

**The Othello Effect:  
The Performance of Black Masculinity in Mid-Century Cinema**

**by**

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## **DEDICATION**

*Dedicated to*  
Shirley Ann Gant  
Rose Mary Gentry

*and to the loving memory of*  
Lillie Ann Ketchum  
Edna Odessa Gant  
Eve Young

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## CHAPTER 1

### The Othello Effect: Racial Exclusion and the Social Production of Cinema

Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!  
Farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars  
That makes ambition virtue! O, farewell!

*Othello*, Act III. Scene iii.

Every man writes about his own Shakespeare—and his Shakespeare  
changes as he himself changes, grows as he grows...

James Baldwin, "This Nettle, Danger..." (1964)

This dissertation attempts to theorize the performance of black masculinity in the mid-twentieth century as a cultural process, by analyzing films with narratives that creatively confronted the problem of race and intercultural relations in the modern Atlantic world, and by directly or discreetly invoking the archetype of the tragic black hero. Examining the film careers of Paul Robeson, Harry Belafonte, and Sidney Poitier, this thesis argues that international travel and transnational work were not only significant in the development of a certain sense of cultural identity for these performers as individuals, but also essential to the transformation of images of African Americans in popular culture. It offers a critical interpretation of screen performances, celebrity persona, and political activism, and contends that the heroic figure of black masculinity was often a contradictory and controversial subject for critical inquiry, yet it has been integral to the popular revaluation of racial representations in the United States. The "Othello effect" describes the signifying power of black masculinity to achieve social change through performance practices, and the reactionary tendency of

normative structures to contain or control these practices. In other words, this concept recognizes the power not only to participate in the creative process, but also to realize images that reflect the expressive values and varied experiences of black lives and cultures. Rather than offering a catalog of black images on film, this study examines biographies and cultural histories during a period in which black performers forged the way for social change by appeasing white desires, displacing white alarm, and reaffirming their commitment to the struggle for human dignity and equality.

By following the trajectories of African American involvement in international film production from the 1930s to the 1960s, each chapter highlights significant milestones along the performers' career paths to fame and recognition. This study also limns out the many ways in which the subject of black masculinity was displaced and revalued in a variety of texts and contexts, and investigates what these transitory positions tell us about historical struggles over agency, power, and the control of representations. The limits of cinematic representation vary from context to context, yet the contingencies of time and place were critically important for developing new strategies for representing the cultural politics of race, gender, and national identity. Unlike Robeson, the son of a former slave, Belafonte and Poitier were born in the U.S. to migrant Caribbean parents; yet they, like Robeson, always laid claim to their status as Americans and demanded fair treatment to work opportunities as such.

This project argues that the performance of black masculinity was integral to the construction of national identity in the mid-twentieth century United States, by identifying the practices black performers developed in opposition to strategies of segregation, containment, and displacement. Ideological tensions, rooted in the bourgeois liberalism and ambivalence of the emergent black middle class, forced black performers into a dilemma: to be complicit in the (re)production of stereotypical images of black culture and life in America, or to opt out of the dominant representational regime by either forming independent production alliances and tenuous distribution chains, or traveling abroad to



explore work opportunities in international settings. For those who remained in the U.S., the efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the influence of the black press, and solidarity with the progressive cultural organizations of the Popular Front offered outlets for political activism, space for dialogue, and strategies for artistic survival.

In *Slow Fade to Black*, film historian Thomas Cripps marked 1942 as a watershed year for the politics of racial representation in American cinema. In the spring of that year, *Variety* promised “BETTER BREAKS FOR NEGROES IN H'WOOD” after a meeting between movie studio heads and Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP. In the first half of the twentieth century, the African American struggle for cinematic representation had finally achieved “artistic recognition” for the “nation's most persistent social problem.” Four themes drive Cripps' history of the Negro in American films: performers, protest, politics, and independent production. Of course, it is important to observe areas where the historical threads overlap and cross-hatch, across the boundaries of culture, geography, and discipline. In an otherwise comprehensive study, Cripps' reduced an integral, productive period in the film career of Robeson and others, who worked “far away from the movie colony,” to a minor interlude in the history of African Americans in cinema.

Cripps asserted that before 1942, the “liberal drift” of the Popular Front's “rising wind” had “only a faint effect on Hollywood.” Regarding America cinema in the 1930s, he argued:

The racial stereotypes kept up with the times. The crooning black convict on death row, the earthy old darkey from whom the child star learned common wisdom, the Negro vaudevillian who played “herself” safely outside the white plot were, in the beginning at least, fresh intrusions upon movies. Each one of them made war upon older types like Stepin Fetchit and his exemplars who survived the “fading effect,” the sociologists' term for the waning of a no-longer meaningful symbol.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

To rework Cripps' argument, I suggest that stereotypes and symbols were oftentimes revived in new forms that did not fade or wane, but actually gained in cultural value, and could best be seen in the heroes of melodramatic war and adventure film genres. For black performers in the U.S.—where even the suggestion of intimate relations across the color line was considered taboo—positive, politically charged representations of black masculinity were coded as dangerously transgressive, and constrained by the motives of mythical popular morality and racist fears of the specter of “social equality.” Thus, censorial film policies and explicitly codified representations of race in the U.S. placed serious restrictions on opportunities for black performers throughout the mid-century period.<sup>2</sup>

While Cripps' two volumes on African Americans in cinema remain an impressive pair of cultural histories related to black filmmakers, their audiences, and their power to create new images, I question the effectiveness of situating such a study within the limited frames of the U.S. social context and “American” film texts.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Cripps' argument about the eventual emergence of “black film as genre” first required the failure of black independent producers to achieve and sustain a separate cinema (inherently unequal, due to multiple hindrances: skill, funds, distribution, and audience interest), and then an inevitable reckoning with the dominant culture industries. It also assumed a near-total rejection of international film productions featuring black actors, and an acceptance (however reluctant) of critics in the black press that Hollywood products were superior to foreign films, in large part due to lack of familiarity with global issues. As Anna Everett's scholarship has demonstrated, critics in the black press expressed an early interest in the global potential of cinema. As early as 1912, Lester A. Walton of the *New York Age* commented on the ways in which “moving picture shows” were “bringing about a new condition of affairs” not only in the United

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2 Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (UNC Press, 1996).

3 Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

States but also in Europe. As Everett noted, such an internationalist perspective fell well within “a historical continuum of audacious African American intellectual freedom fighting.” In his writings, Walton expressed a concern about the export of stereotypes to international markets, an acute awareness of global censorship strategies, and an understanding of the potential effects of propaganda on oppressed, colonized populations.<sup>4</sup>

“Immigrants received a friendly treatment in films,” Cripps argued, while “Blacks demanded to be treated as immigrants rather than as Indians or Orientals,” who purportedly “disappeared from the movies simply because studios wished to avoid conflict.” Leaving aside—for the moment, at least—this statement’s basic assumptions about fixed categories of racial identity and perceptions of assimilability, it overlooks African American demands for immediate recognition of the right to full equality for all U.S. citizens, and elides the central role played by both black exiles and immigrants in struggles over cinematic representation. Even if the majority of black audiences “found little identity” in transnational films and therefore rejected them, it is important to explore how the processes of production and reception influenced and shaped their sense of a common cultural identity. Were black performers merely subject to the cinematic apparatus, and if not, then how did they become masters of its many practices? How did the performance of black masculinity in cinematic texts connote meanings to different audiences in varied geopolitical settings of the mid-century Atlantic world?

### **Instrumental Migrants**

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois famously declared that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.” In the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Du Bois provided an original theory of black aesthetics that “functioned as an urtext of the African-American experience” at

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

the turn of the twentieth century. In the chapter “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” Du Bois described the “double-aimed struggle of the black artisan,” and a “longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.” “He simply wants to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American,” Du Bois wrote, “without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face..” The oft-cited passage on “double-consciousness” is widely used as a foundational statement on the duality of American Negro identity in the struggle “to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture”:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. 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 a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—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.<sup>5</sup>

Du Bois' metaphor of “the Veil” served as a psychological diagnosis of American cross-cultural relations, which actually suggested that all citizen-subjects—not only blacks—experienced the “peculiar sensation” of double-consciousness. The double life is a condition of modern identity construction that can signal either erasure (“the fading effect” or invisibility) or excess (devaluation or over-determination): the binary of self and Other in a (seemingly) singular body; the dichotomous nature of American experience; seeing oneself as others imagine you to be, the uncertainty or arbitrariness of reality.

This condition was necessary for the maintenance of what Du Bois called “that central paradox of the South,” the segregation of cultures by structures of legal dominance and the violent imposition of Jim Crow statutes. For Du Bois, ignorance was at the core of what was then called the “Negro problem,” and

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5 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Random House, Inc., 1989).

education and cultural uplift were the solutions. In the chapter, “Of the Training of Black Men,” Du Bois wrote that in America there existed a tendency, “born of slavery and quickened by the crazy imperialism of the day, to regard beings as among the material resources of a land to be trained with an eye single to future dividends.” For African Americans, the labor issue was greater than just the class struggle between wage earners and industrial capital:

Race prejudices, which keep black and brown men in their 'places,' we are coming to regard as useful allies with such a theory ... And above all, we hear daily that an education that encourages aspiration, that sets the loftiest of ideals and seeks as an end culture and character rather than bread-winning, is the privilege of white men and the danger and delusion of black.<sup>6</sup>

Du Bois later believed that “material relationships masked themselves in the guise of race relationships” (quoting Gates), and his criticism aimed to unmask and illuminate the economic underpinnings of international social relations, toward the eventual “transformation” of American culture. Through the decades, Du Bois wrestled with this problem, worked for the advancement of “the darker races,” and wrote critically about the value and particularity of black life and cultural expression.

Du Bois was not alone in his critique of the social construction of race in the U.S. In *The Betrayal of the Negro, from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (1965), Rayford Whittingham Logan examined the historical relationship between media, politics and society to document the national retreat from a commitment to equality in the post-Reconstruction U.S. Logan described the way in which presidential policies and Supreme Court decisions—e.g., *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation in public accommodations—undermined the freedom and civil rights of African Americans.<sup>7</sup> He located “the economic roots of

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6 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 62-76.

7 Rayford Whittingham Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (Da Capo Press, 1997). Originally published in 1954 as *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901*.

second-class citizenship” in agriculture and the organization of labor under the Jim Crow era doctrine of “separate but equal” institutions. Logan also addressed racist caricatures prevalent in national newspapers and magazines of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

In response to the tide of misrepresentation, black social and political organizations established their own means of disseminating African American ideas, images, and artistic production. Du Bois was a co-founder of the NAACP in 1910 and served as the editor of its magazine, *The Crisis*, from the organization's inception until 1934. His debates with Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, whose United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) published *Negro World* magazine, were legendary. In “Criteria of Negro Art,” an address delivered at the Chicago Conference of the NAACP in June 1926, Du Bois stated, “We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans can not.” He then asked, “And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?” He noted the irony in the way that “white publishers catering to white folk” only wanted “Uncle Toms, Topsies, good 'darkies' and clowns,” but when “a foreign land heard [tenor vocalist Roland] Hayes and put its imprint on him,” then “immediately America with all its imitative snobbery woke up.” Highlighting the influence of European taste on American social norms, Du Bois concluded, “We approved Hayes because London, Paris and Berlin approved him not simply because he was a great singer.”<sup>9</sup>

Du Bois' example of Roland Hayes is representative of figures in this study I refer to as *instrumental migrants*. Paul Robeson, Harry Belafonte, and Sidney Poitier—like Hayes and Du Bois, among many other black artists and intellectuals who traveled, worked, and lived outside the U.S. during the mid-twentieth century—actively participated in the transnational production and exchange of popular culture.<sup>10</sup> Whereas Du Bois and Hayes gained international

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8 See also Charles S. Johnson, “Public Opinion and the Negro” (1923).

9 W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” *The Crisis*, October 1926.

10 Over the span of his life (1868-1963), Du Bois wrote 22 books, including five novels and three autobiographies; up to 1942, these included: *The Negro* (1915), *Africa: Its Place in Modern History* (1930), *Black Reconstruction* (1935), *Black Folk, Then and Now: An Essay in the*

recognition in the more high-minded areas of letters and classical arts, the three main figures considered in the following chapters became heroic icons of black masculinity in the industrial age of mass media and globalization. While they were widely recognized and celebrated as great American artists abroad, their critical reception in the U.S. was more contradictory and contingent on the cultural politics of race, gender, and sexuality in the moment. But they constantly struggled against the dominant regimes of racial representation in mid-century media, shifting their performance practices, political positions, and geographic locations in order to seek better opportunities. They inherited the traditions of earlier generations of black artists and intellectuals, and their “spiritual” strivings for a new, more authentically “true” image of black masculinity constituted a constant, self-conscious cultural process, which was transformative in its effects.

They were also contradictory and often controversial figures. As Hazel Carby wrote in *Race Men* (1998), “Du Bois constructed particular personal, political, and social characteristics of a racialized masculinity to articulate his definition of black leadership.” During the late 1920s, there were multiple and competing arguments for what was to be done about the many modern problems impeding the “moral uplift” of Negro populations.<sup>11</sup> The question of cultural identification “was not just about learning that he was black but also about learning how to *become* a black man.”<sup>12</sup> Alain Locke, editor of the literary anthology *The New Negro* (1925), espoused striving for self-expression and self-determination through the interpretation of the “essential forces” of the “folk-spirit.” Locke claimed that African American culture was developing in an “America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity,” and that even

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*History and Sociology of the Negro Race* (1939), *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940). Considered as a body of work, Du Bois' early literary production constituted the complex construction of the early canon of radical black intellectual thought: the development of a social materialist view of world history; ideologically committed treatises on the discourses on war, propaganda, and the writing of history; and the careful contemplation, negotiation, and practice of African American art and cultural politics under conditions of internal (psychosocial) and external (territorial) exile.

11 Kevin Kelly Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

12 Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

outside the culture center of 1920s Harlem there was “a racial awakening on a national and perhaps even a world scale.” For Locke, these “first fruits of the Negro Renaissance” heralded “a renewed race-spirit” that was “consciously and proudly [setting] itself apart.”<sup>13</sup>

The obvious question, then, was “apart” from what or whom? Locke provided the answer in the temporal binary of “Old Negro” and “New Negro” representational paradigms. According to Locke, the “new group psychology” had as much to do with what the new generation did not represent. He admitted that “adverse circumstances of dependence” had forced the Old Negro (“a creature of moral debate and historical controversy,” “more of a myth than a man,” “more of a formula than a human being”) upon black performers. The New Negro was imbued with “race pride,” a commitment to “social contribution,” and “the belief in ultimate esteem and recognition.” The stock figures of “Uncle Tom and Sambo” had “passed on,” Locke hoped, and the popular melodrama had nearly “played itself out.” The Negro of urban modernity needed to be seen through a lens “other than the dusty spectacles of past controversy.” Locke observed that “the Negro [was] becoming transformed” in “the very process of being transplanted” during the great migration of 1910s and 1920s, but the New Negro avant-garde emerged not only in cosmopolitan American urban centers like Chicago, Detroit or New York. While Locke saw Harlem as “the home of the Negro's 'Zionism',” he also acknowledged that “the race question” was “a world phenomenon.” “As with the Jew,” Locke wrote, “persecution is making the Negro international.” Locke rejected Marcus Garvey's “Back to Africa” concept of mass out-migration as a model of leadership that was too “iconoclastic,” but when considered in relationship to the cooperative work of the Pan-African Congresses and the proliferation of literature and media in the diaspora, even such “transient” and “spectacular” movements displayed an appeal that pointed to “the possible role of the American Negro in the future development of Africa.”<sup>14</sup>

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13 Alain LeRoy Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (Simon and Schuster, 1997).

14 Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Duke University Press, 2001). Manning Marable and Vanessa Agard-Jones, eds., *Transnational*



An essay by Du Bois, “Worlds of Color: The Negro Mind Reaches Out,” concluded *The New Negro* collection and echoed Locke's sentiments about the new black internationalism and cosmopolitanism in comparative diasporas. Moreover, Du Bois delineated a critique of competing Western empires and conditions in the African, Asian, and Caribbean colonies that lay in their shadows.<sup>15</sup> Nearly a quarter-century after he wrote *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois saw “the Color Problem and the Labor Problem” as “two sides of the same human tangle.” In the 1930s, the economic hardships of African Americans during the Great Depression intensified the crisis mood and sense of urgency for black artists and intellectuals. “Negroes will migrate,” Du Bois warned in a 1933 lecture on economic plight delivered at The Rosenwald Economic Conference in Washington, D.C. Posing the question, “Where do we go from here?” Du Bois lamented that, lacking basic civil rights and work opportunities, African Americans were “not in reality a part of this nation.” Du Bois said, “I expect mass emigration of American Negroes unless vital change comes to America,” and then rephrased the question:

We are the victims of a caste system in the United States whose main lines we have been unable to break. We are at the beginning of a vast change in the organization of industry here and in the world, and the question is, what part are we going to take during this change and how are we going to prepare for a place in the world that comes after?<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the Great Depression was followed by the Second World War, and African Americans played a vital role in building and supporting the American economy during the war years. However, the question of what was to be done about the “caste system” in American economic and social life remained at the

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*Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line* (Macmillan, 2008). Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Harvard University Press, 2003).

15 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993). Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000).

16 W.E.B. Du Bois, “Worlds of Color” in Locke, ed., *The New Negro* 385-414.

center of debate about the places and roles available to African Americans throughout the mid-century period. Thomas Cripps argued that “the black cinema achievement of the thirties rested upon the cadre of black stars who could give their style and substance to the movies.”<sup>17</sup> While true, such a claim about the cultural and political aspirations of African American artists and intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s needs to be broadened to encompass the global vision of the struggle for cinematic representation.<sup>18</sup>

In his essay for *The New Negro* anthology, Montgomery Gregory (a former Professor of English at Howard University, organizer and director of the Howard Players, 1919-1924) proposed “a national Negro Theater ... where the Negro playwright, musician, dancer, and artist in concert shall fashion a drama that will merit the respect and attention of America.” Locke saw the potential cultural effect of “increased prestige at home and abroad.” “Our greatest rehabilitation,” he wrote, “may possibly come through such channels, but for the present, more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective.”<sup>19</sup>

Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier were born days apart in 1927, and soon after World War II they crossed paths at the American Negro Theater, where they learned valuable lessons from Robeson's example about the risks and rewards of portraying heroic black characters in the U.S. and abroad. Paul Robeson was born in 1899, the year that Du Bois first declared that “the color line” was the problem of the twentieth century. Robeson began his performance career during the inter-war period, when a renaissance of African diaspora culture took place, prompting debate and exposing the tensions over questions of cultural identity.

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17 Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* 265.

18 Penny M Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2000). Penny M Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). *Contested Democracy: Freedom, Race, and Power in American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

19 Locke 15.

Over the course of their careers, the figures in this study carefully examined American race relations, adopted strategic ideological positions, and enacted a cultural praxis of revaluation in order to perform new heroic modes of black masculinity in mid-century cinema.

In 1957, Robeson reflected on the half-century that had passed since the publication of *Souls of Black Folk*, citing Du Bois' "words of poetry and truth" in the Foreword to his memoir *Here I Stand* (1958): "Our song, our toil, our cheer. ... Would America have been America without her Negro people?" Robeson also recalled the "deep wisdom" of Frederick Douglass, referring to him as "our greatest hero and teacher": "A man is worked on by what he works on. He may carve out his circumstances, but his circumstances will carve him out as well." Later in the book he remembered not only learning music, training his voice, and studying Shakespeare in school, but also that he "was always conscious that I belonged to the Negro community," and "to accept and follow a certain protective tactic of Negro life in America." He felt that his sister Marion suffered "the double burden that a Negro woman bears in striving for dignity and fulfillment in our boasted 'way of life.'" Cultivating a sense of race pride in the face of degradation and discrimination was a necessary strategy for health and survival in the U.S. ("Equality might be denied, but I *knew* I was not inferior."), and Robeson "did not fully break with the pattern until many years later."<sup>20</sup>

Robeson addressed the controversy of his political views in a chapter titled "I Take My Stand," which he opened by fondly recalling the time "before the 'cold war' brought about a different atmosphere": the honor of receiving the NAACP Springarn Medal in 1944, the award of an honorary degree by Morehouse College in 1943, and the opportunity to play Othello on Broadway. Up to that point, Robeson explained, he had shared "the prevailing attitude that the content and form of the play or film scenario was of little or no importance to us. What mattered was the opportunity, which came so seldom to our folks, of having a part..." But as he worked, traveled, and studied the world he "came to

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Beacon Press, 1988) 1-47.

understand that the Negro artist could not view the matter simply in terms of his individual interests, and that he had a responsibility to his people who rightfully resented the traditional stereotyped portrayals of Negroes on stage and screen.” “I made a decision,” Robeson wrote, “If the Hollywood and Broadway producers did not choose to offer me worthy roles to play, then I would choose not to accept any other kind of offer.” In the political climate of anti-Communism in the postwar era, he said, “I saw no reason why my convictions should change with the weather.”

Like other black artists for whom travel outside the U.S. afforded some respite from American racism, Robeson first achieved international fame on the concert stage in the 1920s. In London, he found “a congenial and stimulating intellectual atmosphere in which I felt at home.” He emigrated to Europe to seek better opportunities to make a living and pursue his passions, much like the millions of African American who migrated out of the Deep South in the first half of the twentieth century.

It was in London, in the years that I lived among the people of the British Isles and traveled back and forth to many other lands, that my outlook on world affairs was formed. This fact is key to an understanding of why I may differ in certain attitudes from many others of my generation in Negro life.<sup>21</sup>

Being at the metropolitan center of the British Empire, Robeson met many Africans (Nkrumah, Azikiwe, Kenyatta), studied African languages, and discussed “the real but unknown glories of African culture” with H.G. Wells, Laski, Nehru, and others. “I came to consider that I was an African,” he said, and because of his interest in Africa he decided to visit the Soviet Union and study socialism as a political and economic system. A thorough reappraisal of Robeson’s film career demonstrates that he was, among other performers, part of a sweeping, global change involving the realignment of political forces, the redefining of national priorities, and a contestation the value of “race” as a category of identity. We can understand Robeson’s contradictory film career not merely as a phase of

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21 Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Beacon Press, 1988) 1-47.

“interpretive” gesturing, or outside the New Negro era’s milieu of racial uplift, when all black artists and intellectuals were engaged in a struggle to change the terms of cultural representation.

I posit Paul Robeson as the prime figure for an analysis of the performance of black masculinity. In the role of Othello, Robeson invoked the trope of the tragic black soldier as a means of appealing to “the liberal intellectual,” which was presumably a generic signifier for mid-century theater and film audiences. In numerous interviews, speeches and essays published in the 1940s, Paul Robeson described William Shakespeare’s *Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* as a play “contemporary in its overtones of a clash of cultures, of the partial acceptance of and consequent effect upon one of a minority group.” In his performances and political activism during this period, Robeson hoped to address the problem of racial discrimination in the United States, and worked tirelessly to establish “new conceptions and assumptions of political power, with all sections of the people claiming a place in the social order.”<sup>22</sup>

Errol Hill succinctly stated in his seminal study *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors*: “It would be gratifying to report...that the floodtide of success that greeted Robeson’s 1943 Othello in America had swept away all obstacles and ushered in a new era of hope for the black Shakespearean actor. Such, regrettably, was not the case.”<sup>23</sup> At least another fifteen years passed before African American performers received similar opportunities and critical attention on the stage, and there were few major film adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Othello* produced in the U.S. until Tim Blake Nelson’s basketball-themed *O* in 2001.<sup>24</sup> In her 1995 essay, “Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African-American Literature,” Sandra L. Richards argues that, “in addition to analysis of the written text, one

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22 Paul Robeson, *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, and Interviews, 1918-1974*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Citadel Press, 2002) 163-164.

23 Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

24 Lawrence Fishburne starred in director Oliver Parker’s 1995 UK production *Othello* (Columbia Pictures, 1995), with Kenneth Branagh as Iago and Irène Jacob as Desdemona.

must offer informed accounts of the latent intertexts likely to be produced in performance, increasing and complicating meaning.”<sup>25</sup> As a cultural history of the performance of black masculinity in films, this study takes up similar concerns as Hill and Richards: the centrality of skin color in casting decisions; the social significance of hidden or understated expressions in performance; and the critical importance of the “unproduced drama.”

In what some have called Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy, the moor is an ethnic other, an outsider; the figure of Othello is exiled but professionally established. He is rational and ethical to a flaw, his enlightened reasoning betrayed by Iago’s duplicity and deceptions. His tragic ending provides cathartic relief not only for his own consuming jealousy and primal rage, but also for the audience’s implied complicity in the development of the drama’s foul events. How did the absent potential of the Othello trope inflect or inform the dynamic translation relationship between transcultural texts, performances, and production contexts? Even if Shakespeare’s *Tragedy of Othello* was not a direct source for most of the films considered herein, key examples reflect something akin to Shakespearean cultural politics of difference, scenes of cross-cultural hybridity and masquerade, and tragic modes of black masculinity. Considering the play as a closed text, Othello is just another Shakespearean tragic hero, a flawed and fallen figure similar to Hamlet or Macbeth. However, if taken as a cinematic or multimedia trope, then imagining and interpreting the recurrent themes and performances of a mid-century Othello film cycle can reveal the profound inter-textual encodings of racial and gender differences in diaspora cinema.

In “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference,” Stuart Hall noted how the logic of identity suggests that we should be able to locate “something like a ‘true self,’” an accurate depiction of cultural identity at a given historical moment. Thus, “the language of identity has often been related to the search for a kind ... of

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25 Sandra L. Richards, “Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African-American Literature,” in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Psychology Press, 1995), 64-88.

authenticity to one's experience.” Hall also stated, however, that identity “emerges as a kind of unsettled space, or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses.” Any attempt to uncover the answers to questions of cultural identity must necessarily locate and mark the points of intersection, moments where historical developments and related discourses intersect. Hall spoke of “the displacements of identity that come from social and cultural life,” and how the “great social collectivities which used to stabilize our identities—the great stable collectivities of class, race, gender and nation—have been, in our times, deeply undermined by social and political developments.”<sup>26</sup>

Hall re-conceptualized identity as a “process of identification,” which also entails a dialogic relationship to the Other (or Others), to specific social formations, and to particular sets of discursive practices. Therefore, identity is constructed in relation to perceptions of sameness and difference. “Racism,” Hall said, “is a structure of discourse and representation that tries to expel the Other symbolically.” Yet many mid-century cultural, political and technological developments made the older, essentialist forms of identity increasingly untenable. New cultural identities and “emergent ethnicities” are linked to the past through memory and narrative, and they are constructed through acts of “cultural recovery” and appropriation. In this way, mid-century cinematic practices were transformed by previously marginalized black performers who were “coming into representation for the first time.” In “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” Stuart Hall defined the “diaspora aesthetic” and its significance for reconsidering Africa and the Caribbean in the construction of African American collective identity:

The diaspora experience ... is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity, diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are

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<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference,” in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (Oxford University Press, 1996), 339-349. Edited version of a speech given at Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts, Spring 1989.

constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.<sup>27</sup>

In this vein, the following chapters aim “to see and recognize the different parts and histories of ourselves,” to construct “points of identification,” and to locate and interpret the shifting patterns and positions of performing black masculinity in cosmopolitan contexts.

Pierre Bourdieu defined a “field of production” as “the system of objective relations between ... agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated.”<sup>28</sup> In the following chapters, I consider compelling questions about American cultural politics by examining different modes of black masculinity as it was represented and critiqued in different texts and contexts, which is instructive for investigating the cinematic techniques adopted by Hollywood studios and the counter-strategies of African American performers. These questions include but are not limited to: By what mechanisms did film producers, performers and spectators assign symbolic value to gendered images of “blackness” or “whiteness,” and how did those representations change over time? In the film production process, who possessed the power to control cultural representations (e.g., promotion strategies and publicity materials) and how did power relations differ based on context and location? In their respective careers, how did Robeson, Belafonte, and Poitier exercise agency, authorship and voice in their performances? In what ways did their performances and political expressions reveal their individual struggles over identity politics and the tensions between nationalism and the cosmopolitan ethics associated with diaspora identity? How did the international response to films and performances differ from domestic audiences and critics in

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27 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindborg (University of Chicago, 1996), 210-222.

28 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1993).



the mainstream media and the black press, and why?

### **Native Sons and Exilic Texts**

My goal is to reveal the social processes of film production in the field of diaspora performance. A primary concern for the analysis of performance in this study is the concept of displacement, which will be treated as an event (active, in the moment) for both on-screen “subjects” and off-screen spectators. This concept is critical not only in aesthetic terms with respect to framing scenarios and composing the *mise-en-scène* of the text (“screen segregation”), but also on political grounds in light of the segregation of creative labor and audiences in theaters. Displacement is also considered as an operative process in the construction of black masculinity in the writing, performance or other articulations of the text, especially in negotiating production codes, legal contracts, and editing the final film print for exhibition.<sup>29</sup> One challenge to consider is the centering of the black male subject in cinema as a historical process of cultural contestation.

Chapter 2 offers a reappraisal of Robeson's performance career in broader historical context, by reviewing scholarship on racial representations in U.S. culture during the early twentieth century, and then considers “race films” made by independent African American producers as a critical and oppositional response to racism. Within this context, I look at Robeson as an international celebrity and the representational embodiment the image of the idealized “modern Negro.” The chapter examines biographies and criticism that discuss Robeson's controversial legacy on global stages and screens, and argues that, in cosmopolitan cultural contexts, Robeson engaged and enacted segregated, imperial, and interstitial modes of performing black masculinity. Beginning with the film *Borderline* in 1930, analysis of his film career highlights the paradoxical roles he played by noting the shift in underlying discourses from racial modernism to cultural imperialism in adaptations such as *Emperor Jones* (1933)

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<sup>29</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, and Film*, trans. David Williams (University of Michigan Press, 2003).

and *Sanders Of The River* (1935). The analysis continues by interpreting themes of cosmopolitan internationalism in the film *Jericho* (1937, also known as *Dark Sands*). Of Robeson's twelve films, only four were US productions, and his transnational mobility and acute cultural memory enabled him to exercise increasing degrees of artistic and political freedoms. However, Robeson's quest to find a stable cultural identity also demonstrates an inherent dialectical tension between the instrumental function of British colonial film policies, his claims to "first-class" U.S. citizenship and his commitment to emergent Pan-African political movements. Moreover, we can also consider his involvement in the global cultural front beyond the 1930s, past the fulminating decade of what have been called his "years of promise and achievement."<sup>30</sup>

Before taking a closer look at Robeson's performances in particular films, I want to consider some of the problematic cultural histories that informed their production and reception, which will provide deeper insight into the wide perception that the misrepresentations in his body of work render the films of little value to scholars. Many valuable contributions to scholarship in the fields of film, literary, and cultural studies call for careful reexamination of grand narratives and for greater attention to the complex processes of identity formation and the effects (both real and imaginary) of colonial and post-colonial discourses.<sup>31</sup> A preeminent issue in Robeson scholarship—already addressed in the opening section of this chapter—is the relative success of his artistic achievements in multiple arenas, especially the concert stage, theater, and film. It is important to note that many of his films were not widely distributed at the time of their original release, and film scholars must confront a period of more than five decades during which their availability (and criticism about them) was scant. From a strictly economic viewpoint, the limited availability (low supply) of these films is

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30 S.T. Boyle and A. Bunie, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement*.

31 Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton University Press, 2001); Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*; Michael T. Martin, *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality* (Wayne State University Press, 1995); Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Cornell University Press, 2004).

directly related to their continued lack of popularity (low demand), but this logic fails to take into account their historical significance and shifting aesthetic and cultural values. To avoid the risk of overlooking the multiple “relations of force” Robeson faced during this period, or eliding distinctions between various modes of production (however marginal) and ideological discourses at work within any given social formation, I aim to carefully examine performance contexts (period, locations, modes of production), source materials, and the motives of cultural workers involved in the process, especially when particular representations (images, narratives) appear to be incongruous with certain political expressions or stated objectives (anti-racism, anti-imperialism).<sup>32</sup>

An example of unhistorical conflation can be found in Edwin Hoyt's 1967 unauthorized biography of Robeson—subtitled “The American Othello” for the U.S. edition—in which the subject was interpreted through the tragic mask of the character in the play. At least three possible interpretations can be attributed to the author's choice to view Robeson through the Shakespearean lens: 1) the author saw Robeson as the definitive American actor who most memorably performed the role; 2) the author saw something in Robeson's character that matched the tragic hero (i.e., his tragic professional career reflected the contingencies of cultural politics in a global context); or 3) the author saw direct parallels between Robeson's life story (i.e., he was an exemplary, proud man of color) and some universal themes in the narrative of the Shakespearean play (a victim of white dominance who confronted the realities of racial/ethnic competition in a modern, pluralist society). In the first case, while we do not want to overemphasize his association with this particular role, we also should not underestimate the impact or significance of the play's themes and characters in the formation of Robeson's cultural identity and world-view. After all, he performed the role—his only Shakespearean role—in distinctly different contexts, throughout his lifetime (from his debut in high school to his encore performance

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<sup>32</sup> Stuart Hall, “Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of 'Race' and Ethnicity,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, (London: Routledge, 1996), 411-440.

at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1959). And in the period following the end of his film career in Hollywood, he performed the role for a record 296 shows on Broadway.

With the common exception of *Proud Valley* (1939), we are forced to accept the tragic hero as a structuring absence in Robeson's film career. In any case, to look to the Othello trope for direct or indirect links to Robeson's biography clearly runs the risk of allowing either the subject of "race" (otherness) or the politics of exile (displacement) to obscure or over-determine the process of understanding the life and work of the star. In this historical conjuncture, we must consider the contemporary politics and ideology of the state, the structure of civil society, the artist's engagement with (or estrangement from) different types of political regimes, relevant questions of cultural and/or national identity, and relations of social forces within and across borders. If the experience of departure or displacement had a profound effect upon the life of an individual artist or performer, then perhaps that experience was enacted or reflected in his or her works. In what ways? How are the resulting aesthetic innovations and hybrid cultural productions received upon return to one's native land, and what can we learn by examining their reception in comparative contexts?<sup>33</sup>

In his widely read "interpretive history" of blacks in American films, Donald Bogle commented on the admixture of triumph and tragedy that has come to define Robeson's life and film career: "Robeson seemed to have achieved all that a man can hope for, but ultimately his life mingled irony with heartache, idealism with disillusionment, a love for his people with an eventual rejection by them. He became a victim."<sup>34</sup> Bogle was somewhat unclear about exactly who Robeson's people were or who was responsible for Robeson's victimization, but the interpretation remains the same—disappointment. If Bogle's argument lacked specificity, then Thomas Cripps narrowed the focus when he suggested that

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33 Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of 'Race' and Ethnicity."

34 Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed (New York: Continuum, 2001), 97; my emphasis. Bogle adds that his films "were meant to reflect the liberal and even radical attitudes of the day. Yet they now seem dated and false."

Robeson failed to “carry British cinema to Afro-American audiences.” But this singular failure is not necessarily “testimony to the misplaced optimism of many black American intellectuals who believed the European culture could offer relief from American racial arrangements.”<sup>35</sup> Such a claim is based on two assumptions that must be called into question when considering the case of Paul Robeson: 1) the films and contexts in which he performed constitute cultural forms that can somehow be classified as distinctly “European”; and 2) the target audience(s) for his films were found only in black communities within the U.S. The following analysis demonstrates that most of his films—even those with European authors and ideologies—were intercultural texts that were made to entertain cosmopolitan, transnational audiences.

Far more problematic than Cripps or Bogle in this regard was Harold Cruse, whose 1967 polemic *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* decried the “failures” of black intellectuals to evoke and propagate some ideal model of “spokesmanship” for Negroes in the U.S.<sup>36</sup> Cruse's assertion that “Robeson was not a creative artist but an interpretive one” was possibly his most specious claim, but more troubling was the provincial premise questioning his subjects' inheritance of race pride and espousing the conservation of cultural difference, over and against some utopian search and striving for a race-less ideal that is impossible to attain. He did not analyze Robeson's performing career per se, but instead criticized by emphasizing the primacy of a nationalist cultural philosophy, an essentialist position that necessarily found inherent flaws in Robeson's internationalism.<sup>37</sup> Rather than recognize the aims of those seeking the political potential of an

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35 Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

36 Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967), 285-301. On the use of the term “Negro” as a problematic category of racial identity, see Richard B Moore, *The Name “Negro”: Its Origin and Evil Use* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1992 [originally pub. 1960]).

37 Cruse 285-301. According to Cruse, “there was no creative or aesthetic clash of values actually involved,” and Robeson was content to adopt “the aesthetic values of the dominant group,” while “the situation demanded that the cultural values of the American white majority be challenged and fought with other cultural values.” By this estimation, we might conclude that Robeson was a man “perplexed in the extreme” by a debilitating, externalized Iagoism, and thus forever trapped behind the mask of Othello.

African-inspired diaspora consciousness, Cruse lamented their failure to project a fundamentally separate, homogeneous black cultural identity. Robeson had other goals.

Early filmmakers in the U.S. adopted themes and practices from the nineteenth century forms of minstrelsy and melodrama. These residual forms are of critical importance for understanding the politics of (mis)representation: devaluation, dehumanization, naturalization, identity conflation—a cultural strategy that engenders a confluence of racial performance practices (language and context). The Jim Crow era doctrine of “separate but equal” was reinforced by state and local censor boards, racist mobs, and industrial self-censorship protocols like the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association's (MPPDA) Production Code. Ruth Vasey made the following observation about Hollywood “industry policy” from 1927 to 1939:

Political subjects, including any discussion of the relationship between capital and labor, were generally absent from the Classical cinema, as were revolutionary themes. Explorations of racial conflict were also largely ruled out. It was in these little-publicized areas of the MPPDA's activities that its effects were, in practice, most censorious.<sup>38</sup>

Given the explicit codification of techniques for the cinematic construction of American race relations, producers in Hollywood studios constantly evaluated and renegotiated the terms of racial representation. In early cinema, there is a pattern of devaluing blackness; in the mid-century years—during the second world war and the post-war years, the focal point of this study—pressure from black groups made it necessary for studios to rethink their valuations of racial imagery. Chapter 3 frames the cultural legacy of Robeson's film career within the context of transnational politics in the global arena between 1936 and 1948, by examining the aesthetics of documentary realism and addressing questions of authorship and creative control.

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<sup>38</sup> Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (University of Wisconsin, 1997) 194-224.

Throughout the mid-century period, black performers were native outsiders who helped guide the way for social and cultural change by appeasing white desire, displacing white alarm, and gradually transforming the limits of cinematic representation. The result of their efforts was a response that was both aesthetic and political: a boundless, exilic cinema to break the cycle of Hollywood's stereotypical representations of black masculinity—a cinema without borders. During the mid-twentieth century, the shift in representations of blackness in the U.S. also involved a simultaneous reevaluation of “classic whiteness” and its claims to moral superiority, marked by a general move toward the ambivalent social melodramas reflecting the nation's ongoing identity crisis. Given political and economic realities that limited access to the means of film production for black performers in the U.S., what were the conceptual possibilities for the performance of black masculinity when we examine film-making as a cultural process?

As one of the most versatile performing artists of the mid-century period, Harry Belafonte realized a level of creative control and self-representation that had been practically unobtainable by African Americans in the prewar era. By the end of the 1950s, Belafonte was an independent cultural producer whose popularity as a recording artist provided him with the economic means to control the production process in the fields of music, film, and live performance. Belafonte's status as a celebrity also enabled him to perform as an activist for civil rights in the U.S., and to serve as a cultural ambassador for global human rights. Contrasting representations of black masculinity and femininity in mid-1950s Hollywood musicals and Caribbean melodramas with his own independent productions later in that same decade, Chapter 4 demonstrates Belafonte's deep influence on American culture. The early 1950s were marked by a retrenchment into segregated cinematic practices in Hollywood studios, an aesthetic that dominated cultural production until the latter years of the decade. Integration in the culture industries also resulted in the end of the “race film” era and the decline of the studio system meant that the old Production Code needed to be

updated for new audiences. Competition with television and the international film market led to the rise of independent producers, new technologies, and new regimes of racial representation.

After leaving Twentieth Century Fox, Daryl F. Zanuck's first independent production was an adaptation of Alec Waugh's popular novel *Island in the Sun* (1957). Waugh, a writer of travel magazine articles and books, set this fictional narrative about an American journalist covering political intrigue and interracial intimacy among islanders facing an uncertain, post-colonial future. Belafonte played the part of an inspiring political activist, and sang the film's title song, which he wrote. Dorothy Dandridge appeared in the film as the love interest of a white colonial official, and enticed male audiences with an exotic limbo dance. An analysis of the 1950s American family melodrama illuminates the way in which this film combined elements of the genre with the Shakespearean Othello trope to depict a Caribbean history of interracial denial and desire. The film reflected concerns about a post-colonial "crisis" in white masculinity for the British empire, while American critics recognized the film's relevance with respect to the "one drop rule" and fears about miscegenation and "racial degeneration." These fears materialized in the film being censored by distributors, boycotted in Southern theaters, and threatening letters sent to actors for appearing in it.

In the summer of 1958 Belafonte embarked on a tour across Europe, which confirmed the appeal of his performance style with a global audience. Income from record sales, film contracts, and public appearance fees launched Belafonte into the top category of entertainment earners, and in 1959 he joined the ranks of actors who became independent film producers. In its two 1959 films, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* and *Odds Against Tomorrow*, HarBel Productions cultivated what I call a cinematic blues aesthetic. Conceived and produced during a period of relative isolation following a 1957 accident and eye surgery, these black-and-white films were imbued with the blues, folk, and jazz overtones characteristic of the music Belafonte performed and recorded during this period. An examination of related magazine articles and film reviews published in this



period demonstrates that HarBel films attempted to challenge Hollywood's dominant regime of racial representation by introducing the problem of racial difference into the narratives of mainstream genre films. Analysis of the pair of films is important for understanding Belafonte's global vision for the cinematic (re)construction of race and gender relations, and his growing frustration about domestic tensions over civil rights.

In the 1960s, Belafonte made a commitment to lend his voice, celebrity, and financial support to the civil rights movement. He was a sensation with audiences on trips to Europe and Israel. He introduced American audiences to the music of South African artists like Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela, as well as folk artists like Odetta, Bob Dylan, and The Belafonte Folk Singers. By the 1970s, Belafonte was in the vanguard of black celebrities involved in the reconstruction of U.S. cultural identity to promote diverse images of black masculinity, working on film and television projects with his friends Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby. From the 1980s to the present, Belafonte has maintained his commitment to promoting human rights and global interdependency, conceiving the USA for Africa "We Are the World" benefit concert to fight famine in Ethiopia, and serving as a Goodwill Ambassador to UNICEF.

Unlike his friend, rival and successful singer Belafonte, Poitier was primarily an actor, so he starred in many more films (some that Belafonte turned down) and thus took on the task of performing otherness for American audiences into the 1960s and beyond. Like Robeson in the prewar years and many black actors since, Poitier was criticized for the political messages that some of his films delivered during an intense period of civil rights struggle. By the mid-1960s Poitier had become an American icon unlike any other, and on the screen he embodied the ideal of black masculinity for the baby boomer generation.

Chapter 5 examines Poitier's transnational films between the years 1957 and 1964, illustrating the wide range of roles he played prior to winning the Academy Award for Best Actor in *Lilies of the Field* (1963). They depict the divergent political associations ascribed to postwar constructions of black

masculinity in both the U.S. and international contexts. *Something of Value* (1957) is a cautionary tale about Mau Mau revolutionaries in British colonial Kenya, adapted from the novel by Robert Ruark. *Mark of the Hawk* (1958) is a tragic story about the intervention of Christian missionaries in the political crisis of an African colony on the brink of independence. Both films present acts of violence by the African natives and the colonial settlers against one another, yet both also support the benevolent influence of Westerners in Africa. From the experience of working in Africa, Poitier gained a greater sense of global awareness and a stronger political consciousness, while also gleaning wider critical acclaim and a certain regard among the industry's most influential figures. Upon receiving his first Oscar nomination for his role in *The Defiant Ones* (1958), Poitier was celebrated as "Hollywood's First Negro Movie Star" in the black press and mainstream media outlets.

Poitier received a Tony Award nomination in 1959 for his performance in the original Broadway production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which was adapted for the screen in 1961. *Paris Blues* (1961) followed, with co-stars Diahann Carroll, Paul Newman, and Joanne Woodward. The film also featured Louis Armstrong and a soundtrack composed by Duke Ellington, and although it raised some questions about the cultural status of jazz musicians in the U.S and Europe, it was seen as too stale when compared to the creativity of new wave cinema and the politics of the American civil rights movement. *The Long Ships* (1964) was a Viking adventure film adapted from the novel by Frans G. Bengtsson, in which Poitier plays the Moorish Prince Aly Mansuh. Although Poitier later denounced the role and lamented his experience on location in Yugoslavia, the film is significant because it broke many Hollywood restrictions and stands out as the most villainous character in his body of work. The summer of 1964 was a significant turning point both for Poitier and for the U.S. as a nation. As the Black Power movement made demands for political and economic equality, Poitier drew criticism for acting in films that failed to adequately address the issues of the day. Although he had the power to choose his projects, Poitier

still felt limited in his ability to project a heroic image of black masculinity. In the late 1960s, he turned his attention to writing and producing, and began directing his own films in the early 1970s.

With respect to Othello, Robeson welcomed the role throughout his career and repeatedly embodied its potential meanings, which stoked fear and resentment in a postwar period of popular consensus. Belafonte encountered the Othello trope obliquely in *Island in the Sun*, then inverted its connotations in his independent films. Poitier repeatedly wrestled with the idea of playing the part, and then portrayed another version of the noble Moor in *The Long Ships* and later rejected it. Since the mid-twentieth century, the critical analysis of racial representations in U.S. culture has shifted from a sense of “betrayal” to a period of “crisis,” slowly but steadily laying the foundation for the autonomous realization of widespread cultural recognition. New international pressures reshaped global geopolitics, and the civil rights movement demanded an end to racial segregation and racism’s crippling economic and psychological effects. For black performers, their relatively marginal status with respect to the Hollywood studio system required that they pursue opportunities outside the U.S. and adopt performance practices that continued the struggle over representation in American cinema.

## CHAPTER 2

### “Pride, Pomp and Circumstance”:

#### Paul Robeson and the Tensions of Diaspora

He is that tragic creature, a man without a nationality. He claims to be American, to be British, to be French—but you cannot assume a nationality as you would a suit of clothes.

Paul Robeson, 1934

#### Tragic Blackness: “Othellophobia” in U.S. Cinema, 1915-1948

In the closing paragraph of the chapter “Of the Training of Black Men” in *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois offered the following self-conscious, spiritual reflection on the relationship of African American literature to the Western culture and classical traditions:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land?<sup>39</sup>

In January 1925, Paul Robeson's essay, “An Actor's Wanderings and Hopes,” appeared in *The Messenger* magazine. He had returned to the role of Brutus Jones, and found the prospect of an acting career “most thrilling.” To the

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<sup>39</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Random House, Inc., 1989).

question, "What are the opportunities?" Robeson replied, "Just what I will make them." The future depended on his "courage in fighting over the rough places" he would surely experience, and his constant effort to realize "the desired perfection" in his field, but he was hopeful: "True—plays are not easy to get, but they come from most unexpected sources. Before they appeared, who saw an 'Emperor Jones' and 'All God's Chillun Got Wings'.... And there is an 'Othello' when I'm ready. And if I reach the continent, which I hope to do some day, I may play any role."<sup>40</sup>

Robeson was inspired by other performers in the African American tradition: "I've heard of Aldridge and seen Burleigh, Hayes, Gilpin and Williams. In the field of musical comedy I've seen Sissle and Blake, Miller and Lyles, and now Florence Mills, who, I believe, is in a class by herself." Setting an ambitious goal for himself, he reasoned that "we boast that the only true artistic contributions in America are Negro in origin," in a world where groups of people were judged and valued for their cultural achievements. Robeson declared:

We boast of the culture of Ancient Africa. Surely in any discussion of art or culture, music, the drama and its interpretation must be included. So today Roland Hayes is infinitely more of a racial asset than many who "talk" at great length. Thousands of people hear him, see him, are moved by him, and are brought to a clearer understanding of human values. If I can do something of a like nature, I shall be happy. ... My early experiences give me much hope.

The trope of the tragic Moor has been a familiar narrative in global literature and drama since William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello The Moor of Venice* was first performed around 1604. Shakespeare adapted his version from a chapter in Italian storyteller Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* (*The Hundred Tales*, 1566); Venice and Cyprus were his settings.<sup>41</sup> Many

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40 Paul Robeson, "An Actor's Wanderings and Hopes," in *The Messenger Reader: Stories, Poetry, and Essays from The Messenger Magazine*, ed. Sondra K. Wilson (Modern Library, 2000) 292-293.

41 Geraldo U de Sousa, *Shakespeare's Cross-cultural Encounters* (St. Martin's Press, 1999) 97-128. Other adaptations, Verdi's classical Italian opera. See also Barnaby Rich's *Farewell to Military Profession* (1581).

scholars have observed the importance of race, place, and language in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies, past and present.<sup>42</sup> By and large, these studies emphasize not fidelity to the “original” texts but rather provide for their performance and production contexts. More recently, Celia Daileader commented on race and gender in early modern drama, and the widespread phenomenon of “Othellophilia” in casting: “The fixation on the coupling of a black male and a white female, with the attendant cultural anxieties played out in the story’s tragic result, is not unique to the RSC or even to English ‘classical’ drama.”<sup>43</sup> However, Daileader’s conceptualization of the dynamic coupling fails to take into account the significant third figure in the tragic tale of Desdemona and The Moor: the Ensign (as Cinthio identified his characters). This doomed romance, with its trio of now familiar archetypes and dramatic situations, appear regularly in texts across a variety of twentieth century American cultural forms—except in cinema.<sup>44</sup>

This long absence raises questions about discourses on national cinema and attitudes regarding interracial relations. Gérard Genette wrote about intertextual relationships as being part of a “network of architecture”:

Above all, hypertextuality, as a category of works, is in itself a generic or, more precisely, *transgeneric* architext: I mean a category of texts which wholly encompasses certain canonical (though minor) genres such as pastiche, parody, travesty, and which also touches upon other genres—probably all genres.<sup>45</sup>

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42 Ania Loomba, “Outsiders in Shakespeare’s England,” in Margreta De Grazia and Stanley Wells, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) 147-166; Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford University Press, 2002). See also Loomba and Martin Orkin, eds., *Post-colonial Shakespeares* (Routledge, 1998); Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells, eds., *Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge University, 2000).

43 Celia R. Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). She adds: “Othellophilia is not solely theatrical—or even, necessarily, consciously Shakespearean.”

44 Barbara Hodgdon, *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Hodgdon and W. B. Worthen, *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* (Wiley, 2005).

45 Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (U of Nebraska Press, 1997) 8.

While knowledge of a text's source material (the *hypotext*, per Genette) is helpful for grasping its meaning to the fullest, I argue that familiarity with the cultural context of the production is just as important for understanding the concept of hypertextuality. In American cinema this phenomenon is best demonstrated in the heroes of melodramatic film genres.<sup>46</sup> Genette on symbolic valuation and the “rehabilitation” of archetypal figures as an aesthetic response:

*Primary revaluation*, the revaluation of the hero and his deeds, ... cannot of course consist in investing that hero with a prominence that is his already in the hypotext. It consists, much rather, in heightening his merit or his symbolic value.<sup>47</sup>

I argue that the archetype of the tragic black hero develops throughout this period (in response to an overabundance of comic and musical characters) via the complex processes of archetypal revaluation, dramatic re-figuration, and generic reformulation.

The objective here is not to contribute to the existing catalog of characters derived from Shakespearean texts, but rather to discern the mythic function of pathos in modern cinema and limn out the ideological discourses underlying narratives about the social control of black and white bodies. Samuel Taylor Coleridge described “Iagoism” as it relates to the villain's “high self-opinion”: “how a wicked man employs his real feelings as well as assumes those most alien from his own, as instruments of his purpose.”<sup>48</sup> He manipulates the emotional vulnerabilities of others. He is a reliable interlocutor in his engagement with the audience, but he is deceitful and dissembling with all other characters in the world of the play. Perhaps he is more than just another character in the play; he is the shadow aspect—of Shakespeare, Othello, all characters, all spectators. Othello is the vessel into which the Iago archetype projects the xenophobic animosity of a society: evoking pity for The Moor's tragedy; arousing fear of being

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46 While this chapter primarily concerns an “unusual” social science fiction film in relation to some of the more popular melodramas of the period, subsequent chapters will examine a variety of genres, from art films and documentaries to war and adventure films.

47 Genette 350.

48 Samuel Coleridge, “Notes on Othello,” in William Shakespeare, *Othello* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1986) 187-189.

complicit with unscrupulous villainy. Coleridge also coined the oft-cited phrase “the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity,” pointing out that while Iago named many reasons for his persecution of Othello, he really needed none beyond his petty hatred for The Moor. But if Iagoism mirrors the general patterns of pathological ethnocentrism, then the “Othello effect” is a reflection of the reification of a social pathology made manifest in modern cultural forms.

An effect should be clearly established through analysis of the empirical record: archives, biographies, self-writing, recorded media (audio, visual), press and trade publications, government documents. It may not be a consistent effect, so wherever possible an effort is made to explain any inconsistencies. The aim of examining a cultural effect is not to document famous “racial firsts” nor to delineate the breaking of some preordained cinematic “color barrier.” Rather, the goal of this dissertation is to acknowledge a significant cultural absence and account for what filled the void by offering a broad interpretation of a cycle of films characterized by ambivalence and obliqueness, and often marred by the obscurity of Production Code, yet which served as a critical and oppositional response to racism in American culture.

### **Robeson’s Quest For a Cultural Identity**

The year 1998 marked a critical moment in the reconsideration of the life and legacy of Paul Bustill Robeson, the black activist, actor, athlete, and singer—to name a few of his many remarkable talents—born in Princeton, New Jersey, on 9 April 1898. The variety of centennial celebrations organized to commemorate the birth of this modern “Renaissance Man” indicate not only his multi-dimensional character but also suggest the uncanny complexity of summing up the accolades, accomplishments, and shortcomings of one of the most controversial world figures of the twentieth century. Conference panels, film screenings, library and museum exhibitions, theatrical performances, and book publications were convened in the months and years anticipating this centenary and following it, some idolizing the “Great Forerunner” who was an unwavering



champion of civil rights and artistic freedom; others contending with the scandalized political giant whose outspokenness and tireless activity attracted the public scrutiny of Cold War demagogues and government agencies.<sup>49</sup>

Since the time of his death in 1976 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a number of tributes, archives, essay collections, and scholarships have been established, and scholars from many fields have produced a tremendous volume of research and writing on diverse aspects of Robeson's place in the historical record. The publication of Martin Duberman's definitive biography in 1988 further solidified the magnitude of Robeson's lasting impact on global politics and culture, and a slate of recent biographies, compilations, and essay collections continue to spur interest in his status as a legendary African American icon.<sup>50</sup> This flood of scholarship and flurry of centenary retrospectives demonstrate the many facets available for studying Robeson's life and work in historical perspective. One of the shared duties of scholars, curators, and activists is the work of maintaining our storehouses of memory: tending to "the facts" as they are known in the record; forming alliances to carry out research in an ongoing effort to fill the gaps that leave us wondering about ourselves and the world we live in; reporting the latest contributions of knowledge to the community and asking again the questions that remain unanswered. In one way or another, this type of cultural work tends to address questions of historical legacy by interrogating the archives of our collective memory.

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49 H Wendell Howard, "Paul Robeson Remembered," *The Midwest Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Autumn 1996); John Cunningham, "A second look," *Cineaste* 22, no. 2 (1996); Phillip H. Dean, *Paul Robeson* (Dramatists Play Service, 1997); Editors of *Freedomways, Paul Robeson, the Great Forerunner* (International Publishers, 1998); Paul Robeson Cultural Center and Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Paul Robeson Jr, "Paul Robeson," *Black Collegian* 28, no. 2 (February 1998); Charles L. Blockson, "Melody of Freedom: Paul Robeson," *American Visions* 13, no. 1 (March 1998); Timothy White, "Paul Robeson's song of freedom," *Billboard*, April 11, 1998; Martin Duberman, "A Giant Denied His Rightful Stature In Film," *New York Times*, March 29, 1998; "We hardly knew ye: Four early films of Paul Robeson," *Cineaste* 23, no. 4 (1998); J Hoberman, "'Borderlines: Paul Robeson and Film'," *The Village Voice* 44, no. 25 (June 29, 1999); Joseph Dorinson and William Pencak, eds., *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2002).

50 John Henrik Clarke, ed., *Dimensions of the Struggle Against Apartheid: A Tribute to Paul Robeson* (New York, NY: African Heritage Studies Association, 1978). Martin B Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1988).

In most of his feature films, we rarely see “Robeson the radical”; he (like Othello) was conspicuously absent from American screens during the peak years of his performing career. By examining the many modes of cultural identity that Robeson incorporated in an international context, we see that he was a global traveler and self-fashioned ethnographer, who studied many languages and developed a distinct cultural practice of performing otherness. The limits of cultural production on the national scene should not overly determine the analysis of a complicated subject in a comprehensive study, and a thorough examination of Robeson's films and their contemporary critical reception will illustrate how he engaged and enacted multiple modes of black masculinity in cosmopolitan cultural settings. The films not only provide a visual record of the roles Robeson played, but also offer a window into the era's cultural politics of cinematic representation and the racial economy of cultural production.

Robeson's paradoxical status as an icon of American culture speaks to a crisis of national identity that unfolded in the social order of the (long) middle years of the twentieth century. Born the gifted son of an escaped slave into a world dominated by white supremacist ideology, Robeson realized at an early age the necessity of mastering the practice of any intellectual or physical endeavor he pursued, whether a language, sport, or creative art. He also learned to mask his disrespect for and disconsolation about living in a society that refused to recognize his worth or the dignity of his people. This masquerade is certainly not limited to the political or philosophical perspective of any individual or group of black intellectuals required to work and live under repressive conditions.

In light of this concern, the current analysis reconsiders Robeson's cinematic endeavors and the central role these efforts played in his personal development as well as in the shaping of new subject positions for African American performers. Like the many biographical accounts that treat his early career as a “journey,” Anatol I. Schlosser sees the period through 1939 as an iconoclastic quest for an ever-elusive role: “The story of Paul Robeson as an

actor in motion pictures is the story of a quest; a quest for roles in which he could portray the culture and the humanness of his people."<sup>51</sup> This quest is commonly viewed as a tragic one, but upon closer examination it can reveal the complex process of negotiating positions in the formation of American identity (and the transformation of American culture).<sup>52</sup> Saundra Sharp made the point succinctly in her essay, "Paul Robeson: Portrait of a Giant": "If there is one visible flaw in Robeson's career it is that he thought, as many actors do today, that he could take a buffoon of a character and empower it, that he could take a demeaning script and transform it into one of dignity."<sup>53</sup>

Gaylyn Studlar describes this paradigm of gendered performance as "transformative masculinity," a cultural concept that foregrounds the construction of identity as a process and engages with discourses of stardom, biography, masquerade, and intertextual interpretation.<sup>54</sup> Robeson's image in the popular American imagination has traversed an iconography ranging from recognition as the first black film star, to scandalization as a colossal political pariah, to a symbolic face of the civil rights era on a black heritage stamp. This chapter retraces the routes of Robeson's early journey, from an international celebrity who came to embody the image of the idealized "modern Negro," who then entered a period of displacement and departure, and finally embarked upon a return journey in his ongoing quest for a sense of cultural identity.<sup>55</sup>

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51 Anatol I. Schlosser, "Paul Robeson in Film: An Iconoclast's Quest for a Role," in *Paul Robeson, the Great Forerunner*, Editors of Freedomways (International Publishers, 1998) 72-86; Lloyd L. Brown, *The Young Paul Robeson: On My Journey Now* (Westview Press, 1998); *Paul Robeson Jr., The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898-1939* (New York: Wiley, 2001).

52 *The New York Times Book Review* goes a step further in its summary of Duberman's biography: "The glorious and tragic life of Paul Robeson is a poignant, gripping story from beginning to end."

53 Saundra Sharp, "Paul Robeson: Portrait of a Giant," *Black Film Review* (1985) 16-19.

54 Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

55 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds.

Houston A. Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg (University of Chicago, 1996) 210-222.

In his youth, Robeson sang in the church of his father and the black community of Princeton, New Jersey, while he debated and played sports with his white classmates. Born in 1898, young Paul was an excellent student and an astonishing athlete, and his name was widely known by the time he reached the age of twenty. The son of a fugitive slave, his father was a man who not only won his freedom but also became a prominent leader in the local community. Robeson inherited a coherent sense of himself from his father, an American slave who set himself free. As a student at Rutgers University, Robeson was a Phi Beta Kappa scholar and an All-American athlete. He and others of his generation had to define their own ideas about freedom and develop the means of expressing their values to the nation. He defended his right to associate, collaborate, and perform with like-minded contemporaries in places as disparate as London, Moscow, Accra, and Beijing, all the while maintaining an adaptability and openness to new ideas and experiences, which led to warm welcomes abroad despite his constant troubles at home in the U.S.

Robeson spoke of Shakespeare, the performance of race, and the paradoxes of American national identity as “tragedy of racial conflict”—a modern American interpretation, a tropological reading applied to advance a moral critique of the present situation. In 1945, after touring with a production of Shakespeare’s *Othello* in the U.S. and at the end of what he (among others) suggested could be “the final war,” Robeson wrote an essay entitled “Some Reflections on *Othello* and the Nature of Our Time.” In it, he renders issues and situations presented in Shakespeare’s tragedy as they relate to the racial politics in the U.S., reflecting on the homological relationship between a play written in early 17th century England and how it resonates so powerfully with American audiences in the postwar years. The trope of the romantic black warrior is implicitly linked to questions of race, gender and national identity in the modern era. This trope is also linked to discourses of imperialism and colonialism, which continue to appear in a variety of stage and screen performances and in literature. Robeson challenges the democratic faith of “the liberal intellectual” in

the U.S., posing the question “where should we stand?” with respect to domestic affairs and foreign policy.

The analogy is worth considering because it necessarily calls our attention to a peculiar aspect of Shakespeare's narrative of exile: Othello's lack of identification with some native land of his own. Does Othello have a “homeland”? How would the Moor soldier (mercenary?) have been received if he had returned home a hero with a new wife, instead of taking his own life and hers? The cultural work he performed (his primary “occupation”) was becoming a citizen-soldier of the Venetian city-state and its territories. Robeson's cultural memory (as he expressed on multiple occasions) was intimately linked to slavery and the African past, and much of his cultural work was devoted to defending a certain image of black masculinity.

In 1934, when Robeson stated the words in the epigraph above and described the “man without a nationality” as a “tragic creature,” he could not have known that he would find himself a pariah in the United States less than two short decades later: denied the right to travel abroad; blacklisted from performing concerts in theaters and union halls at home; his name erased from the public record, appearing only in headlines announcing a litany of indignities and personal attacks. A closer look at the early years of his film career reveals that both Paul and Eslanda Robeson cherished the personal and professional opportunities afforded them by living in exile. Upon their 1927 arrival in London they immediately fit in as cosmopolitan public intellectuals. In New York, the Robesons were established figures among the black elite, due as much to his pioneering performances on the concert stage as to his success as an actor in the theatrical works of writers like Eugene O’Neill. While many black musical performers were forced to confront the regular grind and routine racism while touring through the Jim Crow South during the Great Depression, Robeson and his family enjoyed the hospitality and fame bestowed upon them by cultural aficionados around the globe. From the beginning of their relationship, Eslanda Goode never intended to be merely the wife of Paul Robeson. A Harlem

Renaissance intellectual who studied cultural anthropology with Bernard Malinowski in London, she debated the questions of race and African rights in the early 1930s, and penned her husband's first biography in 1930, *Paul Robeson, Negro*. As William Greaves observed, "in many ways she was his alter ego." She was his constant companion, a fellow traveler, scholar, and occasional co-star (in *Borderline* and *Big Fella*). Since the mid-1920s, their family business was the management of his performing career, although they lived fairly independent lives after a near-divorce in 1932.<sup>56</sup>

While it is impossible to fully measure Eslanda's influence on the development of her husband's career, her contributions to the shaping of his theory of culture must be acknowledged. They were both commonly engaged in the practice of ethnographic self-fashioning, in which transformative identities (identities-in-transit) negotiate not only the tensions between gender and sexual relations, but also the complexities involved in the construction of modern cultural and ethnic identities.<sup>57</sup> In London, after Robeson performed in a modernized version of Shakespeare's early modern play about a masquerading villain, the theme and practice of masquerade was involved in the construction of many characters in his films. Indeed, Robeson's films of the 1920s-1930s explored and enacted many different modes of performing black masculinity through a type ongoing cultural contestation and negotiation of conflicting subject positions.

His first three films were made in the silent era and therefore the only ones that do not include his memorable singing voice. They are rather obscure cinematic works of art because they were made on the margins of the U.S. and European film industries by independent producers. Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1925) was a cautionary tale about the dangers of pie-in-the-sky religion,

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56 Their bond was stronger in later years, when they united as a family to fight Robeson's public persecution.

57 In *This Mad Masquerade*, Gaylyn Studlar uses the concept of transformative masculinity to describe stardom in the jazz age as a complex process and a performance cycle in which cinematic culture reiterates images or tropes of masquerade, "of game-playing and disguise." Her aim is "to illuminate the process by which a star is embedded in culture," to examine intertextual relationships to reveal "the process of overdetermination" and "sort out the star's connections to other aspects of culture that may not at once be apparent."

and featured Robeson in a double role as both the despicable villain, the Rev. Isaiah Jenkins, and his brother Sylvester, an industrious inventor. This early “race film” offered Robeson a range of performance that was unavailable to black actors within the Hollywood studio system. According to Musser, the Robesons were unhappy with the project and tried to “quietly forget its very existence.” They felt that Micheaux had “exploited their business naiveté, damaged the actor’s image, and harmed his employability.”<sup>58</sup> Attacks by the clergy and unfavorable reviews made matters worse, and many black film-goers thought the film was offensive.<sup>59</sup> The negative feedback surely informed the development of Robeson's political consciousness throughout this period. Kenneth Macpherson's *Borderline* (produced in 1929 and released in 1930) marked the Robesons’ entrée into the modern European art scene as international celebrities and is an emblematic marker of the beginning of a cinematic quest outside the borders of the U.S.

Success on the stage enabled Robeson to develop a deep sense of the redemptive power of tragedy and self-representation, first in the works of Eugene O'Neill, and then most prominently as the “All-American” athlete who became one of the world's most unforgettable Othellos in public memory. Yet the prevailing perception that Robeson's films, taken as a body of work, represent a preeminent example of a great promise that remained unfulfilled.<sup>60</sup> In the United States, the films are a painful reminder that black talent—however remarkable and extraordinary—could be compromised, convoluted, appropriated, and even used contrary to the interests of black people. Many argue that Brutus Jones was the most memorable of Robeson’s screen performances, in Dudley Murphy's 1933 adaptation of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, an early triumph during his so-called “years of promise and achievement.” But even this role has a troubled

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58 On *Body and Soul*, Musser points out that “Robeson’s loss of creative expression and control” was only one reason for the actor’s unhappiness.” Although the film was “arguably the high point of Micheaux’s career,” it was “a disaster” for others involved in the production.

59 Musser “Troubled Relations: Robeson, O’Neill, and Micheaux” 89-91.

60 Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement* (Univ of Massachusetts, 2001).

history, considering the controversial black dialect written by O'Neill in the play's original script.<sup>61</sup>

As Hazel Carby pointed out, the artistic production of black male bodies in the modernist aesthetic tended to evince an “unwillingness to confront contemporary social and political contradictions,” and in particular the case of O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* involved “a displacement of the social and political in favor of a focus on internal anxieties and desires.”<sup>62</sup> Robeson stated:

O'Neill has got what no other playwright has—that is, the true, authentic Negro psychology. He has read the Negro soul, and has felt the Negro's racial tragedy. ... One does not need a long racial memory to lose oneself in such a part. ... As I act, civilization falls away from me. My plight becomes real, the horrors terrible facts. I feel the terror of the slave mart, the degradation of man bought and sold into slavery. Well, I am the son of an emancipated slave and the stories of old father are vivid on the tablets of my memory.<sup>63</sup>

Musser acknowledged that the play resulted in “profitable work opportunities at home and abroad,” but he questioned Robeson's motives in what he deemed to be a Tommish, “egotistic,” and “somewhat simple-minded” endorsement of O'Neill. In his attempt to legitimize the “authenticity” of O'Neill's characterization of “Negro psychology,” Robeson went a step further to personally identify with the most salient thematic elements of the play. In the its tragic symbolism, he was the modernist embodiment of the black experience in the West. Whatever one may think of the depth of the character created by O'Neill (or lack thereof), this episode was indicative of the meaning of slavery in Robeson's world-view and the significant memory work involved in translating black identities and culture into a performance context. With its noted allusions to colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and Caribbean jungle voodoo, the devolution of Jones's identity in the play bears some deep connection to black roots/routes of departure, displacement, and deterritorialization.

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61 John Orlandello, *O'Neill on Film* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982).

62 Carby 77.

63 Musser 94.



To give proper historical weight to Robeson's stage performance of Jones is to recognize that it was not only an important triumph in his stage career, which certainly illuminated the sensibilities of contemporary critics, but it also made possible one of his most complex film roles.<sup>64</sup> Robeson's roots in slavery were a key factor in his "All-American" public image, and in contradistinction to other examples of "transformative masculinity" in the Jazz Age, his early silent film roles were indicative of the limited avenues for black actors on the screen: the "separate" modernism of Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1924), and the European modernism of Kenneth Macpherson's *Borderline* (1930).<sup>65</sup> DuBose Heyward's 1933 film adaptation of *Emperor Jones* is a skillfully "jazzed up," melodramatic adaptation of the stage play, and the range of creativity required of Robeson is apparent in the many costumes he wears throughout (mirrors are a dominant motif in the mise-en-scène). At first, Brutus Jones is a respectable, working-class Pullman Porter who becomes a sharp-dressing, dice-shooting ladies' man when he is out on the town. After he kills his friend Jeff in a knife fight, he then transforms into a convicted murderer in a striped outfit, breaking rocks on a chain gang with a large hammer. He then escapes to become a stevedore on a steam ship, until he jumps off and becomes the island emperor in Garveysque regalia.

Finally, he is reduced to a denuded, dethroned, and repentant creature in the Caribbean jungle—a pre-modern Caliban haunted by spirits and demons. Moreover, Jones was characterized as a "bad Negro," and his plucky rise and spooky decline were in line with the aesthetic sensibilities elicited by O'Neill's original play. Presumably, we might look to the screen version of Brutus Jones for the inspiration behind Robeson's 1934 statement about the difficult process of

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64 In a way, even Musser acknowledges this in his description of Gilpin's role as Emperor: "Jones can be seen as a complex, tragic figure in the tradition of Shakespeare's Macbeth—playing such a role was then a rare opportunity for black performers," 85. See also Robeson's "Reflections on O'Neill's Plays" (1924).

65 See Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade*, on stardom in the jazz age and concept of "transformative masculinity," which she uses "to illuminate the process by which a star is embedded in culture and to discover why this happens," examining intertextual relations to reveal "the process of overdetermination" and "sort out the star's connections to other aspects of culture that may not at once be apparent."

claiming a national identity. In fits and starts he came to realize that, off-screen and in the world outside the theater, there was too much at stake in the formation of a cultural identity to merely engage in an unending chain of whimsical masquerades. But even for Robeson such prized roles were limited in the U.S., and not necessarily in the number offered but more so in terms of spaces where they could be performed. To realize a regular spate of such characters in the U.S. would first require politically conscious writers to conceive them, producers willing to finance risky projects, not to mention the approval of the Production Code Administration, the studios' self-regulatory arm of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America after 1934.

Of course, 1930s audiences also saw Robeson's pictures in order to hear him sing, and as Jones he delivered memorable versions of J. Rosamond Johnson's arrangements of "Let Me Fly" and "Water Boy." A cursory reading of the Robesons' agency in *Show Boat* (1935) provides an example of their attempts to test the limits of cinematic representation in the U.S., and gives us an idea of how they were able to demonstrate modest degrees of artistic and political freedoms. *Show Boat* was the popular Universal Pictures adaptation of the successful Broadway musical, which was ostensibly a romantic melodrama about race, sexuality, and labor relations, but also suffered from Hollywood's conventional codification and displacement of the issues. Again, Eslanda's influence in this project was important, since her involvement in the contract negotiations resulted in one of the Robesons' biggest paydays. After she (unintentionally) secured a financial offer from Universal they could not refuse, they brokered a deal that included the following: fourth place in cast billing; transportation costs for Paul and Essie; the right to make recordings, radio broadcasts, and concert performances in his spare time; and the condition that any location work outside of California required "the approval of Mr. Robeson who has no wish to go to the Southern states."<sup>66</sup> The Robesons had no say about the final cut, but in the Golden Age of the studio system it was rare for any

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<sup>66</sup> He also turned down Walter White's request for him to perform at a concert in Atlanta.

star to exert a considerable measure of creative control over a major film production.<sup>67</sup>

The Robesons were back in England by the time of the film's U.S. premiere, and Paul was the only aspect of the film praised in the press upon its release in the U.K.<sup>68</sup> Of course, Robeson's voice was showcased prominently, and his performance of "Ol' Man River" became a standard hit in the 1930s catalog of popular songs (and to this day it is widely regarded as synonymous with his name). Robeson's decision to change the lyrics from the original plantation melody into a tragic work song (in the tradition of "John Henry") in later years called attention to the creative role of musical performance in the struggle for black liberation. The transformation is another indication of Robeson's increasing awareness and active negotiation of the burden of representation, in a folk music tradition marked by repetition for the sake of preservation.

Robeson is also critically absent in recent studies of circum-Atlantic and diaspora performance practices, in spite of the important lessons his career offers in terms of struggles for agency and the strategic positioning of black masculinity with respect to the culture industries of the U.S. and Europe. While he is occasionally held out as a tragic example for his failures and minor successes in film, the political tensions that arise in the processes of translation, adaptation and the practice of diaspora illustrate the limits of what Brent Hayes Edwards called "vagabond internationalism":

The cultures of black internationalism are formed only within the "paradoxes" [Tyler] Stovall mentions, with the result that—as much as they allow new and unforeseen alliances and interventions on a global stage—they are also characterized by unavoidable misapprehensions and misreadings, persistent blindnesses and solipsisms, self-defeating and abortive collaborations, a failure to translate even a basic grammar of blackness.<sup>69</sup>

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67 Notable exceptions: Chaplin, Mae West, United Artists.

68 Boyle and Bunie 332.

69 Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black* (Harvard University Press, 2003).

In the early 1930s, Robeson embarked upon a journey as a deterritorialized global performer, and detoured through his regretful depictions of African colonial subjects, subaltern agents, and exploited victims of the British empire. The following analysis details the reactionary, derivative, and colonial discourses found in London Films Productions' *Sanders of the River* (1934), first by limning out the literary substantiation of black humanity, the narrative instrumentality of black music, and the containment of threatening forms of black masculinity. Then, I offer a comparative reading of the countercurrents of diaspora film in an oppositional circum-Atlantic framework, demonstrating how Robeson's agency as an instrumental migrant performer functioned to transform the cultural products of the British empire. Finally, the examination concludes by highlighting Robeson's efforts to create a cultural system of diaspora knowledge and modes of production, while striving for a cosmopolitan ideal that could only be realized in full recognition of the rights to freedom and total equality for all human beings.

### **Imperial Masquerade, 1934-1936**

As Donald Bogle keenly noted about Robeson, "audiences of the 1930s, like those of today, went to see his pictures to learn more about the myth and the man, the mask and the mystique."<sup>70</sup> While Robeson's Hollywood films were generally troubled by strategies of displacement and aversion, his work in the U.K. can be divided into two categories: imperial adventure melodramas and exilic/diaspora musicals. For example, one might describe Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* as a Gothic allegory of the post-colonial limit, a play inhabiting the space where black populations are no longer subject to white colonial administrative rule, yet remain economically dependent and perpetually exploited. Likewise, the British production of *Sanders of the River* can be seen as a nostalgic reversion to colonialism at its so-called "peak." In the context of the British film industry, Robeson's displacement and performances in roles adapted from imperial adventure stories were directly related to shifting status of

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70 Bogle 95.

key cultural signifiers, which paradoxically facilitated the deepening of his diaspora consciousness. The British Colonial Film Office aimed to realize uplifting tales about empire's civilizing mission, and in characters like Bosambo in *Sanders of the River* (1934), Umbopa in *King Solomon's Mines*, and John Zinga in *Song of Freedom*, Robeson depicted "Africans" as subaltern agents for that mission. In later years, Robeson regretted the manipulation of his Africanist presence by the imperial regime's production system; and at the same time he grew increasingly disaffected with the Hollywood studio system.<sup>71</sup>

### *Imperial Masculinity and the African Presence*

An industrial analysis of the adaptation of *Sanders of the River* is instructive not only for understanding the development of a genre of empire films, but also for analyzing British colonial film production and exhibition policies, countering the notion that the U.S. had little or no "economic" interest in Africa prior to 1945.<sup>72</sup> Rosaleen Smyth's 1979 study documented this imperial competition, and she argued that,

As Hollywood dominated the commercial film market, so Hollywood (and to a much lesser extent the British commercial film) was seen as a threat to the British imperium because of the unsavoury image of the white race that was being projected.<sup>73</sup>

After the revival of the Tarzan series in 1932, new versions of the Hollywood paradigm appeared in a host of B-grade "jungle melodrama" imitations. The producers of *Sanders of the River* relied on the European interpretive mythology of an earlier generation informed by a more contemporary mode of modernist primitivism: an imperial melodrama confirming the benefits of uplifting "backward

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71 Hazel Carby, *Race Men*; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*.

72 See I. Wallerstein, *Africa and the Modern World* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1986), pp. 77-100.

73 Rosaleen Smyth, "British Colonial Film Policy, 1927-1939" (1979). King George V in 1926 "deplored the showing to 'primitive people...of demoralising films, representing criminal and immodest actions by white men and women...'" "backward races" "in no position to judge between the true and the false"(438). They obviously saw this as an opportunity to take advantage of their apparently faulty faculties.

peoples”—with commercial appeal. On the surface such a project is wholly contradictory to the cultural philosophy of black nationalism, but a closer examination reveals how this controversial film marked both an international success for the British film industry and a major moment of politicization for Paul Robeson and how “race became the necessary ground upon which reflections about masculinity could take place.”<sup>74</sup>

In the years following The Great War, the decline of European colonialism—described as “the twilight of the white races” by French writer Etienne Dennerly in his 1931 book *Asia’s Teeming Millions*—precipitated an increased general public interest in travel writing and the reportage of administrative affairs in the imperial periphery.<sup>75</sup> After a brief career in the British military, Edgar Wallace began his civilian career as a Reuter’s correspondent, and eventually he assumed responsibility for the coverage of the South African Anglo-Boer War for *The Daily Mail*.<sup>76</sup> On a later assignment, Wallace investigated the violent conditions in the Belgian Congo, where he acquired the material for his Sanders stories. He modeled his writing after the imperial adventure literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—writers such as Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard, for whom the peripheries of the British empire provided the ideal settings for melodramatically testing and codifying the European myth of white male dominance. The rhetoric of empire is literally written into film format in *Sanders of the River*, as it features text titles superimposed over stock footage of African settings. This discourse guides the narrative until the film’s climax, when visual spectacles of wilderness and violence predominate the action.

The film opens by acknowledging the “valuable assistance” given by “Government Officials,” followed by the first title’s pronouncement of the heroic glory of the same men: “Sailors, soldiers and merchant- adventurers were the

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74 Carby 68.

75 David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993) 87-91.

76 Wallace’s South African articles for *The Daily Mail* were later published as *Unofficial Dispatches* and his outspoken criticism of Kitchener’s policies resulted in his being banned from such service until the First World War. Wallace died in 1932 on his way to Hollywood to write the script for *King Kong* (ref: *Hollywood Diary*).

pioneers who laid the foundation of the British Empire. To-day their work is carried on by the Civil Servants—Keepers of the King’s Peace.” This tribute is immediately followed by a title establishing the general setting for their civilizing exploits: “AFRICA... Tens of millions of natives under British rule, each tribe with its own chieftain, governed and protected by a handful of white men whose everyday work is an unsung saga of courage and efficiency. One of them was Commissioner Sanders.” A spinning globe that settles with Nigeria in the center of the frame visually complements this declarative focalization, transporting viewers to the territory of District Commissioner Sanders.

Bosambo makes only an occasional appearance in the Sanders stories, as a “cunning,” missionary-schooled, Liberian—an escaped convict masquerading as the Chief of the Ochori tribe in Sanders’ district (in some stories, his “advantage” is merely described as “a Christian education”). As revealed in the story “Bosambo of Monrovia,” Sanders knows Bosambo’s true identity because he has received a notice from the Republic of Liberia: “Liberian Negro, convicted for habitual petty larceny.” Interestingly, Wallace also depicts Sanders as a master of the art of masquerade: he speaks many of the native dialects, implements colonial policies for the district in the guise of “fetishes,” and elects not to hang crafty Bosambo only because he recognizes his value as an instrument of the empire. Bureaucracy and technology are applied in the colonies as forms of “white magic,” and Bosambo understands how it functions because he is able to speak, read, and write in English.<sup>77</sup>

Robeson’s work on *Sanders* provided what he called “one of the most intellectually and emotionally stimulating experiences” of his life, due primarily to his daily contact with Africans on the set. In addition to professional and out-of-work actors, nearly 250 laborers, students, and unemployed drifters of African descent were hired to play extras. Hungarian-born director Zoltan Korda convinced Robeson that the film would be one in which “native” performers are

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<sup>77</sup> Wallace, *Sanders of the River* 30-39. In the story, Sanders must come to Bosambo, who feigns sickness, and upon inspecting his shoulders discovers a “convict brand.”

presented with “dignity,” emphasizing heroic traditions and the strength of tribal institutions. He also convinced his brother Alexander Korda to cast Robeson as Bosambo and to make “compromises” against his pro-imperialist sympathies.<sup>78</sup> Robeson’s interpretation of Bosambo on screen is not as cunning or self-hating as the character in the stories, who is prone to muttering “Damn nigger!” when pestered by the presence of natives of a lower station, and is so mendacious that he openly brags about being “related” to Sanders. Furthermore, although Bosambo expresses his desire “to be a chief under the British” in both story and film, his bowing and scraping before the godlike “Lord Sandi” on the screen is a notable departure from the text. Robeson’s war and praise song sequences are, of course, the most significant intertextual difference between the stories and the film adaptation.

For his part in *Sanders*, Robeson never left the London studios; the filmmakers possessed in his voice a key instrument for the making of a spectacular imperial melodrama—and 60,000 feet of location footage. It was his multiplicity of roles in this film that enabled the processes of political transformation and transculturation, an inherent (though not always intended) consequence of the production of cultures and identities in colonialism.<sup>79</sup> In addition to portraying Bosambo (the fictional character adapted from the Edgar Wallace stories), he was also projecting an image of himself as a black film star, singing his songs (his “style and substance”) before a purportedly “authentic” image of Africans.

Kenneth M. Cameron argued that Robeson was “an unconscious collaborator in the perpetuation of two damaging archetypes, the Imperial Man and the Good African,” a paradoxical doubled identity found in the film’s literary source.<sup>80</sup> As these archetypes appeared in British writer Edgar Wallace’s stories

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78 Boyle and Bunie 292-337.

79 Chrisman writes against Fanon’s stages of ‘native’ intellectual development for Sol Plaatje, nor does she see this as a ‘transculturation’ process (Pratt), rather she argues that Plaatje articulates a “constitutively multiple” nationalism: “its designators, like its constituents, shift.” (17)

80 Kenneth M Cameron, *Africa on Film: Beyond Black and White* (New York: Continuum, 1994). Cameron also notes that Wallace wanted to cast Charles Laughton as a “comic” Bosambo in



of the venerable Commissioner Sanders, the substantiation of black humanity (the Good African) functioned to legitimate the civilizing mission carried out by “the Keepers of the King’s peace” (the Imperial Man). In the film adaptation, the Kordas appropriated Robeson’s voice not only to “translate” the African cultures of the Nigerian Congo for consumption by spectators in British metropolitan centers, but also to carry the Colonial Film Office’s messages of benevolent imperialism throughout the empire, and promote their ultimate aim of subaltern assimilation.

Whereas the sensitive subjects of interracial marriage, rebellion, and death are treated in Wallace’s stories in a predictable, melodramatic manner, there was little room for ambivalence in the film with regard to the colonial predicament.<sup>81</sup> The conflict in the adaptation is reduced to inter-tribal slave raids that must be halted by “Lord Sandi,” lest the natives go into a frenzy and slaughter one another. During a palaver in which the “Old King” Mofolaba voices his notion to use loyal Bosambo’s skin to fashion a drum, Sanders—in his symbolic white suit and pith helmet— threatens in turn to strike down slavers and anyone who harms the white King’s subjects (“so much as a pigeon,” he warns, equating the status of Bosambo, the Chief of the Ochori, with one of His Majesty’s messenger birds).

Korda’s adaptation was an impressive cinematic digest of Wallace’s Sanders series. The screenplay took liberties with some characters like Lt.

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blackface.

<sup>81</sup> Wallace’s Commissioner Sanders stories are episodic, each following a typical pattern of stasis, disruption, and resolution. Conflict is nearly always resolved by the authoritative actions of Sanders and his men, the fatal follies of the natives, or mysterious melodramatic twist in the plot; in any event, order is generally restored in accordance with the imperial order of things. For example, in “The Magic of Fear,” Sanders uses elaborate surveillance techniques and the threat of violence (which he demonstrates by drawing his gun) to establish the trust and authority of the British Crown. Although the story’s gaze is Western and tacitly subjective from Sanders’ vantage, the primary object of his attention (hence the subject of the story) is Agasaka, the Chimbiri woman who “wore no clothes at all except the kilt of dried grass which hung from her beautiful waist.” Sanders is most intrigued by stories of Agasaka’s “strange powers”: “Magic inexplicable, sometimes revolting, was an everyday phenomenon. Some of it was crude hypnotism, but there were higher things beyond his understanding.” In this instance the African persona is a transcultural signifier that registers the existence of a “higher” power “beyond” comprehension or control and levies justice for the good of mankind. More importantly, Sanders is wise enough to recognize and respect the beauty and power possessed by a native woman. Wallace, *Sanders* 1-24.

Tibbetts, who was also known as “Bones” in the stories and was the character that most likely served as an alter ego for Wallace. In the film *Bones* is a minor character, appearing only in slightly comic moments as when Sanders promises upon his arrival that the lieutenant's only decoration will be mosquito bites.<sup>82</sup> In another example, “The Clean Sweeper” is a story featuring Wallace's stock characters: Sanders, Bosambo, Bones, and scattered natives. The narrative also features a stereotypical bagpipe-playing, heavy-drinking Scotsman and a character known only as “Joe the Trader,” who bartered arms and gin for ivory—an offense for which Sanders has flogged and even hanged “white gentlemen.” These figures represent two types of bad white men, who also appear in the film plotting their exploitation of the natives in the absence of Sanders.<sup>83</sup> In both story and film, whenever such weak or villainous white men attempt to outwit Sanders' authority they are expeditiously killed by natives, illustrating the risk of living by “the unwritten laws of the wild.”

#### *Assimilating Black Music into British Imperial Melodrama*

Hollywood inaugurated the all-black musical genre early in the sound film era with *Hallelujah* and *Hearts in Dixie*. The casting of Robeson as Bosambo in *Sanders* intersected the poetics of African/American song with the poetics of imperialist literature, an encounter likely to produce contemporary forms of black nationalism familiar to the emancipation movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., “Ethiopianism”).<sup>84</sup> It did not occur to Robeson that, by the mid-1930s, the British had developed paternalist colonial film industry. Thus, Robeson's contribution to this enterprise was his interpretation of songs based on “authentic” African chants, gathered by Zoltan Korda. In a very cosmopolitan

82 *Bones* is characterized by his playful insolence, and he often witnesses and frankly comments upon the glaring contradictions of the civilizing mission. Marcel Varnel directed *Old Bones of the River* (“an obvious satire of *Sanders of the River*”) in 1938, with Robert Adams starring as Bosambo.

83 Wallace, *Sanders* 25-44. Even Sanders' old paddle-steamer, the trusty *Zaire* (“outdated transport of a generation of Commissioners past”), is introduced as a significant role-player in the film.

84 See Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

moment, Robeson expressed his desire to fulfill both ethnic and professional ambitions by making *Sanders*:

We know something about the rhythm of Negro music, but these records of Korda's have much more melody than I've ever heard come out of Africa. And I think the Americans will be amazed to find how many of their modern dance steps are relics of an African heritage—a pure Charleston, for instance, danced in the heart of the Congo. *It's a great opportunity for me to break new ground in my singing.*<sup>85</sup>

However, the sensationalist publicity for *Sanders* emphasized exoticism and adventure, which incidentally promoted the glory and trials of Bosambo and his romantic interest Lilongo: “The Mad Charge of War Canoes”—“The Capture of Beautiful Slave Girls!”—“The Congo Death Dance!”—“The Black Magic of Witch Doctors!”<sup>86</sup> Bosambo the “bad nigger” of the novel becomes the bourgeois nationalist bachelor in a jungle melodrama, and having the names of Robeson and McKinney on the bill promised a showcase of black musicality.

Black style carries the imperial substance throughout the film's narrative of assimilation; music and dance are the forms most essential for the cinematic apparatus to overcome the colonial problem of linguistic difference.<sup>87</sup> In story form, the narrator informs us that Bosambo has the “advantage” of a missionary education; in the film, we see Bosambo reading messages in English, and we hear him “translate” the meanings of the song and dance rituals performed by the natives. The first images of the natives are presented in an ethnographic documentary style, purported as the everyday activities of tribal villagers in some indistinct “French area” during a dance ritual.

The Ochori tribe in Wallace's stories were presented as ignorant, defenseless children, and the filmmakers give this impression by staging a raid

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85 Quoted in Boyle and Bunie 300 (my emphasis).

86 Boyle and Bunie 321.

87 Chrisman 12: “For colonial administrators, ...the Zulu feature as political threat to the colony Natal, and as potential labourers to be instrumentalized for production.”

on the unsuspecting village. Chief Bosambo receives an official memo from “Sandi,” a set of instructions delivered by carrier pigeons that reads: “*King Mofolaba’s warriors will cross your territory returning from slave raid. Call your warriors and stop them. Keep the women and children...*” The standoff is a setup for Bosambo’s courting of Lilongo (McKinney), one of the captured “slave girls.” They are married as Christians, but he makes a promise to her that he will be a Mohammedan as he delivers the line: “I’m a Christian for Lord Sandi, but for you I shall be of the true faith.” An on-screen title announces a feast and “the traditional nuptial dance of the Ochori,” followed by stock footage of bare-breasted women moving their hips in a snakelike fashion (a shot of McKinney imitating the dance is inserted), accompanied by drumming, singing, and medium shots of a masked man leading children who gyrate their stomachs. While these traditional, ritualistic ceremonies take place, Bosambo gets a marriage license and promises Sanders he will be monogamous with Lilongo.

After three years they have a bounteous harvest and children. Bosambo teaches his little boy a warrior song; when Lilongo enters she attempts to persuade him to move to the coast, but he responds by predicting that doing so would deprive them of a chance to put their son in an English school for chief’s sons, which might also be the chance for the boy to be “king of all these lands” someday. Although Lilongo’s desires seem oddly Western and sophisticated, this is one of many instances in which Bosambo yearns for a postcolonial future free from white authority. He imagines that his child will someday rule when the British leave, and so his duty is to sacrifice his own authority in the present. Indeed, the film posits this future as the prize that Sanders must watch over and protect—for the British Crown.

The “dangerous savage” symbolism was assigned to King Mofolaba’s warriors, whose large, white ostrich feathers were “the terror of the People.” Bosambo’s war song and dance sequence is a convincing setup of Robeson gesturing before a back-projected image of an actual tribal ritual, but he uses violence only to uphold Sandi’s law. These pseudo- documentary sequences

alternate with scenes designed to illustrate the ignorance of the other kings and chiefs, who make only snide, ridiculous comments, in contrast to Bosambo's sensibility and sincerity. Sanders commands them to obey the interim commissioner Ferguson like they are his children, while a missionary encourages the distraught Ferguson to "be quick and strong now like a father with his misguided children—like Mr. Sanders would."

"Sanders life work destroyed in a week," is the assessment made by one of the Houssas, while Sanders is on the coast at Government House. Jazz is playing and people are dancing away their worries, but Sanders is troubled by the prospect of betraying his fiancé, as he is the only hope for the situation back in the jungle (he alone, or four battalions in his place, he is told). Another on-screen title informs us: "The fighting regiments—made bold by the news of Sanders' death—whip themselves to frenzy by the fearsome Lion Dance." Low angle shots of faces chanting and feet marching are intercut with shots of the regiment leader cheering and gesturing before the lines of warriors, who then run toward the camera into off-screen space.

The most seamless and impressive of all scenes in the film is the lullaby sequence, in which Nina Mae McKinney sings "My Little Black Dove." Studio shots of McKinney singing to children alternate with nighttime shots of natives sleeping before a fire—again infantilizing the Africans as innocent primitives unaware of the ostrich feathers lurking in the dark. Thus, the king's warriors club and kill sleeping guards then kidnap Lilongo as bait for the "leopard's trap" (for Bosambo, who wears a leopard's skin). Here, characterization and focalization in the empire film genre transforms the experience of transculturation in popular media beyond the capacities of its literary equivalent. As is shown above, Robeson's interpretation of Bosambo is not the same cunning character found in Wallace's stories, but in both cases Africans in Nigeria are depicted as godless creatures, illogical children, and warring beasts. He is an instrumental vessel in the service of empire. Although he is introduced in the film as a crafty and cruel civilizing agent, Bosambo's function—after admitting that he has falsely

presented himself—is to report information about the movement of warriors from the old king’s country, and battle them when necessary. His deceitful masquerade ends and he is rewarded with happiness until Sanders leaves for the coast en route to his marriage.

“Lord Sandi’s” return flight to the Congo jungle is the most spectacular sequence in the entire film, featuring aerial shots from a low-flying propeller biplane as it soars among large birds and over massive animals on land and in water. Awestruck natives look up in wonder at the sky; both animals and people fear his return. Sanders chides the tribal kings and chiefs (one of whom is played by Jomo Kenyatta) for their “shameful” behavior, buying arms and gin from bad whites and disturbing the King’s peace. After the paternal tongue-lashing, Bosambo and Sanders speak of marriage and children, then Sanders excuses himself from the company of Tibbetts due to the delirious effects he’s suffering from some jungle sickness, possibly malaria. For additional melodramatic effect, Robeson again sings the song praising Sanders, this time in front of back-projected images of warriors chanting and paddling the “war canoes” down a river. Upon his return home Bosambo realizes Lilongo is missing, so he delivers his children to Sanders with a message authorizing the Government to raise and educate his children if he does not return from his dangerous mission to save her.

As Boyle and Bunie rightly note, “the character he portrays is more British than he is African.” “He understands British colonialism, but rather than fight it he chooses to adapt himself to it, manipulate it, and make it work to his advantage.”<sup>88</sup> He understands colonialism and British-ness because he understands Sanders. The power (“white magic”) that Sanders possesses is his embodiment of the British rule of law, recognition, and violence. When he leaves his dominion, the land is lawless. When he returns, the message is spread by

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88 Boyle and Bunie 323-7. An “imperial” performance, indeed: “Leslie Banks’s rave notices almost all commented on Robeson’s ‘outstanding,’ ‘authoritative,’ ‘impressive’ acting performance; his ‘magnificent physique and terrific voice,’ his Adonis-like presence, his ‘splendour of stature and bearing which transforms the spirit of the jungle into majesty.’”

native drummers, spliced with shots of wild animals and other natives climbing trees and dancing, and this time subtitles are used to “translate” what the drums are saying: “Sandi-is-not-dead. The-law-is-back-on-the-river.”

When Sanders’ fever breaks, sentimentalism for the white Lord is replaced by again by fear. For the real hero in this film is Sanders, as Bosambo failed to evade the trap that has been set by his rival. As the “Congo death dance” reaches its frenzied climax, Sanders fulfills his prophecy in the nick of time: the masked dancer and the knife-wielding assassin are shot by riflemen, and innocent bystanders are slaughtered by machine-guns on Lord Sandi’s boat, fired by black soldiers with white bosses over their shoulders. Bosambo not only survives, but is also allowed to be a “King,” as he has learned the “secret of the British”: “the King ought not to be feared but loved by his people.” Sanders’ telling reply is “keep peace in my kingdom.”

The reactionary logic of this narrative naturalizes the order of law and humanity such that black subjects of the British empire must ultimately defer to white, male, Christian authority, for their own good and survival, even within their colonized homelands. The reconciliation of this nostalgic vision of a developing African civilization under British rule is finally symbolized by a gentlemanly handshake (the subject of a contentious debate between the Kordas), and the voice of a deterritorialized American leading a work song praising “Lord Sandi”:

Sandi the strong, Sandi the wise—  
righter of wrong, hater of lies.  
Laughed as he fought, worked as he played;  
as he has taught, let it be made.  
Away you go, yeh-ge-deh,  
and make it so, yeh-ge-deh.  
Together all, the patterns fall into mankind.  
For light is the burden of labor,  
when each bends his back with his neighbor;  
so each for all, we stand or fall,  
and all for each until we reach the journey’s end.

Lyrically fettered as it is to the tenets of imperial authority characterized by “Lord

Sandi,” and metaphorically constrained as he is by the master/slave hierarchy maintained by that authority, Bosambo’s praise song for the Commissioner can additionally be interpreted in the literal sense as a work song proclaiming the communalism of labor solidarity (“each for all”), and in the anagogical sense as an African-inspired chant willing forth a subaltern agency oriented toward a future world of peace and harmony (“make it so, yeh-ge-deh”). This irony is highlighted because in the years to follow the making of *Sanders*, Robeson’s identification with colonized Africa intensified, and the more he learned about the psychic violence native Africans experienced, the more he was inspired to offer his voice in the effort to slip the yoke of imperialism.

### *Reception, Transculturation, and Creative Agency*

When the film was released in the U.S. in 1936, Andre Sennwald of the *New York Times* wrote: “Paul Robeson sings several English arrangements of native war songs, which are stimulating to hear but a decided hindrance to his portrayal of the savage Bosambo. Similarly, Nina Mae McKinney is likely to impress you more as a Harlem night-club entertainer than a savage jungle beauty.”<sup>89</sup> Judging the melodramatic idealization of Bosambo’s and Lilongo’s romance in *Sanders* by a standard of fidelity to the stories would be to miss the point that the successful assimilation of the couple is merely a modernization of the myth of the civilizing mission’s effectiveness. And in comparison with U.S. racial representations of the time McKinney’s Lilongo is a more “respectable” role than her character in *Hallelujah*, but her fate is still bound by the actions of the heroic male lead: on one hand she is literally the native wife who completes Bosambo’s Christianization; on the other hand she is metaphorically the mother of a nation of civilized blacks that has not yet arrived, but could be raised to maturity if guided by the King’s principles of governance. In Robeson’s *Bosambo*, a heroic adventure takes an ambiguous turn as his romance is superseded by the discursive economy of Anglo-Christian dominance. This

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89 Andre Sennwald, *The New York Times*.



critical analysis demonstrates that a cultural politics was at work in aesthetic judgment processes on both the individual and national levels. For Sennwald, Robeson's and McKinney's art is judged not for its lack of authenticity or coherence with African artifact; the songs are a "hindrance" to what the American reviewer conceives to be a more "authentic," savage African-ness.

Robeson biographers Boyle and Bunie note that *Sanders* was recognized by the British as the first major success of what Jeffrey Richards called the "empire film" genre:

Empire films were the British version of the American western and the Japanese samurai films—celebrations of patriotism and myths of national identity that took the historical realities of British expansionism, colonization, and commerce and transformed them into the drama of high-minded heroes acting in the name of royal prerogatives to defend culture against anarchy: in short, the white man's burden.<sup>90</sup>

Bosambo's idealization as the noble savage is also akin to the "good" native and black characters found in American expansionist mythology. As David Spurr wrote, "[idealization] conceives an idea of the Other that is readily incorporated into the fabric of Western values," generally as a subordinate ally or formidable enemy, but never an equal.<sup>91</sup> The "bad African" King Mofolaba dies, while Bosambo is reconciled because of his successful assimilation of native African culture into the British imperial order.

The exhibition of "authentic" African dances and rituals was a major selling point for the film, and these images dominate the *mise-en-scène*, albeit within "a paradigm that is Western in outlook and sympathy."<sup>92</sup> To Sennwald, Korda's decision to include "authentic locales" and a "tribal atmosphere" suffered from "overproduction," and was the main factor for "his inability to blend his materials into the kind of driving melodrama which admirers of the original stories automatically expect to find." The "great power" of the stories were somehow

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90 Boyle and Bunie 323.

91 Spurr 125-140.

92 Boyle and Bunie.

vitiating by “overemphasizing its purely atmospheric elements.”<sup>93</sup> This suggests not only that the naturalist, ethnographic footage cut the melodramatic excess anticipated by general audiences, but also that the critic's aesthetic sensibilities were affected by the picture's added elements of racial romanticism; the charge of “overproduction” suggests over-adaptation and perhaps over-identification. To Sennwald, the primitive characters from Wallace's fiction were presented in too stylized a manner to be acceptable as realistic “savages.”<sup>94</sup>

In London, The Commissioner for Nigeria protested that *Sanders of the River* “brought disgrace and disrepute to his country.”<sup>95</sup> In silent protest, Robeson refused to perform at the film's premiere and turned down subsequent offers to work for the Korda brothers. In his 1958 memoir Robeson wrote: “I used to do my part and go away feeling satisfied, thinking everything was okay. Well, it wasn't. Things were twisted and changed—distorted. It made me more conscious, politically.”<sup>96</sup> According to his granddaughter Susan Robeson, he “was so disillusioned with the film that he attempted, unsuccessfully, to buy the rights and all the prints, to prevent its distribution.” He could not buy it back because it was such a hit, so instead he increased his involvement in future productions.<sup>97</sup>

In a December 1934 meeting of the League of Coloured People in London, Robeson described himself as “a Negro wandering through the world,” in an attempt to allay the fears of anyone in the audience that they might be “de-Africanized” by exposure to other cultures. He advised them to “take what was best from other cultures and mold it to their own needs.” Robeson had gained a sense of solidarity in opposition to racial subjugation and imperial domination, an effect of undergoing a period of transculturation. But his own idealization of

93 Cameron refers to the location sequences and scenes with Nina Mae McKinney as “Zoltan's mostly visual riposte to his brother's pro-white, pro-British drum-beating.”

94 For a reviewer writing in the English *Reynold's Newspaper*: “Sanders represented a departure, ‘a dramatic film with a “documentary” authority—an illuminating study of a primitive civilization with full-blooded adventure to provide the maximum emotional thrill.’” Boyle and Bunie 322.

95 Cameron, *Africa on Film*.

96 Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Beacon Press, 1988).

97 Susan Robeson, *The Whole World in His Hands: A Pictorial History of Paul Robeson* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1981).

African identity was nomadic, and inextricably bound to a romantic sense of placelessness: “I want to be where I can be African and not have to be Mr. Paul Robeson every hour of the day.”<sup>98</sup> On his first visit to Soviet Union for the 1935 New Year, he exclaimed to a reporter for the *Daily Worker*, “I feel at home.” He had encountered Nazi storm troopers while traveling through Berlin with the writer (and future biographer) Marie Seton. Seton would later relate a telling anecdote about Robeson’s encounter with children in the USSR, and his amazement that they had “never been told to fear black men.”<sup>99</sup> He was only beginning to fully understand how that fear was culturally transmitted in different geographic contexts.

Robeson (like most people of his generation, arguably) was gaining a critical awareness of the uses of film as propaganda, but throughout his transculturation process it became increasingly evident that he understood the significance of source material for films adapted from literary works. He favored stories that allowed him to enact his own conditions of displacement, in the psychiatric sense. His characters tended to express some uncanny shift of emotions, affect, or desires away from the status quo to a more acceptable or immediate situation. In addition to empire films, other popular genres of 1930s literary adaptations included historical fiction and hagiographic, fictionalized memoir-films. For example, in Hammer Films' *Song of Freedom* (1935), Robeson played John Zinga, a lonely black man in a British world, with only his faithful wife Ruth and his comic sidekick Monty to keep him company. Directed by J. Elder Wills, *Song of Freedom* was intended to be an uplifting fantasy of African repatriation.<sup>100</sup> A long montage sequence features Robeson singing a song called “Stepping Stones,” and it ends with Zinga performing as a black emperor on stage—a scene that simultaneously referenced Robeson's celebrity status and foreshadowed the plot's resolution. John’s gifted voice is “discovered”

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98 Boyle and Bunie 300.

99 Boyle and Bunie 310. Compare with Fanon’s scenario of the white child’s encounter with a black man in France (“the fact of blackness”).

100 See also *Men of Two Worlds* (1946).

by an eccentric opera composer, Sir James Pirie, a self-described “explorer” (and “somewhat an anthropologist”) who connects Zinga's “king’s song” and medallion keepsake to the African island of Casanga. The medallion of Zinga is one of the island's symbols of kingship, a memento of the man who surrendered himself and his partner to slave traders. In the sacred song of freedom, there is a deeper, unconscious connection between black music and the burden of representation.

John is described as a descendant of the “backward, uncivilized, impoverished” people of Casanga, a tragic place “still dominated by witch doctors” and a despot queen. The all-purpose performer Ecce Homo Toto played Mandingo, the queen's intermediary who gets Zinga to make promises (“Heaven knows they need someone to help them in their ignorance”), but also teaches him to respect the island's traditions. Zinga's collective unconscious, blood ties and knowledge of Western science save many lives in the end, including his own. The film concludes with Zinga singing the theme song “Lonely Road” at the Crown and Anchor (“I just keep tramp-, tramp-, trampin’...”), offering the Robeson-esque sentiment that he is only visiting from his African homeland: “it’s my home; it’s where we come from...the people we belong to. I always feel...out of place.”

This ham-handed, anecdotal treatment is a remarkable contrast to *King Solomon’s Mines* (1936), in which Robeson played Umbopa, a usurping agent for capitalist adventurers in South Africa. Umbopa's hidden agenda is to help the whites gain access to the diamond mines as part of his plan to overthrow the witch doctor and become the rightful ruler of the people (because of his royal blood). In *Rereading the Imperial Romance* (2000), Laura Chrisman described the rhetorical strategies underlying discourses of race and gender in the imperial adventure narratives of Haggard:

The imperial romance form assumed a particular prominence during Britain’s political and economic expansion in Southern Africa. ... Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* [like Conrad’s

*Nostramo*] also evinces a complicated mystificatory/demystificatory approach to capitalist accumulation, a subtlety in its techniques of 'staging' oppositions between values in order to contain them, resentment, a subtle deployment of ontological discourse to fix racially divided categories of political authority, and an equally underhand rhetorical technique to affirm strictures against inter-racial sex.<sup>101</sup>

Chrisman concluded that Haggard rewrote "Zulus as victims, not agents, of history," in a rhetorical gesture that reaffirmed the value of the colonialist project in the midst of an impending crisis of authority.<sup>102</sup>

Similarly, both Wallace's stories and Korda's films sought to portray the empire builders as the embodiment "of the most noble traits in the English character and spirit," while forms of African humanity symbolically functioned as either subversive agents or surrogate enablers of the civilizing mission. However, Korda's adaptation took notable liberties in bringing Wallace's characters to the screen, most significantly transforming the charming but brutally efficient Sanders into a more benevolent figure.<sup>103</sup> For Umbopa, assisting the Europeans came at a price, but black mineworkers were conspicuously absent from *King Solomon's Mines*, even as the imperial thirst for African labor and resources was plainly depicted. Again, as in *Sanders*, the "Good African" colonial subject was set against the backward, evil witch doctor, who mercilessly ruled an infantile black populace, whose ignorance in turn makes them susceptible to all forms of domination and exploitation. In the end, Western "white magic" (a calendar and almanac) saved the day, and in melodramatic fashion everyone's wishes were fulfilled.

Upon rejecting the imperial adventure stories, Robeson collaborated on leftist projects with Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein and the Caribbean-born

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101Chrisman 6.

102Spurr 109-124.

103Boyle and Bunie 297. Andre Sennwald of the *New York Times* wrote: "He was, you may remember, a merciless administrator who controlled a quarter of a million warring cannibals in the interior jungles of the British protectorate by flogging miscreants, sending them down the river in irons, or hanging them to convenient trees."

writer C.L.R. James.<sup>104</sup> After the London production of the American agit-prop play *Stevedore* in 1935, producer Van Gysegham said, “Paul was hardly a political radical then. ... [H]is focus was still almost exclusively on his art and improving himself professionally.”<sup>105</sup> In 1975, C.L.R. James stated that Robeson’s relationship with anti-colonial activists “centered primarily around his own interest in African culture and languages—and not on African political issues.”<sup>106</sup> When he addressed the West African student union and the India League, “he never really understood Britain’s imperialism.”<sup>107</sup> If 1936 was the significant year for Robeson’s break from an imperial mode of production, then the films he made in the following years show this to be an important period of transition into an interstitial mode of production.

### **Tensions of Diaspora, 1937-1939**

Critical resistance to the construction of Paul Robeson as Other—especially as a colonized subject and subaltern agent of British colonialism (the “substance” or content of the Bosambo and Umbopa characters)—is what obscures not only the evaluation of his performance style, but also the influence on his practices of self-fashioning and self-writing. In 1936, Ben Davis, Jr., put Robeson on the spot: “You became the tool of British imperialism...”<sup>108</sup> Robeson’s reply was appropriately sincere:

You’re right and I think all the attacks against me and the film were correct. I was roped into the picture because I wanted to portray the culture of the African people in which I have the greatest interest. I wanted to show that while the imperialists contend that Africans are ‘barbarians and uncivilized,’ that they have a culture all their own and that they have as much intelligence as any other

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104Boyle and Bunie 319: “Ironically, it was just as Robeson’s interest in the Soviet Union was beginning to blossom that disillusioned anti-imperialists [like George Padmore] one by one permanently parted ways with Moscow.” Robeson primarily identified himself as “anti-Fascist,” and therefore overlooked Europe’s history of colonialism in hopes that the USSR’s alliance with the West might bring about not only the end of fascism but imperialism as well.

105Boyle and Bunie 329-330.

106Boyle and Bunie 320.

107Boyle and Bunie 299.

108Cameron *Africa on Film*.

people.<sup>109</sup>

In the January 1937 edition of *The Black Man*, Marcus Garvey claimed that the only Africans who supported Robeson's films were “young men who have not yet started to think in the highest sense of racial integrity and pride.” He continued, “Paul Robeson ought to realise that the growing prejudice against Negroes in England, or Great Britain for that matter, is due largely to the peculiar impression moving picture fans obtain from seeing such pictures.”<sup>110</sup>

Politically, Robeson was “between camps” in the mid-1930s, but later in 1937 he made his famous declaration—“the artist must choose sides”—marking the end of a period of dissemblance. This was a bold statement of political commitment at a time when the stakes were high, as he already knew from experience. By abandoning the imperial style as a response to criticism, and by focusing more on the narrative content and structure of his films, Robeson not only increased his own political awareness, but also forged paths to the emergence of alternative, oppositional typologies. As Martin Duberman keenly observed:

In the early thirties, Robeson tilted toward a strong racial identification congenial to the theory of cultural pluralism. ... [Later], he would tilt more toward identification with the superseding claims of revolutionary internationalism. ... For most of his life, he managed to hold in balance a simultaneous commitment to the values...of cultural distinctiveness and international unity.<sup>111</sup>

Thus, it was precisely his insistence on following the divergent paths of global cultures that led to the predicament of the British colonial films of the 1930s. Robeson's work for the British empire was paradoxical because that experience enabled him to better understand the workings of colonialism, its culture

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109Boyle and Bunie 325. CLR James: “When Paul said he did not know that scenes had been added to the movie, initially the West Indians and Africans did not believe him. ... But even those most opposed to the film did not come down too hard on Paul because he had done so much that was positive before Sanders.”

110Boyle and Bunie 325.

111Duberman, *Paul Robeson* 111.

industries and ministries, and to witness the primacy of propaganda in the maintenance of imperialist regimes. It is with this understanding that this period of awakening—from a prominent black celebrity to a committed cross-cultural activist (the so-called “years of hope and promise”)—can be linked to a concurrent series of diaspora identities: the model modernist Negro, the African masquerader, the socialist crusader. Robeson was at the forefront of a black diaspora renaissance, which made him a lightning rod for tensions regarding the social formation of a trans-Atlantic cultural identity. The circumstances of exile and responses to critical reception conditioned Robeson to exert greater levels of creative autonomy and political agency (diaspora practices), and the interstitial mode of production enabled Robeson and his audiences to identify (or “take sides”) with the subject positions of the “African” characters he portrayed.

*Out of “This Man’s Army”: Jericho and Nomadic Black Subjectivity*

Set during World War I in 1917, *Jericho* (aka *Dark Sands*, 1937) is colonial adventure produced in Egypt and the UK, and filmed in Cairo, London, and Paris. Described as “a cross between *Emperor Jones* and *Othello*,” *Jericho* is actually more of a modern non-tragedy, since its denouement and resolution are antithetical to *Emperor Jones*. *Jericho* Jackson is a former medical student, now serving as a corporal in a segregated unit of the American Expeditionary Forces. Structurally, the film can be roughly divided into five parts: 1) in the US Army, where is wrongfully accused of murder; 2) escape by sea, where he befriends a white American soldier; 3) on land, troubadours with a strong man show; 4) documenting the Great Salt Caravan, which is inter-cut with 5) the Captain’s quest. This African-inspired adventure film radically re-figured the performance of black masculinity in cinema, and launched the mid-century black hero film cycle.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>Boyle and Bunie 369-371. Directed by Thornton Freeland, Produced by Walter Futter (directed and produced documentary *Africa Speaks* in 1930). Written by George Barraud, Walter Futter (story), Robert N. Lee, Peter Ruric (adaptation). songs by Michael Carr, Jimmy Kennedy. Caravan footage captured by African explorer T.A. Glover.



A typical tone was set in the opening scene of *Jericho*, in which soldiers are depicted as “children.” In an effort to save a group of soldiers trapped during a torpedo attack, Corporal Jackson accidentally kills his commanding officer in self-defense. The incident on the ship recalls *Emperor Jones*, in which Jones kills a rival in a knife fight over a dice game. In this case, however, it is a struggle for power within the ranks of the black soldiers. Notably, this heroic act is presented in direct contrast to a cowardly character (played by Robeson's long-time friend and collaborator Laurence Brown) who takes his own life by jumping ship during the battle. At his court martial, one of Jackson's fellow soldiers makes an ignorant statement on the witness stand and he is found guilty of “two of the most heinous offenses known in the Army”: disobedience of orders and striking a superior officer. Captain Mack's (Henry Wilcoxon) judgment of *Jericho*'s character, and his astute rationalization of his actions are dismissed as biased “opinions,” and appeals for clemency have no effect. *Jericho* is sentenced to death.

On Christmas night, Jackson convinces the Captain to let him see the show that the black soldiers organized for the company, using the pretense of wanting to sing with his fellow men. While the soldiers sing Stephen Foster's “Ol' Kentucky Home,” one says to another about Jackson's death sentence: “They can do anything in this man's Army.” Jackson begins to plot his escape, claiming that he wanted to use his hands “to heal, not to kill.” The entertainment is interrupted by a sermon on “a serious note”—the American mission “to free the world from tyranny”—relating the story of the Three Wise Men to their own “gigantic crusade.” In one soldier's words, the Great War was being fought “to prevent truth and justice from being driven from this earth.” Confronted by this contradiction, Jackson flees with ease to a French port city, robs a local man of his clothing, and masquerades as “Anatole France,” leading the incompetent military police to mistake him for “one of those African froggies.”

On his escape ship, Jackson encounters and befriends the lost, slumbering soldier Mike Clancy (Wallace Ford). When they discover land and are finally free

from military structure and authority, Jackson convinces Clancy to desert the Army and join his quest for “truth and righteousness.” They masquerade for a while as a traveling show with Jackson as the strong man and Clancy as a barker, until Jackson meets the Tuareg Princess Gara (Princess Kouka of the Sudan), and his medicinal wisdom (Western science) saves her father’s life. His interpersonal tact (desire to heal), instead of his partner’s “business” sense, also wins him a wife as well as a place in Tuareg society.<sup>113</sup>

### *Music, Memory, and Documentary Evidence*

Highlighting black advances in diplomacy, military service, and medicine, *Jericho* centered its narrative on the subject of a black U.S. soldier in exile. Upon Jackson's escape, the Captain is accused of collusion, convicted in court-martial, and sentenced to five years in military prison at Leavenworth. Convinced that Jackson betrayed his trust, upon his release the disgraced Captain vows to devote his life to hunting him down and bringing him to justice (“I’m gonna get that man if it takes me the rest of my life!”). In an extended montage sequence, his intercontinental manhunt leads him to London, where the detective-Captain goes to the movies, as if to take his mind off his relentless search. He watches an ethnographic documentary on the Great Salt Caravan of the Tuareg tribes. However, rather than focusing specifically on the customs and practices of native Africans, the film includes a self-reflexive narrative about a black American in exile, with his comic, white “everyman” sidekick.

The English documentary film crew was on a “safari adventure,” documenting an inter-tribal conflict in the desert that served as an ethnographic report to audiences in the British empire's metropolitan center. The details of

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<sup>113</sup>The Tuareg people are predominantly nomadic people of the Sahara desert, mostly in a large part in southern Algeria and circled through central Mali, Burkina Faso, the very northern tip of Benin, Nigeria and half of Niger. The Tuareg are often referred to as "Blue Men of the desert" - because their robes are dyed indigo blue. They live in small tribes with between 30 and 100 family members and keep camels, goats, cattle and chicken which graze the land. a proud race of people, famous for their participation in trans-Saharan trade in salt and dates, fighting abilities, and artwork. Tuareg history begins in northern Africa where their presence was recorded by Herodotus.

Jackson's American past is not an issue; his ambiguous identity remains a mystery, and he is merely referred to as “the giant Negro” in the documentary. The filmmakers reveal to Captain Mack that Jackson has become a great leader among the Tuareg, uniting the tribes to stage an ambush for marauding Moroccan bandits. His American sidekick dies in a tragicomic fashion episode of the battle sequence, severing Jackson's last living link to his homeland.

The benevolence of the British film crew is established when they include a scene of themselves presenting the gift of a gramophone to Jackson. When the gramophone plays a jazzy recording of Jericho's theme song, “My Way,” it reminds him of home and his recently departed sidekick (“*Brother, are you walking my way?*”), and it inspires Jackson to wander away from the camp to a sand dune to sing a solo in the night. The song he sings is a reworking of the spiritual “Deep River,” written in the 1910s by Harry Thacker Burleigh (1866-1949):

Deep River, my home is over Jordan,  
Deep River, Lord,  
I want to cross over into campground.  
Oh don't you want to go  
To that gospel feast,  
That promised land  
Where all is peace.

In Robeson's celebrated concerts comprised of Negro spirituals, “Deep River” was a standard song in his repertoire. In *Jericho*, his performance of “Deep Desert” is a nostalgic moment that did not necessarily express a desire to return to the U.S., but rather suggested his determination to remain in Africa. Whereas “Deep River” espouses a desire to achieve a spiritual connection to a peaceful homeland (in biblical terms, ancient Israel—the “promised land”), in the “dark sands” of the Sahara we hear Jackson's yearning for “a new world” with “silent spaces.” The “giant Negro” speaks of deserts, not rivers:

Deep Desert,

Into your heart I'm drifting,  
Dark clouds are slowly lifting.  
I see a brighter dawn.  
Deep Desert,  
Heavy with care you found me,  
Now you put arms around me—  
Making me part of you.  
*I'm finding a new world  
Far from my native land.  
I buried my old world  
In your shifting sands.*  
Deep Desert,  
Now I know where my place is—  
In your silent spaces.  
*This is my home,*  
Deep Desert!

This is a significant moment in the film, as a diaspora cultural consciousness takes shape due to Jericho Jackson's curious displacement, leading to the story's intriguing and unusual resolution. Shrouded in the “shifting sands” of the desert, and expressing an ambiguous relationship to his “native land,” Jericho is fettered neither by military authority nor an oppressive, racially segregated social structure. He is free to sing his songs and live his way. This is also a significant turning point for Robeson, since the cultural politics of screen segregation led him abroad in search of opportunities for more dignified film work.<sup>114</sup> By this time he was approaching the peak of his relatively brief film career. The film remarkably reflects the historical moment of 1937, a crossroads where the past was buried but not forgotten by African American veterans of The Great War, nor by black intellectuals like Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois. Many blacks volunteered to fight and give aid in the Spanish Civil War at this time, carrying the historical burden of representing the memory of black soldiers and citizens in their native land by serving abroad in the so-called “Abraham Lincoln brigades.” From this point forward Robeson took steadfast positions on international political issues, and frequently changed his song lyrics to deliver

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<sup>114</sup>“Racial” tolerance required the maintenance of a fixed, segregated subjectivity and the containment of nomadic tendencies in radical minor art forms.

poignant critiques of injustice around the world.

Mark A. Reid wrote that *Song of Freedom* and *Jericho* similarly “speak not to Africa but to the dilemma of its diasporic people in the Americas and Europe.”<sup>115</sup> Both films constructed black cultural identity as an idealized image of the Western-educated intellectual whose pan-African ideals advance the British colonial project. Both John Zinga and Jericho Jackson were morally righteous and ethical characters, but they were also victims of circumstance and the targets of opportunistic agents of the military and the underworld. They were both fortunate sons and soldiers, who miraculously escaped harm and managed to discover incredibly plucky paths to happy endings. But in the case of *Jericho* (the nomadic soldier), the narrative's allegorical depiction of the African American experience critically invoked the historical memory of The Great War.

*Jericho*'s tribe is willing to defend him when the Captain arrives, a hint of anti-colonial resistance that denies the legitimacy of imperial encroachment into tribal affairs. By allowing him to escape, *Jericho* returns a favor to the Captain, and his own burden is lifted. Robeson favored this dramatic ending to the original, in which *Jericho* leaves with the Captain but the plane crashes and he sacrifices his own life to save the Captain's. In addition to resembling Brutus Jones in the desert, the role of *Jericho* Jackson has affinities with the Othello trope—at once a soldier-hero and eternal outsider, but the film connotes the trope in a more universal, humanistic manner. In *Jericho*, “Othello” (Jackson) and “Iago” (Captain) reconcile their differences in the desert instead of embarking on a delusional murder spree, as the British attempted to maintain imperial dominance in the inter-war period.

Robeson told one reporter, “It’s the best part I’ve ever had for a picture,” and it deepened his interest in “cinema as a vehicle for his voice.”<sup>116</sup> This perspective seems to counter Cripps's assertion that by this time “Robeson was forty and defeated, it seemed, not by racism, but by contrivance, bad melodrama,

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<sup>115</sup>Mark A. Reid, “Race, Working-Class Consciousness, and Dreaming in Africa” (1998) 174.  
<sup>116</sup> Duberman 208-210.

and low grosses.”<sup>117</sup> As usual, the reviews were mixed. The *London Times* regretted that Robeson agreed to “assume one of the most ridiculous masquerades and indulge in...the most ludicrous dramatics to be seen this side of ‘The Sheik.’”<sup>118</sup> Rather than merely asserting that individuals have certain powers over institutional forces, Reid rightly argued that Robeson’s dilemma was “consistent with the systemic nature of any mass-marketed form of entertainment.”<sup>119</sup>

Not unlike the character Jericho Jackson, Robeson exhibited few signs of homesickness or a longing for American popular culture during the film’s production. The role enabled Robeson to move away from “servile childishness,” if only to “simplistic nobility.” On a trip to the Great Pyramid of Giza, Henry Wilcoxon encouraged Robeson to try singing in the Pharaoh’s chamber, the geometric center of the pyramid. The echo was described as “incredible”—like a chord from a great organ—and then “without any cue” Robeson sang “O’Isis and Osiris” from Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. Paul Robeson, Jr., claimed that his father “made a connection with African antiquity via the music of the greatest European composer.”<sup>120</sup> Robeson and his co-stars (Wilcoxon and Ford) were all moved to tears. Upon his return to London from Cairo, Robeson performed in a concert at Victoria Palace to aid homeless women and children in Spain, and contributed to Max Yergan’s newly formed International Committee on African Affairs.

### Conclusion

Robeson’s heroes in *Big Fella*, *Jericho*, and *Proud Valley* provide a trio of black characters on three different continents who fit the generic mold of Hollywood’s heroes of the same period, but since these were international productions it is easy for critics to discount them and conclude that he failed to challenge or upset the racial norms for U.S. cinema.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, this reading

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117Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* 319.

118Quoted in Boyle and Bunie 371.

119Reid, “Race, Working-Class Consciousness, and Dreaming in Africa” 166.

120 Liner notes, *The Odyssey of Paul Robeson*. “Mammy’s little baby” was Paul, Jr.’s favorite.

121Colin Shindler, *Hollywood in Crisis: Cinema and American Society, 1929-1939* (London:

provides a paradigmatic model for delineating the central role played by the development of international black cultural politics and the shifting value of racial signifiers in the field of visual representation. In their attempts to realize a cosmopolitan ideal in modernist film experiments, 1930 cultural producers sought mass appeal via Robeson's stardom. But in the same way that *Jericho* can be read as a re-imagining of *Emperor Jones*, *Proud Valley* (1939) can be seen as an anecdotal reworking of *Song of Freedom*, replacing the African returner with the romantic black laborer. In rethinking the narrative and repositioning the black subject, these films effectively re-negotiate the politics, but clearly they cannot undo or recall the dissemination of the effects of the earlier works.

Inasmuch as he was able to transcend Hollywood's racial morality in the 1930s, Robeson's global vision of cosmopolitan solidarity thoughtfully (if not always successfully) negotiated the limits of cinematic representation. It was a matter of course for those in his generation to experience the tensions and strife of defining a community (however imaginary) of diverse peoples according to certain images of black masculinity. As significant changes in American culture brought about by the civil rights movement would demonstrate, Robeson was a forerunner best remembered by successive generations for his acts of defiance. Because his most notable film roles did not depict the defiant Paul Robeson, all too often they are misinterpreted or uncritically written off as missed opportunities to achieve his great cinematic potential.

Thus, we must ask whether it is necessary to conclude that Robeson either failed to reproduce on U.S. screens the same type of success he had on stage (with culture imported from the U.K.), or whether he self-destructed within the racially restricted confines of the Hollywood studio system. What does it matter that Robeson opted to withhold his labor from Hollywood studio productions? Why was this boycott tactic effective for integrating American theaters but not American screens? After all, if American theaters refused to allow integrated audiences, then Robeson would never have appeared on stage as Othello.

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Routledge, 1996).

These questions will be addressed more thoroughly in Chapters 3 and 4, but I raise them here to call attention to the general tendency to place the burden of representation on the individual actor, which is a fallacy since most films (especially before World War II) were cultural products that resulted from the work of many minds. The following chapters call attention to the cultural producers—both those from Hollywood studios and those at its margins, their politics, representational practices, and efforts to effect or react to the changing mores of American society.

The “tragedy of Robeson,” Harold Cruse lamented, is that he subordinated his career to “leftwing politics,” but the primary motivation and specific details of Robeson's political engagement (anti-racist, anti-imperialistic) seemed not to matter in Cruse's analysis. He refused to look beyond Robeson's socialist alliances as the over-determining influence in all of his personal and professional affairs. “Robeson's real struggle for cultural identity,” Cruse continued, “belonged in the United States—not with British intellectuals in London's exclusive salons.” He deemed Robeson guilty of “interracial collaboration,” and that he was “in many ways the most ethnically unstable, or the most aracial of all Negro artists.”<sup>122</sup> As early as 1919, when he was honored as an All-American athlete and Phi Beta Kappa student, Robeson was clear about his mission to perform cultural work for the “preservation” and “transmission” of his heritage. London was not only the place where he continued to pursue to this duty in earnest, but it also afforded spaces where his world-view and interests—socially, politically, culturally—broadened and became more deeply rooted. Even in its most contradictory moments, Robeson's quest for cultural identity in cinema presents us with many dimensions of black masculinity as a symbol or marker of difference, yet throughout this process he consistently maintained a commitment to the memory work of connecting to a collective past. Thus, the project of constructing and maintaining dominant conceptions of black masculinity became more problematic when prominent citizens of color departed from the nation's

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<sup>122</sup>Cruse 295.



borders and its ideological mainstream. This phenomenon was commonly seen in the cases of radical black intellectuals, soldiers, sailors, entertainers, and athletes. Robeson was so maligned in the early years of the Cold War because of his activism against U.S. imperialism and unapologetic support of Pan-African liberation, causes that aligned him with the interests of the Soviet Union and put him at odds with the isolationist perspective of many Americans, black and white.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

## CHAPTER 3

### Race, War and Cinema: The Cross-Cultural Frontiers of Documentary Representation

I have done the state some service.  
...Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice.

*Othello*, Act V. Scene ii.

#### Introduction: Myth, Propaganda and the Global Vision of Cultural Struggle

In his September 25, 1942, *New York Times* review of *Tales of Manhattan* (1942), Bosley Crowther related that for months the wires out of Hollywood had been “buzzing excitedly” about “a bold and amazing new picture which would break away from standard movie forms.” The all-star cast featured over twenty actors and actresses, and the episodic plot was centered not around a particular character or protagonist, but rather a wardrobe piece—a traveling gentleman's dress coat. An omnibus of five stories penned by over ten screenwriters (most notably, Academy Award winner Ben Hecht), the film managed to achieve “an impressive effect” despite its loose structure and lack of a sustained central idea, Crowther observed.<sup>124</sup>

Paul Robeson was conspicuously absent from Crowther's film review, but this was somewhat understandable for the time given the fact that the names billed above Robeson's were familiar and beloved Hollywood icons: Charles Boyer, Rita Hayworth, Ginger Rogers, Henry Fonda, Charles Laughton, and Edward G. Robinson. *Tales of Manhattan* was Robeson's first feature film

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<sup>124</sup>Bosley Crowther, “Tales of Manhattan,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1942.

appearance since his return to the United States from more than a decade of exile in Europe. The film was a quintessential example of Hollywood's sentimental, post-Depression, war-ready esprit de corps. Directed by French filmmaker Julien Duvivier, the series of episodes follows the coat as it links together disparate characters across class and color lines—from a matinee idol (Boyer), to a pianist (Laughton), to a bum (Robinson), then to a bandit (Fonda), and finally, filled with money, “as manna from heaven among some Southern Negroes,” as Crowther described it.

For Crowther, this last episode—essentially an epilogue to “four Gotham tales”—seemed “strangely remote” from those that preceded it, yet overall the film managed “to convey a gentle, detached comprehension of the irony and pity of life,” and “expressed a reflection upon the insignificance of superficialities and the humbleness of mankind.” This begs the question of whether the filmmakers could have elicited the same detachment and humility by setting the final segment in the streets of Harlem rather than on a Southern plantation. The intrigue of the coat's eventual destination ceased to be “a teaser for sustaining suspense” for Crowther when it crossed the cinematic Mason-Dixon line. The remoteness of the plantation coda kept in line with the segregated aesthetics of the Hollywood studios' Production Code. While African American stars were cast in the same film, the episodic structure ensured that they did not share screen space with their white counterparts. Even the film critic excluded them from his critical purview; in addition to Robeson, the other black film stars who Crowther mentioned only as “Southern Negroes” included Ethel Waters, Eddie (Rochester) Anderson, Clarence Muse, and the Hall Johnson Choir. For contemporary African American audiences, the outmoded style and open ending of the closing sequence left much to be desired. They might have wondered: Who would don the dress coat next—Robeson, or some representative of the next generation of black performers? And to what purpose?

Robeson was so disappointed with *Tales of Manhattan* that he vowed to join any picket lines that formed in New York to protest the film. He held a press

conference in San Francisco on September 22, and announced his refusal to make another Hollywood movie until the industry offered better roles for black actors.

I thought I could change the picture as we went along, and I did make some headway. But in the end it turned out to be the same old thing--the Negro solving his problem by singing his way to glory. This is very offensive to my people. It makes the Negro child-like and innocent and is in the old plantation tradition. But Hollywood says you can't make the Negro in any other role because it won't be box office in the South. The South wants its Negroes in the old style.<sup>125</sup>

Film historian Thomas Cripps noted that *Tales of Manhattan* was one of a number of World War II era releases that anticipated and shaped the 1950s “message movie” genre, which will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. These modern allegories of race and gender display American anxieties about identity and difference.<sup>126</sup> Most of the major films analyzed in this study are variants of the “social problem” films made by Hollywood studios and independent producers for international markets. Many are melodramatic adaptations of contemporary popular fiction that exhibited signs, in both style and subject matter, of what Toni Morrison labeled “American Africanism”—“a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American.” Morrison’s critical insight on racial ideologies in the American literary imagination is equally profound when applied to the study of the performance of black masculinity in documentary cinema, to limn out the contradictions in modern critical discourses of race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>127</sup> Questions of adaptation, authorship, and cross-cultural performance are also considered in this project, as ways of analyzing active modes of participation by performers in the production process.

This chapter addresses questions of authorship and the aesthetics of

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125“Hollywood's 'Old Plantation Tradition' Is 'Offensive to My People',” *New York Times*, September 24, 1942.

126Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (Oxford University Press, 1993) 64-101.

127Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Vintage, 1993).

documentary realism, specifically by contrasting Robeson's involvement with two documentary film projects: *Africa Sings* (1937, also known in alternate versions by the titles *My Song Goes Forth* and *Africa Looks Up*) and *Native Land* (1942). It frames the cultural legacy of Robeson's documentary performances within the context of racial identity politics in the global arena between 1936 and 1948. It also examines different modes of representing transnational cultural politics leading into World War II and during the early years of the Cold War, recognizing the economic consequences of labor discrimination in the film industry and the harmful social effects of physical and psychological domination. Throughout the mid-century period Robeson remained deeply engaged in cosmopolitan practices of political brinkmanship, ethnographic self-fashioning, and cultural diplomacy. Robeson's cultural struggle demonstrated the potential for individual success and social change on a global scale, and inspired future generations of black performers.

My analysis is guided by the moral critique of contemporary black intellectuals, and retraces Robeson's shift into an oppositional mode of production and the collective work of agitation propaganda. Released in May 1942, just months before *Tales of Manhattan*, the Frontier Films production *Native Land* was directed by Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand. A realist docudrama about domestic labor struggles, Robeson participated the Popular Front film as the narrator of an explicitly anti-fascist script that was radical in wartime but not widely seen. In his *New York Times* review, Crowther declared that *Native Land* was "one of the most powerful and disturbing documentary films ever made."<sup>128</sup> Considering questions of genre in documentary forms, I aim to establish the historical contexts and the inter-textual relationships between the films and their producers, which carried intersecting but sometimes contradictory truth discourses. As historical documents of struggles over competing ideologies of mid-century power/knowledge, how did these images and texts engage questions of national identity, citizenship claims, colonial subjection, and the

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<sup>128</sup>Bosley Crowther, "Native Land," *New York Times*, May 12, 1942.

social effects of corporal control, psychological domination, and racial discrimination?

In the progressive moment of pre-war U.S. culture and black consciousness, popular morality was shaped and defined by issues such as slavery and Jim Crow. In their daily lives, African Americans in the early twentieth century were confronted with the pity and terror associated with tragic experience. In the South, Jim Crow edicts structured their reality, their perception of the world, and penetrated their psyches as they strove to achieve in a society that offered limited opportunity and little protection, and failed to recognize their historical contributions to the making of the nation.

As the production of independently financed “race films” declined, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) staged boycotts and pickets of offensive films, while lobbying studios to change the prevailing racial economy of cultural production. As African Americans migrated to the nation's urban centers, representational practices shifted from scenes of subjection to scenes of inter-subjectivity: black bodies which had been forcibly removed from Africa to be exploited for slave labor were primarily depicted as degenerate stereotypes in nineteenth century minstrel shows. Black folk life was then commonly seen in images of agricultural laborers in the rural, post-emancipation South, but minstrel stereotypes persisted and the lack of economic opportunities during the Depression made the outlook bleak for African Americans. Wave after wave of unwelcome and under-reported incidents of anti-democratic political persecution ran concurrently with radical black protest literature, which led to a major cultural shift during World War II. Throughout the mid-twentieth century millions of African Americans migrated out of the South in hopes of finding work in the urban settings of the industrial North.

Rayford Logan can be credited for his participation in desegregation efforts on many fronts: as public speaker, as chairman of the Committee for the Participation of Negroes in the National Defense Program, and most notably as

the editor of the classic and controversial volume *What the Negro Wants* (1944).<sup>129</sup> This collection of essays by some of the era's most prominent black intellectuals, both liberal and conservative, was originally published by the University of North Carolina Press. In the publisher's introduction, W.T. Couch opened with a caveat:

This book was written at the request of the Press. The idea back of the request was that the country, and particularly the South, ought to know what the Negro wants, and that statements from leading Negroes might throw some light on this question. ... How far the book succeeds in carrying out the basic idea and achieving reasonableness, the reader may judge for himself.<sup>130</sup>

As the publisher, Couch remained somewhat unconvinced but cordially hopeful:

While I disagree with the editor and most of the contributors on basic problems, there is much in the present book with which I have to agree. It is unnecessary for me to go into this here in greater detail. I hope there is something beyond my opinions, and the opinions here expressed, to which all of us recognize allegiance. In our devotion to this, in our efforts to discover what it is, I would like to believe we are as one.<sup>131</sup>

In his introduction to the 1969 reprint of *What the Negro Wants*, Logan—then Professor Emeritus of History at Howard University—related the story behind the publisher's lack of enthusiasm. As Director of the UNC Press, Couch believed that the final manuscript was “not publishable,” and only agreed to honor the contract under the condition that the publisher's introduction would be included. Logan lamented that Couch's introduction failed to offer any points of agreement, despite the “virtual unanimity of the fourteen contributors in wanting equal rights for Negroes.” According to Logan, he and Couch agreed on the “equal representation of left-wing, moderate, and right-wing points of view,” yet almost all the essays—written by W. E. B. Du Bois, Doxey A. Wilkerson (“left-wing”), Logan, Charles H. Wesley, Roy Wilkins (“liberal”), Mary McLeod Bethune,

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129Rayford Whittingham Logan, ed., *What the Negro Wants* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

130Logan ix.

131Logan xxiii.

and Frederick D. Patterson (“conservative”), among others—explicitly called for freedom, first-class citizenship, full equality, and unalienable rights for African Americans. Black intellectuals and the black press encouraged the government to direct wartime propaganda at black audiences, but they also demanded to be given the power to control the image and representation of black soldiers.

“Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists,” Du Bois proclaimed in “Criteria of Negro Art.” “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.” Du Bois decried “the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world.” He complained that even white artists suffered from the “narrowing of their field,” citing the case of writer DuBose Heyward, author of *Porgy* (1925): “The only chance he had to tell the truth of pitiful human degradation was to tell it of colored people.”<sup>132</sup> “Our worst side has been so shamelessly emphasized,” Du Bois continued, “that we are denying we have or ever had a worst side.” “We must come to a place where the work of art when it appears is reviewed and acclaimed by our own free and unfettered judgment.” Du Bois looked forward to the day when “the art of the black folk compels recognition,” and black artists would “let the world discover ... that their art is as new as it is old and as old as new.”<sup>133</sup>

In a pair of 1934 editorials in *The Crisis*, Du Bois responded to critics who interpreted his attitude toward segregation as “a counsel of despair.” To the contrary, he asserted that African Americans had an obligation to fight and raise “children who are proud to fight and who know what they are fighting about”—that is, “the uplift and development of the Negro race.” “They are not fighting to escape themselves,” he wrote. “They are fighting to say to the world: the

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132W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” *The Crisis*, October 1926.

133On art, propaganda, and the double standard for moral concerns, Du Bois compared two plays in New York: “In ‘White Cargo’ there is a fallen woman. She is black. In ‘Congo’ the fallen woman is white. In ‘White Cargo’ the black woman goes down further and further and in ‘Congo’ the white woman begins with degradation but in the end is one of the angels of the Lord.”



opportunity of knowing Negroes is worth so much to us and is so appreciated, that we want you to know them too.” Du Bois acknowledged that ignorance was still a major issue among African Americans, but he also felt that the most disconcerting aspect of U.S. racism was that “white people on the whole are just as much opposed to Negroes of education and culture, as to any other kind, and perhaps more so.” “We are segregated. We are cast back upon ourselves, to an Island Within: 'To your tents, Oh Israel!' ... We have got to stop this and learn that on such a program they cannot build manhood. No, by God, stand erect in a mud-puddle and tell the white world to go to hell, rather than lick boots in a parlor.” Du Bois's remedy proscribed a vibrant protest culture, but protest alone was not enough; he also directed readers to “go to work,” by preparing “methods and institutions” which would provide opportunities that were denied because of segregation, and staging boycotts in order to gain jobs in “stores which exploit Negro neighborhoods.”<sup>134</sup>

Du Bois originally published his “New Creed for American Negroes” in 1935, but it was republished five years later in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), which he intended to be read as “the autobiography of a concept of race, elucidated, magnified and doubtless distorted in the thoughts and deeds which were mine.” In the reorganization of the U.S. economy and its industries, Du Bois laid out an eleven-point “Basic American Negro Creed (BANC),” which strove for: “unity of racial effort” for “self-defense and self-expression”; repudiation of “all artificial and hate-engendering deification of race separation”; leadership from the “Talented Tenth” to find work, join unions, and take action in the labor movement; a “cooperative Negro industrial system”; the “dynamic discipline of soul and sacrifice of comfort”; a “real path to economic justice and world peace.” Du Bois was criticized by his integrationist colleagues in the NAACP, which led to his departure from the organization. But such a “program of racial effort,” Du Bois insisted, was forced upon African Americans “by the unyielding determination of the white race to

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134W. E. B. Du Bois, “Postscript,” *The Crisis*, April and June 1934.

enslave, exploit, and insult Negroes.”<sup>135</sup>

Paul Rotha identified four varieties of documentary production: naturalist, newsreel, propaganda, and continental realism. This chapter closely examines documentary films that demonstrate how these categories sometimes overlapped and enhanced the ideological viewpoints of propaganda by using the dramatization techniques of Hollywood filmmakers. In the years since the wartime surge of propaganda produced by the Axis and the Allies, historians have come to appreciate the power of documentary evidence and the role of global media in shaping our perceptions of reality. By locating the paradigms and contexts for the invocation of minority voices in these mid-century texts, we can better understand how discourses of race and national identity were informed by the concurrent aesthetics of “realism,” modernism, and socialist humanism, all of which were influenced by the contingencies of state propaganda. New versions of old stereotypes persisted into the postwar period, and black performers like Paul Robeson wrestled with the burden of representation. In general, documentary film producers attempted to adjust their practices—with widely varying degrees of success and failure—to address particular political concerns according to the structure of feeling in a given period.<sup>136</sup>

As Daniel Kryder observed, World War II both energized and undermined the progressive advancement of black civil rights.<sup>137</sup> After appearing in *Tales of Manhattan* in 1942, Robeson bid farewell to the Hollywood industry and directly confronted the 1940s state apparatus. Robeson is often mentioned as a blacklisted actor during the anti-Communist “Red Scare” of the 1940s and 1950s, but he ostensibly opted out of the Hollywood studio system by the time he and the “Hollywood Ten” endured their public trial before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC).<sup>138</sup> Just as he refused to perform concerts or

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135W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Harcourt, Brace & co., 1940).

136Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 75-141.

137Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State During World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

138Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (Viking Press, 1980).

plays in segregated theaters, he also refused to work in a segregated film industry. Racist beliefs and values were reinforced by restrictive studio protocols like the Production Code of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). In 1940s Hollywood, a one-man strike was not necessarily an effective political strategy, so rather than perceiving Robeson's significant impact in American cinema, his absence from movie screens made it easy for scholars and critics to diminish his cultural work and political activities in that period. Undoubtedly, the "European approach" to the social problem of race (as opposed to the separatist policies of the U.S. and South Africa, for example) had great appeal for Robeson and other black intellectuals who were hampered and harassed by reactionary political forces and government agencies throughout the mid-century period.<sup>139</sup>

### **Cultural Identity, Documentary Images, and the Burden of Representation**

To better understand the aims of wartime politics and propaganda, it helps to reflect momentarily on domestic race relations in the early 1940s. As Colin Shindler observed, the influence of institutions such as the Legion of Decency and the Production Code Administration "resulted in the imposition of such rigid requirements on film-makers that they were effectively debarred from dealing with the realities of national experience."<sup>140</sup> Under such circumstances, "objective reality" was not always as it appeared to be on screen, so I want to frame the cultural legacy of Robeson's Othello performance within the context of transnational politics and documentary practices in the mid-century period. The following analysis calls attention to the burden of representation for black cultural producers, and the problem of representing black images in documentary formats. The films considered below raised questions regarding the possibility of meeting the demands of African colonial subjects and minorities in the U.S. for citizenship and equality, and offered differing outlooks in each sociopolitical

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<sup>139</sup>Karl Evanzz, "Black Hollywood and the FBI," *Black Film Review* (1985): 16-19.

<sup>140</sup>Colin Shindler, *Hollywood in Crisis: Cinema and American Society, 1929-1939* (London: Routledge, 1996).

context.

The November 22, 1943 issue of *Life* magazine featured a series of five photographs of Paul Robeson and the cast of the Theatre Guild production of William Shakespeare's *Othello, The Moor of Venice* (taken by Herbert Gehr). It had a triumphant debut on Broadway, and for *Life's* editors that performance vaunted a reading that was "very nearly perfect," in part because the production finally fulfilled "Shakespeare's intention that the part be played by a Negro." Of course, this assumption about the Bard's original intent flies in the face of the play's original production in 1604—not to mention a lengthy history of critically acclaimed performances by actors of many hues, but the hyperbole was warranted because on opening night Robeson received "one of the most prolonged and wildest ovations in the history of New York theater." As such, there was no questioning the idea that this event was legitimate material for the pages of *Life*, which on a weekly basis sought to define the modern era in pictures and news stories. The popular periodical's founding editor, Henry R. Luce (with his colleagues at Time Inc.), utilized the portability of the 35mm camera to create one of the most important publications in the development of the field of photojournalism. In the premiere issue of November 1936, Luce summarized the mission of *Life* magazine:

To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things—machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man's work—his paintings, towers and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women men love and many children; to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed...<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup>Excerpt from <http://www.life.com>, Time Inc., 2002 (my emphasis). Ironically, *Time* magazine would report in 1951 on the acquittal of photographer Herbert Gehr for killing his wife, who attempted to catch him in the act of adultery so that she could establish grounds for divorce. Gehr (age 40) was inside the house with another man's wife, when his own wife (31) attempted the raid (with two private investigators) and was shot between the eyes by his .22 rifle. Said one indignant juror: "Mrs. Andrea Gehr was a martyr to this antiquated law [New York state divorce court] which places evidence-gathering in the hands of professional snoopers, and in this case led to a dreadful tragedy." See "The Law That Killed," *Time*, January 29, 1951.

The *Othello* report featured Robeson and other cast members in dramatic poses, portraying key scenes from the play's tragic ending. The five black-and-white photographs were a “spoiler” set for anyone unfamiliar with Shakespeare's tragedy, since the three death scenes were depicted with the following captions: “Othello strangles Desdemona (Uta Hagen)...”; “Emilia (Margaret Webster, who also directed this production), Desdemona's maid and Iago's wife, is dying after having been stabbed by her treacherous husband”; “Having stabbed himself mortally, Othello pulls himself up on the edge of the bed on which Desdemona's body lies.” In just three pages (accompanied by four page-length advertisements), *Life* magazine delivered Shakespearean tragedy to the World War II masses for ten cents on the dollar.<sup>142</sup>

Outside of his politics and singing, Robeson is probably best remembered for his performances as Othello, and the images from the Broadway production in the 1943 *Life* magazine photo session are still reproduced for publication to this day. Of the two photos that were not death scenes, one featured Robeson delivering Othello's soliloquy before he strangles Desdemona, in which he announces his menacing thoughts: “It is the cause, yet I'll not shed her blood, nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow...” Of course, those familiar with the play knew that Othello's jealous rage was induced and well-fed by Iago's murderous machinations.<sup>143</sup> Shakespeare's central dilemma in *Othello* deals with the fine line between truth and deception, which Iago whimsically draws and mischievously crosses throughout the play. On one hand, the audience must question Iago's authority as a speaker (his position with respect to particular characters in a scene, his perspective on the stakes involved in any given situation); on the other hand, the audience has the power to think or act on knowledge gleaned from the play's situations (interpretation), while Othello trusts

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<sup>142</sup>“Robeson in 'Othello',” *LIFE*, November 22, 1943.

<sup>143</sup>Othello to Iago: “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore! / Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof...”; and then: “Make me to see't; or at the least so prove it / That the probation bear no hinge nor loop / To hang a doubt on—or woe upon thy life!”

his fellow soldier (whom he calls “honest Iago”) more than his wife, unable to recognize his true enemy until Emilia reveals the deception.<sup>144</sup>

Robeson's performance as Othello on Broadway was “news,” to be sure, but the subject matter of Shakespeare's great tragedy was not considered suitable for American cinema. By 1943, Robeson had completed the bulk of his film career, and he could not have foreseen the coming HUAC trials, blacklisting, revocation of his passport, and paranoia of the postwar era. Confronted with the global vision of black cultural achievements and political aspirations of the 1920s and 1930s, American cultural producers were disinclined to adapt Shakespeare's Euro-centric text as a trope. The “irrepressible optimism” of most Hollywood themes during the Great Depression and the policies of the major studios into the 1950s precluded the possibility of realizing this tragic black hero on the screen.

This was the second time the magazine editors reported on Robeson performing as Othello, but apparently the Broadway production did not warrant an occasion to place his visage on the coveted *Life* cover page.<sup>145</sup> It should come as no surprise that this particular issue's cover featured the iconic headshot of an American G.I., identified only as “Foot Soldier” (*Fig. 3*) in battle fatigues and a tilted, unstrapped helmet; subjects unrelated to the war effort (fashion, stage and screen, labor and leisure on the home front, politics, art) appeared only occasionally on *Life's* covers after the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>146</sup> Even in the “Foot Soldier” issue such mundane stories were

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144The remaining photograph features the moment when Othello stops the soldiers about to take him into custody. He realizes that he has been duped into his jealousy of Desdemona and murdered her under false suspicions. His final request: “When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate. Nor set down in malice. Then must you speak of one that lov'd not wisely but too well...” His last words are addressed to Desdemona: “I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.” In one of Shakespeare's most famous dramatic exits, Othello attempts to exert some level of self-control over the representation of his heroic life, and to demonstrate that he (not Iago or the state) retains the ultimate power over his tragic death. But the story of an incident at Aleppo is most curious. Is this a reference to some military episode in Othello's mysterious past? What affinities does he share with the “malignant,” “turbaned Turk” who “Beat a Venetian and traduced the state”?

145“LIFE Goes to a Performance of Othello,” *LIFE*, August 31, 1942. See also film review “Robeson in 'King Solomon's Mines',” *LIFE*, August 30, 1937.

146The “foot soldier” on the cover is identified in the masthead as Sgt. Estel Able of Owensboro, KY, recipient of the Silver Star in Tunisia that spring.

given ample space, but the cover image was selected to correlate with the Editorial report of a recent meeting between war correspondents and General Dwight Eisenhower, commander of the United States and British forces in the Mediterranean region.

The Editorial opened by addressing what it deemed to be a common misconception about the ways in which modern warfare was waged. It stated that although “World War II began as a war of machines,” the efficiency and savagery of a “mechanized war”—already realized in the bloody trenches of the first World War—meant that new infantry tactics were developed and implemented on the battlefields of Europe, Africa, and Asia. The editors opined: “In their fascination with the strange and wonderful machines of war, most people forgot that the great battles of World War II have been won by the foot soldier.” The infantries of the Axis powers attested to this observation in the Germans’ “blitz tactics” and the “jungle warfare” strategies of the Japanese; while the Russian Red Army fought the “German machines to a standstill” for the Allies. Speaking “from the heart,” General Eisenhower proclaimed that “the foot-slogging soldier...doesn't get his full credit in the minds of our people at home to which he is entitled.”

“General Ike” (known by “his close friends” as “Ikeus Africanus”) continued: “it's pretty hard to carry into the battle a realization that you are fighting for the Four Freedoms, and for the right of your son to live and be educated the way you lived and were educated.”<sup>147</sup> He told the war correspondents to visit a front line hospital in order to see the casualties and better appreciate the soldiers' sacrifice:

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<sup>147</sup>The nickname “Ikeus Africanus” is most likely a reference to Scipio Africanus (236-183 BC), the Roman general who defeated Hannibal in the Second Punic War. On a related note, Joannes Leo Africanus was the Latin name given to Al Hassan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Fassi (c. 1494 - c. 1554), who was born in Granada and later captured and sold into slavery by European pirates. He was baptized and freed by Pope Leo X, who asked him to write a survey of the African continent, *Cosmographia & Geographia de Affrica* (English title *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained*). Many scholars believe that Leo Africanus served as a model for William Shakespeare's character Othello. See Tom Verde, “A Man of Two Worlds,” *Saudi Aramco World* 59, no. 1 (February 2008): 2-9.

See those men coming in there, freshly wounded, and see the courage exhibited by the Anglo-American in conditions of rain, mud, dust and heat—and I think that the overall story, the mass of those soldiers, is something that we could do well to glorify a bit... We realize it in our own consciousness, but the postman in Abilene, Kansas, or in some little village in England, does he realize just exactly what these people are doing, how they are performing?<sup>148</sup>

It may seem dubious to suggest that the General's reference to “Anglo-American” soldiers was intended as a snub to black soldiers (in most cases, it was probably interpreted to mean the British and American allied forces), but it is not very difficult to imagine some African American service members fighting at the front and their families at home feeling slighted upon reading the statement.

To the magazine's credit, *Life* regularly featured stories pertaining to black issues across the nation (e.g., blacks in the military, black entertainers, struggles over discrimination in the workplace and at the polls), and two of its 1937 covers featured black subjects—however stereotypically framed: a Harlem street shower in July; a watermelon harvest in August.<sup>149</sup> By 1943, black soldiers had been serving and sacrificing for their elusive “Four Freedoms” since the Revolutionary War, and their stories (and routine denials by a racist white majority) related to the everyday lives of African Americans in ways that celebrity athletes and entertainers did not, and to this day soldiers remain America's most prominent black heroes.<sup>150</sup>

Neither is it difficult to see why *Life's* editors decided against using even Shakespearean images of murder and suicide on the cover of an internationally circulated magazine of photojournalism, especially during wartime. Robeson never served in the U.S. military, but his Othello was the only black soldier

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148*LIFE*, November 22, 1943, 32.

149Earlier that month, the magazine ran a story about a “Negro Soldier Chorus in London,” *LIFE*, November 8, 1943. Other early African American stories in *Life*: “Army: Negro Division,” *LIFE*, August 9, 1943; “U. S. Negro Troops Are Based in Liberia / War Manpower Commission Integrates Civilian and Military Manpower,” *LIFE*, December 21, 1942; “Negroes at War,” *LIFE*, June 15, 1942; “Negro Pilots Get Wings at Tuskegee Institute,” *LIFE*, March 23, 1942; “*LIFE* Goes on a Weekend Leave with a Negro Private from Fort Bragg,” *LIFE*, August 11, 1941.

150Prior to the November 2008 U.S. Presidential election, at least.



(fictional or not) to appear in this particular issue of *Life*. Neither Robeson nor any black foot soldiers or officers ever appeared on the magazine's cover during WWII.<sup>151</sup> Beginning with its second issue in 1936, *Life's* covers throughout this period featured military men and women of many nations, along with their “flying machines” and seafaring ships; their artillery, bombs, torpedoes, amphibious tanks and land-roving jeeps; even soldiers' art, fashion, balloons, parachutes and lonely wives.<sup>152</sup>

The fact that no black soldier (not even Othello) appeared on the cover of *Life* in its first thirty years spoke volumes to what E. Franklin Frazier called “a campaign of disparagement of the Negro soldier”—which began in the Civil War and lasted well beyond World War II; this campaign extended its reach into the mainstream of American popular culture.<sup>153</sup> Racial discrimination and the limits of what was considered representable in national distribution chains and media outlets drove blacks in the U.S. to establish their own social institutions as a means of expression, communication, and celebration, as well as a way of deriving a certain sense of “wish-fulfillment.”<sup>154</sup> Out of a desire for respectable self-representation came niche media products like Bob Johnson's *Ebony* magazine in 1945, which unmistakably imitated *Life's* design and format; but as Langston Hughes wrote, *Ebony's* covers “presented pulchritude par excellence”

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151Other than Robeson, the only black images to appear in this issue are: Special Prosecutor A.F. Adderley (“top Negro attorney”) and the officers of the court in Nassau, Bahamas (35); and a two-color ad for Aunt Jemima Ready-Mix (“When meat's scarce, or you're running short of brown ration coupons...” 76).

152Some *Life* military covers before Pearl Harbor: West Point cadet (11/30/36) [3]; Japanese general (2/15/37); Japanese soldier (12/6/37); German bugler (3/28/38); Chinese soldier (5/16/38); Czech general (5/30/38); Prussian in Hungary (9/12/38); Czech soldier (10/3/38); Air cadet flight training (1/30/39); France No. 1 soldier (2/20/39); Japanese home guard (7/10/39); Mussolini (9/11/39); British soldier (9/18/39); British general (9/25/39); Canadian general (12/18/39); French sentry (3/11/40); RAF gunner (5/6/40); French general (5/20/40); German Nazi soldier (5/27/40); Emperor Hirohito (6/10/40); Italian army chief (6/24/40); Navy admiral (7/8/40); US tank commander (7/22/40); US army parachutist (8/19/40) [2]; US Navy sailor (10/28/40); Greek soldier (12/16/40); British desert fighters (12/30/40); US ski trooper (1/20/41); German Nazi Goebbels and Goering (2/3/41); US cavalryman (4/21/41); Army nurse (5/26/41); British sailor (6/16/41); General Patton (7/7/41); British women at war (8/4/41); US marine (8/18/41); Air-raid spotter [female] (10/27/41); General MacArthur (12/8/41). Last war-related cover: “US Navy Returns Home” (11/5/45).

153See “Arlington Receives a Murdered Hero,” *LIFE*, June 28, 1963, on burial of Medgar Evers.

154Edward Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (Simon & Schuster, 1997) 130-149, 174-194.

("racial as well as interracial").<sup>155</sup>

Black soldiers who demanded full citizenship status played a large part in the mid-century struggle for civil rights and transformation of U.S. national identity, raising deep questions regarding the foundational role of race in the nation's history, its myths of national origin, and its defense of the rights of all citizens. Since the Civil War, black soldiers were assigned a false reputation for malingering, low morale, desertion, and dissociation. Such exaggerations and fabrications were especially gross because they failed to account for the racially motivated slurs, attacks, and torture endured by so many black men who enlisted in the armed forces. While on one hand fighting and risking one's life for the sake of the nation was the one of the most effective ways for citizens to prove their fitness for equal protection and fair treatment, on the other hand there was always a great uneasiness regarding the cultural expression of black freedom and sexuality, which circumscribed representations of black masculinity.<sup>156</sup>

Although there were only a few black soldiers in *Life* magazine and on American movie screens, their performance and representation were important subjects of national discourse before, during, and after World War II. Recalling parts of Henry Luce's mission for *Life* magazine ("to see man's work...and be instructed") from the preceding example it is clear that we cannot read documentary images alone as historical evidence. Documentary representation is not enough without reference and inference, and in the absence of diverse voices and subject positions in the mainstream media, we must look beyond the economic imperatives of Hollywood studios and the political objectives of the state apparatus for deeper levels of inter-subjective, cross-cultural understanding. In the 1940s, the struggle for democracy in Europe was implicitly linked to the fight for civil rights in the U.S., and the recognition of black military

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155Langston Hughes, "EBONY's Nativity," *EBONY*, November 1965.

156See Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Da Capo Press, 2001), Gail Lumet Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm* (Random House, Inc., 2002), and Kai Wright, *Soldiers of Freedom: An Illustrated History of African Americans in the Armed Forces* (Black Dog Publishing, 2002).

service attained a special significance for the leaders of the burgeoning movement via the “Double-V” campaign: “Victory at home, Victory abroad.” Reading cinematic representation within the greater historical context of WWII, one can better understand the ways in which black cultural producers contributed to a wide range of narrative discourses, and thus participated in the shaping of new political realities.

Luce's mission for *Life* also provides a basis for questioning the aesthetics of documentary realism and the burden of representation. For African Americans, this often entailed negotiating the desire to perform and present a certain idea or image of black masculinity that could be simultaneously accepted as respectable by bourgeois black communities and perceived as representable to America's white mainstream. John Grierson defined documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality.” A narrow definition of “documentary” can be limited to the historical reality unfolding before the camera lens, but we must think in broader terms because images can always be manipulated or (re)arranged in order to distort reality for ulterior purposes.<sup>157</sup> Leni Riefenstahl has received much critical attention for staging Nazi Party parades in *Triumph of the Will*, but regardless of the artificiality of the events she documented, the historical effect of the imagery remains the same—it was an impressive and terrifying display of fascist power. The cinematic record of Jesse Owens' victories during the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin is available thanks to German cameras and the footage captured by Riefenstahl in *Olympia* (1938), a film commissioned by the International Olympic Committee, in spite of the fact that Adolf Hitler refused to bear witness to African American athletic achievement.

Documentary evidence gave German Max Schmeling, former world heavyweight boxing champion, a technological advantage over rising African American star Joe Louis, the “Brown Bomber.” The German fighter watched hours of film footage to deconstruct the American's techniques and discovered a

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157 Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005).

major flaw in his style. After his first loss to Schmeling at Yankee Stadium in 1936, Louis—then champion—pummeled his Nazi adversary in the 1938 rematch, knocking him down three times before the fight was stopped 2:04 minutes into the first round. The filmed event helped promote Louis to international fame, and not only restored his own image but also coincided with a spirited rallying of American might during World War II.<sup>158</sup> In Michael Curtiz's film adaptation of the Irving Berlin musical *This Is the Army* (1943), Sergeant Joe Louis Barrow appeared in an episode titled "The Well-Dressed Man In Harlem," which encouraged the enlistment of African American soldiers.<sup>159</sup>

The very idea of black men being trained to fight and die for a cause was the ultimate threat to white supremacist ideology, because at any given moment militant minorities might take up arms to destroy the remaining enemies of the Civil War. But during World War II, the perceived threat to national unity was the potential for American minorities to declare a right to withhold their labor, military service, or even expressions of their commitment to the war effort. Indeed, they would venture to call upon the U.S. government to recognize that basic human rights should be guaranteed to all citizens without regard to race, color, creed or national origin. As part of their campaign of psychological warfare, Axis powers attempted to take advantage of the homesickness experienced American soldiers fighting on the European front, distributing leaflets designed to play upon G.I. fears of death or returning to the U.S. crippled, cuckolded, or both. For example, the Germans used tender images and nostalgic narratives to invoke a sense of longing for the comforts of home, and appropriated the aesthetics of *Life* magazine and the archetype of the "lonely wife" to induce feelings of insecurity and jealousy, the "green-eyed monster" that plagued Shakespeare's tragic Moor. The German and Japanese military forces used spies, propagandizing literature

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158"Joe Louis Fights for the U. S.," *LIFE*, January 26, 1942; "Joe Louis' Tour of Army Camps," *LIFE*, September 13, 1943.

159After the war, Louis remained an athlete whose celebrity status was sought to represent many aspirations of African Americans, but he was also overly generous with his wealth and after he retired from boxing was forced to use his earnings from public appearances to keep the IRS off his heels.

and imagery, and deceptive field tactics to encourage black soldiers to desert from the U.S. military.

The short film *Divide and Conquer* (1943) stated that the aim of military propaganda was “to inform, persuade, motivate, unify, challenge.” This OWI production, produced by Gordon Hollingshead for Warner Brothers, set out to counteract the “lies of the Huns,” which were purportedly spread by a covert whisper campaign in order “to destroy our national unity.” Hitler and his Nazi regime (the “monsters of Berlin”) used propaganda to threaten, intimidate, and force the free people of the U.S. to surrender to their “gangster methods.” The arrival of Axis propaganda within U.S. borders was depicted in four vignettes (plus one set in the streets of London), in which people identified as covert agents underestimated the efforts of American forces to conquer the Japanese in the Pacific theater, and doubted the strength of the support provided by U.S. Allies in Russia and Great Britain. But Americans were reminded not to fear, because “unlike the peoples of Europe” U.S. citizens were “not frightened nor hysterical nor confused,” and were “armed with truth.”

As the camera tracked past rows of diverse people—women and men, Black, White, Asian, and Latino—the anonymous, “voice-of-god” narrator proudly proclaimed:

Every state in the union—every race, color, and creed—has geared itself to this war, against intolerance and slavery and evil. We have faith, and faith is a stronger defense than any fort; it is a greater offense than any army. Hitler's lies, his propaganda, his strategy of gangsterism are wasted here. ... You can see through his techniques and will win that fight!

However, minorities in the U.S. also recognized parallels between American practices of separatism and the rise of European fascism. The population of major U.S. cities like Los Angeles and Detroit grew rapidly during WWII, as these were the urban production centers for the United States' “arsenal of democracy.” Mexican Americans in Los Angeles fought with sailors and soldiers in the so-called “Zoot Suit Riots.” Japanese Americans were relocated to internment

campus. Race riots rocked the city of Detroit.

During World War II, memories of national unity were evoked to engender a sense of hope. However, there were always tensions, especially for minorities, whose desperate domestic situation would probably remain unaffected by a foreign war. Marginalized people hoped for widespread recognition of their valuable role in the making of the nation. Their labor and willingness to contribute to the maintenance of the nation's security and stability was most genuine when it was perceived as being done for their own sake, not merely at their expense. In that moment, African American citizens gained a sense of national unity to the degree that their labor and service were seen as constitutive of the national project.<sup>160</sup> This kind of mobilization was evident during the 1940s war effort, and was adapted to the screen according to the racial morality of the Hollywood industry. Films like *Bataan* (1943) typified the conventional means of racial and ethnic representation. Such films were limited by the constrictions of hierarchy, normativity, and "objectivity" (i.e., other-directed), and were prone to misrepresentation and conflation, resulting in the experience of dis-identification and displacement for spectators at the margins.

Given this complex historical and political context, the producers of *The Negro Soldier* were facing a daunting challenge. In "Count Us In," Sterling Brown's contribution to *What the Negro Wants*, the author regretted that, "With a few honorable exceptions, newspapers, radio programs, and motion pictures (omitting, of course, Negro newspapers and newsreels for Negro theatres only) have done little to convince Negro soldiers of belonging." Brown wrote about soldiers being "rankled" by discriminatory curfews, assignment to service and non-combat duties, "menial labor" in the Air Corps, and "a ceiling on Negro officers" in the Army. He lauded the coverage of black military service in "Northern periodicals," but also noted the conspicuous absence of "dark faces" in Southern newspapers—"I should have known better than to look for one: pictures

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<sup>160</sup>John Morton Blum, *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

on Negroes in these papers were traditionally confined to those of prizefighters or recently deceased ex-slaves.” Brown continued to add that,

“The Negro Soldier” is a first-class picture, wisely aimed at offsetting some of this indifference and ignorance concerning one-tenth of our armed forces. But only when the picture reaches American white people will Negroes believe its real service to be achieved.<sup>161</sup>

The OWI productions of *The Negro Soldier* (1944) and *Teamwork* (1946) illustrate the cultural process of transvaluation in the U.S. military. Propaganda films provide social constructions of racial and gendered roles in accordance with dominant conceptions of American masculinity, which proposed a “racial tolerance” contingent upon the containment of nomadic black subjectivity, by way of military discipline and patriotic sacrifice.<sup>162</sup> Like *Native Land*, these films invoke F.D. Roosevelt's universalist concept of the “Four Freedoms,” and while they blur the lines of documentary and fictional narrative, they also move just beyond the instrumental purposes of Hollywood studio aesthetics to depict the dignity and honor of black soldiers serving in the armed forces. Highlighting the multilayered process of becoming and defining what it means to be “American,” these “message movies” offer differing outlooks regarding the possibility of meeting black demands for citizenship and equality. Robeson's journey from exile in the British imperial center led him down a path toward the democratic, socialist struggle for indigenous people in colonized Africa and around the globe.

### **Colonial Subjection and Scenes of South African Modernity**

Robeson contributed the introduction to *Africa Sings*, and its racial romanticism reflected a time when he was also undergoing a personal transformation that drove his desire to achieve social transformation through a critique of colonial discourse, in the midst of making a series of feature films that deal with what Kenneth Cameron called the “African Returner” theme.

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<sup>161</sup>In Logan 308-344.

<sup>162</sup>See Cripps 102-125, and Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*, Revised. (Columbia University Press, 1999) 205-226.

Robeson's humanist prologue to Joseph Best's travelogue of images captured in South Africa featured elements of naturalism, continental realism, and state propaganda. As I argued in Chapter 2, Robeson's early British performances were largely shaped by colonial culture and film policy, and criticism from black audiences led to significant shifts in his political perspective and cultural practices. In his thorough history of the production and exhibition of *My Song Goes Forth*, Charles Musser argued that the Robesons functioned within the established paradigm of African safari adventure books and films, but "as African Americans with radically different ideological perspectives, they departed from other aspects of the genre's conventions in fundamental ways."<sup>163</sup>

The film's director and narrator Joseph Best traveled to Africa in 1927–28 for the newly constituted Missionary Film Committee and made *Africa Today*, which claimed to show not only "Primitive life with its quaintnesses [*sic*], crudities or simple beauties," but also "the good things which civilization has brought to Africa – justice, education, hospitals, good roads, interchange of produce and cessation of tribal warfare." Best was also credited as the director and writer of *My African People* (1948), and Musser speculated that *My Song Goes Forth* survived only because of Robeson's affiliation; he was the film's star, sang its theme song, created an introductory segment, and contributed £250 to the production. However, it is quite clear from correspondence and the film's narration that Best's primary intention was to communicate his main theme that the "native races" of Africa were "looking up," and for the most part Robeson acted in accordance.<sup>164</sup> During the writing process, Best stated in a letter that he would defer to Robeson's "wishes in all details" with respect to the words to the film's theme song, "Africa Sings." Best continued, "You will see that I have expressed more clearly what Mr. Robeson wished me to convey in the prologue

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163Charles Musser, "Presenting 'a true idea of the African of to-day': two documentary forays by Paul and Eslanda Robeson," in *Film History*, Volume 18 (2006) 412–439. Musser also notes *People's Congressman* (1948), Joris Ivens' *Song of the River* (1954), and the concert film *Brücke über den Ozean (Bridge Over the Ocean, 1958)*.

164Best to Robeson: "Now that I know your own angle you can rest assured that it will be followed right through – i.e. avoidance of every political reference or suggestion and keep to the motif as in prologue," Musser 420-1.



and what the film illustrates.”

As Musser pointed out, this collaborative effort revealed “how Robeson could shape a song and transform it to conform to the ideas and sentiments he wanted to express.” As the Chapter 2 analysis of the 1937 film *Jericho/Dark Sands* demonstrated, Robeson used this re-figuration technique again in short time. The most famous example was his reworking of “Ol Man River” that same year at a fund-raising concert for the Spanish Loyalists.<sup>165</sup>

In *Africa Sings*, the images of Africans were intended to represent “facets in the progress of native life,” and in the opening sequence the bustling city streets of Durban were inter-cut with shots of Robeson singing in a recording studio. Robeson directly addressed the camera as he read from the script in his hand, proclaiming that Africans possessed “a natural desire for uplift,” and that they aspired to “a better standard of living.” His authoritative commentary assured the audience that this film would demonstrate the fulfillment of Britain's colonial desire to civilize African natives:

When you are shown pictures of Africans doing their ancient war dances or other traditional picturesque ceremonials, you may be inclined to think, not understanding their culture, that such people are still very primitive, not capable of education, and unable to appreciate all the blessings of civilization. Such a wrong idea this film will certainly help to correct.

Robeson then paused for a moment to glance off-screen, as if affirming to the film's producers that he intended to be able to stand by that statement. The camera tracked into a close up shot, and Robeson said: “I am glad to be able to introduce this film to you, because it gives you a true idea of the African of today, and of how he is adapting himself to modern life.”<sup>166</sup> Robeson then spoke of the

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<sup>165</sup>Musser 416-9. Best in letter to Robeson: Original five reels were cut down to two, because there was “a dead set against it originating from S. Africa House” that affected “bookings through the circuits.” Thanks to Lucia Saks, I have seen the four-reel version of *Africa Sings* for this research (courtesy Peter Davis). Musser arranged for Yale University to purchase a 35mm print of *My Song Goes Forth*. In the process, the BFI re-discovered a “missing reel” of the original film (once believed to be in a condition beyond preservation), preserved this material, and shipped a complete print, which was screened at the Margaret Mead Film Festival in September 2002.

<sup>166</sup>Musser surmises that Robeson was implicitly responding to earlier documentary efforts, such

comparative capacities of people from a variety of backgrounds (Africans, Europeans, Asians) to achieve “the blessings of civilization.” He referred to the film's anticipation of the upcoming Jubilee celebration in Johannesburg, which was held to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of that “splendid city.”<sup>167</sup>

In his analysis, Musser denoted a dialectical split in the relationship between Robeson's prologue and Best's “voice-of-god illustrated lecture,” differences apparent in each contributor's form, approach and ideology.<sup>168</sup> More importantly, Musser criticized Best's “inability to go below the surface and recognize the truth of our common humanity,” which is to say that the entire production failed to address the political reality that was unfolding in South Africa at the time. The 1936 census recorded roughly ten million people; black Africans comprised approximately sixty-nine percent (69%) of the population. While white Afrikaners were less than twenty percent (20%) of the population, they represented fifty-five percent (55%) of the national electorate. Indians made up another separate class of citizens (2%), and those identified as “half-breeds” or “Coloured People” (8%) were in yet another category in an altogether problematic colonial situation.<sup>169</sup>

Robeson offered a fair enough assessment of the predicament in the film's prologue:

Science has shown that we are all products of our environment, and so the poor African in the back-of-house shack, or in the kraal, or town location, all aspire to better conditions and more opportunities for education, self-development, and a useful place in the world.

As Musser noted, it is remarkable that the plight and progress of Africans were the principal subjects in this documentary, when compared to the exotic

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as *Simba: King of the Beasts* (1928), which producers Osa and Martin Johnson claimed was “a presentation of the true Africa” (415).

167Ann Laura Stoler, “Cultivating Bourgeois Bodies and Racial Selves,” in *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

168For more on travel narratives, authority, and cultural identity (the “colonial uncanny”) see Gail Ching-Liang Low, *White Skins/Black Masks: Representation and Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 135-143.

169Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (Yale University Press, 2001).

adventures, exploitation horrors, and spectacular exhibitionism found in other safari genre films of the period.<sup>170</sup> Again, Robeson framed the film as a departure by discussing the African's "splendid physique" and "powers of endurance," and arguing that "natural skill and ability" were "indispensable" to Johannesburg's prosperity and South Africa's achievement of "the great wealth of the gold, diamond, and other mines." Thus, the labor of Africans was seen as an essential element in the project of industrialization and modernization in South Africa.

On the other hand, Best's narration provided neither an intimate nor empathetic portrait in conjunction with the images presented; instead, his subjects were merely "specimens" to be examined for distinguishing signs of the civilizing mission's success. The lives of whites were only briefly considered as the bearers of wealth and good tidings, but the objectification of black Africans was at the heart of the narrative. Best informed the audience that the sugar industry outside Durban created what was known as the "South African Riviera," then he posed a question: "We have seen what the white man has done for himself—what has he done for the native?" Of course, the answer to such a patronizing question was "put him to work," and the film illustrated how African labor primarily served the interests of whites, in a scene showing natives digging in the river for diamonds as a De Beers claim owner oversaw the operation.

Although Best claimed that the upwardly mobile class of blacks—variously employed as clerks, builders, nurses, cooks, waiters, chauffeurs, "house boys" and "rickshaw boys"—were leaving their ox and mule wagons behind in the "squalid slums" to reside in the newer "decent" bungalows, the film's presentation of the kraals, huts, houses, and "locations" fit all too neatly into an overarching narrative of civilizing progress. Indeed, Johannesburg was undergoing a building boom, and the presence of both the cinema and a university were "signs of prosperity and progress"—for whites only. What *Africa Sings* overlooked was the

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<sup>170</sup>See also: Walter Futter, *Africa Speaks!* (Columbia Pictures, 1930), W. Earle Frank and Wynant D. Hubbard, *Untamed Africa* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1933), Martin E. Johnson and Osa Johnson, *Wings Over Africa* (Fox Film Corporation, 1934), Armand Denis, *Wheels Across Africa* (Wilding Picture Productions, 1936), B. Reeves Eason and Joseph Kane, *Darkest Africa* (serial) (Republic Pictures, 1936).

fact that natives were often recruited from parts throughout southern and eastern Africa for work in the mines, and many were displaced to the “squalid slums” after they were forcibly removed from their ancestral homes by white settlers. In the gold mines, natives were paid £1 per week, while whites received £8 per week for the same or less arduous labor. During the lead-up to the Jubilee celebration, native Africans were working in the industries that exploited their natural resources, building the cities, and paid lower wages, all while living in substandard housing in the townships. By 1939, native land reserves accounted for a meager twelve percent of the entire area of South Africa.<sup>171</sup>

The underlying assumption of Best's narrative was that the white Afrikaners were culturally just like the British, except that many (some 250,000 people) had the misfortune of being poor. According to this theory, education was the simple solution to the problem of “poor whites,” like the little old man who “shows up badly” when compared to the sophisticated black African traders and Indian shopkeepers in the Durban market. Nevertheless, Best assured audiences that even this old man's situation was improving with the march of progress. After all, the bilingual school system taught both English and Afrikaans to all white students, and the African Broadcasting Company produced bilingual radio programs. However, over seventy percent of black South Africans received no formal schooling, while education was compulsory for whites. In the racial logic of colonialism, the whites shared the burden of civilizing the rest of the population, but Christian missionary schools and churches provided the only real educational opportunities for blacks, and by 1935 almost 350,000 native South Africans were being schooled in these institutions of colonial indoctrination. Best dutifully delivered a documentary report on South African economic and cultural development, but his narration glossed over many ugly aspects at a time when

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<sup>171</sup>Thompson: “After 1920, the gap was never less than eleven to one in cash wages, or ten to one when allowance is made for the food that the companies supplied to the African workers. Furthermore, by 1939 white miners were receiving paid leave and pensions, which Africans did not receive, and far larger disability payments than those for Africans.” See also William Minter, *King Solomon's Mines Revisited: Western Interests and the Burdened History of Southern Africa* (Basic Books, 1986).

the political hopes of black Africans were still quite bleak.<sup>172</sup>

Best argued that illegal miscegenation and “cross-breeding” constituted a much bigger social problem than the plight of poor whites, and his narration about the lives of “Coloured” children being “something of a tragedy” was somewhat unnerving.<sup>173</sup> But the most revealing aspect of African life the film documented was that human beings could and would exercise the right to express themselves, even at the most basic level, in conditions of near-total depravity. From what can be seen in *Africa Sings*, the cultural lives of African natives included sports, music, and dramatic storytelling rituals, yet Best's narration interrupted one group performance scene to deride it as “kaffir music.” The film's contrasting techniques showed how African customs and rituals were supplanted with Westernized ways of living and being, as older footage of antiquated (“primitive”) practices were cross-cut with obviously staged scenes of “modernized” black men and women conducting business, debating parliamentary procedure (not in a classroom or courtroom, but in open air spaces), or going out on a Western-style date. This final sequence, and its reinforcement of British hetero-normative conjugal relations, effectively summed up the film's major premise: “Africa marches on...to towns and cities and the ways of civilization.”

One critic in the U.K. called the film a “documentary drama,” which was “not lacking in exploitation angles,” but more “educational rather than box-office.” Similarly, another British critic described it as “a case of content gaining an unequivocal victory over specialised technique,” concluding that “for those who care to think, it is extraordinarily instructive, and full of atmosphere.” Perhaps most insightfully, Jane Morgan of the *Daily Worker* pointed out that “while it does not analyse too deeply the ugly machinery evolved to destroy the traditions and spirit of a courageous people, it does do something to counteract the imperialist

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172Musser questions Best's relationship to his subjects and makes a telling comparison to surrealist Bunuel's *Land Without Bread* (1932), as its imperialist imperatives amount to a half-hearted attempt to re-situate British colonial propaganda.

173See G. Bernard Shaw quote. Sequence analysis shows Best's cold narration at cross-purposes with those who sympathize with all suffering children, regardless of race.

poison of the ordinary travelogues.” Morgan continued to note that the film was “probably the first attempt of its kind to contrast the misery of the vast majority of the population with the White Man’s burden of prosperity.” Robeson was probably quite sympathetic to Morgan’s critical perspective.

However, if Robeson adopted an explicitly anti-colonial viewpoint while working on this film, then it was not overtly expressed in the text. Musser surmised that Robeson was acting on a “utopic impulse” with a unique polyvalence, and the prologue constructed a “virtual community” of “radical equality,” upending “the underlying logic of a colonial order and the racial hierarchy” on which it depended.<sup>174</sup> Yet it also remained a strategically generalized argument for cultural uplift, evinced mostly in Robeson’s speech and his modifications to the song “Africa Sings,” which ultimately espoused the benefits of the British colonizing mission. Musser concluded that “the Robesons countered the safari genre’s mobilizations of colonial and racial hierarchies by insisting on a fundamental equality of aspiration and ability – a common humanity.” While Musser saw Robeson playing an instrumental role as “a kind of bridge or mediator” between spectators in Europe and North America, his commentary on the conditions of colonial subjection and the exploitation of natives was overshadowed by the documentary’s focus on the “progress” of new, Westernized Africans in this fast-developing nation.<sup>175</sup>

South African censors regarded the documentary’s message as subversive to their political objectives. Although it failed to recognize the signs of the rising South African social system of apartheid (in particular The Natives Representation and Native Trust and Land Acts of 1936), the film probably succeeded in informing spectators about the humanity and tragic circumstances

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174Musser (413, 427-8) prefers “utopic” to describe Robeson’s world-view because his political strategies were “firmly based in material conditions.” To this end, he also claims that “Robeson’s utopianism was an impulse more than a systematic program.” See also Musser, “Utopian Visions in Cold War Documentary: Joris Ivens, Paul Robeson and *Song of the Rivers* (1954)” in *CiNéMAS*, vol. 12, no 3 (2003) 109-153.

175Musser (435) notes that critics of Eslanda Robeson’s *African Journey* seemed “unable to discern how this new perspective had wide-ranging implications for the ways in which Africans could be represented and understood.” See also Amy J. Staples, “Safar! adventure: forgotten cinematic journeys in Africa,” in *Film History*, Volume 18 (2006) 392-411.

of native Africans.<sup>176</sup> Robeson underwent something of a political awakening in the months following his involvement with the production.<sup>177</sup> The Spanish Civil War began in mid-July 1936, and Robeson was one of many celebrity supporters of the Republican Army and the so-called “Lincoln Brigade.” In May 1937 (a month after *My Song Goes Forth* opened in theaters), Paul Robeson and Max Yergan co-founded the International Committee on African Affairs, which later became the Council on African Affairs—by World War II, the most important American organization dealing with issues pertaining to Africa.

### **Declarations of Rights and Collective Work in *Native Land***

It is abundantly clear that Robeson was never only a musician, and he was always more than an entertainer. He studied and mastered many languages, and became familiar with the musical styles and performance practices of a variety of cultures. He lent his voice and opinions to debates about race, culture, and politics—what was then commonly referred to as “the Negro question.” To put it plainly, he sought cosmopolitan contexts and audiences for his talents, and to prove that African Americans and their cultural practices belonged on the world’s stages, screens, and shelves. Most importantly, his voice and image will be remembered for their association with various local struggles for peace and freedom around the globe. By the end of the 1930s, Robeson came to view himself as a political activist as well as a cultural ambassador.

Between the *Othellos* of 1930 in London and 1943 on Broadway, Robeson explored many modes of performance and engaged in world politics in and through his cultural practices. In 1937, Robeson married his art to his politics, and thus when he returned from the front of the European war the act of performing *Othello* gained a political significance in the U.S. By 1942, Robeson

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<sup>176</sup>Thompson 154-186. Other relevant South African legislation establishing the apartheid system: The Native Lands Act (1913), The Apprenticeship Act (1922), The Natives (Urban Areas) Act (1923), The Industrial Conciliation Act (1924), and The Status of the Union Act (1934).

<sup>177</sup>See Martin B Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1988) 210-232; Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2001) 350-392.

had already refused to perform in numerous segregated houses, and is credited for the role he played (among many others) in integrating both the American stage and its audiences.<sup>178</sup> He reaffirmed his stance when he renounced his connections to Hollywood's regime of racial representation, vowing not to make another "commercial" movie after the disappointing experience of his minor role in the terribly typical *Tales of Manhattan* (1942). From the time he worked on the film adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*, to the revolutionary epic of Sergei Eisenstein's unproduced *Black Majesty*, Robeson primarily identified himself as "anti-Fascist," and therefore overlooked Europe's history of colonialism in hopes that the USSR's alliance with the West might bring about not only the end of fascism but the vestiges of imperialism as well.<sup>179</sup> After seeing the film *Land of Liberty* in the summer of 1939, Robeson hosted a fund-raising event for the producers of *Native Land* (1942).<sup>180</sup>

Robeson eventually became the film's narrator, reading a script by David Wolff, Leo Hurwitz (credited as editor and writer), and Paul Strand (cinematographer and writer). The music for *Native Land* was arranged by Marc Blitzstein, composer of the agit-prop musical *The Cradle Will Rock*. The Frontier Films collective consisted of former members of the Film and Photo League of New York City, the same few who had previously formed a group called NYKino.<sup>181</sup> Associates of Frontier Films included the likes of Malcolm Cowley, John Dos Passos, Lillian Hellman, Joris Ivens, Elia Kazan, Clifford Odets, and Archibald MacLeish, among others, who considered their work as an alternative to the popular, commercial, faux-newsreel series "The March of Time"—launched by Time Inc. in 1935 and declared by Henry Luce himself to be "fakery in

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178Recent essays by Musser explore Robeson's relationship to cinema beyond this moment.

179Boyle and Bunie (319): "Ironically, it was just as Robeson's interest in the Soviet Union was beginning to blossom that disillusioned anti-imperialists [like George Padmore] one by one permanently parted ways with Moscow."

180Musser, "Introduction: Documentary Before Verité" in *Film History*, Volume 18 (John Ubbey Publishing, 2006) 355-360. Musser: "This radical documentary can be seen as a response to the easy celebration of American liberty offered by DeMille and the MPPDA. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was made by former members of the Film and Photo League. Here is yet another example of why *Land of Liberty* is a film that is too important to ignore."

181Ellis and McLane 77-104.



allegiance to the truth.” In the late 1930s Frontier Films produced the domestic labor documentaries *People of the Cumberland* (1938), about the Highlander Folk School's work with Appalachian coal miners; and *United Action* (1939), about the General Motors strike in Detroit organized by the United Auto Workers-Congress of Industrial Organizations (UAW-CIO).

Production on *Native Land* began as early as 1939, but it was not released until 1942, at a time when national interests had shifted to international affairs (as did the focus of the filmmakers).<sup>182</sup> Based largely on a U.S. Senate investigation conducted by the Civil Liberties Committee of Wisconsin Progressive Party Senator Robert M. La Follette, Jr., and the reports of labor organizations, the film's episodic narrative dramatized cases from Michigan, Ohio, Arkansas, and Tennessee, while presenting archival footage to report cases from many other states. The Committee concluded that labor spies were “the most efficient method known to management to prevent unions from forming, to weaken them if they secure a foothold, and to wreck them when they try their strength.”<sup>183</sup> *Native Land* clearly states its purpose in the opening title sequence:

Since the founding of our country the American people have had to fight for their freedom in every generation. *Native Land* is a document of America's struggle for liberty in recent years. It was in this struggle that the fascist-minded on our own soil were forced to retreat. And the people gained the democratic strength essential for national unity and for victory over the Axis.

The subsequent historical montage established a semi-documentary mode of presentation: a universal retelling of national founding myths (“We the people crossed the ocean...into an unknown land...*in search of freedom*”) was

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182Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film* (Oxford University Press, 1993) 121-128. MacLeish was Librarian of Congress and head of the Office of Facts and Figures before the establishment of the Office of War Information (OWI) in June 1942. For more on OWI, see John Morton Blum, *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977) 15-52.

183Formally known as the Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee Investigating Violations of Free Speech and the Rights of Labor (1936-1941). See Robert Michael Smith, *From Blackjacks to Briefcases: A History of Commercialized Strikebreaking and Unionbusting in the United States* (Ohio University Press, 2003); and Steve Schultze, “La Follette suicide linked to fear of McCarthy,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 18, 2003.

accompanied by a series of lifeless American landscapes (“We made a home...there grew up a colony of *free citizens*”) inter-cut with images of the heroic statues of the Founding Fathers and Lady Liberty (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence”), stately architecture, flags, and other patriotic symbols (“*Our freedom* took shape...we proclaimed a new world”). After Lincoln and the Civil War came a new sense of freedom: “More than a word, *it was an ax to clear the continent.*” The subjective voice of “We the People” and its repetition evoked the participatory structure of agit-prop theater and socialist political tendencies. Meanwhile, the wheels of industry rolled across the continent—“machines and people” constituted the modern American democracy, “fought for and built into the steel girders of America.” The collective voice of the narration imagined a national community of hard-working strivers: “We struggled 300 years and *took freedom as our inheritance*”; the Bill of Rights promised freedom as “*a way of life for all Americans.*”

Obviously, this kind of universal narrative omitted key details about the internal divisions of the first 300 years of early modern North American history: the fight to remove Native Americans from the land; the struggle to keep African Americans in bondage; the battles against the influx of immigrants and the movement for women's suffrage; and so forth. These omissions illustrated the filmmakers' attempt to appeal to a mass audience, and inform them of present-day struggles. Letters to Washington from concerned citizens were taken up by the 76<sup>th</sup> Congress (1939-1941), and montage sequence reconstructed the Senate's revelation of “techniques of terror,” a nationwide conspiracy, as well as a complex cover-up operation. Industrial spies, “private armies,” a “private arsenal,” and propaganda were used to perpetrate a “war against Americans”: “the interlocking parts of an immense conspiracy directed by a handful of fascist-minded corporations.”

The cases investigated by the La Follette Committee provide the basis of a testimonial narrative (personal, anecdotal, based on the experiences of ordinary citizens). The film's risk of being construed as excessively propagandizing were

diminished by the specificity of the examples and the direct, self-conscious modes of address and political expression. In Custer, Michigan, September 1934, a farmer's son runs to tell his father that men in a big blue car are there to see him. The farmer leaves his horse-drawn plough in the fields, then walks out of sight with the two men. The men hurry him to the car and drive away fast. His wife runs after, only to find the farmer's battered body sprawled in a shallow stream. Mr. Fred Hill was attacked for speaking up at the farmer's meeting the night before.

In the spring of 1936, an organizer is killed in a rooming house in Cleveland, Ohio: "They say he was a union man." In Arkansas 1936, Negro and white sharecroppers meet at a church to discuss negotiations. After the meeting, two men are gunned down on the road in broad daylight by a "hidden enemy." Throughout these sequences, Robeson sings "Go Down Moses," "I'm a Union Man," "Which Side Are You On?" and "American Day." Robeson's reflexive style of authorial commentary and interrogation addressed the audience directly, demanding a response as well as outrage: "Where was the right to organize?" "Where was the Bill of Rights?" Millions of "little people" had become complacent, and took the Bill of Rights for granted. It was time for "a new Declaration of Independence for the people."

The filmmakers attempted to show both the good and the bad. Members of the laundry workers' union go for an outing on a cruise ship, embodying an intercultural scene with workers from many backgrounds singing, dancing, and having a good time together. Archival film footage documented goons with guns violently breaking up a demonstration by members of the Steel Metal Workers Industrial Union in Embridge, Pennsylvania, an incident that left two people dead. In a fast-paced, rapidly edited sequence, peaceful demonstrations for fair labor negotiations and civil rights were met with open terror, police brutality, secret persecution, torture, blackmail, and lynch law. At the close of this sequence, a preacher delivers a somber sermon, inveighing against "the worst sin of all"—"contempt for human life." He asserts that "in the name of patriotism...men

with great names” have “hired criminals, paid weak men to spy on brothers, expended secret money to set Christian against Jew, white against colored, to brand every immigrant a dangerous enemy.” The Ku Klux Klan and similar organizations represented the “face of fascism” in the U.S., and their actions showed their hatred for “the practice of democracy” exemplified by the AFL-CIO and Railroad Brotherhoods.

On Memorial Day 1937, just as it seemed Democracy was mounting a comeback, idyllic scenes of Americans on holiday and a peaceful picket in Chicago are disrupted by violence. Ten people were killed, some ninety injured; “the dead were all shot in the back.” The victims of this event “turned their tragedy into action.” At the funeral for one, a colleague declares: “He had a right to go on that line. He was the kind of man who stood up for his rights. We don't forget that. Never.” Robeson echoed this sentiment in his closing comments:

For three-hundred years there were wounds, sweat, and battles without names. ... America forged in the heat of battle. ... Freedom won step by step. ... We the People, laboring all these years. ... Plowing freedom into the dark soil...

In conclusion, he reminded the audience that the “House of America” was built on the Four Freedoms, “Yet today our liberty is in danger. The freedom we have won from enemies abroad must be saved again from enemies within.”

Musser noted that a common critical response to *Native Land* is to see it “as a documentary out of touch with key political developments in the United States” during World War II, that “its timing was badly off.”<sup>184</sup> Freedom and equality have always been hopeful but dangerous social ideals—revolutionary even—in the political history of African Americans in the U.S. Racial disparities were more evidently marked in the South until migration to the North during the inter-war period of the 1920s and 1930s. Yet a generation of artists (professional writers, directors, actors, and musicians) settled into the nation’s bustling urban centers and contributed to the development and dissemination of new varieties of

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<sup>184</sup>Musser, “Introduction: Documentary Before Verité.” He also argues that “understood as a response to *Land of Liberty*, its place in documentary history becomes far more meaningful.”

American cultural forms. Although they generally suffered routine incidences of discrimination and denial, they never lost hope for the promise of a more prosperous future. They were critically creative, exercising the right to express themselves in spite of repressive political and social conditions.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>185</sup>Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

## CHAPTER 4

### **“Gotta Travel On”: Harry Belafonte and the Racial Economy of 1950s Cultural Production**

#### **Introduction: Black Labor, Politics and Post-War Media**

Harry Belafonte was one of the most versatile performing artists of the mid-century period, who realized a level of creative control and self-representation that had been practically unobtainable by African Americans in the prewar era. Dubbed the “first Negro matinee idol” in newspapers and popular magazine articles, Belafonte played a central role in the construction and performance of postwar black masculinity in America. By the end of the 1950s, Belafonte was an independent cultural producer whose popularity as a recording artist provided him with the economic means to control the production process in the fields of music, film, and live performance. Contrasting representations of black masculinity and femininity in mid-1950s Hollywood musicals and Caribbean melodramas with his own independent productions later in that same decade, this chapter demonstrates Belafonte's deep influence on American culture.

Thomas Cripps argued that Belafonte “changed the face of Hollywood forever,” as the first African American producer (with his company HarBel Productions) of a major studio motion picture, *The World, The Flesh and the Devil* (M-G-M, 1959).<sup>186</sup> Belafonte himself put it, “Hollywood was symptomatic, and the problem was the nation: I figured unless you change the national vocabulary, the national climate, the national attitude, you're not going to be able

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<sup>186</sup>Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (Oxford University Press, 1993) 267.

to change Hollywood.”<sup>187</sup> Belafonte met Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, and made a commitment to lend his voice, celebrity, and financial support to the civil rights movement. By the end of the decade, he contemplated playing the role of Shakespeare's Othello:

I now have doubts, which I think is a part of growth. For example, I want to do Othello, I really do. But I have enormous doubts. I want to study and read. Before, I would have never thought about it twice. Now, at 32, I am thinking—can I play Othello? Maybe. Maybe if I work enough and study enough, I could. Before, if anyone had offered it, I might have just gone ahead. Now I'm not so ready. Now I say, “Wait a minute, fellows!”<sup>188</sup>

It is possible that Belafonte had his hero Paul Robeson in mind, both as an incentive to play the part and as a reason to avoid it. Robeson returned to the role the previous year at Stratford-Upon-Avon, yet the political culture of the U.S. was still lingering in the fog of the Cold War. In the world of music, Belafonte released a solo album of sentimental ballads (*Love is a Gentle Thing*) in 1959, and produced a globally-oriented album released by The Belafonte Folk Singers (*Cheers: Drinking Songs Around the World*). And in what appeared to be a counter-proposal to the forthcoming Sam Goldwyn film production, Belafonte also released an album recorded with Lena Horne with their own interpretation of songs from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (an ad in *Ebony* magazine promised “a moving performance,” “a musical mating that brings new meaning to songs,” and “the greatest 'Porgy and Bess' of them all!”).<sup>189</sup> Describing him as a “transatlantic troubadour” in a December 1959 profile, *Look* magazine reported on his plans to tour Latin America (“and later the Orient”), and presented scenes of Belafonte (with wife Julie and their son David) making the rounds in London, where his BBC special aired on Christmas Day.<sup>190</sup>

A decade earlier, when *Variety* declared that 1949 was the “Year of the

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187Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Belafonte's Balancing Act,” *The New Yorker*, September 1996.

188Emily Coleman, “Organization Man Named Belafonte,” *New York Times*, December 13, 1959.

189*EBONY* July 1959.

190Chester Morrison, “Harry Belafonte: Transatlantic Troubadour.” *Look* 8 Dec. 1959: 90.

Negro Problem Pic,” many contemporary critics were hopeful about the prospect of presenting an realistic image of postwar black life in America. However, the early 1950s in Hollywood were marked by a retrenchment into segregated cinematic practices, an aesthetic that dominated cultural production until the latter years of the decade. Many cultural workers Hollywood found that their progressive ideas were being checked by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and anti-Communist blacklisting in the industry. As Victor Navasky argues in his seminal book on the blacklist, *Naming Names*: “If the internal-security bureaucracy and its anti-Communist crusade defined Hollywood's political environment, and the collaborators both shaped and reflected the community's moral environment, it was the motion-picture industry itself that dominated, and indeed constituted, the economic environment.”<sup>191</sup>

First awarded in the years 1949 to 1952, the Robert Meltzer Award was conceived by the Writers Guild of America to honor the “Screenplay Dealing Most Ably with Problems of the American Scene.” A cursory review of the 1950 WGA Screen Awards illustrates the complicated politico-economic climate that was quickly developing in the early years of the Cold War. That year's Meltzer Award winner, Robert Rossen, was the writer and director of *All the King's Men*, adapted from the Pulitzer Prize novel by Robert Penn Warren. Rossen's experience with HUAC and the Hollywood blacklist will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, but first I will focus on all other nominees from that year, who were notably responsible for films that addressed questions of racial difference and social equality across the color line.<sup>192</sup>

Mark Robson directed *Home of the Brave* (United Artists, 1949), which starred black actor James Edwards as Private Peter Moss, and was produced by Stanley Kramer Productions (as Screen Plays Inc.). Screenwriter Carl Foreman won the Meltzer award the following year for scripting *The Men* (1950), which starred Marlon Brando in his debut role as a disabled war veteran. Foreman

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<sup>191</sup>Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (Viking Press, 1980) 144.

<sup>192</sup>1949 winners were Frank Partos and Millen Brand for *The Snake Pit* (1948), adapted from the novel by Mary Jane Ward and directed by Anatole Litvak.



later won the Oscar in 1958 for the screenplay adaptation of the novel *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), which he shared with French author Pierre Boulle and co-writer Michael Wilson. However, Foreman and Wilson were blacklisted at the time and received no screen credit.<sup>193</sup> Ben Maddow was nominated for his adaptation of *Intruder in the Dust* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1949), directed by Clarence Brown and based on the William Faulkner novel of the same name. In 1950, Puerto Rican-born black actor Juano Hernandez (born in 1901) was nominated for the Golden Globe for most promising male newcomer, and the film won the UN Award at 1951 BAFTA Awards. According to Navasky, Maddow “first invoked the Fifth Amendment [before HUAC in 1953] but years later decided to cooperate after, he told a friend, he had run into the left-wing union leader Harry Bridges at a party, and Bridges had said, 'Forget it, you've been on strike long enough. Go back to work.'”<sup>194</sup>

For their work on *Lost Boundaries* (Film Classics, 1949), directed by Alfred L. Werker, screenwriters Eugene Ling and Virginia Shaler won the Best Screenplay prize at the 1949 Cannes Film Festival, before their nomination for the 1950 Meltzer Award; but neither worked very much in Hollywood after 1952. The film starred Mel Ferrer as Scott Mason Carter, a light-skinned African American doctor who is pressured into passing for white in order to work, and featured Canada Lee in the role of Lt. “Dixie” Thompson.<sup>195</sup> While Navasky identifies liberal informers like Maddow as “guilty bystanders”—those who were “reluctant, in the sense that had it not been for a subpoena and/or the pressure, they wouldn't have done it”—he also accounts for the damage done to the careers and reputations of those who resisted, financially and otherwise. In the case of Lee:

...as Stefan Kanfer has reported: “In 1949, reduced to penury, he

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<sup>193</sup>Foreman and Wilson were posthumously awarded Oscars in 1984.

<sup>194</sup>Navasky 75.

<sup>195</sup>Also in *Lost Boundaries*: William Greaves, future writer, director, producer; Leigh Whipper, veteran film actor and first black member of the Actors Equity Union; Beatrice Pearson as Scott's wife Marcia Carter; Susan Douglas (Rubes) as Shelly Carter.

called a press conference to protest his anti-Communism. 'I refer to the drivel that has come from the so-called secret files of the FBI about one Canada Lee,' he said. 'I am not a Communist. This is a simple fact.'" By the summer of 1952 he had been banned from forty television shows after the American Tobacco Company dumped him from those it sponsored. "How long can a man take this kind of unfair treatment?" he asked in a letter to the editor of *Variety*.<sup>196</sup>

Finally, Philip Dunne and Dudley Nichols received a Meltzer nomination for *Pinky* (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1949), adapted from the novel by Cid Ricketts Sumner, directed by Elia Kazan, and produced by Darryl F. Zanuck. The film starred Jeanne Crain as Patricia 'Pinky' Johnson, a light-skinned nursing student who passed for white, but is forced to make difficult decisions when Pinky's Granny (Ethel Waters) discovers her secret. The film also garnered three Oscar nominations in 1950: Best Actress in a Leading Role (Jeanne Crain), Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Ethel Barrymore, Ethel Waters). Both writers were well-established in Hollywood by this time, and both managed to work steadily during the 1950s—but not by penning more social problem films. Nichols had been President of the Screen Writers Guild (1937-1938), while Dunne helped form the star-studded Committee for the First Amendment, which traveled to Washington, DC, to protest the HUAC proceedings.

Zanuck and Kazan had worked together on *Gentleman's Agreement* (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1947), the film about anti-Semitism that won three Oscars in 1948: Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Celeste Holm). Gregory Peck as Philip Schuyler Green. Dorothy McGuire as Kathy Lacy. John Garfield as Dave Goldman.<sup>197</sup> In Navasky's assessment,

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<sup>196</sup>Navasky 188-189.

<sup>197</sup>*Gentleman's Agreement* was nominated for an additional five Oscars, including Best Actor and Actress in Leading Roles (Gregory Peck, Dorothy McGuire), Best Screenplay (Moss Hart). See also Edward Dmytryk, *Crossfire* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1947). At the 1947 Cannes Film Festival Dmytryk won the award for "Best Social Film" (*Prix du meilleur film social*), and was nominated for five Oscars at the 1948 Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Robert Ryan), and Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Gloria Grahame).

Probably no single individual could have broken the blacklist in April 1952, and yet no person was in a better strategic position to try than Kazan, by virtue of his prestige and economic invulnerability, to mount a symbolic campaign against it, and by this example inspire hundreds of fence sitters to come over to the opposition.<sup>198</sup>

In his first appearance before HUAC in January 1952, Kazan answered all questions except the one about Communists he knew during the period he was a Party member from 1934 to 1936. When he returned in April, he not only named eight members of the Group Theatre in his pre-written testimony, but also added what Navasky called “an annotated bibliography *cum apologia*” that aimed to project his directorial work in a patriotic light. About *Gentleman's Agreement*, Kazan wrote, “I think it is in a healthy American tradition, for it shows Americans exploring a problem and tackling a solution. Again it is opposite to the picture Communists present of Americans...” Regarding *Pinky*, Kazan made a similar point: “Almost everyone liked this except the Communists, who attacked it virulently. It was extremely successful throughout the country, as much so in the South as everywhere....”

Before his HUAC appearance, Kazan was reported to have said, “I've got to think of my kids,” but apparently he rejected the idea that his kids might object to their father being an informer. Soon after he testified, Kazan placed an ad in the *New York Times* to clarify his political position. The statement argued that those who believed that naming names amounted to “attacking the right to hold unpopular opinions and ... joining the people who attack civil liberties” were perpetuating “a lie.” “Secrecy serves the Communists,” Kazan continued, “The employment of a lot of good liberals is threatened because they have allowed themselves to become associated with or silenced by the Communists. Liberals must speak out.” Clearly, this line of reasoning assumes that the industry practice of blacklisting for political reasons was justifiable, and that those who exercised their First Amendment right to “speak out” against it, or remained silent

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198Navasky 200.

under protection of the Fifth Amendment before HUAC, were merely dupes and posed a dangerous threat if allowed to work.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, “breaking the color barrier” in Hollywood began in earnest during the 1940s, with morale boosting films like Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1942), Archie Mayo's *Crash Dive* (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1943), Tay Garnett's *Bataan* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (M-G-M), 1943), Zoltan Korda's *Sahara* (Columbia Pictures, 1943), and Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1944). But the crop of 1950 Meltzer Award nominees signaled yet another significant shift. As film historian Thomas Cripps succinctly put it:

These films became the cycle that carried the central metaphor of integrationism into the civil rights movement: the lone Negro, or small cell of them being introduced into a larger white group who would be told that they will be better for the experience. Thus the metaphor of lone black warrior thrust among a white platoon, which had been put forth as an icon of a multiethnic war effort, and blossomed into legends such as those of Colin Kelly, Meyer Levin, and Dorie Miller, was revived on the nation's screens in a 1949 peacetime version.<sup>199</sup>

In 1953, the WGA dropped the Meltzer Award and reconceived it as the Laurel Award for Screen Writing Achievement.<sup>200</sup> It is safe to say that the blacklist and Cold War ideology had a cooling effect on the development of films that presented either a clear challenge to consensus ideology or questioned the most problematic aspects of the status quo without somehow redeeming the national character. Thus, the production of these contradictory ‘social problem’ melodramas and Hollywood's efforts to integrate American screens must be understood in light of the nationalization of the ‘Negro problem’ and the effort to

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<sup>199</sup>Cripps 220.

<sup>200</sup>From the WGA web site ([www.wga.org](http://www.wga.org)): “The Laurel Award for Screen Writing Achievement is given to that member of the Guild who, in the opinion of the current Board of Directors, has advanced the literature of the motion picture through the years, and who has made outstanding contributions to the profession of the screen writer,” awarded 1953-2008. Re-established in 1991, “The Meltzer Award is given in recognition of a singular act of courage in defense of freedom of expression and the rights of writers, upon the action of the Board of Directors. Lt. Robert F. Meltzer died following the Normandy invasion in the battle for Brest in World War II.”

end discrimination in the workplace. Integration in the culture industries also resulted in the end of the “race film” era. The decline of the studio system meant that the old Production Code needed to be updated for new audiences.<sup>201</sup>

Throughout this period, Walter White of the NAACP embodied the interrelationship between labor, law, and cultural representations in the media. His daughter, Jane White, was an aspiring actress, and in 1948 she was hired by Zanuck to work with Phillip Dunne on the script for *Pinky*. Meanwhile, Walter White struggled to open a Hollywood branch office for the NAACP, to work with actors who had, in his words, “a vested interest in menial roles,” and a Screen Actors Guild “that through Ronald Reagan's give terms as president from 1947 to 1952 ... agreed only to encourage an end to stereotypical roles,” rather than actively promoting more and better roles. In 1950, Zanuck and Fox studio executives relied on White to write a letter of support to promote Sidney Poitier's first film *No Way Out* (1950), and he also urged NAACP branches to resist the reactionary efforts of local censor boards.<sup>202</sup>

By the time White died in March 1955, the NAACP still had no Hollywood bureau. An article in the December issue of *Ebony* magazine posed the question, “Do Negroes Have a Future in Hollywood?” The cover story featured “almond-eyed” Jeanna Limyou, a 17-year old beauty queen “of Negro-Chinese ancestry,” who had been chosen “Miss Cavalcade” of 1955 at the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Cavalcade of Jazz in Los Angeles' Wrigley Field. *Ebony* photographed Limyou making the rounds in Hollywood and Las Vegas: with Frank Sinatra and Otto Preminger on a tour of the RKO set for *The Man with the Golden Arm*; at the M-G-M studio with star Debbie Reynolds and make-up artist Bill Tuttle; at the Moulin Rouge with Nat Cole, and as a guest on Al Jarvis' “Make Believe Ballroom” teen TV show with host Joe Yocam.

Preminger said, “The future of the Negro in Hollywood will depend on his [*sic*] talent. Race will not be the issue. ... I'll cast Negroes in suitable roles

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201Cripps 126-150.

202Cripps 174-249.

without hesitating.” *Ebony*'s claim that “public disapproval” had ended the “era of 'Uncle Tom' casting” was backed by no less an authority than Stepin Fetchit, who simply said, “It won't sell.” Citing recent surveys showing that millions of African Americans attended movie houses each week, columnist Louella Parsons asked, “In the face of those statistics, what producer would dare offend the Negro?” “The future of Negroes in motion pictures is as secure as the Negro's future in American life,” M-G-M production boss Dore Shary optimistically stated. “Motion pictures have begun to reach the point where Negro characters are dealt with simply as men and women without supplementary identifications as Negroes.” Limyou was a student at the Lester Horton School of Dance and possessed a “good singing voice,” so she was prepared to become a dancer or artist if she failed to find work as an actress.<sup>203</sup>

Despite her beauty and talent, Limyou's only film role was her appearance as one of a dozen actresses cast as a “Negro Woman” in the adaptation of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific* (Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 1958). On stage and screen, Julliard-trained African American actress Juanita Hall played the part of Bloody Mary, the Tonkinese character from James A. Michener's book *Tales of the South Pacific*. *South Pacific* ran on Broadway from April 7, 1949 to January 16, 1954, and Hall was the first African American to win a Tony Award® in 1950 for Best Featured Actress in a Musical. While Hall sang for the cast album, she was dubbed in the film version by Muriel Smith, the actress from the London production.<sup>204</sup>

Attempting to justify Jeanna Limyou's career aspirations, *Ebony* celebrated Dorothy Dandridge's recent success in *Carmen Jones* (1954), which illustrated that Hollywood directors like Preminger were renegotiating the terms of racial representation. Furthermore, market pressure from African American audiences, independent producers, and groups like the NAACP made it necessary for the studios to rethink their valuations of racial imagery. Nevertheless, there

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203“Do Negroes Have a Future in Hollywood?” *EBONY*, December 1955.

204Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (University of California Press, 2003).

remained obstacles to employment for black performers to overcome, and limitations to freedom of expression regarding the politics of race relations in U.S. cinema.<sup>205</sup>

This remainder of the chapter attempts to move beyond the ideological analysis of negative ethnic stereotypes and the marginalization of minorities, to consider instead the complex portrayals of black masculinity in Harry Belafonte's films, which were culturally (hence, publicly) circumscribed in representations of athletes, entertainers, and soldier-heroes (whether “insider” military men or “outsider” militant rebels). As a performer who simultaneously embodied the American popular conception of Caribbean-ness and cultivated the tradition of black folk styles, Belafonte's cultural productions in the late 1950s enabled him to exercise increasing levels of authority in his film, music, stage, and television projects.<sup>206</sup>

### **“Cinderella Gentleman”**

Thomas Cripps described the postwar period of adjustment for the film industry as,

a classic case of thermidor, the cooling of ardor that has followed every era of disquiet from the French Revolution onward, the moment when order seems to matter more than liberty, sameness more than novelty. In this mood it was easy for Hollywood to retreat into familiar ways: cautiously pitching down the middle, living off past successes, reviving the surefire, rewarming its chestnuts.<sup>207</sup>

However, many studios executives had signed “the Waldorf Statement,” which endorsed techniques for denying employment based on claims about one's political associations—past, present, or even without proof. For African Americans, the effect of the blacklist was less obvious, but the chilling impact

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205See also Lewis Freedman, *New Girl in the Office* (President's Committee on Government Contracts, c.1957), produced by On Film, Inc. Starring Gail Fisher and Ed Asner.

206Lisa D. McGill, *Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation* (NYU Press, 2005).

207Cripps 175.

was pervasive nevertheless. According to Navasky:

There was, although it was not remarked on publicly at the time, a *de facto* double standard when it came to blacks. Unlike whites, blacks interested in getting back to work were not automatically required or expected to name names. Instead, they had a number of options, among which the most effective was to denounce Paul Robeson.<sup>208</sup>

Cripps also pointed out that “by 1950, HUAC delighted in coaxing black witnesses into repudiating him [Robeson] or confessing to falling prey ‘to groups fixed up to look like noble causes.’”<sup>209</sup> Hence, when major league baseball player Jackie Robinson was called to testimony in July 1949, he was asked to express his opinion about a statement attributed to Robeson at the Paris conference. He told Committee members, “if Mr. Robeson actually made it, it sounds very silly to me.” In September 1950, folk singer Josh White said to the Committee:

I have a great admiration for Mr. Robeson as an actor and great singer, and if what I read in the papers is true, I feel sad over the help he's been giving to people who despise America. He has a right to his own opinions, but when he, or anybody, pretends to talk for the whole race, he's kidding himself. ... I stand ready to fight Russia or any enemy of America.<sup>210</sup>

When Belafonte was visited by a HUAC representative, he remembered:

...she said she knew about the time I put my hand through a car window in February 1953, the night the Supreme Court turned down the Rosenberg appeal. I said to myself, It could be one man who told them that—the motherfucker who was driving the car. And I told that to Paul Robeson, but Paul said, “Wait a minute. Look at what this is doing to us, the insidious suspicion it is creating. Maybe that poor fella went to a poker game the next night and said do you know what that crazy Harry Belafonte did? ... So it wasn't only one person who could have finked. Maybe it was

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208Navasky 187.

209Cripps 183.

210Navasky 186-190.



seventeen!”<sup>211</sup>

The “insidious suspicion” was nearly fatal for Belafonte after his first appearance on Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town* on CBS in October 1953. He recalled: “Sidney Poitier saved me one night at a bar in Harlem from a man with a knife who came at me...because he thought, how could I have possibly gotten on the Ed Sullivan show unless I finked?” When Belafonte was asked to clear his name before signing a contract [for *Carmen Jones*?], Belafonte sought Robeson's advice, proposing to write a statement saying, “I did 'Caravans for Wallace' because I was paid for it.” He asked, “Is that bad?” to which Robeson replied, “No, there are few enough jobs for blacks as it is and I wouldn't tell a black what to do.”

Harold George Belafonte, Jr., was born in a Harlem hospital on March 1, 1927. His father was originally from Martinique, but gave up his French citizenship during World War I to become a British subject. His parents came seeking “dignity and opportunity,” but “had to constantly elude federal agents who were rounding up illegal immigrants. We changed our names so constantly that after a while I didn't even know *who* I was.”<sup>212</sup> Harold Sr. worked as a cook in the Royal Navy, and left the family before young Harry reached age six. When he was nine years old, Harry's mother, Melvine Love Belafonte, took him and his younger brother Dennis to her homeland for schooling in Kingston, Jamaica. Harry was a troubled young man, but he learned much about Caribbean culture on the docks and streets of Kingston, and more about community values from his white Jamaican grandmother than from major figures like Marcus Garvey.

At the outset of World War II, Belafonte returned to the U.S. in 1939. He left high school and enlisted in the Navy in 1944, and while training in Illinois, he was introduced to the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois. Reading Du Bois' *Color and Democracy*, Belafonte would have encountered the Pan-Africanist intellectual's perspective on the issues of race, class, and cultural memory in the Preface:

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<sup>211</sup>Navasky 192-193.

<sup>212</sup>*The History Makers: An Evening with Harry Belafonte.*

The present war has made it clear that we can no longer regard Western Europe and North America as the world for which civilization exists; nor can we look upon European culture as the norm for all peoples. Henceforth the majority of the inhabitants of the earth, who happen for the most part to be colored, must be regarded as having the right and the capacity to share in human progress and to become copartners in that democracy which alone can ensure peace among men, by the abolition of poverty, the education of the masses, protection from disease, and the scientific treatment of crime.<sup>213</sup>

Dated January 1, 1945, the collection of essays on the racial economy of colonialism and competing imperialisms was prescient in its account of the status of colonial subjects and black citizens in the postwar era. As an artist, activist, and independent cultural producer in the critical years of civil rights reform, Harry Belafonte modeled his career in the cosmopolitan spirit of Paul Robeson, by studying and developing the traditions of black diasporic culture, by establishing connections to other global folk cultures, and by remaining actively and publicly involved in the politics of cultural representation and human rights.<sup>214</sup>

“Without war and crisis to provide thrust,” Cripps wrote, “Hollywood was left with only its sense of the marketplace as a guide to conduct.” For example, the *Amos 'n Andy Show* ran on CBS from 1951 to 1953, starring black actors Alvin Childress as Amos Jones and Spencer Williams as Andrew 'Andy' Hogg Brown. For some, this was an improvement for the popular program over its radio format, which employed white actors imitating black voices. But organizations like the NAACP protested the stereotypical depiction of black culture on network television. Cripps wrote, “New conditions required new practices such as granting black neighborhoods first-run movies, exploiting the 'unusually high' impact of black press reviews, advertising in the black press, consulting with black ad-men, and other means of taking into account the black

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213W.E.B. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945).

2141. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Belafonte's Balancing Act,” *The New Yorker*, August 26 & September 2 1996.

audience.”<sup>215</sup>

Cripps describes the cinematic period between 1951 and 1967 as “the age of Sidney Poitier,” but Poitier was not considered a star by the American media until the late 1950s. An article in the November 1957 issue of *Ebony* magazine titled “What Makes a Star?” failed to even mention Poitier in its lineup of stars who were evaluated and rated by eleven “experts” from Broadway, Chicago, and Los Angeles, based on ten essential elements: talent; star quality; perseverance and “driving ambition”; promotion, publicity, contacts; personality; luck and “the breaks”; uniqueness; experience and training; intelligence; hit records. The last element identified one of the peculiar aspects of stardom for black performers in the 1950s: all twelve featured artists had either starred in a hit musical or recorded an album in the prior year. Diahann Carroll appeared on the cover, and the article highlighted her Broadway performance in *House of Flowers*. The article also focused on well-established stars like Belafonte, Nat Cole, Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, and Sarah Vaughn; the lesser known performers with star potential were Sallie Blair, Johnny Hartman, Lurlean Hunter, Olga James, and Herb Jeffries.<sup>216</sup>

*Variety* editor Abel Green defined “star quality” as “that special and intangible something—a peculiar chemistry ... which sets that personality separate and apart from other performers.” Max Gordon, co-owner of the Village Vanguard, stated, “Ambition, talent, energy and drive are all essential qualifications for stardom. Then there is a very special personal quality that is hard to define, but which makes for a successful performance.”<sup>217</sup> The group of experts attributed Belafonte's stardom to his switch from pop tunes to folk songs, which happened abruptly after a 1950 Christmas show in Miami, Florida. He had been dubbed “the Cinderella Gentleman” after an impromptu performance at the Royal Roost jazz tavern in January 1949.<sup>218</sup> That night club manager Monte Kay

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215Cripps 252-255.

216“What Makes a Star?” *EBONY*, November 1957.

217“What Makes a Star?”

218*Ebony* credited the nickname to New York disk jockey Symphony Sid, who played and promoted Belafonte's first record; unofficial biographer Arnold Shaw credited John S. Wilson of

approached him about performing “a number,” and Belafonte agreed, singing “Lean On Me” and his own “Recognition” (which included Du Bois-inspired lines like “They won't let me forget I'm dark” and “My color's put a veil on me”).

Belafonte was nervous, Arnold Shaw wrote:

“But there was something about him,” Monte reports, “that the audience liked. I had the feeling that, despite his inexperience and lack of showmanship, he had a real appeal. He was not a smash. But there was promise in him. Let me put it this way. I was impressed enough to offer him a job.”<sup>219</sup>

The “job” turned into a twenty-week engagement and a recording of his first two “Cinderella Night” songs, in a session that included Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Tommy Potter, and Max Roach. Belafonte recorded a few pop standards for Capitol Records, but the company did not exercise its option to renew his contract. He was booked in New York at venues like Café Society in Greenwich Village, and for a few out-of-town gigs, but it was never enough to pay managers, press agents, and make a living without going deep into debt.

The April 24, 1950 issue of *Life* magazine included an article with the headlines “Bobby Soxers Become Billy Soxers to Boost Baritone Billy Eckstine” and “This is Billy's Bonanza Year.” Included was a photograph of Eckstine surrounded by smiling white women, one of whom placed her hand and head upon the singer's chest. The caption below the photo read: “After a show at Bop City, Billy is rushed by admirers. Most profess to have a maternal feeling for him. 'He's just like a little boy,' they say.”<sup>220</sup> Belafonte later recalled, “Billy Eckstine—light-skinned, gloriously good-looking, suave—just had people swooning all over the place. And when that photo hit, in that national publication, it was as if a barrier had been broken.”<sup>221</sup> Another photograph showed Eckstine's entourage—a pianist, personal manager, road manager, two press agents, a *Billboard*

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*Down Beat* magazine, in a story published March 11, 1949.

<sup>219</sup>Arnold Shaw, *Belafonte: An Unauthorized Biography* (Chilton Co., Book Division, 1960).

<sup>220</sup>“Mr. B,” *LIFE*, April 24, 1950.

<sup>221</sup>Gates 136.

magazine writer, and a “golf pro” (Charles Sifford, the first African American inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame, who helped to desegregate the PGA of America). With its caption, “On Billy's bandwagon to help him carry out his busy schedule is a big staff,” this photo likely drove Belafonte's career ambitions as well.

When Belafonte decided to give up the emphasis on jazz and pop in his repertoire in December 1950, he decided to open The Sage restaurant in Greenwich Village with two other aspiring black artists, writer William Attaway and actor Ferman Phillips. In addition to serving hamburgers, The Sage offered folk music in the jukebox and a colorful after-hours nightlife. It closed after only eight months. There, Belafonte also began working with guitarists Millard Thomas and Craig Work, who became his regular accompanists; jazz clarinetist Tony Scott, who became his musical arranger and conductor; and Jack Rollins, an assistant to Max Gordon who became his manager from late 1951 until the end of 1954. Belafonte debuted at the Village Vanguard in November 1951. Max Gordon wrote of his audition:

Harry went into his first number, “Take This Hammer,” a Leadbelly song. (Leadbelly used to do it at the Vanguard every night.) So Jack's making a folks singer out of this guy, I thought. Harry's no Leadbelly, no prisoner swinging a hammer on a chain gang down in Georgia. But he made me listen anyway. ... Harry announced the next number, a calypso. Left arm uplifted, right hand on navel, Belafonte moved his hips as if he were dancing with some imaginary broad. I hate a phony Caribbean accent. I've had the real thing at the Vanguard—Calypso singers from Trinidad: the Lion, Attila the Hun, King Radio, Macbeth the Great. What the hell am I going to do with a phony Caribbean accent?<sup>222</sup>

Gordon also complained about his exotic costume—including an “unbuttoned maroon shirt” that displayed an “unveiled navel”—but Rollins convinced him that

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<sup>222</sup>Max Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (Da Capo Press, 1982) 84-91. When Belafonte sang “The Banana Song” [*sic*], Gordon remembered, “I'd heard that one before. Some years earlier a native girl from Jamaica, Laura Bennett, used to sing it at the Vanguard. She wrote it.”

“women go crazy.” By the end of 1952, Belafonte was a sensation at The Blue Angel (an uptown New York supper club), had a recording contract with RCA Victor, and signed a film contract with the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio for *Bright Road* (1953).

According to Shaw, Margurite Belafonte remembered, “It was The Vanguard, The Blue Angel, The Black Orchid in Chicago, the Chase Hotel in St. Louis—and straight to the sky.” Tony Scott’s wife Fran said that “when he went out to Hollywood around this time...he made some of the film capital’s charm boys look like tired, middle-aged men.” “You see,” she continued, “he had not only charm, good looks and vitality, but a probing mind. The only man with whom he bears comparison in all these ways—and Harry’s better looking—is Frank Sinatra.”<sup>223</sup> But Poitier’s Hollywood break came first. Belafonte first saw a live theatrical production in December 1945, when he was working as a janitor’s assistant and was given tickets to the American Negro Theater (A.N.T.) as a tip. He saw a play called *Home is the Hunter* in the Schomburg Center, and was captivated by the power of performance. He encountered Poitier at A.N.T. auditions, and discovered that they shared a West Indian background, and their “accidental births” in the U.S. were merely a few days apart. On the G.I. Bill, Belafonte enrolled to study in Erwin Piscator’s Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research. In addition to Poitier, his classmates included Marlon Brando (whose 1947 turn as Stanley Kowalski in Kazan’s Broadway production of Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* launched him to stardom) and Tony Curtis (the first of the group to find regular work in films).<sup>224</sup>

Paul Robeson entered the lives of Belafonte and Poitier around this time. Poitier later said, “I remember times when he [Belafonte] and I would meet Robeson in a bar on Fifth Avenue just off 125<sup>th</sup> Street, and sit there and talk. He was very fond of Harry. And Harry loved him.”<sup>225</sup> Robeson visited the A.N.T.

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223Shaw 97-99.

224Belafonte had small roles in two Shakespeare plays at the Workshop, *Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Shaw 40-49.

225Gates 135.

players after a show, and Belafonte remembered “the purpose of art is not to show life as it is but to show life as it should be.”<sup>226</sup> Belafonte built his career on such principles throughout the 1950s and beyond. By the time Belafonte made his first records, Robeson's career was so damaged by blacklisting that he started his own record outfit, the Othello Recording Company. Set up by Lloyd Brown and Paul Robeson, Jr., who ran the company from 1953 to 1955, the company released *Robeson Sings* in December 1952. By the mid-1950s, African Americans had attained the moral high ground in their demands for addressing the problem of racism as a national priority, yet Robeson advised Belafonte and Poitier to avoid being seen or connected with him.

### **The Hollywood Production Code and Segregated Aesthetic Conventions**

Belafonte portrayed a school principal in his first feature film, *Bright Road* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1953). In June 1951, *The Ladies' Home Journal* published a story titled “See How They Run,” written by and based on the experiences of Mary Elizabeth Vroman, who was born in Buffalo, NY, raised in the British West Indies, and graduated from Alabama State Teachers College. The story generated hundreds of letters from readers, won the Christopher Award for inspirational magazine writing, and was republished in the June 1952 issue of *Ebony* magazine. Vroman adapted the story for the screen, and was the first African American woman to become a member of the Screen Writers Guild. The screenplay's co-writer, Emmet Lavery, had been President of the Screen Writers Guild from 1945 to 1947, and the adaptation his play *The First Legion* (1951), directed by Douglas Sirk, was nominated for the WGA Award (Screen) for Best Written American Low-Budget in 1952.<sup>227</sup> *Bright Road* starred Dorothy Dandridge as Jane Richards, a new teacher at a rural elementary school in Alabama, and her older sister, Vivian Dandridge, had a bit part as Miss Nelson, another schoolteacher. Philip Hepburn played C.T. Young, a troubled fourth-

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<sup>226</sup>Duberman 391, 408-9.

<sup>227</sup>In 1956, Lavery's screenplay for *The Court-Martial of Billy Mitchell* (1955) received an Oscar nomination for Best Writing, which he shared with Milton Sperling.

grader who likes to draw insects and keep bees. The only exception to the otherwise all-black cast was Robert Horton as Dr. Mitchell, who arrives to treat C.T.'s sickly friend Tanya (Barbara Ann Sanders).

In the late 1960s, Langston Hughes wrote “this story is not concerned with racial problems and so offends nobody.”<sup>228</sup> However, when Hughes was called before HUAC in 1953, he was asked to confess to his naivete about subversive political activities, denounce his more critical works as inappropriate for the shelves of United States Information Agency (USIA) libraries, and present evidence from examples of his work that “affirmed” the American way of life, or “affirmations.”<sup>229</sup> Director Gerald Mayer was the nephew of M-G-M owner Louis B. Mayer, and the son of studio manager Jerry Mayer. He provided many affirmative, patriotic images in the film's opening sequence, including the pledge of allegiance, a bright classroom decorated with the U.S. flag, and a portrait of Booker T. Washington. In both the story and film, the children have names like Booker T. Jones, “Frederick Douglass, Franklin Delano, Abraham Lincoln, ... Joe Louis, George Washington,” and other “great names of history.” Voiceovers reveal the teacher's thoughts, yet the script omitted many of her concerns about class dynamics and the economic hardships faced by the school and the families of its pupils. For example, when Booker T. introduces himself by saying “I'se ten years old. ... I didn't do nothing in the summer,” she exasperates:

Shades of Uncle Tom! ... How to go about correcting those speech defects? ... Go easy, Jane, don't antagonize them. ... They're clean enough, but this is the first day. ... How can one teacher do any kind of job with a load of forty-three? ... Thank heaven the building is modern and well-built even though it is overcrowded, not like some I've seen – no potbellied stove.<sup>230</sup>

When Miss Richards asks “what does C.T. stand for? Is it Charles or Clarence?” he replies, “No'm, jest C.T.” Deeming him to be a most unfortunate

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228Langston Hughes, ed. *The Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1899-1967: The Classic Anthology*. Back Bay Books, 1969.

229Navasky 190-191.

230Vroman, “See How They Run,” in Hughes 253-274.



case, she tells C.T. that he's a "very lucky boy" who will get to choose his own name. He declines her offer to be called Charles Thomas ("My father named me C.T. after hisself, Miz Richards, an' dat's my name."), and lies about eating a big meal for breakfast. Mr. Johnson, "the kindly, harassed principal," told her, "We'd like to feed them all, so many are underfed, but we just don't have the money." She decides to put him on the school lunch program (he's the fourth of eleven siblings), and writes to her fiancé Paul Carlyle, "I've adopted him, darling. He's so pathetic and so determined to prove that he's not. He learns nothing at all, but I can't let myself believe that he's stupid, so I keep trying." But immediately, Tanya gets sick and the teacher's worries shift from C.T.'s poverty to the predicament of racial segregation, as she has to ask another child to bike Tanya home to her parents. "Do the white schools have a clinic?" she wonders. "Is there anywhere in this town free medical service for one small child ... born black?" Miss Richards goes into town to find a doctor, and collects donations from other teachers to pay him, but he has doubts and speaks to her brusquely. Vroman reveals to readers thoughts that the teacher withholds from the white doctor ("What long sequence of events has caused even the best of you to look on even the best of us as menials?"), demonstrating her restraint, self-discipline, and ability to focus on the child's health in spite of racism.

In the schoolyard children play games and sing the nursery rhyme "Three Blind Mice," from which Vroman's story derived its title. To Jane, "the farmer's wife didn't like poor, hungry, dirty blind mice. So she cut off their tails." She giggled to herself, "Only this time it was forty-three mice. ... Why, I'm hysterical... Running round in circles. Running where, little mice?" Her intervention saved Tanya's life, and the doctor informed her in a letter that her hunch about diphtheria was correct and that he would donate his services. But Tanya's parents could not provide the special care she required and she was dead by Christmas. By contrast, when Tanya mysteriously falls ill in the film it is during the performance of a class play, and the principal brings in the doctor whose diagnosis is viral pneumonia. The nursery rhyme angers C.T. because he favors nature and its

creatures. Hearing the song troubles C.T. and drives him to fight, especially after Tanya's death. Mr. Johnson breaks up the fight, but the setback only leads to more inexplicable failure. The film makes C.T. a hero by having him save the class from a bee attack. The principal says, "We're proud of you," and Miss Richards decides that he deserves a higher grade for his good behavior.

Whereas the film relies heavily on religious symbolism and visual metaphor by likening C.T.'s transformation to that of a caterpillar into butterfly, Vroman's story directly addressed questions of labor, industry, and the use of corporal punishment in schools. And while the film seems to suggest that C.T. is being held back due to personal shortcomings, the systemic institutional problems he must face are a revelation for Miss Richards in the story. "C.T., son of my heart," Jane says, "you are the bright new hope of a doubtful world, and the gay new song of a race unconquered." Other teachers warn her that she "won't last long," and remind her that "Negro teachers have always had to work harder than any others and till recently have always got paid less, so for our own health's sake we have to let up wherever possible." Miss Richards decides that the best way to reach and teach C.T. is by appealing to his interest in building model homes, boats, and aircraft, which means he "might have to learn to do a little measuring, and maybe learn to spell the names of the parts" to be ordered from contractors. Ultimately she comes to an important realization:

But you aren't mice, my darlings. Mice are hated, hunted pests. You are normal, lovable children. The knife of the farmer's wife is double-edged for you, because you are Negro children, born mostly in poverty. ...but most of you shall find your way to stand fine and tall in the annals of man. There's a bright new tomorrow ahead.

Indeed, C.T.'s mother allows him to choose the name Christopher Turner Young.

The racial uplift ideology is played down if not entirely absent in the film, and instead African American culture is expressed via the music of the soundtrack. Dandridge sings a lullaby to her class, "Church in the Wildwood," and "Sweet and Low," written by Charles L. Johnson and Sidney Homer.

Belafonte's principal is cool and calm, and likes Jane's enthusiasm. Thinking he's alone in his classroom, he picks up a guitar and sings "Suzanne," written by Belafonte and Millard Thomas, adapted from a blues ballad that was "meant to be sung by a woman." Belafonte wrote, "Hearing its haunting melody, I became so intrigued with its lyrics and melodic structure, I changed the character of the song so it could be sung by a man."<sup>231</sup> The line "Goin' back to Mobile Town" was tied to the film's narrative, since that is where Jane goes to be with family during the holiday break. Although there was no romantic interest between these co-workers in the story, a little tension arises when Mr. Johnson asks Jane if his behavior was "too gay." A little disinterested, he assures her that there is "no harm in hoping" that C.T.'s behavior would improve.

Given the contemporary political atmosphere, and the historic legal struggle over race and public education in the Supreme Court case *Brown vs. Board of Education*, *Bright Road* was viewed as quaint and innocuous because it did not directly address political issues like the segregationist doctrine of a "separate but equal" system. In *The New York Times*, Bosley Crowther wrote that *Bright Road* was "a cozy detour around the fundamental issue that is raised." The screenplay was "extraordinarily weak on motivation," which was made worse by "the 'prettiness' of a Hollywood production," "as though the people who made it didn't wish to open up any problems or tread on any toes." Without clear signs of discrimination, it is difficult to understand why a child brought up in a home that "looks both comfortable and abounding in happiness and love" would be as "resentful and backward" as C.T. in the film.<sup>232</sup>

On November 1, 1954, Dorothy Dandridge became the first African American woman to appear on the cover of *Life* magazine, in a photograph by Philippe Halsman with the headline "Hollywood's Fiery Carmen Jones."<sup>233</sup> Letters to *Life*'s editors provided a fascinating snapshot of the national mood in the months following the Supreme Court's unanimous decision on May 17. Mrs.

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<sup>231</sup>Harry Belafonte, *Songs Belafonte Sings* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1962).

<sup>232</sup>Bosley Crowther, "Bright Road," *New York Times*, April 29, 1953.

<sup>233</sup>"A New Beauty for Bizet," *LIFE Magazine*, November 1, 1954.

Dorothy Wells of Indianapolis, Indiana, wrote:

Sirs:

Your pictures and story, "A Young Mob Tests a City" (LIFE Oct. 11), made me ashamed to be a member of the white race. I will long remember 14-year-old Leon Thompson whom you showed walking across a street with police protection as a giant among some of the littlest people of my race. I hope he will be able to forgive.

A reader from South Carolina questioned whether the story was "brainwashing white people" or "an appeasement to the Communists," while a Texan related that he "was very pleased to see white people standing up for their rights," as he felt that the Supreme Court decision "was an illegal invasion of States Rights." An African American mother from Cleveland, Ohio, wondered if her thirteen year-old son would be "at a standstill the rest of his life, no matter how much education he gets..." Perhaps most tellingly, Bayley Walker of Atlanta, Georgia, wrote, "Our high school and church classes have held several debates on the subject of segregation. We conclude that it is the parents who want segregation, not we, the pupils."

Dorothy Dandridge was hardly the "new girl" in the early 1950s entertainment industry. Before the *Life* issue was published, she appeared in a sensational photograph series in the June 1954 issue of *Esquire* men's magazine. Like Lena Horne in the 1940s, Dandridge quickly came to symbolize black femininity and desirability.<sup>234</sup> Belafonte was also a rising star that year, making his Broadway debut "as a singing actor" in *John Murray Anderson's Almanac*, which opened December 10, 1953, at the Imperial Theatre, produced by The Shubert Organization. Sadly, John Murray Anderson died of a heart attack in New York City on January 30, 1954, but the show went on until June 26, 1954. Anderson nicknamed Belafonte "The Horror," and called his guitar accompanist, Millard Thomas, "The Horror's Horror." They performed folk favorites "Mark Twain" and "Acorn in the Meadow," and the work song "Hold 'Em

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<sup>234</sup>Donald Bogle, *Dorothy Dandridge* (Amistad, 1997).

Joe.” The 8th Annual Tony Awards® were presented on March 28, 1954, at the Plaza Hotel Grand Ballroom, and broadcast on NBC radio. Belafonte won the Tony for Best Featured Actor in a Musical. He also received the Theatre World Award for his debut performance, and felt that he was “on the verge of realizing” his “original ambition” of being a nonsinging actor. As *Theatre Arts* magazine pointed out, since Belafonte's singing voice would be dubbed in his next movie he would have “only one thing to do. Act.”<sup>235</sup>

The 1954 film adaptation of Oscar Hammerstein's *Carmen Jones* (Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation) is the best example of Hollywood's return to popular 1940s Negro musical as a vehicle to reach black audiences. Director Otto Preminger had already established a reputation for challenging the Hollywood studio Production Code and its dictum of enforcing “compensating moral values” in racialized terms. Interestingly, it took a reversion to wartime cultural forms and expressions of values to revive debate about black political ideology and economic opportunities in postwar America. The original Billy Rose production was a hit when it opened at the Broadway Theatre on December 2, 1943, and ran for over 500 performances until February 1945.

In a film that promised a spectacular showcase of black sensuality in CinemaScope, Belafonte played the part of Joe the soldier, who is training to be a pilot but gets into deep trouble for fighting Sergeant Brown (Brock Peters) and falling for Carmen. As in *Bright Road*, the film's brightest star was Dandridge as the exotic Carmen. The film raised questions of black authenticity since the singing voices of Belafonte and Dandridge were dubbed for the operatic numbers. The use of black dialect in Hammerstein's lyrics created a paradoxical tension between the “high” cultural aesthetics of classical opera and the “low” status of vernacular minstrel-speak. LeVern Hutcherson was dubbed into the soundtrack for Joe's singing voice on numbers like “You Talk Jus' Like My Maw” and “Dis Flower,” and Marilyn Horne supplied Carmen's singing voice for the musical's popular songs “Dat's Love” and “Dere's a Cafe on de Corner.”

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<sup>235</sup>“Call Me Actor,” *Theatre Arts*, July 1954.

However, Olga James, who played Joe's girlfriend Cindy Lou, performed “My Joe” (based on the aria “Micaëla's Air” from Act 3 of the opera) and “He Got His Self Another Woman,” and was not dubbed in the film. Pearl Bailey played Carmen's friend Frankie, who was not dubbed in “Beat Out Dat Rhythm on a Drum,” but the singing voice for prizefighter Husky Miller (played by Joe Adams) was supplied by Marvin Hayes. In the ensemble number “Whizzin' Away Along de Track,” the character Myrt was played on screen by a precocious Diahann Carroll, but her part was sung by Bernice Peterson.<sup>236</sup>

To fully comprehend the ramifications of the changing value of race for cinematic representation, we must explore the social positioning of the black masculine aspect of cultural identity and its dynamic relationship to American tensions of class and gender relations. In *Cabin in the Sky* (M-G-M, 1943), for example, director Vincente Minnelli pits good, “spiritual” black characters (i.e., pious but naïve or superstitious) against “bad Negroes” (who are vile, ignorant, or malicious) in Busby Berkeley style. These are the warring stereotypes that Cripps describes in *Slow Fade to Black*: the righteous figures—Ethel Waters (as Petunia Jackson), Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson (Joseph 'Little Joe' Jackson), Lena Horne (Georgia Brown), Louis Armstrong (The Trumpeter)—battle the deceptive and disloyal, embodied in Mantan Moreland (“First Idea Man”), Willie Best (“Second Idea Man”), and Rex Ingram in a double role as Lucifer Jr. and Lucius Ferry. The flashback narrative of Andrew L. Stone's *Stormy Weather* (Twentieth Century Fox-Film Corporation, 1943) allowed for a more stylized presentation of black singers and musicians like Lena Horne (as Selina Rogers), Dooley Wilson, Cab Calloway, and Fats Waller, as well as a showcase for the talents of dancers and choreographers Bill Robinson, Fayard and Harold Nicholas, and Katherine Dunham. Dancers from the war era like Carmencita Romero and Archie Savage, who appeared in *Cabin in the Sky*, found work in *Carmen Jones* in scenes with the next generation of modern dancers like Alvin Ailey and Carmen De Lavallade.

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<sup>236</sup>In “Whizzin' Away,” Brock Peters was dubbed for actor Roy Glenn, who played Rum Daniels.

In his review, Crowther wrote that *Carmen Jones* was “a crazy mixed-up film,” “a sex melodrama with longhair music and a mad conglomeration of bizarre show.” He observed that the material in the film adaptation “is not so much poignant as it is lurid and lightly farcical, with the Negro characters presented by Mr. Preminger as serio-comic devotees of sex.” Dandridge lacked “the desperate, tragic hunger for possession” of Bizet's *Carmen*, and instead seemed like “a calculating little siren ... interested mainly in a good time.” Belafonte was “oddly unheroic,” “an oddly static symbol of masculine lust lost in a vortex of confusion rather than a nightmare of shame.”<sup>237</sup> For Cripps, the film amounted to “a creaking anachronism,” which “by the 1950s it seemed merely a projection of Spanish stereotypes onto blacks and therefore an easy target for critics in search of backsliding.”<sup>238</sup>

Although *Carmen Jones* was a throwback in that it featured an all-star cast of contemporary black performers, the film's producers hoped that the narrative would be received as universally tragic because Joe the hero (Don José in Bizet's opera) spurns the “good girl” and gives in to his passions for a “wild woman.” On the merits of acting alone, Belafonte's soldier was the first of what Cripps calls his “Byronic, doomed outlaws” (in contrast to Poitier's “perennial hero”). While Poitier was apt to choose characters that “worked the centers of the American ethos,” Belafonte preferred marginalized characters who “played its rimlands.”<sup>239</sup> In Richard Dyer's typology, Belafonte's cinematic blackness can be interpreted as the “rebel” social type (whether anomic or alienated), for whom “there is some suggestion that the problem lies outside the hero,” and “is often defined as the failure of some persons in her/his world to live up to traditional concepts and dominant values.”<sup>240</sup> His appeal in films featuring radical outsiders and themes of mobility drew regular comparisons to Marlon Brando, and Belafonte's transition from singer to actor likened him to Frank Sinatra (moreso

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237Bosley Crowther, “*Carmen Jones*,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1954.

238Cripps 262-3.

239Cripps 251.

240Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars* (BFI Publishing, 1998) 52-54.

than crossovers like Nat Cole or Sammy Davis). Both Brando and Sinatra followed Belafonte into musical outsider roles in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's film adaptation of *Guys and Dolls* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1955).

By 1955, Belafonte was still intent on becoming a professional actor, but his Broadway performance awards and frequent television appearances foretold his potential as a popular singer and live entertainer. Belafonte starred in *3 for Tonight* with Marge and Gower Champion, the show's director. Subtitled "A Diversion in Song and Dance" with original music by Walter Schumann, the performance was produced on a bare stage by Paul Gregory, opened at the Plymouth Theatre on April 6, 1955, and ran for 85 performances. In addition to Belafonte's twelve songs and the Champions' dancing, there was a master of ceremonies—Hiram Sherman as the Story Teller—and a chorus of twenty singers, whose only props were their straw hats and wooden stools. *3 for Tonight* was described by *Life* magazine as "a modern cousin of the oldtime minstrel show," but was regarded as distinctive due to "the professional polish of the gifted performers and their engaging unprofessional friendliness." In particular, New York critics gave Belafonte the "most resounding bravos ('vibrant ... magnetic ... in every way brilliant ... ready to join company with the great entertainers')." <sup>241</sup> After closing on June 18, 1955, the show aired on the June 22 episode of the CBS program *Front Row Center*.

William Attaway was a writer for *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, and Belafonte appeared on three episodes of that variety show in 1955. Television had become the most effective medium for broadcasting the calls for freedom during the civil rights movement of this period, and the popular appeal of social problem teleplays was also indicative of a sympathetic cultural response to African American issues on the nation's screens. In "Winner By Decision," a November 6, 1955, episode of *General Electric Theater* on CBS written by Attaway, Belafonte starred as a young, impressionable boxer, persuaded by his mother's love to quit fighting and take advantage of the G.I. Bill to pursue his education.

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<sup>241</sup>"3 for Tonight' and 19 Stools," *LIFE* Magazine, April 25, 1955.



This “live” theatrical program exemplified the way in which Hollywood studios faced competition from a new medium, and challenged producers to seek newer, more sensational material to attract audiences to movie theaters.<sup>242</sup> Thus, the repeal of *Plessy v. Ferguson* marked an important shift in terms of U.S. discourses on race, labor, school desegregation, and the specter of “social equality,” while displacement to foreign locales remained a strategy for the containment of difference and reacting to threats of white resistance and backlash. As Cripps argued, Hollywood's formula of “limiting racial discourse to the admission of a single iconic black into a white circle (platoon, courtroom, surgery, and of course, on televised news after 1954, school)” caved in to economic pressures, yet it simultaneously anticipated or even half-formed the shape of things to come in the U.S. civil rights movement.<sup>243</sup>

### **Denial and Desire in the Caribbean Family Melodrama**

Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin died in 1953, and the following year the U.S. Senate overwhelmingly voted to censure anti-Communist crusader Joseph McCarthy.<sup>244</sup> *Ebony* magazine called 1955 “Harry Belafonte's Best Year,” but after he was featured on the cover of the March 1956 issue with his wife Marguerite and their six year-old daughter Adrienne, he proceeded to top what up to that point had been “unparalleled triumphs.” Although their second child, one-year old Shari, was not in the *Ebony* cover photo by Bertrand Miles (“just wouldn't hold still for a color shot”), the entire family figured prominently in stories for both *Ebony* and *Look* magazines.<sup>245</sup> Both articles mentioned their home in East Elmhurst, Long Island, N.Y., as well as Marguerite's education and work as a child psychologist. The *Look* profile, titled “The Belafonte Boom,” focused on his status as an outsider and rule-breaker, noting that he had become “a national

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242Contrast to Joe Louis as a broken hero in the episode titled “The Return of Gentleman Jim,” and Robert Gordon's *The Joe Louis Story* (United Artists, 1953). See also Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, esp. battle royale scenes and black veterans at Golden Day.

243Cripps 250. See also Neve, *Film and Politics in America*; Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name*, and Catherine Benamou on “Hollywood's wounded hegemony.”

244McCarthy died at the age of 48 in Bethesda Naval Hospital on May 2, 1957.

245“Harry Belafonte's Best Year,” *EBONY*, March 1956.

singing sensation” by performing traditional spirituals and folk songs, and not conforming to “popular taste.”<sup>246</sup> “America is my Tin Pan Alley,” Belafonte said, and beginning in the early 1950s, he began seriously studying global folk musical styles at the Library of Congress, and whenever he traveled he recorded a variety of performers on tape for field research.

Belafonte signed a record contract with RCA Victor in 1952, but his first LP, *Mark Twain and Other Folk Favorites*, was not released until 1954. His self-titled second album, *Belafonte*, had an advance sale of over 50,000 copies. He seemed completely comfortable with the idea of being “an actor in song,” and used his dramatic training to full effect in his shows:

In performance, he sways back and forth, almost in a rock 'n' roll rhythm, his eyes unseeing behind half-closed lids and a plaintive baritone voice pouring from his chest. He moves easily from song to song, varying pace and mood, and he uses his arms with a Barrymore's dramatic power. Often, his face is somber and intense. But at times, it lights up with an infectiously mischievous smile that captivates his audience, who can never anticipate what this remarkable entertainer will do next.<sup>247</sup>

He was “the night-club singer most in demand” with an average salary of \$7,500 per week (up from \$5,500 in 1955), and he had moved far beyond venues like the Blue Angel, Village Vanguard, and the supper club circuit to top spots like the Copacabana and the Waldorf-Astoria. Belafonte broke a 39-year attendance record at the outdoor Lewisohn Stadium in New York (25,000), and after the show the venue's impresario told him backstage to “get scarce,” since fans were set to “swarm” him.

In the same issue, *Look* included a piece titled “Bogart on Hollywood,” which was the transcript of a conversation between “old pro” Humphrey Bogart and a group of “young hopefuls” seeking advice on “how to make good in the movie world.” One of those aspiring actors was Dennis Hopper, who

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<sup>246</sup>“The Belafonte Boom,” *Look*, August 21, 1956.

<sup>247</sup>“Belafonte Boom” 41.

complained, “Most people in Hollywood can't act anyway,” and, “Most people in their private lives, especially, in Hollywood, have no sense of truth.” Bogart reminded him that “You don't know most people in Hollywood,” but both he and Lauren Bacall agreed that it was a bad idea to “try to imitate Brando” like other “so-called young personality boys,” and encouraged all to “be honest with yourself” and “don't let them push you around.” (Frank Sinatra entered the room, and when asked if he had heard of “the Stanislavsky method” he simply replied, “I use the Sinatra method myself.”) “You're O.K., kid,” Bogart told Hopper. He advised: “Keep working. Never be 'available.' Keep playing in the theater or TV, anywhere, as often as you can. Eventually, if you're any good, somebody will see you.”

At age twenty, Hopper's first two roles in major films—*Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Giant* (1956)—coincided with the last two roles in the tragically brief career of James Dean, yet another iconic outsider in 1950s cinema. Dean died in a car accident on September 30, 1955, and received the first posthumous Oscar nomination for acting (Best Actor in a Leading Role) for his part as Cal Trask in Kazan's adaptation of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1955). On March 21, 1956, Belafonte performed at The 28th Annual Academy Awards, which was broadcast on NBC. The previous year, Dorothy Dandridge celebrated her historic Oscar nomination for Best Actress in *Carmen Jones*, which boosted her celebrity status when added to the international spotlight at the Cannes Film Festival and the film's box office success. Produced on a six-week schedule and a \$750,000 budget, the film grossed over \$3 million, an impressive pinnacle for all-black musicals.

Although he had not been in any films since *Carmen Jones*, from this moment until the end of the decade Belafonte kept extremely busy working on his albums, concerts, stage shows, and film projects. He said to himself, “Remember it could all end tomorrow.” Belafonte's next lead role was in Jay Richard Kennedy's musical drama *Sing, Man, Sing!* (opened March 1956).<sup>248</sup>

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248Jay Richard Kennedy, “Sing, Man, Sing!” (Kennedy-Belafonte Productions, 1956).

Alvin Ailey was a featured dancer in the show, and stated that, in his opinion, “Belafonte had no innate identification with American blacks and that he was not a serious artist.”<sup>249</sup> In 1987, Belafonte recalled, “I sang and he danced.” He continued, “He didn't think I sang well enough, and I didn't think he danced well enough.”<sup>250</sup> Audiences quickly came to appreciate his skill for musical interpretation and his record sales soared, with his second and third albums (*Belafonte* and *Calypso*) topping the Billboard charts for months in 1956 and 1957.

*Calypso* was the first album to sell over a million copies, spurring what *Time* magazine called “Calypsomania”—a faddish wave of imitators of the Trinidadian musical style on records, stages, and screens. A music house in Manhattan sold “do-it-yourself Calypso Kits” (bongo drums, gourd, and a pair of maracas), new calypso nightclubs opened (Ciro's in Hollywood, The Blue Angel in Chicago, Le Cupidon and The Jamaican Room in New York), and old nightclubs donned “calypso dress” (fishnet, hammocks, palm fronds, steel drummers). Columbia Records announced an album of calypso songs for children, while Capitol relied on the popularity of a “cleaned-up version” of Lord Flea and His Calypsonians' *The Naughty Little Flea* to capitalize on the moment, as the genre accounted for “roughly a quarter” of pop record sales. *Time* acknowledged that “American imitators” like Belafonte and Pennsylvania native Terry Gilykson of The Easy Riders (who recorded “Marianne” for Columbia) were more financially successful than “authentic” performers like Lord Flea (a migrant Jamaican mento performer from Kingston) and the Duke of Iron (Cecil Anderson), and noted that Belafonte's “Day-O” and “Jamaica Farewell” were “not really calypso, but no one seems to care.” In the traditional, extemporaneous style of professional calypsonians like Atila the Hun (Raymond Quevedo),

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<sup>249</sup>Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2004) 54. Ailey was critical of the New York modern dance scene in the fifties, and expressed disappointment in not being able to find a technique similar to Horton's. He observed the classes of modern dance contemporaries such as Martha Graham, which he called “finicky and strange.” He also disliked the techniques of Doris Humphrey, and Jose Limon, so he began creating works of his own.

<sup>250</sup>Dunning 376-77.

Growler (Errol Duke), and Lord Executor (Philip Garcia), “lyrics might relate some back-fence gossip, reflect on the paternity of a neighbor or comment on political news.” While there had been “calypso flurries” in the past (like “Rum and Coca-Cola” in 1945), the 1957 boom was “something of a mystery,” but Belafonte was clearly at its center.<sup>251</sup>

While *Look* proclaimed Clark Gable as the “King of Hollywood” that year, Belafonte began wrestling with the media hype that insisted on dubbing him the “King of Calypso.” Belafonte performed all manner of Caribbean folk music—in addition to Negro spirituals, blues, and folks standards from contemporary musicians—but this aspect of his cultural identity became permanently identified with the multi-million dollar mid-century calypso craze.<sup>252</sup> The official “Calypso King” competition in Trinidad was inaugurated in 1939, when Growling Tiger's “Trade Union” was top choice in a field that included Atilla the Hun, King Radio, Lord Caresser, Lord Pretender, and Roaring Lion. In 1956, Mighty Sparrow was crowned Calypso King for his song “Yankees Gone,” and in 1957 the winner was Lord Pretender's “Que Sera Sera.”<sup>253</sup>

Hollywood audiences were not at all unfamiliar with Caribbean music and settings in 1950s films. Rita Hayworth, Glenn Ford, Juanita Moore, and choreographer Valerie Bettis starred in *Affair in Trinidad* (Columbia Pictures, 1952), a Caribbean murder mystery directed by Vincent Sherman. Intended as a comeback picture for Hayworth (born Margarita Carmen Cansino) after *The Loves of Carmen* (1948) and her failed marriage to Prince Aly Khan, she performed two numbers, “I've Been Kissed Before” and “Trinidad Lady” (both dubbed by Jo Ann Greer).<sup>254</sup> In the 3-D Universal musical featurette *Carnival in April* (Universal Pictures, 1953), a short film produced by Will Cowan, Haitian-born calypso dancer Josephine Premice performed in the “I Go Siesta” segment.

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251“Music: Calypsomania.” *Time* 25 Mar. 1957; “The Fad from Trinidad.” *EBONY* June 1957: 48-52.

252Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

253Dave Thompson, *Reggae and Caribbean Music* (Hal Leonard Corporation, 2002) 57-66.

254Greer also was the singing voice for Susan Kohner's performance of “Empty Arms” in Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959).

In the wake of Belafonte's *Calypso* album, a new cycle of calypso films appeared in June 1957. *Calypso Heat Wave* (Columbia Pictures, 1957) was directed by Fred F. Sears and featured Maya Angelou and Alan Arkin (leader of The Tarriers). Angelou performed her song "All That Happens in the Market Place," and The Tarriers performed their version of "The Banana Boat Song" (released on Glory Records). Angelou released her album *Miss Calypso* in 1957 (recorded in November 1956), which featured "Scandal in the Family," the song that provided the back story for the narrative in Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1943).<sup>255</sup> "Run Joe" (by Louis Jordan, Walt Merrick, and Joe Willoughby) and "Stone Cold Dead in de Market" (written by Wilmoth "Houdini" Hendricks, aka Edgar Leon Sinclair) were recorded by Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five in the 1940s.<sup>256</sup> In addition to the film's title song, "Calypso Heat Wave," the film also featured "Calypso Joe" and "Rock Joe."

Edward Dein's *Calypso Joe* (Allied Artists Pictures, 1957) was also released that summer, a "B" movie starring Herb Jeffries as the title character, who performed many numbers with his band, The Calypsomaniacs. The film starred Angie Dickinson as Julie, a flight attendant who falls in love with a South American millionaire. Also featured were Lord Flea and His Calypsonians, The Easy Riders, and The Lester Horton Dancers. One of the most exploitative examples in the cycle was *Bop Girl Goes Calypso* (United Artists, 1957), a teen-

<sup>255</sup>In *I Walked with a Zombie*, "Scandal in the Family" was performed by Sir Lancelot (Lancelot Victor Edward Pinard). Sir Lancelot was a popular calypsonian in the 1940s, who was a likely influence on Belafonte. He appeared in Gregory Ratoff's *Two Yanks in Trinidad* (Columbia Pictures, 1942) and Curtis Bernhardt's *Happy Go Lucky* (Paramount Pictures, 1943), and then became a character actor in many of the films produced by Val Lewton's horror unit at RKO. In addition to *I Walked with a Zombie*, Sir Lancelot performed in Mark Robson's *The Ghost Ship* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1943), Gunther von Fritsch's and Robert Wise's *The Curse of the Cat People* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1944), and Gordon Douglas's *Zombies on Broadway* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1945). He also appeared in Howard Hawks's *To Have and Have Not* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1944), as Horatio, the Queen Conch crewman.

<sup>256</sup>*Miss Calypso*'s "Push Ka Pici Pi" was also written by Jordan, Merrick, and Willoughby. Maya Angelou and Alvin Ailey also performed in the show *Caribbean Calypso Carnival* (opened April 1957). Ailey also appeared with Lena Horne in the Broadway show *Jamaica* (1957); Dunning 94-95. *Jamaica* featured the song "Incompatibility," which not only alludes to "the serpent in the tree," but also contains the following line: "Incompatibility—a classic disaster. / Look at *Othello* and *Anna Lucasta*." See also Shane Vogel, "Jamaica on Broadway: The Popular Caribbean and Mock Transnational Performance," *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 1 (March 2010): 1-21.

oriented film directed by Howard W. Koch and featuring Lord Flea, in which a professor tries to prove his theory that rock and roll is already outdated by convincing a “bop” singer in a Hollywood nightclub to switch to the calypso style, against the wishes of her manager.<sup>257</sup>

Musically, Belafonte owed much in his Caribbean folk and calypso repertoire to his long-time collaborator, Juilliard-trained songwriter and arranger Lord Burgess (Irving Burgie). Calypso scholar Daisann McLane noted that the percussive, physical performance style is such that, “You don't necessarily have to be on key, but you do have to be on time.” Distinguishing Belafonte's style from more traditional performers, she called his “calypso with a conk.” Belafonte put his Americanized success in perspective:

There were great calypsonians who could never see the light of day in this country, because they were so distanced from this culture. Now I came along and modified the dialect, I put it into a rhythm that was more closely identified with the American scene. If, instead, I came in and sang this stuff with a thick Jamaican accent, it would have been like listening to Italian opera.<sup>258</sup>

Belafonte outsold American superstars Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra in 1957, and received widespread media attention in the promotion of the film *Island in the Sun* that year.<sup>259</sup>

After leaving Twentieth Century Fox, Daryl F. Zanuck's first independent

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257Other notable films in the calypso cycle: Sam Newfield, *House-Rent Party* (Toddy Pictures Co., 1946), with Macbeth's Calypso Band, The Lord Invador, Pigmeat 'Alamo' Markham, and John 'Rastus' Murray; William Forest Crouch, *Cowboy Calypso*, musical short (Soundies Distributing Corporation of America, 1946); W. Lee Wilder, *Manfish* (United Artists, 1956), filmed in Jamaica, based on Edgar Allan Poe stories; Gerard Bryant, *Rock Around the World* (American International Pictures (AIP), 1957); Golfiero Colonna and Franco Rossi, *Calypso* (Enalpa Film, Italy, 1958), with Guyanese actor, singer and writer Cy Grant, who recorded five albums, and was best-known for his records *King Cricket* and *The Constantine Calypso*, and appeared as “Number Four” in *Sea Wife* (1957), with Joan Collins and Richard Burton; William Berke, *Island Women* (United Artists, 1958), with Leslie Scott, Kay Barnes, Irene Williams and others; Gene Deitch, *Calypso Cat* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1962), a “Tom and Jerry” cartoon.

258Gates 138-9.

259See also Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music*. Oxford University Press US, 2009. pp. 183-199, on Belafonte vs. rock and roll.

production was *Island in the Sun* (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1957), an adaptation of Alec Waugh's best-selling 1955 novel of the same name, directed by Robert Rossen. Rossen won the 1950 Robert Meltzer Award as the acclaimed writer and director of *All the King's Men*, his adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a Huey Long-esque small town politician who rises to fame but is tainted by corruption. The film was an epic in the fashion of *Citizen Kane*, and it also received the WGA Screen Award for the year's Best Written American Drama, the Directors Guild of America (DGA) Award for Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Motion Pictures, as well as three Oscars, including Best Picture of 1949.<sup>260</sup> Rossen was an established screenwriter by the mid-1940s, specializing in adaptations and hard-boiled studio gangster films, and *All the King's Men* was only his third time at the helm. His directorial debut was *Johnny O'Clock* (1947), and then he directed John Garfield and Canada Lee in *Body and Soul* (1947), which was written by Abraham Lincoln Polonsky.

Abe Polonsky was a former Communist whose name was given to HUAC by a number of people, and Zanuck fired him from Twentieth Century-Fox after he publicly admitted that he saw nothing wrong with Communists working in the U.S., for example, as firemen. When Polonsky appeared before HUAC in April 1951, he invoked the Fifth Amendment (against the advice of his agent).<sup>261</sup> Polonsky said of Kazan's decision to name names to the Committee, "Kazan was not in the process of going around giving the names of people whom he thought were hostile to the society he had come to love. ... All he had was a disagreement politically with some people." But when confronted by HUAC, what Kazan and other informers faced was practical and economic problem, not one based on morality, ethics, or politics. "The fact of the matter is," Polonsky said,

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<sup>260</sup>*All the King's Men* also won Academy Awards for Best Actor in a Leading Role (Broderick Crawford) and Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Mercedes McCambridge). Rossen also received Oscar nominations for Best Director and Best Screenplay, and the film was nominated for Best Film Editing and Best Actor in a Supporting Role.

<sup>261</sup>Navasky 100-101, 167, 284. Among those who named Polonsky was actor Sterling Hayden, who portrayed Brigadier General Jack Ripper in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).



“unless Kazan became a stool pigeon or an informer, whichever one he prefers, under no circumstances whatsoever could he have directed a film in the United States.” According to Navasky, Kazan said that “anyone who says he did it for the money is 'simplistic,'” but a comparison of the divergent paths of Polonsky and Rossen suggests otherwise.<sup>262</sup>

Following his Oscar nomination for the screenplay of *Body and Soul*, Polonsky made his directorial debut with *Force of Evil* (1948), which he wrote. The film starred John Garfield as an unscrupulous lawyer who partners with a gangster in the numbers racket.<sup>263</sup> His next screen credit was for his adaptation of *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* (1951), the story of a ruthless fashion designer in New York's garment district starring Susan Hayward. The film was released in April 1951, the same month Polonsky appeared before HUAC; described by Illinois Republican Harold Velde as “a very dangerous citizen,” he worked little and only anonymously for the rest of the decade. On the other hand, Rossen followed *All the King's Men* with *The Brave Bulls*, an adaptation of Tom Lea's novel starring Mel Ferrer and Anthony Quinn that he produced and directed in Mexico in the spring of 1950. Due to HUAC's investigation of Rossen (one of the “Hollywood Nineteen” first called to testify), Columbia Pictures delayed the film's release until April 1951 (sans bullfighting sequences that were deemed too violent at the time). Rossen refused to name names at his January 1951 HUAC appearance, but in 1953 he said, “I don't think, after two years of thinking, that any one individual can even indulge himself in the luxury of individual morality or pit it against what I feel today very strongly is the security and safety of this nation.” Rossen refused to accept the characterization of “being a stool pigeon or an informer,” but he had not worked in three years and decided to provide

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<sup>262</sup>Navasky 279-280.

<sup>263</sup>Polonsky on Garfield's refusal to name names: “He said he hated Communists, he hated Communism, he was an American. He told the Committee what it wanted to hear. But he wouldn't say the one thing that would keep him from walking down his old neighborhood block. Nobody could say, 'Hey, there's the fucking stool pigeon.' You see, that's what he was fighting against: He should be a stool pigeon because he can only gain from it, yet he can't do it because in his mind he lives in the street where he comes from and in the street he comes from you're not a stool pigeon. That's the ultimate horror.” Navasky xix.

names (including *Brave Bulls* screenwriter John Milton Bright, a founder of the Screen Writers Guild) and “a detailed rundown of Communist Party practices” to the Committee.<sup>264</sup>

After co-writing and directing the U.S.-Italy co-production *Mambo* (Italy, 1954), Rossen wrote and directed Richard Burton in the epic *Alexander the Great* (1956), which he also independently produced in Spain.<sup>265</sup> Rossen's lawyer, Sidney Cohn, had to make arrangements for Rossen to get his passport to return to the U.S. in 1956, when Zanuck hired him to direct *Island in the Sun*. The film was shot in CinemaScope on location in Barbados and Grenada, on a six-week schedule and an estimated budget of \$2.25 million. The following analysis illuminates the way in which this film combined elements of the 1950s American family melodrama with the Shakespearean Othello trope to explore Caribbean history and the psychological effects of modern racism.

Since the release of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), the racial melodrama has been the most revealing form for limning out the capriciousness of American attitudes toward interracial desire and efforts for progressive civil rights reform. There was a tendency to contain desires for freedom that were often judged as tragically overzealous and represented as an unstable primal passion. In the 1950s, films in the melodramatic mode continued to explore and expose the controversial issue of American race and gender relations. For example, James Mason, who starred as Maxwell Fleury in *Island in the Sun*, produced and starred in *Bigger Than Life* (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1956), a melodrama directed Nicholas Ray that effectively addressed the mid-century crisis in white masculinity. Ultimately, attempts to produce positive portrayals of African Americans in similar films of this period

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264Navasky xvii-xviii, 73, 74. Rossen said “as far as he knew [Bright] was no longer a Communist.” Bright left the U.S. for Mexico to avoid subpoena. Sue Rossen (widow), told Navasky: “Right from the beginning my husband ... wanted to say, 'I'm a member of the Communist Party and fuck you.'” Later, “He was totally rejected by everybody. ... He was scared about money, terribly frightened,” 303.

265Dino De Laurentiis and Carlo Ponti were the producers of *Mambo*. Silvana Mangano as Giovanna Masetti; Michael Rennie as Enrico Marisoni; Shelley Winters as Toni Salerno; Katherine Dunham as Dance teacher; Julie Robinson as Marisa.

resulted in the neutralization of black masculinity. Waugh, a writer of travel magazine articles and books, set this fictional narrative about an American journalist covering political intrigue and interracial intimacy among islanders facing an uncertain, post-colonial future. In his 1947 essay, "The West Indian Scene," Waugh wrote: "A West Indian day ends as it begins, at an early hour. ... There is no night life in an urban sense... The ninety minutes on the club veranda over the drinks short or long represent the climax of the day." He advised tourists:

The conversation will follow an habitual pattern: there will be local gossip, there will be discussion of the latest party at G.H. [Government House], there will be commercial talk of the price of cocoa, of the slump in sugar. Political talk will be concentrated on the policy of the Imperial Government. It is conversation in which the tourist can take little part. At the start of the evening, he will be asked, for good manners' sake, a number of questions about his trip. ...but unless he is an extrovert who wants to dominate the conversation and become its center, he will find himself gradually slipping into the background, which he will be content to do, since he is here to learn, to absorb an atmosphere, to receive rather than to create impressions.<sup>266</sup>

Belafonte played the part of David Boyeur, an inspiring political activist, and sang the film's title song, which he co-wrote with Lord Burgess:

This is my island in the sun  
Where my people have toiled since time begun.  
Tho I may sail on many a sea,  
Her shores will always be home to me.

Oh, island in the sun,  
Willed to me by my father's hand,  
All my days I will sing in praise  
Of your forests, waters, your shining sand.

When morning breaks the heaven on high,  
I lift my heavy load to the sky.  
Sun comes down with a burning glow,

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<sup>266</sup>Waugh, Alec. *Love and the Caribbean: Tales, Characters and Scenes of the West Indies* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1959) 205.

Mingles my sweat with the earth below.

I see woman on bended knee,  
Cutting cane for her family.  
I see a man at the water's side,  
Casting nets at the surging tide.

I hope that the day will never come  
That I can't awake to the sound of drum.  
Never let me miss carnival,  
With calypso songs philosophical.

By 1957, Belafonte was widely recognized as “the most popular folk singer ever heard in America,” and his album of live recordings *An Evening with Belafonte* was released earlier that year. “Island in the Sun” was included on his next studio album, *Belafonte Sings of the Caribbean*, with songs like “Haiti Cherie” and “Love, Love Alone.” He said he aimed to communicate “the honest emotion” of everyday people, like “some little guy in Haiti when he sings forth his harvest prayer of thanksgiving.” “This goes against the rules,” Belafonte said. He continued:

For big success, you're supposed to decide whether you want to be a matinee-idol type and play to women, a tough-guy type and play to the men, or a Liberace type and play to the mothers. ... Folk songs are music and spirit I understand, and because to me they are so much truth, I have gone beyond the pure minstrel style, the straight verse and straight melodic line, in order to communicate the great dramatic strength in them.<sup>267</sup>

When extensive research failed to produce “an authentic folk song to express a certain slice of life,” Belafonte collaborated with writer Bill Attaway and Lord Burgess.” This was the case with favorites like “Mark Twain” and “Island in the Sun.” In addition to giving Belafonte an opportunity to use his own singing voice in the film, the song also expresses a concern for indigenous rights, labor power, the control of representations, and territoriality. The song is featured in

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267J. Van Holmes, “Belafonte Gives It All He's Got.” *Saturday Evening Post* 20 Apr. 1957: 28, 69.

the soundtrack for the film's opening credits, in a montage of naturalist imagery imbued with black islanders working in various trades. The theme music reappears in key scenes throughout the film, integrated into the original soundtrack music by Malcolm Arnold.<sup>268</sup>

Under the advisement of Zanuck and Rossen, scriptwriter Alfred Hayes adapted Waugh's novel for the screen. The film attempted to translate two problems for American audiences via displacement to the British West Indies: interracial relations in the postcolonial moment and desiring the other.<sup>269</sup>

Compared to the tragic figure of Joe the soldier in *Carmen Jones*, David Boyeur is a radical black labor organizer in *Island in the Sun*. The decision to cut the militant black lawyer Grainger Morris from the narrative puzzled Truman Gibson, a black Pentagon official who also worked as a consultant to the PCA, who "identified with" the character and felt that it helped to explain "some of the basic reasons why [West Indians were] ... pushing toward dominion status."<sup>270</sup>

The spectator is aligned with Bradshaw, an American journalist recently arrived from the U.S., at the outset. This is established in the opening sequence, which is very much like the Disney travel films of the 1950s—complete with aerial shots transporting the audience to an exotic destination, a brief history of the Caribbean locale, and demographic facts provided by voice-over narration. The voice-of-God is soon revealed to be that of Santa Marta's colonial Governor. He has just given Bradshaw an orientation and welcomes him by offering a drink. This is the first of many times in the film the American refuses to drink alcohol, suggesting to the audience that his account of island life will be sober and accurate. His visit is strictly for business, not pleasure. Thus, as an objective observer he is unlikely to skew the facts to gain favors or remain in the graces of

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268Won Oscar in 1958 for *Bridge on the River Kwai*.

269Alec Waugh, *Island in the Sun: A Story of the 1950's Set in the West Indies*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955. Hayes was nominated for an Oscar (Best Writing, Motion Picture Story, shared with Stewart Stern) in 1952 for *Teresa* (1951); Oscar nomination in 1950 (Best Writing, Story and Screenplay, shared with Federico Fellini, Sergio Amidei, Marcello Pagliero, Roberto Rossellini) for *Paisan* (1946).

270Quoted in Cripps 263-264.

the island's elite.<sup>271</sup>

Dandridge appeared in the role of shopkeeper Margot Seaton, the love interest of a white colonial administrator named Denis Archer (John Justin), an aspiring writer who in many ways served as the alter ego for Alec Waugh. With limited screen time, Dandridge had the task of performing a more respectable version of the femme fatale than Carmen Jones. When David and Margot attend a party at Government House, she uses her wiles to obtain a job as stenographer at G.H. As the "new girl in the office," she gets closer to Denis and their romance develops. At the party, Boyeur tells Bradshaw that the island is "shackled with tradition," and the "most important problem" on the island is "color." Boyeur tells Max that the Fleury family's "charity" toward their workers is not enough; what he and his people desire is true "equality." David Boyeur and Mavis Norman (Joan Fontaine) encounter each other for the first time since they were children, and recall a festival when Mavis received a copy of Charles Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* as a prize for winning an obstacle course contest. Although this is the only overt reference to Shakespeare, themes from the Othello trope permeate the narrative. Mavis admires Boyeur because he is committed to a "cause," whereas she feels that women of her class are "parasitic."

Maxwell Fleury (James Mason) is an important character who represents the decline of the patriarchal colonial order. He is haunted by an African presence in various symbols and figures throughout the film. Early in the film he discovers Egyptian cigarettes at his home, and he initially suspects that his wife Sylvia desires Euan Templeton, the Governor's son who is visiting the island. However, Euan falls in love with Max's sister Jocelyn (Joan Collins). When Euan was stationed in Egypt, he "prayed to Allah" for a woman, and now he thanked Allah for Jocelyn. When Max realizes that a former military officer Hilary Carson (Michael Rennie) is the source of the exotic tobacco, he grows more jealous and suspicious.

David takes Mavis across the color line to the market place, to introduce

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<sup>271</sup>See also Renato Rosaldo on "imperialist nostalgia."

her to the locals and teach her more about their life on the island. In this sequence, which includes a another montage of workers and Belafonte leading fisherman in a call and response performance of “Lead Man Holler,” the singer dons a costume similar to his stage outfit: an open-chested, v-necked cotton shirt; a seaman's belt buckled by two large interlocking rings; and—in the film—loose-fit blue dungarees. During the song, there are many close-up shots of Belafonte singing and black bodies working to draw in fishing nets. Later, Mavis takes David to view the ruins on the property once owned by her family, the site of a slave uprising in 1843. When Mavis wonders what could have caused it, David speculates that any little thing can be a spark—a woman, a child, a whip.

The symbolic function of melodramatic music, masks, mirror scenes, speeding cars, and drunken behavior reaches a climax during the multicultural parade and pageantry of Carnival. To complement Belafonte's performance, Dandridge enticed male audiences with an exotic limbo dance. During Carnival, Euan and Jocelyn visit Belfontaine, the Fleury plantation, where a masked native lurks behind the trees, and they discover acts of sabotage: the power is out, someone removes the rotor arm from Max's car, and the phone line is cut when they attempt to call Jocelyn's father. Their isolation, fear, and intoxication in the tropical climate of Santa Marta combine to create the perfect conditions for an erotic encounter.

Max tells his parents that he's interested in running for the legislature because the island is “going to the dogs.” He lives in the shadow of his older brother Arthur, who was his father's favorite, but died a war hero. When Max shouts, “I'd have been better off if I were born black!” his father slaps him across the face. Bradshaw's revelation of a hidden black ancestor to the Santa Marta plantation patriarch (a Jamaican grandmother) leads his children to give in to their deepest, darkest passions. For Max Fleury, anxiety about his racial identity drives him to question his “fitness” for rule and to murder Hilary in a jealous rage. Max Fleury, born the beneficiary of white privilege, quickly transmogrifies into a melodramatic victim of the one-drop rule.

Max Fleury reads Bradshaw's story in the *Santa Marta Record* to the family: "The Fleury family is a perfect example of the problems faced by many of the old families on this island..." Following the patriarch's advice not to appear troubled by the news, Max tells Bradshaw his story on the family was "the goods," that it said "things that needed saying." Max has decided to run for political office, presuming a natural alliance with the black population: "I can say to them, 'I'm one of you!' now." Leaving the club, he sees Hilary Carson walking home drunk, and decides to confront him about his relationship with Sylvia. When Carson brings up the Belfontaine Fund, Max misses the point, and asks if Hilary is expecting a visit from "a girl." Carson replies, "What would I want with a girl?" and relates the story of how his own wife left him for a Polish musician while he was stationed with the military in Tripoli. He deserves "a second chance," he tells Max, who misinterprets the comment and warns Carson to stay away from his wife. Offended, Hilary tells Max that he doesn't "share" women, adding, "I wouldn't take something from someone like you who has a tarbrush rubbed across his face." Max loses control and chokes Carson to death, repeating the word "TARBRUSH!" over and over again. Maxwell Fleury, his wife Sylvia, and the former Colonel Hilary Carson form the tragic triad in this narrative. Max played the pathetic husband in this melodrama, who mistakenly believed he was cuckolded and faced an ending that was sad but not tragic. His demise reflected concerns about a post-colonial "crisis" in white masculinity for the British empire.

Early in the film, Colonel Whittingham (John Williams) tells Bradshaw that his expertise is "crime, not politics," and this statement succinctly summed up the film's approach to its subject matter. When Max persistently pesters the Colonel about his investigation of Carson's murder, the Colonel recommends that he read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. At his political rally to announce his candidacy for office, Max is shouted down by the crowd and his speech is drowned out by steel drummers, until Boyeur intervenes, telling the people, "We have the right to vote and we'll use it. Let's give him his right to speak." Just



before his speech, Sylvia explained to Max that the reason Hilary Carson visited their home was to explain the purpose of the Belfontaine Fund—to preserve Julian Fleury's estate in recognition of his contributions to Santa Marta—but he asked her to keep it a secret from the Fleurys, including Max. This revelation inspires a change in Max, and he decides to set aside his prepared speech (ideas and words from his “head”) in order to deliver an extemporaneous speech (from his “heart”). He tells the crowd that the news of his background raised his awareness about the “two worlds” of Santa Marta, and that he intends to serve as a representative of both sides.

The racialization of Jocelyn Fleury is also important—her engagement to a titled Englishman puts the order of the entire imperial order at risk. Jocelyn questions her “fitness” for marriage into the noble classes, and assumes that she is destined to be a woman of easy virtue. Here is where the most revealing contradictions remain unresolved within the narrative. Jocelyn is pregnant by summer's end, and decides she should go to Canada and give up the child for adoption. Her mother tells her that she “behaved like a peasant girl in the cane field,” but then confesses that Julian Fleury is not her biological father. Although her mother's affair and her pure ancestry are revealed to the audience (and it is stated that Euan will know), there is still a challenge to the existing social order within the narrative. We are to assume that for the couple's sake, (British) society would be willing accept Jocelyn's mixed bloodlines, and that there would be no problem with their offspring's right to inherit a title. By the film's logic, it is easier to accept the idea of a black/mixed woman and a white man getting together. After all, it was Fleury's *grandmother* who was a black Jamaican. Jocelyn's mother reveals her true identity and secures her happy ending, while the contradictions pile up.<sup>272</sup>

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272In Shakespearean terms, one is reminded of Emilia, the voice of consolation and wisdom, who advises Desdemona on how to cope with a jealous husband and make sense of his irrational emotions. “Why, who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch? I should venture purgatory for't.” (IV, iii). In this scene, Desdemona wonders that a wife could ever be unfaithful to her man, and Emilia confesses that she, too, would risk all if her infidelity would bring greater power for her husband (thereby improving her own social status). Emilia also forces Desdemona to recognize the double standard that men have the

This logic bears itself more clearly in the film's resolution of its black characters' romantic encounters. Governor Templeton asks Denis what he thinks about people who have "the wrong sort of grandmother," to which he replies, "One can't choose his ancestors." Margot gets her man, but Boyeur concludes that he must not betray his people. Denis and Margot depart for London on the same flight, but when Mavis asks if it can work the other way round—a black man and white woman—Davis replies, "My skin is my country," and tells her he has no wish to be an "exile in a bowler hat." Thus, Margot is still figured as the black temptress for the white man with a "weakness," whereas Boyeur's decision to deny his attraction to Mavis is a righting of past wrongs of black men who desired white women (and were lynched for this desire in the U.S.). Underlying this narrative of cross-racial romance is a struggle for power that is expressed in both racial and gender hierarchies. Through the characters of Boyeur and Max, the narrative develops around controlling women, controlling rage, controlling desire. David Boyeur refuses interracial romance and nomadic lifestyle for populist cultural nationalism. David and Mavis attempt to rationalize their forbidden love out of their hearts: he fears the "inevitable" moment when she might slip and call him a "nigger"; she claims he is egotistical, and more committed to achieving personal power than empowering his people. They admit they do not mean what they say, but this denial is easier for both the filmmakers and the characters within the film.<sup>273</sup>

This point is made especially clear when the divergences between the

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privilege of extramarital affairs without penalty or social scorn, while women are to be outcast, punished, or put to death for their sexual transgressions.

273The dualistic function of abreaction and catharsis in American racial melodrama. Abreaction is common in melodrama: the hero confronts his weakness, overcomes conflict, and gets the girl; disillusioned teen acts fights authority to get attention from parents. Catharsis is also common, especially in thrillers and films noirs, but in early racial melodrama it normally functioned in one of two ways: death or self-denial. The former is pitiful, whereas the latter assuages fear. Both are tragic, but denial can also be extremely unsatisfying. Hollywood racial melodramas of the 1950s were a pitiful and timid bunch of pictures. Sirk's *Imitation of Life* is considered the penultimate racial melodrama of the 1950s. It provided a complex look at the effects of racism on the psyche of young Sara Jane Johnson, the confused daughter who insistence on denial of her heritage breaks her mother's heart. Sara Jane's experiences of racism convince her that passing for white is her only avenue for success.

narrative and resolution in the novel and the film adaptation are spelled out in more detail. The character Grainger Morris is not merely elided in the film; rather, Belafonte's character is a conflation of two figures in the novel, Morris and Boyeur. In the novel, Mavis fell in love with Grainger, not Boyeur, who decided to pursue Grainger's younger sister Muriel Morris after Margot chose Denis Archer. Muriel had lighter skin than Margot, and the Morrises "had money." The fascination with interracial romance in the film overshadows the potent political rivalry between the radical black labor leader and the wealthy white planter. Zanuck insisted that Belafonte play the most politically charged scenes with a light approach, so when David Bouyeur and Max Fleury debate in the film, it concludes with Boyeur forcing Fleury to admit that he does not really identify with the island's black people. Max and Sylvia walk home sullenly, where they probe the copy of *Crime and Punishment* delivered by Colonel Whittingham. Max guesses that the murderer confessed in the end, and says he would be more inclined to read it if the main character were married. Pathetically, Max retreats to the bathroom with gun in hand, but as he puts the tip of the barrel in his mouth, he realizes that he is unable to pull the trigger. Instead, he shatters the mirror and tells Sylvia to notify the Colonel that he is on his way.

In Waugh's novel, the tension at the political rally builds up to the point where Max is able to hector the crowd into a frenzy, goading Boyeur into pushing him and saying, "Let him have it, boys." Max committed suicide by inciting a race riot, but Boyeur was implicated and charged with murder. With Grainger Morris' aid, the charges were dropped, but the political scandal forced Governor Templeton to resign, and the dejected Fleurys fled from Santa Marta. Morris (who was "a fourth colored") studied law in England, where he fell in love with an English girl, but thought it would be unfair to marry her and bring her back to the island. When Mavis inquired if he thought interracial marriage could work "the other way" (i.e., black man/white woman), Morris declared that he was a celibate:

"No matter what kind of woman I married, whether she was completely white or completely black, people would say the same

thing, 'He argues like that because his wife is this and his children that.' They will say something like that anyhow. They'll say 'Of course he feels like that, look at the color of his skin'; but they'll say it much less if I stand alone. Gradually they'll come to realize that I'm a man without an ax to grind, that I am impartial because I can afford to be impartial. That's how the people must see me, as a man without an ax to grind."<sup>274</sup>

Morris promised to help Mavis find a job in England, and “was ready to take up now, in pride, with courage, the challenge of his lonely destiny.” In a long shot at the close of Zanuck's film, Belafonte walks up the center of screen along a lonely road at dusk, humming the refrain of the theme song.

American critics recognized the film's relevance with respect to the “one drop rule” and fears about miscegenation and “racial degeneration.” These fears materialized in censorship by distributors, boycotts in Southern theaters, and threatening letters sent to actors for appearing in it. The reviewer for *Time* magazine wrote that *Island in the Sun* was a “turbid plot-boiler” that deserved “a special award as the sexiest West Indian travelogue ever made”; but the film gained “no distance at all in solving Santa Marta's color problem.” Belafonte's performance primarily involved “evading the clutches of a white cargo named Mavis (Joan Fontaine), obviously too old for him.”<sup>275</sup> *Variety* stated that the film contained “enough to offend the South and disappoint ... [the] North.”<sup>276</sup> Segregationists organized protests against the exhibition of *Island in the Sun*, and the Department of Defense “received demands that it not be shown to our armed forces.” Legislative committees in North and South Carolina warned theaters, and when South Carolina threatened a \$5,000 fine, Zanuck pledged to pay it personally, saying, “The problems that arise in the British West Indies because of racial issues are not at all comparable to the color problem in the United States today.” Fontaine received hate letters: “How far into the slime will the race-mixers sink?”<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup>Waugh, *Island in the Sun* 438.

<sup>275</sup>“Cinema: The New Pictures, Jun. 24, 1957.” *Time* 24 June 1957.

<sup>276</sup>*Variety* 10 July 1957.

<sup>277</sup>Jack Hamilton, “The Storm Over Belafonte,” *Look*, June 25, 1957, 138-140.

The British press “kicked up a row” about Hollywood censors pressuring Zanuck about interracial love scenes. Fontaine said, “At least I have made them agree that Harry and I can drink out of the same coconut together in a scene. But they insist no kissing, and that we give one another up at the end of the picture.” Belafonte concurred, “I definitely think that the movie industry has a policy which prohibits love-making and kissing between interracial couples.”<sup>278</sup> Upset that Twentieth Century-Fox producers asked him not to mention Joan Fontaine in his public statements, Belafonte said “even a hint of the movie's theme is enough to outrage some people in the South,” but he still thought the movie was “unnecessarily circumspect about the realistic issues raised in the book.” Due to his own family background, Belafonte felt a personal connection to the story, and was particularly disappointed about the film's compromises:

I myself am the product of interracial marriages—two of my grandparents were white. The importance of the movie is that it tries to show a new kind of Negro living and working in the Caribbean. ... I spent a small part of my boyhood in a British colony in the West Indies, where the emotional climate is quite different from that in our Southern states. The way of life there is not strange to me, nor to the people in the Caribbean, but it's strange to America.<sup>279</sup>

In spite of the controversy (or perhaps, at least in part, due to controversy), *Island in the Sun* grossed \$8 million in the U.S., Fox's biggest profit since *The Robe* (1953).<sup>280</sup> The film's financial success not only demonstrated interest in and box office potential for films about racial politics, but also illustrated the crossover appeal of a performer who considered himself an “artistic failure” in 1950. His salary for *Island in the Sun* was \$200,000. Over the years, Belafonte cultivated a “wide and expressive range” in his performance style, and went beyond being the first “Negro matinee idol” to become a leading

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278“Island in the Sun.” *EBONY* July 1957: 33-37.

279Jack Hamilton, “The Storm Over Belafonte,” *Look*, June 25, 1957, 138-140.

280Cripps 265.

entertainer in record sales and on tours.<sup>281</sup> Recalling the days before A.N.T., Belafonte said, “My life had always been such a solitary one, you know. I'd never had any childhood friends or guys I bummed around with.” In 1957, he felt that acting was “my destiny, and my way to be with people.” There were many obstacle to overcome, however, and he said he found out that “it's not so easy for a man who's got brown skin to walk in the stage door of the theater.”<sup>282</sup>

Of course, venue location still mattered for black performers in the late 1950s. For example, on the tour with *3 for Tonight*, after a show for white college students in Austin, Texas, Belafonte and Millard Thomas were denied accommodations with white members of the company. In Spartanburg, South Carolina, “there was agitation in town” because Belafonte was performing with a white company. “They didn't get so riled about Millard,” he recalled, “with his lighter skin, it was often hard for them to be sure he was a Negro.” The police escorted them to a car after the show, and a private plane was chartered to North Carolina. Upon arrival, “the University of North Carolina was like an oasis; the people were very cordial.” Back in New York, a benefit performance of *3 for Tonight* for an all-black audience made Belafonte feel “as if I'd been gone a long time, working far afield. Now I'd come home again. And that night it was as though my whole career was confirmed—because they accepted me.”<sup>283</sup>

A few years later, he began his nationwide concert hall tour for *An Evening with Belafonte*, a show that was divided into three acts (Americana, Caribbean, and “around the world”), “to prove that his range extends beyond the calypso fad.” One night at the Riviera Theater in Detroit, a “well-heeled symphony patrons” trooped alongside “wide-eyed teen-agers and hep college students.” He established a practice of arranging blocs of “student” tickets at reduced prices. Excitedly, Belafonte said, “I've got to get to Hays, Kansas, Salt Lake City, Buffalo, Wichita, farming and industrial areas. It's the only way to find out what people are accepting and rejecting.” While critics felt that “he displayed a bone-deep sense

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281I. Ross, “Story of a Restless Troubadour.” *Coronet* May 1957: 85.

282Van Holmes 73.

283Van Holmes 76-77.

of showmanship,” there were also concerns that he was “becoming overserious,” “weighed down his own sense of responsibility as a Negro,” or “in some danger of losing the guttiness and earthy humor that helped to bring him to fame.” He answered his critics: “I don’t want to hear some character on Madison Avenue tell me what the pulse of the nation is. He doesn’t even know his own pulse.”<sup>284</sup> However, he was growing concerned about over-exposure, and became more selective about television appearances. Elsewhere he said, “I’m still aware of the ‘third ear’ all Negroes have to warn them of danger. But I am being constantly surprised when I find the warmest democracy, in the finest sense, displayed toward me—and this includes some parts of the South.”<sup>285</sup>

The cover of the July 1957 issue of *Ebony* magazine featured a photograph of Harry Belafonte holding Julie Robinson in a loving embrace. Inside, *Ebony* ran the Belafonte’s unapologetic, detailed, six-page testimonial about interracial marriage, “Why I Married Julie.” “I’ve made plenty of mistakes in my life,” he wrote, “and I know that I am not blameless for the failure of my first marriage.” He and his first wife decided to separate in late 1956, after years of difficulty, and the divorce was finalized the following February. Margurite received a \$100,000 settlement, “two homes and the family’s Buick convertible.” She stated that she was “neither hostile nor bitter toward Harry,” and they and the girls enjoyed “many happy moments” before the divorce. *Ebony* included early photos of Margurite as a model, of Julie performing a “lynch dance” with another member of the Dunham troupe (the story of a “Negro who was lynched for crime committed by white man”), and more recent images of Julie as homemaker and hostess. Julie was expecting child that fall, and she said, “Harry is my career now.” Harry first met Julie in 1947 while he was attending Drama

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284“Music: Wild About Harry.” *Time* 1 July 1957. He collaborated with Ed Murrow to produce an episode of *See It Now*, on the “quiet pools of native culture that have survived the intrusions of modern life” in Appalachian hamlets and coastal islands near Georgia.

285Hamilton 131-142. Next film would be a “post-Civil War Western” about half-brothers—“one white and one Negro”; hoped that Brando would co-star. Co-wrote the screenplay with John Oliver Killens. (HB also purchased movie rights to *Youngblood*.) He was “boyishly intrigued by the folklore of the Wild West” and wanted to tell “a fascinating story” about “Negro cowboys and Negro outlaws.” New record contract with RCA Victor was “the first one of its kind.”

Workshop classes at the New School; Julie was teaching at the Dunham School of the Dance and Theater, which and visited the Workshop with other dancers for a demonstration. They were married March 8, 1957, in Tecate, Mexico, but kept it a secret to all but family so that Harry could monitor Adrienne's adjustment to the major life change. "We didn't marry to prove a social point," Belafonte wrote, "we did it for love."<sup>286</sup>

A *Life* magazine profile featured photos of Belafonte with his family: riding a bike with daughter Shari (age 2) in Central Park; performing a Mexican folk dance with Adrienne (age 8); relaxing in the living room with Julie; playing basketball and lifting weights. Julie said of their marriage, "I just fell in love, that's all. Sure, we talked about problems, especially about children. But for me it was easy." She continued, "The years I spent as the only white dancer in Katherine Dunham's company gave me an insight into Negro culture and I'm happy to be a part of it." Other images showed Belafonte introducing Julie to Rev. Shelton Hale Bishop, and sitting with Martin Luther King, Jr. after a Harlem rally in support of his "pilgrimage to Washington." Belafonte said, "Rev. King, I want you to know we Negroes up-South, as opposed to down-South, feel a strong alliance with you. What you've been doing is a great example of the principle, 'If you can't beat 'em, get 'em to join you.'"<sup>287</sup>

Around the same time that *Island in the Sun* made it to the screen, Eric Hodgins wrote in *Life* magazine about "a vast revolution" that had "changed Hollywood from top to bottom in the course of a few explosive years." "The revolution did not change merely a few externals," Hodgins explained, but "it changed an entire society." The revolution "took place at the point of a gun," as "the times were ripe and the old order flabby." The two groups who stood to benefit were "Talent—meaning men and women who can actually, direct, write or act in the movies themselves," and "Independent Producers—meaning producers

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<sup>286</sup>Harry Belafonte, "Why I Married Julie." *EBONY* July 1957: 90-95. Julie was dating Brando, and he probably introduced her to Harry. Margurite appeared on the cover of *Ebony* the following year, and told her side of the story: "The Tragedy of Divorce." *EBONY* Aug. 1958: 25-32.

<sup>287</sup>"Close-up: Harry Belafonte." *LIFE* 27 May 1957: 85-90.



independent of the studios, or almost so.” Hollywood was “half a century old” in 1957, “for it was in 1907 that the first ‘feature picture’ was begun in California.” “It was the unparalleled last 10 years that did the Empire in”—marked by television, the Paramount decision, and “an upheaval in America’s recreational habits”—and “something better than an Empire” was on the rise.<sup>288</sup>

The new order ushered in “all-powerful agents,” “legal wizards,” and tax experts, and the “glamor and confusion” of the Old Hollywood was less noticeable than “businesslike attitudes and cool-headed conservatism.” Agents like Bert Allenberg of the William Morris Agency (representing stars like Ava Gardner, Danny Kaye, and Frank Sinatra) and Lew Wasserman (Clark Gable, Cary Grant, Marilyn Monroe, and Gregory Peck) were now essential for executing and managing the contracts, salaries, and profit-sharing deals for top talent in the New Hollywood, whose bargaining power enabled them to make “breathhtaking demands.” Through such arrangements, independent producing firms like Hecht-Hill-Lancaster (H-H-L) were formed, in this case by agent Harold Hecht and actor Burt Lancaster. Furthermore, companies like United Artists (U.A.), which owned “no studio, nor even a camera,” made its money “by financing independent productions for a share of their profits and by collecting fees for its distributing organization.” Thanks to U.A., one-half of feature-length films in 1957 were produced by independents, and Hollywood saw the emergence of a number of “actor-producers.” Examples included Brando’s Pennebaker Productions, Sinatra’s Kent Productions, William Holden’s Toluca Productions, John Wayne’s Batjac Productions, and Gary Cooper’s Baroda Productions.

Of the few remaining signs of the Old Hollywood, Hodgins noted that “the Oldest Living Independent,” Sam Goldwyn at age 72, “after long inactivity” was “tooling up to make *Porgy and Bess*.” A.H. Weiler reported in the *New York Times* that, in addition to his starring role in the recently announced film project

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<sup>288</sup> Eric Hodgins, “Amid Ruins of an Empire a New Hollywood Arises.” *LIFE* 10 June 1957: 146-166.

“End of the World” (“a science-fiction drama set in 1962 and obviously far removed from singing and segregation”), Belafonte was also working on a “feature-length musical film” based on his career. Also, a United Artists spokesman confirmed that the company had “advanced Belafonte the necessary funds for the writing and research on the subject” of “the biographical facets of the life of the Negro minister and president of the Montgomery (Ala.) Improvement Association.”<sup>289</sup>

In November 1957, the *New York Times* reported on an industry meeting between NAACP representatives, including executive secretary Roy Wilkins, and officials from the MPPDA, the Alliance of Television and Film Producers, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), the WGA, and the Screen Producers Guild. One reason for the decline in job opportunities was the fact that fewer movies were being made. Wilkins said that “Hollywood was way behind the times in its portrayal of Negro life,” and he “endeavored to explain away 'misconceptions' on the part of producers” (which “grew inexplicably over the years” after meetings between studio executives and Walter White) that resulted in “fewer Negro characters in stories.” Wilkins stated that “the NAACP had no objection to Negroes performing in so-called 'menial' roles as butlers, maids and chauffeurs.” This was “honest, decent work,” as long as such parts did not “perpetuate the 'yassuh, massa' type of characters that frequently went to Negroes in the Nineteen Thirties and brought protests.”<sup>290</sup>

Since the mid-1940s, SAG and the Screen Extras Guild saw a drop in membership “from 500 to 125 Negro members in both,” and attendees at the NAACP meeting did not discuss “the complete absence of Negroes among the highly skilled technical crafts” (as directors, producers, camera operators, electricians, make-up artists, press agents, scenic designers, sound technicians). While almost half of the members of the Building Service Employees

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289A.H. Weiler, “Local Screen Report,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1957. Bob Henry and Jim Johnson, “The Nat King Cole Show” (National Broadcasting Company (NBC), August 6, 1957). (with The Randy Van Horne Singers, RCA Victor label mates and NKCS regulars)

290Thomas M. Pryor, “Hollywood Issue,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1957.

International Union (Local 278) were African Americans performing janitorial work, there were only “between twenty and thirty’ Negroes employes primarily during boom production periods as carpenters or ... property men.” One such example was Allen Reisner, *St. Louis Blues* (Paramount Pictures, 1958), and *Porgy and Bess* (Columbia Pictures, 1959), promised to provide another boom cycle. Officials from the MPPDA and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) said they were “considering voluntarily” the job situation for minorities, and all unions disavowed “any policy of segregation, official or otherwise.” One studio official said the problem could be traced back to the 1936, when “Hollywood became a closed shop town,” and the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act that outlawed closed shops merely froze the labor pool based on “seniority-of-employment.” “The industry for no particular reason just never made the start in regard to hiring Negroes,” another official claimed, “but now we are talking about the necessity of making a start.”

### **Apocalyptic Racial Conflict and the Blues Aesthetic of HarBel Productions**

*Done laid around, done stayed around  
This old town too long—summer's almost gone.  
Now I feel like I want to travel on...*

In June 1958, *Ebony* magazine ran a story titled “Belafonte Becomes 'Big Business',” which offered a detailed description of the entertainer's million-dollar corporation and his plans to branch into independent film production. A half-page photograph taken in an office of Belafonte Enterprises (reminiscent of Billy Eckstine's *Life* magazine profile) included Belafonte (wearing dark sunglasses) and his executive staff: executive producer Phil Stein; folk choir manager Sherman Sneed; secretary Gloria Cantor; accompanist Millard Thomas (with guitar); press agent Mike Merrick; assistant producer Charles Coleman; and Lord Burgess, “lyricist and research expert.” Belafonte had purchased a nine-story

apartment building in mid-town Manhattan—“occupied by beauty shops, physicians, dentists and Harry Belafonte's new business empire”—and announced plans to “buy us a theater.” After firing his first two managers, Jack Rollins and Jay Richard Kennedy, he decided to organize his business affairs with a corporate structure, opened offices in New York and Hollywood, and planned a third office based in London. Belafonte felt that occasionally he had been “taken for a sucker financially” or “false-friended,” so he developed an approach to friendship “based on a mixture of instinct and cautious appraisal of the person's integrity.”<sup>291</sup> “My interests were becoming so diversified,” Belafonte said, “that the business of keeping myself in business was getting ahead of my work as an artist. I had to have help.” He said was not very interested in “piling up millions,” “I simply want to be economically secure enough to do the things I want to do in my field without having to take orders from agents, from bookers or producers. I am my own boss.”<sup>292</sup>

In 1955, Belafonte started Shari Music Publishing Company, Inc. in New York, which published songs like “Day-O” and “Jamaica Farewell.” The Clara Music company had operations in Hollywood, and in addition to song-writing and publishing, the firm sold catalogs of choral music to schools, churches, colleges, and professional groups. Belafonte Presents, Inc. (BPI), the keystone of the corporation, was formed in 1957 and acted as the parent company for the group. BPI ran Belafonte's touring concert show, “An Evening with Belafonte,” which set a box-office record during its run at the Los Angeles Greek Theatre in the summer of 1957. Phil Stein, a Broadway veteran, coordinated the activities of the 12-man folk choir, various recording artists, scenic designers, lighting technicians, songwriters, dancers, and novelists (including J.O. Killens) on the BPI staff. Belafonte explained:

Our long range aim is to finance and produce showcases for Negro talent. ... The whole purpose of these ventures is to provide

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<sup>291</sup>Van Holmes 75.

<sup>292</sup>“Belafonte Becomes 'Big Business'.” *EBONY* June 1958: 17-24.

suitable vehicles for Negro talent. Frankly, we're not out to build a gigantic corporate octopus with tentacles all over show business. We are far more concerned with unearthing and developing new singers and dancers who have so much to give. When we buy or rent or lease our own theater we can encourage these talented people to join us. We will provide adequate financing and skilled production people and no one will dictate to us how our shows will be staged. We want to set up a cultural center where Negro artists and sculptors can exhibit their work under the best possible conditions. We will arrange for playwrights and TV script writers to work without having to worry about the landlord's knock on the door.<sup>293</sup>

Belafonte Enterprises greatly benefitted from the popularity and success of Belafonte-the-singer. His five-year agreement with the Riviera Hotel paid him \$500,000 for an annual one-month engagement; and his RCA Victor recording contract guaranteed \$50,000 per year through 1967. He recorded a blues album in New York and Hollywood, *Belafonte Sings the Blues* (1958), and released the first album by the BPI folk choir, *Presenting the Belafonte Singers*. In the summer of 1958, Belafonte embarked on a tour across Europe, which confirmed the appeal of his performance style with a global audience. In early August, Belafonte made his English debut at the Gaumont State Theatre, while Robeson gave a concert on the same night at Albert Hall, three miles away. Despite talk of intergenerational competition, Robeson attended one of Belafonte's shows and visited him backstage. In response to a reporter's observation that the younger singer was more light-hearted, Belafonte said, "It is because Robeson made his protest bitterly that we can be more light-hearted now."<sup>294</sup>

*Belafonte Sings the Blues* was the first album the singer recorded in stereo sound. The centerpiece of the album, "The Way That I Feel" (by folk songwriter Fred Brooks), was a musical expression of the words Belafonte

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293BPI was in negotiations to produce "a series of 90-minute network TV spectaculars."

294Quoted in Duberman 467. Duberman notes that Belafonte was quoted a year later in the *Herald* (19 Dec 1959) as saying: "I disagree violently with Paul Robeson. He's always giving out with that stuff about 'the Africans are on the march.' He makes me think sometimes that his influence might start a Negro movement that could get out of hand. And he would regret that."

included on the jacket: “This is the area—the blues—with which I have the closest identification. . . . Here I can just step out and sing wholly the way I feel.” The album opened with a jazzy, minimalist cover of the Ray Charles standard “A Fool For You,” and interpretations of other songs written or recorded by the blind rhythm and blues pioneer appeared throughout: “Losing Hand” (written by Charles E. Calhoun), “Hallelujah I Love Her So,” “Mary Ann,” and “Sinner’s Prayer” (written by Lowell Fulson and Lloyd Glenn). The album included two traditional songs arranged by C.C. Carter, “In the Evenin’ Mamma” and “Cotton Fields,” which Belafonte described as a “biggedy Negro” protest song of “affirmation,” “solidly in the blues tradition,” demonstrating that “all of the blues are not songs of sadness and despair.” Other familiar songs included Belafonte’s rendition of Billie Holiday’s “God Bless the Child” (co-written by Arthur Herzog, Jr.), and the Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer pop-jazz favorite “One for My Baby.”<sup>295</sup>

In early 1959, Belafonte appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine (March 2), and recorded his landmark concert album, *Belafonte at Carnegie Hall* (April 19-20).<sup>296</sup> Income from record sales, film contracts, and public appearance fees launched Belafonte into the top category of entertainment earners, and that year he joined the ranks of actors who became independent film producers. In its two 1959 films, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* and *Odds Against Tomorrow*, HarBel Productions cultivated what I call a cinematic blues aesthetic. Conceived and produced during a period of relative isolation following a 1957 accident and eye surgery, these black-and-white films were imbued with the blues, folk, and jazz overtones characteristic of the music Belafonte performed and recorded during this period. Both featured direct racial conflict between characters, yet each offered differing outcomes and allegorical statements about U.S. race relations. Disappointed with the limits of Hollywood aesthetics, HarBel attempted to impart a folk blues sensibility in cinema, by focalizing narratives about African

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<sup>295</sup>Songs Belafonte Sings 89. Griffin, Farah Jasmine. *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*. Simon and Schuster, 2001.

<sup>296</sup>“HEADLINERS: Lead Man Holler.” *Time* 2 Mar. 1959.

American experiences and centering the black male subject.

Analysis of the pair of films is important for understanding Belafonte's aesthetic response as a global vision for the cinematic (re)construction of race and gender relations, and as a Dionysian blues expression of his growing frustration about domestic tensions over civil rights. An examination of related magazine articles and film reviews published in this period demonstrates that HarBel films attempted to challenge Hollywood's dominant regime of racial representation by introducing the problem of racial difference into the narratives of mainstream genre films.

*The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (M-G-M), 1959), was a joint production between HarBel Productions and Sol C. Siegel Productions. Writer-director Randal MacDougall adapted the film from two sources: M.P. Shiel's novel *The Purple Cloud* and Ferdinand Reyher's story "End of the World." HarBel Productions contributed \$250,000 of the \$1.4 million production costs, and received one-third of the gross profits in return as per the distribution agreement with M-G-M.<sup>297</sup> The film told the story of a Pennsylvania coal miner who survived a cave-in and lived underground for five days, only to find out upon his reemergence that the world as he knew it had ended. He makes his way to the remarkably desolate New York City, where he eventually discovers a woman who survived in a decompression chamber. At the outset of the film, all appearances suggest that this woman and man are the only survivors of a major global disaster. After working to overcome their differences, the two develop a friendship and fall in love. When another male survivor arrives, a rivalry ensues and the men compete to see who will win the affections of the woman.

On movie posters and in trailers, the tag line for this seemingly simple plot was "The Most Unusual Story Ever Told," and a closer reading of the film's narrative structure and symbolic imagery will reveal its deeper allegorical underpinnings. The film is shot entirely in black and white, and in the edenic

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<sup>297</sup>"Movie Maker Belafonte." *EBONY* July 1959: 94-100.

closing sequence, the story ends on an optimistic note as the three characters join hands and walk together into the sunset. Finally, a title appears at the bottom of the frame that reads: "THE BEGINNING." However, this cliched finish is not all that is suggested by the hyperbolic tag line; the story is also "most unusual" because it tells a tale that was generally silenced, seldom mentioned, or typically left untold in mid-century American cinema.

By way of comparison, George Stevens' 1965 biblical epic *The Greatest Story Ever Told* was an adaptation of Fulton Oursler's best-selling book about the life of Jesus, and it achieved its exalted status as a typological allegory—it was necessarily a story of "past times" according to the New Testament, which had been told many times through the centuries.<sup>298</sup> Most "message movies" of the 1940s and 1950s were tropological melodramas, in that they spoke directly to contemporary social issues.<sup>299</sup> As an anagogical allegory, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* projected into the future in a literal sense that suggested a deeper, parallel symbolism at work. Thus, the ambiguous ending of the film contained a parable as well as a paradox. It was one of the most abstract approaches to the 1950s "message movie," and the story featured a relationship between a black man (Ralph Burton, played by Belafonte) and a white woman (Sarah Crandall, played by Swedish actress Inger Stevens).<sup>300</sup> Significantly, Ralph and Sarah met on a Sunday—the biblical seventh day of the world's creation.

Unbeknownst to Ralph, he has an audience of one in Sarah as he powers up the city lights, shadow-boxes at dusk, and dances around his apartment

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298The cycle of many big-budget, widescreen biblical epics produced in this period also includes: 20th Century-Fox's *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953); Paramount's *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956); MGM's *King of Kings* (Nicholas Ray, 1961); and 20th Century-Fox's *The Bible - In the Beginning* (John Huston, 1966)—the first 22 chapters from Genesis in the Old Testament (The Fall—God's judgment on Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah). [Jacob, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Joshua and the Israelites in Egypt—a slave narrative; King Solomon.]

299Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

300Note Roger Corman sci-fi cycle: *The Day the World Ended* (1956); *It Conquered the World* (1956); *Not of This Earth* (1957); *The Last Woman on Earth* (1960). See also *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), and other "I Am Legend" films based on Richard Matheson's novel: *Omega Man*, Will Smith.



singing the blues like the solo star of a Hollywood musical (“Done Laid Around,” also known as “Gotta Travel On”).<sup>301</sup> But his loneliness is what haunts him, and perhaps some bitter memory of the “old world” (as he calls it) riles him to the point where he lashes out at a cheerful mannequin he calls Snodgrass (allegedly for not caring about the bleak situation and forever laughing at his loneliness), which he then tosses over the balcony rail and onto the street below where Sarah is still watching. Horrified, Sarah screams because she thinks that Ralph has jumped to his death. Shocked to hear an actual human voice and eager to reveal its source, Ralph runs out of the building to meet Sarah in the street where she greets him with these chilling first words: “Don’t touch me!”

It would be difficult to understand the full meaning of this first encounter without some basic knowledge of race relations in American society before the disaster event. In a film that begins as a lonely survivor's search for positive signs of humanity, this scene immediately feels strange, subversive, and out of place. Where one would expect a connection there is a rupture, and the context for such irrational behavior has not been clearly established as with other details. In a key scene, Ralph enters a radio station where he listens to a recording of the final moments of the last broadcast, a radio letter from White House staff reminiscent of the Mercury Theater on-air interpretation of H.G. Wells' science fiction novel *War of the Worlds*; only this time the panic was real and Ralph is now experiencing the aftermath and the new world's re-genesis. Was Sarah's cold response due to some trauma from the disaster event? Or was she genuinely spooked because she thought Ralph was just a creepy fellow who danced, sang, and lived with mannequins?

The ectopic mood is suggestive of the Fordian society in Aldous Huxley's

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<sup>301</sup>“Gotta Travel On” had been recorded earlier in the decade by The Weavers (featured on the 1957 Vanguard release *Greatest Hits*). Belafonte recorded the version used in the film in March 1956, but it remained unreleased until it was issued on the 2001 RCA Records anthology *Very Best of Belafonte*. A different version of the song appears on Belafonte's 1962 album *The Midnight Special*. In 1959, Billy Grammer's version of “Gotta Travel On” was a top five hit on country music charts, and also did well on pop charts. Eddy Arnold also recorded the song for his 1959 RCA Victor release *Have Guitar, Will Travel*, and Jimmy Dean recorded a version in 1961 for Columbia. Grammer was a side man on *The Jimmy Dean Show* in the late 1950s, and a member of the Grand Ole Opry.

1932 novel *Brave New World* (a “negative utopia”), particularly the explanation the Controller offers to the character John (“The Savage”) when he suggests adapting William Shakespeare’s *Othello* into one of their future-cinema “feelies”: “Because our world is not the same as Othello’s world. You can’t make flivvers without steel—and you can’t make tragedies without social instability.”<sup>302</sup> The inter-textual links are there, but the “foreign” context hinders understanding, and at first glance even a familiar scene seems aberrant when adapted to fit a new genre. Unlike the ultra-sensational “feelie” in *Brave New World*, the society depicted in *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* is a future dystopia, where the sole male survivor—a black man—cannot associate with the last woman on earth because to do so would violate the unwritten but well-observed behavioral codes of racial segregation.

As Thomas Cripps poignantly observed, “Creepily, while the planet has become a vacant mote in the galaxy where they act out a racial etiquette invented as a social control over nineteenth century slaves.”<sup>303</sup> Of course, the filmmakers not only assumed that American audiences would understand the situation, but also that they were expecting (hoping for?) a tantalizing encounter and were titillated by the sexual tension in this scene’s abrupt, Method-inspired delivery.<sup>304</sup> Post-World War II movie audiences would understand a narrative like *Othello* all too well, but the social constraints of the period made such a production off-limits for filmmakers in the United States. As a liminal text, it was a familiar story that was strategically avoided and left untold by major studios in Hollywood’s golden era.

*Time* magazine stated that *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* was “a passionately sincere, pictorially brilliant, monumentally silly example of how

302Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited* (Harper Collins, 2004) 198.

A devoted Shakespearean through-and-through, John “The Savage” is appalled by the superficial plot and artificially-induced sensations—“the feely effects”: “THREE WEEKS IN A HELICOPTER. AN ALL-SUPER-SINGING, SYNTHETIC-TALKING, COLOURED, STEREOSCOPIC FEELY. WITH SYNCHRONIZED SCENT-ORGAN ACCOMPANIMENT” (154).

303Cripps, *Making Movies Black* 265-270.

304The film’s trailer also makes this suggestion, positing the contemporary spectators as active participants and not merely passive voyeurs.

people who are obsessed with the race question tend to see everything in Black and White.” Technically, the film was well-acted and well-executed to a point.

But then the moviemakers feel obliged to give their black Adam a white Eve (Inger Stevens), and all at once the grand drama of humanity's survival collapses into an irrelevant wrangle about racial discrimination that has no more real significance, under the circumstances of the story, than a hotfoot in hell. Adam and Eve fall in love, but Adam refuses to accept the fact. He cannot begin a new world because he cannot forget the old; he cannot let social injustice die with the society that fostered it. At this point the moviemakers introduce a particularly amiable snake into their unedifying Eden.<sup>305</sup>

While *Time's* critic identified a “predictable triangular pattern” in the narrative, there is little doubt that the integrationist science fiction film was quite atypical in the 1950s, and even today it is much less familiar than other variations on the theme of man's menace to himself or the supernatural disaster picture.<sup>306</sup> In modernist fashion, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* clearly set out to present the spectator with a stark depiction of the contemporary limits of interracial intimacy and violence in American cinema and society. The aforementioned scene of first contact is a major turning point in the plot—a new beginning—because it pushes the narrative beyond a solitary dilemma to play out an American social dilemma. It is no longer only Ralph Burton's life at stake, but now the future existence of mankind depends upon the actions of a few survivors. As she freely admits, it was much easier for Sarah to watch Ralph from a distance. Seeing him work and entertain himself led her to empathize with him, reminded her that she was still in a world of living beings, and perhaps even suggested to her the possibility of human contact. Thinking he was dead made her feel as though she had died.

However, even while knowing that Ralph is alive and real, when Sarah is

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305“Cinema: The World, The Flesh and The Devil.” *Time* 1 June 1959.

306See Annalee Newitz on WisCon, the United States' only feminist sci-fi convention, founded more than two decades ago. In recent years, WisCon has also been devoted to progressive politics and antiracism in speculative literature. “Using Sci-Fi to Change the World,” AlterNet, June 5, 2008, <http://www.alternet.org/columnists/story/87212/>.

presented with an opportunity for direct contact she still retains a sense of dread, impropriety, and taboo as a man with dark skin approaches. In the old world, for Ralph to merely acknowledge a white woman (let alone affiliate or have physical contact with her) violated the “original sin” of interracial intimacy, and the danger for him meant that he could lose his home, his livelihood, or his life.<sup>307</sup> But (apparently) there is no one left to object, and although he approaches to help her she recoils in terror (a preconditioned response), and her reticence is crystallized in the exclamation of three little words: DON'T TOUCH ME. When the white male counterpart, Ben Thacker (Mel Ferrer), is introduced to this quintessentially American Garden of Eden, suffering from radiation exposure, the audience is forced to ask, “Which is the snake?” Or, in reference to the film's title, “Who is 'the Devil' here?”

Moreso than the film's contributions to the genre of social science fiction, what most critics recall about *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* are the sequences featuring the vacant streets of New York City. With limited means and no special effects, audiences see the power of cinema to destroy the world they know, make it anew, and invite them to determine the course of an uncharted history. The film is characteristic of Cold War liberalism in its obliqueness, yet it also boldly announced that racial segregation—on American movie screens and in American life—was a fatally flawed practice that would lead the nation toward internal conflict and mutual self-destruction.<sup>308</sup> If nineteenth century Christian writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe rewrote the national myth to declare that racial slavery was America's original sin, then HarBel Productions injected racism into its narratives as a psychological condition that threatened the nation's very existence in the near future. While it appeared at the time to be a trivial, half-hearted, and overly cautious attempt to point the nation down a path toward

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307Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (University of Wisconsin, 1997) 131-140. Vasey recounts the example of Universal's *Imitation of Life* (1934), which cut out a lynching scene that “had shown the persecution of a young black man who approached a white woman in the mistaken belief that she had encouraged him.”

308On post-WWII racial tensions, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (Simon and Schuster, 1988); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

racial reconciliation (at least for Belafonte, who originally saw the project as an “incredible opportunity” but later called it one of his “worst experiences”), in retrospect the film can be considered as a prescient and utterly hopeful work of mid-century cinematic art that creatively confronted the nation's racial dilemma.

For the purposes this analysis, the tragic triad derived from Shakespeare's hypotext (Iago/Othello/Desdemona—in order of their entrance or mention in the play) formed the web of tropological relations associated with black-white male rivalry and interracial romance. This complex of Jungian archetypes—inflected by the cultural politics of race, gender, and nationality—raised many questions as a structuring absence in American cinema. In contradistinction to Shakespeare's tragedy of *The Moor*, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* obliquely addressed the question of difference by initially displacing the following thematic elements of the Othello trope: 1) racial identity as an overt subject of narrative discourse; 2) militancy or sex appeal in the characterization of black masculinity; and 3) sex or violence across the color line.<sup>309</sup> However, by restructuring the narrative to place Ralph Burton at its center (anti-Othello/Sarah/Ben), the film positioned his character for primary identification with the audience.

Ben Thacker stood in for Iago in the trope, but whereas Iago activated the dramatic tension in the play, Ben's delayed arrival only added weight to the already heavy mood of the film. Iago is the archetypal figure of racist misogyny who simultaneously activates and dutifully enforces the destructive excesses of the “possessive investment in whiteness.”<sup>310</sup> Ironically, the enforcement of the Production Code required that he rarely appeared as such on screens in the U.S. until the mid-century cycle of “message movies” (“I am not what I am”), but the actualization of this figure necessarily preceded Othello-as-such in the shift toward new regimes of racial representation. The fear of even hinting at sexual relations across the color line rendered taboo the subject of interracial romance, never mind a story centered on the marriage of a black man and a white woman.

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309Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Cornell University Press, 1980).

310George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Temple University Press, 1998).

No such script would muster the censorial policies of Hollywood's Production Code Administration until its ultimate demise in the 1960s.<sup>311</sup>

Of course, such an interpretation is difficult to deduce from audience response and criticism contemporary with the film's release. Hindsight helps us to understand the ways in which films like *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* challenged popular morality and undermined the concept of race purity, and examining the film's production context raises questions about national discourses on cinema and racial formation. Another example from the film helps us read the language of "race" as it was encoded in mid-century films. Soon after their initial encounter, Sarah suggests that she should move in with Ralph. Humorously, he turns her down and replies, "People might talk." But Sarah is noticeably upset by this rejection, and when Ralph suggests that she go out and busy herself she retorts, "I'm free, white, and twenty-one and I'm gonna do what I please!"

"Empty," Cripps wrote, "Belafonte plays with their toy trains, eats and drinks their provender, lives their life (without *them*), at last discovering one of their women...until the last white man on earth (as far as they know) turns up!"<sup>312</sup> However, the audience is given little information about Ralph's life before the accident. This is significant because in the first half of the film he proves himself quite capable of surviving in this world without depending on whites. It is doubtful that Sarah could make it on her own, and because he seems so inexplicable, Ben's actions seem extremely ridiculous.

By relegating minority issues to "message movies," narrative discourse in American cinema oddly posited intercultural contact as dangerous, queer or even heroic behavior. Sarah affirms this assertion when Ralph admits he did not realize that the water taps work in the apartment and she tells him, "I was beginning to think you were Superman." Clearly hurt and craving contact, she

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311Not to mention the portrayal of the white woman's murder by a black man, or any interracial violence for that matter. Note the film career of Jim Brown. See also Martin Ritt's *The Great White Hope* (1970), inspired by the life and times of Jack Johnson, the black boxer who was heavyweight champion from 1908 to 1915.

312Cripps 266.

complains, “No matter what happens I won’t get married. There’s nobody left to marry anybody.” Ralph promises to find her “somebody” and perform as “the Mayor” in the ceremony, but yet again the reason why these two cannot marry each other goes unmentioned. From this point on, Ralph is an anti-heroic character, paradoxically representing both the exotic other and an agent of repressive masculine hegemony. In the following scene, the couple’s first on-screen contact occurs when Ralph attempts to give Sarah a haircut (an inversion of the myth of Samson and Delilah), but he loses his nerve and during the breakdown finally broaches the subject of race.<sup>313</sup> It remains unclear whether his refusal to finish the deed is because he is “not a barber” (invoking the collective memory of forced servitude) or because he is “colored” (invoking the behavioral restrictions of “the color barrier”), but his question upon exiting begs an examination of the social function of the tragic hero: “Why should the world fall down to prove I’m what I am and that there’s nothing wrong with what I am?”<sup>314</sup>

The original music for the soundtrack was composed by Miklós Rózsa, but critical inferences can be drawn from Belafonte’s performance “Gotta Travel On” to decode cinematic representations. As a kind of post-apocalyptic UN ambassador, Ralph Burton’s name is strikingly similar to Ralph Bunche. He uses short wave radio communication to reach out to the world, works to overcome language differences, and the problem of cultural difference among the few survivors. Ben tells Ralph, “You act noble so I look bad,” an invocation of the Othello trope that sets off a putative World War IV between the two characters. In terms of cultural politics, the catastrophic minimization of characters to racial and gender archetypes (i.e. black and white male rivalry, white women) foregrounds the issues these identity formations encounter, and how the ways in which they are addressed—through violence or by seeking common ground through humanistic interrelations—can hamper or facilitate their very survival. It is an

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313In the hair-cutting scene, Belafonte cut real hair, and Stevens had no idea he would cut so much, to evoke a more genuine reaction.

314Eric Avila, “Dark City: White Flight and the Urban Science Fiction Film in Postwar America,” in *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, edited by Daniel Bernardi (U of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 52-71.

openly critical representation of American race relations, yet to fully appreciate the film's significance, we must also consider the burden it carried in terms of an ongoing hegemonic struggle over the cultural representation of U.S. race relations.

HarBel Productions was essentially a business organization that Belafonte aimed to use as "a weapon against stereotyped portrayals of the Negro in films and a socially constructive force in the industry." Belafonte explained, "I want to make films that show Negroes just as we are, as people with the same hopes and loves, weaknesses and problems as other people." The second HarBel film, *Odds Against Tomorrow* (United Artists, 1959), was a social problem crime thriller directed by Robert Wise, adapted from a novel by William McGivern about three down-and-out men who try to rob a bank to solve their money problems. Filmed at Gold Medal Studios in the Bronx and Central Park, HarBel was in full control of the production and contributed \$275,000 to the production, which had a \$1.1 million budget. The distribution deal with United Artists split the gross profits in half.<sup>315</sup>

While both films were even-paced, thought-provoking works with high production values, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* was a post-apocalyptic allegory about U.S. race relations, with Belafonte starring as the survivor who lived underground; *Odds Against Tomorrow* was a cautionary film noir about the dangers of racial bigotry, in which he played an ill-fated underground jazz musician who is estranged from family. In a cinematic style that is perhaps best described as a "cool" blues aesthetic, these 1950s melodramas worked to explore the controversial issue of interracial relations. These mid-century films demonstrate the antinomies of cultural production by exposing the fundamental contradictions and seemingly irresolvable conflicts between popular conceptions of racial and national identities in the U.S.<sup>316</sup>

While African American novelist John Oliver Killens received credit as a

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<sup>315</sup>"Movie Maker Belafonte" 94-100.

<sup>316</sup>Knight, Arthur. "1959: Movies and the Racial Divide." *American Cinema of the 1950s: Themes and Variations*. Ed. Murray Pomerance. Rutgers University Press, 2005. 222-243.



“front” for the script of *Odds Against Tomorrow*, it was actually penned by blacklisted writer Abe Polonsky. As Cripps noted, the film crew “saw themselves as a likeminded circle united by ... 'a great sense of community' capable of 'a lot of discussion without rancor, and in the end secure in their faith that UA would offer 'absolutely no interference'.” Before shooting began, a “coda” (Polonsky's term) was added to the draft that somewhat buffered Belafonte's message that “racism kills in the end.”<sup>317</sup>

The musical score by John Lewis, leader of the Modern Jazz Quartet certainly enhanced the film's cool jazz aesthetic. Polonsky's destructive characters are alluded to in Belafonte's soulful performance “All Men Are Evil” as Johnny, a Harlem vibraphonist with a gambling problem. A critic for *Time* described Robert Ryan's character, the ex-convict Slater, as “a paranoid punk from Oklahoma” who risked the heist operation because of “his sense of white supremacy.” The combination of Wise's sharp editing (with no dissolves) and Ryan's portrayal of a roguish racist help to build tension through the film's climax, but that tension was “released too soon—and much too trickily” for the critic.<sup>318</sup>

In his review of *Odds Against Tomorrow* for *The Progressive*, Daniel Talbot as a hybrid between “an ambitious, arty melodrama” and “something different in the gangster genre.” However, “the real story,” Talbot wrote, “the dominating purpose of the film—climbs out of the interstices and swallows the entire movie: a racial conflict between two of the robbers.” But in the end Talbot felt that the robbery scene was “immensely stilted” the core the film was “stripped of its vitality.” The closing sequence, reminiscent of the ending in the James Cagney film *White Heat*, shifted the film from “efficient melodrama into fake surrealism.” Talbot complained that the climactic heist scene, in which Belafonte stands in for the real delivery boy, was “so superficial” that it made any “fantasy of a bank guard's oafishness come true.”<sup>319</sup> Similarly, Almena Lomax in the Los Angeles *Tribune* appreciated the film's “foreign” mood, but did not “dig” Belafonte's “nappy

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317Cripps 266-267.

318“Cinema: The New Pictures, Oct. 26, 1959.” *Time* 26 Oct. 1959.

319Daniel Talbot, “Five Films.” *The Progressive* Dec. 1959: 43-44.

look.”<sup>320</sup>

However, that was precisely the film's point: black men were invisible to most white Americans, and therefore the guard thinks “they all look alike.” This conflation is upended when a police officer looks at the corpses of Johnny and Slater and asks, “Which is which?” further implicating the racism of authority figures.<sup>321</sup> *Variety* understood the film as an “allegory about racism.”<sup>322</sup> Because the film is quite clear from the beginning that it is an allegory, its open ending is a more acceptable contrivance than a more celebrated film of that same year—Sidney Lumet's *Defiant Ones*, which elicited an especially bathetic response from black audiences. Still Talbot was hopeful that the film representing “a new beginning of the subject” of “minority hatred.”<sup>323</sup>

Belafonte described the film as “the best thing I've ever done.” He surmised, “I don't think there could have been an 'Odds Against Tomorrow' if there had not been an 'Island in the Sun’”<sup>324</sup> Indeed, in less than three years he elevated his status from the “first Negro to play a romantic role opposite a white movie star” to the “highest paid Negro entertainer in history” and independent film producer. As one reporter put it at the time: the “Belafonte appeal” radiated “something more than sex,” a combination of “dedication, conviction, creativity, intensity, or just plain theatrical hokum.”<sup>325</sup> Belafonte reflected:

For the last ten years of my life I have been breaking down barriers. My endeavors have led me into areas where Negro artists have not yet been exposed, the areas of interracial subject matter. In the wake of all these pressures, I have paid my dues as far as the apprenticeship is concerned. They know I am what I am. Now I want to ally myself with those individuals and those situations which make for exciting artistic statements. ... I've not really begun to go where I really want to go.<sup>326</sup>

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320Quoted in Cripps 268-269.

321Robert Ryan, “I Didn't Want to Play a Bigot.” *Ebony* Nov. 1959: 68-73; Frank Sinatra, “The Way I Look at Race.” *EBONY* July 1958: 34-46.

322*Variety* 7 Oct 1959.

323Talbot 44.

324Coleman 35-42.

325Coleman 35-42.

326Coleman 38.

He rejected the notion that he was in competition with his fellow artists based on some sort of “success formula.” Instead, he searched for a deeper personal connection to his work. “As a performer my only identification is in finding the dramatic aspects, finding the things that are dramatically powerful.”<sup>327</sup>

Belafonte planned future films to show African American contributions to art, government, history, and science. Beginning in 1960, he planned to devote half of his creative energies to film production, and announced his hopes for the next HarBel production: “The Last Notch,” “a post-Civil War story with a western setting,” for which he hoped to cast Poitier as a co-star. Also planned a film based on the life of Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, with himself in the title role. He considered Pushkin “one of history’s most colorful and heroic personalities,” and arranged to fly Swedish director Ingmar Bergman to the U.S. for a conference about the project.<sup>328</sup> For his part, Poitier said that Belafonte was “a perfect dramatic machine,” whose “body and voice work in perfect harmony to sustain any mood he sets out to create.”<sup>329</sup>

In early 1960, Belafonte won the American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA) “Joey” award for “Outstanding Show Business Personality of the Year.” After a three month engagement at the Palace Theatre in New York, and on the verge of touring his “Belafonte – In Person” show, Belafonte shared an anecdote in *The Theatre* magazine about “sneaking” into the Palace (“House of Stars”) as a child, and being awestruck about the idea of “becoming part of a legend” as a performer many years later. He decided to stage a solo act, noting that no past performers (including Judy Garland, Danny Kaye, and Jerry Lewis) had attempted such a show. The show opened on December 15, 1959, and the original eight-week run was extended. On the night of his 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday, the staff wheeled a cake onto the stage, and Pat Boone and Bobby Darin left the audience to join Belafonte on stage to sing “happy birthday.” He concluded that there was a “certain mood” at the Palace, “a code of behavior” and “informality”

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327Coleman 38-40.

328“Movie Maker Belafonte” 96.

329Coleman 37.

that enhanced the “sheer aura of drama” that was “desperately needed in all live forms of theatre in America, be they legit or variety.” Belafonte concluded, “It gives credence and a longer lease on life to 'live' presentations.”<sup>330</sup> That same year, he joined the John F. Kennedy Presidential campaign as a spokesman. Although he continued to develop and tour his live performances around the world, he decided to put his film aspirations on hold to focus his attention on the tremendous political transformation of the coming decade.

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<sup>330</sup>Belafonte, Harry. “Memories of the Palace.” *The Theatre* Apr. 1960: 12-13.

## CHAPTER 5

### **“A Revolutionary Process”: Sidney Poitier and Constructions of Blackness in Transnational Cinema, 1957-1964**

#### **Introduction: Transforming the Image of Black Masculinity**

On February 2, 1964, Lewis Funke enthusiastically announced in his *New York Times* theater column that David Merrick was preparing to produce Sidney Poitier in Shakespeare's *Othello* to celebrate the Bard's 400<sup>th</sup> birthday. The production was to be “traditional” and not a modernized version, directed by Tony Richardson, who at the time was already enjoying a successful season working with Merrick on Broadway (with *Arturo Ui* and *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*). Richardson was also one of the most provocative filmmakers of his generation, and his direction of Albert Finney in the critically-acclaimed adaptation of *Tom Jones* (1963) made its star a favorite to win the Oscar for Best Actor at the upcoming Academy Awards ceremony. In 1955, Richardson directed African American actor Gordon Heath in a televised BBC production of *Othello*. “Mr. Poitier's willingness to undertake the Moor is ... a most welcome change of heart,” Funke wrote. “There was a time ... when he was saying that though he immensely enjoyed reading Shakespeare, he was not ready to appear in the plays.” Shakespeare's works were “beyond the range of his interest as an actor,” and “for him to contemplate any of the big roles would have been a form of snobbism in which he did not wish to indulge.” He would play Shakespeare only “if he felt alterations in his values,” if there was some fundamental change in his creative interests.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>331</sup>Lewis Funke, “News Gathered Along the Rialto: 'Othello' Coming Up.” *New York Times* 2 Feb. 1964: X1. Merrick admitted that he was “overextended” in the 1963-64 season, with eight total

Months later, Funke was dismayed to discover that “complications” had arisen “to obstruct the probability of our seeing [Poitier] in the title role of 'Othello' next season.” Both Poitier and Richardson were beholden to “film commitments,” and Poitier decided that he would “not venture the Moor until Mr. Richardson is free.” Poitier said he was still interested, but if it did not happen he would “not be heartbroken.” He said, “I figure I can do the role any time and the older I get, well, the more mature I will be and that will help.” Up to that point, he had been too busy re-defining contemporary masculinity to see or feel the need to join the long ranks of other African American and West Indian Shakespearean performers. Poitier dropped the name of James Earl Jones, whom he regarded as “one of the truly great talents we have.”<sup>332</sup> Jones had a completely different attitude toward Shakespeare, and played Othello off-Broadway in Joe Papp's 1964 New York Shakespeare Festival. His 1963 appearance as the Prince of Morocco in a Central Park staging of *Merchant of Venice* with George C. Scott as Shylock brought him to the attention of Stanley Kubrick, who cast Jones for the part of a pilot in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).<sup>333</sup>

In March 1964, Poitier appeared on the cover of *Ebony* magazine, in costume as a villainous Black Muslim prince for the film *The Long Ships*, which was seen as a breakthrough role on two levels: the film was “unrelated to the race problem” (in the contemporary U.S. at least), and Poitier was seen as “the first Negro to be given a villainous part.” Poitier told *Ebony*, “If Negro actors are not permitted to play villains, this is a paradoxical type of job discrimination.” The

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productions under his wings, including *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Hello Dolly!* in addition to the two directed by Richardson. Gordon Heath's televised performance as Othello came four years after he began playing the part in a touring production in 1951. On Earle Hyman, ANT alumnus, see Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984) 120-142.

<sup>332</sup>Lewis Funke, “News of the Rialto: Sidney Poitier Completes His Play.” *New York Times* 31 May 1964: X1. It's likely that Richardson was committed to producing *The Girl with Green Eyes* (1964) or directing *The Loved One* (1965). In the meantime, Poitier was finishing his play about black and Puerto Rican youths, “600 to 1.” He directed the play *Carry Me Back to Morningside Heights* in 1968, which folded after only seven performances and was dubbed a “bad play” by Ossie Davis. See “Morningside Heights Was Bad Play.” *JET* 28 Mar. 1968: 61.

<sup>333</sup>James Earl Jones and Penelope Niven, *Voices and Silences: With a New Epilogue* (Hal Leonard Corporation, 2002) 125-140.

magazine proclaimed him top choice as “Actor of the Year.”<sup>334</sup>

Sidney Poitier was born (prematurely) in Miami, Florida—the seventh child of Reginald and Evelyn, Bahamian tomato farmers conducting business in a rapidly changing modern Atlantic world. He spent his early years in the majority black communities of the Bahamas, first on Cat Island and later in Nassau. The colonial “mother land” of Great Britain was merely a “distant blur” to young Sidney, and upon his return to Miami as a restless adolescent, Poitier quickly learned to recognize the rudimentary norms and patterns of racial formation in the United States. For people of African descent, the process of becoming American has always been predicated by the desire of the dominant culture to contain, control, and “normalize” blackness, via strategies of segregation and assimilation. For the American public, Poitier's migrant origins gave him a fascinating rags-to-riches back story, but his iconic on-screen image came to represent both the burdensome limits and the tremendous political potential of black masculinity in the postwar era.

Poitier experienced the discrimination of Jim Crow segregation in the American South and then joined the Great Migration North to New York City, constantly searching for work, stability, and the chance to send good news (and money) home to his mother. Early in the winter of 1943, sixteen year-old Poitier “hiked” his age to enlist in the U.S. Army. He worked as an attendant for shell-shocked G.I.'s at a Veterans Hospital in Long Island, and due to boredom and his disfavor with the maltreatment of mental patients, he began acting out in an attempt to be discharged from his duty. Instead, a psychiatrist treated him with sympathy and understanding, and he was processed out of the Army after a little more than a year. He later wondered: “Who is to say that I wasn't, in fact, living through some temporary insanity through the whole period of my early exposure to America? ... And once I became attuned to the strangeness of the racial situation in Miami, that did weird things to my head.”<sup>335</sup>

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334“Top Actor of the Year,” *EBONY*, March 1964.

335Sidney Poitier, *This Life* (New York: Knopf, 1980) 64-77.

In New York City, his budding acting career enabled him to give up his job as dishwasher, marry, and establish a somewhat stable life as a restaurateur. Poitier worked tirelessly just to get on stage at the American Negro Theater, and worried that his Bahamian accent and West Indian background would hamper his ability to make a good living and support his family. He became a voracious autodidact, reading the Sunday *New York Times* newspaper from cover to cover and imitating the voices of radio announcers to master his English pronunciation. He actively participated in Harlem life, art and political events, feeling he had to convince African Americans there and elsewhere that he could represent them, the realities of their social aspirations, the pain and suffering of their daily strife. Of course, in time he would win over wider and whiter audiences, and eventually he would also write, produce, and direct his own films.

Ralph Ellison, in his 1944 review of Gunnar Myrdal's landmark study of race relations in the U.S., *An American Dilemma* (originally published in the 1964 essay collection *Shadow and Act*), sought to explain why the dominant discourse on race relations during the mid-century period often put the matter in terms like "the Negro problem," or "the Negro question," rather than focus on the problem of discrimination and the question of human rights for all. Ellison quickly pointed out that the "full solution" to the dilemma "will lie in the creation of a democracy in which the Negro will be free to define himself for what he is and ... for what he desires to be."<sup>336</sup>

Yet Ellison objected to Myrdal's conclusion that "the Negro's entire life and ... opinions on the Negro problem are ... to be considered as secondary reactions to more primary pressures from the side of the dominant white majority," interrogating:

But can a people (its faith in an idealized American Creed notwithstanding) live and develop for over three centuries simply by *reacting*? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they

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<sup>336</sup>Ralph Ellison, "An American Dilemma: A Review," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Ed. John F. Callahan (Modern Library, 1995) 328-340.



found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs; why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma?<sup>337</sup>

Although admirable for its philanthropic aims and unprecedented in its microscopic detail, *An American Dilemma* failed to appreciate black culture and identity as more than merely the product of a “social pathology,” curable only by assimilation into the American mainstream. By the middle of the twentieth century, the world was only beginning to understand the value and richness of the black experience in the U.S.

Articulating his own engagement with the “American dilemma” of race relations and reflecting on his Caribbean pride, Poitier suggested that the “racial” aspect of his own identity was always overemphasized in the U.S.:

[H]aving arrived in America with a foundation that had had time to set, the Jim Crow way of life had trouble overwhelming me. ... With no other means at my disposal to fight off society's intent to restrict my range of motion, to smother and suffocate me, excess [of pride] was engaged to speak on my behalf. I was saying, “Okay, listen, you think I'm so inconsequential? Then try *this* on for size. All those who see unworthiness when they look at me and are given thereby to denying me value—to you I say, 'I'm not talking about being *as good as you*. I hereby declare myself *better* than you.”<sup>338</sup>

Astutely, Poitier contrasted the striving Bahamian's creed to “get out there and work” with the African American truism that black people had “to be twice as good as the white folks to get half as much.” As an instrumental migrant, Poitier contributed to the development of a new cinematic language in the field of diaspora arts and practices.

This chapter takes its title from a passage in Sidney Poitier's memoir, *The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography* (2000), in which he describes the period during the late 1950s when his film career “really took off” in 1956, after he received a call from Richard Brooks to make *Something of Value* (released in

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337Ellison, “*An American Dilemma: A Review*” 339.

338Sidney Poitier, *The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography* (2000) 42.

1957) in Kenya. Over the next seven years, Poitier participated in a dozen film projects, starring in some and playing supporting roles in others, embodying characters that depicted many different modes of modern black masculinity in a variety of settings. I will focus primarily on the six international films released between 1957 and 1964 that range in subject matter from African liberation struggles in *Something of Value* and *The Mark of the Hawk* (both released worldwide in 1957), to American jazz and European exile in *Paris Blues* (1961), and finally *The Long Ships* (1964), a high seas adventure filmed in Yugoslavia and set in the Middle Ages. These films are critically important for understanding the broader transnational context within which Poitier worked to earn the Academy Award for Best Actor in *Lilies of the Field* (1963).

The following analysis examines Poitier's transnational films produced both inside and outside Hollywood, their production locales and settings, and the ways in which he addressed questions of cultural identity and political subjectivity, as they developed and changed over time.<sup>339</sup> It also attempts to deconstruct cinematic images in a modern world racial system described by Howard Winant as one in which transnational blackness was openly expressed in the anti-racist, civil rights, indigenous, and nationalist movements that challenged exploitative labor conditions, “drew upon the antifascist push of the war and the geopolitical conflicts of the cold war,” and “revealed a panoply of mainstream cultural icons—artistic, linguistic, scientific, and even philosophical—to be deeply conflicted.”<sup>340</sup> Just as studies of international politics in the post-war era show that the shift toward reform in U.S. civil rights policies can only be fully appreciated and understood when examined from a global perspective, a similar argument can be made about the transnational context within which casting decisions and production practices shifted in the globalized film industry of that era.<sup>341</sup>

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339Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, eds. *Transnational Cinema: the Film Reader* (Taylor & Francis, 2006) 1-12.

340Howard Winant, "The Modern World Racial System," in Marable, Manning, and Vanessa Agard-Jones. *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line* (Macmillan, 2008), 41-54.

341Azza Salama Layton, *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941-1960* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

In the years following World War II, some Hollywood producers and directors attempted to address African American concerns about offensive and inaccurate representations in films. Many of them served in the military during the war, and were witnessing the integration of the armed forces and the transformation of the American labor market due to wartime mobilization and postwar migration. The subject of black civil rights entered more prominently into film narratives, often adapted from popular literary sources (novels, plays, and magazine stories), and frequently with political issues displaced to settings in the Southern past or some foreign locale. Even as he obtained roles and gained a position of prominence in the American film industry, Poitier was well aware that the limited amount of work available to him depended to a large degree upon the powers-that-be to offer substantial parts in meaningful projects: “The explanation for my career was that I was instrumental for those few filmmakers who had a social conscience.” He was inspired by the careers of men who “felt called to address some of the issues of their day,” and specifically cited the examples of Darryl F. Zanuck, Joe Mankiewicz, Stanley Kramer, the Mirisch brothers, Ralph Nelson, Mike Frankovich, David Susskind.<sup>342</sup>

For Poitier, the racial economy of 1950s cultural production required that he exercise extreme caution in his selection of roles, accept parts that compromised the virility of black masculinity and masked his sex appeal, all in the process of gaining acceptance as a great American actor. At the same time he understood that he was part of the cultural vanguard, and that he was participating in a transformative process that had the potential to bring about industrial and social

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<sup>342</sup>Poitier, *Measure of a Man* 101. Stanley Kramer first directed Poitier in *The Defiant Ones* (1958), the performance that garnered his first Oscar nomination. Poitier would work with Kramer again for *Pressure Point* (1962), and then again for the blockbuster *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* (1967), produced for Columbia Pictures by Mike Frankovich. Walter, Marvin and Harold Mirisch comprised one of the most successful companies in Hollywood during the 1950s-60s, and the duo of Poitier and Rod Steiger made *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) one of the brothers' most profitable projects. In 1963, the Mirisch brothers acquired the United Artists distribution company, which released a number of Poitier's films during that decade. Joseph L. Mankiewicz was the younger brother of *Citizen Kane* co-writer Herman Mankiewicz, hired by Zanuck to direct Poitier in *No Way Out* (1950). See also Denise Mann, *Hollywood Independents: The Postwar Talent Takeover* (U of Minnesota Press, 2008).

change on a much larger scale:

This was still 1950s America, however, an America in which a career like this had never even been dreamed of for an outsider of color; it had never happened before in the history of the movie business—a leading black man. I was in the midst of a revolutionary process with this institution I was so at odds with. But my eye was still on “the nature of things,” not the career. I was only doing what seemed natural to me, but I knew in the larger scheme of things that it was far from “natural,” and that it didn't obviate what was going on in everyday America.<sup>343</sup>

He was forced to contend with the limitations of performing black masculinity in an America that was still grappling with racial discrimination and segregation in education, labor, residency and social life, all of which circumscribed opportunities for ambitious young black men. So, like Paul Robeson before him, Poitier had to seek work and audiences outside the borders of the U.S. and the confines of the hegemonic Hollywood production system.

### **African Nationalism and Integrationist Instrumentality**

If melodramatic films—also referred to as “women's films” and “weepies”—constituted the genre most associated with mid-century femininity in the U.S., then adventure and war films best represented the masculine aspect of cinematic gender constructions.<sup>344</sup> If WWII helped Americans realize that the problem of racism could not be ignored or left to remain unexamined, then the anti-colonial struggles of the early Cold War era led to reactionary strategies for the containment of radical black masculinity. Although all of the films analyzed in the following pages contain fictional narratives based on historical events, *Something of Value* (M-G-M, 1957) is the most politically complicated, since both the novel on which it is based and its film adaptation were produced at a time when the events that it attempted to depict were still unfolding, and thus the

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343Poitier, *Measure of a Man* 100-101.

344Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (UNC Press, 1991), 13-24.

issues it tried to address were by no means conclusively resolved.

*Something of Value* is a cautionary tale about Mau Mau revolutionaries in British colonial Kenya, adapted from the first novel by Robert C. Ruark, a journalist, adventurer and short story writer. Ruark was perhaps influenced by Lowell Thomas, the multi-media newsman who revered histories of explorers and imperialists, known to many as the American journalist who was “with Lawrence in Arabia.”<sup>345</sup> In 1954, Ruark produced the film *Africa Adventure*, a hunting safari documentary that was shot in British East Africa and sponsored by RKO Radio Pictures. He also wrote articles about his adventures for magazines in the U.S., and conceived a colonial coming of age story centered around the Mau Mau crisis in Kenya.<sup>346</sup> The *New Yorker* reviewed Ruark's story as little more than yet another example of “imitation Hemingway,” but it quickly became a best-selling book in 1955.<sup>347</sup> *Something of Value* may have accurately depicted the lives of white settlers in Kenya, but Ruark's knowledge of the Kikuyu was based mostly on their biased perceptions, and his own interpretations of Jomo Kenyatta's ethnographic memoir, *Facing Mount Kenya*, which was first published in 1934.<sup>348</sup>

American audiences had long enjoyed stories of white hunters, settlers, scientists and missionaries, on African adventure and boldly facing the perils of the civilizing mission. Richard Brooks wrote the screenplay and directed for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and he dutifully followed the familiar formulas of the Hollywood Western in an African setting. Brooks sought to combine the authenticity of African locations with the tensions of Ruark's novel—both domestic and political—into a gripping melodrama. Rock Hudson stars as Peter McKenzie, and Poitier plays his childhood playmate Kimani Wa Karanja. The film opens with an inter-title superimposed over an impressive Kenyan landscape: “When we take away from a man his traditional way of life, his customs, his

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345Lowell Thomas, *With Lawrence in Arabia* (The Century Co., 1924).

346Robert C. Ruark, “Your Guns Go with You,” *LIFE*, February 16, 1953.

347Aram Goudsouzian, *Sidney Poitier: Man, Actor, Icon* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 124.

348Robert C. Ruark, *Something of Value* (Hamish Hamilton, 1955). See also Dennis Hickey and Kenneth C. Wylie, *An Enchanting Darkness: The American Vision of Africa in the Twentieth Century* (Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1993) 197.

religion, we had better make certain to replace them with something of value.” Music for the original soundtrack composed by Miklós Rózsa was based on recordings of Kikuyu songs. African men and women perform traditional dances; laborers toil in the fields; black children receive lessons in schools.

The year is 1945, and early scenes establish the fact that young Kimani and Peter grew up together playing warrior games and seeing each other as equals. As they get older, their paths deviate, as one white settler quips: “You can't treat an African like a brother and expect to have a good servant.” As teenagers, the boys go on a safari hunt for zebras (to attract lions) and Peter's brother-in-law Jeff berates Kimani about his desire to handle the rifle. Kimani is slapped and ordered to obey, and feeling insulted he runs far away into the bush. His leg gets injured in a trap, and he must climb a tree to avoid being attacked by jackals. Peter finds him and saves him, carrying Kimani home on his back. According to Kikuyu tradition, Kimani's father, Karanja (Ken Renard), believes that Kimani's failure to fight back has cursed the family, and this “curse” is manifested in the feet-first arrival of a newborn baby, which must be sacrificed as a “cure.” Of course, British colonial officials could not tolerate such “uncivilized” beliefs, so Karanja is arrested and tried for “witchcraft,” then sent to jail. Kimani's guilt over his father's imprisonment, combined with his resentment about his unequal status (should he now call Peter “Bwana,” “Boss,” or “Master?”), leads him to join forces with the Mau Mau movement.

This exposition roughly sets up the conflict between the heroic white hunter and the dangerous African nationalists in *Something of Value*. For the most part, the revolutionaries are presented as a band of criminals who steal guns and whiskey, and the motley crowd that Kimani joins represents the corruptive, negative influence of alcohol and a broken political system. This suggests that Africans were not prepared for some of the comforts of civilization, and would therefore act irresponsibly without the guiding light of colonialism or Christianity. Ruark himself was a man who loved women and drink, and in the novel this masculine aspect of Peter's identity is central to the character's development as

a respected white hunter.<sup>349</sup> In the film, however, Peter's womanizing is left out and instead the story centers on his romance with his betrothed Holly (Dana Wynter). Thus, Hudson's Peter is much less rugged than Ruark's characterization, thereby softening the character and making him much more palatable for both male and female spectators in the U.S. Within the colonial context, the white hunter remains a rather paternalistic figure, essentially reinforcing imperialism and feeding the violent desire to keep the natives in line.<sup>350</sup>

When reality will not suffice or is deemed intolerable, then the narrative tends to creep toward the realm of the fantastic. Ruark worked an improbable Russian character into the plot. This ham-fisted device was used to suggest Soviet machinations and manipulation by foreign entities. "How pathetically easy it would be, with the English gone and three hundred different tribes making war on each other, to walk in and bring order out of chaos." There are no Russians here, but William Marshall appears as a Kenyatta-esque Mau Mau leader, an "intellectual" who leads the new member initiation ceremony. The initiates recite: "I swear to bring in the head of an Englishman, or may this oath kill me and my family."

The violence of the text is focalized via the symbol of the *panga*—the African version of the long knife or machete—as the Mau Mau rebels' weapon of choice. It first appears in the "African lie-detector test" scene, in which a hot *panga* blade to the tongue is used to draw out the criminal in a police lineup. The insurgent Njogu uses a *panga* when forcing Kimani take a blood oath. It appears again when Kimani participates in the attack on Jeff's family in their home, where he stops Adam Marenga (Frederick O'Neal), another Mau Mau leader, from killing

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349Hugh W. Foster, *Someone of Value: A Biography of Robert Ruark* (Trophy Room Books, 1992).

350Bartle Bull, *Safari: A Chronicle of Adventure* (Penguin Books, 1992) 201-202. "The Europeans, both at work and on safari, depended on the Africans not just for labour, but for survival, whether for their livelihood on the farm, or for life itself in the bush. ... In time, of course, each race tended to indulge in its own amnesia. Many Africans came to forget that the Europeans brought an end to famine, slavery and perpetual tribal war. Too many Europeans forgot that they had not 'built the country' on their own, and that Africa, after all, belonged first to the Africans, as Winston Churchill reminded his readers in 1908."

Jeff's wife Elizabeth with a *panga*. Later Peter chokes Njogu while Kimani tries to hide. These scenes of primal battle show another limit of Hollywood representation. For example, Peter does not kill Kimani when they fight in the film, as it happens in the novel. In Ruark's version their final encounter is brutally violent, as the hero guides the reader into a primitive fantasy of humanization and murder. After hunting for Kimani and locating the cave where he resides with his family, Peter decides not to use his rifle to shoot him from a distance; instead he charges at him to fight with bare hands. Lathela (Ivan Dixon in the film), Peter's loyal gun-bearer, kills Kimani's wife with a spear, and must be convinced by Peter not to bash the skull of their baby orphan.

Production began in the midst of the Mau Mau emergency, with cast and crew arriving in Nairobi in July 1956. Although Poitier's arrival in British East Africa was less harrowing than his experience in South Africa, he still required Brooks' assistance with a hotel situation. Poitier also had to confront his irrational fear of snakes, which he attributed to "the whole mythology of Africa found in Western literature." Although he felt he "was not yet politically aware enough to decipher the subtleties or pay extra-close attention to the fine print," Poitier saw enough to conclude that "colonialism in Kenya was rotten." When he was not working, he read books on religion and history, and discussed race relations with Brooks and Hudson while playing poker. Poitier wrote: "I had been programmed and expertly propagandized by front-page accounts in newspapers about atrocities committed by the Mau Mau guerillas, not only against the white settlers but against uncooperative black Africans as well."<sup>351</sup>

A pair of hunters accompanied the cast and crew as they filmed exterior scenes in Nairobi National Park and the Nanyuki area near Mount Kenya. Louis Leakey, the British-Kenyan archaeologist and naturalist, arranged a safari for the film crew that resulted in a Land Rover accident.<sup>352</sup> When the group encountered

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<sup>351</sup>Poitier, *This Life* 179.

<sup>352</sup>Leakey was born in Kenya, the son of British missionaries. His father worked on a Kikuyu translation of the Bible. Louis grew up and learned to hunt with the Kikuyu, spoke the language fluently, and was secretly initiated into the Kikuyu ethnic group. As a child, he built and moved into a Kikuyu style hut in the family garden, where he kept a collection of natural



the real Mau Mau rebels, they immediately figured Poitier was an American by the way that he walked and talked.<sup>353</sup> Their Kikuyu-speaking guide communicated with the rebels and helped them survive the ordeal. “I feel like a stranger here,” Poitier told Brooks. “I walk down the street and the Africans know I’m not one of them.”<sup>354</sup>

*Ebony* magazine was pleased to see “the four top ranking Negro actors in films—[Poitier, Hernández, Marshall, O’Neal]—appear on screen together for the first time.” The critic was particularly impressed by “the gifted and sensitive Poitier,” who had seemingly “surpassed in this picture all of his earlier screen efforts.”<sup>355</sup> Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* praised Brooks’ “hard-hitting dramatization” of Ruark’s book as “a pretty good estimation of the social problems involved” and “a graphic presentation of ... savagery” of the violent conflict in Kenya, but it failed to fully convince him because its conventional narrative was “more sentimental than realistic” and its contours were “somewhat studio-blurred.”<sup>356</sup>

Given the film’s melodramatic emphasis on domestic tensions, family ties, and personal grievances, the deeper social and political context of the violent conflict was given short shrift. Like so many 1950s films set in Africa, the much advertised thrill of documentary realism was obviously lacking in key scenes that were shot on studio sets. *The Scarlet Spear* (United Artists, 1954), directed by George P. Breakston and C. Ray Stahl, offered a melodramatic narrative similar to *Something of Value*, with expedition services provided by Professional Safaris Ltd. Set in Kenya, a district officer and a female companion try to stop the son of a native chief from violating colonial authority by performing the ancient ritual of killing a tribal foe in order to claim his father’s throne. Elwood Price shot *Mau-*

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objects. After a storied career as a student at Cambridge University, Leakey graduated in 1926. He devoted his life’s work to proving Charles Darwin’s hypothesis about human origins and evolution in Africa. See Mary Bowman-Kruhm, *The Leakeys: A Biography* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005). Leakey wrote two brief books about the Mau Mau rebellion: *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu* (1952) and *Defeating Mau Mau* (1954).

353Poitier, *This Life* 180.

354Goudsouzian 126.

355“Something of Value,” *EBONY*, April 1957.

356Bosley Crowther, “Something of Value,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1957.

*Mau* (Rock-Price Productions, 1955) on location in Kenya, where he staged reenactments of initiation ceremonies and massacres. This exploitation film promised audiences “the naked truth” about the “Cult Secrets of Barbaric People Practicing Black Magic!” and the “Weird Mysterious Love Rites Performed by Sex-Mad Natives!” In Brian Desmond Hurst's *Simba* (UK, 1955), “it is British paternalism—the roughnecks amongst the settlers are dismissed, but the 'good' Brits still know 'their Africans'.” In Terence Young's *Safari* (M-G-M, 1956), “Victor Mature plays a white hunter who sets out to kill the Mau Mau. There is no explanation of the rebellion here: only violence.”<sup>357</sup>

*Something of Value* succeeded in providing more depth in plot and the dimensionality of native characterization. However, it doesn't “get to grips with the struggle between loyalists and rebels,” as Anderson put it, and ultimately offers yet another story about “Mau Mau as psychosis.”<sup>358</sup> Fred Cooper put it succinctly:

Kenya's rulers—convinced they were bringing modern industrial relations, economic growth, and agricultural improvement to their colony—had no clear way of analyzing the grievances of people burdened by soil conservation programs or displaced from settler farms in the midst of rationalizing production. Nor did they understand the anger of squatters, expelled from white farms, who found in their areas of origin a class of accumulating Africans eager to shed their social obligations. The roots of the Mau Mau Emergency were complex, but the official interpretation was simpler: the Kikuyu people of central Kenya ... had gone collectively mad, egging each other on with a “primitive” oath to tribal unity and terrorizing Europeans and Christian, progressive Kenyans.<sup>359</sup>

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357David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2005). The *Safari* cast features an impressive lineup of Black British actors: Orlando Martins (born 1899 in Nigeria; also appeared in *Sanders of the River* [1935] with Paul Robeson and Jomo Kenyatta); Harry Quashie (born 1914 in Ghana); Earl Cameron (born 1917 in Bermuda; also appeared in *The Mark of the Hawk*); Lionel Ngakane (born 1928 in South Africa; also appeared in *Cry, the Beloved Country* and *The Mark of the Hawk*), Juma (born 1943 in Zanzibar; also appeared in Ruark's *Africa Adventure*). Martins, Quashie and Cameron appear in *Simba* as well.

358Anderson 339.

359Frederick Cooper, “Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labor Conflict in Colonial Mombasa,” in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (University of Michigan Press, 1992), 238.

Nevertheless, Brooks adapted Ruark's narrative into a film that reflected not only the civil rights struggle in the U.S., but also the broader global implications of the colonial situation across the African continent. The film closes with a quote attributed to Winston Churchill—a message intended to appeal to international audiences: “The problems of East Africa are the problems of the world.”

In response to Southern exhibitors who refused to book the film, Brooks declared, “Any film which reflects the world as it is today, historically and from the viewpoint of humanity, cannot do any harm because in the long run, people who see the film will be moved to a greater understanding of each other.” Ruark complained that the film's “come-to-Jesus ending is just plain bad.” The film won the National Brotherhood Award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the St. George Statuette at the Venice Film Festival.<sup>360</sup> Richard Brooks was nominated for the Golden Lion Award at the 1957 Venice Film Festival. *Time* magazine reported, however, that M-G-M “unhappily scratched” *Something of Value* from its lineup at the Cannes Film Festival, since the French judges had “mixed feelings” and worried that “its story of British colonialism's bitter fruit in Kenya unhappily resembles France's current gory predicament in Algeria.”<sup>361</sup>

Years later Poitier recalled, “The city of Nairobi, the nation of Kenya, and the production of *Something of Value* were all one hell of a learning experience.” He noticed “tiny touches of improvement” in his acting technique, thanks to the Method training of Paul Mann and Lloyd Richards of the Actors Workshop in New York City.<sup>362</sup> He put this experience to use almost immediately in *The Mark of the Hawk* (UK, 1957), yet another colonial tragedy, this time involving the intervention of Christian missionaries in the political crisis of an unidentified British territory on the brink of independence. Directed by Michael Audley, produced by Lloyd Young & Associates, the film was made in Eastern Nigeria and funded by the

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360Goudsouzian 127-128.

361Time, “Cinema: Newsreel” May 20, 1957.

362Poitier, *This Life* 183.

Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church of America.

Poitier traveled to Nigeria in late 1956, after handling some trouble related to his work visa. In many ways, *Mark of the Hawk* is an important complement to *Something of Value* in the African film cycle of the late 1950s. As *Ebony* observed, this iteration of the “African dilemma” film offered “a challenging view of Africa as seen through the eyes of a cultured leader.”<sup>363</sup> Poitier portrayed the proud but uncertain labor leader Obam, who struggles between the anti-colonial forces (with whom his brother Kanda is allied) and the guidance of Bruce Craig, a white American missionary (played by John McIntire). Eartha Kitt received top-billing for her role as Obam's non-native wife Renee.<sup>364</sup> After his election to the Legislative Council, Kanda questions Obam's motives—“Are you an Uncle Tom?”—and accuses him of being “not-so-African” for living in a “white man's house.”

While the Mau Mau revolt was a local movement based on self-reliance and the use of brutal, home-made weaponry, most international strategies of decolonization depended on the supply of more sophisticated modern arms and warfare tactics. As Mazrui wrote, “the strategy of Christian radicalism and of non-violent political mobilization ... was ultimately a national process within individual colonies.”<sup>365</sup> Obam is at odds with Kanda (Clifton MacKlin) about Craig, and throughout the film he expresses ambivalence about armed resistance in pursuit of a path to freedom, as opposed to strictly non-violent means. Obam's name is translated as “hawk,” and the hawk symbol (used by Kanda) leads white officials to believe that he is affiliated with the recent surge in terrorist activity. Juano Hernández appeared as Matthew Amugu, an African American missionary and a seemingly neutral intermediary who challenges Obam about believing “half-

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363“Mark of the Hawk,” *EBONY*, April 1958.

364She sang the song “This Man of Mine” and agreed to send the royalties to the Board of Foreign Missions.

365Ali A. Mazrui, “Seek ye first the political kingdom,” in *Africa Since 1935*, ed. Ali Alamin Mazrui and Christophe Wondji, vol. 8, *UNESCO General History of Africa* (University of California Press, 1999), 105-126.

truths,” questions the morality of violence, and proselytizes about the benevolence of the Christian church, reinforcing Craig's message about the power of religion to create “a stronger bond than race or country.”

Hernandez and Poitier offer two differing examples of instrumental migrants who navigated the cultural politics of U.S. race relations by performing many modes of blackness in diasporic context. In these characters we are given both acceptable and unacceptable embodiments of anti-colonial black subjectivity, as well as contrasting scenes of inter-subjective understanding between natives and colonists. For example, at a reception at the Governor's House, Craig, Amugu, and Obam discuss non-violent means to achieve political equality. They debate the wisdom of expelling students and church members for supporting the independence movement, and Amugu fears that isolation from “fellowship” will cause the church to lose influence to the union, whose political activities are linked to terrorism. Although the hawk (Obam) was a symbol of violence, it was also the emblem of African workers, whose interests Obam aims to represent at Legislative Council session. When colonial officials refuse to provide a timetable for independence from white rule, Obam threatens a general strike unless three minor conditions were met: 1) broadening the franchise; 2) opening the Council to more representatives; and 3) the abolition of curfew.

At the same time, a white bigot named Gregory discusses the necessary use of force against political activists. Prior to the climactic attack sequence at Gregory's house, Obam tries to dissuade his brother's cohort from committing acts of terrorism. Inside the house, a white settler names Overholt is unsure about Gregory's ambush plan, and questions tactics that “take us back to the Dark Ages.” Craig suggests calling the police to handle it, but too late. Craig is shot and killed outside Gregory's home—a martyr for African liberation. Obam is arrested and charged with conspiracy, then taken to a prison camp. Realizing that his brother was the only voice representing African workers in the Council, Kanda testifies on Obam's behalf during trial that he was responsible for neither the attack on settlers nor Craig's death. Nevertheless, Obam insists “I am guilty,”

a confession that reinforces his status as a subaltern agent collaborating with colonial officials, but hardly represents a full investment in the hegemonic struggle for the co-existence of black natives and white colonists.

In spite of violence, the film is ultimately about saving the souls of Africans, while staking Western claims to African civilization. Compared to *Something of Value*, *Mark of the Hawk* was more sincere in its approach to fantastic plot devices, rooted as it was in the Christian theme of transformation and redemption through sacrifice. While both films depict acts of violence by the African revolutionaries and the reactionary white settlers against one another, both also support the benevolent influence of Western systems of governance in providing solutions for African dilemmas over labor, land, and resources. Whereas Kimani was ignorantly goaded into the Mau Mau movement, Obam must wrestle with the moral claims of competing political ideologies. As a tradeoff for lacking the safari-style realism of the former, it closes in a didactic fashion with a lengthy courtroom testimonial by Obam during his trial—an early cinematic evocation of the truth and reconciliation process adopted by post-colonial states years later. One critic appreciated Young's attempt at making “a sermon in dramatic terms,” declaring that it was “about time” such a film was made by the precept of “simple adherence to the teachings of Christ.”<sup>366</sup>

Poitier remembered Young—originator of the story, producer, co-scriptwriter (with H. Kenn Carmichael)—as an “up-and-coming documentary producer,” “distinguished less for his skills as a filmmaker than for his Quaker-like adherence to honesty and fair play.”<sup>367</sup> Poitier said that on one hand *Mark of the Hawk* was “the most unpredictable and infuriating” his experiences in Africa, mostly because of his “stunning, sexy, free-spirited” co-star Eartha Kitt. On the other hand, South Africa and Kenya “had stretched me, fascinated me, scared me, confused me, helped me to define me, and enriched my life in endlessly pleasurable ways, in painfully maturing ways, in joltingly disturbing ways that

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<sup>366</sup>Howard Thompson, “Mark of the Hawk,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1958.

<sup>367</sup>Poitier, *This Life* 185-186.

ripped me from my boyhood moorings and shoved me violently onto the open sea of an adult world.”<sup>368</sup> Goudsouzian rightly makes the point that Poitier's performances in *Something of Value* and *Mark of the Hawk* “stirred viewers without directly facing America's own racial ills” because “the Third World was a safer forum for appreciating blacks on screen.” The film was well received at a September 1957 sneak preview at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. A special White House screening was arranged for President Eisenhower in November. Although the film was released in the UK in December 1957, Universal-International delayed wide release in the U.S. until March 1958.<sup>369</sup>

The distinction of differentiation reminds us of the importance of distinguishing between the peasant revolt and the conventional party politics of the nationalist Kenya African Union.<sup>370</sup> At the time, this image of Africans made them appear more like the people of India, freedom fighters who dreamed of achieving national independence in their homeland and ousting colonial rule. The American press seemed to be waiting for the arrival of an “African Ghandi,” a cosmopolitan leader like Obama who was rooted in the native struggle but also effective at quelling violent tensions in a period of transition. Some saw great potential in Kenyan labor leader Tom Mboya, who gained a level of influence in the post-emergency situation.<sup>371</sup>

Poitier and Belafonte were both working to find the right balance between enjoying their individual achievements and addressing the collective social status of African Americans and Africans alike. In January 1959, they appeared on David Susskind's live television show *Open End*, where they discussed not only their own artistic interests as entertainers, but also political issues like civil rights and African nationalism.<sup>372</sup> In the spring of 1959, Kenyan politician Tom Mboya swept through the U.S. on a speaking tour, rousing support for a project to

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368Poitier, *This Life* 185.

369Goudsouzian 130-135.

370Wunyabari O. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Indiana University Press, 1993).

371Ingalls, Leonard. “African Leader Looms in Kenya.” *New York Times* 25 Oct. 1955: 12.

372Goudsouzian 179.

provide able young Kenyans with a chance at higher education in the U.S. At that time, the Royal Technical College of East Africa in Nairobi only granted sub-university diplomas, so Kenyans who wanted more than a technical degree had to attend Uganda's Makerere College, an affiliate of the University of London, or find a way to study overseas. *The New York Times* reported on his return to Kenya that summer, and followed up by publishing Mboya's essay, "Key Questions for Awakening Africa."<sup>373</sup>

On September 21, 1959, *Time* magazine reported that "an exotic vanguard" 81 African students, including 78 Kenyans—the largest group ever to arrive from the British colony—were granted scholarships totaling some \$100,000, sending them to 52 colleges and universities, including schools like Howard, Michigan State University, and—most importantly, in hindsight—The University of Hawaii. The story offers the following key details:

To Mboya's aid came prominent U.S. Negroes—notably ex-Dodger Jackie Robinson, Balladeer Harry Belafonte, Actor Sidney Poitier. In flowed the scholarships. The Americans chipped in plane fare; Africans chipped in pocket money. Carefully screened by Mboya, the 81 students enplaned for New York. Robinson, Belafonte and Poitier let fly with a charge that Kenya's higher educational opportunities "are nonexistent under the repressive colonial system."<sup>374</sup>

Of course, one of the students who arrived in Hawaii was Barack Obama, Sr., so it is difficult to measure the success of Mboya's program in global terms. He appeared on the 7 March 1960 cover of *Time* magazine, but Kenya's path to independence in 1963 was a long and difficult one.<sup>375</sup>

### **A Peaceful Paradise, the Cold War, and American Jazz in Exile**

While working in Africa, Poitier gained a greater sense of global awareness

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373"Nationalist Leader Back in Kenya." *New York Times* 21 May 1959: 3. Tom Mboya, "Key Questions for Awakening Africa." *New York Times Magazine* 28 June 1959: SM8.

374*Time*, "Education: Out of Africa," (Sep. 21, 1959). Fifty years later, Obama awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Poitier on August 12, 2009.

375"KENYA: Ready or Not," *Time*, March 7, 1960.



and a stronger political consciousness, while also gleaning wider critical acclaim and a certain regard among the film industry's most influential figures. In particular, Samuel Goldwyn singled him out for the lead part in *Porgy and Bess* (Columbia Pictures, 1959), after Belafonte rejected it. Poitier was offered the part in late 1957 while on location for the independent British film *Virgin Island* (UK, 1958). He thought he had turned it down, but upon his return to New York he realized that he had to confront the representational politics of Hollywood once again. Poitier referred to this moment as “the most dangerous crossroads” in his professional career, since he had to accept contracts for both *Porgy and Noah* (at \$75,000 and \$15,000, respectively), or neither.<sup>376</sup>

The best-selling book *Our Virgin Island* (1953) was a true adventure story based on the lives of American Robb White and his wife Rodie. The film was adapted by director Pat Jackson and blacklisted writer Ring Lardner, Jr. (under the pen name of Philip Rush), and produced by Countryman Films. White was born in the Philippines in 1909, the son of an Episcopal missionary. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, and worked for Du Pont as a construction engineer. He lived for a time in Dominica in the British West Indies, and in 1936 he married Rodie and moved to the British Virgin Islands; first to Sea Cow Bay just South of the capital Road Town on Tortola—the largest and most developed island, and then to the uninhabited eight-acre Marina Cay. White wrote that while on “that lonely, lost and lovely island,” Rodie and he “took love and loyalty, respect and compassion, laughter and hardship, and made a marriage of them.”<sup>377</sup>

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376 *Time*, “Cinema: Boycott in Hollywood?” (Dec. 02, 1957); Poitier, *This Life* 200. Poitier said the show was a ‘classic,’ but declared that “as a creative artist, I just do not have enough interest in the piece.” *Time* reported that Goldwyn’s version of the episode was that “Poitier quit after his demand to approve the script had been refused.” Goldwyn called the boycott “an underground movement by radicals” and said, “If Poitier had seen a script and the way we are treating *Porgy and Bess*, he would be excited to do it.”

377 The Whites departure from Sea Cow Bay was prompted by the presence of a curious character, described as “an enormous black man” named Malvo: “a hulk of a thing with wide, sloping shoulders and arms which hung down almost to his knees.” Malvo would hang around their house watching Rodie until she brought out a broom, which sent him running into the brush. The owners of the Marina Cay Resort (Pusser’s) recently restored the White residence and named it The Hilltop Bar, which hosts live music and serves barbecue.

*Virgin Island* starred John Cassavetes and British actress Virginia Maskell as the couple based on the Whites, Evan and Tina. Poitier plays the amiable Marcus, a character he described as “a robust West Indian lover-of-life.” His friends Ruby Dee and Julian Mayfield were featured in supporting roles, as was Trinidadian calypso singer Edric Connor. Cassavetes had starred opposite Poitier in *Edge of the City*, and as in that film Dee completes the romantic black couple. Unlike Zanuck's Caribbean melodrama *Island in the Sun*, *Virgin Island* lacked the political intrigue, denial and desire for social status typical of the genre. In fact, the Whites' decision to strike out to a remote island and build their own home represented an implicit rejection of the existing social order, and a yearning to establish a post-colonial paradise by the sea. The most dramatic moment in the film is when the young couple gets stranded in a boat when the pregnant Tina is nearing labor. Marcus helps to save the day, then marries Ruth, and they share the island with Evan and Tina.

In reality, the Whites' peaceful paradise was not meant to last. One day, Robb White received two letters that foretold the end of their island experiment. The first letter was from the Attorney General of Antigua, informing him that his license to own property as a non-citizen was deferred due to the Governor's displeasure about something he wrote. The second letter was from Rear Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, summoning White to active duty for the U.S. Navy.<sup>378</sup> Around that time in 1940, Poitier had been hired as a waterboy for workers building a two-mile canal for Swedish industrialist and war refugee Axel Wenner-Gren, connecting a marina to the mansion on his estate, which he boldly named “Shangri-La.” There was a local rumor that Wenner-Gren intended to house German U-Boats in the canal, and Poitier was forced to find work elsewhere when he absconded to Mexico due to his suspicious business ties to Nazis and

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<sup>378</sup>From the Antigua Attorney General's letter to White: “...it would appear that you permitted the publication of a number of representations as to conditions in the British Virgin Islands which seem to bear no relationship to truth, and which would seem to indicate, as it might be said, that you have abused the hospitality of the islands.” It appears in the text that the Navy commission letter came before the attack on Pearl Harbor: “The World War, for me, lasted five years and 67 days,” White wrote.

“quasi-fascist” sympathies.<sup>379</sup>

In the post-war years, the Bahamas ramped up its industrial development and during the late twentieth century became what Ian Strachan describes as a “mass tourism giant” in the Caribbean. Tourism declined during the war years, but the passage of the 1949 Hotels Encouragement Act offered incentives for the importation of construction materials and tax exemptions on income and property for investors. Under the leadership of Sir Stafford Sands, the Bahamas Development Board in the early 1950s ensured that the nation was “fully equipped to serve the needs of multinational capital, both in the leisure and offshore banking industries.”<sup>380</sup>

This type of “paradise promotion” appeared in magazines targeted at the post-war elite, and attracted the likes of Mr. and Mrs. John Astor Drayton from the U.S. In 1953—the same year that White's book was published—this American couple set out (with English journalist Simon Wardell) to convert the Bahamian Isle of Andros into “a modern sportsman's playground” with “all the charm of the wilderness.” The magazine article pointed out that the Drayton's Fresh Creek resort was equipped with a bar and radio telephone, two essential accoutrements for wealthy visitors to an island that only two years prior “was virtually unexplored.” In one accompanying photo, three native workmen put the finishing touches on cabanas and the pool in the rear of Andros Yacht Club, while a white overseer supervised. The luxurious lifestyle of these “modern explorers” was presented in stark contrast to the other inhabitants of North Andros. Another photo showed a group of children walk along a path, dressed as if on their way home from school or church: “In Coakley Town natives still live in undeveloped wilderness. A far cry from the modern developments located directly across Fresh Creek.” Two small boys in the rear of the group are barefooted, just as

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379Goudsouzian 18; Poitier, *This Life* 25.

380Strachan, Ian Gregory. *Paradise and Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean*. University of Virginia Press, 2002. 92-112. Strachan argues that the Progressive Liberal Party under Lynden Oscar Pindling “failed to alter the economic model established by legislation such as the 1949 Hotels Encouragement Act,” 139-148.

young Sidney had preferred to walk home from Sunday school.<sup>381</sup>

The closing sequence of *Virgin Island* was described by Howard Thompson of the *New York Times* as “a small example of racial color blindness,” an image that is much simpler than the portrait of racial ambiguity and frustration achieved in *Shadows*, the 1959 film about the bohemian New York jazz scene directed by Cassavetes. The former film was released in 1960 as *Our Virgin Island* in the U.S., distributed by Films Around the World. Thompson also thought the film was “as thin as a palm frond,” but the sense of improvisation and “good-natured” performances brought the film's social significance to the surface, and managed to “point a disarming, unpretentious compass toward that isle we all dream about.”<sup>382</sup> Poitier later felt it was “a creampuff featherweight of a story,” but at the time he was quite impressed with political and economic developments in the Caribbean. Poitier lived on Guana Island during the production, and the cast and crew watched dailies on St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, which Poitier described as “native to the core.” A majority black population like the Bahamas, and a black Governor as well, it seemed to him like an idyllic model of racial unity.<sup>383</sup>

Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (United Artists, 1958) premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in June 1958. Poitier played escaped prisoner Noah Cullen, who is bound by chains to a white prisoner named John “Joker” Jackson (Tony Curtis). Poitier said that *The Defiant Ones* “doesn't pretend to give a cure-all for hate-thy-neighbor...but it does say, 'I'm going through a hell of a lot with you, and still don't dig everything about you, but in some ways you're not so bad after all.’”<sup>384</sup> For his performance, Poitier was honored with the Best Actor Silver Bear Award, which he received later that summer in New York at the home of former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. The film went on to win honors from the Foreign Language Press, the British Film Academy, and at film festivals in Venice, Mexico

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381“Isle of Andros,” *Gentry*, Issue 7 (Summer 1953). 90-91, 140. Today the Andros Yacht Club remains the only full-service marina in the area.

382Howard Thompson, “Virgin Island,” *NYTimes* (1960) mar24 39:5

383Goudsouzian 145-146.

384“Sidney Poitier: Negro Actor With a Full Work Schedule.” *Look* 28 Oct. 1958: 83.

City, and Sydney (among others), before garnering nine Academy Award nominations.<sup>385</sup>

In a late October issue, *Look* magazine included a profile of Poitier that commented on his family and suburban home in Mt. Vernon, N.Y., his “full work schedule” (mentioning his co-starring roles in Otto Preminger's *Porgy and Bess*, the Broadway play “Raisin in the Sky” [*sic*] and *Paris Blues* abroad), and his desire to see more films made about “nice people” instead of criminals. The actor attributed his success to “a kind of physical averageness that fits Negroes between 18 and 40,” perhaps referring to his proven ability to convince Hollywood studios that he was either older or younger than his actual age, depending on the part.<sup>386</sup> Considering the double burden he faced striving to advance his professional career and uplift the social status of black people throughout the diaspora, Goudsouzian summed it up well when he wrote that “Poitier embodied the black image for the dawning Age of Integration.” Although he was a Bahamian immigrant, he simultaneously represented the middle class ideals of African American achievement.<sup>387</sup>

After his first Oscar nomination for his role in *The Defiant Ones*, *Life* magazine declared that Poitier, at age 32, was “almost without question” considered “the best Negro actor in the history of the American theater.” He spoke of important current issues—culture, education, politics—with dignity and in a manner described as “almost pontifical.” His friends thought he was “a quick connector” because of his uncanny ability to make audiences “feel close to him because he feels close to *them*.” Like Queequeg in Melville's *Moby Dick* or “Huck Finn's Negro friend, Jim” in Twain, *Life* suggested Poitier was “best suited to the role of the good man and good companion, the kind of character who appears again and again in literature.”<sup>388</sup>

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385Goudsouzian 154-157.

386As was the case with *No Way Out* and *Blackboard Jungle*.

387Goudsouzian 176-180.

388Tom Prideaux, Entertainment Editor for LIFE Magazine, “Negro Talent makes 'A Raisin in the Sun' a Prize Play: Sidney Poitier's Successful Search of His Own Corner in Life” (1959 Apr 27).

Likewise, Poitier was celebrated as “Hollywood's First Negro Movie Star” in the black press. In the May 1959 issue of *Ebony*, Lerone Bennett poignantly plotted Poitier's progress from “the West Indian equivalent of a Dead End kid” through his “incredible transformation” into “the first Negro to attain real star status in Hollywood” and “the most exciting young actor in all America.” He looked forward to his upcoming role as a U.S. marine in *All the Young Men*, which he described as “a very bad dude,” based on a script a friend predicted would make *The Defiant Ones* look “like a tea party.” Bennett wrote about Poitier's life as a “devoted family man,” and his wife Juanita appeared on the magazine cover with him—his first of many appearances—as “Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Poitier.”<sup>389</sup>

“I'm a patriarchal kind of man,” Poitier once declared when asked about family life. “I happen to believe that the man should be the head of a household, and make the decisions, and have the respect of his family.”<sup>390</sup> He later wrote about the tensions in his marriage that began “surfacing more frequently by the middle of 1957.” In this period, “I was always living so close to the precipice that there was no surcease from responsibility—ever. My wife just didn't understand enough of what was going on inside me to help—perhaps I hadn't been able to open myself to her.” By his own account, it took a “long, long time” for Poitier “to realize that all those early years I was trying to 'make it' in the film/theater world, I was actually living an essential part of the American dream in all its glory, but didn't know it until I was on the other side...” He was constantly seeking a certain level of success—some sufficient of “pay-off in money and position”—that leaves “each individual free to conduct an appraisal of his wants and needs and determine the level he or she should shoot for.” “In my own relentless pursuit of the 'dream,' tensions built up in my marriage at an early stage and to such an intolerable extent that I was unable to sit still and say, 'Enough...’”<sup>391</sup>

Poitier portrayed a U.S. Marine Sergeant named Eddie Towler in Hall

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389Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Hollywood's First Negro Movie Star,” *EBONY*, May 1959.

390Goudsouzian 130.

391Poitier, *This Life* 190-198.

Bartlett's Korean war film *All the Young Men* (Columbia Pictures, 1960). In this familiar treatment of the united-in-arms melodrama, American racial conflict was displaced to the war front in Korea, but without addressing the reasons American soldiers are fighting there. After World War II, the political imperatives of the Cold War and pressure from civil rights organizations like the NAACP spurred the Truman and Eisenhower administrations to increase the participation of African Americans in the military. In this respect, the U.S. armed forces were more progressive than American society at large, and Hollywood's strategies of screen segregation to accommodate racist sensibilities restricted the major studios' potential to accurately depict stories about the processes of military integration and to present newly emergent models of black masculinity.<sup>392</sup>

Thus, Barlett's decision to cast Poitier in a leadership role had important implications as a milestone in screen representation. This is a significant distinction between *All the Young Men* and earlier integration World War II films like *Bataan* (1943) and *Home of the Brave* (1949). However, the narrative does little to address the roots of the Korean conflict, Communism, or Chinese involvement. Nor does it attempt to give any general impression of the greater number of minorities in the military and their essential role in increasing U.S. manpower. Many important historical figures played a part in the Korean War, but their stories were large overlooked in U.S. cinema. To recreate the bitterly cold Korean landscape, exterior battle scenes were shot at Glacier National Park in Montana, and at the Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood in Oregon. Sergeant Towler hardly seems like “a bad dude” at the outset of *All the Young Men*; lost in a hostile environment, he is timid and uncertain of his worthiness as a leader of this group of men.<sup>393</sup>

Towler's primary rival is the objectionable, sneering “topkick,” First Sergeant Kincaid, played by Alan Ladd. Kincaid gets wounded and needs a blood

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392Buckley, Gail Lumet. *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm*. Random House, Inc., 2002. pp. 335-367.

393Kai Wright, *Soldiers of Freedom: An Illustrated History of African Americans in the Armed Forces* (Black Dog Publishing, 2002) pp. 196-223.

transfusion, and Towler is the donor who saves him. Sgt. Towler also has to tolerate the ignorance of Private Bracken (Paul Richards), a Southern bigot who is reluctant to take orders from a black officer. Singer James Darren played the greenhorn Private Cotton, and comedian Mort Sahl made his film debut as wise-cracking Corporal Crane. Argentina-born actress Ana St. Clair was cast as Maya, a Korean woman who is almost raped by Bracken, but is spared from this disgraceful act by Sergeant Towler. Versatile television actor Mario Alcalde played a brave American Indian scout named Hunter, and members of the Blackfoot Indian tribe were cast as North Korean soldiers. In the end, U.S. reinforcements break through and save the day.<sup>394</sup>

If the film did little to boost Poitier's rise to superstardom, it certainly helped financially. Poitier signed a \$100,000 contract to play the part, with a profit-sharing deal. Bartlett was an Oscar-nominated producer (for the 1952 semi-documentary *Navajo*), for whom *All the Young Men* was an ambitious fourth project. A review of the film's segregated advertising campaign showed that notices intended for blacks also appealed to white audiences in the North and West regions of the U.S.<sup>395</sup> As one critic pointed out, *All the Young Men* attempted to blend into one film two genres that Hollywood had steeped “rich in cinematic cliché—the war movie and the fearless-denunciation-of-race-bigotry movie.” That same critic noted that Poitier was “an accomplished actor so discriminated against because of his color that he will probably never be allowed to play a character who is not strong, sensitive and noble.”<sup>396</sup> Another critic lamented that the film's sluggish celebration of integration in the U.S. Marines was merely “a variation on a well-used Western plot.” “Through it all, Mr. Poitier struggles with commendable patience and dignity, bearing the black man's

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<sup>394</sup>Like Rock Hudson, Ladd was one of the most popular movie stars of the mid-1950s, especially after his turn as the cowboy in *Shane* (1955), but by this time his career was in sharp decline. Ladd wanted the title part in *Lawrence of Arabia*, but David Lean chose to cast Peter O'Toole instead. St. Clair was also known as Ana Maria Lynch, and was married to director Bartlett at the time.

<sup>395</sup>Goudsouzian 180-183.

<sup>396</sup>*Time*, “The New Pictures” (Aug. 29, 1960)



burden of well-intended but specious patronage.”<sup>397</sup>

Poitier received a Tony Award nomination in 1959 for his performance in the original Broadway production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which was adapted for the screen in 1961.<sup>398</sup> “As I see myself,” Poitier said at age 34, “I'm an average Joe Blow Negro. But as the cats say in my area, I'm out there wailing for us all.”<sup>399</sup> Roles were still limited, but Poitier was not alone, as other African Americans were finding more work in films at the turn of the decade. For example, Allen Reisner's *St. Louis Blues* (Paramount Pictures, 1958) starred Nat “King” Cole as W.C. Handy, and featured Poitier's former screen-mates Eartha Kitt, Juano Hernandez, and Ruby Dee, as well as performers Pearl Bailey, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, and Mahalia Jackson. Arnold Laven's *Anna Lucasta* (United Artists, 1959), released between *The Defiant Ones* and *Porgy and Bess*, starred Eartha Kitt, Sammy Davis Jr., Frederick O'Neal, and Rex Ingram.

One of the most notable films from 1960, John Ford's *Sergeant Rutledge* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1960) with Woody Strode and Juano Hernandez, was released months before *All the Young Men*. The following year, Strode and Hernandez appeared in Gordon Douglas's *The Sins of Rachel Cade* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1961), set in the Belgian Congo and featuring Frederick O'Neal, “Scatman” Crothers, and Rafer Johnson in supporting roles as Africans. *Porgy and Bess* and *Raisin in the Sun* were two of the most memorable black cast productions of the period, yet in retrospect Poitier's performances represented the dialectical poles of past (spectacular Negro musicals) and future (melodramatic cultural realism) constructions of black masculinity in U.S. cinema.

Poitier first met actress Diahann Carroll when both were in the cast for *Porgy and Bess*. The two reunited—both professionally and romantically—during the production of *Paris Blues* (United Artists, 1961). The film was adapted from the 1957 Harold Flenders novel of the same name by Martin Ritt, who previously

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397Bosley Crowther, “All the Young Men,” *NYTimes* (1960) aug27 8:6

398Poitier's role as Walter Lee Younger was filled by Ossie Davis, so that he could go on location for the filming of *All the Young Men*.

399Pryor, Thomas M. “A 'Defiant One' Becomes a Star.” *New York Times* 25 Jan. 1959: SM27.

worked with Poitier in *Edge of the City*. Flenders' novel was already dated, and key alterations in the narrative by the scriptwriters were somewhat backward-looking for the early 1960s jazz scene, especially considering the revolutionary cultural developments of 1959.

*Paris Blues* was produced by ex-magazine photographer Sam Shaw for Pennebaker Productions.<sup>400</sup> The tag line in film posters said all that anyone needed to know about the picture: "A story of young lovers," to which Poitier sometimes added "bittersweet."<sup>401</sup> Although the film raises some questions about the cultural status of jazz musicians, it was seen as a lovers' holiday in the French city for a talented cast with a poor script. Diahann Carroll remembered finding it "difficult to separate our lives and our roles" as she portrayed Connie Lampson, an American tourist on a two-week vacation who falls in love with the character played by Sidney Poitier, Eddie Cook.<sup>402</sup>

Eddie Cook is the main character in the novel, but as written in the film adaptation Poitier shared the screen with Carroll and their co-stars Paul Newman, Louis Armstrong and the musical score composed by Duke Ellington (who incorporated rearrangements of his "Mood Indigo," "Sophisticated Lady," and "Take the 'A' Train" into the soundtrack).<sup>403</sup> Newman plays the film's main character, Ram Bowen, a trombonist whose minor status in the novel was upgraded to accommodate the Hollywood star. Newman's wife, Joanne Woodward, was cast as Bowen's love interest Lillian Corning, which only added confusion to the actors' on-screen chemistry and the blurred boundary between fiction and reality.<sup>404</sup> The relationship between the Woodward and Newman characters ends coldly, countering the fact of their happy union in the real world (since Newman's 1958 divorce from his first wife), while the relationship between

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400The producer's son, Larry Shaw, shot the cover photograph of Poitier and Carroll for EBONY.

401Hopper, Hedda. "Paramount to Do Negro Army Drama." Los Angeles Times 9 Feb. 1961: B12.

402Goudsouzian 189.

403The *Paris Blues* soundtrack album was released by United Artists Records (1961).

404Ritt directed Newman (as Ben Quick) and Woodward (as Clara Varner) in *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958), adapted from William Faulkner's novel *The Hamlet*, with Anthony Franciosa (as Jody), Orson Welles (as Will Varner), Lee Remick (Eula) rounding out the Varner, and Angela Lansbury as Minnie Littlejohn. At 1958 Cannes Film Festival Paul Newman won the award Best Actor and Martin Ritt was nominated for the Golden Palm.

Connie and Eddie is supposed to have a bright yet politically uncertain future in the U.S.

The film's narrative touched upon issues connected to the real lives of Carroll and Poitier, which invites the audience to interpret the motives of the characters and the actors playing them in interesting ways.<sup>405</sup> At the outset, there is some interracial flirting between Ram and Connie, but she falls in love with Eddie. The primary plot line revolves around the seriousness of the jazz concerto that Ram is writing. The highlight comes with the arrival of Louis Armstrong's character "Wild Man" Moore, who appears at the film's climax when a large Parisian crowd greets him before his show and at the after-hours jam session at The Cave, an underground jazz club. This exuberant extended musical sequence is over five minutes long, but the film runs out of steam when Satchmo leaves town. Poitier's tenor saxophone solos (dubbed by Paul Gonsalves) are shot using jumpy camera techniques and cut-away shots, in part because he was not very convincing as a saxophone player. Perhaps his best musical scene is when he plays around on a drum kit, which suggests another direction the film might have taken. But the thin, misguided story and personal affairs are a distraction to the fabulous music made for the film.

Bosley Crowther wrote in the *New York Times* that the story was simply anemic: "no substance to the characters, no solid point in their romantic meandering around Paris, except to work a little sight-seeing into the film." The debate over U.S. civil rights between the Poitier and Carroll characters appeared "obviously premeditated" and their performances carried "no vitality" due to the weak script.<sup>406</sup> In particular, Poitier's delivery of the line "I'm not interested in The

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<sup>405</sup>In reality, they were married to other people and rekindling an affair from an earlier romantic moment. Carroll recalled hoping that they "could just do the work and leave each other alone," but their intimacy lasted nine years and eventually ended both their marriages. In 1965, *Ebony* magazine ran a cover story using the same photo that appeared on the issue that featured *Paris Blues*, overlaid with a filmstrip banner emblazoned with the headline "How Movies Break Up Marriages." The story was also about how failed marriages prompted major shifts in career paths for many celebrities (see also DFZ 1956). Given the bad publicity over his marriage problems, Poitier tried to avoid the black press, which he felt was "relentless" when behaving more like a gossip rag than a shining beacon of ethnic pride.

<sup>406</sup>Bosley Crowther, "Paris Blues," *NYTimes* (1961) nov8 41:1

Cause—I'm interested in you,” is less convincing than his fake saxophone routine. Eddie admits he is “running away,” but his commitment to Connie is half-hearted (“If you'll be there I'll try”), which actually leaves his ultimate intentions up in the air. Ram has his reasons to stay in Paris: his musical mission, and a past with emotional connections to characters like the club owner Marie Séoul, and the drug-addled guitarist Michel Devigne (Serge Reggiani). Poitier later said he thought the main problem was that United Artists “chickened out” by pairing the couples in a traditional fashion rather than going with a more gutsy angle of interracial romance.<sup>407</sup>

In retrospect, the film's aesthetics and narrative were stale when compared to the creativity of new wave cinema and the politics of the American civil rights movement, in spite of Ellington's Oscar- and Grammy-nominated musical score. *Paris Blues* merely reminds us that everyone must go back to work, to keep striving for the American dream wherever you may be. The reviewer for *Time* magazine concluded that director Martin Ritt's search for “artistic truth” merely wound up giving the impression that “expatriates are a pretty dull bunch.”<sup>408</sup> However, many African American expatriates were quite successful in Paris in the 1950s. Writers like Richard Wright, Chester Himes, and James Baldwin were prolific in exile, commenting on American life and politics while establishing themselves in the cosmopolitan literary circles of Paris.

Jazz music was loved and respected by the French as a significant contribution to culture in the U.S. and Europe. According to *Ebony*, while in Paris Armstrong and Ellington “were feted and entertained lavishly by artists, poets, actors and intellectuals.”<sup>409</sup> The Ellington orchestra's first trip to Paris was in July 1933. French jazz critic Hugues Panassié was a twenty-one year old audience member, a wrote about his excitement to see “the best jazz orchestra in the world

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407Goudsouzian 193. Delmer Daves, *Kings Go Forth* (United Artists, 1958). John Cassavetes *Shadows* (1959) was a more progressive example of incorporating the jazz aesthetic in a free cinema style. Moreover, the directors of the French new wave had given us fresh, personal perspectives in many versions of the city film set in Paris.

408TIME, “Jazz & All That Jazz” (1961 Oct 13)

409“Paris Blues,” *EBONY*, August 1961. Billy Strayhorn was a familiar figure in the Paris scene.

in his 1946 essay “Duke Ellington a la Salle Pleyel.” Ousmane Socé, a Senegalese writer and former ambassador to the United States, included the Ellington orchestra in a scene at the Salle Pleyel in his 1955 novel *Mirages de Paris*, which may have been based on a 1950 performance.<sup>410</sup>

In his book *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (1996), Krin Gabbard provides a detailed account of Duke Ellington's involvement in the film industry throughout his lifetime as a performer. His music was included in the soundtracks for films such as *Black and Tan* (1929), *Check and Double Check* (1930), *Jam Session* (1942), *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *No Way Out* (1950), and Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (Columbia Pictures, 1959). In the last case, Gabbard writes about Preminger's admission to “exploiting Ellington as an unestablished talent [as a composer] in the film industry; the director knew that the most sought after composers would not have traveled to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and willingly involved themselves in the film's early stages.”<sup>411</sup> Ellington said, Music in pictures should say something without being obviously music, you know, and this was all new to me.” He promised, “The next one will be better. I'll try another one and then I'll show them.”<sup>412</sup> In the case of *Paris Blues*, Gabbard argues that the climactic jam session effectively violated Hollywood's musical conventions. Ram seeks the opinion of a French expert on classical music, René Bernard (André Luguet), who tells him that his composition “Paris Blues” is “melodic” but not “serious” enough for concert audiences. Gabbard interprets the tune's reprise in the film's closing sequence as a critical response by Ellington and Strayhorn to the film's dichotomous positioning of jazz music (as a primitive or immature form) and institutionalized Western music (as “serious” art).

In her book *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*, Penny M. Von Eschen demonstrates that jazz was serious enough that in

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410Mark Tucker, ed., *The Duke Ellington Reader* (Oxford University Press, 1995) 81-87, 289-290.

411Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (University Of Chicago Press, 1996) pp. 160-203.

412“Max Harrison on *Anatomy of a Murder*,” in *The Duke Ellington Reader* (Oxford University Press, 1995) 313-315.

1955 U.S. State Department officials approved Louis Armstrong for a tour as a cultural ambassador. In 1956, Armstrong made an unofficial tour in Ghana on the verge of that nation's independence, and began the first leg of his band's official tour in October 1960. Armstrong worked on Paris Blues during the band's break from the tour in December, then returned to Africa in January 1961. On the album *The Real Ambassadors*—which was recorded in September 1961 and released by Columbia Records in 1962—the song “Cultural Exchange” mockingly reported that the State Department had recently “discovered jazz,” reminding the listener that “government eyes are watching you,” and another song repeated the refrain “Remember who you are and what you represent.” “He's the U.S.A.” that the “government don't represent,” the chorus sings, expressing a hope that someday “soon our only difference will be in personality,” which anticipated Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “I have a dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial during the 1963 March on Washington. Perhaps Eddie Cook needed to leave the old-fashioned Ram Bowen and his classical music aspirations behind not only for a chance at love, but also to experience first-hand the 1960s revolution in American culture and politics.<sup>413</sup>

Upon Poitier's return from Paris, he remained interested in international politics and actively involved diplomacy via cultural exchange. The success of director Daniel Petrie's film adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun* (Columbia Pictures, 1961) kept Poitier in the spotlight, and further established his star status in Hollywood. A critic for *Time* magazine saw Poitier as a kind of “black Brando”—“always exciting to watch,” and lavished praise on the script by Hansberry. Although the screen adaptation was interpreted as “a charming, passionate, superior soap opera in blackface,” it was still a rare chance for audiences to see “the Negro not as a theatrical stereotype or a social problem, but as an all-too-human being.”<sup>414</sup> In May 1961, *A Raisin in the Sun* won a new prize for “outstanding humanitarian values” at the Cannes Film Festival. In June

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<sup>413</sup>Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>414</sup>*Time*, “Acute Ghettoitis” (Mar. 31, 1961)

1961, Poitier and Carroll were in Washington, D.C. to attend a dinner for the Performing Arts Committee of the American Society of African Culture (AmSAC), an organization dedicated to the promotion of cultural exchange.<sup>415</sup>

### **Clash of the Moors and Vikings in *The Long Ships* (1964)**

As Aram Goudsouzian has documented, Poitier considered offers to play Othello in the late 1950s and later in 1966, but ultimately resolved not to play what he called “a black man who is a dupe” to Iago's murderous machinations.<sup>416</sup> His first serious consideration of Othello was in September 1960, when he rejected it as “a bad part.” While promoting the release of *Raisin in the Sun* in early 1961, he mentioned that he had signed to make two films that year: “The Interns,” a medical drama for Columbia; and “The Iron Men” for Paramount, with Poitier cast as the leader of a unit of black pilots in the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron during World War II. This is the story of the celebrated Tuskegee Airmen, who flew heroically in combat against the Germans in Italy and North Africa, but were derided by American racists as “Eleanor's niggers.” Notable figures in the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron included Colonel Benjamin Davis, Jr. and Charles “Buster” Hall, who was the first of the unit to shoot down a German plane. In early 1944, the squadron joined the ranks of the all-black 332<sup>nd</sup> fighting group, which had been transferred from training in Tuskegee to Selfridge Field, Michigan, and then was sent abroad after the Detroit riots in June 1943.<sup>417</sup>

Set in Italy, “The Iron Men” was supposed to be a modernization of Shakespeare's *Othello* for the screen, but apparently Poitier was warned against it and Paramount dropped the project.<sup>418</sup> Peter Glenville was slated to helm the

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415“Cultural Exchange Program Discussed At D.C. Dinner,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 3, 1961. See also Shachtman, Tom. *Airlift to America: How Barack Obama, Sr., John F. Kennedy, Tom Mboya, and 800 East African Students Changed Their World and Ours*. Macmillan, 2009. 218-219.

416Goudsouzian 251.

417Wright 181.

418Keyser and Ruzkowski (64) and Goudsouzian state that John Cassavetes was slated to direct “Iron Men” (197). Hedda Hopper claimed, “Marty Rackin of Paramount signed Martin Poll ... to produce; Sidney Poitier to star, and Peter Glenville to direct 'The Iron Men.'” See Hopper op. cit.

picture, and negotiations underway during the middle of the Broadway season while he was directing Laurence Olivier and Anthony Quinn in the British historical drama *Becket*. Glenville later directed five actors in Oscar nominated performances: Geraldine Page in *Summer and Smoke* (1961), Una Merkel, Richard Burton, Peter O'Toole, and John Gielgud in the film version of *Becket* (1964).<sup>419</sup> Since Orson Welles' 1951 adaptation, the only widely released film version of Shakespeare's tragedy in the U.S. was a Soviet production; Sergei Yutkevich's *Otello* (USSR, 1955) was distributed by Universal Pictures in 1960. Poitier would also claim that he was adverse to playing "period pieces," which was one of the reasons he gave for passing on an adaptation of William Styron's 1967 novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.<sup>420</sup> This statement is somewhat ironic, considering the fact that it was Poitier's debut performance in the American Negro Theater's production of *Lysistrata* that attracted attention to him and launched his film career.

In March 1961, Poitier told the *New York Times* that he took some film parts "when I needed the money," but vowed that he would "never again" make such compromises. In hindsight, the rejected parts and unfulfilled projects seem quite fascinating when compared to the films in which Poitier appeared between 1961 and 1964—on both stage and screen. He said that sophisticated audiences expected movies "to provoke and excite" and asked, "Aside from the Congo situation, what could be more dramatic than the story of the Negro in everyday life?" Clearly, some projects crossed a personal boundary for him and were deemed too adventurous or provocative. Other than "The Iron Men," perhaps the most intriguing of these missed opportunities was the possibility of a role in Michael Roemer's *Nothing But a Man* (1964). Poitier developed a strong interest in writing, directing and producing for the stage and screen. He wanted to direct a short musical documentary called "Uhuru!" based on Max Roach's extended

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<sup>419</sup>On Broadway, Glenville was nominated four times for the Best Director Tony Award: *Separate Tables* (1957), *Rashomon* (1959), *Take Me Along* (1960) and *Tchin-Tchin* (1963). Rita Moreno portrayed Rosa Zacharias in *Summer Smoke*, but was nominated for the 1962 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in *West Side Story*.

<sup>420</sup>Goudsouzian 296.



jazz performance of the “Freedom Now Suite.” He had optioned Paule Marshall's “Brown Girl, Brownstones,” a story about the experiences of a West Indian family living in Brooklyn.<sup>421</sup>

Another fascinating possibility involved James Baldwin's play *Blues for Mister Charlie* and the possibility of working with Marlon Brando on a film adaptation. Poitier read a draft of the script in the summer of 1962, but decided not to be in the play—or any other major stage production since then. At the time that the Nation of Islam was establishing a prominent role in African American communities, Poitier met Malcolm X at the home of Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis in 1962.<sup>422</sup> After publication of *The Fire Next Time*, *Life* magazine reporter Jane Howard joined Baldwin on a speaking tour through the Deep South. Beginning in Harlem, she interviewed Baldwin and published quotes from some of his speeches. On the streets with young people and activists in Durham (taking notes outside a local Islamic Mosque), Jackson (waiting for a taxi with James Meredith), New Orleans (with CORE members at Xavier University). He chartered a flight to get to Greensboro in time for a meeting. In New Orleans, Howard was put out of a taxi by a black driver who feared getting “caught with a white woman in my cab.”<sup>423</sup>

Howard named Poitier among “Baldwin's real friends.” “His life has become so chaotic,” Howard write, “that in order to concentrate he has to flee to Istanbul, Paris, London, Switzerland, or an almost as remote Connecticut retreat.” Like Poitier, he was struggling daily to balance his life between “Baldwin the Artist” and “Baldwin the Spokesman.” He was writing *Blues for Mister Charlie* because he wanted to push “a whole lot of buttons,” “to do something new, to go places I've never been, and I don't mean just geographically.” Putting a finer point on the contemporary creative impulse among African American artists, Baldwin said: “As soon as we are discontent with what you've told us is our 'place,' we destroy your myth of the happy nigger, the noble savage, the shiftless, watermelon-eating

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421Thompson, Howard. “Focus on a Peregrinating Poitier.” *New York Times* 26 Mar. 1961: X9.

422Goudsouzian 204.

423“Editorial,” *LIFE*, May 24, 1963.

darkie.”<sup>424</sup>

Attempting to take Baldwin's rhetoric writing to heart, *Life's* editors announced that there was “a new impatience in the land, a new cynicism among Negroes toward established legal procedures in the light of past disappointments.” They saw disagreement about the “ways and means” of achieving equality, pitting “extreme black nationalists” against “men like King and the NAACP's Roy Wilkins.” Atlanta publisher Ralph McGill was quoted, declaring that the time for “waiting” was over, and stating his preference for King's tactics of nonviolent direct action over risking the rise of “a real hater—a Black Muslim.” Baldwin tried to see the problem from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, he said, “I'm not better because I'm black, but if you say God is white why shouldn't I say he's black? The question isn't whether you're as good as white people but whether you're a man.” On the other hand, Baldwin felt that “the Black Muslims serve one extremely useful function: they scare white people. Otherwise, they are just another racist organization and the only place they can go is disaster.”

In March 1964, *Sepia* magazine reported on the work that the Beverly Hills-Hollywood branch of the NAACP had accomplished since the “Negro Revolt of 1963.”<sup>425</sup> Jimmy Tolbert, an African American attorney and branch president, spearheaded the campaign for more job opportunities and better roles. This was a marked break from past practice, when a series of similar campaigns had been orchestrated from the headquarters in New York. In September 1963, the NAACP issued a press release announcing its six-point plan for “greater utilization of Negro performers” in advertising and mass media: 1) due recognition of the sizable African American consumer market; 2) ending

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424“Telling Talk from a Negro Writer: James Baldwin Talks Tough—and Eloquently,” *LIFE*, May 24, 1963.

425On June 12, 1963, President John F. Kennedy delivered a nationally televised speech on civil rights, in which he called for the country's support in addressing “a moral issue.” Hours later, Medgar Evers was assassinated outside his Jackson, Mississippi, home by Ku Klux Klan member Byron De La Beckwith. As Evers exited his vehicle after a meeting with NAACP lawyers he was shot in the back. June-August 1963: More NAACP activism on Hollywood representation, Goudsouzian 208-211.

discrimination in sponsored broadcasts; 3) adoption of “merit employment” policies; 4) employment of African American models in advertising; 5) unrestricted advertising in the black press; and 6) formation of internal committees to negotiate with the NAACP.<sup>426</sup>

The article reported that Poitier's distinction as “the only Negro actor ever given back-to-back starring roles in Hollywood films” elevated him into “the salary-plus-percentage bracket.” Perhaps too optimistically, Tolbert insisted that at that moment “there seems to be full employment, with few exceptions.”<sup>427</sup> All the same, Poitier's new contractual options afforded him the space and comfort to safely choose his roles. Stanley Kramer produced his leading role in *Pressure Point* (United Artists, 1962), directed by Hubert Cornfield, but Ralph Nelson's *Lilies of the Field* (United Artists, 1963) was the biggest payoff. Murray Schumach of the *New York Times* called *Lilies of the Field* “a Hollywood miracle,” since production (adapted by James L. Poe from the William Barrett book) finished ahead of schedule and under the meagre \$250,000 budget. Poitier received \$50,000 plus ten percent of the film's gross, which United Artists estimated at the time to be \$2.5 million.<sup>428</sup> Poitier and the film were honored at the Berlin International Film Festival in June 1963: the film was nominated for Golden Berlin Bear; Poitier won the Silver Berlin Bear for Best Actor; Nelson won the Interfilm Award, the OCIC Award, and Honorable Mention for the Best Feature Film Suitable for Young People.

Poitier had more time for cultural exchange and political activity prior to the U.S. release of *Lilies in the Field* in October 1963. In July, Poitier traveled beyond the “iron curtain” to present *The Defiant Ones* at the Moscow Film Festival. In August, he attended the civil rights March on Washington, and gave

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426“NAACP vs. Hollywood,” *Sepia*, March 1964.

427Belafonte was the first black producer in Hollywood; Jimmy Edwards was the first to sign a major studio scriptwriting contract; John Ford favorite Woody Strode managed to land a variety of roles; while Sammy Davis, Jr., benefitted from his connection to Frank Sinatra. The only women mentioned in the article were Lena Horne (“seldom seen on screens after marriage to Caucasian”) and Diahann Carroll (“Typical of Negro stars with great talent who have lost out to beauties of other races”).

428Murray Schumach, “Hollywood Trick,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1964.

television interviews at the Lincoln Memorial alongside other celebrities like Baldwin, Belafonte, and Brando. In March 1964, *Lilies of the Field* won two Golden Globes: one for being the “Best Film Promoting International Understanding,” and the other for Poitier as the Best Motion Picture Actor (Drama). In April, Poitier received the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role.<sup>429</sup> When Poitier finally settled on the words for his Oscar acceptance speech he said, “It’s been a long journey to this moment...” Of course, he was not speaking only for himself in that instance, as in most cases when he found himself centered in the public eye. His personal triumph represented the fulfillment of the proverbial American Dream. Like Simon of Cyrene, the figure he portrays in George Stevens’ biblical epic *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (United Artists, 1965), who shouldered the load of the crucifix intended for Jesus, Poitier bore the burden for generations of African American, and set a bold new standard for generations of black migrants to come. But he also harbored a desire to savor the moment for himself, naturally. Even Poitier found “consensus liberalism” hard to swallow, as evidenced on the night of his Academy Award victory in his measured response to a reporter’s question regarding civil rights.

*The Long Ships* (Columbia Pictures, 1964) was released the following summer, an Irving Allen Viking adventure film adapted from the book *The Long Ships: A Saga of the Viking Age* by Frans Gunnar Bengtsson (originally published by Knopf, 1954).<sup>430</sup> This film is essentially historical fiction made into a farce, and it is easy to see how much gets lost in translation and cheapened in the adaption from book to screen.<sup>431</sup> Poitier plays the Moorish Prince Aly Mansuh, opposite Richard Widmark’s roguish Norse hero Rolfe. Although he later denounced the

429Goudsouzian 211-220. Other Oscar nominations: Ralph Nelson (Rainbow Productions), Best Picture; Lilia Skala, Best Actress in a Supporting Role; Ernest Haller, Best Black-and-White Cinematography; James Poe, Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium (from William E. Barrett novel).

430The screenplay was co-written by Beverley Cross (*Jason and the Argonauts* [1963], *Clash of the Titans* [1981]) and Berkely Mather (*Dr. No* [1962]). The two teamed up again for the screenplay of *Ghenghis Khan* (1965).

431New YorkRB Classics edition (July 2010?) – translated by Michael Meyer, with an introduction by Michael Chabon.

role and lamented his experience on location in Yugoslavia in April 1963, the film is significant because it broke many Hollywood restrictions and stands out as the most unconventional character in his body of work. He accepted the part when work was scarce. Poitier later claimed that “Belgrade was without doubt the worst place I have ever been to make a movie. It was just awful.”<sup>432</sup> He had a brief respite in May to shoot a cameo in Glen Canyon National Forest for the production of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

Poitier is transmogrified into a “likable villain” in his role as a devout Moorish sheik. Aly Mansuh leads an army of Muslim warriors on horseback, engages in swashbuckling sword fight scenes, and possesses a harem of many wives. He captures and tortures Rolfe while interrogating the whereabouts of the great golden bell, the “Mother of Voices.” Mansuh then captures a band Viking men in a battle on the beach, and marches them into the city as manacled prisoners. *The Long Ships* ostensibly marked the end of the Production Code era; from the 1930s to the 1950s, a film involving a black man (played by a black actor) enslaving, torturing and killing white invaders in the name of Islam was simply unimaginable in Hollywood cinema. Although Aly Mansuh has made a vow of celibacy until he finds the bell, this detail does not make him less a man; rather, it establishes the character in the archetype of the noble Moor. In addition to his first wife Aminah (Rosanna Schiaffino), the film's multiracial romance involves Aly Mansuh's diverse harem of many wives.

His sexual abstinence is a convenient device for avoiding the censors, but it led to trouble both in the narrative and with exhibition. Aminah seduces Rolfe into revealing his knowledge about the bell's location. Columbia executives agreed to edit some sexually suggestive scenes, but they refused to cut interrogation scenes showing Aly Mansuh's physical contact with Viking Princess Gerda (Beba Loncar), which was more intimate than his relationship with sultry Aminah. This activity leads to the swordplay with Rolfe's brother Orm (Russ

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<sup>432</sup>Poitier, *This Life* 253-256. Interestingly, the *Ebony* article does not mention his troubling experiences in Yugoslavia, nor the historical basis of the film's source material.

Tamblyn), who loves Gerda. The Vikings escape and rape the harem's neglected wives in the film's most farcical scene, which amounts to a raunchy, slapstick orgy. Lionel Jeffries is cast as Aziz the eunuch, who delivers timely one-liners and plays the foil in numerous homo-erotic situations. This freedom was made possible by the narrative's displacement in time (9<sup>th</sup> century costumes and sets), place (Yugoslavia standing in for Barbary Spain), and a transnational production effort that stood radically outside the Hollywood system.

It took six months to complete film, and the \$6 million Warwick/Avala Production budget ensured that the setting for its stars was visually spectacular.<sup>433</sup> Director Jack Cardiff was in the midst of a successful string of international films, including his adaptation of D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (UK, 1960), *My Geisha* (1962, filmed in Japan), and *The Lion* (1962, filmed in Kenya). The journeyman filmmaker was known for his photography on Powell and Pressberger's *The Red Shoes* (1948), but Cardiff was no stranger to the Viking cycle since he was the cinematographer for Richard Fleischer's *The Vikings* (United Artists, 1958), which starred Kirk Douglas, Tony Curtis, Ernest Borgnine, and Janet Leigh. In the summer of 1963, American International Pictures brought Mario Bava's Viking adventure *Gli invasori* (Italy, 1961) to American screens. For *The Long Ships*, Cardiff was working with a more authoritative narrative source, and “the largest movie set ever built in Europe,” which included the half-square mile Moorish City and a Viking village located several miles away at the basin of a fjord.

The eight, identical gilt-covered bells cost \$75,000, since varying weights were used to film the removal of the Mother of Voices from atop the Pillars of Hercules—the promontories that flank the entrance to the Strait of Gibraltar—and its transport to the city by ship. A special crew of stuntmen were trained to man replica Viking vessels. The film's fleet of long ships were built under the

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433Irving Allen (né Applebaum) Productions: director/producer of *The Hellions* (1961) - South African western; *Slaughter Trail* (1951) - US vs Indians western. Warwick Film Productions (UK): *Killers of Kilimanjaro* (1959) (producer) - safari adventure in Tanganyika (now Tanzania, formerly German East Africa); *Odongo* (1956) (executive producer) - adventure about lost African boy; *Safari* (1956) (producer) - Mau Maus in Kenya.

supervision of Erik Kiersgaard, a Danish sea captain and Viking historian. Two special trains with thirty-five coaches were used to transport five-hundred horses to the beach for the attack scene after a Viking shipwreck. Rolfe negotiates with Aly Mansuh to have his men build a seaworthy vessel to avoid execution by way of the morbid Mare of Steel, a gigantic (some five stories high), black, razor-sharp blade. If the Mare of Steel represents Aly Mansuh's power, then his desire to possess the Mother of Voices is his tragic weakness. In the final battle scene, he is crushed to death by the bell he wished to possess. As Aly Mansuh dies, Rolfe shows his respect for the noble Moor's courage, determination, and will to fight.

With a cynical flair that would later become a hallmark of black exploitation cinema, *The Long Ships* upended Hollywood social problem films about racial integration, which attempted to enlighten American audiences about contemporary race relations but often missed the mark for progressive audiences. It was offered as pure entertainment for men who enjoy adventure tales; a truly international production, aimed at a global audience and featuring themes that transcended national boundaries. "Nobody is going to sleep through this one," wrote Howard Thompson of the *New York Times*, noting that the film had "enough action to rattle five Westerns." Cardiff interlaced "artistry and action with real sweep and zing," while Poitier and Widmark reveal a sense of self-reflexivity in "surface characterizations laconically returned to the writers (and the audience)." Thompson warned audiences about the "hair-raising" execution scene, and saw Poitier's Aly Mansuh as an impressive character.<sup>434</sup> Nevertheless, the film came at the wrong time, released in the wake of the assassination of President Kennedy and in the midst of a civil rights uprising. When asked about the film Poitier told a reporter, "To say it was disastrous is a compliment." Perhaps *The Long Ships* reinforced his aversion to "period pieces," but in the final analysis he said that the film was "a constant reminder that I must never let my head get too big. A complete failure, and I carry a helluva a lot of

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434Howard Thompson, "The Long Ships," *NYTimes* (1964) jun25 25:1

responsibility not to choose money for money's sake.”

In his scathing *New York Times* guest column about Poitier, Clifford Mason chided him about regretting the role, since Aly Mansuh was “a noble enemy” and “nobody's eunuch.”<sup>435</sup> Much like Othello, there's little inspiration to be found in the character of Aly Mansuh—he is merely a foil within the plot of someone else's history; quite unlike Othello, he is not the tragic hero or victim but a rather vainglorious villain in one episode of an epic adventure story. But then again, even the heroic Viking at the center of this legend is disreputable, ignoble, and treacherous—with all the raping, pillaging and plundering that happens on his voyage—but it is the Norse gods who determine the fate of men in this tale, not an Abrahamic one. In many ways Poitier's role was a throwback to earlier “exotic” parts in adventure fantasy films, like the characters played by Rex Ingram in, say, *Thief of Baghdad* (1940) or *A Thousand and One Nights* (1945); yet in other ways *The Long Ships* was ahead of its time for its bawdiness and gore. In any case, this is this most atypical part ever played by Poitier, in a film that was targeted toward a much narrower audience than he hoped to reach, influence, and inspire. Still, it was the first role (if not the only) that represented the embodiment of his inner feelings about racial competition in the U.S., expressed in previously cited passage from *A Measure of a Man*: “I'm not talking about being as good as you. I hereby declare myself better than you.”<sup>436</sup>

For Poitier, the upshot of winning the Oscar was that he could “say 'no' to mediocre parts” like Aly Mansuh. The careers of both Poitier and Widmark recovered from the adventure, and they appeared opposite one another again as cold warrior in *The Bedford Incident* (1965), directed by James B. Harris for Columbia Pictures. And anyone in the general audience who found Aly Mansuh distasteful would surely forget about him and forgive Poitier upon witnessing the highly anticipated, star-studded, blockbuster event that was *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

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435Clifford Mason, “Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1967.

436Op. cit.



If Poitier was in a dark mood in the period leading up to the Academy Award, then his achievement allowed him to undertake an exuberant, triumphant recovery. Upon Poitier's return to Nassau in May 1964 he was greeted by a national celebration, which began at Windsor Field and continued with a 10-mile motorcade route through the city among thousands of cheering Bahamians. It was somewhat bittersweet on a personal level because his parents were recently departed—Reginald in December 1961, Evelyn just three months before his homecoming. By that time, he had also lost his brother Cedric, his sister Teddy, and three of his childhood friends (Yorick Rolle, Joe Palashi, and Harry Johnson). The reception—officially at Government House and more informally in the haunts of the Over the Hill district—warmed his humble heart and comforted his wandering soul. In spite of stormy weather he said, “It rained but I was bathed in love.” He sang the “Amen” chorus from *Lilies of the Field* with a crowd at a local calypso club.<sup>437</sup>

The summer of 1964 was a significant turning point both for Poitier as an individual and for the U.S. as a nation. In May he participated in a celebration of the tenth anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education at Madison Square Garden with Belafonte, Sammy Davis, Jr., Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton and others. In June, he was in Washington D.C. to witness the Senate filibuster to block the bill that would become the Civil Rights Act, and when the 534-hour delay was over he attended a ceremony on South Lawn of the White House. A few days after that Malcolm X—who broke with the Nation of Islam in March 1964 and journeyed abroad for his hajj to Mecca—attended an informal summit of black artists and activists at the Poitier estate in Pleasantville, New York, hosted by Juanita.<sup>438</sup>

Later that summer, Poitier led the American delegation at the Berlin Film Festival, where he received a rousing ovation after the presentation of the

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437Normand Poirier, “Sidney Poitier's Long Journey,” *Saturday Evening Post*, June 20, 1964.

438Also present were Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Dorothy Hight, Clarence Jones, John Oliver Killens, A. Phillip Randolph, and Whitney Young. Poitier had been living in a one-bedroom apartment on West 57th Street since 1962.

documentary *John F. Kennedy in Berlin*. In August, Poitier agreed to join Belafonte to deliver \$70,000 in donations to the SNCC “Freedom Summer” civil rights volunteers in Greenwood, Mississippi. Upon their nighttime arrival at an airstrip, they were greeted by Ku Klux Klan terrorists and chased to the local Elks Hall. Emboldened by the experience of solidarity with the volunteers, he helped finance the trip for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegates to attend the historic Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City.<sup>439</sup>

At a 1967 press conference, some three years after he won his first Oscar, Poitier still found it necessary to ask members of the press to recognize him for his many dimensions: “artist, man, American, contemporary.” Through the years, he managed to fulfill many of his artistic and political ambitions in a manner that was iconoclastic but not static; what Goudsouzian calls his signature “cool boil” style. But Poitier's ascent to the peak of his career in the mid-1960s was flighty and uncertain, laden with risk, opportunity, and reward. As the Black Power movement made demands for political and economic equality, he drew criticism for performing in films that failed to adequately address the issues of the day. Poitier took a careful yet precise measure of himself, then constructed a model of black masculinity that was necessary to prepare America and its global audience for the cultural revolution that characterized the remainder of the 1960s and the decades to follow.

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<sup>439</sup>Goudsouzian 221-225.

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