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Ever-Widening Horizons?

The National Urban League and the Pathologization of Blackness in *A Morning for Jimmy* (1960)

MICHELLE KELLEY

Your experience has nothing to do with the other fella. Just because he is discouraged, you have no right to be. You are a person, with a mind, an individual. You got to be better than the other fella. And you can be.—JIMMY’S GRANDFATHER IN *A Morning for Jimmy*

In 1960, Mrs. H. Sale of Midland, Texas, wrote to Association Films, distributor of the National Urban League (NUL) film *A Morning for Jimmy* (Barry K. Brown, 1960). In the handwritten letter, forwarded by Association Films to the league, Mrs. Sale, a white woman, lauds the film’s ethos of self-help: “Today I saw a film produced for the National Urban League by your company. It was excellently produced + photographed, and put the stress on the responsibility of the Negro himself rather than expecting the white man to do something for him.” Mrs. Sale proceeds to commend the NUL for espousing a by-your-bootstraps philosophy of black social uplift, which she suggests distinguishes the league from the civil rights organization with which it was often compared, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). “It has seemed to me,” she writes, “that the NAACP has been primarily concerned with fomenting unrest instead of educating the Negro to his own responsibility to improve his lot.” Mrs. Sale concludes her letter by asserting the importance of educating both blacks and whites in order to affect social progress and curb prejudice.¹

Described in the NUL’s press release as “a vivid portrayal of the problem of guidance and incentive faced by many minority youth,” *A Morning for
Jimmy tells the story of an African American teenager whose encounter with discriminatory hiring practices causes him to doubt the attainability of his goal to become an architect. However, with the help of his teacher and an array of black professionals, Jimmy learns that if he works very hard, he may be able to achieve his dreams. Jimmy features a score by accomplished jazz musician Billy Taylor and a cast of both amateur and professional actors, including New York City’s High School of the Performing Arts student James Pemberton as Jimmy and a young Cicely Tyson in the role of Jimmy’s sister. Completed in 1960, the film was distributed nontheatrically on 16mm and broadcast on television across the country. The NUL determined that over 50 percent of those who saw Jimmy at a nontheatrical screening, such as a school assembly, NUL event, or civic group meeting, were African American high school students in the South, a demographic it was eager to reach with its message of expanding professional opportunities for black youth. By 1962, the league estimated that roughly eight million viewers had seen A Morning for Jimmy either on TV or at a nontheatrical screening.

Viewers reportedly responded favorably to A Morning for Jimmy. These viewers included both racial conservatives like Mrs. Sale, who argued that it was the responsibility of African Americans themselves to redress inequality, and black youth from Dallas to New York who drew inspiration
from the film’s rare depiction of black professionals and a black middle-class family. Yet as I will argue, despite its appeal to viewers of varying races, ages, and social positions, A Morning for Jimmy is a racially conservative film that negatively characterizes black identity and solidarity. In this chapter, I trace the planning and production of what became A Morning for Jimmy from 1955, when screenwriter Bernard Miller submitted a script to the league called A World for Jim. For reasons I discuss below, the project was suspended. By the time it was resumed in 1960, profound changes had occurred, both within the broad context of U.S. race relations and, more specifically, within liberal thought on race, prejudice, and inequality. World/Morning bears traces of these changes, which subtly informed the project’s evolution.

Both Miller’s World script and A Morning for Jimmy downplay the role of systemic racism and discrimination in perpetuating racial inequality. Instead, they suggest that black people themselves have impeded racial progress by becoming embittered by their encounters with prejudice. However, World and Morning differ in their characterization of this bitterness. World focuses on the supposed psychological pathology of the individual black child. The script’s protagonist, Jim Anderson, struggles to overcome emotional barriers within himself to achieve his vocational goals. In contrast, Morning focuses on the pathology not of the black child but of the black community, personified by Jimmy Carroll’s father. Racial liberals of the 1950s and ’60s argued that African Americans were psychologically damaged, believing that by pointing to the harm white racism causes its victims, they were helping to combat injustice. Yet these arguments stigmatized African Americans as pathological while displacing focus away from the pathology of white racism. Similarly, although both A World for Jim and A Morning for Jimmy acknowledge the very real psychic pain that systemic white racism can cause, by focusing on this pain as the primary obstacle its protagonists must overcome, they deflect from the problem of racism as such. As a result, the World/Morning project places the onus for racial progress on black people themselves, suggesting that what needs to change is not society at large, but rather African Americans’ response to it.

“Not Alms but Opportunity”: The National Urban League

A Morning for Jimmy is informed by the NUL’s long-standing belief that, as Miller writes in a prefatory statement to his script, “the Negro at work is his most convincing argument” against discrimination. Since its establishment in 1911, the league had ascribed to the idea that the best way to overcome
racial inequality in the U.S. was through displays of black merit in the workforce. Middle- and upper-class reformers, both black and white, established the league to help recent rural migrants to New York City assimilate to urban life, yet their attitude toward the new arrivals was, at best, benevolently paternalistic. When, in the midst of the first wave of the Great Migration, the city implemented a series of Jim Crow laws, these reformers responded not by decrying the city’s racist response to the migration, but rather by attempting to reform the attitudes and behaviors of the recent migrants.7

The NUL’s approach to black uplift changed only slightly in the context of the civil rights era. Due in part to progress made in legislative reform efforts in the 1950s, in the 1960s the league embraced legalism as a supplement to its primary, merit-based strategy of black advancement. As NUL public relations executive Guichard Parris wrote in his history of the league, “For the first time . . . the NUL advanced from its traditional position of asking ‘not alms but opportunity,’ or simply for equal opportunity. It recognized and admitted the impossibility of blacks to compete equally because of historic handicaps and called for similar recognition from society.” For Parris, this was “special pleading without apology.”8 Nevertheless, despite this acknowledgment of structural inequality in the 1960s, the league’s members maintained their faith in the idea that the U.S. was, in essence, a meritocracy, and they averred the notion that displays of black merit in the workforce would lead, gradually but inexorably, to racism’s ultimate eradication.

A Morning for Jimmy was not the NUL’s first foray into the use of mass media to promote its work and spread its racially moderate message. As Barbara Diane Savage has documented, the league gained unprecedented access to the nation’s airwaves during World War II. The wartime emergency and its attendant increase in racial tensions created an incentive for the networks to broadcast the league’s messages of tolerance, inclusivity, and black merit.9 In the 1950s, the league continued to work in radio while attempting to expand into film and TV, though these efforts repeatedly met with failure. It was not until A Morning for Jimmy that the NUL achieved its long-standing ambition of making a vocational guidance film of sufficient quality to find a wide audience outside the league.

Jimmy’s Roots: Planning and Production History

The league began to plan for the production of a vocational guidance film in 1955. The project was initiated as part of the NUL’s Tomorrow’s Scientists and Technicians campaign, which aimed to encourage African American youth
to pursue careers in skilled professions historically barred to them. Bernard Miller, a little-known writer with a background in television and nontheatrical film, wrote the preliminary script. Titled A World for Jim, Miller’s script explores the plight of Jim Anderson, an African American youth who aspires to become an engineer. However, Jim’s dreams are nearly dashed when he becomes embittered by the seemingly insurmountable career challenges he faces due to his race. A run-in with the law brings Jim face-to-face with an African American judge who challenges Jim’s pessimistic worldview.

Miller submitted two detailed drafts of the script to the league, including dialogue and camera instructions. The first draft was critiqued on the levels of production feasibility and character motivation by experts in the field of nonfiction film production, including the noted documentarian Julien Bryan and the director of the American Jewish Committee’s Film Section, Robert Disraeli. Miller appears to have subsequently revised the script based on Bryan and Disraeli’s suggestions. As a result, Miller produced a much longer, fifty-four-page script in which he added two narrative elements: a gang of rogue youth called the Exiles, which Jim joins, and a high-achieving African American teenager named Lloyd Bender. Despite, or perhaps because of, these revisions, which would have substantially increased the production’s cost, the league chose to terminate its contract with Miller, and the film project was suspended.

The project lay dormant for four years. According to an internal report on the production history of A Morning for Jimmy, in 1959 both Disraeli and writer Basil Beyea submitted versions of the script to the league; however, for reasons that are not revealed in the league’s papers, the NUL judged both scripts to be unacceptable. Shortly thereafter, NUL board member and NBC Public Affairs Department executive Edward Stanley recommended Himan Brown to the league as a producer for the film. Brown was a noted pioneer of radio who innovated many of the medium’s signature dramatic sound effects. His son, Barry K. Brown, who was just beginning to work in the film industry, was chosen to write and direct.10 Barry K. Brown subsequently submitted an entirely new script, albeit one strikingly similar to those that Miller had drafted for the league in 1955.11

A World for Jim

The script for World consistently emphasizes Jim’s perception and vision. It describes the proposed film as opening on a close-up of a graduation cap and gown. Miller writes that the camera pulls back to reveal a young man
rushing into the room and hurriedly putting the garments on. Regarding himself in the mirror, Jim chuckles sardonically at his own reflection. During his high school graduation, in an effort to escape a speaker’s droning oration, Jim reflects on his youth and on recent events. Through a series of flashbacks and subjective images granting us access to his thoughts, we learn that, due to the negative influence of his peers, parents, and the actions of an “angry and prejudiced teacher,” Jim has grown increasingly despairing of his prospects. Despite the intervention of a benevolent white teacher whom Jim nonetheless distrusts, Jim’s grades have been falling. In a particularly striking sequence, the script describes Jim playing basketball; before a cheering crowd, he shoots. Yet in that very instant the crowd vanishes, leaving Jim alone, sobbing on the darkened court. After graduation, Jim traverses a black business district. “The Camera becomes Jim’s eyes,” writes Miller. “We have a continuous and panoramic view of what this boy, discouraged by what he considers to be his limited opportunity, selectively observes in his environment.” Miller proceeds to identify a series of black-owned businesses ostensibly intended to represent the limited vocational opportunities afforded to African Americans.12

Following a brief visit home and a heated confrontation with his father, who offers to help him procure a factory job, Jim returns to the scene of his high school graduation where the senior dance is taking place. This scene is presented quite differently in the first and second drafts of Miller’s scripts. In both scripts, Jim tries to enter the dance. However, a white boy collecting tickets stops him, reminding Jim that he cannot enter without a partner. Jim shouts the boy down, declaring that he has as much right to enter as anyone else. “He is reacting as though the issue in question were one of segregation,” comments Miller. In the shorter of the two scripts, Jim, having forced his way in, proceeds to intervene between a white couple on the dance floor. “You’d better get used to colored guys taking a lot of things from you,” Jim tells the white boy, having claimed his date. “Jim, I don’t care much about your color. But your manners are lousy,” the boy replies, a comment that Miller seems to have included to attest to the fact that Jim’s perception of racism is, in fact, a misperception.13 In the longer version of the script, Jim intervenes between Lloyd Bender and his date. Jim mockingly asks Lloyd, who was salutatorian at graduation, “I want to know what the secret is, Lloyd. I want to know how you got on that big white honor roll.” In both script versions a fight ensues, prompting the arrival of a police officer. Jim flees the scene; however, he rather unluckily runs into yet another officer on his beat, and the two policemen tackle him.14
Following the incident at the dance, Jim faces charges including disorderly conduct, assault, and resisting arrest. Jim and the African American judge discuss the source of Jim's bitterness, namely, the limited opportunities he faces due to his race. The judge suggests that in fact Jim confronts two problems: the problem of the color line is one, but the other, more pressing problem concerns Jim's lack of ambition and limited job preparedness. “The fact that it may be tough for a Negro boy to get a particular job is a racial problem,” admits the judge. “The fact that you're not even preparing yourself to get that job is your own personal problem . . . and has nothing to do with race.” While seeming to present a balanced perspective, this statement glosses the complex relationship between limited job preparedness and racial inequality. Jim's lack of preparation has everything to do with race. Not only does the reality of racial inequality instill in Jim a profound sense of hopelessness, thwarting his ambition; it also limits his access to means of readying himself for a skilled profession, such as job training. The judge accuses Jim of complacency and ineffectual, aimless anger. When Jim asks the judge how he, a mere teenager, could possibly aid the cause of progress, the judge replies, “At age seventeen Jim . . . I'd say the best way would be to prepare yourself for change. What's the point of people like me working day and night for new laws . . . and civil rights . . . if people like you are not ready to accept them?”

The judge's advice to Jim—specifically, that job preparedness is the best way for him to help advance the cause of equality—aptly expresses the basic tenets undergirding the league's approach to racial uplift during this era. The judge argues that his legislative efforts, though important, are meaningless if young black men like Jim fail to prove their worth in the world of work. Indeed, within the logic of the script, Jim's commitment to self-improvement and career success is of greater importance in the fight against inequality than are the judge's legal activism and reform initiatives.

Rather than sentence him to jail time, the judge offers Jim probation. However, as a condition of his probation, Jim must meet with several of the judge's friends and colleagues, all African Americans who have excelled in historically white-dominated professions. Jim's final meeting is with an African American engineer overseeing the construction of a bridge. In response to Jim's question as to whether or not he thinks Jim will succeed in achieving his career goals, the engineer asks Jim if he is “any good.” “I can't really say,” replies Jim sheepishly. “Well, I guess that's what it adds up to,” says the engineer. “Yes, I know,” replies Jim. “That's what everybody tells me.” The black professionals' repeated assertion that Jim's primary obstacle to achieving success is not discrimination but rather his own as-yet-unproven merit fills
him with hope. The script ends with Jim looking out over the vast expanse of a bay from the bridge as the camera recedes. *A World for Jim* thus suggests the expansion of Jim’s prospects and, to borrow the title of another *null* film of the 1950s, the “ever-widening horizons” of black vocational opportunity.16

Probing the Psychology of Black Youth

Miller’s *World* script attests to the widespread interest at this time, manifest in both Cold War social science and popular culture, in the psychology of black youth. His script depicts Jim’s psychic torment in a number of instances. For example, he describes Jim weeping alone on the abandoned basketball court. Later, appearing before the judge, Jim erupts with sudden, unexpected anger. Indeed, Miller’s script displays a surprisingly complex understanding of the psychic effects of racism and inequality. Miller may have focused on exploring these effects because of the highly publicized importance attributed to them by the Supreme Court in its 1954 ruling in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The Court’s decision overturned its 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which permitted the segregation of public schools based on race. The Court reversed this decision in part due to the expert testimony of many of the nation’s leading social scientists, who argued that segregation causes irreparable psychic harm to African American youth. As Chief Justice Earl Warren stated in his delivery of the Court’s opinion, “to separate [African American children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.”17 Although *Brown v. Board* was a milestone in the history of legislative efforts to achieve a more equitable society, racial progressives have since criticized aspects of the case. Daryl Michael Scott asserts that the *NAACP* attorneys’ focus on the psychological effects of segregation came at the expense of addressing its social and economic costs.18 Lani Guinier argues that these attorneys stressed the psychic toll exacted by segregation on black youth in order to secure the sympathy of predominantly white middle- and upper-class liberals. In doing so, however, they failed to demand more sweeping structural changes that likely would have met with resistance from their white supporters.19

Both the Court ruling and *A World for Jim* reflect many of the same ideas about race, psychology, and social change prevalent among racial liberals of the 1950s. In fact, many of the criticisms that have been directed at *Brown* since 1954 can also be leveled at Miller’s script. For example, Guinier
observes that the Court’s opinion unwittingly contributed to racial stigmatization: “Predicated on experiments purportedly showcasing blacks’ low self-esteem, the opinion reinforced the stigma long associated with blacks, even as it attributed the stigma to racism rather than biology.”20 That is, the opinion characterized African Americans as psychologically damaged. True, the Court suggested that their collective psychic malady was attributable to social inequality—or, more specifically, to the fact of segregated schooling. Nevertheless, blacks were still made to bear the stigma of pathology. World likewise acknowledges the reality of racism and discrimination, and, like Brown, it attributes black youths’ low self-esteem to the problem of prejudice. Yet also like Brown, its focus is not on white racism per se. World suggests that the obstacles Jim faces are not primarily those of racism and discrimination; rather, they are psychological impasses that block him from achieving success. As the judge tells Jim, “Those fancy barriers you’ve set up in yourself . . . are just as tough to penetrate as any color line I ever saw.”21

It is, however, important to consider the broader social context of both Miller’s World script and the Brown v. Board ruling. The Legal Defense and Education Fund attorneys’ focus on the psychic pathology of the black child as a consequence of segregation may indeed have contributed to racial stigmatization, as both Scott and Guinier contend. However, the idea that segregation does, in fact, cause black children to suffer psychologically was at the time by no means widely accepted within white society at large. Undoubtedly, recognition of the real psychic costs of inequality is crucial to any effort to combat its persistence. Nevertheless, I agree with Daryl Michael Scott, who affords a powerful condemnation of the use of what he calls “damage imagery” even when the intent behind it is racially progressive. “Depicting black folk as pathological has not served the community’s best interests,” he writes. “Again and again, contempt has proven to be the flip side of pity.”22 Despite its progressive intent, the completed film did little to aid the cause of redressing inequality as it characterized the African American family as the locus of a deep-seated, self-perpetuating pathology.

A Morning for Jimmy

In the completed film, A Morning for Jimmy, Jimmy Carroll returns home visibly upset. When questioned by his mother, he reveals that he was denied an after-school job in a downtown department store because he is black. When Jimmy’s mother asks her son why he is so upset, reminding him that this encounter with racism is by no means out of the ordinary for him, he
Michelle Kelley responds, “I just thought with all the talk lately, that they might take me. This is a democracy, Ma, isn’t it?” The film thus acknowledges the contemporary civil rights struggle and the ongoing transformation of U.S. race relations, the “talk” to which Jimmy refers. Jimmy’s mother encourages her son to continue to strive to overcome racial barriers. Jimmy’s father, however, is far more pessimistic about his son’s prospects. “Didn’t you know what to expect?” he asks Jimmy upon learning of the department store incident during dinner. “I told you enough times. You can never get as good a job as a white fella.”

We later see Jimmy in an integrated classroom where he is clearly not paying attention to the lesson. When his African American teacher, Mr. Brown, calls on him, Jimmy admits that he has not heard the question asked of him, prompting Mr. Brown to request that Jimmy remain after class. During their meeting, Jimmy informs his teacher that he has decided not to work hard in school. “It’s no use,” he tells Mr. Brown. “What’s no use?” asks his teacher. “Being colored and trying to do something. They just won’t let us be anything.” “Jimmy, almost every Negro at one time or another has felt what

Figure 7.2. Jimmy tells his mother that he was racially discriminated against. Jimmy’s mother comforts her son and encourages him to continue to pursue his dreams. A Morning for Jimmy (1960).
you’re feeling now,” admits Mr. Brown. “But those of us who have made some success of our lives have done so only because we’ve refused to remain discouraged.” “Jimmy, you’re not the only one in this,” Mr. Brown continues. “Are the militant students of the South beaten? Are the peoples of the new nations of Africa discouraged?” Mr. Brown thus compares Jimmy’s plight to theirs, implicitly suggesting that, like these activists, Jimmy must remain steadfast in the face of adversity. Mr. Brown asks Jimmy if he would like to spend the afternoon meeting several persons who, in spite of their race, have achieved career success. One of them, he notes, happens to be an architect, precisely the profession to which Jimmy aspires. Accompanied by Mr. Brown and Taylor’s upbeat, free jazz score, Jimmy traverses the city meeting African American professionals in the fields of information technology, the culinary arts, engineering, medicine, and architecture.

Upon returning home, Jimmy gushingly tells his father about his afternoon and professes his desire to pursue a career in architecture. His father,
however, remains staunchly pessimistic. “Sure, son. Sure there are a few Ne-
groes with good jobs. The ones the white folks set up to show off. But don’t
you realize, Jimmy, the majority of us can’t get those jobs?” In the film’s last
scene, Jimmy discusses the dilemma he faces with his grandfather, played by
retired null executive Robert J. Elzy. Unlike Jimmy’s father, his grandfather
emphatically maintains that Jimmy should pursue higher education and an
architectural career. A Morning for Jimmy concludes on a mutedly optimis-
tic note; Jimmy and his grandfather walk away from the camera alongside
a set of railroad tracks accompanied by the nondiegetic sounds of Taylor’s
piano and lone trumpet. As in World, the film’s final image is a long shot of a
bridge, reminding the viewer of Jimmy’s architectural aspirations.

From World to Morning

In A World for Jim, particularly in the longer of the two drafts, Jim’s bitterness
is attributable to multiple influences, though perhaps none more so than that
of his peers. By contrast, A Morning for Jimmy identifies its protagonist’s trou-
bles as originating with his family or, more specifically, with Jimmy’s father.
John Carroll embodies a weakness that the film suggests is endemic among Af-
rican Americans. John, we learn, had in his youth trained to be a bookkeeper;
however, the prejudices of his potential employers thwarted his ambitions, in-
stilling in him a deep-seated bitterness. Five years after the release of A Morn-
ing for Jimmy, Secretary of Labor Patrick D. Moynihan authored his contro-
versial report The Negro Family: The Case for National Action. The Moynihan
Report, as it was commonly called, argued that the disorganization of the black
urban poor was self-sustaining: even if institutional racism was wholly eradi-
cated, Moynihan claimed, this subset of the black community would remain
a social underclass because of the disorder of its families. Thus, Moynihan
identified the primary obstacle to black social and economic advancement as
black people themselves. Moynihan acknowledged the impact that the legacy
of systemic white racism and inequality had on black people. Nevertheless, he
argued that these things were of less consequence for impoverished African
Americans than were the ways in which they raised their children and struc-
tured their home lives. A Morning for Jimmy differs in many ways from the
Moynihan Report, most notably in its focus on a black middle-class family.
Yet like the report, the film displaces focus away from the problem of systemic
white racism through its emphasis on the shortcomings of the black father.

Despite this, however, Morning is, at least on first viewing, seemingly more
politically progressive than Miller’s World script. Unlike World, Morning
explicitly acknowledges the persistence of white racism. Whereas *World* only alludes to the reality of racism, *Morning* makes it central to the film's narrative: Jimmy's encounter with discriminatory hiring practices is the story's instigating incident. Additionally, *Morning* references anticolonial struggle and the direct-action protest movement in the South. Thus, unlike *World, Morning* acknowledges, however limitedly, the emerging politicization of black identity.

Additionally, *Morning* calls into question the idea, central to the NUL's philosophy, that through displays of merit, African Americans can overcome entrenched inequality. *World* also briefly calls into question the idea that social advancement in the U.S. is based on merit. When the engineer meets Jim, he asks him if he is “any good,” implying that Jim's success is contingent on his ability. However, he adds, “Sure, there are plenty of know-nothings in the field. But we're not inheriting businesses from our fathers. We've got to be a little bit better than good, if you get me.” Here, the script acknowledges structural racial inequality. Jim must not only be competent at his work; he must be better than his privileged white peers to compensate for his race. Nevertheless, by the end of the script, the idea that the U.S. is,
in essence, a meritocracy is strongly affirmed. *Morning*, however, offers no such affirmation. At the conclusion of the film, Jimmy discusses his situation with his grandfather, who encourages Jimmy to work hard to achieve his goals. Jimmy replies, “I guess you’re right, Gramps. I guess you’re right. There really isn’t anything in the future for me, unless I work for it. Then there still might not be anything there. But I guess I’ll have to try, and try real hard.” The film thus admits the possibility that, no matter how hard Jimmy works (and, presumably, regardless of his skill and ability), he may not realize his ambitions.\(^{25}\)

Despite this sober acknowledgment of the limitations of the null’s faith in the power of hard work to overcome systemic inequality, *A Morning for Jimmy* nevertheless suggests that there is, indeed, hope for its protagonist. The film implies that Jimmy’s ambitions can be achieved only if he rejects the pessimism of other African Americans, exemplified by Jimmy’s father. Although their bitterness is perhaps understandable, the film implies that it is debilitating, and fathers like Jimmy’s do their children a profound disservice by instilling it within them at a young age. Of course, the film includes black characters depicted as having a positive influence on Jimmy. However, characters like Jimmy’s grandfather and teacher are portrayed as exceptions to the rule. Most African Americans are twisted up inside, the film suggests; their resignation is like a genetic disorder, passed from generation to generation, usually through the father. Only by steeling themselves against their influence can individual black youths like Jimmy rise above their brethren to achieve middle-class career success.

This point is made explicit in the film’s concluding scene. As they talk, Jimmy’s grandfather explains to his grandson that his father’s sullenness and resentment are attributable to his failure to succeed as a bookkeeper. The grandfather describes his son as having been “hurt”; however, he tells Jimmy that his chances are far better than those of the boy’s father. The grandfather then generalizes from the experience of Jimmy’s father to African Americans collectively: Brown’s script reads, “Lots of Negroes are hurt. Don’t listen to them. They’ll always tell you there’s no chance. There may have been no chance for them, but there is one for you. . . . Your experience has nothing to do with the other fellow’s. You are the only one you should be concerned with. Just because the other fellow is discouraged doesn’t mean you should be. You are your own person with a mind and soul [an] individual. You got to be a bit better than the other. You can be, too.”\(^{26}\)

Far from suggesting that he identify his plight with black activists in the South or anticolonial protesters in Africa, *Morning* ultimately argues that it is
only by disentangling himself from the black collective that Jimmy can achieve his vocational goals. Black anger is characterized not as a motivator for political action, but rather as an impediment to individual self-advancement. In this way, despite acknowledging new forms of activism and third-world solidarity movements across the globe, *Morning* is arguably less invested in the emerging politics of black solidarity and black identity than is Miller’s *World* script. In *World*, the engineer tells Jimmy he must be better than his white peers, acknowledging the structural inequality that defines the ideally meritocratic world of work. By contrast, *Morning* focuses not on the obstacles African Americans face in competing with whites but on the need for black youth to compete with and overcome the influence of other blacks. In this way, *Morning* is a profoundly reactionary film, suggesting that inequality is perpetuated not by racism per se, but rather by the pathological bitterness of African Americans. In keeping with the league’s ethos, the film characterizes black solidarity as little more than a potential impediment to individual achievement.

Ever-Widening Horizons? [171]
Conclusion: Reading *A Morning for Jimmy*

*A Morning for Jimmy*’s racial conservatism clearly resonated with white viewers like Mrs. Sale, who responded favorably to the film’s strategic effort to displace responsibility for racial inequality from whites to African Americans. But why was the film also well received by black youth? In correspondence from NUL Associate Director Otis E. Finley to Director of Vocational Guidance Ann Tanneyhill, Finley reported, “Audience reaction at all showings was highly favorable. In Tulsa and Oklahoma City the student audiences reacted with loud applause when they saw the Negro hotel food supervisor give orders to a white chef.” In May 1961, a school administrator at PS 139 in Harlem wrote to Tanneyhill about a screening of the film for the school’s 1,700 pupils: “[The students] were enlightened to see a family sit down to dinner + eat together,” he told Tanneyhill. “Expressed surprise to really see this and questioned me as to whether this really happened. So small and yet so very big!” Although I have argued that *A Morning for Jimmy* was a product of postwar racial liberalism’s effort to disavow white responsibility for systemic racial inequality, African American viewers were clearly able to ascribe progressive and even radical meanings to the film’s sounds and images. Undoubtedly, despite its conservatism, elements of *A Morning for Jimmy*, such as its use of nonprofessional black actors and Billy Taylor’s jazz score, imbued the film with political potency. That black audiences were able to focus on these elements, however, is a testament not to the essential progressivism of the film’s message; rather, it suggests the agency of black audiences well practiced in culling emancipatory significance from even the most racially regressive works of popular culture.

**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](https://www.dukeupress.edu/Features/Screening-Race).

*A Morning for Jimmy* (1960), 29 min., 16mm

**PRODUCTION:** National Urban League and Association Films, Inc. **DIRECTOR/WRITER/EDITOR:** Barry K. Brown. **PRODUCER:** Himan Brown. **SOUND:** Morgan Smith. **MUSIC:** Billy Taylor. **ACCESS:** National Archives and Records Administration.

*A World for Jim* (1955), script (two versions)

**WRITER:** Bernard Miller. **ACCESS:** NUL records, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
RELATED FILMS

This Is Worthwhile! (c. 1956), filmstrip


note: The proposed film Ever-Widening Horizons was adapted into this filmstrip, or series of still slides to be shown accompanied by scripted narration. The filmstrip promoted the nul’s Vocational Opportunity Campaign, intended to aid African American youth in gaining employment and pursuing careers.

NOTES


5 For more on the reception of A Morning for Jimmy, see box I, e4, folder 2, “A Morning for Jimmy,” nul. The folder contains letters to the league responding to the film as well as typewritten accounts of viewer responses at nul screenings. I also discuss A Morning for Jimmy’s reception in the conclusion of this essay.


10 “Background and Historical Development of A Morning for Jimmy.” Note that this document refers to Barry K. Brown as Himan Brown’s brother; however, he was his son.

11 Barry K. Brown claims that the dialogue for the film was improvised; however, a fully drafted script that deviates only slightly from the completed film is contained in the league’s papers. Brown shot the film on 35mm using an eighty-pound Arriflex camera and edited the film himself. Barry K. Brown, email message to author, August 14, 2016. The film was distributed in 16mm.

12 Miller, A World for Jim, version one, 6, 9.

13 Miller, A World for Jim, version one, 10, 11.

Miller, A World for Jim, version one, 15, 16.
16 Miller, A World for Jim, version one, 21, 31. Ever-Widening Horizons was the original title of a proposed film project documenting the league's activities that subsequently yielded the filmstrip This Is Worthwhile! Box I, g11, folder “Working Together for Tomorrow's Jobs” (film), 1952–1953, nul.
21 Miller, A World for Jim, version one, 16.
22 Scott, Contempt and Pity, xviii.
23 As noted above, in the longer draft, Jim joins a teenage gang called the Exiles. In both drafts of the script, Jim first learns of the reality of white racism from other black youth who mock his career aspirations.
26 A Morning for Jimmy shooting script, 13. Note that the line in the script is slightly different than that uttered by Elzy in the role of the grandfather in the film, which I cited at the outset of this essay.