

Introduction

A Nigger in the Woodpile, or Black (In)Visibility in Film History

On the screen we see two white farmers talking to each other next to a pile of wooden logs. One of them places a stick of dynamite inside one of the logs, which he then slips back into the woodpile. When the white men exit, two Black men enter and surreptitiously steal several pieces of wood (figs. 5 and 6).

In the next shot, we see the interior of a cabin where a large Black woman is preparing food next to a wood-burning stove (fig. 7). The Black thieves enter, and one of them places log after log into the stove until the inevitable happens—the concealed dynamite is ignited and the stove explodes, blowing the cabin apart. The two white farmers then enter the smoke- and debris-filled cabin, looking and laughing at the Black thieves who, according to the film's catalogue description, have been "given a punishment they will not soon forget."¹

This comedy, *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1904), demonstrates many elements that are typical of Black representation in early cinema. The three Black characters are played by white actors in blackface, wearing costumes signifying their traditional racial "types": Mammy in apron and bandanna; an uppity "colored deacon," striking a Zip Coon figure in top hat and tails; and his partner in crime, a harmless, shabbily dressed, white-haired Uncle Remus. The film depicts African Americans as habitual thieves, this time stealing firewood instead of the usual chickens or watermelon. And the film's "punitive" ending (a commonplace in early film comedies) functions to bring about narrative closure at the expense of the Black transgressors.² Although *A Nigger in the Woodpile* contains elements, largely derived from the minstrel stage, that would seem to appeal to general (white) audiences, one wonders whether African Americans patronized such early films, and how they would have responded

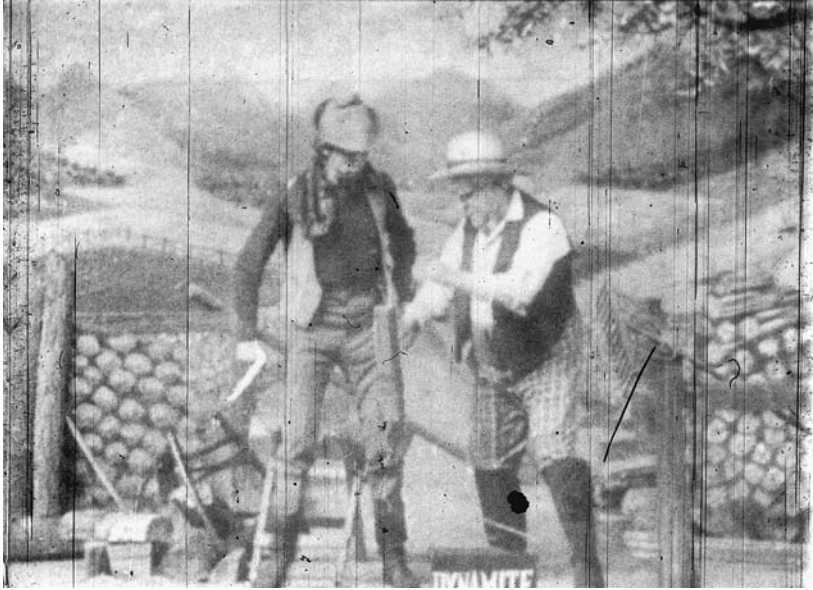


FIGURE 5. White farmers set a concealed, explosive trap for thieves pilfering wood from their pile. *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904). Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division.

to them. This question is particularly relevant because many potential Black moviegoers at the dawn of the twentieth century would have been recent migrants from the South who had fled from the kinds of poverty and violent repression that this film comically glosses over.

Few scholars have explored how the rise of the cinema as the predominant American entertainment during the first decades of the twentieth century coincided with the migration of hundreds of thousands of African Americans from their “traditional” homes in the South to increased social and economic opportunities in northern cities. Between 1890 and 1930, well over one million Blacks moved from the South to the urban North, making it “the largest movement of Black bodies since slavery” removed Africans to the New World.³ Although this “Great Migration” coincided with the years in which the cinematic institution began to take shape, studies of both early American cinema and the African American migration have overlooked the significance of the entrance of Blacks onto moving picture screens and into film audiences.

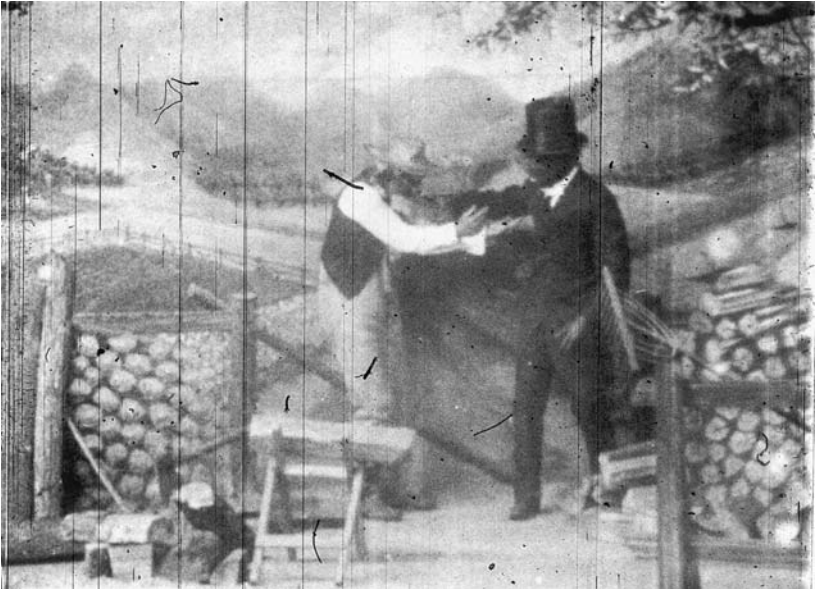


FIGURE 6. Two unsuspecting Black thieves load up on wood. *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904). Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division.

This book investigates how the urban and northern migrations of African Americans before, during, and immediately after World War I influenced, and were influenced by, the emergence and development of the cinema. I address two fundamental questions raised by the concurrence of the Black urban migration and the rise of the American film industry. First, how did the growing African American movement into urban centers influence the development of cinema as a major institution of American popular culture, including both its representational strategies and its practices as a social space? Second, what role did the cinema play in the process of modernization and urbanization of African Americans, in light of the fact that filmic representations of Blacks tended to be crudely stereotypical and retrogressive? Looking at some of the earliest relationships between African Americans and the cinema, from the medium's emergence in the mid-1890s to 1920, when both the dominant classical cinema and alternative Black "race film" production are firmly established, I argue that Black urban populations and the cinematic institution exercised greater influence

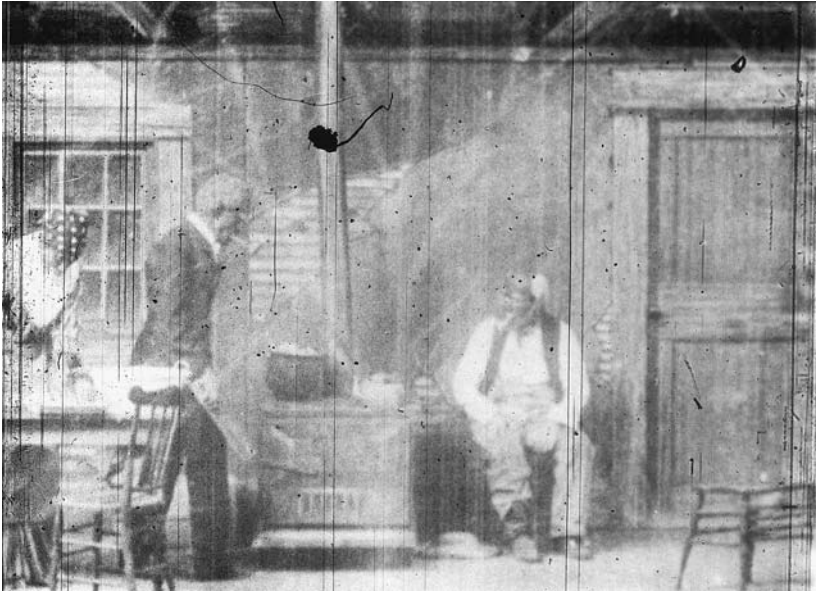


FIGURE 7. Inside the Black cabin, the head thief holds the booby-trapped log. *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904). Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division.

over each other during these formative years than has been previously acknowledged. To be sure, the cinema's early racial politics prominently included racist portrayals on screen, segregation in theaters, and exclusion from the dominant sphere of production. In light and in spite of these conditions, the cinema functioned as a major site in which Black subjects could see and be seen in modern ways; it served as a contested discursive and physical space in which migrating Black public spheres were constructed and interpreted, empowered and suppressed.

I open with a description of *A Nigger in the Woodpile* not only because of its seeming typicality of Black representation in early films but also because it serves more broadly as a metaphor for the treatment of African Americans in the study of silent cinema. The film literalizes a common slang expression alluding to something suspicious, something uncertain, and, significantly, something concealed. Dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, (white) Americans have used the expression "a nigger in the woodpile" to indicate that something is amiss, that there is a "catch" or an unseen but important factor "affecting a situation in an adverse way."⁴

Thus, at a metaphoric level, this phrase serves as an apt description for the way in which early films frequently conceal and reveal Black figures, creating discomfort and disorder intended to amuse, fascinate, and/or alarm white viewers. In addition, I invoke this expression because I want to suggest that racial difference has functioned as something like the proverbial “nigger in the woodpile” of early film history and theories of film-viewer relations, including those developed by revisionist film scholarship.⁵ That is, Blackness has been an ever-present but strangely inconspicuous, and therefore insufficiently theorized, element of the cinematic institution, concealed by emphasis on gender difference in film theory and obscured by readings of early Black film images as uniformly negative stereotypes in film history. In addition, though scholars have long recognized that early exhibitors were anxious about racial mixing in their theaters, few have explored how the segregation of the social space of the cinema (including theaters that seated Blacks and whites in different sections during the same screening, theaters that designated separate screenings for Black and for white viewers, and theaters that served only one racial clientele) affected how early audiences, particularly African American viewers, experienced this new “democratic” or “universal” medium. Therefore, I invoke the phrase “a nigger in the woodpile” as a problematic, to examine how it and similar racist expressions, film titles, and scenarios reflecting the pervasive racism of turn-of-the-century American culture have forestalled the kind of critical engagement that would expose how the “unsettled and unsettling” Black presence (to borrow a phrase from Toni Morrison) influenced the cinema’s early social and aesthetic development.⁶

One significant way film historians have accounted for the vicious and casual racism exhibited in early cinema—from Edison’s short comedies to D. W. Griffith’s epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—has been to relate it to the movies’ large immigrant audiences. For decades, film scholars have noted and questioned the cinema’s role in “Americanizing” European immigrants, debating the extent to which the movies actually functioned, for example, to teach Irish, Italian, Slavic, and Jewish newcomers how to speak American English and adopt the social customs, middle-class values, and racial ideologies necessary to assimilate into mainstream American life.⁷ Similar to Eric Lott in his analysis of blackface minstrel performance, Michael Rogin has persuasively argued that cinematic constructions of Blackness allowed ethnically and culturally diverse immigrants whose racial status was in dispute to become American by identifying as “white.” By appropriating Black identities, the most popular forms of American mass culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—minstrel perfor-

mance, followed by Hollywood filmmaking—functioned to, in Rogin’s words, “move settlers and ethnics into the melting pot by keeping racial groups out.”⁸ Lott and Rogin offer crucial insights into how the systematic objectification of Blackness in the most popular forms of American mass culture of the last two centuries enabled the vast ideological task of homogenizing diverse white ethnic clienteles. But their accounts unwittingly replicate the marginalization of Blackness that characterizes minstrelsy and the dominant cinema by obscuring the roles African Americans have played as the *subjects* of their own history with mass culture, as individuals and communities who consistently challenged these racist and exclusionary representations.

Instead of providing an account of the cinema’s social and representational development that revolves around the familiar paradigm of immigration, I propose an approach centered on the internal migration of Black people from southern and rural areas into northern and urban centers, and the unique pressures this movement brought to bear on Black representation, public circulation, and citizenship. During the first decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved away from the racial violence and repression of the South toward increased social, political, and economic freedoms in northern cities. Black urban migration increased from a trickle to a flood around 1916, when World War I sharply curtailed the supply of immigrant labor to northern industries, sending labor agents south to recruit Black workers. The lure of higher-paying work and freedom from social and political restrictions drew many southern Blacks away from sharecropping and tenant farming toward the northern “land of promise.”⁹

This mass Black movement did more than transform America’s racial demographics. It also inspired a major mode of twentieth-century African American cultural production—the migration narrative—that has been developed by numerous African American novelists, visual artists, musicians, and filmmakers. As Farah Jasmine Griffin has shown, the great diversity of Black artistic and intellectual work depicting the migration, its motivations, and its effects forces us to consider how this massive relocation profoundly changed African Americans’ conceptions and representations of their roles in American modernity—including, I would add emphatically, mass culture.¹⁰ The model of the migration narrative not only helps to situate the many Black-produced films that took up the theme of migration but also serves as a useful framework for understanding the history of a broader African American film culture, that is, the unique set of production, exhibition, and reception practices African Americans de-

veloped in order to participate in the racially exclusionary institution of the cinema. African Americans migrated to the movies—as producers and consumers—as part of their larger individual and collective efforts to challenge static, Old Negro stereotypes and to try on the roles of modern New Negroes entering urban modernity and seeking full American citizenship.¹¹

The development, and contradictions, of several aspects of Black film culture can be better understood in relation to key themes in the African American migration narrative. This is certainly true for African American spectatorship and moviegoing, which lie at the heart of this study. For example, Griffin traces how migration narratives juxtapose the unsophisticated nature of power in the South (a power that is “immediate,” “identifiable,” and frequently violent) with the “more subtle and sophisticated” mechanisms of power at work in the northern city.¹² African American reception practices, along with other aspects of their daily lives in the urban North, were shaped by the more impersonal and unpredictable expressions of white power they encountered in the North. The extent to which Black people were restricted from public amusements because of northern de facto as opposed to southern de jure segregation raises serious questions about how they contextualized and enjoyed the new freedoms they sought by migrating northward. Urban migration did enable African Americans to enjoy a wide range of leisure activities that were unavailable or highly restricted in the South. Migrant interviews indicate that increases in leisure time, disposable income, and options for recreational activities represented significant improvements in the quality of life, alongside the higher-paying jobs, better educational opportunities, and greater political participation northern cities afforded. But the movies occupied an important space in the new cultural landscape Black migrants encountered up North not simply by offering an accessible and enjoyable leisure activity but by providing a public context, among many, in which to manage a new set of racist power relations.

In terms of Black filmmaking practice, directors like William Foster and Oscar Micheaux explored the numerous positive and negative implications of Black geographic movement for the moral, cultural, and political standing of the Race. Foster made short comedies that reflected the vibrant cultures African Americans were developing in cities but also poked fun at dishonest and vain Black urban types. Micheaux staged many migration narratives with different trajectories, frequently suggesting that African Americans should escape the violent, traditional forms of racism in the South *and* the subtle, modern forms of racism in northern cities by ven-

turing out into the wide-open spaces of the West; he himself had attempted several homesteading ventures in South Dakota.

Black urban migration is one of the major themes addressed in the current wave of scholarship on Micheaux, his recently rediscovered early titles, and the cultural milieu in which he produced and exhibited his films. Recent publications include a cultural history of Micheaux's work by Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, a study of Micheaux's aesthetics by J. Ronald Green, a biography by Betti Carol VanEpps-Taylor, and a diverse collection of essays accompanying a catalogue of films by Micheaux and other silent-era race filmmakers edited by Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser.¹³ These studies, along with Gaines's discussion of the "mixed-race" heritage of American cinema and Anna Everett's work on early African American film criticism (particularly the writings of *New York Age's* prolific and influential critic Lester Walton), provide an extraordinary portrait of the creative cultural and political work performed by African American filmmakers and their audiences during the silent era.¹⁴

This book seeks to supplement those studies by focusing on the multiple relations between African Americans and the cinema (as subjects, spectators, and filmmakers) leading up to Micheaux's prolific career. Rather than placing individuals (like Micheaux or Walton) at the center of my account, I organize my discussion around the concepts of African American migration and urbanization, and the problems and possibilities of increased Black mobility and visibility that they represented. I explore the ways in which these social, geographic, and conceptual Black movements radically realigned African American individuals and communities in relation to each other, to the dominant American culture, and to white ethnic immigrants in order to situate the emergence of Black film culture within a broad constellation of historical and theoretical questions. I attempt to flesh out details about Black moviegoing and filmmaking as empirical, concrete, traceable practices, but I also attempt to reconstruct the unrecorded, ephemeral, and subtextual aspects of early Black spectatorship and representation. Thus my focus on Black migration is intended to illuminate the wide range of ways in which African Americans negotiated confrontations with the cinema as a major feature of modern American life.

Details about very early Black responses to the cinema, particularly before and during the nickelodeon era (pre-1907), have been difficult for scholars to trace. How can we know if African Americans went to see films like *A Nigger in the Woodpile* when there is so little documentation of Black reception in turn-of-the-century African American writing and in the trade press? What can we know about Black reactions to this and other

early films with comic Black types? When African American filmmakers begin to produce Black-cast films in the mid-1910s, we begin to see more (and more detailed) Black commentary on the cinema. How effective were these initial Black efforts to respond to the much larger and more thoroughly organized dominant film industry? I attempt to bring such elusive issues into focus by bridging discussions of Black representation in white- and Black-produced films with a consideration of African American reception, focused on a particular northern urban locale: Chicago.

Chicago is the locus of a host of historical factors that productively illuminate the close relationships between race, modernity, and mass culture. As the country's fastest-growing turn-of-the-century metropolis, Chicago attracted large numbers of European immigrants and African American migrants who established distinct, separate neighborhood cultures as they competed for industrial jobs and municipal resources. As a prime destination for Black migrants from the South, Chicago's "Black Belt" quickly grew into a segregated "Black Metropolis" where African American entrepreneurship, entertainment culture, and political activity thrived in the face of hostile "native" and ethnic white resistance to Black insurgence and racial integration. Moving to Chicago signified a move into urban industrial modernity, and Black migrants discovered and contributed to a dynamic, confident Black urban community. Still, racial segregation profoundly shaped the housing, occupational, and recreational options available to Black people in Chicago, complicating the hopes and experiences of new arrivals.

As the film industry grew in scope and popularity during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Chicago's Black entertainment culture (including its film culture) came to national prominence. Compared with other major migration destinations, Chicago's South Side Black Belt boasted a very large number of theaters catering especially to African American audiences, mostly located along the "Stroll," Black Chicago's primary commercial and entertainment strip on South State Street. Moving pictures were exhibited in many of the same venues up and down the Stroll in which ragtime and jazz musicians were transforming American music. Amid music shops and poolrooms, pawn shops and restaurants, barbershops and saloons, theaters showing moving pictures participated in the lively social, business, and entertainment scene that was heavily promoted in the pages of the *Chicago Defender* (which also had its offices along the Stroll).

The *Defender* was widely regarded as the country's leading "race" newspaper. According to historian James Grossman, the *Defender* "grew

into the largest-selling black newspaper in the United States by World War I, with two-thirds of its circulation outside Chicago."¹⁵ As a strident campaigner for Black migration, as well as the first African American newspaper to feature a regular entertainment section, the *Defender* ran theatrical ads and reviews (as well as news articles, editorials, and letters from readers) that functioned as a guide to urban cultural life for Black readers in Chicago, and for potential migrants in the South. Black Pullman porters circulated the *Defender* on their southern routes, enabling Blacks outside of the city to learn about Chicago's attractive social, economic, and recreational opportunities.¹⁶ At the same time that the *Defender* represented Black Belt activities to a national readership, Chicago-based Black filmmakers William Foster, Peter P. Jones, and Oscar Micheaux produced Black-cast films that relied on the performers and publicity networks that were centered in Chicago, but also circulated to African American audiences across the country. As one would expect, the *Defender* commented regularly on the efforts of these local pioneers, as well as other Black film companies springing up across the country. The *Defender's* value as a record of early African American filmmaking, moviegoing, and film criticism, couched within discourses on migration, racial uplift, and political activism, cannot be overestimated, even if tracing the experiences of its largely working-class Black readership requires some reading between the lines. As the birthplace of African American filmmaking (with the production of Foster's *The Railroad Porter* in 1913), and a major center of Black entertainment and media culture (journalism, musical performance and publishing, sports, vaudeville), Chicago serves as an exceptional location for charting the development of African American relationships with the cinema as part of the expansion of Black urban communities.

The Stroll was not just a famous stretch of sidewalk; as Shane White and Graham White have documented, it was also a "form of expressive behavior" that had strong roots in southern displays of fashion, deportment, and cautiously constructed self-determination. In the growing Black districts of the "free" urban North (which for African Americans in the 1910s was exemplified by Chicago), the act of strolling "rapidly developed into one of the defining features of northern black city life," enabling African Americans to look and be looked at in ostensibly more liberal and glamorous contexts.¹⁷ But while many African Americans enjoyed and celebrated the Stroll, a number of detractors pointed to its negative qualities as a stage for and method of modern Black public performance.

As tens of thousands of Black southerners arrived in Chicago during the Great Migration of the late 1910s, numerous white observers ridiculed

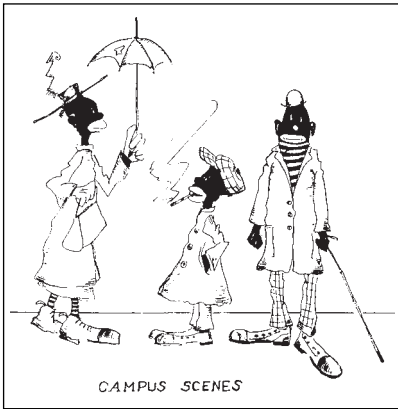


FIGURE 8. Caricatures of Black Belt types as they stroll in close proximity to the predominantly white Armour Institute campus. Armour Institute of Technology *Cycle* yearbook, 1916. IIT Archives, Paul V. Galvin Library, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago.

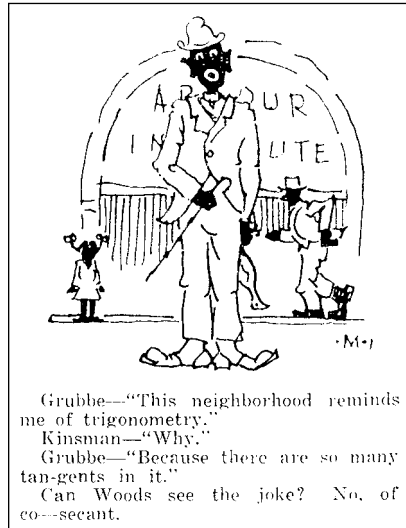


FIGURE 9. Armour Institute students combine racist cartoons and math humor in their characterization of the rapidly increasing numbers of neighborhood Blacks. Armour Institute of Technology *Cycle* yearbook, 1920. IIT Archives, Paul V. Galvin Library, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago.

Black attempts to enjoy rights and respect, partly by trying to look the part of urban sophisticates. For example, students at the predominantly white Armour Institute of Technology, which was located just west of the Stroll at Thirty-third Street and Armour Avenue (later Federal Street), featured insulting cartoons of neighborhood Blacks in their yearbooks (figs. 8 and 9). The institute watched, at close range, as the number of Black residents in its vicinity grew dramatically, heightening anxieties about controlling and sharing the public space surrounding its campus. The street scenes depicted in Armour Institute yearbooks—populated by African American male dandies and a would-be Black “lady”—render Black Belt residents as blackface caricatures (black skins, wide white lips, gaudy dress) that mock Black efforts to display class and refinement.¹⁸ These illustrations of affected but shabby Black urban style seek to ridicule the public circulation and upward mobility that many Black Chicagoans associated with the specific act of promenading along the Stroll.

White racism was not the only challenge faced by Black Chicagoans seeking to take advantage of the city's public spaces and amusements. Although the cinema was one of the most attractive commercial entertainments available along the Stroll, not all members of Chicago's African American community were enthusiastic about the movies. Associations between cheap movie theaters and other "low" State Street entertainments led many race leaders to warn their followers away from such potentially degrading places. Still, Black moviegoing increased throughout the first decades of motion picture production, and by the late teens Black Chicagoans (like their counterparts in other urban locales) participated in the cinematic institution as audiences, theatrical reviewers, and filmmakers as well as screen performers, theater owners, managers and employees. My study describes how these individuals and groups interacted as constituent parts of larger cultural formations—Black urban public spheres—that coalesced around a variety of overlapping and competing institutions, from traditional, noncommercial venues such as churches to new, commercial entertainments such as the burgeoning film industry.

The notion of overlapping public spheres is central to my conception of Black film culture because it allows me to explore how Black interactions with the cinema were intimately related to other institutions, activities, and discourses that were prevalent in Black urban communities during the first two decades of the twentieth century. I seek to describe the ways in which the cinema provided spaces for the production of Black urban culture, while it also seemed to challenge and circumscribe this process. Drawing on the work of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, who revised Habermas's notion of the bourgeois public sphere to include marginalized groups (e.g., women, the illiterate, the working classes) and spheres of production (e.g., mass media), I am interested in how a model of multiple public spheres can help us to understand how a diverse and migrating African American community attempted to engage in public life, political discourse, and the democratic process via engagements with mass culture.¹⁹

More specifically, Negt and Kluge's elaboration of public spheres as "horizons of experience" offers a useful lens through which to examine the development of Black film culture as a complex set of practices and responses performed by a group that has been systematically excluded from the dominant space of public life and opinion.²⁰ Their concept of "experience" as a mediating term between individual perception and larger social meaning enables us to read Black film culture as an alternative (but not always oppositional) formation that not only responds to the social dimensions of the cinema (such as efforts to gain access to the public space of

movie theaters and to the means of producing films) but also involves an intersubjective field of individual psychic processes and collective energies.²¹ How, for example, can we understand why Blacks would patronize an industry that repeatedly segregated them in exhibition venues and that figured Blackness in limiting, degrading stereotypes? What kinds of individual and collective, internalized and vocalized responses did these practices elicit? While I present and interpret historical evidence regarding the activities and responses of empirical African American viewers, the variability of a Black “public” and the unpredictability of Black “experience” can also be described as discursive constructions; issues of access, participation, and influence function together with those of perception, reflection, and interpretation to shape Black film culture. My aim is to think not just about how the movies affected Black society (even if understood to be diverse) but about how African Americans structured a multifaceted culture around the cinema as both a social (physical) and an imaginative (psychic, subjective) space, and how they exerted pressures on dominant film culture on both of these levels.

As a facet of public life, Black film culture must be read in relation to other cultures that structured Black urban experience during this period. In cities like Chicago, African Americans developed, among many others, vibrant Black religious cultures (from large, middle-class Protestant congregations to small, Pentecostal storefront churches); Black music cultures (including jazz and blues performance, elite classical musicales, and popular musical theater); Black political cultures (from the mounting of Black candidates for local offices to the advocacy work of women’s clubs); Black sports cultures (such as Negro baseball leagues and boxing fandom); Black print cultures (such as literary salons and community-based journalism); and Black business cultures (including networks of entrepreneurs controlling major institutions like Black-owned banks and beauty product factories, smaller ventures like restaurants and retail stores, and disreputable “underworld” enterprises such as pool halls, policy shops, and houses of prostitution). These Black cultures intersected (across boundaries of class, gender, age) to structure Black work and leisure time in urban environments. They produced Black urban life as a matrix of experiences and sensations, including comfort and danger, familiarity and novelty, contemplation and action, proscription and empowerment.

As I will elaborate throughout this study, a variety of Black urban cultures intersected with and shaped Black film culture—as illustrated by the opposition of Black clergy to certain venues of film exhibition, the employment of jazz musicians in movie theaters, and the use of the Black press as

a vehicle for expressing protest against and praise for particular theaters and films. Black film culture, among the many cultures African Americans developed in cities during the first decades of the twentieth century, addressed desires not only to participate equitably and meaningfully in American life but also to redefine and reconstitute African Americans individually and collectively. Just as it functioned for other communities, the cinema served as a public entertainment, an increasingly popular form of consumer culture, and as a field of fantasy, creativity, and interpretation for audiences, entrepreneurs, employees, and filmmakers. The cinema provided sites in which to flaunt and to manage increasing diversity, and to achieve a sense of control and coherence in a new and/or rapidly changing environment. For African Americans this was an extraordinary phenomenon, given the racist and exclusionary treatment of Black people by the dominant film industry. Local Black uses of the cinema suggest that from very early on African Americans approached the cinema as they approached so many other elements of public life—with a range of individual and collective strategies to incorporate, reject, and/or reconstruct the institutions and practices shaping their daily lives.

This book describes Black film culture not only in terms of the experiences and cultural practices of African Americans but also in relation to the ways in which Blackness was conceived and constructed by the mainstream film industry during this period. Foregrounding my discussion of the development of Black film culture are the persistent problems racial difference presents on the levels of representation and address, and the many devastating ways in which dominant cinema, from the very beginning, has reflected and reproduced America's repressive racial hierarchies. These issues surface not only in my efforts to determine what kinds of films early Black audiences were watching (e.g., films with Black stereotypes, films with no Blacks at all), but also, more significantly, in my attempt to trace the many different factors shaping American film culture at social and discursive levels.

Prompted by Toni Morrison's discussion of how an "Africanist presence" has structured the American literary imagination, I am interested in how this same "four-hundred-year-old" presence of Black people in the United States, "which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture," has also shaped this country's dominant film culture.²² Indeed, one of the most common colloquial uses of the expression "a nigger in the woodpile," which is not mentioned in most dictionaries (even dictionaries of American slang), is to imply a Black presence in a white family tree.²³ For example, white writer Anne Lamott recalls in her memoir that throughout her childhood her father's male friends would

look at her and then joke “that there must have been a nigger in the woodpile, I guess because of both the [wiry] hair and my big heavy-lidded eyes. . . . I knew it meant that a black man must have been my father.”²⁴ The phrase has long functioned as a euphemism for the long history of interracial sexual relationships. It is a crude and knowing metaphor acknowledging that Blackness has long permeated “white” bloodlines. When considered alongside the meanings discussed earlier, it is clear that the notion of Black influence in “white” bodies—and by extension in “white” histories—raises connotations of illegitimacy, dubiousness, disruption, and, importantly, concealment. This usage of “a nigger in the woodpile,” which has been less frequently acknowledged in official etymologies, points to the fundamental ways in which the consistent Black presence in American history and culture—in a “white” genealogy—is disavowed and obscured by dominant political and representational strategies.

By speaking to a “white” audience, mainstream preclassical cinema seems to negate Blackness. At the same time, though, early films feature countless Black images in a wide variety of contexts. I want to suggest that this dialectic of absence and presence can help us to understand how Black film culture operates not simply as an alternative to or protest against dominant cinematic practices but as a constitutive, if usually unacknowledged, part of the development of the dominant “white” film culture. Although major film companies may not seem to care much about Black moviegoers on Chicago’s South Side, the ways in which Blackness emerges and is suppressed in their films, related discourses (advertising, criticism), and exhibition practices suggest how deeply the cinema was affected by the country’s shifting racial relations. If we read the making of Black film culture as a migration narrative, an important part of the story is how migrations of Blackness into the dominant cinematic imagination reflected and affected larger Black efforts to move out of traditional, restricted roles associated with what one migrant called “the darkness of the south,” and into the bright lights of modern American public life.²⁵

Migrating to the Movies is elaborated in three parts, moving roughly chronologically from the first interactions between Blacks and the cinema—as recorded images—beginning in the mid-1890s, to some of the earliest documented instances of Black reception in the first decade of the twentieth century, to the beginnings of African American film production around 1913. I trace these relations through the increasing circulation of Black people in cities—particularly during the Great Migration out of the

South coinciding with World War I—to explore the ways in which growing Black urban populations and expressions of Black citizenship shaped dominant and African American filmmaking practices and Black spectatorship. My analysis concludes with the immediate aftermath of the “Red Summer” of 1919, when tensions stemming from the increased Black visibility and insurgency flared into interracial riots across the country, including several major migration destinations. These conflicts dramatically confirmed to Black migrants that the freedoms they sought in the urban North would have to be defended continually in multiple public spheres. My study seeks to understand the relations between migration-inspired racial violence in the streets and the treatment of Black cinematic subjects (e.g., punishments in films like *A Nigger in the Woodpile*) and spectators (segregation and exclusion). I trace how racial difference and Black mobility structured modern life during the years in which African Americans established conspicuous urban cultures, and the cinema developed from attractions to classical narrative, from novelty to cultural institution.

Part One, “Onto the Screen,” considers how Black movement was registered in dominant cinema. I describe a wide variety of early films not so much to determine the kinds of films Black audiences might have patronized but to consider how African American migration affected the elaboration of cinematic racial codes in general, and the treatment of Blacks (as both spectators and images) in particular. Chapter 1, “‘To Misrepresent a Helpless Race’: The Black Image Problem,” explores the complexities of representing Blackness in early cinema. Moving beyond the “history of negative stereotypes” approach, I argue that Blackness constituted a representational problem in the cinema from the very beginning. I draw on postcolonial and feminist theoretical models to explore how racial performance and signification complicate the structures of cinematic vision and visual pleasure commonly associated with the seemingly literal cinematic “image,” as well as the seemingly uncomplicated Black image.²⁶ Then, in chapter 2, “Mixed Colors: Riddles of Blackness in Preclassical Cinema,” I survey particular films to illustrate how the problem of representing Blackness is organized around the power of the look and the visibility of Black people in a wide variety of cinematic contexts. Although D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is a watershed text in terms of how it mobilized Black stereotypes and African American outcry against cinematic racism, I analyze Black representation in films produced before *Birth*, focusing on those that foreground marking and seeing Blackness (e.g., plots in which white babies or female love interests are switched with Black ones). Speaking to a “white” viewership, preclassical cinema repeatedly staged scenarios of racial surveil-

lance, misrecognition, and subversion, thereby registering (in many surprising ways) that African Americans were migrating—literally and figuratively—out of their prescribed social roles.

Part Two, “Into the Audience,” describes African American spectatorship and moviegoing practices. Chapter 3, “‘Negroes Laughing at Themselves’? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity,” describes how Black urban spectators used the cinema as a public, collective arena in which to demonstrate their social progress. At a time when Black people sought to distance themselves from long-standing stereotypes, Black spectatorship involved not just responses to the screen but also the politics of representing “the Race” in one’s public performance as an urban New Negro. Looking at critical and fictional accounts of Black spectatorship (that reach beyond the World War I era), I describe early Black viewing practices as a form of “reconstructive spectatorship,” in which African Americans used the cinema as a literal and symbolic space in which to rebuild their individual and collective identities in a modern, urban environment. Then I explore how Black spectatorship was developed in relation to debates about Black urban public behavior in Chicago, and in response to the rise of the classical paradigm of narration and address, which encouraged absorption in the narrative on screen rather than in the social space of the theater. I argue that Black spectatorship was not an either/or proposition of passive acceptance versus oppositional criticism played out only between individual viewers and films. Rather, it was a varied, performative, and social element of Black film culture.

After establishing a new theoretical framework for considering the dynamics of early African American spectatorship, chapters 4 and 5 describe Black moviegoing in Chicago, a prime destination for southern migrants. Chapter 4, “‘Some Thing to See Up Here All the Time’: Moviegoing and Black Urban Leisure in Chicago,” describes Black patronage of movie theaters among a constellation of African American leisure activities from the turn of the century through the Great Migration (1916–19). I outline how factors like segregation and class stratification informed Black moviegoing within the context of debates about what constituted “appropriate” leisure activities for Chicago’s diverse and rapidly growing Black population. I describe how the tenuous cultural legitimacy of the movies both mirrored and had unique implications for the similarly tenuous social standing of African Americans in the urban North, because both were commonly associated with “low,” disreputable recreational activities (e.g., drinking, prostitution, gambling). Chapter 5, “Along the ‘Stroll’: Chicago’s Black Belt Movie Theaters,” locates and describes specific venues of film exhibition,

detailing how owners and managers constructed their theaters—both architecturally and in promotional discourses—to attract African American patrons. Situated among businesses and institutions serving a wide variety of clientele, Black Belt theaters, I argue, negotiated the cinema's contradictory cultural status by appealing to race pride and "high-class" pretensions, on the one hand, and flaunting elements of vice and sensationalism, on the other. In this way, Chicago's Black film culture grew out of a complex set of social pressures stemming from efforts to assert the Race's respectability and cultural autonomy, but also from the desires of many African Americans to participate in the popular and often "low" forms of American mass culture.

Finally, Part Three, "Behind the Camera," explores how African American filmmakers attempted to comment on dominant cinematic practices and to build and profit from developing Black consumer cultures. Chapter 6, "Reckless Rovers versus Ambitious Negroes: Migration, Patriotism, and the Politics of Genre in Early African American Filmmaking," analyzes the modes of audience address in some of the first Black-produced films, looking particularly at questions of place (settings of films and exhibition). Because these filmmakers attempted to speak to heterogeneous Black audiences dispersed (as a result of migration) throughout the rural and urban South, the industrial North, and western states, their films often stressed the "Americanness" of the Negro, employing popular themes of migration and patriotism in an effort to enlist the broad moral and financial support of a disparate African American market. But these filmmakers and their audiences also debated the appropriate genres for attracting and portraying African Americans. Most companies, like the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, focused on producing uplifting dramas. But Lincoln and others also circulated nonfiction films (e.g., documentary footage of African American soldiers), which were popular among Black audiences seeking realistic representations of the Race. A small number of companies, including the Ebony Film Corporation, risked offending African American audiences by producing comedies in which different Black types (e.g., Old Negroes and New Negroes) were juxtaposed for humorous effect. I argue that these debates and production practices highlighted rather than resolved the significant differences (in location, taste, approaches to uplift) among African American producers and publics.

As Black filmmakers debated the merits of various genres, they consistently struggled with the problems of producing Black-oriented films (not to mention developing a distinct Black cinematic aesthetic), such as securing funding, avoiding stereotypes, and competing with mainstream prod-

uct. In chapter 7, “‘We Were Never Immigrants’: Oscar Micheaux and the Reconstruction of Black American Identity,” I describe how Micheaux mobilized themes used by other Black filmmakers to comment (usually didactically) on contemporary social and political issues such as migration, and to stake his unique cinematic claims on behalf of Black people for full American citizenship. For example, Micheaux concludes his migration tale, *Within Our Gates* (1920), by awkwardly combining a marriage proposal (adhering to classical cinematic conventions of closure) with a lofty proclamation of Black American patriotism in an effort to reconcile the racial violence haunting the southern past of the film’s migrant heroine. Micheaux’s films, more than those of his contemporaries, illustrate the range of modes available for rendering modern Black life and highlight the contradictions of defining and claiming Black American citizenship. In doing so, they also test the cinema’s capacity to represent an increasingly mobile, diverse, and insurgent Black population.

My discussion of early Black film images and film culture seeks to demonstrate the centrality of questions of race in preclassical cinema and its reception. In addition, this project emphasizes the crucial role popular culture has played in the development of African American urban life in general, and the articulation of “modern” Black subjectivities in particular. As African Americans migrated, their engagements with mass culture produced new ways of seeing Black character and constituencies, as well as new ways of performing as Black viewing subjects. Blackness has been the metaphoric “nigger in the woodpile” of early film history. This book attempts to reconstruct the experiences and effects of those Black historical agents long shadowed by American mass culture’s minstrel masks.