the victory of the intended victims over the *mobsters*, then the NAACP’s position is that the epithets should be removed because they will have no meaning. Unless the epithets are cut out, we oppose the showing of this picture in Baltimore. The Board has retained these epithets in the picture which degrade the colored citizen and deleted the parts which every thinking American can appreciate of a citizen defending his home and his womankind.

On the heels of civil rights, this particular statement voices the importance of the riot scene and perhaps of an emergent sense of the justification of violence in pursuit of Black rights. Jackson brings to light here a reading quite at odds with Traub’s and one which points to the film as open signifier. First, Jackson reads the African American fighters as “World War II veterans” where Traub read them as a “negro mob,” and Dr. Brooks, in the film, called them a “gang.” Because Jackson had seen an earlier print of the film, one which included more textual evidence of the Black men’s veteran status than that of the flare gun, she reads Black victim-hood into the story. Traub on the other hand reads not only Black villainy but lawlessness into the same scene, highlighting how film became a testing ground for the articulation of opposing consciousness about Black rights and, specifically, about the righteousness of Black retributive violence. Clarence Mitchell, director of the Washington

Bureau of the NAACP, agreed with Jackson's reading of the film—and with her imputation that the white group was not a gang but rather a lynch mob. In a telegram to Spyrous Skouras of Fox, he wrote complaining that the “defeat of the [white] *mob*” (italics mine) had been entirely left out of the picture and stating that, as cut, “its original message is hopelessly lost...Unless picture can be shown without epithets, urge that it be withdrawn.”¹⁸⁹

Reading it as part of a “cycle” of Negro-themed movies, *Ebony* also praised the *earlier version* (now lost) of the film calling it “the most outspoken, hardest hitting picture every filmed on racial hatred...Where others dealt with passing, Army Jim Crow and lynchings—all areas that do not personally affect the average white—*No Way Out* deals with events and people that are a part of any community.” However, the film that the producers showed them was drastically different both from both the original Maryland version and from the “official” commercially distributed DVD and VHS version. The original version that was presented to *Ebony* (probably the same one presented to the NAACP in Maryland) played up the postwar angle, making a stronger connection between the Black Veterans and the race riot—and therein a stronger link between the race riots of 1943, which were intimately connected with war's ideological failures and were the most immediate and pertinent historical referent for the film's own race riot scene. For example, *Ebony* makes mention of a scene where “a one-armed white vet” tries “to stop his father from joining the race rioters.” When the father calls the son a “nigger lover,” he responds by saying: “As my father, as an American, as a husband, I think you stink.” This scene of white race-traitorism, among others, was entirely absent from the currently released film.¹⁹⁰ The version of the film that *Ebony* previewed also dealt with the

¹⁸⁹ Clarence Mitchell, letter to Spyrous Skouras, Oct 13, 1950. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

¹⁹⁰ In the early version of *No Way Out* that *Ebony* saw, Linda Darnell was actually killed in Poitier's place, delivering, in her dying moments, a speech that finally exposed unarticulated poor-white ennui—even nihilism—in the wake of African

issue of segregation more directly. When Dr. Wharton invites Dr. Brooks to breakfast, the latter responds: “‘where would you take me?’...Trying to explain Jim Crow, the Negro says: ‘I’ll never live long enough to learn what you know about medicine, but you can’t teach me anything about being black’.”¹⁹¹ This scene, one that both challenges Brooks’ weakness by allowing him to stand up to Wharton, his mentor, and also presents the reality of segregation, is missing from the film as released.

The Black responses at the preview screening held at the Regent Theatre also reflected disappointment that the film’s most powerful scenes had been clipped: “Let it show,” said Mrs. Hilda Purvey a member of the preview audience, “that the colored race is finally fighting back.” In spite of the cuts, many accepted the picture as a step towards integration. Said one viewer: “Until America is ready to accept strong motives for racial cooperation, democracy will remain stagnant. ‘No Way Out’ provides such a motive.” Even Carl Murphy’s wife said of the film: “It should awaken the conscience of all and help better interrelationships.”¹⁹² In addition, *Baltimore Afro-American* film reviewers Lillian Scott and E.B. Rea praised the film. Rea was moved by the film’s depiction of the reality of white racism and Black victimization. He called it a revelation of “the actual (whether evident or not) thoughts and feeling of millions of persons.” Appropriating Zanuck’s racial evasiveness, he stated that the film dramatized the “sensibilities of both the race that is confused in its thinking and the race that is the victims of this confusion.”¹⁹³ Lillian Scott also praised the film, especially the performance

American gains, a subject that is rendered strong subtext by the pitting of Biddle against Brooks in the story. While we pity Brooks, we also strangely pity Edie and Biddle. In the earlier version Edie laments: “We’re garbage you and me. We gotta get cleared away or we stink up the streets. A human being has got to have a reason for being alive. Color ain’t enough or the money we’ve got. Just hurting ain’t enough and that’s all we ever did. We never built anything, we never healed anybody—we never even cooked a supper for friends. He’s a human being. He lives for everything and we live for nothing.”

¹⁹¹ “No Way Out,” *Ebony*, Mar 1950, 33.

¹⁹² “‘No Way Out’ hailed as powerful drama,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct 14, 1950, 17.

¹⁹³ “‘No Way Out’ vividly depicts ugly traits” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct 21, 1950, 18.

of Richard Widmark, but noted that Poitier's Brooks was "not quite as professional or mature" in his bearing as "the young interns, white or colored, one sees in hospitals." Scott continued, "It is, of course, a great relief to see Hollywood portraying Negroes as highly intelligent, trained people for a change but why do these superior qualities always come packaged in an overly receptive, humorless individual...[I]s there no such thing as an intelligent phlegmatic individual?"¹⁹⁴ Although *No Way Out* was recognized as a departure, in its revised form, it had not gone far enough for many African Americans.

A few of my oral history respondents did remember the film. Mr. Fabre of Brooklyn for example noted that his community did not like the film because of the use of the word "nigger":

When I saw No way out, [most of the people in my neighborhood] said 'That's just 'N' this and 'N' that.' ...—'That's just another picture with the word "N" in it. They say: "you going to see it?" I say ""yes, I would like to see what it's like." They said: "It's the same old 'S' [sic]." That's what they would say.

Another respondent, Mr. Gollop of Harlem, New York, although he praised the film for showing a Black man who had "a profession," critiqued the film's racial message. Evidence of the openness of the text, its slippery racial ideology is manifested in the fact for Mr. Gollop the film actually was pro-segregation: When I asked: "What did you think about how it presented integration?" Mr. Gollop responded: "It didn't present—actually it presents ...segregated is better than integrated." Although the film presented the possibility of professional improvement, it nevertheless suggested that integration was dangerous. However, for Mr. Gollop both the spitting incident and the unfairness in hospital treatment were realistic:

[Richard Widmark] He was one of my favorite actors. But cause [Ray Biddle] was such a racist that remember he spit in Sidney Poitier's face and Sidney Poitier was there to help *him*. You know.

ECS: was that true to life? I mean how did you respond to that?

¹⁹⁴ Lillian Scott, "No Way Out' hits bias a solid blow," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Aug. 12, 1950.

Yeah well I felt it was true to life. Cause ...You know about [Dr. Charles] Drew. He was the one that invented Plasma during the Second World War. And because of him they saved a lot of lives on the battle field in the Second World War. And he got in an accident in Carolina and they wouldn't give him a transfusion. Now see.

Just as in the case of *Pinky*, much of the earlier material was more powerful, in *No Way Out* in efforts to circumvent censorship (or, worse, industrial sanctions resulting from poor box office), Fox, under Zanuck's authority, clipped many of the scenes that were most meaningful to Black audiences, changing what was already quite an elaborately symbolic and melodramatic representation of racial realities into an even more racially equivocal text.

Conclusion:

As one of the most racially-progressive studio heads, Darryl F. Zanuck, provides an important test case for the boundaries of Black representation in the studio system. In Pre-SRC Hollywood, Zanuck had helped develop films like *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Little Caesar* (1931), and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932). In the postwar era, the apparent decline of censorship and a public taste for realism offered Zanuck the opportunity to further explore themes that pertained to these pressing issues of social justice. Zanuck was well trained in accommodating the censors and, as Custen has shown, regularly “ran interference” with the state censors on his productions.¹⁹⁵ But Zanuck's tendency to incorporate censors' advice may have led him to curb his racial representations. Industry self-regulation both by the PCA and by the producers themselves, was often ruled by industrial interests of the motion picture business, which often led it to conform to Jim-crow and discriminatory practices. It seems the stories Zanuck developed were often at their most effective and powerful before they went into production.

¹⁹⁵ Custen, *Twentieth Century's Fox*, 151.

In this chapter, I focused on the textual effects of these studio interventions, asking what was the effect of these interventions on cultural meaning and on the racial resonance of cinematic material. Through examining *Pinky* and *No Way Out*, we can see the range of textual and narrative devices employed at Twentieth Century Fox in a single era of racial representation, and the particularly postwar years. What is clear from these examples is that Zanuck's racial productions not only had multiple lead characters (which provided for separate Black and white reading strategies), but were also "directed," in a broader sense of the term, by a lively and various group of voices and perspectives which combined to author the text—ranging from Walter White and his daughter to various scriptwriters and studio insiders. Zanuck sought, therein, to open up spectatorial possibilities to various publics before production, creating a kind of textual polysemy unnecessary for texts that were not designed to please two racial groups at odds with one another. Ultimately, though, Zanuck conformed these voices to his own narrative regime and returned to a set of racial formulas that limited these films. The process of production, however, reveals the various narrative possibilities that remain latent in the text. It draws out voices, directions, and experiences only hinted at in the final film version, giving us a fuller picture of the racial meanings and racial promise that undergirded Fox's cinematic articulations.

This chapter has given only a sense of how major, mainstream Hollywood productions operated to limit cinematic explorations of race. It begs the question: how did the racial politics of the independent racial productions differ from studio racial politics? As we shall see in the following chapter, which is meant to be read in conversation with this one, many of the systematic constraints that bound Zanuck and his product were absent in the field of non-Hollywood production.

Chapter 6:
Racial Production Politics, Reception, and Censorship: The Meanings of The Well (1951)

In 1940, Dorothy Gordon, an African American girl, just nine years old, was sexually assaulted and murdered by a white man in Los Angeles, California, an event that made headlines in the Black press. Her body was later discovered in a grassy abandoned field by three Paramount film company employees looking for items for a film shoot.¹ In the summer of 1943, racial violence erupted in various cities throughout the country, including Beaumont, Texas, Newark, New Jersey, and prominently, Detroit, Michigan. In April 1949, a young white child, Kathy Fiscus, fell down an abandoned well (120 feet deep) in the middle of a field. Rescue crews worked into the night to retrieve the child, and Americans across the country sat spellbound in front of their television sets and radios waiting to find out whether the child would live or die. This last incident, broadcast on television, sparked regional and national attention. In a letter to the *L.A. Times*, California resident Charles David stated, “All over the world, adults identified themselves with the parents of Kathy and every child imagined itself in Kathy’s place. The ordeal of this little girl stirred our imaginations and brought the San Marino tragedy strangely close to everyone.”² Louise Dresser, another citizen who wrote to the newspapers, stated, “Little Kathy’s life has shown the entire world how closely our country is knitted together—how in a crisis, we are completely ONE. Gone are the big or little differences of opinions and policies—gone all thought of anything but working, pulling, sweating in

¹“Find body of Dorothy Gordon, Kidnap Victim,” *Chicago Defender*, Apr 27, 1940, 1.

² Charles David, “Letters to the Editor: Thoughts about Kathy,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr 15, 1949, A4.

one great spirit of brotherhood.”³ Another commentator on the tragedy wrote of the “splendor of unselfish emotion” displayed in the rescue efforts and commented that it had produced, “something like a miracle of human compassion,” the small child becoming “a symbol of something precious in all of our lives.”⁴ Kathy Fiscus died, however, producing a sense of loss shared by many throughout the country.⁵

Although the Detroit riots news story may appear removed from the Kathy Fiscus and Dorothy Gordon stories, the 1951 film, *The Well*, joins the strands of these three variously meaningful contemporary American news narratives in an attempt to make sense of “the problem” of race in the early 1950s. Building popular memory into a test of equality, *The Well* asked white and Black viewers to feel the same for a little Black child as they had for Kathy Fiscus. *The Well* articulates race in ways which vary from Hollywood’s melodramatic techniques as evidenced in films like *No Way Out*. Its racial representation was clearly and self-consciously different from other “racial message” films of the moment. It also differed too in its relationship to the industry and its use of the comparative freedom of representation provided by its status as independent production.⁶

Far too little scholarly attention has gone to analyzing and appraising the representation of African Americans in B-, independent, and foreign films in this period, although my reception research has shown that many African American reviewers were intrigued and sometimes found pleasure in these images.⁷ As Catherine Benamou’s *Its All True: Orson Welles’s Pan-American Odyssey* points out, individual independent filmmakers often took bold initiatives to represent African

³ Louise Dresser, “Letters to the Editor: Thoughts about Kathy,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr 15, 1949, A4.

⁴ “One Little Girl,” *New York Times*, Apr 11, 1949, 24.

⁵ There is a striking similarity between this narrative and Billy Wilder’s *Ace in the Hole*, produced the same year. But according to the AFI catalogue, Wilder publicly denied that the Fiscus incident had been an influence on *Ace in the Hole*.

⁶ Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 215-249.

⁷ See for example, Lillian Smith, “A Southerner Talking,” *The Chicago Defender*, Apr 9, 1949, 7. Lillian Smith, “Intruder In The Dust’ Puts Hernandez In ‘The Tops’ Class,” *The Chicago Defender*, Nov 26, 1949, 27.

Americans, and race more generally, in a nuanced fashion that attempted to create cultural verisimilitude.⁸ The unusual production practices and strategies of encoding race in *The Well*, which was described by both Black and white press as one of the best racial problem films of the late 1940s and early 1950s “racial problem cycle,” prompted the deletion and dampening of racially evocative material by some censors (as examination of censorship files reveals) and generated complex African American response. Stylistically, *The Well*, more than either *The Burning Cross* or *Native Son*—also independent ventures—used realism to motivate white and Black audience identification with African Americans in the plot and to cause them to feel, at the moment of the burgeoning civil rights movement, the African American historical realities and contemporary circumstances that necessitated direct action.

The Well also operated in ways that are intensely culturally intertextual not only in style but content, and this intertextuality served as the basis for identification across race for white audiences and perhaps also, at the film’s end, for Black audiences. As with many low budget films that could not create their own exploitation, *The Well* infused intense and culturally relevant current events into the narrative structure to arouse excitement and recognition among movie goers. The Kathy Fiscus incident had been broadcast over radio and television in 1950 and, like the Baby Jessica incident in 1986, had Americans glued to the broadcast of the unfolding story. The Detroit riots had been plastered over headlines in the Black and white press and captured on film by the All-American newsreel company. And the Gordon kidnapping had made the papers in both the Black and the white press, making headlines in the Black press as far west as Chicago.

⁸ Catherine Benamou, *It's All True: Orson Welles's Pan-American Odyssey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 147. Benamou states that auteur’s positioning “in the ‘margins’ (defined politically, aesthetically, culturally or socially) always introduces an element of ‘risk’ vis-à-vis the industry...Yet these same margins can also give the auteur the independence and moral strength with which to confront the industrial Goliath,” (147).

The Well drew on collective memory and the structures of feeling created by previous communal, mass mediated events to build a cinematic experience which not only depicted community but interpellated its audience as community. In doing so, it merged events with differing cultural meanings into one single racially-coded fictional text: the Detroit riots are combined with the Kathy Fiscus case and the Gordon case in a sort of montage of recent mass mediated events. However, the racial theme remained prominent and the white child victim of the Kathy Fiscus incident—the one most directly and obviously referenced—is replaced, in *The Well*, with a Black victim, who initially bears some resemblance to the Black victim in the Gordon kidnapping case. Adapting a white tragedy into an interracial one (and replacing a white child victim with a Black one) rather than using a white character to play a Black character as in *Pinky*, was a different strategy for extending white sympathy. The producers used the innocent white child's endangerment and eventual death, still fresh in the minds of the audience, and translated it into a Black context as a way for audiences to enter into identification with a Black child victim and by extension with Black community and culture. This bold move shifted the spectatorial possibilities of the racial problem film.

The Well tells the story of a seemingly average and peaceful town somewhere outside of the South. The film begins with Carolyn (Gwendolyn Laster), a five- or six-year-old African American girl, happily skipping along in a deserted meadow and then, suddenly, falling down a well. The child's parents, Ralph Crawford (Ernest Anderson) and Martha Crawford (Madie Norman) report Carolyn missing. While Sheriff Ben Kellog (Richard Rober) and the family at first suspect the child has merely wandered off, it is soon discovered that the child was last seen with a strange white man, who not only held the girl's hand as she crossed the street but bought her flowers. His behavior seems, to both

African Americans and whites in the community, to incriminate the white man, at least in the disappearance, if not the kidnapping, rape, or murder of the child. Although the sheriff attempts to keep the involvement of a strange white man in the case a secret, an African American youth, Jimmie (uncredited) overhears his boss, flowershop owner Mr. Woody (Wheaton Chambers), tell the sheriff that it was a white man who was last seen with Carolyn. Jimmie tells other members of the Black community. Word quickly spreads through the community, as it would, that a white man is being sought in the disappearance of a Black child. In a reversal of the standard American miscegenation narrative (Black man/white woman) and the better part of the racial history of law enforcement, the police enter into hot pursuit of the white man, glaring down every white man in a grey suit they encounter. The fact that the man they have been pursuing is eventually revealed to be Claude Packard (Henry Morgan), the nephew of local business leader and construction company owner, Sam Packard (Barry Kelly), means little to them. Claude Packard angrily, then desperately pleads his innocence, as he is grilled by police, stating “I’ve got a wife and two kids. A thing like this could ruin me.”

When members of the Black community find out about the situation—and its reversal of the miscegenation narrative—, they react with incredulity about the possibility for justice, openly critiquing, in public places like lunch counters and public libraries, the historical double standard of the system of justice. The girl’s father, Ralph Crawford, and uncle, Mr. Gaines (Alfred Grant) are justifiably angered by the attempts of Sam Packard to use his influence to secure the release of his nephew and confront him outside the police station. Packard, who is already frustrated by the failure of his underhanded and deceitful attempt to free his nephew (attempts which his nephew resists), is further upset by this encounter with the tearful pleading father and his angry brother in law. He

raises his elbows defensively in an attempt to frighten the pair back. In this pivotal moment, one in which hurt pride, accident, and true and justified Black anger dangerously combine, Packard falls—or is pushed—onto the ground—(the camera renders this unclear). White citizens crowd around in concern, while the Black father and uncle quickly slip through the crowd. When a woman asks what happened, a bespectacled, average-looking older white man says simply: “The niggers did it.”

This incident marks the first of a series of physical, often violent, encounters between Blacks and whites that are emblematic of the fragile nature of racial politics in the town. Word quickly spreads among whites that “they” (i.e. African Americans) have “beaten up” Sam Packard. The core of those involved in perpetuating the rumors are the average folk—white working people—Gleason (Roy Engel), a man who operates a radio company, unnamed women who linger outside a restaurant and a shop. The worst of the violence is orchestrated *not* by the working class men but by a hard-working local industrialist—a pillar of the town, Sam Packard. To add further pressure to the already tense situation, in another part of town, a young white woman Lois (Mary Ellen Kay), frustrated by the inattention of a boy she admires, lies to him that she has been “insulted” by a Black man. This too contributes to setting off a string of incidences of racial violence. When a group of African American men set one of Claude Packard’s warehouses on fire, Packard gathers together a huge mob to “drive the ‘niggers’ out of town,” claiming that he will accomplish the task even if he has to “kill ever mother’s son of them.” As a result, the African American community rallies together to defend itself.

The town is only pulled away from this racial violence when Peter, a white child in Carolyn’s class at school, discovers that the missing girl has fallen down a well. Moved by a universal wave of compassion for the child, the entire town, including Sam Packard and his nephew, Claude, come to

their senses and to the girl's aid. The Packards put their knowledge and construction equipment to the service of her rescue. In a metaphorical and yet profoundly physical gesture, the former white rioters work alongside African American men to build a parallel shaft to the well into which the girl has fallen, ultimately digging out the dirt between the two shafts and creating a *bridge* linking them. In the film's racially utopian ending, the child lives, and the whole town celebrates together. What is more, the white men who have been among the town's most racist have a chance to redeem themselves through manly, unselfish, un-self-conscious cooperation and by recognizing the value of (Black) human life. While this ending fails to address institutional racism, it bears a greater resemblance to how interracial interactions actually work than the baseless, epithet-driven hatred of *No Way Out* gave viewers in Ray Biddle. For *The Well's* white racists, recognition and remorse ultimately drive the same hateful men and women to acts of incredible and surprising interracial sacrifice. Moreover, this ending taps into the Black interracial imaginary I discussed in Chapter one, where courageous whites overcome the color line in response to a crisis. By reversing racial narratives and mythologies, by assuming the basic equality of Black and white people, and by realistically depicting the Black community, the film uses the free reign afforded to it by its independent status to answer back previous (inter-) racial representation. The film may have appeared similar to other racial problem and interracial films of the era, but in many ways its trajectory was different: *The Well* owed a great debt to Race Films, which, as Jane Gaines has shown, were often "mixed-race films," dealing obliquely with questions Black and white within a presumably all-Black framework.⁹

Collective Authorship: The Popkins and the Cinematic Outcome of White Racial Awareness

As a number of scholars have argued, the late 1940s were characterized by a shift in Hollywood's political economics. Increased government scrutiny that year in the form of the HUAC

⁹ Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire*, 272.

hearings as well as the 1948 Paramount Decrees led to the gradual fall of the old, vertically integrated studio system structure.¹⁰ Competition from television further exacerbated the problem of low movie house attendance. Although these events dealt a heavy blow to the studios, they actually provided unique opportunities for independent producers. In Davies's words the industrial shifts that were set in motion in 1947 "may have allowed for the exposure of controversial political attitudes" in films.¹¹ Thus, some of the independent film producers of the late 1940s and early 1950s—especially makers of Race films—used their independent status to challenge American racial mythologies. Among these were Harry and Leo Popkin, who (along with Russell Rouse and Clarence Greene) were co-producers and co-directors of *The Well*.

The Popkins were not insiders in the Black community. However, their history of sustained professional interaction with African Americans—and their recognition of some struggles and cultural dynamics operative in Black communities—were evident not only in the production and textual politics of *The Well* but in their earlier films as well. The Popkin brothers were well-positioned to answer the racial message film's cultural evasions. Born and bred in New York City, and educated at Jarvis Collegiate high school in multi-racial Toronto and at the University of California, Harry Popkin began his career as a cashier at Gore Brothers Theater Circuit in Los Angeles.¹² Three years later, he became a manager and theater owner. He ultimately formed the Eastland circuit and

¹⁰ See Tino Balio, "Part IV: Retrenchment, Reappraisal, and Reorganization, 1948," in *American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 401-447. Philip Davies, "A Growing Independence," in *Cinema Politics and Society in America*, eds. Philip Davies and Brian Neve (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 129.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² For information on Popkin's biography, see Charles S. Aaronson, *1952-1953 Motion Picture and Television Almanac* (New York: Quigley Publications, 1952), 229. According to this same volume of the *Motion Picture and Television Almanac*, Popkin held this theater chain at least through 1952, acting as co-owner with Jack Berman of the Berman Bros. exchange. Together, they owned seven theaters in Los Angeles. The Brooklyn, Jewel, Joy, Meralta, National, Terrace, and Vern theaters. Charles S. Aaronson, ed. *1952-1953 Motion Picture and Television Almanac* (New York: Quigley Publishing, 1952), 410.

bought out the Gore Brothers.¹³ In the late 1930s, he entered the sports world, as manager and owner Olympic auditorium, among other West coast venues. In his job as manager of these venues, Harry Popkin worked in the fight promotion, where intense racial tensions coexisted with fierce interracial respect. Around the same time, he began producing Race films. Thus, the Popkins had some interracial experience before they came to Hollywood. Million Dollar Productions, the production company headed by Harry and Leo Popkin was the first to make exclusively all-Black films from Hollywood.¹⁴ The entire staff of Million Dollar Productions, save the Popkins, was Black.¹⁵ In the late 1930s, the Popkins produced Black-cast gangster, “underworld,” backstage musicals, and social problem films, films which engaged with the vanguard of contemporary Black cultural production in entertainment and included up-to-the-minute Black vernacular. The majority of the Popkins’ films were not comedies but engaged serious themes. Henry T. Sampson has called the Popkins’ films “the most stylish of the Black films produced during this period.”¹⁶ Although

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Olympic Boxing was the name of Harry Popkin’s enterprise, although it seems that Leo Popkin was not involved with this venture. Popkin was a promoter for the Olympic outfit, until December of 1938. (See “Daro Issues Ultimatum to Popkin” *Los Angeles Times* Dec 22, 1937, A9. See Jack Singer, “Waterman Named New Olympic Boss,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 21, 1938, A9). Meanwhile Leo was acting as manager of the Million Dollar Theater at Broadway and Third in LA, a 12 story 60,000 square foot entertainment venue that the Popkins ultimately bought. (“Kidnap Bandit Gang Hunted,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar 16, 1937, A2.) Many of the Popkins’ business deals were risky and caused dispute. (See Thomas F. Brady, “Popkin plans suit to protect movie,” *New York Times*, Jan 17, 1951, 39. Even their dealings with UA concerning *The Well* produced a lengthy dispute file because the company alleged that Popkin tried to sell the film to another company (available at the UA archives, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI). But much of this risky business dealing probably was the result of the team’s tenuous and independent status in both the boxing and the theatrical worlds in which they were always minor players.

¹⁵ According to the *Chicago Defender*, the company leased “an elaborate suite of six offices covering nearly half a block on North Hoover street” and was leasing space also on International’s lot. The staff included Alice Pettus who was the secretary and switchboard operator and was eventually advanced to the position of auditor (“Hollywood Capitalist Willing to Spend Vast Sum on Producing Colored Pictures for Next Year,” *Nashville Globe*, Jun 9, 1939), Ralph Cooper, Halley Harding, former All-American football star and production manager and assistant Buck Jones (also a former football star). According to a 1939 article, Black journalist Harry Levette was also on staff with the company for a time, (“Hollywood Capitalist Willing to Spend Vast Sum on Producing Colored Pictures for Next Year,” *Nashville Globe*, Jun 9, 1939). Regarding the placement of Million Dollar Productions on the “International studio lot that houses several white companies,” see Harry Levette, “Thru Hollywood with Harry Levette,” *Chicago Defender*, Nov 20, 1937, 18. “Search for Talent,” *Chicago Defender*, Nov 27, 1937, 10.

¹⁶ Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow press, 1995), 222.

previous generations of Race films produced by Black producers had clearly defined them, this generation set itself apart by increasing the budgets on these productions and by distributing them more widely—sometimes even marketing them to white theaters.¹⁷ While at Million Dollar, they produced, among other films, *The Duke is Tops* (AKA *Bronze Venus*) (1938) which was Lena Horne's first film, *Four Shall Die* (1941), *Gang Smashers* (1939) and *Gang War* (1940). They also worked closely in their productions with African American actor and Apollo M.C. Ralph Cooper to develop, hone, and project humanity in Black characterization in their films.¹⁸ They maintained extremely good relations with both the Black press and the trade press, eliciting consistently positive reviews in *Variety* and simultaneously consistent coverage in Black press sources, nationally. However in the early 1940s, with the decline of the Race film industry, they ceased production of Black films. They returned to producing movies in the late 1940s but this time with predominantly white casts.¹⁹ They got a six picture distribution deal with United Artists of the sort described by Tino Balio.²⁰ One of

¹⁷ For more on their being marketed to white theaters, see “Bargain with Bullets’ is Cinematic Bargain,” *New York Age*, December 4, 1937. The author states that the film was shown to the Loew’s theater chain.

¹⁸ According to the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, Ralph Cooper was the manager of Million Dollar Productions in the late 1930s. Faye Jackson, “All-colored films offer outlet to Professional Talent of Race, ways Star of New Gangster Pic,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, Aug 28, 1937. See Harry Levette, “Movieland graces premiere of ‘Bargain with Bullets’,” *Chicago Defender*, Sept 25, 1937, 5. Harry Popkin also credited Cooper with his decision to come to Hollywood to produce Black films. See Harry Levette, “Movieland graces premier of ‘Bargain with Bullets’,” *Chicago Defender*, Sep 25, 1937, 5.

¹⁹ According to AFI, their last Black-cast film was *Take My Life* (1942). As Million Dollar productions they produced, in rapid succession: *Bargain with Bullets* (1937), *The Duke is Tops* (1938), *Life Goes On* (1938), *One Dark Night* (1939), *Reform School* (1939), *Gang Smashers* (1939), *Gang War* (1940), *While Thousands Cheer* (1940), *Four Shall Die* (1941), *Take my Life* (1942). Harry Popkin was credited as “Presenter” on the 1945 *And Then There Were None*, a film that actually ran into problems with regard to its use of the term “Ten little ‘Niggers’,” one original to the Agatha Christie story. However the first of the pair’s films for UA came in 1948 and was *My Dear Secretary* starring Kirk Douglas. Subsequently they produced, again in rapid succession, *Impact* (1949), *The Big Wheel* (1949), *Champagne for Caesar* (1950), *DOA* (1950), *The Second Woman* (AKA *Ellen*) (1951), *The Well* (AKA *Deep is the Well*) (1951), and *The Thief* (1952).

²⁰ See Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company that Changed the Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 40-84. Balio describes the particular and unique arrangement UA gave to its independent producers during the 1940s and 1950s, one in which the distributor gave an unusual amount of production control to the producer but retained the right to distribute the film under contract for ten years. UA had final say and control over advertising and the distribution plan—but the production company did contribute to these decisions and retained the copyright to the film (see page 199-207—especially page 201). More information about distribution of *The Well* could not be found in the UA files. For a brief summary of one example of the UA distribution deal see, Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 113-120.

the pictures under UA contract was *The Well*. United Artists played a crucial role in distributing independent films. Some of those independent films UA released that contained African Americans contained groundbreaking representations of African Americans or of integration, including *Dead End* (1937) the first what would come to be a series of films featuring a youthful gang of ethnic kids that would eventually become integrated upon the inclusion of a (*highly stereotyped*) African American youth, Selznick's *Since You Went Away* (1944) featuring Hattie McDaniels, *Body and Soul* (1947), *Curley* (1947) which featured the integrated "Our Gang" crew, Kramer's *Home of the Brave* (1949) (another racial problem film), *Go Man Go* (1954) a film about the Harlem Globetrotters, Delmar Daves's *Kings Go Forth* (1958) a miscegenation film starring Frank Sinatra, Tony Curtis and Natalie Wood as the half-Black American love interest, *Anna Lucasta* (1959), and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), among others.

The Popkins used their marginal status and the process of subtly adapting screen material to say things that had not been said in mainstream Hollywood films but desperately needed saying. Because their films came out *after* the Hollywood fare, the Popkins could build upon the stories Hollywood popularized, and often brought out their contemporary resonances, revealing what Hollywood had evaded. For example, their film *The Second Woman* was a thinly veiled but critically acclaimed re-working of the basic story of Hitchcock's *Rebecca*. As the AFI catalog notes, the advertisements for *The Second Woman* actually *encouraged* this comparison. The Popkin knew a good story when they saw it and knew that audiences would pay to have *more* of those stories they loved. Thus, they turned delay and B-status, into an advantage in much the same way as had Black film exhibitors. On their return to Hollywood, the Popkins worked through a production outlet known as "Cardinal" and also got involved, if marginally, in emergent independent production activities,

through their membership in the Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers (SIMPP), a move which clearly marked their self-definition as part of the emerging independent production scene. Unlike Twentieth Century Fox's Darryl F. Zanuck, who relied primarily on the NAACP for his understandings of race, the Popkins had spent years catering to Black audiences as Black film producers with an African American staff. Like those exhibitors seeking to provide place for Black audiences, the Popkins' tenure in the industry was relatively short-lived but marked by experimentalism and risk taking.

An examination of their work in Race films reveals their early interest in showing more of Black life than Hollywood would allow but also, if less directly, in raising the issue of the race politics of social reform. For example, their 1939 film *Reform School*, a Black-cast social problem film, borrowed its story from the white immigrant Warner Brothers film *Crime School* (1939), remaking it in a Black context. Both films critique the institutional devolution of the reform school system into one that criminalizes American youth. This remake did more than simply recast the film with Black actors. It entailed broad shifts in the meaning of the text. Because, as was disproportionately true in American society, it is *Black* youth, in the film, who are cast away by society and victimized by the very system which promises reform, the plot tapped into a set of emotive and social channels more socially relevant and resonant than those raised by *Crime School*.²¹ The film follows Freddie Gordon

²¹ Although this film is no longer extant, the screenplay is available upon request at AMPAS Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills, CA. Although the film makes no direct mention of race or Black politics, it nevertheless strongly critiques the system of "reform." Mother Barton, [(Louise Beavers)] balks both at the cruel treatment of the boys in the reformatory, specifically the use of bull whips and clubs to reform the boys, and also the fact that they are not given a chance once they leave the reformatory. The script seems to be made up predominantly of Mother Barton's speeches about the topic. "First Official: But you must realize an institution of that sort must have discipline. M. Barton: Certainly, but discipline should be tempered with justice and understanding. First Official: You must remember we're dealing with criminals. M. Barton: "Juvenile delinquents" is a better term. Second Official: No matter what you call them, they've broken the laws and have to be punished. M. Barton: But not with brutality.

(Reginald Fenderson), a Black teenager who has committed a petty crime and consequently cannot find work. His inability to find employment causes him to fall back into a life of crime. Caught by police and confined to reform school under a particularly cruel superintendent (Edward Thompson) and deputy (Monte Hawley), his criminal tendencies are reinforced. Mother Barton (Louise Beavers), an understanding and tough parole officer, hears from Freddie about the conditions in the school and works to have superintendent Stone removed. Once Stone is forced out, Barton takes over as superintendent of the reform school, placing the troubled youth on the honor system as a way to teach them to respect the law rather than to fear it. Although at first the boys take advantage of her, eventually they grow to respect her and it appears her techniques are working. But Stone's deputy, Jackson, steals from the school safe and frames Freddie. The boys stick together and, believing Freddie innocent, they go into town to find Jackson, whom they suspect of the crime. Mother Barton finds the boys at Jackson's house. Jackson confesses and attempts to flee but is ultimately captured by police. So successful are Mother Barton's policies that they are extended to all reform schools in the state and the boys, upon leaving the institution are able to secure good jobs.²²

First Official: Any suggestions?

M. Barton: [Y]es, I would change the system in handling the youngsters....Educate the public and businessmen of this country to know that when Reform school boys are released they are not criminals. They are ready to take their place in society. ...

Second official: It's just a dream, that's all. Mother Barton: Its a dream that is going to come true with or without your help; Gentlemen, I intend leaving not one stone unturned-I'm going to use friendship, politics, in fact I'm going to use every means at my command to see that it does materialize."

²² This synopsis is based on my own reading of the script and on the summary provided by the American Film Institute Catalogue entry for the film.



Figure 44 Reform School (AKA. Prison Bait) Pressbook. AMPAS.

The story of *Reform School* raised the question of whether Black youth could receive equal justice and of prison reform, hot-button issues within the Black press. The film also implicitly pointed to institutional racism ingrained in white systems of justice. It shifted *Crime School*'s gender and race politics by literally replacing Humphrey Bogart with Louise Beavers, thus referencing the history of Black female reform movements active in the Progressive era.²³ The costuming of Beavers furthers this association and distances her from the Mammy she often played in white films. Dressed to the hilt in furs and high hats, Beavers, as Matron of the reform school, takes on all the dignity of serious middle class Black uplift we might expect from Mary Church Terrell, as the adjacent picture suggests. Remaking films in Black, as practiced by the Popkins, then, enriched the film's meanings

²³ Deborah Grey White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: WW. Norton, 1999).

for African Americans and its Black political implications by relocating their action in the Black community.

Low-Budget, High Effects

Independent companies were often handicapped by poor distribution and often lacked access to major exhibition venues. As a result, they often looked for an edge that would bring their product wide-spread appeal. The Popkins realized that one did not have to have a big budget to create moving special effects. In general, it was the production policy of the Popkins' to attempt to suit the phenomenological *feel* and the "effects" (special or not) of the film to the subject matter. In *Gang War* for example, innovative subjective camera work during fight scenes served to heighten audience experience of the film's violent action without undue brutality and to bring the audience emotively into the center of the action. For example in one sequence, they had an actor punch the camera, in scene whose camerawork remains surprisingly effective. In the Edward Ludwig Indianapolis 500 racing film, *The Big Wheel*, which Harry Popkin co-produced with former heavy weight champion Jack Dempsy, the Popkin team used various kinds of images to give audiences an authentic and palpable sense of being at the nation's most famous speedway. First, we see shots of the crowds, not only watching the races but laying on top of their cars waiting for the races to begin, a local tradition. Once the race action has begun, they used several visual and narrative strategies to increase audience identification with the racer for whom we are rooting—Billy Coy (Mickey Rooney). They show helicopter shots that demonstrate the breadth of the speedway. These images give us a sense of the magnitude of the place and of Coy's task in completing the race. They cross-cut this action with images shot from a camera harnessed to left side of a racecar, right above the wheel, to increase viewer sense of action and acceleration and to give us a sense of the race from the subjective position

of the racer. A sense of the intensity of the race-way action is further increased by a stationary camera shot that focuses on a narrow portion of the speedway while a number of cars are passing, thus giving us a sense of the velocity of the cars. Finally, they cross-cut images of Coy and the speedway with images of his mother (Mary Hatcher) in the stands, playing on the notion of the fact that the racers are “mother’s sons” to increase our sense of concern for them. These images use the documentary fact of the Indianapolis speedway and its institutional reality as the basis for an “authentic” portrayal that mobilizes naturalized suspense. By showing us, from the various angles I have described what it is really like to be there, we get a heightened sense of realism and of identification with Coy and with the cultural energy of this localized place more broadly. For those uninitiated in the culture of racing, the film provides a view of it that is compelling and that makes the audience feel like an insider. In the noir spy thriller *The Thief*, the entire film was shot without dialogue, an effect or gimmick that worked with the narrative, emphasizing the loneliness of the film’s spy protagonist and, from a marketing perspective, earned the film significant press coverage. In *The Well*, the Popkin team used its low-budget effects to motivate audience identification with community—both along and across racial lines. They used techniques of building audience identification to social and political effects.

By 1951, when they made *The Well*, the Popkin team had come a long way since their Black gangster films *Gang War* (1939) and *Gang Smashers* (1940), although *The Well* reflected in many ways the legacy of these earlier film ventures. *The Well* was a nuanced rendering of race relations rather than an authentic portrait of Black life. Rather than *talking* about race, as many of Zanuck’s films had, *The Well* moved. The Popkins knew from their experience producing gangster films, that African Americans audiences loved action films. *The Well* took the action genre and turned its energies to

solving the race problem. But rather than focusing primarily on action, *The Well* had heart. With *The Well*, the Popkins, who were famous for low budget, sensational remakes which altered, in thoughtful ways, the original text, mobilized “universal” cultural news events, and their attendant emotional lexicon, in the service of a plot centered on African American experience.²⁴

Interracial Film Production Techniques: “Man-on-the-street” Racial Realism Meets the Action Genre

As Barbara Klinger has argued, the 1950s saw a rise in “chamber dramas” and adult fare in studio films. In response to foreign films like *La Ronde* (1950) (that showed sexually explicit material) and to compete with television (which could not), one trend in postwar studio filmmaking was to treat more controversial themes. This trend was also made possible by changes in the Code which placed fewer restrictions on volatile subjects.²⁵ Although, as I will show, the Popkins were attempting to sell *The Well* to teenagers, this trend towards handling more serious themes may have been what sold UA on the Popkins’ projected film line up. Adult fare stood in contrast to the high-budget, splashy Technicolor Westerns and musicals such as *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Broken Arrow* (1950), in the early 1950s—again to compete with television’s flat, gray images.

²⁴ Although *The Well* was the only interracial film for which the Popkins received production or direction credits, the PCA file for *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), which traced the career of Robinson from the Negro League to the majors, suggests that they were also involved in its production. The letter from the PCA suggesting deletions to the script was addressed to Harry Popkin of “Jewel Picture Corp.” (Breen, letter to Harry Popkin, May 9, 1950, *The Jackie Robinson Story* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library. AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA). Although the film was not officially a Popkin production, the Popkin signature style and motifs were all over the film. Positioning itself somewhere between news and drama, *The Jackie Robinson Story* also centered on current events, as had *The Well*. The film’s production team was also made up almost entirely of these involved in Popkin productions. The film was produced by a member of the Popkin team Joseph H. Nadel, who had been production supervisor for *The Well*, a producer for Popkin team in *DOA* (1950), *The Big Wheel* (1949), *Impact* (1949), and *My Dear Secretary* (1948). Mort Briskin, the executive producer of *The Jackie Robinson Story*, had also been a producer on *Quicksand* (1950), *The Big Wheel* and *The Second Woman*, all Popkin Productions. Ernest Laszlo, the cinematographer for *The Well*, also shot *The Jackie Robinson Story*.

²⁵ Barbara Klinger, “‘Local Genres’: Hollywood Adult Film in the 1950s,” in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, eds. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 1994), 136-7.

The Well joined the realist *thematic* treatment of the adult fare with other techniques for connoting “cultural verisimilitude.” But in what sense was *The Well* “realist”? Robert Stam has argued that realism, in mass media studies, must be discussed not as an abstract standard but rather as an historically- and contextually- situated norm, one derived from historically bound definitions of the real.²⁶ In a similar vein, in his work on genre, Steve Neale has suggested that a sense of realism is generated primarily by reference to a “specific system of expectations.”²⁷ But outside of these, Neale indicates that “cultural verisimilitude” or direct reference to “public opinion” and shared public understanding frequently operate to call audiences to recognize the real in ways that are not particular to a specific genre.²⁸ This is the sort of verisimilitude present in the gangster films that quote “authenticating discourses artifacts, and texts: maps newspapers headlines and memoirs.”²⁹ What was the system of expectations that guided *The Well*’s articulation of realism? *The Well* used, simultaneously, two distinct aesthetic paradigms for connoting realism: 1) televisual models of realism lent *The Well* both its “news”/current events appeal, as well as contributing to its rapid editing (an editing style necessitated by the short duration of television programs) 2) a naturalist visual, dialogical and narrative aesthetic that, at the time, was being used both in Hollywood, in films like *Call Northside 777* (1948) and *Naked City* (1948), and in Italian neo-realist films.

Casting was one area where the Popkins used naturalist strategies to achieve realist effects. Rather than casting this film with “glamour queens,” the Popkins told *Los Angeles Daily News* columnist Virginia MacPherson that their story did not require the star factor: “The woman who

²⁶ Robert Stam, “Bakhtin, Polyphony and Ethnic/Racial Representation,” in *Unspeakable Images*, ed. Lester Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 260.

²⁷ Steve Neale, “Questions of Genre,” in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 160-3.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

plays [Carolyn's] agonized mother makes you think she IS the mother. How could we have gotten that suspense if we'd used a world famous glamour queen?"³⁰ The woman who plays the mother was Maidie Norman, who had been involved in the stage production of "The Cradle Will Rock" as well as starring in *The Burning Cross*, and *The Peanut Man* (1947), a Black-cast feature film about George Washington Carver. While the practice of using "unknowns" in a production was not new, much more unusual was the Popkins' depictions of the townspeople who become central characters in the film:

Most of the cast are housewives and ordinary businessmen...we shot the film in northern California and we just went around signing up people as we needed them. We kind of told them what to do. But mostly we just turned them loose and let them do what they felt. And we got some sensational stuff.³¹

Using what I will term "loose direction," a directorial style and an overall aesthetic paradigm closer to neo-realist practices than traditional Hollywood studio-affiliated trends in acting, casting, directing, *The Well* threatened to destabilize screen dynamics by throwing attention onto marginal characters who momentarily seized the attention of both the audience and the other actors.³² For example, in the scene where the riots begin, it is an uncredited non-actor who says, "the niggers did it," and thus becomes—suddenly—a precipitating cause for the riots. In a very real way, *we don't know* who will emerge as the key character of any given scene.

The director, Clarence Greene, also claimed to have developed "tricks to enhance the naturalness of their [the actors'] performance."³³ Greene claimed the filmmakers used "reaction

³⁰ Virginia MacPherson, "Says lack of stars made 'Well' a hit," *Daily News*, Sept 29, 1951.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Among *The Well's* other unusual production practices was that just as the spotlight was communally shared in front of the camera, behind the camera, leadership on the set was also cooperative. According to the film's "directors," screen credit was randomly assigned among the films' top three most powerful creative talents, Russell Rouse, Clarence Greene, and Leo Popkin. "We gave each of us a first credit in one department," Greene told Ezra Goodman of the *New York Daily News*. Ezra Goodman, "Behind the Camera," *New York Daily News*, Oct 30, 1950.

³³ Gladwin Hill, "Human Tragedy Recreated in 'the Well'," *New York Times*, Sept 9, 1951, X6.

shots of them incidental to other action when they didn't know they were being photographed.”³⁴ In addition, they padded dialogue with “extra wordage before and after so that kept lines would come in the middle of speeches when they weren't ‘pressing’ so hard; the padding was later discarded.” What is more, the directors cast Bill Walker, a Black victim of the Detroit riots, in the role of the doctor who eloquently speaks to his fellow members of an interracial council about his experience of a riot.³⁵ This application of naturalism in acting technique to the Black case off-set the staginess typically associated with images of integration in such film as *Bright Victory*, *Home of the Brave*, and *Pinky*, which tended to defer discussion of racial problems to melodramatic, emotionally-saturated dialogue. *The Well* contained other elements common to a naturalist realist aesthetic: not only are many of the film's prominent characters played by non-actors, but the film's on-location shooting, in the central California towns of Maysville and Grass Valley, were other “authentic” realist tropes used within the film.

Although this style may have owed some creative debt to Italian Neo-realist films, which were increasingly depicting African Americans in a new light in the late 1940s and early 1950s,³⁶ according to Director Russell Rouse, the film's overall style was based also on a tele-visual model: Rouse, who worked in television, reported to the *Los Angeles Times* that he used what he called “TV techniques” including “moving camera, the fast cuts, and the feeling that there is a panorama viewpoint.”³⁷ These techniques, particularly the strategy of harnessing a camera to the back seat of a convertible

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Tombolo*, *Paradiso Nero* (1947), *Senza Pieta* (1948), *Paisan* (1945), *Angelo* (1948) and other Italian films represented African Americans (mostly men) in a relatively naturalized light and as soldiers, something that earned them praise and extremely interesting reviews in the Black press.

³⁷ “Television this week; Programs day by day,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 30, 1951, C14.

while it is moving, create a visual effect that does indeed heighten the sense of realism and—because of the high velocity with which the camera moves—the *urgency* of the riot scenes.

The Popkins' techniques were also linked to the Action genre. If the dialogue-laden racial problem film was contingent upon the notion of a concerned “listening public” one formed by radio listener-ship and encouraged by the talkative newsreels, *The Well* and other B-message films combined and sometimes subsumed message with action and in doing so, came close to converting the “listening public” to an active one. *The Well* is an action film with a racial-documentary core: the action genre's fast-paced and suspenseful elliptical editing—coupled with authentic cultural references—created for Black viewers a sense of social, cultural and physical movement that had been absent in films like *No Way Out*. The Popkins mobilized the Action genre because it was one of the most important genres in Black theaters of the 1940s and 1950s. In my oral history of Black spectatorship, the vast majority of African American respondents who went to the movies in the 1940s and 1950s went to see “action”—by which they meant not only the action genre but the “screen action” and intensity imposed by seeing characters in perilous, suspenseful situations, more generally.³⁸ The realism of the B- action films lay not in the effectiveness of their simulation of reality but in a *situationally-imposed intensity*—the sense of realism came from the height of the stakes attached to the drama rather than the innate believability of the scenes they depicted. The action therefore was not realist—even in a culturally verisimilar way—but had an intensity that encouraged viewers to take it seriously because what was projected was a matter of literal life and death. Action films motivate our identification based on the premise of our sympathy, concern, and alarm for the characters—and in this case—for the community as a whole. They play also on primary identification with the camera—

³⁸ Forty-six out of fifty-seven people answering the question mentioned an action movie as one of their favorites genres.

with the act of seeing and being moved by “action.” Editing and music gave action a “realism of necessity” that heightened their perceptual intensity. In *The Well*, these elements are used to create suspense rather than to dramatize spectacle they had in *No Way Out*. This type of “realist” action would have been eminently legible to Black audiences, who, as the Popkins well knew, were raised attending B-westerns and serials (referred to by many of my interviewees as “chapter” pictures).

In addition to referencing television and the Action genre, *The Well* also appropriates a variety of other media experiences to heighten the sense of realist urgency. Once the townspeople have sunk a parallel shaft to the well, we are entirely riveted by the film’s aural elements, as the voices of the rescuers are broadcast via radio to the surrounding community, and, by extension, to us. At a moment when competition from television threatened the stability of the film market and the Paramount decrees challenged the dominance of the studios, the industry was trying to reinvent ways of drawing in its audience. Although Technicolor was the flagship technique used by the industry to enhance selling power and draw audiences, *The Well* did not have the budgetary resources to use these technologically advanced methods of communication. One potential way of engaging audiences with a limited budget was to a technique that television, radio and the Action genre harnessed—namely, to generate a sense of immediacy and to create realism through simulating a kind of liveness. While *The Well* is still clearly cinematic in its structure and includes beautiful cinematographic compositions, it borrowed a sense of contingency, in part from television and radio. In its acting and directorial style, in its rapidly moving narrative, and in its sense of narrative contingency, *The Well* replicates this sense of liveness that both television and ironically also the Action film offered viewers, thus paralleling Hollywood’s “action and spectacle” formula of the 1950s with the incorporation of tele-visual techniques that small independent producers had used.

Aiding this live action aesthetic was a style of narrative revelation the directors described as “oblique,” using what Greene called the “skipping technique.”³⁹ In employing this method, the filmmakers never fully reveal what has happened in a given scene—purposefully “skipping over” important details and leaving the audience to interpret what has occurred. For example, the build up to racial violence in the film is *suggested* without being actually shown: “We never show [the errand boy] overhearing the conversation [about the race of the suspected murder] but as soon as it is over he leaves the flower shop hastily...we see the errand boy enter a barbershop where Negro customers are gathered.”⁴⁰ Indicating various levels of obliqueness in technique, Greene continued “[t]he camera watches from the outside, the scene which is enacted within the shop in pantomime. Then we pick up stray bits of conversation among the Negro population.” Re-appropriating Breen’s strategy of suggestion, the filmmakers pioneered the “skipping technique,” wherein “incomplete incidents [are] strung together rapidly” for engaging with, Greene specifically stated, young audiences.⁴¹ The oblique effect, which motivated audience interest and attention by giving the audience agency to interpret and decide the meaning of ambiguous scenes and shots, was tailored to

³⁹ Greene likened this technique to skipping a rock across water. With this elliptical technique he would “skip over” some of the vital information, leaving an active and interpretively galvanized audience to fill in the blanks. Edwin Schallert, “Hollywood in Review: Actors Stage, Film Calls Pose Dilemma, Directors Go Subtle,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jun 24, 1951, D7.

⁴⁰ Greene stated, “A step-by-step [narrative] progression today is dated in pictures. Put a film like that before a youthful audience and they will hoot it and boo it, and they are the best test.” (Ibid.) This realist technique seems extremely similar to that identified by Bazin in the Italian Neo-realist cinema. Bazin states, “The unit of cinematic narrative in *Paisa* is not the ‘shot,’ an abstract view of a reality which is being analyzed, but the ‘fact.’ A fragment of concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity, whose meaning emerges only after the fact, thanks to other imposed facts between which the mind establishes certain relationships. Unquestionably, the director chooses these ‘facts’ carefully while at the same time respecting their factual integrity.” Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol II* ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 37. While there is little evidence to suggest that Greene, Rouse and the Popkins were consciously influenced by Italian Neo-Realism, they used the same technique of stringing together “fragments” of reality—employing oblique forms of revelation to connote a sense and phenomenology of the real.

⁴¹ Edwin Schallert, “Hollywood in Review,” D7.

the specific demographic the Popkin team sought, to the fast paced action-filled theme, and to the needs of the narrative.⁴²

Although realism in acting was a vital part of *The Well's* overall realist aesthetic, Popkins extended this aesthetic through presenting realistic character motivations in the scripting and loose direction. That is, the character's motives are made plain—even naturalized within the text. Throughout the film, we are given soundbites, often quite literally, of the local racial logics that undergird the actions of major and minor characters. The audience is even made to understand and relate to the motivations of the rioters. As the camera cuts from conversations among Blacks to conversations among whites, the film makes clear the obviously flawed and prejudicial logic of the whites' reasoning and the false, yet historically-based conclusions drawn by African Americans. Even when the town devolves into rioting, and although the actions of the townspeople are reprehensible, the motivations of the townspeople never become illogical (or purely evil) but remain simultaneously reasonable and condemnable given what we know they have heard and what they think they know. By presenting what Matthew Bernstein has referred to as a “diversity of...attitudes” and reactions and by packing “didactic components...into the film's situations,” the film maintained a realist edge.⁴³ The complexity of plot and dialogue that results from this diversity of perspectives is both interesting and simply much more true to how a group responds to intense situations than the mono-logical, emotionally driven responses often shown in other racial problem films. These tactics also helped them to avoid preachment and to make even minor characters pivotally important to evolution of the

⁴² This narrative specific effects authoring was evident also in the gangster films, where the effect of the camera being punched is present in *Gang War* (1939) and where the car chase scenes are used to particular visual and phenomenological effect.

⁴³ Bernstein uses these terms in reference to the film *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954), which came out some years after *The Well* but appears to have used a similar set of techniques for creating a sense of credibility. See Matthew Bernstein, “Institutions and Individuals: *Riot in Cell Block 11*,” *Velvet Light Trap*, 28 (Fall 1991), 3-31—especially pages 19 and 20.

plot and of *audience* response to the situations presented. The localized logics presented in these scenes are made more realistic and believable by the naturalist acting style. With each cut, the rumor gets worse and the logic for violent action stronger. After African Americans retaliate when a group of white men beat up a Black man for no reason, the reactions of the white people of the town are captured in a single sequence. The white rumor mill, which may be an ode to *Fury's* pre-lynching scenes, begins with "A whole carload of them [African Americans] went after a couple of white boys," which we have seen to be true, although the attack was not unmotivated as this man describes it. Soon, however, the claims get more elaborate. A taxi driver says: "They [African Americans] were after a white girl and those boys were just trying to protect her." This statement is based on a lie told by a white girl. Finally the story ends up: "They attacked a white girl, I heard she killed herself afterwards." The film reinforces the groundedness of its own perspective at the level of community and also reveals fragments of the everyday racial attitudes—a-man-on-the-street racial commonsense and psychology—with which audiences could potentially understand *and recognize* at one level, even if they reviled them at another.

The settings of these gossip scenes—women lingering on the streets after having come out of a store, men talking with the gas station attendant as he fills their tanks, and well-dressed businessmen talking as they walk, briefcases in hand—made more palpable and accessible the realism and naturalness of these scenes. The motivational structures of the characters are made lucid: Packard is interested in his own standing in the town, Mr. Crawford in preserving his family and finding his "baby," Kellog in finding the criminal and the girl. The film also depicts the possibility of growth and change in character motivation, especially in light of events which prove bigger (and more important) than individual motivations. For example, Packard ends up donating his equipment and

engineering expertise to the rescue effort; Mr. Crawford pleads with the rescuers to come up and save their own lives rather than to simply get his daughter out; and Kellog shifts from tough police officer to compassionate rescue worker. This depiction of communal consciousness overwhelming individual motives signals the film's adherence, not only to a community perspective, but to a common moral system—an association that at least stood aloof from, but could also have been quite hazardous, in relationship to the McCarthyism.⁴⁴ What is more, each major character is defined by *multiple motivations* which give the text a marked contingency because we do not know on which of these motives a character will act at any time. This multi-faceted nature of characterization lends nuanced meaning and heightened audience receptivity to the characters' actions. Mr. Crawford has a dueling desire to support his family through his job, find his daughter, and protect the community welfare. Gaines wants to find his niece but also seeks revenge on her presumed attacker. The audience uncertainty that results from multiple character motivations only adds to the film's overall sophisticated realism and to its suspense. These sophisticated and subtle modes of characterization were untypical of African American representation—even in the racial problem film.

Realizing Black Politics, Presence, and Perspective

Part of the film's "realism" arises from its culturally verisimilar, if condensed, snapshots of African American culture, subjectivity, history, and politics. *The Well* gives a Black perspective on rioting that roots Black violence in the history of white injustice rather than, as in films like *No Way Out*, in Black bitterness, hostility, and unprompted defensiveness. It is the welling up of the hidden history of white miscegenetic rape that produces Crawford and Gaines' accidental violence against

⁴⁴The film began production in September of 1950 and the HUAC hearings began in March of 1951. The film was not released until September of 1951, so the film was in production during the HUAC hearings. The film arguably references McCarthyism in the scenes where liberal Claude Packard is interrogated by the police force, despite his innocence.

Packard and the white woman's age-old lie about a Black man's attempts at miscegenation that produces the second act of violence. Looking abstractly at the presence of African Americans in the film[,] it is also important to notice that African Americans of various shapes sizes and ages are depicted as mobile and as occupying a variety of public and private spaces from which they had often been eliminated in other contemporary films. The film brings into representation the idea of the presence of members of the African American community who had been relegated off-screen, or to corners of the text, and thus subjected to rigorous cultural and ideological conscription in films such as *In this Our Life* (1942), *Crash Dive* (1943), *Bright Victory* (1951).

Nevertheless, because *The Well* is not Black cinema, but rather interracial cinema, its focus is not on the *inside* of the Black community but rather on an accurate and historically grounded depiction, even replication, of the discursive interaction between the African American and white communities on relevant racial issues. The film was engaged not with showing the Black community to the Black community (as would be the case with Black independent cinema) but rather with showing both Blacks and whites how the other group thought about them. Therefore, the depiction of the Black community does not focus on its "inside" (as it does in a film like *Daughters of the Dust*). Rather the focus is on the outskirts and the margins—on where the Black community brushes up against the white community, occasionally with explosive consequences. But this focus on the margins admits its marginality—it suggests an unshown center. The sequence where we see the spread of gossip not only accomplishes that, but also takes us on a tour of vital Black institutions. The tour begins with the barbershop (where a group of young Black men and an Asian man sit discussing the news); it then moves to the gas station where the Black attendant, galled, hears the news. From there it moves to the shoe shine stand where the gas station attendant shares this news with others and

ends finally, and the homes (white and Black) where Black women discuss the news as they hang laundry and sweep up. These moments announce the presence of African American spaces. But they demonstrate, also, African American presence in the streets and public places, throughout the town. The very spaces that Jim Crow controlled in the South and some parts of the North are not only fluidly traversed by African American characters but, further, possessed by Black subjectivity, logic, and rhetoric. The film however never enters the barbershop or the housekeeper's quarters. The film maintains a respectful distance, only hinting at the existence of these Black institutional spaces, planting the camera and microphone on their margins. Thus the Popkins avoided exploiting Black spaces as exotic for white eyes and instead render them in ways that African American spectators could recognize and imaginatively elaborate.

Most importantly, African American dialogue is rendered in a naturalized, logical way. In response to hearing that they have captured the presumed kidnapper, a white man who is moving boxes with two Black co-workers says: "Give him a break, maybe he didn't do it." In response, one of the Black men says to the other: "Tell him what kind of break we would get if it was one of us." Although an integrated milieu provides grounds for the conversation, not only is the white man outnumbered in the dialogue but African American logic gets the final word. By calling on his friend to "tell him what kind of a break we'd get," the film also implicitly draws on a sense of a Black community with a shared knowledge based and collective memory of violence and injustice. The mode of speech is casual but also one of direct challenge, stinging retort, sarcasm and even bitterness. In a moment when mass mediated interracial conversations were marked by false pageantry and official performance, *The Well* grounds this Black vernacular rhetoric in the everyday. In another sequence, after having heard that Claude Packard will be released, a Black youth, who we have seen

on several previous occasions, says: “This proves my point. You can get away with murder as long as you’re the right color.” These examples demonstrate not only Black logic but in at least two instances a quick witted Black resistance, even sass, towards whites. Like the depiction of African American spaces, the representation of emergent Black militancy and the keen Black consciousness of discrimination and racial disparities in justice, while perhaps only a nascent suggestion in the text, is likely to have brought pleasure to Black viewers and a new perspective on the Black subjectivity to whites. By using this structure, the film suggests that if the figure of blind justice would give Black people her ear, they would win her approval. The young Black man’s retort is also significant in bringing about the film’s broader integrationist purpose. By presenting—even equalizing—Black and white voices, *The Well* does what the preachy, staid integrationist discourse of the moment (like that seen in *Home of the Brave*) could not. In these moments, it pictures integration as the assimilation of whites into Black logic and purpose, rather than of Blacks into white society. Integration was typically framed by the media in terms of speeches, Black celebrity, and the visual grammar of exceptionalism and civic ritual. *The Well*, by contrast, translates this concept into vernacular—Black vernacular—rhetoric and speech. This is not integration framed for a close-up, this is integration in action.

I think it is appropriate to discuss the Popkins’ racial vision as not only interracial but also in Bakhtin’s terms, polyphonic. Polyphonic discourse represents “a plurality of voices which do not fuse into a single consciousness but rather exist on different registers and thus generate dialogical dynamism.”⁴⁵ In *The Well*, which, according to *Ebony*, had a total of 125 speaking parts,⁴⁶ not only do both intra- and interracial communities show variation in voices, but in the film, the Popkins resisted their noir tendencies and refused to adopt the single narrative voice-over typical of many noir

⁴⁵ Robert Stam, “Bakhtin, Polyphony and Ethnic/Racial Representation,” in *Unspeakable Images*, Lester Friedman, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 263.

⁴⁶ “Deep is the Well,” *Ebony*, Feb 1951, 42.

films. Although many scenes are focalized through Ben Kellog's perspective, it is important to note that he represents "equality under the law" rather than "law and order"—a force for communal accountability and a direct threat to white racism and violence. Although Ben Kellog is the character we most frequently follow, his voice and perspective do not entirely dominate nor is he even able to control other narrative voices. Indeed, the voices of African Americans most often run wild in the film and are outside of his control and even his purview. These voices are not even locked into discourse with his own, except on a few limited occasions. It is the cops' very inability to contain this multi-vocality that becomes the subject of the film and which precipitates the riots.

The white population depicted in *The Well* contains a textured fabric of highly varied voices. These voices, scattered throughout the text, each articulate a different and distinct racial position and logic. For example, although Packard and his nephew share a name, a profession and racial identity, they nevertheless occupy two distinct positions on how to deal with Claude's wrongful imprisonment. By challenging audience expectations in this way, the film avoids stereotyping. In another instance, Casey, a white woman, hits a white man over the head with a frying pan to prevent him from attacking her Black co-worker. However, a few scenes later another white woman shouts from the crowd as a Black man enters the police station, shackled, "leave him out here: we'll take care of him." Both of these depictions would have shocked many audience members for their stark contrast with 1950s ideals of white femininity but together they serve to elucidate the film's complexity, its point that there is no single, simple white female subject position: each character is led and governed by their own logical, experiential position.⁴⁷

The Popkins applied naturalistic effects to depiction of African American community life. It is a Black perspective that is the privileged narrative focus in *The Well*. Although Ben Kellog is the

⁴⁷ *Intruder in the Dust* (1949) and *Storm Warning* (1951) also show women as members of a nasty mob.

investigative force behind the film, the film's heart is the African American Crawford family. The film begins and ends with the Crawfords and their home is the only one we see and the only one threatened in the film. What is more, it is the Carolyn's mother, subtly and believably played by Madie Norman, with whom the audience's sympathies rest, most often. But rather than reducing the African American perspective to the psychological viewpoint of an individual, as Zanuck might have, *The Well* examines race and interracial relationships through the social interactions of a community. In spite of its interracialist leanings and its mobilization of universally recognizable symbols and narratives, the film nevertheless maintains a parallel exploration of the differences that exist between Black and white perspectives, voices, cultures, and histories, differences that these two events bring into relief. This community, if not independently viable, is at least a culturally and communally cohesive network. Although we see Black Americans spread throughout various white spaces, including the homes they clean and the shoe shine stand, they manage to occupy and (literally and figuratively) overrun these spaces. Using the dual plot elements of the race riot and the tragedy of a child falling down a well, the film explores a variety of modes of interracial interaction and discourse and a polyphony of conflicting racial logics, mythologies, and ideologies within and among Black and white communities in the North. By using the riots as a way to bring to the surface the deeply rooted interracial misunderstanding and injustice which the racial message film suggested should be covered over with a progressively polite colorblindness, the film demonstrated to audiences of the 1950s the precariousness of a model of integration premised on repression and presented a model of integration that could extend beyond niceties. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, even realist, racial message films like *Pinky*, *Cross-fire*, *Lost Boundaries*, and *Gentleman's Agreement* were marked, to an extent, by artifice, melodrama, and a shallow racial logic. If the film's catharsis-through-riot formula

fails to offer lasting solutions to the racial problems it presents, it nevertheless highlights and articulates the vernacular sentiments of interracial interaction, rendering them in subtle but vivid realist detail that the studio racial message film eschewed.

Mythic Reversals

The Well also exceeds the technical standard of realism by using its realist mode for the debunking of myths. As J.P. Telotte points out in his analysis of postwar film noir, realist discourse often positions itself against or in conversation with illusion.⁴⁸ *The Well*, however, rather than producing and then subverting overt visual representation of illusion, primarily pits its own realism against myths and lies—the rumors the town consistently conjures up and the racial ideology that undergirds them. The film directly confronts a number of myths that have historically led to the erroneous construction of Black masculinity and of the race problem more generally and thus gives Black spectators the pleasure of reversal. Unlike many racial message films that emphasize the presence of integration-ready Black characters to counter and challenge racist myths, *The Well* directly speaks the myths through scenario and dialogue in order to point to the false roots of racial mythology.

Although the film does present miscegenation, it twists the concept, challenging the stereotypical mythic narrative that assumes Black male lust for white women. Rather the film highlights a miscegenation narrative that contains true perversion and a real, frightening imbalance of power: the “filthy” kidnapping (and implied sexual abuse) of the Black female child, Carolyn, by a white man, Claude Packard. By simply presenting this largely ignored but historically real counter-narrative of the abuse of one of the least empowered member of society, the Black girl, at the hands of its most powerful member, the white man, the film challenged contemporary miscegenation

⁴⁸ J.P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: the Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 33-36.

narratives, which constructed the Black male as incessant aggressor and violator. This presentation also reminded the audience of white abuse of Black women since the era of slavery. Moreover, the police force and members of the white community actually believe the white man to be guilty, and seek to punish him. This presents a version of white identity designed to challenge the universal assumption of race bias against African Americans and require, from the audience, the active deconstruction of mythic notions of racial behavior. The investigative sheriff who is so avidly allied with an equal enforcement of law and order that he roughs up the white accused is a major (and politically important) site of identification, probably for both Blacks and whites.

The film further debunks the myth of the Black male rapist by referencing the history of false accusations of Black men by white females made most notorious by the Scottsboro trials of the late 1930s. In a scene that might become palpably emotional for those who had heard of the recent lynching by electrocution of the Martinsville Seven accused of rape or the Trenton Six who also had been accused of murder on circumstantial evidence,⁴⁹ the dialogue reads:

Boy 1: You gotta know how to handle 'em [African Americans]. You gotta keep 'em in line.

Chip: Well don't think we won't when the time comes.

Lois: Hi, Chip.

Chip: (to Lois who is passing by) Hi. (turning back to Boy 1) When they start beating up white guys—that's the time to do something.

Sally: Well! Chip didn't exactly fall all over you. He seemed a lot more interested in talking about those niggers. And you told me that he was so gone on you.

Lois (walking back towards Chip): Chip Wiggam! I don't think you even care that I was just insulted.

Boy 2: What are you talking about? Who insulted you?

Lois: A nigger. Sally and I were walking along Parson street—

Boy 1: You mean one of them made a pass at you?

Lois: Well, what do you expect us to do about it? We're just helpless girl. But if you want to just stand here and yak about it, come on, Sally.

⁴⁹ See "Bail is demanded for 'Trenton Six'," Jul 23, 1949, *The New York Times*, 6. Regarding the Martinsville Seven of Martinsville, Virginia, "Final Please Denied, 4 [sic] Negroes Die Today," *New York Times*, Feb 2, 1951, 36.



Figure 45- Racial epithets on Main Street

The only thing more startling than naturalness of the film's verbal articulation of the word "nigger" in this scene is its visual counterpart. The word "nigger" (and its racial logic) issue not from rowdy and sickly racist white working class men (as in *No Way Out*), men already, as Stephen Ross has pointed out, already othered by Hollywood discourse.⁵⁰ They issue instead from perfectly average white teens—even bobby-soxers and James Dean wannabes. To hear this racist discourse emerge so naturally and effortlessly from the normalized, regular, even idealized white 1950s youth and to see how Black suffering becomes a simple plot twist in the average "teenagers in love" romance story, draws in another set of intertextual "teen pic" cues with deeply troubling effects. In so doing, the film creates a sort of disruptive or subversive intertextualism—a brand of referencing that disrupts and gives lie to mythic textual material that it references. By giving us a voyeuristic view of the off-the-cuff racism of these average white youth, we are given a new view of these "types," from which our old view will never recover.⁵¹

From a Black perspective, these cinematic moments that confirm the normalcy of white American racism may have been priceless—painful, yes—but they may well have activated a phenomenology of restored justice—a sensation of affirmation—which traditional Hollywood cinema

⁵⁰ Stephen J. Ross, *Working Class Hollywood* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁵¹ Our view of these teens never recovers in part because they are never again shown and are absent in the rescue efforts.

withheld and which would not become popular until the rise of Black cinema in the 1970s. These images of white people's quick and unremorseful jump towards racism implicates whites in a structural and ideological racism rather than in the incidental prejudice that films like *Gentleman's Agreement* fictionalized. The exchange between Lois and Chip also accomplishes another disruptive function in American definitions of miscegenation, one that also would have enriched Black spectatorial experience. It reveals—renders on the big screen—the actual *moment* of white female fabrication of the miscegenation lie that ends in violence against innocent African Americans, and thus confirms the Black male rapist myth as lie.

The final reversal of the miscegenation myth occurs in a seemingly insignificant scene. Casey, Kellog's love interest, works at—and perhaps owns—the diner which bears her name. When a white racist mob threatens one of her co-workers, Casey not only protects him, striking the would-be assailant over the head with a frying pan but *physically* places her body in front of his. The blocking here is important. Casey physically shields the Black man from whites—she uses her body, which the film had previously rendered erotic—to protect him. Where it had often been concern about white women's bodies that had prompted the miscegenation hysteria, in *The Well*, it is the white woman's body that comes to the defense of her Black male friend and co-worker.

Reframing integration: The Realist Integrationist aesthetic

If the problem of the Twentieth century was the problem of the color line, then the problem of mid-Twentieth century America was where and how that line would be drawn and who would protect it. Executive Order 8802 and the concurrent appointment of the Fair Employment Practices Commission in 1941, placed integration on the National agenda and concurrently in the eye of

national media.⁵² Wartime dramas like *Bataan* (1943) as well as the *March of Time's* newsreel, "The Springfield Plan," pictured integration but featured Blacks and whites engaged in a rigidly staged interracial dialogue. Many of the public images of integration, from that of Jackie Robinson receiving a medal from President Truman, to that of Sugar Ray Robinson dancing with Judy Garland, had an official and stogy veneer that rendered them experimental.

In the early part of *The Well*, by contrast, integration is a naturalized part of the narrative. At the film's beginning, before the riots, we are shown that the town is integrated. Black and white workers labor with readily apparent and unself-conscious equality. Blacks also work in service capacities with whites but do not hesitate to address them as equals and even discuss the town's racial happenings with them in a knowing way. Although these scenes are brief, their effective deinstitutionalization of images of integration is quite powerful. Carolyn is shown to be the classmate of a Peter, a little white boy who cares about her and will eventually discover her shawl and book by the side of the well and immediately recognize them as hers. By framing everyday actions and modes of speech under the rubric of integration, they pictured it in ways that had been largely absent from the highly theoretical debates in the press. The film achieves this effect of naturalization primarily through the subtle strategy of framing.

⁵² Executive order 8802 read: "I do hereby reaffirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin, and I do hereby declare that it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations, in furtherance of said policy and of this order, to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin" Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Executive Order 8802, 1941.



Figure 46- In a sustained long-shot, African American and white co-laborers discuss the racially charged kidnapping situation with some rapport. But African Americans get the last word. When the man on the left says “Give him a break. Maybe he didn’t do it,” the man in the center says, “Man, tell him what kind of a break we would get if it was one of us!”



Figure 47- African Americans and whites sit together at a lunch counter. But Elzie Emanuel’s unnamed character (second from left) remarks, “See, this proves my point: you can get away with murder as long as you’re the right color.”



Figure 48- In this scene, an African American gas station attendant discusses the racially turbulent situation with white customers, telling these whites that Packard's nephew has gone free.

The inclusion of images of working class Blacks and whites laboring side by side and conversing familiarly naturalizes integration, a move which, in 1951, was powerfully counter-normative. Even when Black and white communities are involved in open conflict, the framing makes it impossible to disentangle the two groups—it seems to pronounce them interlocked—to bracket them, sometimes uncomfortably, together.

American narratives of interracial interaction have fallen into a number of standard formulae including the narrative of miscegenation (which is most often doomed), the narrative of becoming the other (which includes both narratives of white racial integration into blackness and the much more frequent reverse assimilation),⁵³ and narratives of interracial mercy—of whites bestowing gifts upon Blacks (that is, integration as a Horatio Alger story of Black uplift through white help). Much less frequently have the narratives of integration taken on the problematic of brotherhood or treated Black and white cultures as parallel rather than hierarchically situated, as they are in *The Well*.

The film's broader unannounced integrationist motif, one which is evident in the integrated lunch counters, libraries, and workforces in the city are not only rendered backdrop, but in some sense further hidden from the audience's immediate attention by the sensational action and discourse of these scenes which act as their central focus. As the characters discuss police pursuit of Claude Packard, the audience is positioned to attend to the story of Claude Packard's presumably nefarious interactions with Carolyn rather than the intergrationist motif that makes up its backdrop. This integrationist motif, sprinkled as it was, throughout the text would not have been easily removable by censors and, indeed, no attempts to remove scenes of integration show up in the elimination records I have seen.

⁵³ Jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow, for example, told people he was actually Black when he was actually white.

Visually, the film normalizes integration through the camera's casual glance, which frames Black and white proximity, and through parallel editing, which implicitly likens Black and white racial logics and behaviors. These visual signs of integration are linked with an aural method of suggesting social equality. Black characters consistently call those white characters they know by their first names, regardless of their social rank or position. Conversely, whites consistently refer to Blacks they do not know well as Mr. and Mrs., thus shifting racial expectations around naming. It is significant, I think, that in the first scene of the film the mother is called Mrs. Crawford by the policeman, thus immediately signaling his respect for her status. Nearly every African American in the film, including the cook in her restaurant and both Mr. and Mrs. Crawford call the white female restaurateur "Casey," her first name. In this way, among others, Black inferiority is never even imagined by the film. Even when the situation might prompt disrespect, as for example, when Mr. Gaines accuses the Sheriff, Ben Kellog, of not trying hard enough to find his niece, Kellog responds respectfully—even if through clenched teeth—calling the girl's uncle "Mr. Gaines."

There is also a dialogical realism here. The timbre of dialogue is verisimilar: the accents are varied but fall along lines typical to Northern Blacks. Also, African Americans, as the character of Jimmie (Mr. Woody's assistant) shows, are capable of code-switching—of having one mode of conduct in the face of whites, and another within their own community. Jimmie acts as if everything is all right until he leaves Mr. Woody's shop and then he tells African American friends what has happened.

The film is also honest about the persistence of voluntary self-segregation within integrated settings and the potential problems, even fundamental flaws, of a colorblind logic in a system from which racism, prejudice and discrimination have not yet been fully exorcized. The fact that African

Americans openly discuss at a lunch counter within the earshot of whites (who linger, perhaps listening, at the outskirts of the frame) the inability for Blacks to attain justice, could be read as not only a public discussion and social analysis of the problem the town faces but also as a veiled challenge to surrounding whites as a way to claim public space as their own.

The Well's Black Family Discourse: Masculinity and Femininity from Type to Action

Black realist representation is also evident in the film's depiction of the Black family and its intricate characterization of Black female and male subjectivity. The film presents a complex and realistically motivated portrait of the Black family. Black masculinity in the film is dynamic and Black femininity, mobile. Black masculinity's complexity is materialized in the sharply various characters of Mr. Crawford, Granddaddy Crawford, and Mr. Gaines. Together these depictions of Black masculinity work to challenge not only the myth of a singular deviant Black male identity popularized within the press' criminalizing discourse but also to challenge the one dimensional subservient versions of Black male identity portrayed by Hollywood films to date. Each of these characters is governed by an accessible and distinct familial logic. Even Mr. Gaines, the most militant of the Black characters, is framed sympathetically. For example, in the scene where the three men go to the police station to talk to the sheriff about whether Carolyn has been kidnapped, Mr. Gaines speaks one of the film's most powerful condemnations of white injustice. He condemns the police force's slowness in finding Carolyn's kidnapper by stating, "Maybe you haven't found him yet because he's a white man, sheriff!" By allowing an African American not only to verbalize this critique, but to say it directly to a white authority figure, the film offers images of Blacks "talking back" which may have been an important source of pleasure for a Black audience more accustomed to the Stepin

Fetchit/Judge Priest legal relationship.⁵⁴ However, in this scene the filmmakers resist the tendency to “other” Black militants, instead rooting Black anger in familial grief. Even though Gaines is initially framed as a militant in the scenes in which he questions the sheriff, we, the audience, cannot dwell on this framing for long because his comment is immediately followed by the grandfather’s modifying, refining perspective which suggests that Gaines’ anger is the result of his worry: “Mr. Gaines is Carolyn’s uncle. You can understand that we’re terribly worried about my granddaughter.” Additionally, later in the film, Gaines is seen searching the countryside with Granddaddy Crawford for his missing niece. This familial framing of the discourse on militancy may have made it easier for whites to understand Black resistance, but also demonstrates the universality of familial loyalty—the extent to which both Black and white violence and anger could be rooted in a shared ethic of the sanctity and preciousness of the family. Moreover, the grandfather’s comments contribute to the overall effect of dialogical verisimilitude by reminding us of the importance of Black diplomacy with whites for the protection of the Black family.

The depiction of Ralph Crawford is an equally if not more important challenge to one-dimensional Black masculinity. Not only is he a laborer, a worker at an auto-mechanics shop, but it is his struggle between anger and grief that provides much of the emotional tension in the early parts of the film. Crawford also works to challenge the assumption of paternal absence or ineffectualness. The clearest example of this is the scene mentioned above where he and his brother and father go to the police station to discuss Carolyn’s disappearance. Although clearly dismayed by his daughter’s disappearance, he makes a valiant effort to respect the sheriff’s authority even after Kellog has avoided giving him information that may be vital to discovering his daughter’s

⁵⁴ I am referring here to their relationship between the two in the John Ford film *Judge Priest* (1934), where Stepin Fetchitt draws almost incoherently and acts in a subservient manner with the judge.

whereabouts. He is urgent about retrieving his daughter but, unlike his brother, Crawford uses the language of togetherness, uniting his purpose with the sheriff's: "We have got to find my baby. We have got to find her before anything happens to her." Once he realizes that it is true that a white man has been seen with his child, he turns from Kellog, distraught and angry, and says, nearly in tears: "What'll I tell my wife?" The complexity of his emotional reaction and his increasing ambivalence about whether or not to respond to the kidnapping with violence is made palpable in his encounter with Packard. He continues to plead with Packard in a manner not dissimilar from that he used with Kellog, but the veneer of respect is wearing thin in the face of Packard's dismissals and physical rebuffs. Crawford hands take on a logic of their own as he grasps at Packard, as if he could pull the whereabouts of his daughter from the sleeves of this wealthy man's suit.

In *The Well*, Black women are, for the most part, freed from being defined by their relationship to domestic work and from their traditional haunts—the kitchen and the white home. Lena Horne had already proven for the era that Black women could be beautiful and sexual. So by the time *The Well* came out, this was not the step needed to progress Black female representation. As Richard Dyer has shown, Horne's sexuality never really found its masculine match.⁵⁵ *The Well* begins to fill in the absence in cinematic discourse centered around the question of Black female subjectivity and to provide the cinematic proof of Black female humanity. Layers of artifice, whether imposed by the distanced, performative, screen persona of singer/actress Lena Horne or the casting of white actresses in the role and space marked for Black femininity as in *Pinky* stood in the way of complete narrative identification by Black spectators. In *The Well*, Madie Norman plays the young, *brown-skinned*, mother who steers clear of both the Mammy and the Jezebel stereotypes.

⁵⁵ Dyer, Richard, "The Colour of Entertainment," *Sight and Sound* 5, no. 11 (Nov 1995): 28.

The early parts of the film momentarily picture Black women in domestic spaces (although even here they hover about the margins of the homes—on the back porches and other places where they are never cut off from the Black communal “grapevine” that defines them). The moment we learn of Carolyn’s whereabouts becomes a moment of symbolic freedom. Not only does Carolyn for the first time have the potential of being freed but Mrs. Crawford and her Black female attendants are likewise freed from the confines of the home and, the camera lengthily reveals, released into action on the streets. It is a Black woman who acts as messenger, alerting the police station that the child has been found. It is “the emotion of mother-love,” as one Black commentator in the Black press suggested, that is the emotive center of the final sequences of the film.⁵⁶ This is important not only because Mrs. Crawford is Black, but also because the mother—the Black mother—is able and allowed here to take her subjectivity out into the open—to publicly display her emotionality and grief. This lack of external restraint upon Black female self-expression is important not only for the film’s narrative purposes but for shifting the broader rendering of Black female representation. Nor is the public-ness of Mrs. Crawford’s grief exploited. In the film’s final scenes, although various people, white and Black, approach the mother to see about her needs, she is powerfully silent, refusing to return niceties, even—and perhaps especially—from white folks. The decision to just let the Black mother be is an important one that distinguishes *The Well*’s treatment of African American women and opened up possibilities for Black women spectators identification.

Black Teen Spectatorial Possibilities: The Well as Teen-pic

Linked to this complex discourse on the Black family is the discourse on imperiled, yet precious African American youth. Although there are a variety of ages, skin tones, and socioeconomic levels represented in the film, *The Well* elaborates the situation of Black teenagers,

⁵⁶ Francis Rivers, “The Well’ takes real events as its cue,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Dec 22, 1951, 7.

who, as the film evolves, become a major part of *the Well's* departures from Hollywood representations of African Americans. The teen market was important for filmmakers (and B-film makers particularly) in the 1950s with the increasing postwar prosperity of the American family and the subsequent rise of teenage disposable income.⁵⁷ It is not only a Black youth who originally spreads the rumor/news that begins the riot, but it is also Black youth who process and discuss amongst themselves the news of Carolyn's kidnapping and the possibility of white justice in their town. However, the film's cinematic strategies avoid othering these African American youth. No menacing music accompanies Jimmie's sudden appearance in the flower shop after he has overheard Mr. Woody reveal that Carolyn was last seen with a white man who bought her flowers. Nor do we see African American youth in gangs as would become the trope in films like *No Way Out* (1950), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), and *Cool World* (1964). Instead, the African American youth are the most thoughtful element within the Black community, and in the film as a whole. They sit over books in the library discussing the possibility of getting racial justice in a white town with a white sheriff. They also discuss this issue in terms of the history of the miscegenation narrative saying, "this time the shoe is on the other foot." These youth's awareness of American racist narratives about blackness—their ability to discuss these in a measured way—stands in sharp contrast to the images of the brutal, rowdy, unthinking youth gangs which would appear in later films.

⁵⁷ See Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 42-70.



Figure 49Black teens in a measured racial discussion over books

The scene has a casual air but manages to represent these young men as both articulate and righteously indignant, racially conscious and reflective. This effect is facilitated in large measure by the naturalized casting of actual Black youth “as themselves” in these roles. These young men, the film shows us, do not spring into action without thought. Instead, they discuss and process the validity of these rumors and perhaps, as the library setting implies, connect them with their knowledge of history.

Finally, the demonstration of Black youth as the victims not only of the white mob but also of the white power structure is one of the most compelling moments in the film. We see this most clearly in the scene where a young Black male student is treated roughly by a police officer. At this moment, the tendency of the justice system to criminalize the reformable and to falsely aggrandize the masculine threat of the Black youth is soundly challenged. This was—and I think not by coincidence—an resounding motif of the Popkin’s earlier work in *Reform School* and *Gang Smashers*. The humanity and nuance that *Reform School* brought to the depiction of African American youth reaches its fruition in *The Well*. Multi-regional research into the marketing of the film is needed, but it is very possible that the film was marketed to the Black teen demographic. The acknowledgement of Black youth as young men, literate and deserving respect and dignity, rather than as menace is an important contribution of this text to its contemporary racial discourse.

Depictions of the Riots:



Figure 50-In one riot scene, whites point out Black teenage girl and plan to run her down.

A crucial part of the power of *The Well* is that it uses its realist visual techniques to begin to uncover institutional racism. By demonstrating *how quickly* whites in an average, integrated town can devolve into an epithet spewing mob, the film begins to point to the *underlying* racism of average American communities in ways that films like *No Way Out* and *Pinky*, preoccupied with showcasing white liberalism, failed to reveal. The film generated a sense of verisimilitude by picturing scenes that were common to most riots—the milling and loose congregation of crowds before the riot occurs, the persistence of rumors, the spread of violence to various sites throughout the town, etc. But it also points out that, for whites, the riots occurred because of the need to socially control a growing, strengthening, and increasingly rights-oriented African American populace. As Chip puts it, whites have “got to know how to handle ‘em” and how to “keep ‘em in line.”

The rioting in *The Well* occurs in action sequences, which unlike the riot scenes in *No Way Out*, accelerate, rather than expressionistically divert, the plot. These sequences feature shocking scenarios—white men jumping a Black janitor scrubbing the steps, white men running their car into the car of an African American and beating him right in front a church sign reading “blessed are the meek.” The actual images that make up these scenes are not brutally rendered but suffice to show the randomness of the violence and the way that it has changed the town: we see through an over the shoulder shot, two white youth pointing out and then trying to run over a young Black woman crossing the street (whose angry reaction we then see in close up) (see Figure above). We see an armed group of white youth chasing a Black youth until he runs into a Church. A group of white youth throw a brick through a Black grocer’s window. We also see, after the fact, the bloodied heads and bodies of Black victims of violence as well as a crowd of fifty plus white men chasing two Black men into a trash dump and falling upon them viciously. Finally, we watch as Gaines is interrupted in his search for (the body of) his niece by Wiley (Packard’s assistant) and group of white men who beat him, arms pinioned, and call him a “dirty nigger.”

Yet, even in the midst of this violence and hatred, the film’s authors maintained the representation of countercurrents. Even though most people are out for blood, some of the town’s residents still do right. For instance, a white priest stops white men from entering the church to harm a Black youth and a Black man picks up a white youth in his car to help him avoid a group of Black aggressors. These responses that do not fall only along racial lines take on an individual motivational logic of their own. They also encourage interracial identification even in scenes where interracial violence predominates. The riot scenes work by juxtaposition rather than by revelation of brutality. By cross-cutting contrasting different sorts of behavior—one right, one wrong—the film imposes a

subtle moral lesson and also highlights the *cruelty* rather than the brutality of the violence, another way of depicting violence in ways that would not incur censorship. As was typically the case in reality, it is also clear in *The Well* that it is white men who have strength in numbers and consider that this is their town and they need to “run the niggers out.” Only the white men at Packard’s place are referred to as a “wild mob.” When Packard says that he is going to run the “niggers” out of town, Sheriff Kellog says, “just you try it and I will shoot you all down like a pack of mad dogs.”

We also have images of Black response, of Black resistance, and eventually of militancy. Black militancy is not shown as an identity—but rather a positionality, as a logical point arrived at by Blacks who have been subjected to repeated, unremitting, and unpunished wrongs. It is a discursive response to white injustice. Jimmie, the florist’s assistant, is moved to anger by the fact that it appears that the sheriff is covering up the news of a kidnapping of a *Black* child. Likewise, the nameless student played by Elzie Emanuel joins the ranks of the militant because of the repeated confirmations, in the news, in history and in his own experience, of white injustice. Although Black violence is by no means celebrated by the film, it is completely justified and its logic rendered transparent by the film’s progressive revelation of white racism and by the articulate explanation of the Black subject position from the mouths of Mr. Crawford, Mr. Gaines, and Granddaddy Crawford.

The riot scenes in *The Well* are also marked by historical realism. In the Detroit riots, of the twenty-three people killed, twenty were Black.⁵⁸ In *The Well*, while there are eleven incidents of white on Black violence, there are only four of Black on white violence and these incidents are more often than not attacks on institutions and symbols of authority rather than on people. The film also makes direct links to the Detroit riots in other ways. The scene where it is implied that African Americans

⁵⁸ “Troops Curb Detroit Riots; 23 Are Dead,” *The Washington Post*, Jun 22, 1943, 1.

have set fire to one of Packard's storage buildings not only shows a symbolic attack on the man and his wealth but may have been a reference to the Packard Car Company which played a crucial role in the Detroit riots.⁵⁹ A number of the attacks in the riot scene take place with the aid of cars. Cars, which were the central symbol of postwar prosperity, optimism, and were associated with America's auto production capital Detroit, become weapons in *The Well* and instruments for the circulation of rumors. In many ways, this historical realism evident in invoking the Detroit riots (a move that Zanuck would not dare to make in *No Way Out*) stood in for the detailed rendering of violence. For example, in another symbolically resonant scene, Black men tear through the white top of a convertible, piercing its white, skin-like leather with knives and broken bottles. Here again,



Figure 51- African Americans knife the white roof of a car—an action that powerfully symbolizes Black violence against whites—and references the Detroit riots.

destruction of the car references the Detroit uprisings, but it acts also to displace Black violence onto a *white* inanimate object, something that may have helped the scene avoid censorship.

The film also highlights, if through oblique references, police brutality and the persistent problem of systemic injustice against Black young men. In one scene a Black youth who we have

⁵⁹ The Packard car company had a Klan inspired race strike based on the promotion of three black employees only *days* before the Detroit riots. The role of the Packard company incident in precipitating the riots was noted by a number of journalists. "Troops Curb Detroit Riots; 23 Are Dead," *The Washington Post*, Jun 22, 1943, 1. "CIO Board Ok's Thomas Klan Charge," *Chicago Defender*, June 26, 1943, 20.

previously seen is a student is brought into the police station to be arrested. He is the only person, we note, who is arrested in association with the riots.



Figure 52- Police Brutality against a young Black student

Not only is he almost seized by a white mob outside the station, from which a woman calls out “leave him here! We’ll take care of him!,” but he is then subjected to mild brutality by the white police officer who physically forces him to stand despite considerable and visible bodily injuries and his wincing complaint that his arm “hurts bad.” When he tries to sit, the officer grabs him by the arms and lifts him roughly up against the wall, telling him to turn around as he roughly frisking him.

The sheriff then enters and asks what is going on, to which the officer replies:

First officer: “I picked him up on Samson street—a street fight.

Sheriff: Well he certainly wasn’t fighting alone: where are the others?

First officer: Well, the others were just kids—white kids—about eighteen or nineteen years old and this guy jumped ‘em.

Sheriff: How many were there?

First officer: Five or six.

Sheriff: By the looks of him they must have put up some battle. (to prisoner) How old are you son?

Black youth: Eighteen.

Sheriff: (Stares long and hard at first officer but says nothing) Get him over to the hospital.

(officer takes boy roughly by the arm and begins to lead him out) Wait a minute. (To another officer:) You take him. (To first officer:) You work the desk.

First officer: But Ben you got me all wrong.

Here the suggestion of police brutality is made clear through the cop's rough actions. Beyond this, however, the scene also reveals the mythic construction of Black youth as villainous and denudes the white narrative of "encirclement," that is, the tendency of whites to inflate the age, anger, and power of Black "aggressors" in light of white racism and to view themselves, or "their own" as the imperiled, surrounded innocent in instances when they are clearly in the wrong.⁶⁰ The arresting officer's construction of whites as "just kids" and the Black youngster as a menace capable of jumping five or six whites, is made obviously false by the visual evidence of the young man's scrawny frame, his quick obedience, his wounded body, and his pleading manner. This visual evidence is something that Kellogg immediately sees and recognizes. Kellogg's series of looks—from his investigatory and eventually compassionate eyes on the boy, to his accusatory eyes on his deputy—signal the importance of accurate, realist vision to solving the town's problems and restoring just order. However, the scene is somewhat complicit with prevailing racial ideologies regarding law enforcement, in that it is the sheriff, rather than the Black community or the youth himself, who gets to voice righteous indignation over the wrongful accusation. What is more, the brutalizing officer suffers very little consequence for his actions but is rather left to come to reform on his own. Overall, the depiction of the riots renders whites the predominant aggressors and African Americans as engaging in violence out of self-defense against the "white mobs."

By comparison with *No Way Out*, the riot scenes in *The Well* are more historically accurate in their presentation of African American's role, more detailed in their exposition, and more action-oriented. In *No Way Out*, the riot scenes showed no close-ups of physical contact between Blacks and

⁶⁰ Ella Shohat, "Ethnicities-in-Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema," in Lester Friedman *Unspeakeable Images* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 271.

whites. But in *The Well*, while the violence was still left unshown, physical contact was shown and violence more strongly implied. The acts of violence were also shown as occurring in smaller clusters rather than in two big gangs as in *No Way Out*. The riot violence in *The Well* cannot be characterized as a fight between two massive mobs, but was marked by smaller, more localized acts of symbolic violence between two internally-differentiated communities. The riot violence in *No Way Out* was expressionistic, sadistic and melodramatically rendered, whereas the riot violence in *The Well* was depicted as believably spontaneous. In *No Way Out* the historical references to Detroit 1943 were entirely obliterated by pre-emptive censorship. But in *The Well*, these references to Detroit were clearly and powerfully present, which would have caused the film to have a political, personal, and historical significance for viewers by way of collective memory.

Digging Ourselves Out of This Mess

The ending of the film is utopian in a populist, perhaps even Capra-esque sense, but it manages never to lose its realist edge. Racial healing is lightning paced, a fact that might be considered to diminish the realism of the film. However, the quick healing follows the film's overall notion that racial motives are undergirded by human motives—that the logic of mass excitement and, as Dr. Billings (Bill Walker) put it, “hysteria,” can be as easily harnessed to projects dedicated to healing the peace as they had been to rupturing it. In this, the film prompts recognition that communities rally around spectacles of perceived threat, whether the threat is a race war or a child down a well. This was an important message for the postwar era and particularly for a moment dominated by McCarthyism. Part of what facilitates our acceptance of this accelerated narrative of communal reconciliation is the staunch, even stark realism of setting and the technological realism on which the film relies for its power in these last scenes. Once it is discovered that Carolyn is down

the well, Blacks and whites throw down their weapons, and pick up their shovels in a race against time to get her out. Here another contrast overwhelms the racial one that the film has centered on. As the advertising would have it, the movie depicts “tons of steel tearing the earth...reaching for one small human life.”⁶¹ In war films like *Bataan* and *Home of the Brave* (1949), guns, tanks and other artillery had always united Black and white men, acting even as an equalizing force as they stood shoulder to shoulder, fighting the enemy. In *The Well*, this 1000 pounds of steel are not bullets or tanks but rather industrial machinery, a motif much more appropriate to the era and the Northern locale of the film.

This machinery also works to develop the latent working-class undertones of the film. It is around the huge digging apparatus that our attention will focus for the final scenes, and it is this solid iron law of industry around which Blacks and whites will reorganize and steady themselves, fixing what the riots have unloosed. This shaft sinking tool not only drives a hole into the earth but fuels the masculine energy and the feminine attention to the rescue effort, in ways not unlike those of the war film which rendered iconic the tank, the airplane, and the gun. Surrounded by construction equipment to which the camera gives intense attention, the metaphor of this final scene of rescue as a reconstruction is hard to miss. The camera refuses to focus on the narrative of interracialism, again choosing to relegate this aspect to the backdrop. What captures our immediate attention, both through the dialogue and the image track, are the technical details of the rescue (which are attended to by both Blacks and whites), details which would have been familiar to those who had seen the Fiscus incident on television. They are revealed with a McGuyver-esque detail, including maps, and diagrams. Rather than focusing on the process of reconciliation, the camera shows us the efficiency of the bi-racial team of rescuers who need each other to make the rescue

⁶¹ UA press book. *The Well*. Margaret Herrick Library. AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA.

possible. What is more, the model and type of interracial conversion presented here is exceptional. Although white help is present, it is predicated not on white pity, but on the palpable sense of an equal and mutual need and compassion on the part of both whites and Blacks. Riveted by the spectacle of human tragedy cast in Black, whites are themselves stilled in their racism. The text of the scene, which is about overcoming time by getting to the bottom of the well, seems to support the subtext which likewise accelerates the time of racial conversion. The ending also seems to strongly suggest that we don't have *time* for racial infighting, or even for discomfort: it is the shortness of time—one imposed by the action of the final scenes—that forces its protagonists (and perhaps also the audience) to decide between pettiness and humanity.

The end of the film is also progressive in that it puts private resources into the services of the community. The radio operator (Hal), the lumber yard owner, and finally Packard himself, commit their private resources to public—even *Black* public—interests. The end of the film suggests the drive to rescue the girl is a moment of collective consciousness and collective conscience, a moment where the sudden contagion of a common sense of meaning is produced and appropriated. What is more, the motif of mutual work suggests integration as a means to an end rather than driven by a desired social intermingling or curiosity about the other. The rescue effort becomes more an end in itself than a means to an end. This form of integration is practical, pragmatic, and highly implementable and local. What is more, the white sympathy with Blacks in *The Well* never becomes pity. So tightly harnessed is it to the palpable reality of Carolyn's audible suffering and her mother's visible pain, that it never has time to get caught up in the process of vaguely imagining or exoticizing the other. Nor is it ever reduced to melodrama or to stagy public spectacles of togetherness.

The Well manages to find a masculine language and model for integration, which avoids making the Black man into what Darryl F. Zanuck (referring to Sidney Poiter's character in *No Way Out*) called "a weakling."⁶² Black and white men are exactly equal in their involvement in the efforts to save Caroline. The model of integration projected here is one of shared labor—one which seems to be obliquely supporting the Fair Employment Practices Committee in the visual language of industry which the wartime newsreels had made popular and familiar to audience. This form of integration promotes cooperation but not total dissolution of cultural and social positioning.

The film's final model of integration, then, is not based on the mutual joy of exploring the other but rather on the fact that Blacks and Whites need one another: that they *must* work side by side. The visual blackening of the whites through mud symbolizes that this is perhaps an immersion into racial blackness, a white integration into blackness—a reverse integration into Black purposes and into the psychological identification with the Black family. The film's setting at night, likewise equalizes the pigmentation of the film's characters.

The ending of the film is, indeed, utopian but the fact that the Popkins, Rouse, and Greene desired such a racially integrated utopia not only reveals the sincere interracialism of the team, but also gives viewers a palpable vision and visceral cinematic experience of interracial harmony, one which had passed and been tested in the truth, reality, and bloody consequences of interracial hatred. The ending also presents the iconography of the masses—of mass movement, a theme which the film—with its focus on crowds, communities, and group motivations has been presenting all along. In this final scene, the groups that had recently been in enmity stand side by side, focusing on the spectacle and horror of Black female imperilment and the threat to the Black family. When the

⁶² Darryl F. Zanuck, Memo to Lesser Samuels cc: Philip Yordan, Feb 1, 1948. Twentieth Century Fox Collection. Doheny Library. University of Southern California. Los Angeles, CA.

rescue is finished, and we find Carolyn is all right, the member of the community cross this limit line set up by the rescuers, an image which could clearly be read as a metaphor for finishing a race against time, or for crossing the color line to a more complete, honest, and mutually respectful integration.

This resolution is also premised on the ability of the townspeople to see each other—and themselves more honestly. Stilled by a spectacle of greater magnitude than the one of their own making, these townspeople must to learn to look deeply and meaningfully, even at spectacle. In the ending we never see Sam Packard hug a Black man—but he does take an intimate, long look at the Crawford family, looking into the depth of their situation. When Wiley comments, purportedly about the well: “it’s a long way down there” and Packard assents, “I know...I know.” This moment signals the new mode of looking (and hearing) that Blacks and whites will engage in, one which sees and hears with more compassion and greater depth and precision.

Racial Censorship of The Well

Both the censorship process and the reception of *The Well* within different segments of the Black community serve to help us to understand the resonances and meanings of the film at the time of its release and the representational politics of that moment. *The Well* was censored in the South, the North and in Maryland, a border state. But overall it was *less* censored than *No Way Out*, a markedly less realist film. How it was censored, and how it managed to avoid censorship, is worthy of analysis and is vitally linked to the film’s historical meanings.

The Well’s production team took a number of precautions to reduce the censorship of the film. Unlike the makers of *No Way Out*, they used the word “nigger” rather sparingly, relying instead highly effective but less specific “othering” words like “them” and “they.” Only brief shots of rioting were needed to create a sense of their power, so the Popkin team pre-engineered their riot scenes

such that they were already “cut to a flash.” Ironically, when censors cut these fast-paced sequences more, they may ironically have caused them to increase in power, as the quicker editing would pick up pace and heighten effects. The riot scenes were also shot in such a way that the immediate effects of violence—the visualizataion of pain—was not present. The Popkin team cut away most often from those poised to strike or merely showed a mob overcoming a single person without rendering the violent acts clear. However, the most important effect used by the Popkin team was the editing which cross-cut these scenes into a unity of effect—creating a sense of both their simultaneity and the mounting savagery—and immorality—of violence. This heightened suspense and the “skipping technique” meant that the directors did not have to show that much violence to make effects complete.

Still, the film did undergo regulation by the PCA and censorship by state censors. Although non-Hollywood independent producers did not have to submit their films to the Production Code Administration, the Popkins did submit *The Well*. Agreeing to obtain PCA’s guidance was required to for their UA distribution deal. The PCA’s response to the film suggested a dampening of some of the film’s shock value and perhaps with this, its realism by obscuring its roots in another historical incident, the sexual assault and killing of Dorothy Gordon by a white culprit, one widely publicized in the Black press and the *Los Angeles Times*.⁶³ The PCA’s overall critique of the film was relatively mild, but Breen made two of his famous “strong suggestions”: first, he stipulated that the Popkins

⁶³ The California kidnapping of Dorothy Gordon was heavily covered in the *Los Angeles Times* as well as the *Chicago Defender* which means the Popkins were very likely to have been aware of the case. *The Chicago Defender* noted the unprecedented police attention to the disappearance of the young girl. Articles also emphasized the fact that extortion had been ruled out in the case. A group of African Americans who believed they had found the suspect guilty of kidnapping Gordon tried to beat him up, producing a scene of racial tension similar to those seen in *The Well*, “Kidnap Suspect Saved by Police,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar 31, 1940, 3. The grassy field where Gordon’s body was found was also quite similar to the place where, in the film, Carolyn falls into the well. It was also three florists who ultimately identified the Gordon body, and it is a florist who identifies the kidnapper in the film. “Three Who Found Kidnap Victim Seek Reward,” *Chicago Defender*, Apr 27, 1940, 3.

play down the racial violence in the film and, second, he asked that the Popkins eliminate any suggestion that Carolyn was sexually molested by Claude Packard (“As agreed upon in our previous conferences, it is absolutely essential, if the finished picture is to be approvable, that there be no inference of the raping of the child, in any of the dialogue”). The Popkins promised to make a number of script changes but eventually decided not to make half of them. As one result, the film left open the suggestion that the townspeople believe that Packard had actually not only killed but sexually assaulted the young Black girl.⁶⁴ However, by letting the audience know from the beginning that Packard is innocent, they avoided any audience concern about interracial sexual abuse.

The term “riot” never came up in the PCA’s correspondence with the Popkins—perhaps the Popkins avoided using this term to circumvent censorship. Rather the PCA reminded the Popkins of their previously stated intention to play “the scenes of physical clash between Negroes and whites...as much as possible, by suggestion, omitting all brutality and avoiding any undue emphasis on physical violence between the two races,” a treatment that the PCA thought “very important, in order to avoid difficulty with your picture in your general release.”⁶⁵

The Well was censored by a number of states and municipalities. The Virginia Division of Motion Picture Censorship originally banned the film stating “scene such as shown in this picture could stir up racial feelings and cause unpleasant consequences.”⁶⁶ UA reapplied a year later. At this point, the VDMPC rescinded their ban, requiring, instead, that the riot scenes be “shortened to a

⁶⁴ For example the PCA suggested the changing of these lines that remained in the film: “In Packard’s line, the underlined word would be omitted: ‘A filthy thing like this can ruin a man.’ Page 47: Scene 56: The line, ‘And I won’t be dragged through the filth!’ would be rewritten to omit the underlined word, either supplanting it with ‘scandal’ or leaving it out entirely. Page 50, Scene 61: In both speeches by Crawford, the lines would be rewritten to read, ‘What has your nephew done with her?’ and ‘I’ve got to know what he’s done with my baby!’” Joseph Breen, letter to Clarence Greene, Sept 19, 1950. *The Well* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library. AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA. The first of two of these lines was actually kept in the film.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Print elimination record “The Well” Oct 25, 1951. (VDMPC records. Library of Virginia. State Records Center, Richmond, Virginia) reads: “Above named film rejected in toto.”

flash” and that the Construction company owner, Sam Packard’s use of the term “Dirty Black Devils” be omitted from the film (although they wrongly attributed this line to the Sheriff). This unfounded rejection imposed a year’s delay in the film’s release in the film.⁶⁷ According to the film’s PCA file, the Massachusetts Board also censored the film, eliminating the use of the word “nigger” on four occasions in the first reel and three occasions in the second reel, thus eliminating the term entirely from the picture.⁶⁸ They required no other cuts.

Pennsylvania, New York, and Kansas, and Ontario passed the film without eliminations which is significant given the strong stance of these censor boards on *No Way Out*.⁶⁹ Perhaps this discrepancy had to do with the limited distribution of *The Well* or with its racially unified resolution. It may also speak to the relative success of the Popkins at minimizing the racial violence in the film. The fact that *No Way Out* had been released without severe audience response may also have helped the film’s censorship case.

In Ohio, the film was originally rejected by ODFC on the grounds that it “would tend to incite riots,” on its face a seemingly racially-neutral reason.⁷⁰ But more detailed exploration of the board’s files indicate that the ODFC were centrally concerned about the film’s race politics. One internal draft of an official statement about the film dated Oct 17, 1951, written after the board’s second screening, stated that *The Well* “will accentuate rather than alleviate or even minimize

⁶⁷ A *Reconstructed print* of the film, i.e. one already re-cut to suit censors’ objections elicited an elimination order on Oct 23, 1951. But even then the board still was not sure about exhibition requiring that UA “shorten all riot scenes to a flash, and after the deletions have been made, return the print for re-screening by this Board.” Finally nearly a month later on November 20, 1952, the Board approved the film with one more elimination—Sam Packard’s line about the “Dirty black devils,” one they thought the sheriff made.

⁶⁸ *The Well* PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library. AMPAS. Beverly Hills, CA.

⁶⁹ See the “Analysis Chart for Feature Films” for *The Well*. MSBMPC Records. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD.

⁷⁰ Bernard Kamber, Memo: “in re: Ohio Censorship ‘The Well,’” Feb 11, 1952, 2. United Artists Collection. Wisconsin State Archives. Madison, WI.

problems of racial discrimination or racial segregation.”⁷¹ As we have seen in Chapter 3, the ODFC was particularly uncomfortable with films of racial strife. In discussing the censorship of the film with Bernard Kamber of UA, board member Susannah Warfield had the audacity to explain the board’s action with reference to racial disturbances in Springfield, Ohio following the showing of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). But United Artist representatives Bernard Kamber and Jack Finberg, who had prior knowledge of successful appeal of *Pool of London*’s 1951 Ohio rejection, opted to appeal the ODFC’s decision to Clyde Hissong, the director of Ohio’s Education Department and supervisor of film censorship in the state. Kamber and Finberg not only presented evidence that there had been no racial disturbances following showing of *The Well* but also insinuated the board’s racism by asking Hissong if he intended to let a Southern board like Maryland decide how the film would be censored in Ohio.⁷² Warfield’s intent had indeed been to ask for the same cuts as Maryland had—and more: in addition to removing all instances of the word “nigger,” she wanted removed specifically two statements: “Tell him what kind of a break we’d get if it was one of us” and “You can get away with murder as long as you’re the right color,” instances of Black men talking back to white men and asserting the history of racial injustice only one of which had been deleted in Maryland. But Hissong took the bait, arguing vehemently with Kamber and Finberg that Maryland did not dictate Ohio’s censorship. After this conversation, Hissong sat in on the screening of the film himself and decided to leave it *entirely* uncensored in Ohio.⁷³ Warfield, however, was not sated. She notified United Artists that they would pull the film’s license if there were any trouble, citing concern about “the

⁷¹ Statement of the director on *The Well*, Oct 17, 1951. ODFC records. Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, OH.

⁷² Bernard Kamber, Memo: “in re: Ohio Censorship ‘The Well,’” Feb 11, 1952, 2. United Artists Collection. Wisconsin State Archives. Madison, WI.

⁷³ Censor’s Slip (dated 10-5-51) states: “Feb 15 [1952]-Advised Mr. Hilton by phone, approving ‘The Well.’ If unfavorable reaction should arise, will invoke right to recall.”

effect this picture might have in mixed groups.”⁷⁴ Although the ODFC did not ultimately censor the film, it scrutinized audience reaction for any justification to retract the license. It also severely delayed its release: the film had been submitted on October 5, 1951 and the film was not approved until over *four months later*, on February 15th 1952. The delay sparked protest from the *Cleveland Call and Post*, one of the state’s largest Black newspapers, as well as the ACLU.⁷⁵

Although the film was censored in other locations, the response of the Maryland State Board of Motion Picture Censors illuminates another aspect of the racial politics of this film: it reveals the complex entanglement of racial reception and racial censorship. The Maryland Board of Censors did choose to censor the film and according to UA files, the board was the most stringent and the most difficult for the film company to deal with. The MSBMPC based this decision in part on the responses of team of consultants which included the Baltimore Police Chief, the (bi-racially staffed) Maryland State Interracial Commission (a predecessor of the Commission on Human Relations) and Carl Murphy, who was the editor of the Black newspaper the *Baltimore Afro American* and president of the Baltimore Branch of the NAACP. So, essentially, the board appointed local Blacks as “consulting censors” of Black images. As with other films on which they consulted others, it is unclear from the censors’ records exactly what prompted this inclusion of the Black perspective. Were board members

⁷⁴ Susannah Warfield, letter to Robert Hilton, Feb 19, 1951. ODFC records. Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, OH.

⁷⁵ The letter from the *Call and Post* editor, who had seen a preview showing of the film in Ohio, wrote to the board stating “I represent one of the largest Negro papers in the state of Ohio, and I would like to know why such a movement was taken by the Ohio board of Censures [sic]. I would appreciate a reply concerning this banning of the film.” (Anne Banks, letter to “Ohio Board of Censorship,” undated). Ohio replied that the film had been “withdrawn *at the request of the company*,” (which, of course, the company would not have done of their own free will) and would “probably be resubmitted soon.” (Susannah Warfield, letter to Miss Anne Banks, Dec 23, 1951). Mrs. Frances Schmidt of the Cincinnati ACLU, wrote the ODFC in Feb 1952 about why the picture was not being shown (the ACLU members had also attended a preview screening). The board replied that films usually take a week to ten days to be processed and, as it had been received should be decided upon shortly (Hissong, letter to Schmidt, Feb 13, 1952). The ACLU wrote *back* to the board in March asking what was prompting the continued delay. (Schmidt, letter to Hissong, March 3, 1952). This suggests that the strategy of doing a preview screening was quite useful. ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society. Columbus, OH.

perhaps relying on the fact that elite Blacks would corroborate and publicly validate the Maryland Board's excisions? Or were they genuinely hoping to use selective Black reception as a way to stem Black protest of the film and potential rioting in response to unwelcome film images?

As he had with *No Way Out*, Carl Murphy appears to have proposed the elimination of all racial epithets in the film. When it was leaked that the MSBMPC would eliminate all utterances of the word "nigger" from *The Well*, none other than Walter White, himself wired the Board to protest the film's censorship:

This moving story of how both whites and Negroes succumbed to prejudice and fear is one of the most important motion pictures ever made in the United States in my opinion. Certain words like 'Nigger' which are objectionable in normal circumstances are used in the film completely within their proper context in demonstrating the basic prejudices of the persons who use such epithets. To remove them because of hyper-sensitivity would be the most regrettable step and one which would give falseness instead of truth to the film.⁷⁶

This quote illuminates the logic of White's reading of the film: the inclusion of the word "nigger" was important to maintain what White saw as the veracity of the film. That veracity was key to its potential impact upon public perception of the race problem. As with *No Way Out*, Sydney Traub, chairman of the MSBMPC, issued a frustrated reply:

Because it is our considered opinion that there are certain episodes and dialogue in the picture which could be crime inciting, we cannot give further thought to approving it...our position is supported by leading citizens of both races in this state...who, in writing have recommended deletions far beyond those contained in our order.⁷⁷

White's actions in contacting the Maryland Board to convince them not to delete the word "nigger" greatly upset Murphy whose legal redress committee had, Murphy wrote the NAACP board of

⁷⁶ Walter White, telegram to Sydney Traub, Nov 12, 1951. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Division. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

⁷⁷ Sydney Traub, letter to Walter White, Nov 14, 1951. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Division. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

directors, only “secured the cooperation of the Motion Picture Board in eliminating epithets after three years’ work with them...Our position is that epithets are as vile and obnoxious to us as ‘son of a b—’ or other indecent language is to other persons and there is no excuse for its use in polite language.”⁷⁸ In a brilliant example of what Houston Baker has called “mastery of form,” Murphy here converts the censors’ language and logic to an African American purpose.⁷⁹ Firing off an exasperated plea to the NAACP board of directors for support, Murphy strongly stood by his position. His was an instrumentalist position, which was less concerned with the continuity, message, or effect of an individual picture than with the dangerous potential of the individual moment of articulation of the notorious epithet. For Murphy, the concern was that censors’ typical inattention to the word “nigger” evidenced a double standard when it came to racial morality. The continual employment of racist language in motion pictures would indoctrinate young people in its uses. Murphy may also have had other reasons for his unwillingness to bend his standards in the case of *The Well*. As a leader of the effort to end police brutality in Baltimore, he may have been disappointed by the film’s general projection of the police force as racially unbiased. This was a supposition he had openly challenged only a few years earlier when he cited police brutality as the biggest contributor to racial tension in Baltimore.⁸⁰

This conflict between White and Murphy, members of the same organization, demonstrates not only the bifurcation of the Black perspectives on the film but suggests more generally the

⁷⁸ Carl Murphy, letter to Louis T. Wright, chairman of the NAACP board of directors, Dec 4, 1951. Murphy was indeed so upset by the incident that it prompted him to offer a resolution to the board that “Before National officers take a position on any local issues, which arises in the area of a Branch Office, they shall confer with the officials of the Branch affected and work out a joint solution,” (enclosure in Carl Murphy, letter to Louis T. Wright, Dec 4, 1951). Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

⁷⁹ Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 15-36.

⁸⁰ Murphy’s concern about the problem of Police Brutality is highly evident in *The Baltimore Afro-American* but for more on this particular involvement in this issue, see Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American: 1892-1950* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 114.

existence of multiple Black reading strategies mitigated by political, regional, cultural and perhaps experiential differences at a crucial historical moment. It is ironic that these differences were demonstrated within the very organization whose unified response to *The Birth of a Nation* had caused its censorship and evidenced the most powerful film reception in Black history. White clearly was more concerned with the nuances of each film's racial representations and was concerned about the tendency of local branches to use censorship as a way to fight mass mediated racism.⁸¹ Murphy on the other hand, was more interested in creating a place for Blacks in local political struggles than in issues of national representation. For him, the individual cinematic articulation was not more important than the legible consistency of perspective that would give Blacks place and voice in future local struggles for dignity, both on the screen and on the ground. Murphy's attention was focused at the local level, but this should not be taken for narrowmindedness. Murphy understood as well the tenor of politics and the necessity of strategic discursive positioning in the local realm as White did in the national. White had perhaps accumulated more film expertise over the years—or at least was more knowledgeable about the industry's racial politics and could appreciate what was innovative about *The Well* vis-a-vis the depictions of African Americans Hollywood had presented less than a decade earlier.

Although the Maryland censor board heeded Black criticism of the use of the word “nigger,” this was by no means their only concern about the film, as the text of their excisions reveals. The board removed from *The Well* all of the racial epithets but also many of the instances of white cruelty and brutality, including the attempt to run down a Black woman, and instances of white violence against an innocent Black man. Crucially, the MSBMPC also cut some of the most powerful

⁸¹ Walter White, letter to Carl Murphy, Jan 4, 1952. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Reading Room. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

moments of Black critique of white injustice. For example, the board removed the scenes when the African American mover utters the line “Tell him what kind of a break we’d get if it was one of us” and the Black student says “You can get away with murder as long as you’re the right color.” The censors also cut the entire scene of a Black rally which not only depicted armed and angry Black men but also contained the line used in some of the film’s advertisements: “This time we’re not running. For every one of us there is going to be two dead ofays! Two for one!” They also eliminated four scenes of white racial violence against Blacks. The latter dampened the film’s effectiveness in communicating white culpability and dominating violence in the riot. One scene of Black violence was also excised, notably the scene where the African American characters “slash... the automobile.” Twelve substantial cuts were required for *The Well* to be exhibited in Maryland. The number of cuts may have been a direct result of the board’s consultation with members of the community, an act which increased their ability to argue that they were representing community standards in their censorship.

While it is difficult to say definitively the cause for these excisions, we can nevertheless evaluate how these excisions would have affected the film. These excisions seem to have been designed to dampen the overall effect of violence but also to *even it out*, presenting Blacks and whites as equal culprits in the violence. Why they eliminated Black property damage of the car can only be speculated but perhaps they too saw the powerful symbolic link to Detroit. It is equally possible that they were concerned that this scene would incite Black Americans to destruction of property. There is also the possibility that the Maryland Interracial Commission itself saw this scene as offensive and stereotypical, given the longstanding repetition of images of African Americans with knives.

Distribution and Exploitation of The Well

Judging by the advertisements for the film in New York and Baltimore, *The Well* initially went to mainstream downtown theatres and then was subsequently released in Black theatres, a distribution pattern relatively consistent with common patterns of release to Black moviehouses. But what set *The Well* apart was the timing, which seems to have been faster than the typical system of clearances would allow. According to my research, UA may have offered Black movie houses the opportunity to bid for the film on equal terms with whites, although they did not allow these houses to get the film in its initial run on the flat rental basis that normally characterized Black exhibition.⁸² The studios designed an entirely different advertising campaign for African American audience and white audiences. Although, as I have argued the studio-designed advertising campaigns for films with racial themes often included racially-specific advertising materials, with *The Well* the advertisements seemed to bait the Black audience against the white, taking racial advertising to new levels of confrontationalism. Thus, it seems that *The Well* was not only an experiment in interracial filmmaking—breaking new ground in showing equality onscreen—but in interracial audience-making.

Advertisements, Race, Interpellation and the Production of Expectation in *The Well*

Advertising has been understudied as a mode of cinematic interpellation and spectator positioning and *The Well*'s advertising campaign tells us much about how the producers and distributors were drawing Black and white audiences with quite different bait. The press book evidences three major advertising strategies: one Black, one white and one middle-of-the-road—inter-

⁸² A note in the UA file from the head of UA's distribution wing, B.G. Kranze to branch, district and division managers suggests that some branch managers were distributing the film to Black houses at a flat fee. "This letter is to remind you that THE WELL is not to be sold to any colored houses unless you get the maximum percentage terms...THE WELL as you know, will be a top grossing picture for these houses." (B.G. Kranze, memo "Re: THE WELL," Dec 14, 1951) What is significant is not so much that he insists on top percentages but the fact that he was being undermined by branch and district managers who were booking the film on a flat rental basis. It is also significant that this correspondence is dated December 14, only a few months after the film was released, which suggests that the film was shown in Black movie houses on a non-final run basis.

racialist—in its approach. Much of the advertising plays up the racial angle of the story. For Black audiences, it plays on Black anger and the Black family motif and, for white audiences, white respectability and victimization (the latter two themes that wartime and postwar noir had rendered thematically—and stylistically—recognizable).

Figure 53- A noir-esque ad campaign designed for the white press



The white advertising campaign for *The Well* follows a noir-ish trajectory: it focuses primarily on the accusation against the white man and shows no African Americans. In some version of the ad,

its designer also used the brimmed-hatted Sam Packard as the aggressor, strengthening the visual connection between this film and other noir films. As was also true in the Black advertisements, the tagline appears in boldface below a picture of Claude Packard being manhandled by police and exclaims: "I have a wife and two kids...a thing like this can ruin me!" One of the ads also, again pointing to noir paranoia and persecution, links the presence of a woman to white male downfall. The language of ruination, applied here to a white man, perpetuates the noir film's trope of highlighting white male imperilment at the hands of a system he cannot control.

In between the white and Black ad campaigns was an "integrated ad campaign." These images and tags were themselves impressively bold for their day, as they hailed audience on the basis of "the boundless love of mother for child fighting fear that tears her heart!" Although this advertisement seems normal enough, the fact that the race of the mother (who is African American) is not stated in the ad, centralizes her motherhood and normalizes the centralization of a Black female protagonist, calling Black and whites alike to identify with her. Some of these even mentioned prejudice and played up the race angle with tags like, "Negro girl missing...white man held!!!"

The pressbook demonstrates that the film's advertising positioned the film against the racial problem movies and highlighted the film's community angle, in ways that hailed the audience through the supposition of their similarity to the onscreen characters. Drawing on the cultural logic of wartime America where soldiers and home front heroes were heralded for their collective and often cooperative acts of bravery, this advertising strategy emphasized the importance of average acts of community heroism:

Beyond the call of duty. If one was to be asked what he associates with that phrase, he would probably say, 'war hero.' It would be a rare person indeed who would think of the corner grocer, the accountant, the short-order cook in a restaurant or a civil engineer in connection with the 'call of duty.' But it is just at these unexpected

sources, among the Joes and Janes of the average everyday world that we find great displays of courage and sacrifice welling up from hidden channels. Such is the contention of the authors of United Artists' dramatic film 'The Well' and it is this long neglected aspect of the average man's ability to turn from forces of evil to forces of good that gives the picture its impact of strength and excitement.⁸³

By suggesting the capacity for gritty, salt of the earth compassion of the average American (and African American) the films advertisement reached beyond cinematic race politics as usual and began to prompt audiences to not only look but react to film a community. Emphasizing the centrality of relay race-style acts of teamwork (ones that required not only individual bravado but also acts of profound humility and moments of passing the torch), these ads positioned audiences to identify as fellow teammates and prompted audiences towards a phenomenology that would reinforce, through exhilarating action, a (counter) ideology of race based on teamwork rather than competition and hierarchy. The film's communal sensibility draws on a communal rhetoric of ordinary heroism that would come to characterize civil rights protestors.



Figure 54- Racially-integrated ad campaign, using racial problem buzz words. The Well Pressbook.

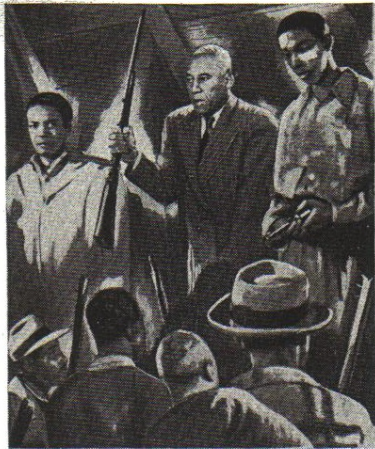
⁸³ Ibid.

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IMPORTANT

**Use this Ad In Special
Readership Papers Only!**

"The Best of the New Film Dramas!" -WALTER WINCHELL



*"This time we're not running,
this time we'll be waiting
for them! For every one of
us there's going to be two
dead ofays! **TWO FOR ONE!**"*

THE WELL

Harry M. Popkin presents "THE WELL" with Richard Rober • Barry Kelly • Henry Morgan • Christine Larson • Tom Powers • Maudie Herman • Robert Osterloh • Ernest Anderson • Produced by Clarence Green and Lee Popkin • Written for the screen by Clarence Green and Russell House • Directed by Lee Popkin and Russell House • Music composed and directed by Dimitri Tiomkin • A Harry M. Popkin Production
Released thru United Artists

2 cols. x 150 lines—300 lines

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Figure 55-African American Press advertisement

The African American advertising, however, takes quite a different angle. First, it is important to note that the architects of the advertising for *The Well* not only designated a separate page for African American audience, as United Artists (who were frequent distributors of African American themed or sub-themed independent films) often did, but also created entirely separate newspaper advertisements for the film, a practice that was less common. As we see in the figure provided on the left, the top of the ad clearly signals that the ad is intended for “special [i.e. Black] readership papers only.” The image shows an older, suited Black man shaking a rifle as he stands on a platform before an all-Black crowd. Beside him is a bruised and bandaged younger Black man. This image demonstrates the militancy of the Black community across generations, a sort of “Deacons for Defense” approach to civil rights. What is shocking about the ad is not only the frankness of its depiction of Black men with guns, armed specifically to kill white men but the frankness of the copy for the ad: “This time we’re not running, this time we’ll be waiting for them! For every one of us there’s going to be two dead ofays! Two for one!” The ad does not position whites as a threat to the Black community by saying “we’re not running,” but it suggests a history of white threat, by differentiating “this time” from implied past instances of white violence against Blacks. The ad thus primed Black spectators for militancy and boldness. Thus this advertising campaign (whose author I was unable to determine in the United Artists files), seems to have much in common with the direct, racial language I have argued was already present in much of the Black press’s local theater advertisements.⁸⁴ The prominence of the wounded, younger Black man in this advertisement adds to

⁸⁴ The National Director of Advertising and Exploitation for UA was Francis M. Winkus and the Assistant National Director of Advertising and Exploitation was Alfred Tamarin. *1952-1953 Motion Picture and Television Almanac* (New York:

the sense that the violence is justified—that the evidence for the justification of the violence is right in front of the people. It is significant that the men are dressed not as thugs or criminals but are actually led by a man in a suit—an older man. This suggests a sort of middle class or respectable character to the insurgency. The ad plainly captures the anger and the militancy of the Black community.

These racially-charged images, while they may only have been *familiar* to those Blacks who had participated in rioting, strongly interpellate all Blacks who had at any level experienced racial violence in their families or communities. This was, at the time, likely to be most of the readership of these Black papers. The ad's use of the term "ofay," a racial epithet employed against whites, similar to "honky" and "cracker," is unusual as an example of Black vernacular in film advertising. How exactly the Popkins encountered this term or what made them decide to use it, I cannot say, but its inclusion may have been both surprising and a site of identification for African Americans. The advertisement campaign seems to have displayed much of the "sensationalism" Eric Schaeffer has shown to be typical of exploitation films, which were made entirely outside of the studio system and without major distribution.⁸⁵

The African American advertising also played up the fact that the film was an action movie: "Throughout this swift-moving drama, there is never any actual expression of racial arguments, pro and con, and visually as the story unfolds to its exciting climax. In this respect, it differs from some of its predecessors in the recent cycle of racial film dramas turned out in Hollywood, which include

Quigley Publications, 1952), 388. Whether there were African Americans employed in this department is not clear to me, although there is some evidence that UA pioneered in its use of African American creative talent to develop advertising campaigns. The AFI catalogue records that advertising for *Kings Go Forth*, a UA-distributed racially-oriented film from 1958, employed A.S. Young, the "first African American press agent to work on a Hollywood production." Perhaps UA also pioneered in consulting African Americans on *The Well's* ad campaign.

⁸⁵ Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

'Lost Boundaries,' 'Home of the Brave,' 'Pinky,' and 'No Way Out.'"⁸⁶ Also, so uniformly positive was the reception of the film by Black leaders that the pressbook actually suggested getting members of local Black organizations to write letters to the theatre which could be quoted from for advertising purposes.

In Baltimore, local advertising largely played up the "Negro Girl missing...White man held!" angle rather than using the more controversial and revolutionary "dead ofays" advertisement. For the most part, local advertisers left the ad copy untouched, which as I have shown, was unusual for interracial films, but they did add a single phrase to the ads, one centering on the white racial profiling angle: "Look at this man!" they added to the picture, using copy to hide the face of the assailant. Several advertisements also subtly increased the cross-gender, interracial angle of the film. For example, the heavily used picture of the Sheriff helping—or grabbing—Madie Norman, was used under the banner of the phrase "Negro girl missing...white man held!!!" The association of this tagline with the image of the man who will be revealed in the film to be Ben Kellog, the white sheriff, pulling a the arm of pain-stricken Mrs. Crawford, could suggest to uninitiated prospective audiences that the white man in the photo is harming the Black woman rather than helping her—perhaps even suggesting that the pictured white man is the one cited in the ads tagline who is being "held" and Madie Norman, the Negro girl.

Wider Black Response to The Well

What sort of structures of feeling and phenomenological response does *The Well* inspire? What kind of emotional experience does it produce and to what political ends does it put these? The film draws on a variety of emotions which are racially inflected but not entirely determined by race.

⁸⁶United Artists. Pressbook for *The Well* page 4 under title "Special Campaign for Special Audiences: For Negro Newspapers: Powerful Drama, 'The Well,' stars top Negro performers."

For African American viewers, a sense of righteous indignation, the pleasure of long awaited disclosure, the pleasure of articulation, and the pleasure of cultural, historical and discursive verisimilitude seem to be potential sites of enjoyment. For whites the pleasure of racial harmony, cross-racial sympathy, and the restoration of order seem to be subject positions suggested by the text. The film offers other unusual scenes and scenarios which may have been sites of subversive pleasure for the African American audience, as with the major plotline, because of their strategy of surprise and reversal. The scene which depicts the cops looking for whitey—the sizing up the white men in grey striped suits—may have been a site of pleasure for African Americans who had so often been the subject of the suspicious white stare/glare. More research would be necessary to ascertain the limits and generalizability of these responses.

As we have seen, the NAACP was generally very excited about the film: Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, was invited to a preview of the film by its producers. In response, White not only wrote to Harry Popkin thanking him for the film, but also brought the film to the attention of Eleanor Roosevelt, who had controversially commented that the Zoot Suit riots were based on racial discrimination. He urged her to go see the film in preview.⁸⁷ White's public statement on the film was similarly supportive. It would, he thought, enable people to "gain a new concept of American democracy and of respect for the democratic process."⁸⁸

The film's response among Black national political leaders was highly laudatory, if often unspecific. Ralph Bunche, winner of the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize and the highest ranking Black official in the United Nations, collaborator on the landmark study, *The American Dilemma*, and himself a Detroit native, wired Harry Popkin after seeing the film to tell him he thought it was "the

⁸⁷ Walter White, letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, Sept 5, 1951. Papers of the NAACP. Manuscript Collection. Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

⁸⁸ "NAACP heads approve powerful new dramatic movie, 'The Well,'" *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, Sept 8, 1951.

finest motion picture ever made.”⁸⁹ Reginald A. Johnson, director of field services for the National Urban League seemed to emphasize the film’s power-without-preachment strategy, declaring: “*The Well* was terrific. It says so much with so few words that I am quite sure it will have more of a constructive impact than any other picture I have had the privilege of seeing which involves racial community relations.”⁹⁰ Louise Mumm of the National Social Welfare Assembly cited *The Well* as a “stimulating portrayal of the long time struggle with racial prejudice between colored and white races...the characterizations portrayed by the leading actors and actresses were sympathetically, honestly and excellently performed.”⁹¹ The film was also praised by New York NAACP leader James Egert Allen who cited the film as “realistic and intensely emotional. It is a picture for old and young. The scenes are carefully drawn, the acting is most natural and the cast is well-suited...during these days of racial hate and misunderstanding a film such as *The Well* can do much to develop better human relations.”⁹² This was strong and significant praise coming from leaders with no documented history of commentary on entertainment. The startling number of responses of Black political leaders suggests that they were invited to a screening and asked for comment. Although the fact that these leaders focused on the acting in the film is not a surprise, it is perhaps relevant that they so consistently mention the “honesty” or “natural” quality of the acting.

Besides White, the most active proponent of the film was African American Judge Francis Rivers. He not only wrote an open letter to the Baltimore *Afro-American* regarding the film, but also

⁸⁹ “The Well evokes Commendable Praise,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Sept 22, 1951, 2. Bunche was also the first African American to make an Oscar presentation and he did so in that year. For information on Bunche’s Oscar appearance, see “Dr. Bunch gives ‘Oscar’ for best film” *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 14, 1951, 17.

⁹⁰ “The Well evokes Commendable Praise,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Sept 22, 1951, 2.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

strongly urged the Governor of Maryland to reverse the MSBMPC's decision to censor *The Well*.⁹³ Rivers was moved by the film and said he "believed that most Americans whatever their color or creed will be helped to better understandings and more durable good racial feelings by this frank recognition of the bitter emotional realities which foster unseen in the hearts of white and colored alike."⁹⁴

National political organizations like the NAACP used the mass media and the press as not only a means for sensational domestic mass dissemination of the Black struggle and plight. They also saw Black participation in cinematic image production as a civil and democratic right. For these African Americans, *The Well* was important not only for its mixed—and, indeed, integrated—cast but also for what Walter White called its "moving" images. This well-chosen phrase suits the film in that it captures not only the emotional tone but the importance of mass movement that pervades the text. Notably absent, however, from White's language is discussion of 'dignified' portrayals that often characterized his approach to Black film representation. Maybe the prevalence of youth (or we might more cynically speculate) working class Blacks in this film, caused him to avoid this point of praise. White was more comfortable with the model of elite integration with its high civil language and ideals than with seeing angry, "fi'ed up," Black workers cynically discussing the shortcomings of integration. As I have suggested, the Black characters in *The Well* did not lack dignity. Perhaps Walter White's comments reflected his own middle class bias.

⁹³ Francis Rivers, letter to Gov. Theodore McKeldin, Nov 14, 1951. Francis E. Rivers, telegram to Mildred K. Mombberger, Secretary to the Governor, Nov 17, 1951. Governor's Papers. Maryland State Archives. Annapolis, MD. Governor Theodore R. McKeldin, telegram to Francis E. Rivers, Nov. 20, 1951. (Telegram confirms McKeldin's appointment with Rivers, presumably to talk about the film about which Rivers wrote to the Governor three days prior.)

⁹⁴ Judge Francis E. Rivers, "The Well' takes real event as its cue," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Dec 22, 1951. Judge Rivers was a Black Republican and a New Deal Civil Rights politician; He was the first black justice of the City court of New York.

Black Press reviewers also took a strong and positive stance on the film. Ruby Berkeley Goodwin of the Colored New Service listed it among a new spate of independent films that would give audiences “great theatre fare as well as some pointers on democratic living.”⁹⁵ The *Pittsburgh Courier*’s readership voted the film the Best of 1951 by a margin of over four thousand votes.⁹⁶ Roughly 26% of votes were cast for the film. Clarence Markham’s *The Negro Traveller*, a nationally distributed Black magazine published out of Chicago, also voted the film the best of the year.⁹⁷ *Ebony* argued that “those who see the film...cannot fail to be provoked into intelligent thinking as well as sympathy for Negroes living in prejudice-ridden communities.”⁹⁸ *The New York Age* emphasized the film’s boldness in representing Black militancy:

No producer had the courage to make a picture showing the anger of a Negro when even the uniform of his country couldn’t get him service in a diner; when the fruits of his labor were burnt to the ground before his eyes or when the woman he loved had been used by a white mob. That’s the ‘other side’ they are afraid to recognize, afraid to put on the screen. And then one day, producers Clarence Green and Russell Rouse, who gave us the unforgettable *DOA* had an idea for a screenplay: “*The Well*.” It was the story of both races in any small town, suddenly torn apart by the news that a six year old Negro girl was missing. Suspicion was turned to a white resident, and the anger of the Negro populace was so vivid that white men walked in fear on the streets before the vengeance of the colored people. By the time the child is discovered in ‘*The Well*’, and all hands pitch in to rescue her, you know that one of the strongest and truest portrayals of a Negro as a race has finally come to the screen. ...you’ll see more Negroes portrayed as people, everyday folks, than ever before in the history of the screen. ...And for the second time (*No Way Out* was the first) you’ll see US as the screen has never seen US, fighting mad, on the offensive from beginning to end. You’ll plummet down into a myriad of faith, pride, anger and victory, in “*The Well*.”⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ruby Berkeley Goodwin, “New Picture cites deadly dust dangers,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Feb 17, 1951, 18.

⁹⁶ “The Winners of Courier Theatrical Poll,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Apr 5, 1952. Coming in second was *Showboat*; third, *Quo Vadis*; Fourth, the Popkin’s film *DOA* and Fifth, *Valentino*.

⁹⁷ “‘The Well’ picked year’s best film,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 13, 1952, 6.

⁹⁸ “Deep is the Well,” *Ebony*, Feb 1951, 38.

⁹⁹ “Front and Center with Sonny,” *New York Age*, Aug 11, 1951.

Most notably, this reviewer, called “Sonny” in the article’s title, emphasizes Black militancy as a major source of pleasure and also accuracy in the film. He mentions anger no less than three times and describes Blacks in the film as “fighting mad [and] on the offensive from start to finish,” a reading white critics did not share. He also notes the everyday humanity granted to Black people in *The Well*, and the narratives of justice effaced by previous screen representations. Also a point of analysis for “Sonny” is the dynamic emotional structure that people of color have access to in watching the film. People of color have reasons for faith, pride, anger, and crucially, the war-altered word “victory,” which stem from African American characters on the screen rather than whites. He seems to almost ignore the ending of the film, suggesting that by that point, he had already made his evaluative decision about the film. Key is his description of this film as alternative, even emergent, in its depiction of African Americans—particularly fighting African American men. “Sonny” sees it as a watershed African American representation, one with a rare and powerful truth and with the ability to move and reflect the lives of Black spectators—as few films had before.

The film also received praise from a number of mainstream and trade press sources whose writers were white.¹⁰⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt writing in *My Day* called the film “an exciting movie, filled with drama and tension...I am sure that none of you will want to miss it.”¹⁰¹ Jimmie Fiddler called it “the Most talked about picture of the year.”¹⁰² And Walter Winchell called it “a powerful and poignant picture...Generates the type of emotional telegraphy that communicates from heart to

¹⁰⁰ See especially Edwin Schallert, “Mob Violence and Rescue Stirring Feature of ‘The Well,’” Oct 26, 1951. The *Los Angeles Times*; “SRL goes to the movies,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, Sept 22 1951, 30. Ezra Goodman, “Behind the Camera,” *Daily News*, Oct 30, 1951; “Girl in ‘Well’ Starts Stark Drama,” *The Mirror*, Oct 26, 1951; “The Well,” *New Statesman and Nation*, Feb 23, 1952.

¹⁰¹ UA Pressbook for *The Well*. AMPAS. Margaret Herrick Library. Beverly Hills, CA.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

heart."¹⁰³

Although occasionally distracted by what they saw as low production values, the overall sentiment in the white and trade press was that the film was surprisingly good. What was notable about this response the large variance in reading strategies between Black and white critics. White critics generally discussed the film, especially with its small under 500,000 budget, as being a technological, rather than social, achievement. Edwin Schallert, film reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* noted: "The rescue operation in 'The Well' has such conviction from a technical standpoint and such amazing suspense that it deserves to be recorded as one of the most outstanding screen achievements during the year."¹⁰⁴ However for Schallert, the film's latter portions were much more convincing than its earlier portions: "Technically [the riot portion] of 'The Well' also has great power, though its fictional quality makes it less forceful than the latter portion."¹⁰⁵ For Bosley Crowther, too, the ending was the site of the film's real impact. Crowther actually went as far as to argue that the early portions of the film were unrealistic in that:

there has never been any 'race trouble' in this town, and the writers neglected to develop any basis for a distrust of justice or an explosion of hate. Prejudice and antagonism are arbitrarily and recklessly assumed and portrayed in a manner which appears less calculated to understand society than to create effect.¹⁰⁶

Although his critiques are justified, he nevertheless privileges the second portion of the film over the first in terms of its moving nature, as he ultimately concludes, that the film's "message of brotherhood seems well-intended and that rescue operation packs a big thrill."¹⁰⁷ Although he, like many Black film critics, complains of the falseness of the quick racial resolution, he nevertheless joins

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Edwin Schallert, "Mob Violence and Rescue Stirring Feature of 'The Well'," Oct 26, 1951. The *Los Angeles Times*.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen in Review" *New York Times* Sep 27, 1951, 37

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

with white critics in his assessment of the film's latter portions as being the most engaging and important and its overall theme as one of "racial harmony." Where Black reviewers had emphasized the earlier parts of the film—the films' scenes of racial violence reminiscent of the Detroit riots—the white reviewers had emphasized technique and the films' optimistic end—one reminiscent of the Kathy Fiscus incident—, signaling racial differences in critical spectatorship. Although there may be other causes, it is reasonable to suggest that the film's encoding strategy, specifically the skipping technique that encouraged viewers to "read into" the film's racially-charged images, accounts for the racial differences in response.

The film garnered a critical reception which affirmed the power of its subtle realism. The film was eventually, much to the State department's dismay, elected to represent the United States at the Berlin and Uruguay film festivals over more escapist films like *An American in Paris*.¹⁰⁸ The film also received through United Artists, standard *international* distribution.¹⁰⁹ As a result of this, the film garnered an enthusiastic response from the Foreign Language Press Film Critics Circle which honored the film with a special mid-season citation.¹¹⁰ It also toured the Nation in the film industry's "Movietime USA" film jubilee, a touring "film festival" that celebrated the 50th anniversary of America's first movie theater and was part of national campaign to revive audience interest in movies.¹¹¹ The film was nominated for two Academy awards, one for best screenplay and the other for achievement in editing.¹¹² However perhaps more importantly, the Popkins entered Madie Norman to be eligible for Academy honors. Norman along with William Warfield who had sung

¹⁰⁸ Jack Ramondbonn, "Berlin Sets Scene for Second Film Festival," *New York Times*, Jun 1, 1952, X3.

¹⁰⁹ See the Foreign Correspondence file at the United Artist archive. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, WI.

¹¹⁰ "Foreign Critics Honor 'The Well'," *New York Times*, Oct 22, 1951, 33. The citation praised the film's "inspired use of the motion picture screen to combine dramatic excitement, suspense and the most dynamic film entertainment with a high sense of the basic humanities in all of us."

¹¹¹ Display ad 44—no title. [Let's go! It's MOVIE TIME USA"] *Los Angeles Times*, Oct 1, 1951, B9.

¹¹² Edwin Schallert, "Nominations for Oscars Announced" *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 12, 1952, A1.

“Old Man River” in the 1951 cinematic remake of *Showboat* were both Oscars hopefuls until they were ruled out in the very last stages of voting in April of 1952.¹¹³

Unlike the racial message films which attempted to limit racial cinematic discourse to white-friendly presentations of controversy, white (or white-like) bodies, and verbal discussions, *The Well* moved racial discourse into action. It used the strategy of: less message more movement. The film used editing and implication—the “skipping technique”—to engage audience’s emotional investment and suspense in matters that had immediate social importance—an important feat. The film used suspense in an arena of civil rights and justice that Black audiences could realistically feel suspense about. It built upon a cultural phenomenology already set in place: worry about the future of their family and male youth, anger at injustice, concern about the potential of the Black family to make it, pleasure at confronting the white man and ironic pleasure at reversal—at the “shoe being on the other foot”—at the fact that, for at least a moment, it was a white man pegged as criminal and deviant. The film also managed a level of contingency and avoided narrative simplicity by the use of alternative rhetorical structures to guide the actions of the characters and by using the realist acting performances which avoided the speechifying tendencies of Black Hollywood representations and caused audiences to look for something real. In so doing, the film’s encoding strategies offered new opportunities for audience decoding: it offered African Americans the opportunity to identify *communally* AND *interracially* in the same film. The film also managed to circumvent censorship in many states. Perhaps the Popkins smartly employed delay in this connection as well, deliberately releasing their film after *No Way Out* so that censors had the opportunity to exercise their fears on that film rather than on *The Well*. Because of its honest and largely uncensored portrait of Black and

¹¹³Harry Levette, “Colored Stars eyed ‘Oscars’ to the very last” *Baltimore Afro American*, Apr 8, 1952, 6.

white integration and unrest, African Americans had the opportunity to revel in the pleasure of reversal and the affirmation of Black communal perspective. Because of its unique textual articulation and its history, *The Well* deserves to be considered one of the most important African American-centered racial problem film of this era.

However, the film is by no means a perfect articulation of race. In the same way that *Gone with the Wind* was politically dubious in grafting a love story over the history of slavery and emancipation, *The Well* presents the story of race riots through the eyes of the police, a police force which in all likelihood would have in reality been swayed by the biases introduced by its own complete whiteness.¹¹⁴ While the film hints at sources of injustice and racism within the police force, it also quickly—too quickly—roots them out without acknowledging the structural basis of this racism and the history of abuses against African Americans through anything other than Black people’s mouths. But this was a film whose goal was more to show what *could* happen, to center in on the marginal possibility of change and human growth. The film’s ultimate accomplishment was not so much the depiction of racial realities for African American, as had been (and would be) the case with Black independent cinema, but the depiction of accurate Black/white interracial relationships from a Black and humbled white perspective. This provided the pleasure of reversed racial mythology for Blacks, and, for whites, provided the eventual realization of an ideal racial harmony, one that would not require an admission of guilt and in which masculine labor could work to redeem even the worst racist. After all, this was still Hollywood. Even realism would be influenced by idealization of

¹¹⁴ By this point there had been Black police officers in New York since 1911. And Chicago had had a black police captain since 1940. Although Black officers were still rare, they were nevertheless, in reality, present. By avoiding showing Black presence on the police force, the Popkins inadvertently revealed a limit line on integration. See, “FIRST NEGRO NAMED FOR CITY’S POLICE; Samuel J. Battle, Once Rejected by Cropsey, Wins Appointment to the Force.” *New York Times*, Jun 29, 1911, 6. (“First Negro Police Captain will be Sworn in Today.” *Chicago Daily Tribune* Aug 10, 1940, 7)

interracial cooperation and compassion. But by creating a Hollywood dream that was so centered on racial honesty, frankness, and justice in 1951, Harry and Leo Popkin stood just a little bit ahead of their time.

Conclusion:

This dissertation has examined the production and constraint of cinematic meaning involving questions of racial justice, during the nascent years of the civil rights movement. I have focused on the processes that produce cinematic meaning, from points of decoding extending into and around the process of exhibiting films in public (primarily movie houses but also including the coin-operated film jukeboxes that displayed “Soundies”) to points of encoding, which extend back to the selection and adaptation of narrative sources. Through this approach, I have been able to explore sites of contestation, constraint, and agency that complicated the representation of African-Americans and racial issues in American films during a key period of change in U.S. racial attitudes and experience. I have also been able to explore the impact on American film products of various kinds of cultural producers—including studio production heads, industry regulators, state censors, film exhibitors, and the viewing audiences themselves. These individuals and institutions acted as important agents in the creation and reception of film as a cultural discourse on race and racial relations. The cinematic struggle for racial meaning was embedded within a whole complex of other racial struggles in an era marked by the upheaval of war, as well as by changed—and in some ways heightened—expectations for social justice among Black Americans.

Chapter 1 suggested the ways that local film exhibitors that served Black audiences often re-encoded the white appeals of conventional film advertising and the Jim Crow racism of cinematic viewing spaces—replacing the racial disparagement systematically present in both with signs of and

avenues for race pride. It suggests as well the ways that the racialization of the spaces of exhibition positioned Black spectators to read films in ways different than white viewers. In the cases where segregation was performed in exhibition venues, this racialization limited the possibilities of Black spectatorial engagement with the screen itself. But in an “all-Black” environment, as the Black-community theatres of exhibitor Abe Lichtman show, film spectatorship among African Americans was in some ways enhanced by its racial components.

Chapter 2 has explored spectatorial modes and reading strategies of “average” Black working and middle class audiences by going directly to the viewers. My research suggests that they decoded Hollywood films in ways that widely varied from the films’ intended racial meanings, often making more of elements that were marginalized in a text and reducing in importance (by scant attention) those very narrative and star-centered elements privileged by the film.

In these readings, my respondents created a cinematic vocabulary for imagining civil rights from images neither intended for them nor intended to speak to race as a politically charged issue. The fact that viewers did not like the Hollywood racial problem film (but recognized what it referred to) is an important discovery: it suggests the strained relationship between African American communities and Hollywood motivated by the American film industry’s depiction—for entertainment-of the former’s own severe community problems—at least through standard Hollywood modes of realism. That African Americans often found integrated—and even radically resistant—racial images in some representations not explicitly encoded as such, suggests the tendency of African American spectators to “play fast and loose” with Hollywood’s meanings and to re-sort Hollywood’s depictions of race into meaningful structures that could give hope, promise, truth and transcendence.

Chapter 3 shows the struggles that occurred at the state level over what American films could and could not say about African Americans and U.S. race relations. It demonstrates that racially conservative state censorship of African American images was alive and well in the 1940s and 1950s in the South *and* in the North. My research makes apparent that state censorship boards became accustomed to Hollywood's conventions in treating race. Films that did not conform to those narrative and representational modes—but seemed, to censors, more racially dangerous, particularly films that challenged the racial status quo or lacked neat and satisfying conclusions, were heavily censored. Feature films such as *Native Son*, *Storm Warning*, and *The Burning Cross* as well as the “Soundies,” suggest that treatments of racial topics that moved outside of conservative screen norms that reinforced racial inequality were heavily censored by state censorship boards.

My study still indicates the prevalence of regional specificity in censorship by state governments: for example, the barring of racial epithets, which was probably intended to accommodate Black spectators, was more common in the North than in the South. What we learn from my exploration of the reaction of state boards to films in the period under examination is that public, state-level *legal* discourses about race often influenced racial censorship—thus suggesting that the state's racial color lines and even the *de facto* unspoken racial status quo of individual states heavily influenced the kinds of racially-implicated film images that could be shown regionally and even nationally.

Chapter 4 reveals that MPPDA/MPAA industry self-censorship enacted through the SRC and then the PCA, like state censorship boards, played a repressive role in the sense of limiting the film industry's ability to depict racial representations—particularly representations of racial equality, between Black and White. My research shows the effects of the enforcement of both the Production

Code and of MPPDA notions of “industry policy” on Hollywood’s depictions of injustice in the penal system, lynching, and social equality (in the form of miscegenation as well as mere brotherly compassion). While industry self-regulators were afraid of incurring the wrath of white Southerners in response to progressive cinematic representations of African Americans, there is evidence of a few important moments and areas of consistent attunement of Hollywood self-regulators to other groups, as when industry self-censors attempted to include African American perspectives in their film consultations. My research indicates an important, heretofore overlooked arena of racial politics in the SRC’s and then the PCA’s occasional encouragement to the studios to remove stereotypes and in the PCA’s decisions, over the course of many years, to consistently request the removal of the word “nigger” from all films seeking a Production Code seal. The evidence is that while film industry self-regulators during the studio system heyday may have been overly sensitive to the power of Southern box-office and Southern state censors, they were not completely unsympathetic to the need to keep the screen clear of the most scurilous kinds of white racist invectives and imaginings. They did consult elite African Americans, like Walter White and Paul Williams, and even suggested that studios regularly consult African American with regard to racial representations. Ultimately, however, self-regulation could not dictate entirely the racial content of films. Much of this was left up to the producer and director.

Chapter 5 explores the ways that African American characterization and the depiction of historical themes was shaped by Darryl F. Zanuck during this pivotal era in films specifically intended to address the problems in African-American life created by institutionalized racism. My research revealed how the scripts for two key racial problem films, *Pinky* and *No Way Out*, were often at their most politically and socially daring not in their original source material nor in their final form but

rather in their early, exploratory stages of development. Perhaps this was before Zanuck began to be concerned about potential censorship and box office returns. This chapter suggests that a struggle over racial meaning occurred at the highest levels of creative authority—in these two Zanuck productions. Although it was his initiative and idealistic belief in the importance of representing these racially-charged topics that brought them to the screen in the first place, my research indicates that Zanuck's doubts and fears did much to restrict the progressive representation of important African American themes in both these films. My research suggests also that Zanuck's longstanding belief in film showmanship and the importance of telling the story of an individual provided the comfortable baseline to which he retreated when faced with the complexities of racial politics. Yet, rather than entirely pulling his punches, Zanuck was involved in the creation of characters, images, and narratives in these two films that could be read in multiple ways, a strategy that diffused the racial impact of these films and softened and qualified their criticism of Jim Crow policies. Zanuck's strategies produced various results among spectators and censors. *Pinky* generally avoided censorship. Although it was censored in Atlanta, Birmingham and Pennsylvania, the film did not incur censorship troubles in any others of the locales I studied. With *No Way Out*, arguably a more daring racial experiment, Zanuck did not bypass censorship. The Black reception of *No Way Out*'s original cut indicates that Black spectators read the film in terms of a broader cultural shift toward Black political mobilization—"fighting back," as one respondent called it. The engagement between censors and African American spectators indicates just the sorts of struggle over cinematic meaning that I am arguing was important to broader cultural definitions of Blackness in this era.

The final chapter on *The Well* explores a single film from encoding to decoding. This chapter shows the ways that independent producers Harry and Leo Popkin devised naturalistic

strategies of interracial representation. This worked to make issues like race riots and racial antagonism into less of a spectacle and provided audiences with a viewing experience that potentially included identification with a variety of different types of characters across the boundaries of age, class, gender, profession, and race. *The Well* contained Black images rarely seen in interracial films of the era. My research suggests that in some instances where white independent producers were involved or invested in African American representation, film characters could be more variegated, textured, and powerful. It suggests that white independent film producers committed to cinematically effective and culturally sensitive production could make films that had relevant and political meaning for Black spectators. The film suggests the ways that particular cinematic tropes could be mobilized to permit images that would have been too controversial (and therefore censorable) in other cases. The result was a film that was received in a generally positive way by African American viewers and in the white film trade press, even if the reading strategies of these two groups varied greatly. This film incurred severe censorship in Maryland, but with the help of studio representatives from United Artists, managed to avoid censorship in most other states, including Ohio, where it was passed uncut by the notoriously conservative state censorship board. This suggests that had Zanuck fought—rather than kowtowing to—state censors, he may have been able to avoid state censorship. My analysis of *The Well* suggests, too, the importance of evolving standards of “realism” in the American film industry in the postwar era as well as the industry’s embracing of serious drama in the 1950s as an appeal to adult audiences that could be wooed away from television.

My research has also expanded our understanding of Hollywood’s representation of race in general and of the racial problem film more specifically. By showing the mixed motives of producers, the PCA’s role in containing representation of racial images and racialized language, state censors’

concern and censorship of these images, exhibitors' priming of civil rights oriented readings and, finally, audience's responses w that often defied the logic of other agents who attempted to make and control cinematic meaning, we have seen how these ideas, which had an active life in public discourse on important questions linked to American race relations, were appropriated into the lexical and ideological mechanisms of the cinema.

This work has also uncovered the history of films addressing African Americans that have gone largely un-examined. It has discussed the "Soundies," as well as those films that discussed pivotal African American political issues but without explicitly mentioning race (like *Fury* and *Storm Warning*). These images were structured by the absence of African Americans and often had a strong influence on African American spectators, even if this effect was not pleasurable. In my examination of exhibition, as well as production and reception, I have given attention to alternative films (and film exhibitors) that discussed and depicted African American life during the 1940s and 1950s, films like *Harlem Sketches* (banned in Ohio), *Senza Pieta*, *Native Son*, *The Burning Cross*, and of course, *The Well*. These films stretched beyond Hollywood's iconography, technique, and formulae for depicting African American themes. They also often dealt—with a documentary realism not typically applied to race in Hollywood films—with issues not addressed by Hollywood films—issues like white supremacy, "whiteness" as such, the history of American racism, and America's systematic injustices against people of color. Although these films were limited in a number of ways and despite the fact that they are not as aesthetically pleasing as standard Hollywood fare, they nevertheless are vital to a complete understanding of racial representation that was exhibited on film screens in the United States in this period.

The three chapters in this dissertation that perform in-depth analysis to constraints of film representation complicate our notion of repression, especially as it pertains to the question of race. On the one hand, they demonstrate Foucault's point—that repression is productive. But they also suggest that not only “repression” but the forces of *oppression* and *omission* are implicated in the process of limiting racial representations during this period in which African-Americans struggled to find the means for changing a national view of race. The American cinema, as the mass media that dominated the cultural imagination and entertainment experience of most U.S. citizens in the 1940s and 1950s, was a crucial place where racial meaning was contested and negotiated, put into flux and perhaps destabilized, even if never truly radicalized during this time period.

In exploring films' reception through the responses of actual members of the African-American audiences of the period, we can begin to discern how the meanings of these films worked within the consciousness of viewers, and we can see its ideological and counter-ideological effects. Responses to the films *Pinky* and *No Way Out* demonstrate that while Black viewers may not have received the message of the film as a magic bullet that would solve racism, they “got the message.” Zanuck had intended these films for white folks, not for them. My research into reception as a site where viewers created sometimes unexpected civil rights meanings suggests the need for more reception research to explore in greater depth than I have been able to, what specific images were important to folk in raising—or dampening—their sense of civil rights.

Film reception scholarship has shown that textual meaning is irreducible to a single reading. In order to explore the dynamic nature of the communicative process by which the industry engaged with spectators (and spectators with the industry), I have examined those various points along the way from encoding to decoding where meaning was pinned down—or “made”—in moments of what we

might call “interpretive constraint” that submit the film’s array of potential meanings to a particular set of institutional limitations that define the reach and scope of their meanings. Analysis of these junctures demonstrates how Hall’s theory operates in a specific historical context. These analyses bare out the fact that cinema is a living document whose meanings cannot be reduced either to the “moment” of production or to the moment of “reception” but are often defined in the process of engagement in power struggles that constitute and structure these various moments. The text always exists and is bound within a specific set of contexts. And textual meaning is often as strongly based on the culturally—and institutionally—specific “frames of knowledge,” as Hall would say, that bracket and buffet textual articulation as on the “content” of the “message” itself.

My research has taken a broad period of time and a very wide range of film-related processes and locations of agency or intervention in the making of cinematic meaning in relation to African Americans and racial questions in the United States. Future scholarship may seek to address many of the issues I cover in more depth. It could expand the implications of this work by studying the effects of white reception in comparison with Black reception to the same set of films. More research is also needed to explore the specific and regional nature of Black spectatorship by performing more explicit analysis of the differences in Black spectatorship or between patterns of white and Black spectatorship in terms of racial views and film readings in a wide range of locales. Those locales might logically be those with promising archival holdings on local censorship or where an enterprising researcher may locate materials related very specifically to Black movie theaters. Useful comparisons might be made between specific cities with censorship boards, such as Memphis and Atlanta, or between major cities such as Richmond, New York, and Baltimore. More research is also needed on the consistencies and modalities of racial representation in the independent and foreign

film traditions and their unique spectatorial mode of address and their interplay with Black subjectivity.

By foregrounding a wide range of agents in the process of film production, censorship, and reception, my project has pointed to the ways that film is enmeshed with—and sometimes highly generative of—public discourses about the meanings of race in the moment of origins for the long civil right movement when these meanings were in a state of flux. It highlights the ways that the struggle to achieve meaning in films around the presence (or implied presence) of African-American concerns and representation became a grounds for thinking about, imagining, and fighting for civil rights—specifically the fight to say and show racial injustice, Black subjectivity and Black individuality.

Appendix 1:
Methodological Appendix:
Oral History

The responses I quote and analyze in chapters one and two come from oral history interviews I conducted with Ninety-four (middle and working class) African American interviewees (31 men and 63 women) who went to the movies in the 1940s and 1950s. The interviews took place in the summer and fall of 2005 in three locations—Baltimore, New York and Richmond—each locale representing a particular regional space and identity along the Eastern Seaboard (i.e. North, Border, and Upper South).

To find interviewees who were moviegoers during my period of study, I wrote to all the “senior centers” on file at the Baltimore City Department of Aging, the New York City Department for the Aging, and the Virginia Department for the Aging. I also consulted online phone directories for the cities under study to compile a more complete list. I visited all the centers that were willing to work with me. I personally conducted each of the interviews and I only interviewed African Americans (although a few of my interviewees were of Caribbean descent). Copies of my advertisements, my letter of introduction, my questionnaire, a chart of the socioeconomic status served by the Senior and community centers I visited and a chart of the limited demographic data I gathered are provided below, as part of this appendix.

Although I was most interested in questions of class, after a few interviews I realized that asking about income and even educational attainment made interviewees uncomfortable. So, early in

my interviewing, I discontinued systematic questioning about class. While some interviewees did not want to be named, others were anxious to have their names revealed as a part of the historical record. Those respondents who declined to be named are identified only by their gender, the center at which the interview was held, and the date. Interviews lasted from 10 minutes to 2 hours depending on the interviewee but the vast majority of the interviews lasted about 40 minutes. Different interviewees provided different kinds of information, based largely on what they could remember. Some remembered only the theater experience, some only films—but most some combination of these.

PART I: Questionnaire:

A) Core concerns to structure conversation:

- Identification with films, stars.
- Preferences and ideals for films.
- Connection between race, gender, politics, civil rights, film and identity.
- Connection between local identity and films. Resonances in this area.
- Sense of the experience of going to the theatre.
- Relationship to images of Black people versus white people.
- How they thought about film. Where it fit into their lives.
- Discussions in the Black community in general about film—their understanding of Black discourse about films.
- Their understanding of white discourse about films.
- Relationship between film and censorship.

B) Core Questions for oral history interviews:

- 1) Tell me something about what your life was like between 1940-1960. Where were you living and with whom? What was your neighborhood like? Did you live among any white people? What jobs did you hold or schools did you go to? What community organizations were you involved in at this time? What kinds of things did you do in your time off? What were things like financially?
- 2) What was Baltimore like at that time?
- 3) What were race relations like? In your community? In your neighborhood? On your block?

- 4) What is the first film you ever remember going to? How old were you? Where did you see this movie? Who did you go with? Who made the decision to go? How did the film make you feel? What did you like about it?
- 5) During the period from 1940-1960, how often did you go to the movies and with whom did you go? Which theatres did you most often attend and who did you go with?
- 6) What were your favorite types/kinds of films from this era? Why did you like them? What were your least favorite kinds of films? What types of films did you generally dislike or generally turned you off? What kinds of films did you avoid going to see?
- 7) In the period from 1940 to 1960 what are the films you remembered most vividly?
- 8) What films do you remember strongly liking? Did you have any all time favorites? Do you remember strongly disliking any? Why?
- 9) Who were your favorite movie stars and why did you like them? Who were your least favorite movie stars? Did you go to the movies because of who starred in them, who directed them or for other reasons?
- 10) Who did you see in a movie that you identified with? (Character or star?)
- 11) Did you have any favorite scenes or moments from films of this era?
- 12) Did you have any strong feelings about the movie industry in Hollywood? Did you know anyone who did?
- 13) Of your least favorite films of this era, what would you change about them and why?
- 14) What did you like about going to the movies at theatres in the 1940s and 1950s? What did you particularly like about the experience of going to the theatres you regularly attended? Were there things you disliked about going to the movies? About the theatres you regularly attended?
- 15) Was there anything different about going to the Black vs. white theatres? About going to different Black theatres?
- 16) What were the audiences like at the theatre you regularly attended? Who did you regularly see at the movies?
- 17) Did you know anyone who worked at a movie theatre at this time?
- 18) Were there any experiences of going to the movies that stand out in your mind as exceptional? What made them exceptional?

- 19) When did you first see a Black person on the screen? What was that experience like? How did it make you feel? (Was this typical of other Black images from that time?)
- 20) What films make you think about the time of integration? What films were out at the time of integration? What do you remember about theatre integration?
- 21) Did you see any films with all Black casts? With themes that were particularly relevant to the African American experience? Films that dealt with race relations? What were your thoughts about these films?
- 22) What did you think about how Hollywood represented African American women? African American men? African American youth? African American issues or themes? (what were themes or images or characterizations that you thought at the time many African Americans could relate to? What were themes that you related to?)
- 23) Did you ever see a short film on a jukebox—called a “Soundie” film?
- 24) If you had been a Hollywood producer or director during this era and if you could have made a film dealing with race or with Black experience at that time—what would it be about? If you had been a star, what kind of role would you have liked to play?
- 25) Where did you hear films discussed (or people talking about films) in your community? Were there certain films that people in the African American community really liked or didn’t like that you remember hearing about? What did you personally think about these films?
- 26) Do you personally know about any organized protests or boycotts of films in this era? Do you remember anyone doing something crazy like throwing bricks at the screen?
- 27) Which of the following films do you remember seeing? What did you think about these films the first time you saw them? What can you tell me about your experience of going to see these films? (Help me get back to that moment where your sitting there in the movie theatre and watching this up on the screen).
- 28) Where did you see this film? What kinds of messages did you get from them? What kinds of messages did you think the producers were trying to send? Do you think they brought different messages to Black and white audiences?
- 29) Did you know that films were censored by a state board? If so, what did you think about censorship at the time?
- 30) Is there anything I didn’t ask that I should have?
- 31) Can you refer me to anyone who you think might provide me with information that would help me with this project?

PART II: Letter of Introduction:



THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
PROGRAM IN AMERICAN CULTURE
505 South State Street
3700 Haven Hall
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1045

Dear Senior Center Director,

My name is Ellen Scott and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan in the Program in American Culture. I am working on a dissertation exploring African American movie-going in Baltimore, Richmond and New York from the period of 1940-1960. I am writing to ask if I can contact seniors in your center to discuss with them their thoughts and memories about films they viewed and the experience of going to the movies in this era.

Would it be possible for you to assist me with contacting some potential interviewees at your institution? Included here are some flyers and inserts about the project that include my contact information. Could you be so kind as to distribute these to any bulletin boards, newsletters or handouts you have at your facility, and to mention my project in any general announcement times? Also, I would like very much to be able to use a room in the center for the interviews so that respondents could feel the comfort and control of staying in a familiar, yet public setting. Your help with either or both of these aspects of my study would be make an immeasurable difference.

To give you some background on study design, the interviews last somewhere between 1 and 1 1/2 hours and can be carried out individually, or with other residents present. The entire list of questions can be sent to you in advance. The only prerequisite for the interviews is that the respondents be African American, that they attended the movies between 1940 and 1960, and (as indicated above) that they have something to say about their experiences going to the theatre or their responses to any films they saw during the period. The interview is fun and interesting for respondents because focuses on a part of their past that was generally positive and it allows them the opportunity not only to share their past to with a receptive listener but also to have their experiences made a part of historical record. Accordingly, I would be happy to share the results with the participants. In addition, I will acknowledge the important contribution of my interviewees with a small gift as compensation.

If the study sounds like it would be a good fit for your senior group, please contact me at 734-276-3531 or ecscott@umich.edu or at the address listed below so that we can set up a meeting time. Of course, in exchange for your help, I would be happy to acknowledge you and your organization in the dissertation and in all future publications that incorporate the results of the study. I am anxious to enlist your help in a project that I think contributes both to history and to intergenerational learning by appreciating and highlighting the wisdom and unique knowledge of our elders and by making their often neglected voices a part of historical record.

Thank you sincerely for taking the time to consider and respond to my letter and for any kind assistance you may be able to offer,

Ellen Scott
1905 Spruce Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103
Office: 215-746-7117
Cellular: 734-276-3531

TEL: (734) 763-1460 FAX: (734) 936-1967 <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/ac>

PART III: Advertisement for the study:

What do YOU remember about the **movies** from your youth?



I would like to talk with you about your **memories, opinions, likes** and **dislikes** about movies and movie theatres from **1940-1960** for my doctoral dissertation. Please contact Ellen Scott at 215-746-7117 or by email at student@umich.edu.



Your **film Memories** are part of **American History**.

Part IV: SES of Senior Centers visited:

<i>Richmond: Visited 2 of 5 centers</i>		Socio-Economic Status
Linwood Robinson	Sheila Harris	Income levels from \$600-1200 per month with most falling at the lower end of the range.
Senior Center of Richmond		No information.
<i>Maryland: visited</i>		
Waxter Center	Verna Kindle	Out of 2341 seniors served by the center 1999 of these had an income level between 30 and 50 percent of the median income for the United States, a category the U.S. department of Housing and Urban development dubs very low income.
Senior Network	Rob Ferguson	44% qualify as low income, living on an annual amount between \$9,060 and \$18,120
Winchester/Sandtown Senior Center	Mary Collins	No information.
Southwest Senior Center	Susan Petry	No information.
<i>New York:</i>		
James Weldon Johnson Senior Center	Jane Richardson	According to a recent study published by Columbia University- The median household income for Community District 11, the community served by JWJ and East River Senior Centers was \$21,480 in 2000, which was only 45.7% of the median income of Manhattan (\$47,030). According to the director

		of the programs at JWJ, Jane Richardson, the vast majority of these are below the poverty line.
Lincoln Senior Center	Mrs. Freeman	Serves the Harlem River Drive Housing Project.
King Tower Senior Center	Ms. Viola	No information
Hamilton Grange Senior Center	Rev. Dr. Robert Johnson	Majority of seniors live on 8-12 thousand dollars per year.
Abyssinian/Kennedy Senior Center	Ms. Josie Piper	No information
Gaylord White Senior Center	Jane Richardson	According to a recent study published by Columbia University- The median household income for Community District 11, the community served by JWJ and East River Senior Centers was \$21,480 in 2000, which was only 45.7% of the median income of Manhattan (\$47,030). According to the director of the programs at JWJ, Jane Richardson, the vast majority of these are below the poverty line.
East River Senior Center	Jane Richardson	According to a recent study published by Columbia University- The median household income for Community District 11, the community served by JWJ and East River Senior Centers was \$21,480 in 2000, which was only 45.7% of the median income of Manhattan (\$47,030). According to the director of the programs at JWJ, Jane Richardson, the vast majority of these are below the poverty line.

Part V: Demographic information

<i>Baltimore</i>						
Respondent Name:	Born:	Senior Center:	Gender:	Movie houses mentioned:	how often went to movies:	Did you attend mostly on Saturday?
Calvin Vaughn	1931	Southwest	Male	Bloomfield, Biddle, Royal, Hippodrome, New Albert,	2/wk	Yes

Mary C. Flannagan	1925	Southwest	Female	Lennox, Carey, Royal, Regent (last two in years after 18 y/o)	infrequent	Yes
Verna Kindle	1945	Waxter	Female	Bridge		yes "On Saturdays it was a big deal here to send your kids to the movies"
Delores Jackson	1942	Southwest	Female	Met		
Cecilia Walker	1938	Southwest	Female	Royal Theatre, Lincoln, Biddle		no; Sunday after finished chores and went to Church
Man	1928	Winchester	Male			
Annette Butler	1934	Waxter	Female		1/wk	
Robesonia Johnson	1937	Waxter	Female	Clark, Dunbar, Biddle, Park, Radio, Ritz, Towne, Ritz, Howard, Hippodrome.	very often	
woman	1924-25?	Winchester	Female	Royal, Beacon (this second theatre is not listed as Black by Headley)	1/wk	
Bernard	1918	Waxter	Male	Carey		Yes
Betty Anne Phillips	1937	Senior Network	Female			Yes
Baltimore Interview 1	1940	Winchester	Male	Royal, Lafayette, Bridge, New Albert, Regent, Diane/New Carlton, Roosevelt		Yes
Dorothy Cherry	1946	Southwest	Female	Harlem, Met, Regent, Royal, Charles theatre (live plays), Hippodrome	1/month	
Fran Garcia	1944	Winchester	Female	Royal, Harlem (her aunt worked there so she went often)		
Frances Gaines	1922	Winchester	Female			
Thomas Turner	1934	Waxter	Male			

Marion Bush	1925	Waxter	Female		frequently	No: during week after work
Laura Robinson	1928	Waxter	Female	Rio, Dunbar, Eden, Hippodrome, Mayflower		Yes
Joseph Stewart	1932	Southwest	Male	Towne, Goldfield, Cheeg, Diane, Regent, Met	4x/wk	sat, sun
Norma Scott	1936	Independent reference	Female	Fulton, Harlem, Regent		Sat, sun
David Scott b 1929	1929	Independent reference	Male		2-3x/mo	Yes
Benjamin Griffin	1935		Male			
Hankin		Independent reference	Male	Went in TX		Yes
Lillian Smith		Waxter	Female	Biddle, Royal, Diane		yes--not on Sunday
Geneva Barksdale		Winchester	Female			Yes
Baltimore Winchester woman		Winchester	Female	Beacon	1/wk	
Waxter focus group Artists (4)		Waxter	Male, Male, Female, Female	Lennox, Royal, Roosevelt, Lincoln, New Albert, Met, Dunbar, Radio, Rio, Eden		Yes
Focus Group Waxter video (4)		Waxter	Female (all 4 ladies)	Hippodrome, Unnamed theatre on Lafayette Ave.		yes
Winchester Sr. Center 2 (5)		Winchester	4 Female, 1 Male	Biddle, Royal, Harlem, Carey, Lennox		yes-- "its not just you went on Sat. but you couldn't go other days"
Focus Group B-more 1 (4)		Winchester	Alice Smith, Edie Bye Alice Winter, Female	Royal, Dunbar, Eden, Met, Diane, Lincoln, Cherry Hill/Lincoln Park theatre		

Senior Network Focus Group (5)		Senior Network	Male and 4 Female	Biddle, Roosevelt, Lincoln, New Albert Hall, Royal Theatre, Diane, Carver, Regent, Harlem, Lennox, Lafayette, Morgan (white), Met (white), Apollo, Walbrook, Windsor		Yes
<i>New York</i>						
New York interview 1-King Tower. Doc	1933	King Tower	4 Female	Corinthian, RKO, Loew's, Victoria, Western, Sunset		Yes
JWJ senior center (5)		JWJ	4 Female (Mrs. McGee, three unnamed others), 1 male			
Loretta Johnson	1941	Abyssinian	Female			
Harold Gollop	1928	Abyssinian	Male			Yes
Gloria Praez New York	1925	Gaylord White	Female	Eagle		
Hamilton Grange (3)		Hamilton Grange	Male (George Benson), male, female (Louise Benson), Female			
Louise Benson		Hamilton Grange	Female			
Joseph Nicholson (New York Interview.doc)	1935	Abyssinian	Male			Yes
Gaylord white-new york.doc		Hamilton Grange	Female	Loew's,		
Hamilton Grange (2)		Hamilton Grange	male, male	Loew's (travis)		Yes
Mr. Fabre		Gaylord White	male			
Delores Glover	1950	Gaylord White	Female			Yes
Joseph Bradee	1925	Abyssinian	Male			
Lucille Crump		Hamilton Grange	Female			
New York Seniors		Hamilton Grange	Female		4x/wk	

New York Woman		Lincoln	Female			
William Blount	1944	Lincoln	Male	RKO, Loew's, Flushing		
Charlene Arano		Lincoln	Female	42nd street movie houses; Harlem Opera theatre, RKO on 125th street	2x/mo	
Claudia Tripp		Lincoln	Female			
Richmond						
Dorothy Berry		Richmond Senior Center	Female			yes; in NY
Noelle Ferrell		Richmond Senior Center	Female	Dutchess, Dixie, (These were in NY I think)	2x/mo	
Susie Kee	1921	Richmond Senior Center	Female	Hippodrome, Booker T., Globe,	Infrequent	
Mary D. Lewis	1932	Richmond Senior Center	Female	Booker T., Walker	Infrequently because of money	
Lois Johnson	1938	Richmond Senior Center	Female	Gregory theatre (owned by her cousin)		
Greyhound Mover		Richmond Senior Center	Male	Hippodrome, Globe, Booker T., Walker, YMCA		
Thelma C. Lee		Richmond Senior Center	Female			Yes
New York Gentleman living in Richmond		Linwood Robinson	Male			
Roy Battle		Richmond Senior Center	Male	Roman National, Bijou, Hippodrome, Carey, Byrd,	1-2x/wk	
Linwood Robinson (4)		Linwood Robinson	4 females	Robinson, Booker T., Walker, Hippodrome		
Barbara Christian and Joyce Hubbard		Linwood Robinson	female, female	Walter, Booker T. (high grade), Hippodrome, Globe (low grade)		
Vertrene Putney		Linwood Robinson	Female			

Linwood Robinson pair	1911	Linwood Robinson	female, male	Booker T., Hippodrome,		sat, sun
Robert Clemens	1926	Linwood Robinson	Male	Walker, Booker T.. Hippodrome, Globe (white), Byrd, Lowell, Strand		
Paul Styles	1926	Linwood Robinson	Male	Apollo, Lincoln, Renaissance		
Laverne		Linwood Robinson	Female	Hippodrome		
Rev. Leroy Williams		Richmond Senior Center	Male	Hippodrome, Walker	Infrequent	

Appendix 2:

Ohio Division of Film Censorship: Standards: Post-1945

- “A. Concern is not with some of the very qualities that are most significant to the movie goer
- 1) Censor does not pass judgment on the quality or acting, His purpose is not to accept and to reject that which is inferior) sometime he should like to assume that function, but it is not his). All movies have not the power and sweep of *Madame Curie* or *Wilson* or *Valley of Decision* [sic].
 - 2) He does not even reject a picture that is silly or worthless.
 - 3) His business is not to evaluate the picture as such by the motive and probable result. The law states: moral, harmless, entertaining, shall be accepted.
- B: Concern is with motive of action and with effect of action
1. Situation determines reaction to scene. Man in closet in “George Washington’s Scandals” is not particularly offensive—pure farce—portrayed as ridiculous.
 2. Continuity of ploy determines reaction. Sometimes intrinsically objectionable scenes may be retained because of plot necessity. Ex. Barroom girl in *The Lost Weekend*.
 3. Innuendo often objectionable—“how large you’re growing.” Mother to Corliss in *Kiss and Tell*. Significant lift of Mrs. Wilcox’s eyebrows as she sees Corliss leave obstetrician’s office. Asides—“teetotaler is a fool” in *Lost Weekend* “Prohibition caused this” propaganda thrown into story—and not part of the forward moving development.
Not what they said, but how it is said.
Ridicule of that which society respects. Individual clergyman may be comic or even dishonest, it is not desirable to have the implication present that the clergy is not to be respected.
Degrading experience or emotion is not necessarily eliminated. The degrading experience portrayed with its inevitable conclusion is at times the most moral portrayal. The D.T.’s in *Lost Weekend* presents a powerful temperance appeal.
 4. Retribution no method...
 5. Exaggeration of the crime scene beyond sufficient to tell story.
- Conclusion: “Nothing in the Word is so flexible as values; each depends on the particular constellation in which it is being considered.” While these notes are unofficial, they do provide some basic outline of Censors’ evaluation process. “Problems of Censorship,” n.d. Box 50.737, ODFC Records. Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, OH.

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