

CONFERENCE PAPERS

In Touch with the Spirit:

Black Religious and
Musical Expression
in American Cinema

Conference Conveners:
Phyllis R. Klotman and
Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson



Black Film Center/Archive
Department of Afro-American Studies
Indiana University-Bloomington



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**Black Film Center/Archive
Department of Afro-American Studies
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Phyllis R. Klotman, Director
Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson, Assistant Director

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INTRODUCTION

In Touch with Film, the World of Academe and the Spirit of African American Culture

"In Touch with the Spirit: Black Religious and Musical Expression in American Cinema," represents the culmination of over three years' thinking and planning. The idea of a multidisciplinary conference was first conceived in a brainstorming session with a small group of Afro-American Studies faculty. That kernel subsequently grew into the broader notion of creating a conference around two dominant entities in African American cinema: music and religion. Music and religion are not only pervasive in black cinema, but also culturally based dynamic forms of communication in their own right. The proposed conference papers were not only to address the relationships among film, music, and religion, but also to explore the myriad ways in which these expressive forms embody historic, political, and social ideas and issues.

This monograph presents a sampling of the papers delivered at the conference. The papers are grouped into three sections: the scholar's involvement in the filmmaking process, early black theater and cinema, and contemporary issues in black cinema and other forms of popular expression. In the first section, reminiscent of the "diary-style," technique perfected by Spike Lee, scholars Mellonee Burnim, Ger-

ald Davis, and William Wiggins discuss their individual involvement in the filmmaking process. In the second section, scholars Bettye Collier-Thomas, Charlene Register, and J. Ronald Green introduce primary research pertaining to the early history of black cinema. In the final section scholars John Howard and Drew Smith examine popular culture's role in communicating social issues within the black community.

Burnim, an ethnomusicologist, served as a consultant for Louis Guida's documentary Saturday Night, Sunday Morning: The Travels of Gatemouth Moore (1992). In her paper, "Saturday Night, Sunday Morning: The Secular/Sacred Dynamic in the Life of Arnold Dwight 'Gatemouth' Moore," she explores the complex, intimate relationship between secular and sacred music and lifestyles. Burnim points out that Guida's film, "reveals the struggle between secular and sacred in the black community, but also the ambivalence toward it." She also suggests, however, that by moving beyond polarities, we might consider "who we are as an African derived people."

Irony and ambivalence permeate Davis's paper, "'To be or Not to Be?' Notes on the Art of Filmmaking African-American Real Life." As he searches for cultural "truth," Davis para-

doxically questions the accuracy of his own cultural eye. In the end he believes that "our works must bear the imprimatur of our mature cultural forms, they must represent a different cultural reality, the texture of our lives."

Wiggins chronicles a two-year odyssey which culminated in the production of the religious drama, In the Rapture. He explains that, as an ethnographic filmmaker, he had no preconceived aesthetic, adding that "the only aesthetic I wanted to record was the folk aesthetic of Mrs. Hatcher, her actors, and the congregation of Second Baptist Church." The search for an "authentic aesthetic" became, however, a formidable task. Positioning of the camera, selecting a director, and understanding the dynamics of a religious drama all came to figure prominently in the success of the project.

The issue of authentic representation also permeates the articles in the next section, "Early Black Cinema." Bettye Collier-Thomas explores the ways in which the internal and external issues of politics and oppression affected the development of black theater and black cinema. She also examines the interplay of themes that found their way into both artistic forms. As Collier-Thomas surveys the theaters and companies which flourished during the early part of the century, she also looks at Oscar Micheaux, and how his film Within our Gates posed problems for theaters interested in booking black films.

Charlene Register and J. Ronald Green further investigate cinematic representation

as they dissect specific aspects of Micheaux's genius and contemplate his legacy. Discussing primarily Body and Soul, Register finds the film "unique in its technical as well as its moral complexity." She argues that even though Micheaux and his star actor Paul Robeson were already embroiled in controversy, the bold filmmaker used Body and Soul to place aspects of black religious practice and the sacred/secular dilemma under a revealing, not always flattering microscope. Ironically, as Micheaux was criticized for "airing dirty [cultural] laundry," Spike Lee many decades later was admonished for exposing aspects of African American culture for mass consumption and public scrutiny.

Green focuses on Micheaux's Darktown Revue, which symbolically uses music to convey class structure. Green's analysis shows how "the middle-class is represented by the well-groomed and perfectly-rehearsed chorus [and] the lower-class by performers who are reduced to caricature." Challenging scholars to understand how Micheaux positions caricature in order to expose and analyze images, Green implicitly asks, how can a filmmaker scrutinize images without incorporating them into his narrative?

The final two articles assess contemporary aspects of black drama, music, and other forms of popular expression, once again in conjunction with oppression and politics. Using Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing (1988) to frame his argument, Howard presents an anatomy of two dominant themes in identity-based African American dra-

ma: sanity and violence. While on the surface sanity and violence may seem to be a part of Lee's ever-present shock treatment, Howard suggests that the violence which permeates Lee's films, and so much of African American cultural expression, functions "not so much as a retaliatory act of self-defense, but as a cleansing, healing act of self-preservation." Howard argues that whether incorporated into Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun or Ntozake Shange's Boogie Woogie Landscapes, images of madness and violence represent a vital component of African American life that informs not only black cinema but also other forms of popular and artistic expression.

Drew Smith's paper, "Contemporary African American Religious Quests for a Popular-Based Political Culture," posits three types of political resistance: cultural nationalism, direct-action racial protest, and electoral participation." He further examines the relationship between religion and politics in their various manifestation in African American culture. His paper is linked to others through his analysis of political messages situated within popular forms of media such as music videos.

Counter-culture groups such as Public Enemy promote black nationalism through lyrics that communicate the religious and political philosophies of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan. Smith believes that "in order for the black community to fully benefit from the political power that religion has historically offered it, mainstream and counter-

mainstream religion must begin to bridge their communication gap and find ways of incorporating one another's agendas."

The decade of the eighties spawned numerous productions and a new awareness and appreciation of African American cinema, which together have created a dynamic cultural criticism. Additionally, recent discoveries of such telling, timeless classics as Micheaux's Within our Gates and Veiled Aristocrats have enabled scholars not only to assess Micheaux's work as a collective whole but also to see it as an integral part of early twentieth century cultural practice.

The Black Film Center/Archive at Indiana University was created to broaden the knowledge of the past regarding black cinema and to enhance the vision of its future. We remain committed to the collection and preservation of films by and about African Americans. Moreover, we strive to undertake and encourage research in the history, meaning, and aesthetics of black film through festivals and conferences. Our ultimate goal with "In Touch with the Spirit," along with other projects we undertake, is to research, to teach, and to serve the academic and general populations as we examine and celebrate the uniqueness and diversity of black cinema.

Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson
Assistant Director
Black Film Center/Archive

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT PHOTOGRAPHS



(L to R) Louis Guida, Mellonee Burnim



(L to R) William Wiggins, Jr., Gerald Davis



Bettye Collier-Thomas



Charlene Regester



J. Ronald Green



John Howard



Drew Smith

Saturday Nite, Sunday Morning:
**The Secular/Sacred Dynamic in the Life of
Arnold Dwight "Gatemouth" Moore**

Mellonee Burnim

He was known to his friends and colleagues in the world of blues and bars as "Gatemouth"; to those in religious circles, he is simply "Reverend" or "Bishop" Moore. Born in 1913 in Topeka, Kansas, the son of a washerwoman and an absentee father, Arnold Dwight "Gatemouth" Moore began the first of his two extraordinary careers at an early age. As a teenager he ran away to join a carnival, and through tent shows and minstrelsy got his first taste of show business. In his early twenties he moved on to Beale Street in Memphis, where, by 1934, the foundation for his career in blues was laid. By the mid-1940s, though only in his thirties, "Gatemouth" Moore had gained national prominence as a blues singer. According to former NAACP Executive Director Benjamin Hooks, a personal friend of the singer's, Gatemouth was a "legend in the black community." Today, B.B. King still remembers him as "one of the greatest blues singers ever." And yet, in 1949, at the height of his career as a bluesman, Gatemouth gave up all the trappings of blues stardom--money, fame, women--to become a preacher.

This paper explores the complexities and ambiguities which fuel a performer's decision to "switch" from the world of the blues to the world of

gospel music. The focus here is not on the music itself, but on the complex cultural dynamic between the secular and sacred and its impact on both musicians and their audiences. It is precisely this dynamic tension that is captured in filmmaker Louis Guida's documentary, *Saturday Nite, Sunday Morning*, which serves as a locus for this discussion. In this compelling portrait of Arnold "Gatemouth" Moore, the performer turned preacher tells his own captivating story of spiritual transformation, recounting the actual moment that marked his switch from singing the blues to preaching the gospel.

I'm a sanctified preacher. I'm a holiness preacher. Been born again, and filled with the Holy Ghost. Oh, when you got the Holy Ghost, God'll give you power. Am I right about it? I said I'm glad 40 years ago, three o'clock in the morning, in a nightclub, Al, in Chicago, something got a hold of me. Turned me all around. Put clapping in my hands; dancing in my feet; joy in my body. I

cried fiyuh (fire)!
Fire! Fire! Fire!

Through intimate glimpses like this, along with excerpts from Rev. Moore's sermons and interviews in which his friends and colleagues from the worlds of blues and gospel tell their own stories, *Saturday Nite, Sunday Morning* provides both a philosophical and historical backdrop for this present-day legend and the conflict he embodies.

As a consultant for the religious music component of this film, and one of four academic consultants, I gained a unique perspective on Arnold "Gatemouth" Moore and on the decisions involved in documenting so complex a life. It was obvious from the outset that the story of Moore's movement from singing the blues to preaching the gospel would lie at the heart of the documentary, but also equally obvious that the film should not simply tell a story but also explore as fully as possible the motives and consequences of Moore's switch from secular to sacred. As the analysis will show, this thematic underpinning is a pervasive element in the finished product.

As an ethnomusicologist, I was also concerned that the film provide a clear picture of Moore's cultural support base for both his music and his ministry. The film text should not obscure the viewpoints of those who saw this larger-than-life figure as Rev. Arnold Dwight Moore behind the views of those who saw him only as "Gatemouth," a label which freezes Moore in the blues domain. Not all of the voices I

would have liked are heard in *Saturday Nite, Sunday Morning*; those of Moore's family, for example, are absent. My perspective, after all, represented only one variable in the complex of creative and scholarly ideas and images that informed this work. Yet, through the lenses of the personalities which are featured, some very rich and striking truths about the debate between sacred and secular become evident.

This study makes no pretense of bringing closure to this ongoing debate, nor does it seek to provide a broad comparative analysis of the experiences of other black musicians facing the same choices as "Gatemouth." But in many ways Arnold "Gatemouth" Moore is a prototype: he epitomizes the struggle between secular and sacred that has been a part of the black community since slavery. What emerges in Guida's revealing film is both the polarity that has grown up around this issue and also, more profoundly, the ambivalence toward it that exists among blacks, no matter what their religious affiliation or gender, and no matter whether they are performing artists or simply members of the larger black community. This analysis, though preliminary, can thus be considered a probing of a single performer's experience of how music functions to both empower and circumscribe the lives of African Americans.

Stories of crossovers from gospel to popular music are so familiar that even cultural outsiders can cite a cadre of poignant examples, from Sam Cook to Aretha Franklin. But legacies of those who have con-

sciously rejected secular music to embrace the religious domain are few, and switches in this direction, though fraught with struggles and almost palpable tensions, are much less easily rationalized or justified.

Clearly it is not the lure of monetary compensation that inspires a crossover from a secular to a sacred career: rarely does the pulpit or choir stand generate the financial reward, popularity, glitz and glamour of the entertainment stage. When Gatemouth Moore left the blues world, his income of over \$1000 a week represented top dollar earnings for 1949.¹ He remarks on that impressive earning capacity:

Listen, sir. Do you know I was at the height? I had just got to the place where I could demand a thousand dollars a day singing blues. I played Small's Paradise and the famous Apollo Theater. And I had Gatemouth Moore and his Orchestra. I'd suffered and worked up to that, and I was considered one of the best, if not the best, in the business.

After turning to the ministry, Moore often received little or **no compensation at all**, even after a grueling week of testifying and singing in church revivals. But Rev. Moore suggests he had no choice in the matter of giving up Saturday night singing for Sunday morn-

ing preaching:

And that night when I walked out on the stage to sing some blues, instead of singing blues (and I wasn't drunk, never took a drink in my life), walked out in front of a packed house, thousands of people, and instead of singing "My Baby's Gone" start singing "Shine on me, I wonder if the lighthouse will shine on me," in a packed nightclub in Chicago in front of thousands of people, and walked off of the stage 40 years ago. Now listen, figure that out. And well as I like money. Oh yes, the Lord had to, somebody grabbed me.

How do we figure out this dramatic switch? And what complex social, historical and cultural significance does such a crossover have in the context of black religious expression? The commentaries of Rev. Arnold Moore and those associates featured in *Saturday Nite*, *Sunday Morning* offer essentially three primary perspectives--that of preachers, performers, and combination preacher-performers--which provide a continuum of points of view ranging from conservative to liberal.

Before looking at the most conservative view, it is instructive to learn how Rev. Moore himself assessed any predisposition toward the pulpit.

According to Moore, preaching was not something he aspired to do. Although he was raised in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and later was "ordained in everything but the Catholics," Moore developed an extreme distaste for the preaching profession at an early age. As he says in the film,

I've never wanted to be a preacher. I hate[d] preachers since I was a little boy. My mama was one of those preacher lovers. And because of a preacher (and I'm serious, but I must tell this), I was a big boy before I knew a chicken had anything but a foot and a neck. They ate all the good meat first.

The story continues with Rev. Moore regaling a preacher who had once come to his house for dinner and proceeded to eat every piece of chicken prepared, with the exception of one wing. According to the cultural code of the day, Moore and his siblings were not fed until the guests had dined sufficiently. When, upon his departure, the visiting minister asked that the remaining wing be wrapped up for him to carry home, the young Moore exclaimed "Well, I'll be damned"--fatal words, which resulted, he says, in "the worst whipping of my life." Moore vociferously declares:

...I ain't liked preachers since. So the **only** reason I'm

preaching is ain't nothing I can do about it. I ain't never want to be no preacher.... And don't care **nothin'** 'bout 'em.

Despite this rather scathing indictment of his fellow professionals, Rev. Arnold Dwight Moore has, in his forty-year ministry, been ordained in five different denominations--the Spiritual Church, the Baptist, Church of God in Christ, the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Church of God. He rather proudly asserts:

So denominations don't mean nothing to me, for I know there is someone in every organization that's real and mean to live the Bible way. And when you're not doing what the Bible say--wherever you are--it don't mean a thing.

Throughout *Saturday Nite, Sunday Morning*, Rev. Moore speaks about the ministry with the absolute conviction evident in this quote. But in his testimony about the role of the blues in his life, he betrays considerable ambivalence. At one point, he declares forthrightly, "I'm not interested in singing the blues anymore." Yet, at another, he reveals a burning desire to return to the European stage just one more time, to sing the twenty songs in his library that he never recorded. It is precisely this ambivalence that is at the heart of the interpretations

offered by Moore's colleagues in music and ministry, and at the heart of the sacred/secular dilemma felt by the black community at large.

There are those, however, who do not share in this ambivalence. Not surprisingly, the strongest objection to the prospect of Gatemouth's re-entry into the blues market comes from fellow preachers. Two Pentecostal ministers, Rev. W. L. Porter of Memphis, and Rev. E.M. Coleman of Mississippi, insist that salvation demands a complete turning away from all things "worldly." In Gatemouth's case, this would mean no active involvement in singing the blues and, moreover, **no desire** to do so. Although Rev. Coleman and Bishop Porter are separated by gender and geographical locale--one is male and urban, the other female and rural--they share, theologically speaking, common ground.

Rev. Coleman: When he was a blues singer, he was a blues singer. That was another time; that was another person. But now God has saved him. So that's another part of his life. But now he's a different man, see. And now the blues don't have any part in the church. So what we were before God saved us is not important. It's what we are now.

Bishop Porter: Well, the blues and the church really doesn't go together.

Really. I don't think that a person can be a worldly entertainer and really be a true Christian. Because you got to separate yourself from the world, be free from sin. You can't perform on the stage and then come and perform in the church and be a Christian. I mean, there's no difference then, you know, that's totally contrary to the Bible.

Indirectly, Rev. Moore offers continuous rebuttals to these two hardliners and their insistence that many of the "worldly" trappings of the blues milieu had absolutely no place in his life. In many interviews, Moore distances himself from the seamier side of blues, with such claims as:

I...never took a drink in my life; I wasn't committing no crime; I wasn't hollering. I wasn't doing no dancing. Wasn't doing no moving, just telling the story.

Moore's justifications could easily be interpreted as his being "in" the world, but not "of" the world.

A third minister, Rev. Benjamin Hooks, comes from the Baptist rather than the Pentecostal Church, and offers a considerably less rigid assessment of Rev. Moore's involvement in both secular music and the ministry. For Hooks, music

is a profession which in and of itself does not pre-determine one's fate regarding salvation. Rev. Hooks emphasizes that because God looks on the heart, the mere fact that someone "sings the songs of Zion" provides no absolute assurance that one is "living the life of Zion."

Hooks' point of view is considerably more liberal than that of Coleman and Porter. Yet, at the same time, he thrusts more personal responsibility for salvation upon the individual. Rev. Hooks states:

Now, there are black ministers who will say there's a dividing line between the sacred and the secular, and one who sings the blues cannot be a Christian. When I was a boy growing up it was a sin to go to the movies in certain churches, to play ball, to shoot marbles, everything you could think of was a sin. Don't mention dancing, that was a cardinal sin. Black folk unfortunately got all caught up in this--Southern Baptist, I call it--concept, that anything you could enjoy was a sin. We were born out of the womb of Judaism, and Christian-Judeo tradition is joy, not gloom and doom. African religion was a joyous experience. Black religion in

slave time was dancing and singing, "Over my head I hear music in the air; there must be a God somewhere."

Hooks further suggests that:

I think one could make their living, as far as I'm concerned, as a singer or as a band leader, as Cab Calloway, and I don't think that forfeits your right to go to heaven. Because if you believe in God with all your heart, and you create joy--on the other hand, if you hate people, if you can lynch somebody, and then leave the lynch mob and sing, "Oh how I love Jesus," you're on your way to hell. Because, you know, we have confused values.

The comments of B.B. King, although not generated from the pulpit, clearly echo those of Hooks. His also is a voice of acceptance and tolerance for Moore's past professional life and for the choices made by others in similar circumstances. B.B. King explains:

That's a way of making a living, has nothing to do with your soul. So people that sing, some become popular as a blues singer, as a gospel singer, as a

preacher, as a, whatever you may do. That's an occupation. And I think that it's wrong to say a guy can't go to heaven simply because he sings the blues and makes a living. I think that's wrong.

The commentaries on the sacred-secular dichotomy offered by Hooks and King represent middle ground on the analytical continuum. The most liberal viewpoints in the film are put forth by the two men who have most profoundly experienced the continual pull of the sacred and secular worlds on their professional lives. These two men--Rev. Al Green and Bishop Moore himself--are most accurately classified as performer-preachers, for their sense of mission and purpose clearly embodies both domains.

Partners with Rev. Moore in rejecting a lucrative career in the entertainment world, Rev. Al Green provides a clear and cogent interpretation of the movement from secular to sacred music as a return to one's roots, an interpretation reminiscent of Hooks' earlier references to the music born out of the slave experience. Green is acutely aware of the cultural and spiritual grounding shared by so many black musicians, and, as a result, he finds no fault in the "switching" process. Rev. Al Green states:

I think a singer can be an excellent preacher. And it makes all the sense in the

world to work in rhythm and blues and then return again to the same roots where you came from. Because that is the basis of where you come from. That is the basis of your upbringing....

The most poignant, revealing, and at the same time the most ambivalent of all of the voices we have heard up to this point is that of Rev. A.D. Moore himself. Moore describes his own point of view on the secular/sacred issue as "peculiar"--unrepresentative of most preachers. Unlike Coleman and Porter, who speaks of two lives, the old and the new, which symbolize the stages of pre- and post-salvation, Rev. Moore speaks of two dimensions of the same life--music as one, preaching as the other. As Moore sees it, the two sides are independent and autonomous; though they share both time and space, one dimension does not interfere with the other. Rev. Moore explains:

But you see, I have a peculiar thinking about music and preaching that's different than most preachers. So, music has one side of my life, and preaching is the other side. And I don't think the music side of my life interferes with my preaching. That's my thinking.

Moore's concluding state-

ment shows that he is acutely aware of the judgments Christians and non-Christians make about his musical past, and about its continuing influence on his present ministry. The Reverend finds solace in his personal relationship with God, which, in his way of thinking, clearly overrides public opinion.

To me salvation is personal with the individual and God. So I'm not interested how you think about it. That won't help or hurt me. I'm interested [in] what I do. I have a saying, "It makes no difference what you think or say about me and my religion; but it does make a difference what I think, say, or do about mine." I've been saying that for 40 years. So with me, my Christianity is personal with me and God.... What you do that's your business. I never look at it--don't phase me at all.

So deep and revealing a probe into the life of Arnold Moore raises the question of how Moore's experience of music and ministry is instructive to African-Americans as a people, as a culture. The answer lies in part in Moore's motivation for having become a minister. As noted earlier, he insists that: "The only reason I'm preaching is cause ain't noth-

ing I can do about it." The introduction of God into the equation puts the question of Moore's sincerity into a spiritual realm which defies simplistic analysis. For Moore, the power and significance of what he does as a singer and as a minister cannot be judged on context or product alone, but must take into consideration the stimulus and motivation for creating that product.

The public scrutiny that Moore faces in juxtaposing singing the blues and preaching the gospel is not unlike the scrutiny faced by the father of gospel music, Thomas Dorsey, who translated his blues and jazz background into gospel music, or that of gospel musician Mahalia Jackson, who carefully guarded her secret love for the blues of Bessie Smith, and her desire to sing like her.

These two examples alone would suggest that perhaps those black Americans actively engaged in the process of creating music, be they professionals or amateurs, often see what too many others, both inside and outside of black culture, are prone to ignore: to separate our spiritual being from our cultural being in any realm of African American expression--music, dance, preaching and even teaching--is to remove us from the essence of who we are as an African derived people. The struggle should not, therefore, be to define our being within the narrow constraints of what action or behavior constitutes sin, but rather to continue to work at better understanding and appreciating what it means to be simultaneously black in

these United States and "in touch with the spirit."

NOTES

1. During various filming segments Moore clarified that his earnings were actually \$1000 a week during this period, not \$1000 a day as stated in this quote.

"To Be or Not To Be...?"
The Art of Filming African American Real Life

Gerald Davis

I am at a point in my life at which I enjoy being contentious. Or at least I enjoy *pretending* to be academically engaged, an affliction which seems to have reached near epidemic proportions in our intellectual circles. I mean we loudly claim to be *African American* scholars, when really we are just scholars who appear to produce a different product merely because we *look* different--we are "colored," "non-white." This is not a moral judgment, of course. Most of us in the academic game are bright, we understand the rules, and we play by the rules simply because we want our just rewards. What causes me to bristle a bit is that even when we are in environments in which we can comfortably be African American scholars, we still seem to opt for the false posture, as if we had lost the ability to existentially differentiate between the *real* community and the academic work-a-day worlds in which we operate. This is a hard call, but I do not mean to be harsh. We are here at this wonderful conference because we believe that we are doing something fundamentally *different* as *African American* manipulators of media materials, particularly film. It is because of this belief that we must examine our efforts to see if we really are doing something different, if we truly are "in touch with the

spirit." That charge, that single challenge, frightens me, and at the same time compels me to plumb my sensibilities and search my own film with a keen and passionate eye--to see if it is guided by an intuition, and if it renders a vision, that we can unequivocally call *African American*.

I begin in this argumentative and intentionally obfuscating mode by way of publicly assuaging my guilt for beginning this paper in a manner I have so liberally criticized--this habit of routinely anchoring our own research in the works of non-African Americans. It is not the reference itself that worries me: anchors like those in the title and below may serve their purpose well. What worries me are the references made out of ignorance. Too few contemporary African American scholars have taken the time to explore the fabulously rich history of intellectual inquiry into African diasporan matters by those native to the African diaspora, and so, out of ignorance, continue the regrettable practice of pretending there is no reliable history of African American ideas upon which to predicate our research.

Shaggy dog narration completed, I open this commentary by citing a European, the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello. I might have used Adrienne Kennedy's *The Owl Answers* to

make my point, but Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* makes it more directly. In a sort of philosophical mise-en-scene, Pirandello's wonderfully rebellious six characters force the playwright to accept the fact that artistic creations will frequently develop their own existential lives, independent of their inventor. And that is, more or less, the point of this paper: In spite of the best intentions and conceptualizations, and the tightest, most artful scripting, ethnographic film may develop its own personality. As a result, its vision may be narrower than was originally intended, but more often it is broader; and, that, somehow, is how it ought to be. That is the nature of the art of film documentation of cultural phenomena.

But therein also lies the existential conundrum of ethnographic filmmakers. We do film documentation because we passionately believe that only film has the range to duplicate visually the cultural and structural complexities of African American or African diasporan performances and ideas. Yet, knowing that our control over the disassembly and reassembly of ideas is limited, and our ability to manipulate cultural images finite, we must admit the imperfections and incompleteness of our vision, and come to fear that we have no special handle on the truth of our peoples' lives. That, ultimately, is the creative tension we must live with--the constant negotiation between our fueling passion and our cooling fear.

This all comes to mind as I

review *The Performed Word*, the film I produced some years ago with a generous first-time-out grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Although, like Pirandello's characters, it may no longer be defined by me, its principal progenitor, I am still intrigued by this visual organism--intrigued, and wavering in my regard for it. Today, I am relatively pleased with the film. Yesterday, I was less pleased and easily developed an exhaustive list of substantial flaws in the piece. Tomorrow, I may think that my film is positively brilliant, or at least that it contains a moment or two of what we like to recognize as "ethnographic truth." That truth, finally, has less to do with authentic cultural description than with the accuracy of my own cultural eye. It is this elusive accuracy, and my shifting, uneven regard for my film (endemic, I think to all ethnodocumentary filmmakers), that center this commentary. (Fortunately, my predilection for self-criticism ad nauseam is tempered by the modest annual royalty checks I still receive, nearly twelve years after the piece premiered at The American Museum of Natural History in New York.)

I begin to question the accuracy of my own cultural eye when I see how variously defined *The Performed Word* is by those who rent or purchase it for screenings. Scholars generally seem to understand our initial intent to frame or model what we considered to be the salient features of African American expressive culture. African American church folk respond to the piece, especial-

ly the two lengthy and heavily edited sermon segments, as if they were in church. Screenings are liberally punctuated with "Amen" and "My, My, My" and "All right, tell it." Non African Americans think the film "just wonderful," "so unique" and "so real." (Those are actual quotations.) Curiously, while African American audiences seem to account for nearly 80% of the film's rental traffic, purchases of the product on film and videotape seem to be almost exclusively non-African American.

I am, of course, grateful for any interest in *The Performed Word*, but its reception and commercial success among non-African American audiences disturbingly bring to mind the response to the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. You may recall that *The Gods...* had to do with an aboriginal community taking as a god a Coca-Cola bottle which fell from the sky. Filmed in a pseudo-ethnographic style, the film greatly appealed to audiences intrigued with images of "primitive," charming savages grappling with intrusive, mundane elements of contemporary Occidental society.

What troubles me profoundly about these responses to *The Performed Word* is that we may have come dangerously close to presenting audiences--both African American and non-African American--with images little removed from the caricatures of African Americans so prevalent in films about my people. We may also have unwittingly permitted our audiences to impose upon our own cinematic images exactly the kind of skewed literary misconceptions of African

peoples our "authentic documentation" sought to correct. I do not think I am being unnecessarily harsh in this evaluation of my product. Reviewers have been marvelously generous in their praise. But what I am getting at is this: in our own work we may injudiciously employ an entire inherited vocabulary of representational symbols that are as culturally loaded as any other signification system.

In our project, originally entitled *Sending Forth the Word*, we insisted at every turn that this examination of African-American contextualized images was not going to rely on stereotypes. Through careful, deliberate positioning of images and text, our product was to be light years ahead of the work of folklore and anthropology filmmakers like Bill Ferris. With all good intentions, we declared that this project was centered in African American cultural realities, and that we were going to use the unique structure of the African American sermon as the framework for the film's sense of timing and the organization of its expository units.

I selected a national advisory panel of renowned scholars (including my good colleague, Bill Wiggins, the chair of the panel for which this paper was prepared), most of whom were African American, two of whom were African American preachers, and the majority of whom were folklorists with experience in hard cultural analysis and filmmaking. In an extensive schedule of coast-to-coast screenings, including an important stop at the Bloomington campus of Indiana University,

we offered a rough cut--the first assembly of the segments of the piece, roughly in the order in which they were to appear in the final version--to knowledgeable and critical audiences for comment and reaction. As a result of the screenings, we made significant changes in the film. At the Indiana University stop, for example, we changed the film's name, courtesy of comments from Portia Maulsby and Phyllis Klotman; restructured its segments, dropping some, adding others; and refined the narrator's text for greater clarity.

Of all the comments we heard during extensive screenings, the one which in hindsight seems most insightful, and which is probably the foundation for this afternoon's paper, was offered by an HBO reviewer in New York. On her way out of the screening this reviewer pulled me aside and told me that she liked the film's "energy" but that it had "too many intelligences." The bottom line, which I understood perfectly, was that HBO would not purchase the film. The more subtle meaning escaped me at the time, but at least I had the presence of mind to query further. The reviewer explained that she did not think that I was in control of the visualization of the concept, that what I had represented to her in several conversations was not what she saw on the screen. Curiously, folklore scholar Roger Abrahams had made a similar observation even before we began filming. At the first meeting of the advisory panel in Santa Fe, where all of the principals met for the first time, Abrahams had taken

me aside to tell me that the man I had hired as the project's director/co-producer "was not on my same wave length." (Halfway through the location filming, when the director/co-producer was released from his expensive contract, the very experienced crew said they had tried to tell me from the beginning that this man I had hand-picked didn't know the orifice in his behind from a hole in the ground.) It was all a bit too subtle for me at the time. My cooling fear had not yet tempered my fueling passion: This was my first time out. I had a major competitive grant. We had made great progress without additional infusions of support. The idea, the conceptualization, was solid. It should have worked.

Years later, as the accuracy of the HBO reviewer's response and the deaf ear I turned to Abrahams' advice continue to haunt me, I realize that it was the actualization of the idea that was not infallible. It was not that we did not take great care in choosing the right people to actualize our ideas carefully and creatively. As a term of my NEH award, I was required to hire an experienced co-producer. The first name suggested to me was William Greaves, whom I met with a couple of times and concluded I could not work with productively; it was clear the film would have been a William Greaves production. Of course I knew Greaves was probably the most successful of the African-American producers at the time, that he had his own sizeable New York-based production company and an impressive list of

industrial and documentary titles to his credit. Still, I did not trust Greaves' interpretation of my idea, and I certainly was not pleased with the portion of the grant Greaves would have required.

Following a recommendation made by Ellis Haizlip and Pepsi Charles, I then contacted an Afro-Puerto Rican filmmaker who had worked successfully with PBS stations in independent productions and had studied ethnographic filmmaking with one of my heroes, Jean Rouché, at his seminars near Paris. The absolutely charming and urbane Carlos de Jesus also seemed to understand my concept, including my interest in manipulating segment timing and textures in an attempt to "neo-nize" the look of the final product. He was hired.

Allowing Carlos director's privilege, we hired Hiroaki Tanaka, whom he had worked with previously, as first and principal cameraman. We flew Tanaka from the Dominican Republic where he was living with his wife and family. Tanaka, who was Japanese, was a marvelous professional and had a wonderful eye. Even more luminous was the work of our second cameraman, Rick Butler, an African American whose brilliant ability to anticipate movement provided us with some of our finest footage. Our principal sound man was Mark Berger--Jewish, Californian, and at that time the holder of three Oscars. (He has since added a fourth to his mantel.) Berger provided access to LucasFilms for some of our equipment rentals and to the state-of-the-art Saul Zaentz Studios for our sound mix work, enabling us to

record our sermons on sixteen tracks. Our project assistant director and post-production editor was the talented Japanese film editor Ernie Shinagawa, who had been one of my teachers at the Anthropology Film Center in Santa Fe. When Carlos was later released from his contract, Ernie was made director, and on our return to Oakland assigned to reshoot some of the footage shot under Carlos' direction. (Later some of Ernie's own uniquely memorable footage ended up on the cutting room floor.) Finally, we hired Paul Grindrod as our associate producer. This Nordic looking, white-blond young man from Wisconsin turned out to be the most closely attuned to my vision of any in the crew.

Most of the principals had been with me in film school at the Anthropology Film Center in Santa Fe, and all are doing well professionally. This perhaps goes to the heart of Abrahams' advice and the HBO reviewer's comment. While most of the crew were superbly professional, it was the first time most had worked intensely in any sort of African American community setting. It was not until I began looking closely at the dailies that I began to realize that we were getting formula shots straight from a Hollywood shot glossary. Particularly because Carlos was unfamiliar with the affective African American church, the Church of God in Christ in this case, he could not anticipate any of the action and could not direct the camerapersons with any real authority. Many of his shots were off the mark and missed the dynamism and the complexity we sought to record

and then disassemble and reassemble in post-production. Fortunately, after comparing rolls, Rick Butler, the African American cameraman, convinced Tanaka to ignore Carlos and shoot from his knowledge of the church, taking general cues from me over our communications head set. This is some of our best work.

It would be glib to assume that an all African American crew would have delivered a more consistent rendering of the vision I shared with my project advisory panel. Nor do I mean to suggest that my ethnically and culturally diverse crew intentionally sought to subvert the project's intent. They did not. They were, in fact, wonderful, sensitive folk who took great pains to explore with me my vision for the film. I was simply too green, too inexperienced at the beginning of production to understand that every film professional involved in a project will bring his own sensibilities to the structured imaging process, to filmmaking, and may subconsciously insinuate those sensibilities into the final product. (This may explain, in part, why some experienced directors and producers are such tyrants; a single vision must prevail.)

If African Americans who have been in the church all of their lives understand the enormous complexity of that phenomenal institution imperfectly, why should I have expected those unfamiliar with both African American culture and the African church to render cinematically the ethnographic truths I hungered for? The answer is simple enough: I

believed in ethnographic truth. I naively believed that the camera did not, could not lie. Get the raw footage, construct the film in the editing room. Once in the can, the truth will be revealed. I could not have foreseen that from the outset that the lines of imperfection are in the eye, in the cultural eye, behind the camera. Without some strong corrective sensibility, every subsequent angle can compound the initial skewing of the producer's vision.

One of my heroes, Ntozake Shange, offers her readers what I regard as the canon on visualizing African Americans in "A Photograph: Lovers in Motion." Properly set, these powerful lines provide the corrective sensibility we, as filmmakers, need. The wordsmith writes:

...I realize yr not accustomed to the visions
of a man of color who has a gift/
But fear not/ I'll give it to ya a lil at a time, I am only beginning to startle/ To mesmerize & reverse the reality of all who can see. I gotta thing about niggahs/ My folks/ that just won't stop & we are so correct for the photograph/ We profile all the time/ Stylin/ Giving angle and pattern/ Shadows & still-life. If somebody sides me cd see the line in niggahs/ The texture of our lives/ They wda done it/ But since nobody has stepped forward/ Her I am. Yes...

(from Three Pieces, 1981, p. 92)

If we, as independent African American film ethnographers, are going to "startle... mesmerize & reverse the reality of all who can see," we cannot restrict ourselves to the existing conventions of media documentation. We are going to have to move beyond the standard visual conventions of cinema verite. Cinema verite, the method most film documentarians have embraced, promises spontaneous, unstructured realism. But not even verite filmmaking can fulfill the promise of authentically documenting and interpreting African American expressive culture. The nature of media production is the manipulation of images. At every step, creative decisions are made which reflect the idiosyncratic cultural eye of the director, the editor, or the producer.

Ideally, the African American filmmaker with the truer cultural eye will produce the media analysis of an expressive cultural event closer to the way the event is understood, experienced, and symbolized *in situ*. But even we, as African American filmmakers, must range far and wide to discover inventive techniques for enhancing the quality of our representations of those African Americans with whom we work. Elsewhere, I have suggested that African American film professionals who are self-consciously African American or committed to a sort of Afrocentric introspective sensibility have been too timid in "trusting the culture" and its possibilities for alternative representations

of African American expression. I will not revisit that discussion here. Suffice it to say that I think African American film documentarians who are working with African American or African diasporan materials ought to take more risks. They ought to adopt the more wide-ranging mentality of African American commercial filmmakers.

Several years ago, I attempted a conceptual riff as part of an experiment in "conceptual theater" mounted by sculptor Benjimano Buffano (his elegant steel sculpture greets those approaching San Francisco International Airport). Buffano used multiple playing areas in a theater to isolate layers of an event (coordinated through dialogue, lighting, etc.). I ventured that since African American folk are accustomed to handling a variety of visual and aural stimuli simultaneously, six forward-positioned viewing screens, each of which was handling an element of an event, would multiply the quality and the quantity of the data one could offer African American audiences. The idea still intrigues me, because I think we habitually underestimate the intellectual and sensory capacities of audiences. And certainly we ought to look more closely at the theatrical film constructions of Melvin Van Peebles and Spike Lee to gain a clearer sense of the importance of community style, point of view, shooting angles, and teasing visual one-lines from narrative events--all to achieve a unique and more authentic perspective.

On balance, I think *The Performed Word* would have been a richer work had we taken more

risks, had we put more trust in the structures of African American expressive performance, much as Warrington Hudlin and Spike Lee did in their early, "small," black and white productions. Like most of you, "I gotta thing about niggahs/ My folks/ That just won't stop/ & we are so correct for the photograph/ We profile all the time/ Stylin/ Giving angle and pattern/ Shadows & still-life...." *The Performed Word* works, I think, because we at least to some degree mirrored what is culturally familiar. During our preaching sequences, we manipulated filmic units to produce the prototypic African American sermon. But is this enough? I do not think so. If we are going to accomplish truer African American or African diasporan ethnodocumentary film, we are going to have to know more of how African diasporan peoples themselves visualize cultural phenomena. Our work ought not to be *black* simply because our actors, the persons who people our films are of darker complexions. In much the same way Japanese films and some African films look distinct, our works must bear the imprimatur of our mature cultural forms, they must represent a different cultural reality, they must be structured differently--if, finally, we are to be worthy of Shange's challenge to see the "...line in niggahs/ The texture of our lives." "To Be or Not To Be" (Europeanized) is our constant dilemma. It must also be our ever-present opportunity.

In The Rapture: The Anatomy of an Afro-American Documentary Film

William H. Wiggins, Jr.

In the Rapture was the first documentary film ever made of an actual performance of an Afro-American religious drama. Prior to my filming of this popular Indianapolis-based religious play, written and directed by Mrs. Margerine Hatcher, Spencer Williams' *The Blood of Jesus* was the best film example of traditional Afro-American religious drama. Filmed in Texas with an all-Negro cast, Williams' work has much in common with *In the Rapture*. Both films use the familiar music of the spirituals, and both share the same symbolic characters and images--angels in white robes, sinners in flashy worldly clothing, and the Devil--all set against the backdrop of the cross. Both films also deliver essentially the same message: salvation from the sins of the world can only be found through the acceptance of Jesus Christ as a personal Savior. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the filming philosophies of *The Blood of Jesus* and *In the Rapture*. Like most commercial filmmakers, Williams began with a clear aesthetic in mind. Hoping to create an entertaining film that would also turn a profit, he shot certain scenes until the actors, playing to his camera, conveyed precisely the human emotions he sought to capture on film. As an ethnographic filmmaker, I had no such predetermined aes-

thetic. The only aesthetic I wanted to record was the folk aesthetic of Mrs. Hatcher, her actors, and the congregation of the Second Baptist Church in Bloomington, Indiana. My four cameras played to them, not vice versa. In this culturally true and technically non-intrusive manner, I sought to capture the religious experience as it unfolded, and to provide those whose religious tradition lacked such experiences with a deeper understanding of ritual drama and appreciation for plays like *In the Rapture*.

This paper chronicles my two-year experience with the *Rapture* documentary film project, beginning in the summer of 1974 and ending in the summer of 1976. It is a synthesis of journal entries, field notes, and research grant proposals; correspondence with Mrs. Hatcher and the funding personnel of the National Endowment for the Arts' Folk Arts Program; newspaper articles written by those interested in the project; and all the extensive but deeply rewarding thinking and planning that went into the making of *In the Rapture*.

The project that would culminate in a full-length documentary film began in July of 1974. Having completed my dissertation for a Ph.D. in Folklore (fittingly, on Emancipation Day), I was at loose ends as to what my next research

project should be. I broached the idea of turning my scholarly attention to filming a series of Afro-American religious dramas, such as Nannie Burroughs' *Slabtown Convention*, with my friend and mentor, Henry Glassie of the Indiana University Folklore Institute. I explained to Henry that a student had whetted my interest in filming this particular drama by giving me a copy of the play's text and describing the *Slabtown* productions put on annually by his home church in South Bend, Indiana. Henry liked the idea and encouraged me to pursue funding for the project by writing to Alan Jabbour, the Director of the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts.

I soon wrote to Jabbour, who was not long in responding. In what was only the first of the many letters I would receive from Jabbour during our two-year correspondence, he said that he shared "Henry Glassie's enthusiasm for the idea of filming the dramas for preservation, wider availability, and educational use." Jabbour also added, or perhaps warned, that such a project would require a good deal of "serious planning." In what he called "random thoughts," Jabbour set forth three major criteria that I would have to meet in order to receive funding from his agency:

First, you will have to locate a first-rate documentary filmmaker sympathetic with the concept you have evolved and with the people...
Second, you must ar-

range matters so that the churches will be willing and active participants in the project; it would be nice to plan it so that they could be beneficiaries--say, providing them with a free print of the film. Third, you must arrange for distribution if the end product is to be a published film. (Excerpt from Jabbour letter, August 1, 1974)

Guided by Jabbour's "random thoughts," I went to the Indiana University Department of Radio and Television in search of "a first-rate documentary filmmaker" who would be willing to defer to me and the needs of these very special plays and their casts. I sought someone who would allow me to use my experience as a folklore field collector to determine which shots would best capture the true folk beliefs of Afro-American religious drama, someone who would be willing to consult with all of us on such matters as devising a filming schedule. My first attempt at finding such a filmmaker was a disaster. He was a thirty-year-old, headstrong, Ph.D. student in Instructional Systems Technology at Indiana University who refused even to entertain the merits of my folk-based concept of filming. For him, the director called the shots, and the actors played to his camera, not vice versa.

In hopes that my second attempt at selecting a filmmaker might go more smoothly, I

decided to attend the November 7th and 8th productions of *Heaven Bound*, another popular religious play, in Atlanta, Georgia. I wanted to familiarize myself thoroughly with this drama by taking photographs of the performance and interviewing members of the cast. I figured that this field-collected information would make it easier for me to explain my ideas about religious drama and my filmmaking philosophy to the next filmmaker that I approached. The trip was pure Dickens: It was the best of times, and it was also the worst of times. Several senior cast members refused to allow me to record or take pictures of the actual drama. They cared little about "Dr." Wiggins' academic training or letters of recommendation, and were not going to allow their beloved drama to be part of any film project. Fortunately, the pastor of the church in which the play was being shown did allow me and my young daughter Mary Ellyn to come by on the morning of November 8th and photograph the play's props and set.

Though not the ample field information I had wanted to collect, these photographs would prove to create the best of times for my documentary film project. When I showed the slides to my course on the black Church in America, two of my students readily identified the props and sets as being part of an Afro-American religious folk drama that I knew nothing about, even though, as they explained, it was produced annually in such Indiana cities as Gary, East Chicago, Indianapolis and Columbus. One of my

students, Robin Littlejohn, was a member of the Northside New Era Church, the site of the Indianapolis production. She described the play as being,

...a religious play about the coming back of the Lord. People in the play are tempted by the devil but the power of Jesus overcomes the devil and brings the people home... Costumes are used and the church is staged for the play.

It sounded like Atlanta's *Heaven Bound* with the addition of Jesus. The description of another student, Sheree Ladd, who was actually a former cast member of the play, too sounded very much like *Heaven Bound*. She remembered the play as a,

...processional with the devil trying to prevent members from entering heaven. Soloists are seated in the congregation and as they begin singing the devil searches them out, and tries to persuade them to follow him.

Ladd also remembered many songs being "used and acted out." Many of these same songs--"Walk around Heaven," "Lost Sheep," "Throw Out the Lifeline," "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," "Stood on the Banks of Jordan," and "Heartaches"--were also used in *Heaven Bound*. In a November 19, 1974 letter to Jabbour, I described the new developments

in the project, including an invitation to attend an upcoming production of the *Slabtown Convention* in South Bend, Indiana. I also shared the "startling," fortuitous discovery, courtesy of my students, of the local play that so resembled *Heaven Bound*. I told Jabbour I had "already begun correspondence" with Reverend N. E. Vincent, Pastor of the Northside New Era Baptist Church, about the play that my students called *In the Rapture*.

Thus began my *Rapture* fieldwork. On December 14, 1974, I drove to Columbus, Indiana and interviewed Reverend Elzie Lawler, pastor of that city's 2nd Baptist Church, to find out more about his church's production of *Rapture*. I recorded the following notes in my fieldwork journal:

Spent approximately three hours with Reverend Elzie Lawler, Pastor 2nd Baptist, Columbus, Ind. *In the Rapture* was not produced by members of 2nd Baptist. An Indianapolis troupe was invited in to put on the play. Rev. Lawler was impressed with the troupe's interdenominational flavor and willingness to produce the play for little more than expenses. (Excerpt from Fieldwork Journal, Columbus, Indiana, December 14, 1974)

My *Rapture* project was beginning to take shape, and be-

ginning to generate interest not only from those directly associated with it but from others outside as well. Just before Christmas holidays, I received an interesting letter from a young Afro-American filmmaker, Warrington Hudlin, (later to become a well-known filmmaker), concerning my religious drama film research. Hudlin had heard about my project from Jabbour, and because he shared my interest "in film and black culture," wanted to know "which aspects of the black American religious tradition you are concerned with and your ideas on its presentation through film." (See Appendix A for complete text of letter.) I was happy to share my impressions of a form of Afro-American religious folk drama for which my research and respect were growing daily.

January 1975 marked much progress in the project. I was finally able to secure a filmmaker who would meet the high professional standards set by the NEA Folk Arts Program and the artistic standards I had set personally. He was W. Howard Levie, Director of the Indiana University Motion Picture Production/ Audio-Visual Center. In a detailed memo I received only a day after our first meeting, Levie made it clear that he was exactly the kind of director I had been looking for:

My understanding is that you wish the production style of the film be such that it intrudes upon the performance as little as possible, probably involv-

ing the continuous filming of the action from several vantages which would be edited together.

Levie also included in his memo a good deal of information about budgets, supplies and production matters, what he called a "starting point" for all the "information and documentation" we would need to finalize our plans. He also announced, much to my pleasure that "the motion picture production department would be pleased to participate with you in this venture." (See Appendix B for complete text of letter.) I eagerly shared these developments with Jabbour in a letter stating that "the project is beginning to take final form." I reported that Dr. Levie had "consented to head the filming crew and place the reputation and considerable equipment of his department behind the project."

I also reported to Jabbour that I had been in contact with the University's offices of Research and Development and Research and Advanced Studies/Program Development in search of matching funds for the project. I explained that, because of the scarcity of funds, I was limiting the scope of the project to the filming of one Afro-American religious drama, either *The Slabtown Convention* or *In the Rapture*, both still produced in Indiana. I hoped that by narrowing the scope I could strengthen my appeal for matching funds from the many state foundations like Lilly. As I told Jabbour, I was,

leaning toward the

filming of *In the Rapture* at Bloomington's black Second Baptist Church. This arrangement is feasible for several reasons. First, in terms of tradition, we will be able to capture it. There is a troupe in Indianapolis which goes about the state putting on the play at various churches. So this Bloomington filming will be nothing unusual. Secondly, the church structure has a balcony and other structural features which will make filming easier and, thirdly, the cost of carrying a film crew on location and renting film equipment is also eliminated. (See Appendix C for complete text of letter.)

On February 1, 1975, I made the following entry in my fieldwork journal:

Talked with Rev. Vincent after school workshop. He suggested that I contact Mrs. Ida Myles/4126 Bynam/Indpls/-283-2607 for information about *Rapture* and contact for Mrs. Hatcher.

Contacted Mrs. Myles and found much information. She will get Mrs. Hatcher's

number and inform her of my interests. She prefers "the old" production of *Rapture*, the current one is too "comical."

Thanks to Mrs. Myles help, I was able to set up a personal interview with the family of Mrs. Margerine Hatcher, the playwright of *Rapture*, and eventually with Mrs. Hatcher herself. In a letter to Jabbour I described at length the impression of the playwright I had gotten from her husband and daughter:

...it is clear that Mrs. Hatcher is a compulsively creative playwright. For example, in addition to *In the Rapture*, she has conceived and produced several other plays, such as *In Times Like These*, a look at the disintegration of urban family life. Currently she is putting the finishing touches on a new play, *The Creation*, she has been writing this play for several years and only recently found the voice she wanted for God. I have spoken with Dr. Hudson about the possibility of having a premier of the play as part of next year's drama schedule at I.U. Secondly, she and her husband work

very closely together. He is the stage manager who makes all of her ideas come alive in props and settings. In this regard I was pleasantly surprised to learn of the sophistication that he has brought to the play. He has designed three sets for *In the Rapture*, each one designed to fit a different size church. Prior to a performance he normally spends four hours, from 2 to 6, putting up his scenery. (See Appendix D for complete text of letter.)

It is obvious from this long letter that I could barely contain my excitement about the project. Perhaps the most satisfying news I had to report to Jabbour was that Mrs. Hatcher herself had called, agreeing to an interview and inviting me to see, and film, a March 9th production of her play. Her endorsement of the project was satisfying indeed.

February, 1975, also marked the completion of my NEA Folk Arts proposal for \$53,880. Thanks to my conversations with Mrs. Hatcher, the *Rapture* cast, my film crew, and correspondence with Jabbour, I was able to include in my proposal the steps of my ethnographic filmmaking methodology which would be taken to insure that the film reflects the attitudes of the traditional cast and audience:

First, I will video tape an earlier production of the play. These tapes will be closely studied so that I will get a true feel for the drama's theme and proper production. Second, I will interview in depth each cast member prior to the Bloomington filming to fully understand their ideas about their roles in the play. Third, I will bring Mrs. Hatcher to Bloomington before the filming so that she can see the Second Baptist sanctuary and determine how it can be staged. Fourth, after reviewing my interviews, audio and video tapes, and reading extensively about folklore filmmaking, I will develop a play book for the filming of the play, which will be shared with my film crew. After they have previewed the video tapes, read my play book, and studied the church for technical problems of lighting and sound, etc., a final meeting consisting of myself, Mrs. Hatcher, and the film crew will be held to finalize our filming methods. (NEA Folk Arts Grant Application, Febru-

ary 1, 1975)

I felt confident that by the end we would have a ninety-minute film documentary which would truly capture the traditional spirit and art of the hitherto little known Afro-American religious drama, *In the Rapture*.

On March 9, 1975, after almost a year of planning, I took a student film crew to Indianapolis to film a live performance of the *Rapture* at the Church of the Living God. The crew filmed for two hours. This first raw footage gave me several new filming insights as well as revealing some unanticipated problems. For example, we were not able to film the cast devotional services which were held in the church basement at the same time that the congregation was being led in a similar service upstairs in the sanctuary. We also needed two additional cameras to cover such important scenes as the filming of the acting surrounding the song "Search Me Lord," since an angel's wing blocked all of the action from our one stationary camera. Perhaps the most important insight gained from this preliminary filming was that *In the Rapture* must not be "staged" outside of the church. Mrs. Hatcher and her cast members perceived their drama to be a religious ritual, not an entertaining spectacle.

I shared these ideas and three edited video tapes of this March 9th performance with Jabbour. He wrote back quickly to say that, after viewing only one tape, he "sure liked it." Jabbour offered some tactful suggestions about the careful placement of microphones, not-

ing that, in his experience,

...film people are sometimes more visually oriented and lavish most of their loving care on the camera, neglecting the recorder. But as you well know, good mike placement can make the difference between clear comprehension and a general rumble of sound.

Jabbour also said that he completely agreed with my contention that the play not be staged outside the church. "I'd even go so far to say" he added, "that I wouldn't even want to stage it in a church without its normal church audience." (See Appendix E for complete text of letter.)

The project really began to come together during the month of May. On May 4th I witnessed my second live performance of *In the Rapture* at the Southern Baptist Church in Indianapolis. I recorded the following notes in my fieldwork journal:

Unlike the first performance the play was staged in only the blue-black light of Mr. Hatcher's two proplights, they were suspended from the ceiling this time. I can now fully ap-

preciate his backdrop, after seeing all of his angels, horns, clouds, etc. come alive under the glare of his blue-black lights. (entry, fieldwork journal, Indianapolis, Indiana, May 4, 1975.)

The highlight of all of my *Rapture* activities was the reception of an official memorandum from NEA's Folk Arts Program notifying me that my proposal had been funded in the amount of \$24,000. In August I picked up a \$12,500 matching grant from the Indiana Committee for the Humanities. (For newspaper announcements, see John Fancher, "Black Documentary Film Slated," The Bloomington Daily Herald-Telephone, July 10, 1975, p. 6; "City's 'Rapture Family' to Film at Bloomington," The Indianapolis News, August 9, 1975. "In the Rapture' to Try to Capture Religious Fervor," The Indiana Daily Student, August 12, 1975.)

By August the film crew and I were spending long hours reviewing my field-collected rough cuts of the drama and brainstorming over ways to best film the Bloomington production of the drama. I noted in my field journal that Phil was "impressed with both the production and our tape of the play." He wanted to bring his sound men to see it, and most importantly, "view it several more times." In my journal I also recorded some of Stockton's suggestions about splicing cuts of the cast's devotions with those of the congreg-

gation as a means of leading into the play. Stockton had suggested that I try to get a feel for the high and low parts of the play so that he would be ready to shoot. I outlined the following segments:

- 1) "Lord Don't Move That Mountain"--this mime is similar to Heaven Bound's climatic fight between the devil and the Lord's soldier. (2) "Oh Peter!" the Lord's soldier. "Oh Peter!" demonstrates two important factors: (a) the unique procession and (b) initiated impromptu dialogue between Satan and the sinner.
- (3) "Heartaches" shows the fall of the sinner, the final dialogue between the devil and the sinner, Christ is central with the heart, the ultimate defeat of the devil. Select a number that will feature the choir, something like "Climbing Up the Mountain" where they are all singing and not merely call-response. (See Appendix F for complete journal entry.)

There were many other technical factors to be considered before we filmed the Bloomington performance--lights, sound systems, power sources. The task was as daunting as it was exciting. On August 30th, Phil Stockton and I met with Mr. and

Mrs. Hatcher in Second Baptist to finalize our plans for the staging and filming of *In the Rapture*.

One week before the October 19th Bloomington filming, I wrote a letter to Jabbour explaining that I had been "up to my ears in nailing down the last minute details." I included clippings, Phil Stockton's carefully detailed schedules (see Appendix G), and other indications that the project was finally reaching its climax. I told Jabbour how impressed I had been with Stockton. "What I like about him," I noted, "is his readily grasping what we are trying to do." I also told Jabbour about a Sunday meal we were to have with Mrs. Hatcher, at which Bloomington's mayor Frank McClosky was to give the cast a proclamation. As I related to Jabbour, when Mrs. Hatcher heard this news she expressed a joy that made me feel good all over. (See Appendix H for complete text of letter.)

Thanks in no small measure to Stockton's meticulous planning, the October 19th filming went off without a hitch. Newspaper reviews were favorable, as is obvious from the title of an October 20, 1975 article in The Indiana Daily Student: "Jesus Steals the Show: Black Play 'Rapturous.'" Furthermore, Mrs. Hatcher and the Rapture cast were pleased with the filming of their drama. A few days after the October 19th performance, Mrs. Hatcher wrote me a very warm letter, which read in part:

I just can't Thank you and the Afro American Institute

for what you have done for *In the Rapture* and you are really included in "Our Rapture Family" as you named us that and it is really hanging on. The children are still up in the air over the way we were received and treated in Bloomington. We will never forget it. (Personal correspondence with Mrs. Margerine Hatcher, October 23, 1975.)

After taking the remainder of the month off to rest from the filming process, Phil Stockton's film crew and I began the arduous task of editing the *Rapture* performance that we had captured on film. The editing schedule was almost as demanding as the filming schedule had been. (See Appendix I for full schedule.)

Two events in August of 1976 marked the formal end of this taxing but immensely rewarding film project. First, I presented copies of *In the Rapture* and *The Rapture Family* to Mrs. Hatcher during a special program at her church. And, second, these two documentary films were entered into Indiana University's Educational Motion Pictures Catalog, making available to everyone a truly unique example of Afro-American religious drama.

Appendix A

Personal Correspondence with Warrington Hudlin, Afro-American filmmaker, New Haven, Connecticut, December 23, 1974.

Dear Mr. Wiggins:

My name is Warrington Hudlin. I am a black filmmaker [sic] who recently graduated from Yale University. In a recent conversation with Alan Jabbour at the National Endowment for the Arts, he mentioned that you were organizing a film project on the black American religious tradition. One of my primary interests is exploring and documenting black lifestyle and culture. I have a film proposal pending in Mr. Jabbour's program for the upcoming grant cycle to conduct a film exploration of inner-city life based on key locations within the black community. Due to our shared interest in film and black culture, Mr. Jabbour suggested that I get in touch with you. I am very interested in making contact with people who are involved in similar work.

Mr. Jabbour only gave a brief description of your project and I wanted to know which aspects of the black American religious tradition you are concerned with and your ideas on its presentation through film. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Warrington Hudlin

Appendix B

Personal correspondence with W. Howard Levie, Director of the Indiana University Motion Picture Production/Audio/Visual Center, Bloomington, Indiana, January 14, 1975.

As a result of our discussion on January 13, 1975, my understanding is that you are in process of submitting a grant to the National Endowment for the Arts to document on film the religious drama "In the Rapture." I understand that this performance would take place in a local church, last about 90 minutes, and perhaps be a "pilot" for the documentation of other similar religious dramas which are performed at other locals.

My understanding is that you wish the production style of the film be such that it intrudes upon the performance as little as possible--probably involving the continuous filming of the action from several vantages which would be edited together later.

The motion picture production department would be pleased to participate with you in this venture. It would of course be necessary to have sufficient lead time in planning to allow us to assign staff to the production. Also, I assume that it would be next fall at the earliest before any planning or production would begin.

While an accurate production budget estimate is not possible without going into much more detail about the production, the following may be used as a general guideline:

Supplies & Materials:	\$ 8,500
Salaries & Wages:	8,000
Other:	<u>2,500</u>
	\$20,000

This estimate is for a 90 minute, color, sound film photographed in documentary style and includes all supplies, materials and laboratory charges to one positive release quality print. This estimate does not provide for additional prints or any distribution costs. The salaries and wages category includes costs that will be incurred by Audio-Visual Center production personnel only. It does not provide funds for anyone from your office, cast payments, or anyone else not directly involved in the production of the film. Nor does the budget include fringe benefits, university indirect costs, or that sort of thing.

You may wish to regard this memo as only a starting point

to provide you the information or documentation you need.

Appendix C

Personal correspondence with Alan Jabbour, January 13, 1975.

I will not have my tentative film grant proposal ready until your arrival later this month. Because of the Christmas holidays, I was not able to contact certain key persons and agencies until now.

However, now the project is beginning to take final form. In terms of filming and related budgetary matters, I was finally able to see Dr. W. Howard Levie, the Director of Indiana University's Motion Picture Department. He has consented to head the filming crew and place the reputation and considerable equipment of his department behind the project. By the end of the week he will send me his budget. I have also been in contact with the University's offices of Research and Development and Research and Advanced Studies/Program Development in search of matching funds for the project. Because of the scarcity of funds I am limiting the scope of the project to the filming of one Afro-American religious drama, either "The Slabtown Convention" or "In the Rapture", which is still produced in Indiana. This will strengthen my appeal for matching funds from teh [sic] many state foundations like Lilly. Presently, I am leaning toward the filming of "In the Rapture" at Bloomington's black Second Baptist Church. This arrangement is feasible for several reasons. First, in terms of tradition, we will be able to capture it. There is a troupe in Indianapolis which goes about the state putting on the play at various churches. So this Bloomington filming will be nothing unusual. Secondly, the church structure has a balcony and other structural features which will make filming easier and, thridly [sic], the cost of carrying a film crew on location and renting film equipment is also eliminated. But you will see the tentative proposal when you arrive.

By the way, when do you plan to be in Bloomington? I would like for you to meet Dr. Levie, too, during your visit. Wrapping up all the loose ends I did receive an interesting letter from Warrington Hudlin.

Appendix D

Personal correspondence with Alan Jabbour, February 19, 1975.

Much progress has been made on the *In the Rapture* film project. Several Saturdays ago I drove to Indianapolis and spent the day interviewing the husband and daughter of Mrs. Margarine [sic] Hatcher, the play's author. From this lengthy interview I learned several important facts. Firstly, it is clear that Mrs. Hatcher is a compulsively creative playwright. For example, in addition to *In the Rapture*, she has conceived and produced several other plays, such as *In Times Like These*, a look at the disintegration of urban family life. Currently she is putting the finishing touches on a new play, *The Creation*, she has been writing this play for several years and only recently found the voice she wanted for God. I have spoken with Dr. Hudson about the possibility of having a premier of the play as part of next year's drama schedule at I.U. Secondly, she and her husband work very closely together. He is the stage manager who makes all of her ideas come alive in props and settings. In this regard I was pleasantly surprised to learn of the sophistication that he has brought to the play. He has designed three sets for *In the Rapture*, each one designed to fit a different size church. Prior to a performance he normally spends four hours, from 2 to 6, putting up his scenery.

Thirdly, and most satisfying, has been the recent contact I had with Mrs. Hatcher. She called me Monday afternoon and invited me to see a March 9th production of her play. She has also graciously consented to an interview on the first Saturday in March and most importantly sees the importance of having her play filmed. Hence, as we state in the proposal, Dr. Hudson has secured two videotape cameras to film the March 9th production.

There's more to say, but it can wait.

Appendix E

Personal correspondence with Alan Jabbour, April 25, 1975.

This is just to a note to acknowledge with thanks my receipt of your letter of April 10 and the three cassettes of *In the Rapture*. So far I've seen only the first cassette, so I can't offer comprehensive comments; but I can say that I sure liked it.

I find myself especially anxious that the film crew pay careful attention to sound as well as visual matters. The placement of microphones will be crucial to getting clear sound quality, and it should be a subject of long and careful consideration. I only offer these comments because, in my experience, film people are sometimes more visually oriented and lavish most of their loving care on the camera, neglecting the recorder. But as you well know, good mike placement can make the difference between clear comprehension and a general rumble of sound.

I completely agree with your contention that the play should not be staged outside the church. I'd even go so far as to say that I wouldn't even want to stage it in a church without its normal church audience.

Appendix F

Fieldwork journal entry, Indianapolis, Indiana, May 4, 1975.

Phil was impressed with both the production and our tape of the play. In the future he'll bring his sound men to see it, but more importantly he wants to view it several more times as well.

These were the suggestions he made. Splice cuts of the cast's and congregation's devotions as a means of leading into the play. Use Mrs. Hatcher's movements as a coordinating theme for future editing. *[I think the angels should also be considered. In short, make your transition by panning from the angels to the action and back, etc.] Try to get a feel for the high and low parts of the play so that he will be ready to shoot. [As I look back these segments will be: (1) "Lord Don't Move That Mountain" -- this mime is similar to "Heaven Bound's" climatic fight between the devil and the Lord's soldier. (2) "Oh Peter!" demonstrates two important factors: (a) the unique procession and (b) initiated impromptu dialogue between Satan and the sinner. (3) "Heartaches" shows the fall of the sinner, the final dialogue between the devil and the sinner, Christ is central with the heart, the ultimate defeat of the devil.] Select a number that will feature the choir, something like "Climbing Up the Mountain" where they are all singing and not merely call-response.

These are technical factors that Phil wants to see about next week: (1) see the 2nd Baptist sanctuary to get a reading of the lights, their electrical system's power, and block out the camera areas. He also said there are two \$1,500 cordless mikes that can be used by Satan and the sinner. A sound system can also be placed in the rear [of the church] and the sound can be 'mixed' on the spot.

Appendix G

Personal Correspondence with Phil Stockton, director of Rapture film crew, Bloomington, Indiana, October 11, 1975.

WEEKS CALENDAR - IN THE RAPTURE

Monday, October 13th

9:00 A.M. Install power distribution board and utility pole -- Bektesh, Stockton

Tuesday, October 14th

9:00-12:00 Assemble equipment -- Bektesh, Stockton, & Boehm

Wednesday, October 15th

Public Service Hook-up. Test Circuits -- Bektesh

Thursday, October 16th

9:00 A.M. - 12:00 Move lights, stands, cables, etc. to church--Bektesh, Stockton, Boehm

1:00-5:00 Construction Platforms.

Friday, October 17th

8:00 A.M. Bektesh to Chicago to pick-up Equipment

1:00-5:00 Scales install sound -- Stockton, Boehm Assistants

5:00-8:00 Shoot setup 400 ft.
1-BL & Nagra, Stockton, Boehm, Scales and Assistant

8:00-10:00 Stockton, Hatchers and Wiggins Review show

Saturday, October 18th

9:00-12:00 Revise Log -- Xerox
Stockton & Toby Strout
Load magazines -- Ben Strout

3:00-5:00 Bektesh return -- set up cameras. Stockton, Bektesh, Niekamp, Setterberg, Boehm

6:00-10:30 Rehearsal

10:30-1200 Shoot Discussion session
3 cameras -- 3,200 ft.
Full crew

Sunday, October 19th

1:00-3:00 Revise log -- Stockton, Toby Strout
Load magazines -- Ben Strout -- at AVC

3:00-5:00 Check equipment -- Bektesh and Stockton

7:00-10:00 Shoot -- full crew
Four cameras 12,400 ft.

10:00-12:00 Clean-up to AVC

Monday, October 20th

Return equipment to Chicago -- Stockton

Appendix H

Personal correspondence with Alan Jabbour, October 11, 1975.

One week to countdown! I know this letter is long overdue, but since our last phone conversation I have been up to my ears in nailing down the last minute details. Here are the news clippings I promised -- I will be sending some more after the filming, since we have two interviews set up for Monday and Tuesday of next week. This weekend schedule gives you some idea of how the cast's time will be spent while they are here. One note worth mentioning is the fact that Bloomington's mayor Frank McClosky will give the cast a proclamation at the Sunday meal. When I shared this news with Mrs. Hatcher she expressed a joy that made me feel good all over. The other persons listed to speak on this occasion are directors of scholarship programs at the University.

Since I talked with you last I have made two separate trips to Indianapolis to watch productions of the play. The first time I took along the film director and his sound personal [sic] and the last time I took the three man filming crew. I must say that I am impressed with the film director Phil Stockton. We have bent each others ear for the past several months in preparation for next Sunday's filming. Last Wednesday we met at Second Baptist church and went over the film plans. He will begin setting up the sound equipment on Wednesday and will be completed by Friday night. What I like about him is his readily grasping what we are trying to do. For example, he will have a roving camera which will cover the pre-performance devotional--a battle I had to fight with the sound man before winning--their coming up the stairs to the church sanctuary, and one Friday night he will shoot footage of Mr. Hatcher putting up his sets. After the full dress rehearsal on Saturday night we will shoot 45 minutes of interview with the cast concerning the origin and development of the play.

Appendix I

IN THE RAPTURE

Editing Schedule

November	Screening and evaluation of footage
	Synchronizing main show footage and sound track
	Synchronizing discussion footage and sound track
	Preparing transcript of discussion session
December	Interlock screening of main show and discussion session
	Edge number coding of workprint and sound track
January	Second interlock main show
	"Paper edit" main show
February	Cut main show [Mr. and Mrs. Hatcher and members of the <i>Rapture</i> cast came to Bloomington to view the film and accept or reject our editing.]
	Second interlock discussion film
	"Paper edit" discussion film
March	Continue cutting main show
April	Main show to lab for first print
	Cut discussion film -- to lab for first print
May	Approval and revisions main show to lab for final print
	Approval and revisions discussion film to lab for final print
June 30	Deliver final print
July 31	Deliver extra prints.

Black Theatre Development and Black Film: 1910-1921

Bettye Collier-Thomas

The radio is a blessing from God to the human race. The movies are our greatest opportunity to give the world an occult demonstration of what the races of mankind are thinking and doing. If our two greatest instruments for education and enlightenment are to be used, when it comes to the Negro, only to misrepresent, humiliate, ridicule, and spread mischievous propaganda against him, it is time for the Negro to rise up in self-defense, and like the Jew and the Irish, become his own interpreter, propagandist, and deliverer from organized prejudice.¹

Nannie Burroughs

For a people who seem to care so much about their public image, you would think blacks would spend more energy creating the conditions for the sort of theater and art they want, rather than worrying about how they are perceived by the larger society. But many black people still seem to believe that the images of themselves projected on television, film and stage must be policed and monitored from within. Such convictions are difficult--even painful--to change.²

Henry Louis Gates

The negative portrayal of African Americans in the media has been a long-standing concern of writers and scholars, especially those who view it as part of a larger oppression

that stands in the way of artistic achievement as well as political and economic advancement.³ Writing in the 1930s, a time when degrading, stereotypical images of blacks appeared all too frequently in films, advertisements and other forms of popular culture, Nannie Burroughs was concerned about the growing popularity of "Amos 'n' Andy," a nightly radio serial in which two white actors portrayed two southern black men struggling to make a new life in the city. The show appealed to millions of Americans who reveled in the humorous antics of the Kingfish, Sapphire, and their friends and neighbors. It combined strong and compassionate characters with traditional blackface minstrel and stock vaudeville humor. Though the caricatures the show relied on were the mainstay of early black musical comedies, and were likewise integral to the development of black theatre, they had become so patronizingly offensive that many African Americans agreed with Burroughs that it was time to "rise up in self-defense."⁴

Looking back at the debate over prejudicial media images, Henry Louis Gates has recently argued that it is more important for blacks to create "the conditions for the sort of theatre and art they want, rather than worrying about how they are perceived by the larger society."⁵ For many African Americans, however, reclaiming

a public image is not a question of either/or but of both. Their collective image is, they argue, so inextricably bound in issues of self-definition, political and economic advancement, and even survival that people of African descent must police the negative images perpetuated by popular culture and at the same time create positive ones through their own artistic endeavors. To do so, however, requires determining what images should be portrayed and which are truly authentic. It is this always volatile, often explosive concern that has precluded consensus on this topic in the African American community.

Historically, African Americans have employed a number of different strategies to regulate their public image. This essay examines one of those--the Black Theatre Movement--along with some of the political issues that gave rise to it, the artistic factors that contributed to its success as a cultural institution, and the social and economic factors which led to its eventual decline. That decline was due in part to the advent of motion pictures. The essay also explores the ambivalence many black intellectuals felt towards motion pictures, which, as they gradually garnered a larger portion of the black theatre program, relegated black drama, musical comedies and vaudeville to a secondary position. Though a subject virtually unexplored by scholars, the Black Theatre Movement represents a unique experiment in artistic development and social advancement which provided a focus not only for Af-

rican American talents but also for the issues they faced in the early part of this century.

Because the ability of a group to define its collective image is closely linked to the economic and political power it wields, the development of the Black Theatre Movement must be viewed within the multidimensional context of politics and oppression. The birth of the black theatre was part of an attempt by African Americans in the early years of this century to redefine their public image and create conditions necessary for racial advancement. By 1900 the stage was certainly set for re-appropriating the African American image: America had witnessed an explosion of literature and artifacts, replete with grotesque caricatures and other disparaging portrayals which none too subtly defined the place of black people in American life and culture. Created primarily by whites, these parodies of black humanity were immortalized in every imaginable cultural form. One could hardly eat, work, play or even move without confronting the image of the black as a beast--childlike, ignorant, available for exploitation.

It was insidious images like these that came to justify segregation, lynching, riots and other forms of oppression and intimidation perpetrated against the black population.⁶ In protest against such outrages, a number of national organizations and community institutions were cultivated, providing African Americans with their own outlets for creative development. It was through efforts such as these that the

Black Theatre Movement was launched. The opening of black theatres promoted a number of cooperative ventures and artistic vehicles which capitalized on black talent and provided a niche where black drama, musical comedy, and eventually film could flourish.

African Americans were not the first oppressed group in America to seek control of their collective image. The most famous ethnic minority to manage its own image successfully were the Jews, who achieved economic success through control of the media and of the entertainment industries. Although their religion and historical identity exposed Jews to anti-Semitism, economic power and status as a white minority placed them in a position to control their image, and to challenge those who would ignore their prerogative to do so. Perhaps their greatest victory was capturing the media itself and restructuring images to accommodate their own assimilationist needs. In *An Empire of Their Own*, Neal Gabler describes the movie industry's early appeal to the Jews:

If the Jews were proscribed from entering the real corridors of gentility and status in America, the movies offered an ingenious option. Within the studios and on the screen, the Jews could simply create a new country--an empire of their own, so to speak--one where they would not only be admitted,

but would govern as well.⁷

History and circumstances did not favor African Americans in the same way. But with the black theatres they established, if not an empire, a community that represented an institution of extraordinary vitality that met a variety of artistic, social and economic needs.⁸ During the first decade of black theatre development, a great deal was written by intellectuals, theatre critics and community leaders about the need for black theatres. These advocates were quite specific in their definition of what constituted a black theatre: A black theatre was not simply an institution which catered to a black clientele. It was an entity which was managed by blacks, catered primarily to black patrons, and employed blacks at all levels. While desirable, it was not necessary that a theatre be owned by an African American to be considered black. The theatre was considered as an institution central to the educational development of the race, and necessary to provide employment for black poets, playwrights and composers who were free to create more realistic images of black life and culture than the popular media had heretofore produced. And, in 1910, theatres were seen as a necessity to expand the flagging employment opportunities of black performers.

The pioneer black theatre was Chicago's Pekin Theatre, opened in 1907 by Robert T. Motts, an African American. The Pekin Theatre was a model of black enterprise and ingenu-

ity, but the facility was extremely small and inflexible.⁹ The next, and most famous theatre was the Howard Theatre, which opened in 1910 in Washington, D.C. Washington was among the first of the major centers for black entertainment, and its Howard Theatre became the prototype of black theatres that were developed from 1910 to 1921. Among those theatres were the Standard Theatre, which opened in 1914 in Philadelphia, and the famous Lafayette in New York. Although believed by many to be the first center for black theatre development, New York in fact did not have a black theatre until 1919, when the Lafayette opened its doors. In 1910, when the Howard opened, New York had been considered by many to be a "backward" theatre town for black theatre development. Although it was, like Washington, Philadelphia and Chicago, an acknowledged center of stage life and success for the African American performer, its Lafayette had actually opened as a white theatre, until promoters discovered that the neighborhood was rapidly changing from white to black. (New York's legendary Apollo Theatre did not open until 1934.)

It was no coincidence that Washington gained the reputation as the preeminent theatre city, or that during the first year of the Howard Theatre's existence it was the center of attention among white theatre speculators, black intellectuals, and theatre critics. The city had been carefully chosen by white theatre magnates for the launching of the first full-fledged black theatre in a

black community. It was considered a social and economic experiment to determine whether or not blacks would support such an institution. Would African Americans who frequented the segregated downtown theatres attend an all-black theatre? Would a theatre for blacks attract African Americans who refused to be Jim Crowed in the "Nigger Heavens" of white theatres? Would whites attend a theatre located in a black community? Would such an institution be economically profitable? If the Howard Theatre succeeded in Washington, D.C., which in 1910 had the nation's largest urban black population, then it was possible to launch similar institutions in other cities with large black populations.¹⁰

White owners had made it abundantly clear that the Howard Theatre was an experimental enterprise. They informed the black press that the Howard Theatre had been opened as a "test case," to determine whether or not it was profitable to provide African Americans in major cities with theatres equal to those of whites, where they could enjoy the best of entertainment and maintain their self-respect. Jacob S. Rosenthal, one of the owners of the Howard, said:

We built this theater and dedicated it to the colored people of the District of Columbia to afford them an opportunity of visiting a playhouse on the same terms as their fellowmen, irrespective of race

or color. We were aware that such a policy would in all probability cost us the patronage of the white people, but undeterred by this probable loss, we went ahead, believing that there were sufficient self-respecting and appreciative colored people who would patronize our house as to make the investment profitable.¹¹

For more than a year after its opening, the national black press carefully chronicled developments at the Howard Theatre, which by anyone's standards was a huge success. The Howard Theatre was, and still is, generally considered to be a major milestone in black theatre development, and, until the early 1920s, Washington maintained its status as the center for black theatre development. The Howard lost its place as the preeminent black theatre in America only when New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Chicago became major entertainment marts for urban African Americans, particularly on the East Coast.

But although it was eventually overshadowed by other theatres, like New York's Lafayette, the Howard remained an essential link in the early black theatre chain created in 1916 by the Quality Amusement Corporation's circuit of black theatres. Because it was the test case, and because it presented the same type shows as the other major black theatres and maintained a similar man-

agement policy and program format, the Howard still serves as the exemplary theatre. An examination of performers and developments at the Howard Theatre provides, therefore, a rich opportunity to analyze black theatre development in the nation during these early years.

The Howard Theatre opened during the heyday of the musical comedy, a form of entertainment which was quite popular at both white and black theatres. The theatre booked some road shows, which were generally confined to major black theatres large enough to accommodate them, and to white theatres willing to play black shows.¹² Black musical plays differed greatly from the equivalent white shows, which played Broadway and reflected the broader American taste.¹³ The black musical comedies that were popular from the turn of the century to around 1917 were generally parodies of black life. These early musical comedies and revues, in which minstrel form was gradually replaced by burlesque, were strictly for entertainment. Most of them had poorly developed plots: the idea was simply to provide a basic story around which an infusion of song and comedy could be shaped. Beautiful girls, elegant costumes and elaborate scenery were the other ingredients in a successful musical comedy. The plots and language of many of these early works written by African Americans were in fact similar to the later "Amos 'n' Andy" shows that would come to trouble writers like Nannie Burroughs. But serious plots and themes about African American life were very painful for

black and white audiences to watch. Not until the 1920s would black college and amateur dramatic organizations experiment with a new artistic medium, which had as its focus black life.¹⁴

Musical comedies written and produced after 1916 were developed more along the lines of shows produced on Broadway, which was the epitome of the white show world. It unquestionably defined the artistic standards. As African Americans embraced the legitimate drama and became more and more concerned about acceptance by the white show world, they produced plays and musical comedies which had been performed on Broadway and which were invariably written by whites. The Lafayette Theatre, with its famous players, led the movement of African Americans towards an assimilationist artistic standard. From 1916 to 1921, under the management of the Quality Amusement Corporation, the Lafayette Theatre on Seventh Avenue became the fountainhead for black theatricals.¹⁵

Around 1917, however, musical comedies did begin to diverge in two different directions. In larger musical revues, with their thinly veiled plots, there was scant attention to issues of race. The new works, patterned more closely after the highly celebrated Ziegfeld Follies, reflected less of the minstrel, ragtime and vaudeville influence. But in vehicles where plots revolved around black life, there was a distinct and serious race consciousness. In "My People," "Children of the Sun," "Darkest American," "Bamboula," "Follies

of the Stroll," and "Chocolate Brown" there is a thread of race consciousness rarely seen in the earlier musical comedies.¹⁶

These musical comedies, like other art forms, reflected the times. The postwar period saw an increasing interest in African Americans, due in part to the migration of thousands of blacks from the South to the North and Midwest. Writers, politicians and public service agencies turned their attention to the social and economic ills which beset the country. Dramatists experimented with black materials, and black people became more race conscious. With its focus on Africa as the ancestral homeland, this celebration of the black experience became popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁷

It was a time seemingly filled with opportunities for black artists. The Quality Amusement Corporation, organized in 1916 to present dramas featuring black actors, sought ways to coordinate these opportunities by expanding the circuit of black theatres. Their circuit, which originally included the Lafayette Theatre in New York, the Howard Theatre in Washington and the Avenue Theatre in Chicago, had already added the Standard Theatre in Philadelphia, the Colonial Theatre in Baltimore and the Attucks Theatre in Norfolk. From 1916 to 1919 these theatres presented weekly dramas featuring the Lafayette Players. In 1919, a syndicate of black entrepreneurs, led by Philadelphia bankers E. C. Brown and Andrew F. Stevens and New York Age theatre critic Lester Walton, assumed the name and own-

ership of the Quality Amusement Corporation and took control of the Lafayette Players and the lease of the Lafayette Theatre.¹⁸ The new corporation planned to extend the circuit to include houses in New York, Chicago, Washington, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Richmond, Norfolk, Cincinnati, Indianapolis and Louisville, as well as many of the large southern cities, particularly New Orleans and Atlanta. The promoters optimistically hoped to organize and manage dramatic and musical companies, open a school of dramatic art in New York, and establish a booking office to supply black theatres throughout the country with black acts. They sought to expand the field and the vistas of black theatricals and demonstrate the need for and possibilities of operating booking agencies and theatres which served an exclusively black clientele.

The Quality Amusement Corporation's lofty goal of providing a vehicle for developing and displaying the talents of blacks in the dramatic arts was commendable, and to some degree it achieved success. Throughout the 1920s, the Quality Amusement Corporation continued to lease theatres, produce shows and provide acts for black theatres. Black theatre development experienced phenomenal growth in the period after 1920, and black writers and musicians saw their opportunities improve. Black motion picture companies, which included a number of actors and actresses who starred with the Lafayette Players, also benefited from the Quality's efforts to elevate blacks in the

dramatic arts.

That the Quality Amusement Corporation had to adjust their expectations, and ultimately failed to market their ideas and extend the base of their theatres beyond the initial group, was due to events outside their control, not the least of which was ruthless competition from white speculators.

When the Quality Amusement Corporation began its bid it not only provided an impetus for the expansion of black theatres in cities throughout the nation, it also opened the door to white speculators, who were impressed with the success of urban black theatres and became convinced that there was a major market for black theatricals in key cities. And not only did the Quality have to compete with white speculators who had invaded the field; it also had to compete with new black booking agencies, such as the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA) and the Consolidated Southern Association, which represented a more diversified market of black theatricals. The corporation had to struggle to maintain its African American clientele, which preferred the black theatres developed by white interests, and who frequented segregated white theatres. The competition finally contributed to the collapse of the Quality Amusement Circuit by 1922. The Lafayette Theatre slipped from the grasp of the Quality and was sold to a white firm.¹⁹

Other complex factors dealt their blows to black theatres and their existence as vital community institutions. There was some ambivalence among

blacks toward drama, due primarily to an escalation of black interest in motion pictures. This was not an entirely new threat. Commercial cinema, which had its beginning in 1895, had actually developed alongside the Black Theatre Movement. By 1900, the impact of film was being felt throughout America, especially in large urban cities. When the Howard Theatre opened in 1910, the movement had firmly taken hold across the nation.

Although African American intellectuals and urban masses demonstrated an indifference to the cinema, black theatres were developed to accommodate this new art form. The first black motion picture house was opened in Washington in 1908 by Raymond Murray. An unprecedented success, the theatre was destroyed by fire at the end of the theatre season. In 1909 Murray then organized the Hiawatha Theatre Company, which was housed in the first theatrical structure in the United States to be built for use by African Americans. The Hiawatha, like many movie houses exhibiting silent films, furnished vaudeville specialties in conjunction with the regular picture program.²⁰

In the first decade of the century motion picture houses sprang up in major cities around the country. In 1911, Washington, Chicago and Philadelphia were cited as having more black motion picture theatres than any other cities in the United States. The motion picture industry took a heavy toll on vaudeville by throwing many performers out of work, even though theatres employed quite a number of vaudeville

acts to perform during the intermission. Throughout the nation a number of vaudeville theatres were converted to motion picture, or combination houses to meet the increasing public demand for film.²¹

There was some recognition that these changes would place black theatricals in a difficult situation, particularly those involved in the dramatic arts, musical comedies and musical revues. Lester Walton, New York Age theatre critic and Quality Amusement Corporation partner, felt that movies had a decidedly negative impact on black theatres. He observed that it was difficult to operate at a professional level and charge prices similar to those charged for motion pictures. Admission to motion picture theatres was as low as five cents; prices for drama and musical comedies, in contrast, ranged from fifty to seventy-five cents. Black theatres simply could not compete with the growing number of white theatres, which offered popular, first-run movies, which black theatres either could not obtain or else acquired long after their showing in white theatres. Some of the larger black theatres reluctantly changed their billing policies to focus more exclusively on motion pictures. Black theatres were not entirely alone in this encroachment by films: low-cost motion picture theatres took their toll on all legitimate theatres, white and black alike.²²

Given the differential in prices and the economic status of most African Americans, it is not difficult to understand why patrons made the choices

they made. To a certain extent, there were class issues involved here. Theatres like the Howard, Lafayette, and Avenue were primarily viewed as middle-class entities; they were never intended to serve the masses. Their billing policies reflected this philosophy. Large musicals, specifically aimed at attracting a middle-class audience, for the most part played in the large urban black theatres in the North and in selected white theatres.²³ Small vaudeville theatres and motion picture houses tended to provide their clientele, which leaned toward ragtime and vaudeville, particularly risqué vaudeville, and movies, with more diversity than the larger theatres.²⁴

But although the large musicals excluded broader audiences, and cost a good deal to stage, they also employed a large number of black artists. These productions required the skills of numerous African American actors, writers, composers, lyricist and musicians in areas from which they had, before 1900, been largely excluded earlier. The motion picture industry did not offer new opportunities to those actors and performers previously employed in black theatricals, since, prior to the 1920s, most black characters were portrayed by white actors in blackface. Exclusive presentation of motion pictures, therefore, created serious economic problems for all those associated with black theatricals.

The popularity of film, which increased among black theatre-goers during World War I, created another, and perhaps even more serious problem--the

proliferation of negative images of blacks. Concern over such images had been expressed as early as 1913. After viewing Pathe Weekly film clips, which illustrated important current world news, Lester Walton asked, "What part will the motion picture industry play in properly presenting to the world at large the American Negro?" Among Pathe's offerings was a film showing flood refugees at Memphis, Tennessee. All of the refugees were black. Remarkably insensitive to the plight of the long line of hungry homeless men, women and children, the director arranged three half-starved black children in a row, placed a bowl of mush and a piece of bread before each and noted their reaction. The camera captured negative images of black children who appeared to be savages. A black woman was shown undergoing a vigorous disinfecting by health officials. Walton was justifiably concerned about stereotypes of blacks being propagated through film. Pathe News was worldwide in its distribution, and had the power to influence thousands of people.²⁵

During that same year, the Al Bartlett Film Company of Atlanta, Georgia produced films expressly for black theatres. In one all-black film, *Slim, the Cowpuncher*, African Americans were depicted as being lazy and indolent, shooting dice, drinking gin, and stealing watermelons. Walton again voiced concern that these films depicted stereotypes that did not represent the race as a whole. He urged blacks to vigorously protest presentations which defamed them.²⁶ In 1915, the release of *The Birth of a*

Nation, a film perceived by many African Americans as a slander of the race, brought vigorous protest from black people. The National Association of Colored People took the leadership in organizing protest against this film.²⁷

In addition to inviting protests against films like *The Birth of a Nation* and organizations like Pathe News, the Al Bartlett Film Company also stimulated African American producers to develop creative films which they felt provided a positive alternative to the prevalent stereotypical images of blacks. The first black film producers appeared on the scene in 1915.²⁸ Beginning with one-reel burlesque black comedies, and advancing to six- and eight-reel feature productions, they had, by 1925, increasingly exposed black audiences to films produced by African Americans. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Emmett J. Scott, Oscar Micheaux Company, Monumental Pictures Corporation, the Dunbar Film and Theatrical Company, and Blue Ribbon Pictures, all organized in the period 1916 to 1921, were among the earliest black film companies.²⁹

The availability of these films did not mean that all motion-picture houses showed them. Some, like the Mid-City Theatre, were strictly vaudeville houses. The Howard Theatre, among the first-run theatres featuring classic motion pictures, showed films produced exclusively by Paramount Studios, varied its pictures to meet the needs of different classes and religions, but showed relatively few black films. One of the few black

productions shown at the Howard Theatre between January, 1919, and December, 1921, was *The Homesteader* by Oscar Micheaux. Newsreels by Hearst, Pathe and Fox were regular features.³⁰

Other "up to date" black theatres in Washington--the Foraker, Dunbar and Hiawatha theatres--were straight motion picture houses, featuring only some vaudeville. These theatres prided themselves on showing the most popular, "high-class" screen classics, which, again showcased favorite white artists and very few black actors. When blacks appeared in Hollywood films, it was inevitably in a service capacity, usually as maids and butlers. The Hiawatha Theatre, billed as "The Premier Picture House of Washington," was an example of an urban black picture house which prided itself on showing many black films produced by black filmmakers as well as classic films. Among these were *The Homesteader* (1919), *The Birth of a Race* (1919), *A Man's Duty* (1919), *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1919), *The Law of Nature* (1919), *Within Our Gates* (1920), *The Brute* (1920), *Green Eyed Monster* (1920), *A Giant of His Race* (1921) and *By Right of Birth* (1921)--all widely hailed and enthusiastically supported by the theatre's patrons. The Dunbar and Foraker theatres (the latter of which was under the same management as the Hiawatha) also showed these popular black films.³¹

From 1917 to 1921, African American audiences in the major cities also saw black films produced by the Frederick Douglass Film Company, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Oscar

Micheaux, Democracy Film Company, Reol and a smattering of other companies. *Winning His Suit* and *The Scapegoat*, produced by the Douglass Film Company, were widely seen in theatres in New York, Washington, Baltimore, Jersey City, Phoenix and Chicago. Located in Jersey City, the Douglass Film Company was said to be the only one of its kind backed entirely by African Americans. The company was financed by Dr. George E. Cannon and Dr. W. S. Smith, medical doctors concerned about the proliferation of negative black images in white produced films. Discussing the difficulties of a pioneer black film company, Dr. Smith said that "White film producers only manufacture pictures which ridicule the race. What they think is Negro comedy is usually a burlesque on the race." Smith explained that the Frederick Douglass Film Company entered the field to provide the public motion pictures which did not degrade the race. However, he stressed the importance of black community support in the success or failure of the company.³²

Smith emphasized the absolute necessity of black theatre patrons supporting what was commonly known as "colored houses." He related the difficulty of booking *The Scapegoat* in a New York theatre which made its money catering to black people. In refusing to book the film, the white manager stated that "his colored people did not want such a Negro play; that they were satisfied with what they were getting and liked the pictures with slap-stick Negro characters they saw at his house." Smith advised that

what "this manager needs [is] to be taught a good lesson by the colored people who are putting bread and butter into his mouth. If they make a demand for better Negro pictures they will get them, but if they continue to crowd his house to see obnoxious Negro types, the manager cannot be blamed for thinking his colored patrons are perfectly satisfied." Smith underscored the fact that this encounter was not an isolated case. Another white manager related that although two-thirds of his customers were black, he used white pictures because "Negroes preferred to see white faces on the screen or funny Negro pictures." When asked to elaborate on his perceptions, he replied, "Well, you know I mean comedy, like Negroes in some hen roost, shooting craps, eating watermelon or razor fights. You know your people are funny anyhow."³³

The number of patrons providing the "bread and butter" for urban motion picture houses was considerable. The "Great Migration," generally dated from 1916 to 1930, created a major shift in the black population from rural to urban areas. Theatre development tended to follow population growth patterns. In 1910, Washington had the largest urban black population, and by 1920 was outranked only by New York and Chicago, which occupied first and second place respectively. Black motion picture theatres in Washington were typical of theatres in New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Detroit in their facilities and film offerings. Prior to the opening of the Lincoln Theatre (1922) in Wash-

ington, which was actually designed as a motion-picture house, most of the straight but makeshift motion picture houses could seat anywhere from 200 to 600 persons. Although African American patrons clamored to see black films, particularly those produced by African Americans, theatre managers continued to be particular about the films they showed. Southern white theatre managers especially monitored black literature and films distributed in their communities. There was always the veiled threat of violence, which could surface if a theatre manager presented a film which whites deemed offensive. One black theatre manager in the South commented that although he liked *The Scapegoat*, and his patrons thought it the best black film ever produced, he was not enthusiastic about showing a film which portrayed black police officers. He was apprehensive about the reception it would receive from white people in the town.³⁴ Other examples of motion pictures which posed problems for theatres interested in booking black films were black film pioneer Oscar Micheaux's *Within Out Gates*, based on the Leo Frank lynching case and *The Brute*. Concern about the volatility of these films was not restricted to the South--whites around the country, and even some blacks, considered them radical enough to precipitate riots.³⁵

Despite these concerns there was increasing demand for black films that dealt with serious, compelling themes. *The Scapegoat*, adapted from a story written by Paul Laurence Dunbar, showed to capacity hous-

es at the Franklin theatre in New York and at the Howard Theatre, prior to being shown in other cities. Both of these theatres drew audiences familiar with the story and with members of the cast. Many of the cast members--Abbie Mitchell, Sydney Kirkpatrick, Walker Thompson, Maud Jones, Leon Williams, Mabel Young, Lorraine Harris and Jack Thornton--had performed with the Lafayette Players and were widely known by African Americans throughout the country.³⁶ Theatre critic Lester Walton noted the film's technical flaws, but thought that the film deserved serious attention and commendation and judged it the best black "photo play" produced to that date.³⁷

The Scapegoat and its successors attracted large black audiences who were eager to see black films free from the degrading stereotypes so prevalent in white plays and films depicting black life. The first black films, although poorly produced, were supported because of the growing race pride so much in evidence during World War I and after. After a succession of black films, theatre patrons and critics began to demand a higher standard from black film producers. Observing, in 1920, that African Americans had developed a race consciousness and pride that in part created a demand for black motion pictures, Lester Walton warned black producers that if they expected to maintain their leadership they must be "just as artistic in studio directorship, just as expert in photography and just as efficient in the matter of film distribution as the other fellow: for the

day of expecting charitable consideration in business even of our own people just because we are Negroes is past."³⁸

The 1921-22 theatrical season brought many changes in black theatricals and in black theatres, some of which Walton and others had foreseen. Clearly a decade of black theatre development had ended and a new era was beginning. The decade had begun with national attention focused upon the Howard Theatre "experiment," which by anyone's standards was a great success: The location was strategic, the facility was among the best in the nation, the entertainment was stellar, the management was tops, and the theatre catered to the increasingly diverse interests of the black community. This is not to say that the theatre did not have problems. It confronted any number of the problems common to the Lafayette, Standard, Grand, Avenue and other black theatres of the time: issues of community support, changes in policy, vulgarity, competition with white circuits for black entertainment, and difficulty in securing varied topnotch black acts on a regular basis.

Even with these problems, some of which were almost insurmountable, those involved in the Howard and the Black Theatre Movement had accomplished a great deal in the years that intervened between the Howard's opening and its decline as the center of black theatricals in Washington. They had learned: that theatres developed for a strictly black clientele would succeed, particularly in urban areas with large black populations; that there was money to be made in black entertainment;

that blacks could manage theatres and other enterprises; that major road shows written, directed and performed by African Americans could have cross-over appeal; that blacks could perform legitimate drama as well as whites; that blacks could write and produce motion pictures.

They had also learned, somewhat painfully: that black audience development was an area that deserved careful consideration; that a theatre's policy had to be carefully constructed to meet audience needs while still accommodating racial aspirations; and, in perhaps the most ominous lesson of all, that black theatre owners and managers had to be prepared to deal with competition from white entrepreneurs who had discovered a lucrative market which they aimed to control. In 1921 black theatre managers and owners had been greeted by the invasion of white theatrical interests in the black theatre districts. Less than a year later, black loss of control of the Howard in early 1922 coincided with the opening of the Lincoln Theatre by white interests, which some Washingtonians felt were hostile to the aspirations of African Americans. Designed as a motion picture palace, the Lincoln Theatre was part of a national trend to develop large black houses, primarily to capture the new black interest in motion pictures, while continuing the most successful elements of the variety programs.³⁹ Located in close proximity to the Howard, the Lincoln provided the Howard with its first, and unbeatable major competition.

Many black intellectuals

felt a good deal of ambivalence about the rise in popularity of motion pictures, which coincided not only with the decline of the Howard Theatre but also with the Quality Amusement Circuit's failure in its bid to place legitimate drama at the pinnacle of black theatre concerns. But as regrettable as these consequences were, they were tempered by the extraordinary success of the Howard and the Black Theatre Movement during the first decade of development. They could almost be taken in entrepreneurial stride.

But the advent of motion pictures may have had more subtle and long-lasting effects on black theatres and black audiences. To determine those effects we need to know far more about what black audiences saw. We do not know the extent to which black films were shown in major black theatres, as opposed to the small black motion picture houses. Nor do we know how well these films were received and their impact on different black audiences. What we do know is that the majority of black patrons, particularly in urban areas, were exposed primarily to Hollywood films, and that these films had all-white casts, and included black actors only in minor roles and then primarily as servants.

We also know that during the 1920s and 1930s the appropriation of the black caricature in Hollywood films became a standard feature. Steady black protest from 1930 to 1960 effected some changes, and integration, though it destroyed the black theatre, also opened up new opportunities for black performers. But, adjusting to

the changing times, black caricatures underwent only cosmetic changes. Today we are still confronted with stereotypes, they have just been repackaged to meet contemporary tastes.

NOTES

1. Baltimore Afro-American, "Miss Burroughs Says Amos 'n' Andy Are Drawback to the Race," by Nannie Burroughs, November 29, 1930.
2. New York Times, "Why the 'Mule Bone' Debate Goes On," by Henry Louis Gates, February 10, 1991.
3. For discussion of African American images in the media, See: Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mamies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1989); Thomas Cripps, Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Daniel J. Leab, From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1975); Donald Bogle, Blacks in American Films and Television: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989); Gary Null, Black Hollywood: The Black Performer in Motion Pictures, (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990).
4. Bettye Collier-Thomas, "The Howard Theatre and the National Black Theatre Movement, 1910-1970," pp. (unpublished book manuscript, Center for African American History and Culture, Temple University); Melvin Patrick Ely, The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon, (New York: The Free Press, 1991) pp. 116, 166.
5. Times, "Why the 'Mule Bone' Debate Goes On."
6. Jessie Carney Smith, ed., Images of Blacks in American Culture: A Refer-

ence Guide to Information Sources (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

7. Neal Gabler, An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood, (New York: Doubleday, 1988) pp. 5-7.

8. There is no published full length treatment of black theatre development. Bettye Gardner and Bettye Thomas, "The Cultural Impact of the Howard Theatre on the Black Community," Journal of Negro History, LV (October 1970), 253-265, is one of the few scholarly studies of a black theatre. The Apollo Theatre has been treated in several non-critical, anecdotal studies which reminisce about the shows and performers and extol the efforts of early theatre manager Frank Schiffman. Examples of this are Jack Schiffman, Harlem Heyday: A Pictorial History of Modern Black Show Business and the Apollo Theatre, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1974); and Ted Fox, Showtime at the Apollo, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983).

9. For a number of years during the transition from predominantly white to predominantly black patrons, the Lafayette Theatre allowed black attendance on a segregated basis. Although, black performers appeared in the theatre, it was not until 1913 that the theatre owners gave tacit recognition to its growing black clientele, and not until 1919 that it became a black theatre. "Lafayette Opens Under Colored Management To Good Houses," New York Age, July 5, 1919; Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 108, 109; "New Therter (sic), Philadelphia People Jubilant," Washington Bee, January 31, 1914; Alfreda M. Duster, Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 289.

10. U. S. Department of Commerce, Negro Population 1790-1915, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941); Constance McLaughlin Green, The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967) p. 200. In 1910 the African American population in D.C. totalled 94,446 persons. Blacks rep-

resented 28.5 percent of the Washington's total population.

11. "The Howard Theatre Again," New York Age, October 12, 1911; "The Howard Theatre," Washington Bee, December 3, 1910.

12. Road shows, such as musical comedies, were expensive to produce and to maintain. Presenting shows with assorted stage props and with sizable casts required large theatres. With the exception of theatres like the Howard, Lafayette, Standard, and Avenue theatres, few black theatres had stages large enough to accommodate major road shows, this was especially true in the period 1910-1916. Also, since some white theatres refuse to book black shows, this further limited the venues for black performances.

13. Collier-Thomas, "Howard Theatre," pp. 75; For a chronological history of blacks in musical theater on Broadway see: Allen Woll, Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

14. Collier-Thomas, "Howard Theatre," pp. 77, 78; Floyd Leslie Sandle, "A History of the Development of the Educational Theatre in Negro Colleges and Universities From 1911 to 1959" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1959). For a discussion of the treatment of drama in black colleges and universities and the organizations founded by African Americans, see especially Chapter II, "Pioneers in the Movement Toward a Negro Theatre," pp. 39-82.

15. Collier-Thomas, "Howard Theatre," pp. 80-82.

16. Ibid., p. 81-82; "Howard Theatre," Washington Bee, September 1, 1917; "'The Children of the Sun' Most Pretentious of All Smarter Set Offerings," New York Age, September 27, 1919; Ibid., "'Jasper Lee's Revenge' is a Negro Classic," March 20, 1920; "Chocolate Brown Show at Howard," Washington Tribune, July 9, 1921.

17. Collier-Thomas, "Howard Theatre," p. 84; John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro

Americans, (5th ed.; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), pp. 368-370; Nathan Irvin Huggins, Voices From the Harlem Renaissance, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 5-7.

18. "Theatrical Circuit - To Have Theatres in Many Cities --- Lester A. Walton is to be General Manager," New York Age, July 12, 1919; Ibid., "The New Colored Circuit," July 19, 1919; "To Organize a Chain of Colored Theatres," Baltimore Afro-American, July 11, 1919.

19. "On the Quality Circuit," Billboard, April 12, 1921; "Quality Amusement Corp. Plans to Concentrate in the East," New York Age, April 23, 1921; Ibid., "Want Drama and Music at Lafayette: Reason Management Changed Policy," February 12, 1921.

20. Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, p. 11; "Pioneer Theatre Mgr. Tells of Early History," Washington Tribune, October 4, 1924.

21. "Theatrical Comment," New York Age, September 21, 1911.

22. Ibid., pp. 105-106; Loften Mitchell, Black Drama: The Story of the American Negro in the Theatre (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1967), pp. 70, 72. Lester Walton made these comments in an interview with Loften Mitchell in 1953.

23. Collier-Thomas, "Howard Theatre," pp. 103-104.

24. Ibid.

25. "Colored Motion Pictures Are in Great Demand," New York Age, March 6, 1920; Ibid., "The Motion Picture Industry and the Negro," June 5, 1913.

26. "A Time for Action," New York Age, October 16, 1913.

27. Leonard C. Archer, Black Images in American Theatre: NAACP Protest Campaigns--Stage, Screen, Radio, and Television, (New York: Pageant-Poseidon Press, 1973); For full discussion of the NAACP role in organizing protest against Birth of A Nation, see NAACP Papers at Library of Congress.

28. Collier-Thomas, "Howard Theatre," pp. 109-110; Thomas Cripps, Black Film as Genre (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 15, 17.

29. "Only 8 Companies Producing Movies," Baltimore Afro-American, June 23, 1922. In 1922 a study of African American motion picture companies found that twenty-eight companies had been organized, but only eight had survived. Five of the companies were individually owned, or were closed corporations and partnerships. Only three of the successful companies sold public stock. Forty-eight black films had been produced. The study noted that the market for black-produced films included somewhat less than 600 black theatres, with far less than 100 in the first-run class. The close proximity of black theatres in cities made it almost impossible for any picture to play more than 200 theatres in the nation.

30. Collier-Thomas, "Howard Theatre," p. 110.

31. "The Homesteader," Washington Bee, August 23, 1919; "Hiawatha Theatre," Ibid., October 25, 1919; "Famous Star," Ibid., December 27, 1919; "Christmas Get-Together," Ibid., January 3, 1920; "Six Days," Ibid., April 3, 1920; "Hiawatha," Ibid., October 30, and November 13, 1920; "Hiawatha Theatre 11th and U," Ibid., October 22, 1921; and "Broke All Records for Attendance at Dunbar Theatre," Washington Tribune, December 3, 1921.

32. "The Difficulties of a Pioneer Film Company," New York Age, August 9, 1917.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. "Within Our Gates" was held up by the Chicago Censor Board for two months. The Chicago Defender claimed that "a certain coterie of 'Race leaders,'" a number of whom had not seen the film, tried to block the showing of the film. For discussion of this see the Chicago Defender, "Within Our Gates," and "Great Lesson," January 17, 1920; and "Within Our Gates," January 24, 1920; For

discussion of Southern police shutting "The Brute" down, see Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, p. 189.

36. "'The Scapegoat' is Finding a Ready Market," New York Age, June 14, 1917.

37. "The Scapegoat," New York Age, May 17, 1917. Unfortunately, no discussion of the films plot could be located. Thomas Cripps in Black Film Genre observes that "what is needed is a careful methodic anatomy of the [black] movies."

38. "Colored Motion Pictures Are in Great Demand," New York Age, March 6, 1920.

39. Collier-Thomas, "Howard Theatre," pp. 120-122.

Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul*: A Film of Conflicting Themes

Charlene Register

Oscar Micheaux produced *Body and Soul*, featuring Paul Robeson in his first screen appearance, in 1924, a year that witnessed considerable strides for African Americans in both motion pictures and theater. The declining popularity of blackface impersonators like Al Jolson had opened the door for a number of black actors.¹ Among them were George Reed and Mattie Peters, both of whom were under contract with the Fox and Principal companies;² Edna Morton, often referred to as the black Mary Pickford of the silver screen;³ and Jennie Salmon, an 18-year old chorus girl who performed with The Chocolate Dandies stage show and "so impressed Rex Ingram, the noted motion picture director...that he signed her for a part in his next picture, *Mare Nostrum*."⁴ According to the Baltimore Afro-American,

In the dramatic productions the colored actors had one of the best years on record, with not a single day in 1924 in which some race actor was not at work. The one colored film employment agency in the country exclusively engaged in supplying studios with Negro actors reports 500

calls in 1924 from the different studios.

The impressive gains made by African Americans were offset somewhat by the fact that most were cast in comic or subservient roles.⁵ Black motion picture actress Essie McKinney appeared in *Up the Ladder* as a maid, and Mattie (or Mammy) Peters was recruited to locate a black actress for a similar role in First National's production of *Lilies of the Field*.⁶ The long list of successfully employed black comedians included Zack Williams, under contract with Century Comedy Studios;⁷ James "Bubbles" Berry, who worked for Universal Century Comedies;⁸ Tom Wilson, an African American actor who often appeared in blackface alongside white actors, as he did with western star, Tom Mix, in *The Heart Buster*;⁹ and Ernest Morrison, also known as Sunshine Sammy, who worked in the *Our Gang* comedies with the Hal Roach Studio. At this time the latter studio had, along with Larry Semon and Educational Film Studios, seven black comedy actors under straight contract and a host of others employed as "extras."¹⁰

There were films that portrayed African Americans in more positive roles, or even featured all-black casts, but they were not great financial

successes. One reason for this, according to an article which appeared in the Afro-American, was that black filmmakers failed to feature prominent actors. As one critic asserted, "if producers would have recognized stars to star [in] their pictures these films would have some degree of marketability...." This writer further argued that, "What they really need is stars to star [in] the pictures and not the pictures to star the stars, as the day is gone when people will pay to see a colored picture simply because it is a colored picture."¹¹

Two pictures that generated profits because they did feature black stars were *Easy Money*, which cast S. H. Dudley, a former vaudeville entertainer, in a starring role, and *The Brute*, an Oscar Micheaux production, which featured the prizefighter Sam Langford.¹² Clearly, Micheaux realized the importance of featuring prominent actors in his films to add interest and heighten appeal, and clearly he realized the star status Robeson brought to his film. With Robeson's wide acclaim, and Micheaux's extensive filmmaking experience, it seemed inevitable that *Body and Soul* would be a successful production. As one advertisement noted, "A record audience will undoubtedly avail themselves of the opportunity to see this magnificent combination of Negro brains and art."¹³

By 1924, with the making of *Body and Soul*, Micheaux had established himself as a reputable filmmaker. He had entered the filmmaking arena in 1918, and by 1924 had made fifteen films, including, in addi-

tion to *The Brute*, *The Homesteader* (1918), *Within Our Gates* (1920), *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), *Brand of Cain* (1920), *Gunsaulus Mystery* (1921), *Deceit* (1921), *Virgin of Seminole* (1922), *The Dungeon* (1922), *Son of Satan* (1922), and *Jasper Landry's Will* (1922). Micheaux is also credited with a number of other films from this period which may not actually have been produced--*The Shadow* (1921), *The Hypocrite* (1921), *The Ghost of Tolston's Manor* (1922), and *The House Behind the Cedars* (1923). It is believed that the prolific Micheaux produced as many as three films in the year of 1924 alone.

Like Micheaux, Robeson had achieved considerable fame. His star status on the stage was so secure, and his name such a promotional plus, that when *Body and Soul* premiered, it was often advertised as a Paul Robeson drama. The Afro-American reported that "Paul Robeson, America's greatest Negro actor, comes to Baltimore for the first time next Thursday, Friday and Saturday appearing at the Royal in Oscar Micheaux's newest production, *Body and Soul*."¹⁴ There were reports that Robeson had experienced a decline in finances at this time, and took "the silent film role to make a little money and to get work as an actor," but, even if his finances had dwindled his stature as an actor had not, and his name would assuredly have given the picture a greater degree of appeal and promoted proceeds at the box office.¹⁵

The anticipated box office success of *Body and Soul* was not, however, a measure of Mi-

cheaux's and Robeson's brilliance and artistry alone. Both had generated considerable controversy as well as fame in their careers. Robeson's most controversial roles had been in two plays by Eugene O'Neill, *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and *The Emperor Jones* (a role Robeson would later popularize in a film version of the play). In the former, Robeson had played opposite a white actress in a story about a young black, Jim Harris, and a white girl, Ella Downey, who grow up together and eventually marry. Almost from the start their marriage is plagued by Jim's self-doubt about his ability to prove himself as a lawyer, Ella's insecurity and dependence on Jim, and her latent fear that if Jim succeeds in passing the bar exams he will prove his superiority. Ella's ever-precarious mental state and frequent outbursts cause Jim to fail--which perversely pleases the deranged Ella. At the play's end Jim resigns himself to taking care of her; she stoops in front of him and kisses his hand.¹⁶

Such action had provoked outrage among both blacks and whites. Robeson, however, had defended his role. In a 1924 article in *Opportunity*, Robeson stated that,

In retrospect all the excitement about *All God's Chillun* seems rather amusing, but at the time of the play's production, it caused many an anxious moment. All concerned were absolutely amazed at the ridiculous critical reac-

tion. The play meant anything and everything from segregated schools to various phases of intermarriage..I am still being damned all over the place for playing in *All God's Chillun*. It annoys me very little when I realize that those who object most... know mostly nothing of the play and who in any event know little of the theatre and have no right to judge a playwright of O'Neill's talents.¹⁷

Robeson, who had welcomed the opportunity to act in O'Neill's plays, and who, in the same article, had noted that having his performance in *Emperor Jones* compared to that of Charles Gilpen was the "greatest praise," saw the controversy as a symptom of other problems:

The reaction to these two plays among Negroes but points out one of the most serious drawbacks to the development of a true Negro dramatic literature. We are too self-conscious, too afraid of showing all phases of our life--especially those phases which are of greatest dramatic value. The great mass of our group discourage any member who has the

courage to fight these petty prejudices.¹⁸

Oscar Micheaux was among the few black filmmakers who were not afraid to show "all phases of our life." And in 1924, his successes had garnered the faith and support of the African American community and press. An article in the Afro-American endorsed his efforts, noting that:

...we hope that Oscar Micheaux may make enough capital from his productions to enlarge his plant and effect a booking and distributing organization in order that we may have more colored films¹⁹

The press, and no doubt also the public, hoped for something more from the films of this time--an alternative to the negative, stereotypical images of blacks on the screen. The Afro-American article continued:

The propaganda spread by pictures with all white casts always "glorify the fellow of the other race." By a skillful use of well calculated "hoke melodrama" they are subtly teaching us that they are superior... In adolescent minds these facts stick, and all mature minds are not strong enough to withstand this implication.²⁰

Some of Micheaux's later critics would question his success in redressing damaging stereotypes. Film historian Thomas Cripps asserts that "Micheaux's novels and movies usually were attempts to provide entertainment for black readers and viewers although they suffered from the same racial stereotypes that plagued white movies."²¹ Cripps' assertion may have some validity, yet it fails to acknowledge the fact that, despite some weaknesses, Micheaux's films provided a great number and a greater degree of more positive portrayals of the African American on the screen; portrayed African Americans in more diverse roles; and provided fewer unfavorable stereotypes of the African American than did Hollywood's previous portrayals.

Perhaps more important, *Body and Soul* is significant in black film history because of its unique treatment of the complex relationship between good and evil. Micheaux also explores other deep and conflicting relationships in a series of subtle sub-themes--light-complexioned actors vs. dark complexioned actors, "standard" English vs. dialect, and women vs. men. Throughout the film the plot intricately weaves these complex themes, some of which also emerge in Micheaux's other film and novels.²² It is amazing to ponder on how an African American filmmaker who lacked both capital and extensive filmmaking experience with major motion pictures and who, in the America of 1924 was subjected to so many other limitations, could develop such a unique film.

In *Body and Soul* the major

conflict between good and evil is located in the character of the very controversial Rev. Issiah Jenkins, a black minister. Not surprisingly, the film elicited a public outcry from the black community over the minister's unflattering portrayal. One review of this film stated that,

If some of the Reverends could see how Micheaux pictures harm...that Jackleg Preacher, but, of course, they wouldn't go near that den of iniquity, a theater. And, of course in Baltimore the women don't buy the Reverend suits, feed them on chicken dinners, hang on their slightest word and force their daughters on their attentions. *Body and Soul* is a picture of great emotional appeal, indeed.²³

The controversy that greeted *Body and Soul* was perhaps an extension of the controversies that had already surrounded both Robeson and Micheaux throughout their careers, and in connection to this character in particular. In 1924, just prior to *Body and Soul*, Robeson had portrayed "a sinful southern preacher whose congregation finally takes its revenge" in a play entitled *Rosanne*, in which he served as a replacement for Charles Gilpin.²⁴ The controversy over the play seemed, however, only to heighten Robeson's appeal, and it was no

doubt because of, and not in spite of, these protests that Micheaux cast him in the role of Rev. Jenkins, whom Dorothy Gilliam later described as "a rakehell Georgia Negro preacher whose secretive behavior suggests that he is concealing another identity."²⁵

This was not the first time Micheaux had presented a less than positive characterization of ministers. In his first motion picture, *The Homesteader*, produced in 1918, Micheaux had encountered difficulty obtaining censor approval due to the protests of three African American ministers who "claimed that it was based upon the supposed hypocritical actions of a prominent colored preacher of this city[Chicago]."²⁶ Micheaux had expressed distrust of African American ministers not only in his films but also in his writings. In an article that appeared in the *Chicago Defender* in 1911, Micheaux had asserted that "blacks have been held back largely by some of our social demagogues."²⁷ A similar sentiment is conveyed in his novel *The Conquest*, in which he refers to his father-in-law, a minister, as being "cunning and deceitful, pretending in one sentence to love, and in the next taking a thrust at my emotions and home."²⁸

In view of Micheaux's personal impression of African American ministers, it seems natural that he would create a character such as the Reverend Issiah Jenkins as the protagonist of *Body and Soul*. It also seems natural that such a character would raise the ire of the African American community, because with his portrayal Mi-

cheaux had violated two unwritten laws: The first law, which applied to filmmakers and writers, was that black artists should not publicly expose negative aspects existing within the black community; the second law was that black artists should never attack the black community's most sacred institution, its religion.

But Micheaux was not afraid of exposing the negative, and of challenging audiences to view the conflict of good vs. evil carried to its utmost extremes. The Rev. Issiah Jenkins, the film's protagonist, is introduced early as an ex-convict who has escaped prison and been apprehended in Tatesville, Georgia. While awaiting extradition to the North and deportation to England, where he is to face a variety of charges, Jenkins manages to escape from authorities. Clearly, having an ex-convict pose as a minister is indicative of Micheaux's less than positive opinion of ministers. But as the film progresses, this view grows darker and darker, as Jenkins commits one transgression after another. He is shown drinking liquor, even stealing a bottle of liquor from a local club owner, whom he further insults by requesting a contribution and then threatening to expose the club-owner for his sinful deeds. Jenkins remarks, "I've laid off you and this house of Hell; but I'm thinking about preaching on the subject--soon!" Such intimidation and deception typify the hypocrisy characteristic of this preacher.

Micheaux often cuts from a scene of Jenkins imbibing liquor to a shot of his faithful

church members expressing their conviction regarding his morality as a spiritual leader. As Sister Martha Jane states, "Don't you pass no 'sinuations 'bout my pastor--that Godly man!" Reverend Jenkins answers their devout faith in him with guile and deception. He deceives everyone--his church members, his close acquaintances, and finally, himself. Through it all, Jenkins is clever. For example, while delivering a sermon, Jenkins recognizes in the audience an old acquaintance who was also a former convict. Fearing that his disguise will be uncovered, Jenkins says, "Dem dat am lookin' at me now an' says nuthin, dem, will I see latuh." Jenkins has strategically given his fellow ex-convict a message without the members of his congregation even realizing that it was not part of his sermon.

To more fully contrast the theme of good vs. evil, Micheaux introduces a counterpart for Jenkins in the character of a brother, Sylvester. In one reference to the relationship, Jenkins casts aspersions on Sylvester, saying, "that no-account brother of mine! I've warned you Sister Martha Jane about letting this child [Isabelle] become worldly." Sylvester is rarely shown in the film, but in those few instances where he does appear he is always very well-mannered, polite, and righteous, in sharp contrast to his brother. Sylvester is always dressed in a suit and tie, while Jenkins wears the characteristic dress of ministers. With considerable ingenuity, Micheaux cast Robeson in both parts. By doing so, he leads the viewer to

see affinities between these two characters, to "connect" the two images of goodness and evil and see the relationship both figuratively and literally. It is not only the sharp, Jekyll-and-Hyde contrasts between good and evil Micheaux is interested in, but also the conflicts that result from the interaction between the two. And who better to portray conflicts than Paul Robeson.

Micheaux often cast the same actor in two different roles in the same film. In this film, for example, the actor who plays a stranger elsewhere in the film also plays the strange man who buys the destitute Isabelle her food in the Atlanta scene; this is the same actor who portrays Jenkins' deacon. Sometimes this doubling was simply an attempt to stretch his meager resources. More often it was with a thematic end in mind, as in the case of Sylvester and Rev. Jenkins. Micheaux's doubling may also have been an effort to redeem himself with the African American community by highlighting the good qualities of African Americans.

Despite Sylvester's appearances in the film, Jenkins provides the basis upon which the plot is developed, and, as that plot advances, his behavior becomes increasingly offensive. He commits rape, assault, and even murder. Micheaux's theme of good vs. evil reaches its dramatic pinnacle when Jenkins rapes Isabelle. Micheaux introduces the rape scene by showing Jenkins and Isabelle riding in a horse drawn carriage. When they encounter a severe rainstorm, they seek refuge in an abandoned cabin. Jenkins lights

a fire in the fireplace to warm the cabin, encouraging Isabelle to remove her wet clothing to allow it to dry. In this scene Jenkins is very cunning--even as he attempts to win Isabelle's confidence and rid her of her fears, he is preparing to violate her. During this scene Micheaux uses the camera most cleverly to create dramatic action and advance the plot. As Jenkins enters the room, the camera focuses on his feet; it steadily follows each step as he approaches his victim. At no time is the actual rape scene shown on the screen. Instead the camera cuts to a shot of Isabelle and then again focuses on Jenkins' feet as he exits the room. The advance of Jenkins' methodical footsteps adds suspense to the rape scene, revealing the calculation with which Jenkins has planned the rape of his victim. This technical device, which Micheaux uses in other films, enables Micheaux to share the guilt with his viewers, who have had time to superimpose their own mental images of rape to that on the screen. Interestingly, this is the first scene in which Isabelle's hair is not pinned up; it has been suggested that Micheaux was attempting to heighten the sexual appeal of his character by allowing her hair to hang down in her face.

The Reverend Jenkins' brutal behavior does not stop with one assault. With unmitigated brutality he assaults Isabelle a second time. When Isabelle asks her mother for permission to marry Sylvester, explaining to her that the real reason is because Jenkins has violated her, her mother retorts, "What's

the Nigga got to marry on!" Isabelle informs her mother that the use of such a term is vulgar. Here Micheaux was expressing his opposition to the use of the word "nigger" and perhaps was suggesting to the African American community that they should discontinue such use. Micheaux's denunciation of this term lends credence to the view that he did attempt to elevate the black community in his portrayals in spite of the evidence to the contrary.

As she continues to describe her experience with the Reverend Jenkins, Isabelle says to her mother, "I made myself feel that Sylvester would understand my helplessness and forgive and help me. It was then we came for your consent to marry. But refusing, you left me alone again with him [Jenkins] that day." Isabelle goes on to reveal that Jenkins had subsequently begun to demand money, and had again tried to attack her. She steadfastly has refused his demands, calling him a "white-livered, lying hypocritical beast--to steal my poor mother's money."

Infuriated by her refusal, Jenkins forces Isabelle to give him money, knocking her to the floor. Such an image alone--a minister launching a vicious attack on a female--would certainly have provoked outrage among audiences, but Micheaux carries the abuse even further. Jenkins tells Isabelle that her mother will never believe her story and that, to avoid castigation, she should flee her home and go to Atlanta. The desperate Isabelle complies, composing a note to her mother that says she is leaving home, and signing it, "crushed in

body and soul." Viewers have been presented with a corrupt minister who has committed rape, haunted his victim by assaulting her, and finally forced her to lead a life of starvation, a sentence which ultimately results in her death.

But Isabelle's tragic death is not the only one Reverend Jenkins is responsible for: he goes further and commits murder. After Isabelle's death, Jenkins' deceptive, vicious deeds are revealed by Sister Martha Jane, and the church congregation launches an attack, hitting Reverend Jenkins with hymn books. Fearing for his safety, Jenkins flees, only to be later confronted by an armed attacker who provokes Jenkins into battle. With his overpowering size, Jenkins easily subdues his attacker, then exhibits unconscionable ruthlessness by levelling a final blow to a man who is already incapacitated and lying on the ground.

The evil associated with this character was clearly beyond the bounds of acceptance. It is thus entirely understandable why audiences were outraged by Micheaux's portrayal of Jenkins as the typical African American minister. Micheaux had not only violated one of the most important unwritten codes of conduct within the African American community--never denigrate African American ministers--but in his attempt to convey the theme of good vs. evil he had, with *Body and Soul*, provided such a malicious and despicable portrayal of African American ministers that it was almost certain he would be harshly criticized by the African American community.

His portrayal is redeemed by a fact not revealed until the film's conclusion: it has all been a dream. One offended, incredulous, reviewer asserted, "If in the end it had not proved to be a dream I know the audience couldn't have stood it. In fact some of them were talking out loud to the picture, tearfully and wrathfully."²⁹ By including Sylvester, and by ending the film with the revelation that it has all been a dream, Micheaux was able to salvage his standing within the community, as well as his reputation as a filmmaker.

Micheaux's film is also redeemed by the fact that it goes beyond attacks on specific characters to expose and denounce objectionable behaviors in the black community at large. One such behavior is intrarracial prejudice, which divided the black community on the basis of color differences. In *Body and Soul* Micheaux deliberately contrasts light complexioned vs. dark complexioned actors, using color as a device to subtly delineate character and concept and to expose the bias against "dark."

Most of the primary characters, with the exception of Jenkins, are light in complexion. The secondary characters like the clubowner and the women from the household of Ruth (Sister Caline and Sister Lucy) are darker in complexion. Curly, however, is an exception of a minor character who is light, but in the film, Curly is often referred to as "yellow," as when Jenkins commands, "Shut your yaller mouth..." One of the deacons who assists

the Reverend Jenkins is light in complexion; the other is dark. Micheaux makes the dark one, who performs antics while Jenkins is delivering his sermon, stereotypically clownish. With these and other differentiations Micheaux points the finger at the African American community and the color divisions which existed within it.

Although the film was advertised as having an all-black cast, there is at least one white character in *Body and Soul*. When Isabelle is living in Atlanta and is nearly starving to death, she purchases food from a white entrepreneur. It seems that Micheaux included this character in the film in hopes that the film would have some degree of appeal among white audiences.

In addition to color, Micheaux strategically uses "standard" English vs. dialect to enhance his characterizations. Contrasting the two could, again, have been strategically used by Micheaux to appeal to a wider variety of audiences who might view the film, but he seems to be concerned with the power of language as well as with the marketability of his film.

Although *Body and Soul* is a silent film, the title cards indicate how the characters speak, and in this film, the Reverend Jenkins appears able to speak both "standard" English and dialect. Other characters who speak "standard" English are Isabelle and Curly. Isabelle's mother, Sister Martha Jane, speaks in dialect. For example, she says, "But honey, why is you libin' like dis? What has you done wid all de money?" A secondary charac-

ter, the clubowner, also speaks in dialect. Micheaux is not only reflecting the diversity of the African American community in its variety of speech patterns; he is also subtly implying that the more skillful African Americans were those who could traverse back and forth between "standard" English and dialect. The conflicting theme of "standard" English vs. dialect was often found in Micheaux's films, and might, according to James Hoberman, reflect his own ambivalence.³⁰ It might also reflect Micheaux's awareness that the power of language can be abused, and that the more linguistically skilled African Americans, like the Reverend Issiah Jenkins, could deceive more easily.

In *Body and Soul*, Micheaux also explored the complex theme of women vs. men. Although the male characters, Jenkins in particular, have a more dominant role in the film and provide the vehicle by which the plot is advanced, the female characters--Isabelle and Sister Martha Jane--assume the more morally positive roles. Three of the male characters in the film are involved in some kind of illicit activity. Curly attempts to extort money; the clubowner sells liquor illegally, as well as improperly providing the preacher with liquor; and the Reverend Jenkins commits a series of immoral acts including swindling money, assault, rape and murder. The only positive male character in the film is Sylvester, who has a minimal role.

By contrast, the female characters, Sister Martha Jane and Isabelle, portray strong

African American women who adhere to high moral codes of conduct. Sister Martha Jane is a devoted mother who works endlessly to provide for her daughter. Although she initially refuses to believe that Jenkins has violated Isabelle, she attempts to rescue her from a life of degradation and cares for her when she is on her deathbed. Similarly, Isabelle is a devoted daughter who seeks her mother's permission before she decides to marry. Isabelle even allows herself to be assaulted by the Reverend Jenkins to protect her mother's money and dignity.

Micheaux's portrayal of men as symbols of power and authority may simply be a reflection of the period, the 1920s. But his portrayal of women seems surprisingly modern. Though they assume roles of lesser power status, Micheaux's women are assertive and dominant: Sister Martha Jane exerts control over her daughter, and again over the Rev. Jenkins. Her dominance can be explained by the fact that she appears to be head of her household without a father figure or husband, but Micheaux also seems to perceive African American women as strong figures because they actually adhered to high moral codes of conduct. And though the men in *Body and Soul* are in positions of power, they are also more capable of committing acts of corruption and deception. Micheaux seems to be forcing African Americans to re-examine the roles of women and men by subtly suggesting that women with their high moral codes of conduct provide good models, and that although men consider themselves symbols of

power and authority, it is they who should emulate women and not vice versa.

Body and Soul is unique in its technical as well as its moral complexity. The film's intriguing tracking techniques, in three scenes in particular, help develop the main theme of the conflict between good and evil and show Micheaux's skill as a filmmaker. In the rape scene, the camera disturbingly follows Jenkins' footsteps, never showing the actual rape. During the wind storm, the movement of the camera creates an illusion of fierceness and anger. Several close-up shots of the money Sister Martha Jane has earned through her industry, as well close-up shots of her hands ironing clothes and picking cotton, convey Micheaux's idea that earning money in a legitimate manner required hard work. Through Micheaux's technical skill and ingenuity, money itself becomes symbolic in the film.

Micheaux develops the plot of *Body and Soul* through the use of a series of flashbacks and dream sequences. In the first part of the film, Sister Martha Jane awakens from a dream and exclaims, "Ah don had a ter'ble dream." The film also ends with Sister Martha Jane awakening from a dream and realizing that the money she saved for her daughter had not been swindled after all by the corrupt Reverend Jenkins. It is not until the end of the film that we realize the haunting of Isabelle by the corrupt Reverend Jenkins was also merely a dream.

Although, Micheaux's film provoked criticism because of its portrayal of African Ameri-

can ministers, it certainly did prove to be intriguing to film audiences. In assessing how film audiences reacted, the Afro-American claimed that:

Body and Soul is conceded by reviewers to tell the most gripping screen story that has been told in a colored picture....The photography and scenic surroundings are perfect. Beside the principals, there is an all-colored supporting cast, chosen from the most capable film actors on the screen. Though this is Robeson's first picture appearance, he is said to equal his speaking attainments in the film drama.³¹

The Pittsburgh Courier was not so favorable, reporting that:

Paul Robeson in *Body and Soul*, a picture drama under management of Oscar Micheaux opened to big business at the Twentieth Century Theatre in Chicago, February 28, but patronage slumped in the middle of the week owing to the fact that the story was void of interest.³²

Finally, another review which appeared in the Afro-American praised the film for its moral and emotional force:

Not since *Over the Hill* has there been a story that touches the heart with greater force than this story of a good but helpless girl in the toils of a hypocritical beast, who ruins her very *Body and Soul* for his greed and lust.³³

Body and Soul conveys its theme of good vs. evil through a variety of conflicting, controversial sub-themes. The controversy this film provoked is perhaps a reflection of the controversy surrounding both Micheaux and Robeson throughout their careers. Micheaux was provocative as a filmmaker because he did not shy away from explosive issues--lynching, interracial relationships, passing, incestuous relationships, and intraracial prejudice. Robeson was equally provocative because, as an actor and singer, he used his position and power to advocate his political views, which were often in direct conflict with those held by the audiences who were still in awe of his intelligence and talent. *Body and Soul* is a significant film in African American film history because of what it reveals about Oscar Micheaux, the filmmaker, and about Paul Robeson, the singer, dramatic performer, and first-time motion picture actor, especially the courage and artistry with which they probed "all phases of our life."

NOTES

1. "Demand for Film Actors," Chicago Defender, 20 December 1924, p. 10.
2. "Ragtime" Billy Tucker, "Coast Dope," Chicago Defender.
3. "With Famous Players: Edna Morton, Our 'Mary Pickford' of Filmdom, Stars in New Production With Blanche Kennedy," Pittsburgh Courier, 11 August 1923, p. 1.
4. "'Chocolate Dandies' Star To Go To Africa As Film Star: 18-Year-Old Beauty Chosen by Rex Ingram, Noted Motion Picture Director to Take part in *Mare Nostrum*," Pittsburgh Courier, 18 October 1924, p. 12.
5. "Film Briefs," Afro-American (Baltimore), 22 November 1924, p. 8.
6. "'Mammy' Peters in Film at Carey," Afro-American (Baltimore), 26 September 1924, p. 5.
7. "Ragtime" Billy Tucker, "Coast Dope," Chicago Defender.
8. D. Ireland Thomas, "Motion Picture News," Chicago Defender, 28 June 1924, p. 6.
9. "Racial Star Liked: Mix and Wilson Drive Blues Away in *The Heart Buster*," Chicago Defender, 9 August 1924, p. 6.
10. "'Sunshine Sammy' To Form Company," Pittsburgh Courier, 2 August 1924, p. 10. See also Afro-American article, "Demand for Film Actors Increasing," 20 December 1924, p. 6.
11. "[Wants] Negro Stars For Race Films," Afro-American (Baltimore), 20 December 1924, p. 7.
12. Ibid., p. 7.
13. "Film Tips: Paul Robeson and All-Colored Cast at Royal," Afro-American (Baltimore), 26 December 1925, p. 4.
14. Ibid., p. 4. On February 14, 1925, the Afro-American (Baltimore) also stated: "New Micheaux Film Stars Robeson," the New York *Amster-*

dam News had also featured a headline stating, "Robeson and Chenault in *Body and Soul*" (2 December 1925, p.5.

15. Dorothy B. Gilliam, Paul Robeson: All-American (Washington: New Republic Book Co., 1976), p. 32. In Gilliam's opinion, "It [*Body and Soul*] was definitely a B-movie, and Paul [Robeson], who had taken [*Body and Soul*] never referred to it, although Variety 'was impressed with its power for both black and white audiences." Thomas Cripps confirms these views, and contends that, "He [Robeson] probably took his first film role simply to make a little money and to get work." (Thomas Cripps, "Paul Robeson and Black Identity in American Movies," p. 471.) Martin Duberman, in his biographical work on Robeson notes, "Late in 1924 Essie [Robeson's wife] concluded arrangements with the black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux for Paul to star opposite Julia Theresa Russell (Micheaux's future sister-in-law) in the movie *Body and Soul*." Duberman continues, "Essie was delighted to get contract terms from Micheaux that called for three percent of the gross after the first forty thousand dollars in receipts and a salary of one hundred dollars per week for three weeks." Martin B. Duberman, Paul Robeson: A Biography (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), p. 77.

16. Gilliam, p. 32.

17. Paul Robeson, "Reflections on O'Neill's Plays," Opportunity 2, no. 24 (December 1924): 368-369.

18. Ibid., p. 32.

19. "Page O. Micheaux," Afro-American (Baltimore), 2 May 1924, p. 4.

20. Ibid., p. 4.

21. Thomas Cripps, "Paul Robeson and Black Identity in American Movies," Massachusetts Review 11, no. 3 (Summer 1970): 472.

22. For studies of Micheaux's novels see Virginia Faulkner and Frederick C. Luebke, eds. Vision and Refuge: Essays on Literature of the Great Plains (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pp. 109-125.

Article submitted by Chester Fontenot, Jr. entitled, "Oscar Micheaux, Black Novelist and Film Maker."

23. Maybelle Chew, "Along the White Way: *Body and Soul*," Afro-American (Baltimore), 11 September 1926, p. 5.

24. Gilliam, p. 36.

25. Ibid., p. 40.

26. Chicago Defender, 1 March 1919, p. 11.

27. Oscar Micheaux (Government Crop Expert for Rosebud County), Chicago Defender, 28 October 1911.

28. Oscar Micheaux, The Conquest: The Story of A Negro Pioneer, (Lincoln: Woodruff Press, 1913), p. 264.

29. Maybelle Chew, "Along the White Way: *Body and Soul*," p. 5.

30. J. Hoberman, "Bad Movies," Film Comment 16, no. 4 (July-August, 1980): 12.

31. "Film Tips: Paul Robeson and All-Colored Cast At Royal," Afro-American (Baltimore), p. 4.

32. Sylvester Russell, "Sylvester Russell's Review," Pittsburgh Courier, 5 March 1927, second section, p. 2.

33. Afro-American (Baltimore), 25 September 1926, p. 6. (Newspaper Advertisement featuring *Body and Soul* at The Carey Theatre).

Oscar Micheaux's *Darktown Revue*: Caricature and Class Conflict¹

J. Ronald Green

Critics have often considered Oscar Micheaux--writer, filmmaker, entrepreneur--more competent in his entrepreneurship than in his artistry. This essay is part of a book-length study that argues that Micheaux's critical reception falls far short of his accomplishment, largely because critics have based their judgments on the wrong criteria. Micheaux has been judged by the standards of classical cinema, when in fact his films, like other race movies, are as different from classical cinema as the race music of the same period is from classically based music.

One of the primary issues in Micheaux's critical reception is his problematic relationship to the middle class. Viewing his novels from the perspective of class, critics have repeatedly derided Micheaux for being "white," "bourgeois," "fatuous," and "middle class." While it is true that his narrative strategies often revolve around an idea of class, and that at times he valorizes the middle class, Micheaux is not simply capitulating to whiteness. Rather he is seeking some middle ground, a vantage from which to explore the agonistic strength of class conflict, and from which to fight both fronts of the class war--the oppression from above and the degradation from below.

The valorization of the middle-class at the expense of the lower-class, one of Micheaux's favorite narrative strategies, can be found in all his films but is especially noticeable in *The Darktown Revue*. This 1931 film, which is Micheaux's only entry in the black-subject two-reelers that Thomas Cripps discusses extensively in a chapter called "Better Than White Voices" in *Slow Fade to Black*,² is comprised of production numbers which juxtapose middle-class and lower-class blacks. The middle-class is represented by the well-groomed and perfectly-rehearsed chorus; the lower-class, by performers who are reduced to caricature in a series of vaudeville acts which the well-heeled chorus members witness with ingenuous disdain. This middle-class observance of lower-class performance, which is schematic throughout *The Darktown Revue*, sets up a paradigm of what W. E. B. DuBois called "twoness." According to DuBois,

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.³

The fine condition of *The Darktown Revue* aids in the perception of the "twoness" inherent in the construction of its images as well as in its characterizations and music. Because it is a short-subject film, in fact Micheaux's only extant one, *The Darktown Revue* is relatively free of the struggles for coherency and technical mastery often found in Micheaux's other films. *The Darktown Revue* offers a pure, virtually emblematic instance of the paradigm that recurs with the rich variation of a favorite jazz chord throughout Micheaux's feature films. It shows Micheaux's struggle with DuBois' wrenching twoness, and his attempt to forge out of that twoness a strong, complex and critical idiom of African-ness in the American citizenry.

The choir members who, in *The Darktown Revue*, represent the middle-class aspect of Micheaux's dialectic, look like the college-aged sons and daughters of a long-established black bourgeoisie well accustomed to ownership and culture. Their first song, "Watermelon Time," sets up a musical dialectic that is reiterated throughout the film in character, sound, and image. Originally composed as caricature (it was one of Ernest Hogan's "coon" songs), "Watermelon Time" can be classified here as popularized folk music of the sort written by Stephen Foster. The style of Donald Heywood's musical arrangement is not pure folk, but a commercial, "sweet" multi-part harmonizing reminiscent of barbershop quartets. This "Watermelon Time" is a

musical hybrid, combining black, rural, folk melody and lyrics with white, urban, popular harmony and voice training. The effect is white bourgeois diction superimposed over black rural dialect.

This song is followed by a vaudeville act performed by Tim Moore and Andrew Tribble, two veterans of the black musical stage. Their act includes ethnic stereotyping, clichéd references to laziness, and gratuitous racial naming jokes such as "Blondie" and "me and another Hawaiian boy." The dialectic established in these two scenes by the mix of rural and urban, high and low, sublime and comic aspects of African-American life reflects not only DuBois' twoness but also the dialectical contrasts found in black urban communities at the end of the major migrations and the declining slope of the Harlem Renaissance.

The title of the film itself invokes a similar dichotomy. The jazz age was a transition period for the use of the term "darktown." In his first chapter of *Harlem Renaissance*, Nathan Huggins makes a distinction between the emergence of Harlem and the previous development of other "darktowns," or black communities, even in New York City, suggesting that these two kinds of darktowns reflect the bifurcation of class between sophistication and sordidness.⁴ In *The Darktown Revue*, the chorus and the vaudeville skits respectively represent this same contrast.

This basic binary structure of upper- and lower-class styles is also evident in descriptions of the Fisk Jubilee

Singers, who made a series of successful public tours soon after emancipation, some sixty years before Micheaux's *Darktown Revue*. The Reverend G. D. Pike's explanation of the Jubilee Singers' strategy for building an audience clarifies how the leaders of Fisk University consciously contrasted bourgeois values with lower-class values to help "change the joke and slip the yoke." Pike mentions a performance from early in the tour that may have been an experiment in a kind of caricature:

It was at this concert that Mr. Dickerson [one of the Fisk singers] made his first appearance in the Temperance Medley. He is described as standing out in front of the others, with a long rusty coat and mutton-legged pants, by far too short for him, with low-quartered shoes. The whole class were said to have been trembling for him, while his knees knocked together like chattering teeth, but, under his magnetism, the audience seemed to lose their identity....⁵

This skit would have been presented in the interest of the temperance message, but it may also have exploited caricature. A later example is more explicit:

...Georgie [a little fellow who found his way into camp, hungry and nearly naked]...also joined the company. His ability in declamation and song, considering his age, was indeed wonderful. His rendering of the "Hard-Shell Sermon," "Sheridan's Ride," and "The Smack in School," was simply inimitable. The audience seemed never to have enough of it.⁶

Clearly there is something going on quite early in the Fisk tour that is more than strictly devotional, uplifting music. This description of Georgie's act hints at elements of buffoonery as well as vaudeville and musical comedy.

Fisk's strategy of "Evangelical comedy" may or may not, like Micheaux's, have been dialectical in its use of high and low cultural idioms, but the act is strikingly similar to that presented sixty years later by the performers in Micheaux's *Darktown Revue*. Micheaux's spoof on the "hard-shell" sermon must have been a vestige of the Fisk Singers tour, or a carryover from some earlier version. But such a resurrection raises some interesting questions: Why would Micheaux return to the form of the jubilee choir, whose 1871 success, though remarkable for its time, is grounded in a sensibility running deep into slavery? Why would he return to a form of vaudeville skit associated with the buffoonery of the

second age of minstrelsy, popular half a century earlier? And, most important, why should he make--and, why should we be interested in--a film like this at all, when the cultural sensibilities of audiences had already passed triumphantly through the sophisticated age of jazz, the era of the New Negro, the Harlem Renaissance, the roaring twenties, and were, according to Alain Locke,⁷ well on their way to the age of classical jazz and the dawn of African-American classical music?

Answering these vexing questions requires a closer look at Micheaux's historical situation. The Fisk Singers perhaps did live in a glorious moment: the potential for full citizenship for blacks had been made more and more of a reality with their public acceptance by certain doyens of the white establishment. The group had made a case for African American competency. The leaders at Fisk had carved a niche for their ethnic group that would be a reference point of progress, not just culturally, but also financially, for other black performers. But that progress was short-lived. Only five years later Rutherford Hayes was in the White House, Reconstruction was in full retreat, and the Ku Klux Klan was on the rise. With the great migrations that followed came race riots in the Northern cities, as white competitors at the lower end of the American meritocracy balked at the influx of black workers.

It was through these years, and through the worst of these setbacks, that Micheaux developed his early work. He wrote

his second novel during the great migration of blacks from the South that occurred during the First World War. He began his film career just as the most famous of the post-war riots broke out in East St. Louis in 1917 and in Chicago in 1919. The earliest film of Micheaux's that has survived, *Within Our Gates* (1920), deals directly with lynching, a topic so controversial that the film was consequently subjected to censorship and banning in Chicago and elsewhere.

Into this historical scene also stepped D. W. Griffith, who quickly established himself as the champion of the field of cinema to which Micheaux was to devote his career. Soon after Micheaux published his deeply angry and ironic first book about the failure of his entrepreneurial homesteading enterprise, entitled *The Conquest* (1913), Griffith scored an epic conquest over any ground that might have been gained since the time of the Fisk Jubilee campaign. *Birth of a Nation* (1915) was a sophisticated film production, inspiring enough in its techniques for the president of the United States, the former president of Princeton University, and a respected historian (all in the single person of Woodrow Wilson) to call it "history written in lightning." Griffith's sophisticated film production contains, of course, not a grain of social, political or economic sophistication: It is thoroughly aristocratic and agrarian where its techniques of realism are strongest. The idealism surrounding the white protagonists -- produced with cinematographer Billy Bitzer's

soft-focus portrait technique and with the subtle editing strategies for which Griffith is celebrated--is hardly realistic. Any realism of *Birth of a Nation* breaks down completely around its portraits of blacks, played by white men and women in blackface, whom Huggins characterizes as "merely playing minstrel types." The pathetic backwardness of *Birth of a Nation* is indistinguishable at many levels from the reigning attitude of that period among the American populace and their elected officials. If there was any social change going on when Micheaux emerged, it seemed to be change for the worse. Micheaux, in fact, was faced with a racial climate more violent than that which greeted the Fisk Singers.

Micheaux's work can be seen as an attempt to change the cinematic modes of representation of 1930 and to resist the violence articulated by a "web of social relations,"⁸ which was the principal hindrance to black autonomy against which any strategy for advancement would have to address itself. Merely doing a good job and adopting the dominant American values was not adequate. Presenting positive images of ethnic competency was not enough. The enervating violence had to be met head on. Many black artists had insulated themselves from the violence with the protective facade of caricature. Nathan Huggins has emphasized the role of violence in the evolution of the ethnic caricatures:

The black mask of the minstrel--its most figurative rep-

resentation of the ethnic stereotype--was a substantive shield protecting more than self-esteem.... Signs which warned, "Nigger, - Read and Run" chilled the hearts of Negro performers who played [in the South]. Yet, they hit upon a way. They would enter such towns in private Pullman cars, which were parked at a siding. Then, with their band, the entertainers would parade from the railroad car to whatever served as the theater; and after the performance, they would strike up the band and parade back to their Pullman. Whatever the number of shows--if there was a matinee or two-day stand--they would march to rousing music or they would not be on the streets of that town.... "As soon as all the members of the company were on the ground we would start playing 'Dixie.'" ...these black performers knew that their very existence depended on their never pretending to be other than their stage characters.⁹

Huggins notes that many famous black comics such as Kersands and Hogan "prided themselves on

playing at its most extreme what the audience wanted," and that such playing of the extreme "could be a personal insulation." Huggins makes it clear, nevertheless, that the assumption of the mask was also damaging to the performer and to the audience.¹⁰

Micheaux engaged this problem by presenting caricature to African Americans for the purpose of criticism. He directly challenged his own people with an ethnic caricaturism that had been adopted from the white tradition by blacks, and subsequently internalized, making film after film dedicated to facing down those caricatures with his African-American audience, dedicated to reversing the disappearance act and to calling back into battle for American citizenship the African self that was under siege.¹¹

In his work there are more or less pure examples of his use of this strategy. At the pure end of the spectrum, there are explicit caricatures--true minstrel figures directly from the world of performance and entertainment. Such caricatures naturally occur in those films that include production numbers. At the other end of the spectrum, are those characters who, though fully embedded in the plot--not in production numbers or skits--nevertheless have characteristics of minstrel caricatures.

By far the purest example of Micheaux's use of minstrel caricature is *The Darktown Revue* itself. The vaudeville acts in *Darktown Revue* are old-fashioned, ante-bellum and post-Reconstruction caricatures. The black audience is

invited to stand above these caricatures in spite of their enjoyment of them. The choir in *Darktown Revue* is a surrogate audience, serving the same function as a classic Greek chorus. After the Moore and Tribble skit, the choir sings "Ain't it a Shame"; the framing song that the choir sings before and after the comic sermon is the rhetorical "Is that Religion." The lyrics of the choir's song then explicitly critique the sort of religion caricatured in the previous skit.

In the ABAB¹AB²ABⁿ-structure of this revue, A represents black middle-class legitimacy; B, B¹, etc., represent various ethnic caricatures, such as "coons" and hard-shell preachers. This paradigmatic structure is used repeatedly by Micheaux in other films as a narrative form for his ethnic criticism. As a paradigm of Micheaux's critique, the A, or middle-classness, is the term upon which the positive values for critique are founded; it is the normative reference by which the qualities of B, B¹, etc., of the caricature series are found wanting. In the light of this paradigm, it is easy to see why Micheaux has been accused of racial self-hatred and white racism. Ethnic criticism for the purpose of ethnic development is, however, not inherently racist; the "A" figure in the paradigm can be understood as complex and dialectical; it cannot automatically be equated with any simple notion of whiteness, middle-classness or the bourgeoisie.

The choir and its director

in *The Darktown Revue* must not only present their beautifully-produced, upper-middle-class persons for the audience to identify with; they must also present hot jazz. A competent brand of hot jazz is laid over the opening and closing credits, and later good improvisational jazz piano, played by the choir leader, Donald Heywood, is interlarded with some of the high-jinks of the choir. This privileged positioning of hot jazz, through mise-en-scène and soundtrack, complicates the middle-classness of the choir in a way that is consistent with Micheaux's feature-length films. The hot jazz urbanizes the "uplift" choir and its leader, while at the same time endorsing the ethnic roots, accomplishments, and implications of jazz and spirituals. Since it is the choir and its leader who introduce and endorse both spirituals and jazz, their representation of middle-classness must be understood to include an artistically impressive black ethnicity. Hot jazz was the sole province of blacks not only because they invented and developed it as "race music," but also because it was difficult for whites to perform. In 1931 few whites had distinguished themselves in hot jazz, and only one, Bix Beiderbeck, was considered the equal of black performers (and some would even debate that).

Though the jazz age was an accomplished fact, hot jazz had really only occurred in sophisticated urban environments such as New York and Chicago. Most of the country's middle class were listening to "sweet" jazz, pop music played by white groups who were adapting black

music for the mass market. Micheaux must therefore be judged ethnically loyal and unusually self-confident for his presentation of hot jazz as a positive value within his middle-class norms.

The inclusion of hot jazz among the middle-class musical forms of *Darktown Revue* is significant for another reason. Hot jazz evokes not only ethnicity, but also vernacular expression. In the 1936 essay that provided the historical schema for the evolution of black music, Alain Locke gives folk music a privileged place. His respect for folk origins reflects not only the tenor of some of the best of the Harlem Renaissance thinkers, such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, but also the strong current of thought that today runs through the fiction of Alice Walker (*Shug's Blues*), Toni Morrison (*Tar Baby*) and Ishmael Reed (*Hoo Doo*) and in the critical and theoretical writings of Amiri Baraka (*Blues People*), Houston Baker (*The Blues Matrix*) and Henry Louis Gates (*The Signifyin(g) Monkey*). The family of issues that includes folk, vernacular, ethnic roots, and tradition also includes the idea of amateurism and the issue of the relation of amateurism to professionalism. That issue bears directly on the thesis I have treated elsewhere of Micheaux's identification of a "dangerous attraction" in African-American assimilation, and the issue of DuBois's twoness.

The complexity of Micheaux's middle-class values, based in a responsibility to twoness, affects the style of his other films, and the paradigm estab-

lished in *The Darktown Revue*--the middle-class observance of lower-class performance, extends forward and backward through all of Micheaux's work. In *Murder in Harlem* (1935) the paradigm operates throughout the scene in which the female lead, Claudia (Dorothy Van Engle), vamps Lem Hawkins (Alec Lovejoy), one of the less-than-admirable black characters who is caught in the machinations of the white antagonist. This impressive scene contains a set of variations on the paradigm. The setting is a large apartment living room that is used as a "buffet flat."¹² The clientele at this flat are portrayed as respectable and middle class; they are dressed in impeccable evening clothes and their manners are polite and reserved, in spite of their drinking, sporting of frivolous hats, and obvious enjoyment of the evening. When Lem Hawkins shows up at the door, he is greeted by the owner of the flat, "The Catbird" (Bee Freeman), who compliments his attire, offers to take his hat and cane, and tells him that he looks so "hot tonight" that she would not mind making a play for him herself.

The audience might be inclined to take these compliments straight if this sequence had not been introduced with a scene in which The Catbird and her male partner discuss what a fool Hawkins is and how they are going to trick him out of his newfound wealth at the "party" that night. Also, Hawkins looks out of place even though he is dressed up. He is wearing a brown, ill-fitting suit with a lighter-colored vest, is "overweight," and is

smoking with a cigarette holder he holds like a cigar. By contrast, the other clientele are dressed in perfectly-fitting evening dress, many in black tie or evening gowns; they are a "perfect medium" weight and urbanely smoke cigarettes. Hawkins is dressed more like the entertainers and the servants, and is recognized by them as a member of their class. When Hawkins calls the waiter to bring a drink, he uses the exceedingly impolite phrase, "Say, dark man," as if he were drinking with other commoners in a bar and initiating a session of the dozens.

The waiter and Hawkins become part of a film demonstration of what Micheaux considered a close connection between certain types of public behavior and the persistence of the entertainment caricatures and stereotypes that were hurting the African American citizenry, especially those who practiced caricature, so much. In the diegesis Lem Hawkins is not an entertainer, but small connections throughout the scene in the buffet flat tie him more and more to the world of the buffet flat's featured entertainers and servants rather than to its clients. In the background of several shots the dark, rotund leader of the band can be seen singing, broadly smiling, looking much as Hawkins looks in the foreground. In fact, both somewhat resemble Louis Armstrong.

A subsequent scene corroborates Micheaux's intention to equate Hawkins with entertainment and caricature. A black man dressed in dark pants, dark pullover, and a light pork-pie hat appears at the door of the

buffet flat. The maître d' tries to explain to the intruder that he is not welcome, which generates an exchange that very much resembles the vaudeville repartee routines of such well known teams as Williams and Walker. In fact, the interloper looks enough like Bert Williams and the maître d' like George Walker that black audiences, who venerated the Williams and Walker team, could hardly fail to make the connection, especially since the interloper has been gotten up in what approximates blackface style. The interloper enters the buffet flat in spite of the efforts to reject him, saying that he is looking for a friend. Since he is a lower-class caricature of a fool from the entertainment world, and for that matter from the world of *Birth of a Nation*, we expect him to be looking among the entertainers or servants, but instead he pays special attention to Hawkins. He moves very slowly and gives Hawkins a long look. He then asks if Hawkins has seen a very black man with one eye and a crooked nose called "bogey man." Hawkins and Claudia laugh at him, and slowly he leaves, still staring at Hawkins. Hawkins has again been singled out for inclusion in a discourse of fools and caricatures drawn explicitly from entertainment routines.

Micheaux's conscious construction of a systematic equivalency between entertainers and non-entertainers within an integrated diegesis (where the world of the story includes entertainers whose performances are explicitly understood by all those within the story entertainment) is an original

tactic. As Jane Feuer has pointed out in her book on the Hollywood musical, professional singers are often used by Hollywood to portray amateurs:

For a movie genre which itself represents professional entertainment and which is also frequently about professional entertainers, there seems to be a remarkable emphasis on the joys of being an amateurNo performer in the Hollywood musical had more talent than Judy Garland, and no performer more frequently portrayed the amateur, a girl who sings for love instead of money.¹³

Micheaux's inclusion of amateurs within the realm of entertainers, however, is not meant to emphasize joy and talent, but foolishness and low class. The strategies of mainstream musicals that Feuer describes and the strategy of Micheaux in this case are based on opposing values--white mainstream viewers are expected to identify with entertainers; black race movie viewers are expected by Micheaux to identify with non-entertainers who want to be consumers of entertainment. This set of identifications has implications of class position. White mainstream viewers may envy the performance talent of the lower class performers; black viewers may envy the material power and consequent social esteem of the

upper class consumers of entertainment--black viewers may identify with performers as well, but primarily (according to Micheaux's paradigm) as a means to class mobility. There is little evidence of envy of talent per se; the black audience is not expected to wish that it could just burst into professional song like Judy Garland or Ethel Waters. The black audience is expected to wish it could own the show that produced Judy Garland or Ethel Waters, or that it was among the swells in the audience on the night a Garland or a Waters was discovered.

Micheaux's complex strategy can be seen in another scene from *Murder in Harlem*. Here Claudia, having suggested that she and Lem Hawkins dance, compliments Hawkins' dancing while making it clear to the viewer that he is a juke-joint dancer--and not a nightclub or ballroom dancer like those who surround them. This shot is composed so that such a comparison is unavoidable: Claudia and Hawkins dance alone in the extreme foreground, surrounded by the more elegant dancers in the background. These more elegant dancers not only form a virtual audience for the foreground performance; they actually behave like an audience watching an amusing show in front of them. At one point, one of the observers runs his eyes up and down Hawkins in casual disbelief at the foolish spectacle. The composition of this shot and the interpretation of the foreground behavior as vaudeville skit and the background behavior as upper middle-class audience enjoying and judging the foolishness of the skit

closely parallels the shot composition of the vaudeville scenes in *The Darktown Revue*. The application of that paradigm in the scene from *Murder in Harlem* again makes explicit Micheaux's intention to make a connection between lower-class black behavior and the caricatures of blacks prevalent in entertainment. He wants his black audience to identify with the middle class audience within the film. Micheaux may be reinventing the strategy of Griffith and Hollywood. But in trying to increase the middle-class appeal of race movies through identification with middle-class values, Micheaux is reinventing that strategy with a wholly different goal.

It might seem cruel of Micheaux to emphasize class difference in the way just shown, in a way that invites comparison with D. W. Griffith and invites laughter and disdain toward a class-bound "brother." The point for Micheaux, however, was not cruelty. The point was to defeat caricature. Micheaux was not using caricature as a platform for elevating himself at the expense of another through a strategy of distinction; if that were his goal, he would be concerned to retain caricature in society as a necessary foil for class distinction. His strategy was directed not at the middle class but at the class below, as expressed in the often-quoted remark from his first novel: "One of the greatest tasks of my life has been to convince a certain class of my racial acquaintances that a colored man can be anything [emphasis added]." ¹⁴

One way to gain a purchase

on Micheaux's intentions is to explore the different meanings critics have assigned to the term "anything." Critics have suggested such negative terms as "white,"¹⁵ "fatuous,"¹⁶ "bourgeois," and "middle class." They view whiteness as a quality that is emulated by blacks seeking advancement in class rank, fatuousness as the inevitable result of such emulations, and bourgeois as the economic class into which Micheaux is thrust by being a producer of film. The middle class represents for Micheaux's critics the unflattering traits associated with middling lives of reduced expectation, delayed gratification, and conformity that can produce states of alienation, self-diminishment, complaisance, and joylessness.

The middle class, however, is also the vast repository of most citizens in the developed world. Virtually all critics and scholars, including those who have assessed Micheaux, including the writer and the readers of this essay, are of the middle class. The term "middle class" is too big to differentiate the critical responses that have employed the term.

Before searching for relevant specificity within the bewildering idea of the middle class, we need to fix a perspective within the basic idea of class. A modern and an ancient semantic connection between the terms "class" and "classic" illustrates the connection between social status and economics. It has been noted that part of Bessie Smith's popularity was her ability to make money (though this observation has to my knowledge nev-

er been used to denigrate her talent). Amiri Baraka has said that Bessie Smith and the other classic blues singers did not sing "strictly to make money, but their immense popularity was the result of their ability to make money."¹⁷ Classic blues, which was introduced primarily by the famous women blues singers of whom Bessie Smith is the most celebrated example, was the first significantly-professional manifestation of the blues:

What has been called "classic blues" was the result of more diverse sociological and musical influences than any other kind of American Negro music called blues. Musically, classic blues showed the Negro singer's appropriation of a great many elements of popular American music, notably the music associated with popular theater or vaudeville....

Socially, classic blues and the instrumental styles that went with it represented the Negro's entrance into the world of professional entertainment and the assumption of the psychological imperatives that must accompany such a phenomenon....the wandering country blues singers of earlier times had from time to time

casual audiences who would sometimes respond with gifts of food, clothes, or even money. But again it was assumed that anybody could sing the blues.... [then] the artisan, the professional blues singer, appeared; blues-singing no longer had to be merely a passionately felt avocation, it could now become a way of making a living.¹⁸

The term "classic" is generally used today to denote work "of recognized value" that serves "as a standard of excellence" or is "historically memorable"¹⁹ for the society as a whole. In other words, it is a term of honor in the realm of social status. Classic blues was a socially more esteemed blues than primitive or folk blues. Baraka, however, makes clear that the social esteem of classic blues is associated partially--but inseparably--with the economic realm: "Classic blues suffered irreparably because to a certain extent its popularity was based on an economic principle...."²⁰

Equally instructive is the fact that the ancient term "classic," and the status that term implies, derive directly from the same linguistic roots as the idea of class, roots which grow firmly in cultures of politics and economics. When the Latin grammarian, Aulus Gellius, wrote in the second century A.D. "classicus...scriptor, non proletarius" ["classical, not proletari-

an, writer"], he was making a distinction between different politico-economic levels of Roman citizenship, levels or classis formally established for the purposes of taxation by the Roman king Servius Tullius in the sixth century B.C. For Gellius, the term "classical" referred to citizens with property and political rights, while "proletarian" referred to the lowest rank whose only supposed contribution to society was to reproduce. Gellius's "classical" writers had class, one might say, while his "proletarian" writers quite literally had none. In the second century, relative literary value was linked directly by the term "class" to politics (as in citizenship rights) and economics (as in private property and taxation). As Baraka has suggested, that analogy still holds for the classic and folk blues in America eighteen centuries later: classic blues is linked by the term "class" to money and what Baraka calls "citizenship." Baraka claims that citizenship was granted by white America to the classical jazz of Duke Ellington, for example, but not to the primitive blues.²¹

In reassessing the accomplishment of Oscar Micheaux, and reflecting critically on the accomplishment of race movies, class is of direct interest because of its association with value. My past critique²² of Thomas Cripps's artistic evaluation of Micheaux's films is implicitly a call to reexamine our assumptions about the economic conditions of Hollywood classicism. The classic films of the 1930s had "class" in the sense Gellius meant it

in the second century. The films by Lubitsch, Cukor, and Hawkes were not only thoroughly elegant, beautiful, literary, witty, and well-made, they were also expensive and they were parables and icons of first-class citizenship.

Discussions of the role of production values in Micheaux's style will occur elsewhere in my study of Micheaux; they are fundamental to this effort to understand the class position of Micheaux's films. My previous analogy of Micheaux's low production-value films with blues and jazz also anticipated this discussion of the class position of classic blues. Jane Gaines has offered a friendly criticism of my analogy between African American music of the 20s and 30s. She says that in any attempt to theorize film in terms of music one should "be wary of the tendency to idealize an African American cinema that might have seen a Golden Age analogous to the Golden Age of jazz," because "analogies between film and other forms...have a built-in tendency to gloss over economic realities...."²³ Her warning suggests that the elevated expense of production may "thrust filmmakers (no matter what their class origins) into the bourgeois class."²⁴

The point is well taken, and since my study of Micheaux is in part a case study for a second book that will reconsider the cultural values of inexpensive cinema, the last thing I want to do is gloss over economic realities. I am primarily interested in Gaines's emphasis on paying close attention to Micheaux's class position, defined, she implies, as

fundamentally economic in the Marxist sense. I want to reply first, however, to her warning about the music-and-film analogy. I think the analogy holds if one does not idealize the Golden Age of jazz, which I would not want to do. Jazz, as Baraka points out, and even blues, are already partially assimilated forms. Baraka speculates that the prototype of the black middle class was probably formed about ten seconds after the first slave ship arrived in America.²⁵ Jazz in particular would never have had a golden age if it had not modified its style so as to be acceptable to wider audiences. Often that meant bending to pressures to become acceptable to the middle class, to white people, and to the bourgeoisie; often such revision required various kinds of fatuousness--consider the case of Louis Armstrong, arguably the greatest jazz innovator and improviser ever, but also arguably made fatuous through his participation in classicism. In other words, jazz can be accused of all the critical failures that have been applied to Micheaux.

It is true that in some ways the analogy of music to film does not hold at the level of production itself, but in significant ways it holds more than one might imagine. To produce solo music one needs only oneself and the means of survival--any economic class position will do. Classic blues and jazz of the golden age were, however, relatively capitalized art forms. In any given year it probably took as much money to maintain a big band as it took for Micheaux to produce his films, maybe more.

It would, however, have taken exponentially more for Micheaux to produce a film with the production values of a Hollywood classic film, which is a break point in the scale of capital that I have tried to emphasize. And though it is probably true that it took substantially more to support the classic white swing bands of Paul Whiteman or Benny Goodman than it did to support even the most successful black swing bands, the truly exponential leap in capital intensity of large ensemble music is the classical symphony orchestra. It costs roughly the same amount to support a symphony orchestra for one year as it costs to produce a Hollywood movie. An analogous leap in capital intensity in the film world can be found in the exponential difference in capitalization between race movies and Hollywood movies. The very fact of that exponential difference is what kept race movie producers from being thrust into the bourgeois class, since on the contrary they were held below it (depending on where you draw the border line of the bourgeois class).

The value of life and culture on a human-to-human scale before the infusion of capital is analogous to what Marx called the value of direct labor, and direct labor is structurally in conflict with dead labor or accumulated capital. There is no question that the introduction of African American values into the mainstream will enrich the dominant culture and that it should be done; there is also, however, no question that the most important aspects--the human-scale aspects--of those African American val-

ues were already there in pre-classic black music and in race movies. There is no inherent improvement in the artistic and cultural value of Spike Lee's more-capitalized films over Oscar Micheaux's less-capitalized ones; and with increased (accumulated) capital there is a softening of the expression of structural class conflict.

My concern in the analogy between black music and black film has always been to emphasize the value of the poorer forms of each, not the classical eras of each. My original statement to which Gaines has referred states that the so called amateurishness of Micheaux would be a saving grace, an antidote for the glib slickness provided by the deployment of dead labor in Hollywood classicism. Implicit in these judgments is the equation of race movies not with classic jazz but with pre-classic black music. My response here to Gaines notwithstanding, her question still stands in the sense that pre-classic film is more expensive than pre-classic music. It remains to be seen whether that fact thrusts pre-classic film producers into the bourgeois class.

The importance of Micheaux's class position has been well recognized. The critical references to his middle-class and bourgeois class position are value laden, as are more obviously the references to his whiteness and fatuousness. Clearly the criticisms surrounding Micheaux's middle class values reflect a confusion about his approach to the middle class, and are thus unfair.

The preceding discussions

of the analogy between jazz and race movies, the class position of filmmaking, and the confusions about class in the literature of Third Cinema leave one wanting a more analytic model of class position that might help in identifying examples of cinemas, such as Oscar Micheaux's, that are likely to facilitate an understanding of valuable local knowledges. According to Marx's idea class is always defined by conflict, so any class in the middle of anything must be fighting two enemies--one above it and one below it. This idea provides a model simpler than a mere listing of all the manifold categories that make up the middle class (many of which are applicable to all of us). Also, Marx's simpler analytic model is more useful in explaining complex situations, since middle-class characters can be seen in any given act as engaging in struggle or identification with a bourgeois or with a proletarian class interest, or with a more or less analyzable mix of struggle and identification.

Another example from *Murder in Harlem* will illustrate. In this film the black character Lem Hawkins is being manipulated by the white factory manager into framing a third (black) character for a murder. Micheaux explicitly portrays Hawkins as the racist stereotype of a caricature from the world of entertainment, though Hawkins has no such diegetic role. The critical reversal in the film occurs when the middle-class black attorney, the protagonist Henry Glory, subjects Hawkins to a tough interrogation on the witness stand. Just before

this scene, Glory tells his client (the sister of the framed night watchman who has retained Glory to handle her brother's defense) that he knows how to make Hawkins talk: he will badger and ridicule him on the witness stand, which causes the courtroom audience to laugh. Glory turns the poor Hawkins into a caricature in front of an audience, and Micheaux has again succeeded in emphasizing the connection between the African American class predicament and black entertainment caricature.

Glory's interrogation of Hawkins sheds light on Micheaux's relationship with middle class values and to his class position. Glory loosely represents Micheaux himself, since Glory is first introduced selling his own fiction door-to-door in the black community, which is precisely how Micheaux sold his own books and, by analogy, how he distributed his films. And Glory's tough attitude toward Hawkins' buffoonery replicates Micheaux's own feelings toward the behavior of African Americans "of a certain class." The real key, however, to understanding and appreciating Micheaux's position in this complex state of affairs lies in the outcome of the courtroom interrogation.

Hawkins' initial testimony under interrogation reaffirms his connection to entertainment caricature: during Hawkins' testimony about the crime, the white manager flips him a coin, which sends Hawkins into a happy shuffle routine in front of the factory door; and when the rape and supposed murder is occurring, Hawkins, trying to spy on the rape, tiptoes around

the boss's office like a buffoon, accompanied by comic movie music. These scenes could have come straight out of the *Amos and Andy* television series or out of an Abbott and Costello movie.

Here a middle class black man, the leading man Henry Glory, is fighting black caricature and lackeyism. According to the paradigm set forth in Micheaux's *Darktown Revue*, Micheaux's middle-class hero is in conflict with the class below, the proletariat. So simple a characterization of Micheaux's class position underestimates not only Micheaux's integrity but also his social complexity. In this scene Micheaux's hero is also fighting white racism and bourgeois capital -- those interests represented by Brisbane, the factory manager, who orders Hawkins to observe the crime, flips him a coin, and who is thus primarily responsible for Lem Hawkins' current predicament and criminally-convoluted behavior.

Hawkins' caricatured buffoonery continues throughout the first half of the testimony, as he plays the role of the helpless victim who sees himself being manipulated and implicated in the murder of a white woman. Then, however, Micheaux begins a significant modulation of Hawkins' character. Hawkins begins to communicate an impressive proletarian intelligence, which Brisbane recognizes potentially oppositional. Brisbane, and the audience, get a good look at the survival skills underlying Hawkins' caricature act.

As Hawkins' character modulates through this scene so does our understanding of him

and of the class issues his portrayal embodies. These revelations constitute the most important reversal in the film. Glory's critique of Lem Hawkins is countered by Hawkins' revelation of his own criminal subjection by the white manager. Even more important is Hawkins' revelation of his own proletarian intelligence in the face of that subjection. After all the song and dance about his helplessness and inability to understand the intricacies of the plot in which he is unfairly implicated, Hawkins shows that he understands it all perfectly. The first indication of Hawkins' perfect understanding comes shortly after Brisbane, the factory manager, has pulled the incriminating note he has been dictating to Hawkins out of Hawkins' hands, saying, "You'd never understand." Brisbane orders Hawkins to write another one, but Hawkins plays dumb and Brisbane says "write another note, dumbbell." Hawkins responds with heavy irony: "Oh, write another note, dumbbell." The irony in Hawkins' response indicates that he is not a dumbbell, and the dialogue that follows Hawkins reveals a keen intelligence:

Brisbane dictates the second note to Hawkins: "That tall Negro did this. He will try to lay it on the night...."

Hawkins: "'He will try to lay it on the night....' I understands. The night, that's me. You mean, he will try to lay it on me. I under-

stands it all now."

Hawkins nevertheless writes the dictated note; Brisbane nods his approval.

Hawkins: "Ah, I got it now, Mr. Brisbane.... You did it, but you want them to think that Vance did and these notes will make them think that Vance did, but Vance, he tryin' to make 'em think that I did. 'Course you know I didn't, and you won't let 'em arrest me, but Vance, he be here tonight and if he finds her and calls the police, they goin' arrest him and maybe lynch him quick, then they ain't goin' never find out who killed her. Huh, I understands."

Brisbane: "Yeah. You understands too damn much."

After this display, Hawkins' irony escalates to sarcasm:

Brisbane reads the note and hands it back to Hawkins for a correction: "Here, rub that 'a' out in 'Negro' and make it 'e.'"

Hawkins looks at the note: "Uh, it seems to me that, that you ain't spellin' it like they calls it nohow. There should

be an 'i' instead of an 'e' and there should be two 'g's instead of one." Hawkins raises his eyes in a gesture of overtly-fake innocence.

Brisbane shifts uncomfortably, but says nothing. Hawkins finishes the note and Brisbane takes it with an approving gesture.²⁶

Hawkins' intelligence is certainly perverted by the history of black oppression, including the violence and the web of social relations earlier spelled out by Nathan Huggins and James Grossman. It is also perverted by his own immediate predicament of racial oppression. Admittedly, Hawkins' resistance to Brisbane is not radically oppositional, since Hawkins accepts payment of \$250 and reverts to caricature at the end of this scene. Still, the reversal of Hawkins' otherwise unmitigated buffoonery and lackeyism reveals that caricature is a cover--and a dangerous cover--that has nothing to do with the essence of racial identity and everything to do with the necessities of survival under white oppression. And it reveals that under extreme pressure the soul of racial and class opposition will show itself and threaten action.

The films discussed here show the pre-classic film genius of Oscar Micheaux. His thematic focus and variational drive, his innovation, and his unique combination of complexity within integrity all exemplify the genius of the era of race movies. Many critics still resist Micheaux's low

production values and stylistic primitivism, but that resistance may subside with critical familiarity. Not everyone will be interested in Micheaux, just as not everyone is interested in pre-capitalized music or folk art, but they cannot deny the accomplishment and value of these forms.

Micheaux was no Marxist. Nevertheless, his analytic and critical use of the idea of the middle class as a position between Marx's "classic" binary antagonism of bourgeois and proletarian classes allows us to remove Micheaux and ourselves from the morass of conflicting and often unattractive values associated with the more diffuse descriptions of the middle class. From the perspective of Marx's binary class conflict, Micheaux's endorsement of middle class values seems less cruel to his lower-class figures and less complicated with his upper-class models than has hitherto been recognized: less cruel, because interrogation in the case of Hawkins quite literally leads to freedom, and less complicated because that interrogation also leads to indictment.

The original title of *Murder in Harlem* was *Lem Hawkins' Confession*. Surely this emphasizes the importance of the interrogation scene and of what the conflict between black, middle-class interrogator and black, lower class interrogatee reveals about Micheaux's middle-class position. This importance is re-confirmed by a seeming accident of language that links the interrogation of Hawkins with the critical approach to race and class that bell hooks discovers in one of

Micheaux's other films:

Ten Minutes to Live exploits all the conventions of simplistic melodrama even as it interrogates on multiple levels issues of representation. Nothing appears on the screen to be as simplistic as it often seems in everyday life. The capacity of individuals to discern good and evil, to distinguish that which is desirable and that which threatens, is interrogated [emphasis added].²⁷

The middle-class position for Micheaux is neither a cabin in the cotton nor a mansion in the sky--it is not even a house in the suburbs. It is a place from which to fight a class war on two fronts--the degradation below and the oppression above. Micheaux's middle-class position is a critical, hard-nosed working position.

NOTES

1. This essay is a longer version of an essay to be published in the *Revue Francaise d'Etudes Americanines* in France.

2. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 219-235.

3. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics* (New

- York: Avon, 1965), p. 215.
4. Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 13, 14. On Harlem, and on darktowns, see also James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 1930), Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940, reprint, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), and Roi Ottley, 'New World A-Coming': *Inside Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943).
5. G. D. Pike, *The Jubilee Singers, and their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, Publishers, 1873), p. 82.
6. Pike, *Jubilee*, p. 90, 91.
7. Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936; reprint, New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), p. 11.
8. James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 19.
9. Huggins, *Renaissance*, pp. 260-61.
10. See chapter six of Huggins' *Harlem Renaissance* for a telling description of the psychological and social damage of entertainment caricature. See page 260 in that chapter for a description of the violence in daily life that drove entertainers to use racial caricature as a protective strategy.
11. A companion article relating to caricature as a response to violence is forthcoming. That article focuses on music and on caricature that is more embedded in the narrative rather than caricature in production numbers; its examples are chosen from Micheaux's feature film, *The Exile* (1930), made the same year as *The Darktown Revue*.
12. For a discussion of the buffet flat phenomenon, see Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p. 122.
13. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 13-15.
14. Oscar Micheaux, *The Conquest* (Lincoln, NB: Woodruff Bank Note Co., 1913; reprint, College Park, MD: McGrath Publishing Co., 1969), p. 145.
15. Joseph A. Young, *Black Novelist as White Racist: The Myth of Black Inferiority in the Novels of Oscar Micheaux* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).
16. J. Hoberman, "A Forgotten Black Cinema Resurfaces," The Village Voice, November 17, 1975, p. 88. "...Naomi falls in love with her fatuous older foster-brother, Jimmy. (Jimmy has hitherto for [sic] demonstrated his supposed virtue with his infamous 'only one Negro in a thousand can think' statement.) He repulses Naomi's advances, and conspires with Mother to marry Naomi off. Ultimately they hitch her to a rich farmer named Clyde, who--despite the fact that the Saunders have praised him for his bourgeoisie [sic] values -- is played by the film's blackest actor as a superstitious, shuffling fool."
17. Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*, p. 119.
18. Baraka, *Blues People*, pp. 81-82.
19. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam, 1965).
20. Baraka, *Blues People*, p. 119.
21. Baraka, *Blues People*, pp. 127, 130, 141.
22. J. Ronald Green, "'Twoness' in the Style of Oscar Micheaux," in Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black Film and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 26-48.
23. Jane Gaines, "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux," in Manthia Diawara, *Black Film and Politics*, pp. 49-70.
24. Gaines, "Fire and Desire," (quotation from unpublished manuscript).

25. Baraka, *Blues People*, p. 123.

26. All transcriptions from the film, such as this one, are my own and are taken from a video copy purchased from Phoenix in New York. The source of their video copy is the film print of *Murder in Harlem* discovered in Tyler, Texas by G. William Jones of the Southwest Film/Video Archives in Dallas.

27. bell hooks, "Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness," in Valerie Smith, Camille Billops, and Ada Griffin, guest eds., *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 2, summer 1991, p. 360.

Defining the Right Thing: Sanity and Violence in the Works of Twentieth-Century African American Dramatists

John Howard

In his 1989 screenplay, *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee examines racial and ethnic unrest on one block of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of New York City. Early in the drama, the venerable elder, Da Mayor, momentarily detains Mookie, the pizza delivery boy, to offer a few simple words of advice. The would-be wise man ambiguously counsels the main character to "always try to do the right thing" (Lee 144). As the plot unfolds, however, Lee, who often seems to raise more questions than he answers, shows his audience that, in the face of oppression, doing the right thing may be a far easier task than defining the right thing.

For decades African American artists and political leaders have struggled with Lee's intractable question: What is "the right thing?" More specifically, is violence or non-violence the more appropriate response to racial discrimination and persecution? In the postscript to *Do the Right Thing*, Lee succinctly presents the two sides of the debate with quotes from two of the twentieth century's greatest African American political leaders, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Preaching non-violence, King contends that "violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral, . . . a descend-

ing spiral ending in destruction of all." Arguing the opposing view, Malcolm X insists that he is not opposed to "using violence in self-defense. I don't even call it violence when it's self-defense. I call it intelligence."

Well before Lee, King or Malcolm X, black dramatists had long been exploring the results of white oppression, and questioning whether violence or non-violence was the more appropriate response to the physical and mental anguish it has wrought. Adding another dimension to the dialectic, female African American writers have, in recent years, described their struggle with the dual oppression of racial discrimination and male domination, both black and white. Violence weighs heavily in these works, not so much as a retaliatory act of self-defense but as a cleansing, healing act of self-preservation. Indeed, identity-based African American drama, as a body, can be seen as a movement from a justifiable rage, to a bitterness bordering on madness, to a more aggressive--sometimes defiant, sometimes violent--stance. In the following survey, covering the 1960s to the 1980s, the selected examples show violence as cathartic, functioning as the only sane reaction to the forces of the dominant culture. If

creative writing is viewed from this perspective, Lee's screenplay is not an aberration, but a dynamic example of how African American writers incorporate the theme of violence into their work.

The archetypal unstable protagonist of twentieth century African-American drama is Walter Lee Younger in Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Though he is not yet ready for the asylum, Walter Lee's wild ranting is that of a lunatic. His overblown aspirations and the relentlessness with which he pursues his get-rich-quick schemes indicate that he has begun to lose touch with reality. "I want so many things," he says in Act I, Scene II, "that they are driving me kind of crazy" (Hansberry 73).

Walter Lee's twisted perception of the affluent life he so desperately desires is a white construct:

I'll come home...after a day of conferences and secretaries getting things wrong the way they do... 'cause an executive's life is hell, man--... And I'll come up the steps to the house and the gardener will be clipping away at the hedges and he'll say, "Good evening, Mr. Younger." And I'll say, "Hello, Jefferson, how are you this evening?" (Hansberry 108-9)

Walter Lee is unable or unwill-

ing to find role models within the black community, which he describes as "the world's most backward race of people," and as "a race of people that don't know how to do nothing but moan, pray, and have babies!" (Hansberry 38, 87). Walter Lee's internalized racism and consequential loss of identity have pushed him to the brink: "Bitter? Man, I'm a volcano" (Hansberry 85).

In the African American theatrical tradition, the anger and mental anguish that have driven the embittered Walter Lee to the edge are steadily directed inward, where they often turn to madness, self-doubt, and even self-hatred. The stage dramas of writer Adrienne Kennedy typify this intense self-examination. In Kennedy's thematically similar and referential plays, much of the action takes place within the mind of the heroine, who often seems to speak in the multiple voices of the different sides of herself. In an interview, Kennedy describes her characters as "other personas" of the same main character (Betsko & Koenig 251). Critic Ruby Cohn considers this method of "seeking an identity under schizophrenic splits" to be highly effective (Cohn 115), but others have found Kennedy's surrealist-absurdist techniques to be indicative of madness in the playwright herself. According to Kennedy, after the initial production of the Obie-award winning *Funnyhouse of a Negro* in 1964, rumors circulated about her own sanity, and many said "she's psychopathic" (Betsko & Koenig 250).

Ntozake Shange, whose experimental use of cast was no

doubt influenced by the early plays of Adrienne Kennedy, also examines the inner workings of the female psyche with "other personas." In one of her "choropoems," the 1978 *Boogie Woogie Landscapes*, Shange constructs a dream sequence in which several characters, or "night-life companions," provide differing points of view for scrutinizing the psychological state of the primary character, Layla, in whose bedroom the entire play is set. Though bodily abuse is often graphically depicted in her works, Shange, who was often afflicted with depression and who on several occasions attempted suicide, is, like Kennedy and other playwrights in identity-based dramas, obviously more concerned with the mental than the physical consequences of oppression.

In many plays in which madness is consistently linked with self-hatred, the anguish has eclipsed a sense of self altogether. *The Electronic Nigger*, a 1968 play by writer Ed Bullins, presents two black men who have been so "white-washed" by American society that they have lost almost all sense of self--so much so that Mr. Carpenter can declare, "I am not black" (Bullins 21). Like Kennedy and Shange, Bullins pointedly shows that the psychological victimization of black Americans is much more debilitating than overt, physical assaults.

In the plays of George Wolfe, self-hatred has also become self-denial, though here the anguish and madness have created farce. The central character in Scene X, "The Party," of Wolfe's 1988 *The Col-*

ored Museum, exclaims in the words of the pop song, "I'm dancin' to the music of the madness in me." Yet, it is dubiously suggested that "attitude" (Wolfe 51), not anger, will help overcome such madness. Likewise, in Scene VII, "Symbiosis," a middle-aged black man in a three-piece suit carries a briefcase and insists that he must trade in the artifacts of a more militant black past--he swaps Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* for Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*--because "my survival depends on it. Being black is too taxing. Therefore, I will be black only on weekends and holidays" (Wolfe 36). Wolfe hints that repressed anger is the driving force behind the farce that is this play. Indeed, repressed anger fosters the madness which must be overcome.

Images of madness and a tortured sense of self proliferate throughout the writings of black Americans in the twentieth century. From W.E.B. DuBois' 1907 sketch, "On Being Crazy," in which both black and white players in a racist system are described as crazy, to Langston Hughes' 1967 broadside of two LeRoi Jones plays, madness has become a permanent part of the lexicon of African American literature. Hughes laments this development:

It is the fashion for young authors of Negro plays nowadays to make their heroes all villains of the darkest hue, or crazy, living in crazy houses [an obvious reference to Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a*

Negro]. The whites are for the most part villains or neurotics, too, so I gather that contemporary Negro playwrights do not like anybody any more--neither their stage characters, their audiences, their mothers, nor themselves. For poetry in the theatre, some of them substitute bad language, obscenities of the foulest sort, and basic filth which seemingly is intended to evoke the sickest of reaction in an audience. (Hughes 205)

In his call for a higher poetic aesthetic, Hughes ignores the historical factors which have justifiably led to a black view of whites as villainous. He ignores the fact that rage, when repressed--as he seems to recommend--fosters the very madness which the playwrights wish to depict.

In contrast to Hughes, other writers depict acts of defiance, symbolic and actual violence as ways out of the cycle of oppression, repression and madness. In marked contrast to her son, Walter Lee, who walks the tightrope between sanity and insanity, Hansberry's Lena Younger is, in the words of Theophilus Lewis, "a Gibraltar of emotional stability" (Lewis 34). Lena Younger has endured a life of subservience to a white elite, and she reaches her zenith in one great act of perseverance, indeed defiance, when she realizes the dream of

a lifetime. Lena vows to move her family into a detached home with a yard (which happens to be located in an all white neighborhood), despite the resistance of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, personified by their patronizing future neighbor, Karl Lindner, and despite the protestations of their current neighbor, Mrs. Johnson, who insists that "this time next month y'all's names will have been in the papers plenty -- NEGROES INVADE CLYBOURNE PARK BOMBED! (Hansberry 102).

Erroneously interpreted by many as a happy ending, the conclusion of *A Raisin in the Sun* foreshadows an even greater struggle for the Younger family. In the introduction to the 1988 Signet edition, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) describes it as "reflective of the essence of black people's striving and the will to defeat segregation, discrimination, and national oppression" (Hansberry xiv). The audience is left with little doubt, however, that Lena will be equal to any and all challenges. Though such eventualities may include violence from the white community, as suggested by Mrs. Johnson, Lena's response will not be a violent self-defense, as Malcolm X calls for, but rather a resolute defiance sufficient for the circumstance. In response to daughter-in-law Ruth's reminder that "there ain't no colored people living in Clybourne Park," Lena matter-of-factly states, "Well, I guess there's going to be some now" (Hansberry 93).

Ntozake Shange also presents heroines who ultimately prevail, though faced with

seemingly insurmountable tragedies--persistent job discrimination and exclusion (*Spell #7*); firebombing, rape, infibulation, and clitorectomy (*Boogie Woogie Landscapes*); and abortion, desertion, and, finally, the unspeakable tragedy of the deaths of children at the hands of their father (*for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*). Whether by benign resignation or the full and genuine embrace of selfhood, Shange's women defy male tyranny and white hegemony. In the three dramas cited they learn to be "colored & love it" (*Spell #7*, 107), to transcend through religion and dance, or to discover spiritual fulfillment from within: "i found god in myself & loved her/ i loved her fiercely" (*for colored girls* 63).

It is not only the women in her plays who find self-acceptance through acts of defiance, it is also Shange herself, for whom the very process of writing itself is an act of defiance:

i cant count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language that i waz taught to hate myself in/ the language that perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every black child as he/she learns to speak of the world & the "self." yes/being an afro-american writer is something to be self-conscious

abt/ & yes/in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feelings i want to think n communicate/ i haveta fix my tool to my needs/ i have to take it apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/leaving us space to literally create our own image. (Shange xii)

In speaking of attacking and maiming, Shange adopts the language of violence, as she does in the foreword to a volume of her plays, she readily admits to her audience that writing about these bleakest of life's moments often leaves her "with little more than fury n homicidal desires" (*Three Pieces*, xii).

The will to murder is addressed more directly in other works by Shange, by James Baldwin, and, most potently, by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). In the closing passages of LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman*, written in 1964, Clay, a young and proper middle-class black man, becomes exasperated and angered with his subway acquaintance, Lula, a bawdy white woman who has taunted him, challenging not only his standards but also his virility. After he confesses that his mother is indeed a Republican, as she had guessed, Lula verbally assaults Clay, accusing him of betraying his race, for becoming "an escaped nigger,...for having crawled thought the wire and made tracks to my side" (Jones 29). By the play's end, she has ridiculed him thoroughly, attempting to provoke some sort of

response in this genteel young man. She wants, frankly, to act out the role of the brutish, savage, sexually dominating, black male stereotype.

Clay explains that his cultivated life as a poet, clearly a semi-autobiographical portrait of the playwright, is a way of maintaining sanity, or rather of remaining harmlessly insane, in a world gone mad. "I sit here, in this buttoned-up suit," he says, "to keep myself from cutting all your throats" (Jones 34). As his anger mounts, his reasoning, paradoxically, becomes more lucid:

(Charlie Parker)
would've played not
a note of music if
he just walked up to
East Sixty-seventh
Street and killed
the first ten white
people he saw. Not
a note! And I'm the
great would-be poet.
Yes. That's right!
Poet. Some kind of
bastard literature
...all it needs is a
simple knife thrust.
Just let me bleed
you, you loud whore,
and one poem van-
ished. A whole peo-
ple of neurotics,
struggling to keep
from being sane.
And the only thing
that would cure the
neurosis would be
your murder. Simple
as that. I mean if
I murdered you, then
other white people
would begin to un-
derstand me....If
Bessie Smith had

killed some white
people she wouldn't
have needed the mu-
sic. She could have
talked very straight
and plain about the
world. No metaphors.
No grunts. No wig-
gles in the dark of
her soul. Just
straight two and two
are four....crazy
niggers turning
their backs on sani-
ty. When all it
needs is that simple
act. Murder. Just
murder! Would make
us all sane. (Jones
35)

Ironically, in the end, it is Lula who kills Clay with a knife. In the most grisly fashion, the other subway riders, both black and white, nonchalantly throw his body from the train. The gulf between theory and practice, words and action, has tragically been Clay's downfall.

In the same year, 1964, James Baldwin reached a similar conclusion in his play, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, though it is not as unabashedly articulated as in the works of Jones. While first his wife and then his only child, Richard, are killed at the hands of vindictive, unrepentant white malefactors, The Reverend Meridian Henry, from the pulpit and in casual conversations with members of his congregation, continues to preach a doctrine of non-violence. He laments "the fearful choices we must make! In order not to commit murder, in order not to become too monstrous..." (Baldwin 130). When the small-town, all-white Mis-

Mississippi jury finds his son's murderer innocent, however, Meridian is forced to rethink his position. At the curtain, the minister vows to keep the gun his son had carried.

The leader of the local black community seems to be the last to have recognized the need for violence in the face of violence. The members of Blacktown, having viewed the court proceedings, have long since determined that they are unwilling participants in a fiercely oppressive system of insanity, and they now recognize the key to sanity. In a reversal of roles from the plays previously cited, the white citizens, not the black, are seen as mentally ill, and, in an ironical play on the medieval medical practice of blood-letting, the people of Blacktown recommend a curative: "These people are sick. Sick. Sick people's been known to be made well by a little shedding of blood" (Baldwin 128).

Ntozake Shange also sees violence as a legitimate recourse in certain circumstances, as she points out in a poem from the 1987 collection, *Nappy Edges*. Indeed, the very title of the work, "with no immediate cause," mocks the idea that victims must rationally, quietly bear the fury of their oppressors. After methodically and graphically detailing the types of physical abuse to which women are subjected, Shange notes:

"there is some
concern
that alleged bat-
tered women
might start to mur-
der their

husbands & lovers
with no
immediate cause"
i spit up i vomit
i am screaming
we all have immediate
cause (*Nappy Edges* 4)

LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman* symbolically addresses the idea of blacks in murderous rebellion, as do Baldwin's play and Shange's poem. Jones's fable, *The Slave*, however, actually depicts such a scenario. With a rage that can scarcely be contained, Walker Vessels leads a black revolution, an armed campaign, bent on destroying white "civilization." He will not even stop short of killing his ex-wife's husband, and even the two children he himself has fathered, in a scene which chillingly presages the death of Crystal's children at the hands of their father, Beau Willie Brown, in *for colored girls*.

Though Jones espouses the concept of black violence as the only sane response to three hundred years of white violence, he nonetheless understands and addresses the complexities of the debate. Even Walker confesses that his war on white America may "at best...only change, ha, the complexion of tyranny" (Jones 66). And Jones allows Easley, the voice of white, liberal accommodationism, to articulate the age-old adage of oppressed becoming oppressor:

Do you think Negroes
are better people
than whites...that
they can govern a
society better than
whites? That they'll
be more judicious or

more tolerant? Do you think they'll make fewer mistakes? I mean really, if the western white man has proved one thing...it's the futility of modern society. So the have-not peoples become the haves. Even so, will that change the essential function of the world? Will there be more love or beauty in the world...more knowledge...because of it? (Jones 73)

Yet Jones' position is clear. In responding to Easley's remarks, Walker asserts the rights of African Americans and the cause of their revolution: "The point is that you had your chance, darling, now these other folks have theirs" (Jones 73).

Much of African American intellectual history can be viewed as a struggle between those who would minimize the oppressive role that white America has played in the formation, or destruction, of black identity, and those who would stress the self-affirming need to combat, or at least acknowledge and protest, the forces of oppression. Booker T. Washington, with his philosophy of self-help, virtually ignored the legitimate claims by the black community that white obstacles to progress would remain intact unless confronted. W. E. B. DuBois, on the other hand, challenges Washington's beliefs. In an epigraph to his turn-of-the-century essay, DuBois quotes

Byron: "Hereditary bondsmen! Know ye not/ Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?" (DuBois 79).

The turn-of-the-century debate between Washington and DuBois is analogous to the 1960s debate between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. If African American theatre is viewed in this context of an aggressive/passive, violent/non-violent continuum, then certainly, as a whole, it tips the side of the scale occupied by DuBois and Malcolm X. LeRoi Jones would arguably represent the epitome of black dramatic confrontationalism, his "revolutionary theatre" the apex of violence through literature. In his essay of the same name, Jones speaks with the directness and immediacy of a bomb-blast: "The force we want is twenty million spooks storming America with the furious cries and unstoppable weapons" (Jones 132). As he shows us through his plays, it is only sane response--"a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments" (Jones 130).

With the screenplay *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee becomes the heir apparent to this combative philosophy of sanity through violence. Many viewers may insist that the question of violence or non-violence as "the right thing" remains unanswered at the film's end, but an historical analysis of Lee's place in African American drama reveals Lee's sympathy with the early teachings of Malcolm X (whose life was the subject of Lee's next film project). After all, it is the main character Mookie, played by Lee, who after holding the middle ground throughout the movie--at work

with the Italian Americans, at home among the African Americans--initiates the riot by throwing a trash can through the window of Sal's Pizzeria.

And while the mellow sounds of We Love Radio and Bill Lee's soundtrack provide a calming influence throughout the course of the movie, the driving beat and rhythms of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" overpower and predominate. Although the film itself and the riot scene, in particular, may most convincingly illustrate, as some say, the descending spiral of destruction described by King, Lee demands, like Walker Vesels, that African Americans have their chance in power. Lest any doubt remain, Lee includes a small graphic at the very end of the film after all acknowledgments have been made and the final credits have rolled. In small print but all capital letters, is the clear-cut, wholly unambiguous statement: "FIGHT THE POWER, YA DIG, SHO-NUFF, BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY" (Lee 284).

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Contemporary African American Religious Quests for a Popular-Based Political Culture

R. Drew Smith

Studies in African American religion reveal three kinds of politicized expression--cultural nationalism, direct-action racial protest, and electoral participation. Although each of these forms of political resistance has, periodically, fueled mass-based responses to black social urgencies, the three have often been at odds with each other. In essence, they part ways over the importance of participation in mainstream social and political institutions within the United States: While civil rights and electoral activists have traditionally been committed to channeling blacks into the American mainstream, cultural nationalists have steadily rejected movement in this direction. Throughout the twentieth century, this fundamental division has plagued any efforts to effect a broad-based political incorporation of African Americans in this country.

Popular support for those movements currently jockeying for ideological advantage among the black populace is often divided along generational and class lines. Integrationist civil rights and electoral strategies hold, as they have in the past, the allegiance of most blacks in the middle to upper age and income ranges. The rejectionist orientation of cultural nationalism continues to attract blacks in the lower age and income ranges. Indica-

tions are that gaps between groups, gaps that thwart current efforts to effect a popular-based political culture, are widening, for a number of reasons.

Economic and social policies have dramatically increased the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of black poverty¹, making disparities between classes and generations more pronounced. And, as disparities mount, so do antagonisms. Younger, poorer blacks, have been far more vocal about mounting social despair than blacks in higher age and income brackets who, preoccupied with consolidating institutional gains, have been fairly reticent on class issues. Younger blacks have also been given a powerful voice, thanks to a growing industry providing commercial outlets for the popular expression and cultural articulation of black youths. Indeed, black urban youths have become the axis around which any politics of resistance necessarily revolves.

Alert to this, cultural nationalists, such as the Nation of Islam and related groups, have artfully cast themselves as the religion of oppressed black urban youths. Their vitality among this population is currently much in evidence. It is not only the message of cultural nationalism that appeals to oppressed youths, but also the medium.

The defiant, grass-roots forms of communication that cultural nationalists have taken advantage of range from rap recordings and music videos, to hand-distributed newspapers and pamphlets, to types of apparel that symbolically or concretely convey cultural nationalist messages.

Popular gains by cultural nationalists are not, however, solely attributable to their successes at tapping into growing black disaffection. They are also due to the failure of black mainstream groups to do likewise. Black civil rights and electoral leaders clearly target their discourse and activities primarily to mainstream audiences rather than to lower-income and younger-generation blacks. Their political activities, rightly directed toward gaining access to power-wielding institutions and procedures, increasingly associate the civil and voting rights activists with the American establishment. Moreover, the venues and methods chosen to convey their agendas seem more concerned with reflecting their higher social attainments than reflecting identification with the grass-roots. Lower-strata blacks, particularly urban youth, are not represented in significant numbers in formal social, educational, religious and political contexts. Nor do formal oratory and writings have much appeal for younger, poorer blacks conditioned to be only minimally responsive to such stimuli.

If greater levels of political cooperation across these generational and class divisions are to be achieved, the barriers to communication be-

tween mainstream and counter-mainstream blacks must be broken down. The following discussion examines the history of religious quests for popular-based political culture, focusing more on the stylistic than ideological differences between groups, differences which must be negotiated before ideological antagonisms and differences can successfully be broached.

Efforts to politicize the black rank-and-file have often been frustrated by sabotage and suppression from without and by dissent over strategies and leadership from within. Whatever collective black political action has emerged has been greeted as a triumph of black political will. Over the years, religion has played an important role in the most significant African American political action. It has often been religion that has provided blacks with the only ideological and institutional terrain they could freely traverse. In addition, the ideological substance of their religion has proved politically potent for blacks in important respects, particularly in its tendency to diminish the sovereignty of existing political authorities.

Black Protestantism has supplied the ideological and institutional basis for a great deal of this religion-based political action, but innovations on the doctrinal substance and ecclesiastical practices of Islam have also factored significantly in African American resistance activities over the last fifty years. On one level, this religion-based resistance has moved in a nationalistic direction, emphasizing territorial indepen-

dence. Occasionally, this has embraced actual land-appropriating, nation-building intentions, such as in Alexander Crummell's, Edward Blyden's and Marcus Garvey's nineteenth and twentieth century emigrationist yearnings for African Christian nationhood. More often, territorial independence has had an institutional focus, beginning with eighteenth and nineteenth century black Protestant breaks with white religious authority and extending through their subsequent social and economic institution-building initiatives.² However, as black Protestantism evolved from being an institutional protest against mainstream Protestantism to becoming, to a large degree, part of the mainstream itself, nationalistic ferment flourished, mostly in non-Christian black religious contexts.³ Perhaps the most radical and enduring form of oppositional nationalism has been the quasi-Islamic domain of the Nation of Islam. The Nation of Islam was founded on the belief that an enigmatic black man, W.D. Fard, who surfaced in Detroit in 1930, was divine. Fard's main teaching was that blacks were of noble, Islamic origins, and that they could reclaim their spiritual and social centering only by harkening back to their Islamic roots. Elijah Muhammad, one of Fard's first followers and his designated messenger, became the sole cultic leader when Fard disappeared, only four years after his mysterious appearance. Elijah Muhammad embellished Fard's themes, teaching his quickly growing following that blacks were the original people of the Earth, that whites were devils, and

that the socio-political agenda of blacks should be based in the anticipation of divine retribution against whites.⁴

These teachings were the component parts of the Nation of Islam's over-arching social doctrine of black self-sufficiency through separatism. The Nation believed in the necessity of black social formation in an environment free of the distortions that come through interactions with whites, and it pursued this aim with some success in its institution-building initiatives. With a membership during its peak years (1950 to 1964) of between fifty and one hundred thousand, spread across twenty-seven states,⁵ the Nation built a financial empire valued at about \$25 million. This included "15,000 acres of farmland...several aircraft, a fish import business, restaurants, bakeries and supermarkets."⁶ Combined with its holdings of properties used for teaching and worship purposes, the material and human resources amassed by the Nation provided compelling affirmation of the vitality of the themes of self-sufficiency and separatism within the black community.

An even greater symbol of the Nation of Islam's vitality during the reign of Elijah Muhammad was the emergence of its gifted spokesman, Malcolm X. Malcolm, who faithfully followed Elijah Muhammad until breaking with him in 1964 over questions of ethics and politics, played a critical role in popularizing the Nation across space and across time. Not surprisingly, Malcolm's 1964 assassination started a precipitous decline in the Nation's

fortunes, which finally concluded in the total fragmentation of the Nation after the 1975 death of Elijah Muhammad.

In recent years, Louis Farrakhan, who was originally introduced to the Nation of Islam by Malcolm X, has successfully regrouped an estimated 10,000 current members around the Nation's legacy. Through his national, and occasionally international speaking tours and his widely circulated newspaper, *The Final Call*, Farrakhan has promoted Elijah Muhammad's original teachings to audiences extending beyond the Nation of Islam's active membership and beyond the institutional context of its mostly northeastern and midwestern urban mosques.

Farrakhan's popularity has also been aided, in a way that Malcolm's and Elijah Muhammad's never were, by access to electronic media via surrogates who have either actively or sympathetically supported his movement. As Adolph Reed, Jr. points out, this media access is an outgrowth of the discovery by a broad range of profiteers within the commercial sector that black cultural nationalism sells.⁷ And as the entrepreneurs have experienced financial success, Farrakhan and his Nation of Islam have benefitted from the high-profile, sympathetic exposure they have received. The result is that Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm, and Farrakhan have become sacrosanct figures for a growing number of black urban youths who take their cues from popular media.

One of the primary high-tech media serving Farrakhan's cause has been rap music recordings and music videos. One

group that has, for some time, symbolized the political edge of the rap phenomenon is the decidedly pro-Nation of Islam "Public Enemy." The group consists of the primary rapper, "Chuck D," a complementary rapper, "Flavor Flav," a public relations-oriented "Minister of Information," and a small militia-like force called the Security Force of the First World (S1W). With its repertoire of rap lyrics, music videos and frequent interviews, Public Enemy has consistently celebrated the Nation leaders Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm and Farrakhan. For example, in a taped interview, the S1W's commented:

[we do what we do] out of our love for the Minister [Farrakhan] and our love for the work that he's doing from the teachings of Elijah Muhammad....

Public Enemy went on to say that:

the nation at this point is at the forefront of the black struggle and in order to be a part of the black struggle you have to be a part of the nation.⁸

Briefer homages to the Nation are interspersed throughout Public Enemy's lyrics. Even the symbolism in which the group cloaks itself, from its Malcolm X emblazoned apparel, to its S1W replication of the Nation's Fruit of Islam, pays tribute to the Nation on other

levels.

More important than the images that associate Public Enemy with the Nation is Public Enemy's advocacy of the Nation's racial, economic and political doctrines. Among rap artists, Public Enemy has led the way in promoting a black nationalism rooted in the separatism and racial essentialism characteristic of the Nation. As Gene Santoro suggests, Public Enemy:

self-consciously voice[s] [Malcolm's] contentions that black Americans must elevate their own values, build their own economic bases and understand that worldwide political and social movements against ruling powers are inextricably linked because they all confront Eurocentric racism.⁹

Although Public Enemy is among the more well-known of the Nation's rap advocates, an even broader-based, rap-driven offshoot of Elijah Muhammad's original Nation of Islam is a loosely knit "movement" of younger generation urban blacks who call themselves the Five-Percent Nation. This "movement," currently evolving symbiotically alongside Farrakhan's Nation, is centered primarily, although not exclusively, in the Northeast; it is sufficiently concentrated in places like Brooklyn and northern New Jersey that Five-Percenters refer to the former as "Medina" (after one of Islam's holy cities) and the latter as

"New Jerusalem."¹⁰ Among the proponents of the Five-Percent Nation are highly visible rap artists such as "Poor Righteous Teachers," "Brand Nubian," "X-Klan" and "King Sun." Five-Percenters are extremely cryptic, from their coded language, to their lack of visible organizational structure, to their core proposition that practitioners represent an enlightened remnant ("gods") who possess privileged knowledge about the "black planet." A Five-Percent "lesson" clearly illustrates this:

Who are the Five Percent of this planet earth? They are the poor righteous teachers, people who are all wise and know who the true living god is, who teach that the almighty true and living god is the black man from Asia.¹¹

Drawing on themes similar to those of the Nation of Islam, the Five-Percenters teach race duality, political conspiracy, and retributionist wars against white oppressors.

Although these counter-culture variants of religion-based resistance have clearly gained considerable popular momentum, most religiously-minded, politically-active blacks continue to be wedded to more mainstream forms of resistance. Laying claim to a share in the power and resources of American society, this mainstream resistance has challenged the political establishment from the outside through protest or from the inside through electoral advan-

tage.¹² The direct-action protest movement, which gained its inspiration from the religion-based political action of slavery resisters Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey, attained heights of mass involvement and its specifically non-violent character in the civil protest activities of the 1950s and 1960s. However, by the 1970s, when direct-action protest gave way to unprecedented black electoral opportunities, religiously - minded blacks adjusted their mass-resistance instincts more than ever to the tactical demands of the electoral arena. And they did so with some success, judging by the dozens of black clergy elected to office over the last twenty years and the routine and often strategic clerical marshalling of theological, material and human resources on behalf of electoral candidates and causes.¹³

Middle-income, middle-age black Protestants almost singularly constitute this legacy's current vanguard. However, it is increasingly clear that if this legacy is to prevail, or even endure, it must be carried beyond its existing ranks far more systematically and effectively than it has been. In the first place, the new generation of resistance, made up of the burgeoning ranks of lower-strata urban blacks, has, over the last two decades, largely rejected the mainstream, institutional agendas of middle-class blacks; this new generation has, as well, become increasingly antagonistic toward their institutional terrain. The points of contact across this class-based and generational divide have, therefore,

been few, and where they have existed they have not been sufficiently compelling to counter younger-generation cynicism toward the institutional and ideological enthusiasms of civil rights and electoral oriented blacks. The depth of this cynicism is captured in remarks by Chuck D in the music video version of Public Enemy's extremely popular song "Fight the Power," where he says: "that march in 1963 was a bit of nonsense; we ain't rolling like that no more."¹⁴

Not only have mainstream blacks failed to convincingly spell out why resistance-oriented blacks on the other side of the divide should share their enthusiasms; they have also not been very attentive to the problem of how to take their case (once suitably developed) to their less-than-conventional counterparts. Clearly, if mainstream blacks are going to address their waning influence among younger, poorer blacks, they must pay much greater attention to matters of both substance and style.

What is most lacking in the style, as well as the substance, of mainstream religious resistance is a level of defiance appropriate to the level of social despair among large portions of the black populace. While counter-mainstream resistance has projected an undeniably defiant image, mainstream resistance has retained a mild, conventional image throughout this century. There was, in certain respects, a brief hiatus from this trend during the Civil Rights movement; but, nonetheless, as mainstream religious activists shifted from

the protest of the 1950s and 1960s to the electioneering of subsequent years, and as their image evolved from one of dissatisfied outsiders to one of comfortable insiders, marginalized, disaffected blacks could find less and less to identify with.

A more direct cultural barrier to lower-strata identification with mainstream religion is its middle-class image. Because the politically active sector of black Protestantism has tended to come from its more middle-class ranks, most black church-based political activism has been traditionally tied to a cultural agenda that reflects middle-class tastes. The church activism of the Civil Rights movement, for example, drew heavily on cultural styles and symbolism associated with the more formal dimensions of black church culture, from the "literary-style" sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr. to black "heritage" traditions of sacred music, including classically oriented anthems and Negro spirituals. Likewise, the sermonic and musical styles characteristic of churches in the current wing of black church activism tend to emphasize educated preaching and "heritage" music, even though the latter has been expanded somewhat to include more black Gospel music.

The musical and artistic expressions of the counter-culture, from the angry poetry and renegade rock and jazz music of the 1950s and 1960s to the rap music of the 1980s and 1990s, has been largely excluded from the cultural arsenal of mainstream activist churches. Where stylistic dimensions of the

prevailing counter-culture have been appropriated by mainstream black Protestants, it has usually been within Protestantism's more evangelical wing. In such instances, Christian artists have embraced a stylistic identification with the counter-culture of the time, but in a way that has denuded it of its more direct political content, favoring instead more conventional theological concerns. Such was the case with pioneering "contemporary" gospel musicians like Andrae Crouch in the early 1970s, who embraced the jazz and rock styles popular at the time, but steered clear of any social critique. The same incorporation of counter-cultural style, minus social critique, is also true of 1980s Christian rap artists like Michael Peace and a cadre of otherwise trailblazing Christian rappers since.

A select few contemporary Christian rappers have been inclined to bring a counter-cultural style and message together. Foremost among these are the Christian rap group "Preachers in Disguise," who have taken on such issues as racism within both church and society. A rap selection entitled "Racism" contains the following lyrics:

How long, how long
will you let it go
on/ As if nobody
knows its takin'
place, come on/ The
problem of racism is
the cause of the
continent/ We want
some people stop
fakin', wake up and
take a stand....¹⁵

Groups like these are, however, finding very little support within mainstream black Protestant circles, and will likely be forced, like earlier jazz-rock gospel innovators, to either alter their style and message--or simply disappear. Certainly, if the activist church sector is not receptive to, or nurturing of, the counter-cultural instincts within their own church ranks, it would seem unlikely they are prepared to effectively reach out to the counter-cultural hordes outside their churches.

In view of the urgent need to bridge the communication gap between the politics of the religious mainstream and counter-mainstream, the negligence of activist churches in enlisting Christian rappers or the jazz-rock gospel innovators who preceded them in this cause is a major strategic error. This costly negligence has its roots in the instinctive cultural conservatism of mainstream black Protestantism. This may seem a paradoxical feature, given black Protestantism's political progressivism, but the truth is that on very few occasions since the independence days of the 19th century has both the cultural style and the political content of black Christianity departed radically from its mainstream ecclesiastical and social surroundings.

Exceptions to this include Marcus Garvey's African Orthodox Church and, more recently, a new generation of cultural nationalist Protestant churches. This new-style Protestant "cultural nationalism" (or "Afrocentrism," as it goes by now) has renewed the call for alternative black religious terrain,

contending that black group-progress within the U.S. can be assured only through appropriating uniquely African outlooks. Expressed most often in efforts to revise ecclesiastical culture, this cause has been zealously pursued by black clergy such as Albert Cleage in Detroit, and Jeremiah Wright in a Chicago United Church of Christ, Frank Reid, III, of Bethel A.M.E. Church in Baltimore, Calvin Butts of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, and former Washington Roman Catholic priest George Stallings,¹⁶ to name only a few. Most Protestant Afrocentrists believe that Afrocentric perspectivism represents a crucial popular challenge to elite cultures.

However, while Protestant Afrocentrism may pose significant challenges to white elite cultures, it merely builds on the existing cultural "heritage" of black elite cultures. Perhaps because of the cultural safeness of this agenda, intraracially speaking, activist churches have embraced it (more than they have counter-cultural music) as a method of reaching out to younger, poorer blacks. They have employed this method of outreach usually by way of "rites-of-passage" programs, designed to engage young males from both church and community in educational and service activities that generate self-esteem and racial pride. Despite their inherently middle-class cultural dimensions, these Afrocentric youth programs currently stand among the more credible initiatives taken by mainstream churches to forge political linkages with counter-cultural blacks.

But just as there is a dispositional exclusivity in the cultural domain of mainstream churches, so there is also in the domain of counter-cultural blacks. Access to, and inclusion in either domain is determined, to a significant degree, by one's disposition toward mainstream educational legacies and pursuits. A favorable disposition is a requirement for cultural membership in mainstream black religion; the reverse is true with respect to counter-cultural black religion. The latter eschews association with these mainstream legacies and pursuits, and distrusts, if not rejects, even those persons sympathetic to their agenda who have not sufficiently severed their existing links to such legacies and pursuits.

This is tellingly illustrated in the controversy that greeted black filmmaker Spike Lee's involvement in a long-awaited motion picture about the life of Malcolm X. An array of black cultural nationalists decried placing Malcolm's legacy in Spike Lee's custody (despite the fact that Lee is a great admirer of Malcolm), charging that Lee's cultural and ideological bearings were too middle-class for him to produce an authentic representation of Malcolm's life and legacy. One of Lee's harshest critics, poet Amiri Baraka, expressed a sentiment common among protestors when he said: "We will not let Malcolm X's life be trashed to make middle-class Negroes sleep easier."¹⁷ Clearly, class divisions effectively deny access in both directions.

Without a doubt, the re-

stricted cultural flow across age and class barriers among religiously-minded blacks remains one of the major obstacles to the development of a broader religion-based political culture. In any event, the onus would seem to lie with mainstream religious groups, who, given their institutional and ideological prevalence, must take the leadership initiative. Even if they do consent to seize the initiative, it will remain to be seen whether greater appeal by these churches to the more renegade popular styles and forums of the counter-culture can close the gap between the political cultures of the two camps.

Nevertheless, to the extent that mainstream blacks are not more attentive to contemporizing their style, they deny their message a fair and adequate hearing among a growing population of blacks currently opting in a counter-cultural direction. And, if counter-cultural blacks are not willing to back away from their own forms of exclusivity, no mainstream concessions along stylistic or any other lines will be of any consequence. With mutual compromises, both the simpler and the more vexing antagonisms can be resolved, and ultimately a broad-based black resistance created; without them, the chances for all these only fade further.

NOTES

1. Recent figures show that "the percentage of high-income black families more than doubled from 1967 to 1990-... [while] the proportion of black

families at the lowest income level grew by 50%" (New York Times, September 25, 1992).

2. See Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983) and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, (Liverpool: Univ. of Liverpool, 1963).

3. See Wilmore, op. cit., especially Chapter 7.

4. See C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) and E.U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962).

5. Lincoln, op. cit., p. 4.

6. Steven Barboza, "A Divided Legacy," *Emerge Magazine*, Volume 3, #6 April 1992, p. 27.

7. Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Allure of Malcolm X and the Changing Character of Black Politics," in Joe Woods (ed.), *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

8. Video, Rap's Most Wanted, (New York: Luke Records, 1991).

9. Gene Santoro, "Public Enemy," *The Nation*, June 25, 1990; p. 903.

10. Charlie Ahern, "The Five-Percent Solution," in *Spin Magazine*, Vol. 6, #11, 1991.

11. Cited in Ahern, *ibid*, p. 56.

12. See Adolph Reed, Jr., *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics*, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), Chapter 1.

13. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1990), Chapter 8, and R. Drew Smith, "Black Clergy, Electoral Participation and the Search for Prophetic Politics," unpublished.

14. Included within Rap's Most Wanted, video, op. cit.

15. PID, "Racism," from Back to Back (Frontline Records), 1989.

16. By refusing to submit to the authority of the Catholic Church, Stallings is technically no longer a Catholic, and could, ecclesiastically speaking, be considered a Protestant at this point.

17. New York Times, August 9, 1991.

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