



PROJECT MUSE®

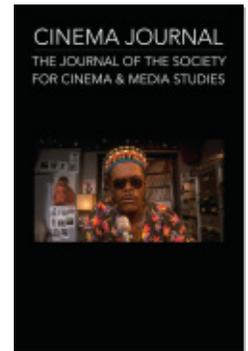
Whose “Black Film” Is This?: The Pragmatics and Pathos
of Black Film Scholarship

Terri Francis

Cinema Journal, Volume 53, Number 4, Summer 2014, pp. 146-150 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2014.0047>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/550098>

However, another mentor, who is black, reminded me of something else: “No matter what you write about, you will always be the black scholar who writes about ‘fill in the blank.’” It crystallized for me then that there *is no* getting around the *black*. Therefore, I decided against some of my other choices, which included writing about filmmaker John Sayles (although I wanted, and still do, to explore his portrayals of black people in his movies) and stuck with Singleton.

For the first time in my life, I felt as if I was in command of deciding what kind of man I wanted to be, and the four examples of black popular culture I’ve mentioned here were essential to the development of my character and self-perception. That they were distinctively black in their language, ideology, expression, and storytelling connected to those parts of myself I had either ignored or was blind to. The culmination of those artistic expressions stimulated an awareness, eagerness, and even anger within me. They were a call to action. For those reasons alone, I cannot fathom a black popular culture in which the *black* is given little or no merit. In my quest to understand what motivates their interest, I am not advocating for white scholars to forgo research that is black focused, or for filmmakers and screenwriters to shy away from those topics as well. However, I am suggesting that the *black* in black popular culture benefits immensely, in terms of discussion, critical analysis, and interpretation, from scholars and artists who know and truly understand that the adjective in the phrase is about more than just the universality of the human condition. *

Whose “Black Film” Is This? The Pragmatics and Pathos of Black Film Scholarship

by TERRI FRANCIS

Teaching black film, whether in the form of African, African diaspora, or African American media, has become more commonplace in cinema and Africana studies programs across the country. Yet those who teach this material, and allies who seek to diversify and deepen what we mean by “film studies,” encounter a range of practical, pedagogical, and political conundrums in rapidly changing environments both within and outside the university. The popular understanding of African American film history continues to run parallel to and seemingly apart from the knowledge and insight that professional researchers and archivists share with their constituencies. So, whose “black film” is this, and what are we doing with it? What is this “black film” in black film? This essay addresses three current challenges for the field of black film scholarship. First is navigating

the nationalistic and auteurist rubrics of film studies curricula, given that black film is a product of diaspora and that it may not be possible to document each filmmaker's idiosyncratic career using traditional historiographical approaches. Second is weighing how movies convey past and present experience in complicated ways, as they are themselves products of the past and present. Third is advocating for black film against the backdrop of an absurd media environment and popular culture in which African American audiences both distrust Hollywood and at the same time seem skeptical of black independent media that challenges representational comfort zones.

The idea of black film provides a space, maybe the only space in a department, where students take up matters of race, racism, and other prejudices within Hollywood's economic and aesthetic structures—where they broach the idea that films are not only “art” and entertainment but also commodities that carry with them ideas about who we are and how we live. In constructing syllabi, though, I feel I must choose between two courses—Race, Racism, and Representation in Hollywood, and Films That Black People Have Made (Anyone Has Made)—that are so dense with black collective memory they should be considered black film the way *Invisible Man* is considered black literature.¹ In teaching black film, it is never just about form—or it is always about form, shaped in contention or collaboration with the media industry and its aesthetic and political norms.

The material I teach, early and independent black films, is largely unfamiliar to students, colleagues, and even the public at large, and this presents issues of affect and receptivity. Black film is not a national cinema; black film is a cinema whose borders are variously defined by multiple audiences, diverse scholars, different generations of students, and the changing priorities of the popular press.

The way film and media studies programs have been introducing “black” film into film history is largely through its status as a representation of black culture or as a substitute for the teaching of black history. But this strategy is problematic in a number of fascinating ways. If the *black* in black film is to be defined, it's surely more of a psycho-social-aesthetic nonlocation, a site of citations; the *black* in black film is an idea. “Black is, black ain't,” as Ralph Ellison put it.² If it is a form, then it can be made and unmade. And in a marketplace of identities unmoored from historical context, it can be took. Blackness is a tenuous and uncertain platform within a hall of mirrors where reality is reflected, refracted, and crooked. It is like a genre of genres in which questions of authenticity, authorship, and appropriation are parsed against the often highly emotional backdrop of long-standing cultural debates on the role of the artist and the responsibilities of the black artist to represent. Such a position offers film studies as a whole potentially expansive view of the ways in which media makers and media scholars navigate questions of authorship, genre, and nation through the idea of black film. The routine film studies rubrics of author, genre, and nation pose pedagogical challenges when constructing syllabi for black film, because this filmmaking practice bends and resists these very categories.

1 Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995).

2 *Ibid.*, 9.

In the telling of African American history, visual material tends to be mobilized as evidence or as illustrative of larger historical moments without fully considering the specific histories and structures of the photographs or motion pictures themselves. The reality is, however, that once we bring pictures into the mix, we open up a whole new set of problems, and we need new concepts for situating, not necessarily interpreting or even judging, the images. Historical photographs and motion pictures certainly provide a treasured portal to the elusive past, yet they are themselves products of that past (and, in a way, of our present). Seamlessly incorporating excerpted footage into a narrative elides questions such as the following: Who made this picture? How did he, she, or they make this picture? What should we make of the content found outside the frame, after the cut, and behind the camera? How we answer these questions forms the stories of innovation, entrepreneurship, and personal adventure that position black film at the vanguard of African American modernity.

Movies are a forum, dialogical and full of unresolved contradictions, not merely a reflection or representation of reality; and black cinema is a particularly self-reflexive one that unfolds amid continued dissatisfaction with black images on screen, perennial hype on new waves of black film, and the ongoing whiteness of boardrooms that control the media screenscape. “Black film” is uniquely positioned as both an object of public scrutiny and of disdain, as well as a fantasyland of accurate and satisfying portrayal. We have a complicated love-it-and-loathe-it relationship to popular culture. Indeed, many so-called negative images do have a certain allure, as there is a perverse pleasure in cringe-worthy television, and, privately, many viewers don’t cringe at all. Why not openly embrace, laugh at, and laugh with “ourselves” or at caricatures of folks we know, at exaggerations of all-human foibles? Why hide such intimacies under phrases like “guilty pleasure”? Meaning many things to many people, “black film” is a niche market of entertainment products sold and consumed on a variety of platforms. And at the same time black film is an underground network of lost and recovered fragmentary archives, such as the LA Rebellion films being unearthed by scholars Jacqueline Stewart, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Allyson Nadia Field.

The shared discursive space between popular culture and black film raises more issues in that the relationship among media, the movies, and black folk has long been a vexed one. Vital concerns include (1) the pervasiveness of derogatory imagery; (2) the relative invisibility of both African American-authored stories and African American theories of criticism; and (3) the inaccessibility of independent works because of business-related issues such as ineffective or inappropriate marketing strategies. Less obvious but just as essential a problem for black film is the near-total lack of infrastructure for screening film and sustaining public dialogues with filmmakers and audiences on a do-it-yourself level. My classrooms often double as critical exhibition spaces for screening rare black independent film, actually staging what amounts to town halls in which students, and at times the public at large, can engage with the unwieldy race polemics that often get attached to the black image in “film,” which of course today means television, web series, social media, and music videos. Increasingly these types of products provide the perceptual coordinates through which students see *Within Our Gates* (Oscar Micheaux, 1920), *Story of a Three-Day Pass* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1968), *She’s Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1986), or *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991) for

the first time—and their screening might well be via YouTube (Figure 1).

In the popular press, as in the classroom, the crisis of black visibility and the hype around new black films compel more attention than the no-drama thrill of learning the histories and theories of African American cinema. Even when discussing the successful careers, or well-received films, of black filmmakers, the dominant tones of



Figure 1. Sylvia Landry and Armand Gridlestone (Evelyn Preer and Grant Gorman) struggle in *Within Our Gates* (Micheaux Book and Film Company, 1920).

film analysis remain the rubrics of misrepresentation and burden. I am ever trying to balance scholarly skepticism with the exuberance of advocacy and teaching. Looking toward the future, we need to reexamine our relationship to multiple media industries, particularly those of independent and experimental black film.

Thus, questions of criteria continue to nettle us: how *black* is black film anyway? Must a film be produced by black people, feature a black cast, and/or address a black audience to be classified as a “black film”? Can a black film be produced within the Hollywood studio system? Is there a discernible black film aesthetic? Does the market determine our syllabi? Or is our teaching research driven? What am I teaching when I teach black film? And what does it mean to teach black film in the context of America’s “conversation on race”? What of dubious and undignified blackness? How do we approach teaching what cultural appropriation violates—and makes possible—in a multicultural setting? Are we really this invested in biology and in skin color? Where are our artifacts?

The *black* in black film, as well as the *film* in black film, continues to morph and change, bringing with it implications for library acquisitions and also access. Will black film courses have required screenings? Required Twitter feeds? In which formats should departments invest? Are libraries and film studies centers willing to purchase expensive and rare black films? Do librarians and others recognize our content as necessary? Where does the responsibility for purchasing new films, DVDs, and so forth lie? If students can get the material on their own, why shouldn’t they? The answers to these questions vary between institutions and will certainly continue to change as we move toward an increasingly digitized future and all that is beyond that.

Over the past decade of teaching I have noticed how students’ expectations and experiences of my courses hinge on their openness to avant-gardes in African American art, literature, music, and theater. And every semester I have plenty of students who are like I was in college: I had no interest whatsoever in mainstream media, but I saw each Spike Lee joint when it came to my city. Once I discovered the wider world of black film in graduate school I viewed it through my studies of African American and diaspora literature, music, theater, and art. I ask myself how to reframe some students’ skepticism toward unfamiliar and difficult moviemaking modes when they are



Figure 2. Sara Rogers (Seret Scott) in *Losing Ground* (Kathleen Collins, 1982). Courtesy of Milestone Film and Nina Lorez Collins.

Collins, 1982) generates new, enthusiastic, and better-informed audiences—you can't unsee those films (Figure 2).

The competing demands and particular circumstances of black film, given the quickly changing conditions of teaching film generally, challenge us to show students strategies of media literacy that account for its crookedness and inspire them to seek out, and even craft, new possibilities in black film production and black film cinophilia. *

saturated with easy-to-watch and much-discussed media products. My role is partly to advocate for black film and, in doing so, to make space for the contemplation of black art, fostering intergenerational exchanges of experiences and knowledge. In the end, simply introducing students to Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, and outstanding works like *Chameleon Street* (Wendell B. Harris Jr., 1989) and *Losing Ground* (Kathleen

Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations

by NINA CARTIER

Postmodern, post-soul, post-black—we have numerous appellations for our current moment in black popular culture, yet we really aren't post-anything when it comes to our expectations of black women on-screen. As an export, black popular culture transforms into US popular culture, especially if we consider the immense popularity of hip-hop as an international force, like jazz and R&B were before it. It has always been "cool to be black," while at the same time, no one ever wants to be "black." Qualified, it is always cool to possess the vitality, originality, and magnetism black people as a whole seem to imbue, while accepting none of the pain, prejudice, and struggle the fact of actually having so much discernible melanin entails. It is a strange ontology, this blackness, and it becomes stranger