“I’ll See You in Church”

Local Films in African American Communities, 1924–1962

MARTIN L. JOHNSON

Pictures aren’t made in a straight line. We take a little bit of this and a little of that and then it’s all looked at and selected and made into a whole. . . .

You mean you piece it together?

That’s the idea, I said.

Well tell me something! she said. Isn’t that just marvelous? Just like making a scrap quilt, I guess; one of those with all the colors of the rainbow in it—only more complicated. Is that it?

Just about, I said. There has to be a pattern though and we only have black and white.

Well, she said, there’s Indians and some of the black is almost white and brown like me.—RALPH ELLISON, Three Days Before the Shooting

As the history of cinema in the United States becomes unmoored from the history of Hollywood, familiar lands become foreign countries. From new vantage points, events that were once considered to be minor or inconsequential, such as the showing of movies outside of theaters, are now cause for rethinking how cinema was experienced in the twentieth century. As small-gauge and orphan films resurface, our view of cinema history swish-pans from the few dozen movies produced in Los Angeles and New York every season to the tens of thousands, and at times hundreds of thousands, of motion pictures made every year by amateurs and professionals in the middle decades of the twentieth century. These methodological and historiographic shifts have led to many discoveries and rediscoveries of film practices that have been submerged for decades. The surfacing of a single film
or collection of films appears at first as the sui generis work of pioneers and autodidacts, later as a prime example of a broad category of film practice, and finally as something ordinary that has withstood the many adversities—from chemical degradation to historical neglect—motion pictures of all types faced in the twentieth century.

Our understanding of what constitutes African American cinema has expanded as a result of these shifts. Because the classical Hollywood cinema norms that dominated the early decades of film studies resisted addressing movies made by industry outsiders, early scholarship on African American film focused on the ways in which black people were largely misrepresented in film. The rediscovery of Oscar Micheaux’s films put forth another thesis, that African Americans created and supported so-called race films that constituted a countercinema to Hollywood. More recently, scholars have advanced a third argument, that African Americans put cinema to many uses, particularly those individuals and social groups who were most invested in racial uplift.¹

In this chapter, I build on recent work on African American cinema by emphasizing films that celebrate and promote local people and places, which I call local films. Following Julia Hallam, I argue that local films are motion pictures exhibited outside the home that depict and project place, and it is this public engagement with place that distinguishes local films from adjacent genres, such as travelogues and home movies.² Local films were shot with the intention of public exhibition, and those who appeared in such films were often encouraged to see themselves, as well images of their community, on screen.

One of the earliest sites of nontheatrical film exhibition were religious institutions. African American churches were early adopters of motion pictures, particularly in communities where segregation ensured that many movie theaters were restricted to white audiences.³ What follows focuses on three prominent African American religious leaders—Solomon Sir Jones in Muskogee, Oklahoma; Lonzie Odie Taylor in Memphis, Tennessee; and Bishop Richard Robert Wright in Philadelphia and South Africa—who used film to capture the lives of their congregants and document church activities, including missionary work and visits to national conventions. Although these films are now held by archives, for much of the twentieth century they were in private collections, inaccessible to and therefore unacknowledged by historians of African American or nontheatrical cinema. Shot in 16mm, a gauge that has long thought to have been the domain of a largely white, upper-class elite, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, the films offered African Americans the opportunity to see themselves in their own communities.⁴
As Judith Weisenfeld has documented, African American religious life was of significant interest within and outside the black community in the 1920s and 1930s. Anthropologists, sociologists, and commercial movie producers all created work that sought to capture experiences of African American religiosity. However, much of this work was primarily interested in the rituals and traditions of church life, not in documenting the lives of the members themselves. Within church communities, films were primarily used in three ways: to educate and inspire church members about prominent issues, to document the activities of church members and their supporters, and to allow people who attended church regularly to see themselves on screen. These case studies, then, are more than just revelations of the diversity of moving image production in African American church communities in the 1920s and 1930s. They are also an affirmation of the importance of motion pictures to African Americans, even when Hollywood had little to offer them.

Solomon Sir Jones: The Little Baptist Giant

Solomon Sir Jones, or Dr. S. S. Jones, as he was identified most frequently in newspapers, was born in Tennessee and grew up in Memphis. In 1889, Jones volunteered to go to Oklahoma as a missionary from the American Baptist Home Missionary Society. Over the next twenty-three years, he established churches in five cities, including Muskogee, where he settled and became editor of his church’s state newspaper, the *Baptist Informer*, earning the sobriquet “Little Baptist Giant” from one black newspaper. By the early 1920s, Jones was one of the best-known religious leaders in Oklahoma, which was in turn a prominent center for black people in the West, and known for its all-black towns where African Americans were, for a time, able to start businesses, churches, schools, and other institutions without encountering prejudice and racist laws in effect elsewhere. In fact, it was Jones’s high profile in Oklahoma, not a sudden interest in moving pictures, that likely led to his short-lived but significant foray as a filmmaker.

When Jones acquired his 16mm motion picture camera in late 1924, he was about to embark on a great adventure. A year prior, Jones had entered a contest run by the beauty products behemoth Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, which was now in the hands of Walker’s daughter, A’Lelia. As Kathy Peiss has noted, African American beauty products, particularly those intended to reinforce European beauty standards such as straight hair and light skin, were critiqued by many in the black press. At the same time,
companies like that of Madam Walker were among their most loyal advertisers. Under A’Lelia Walker’s leadership, the company sought to build its image among African American leaders.⁷

One of Walker’s most high-profile efforts was the Trip to the Holy Land contest, apparently inspired by her own travels to Palestine. The contest was launched in early 1923, with advertisements placed in black publications nationwide. In March 1923, the *Dallas Express* ran a full-page advertisement which noted that the contest was intended to give any “Bishop, Presiding Elder, Pastor, or general office of any religious denomination” an opportunity to visit Palestine or, as it was commonly referred to in the 1920s, the Holy Land.⁸ Candidate nominations were accepted until July 1, 1923, and people could vote, using coupons inserted into the packaging of Madam Walker’s beauty products, until the following July. By the time the contest commenced, 358 men of the cloth—by the terms of the contest, women were
not invited to participate—had joined in the race for votes. As intended, the contest quickly turned into a battle pitting regions (the mid-Atlantic, the South, the Midwest, and the West) and religions (Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal [AME], and the United Holiness church) against one another. Vote totals were regularly reported by black newspapers, and Walker’s ads encouraged church organizations to lobby for their favored candidate.

Although Jones’s campaign started slowly, by late 1923 he had caught up with the front-runners and was soon the only Westerner in the running. In July 1924, the contest concluded, with Jones winning third place. While he just missed winning a cash prize, he was still given a free trip to Europe and the Middle East, along with ministers from Washington, DC, Atlanta, and Cincinnati. The four ministers boarded the S.S. Paris in January 1925 for an eight-week trip that took them through Europe—England, France, Switzerland, and Italy—before heading to Egypt and Palestine. The group

"I'll See You in Church"
also visited World War I battlefields. *The Messenger* wrote, “[The] clergy-men intend to take photographs and moving pictures of what they see on this eventful trip. These will be used in a series of lectures they will deliver upon their return.” The trip itself received considerable coverage in black newspapers, perhaps because Madam Walker was a prominent advertiser, with articles written before the group embarked and again on their return.

In promoting their second contest, this time offering winners a journey around the world, representatives of the Walker company noted that Jones had made good use of the films he took during the first contest: “When the Madam Walker Company announced its Trip to the Holy Land Contest, there were many skeptical people and many criticisms, but when the four contesting ministers made the trip and their pictures appeared in our colored weeklies and da[i]lies, embarking on the palatial Steamship Paris for this world renowned trip, crit[i]cism changed to praise. Rev. S.S. Jones of Muskogee, Oklahoma, is now covering the country giving special lectures on the countries he visited on this remarkable trip.” Jones gave travel lectures throughout the Midwest, where he presented a selection of the 200 photographs and 60,800 motion pictures—he presumably counted every frame—he took in his travels. A flyer from mid-April 1925, just a month after Jones returned from his trip, promised audiences in St. Louis “A Burning Message for All which cost thousands of dollars and almost life itself to get!” In late May, he screened his travel pictures at Langston University in Oklahoma. While there, he also filmed the university’s graduation ceremony, and soon after began making his local films on a regular basis, shooting eleven more reels of film in the remainder of the year.

When the Solomon Sir Jones collection was acquired by Yale University in 2009, it was lauded as a rare, early collection of African American local films, mostly produced in small towns in Oklahoma. But the twenty-nine-reel collection contains four reels of film that were taken during Jones’s trip to Europe and the Middle East, and another eight reels that feature footage taken in other states. In addition to the Holy Land pictures, several other reels appear to have been edited for exhibition, including two that incorporate footage from a commercial 16mm production, Bell and Howell’s Adventure Series, and others that seek to draw relationships between similar events. For example, in one reel, Jones films a photograph of the devastation caused by the 1921 Tulsa race riot, in which whites burned thirty-five city blocks of the prosperous Greenwood District, while a moving image depicts the neighborhood several years later.
Instead of using title cards, Jones filmed a bulletin board with push-pin letters, which he changed to identify people and places and, in many cases, also date when footage was taken. The first films in the collection appear to be from December 1924, when Jones films himself and his church in Muskogee. The Holy Land images are undated, perhaps because Jones knew that he wanted to screen them over a number of years. The presence of the two Bell and Howell films in the collection, in addition to the fact that Jones began shooting in late 1924, before Kodak had a spring-wound automatic camera, suggests that Jones used Bell and Howell’s Filmo camera, introduced in 1923.

Aside from his films in his church communities, Muskogee and Okmulgee, Jones seemed primarily interested in organizational activities—Baptist
conventions, business meetings, and the like—or events, such as church construction, that would draw broad interest. For example, when Jones visited Boley, Oklahoma, to film a drill performance by the Camp Fire Girls and Military Boys, one paper noted that he “was present with the great addition to the race[‘]s progress his moving picture machine.” The camera’s role was not merely recording events for the benefit of those who participated in them. Rather, the events he filmed were intended to be public, shown by Jones to other audiences.

It’s not clear why Jones stopped making moving pictures in 1928, as he continued to tour with Holy Land movies until at least 1929, and possibly longer. In March 1929, he went to St. Mary’s Baptist Church in Wichita, Kansas, to show what the Negro Star called the “most interesting Biblical pictures that have ever been in the city of Wichita,” part of a tour in Kansas that also included a stop in Topeka. He continued to officiate funerals in the early 1930s and died in 1936, at the age of sixty-seven. Although Jones was an active filmmaker and exhibitor for just four years, in this period he managed to use motion pictures to enhance his reputation as a nationally prominent religious leader and businessman.

Taylor-Made Motion Pictures

While Jones was an active filmmaker and exhibitor for just a few years, the Reverend L. O. Taylor built his career as a minister and a photographer-filmmaker in tandem. In 1931, he became pastor of the Olivet Baptist church, a new institution in Memphis’s Orange Mound community, a suburban neighborhood established in the 1890s by African Americans. According to a history of Orange Mound, in 1937 Taylor led an expansion of the church, including adding an auditorium, and remained pastor until 1956. Although Taylor’s photography, and later filmmaking, was initially separate from his church activities, he quickly integrated movies into a repertoire of creative expression—poems, essays, and sound recordings—that marked his unique place in the Memphis community.

In 1977, Taylor’s films and photographs were donated by his widow to the Center for Southern Folklore in Memphis. In 1989, the experimental filmmaker Lynne Sachs, a Memphis native, made a documentary on Taylor titled Sermons and Sacred Pictures, long before historians were interested in nontheatrical film. More recently, a selection of Taylor’s films have been digitized and placed online, but only on a commercial stock footage site.
first not to have much in common, both are as interested in using Taylor’s films in service of other narratives as they are in the films themselves.

For example, in *Sermons and Sacred Pictures*, Sachs uses Taylor’s footage and sound recordings, interviews with his former parishioners, and her own footage of a screening of Taylor’s films to re-create Taylor’s role in the Memphis black community in the mid-twentieth century. Footage taken from a train, for example, is set against the audio from an interview in which someone recounts the experience of African Americans riding trains in the segregation era. While many documentaries pair primary source documents with newly recorded witness testimony, the fact that Sachs’s subject is a filmmaker means that such a tactic effectively undermines an assessment of Taylor’s own film practice. These early sections of the documentary, which set out to re-create the atmosphere of African American life in Memphis in the 1930s and 1940s, treat Taylor’s practice as an archival one, which gains meaning only when the filmmaker situates it within contexts, such as the civil rights movement. Historic Films, the stock footage site where Taylor’s films can now be viewed, repeats this logic, making these films no different than home movies or newsreels.

Rather than evaluating Taylor’s films on their own merits, Sachs implicitly argues that Taylor’s filmmaking activities are best understood as performance. Interviews with people who appeared in, and saw, Taylor’s films in *Sermons* serve to emphasize the insularity of his productions, as if they were made only for an audience who expected to see themselves on screen. Early in the film, Sachs even reproduces the exhibition experience of Taylor’s film, filming an audience in a nontheatrical space watching Taylor’s films, with both the 16mm projector and the screen visible in the frame, and audio of a murmuring crowd on the soundtrack, as if people were responding to seeing friends on screen. As one unidentified interview subject says of Taylor, “he would take pictures, and edit them together, and make a presentation out of them.” By emphasizing the experiential qualities of Taylor’s films, Sachs’s documentary embeds them within communities of viewers, who in turn saw them through their own limited perspectives on Taylor’s entire body of work.

Although the website Historic Films is intended to be used by documentary producers in need of footage, its collection of Taylor’s films retains the original organization of the films, so it is possible to view them as completed reels rather than just fragments. Taylor modeled his film practice on contemporary documentary practices, particularly the newsreel. In one of the title cards he made for his films, he suggests that a “Taylor Made Picture” is

“I’ll See You in Church” [79]
“bringing you news and historical records,” revealing an intention to keep these films after they were shown to local audiences.

In fact, from the extant films it is clear that Taylor saw his role as a recorder of the African American experience. Title cards such as “The Negro in Business” and “The Negro in Church Life” encouraged audiences to think of the films, even when they were of their own community, as representative of much broader experiences. For example, a 1940 Church Life installment includes a scene depicting a river baptism with a striking intimacy. The opening shot of the film is framed to include the baptisms in the lower right of the screen and the crowd of onlookers on the riverbank in the top half of the frame. In this way, the film both witnesses the baptism and depicts others who witnessed it. This shot is followed by several shots of the congregation and finally a close-up of one of the baptisms. While the people in the shot are aware of the camera’s presence, this is not a performance for the camera, but rather documentation of an ordinary event. In this way, Taylor’s work echoes that of contemporary black filmmakers such as Spencer Williams, whose documentary style filming of a baptism scene in The Blood of Jesus (1941) serves to bring legitimacy and reverence to African American religious practices.

If Jones demonstrated the usefulness of motion pictures in church work, Taylor showed that it was possible to build an enterprise of local film production. Rather than just using scenes of local people to get them to see themselves in the movies, Taylor sought to make the experiences that marked their daily lives significant, and integrated them with other news events, such as a 1939 stop by the black gospel radio performers Wings Over Jordan, to accentuate the significance of his practice. Taylor’s films of the meeting of the National Baptist Convention were also popular, though it is unclear whether these films were intended to be shown at the conventions themselves or to church members back home who wanted to see what went on in the meetings of the oldest, and one of the largest, African American organizations in the United States. Taylor continued making pictures throughout the 1940s and 1950s, creating along the way a cinematic record of the African American experience in Memphis.

Film as Missionary Work: Bishop Richard Robert Wright in Philadelphia

Religious leaders often used their films to connect people living in different places. For example, Jones’s travel films were shown alongside his local films of towns and church communities throughout the Midwest. Taylor, on the
other hand, only screened movies in Memphis, but he often filmed people and places far from the banks of the Mississippi, presumably to be shown back home. Bishop Richard Robert Wright Jr. was also tied to local church communities in Philadelphia, but rather than train his camera on church members at home, he produced films during his time as a missionary in South Africa. While these films may have been screened in the places where they were made, such as the AME's mission projects in South Africa, they appear to have been primarily produced for exhibition back in the United States, occasionally to audiences who would recognize their friends and neighbors who were doing service work overseas.

Although Wright was born and educated in Georgia, as a young adult he migrated to Philadelphia, where he earned a PhD in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. He very quickly became involved in Progressive politics and, particularly, the Social Gospel movement, with a focus on the challenges faced by black southern migrants in the north. In 1909, he was appointed editor of the AME's newspaper, the Christian Recorder, a position he held until 1928, when he became a pastor. In 1932, he was appointed president of Wilberforce University in Ohio, which was affiliated with the AME church. In 1936, he was elected bishop of the AME church and, in keeping with standard practice, was sent on an overseas mission for his first four-year term, arriving in Capetown on November 30 of that year.

In his autobiography, Wright does not mention his filmmaking during this period, but in scrapbooks he kept of his time in South Africa he includes a receipt for the purchase of a hundred-foot roll of Kodak film, dated October 11, 1937. Like Jones, Wright became a filmmaker later in life, shooting his first film at the age of fifty-nine. In his papers, which were donated to Temple University by Wright's daughter, Ruth Wright Hayre, there are five 16mm reels, one of which is an edited film, including intertitles, of Wright's missionary work in South Africa. In February 1938, Wright returned to the United States after a serious medical issue and sought treatment at the Flint-Goodridge hospital in New Orleans.

In March 1938, Wright screened his motion pictures in New Orleans, most likely to a church audience. While in the city, he also sat for a portrait by Arthur P. Bedou, a studio photographer who was best known for his work with Booker T. Washington. In a letter, Bedou calls Wright's movies “bea[u]tiful,” expressing hopes that “when you . . . return . . . you will bring a new set.” While it is not clear which films were screened by Wright, two reels in the collection were made during this period and were likely to have been seen in the Crescent City that spring. While in the United States, Wright also screened "I'll See You in Church"
films in St. Louis, Kansas City, and other cities, most likely in AME churches rather than movie theaters.²⁹

The reel opens with an intertitle: “Bishop Wright presents some views of his travels with Mrs. Wright in South Africa during 1936, 1937 and 1938 in connection with his supervision of the Fifteenth Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.” By placing his travels within his evangelical work, Wright allows for the picture to be read either as depictions of a distant place or as records of works that were likely funded by church members in the U.S.

The early scenes in the film are arranged in chronological order, starting with shots of the countryside followed by those of a train. The next intertitle reads, “First New Year’s Day in South Africa: ‘Coons.” As the following shots confirm, the footage is of Cape Town’s annual Kaapse Klopse, or “Coons,” minstrel festival, celebrated by South Africa’s Cape Coloureds. The South
African appropriation of the slur “coons” was startling enough to Wright for him to report its usage to newspapers in the United States. Subsequent shots depict other important geographical and cultural sites for Wright's audience of U.S.-based church members, including tourist attractions and church gatherings. While this footage could be read as part of a travelogue, like Jones's films of his travels in Europe and the Middle East, the fact that Wright was screening these films to AME church members, many of whom likely lent financial support to the South Africa mission or, in some cases, knew people who were doing missionary work there, made them more intimate affairs than they appear to be.

One particularly important scene comes midway through the reel, introduced by a title card that reads “Wilberforce Institute, 1000 miles north of Capetown.” The institute was established by the AME church in 1908 and received almost all of its funding from AME churches in the United States. The opening shot is a 360-degree pan of a flat, barren landscape pocked with brick and stone buildings. In a subsequent shot, which appears to be slow-cranked in order to produce the illusion of frenetic activity, people clear land for the presumed construction of additional buildings. In the next shot, some of the same individuals are lined up, carrying out what appear to be military exercises. As with much of Wright's footage, these scenes can be read both as signs of progress and a demonstration of the needs of a distant community, linked by AME's ongoing relationship with South Africa.

In December 1938, Wright and a small entourage traveled to Swaziland, where he was to meet King Sobhuza II, the country's monarch, a trip that had been planned for almost two years. While he does not appear to have documented this visit with his camera, in his memoirs he recalls that one of his traveling companions, Lucy Hughes, then president of the AME's Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society, brought a camera along: “He [King Sobhuza II] came out of his office and welcomed us: my wife, Dr. and Mrs. White, Mrs. Hughes, and about a half dozen others in our party. Mrs. Hughes lifted her camera to take a motion picture of the group with the kraal in the background. As soon as she had finished her picture, King Sobhuza II raised his hand and said, 'Excuse me,' entered his office and returned with his own motion picture camera. He took views of us, one of which included me taking a picture of the king and his kraal.” Unlike those of Taylor and Jones, the movies were not an essential tool in Wright's ministry, and later footage, taken in Haiti, St. Thomas, and the Virgin Islands, among other places, does not appear to have been prepared for widespread exhibition. At the same time, in this anecdote Wright reveals a world in
Wilberforce Institute,
1000 miles north
of Capetown
which the movies were commonplace, at least among a certain social stratum, and carried with them a democratic potential. In fact, Wright’s father, Major Richard R. Wright, made his own movie debut a few years later, encouraging African Americans to support World War II in Jack Goldberg’s 1943 film *We’ve Come a Long, Long Way*.33

Archives and the Local Film

In Ralph Ellison’s unfinished second novel, published in its fullest form in 2010 as *Three Days Before the Shooting*, he depicts a character named Mister Movie-Man, one of a trio of itinerant filmmakers who seek to take advantage of gullible movie-struck individuals in small towns in the South. Although it is unlikely that Ellison, who grew up in Oklahoma City, encountered S. S. Jones as a young man, Ellison’s creation of this character—one of the few itinerant filmmakers depicted in fiction—seems to be based on an experience from his youth, when such flim-flam men were commonplace. In fact, in the 2002 documentary *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey*, Jones’s footage is used to connote the experience of growing up in Oklahoma.

The scenes in Ellison’s unfinished novel suggest a world of African American film production that is only now coming into fuller view, even though Ellison’s manuscript, like the reels discussed in this essay, have been known to researchers for many years. In fact, this rhetoric of loss haunts many discussions of films made by African Americans, even when the films themselves were not lost. The local films discussed in this chapter were not for contemporary audiences alone. Rather, filmmakers took care to document these places, recording and identifying them for future generations. For example, all three filmmakers used title cards to identify the date and place of each shot, even though most itinerant filmmakers seldom took the trouble of doing so. If we place too much emphasis on their lost status, we risk losing a sense of why they were made in the first place. By resisting the urge to read these films as merely artifacts, we may open up larger questions about the African American experience of cinema in the early decades of the twentieth century.

For example, the rediscovery in 2009 of the Solomon Sir Jones films, which were acquired by Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, has been discussed as a significant find, with Currie Ballard, who purchased the films and brought them to auction in New York, giving interviews on his role in making the collection more widely known. However, as early as 1998, the writer and historian Ann Eskridge claimed that she discovered the films and exhibited them at the Henry Ford Museum in Detroit, and
even incorporated them into a documentary, *Echoes across the Prairie: The Vanishing Black West*, that she made that year. In fact, there were two collections of Jones’s films. The larger collection, which was acquired by Ballard, contains films made for public exhibition. But Jones’s home movies were given to a family friend, Clarence Long, whose sister, Naomi Long Madgett, is a prominent African American poet and publisher. In her 2006 autobiography, Madgett wrote about her early encounters with Jones, noting that he “had the vision to know that black life in Oklahoma, including the all-black towns, was important to record.” While these films were not in an archive until recently, they were visible enough to be mined as archival footage for other projects. In 2011, Madgett donated nine 400-foot reels shot by Jones to the National Museum of African American Culture and History, which digitized them in 2015.

Likewise, L. O. Taylor’s films have been known to researchers for some time, but they have not been the subject of scholarship, a situation that might change with their recent digitization. When Sachs’s documentary was released in 1989, there were comparatively few published studies of nontheatrical or small-gauge film, which made the Taylor collection appear to be more of an outlier than has later turned out to be the case. Finally, although the Wright collection is smaller, his films of South Africa are not mentioned in histories of the AME church, even though they provide valuable insight into the cultural and social exchange between these church communities in the United States and South Africa in the 1930s. The visibility of African American experiences in these three collections is masked by an invisibility of the films themselves, which is itself a consequence of how these films are archived and described. While films in all three of these collections could be described merely as home movies, the fact that they were exhibited in public settings makes them more than private documentation of the past. Rather, these films can be seen as akin to work of other African American filmmakers, from George Broome to William Foster, who sought to use the cinema as a tool of racial uplift.

In this chapter, I have discussed the work of three ministers who filmed church communities, and made films for these communities, in the first half of the twentieth century. While there is a strong temptation, guided by the valuation placed on the rare, the unique, and the aesthetically significant, to read such films as exemplary, I think the opposite reading, as commonplace and ordinary, is more warranted. By claiming that films like those I have discussed in this chapter were a common mode of African American motion picture production in the 1920s and 1930s, debates about the propriety of either negative stereotypes perpetuated in Hollywood films, or the countercinema

“I’ll See You in Church” [87]
of Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams, become less important than the fact that many African Americans were able to see moving images of themselves in institutions that they created and sustained.

To put my argument in more expansive terms, the median film in 1935, in terms of what was produced, and perhaps also what was seen, was not a B Western, but a home movie, an educational film, or a local film, like those made by the three filmmakers discussed in this chapter. By situating these films in their own time, as images that sought to capture, share, and archive African American places and people, it becomes possible to see them for what they were—local films of black life, made by individuals who were determined to document experiences that no one else would.

FILMOGRAPHY

All available films discussed in this chapter can be streamed through the book’s web page at https://www.dukeupress.edu/Features/Screening-Race.


Ruth Wright Hayre Collection. Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University. Five reels of black-and-white and color 16mm film.

NOTES

1 While there is not space to review even a small portion of the relevant literature, key texts include Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: Viking, 1973), now in its fifth edition; Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser, Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), which has been reprinted. The third generation of scholarship begins with Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and continues with Cara Caddoo, Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); and Allyson Nadia Field, Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
2 Julia Hallam, “Film, Space and Place: Researching a City in Film,” New Review of Film and Television Studies 8, no. 3 (2010): 277–96. For more on local films, see Martin L. Johnson, Main Street Movies: A History of Local Film in the United States (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

3 See Caddoo, Envisioning Freedom, which discusses the use of films in African American churches before 1920.

4 For example, see Charles Tepperman, Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Moviemaking, 1923–1960 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 37. While Tepperman does mention Eloyce Gist, whose 16mm films made in the late 1920s and early 1930s are well known, in a footnote, his reliance on the amateur trade press leads him to exclude accounts of African American filmmaking. Archivist Jasmyn Castro has established the African American Home Movie Archive (http://aahma.org), which includes a database of films produced by African American families, held by archives throughout the United States. See chapter 18 in this volume.


8 Advertisement, Dallas Express, March 31, 1923, 1.

9 “Bishop Fountain Leads in Mme. Walker’s Holy Land Contest,” Dallas Express, October 13, 1923, 1.

10 Advertisement, Pittsburgh Courier, August 2, 1924, 8.


12 “Capetown to Be Visited by Walker Tourists on Trip around the World,” Pittsburgh Courier, June 5, 1926, 7.


15 “Langston, Okla.,” Topeka Plaindealer, May 29, 1925, 2.


17 “Boley News,” Topeka Plaindealer, September 18, 1925, 2.

18 The Smithsonian has acquired Jones’s home movies, which were made between 1925 and 1931.


20 Jones filmed several businesses in the Orange Mound community in 1926, though it’s unclear whether he encountered Taylor during this period.


“I’ll See You in Church” [89]

22 Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Notable Black Memphians (Amherst, NY: Cambria, 2008), 300.


24 In 2007, the Center for Southern Folklore received a $210,951 matching grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to archive and preserve Taylor’s photographs, film, and vinyl records. This preservation work has been completed, but due to staffing and space limitations the collection is not yet fully accessible to researchers. Digitized and watermarked copies of some of the films can be viewed on the stock footage site Historic Films (http://www.historicfilms.com).


26 Richard Robert Wright, 87 Years behind the Black Curtain: An Autobiography (Philadelphia: Rare Book Company, 1965), 244.


28 Bedou to Wright, March 19, 1938.

29 Clippings, March 25, 1938, Ruth Wright Hayre Collection. Isabel M. Thompson, “Covering the Kansas Cities,” Pittsburgh Courier, April 6, 1938, 22. According to the Courier, Wright also made stops in Washington, DC, Atlanta, Montgomery, Chicago, and Philadelphia and at Wilberforce University in Ohio, though it’s not clear whether he screened his motion pictures in each city. See “Bishop Wright, Wife Return from Field,” Pittsburgh Courier, April 30, 1938, 19. He also screened movies in York, Pennsylvania. See “Bishop Wright Will Speak to Yorkers,” Gazette and Daily, June 24, 1939, 5. In York, Wright screened his films at an AME church, and it is likely that AME churches hosted his screenings in other communities.

30 “South Africans Call Selves ‘Coons,’” New York Age, February 13, 1937, 2. In the article, Wright compares the festival to the Mummers Parade in Philadelphia, and Mardi Gras in New Orleans.


32 Wright, 87 Years behind the Black Curtain, 250.

33 Weisenfeld, Hollywood Be Thy Name, 190.


36 These films are now available on DVD: Richard Norman, Richard Maurice, Spencer Williams, and Oscar Micheaux, dirs., *Pioneers of African-American Cinema* (Kino Lorber, 2015).