HOLLYWOOD’S INVISIBLE MEN:
MOBILIZING THE BLACK SOLDIER IN AMERICAN CINEMA

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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provides a genealogy of the black nationalist icon made famous by Blaxploitation heroes Sweet Sweetback and Shaft, locating its origins in the new, dignified image of the black soldier that appeared in WWII Hollywood films as part of the Roosevelt Government mandate to increase black enlistment. Focusing on a figure that has been essential in literary and historical studies of African America, but to date absent from film scholarship, I trace the transformation of this filmic figure in a variety of incarnations and socio-political contexts, ranging from wartime propaganda, to postwar dramas, to Vietnam Era “guerrilla” productions. In these films, the evolving depictions of the black soldier narrate the ideological labor performed by the black body in America between WWII and the end of the Vietnam War: pacifying racial conflict in the US; creating benevolent images of America’s imperialism abroad; and articulating black America’s revolutionary nationalism and diasporic imagination.

The malleability and potency of this figure also enabled the cinema to provide a public sphere for national debates about (but not limited to) blacks in the military, racial integration, and black nationalist militancy that ultimately led to the radical changes of the late Civil Rights Movement. I label this forum a “reconstructed public sphere”
because this new, cinematic black public was in fact a visual incarnation and
transformation of what Michael Warner has called a counterpublic—one in which
wartime and post-war viewers learned new modes of spectatorship and collaborated on a
visual reconstruction of black collective history and political identity.

One of the few studies of the interrelationship of Hollywood and non-industry
black filmmakers during the Civil Rights Movement, Hollywood’s Invisible Men also
revises the record of black artistry and representation in shaping a postwar national
cinema in the U.S., in part by making use of archival research on “lost” films. This
dissertation thus not only explores the reconstructive capacities of the figure of the black
soldier, it also literally reconstructs black cinema’s history and presence in the
representational struggles of the Civil Rights Movement.
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DEDICATION

In memory of my grandfathers,

James M. Rosbrow and Herman Reich,

whose lives led me to write this dissertation.

And dedicated to my first and eighth grade teachers,

Helen Landess and Carol Strasburger,

who taught me how to write.
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Introduction: Historicizing the “Baadassss” or Imagining Cinematic Reparation

From this point forward, black populations would pose a legitimacy dilemma for the U.S. state, not only as a large, vocal minority clamoring for citizenship rights, but also as a constituency that could be mobilized around anti-imperialism and antiwar sentiment.¹

“A baadassss nigger is coming back to collect some dues…”: so ends Melvin Van Peebles’ explosive 1971 film, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*. The words appear over the final image of blue sky and a brush-covered hill marking the border between the U.S. and Mexico—through which the black-militant Sweetback has just escaped the police. The audience is left with this last shot to imagine what Sweetback and those dues will look like when the baadassss comes back.

Though his third feature, *Sweetback* was Van Peebles’ first film to receive widespread distribution and, according to numerous film historians, it changed American cinema completely, in no small part because it was one of the highest-grossing films of 1971.² In an essay on the film, Huey Newton himself calls it “the first truly revolutionary Black film made,”³ though it also generated tremendous controversy because of its glorification of violence and “insinuation that a revolution could succeed through sexual violence.”

Despite criticism from numerous sections, *Sweetback’s* release played an important role in the dramatic shift in black cinema starting in the early 70s.

Van Peebles himself claims that his work spawned the blaxploitation movement, a cycle of films featuring violent, sexual and hyper-masculine (anti)heroes from the black ghetto, including: *Shaft* (1971), *Hammer* (1972), *Slaughter* (1972), *Black Caesar* (1973), *Foxy* (1974), *Dolemite* (1975), and many others. Though blaxploitation cinema was credited with circulating some of the first cinematic images of African Americans in positions of power, finally launching a successful (albeit brief) postwar black independent film movement and affording a handful of African Americans access to directors’ jobs in Hollywood, the movement was unable to maintain its independence. Rather, highly lucrative because its cheaply made films gathered big ticket sales, the blaxploitation formula and many of its writers and directors were quickly bought up and repackaged into a stereotypical, shoot-em-up genre by the Hollywood majors. Nonetheless, the popularity of this new film genre, with its sexually and physically powerful black male characters, did alert the world to the popularity and profitability of new kinds of black representation. Not only, then, did “the rise of blaxploitation establish…the economic power of black moviegoers,…it [also] jump-started the long and difficult process of building a black presence in the film industry.”

Scholarship historicizing blaxploitation has thus far taken two distinct approaches: describing the genre as if emerging *ex nihilo*, showcasing an unprecedented transformation in black filmic imagery; and positioning it as an outgrowth of the Black Power movements, noting similarities between the armed black protagonists of

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4 Massood 95.
blaxploitation films and the visual iconography of nationalist militants. It also seems important to note that numerous blaxploitation narratives have also drawn on popular ghetto-centric literature of the late 1960s and early 70s, including works by Chester Himes, Claude Brown, Sam Greenlee, Donald Goines, (all of whom, except for Brown, wrote novels that were adapted into film in the early 70s). Indeed, in her book on gendered representation in blaxploitation cinema, Stephanie Dunn points out, “Blaxploitation has long been a contested label, raising questions about how it denotes exploitation, who and what is being exploited, who gets to name the genre as such, and whether or not it is an adequate or appropriate label for this body of films,” contesting even the validity of the genre’s appellation. On the other side of the debate, considering blaxploitation’s role in shaping the politics of the period and its aftermath, Kara Keeling argues that the genre has “played a profoundly important role in adjudicating between a range of political positions vying for recognition as Black Power during the late 1960s and early 1970s and in presenting their resolution in the form of common-sense black nationalism.” However, despite a small cluster of scholarship on the genre, to date the

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6 Even while Sweetback has generally been associated with the blaxploitation genre—in no small part because of the film’s popularity and economic success—itс avant garde, experimental and musically-driven style also resemble closely those of another, loosely affiliated body of work by black independent filmmakers of the period, retroactively dubbed the LA School and the LA Rebellion. These filmmakers—most notably, Haile Gerima, Larry Clark and Charles Burnett—all graduated from the UCLA film program in the late 60s and early 70s and, like Van Peebles, were producing artistic, politically-conscious films that changed the depiction of black masculinity on screen. However, for the most part, their images did not circulate in the early 70s, but rather gained recognition in the 80s and 90s, with the emergence of a body of academic black film scholarship on the Rebellion.


brief movement—and, in particular, Melvin Van Peebles’ transformative representational paradigm—remains largely unmoored in film history and is considered an exceptional rupture in the trajectory of American cinema.

In the vein of other recent historicizing projects in African American studies, such as Nikhil Singh’s re-periodization of the Civil Rights Movement and James Edward Smethurst’s historicization of the Black Arts Movement, “Hollywood’s Invisible Men: Mobilizing the Black Soldier in American Cinema,” reframes blaxploitation’s protagonist, offering a basis for the evolution of this bold figure. In what follows, I provide a genealogy for the militant iconography made famous by Sweetback and Shaft, locating its origins in a far less predictable figure: the filmic black soldier of WWII.

Across the dissertation, building on Thomas Cripps’ study of black representation in what he calls Hollywood “message movies,” I show how the black soldier that appeared in wartime Hollywood and black independent films was in fact a new figure, carefully crafted by the conjoined efforts of key players in the United States government, the Hollywood Studios and the NAACP—or what Cripps has humorously called the Hollywood-OWI-NAACP axis.9

This filmic soldier was among the first dignified images of African Americans to appear in Hollywood films, where black men were usually relegated to buffoons, and women to mammys. In these unusual films—ranging from popular Hollywood fare (Bataan, Sahara, Crash Dive, Life Boat and Stormy Weather) to government and

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9 Thomas Cripps argues, “It was as though together the OWI-NAACP-Hollywood axis was an organic embodiment of the notion that crisis bred reassertions and actions of the common core of values that the need for unity had called attention to.” Thomas Cripps, Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. 62.
independent productions (*Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier*)—black soldiers wore uniforms of the state, participated in the war effort, fired guns, acted heroically, served in integrated military units and proved themselves central to the protection of democracy, and all more than a half decade before the beginnings of legal integration of the Armed Forces. Reflecting at once the shifting cultural imperatives of the Civil Rights Movement and the racial politics of an internationally ambitious Cold-War-era United States, this new black soldier became a trope through which, I argue, representations of black men continued to transform over the Civil Rights era, culminating in the figure of the militant: the violent, sexual Sweetback; the armed, hyper-masculine Shaft; and the separatist, paramilitary Freeman (*The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, 1973), Gordon (*Gordon’s War*, 1973) and General Ahmed (*The Black Gestapo*, 1975).

The many incarnations of the filmic black soldier across the long Civil Rights era cinema yielded a polyvalent figure, expressive of both conservative America’s efforts to present itself as an equitable nation to allies abroad and black nationalists’ growing concerns about American domestic oppression and global imperialism. Indeed, the production and circulation of the WWII soldier in particular, served the then overlapping interests of political entities usually antagonistic toward each other, namely: the U.S. Government (in particular its Office of War Information and its Education and Research Branch) and the military, the Hollywood Studios and the NAACP and its base. My study therefore reveals an unusual collaboration between black activists and the government that transformed not only the representational politics of the war years, but also those of the Civil Rights Movement that would follow. In so doing, it also demonstrates the
cinematic investment in creating and reaching audiences concerned with changing domestic and international racial politics—and its necessary creation of new modes of representation and spectatorship.

History

I began researching the film history of the black soldier after reading Robert Allen’s *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, a book-length record of the prosecution of 258 black soldiers who refused to work in dangerous conditions after the negligent deaths of 320 of their fellow soldiers (more than two-thirds of whom were African American). Allen’s book tells the story of marines who were regularly forced to load live munitions onto warships with unsafe speed because of petty bets between commanding officers. After their haste resulted in a massive explosion and 320 deaths, the traumatized survivors asked for safer working conditions and the leave given their white counterparts. Not only were they denied improved working conditions and leave, “208 faced summary courts-martial and were sentenced to bad conduct discharges and the forfeit of three month's pay for disobeying orders” when they refused to go back to work. The other fifty were subject to general courts-martial for mutiny.¹⁰

Though I wasn’t particularly surprised by Allen’s description of the Jim Crow conditions in the Navy, or the U.S. government’s relentless prosecution of 50 innocent marines on essentially racist grounds, I did become fascinated by the inherently contradictory figure of the black WWII soldier described in *The Port Chicago Mutiny*. Allen depicted him as heroic and disadvantaged, while the U.S. Navy seemed to have

spent plenty of effort to (re)present him in the public imaginary as seditious. The U.S. government’s version of this soldier—the bad black soldier whose racial identity and desires have the power to destroy the nation itself—recalled for me another famous “bad” black soldier and one of the first black soldiers to grace the silver screen: the would-be rapist Yankee Gus from *Birth of A Nation*.\textsuperscript{11} This Civil War soldier (played in blackface by a white man, Walter Long), who appeared as the first waves of black soldiers were leaving the U.S. to fight in the first world war in Europe, desires only one thing: white man’s privilege. When he tries to rape Flora Cameron, a young woman symbolic of the D.W. Griffith’s “innocent” South, she throws herself to her death. The close-ups devoted to Gus’ lustful countenance and uniformed body work to establish the dangers of arming a black man and clothing him in the authority of the state. Along with the narrative of the destruction of the South (and nation) by a white politician’s liaison with his black maid, this famous depiction of Gus screened in the theaters across the United States and helped to inspire the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. As black soldiers who had been given heroes’ welcomes in Europe began returning home from WWI, they were met with a dramatic increase in racial violence and lynching nationwide—in no small part because of *Birth of A Nation*’s ideological success. Gus and Griffith’s *Birth* were also instrumental in the founding of Hollywood and the consolidation of classical Hollywood style in cinema story-telling.\textsuperscript{12} In other words, the evocative figure of the black soldier—a very different

\textsuperscript{11} The Lincoln Motion Picture Company production’s of *A Trooper of Company K* (1917) offered the next recorded depiction of a black filmic soldier.

black soldier from the one this project investigates—can be found in the origins of the development and institutionalization of American cinema itself.

Perhaps little had changed for the black soldier between Gus’ arrival on the scene and the prosecution of the fifty Port Chicago “mutineers”? I started to wonder about the contradictions inherent in the figure of the WWII-era black soldier himself—state authorized, powerful, armed, representative of democracy abroad, yet subject to Jim Crow treatment and legal segregation at home—and how he appeared in film. What was his role in the development of the cinema during yet another period of American civil strife as well as cinematic reorganization? As I lay the groundwork for my study, I found myself guided by the following questions: What work did the figure of the black soldier do in WWII? In what ways did this figure tell the story of American politics at home and abroad? How was the figure deployed differently by different interest groups, like the government, Hollywood and black filmmakers? How did the films manage the contradictions and potential volatility in their representations of black soldiers? And, finally, to what extent did this figure of the empowered black soldier share common origins with the renegade protagonists of blaxploitation?

My provisional answers to these questions are laid out in the chapters that follow this introduction. In part, they argue that, as a figure reflecting on the one hand the convergence of American cultural production and governmental mandates, and on the other, black activists’ representational agendas, the filmic black soldier needs to be understood in the dual contexts of an international, imperialist America and an internationalist black political community rather than the singular domestic arena. In this

respect, my dissertation puts the very American phenomenon of the Civil Rights Movement into a global context and demonstrates how the filmic black soldier was shaped by not only domestic but also international concerns as well.

What I found that surprised me (primarily because it was an answer to a question I hadn’t asked) was that the evolving depictions of the WWII-era soldier served—much like D.W. Griffith’s Gus did in his time as well—as responses to unfinished business in a much older American history: Reconstruction itself. However, while Griffith’s Gus offered a justification for the end of Reconstruction in the South, the new filmic black soldiers of WWII and the long Civil Rights Movements, forged amidst the tumult of historical necessity and cross-racial political alliances, seemed to offer redress. Chapter Three, in particular, focuses on this idea of redressing Reconstruction—or what Sweetback might call “collect[ing] some dues.” At times quiet and cautious, at others proud and militant, the black soldiers I study in this work became central to a multi-racial America’s imagination of a new home and a new racial order in the wake of the Second World War.

The Thorny Issue of Spectatorship

In one of the early comprehensive books on black cinema, Manthia Diawara describes his edited collection, *Black American Cinema*, as “examin[ing] Black American cinema from two perspectives[:…a Black film aesthetic[:…[and] the thorny issue of film spectatorship,…. [including] a history of film reception, generic expectations, patterns
of spectatorial identification, and the possibility of political resistance.”

This dissertation, too, takes on the challenge of “examining Black cinema from two perspectives.”

First: by exploring the changing representations of the black soldier both over time and across Hollywood and black independent cinemas, I am able to chart the development of black film aesthetics during the Civil Rights era. In so doing, I am also able to show how, by the middle of WWII, Hollywood cinema had already been (and would continue to be even further) shaped by the aesthetics of black independent film. One of the few studies of the interrelationship of Hollywood and non-industry black filmmakers during the Civil Rights Movement, this dissertation thus revises the record of black artistry and representation in shaping a postwar national cinema in the U.S. Making use of archival research on “lost” films, my dissertation not only explores the reconstructive capacities of the figure of the black soldier, it also literally reconstructs black cinema’s history and presence in the representational struggles of the Civil Rights Movement.

Second: Because the transformations in the on-screen figure of the black soldier necessarily reflect the transformations in its viewership, as I examine the changing representations, I also consider the potential viewing strategies of black-soldier film audiences. In what follows, extending the contributions of leading scholars of black film spectatorship, I offer a theorization of these evolving strategies that accounts in particular for how disillusioned WWII-era black audiences might have engaged productively with

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the patriotic propaganda films they consumed. Building on Jacqueline Stewart’s ideas about the viewing practices of African Americans watching Hollywood films during the Great Migration, I argue that black WWII and Civil Rights era audiences engaged both personally and critically with propaganda films they watched during the period, and in so doing, became part of a viewing public focused on the politics of black identity during war. This engagement I call “reconstructive spectatorship” because it was mediated through a number of processes of reconstruction: a redressing—or reconstructing—of history; a reconsidering—or reconstructing—of black politics; and a recreation—or reconstruction—of the film text itself.

In theorizing black spectatorship strategies in this dissertation (which I do primarily in Chapters Two and Four), I’ve drawn in particular from works by Manthia Diawara, James Snead, bell hooks and Jacqueline Stewart, all of whom, in turn, have been influenced by semiotic and post-structuralist theories of film spectatorship.14 These generally argue that the spectator of classical Hollywood cinema identifies with on-screen images and narration by way of his identification with the apparatus of the cinema itself. Or, in Christian Metz’s famous words, “the spectator identifies with himself, with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject, which comes before every there is.”15 Laura Mulvey elaborates:

the camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion of Renaissance space, flowing moments compatible with the human eye, an ideology of

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representation that revolves around the perception of the subject; the camera’s look is disavowed in order to create a convincing world in which the spectator’s surrogate can perform with verisimilitude.\textsuperscript{16}

The problem with SLAB spectatorship theories, Mulvey goes on to explain, is that the “transcendental” subject and gaze they describe are inherently gendered male—and the cohesion of the cinema itself is organized around the fetishized image of the woman. Mulvey’s ground-breaking argument in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) opened psychoanalytic and post-structuralist theories to all kinds of identity-based critiques, including Manthia Diawara’s insistence “that the dominant cinema [similarly] situates Black characters primarily for the pleasure of White spectators (male or female).”\textsuperscript{17} Diawara’s argument, much like Mulvey’s, interrogates the assumption of a “universal” spectator and suggests that different subjects, because of their material conditions, watch—and therefore identify—differently.

It is my proposition that spectatorship based on identification is far more complicated than even Mulvey’s and Diawara’s critiques suggest, both because identification is not necessarily based on a stable experience of identity and because the relationship between the spectator and the screen is also affected by the spectator’s experiences in the theater and of the audience. In his essay on \textit{King Kong}, Snead conceptualizes the exchange between spectator and film as occurring in a “filmic space,” like a psychodynamic space, in which all kinds of play are possible. He writes:

\begin{quote}
It is not true that we identify only with those in a film whose race or sex we share. Rather, the filmic space is subversive in allowing an almost polymorphically perverse oscillation between possible roles, creating a radically broadened
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Diawara 215.
freedom of identification.\textsuperscript{18}

Snead’s intervention is significant not only for a theorization of minority spectatorship, but as a revision of psychoanalytic frameworks for understanding spectatorship as well. His reference, with the phrase “polymorphically perverse,” to Freud’s \textit{Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality} (1901) rethinks cinematic identification as a pre-oedipal \textit{experience} rather than an oedipalized \textit{process}.\textsuperscript{19} In other words, rather than identifying primarily to fill a phallic lack, as Mulvey and, before her, other post-structuralist theorists have proposed, Snead’s spectators engage in a looking that is driven as much by libido as by object-choice. Transposing Snead into Baudry or Metz’s Saussurian-Lacanian teleologies, then, we would find that the apparatus does not recreate the entry into the symbolic that accompanies the mirror stage, and with it primary and secondary identification, but rather allows for a mobile, labile, polymorphically perverse experience of the film world and the self that doesn’t even necessarily insist on the self as a discrete or transcendental subject. In other words, Snead’s rejection of a one-to-one relationship


\textsuperscript{19} In \textit{Three Essays}, Freud explains that, as children, we are all “polymorphously perverse”: that “a disposition to perversions is an original and universal disposition of the human sexual instinct and that normal sexual behavior is developed out of it as a result of organic changes and psychical inhibitions occurring in the course of maturation” (97). Sigmund Freud. \textit{Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality}. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Harper Collins, 1962. Freud goes on to describe “normal sexuality” as a product, in part, of inhibitions, and the more rigid adult libido as constructed through an interplay between these inhibitions—feelings of “shame, disgust, pit and the structures of morality and authority erected by society” and original polymorphousness (97). Snead’s use of the term implies a mode of spectatorship that is not bound by the above inhibitions, but rather led by simply desire for pleasure. While it is perhaps going too far to suggest that in the darkened space of the theater all personal and social inhibitions fade away, Snead’s suggestion is that, in fact, many might—and that there’s no saying which ones will be the first to go. Therefore, Snead argues, it’s absurd to assume that racial prohibitions or identifications are the dominant, structuring forces in cinematic desire and identification.
to identity and to film images opens the experience of spectatorship he describes to not only non-transcendental subjects but also to subjects in always already shifting relationship to their own identities and subjectivities.

While Snead himself does not posit a subject beyond race, his ideas about a “subversive” filmic space could easily lead to a Foucauldian reading of the subject, able to experience pleasures, bodies and sights without adhering to fixed reference points of gender, race or sexuality. Though few theorists have discussed these liberatory aspects of Snead’s intervention, it bears pointing out that, years before queer theory, they anticipate the gains of the early 1990s shifts in theorizing the self in relation to social identity. These shifts (best exemplified in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*) by which the subject becomes unhooked from notions of a core self, are important for all spectatorship theories, particularly minoritarian ones, because they demonstrate not only that identification is fluid, but that the self itself is an unstable construction, shaped by social practices and norms, but not irreducible to them or any other fixed formulation.20 Snead’s film viewers, then, oscillating between identification with on-screen images and playful transformation of their own identities, seem to be able to imagine themselves into any narrative, in any role, and toward any end—so long as the desire to do so is there.

Understanding (as Snead does) the film experience as a “space,” the gaze as potentially “oscillating,” and identity and identification themselves as inherently unstable, I argue that spectators who engaged with the changing representations of black

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soldiers during the long Civil Rights Movement learned new modes of relating to American racial history, racial identity and the film image itself. I also maintain that black spectators, because of their racial identities and experiences, were more likely, in Jacqueline Stewart’s words, to “read…alternately with and against disparate racial identities being performed on screen.” Indeed, Stewart claims that black viewers resisted the “absorption” that characterized mainstream audiences’ viewing experiences with classical Hollywood cinema and instead engaged reconstructively with the film text and each other, filling in black images absent from the 1920s films they were viewing. This viewing practice, she argues, provided for “the reconstruction of the negated black viewing subject on psychic, social and public levels.”

Though Stewart’s theorization applies to African American migrants during the 1920s watching Hollywood cinema, unlike the Civil Rights era viewers I discuss here, her claim that spectatorship strategies can bring about “the reconstruction of the black viewing subject” strikes me as very true, very important and quite germane to this study of the filmic black soldier. Specifically, I believe that the new and evolving figures of black soldiers in WWII-era and Cold War films helped not only to “reconstruct…the black viewing subject” but also to encode a whole set of reconstructive viewing practices for spectators, that I also call “reconstructive spectatorship.”

Thus what I label “reconstructive spectatorship” is a strategy of cinematic engagement that is reconstructive in (at least) three senses: historically,

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psychoanalytically, and socio-politically. While I would never want to posit one, monolithic black viewing community, and therefore cannot assume an average black spectator, I do see the films I describe—particularly the propaganda films of Chapter Two and Chapter Four—as themselves imagining and addressing that spectator with three potentially “reconstructive” proposals. 1) Addressing his history: These films asked that, as viewers identified with, detached from, and brought critique to the images of black soldiers on their screens, they also collaborated in recollecting and, potentially, re-scripting of American history and Reconstruction itself. Indeed, a number of the films’ narratives only make sense to the extent that viewers participate in a re-remembering of historic events. 2) Addressing his identity: Viewers’ identities as black Americans were transformed (by the messages in the films) when they identified with the patriotic images on screen; they were consolidated, politicized and possibly radicalized if they did not identify; and, most likely, viewers practiced an “oscillating” gaze that enabled—if not required—them to reconstruct themselves as new kinds of subjects of a new era in race history across the globe. 3) Addressing his politics and sense of community: By urging spectators to identify with a particular culture of blackness and black spectatorship, the films ensured that in the spaces of the often-segregated theaters, community centers and churches, these viewers connected with each other, argued with each other, shared the transformative cinematic experience with each other and, in so doing, (re)constructed the black cinematic public sphere.

Implicit in my discussion of reconstructive spectatorship practices is another argument to which I do not give as sustained attention in this dissertation (but which I hope to expand upon in the future): that through the figure of black soldier, American
cinema provided an essential forum for national debate about blacks in the military, black civil rights, and black nationalist militancy during the long Civil Rights Movement that can best be described as a black cinematic public sphere, or a black counterpublic.23

Because of the limitations imposed on this study by the dearth of information about the distribution of a number of the black-soldier films and, in particular, about actual black viewing communities of the time, I am unable to offer a thorough discussion of this public sphere here. What I can say is that the role of the cinema in establishing and organizing black revolutionary politics in America—in particular around questions of black national participation and militancy—cannot be underestimated.

Chapter Summaries and A Note on Methodology

The methodology of this dissertation draws upon recent trends in African American studies, spectatorship theory, psychoanalytic theory, public sphere theory and performance studies as well as cinema studies, and enables me to bring together what are traditionally separate fields of study: black independent and Hollywood cinema; history and spectatorship theory; and African American studies and public sphere theory. Indeed, the chapters themselves are structured around differing methodological concerns, with each chapter investigating black soldier films of a particular moment through the lens of a specific methodology. Chapter One offers an historical approach to film criticism. Chapter Two focuses on spectatorship theory. Chapter Three offers a reading of

23 I use this term as Michael Warner has theorized in *Publics and Counter Publics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002. For a detailed discussion of Warner’s term, see his second chapter, “Publics and Counterpublics.” For more on how I use the term, see the fourth chapter of this dissertation.
psychoanalytic theory alongside film analysis. And Chapter Four unites public sphere
theory and performance studies.

The first chapter, “Race Travels: Black Bodies at War in Hollywood” describes
the emergence of the new figure of the black soldier in Hollywood cinema during WWII
through readings of Bataan (1943), Sahara (1943) and Stormy Weather (1943). The
chapter begins by demonstrating how, through transforming the derogatory images of
black men from prewar cinema into dignified, powerful soldiers, these three wartime
films inaugurated a new relationship between mainstream white audiences and the black
film entertainer—and, arguably, a new practice of racially-coded spectatorship as well.
Contextualizing this filmic project historically, I explain how this new relationship
toward racial representation served a range of American wartime and nationalist projects.

More specifically, in my readings of the films, I argue that during this critical
moment of the United States’ entry into the war, Hollywood filmmakers fulfilled their
governmental mandate to further the war effort by using nationalist space, the concepts of
home and away, and the figure of the black soldier to perform cinematic national and
racial inclusion. The first two films, Bataan and Sahara, represent their soldiers as
important participants in racially-mixed military units far from the continental United
States, and thus successfully revised the cinematic representation of black masculinity
abroad without threatening its segregation at home. A counterpoint, Stormy Weather,
with its use of home space and its narrative about a struggling WWI veteran musical
performer, reveals the limitations on such new representations of black equality and
agency—as well as the legacy of black soldiers in America. In Stormy Weather, in order
to re-integrate himself at home, the black soldier must become a de-masculinized, de-
militarized performer. All three films addressed themselves directly to their viewing 
audiences through preface or voice-overs and ultimately asked them to re-imagine the 
relationships between blackness and patriotism, blackness and masculinity, and blackness 
and entertainment—but at a safe remove from social integration. Taken together, I argue, 
these films and the handful of other “integrated” war films like them, began to 
reconstruct the role of the black soldier in American nationalism, and thus change white 
America’s relationship to black moving image as well.

Chapter Two, “A Broader Nationalism: Reconstructing Memory, National 
Narratives, and Spectatorship in Black-Audience Propaganda” analyzes the three lone 
extant WWII propaganda films made by black artists: Marching On! (1943), We’ve Come 
A Long, Long Way (1943) and The Negro Soldier (1944). In this chapter, I show how, 
aiming to reach disillusioned African Americans with messages of patriotism and 
national solidarity, Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way and The Negro 
Soldier offered stories of black participation in the military alongside seemingly 
contradictory narratives of black cultural and political identity and struggles for civil 
rights. Interweaving personal narratives, documentary and historical recreation, these 
films, I argue, used representations of history and remembrance to forge a black cultural 
consciousness in service of a broader, American nationalism. Focusing in particular on 
the spectatorship practices I find encoded in the three films, I argue that Marching On!, 
We’ve Come A Long, Long Way and The Negro Soldier engaged a concerned and 
radicalizing viewership community in strategies of “reconstructive spectatorship”—a 
mode of film spectatorship based on black aesthetic tradition and the material conditions
of Jim Crow, and potentially capable of transforming its practitioners into a politically unified community.

Chapter Three, “Psychic Seditious: Black Interiority, Psychoanalysis and the *Mise en Scène* of Resistance in Cold War Cinema” identifies another trope of the black soldier in postwar films: the sick and resistant black soldier. In this chapter, I argue that in the wake of Truman’s 1948 Executive Order 9981 integrating the Armed Forces, the filmic black soldier became an important representative of a new, more democratic post-war America as well as the anxiety of a culture struggling with integration. My readings of *Home of the Brave* (1949) show how this sick black soldier’s illness performed a paradoxical function: on the one hand it expressed the soldier’s (and black communities’) resistance to America’s Cold War politics; on the other, it evidenced his vulnerability and dependence on white America (and its military doctors), thereby also reducing his threat to an integrating nation. Focusing on the depiction of disease, repeatedly figured as mental illness in numerous Cold War era black-soldier films, I argue that the black soldier’s sickness also doubled as Hollywood cinema’s nascent attempt to represent and explore black interiority, including black America’s feelings about racism—and to present these to presumptively white viewing audiences concerned about integration. Through readings of *Home of the Brave* and the psychoanalytic discourse it deploys to contain, explain and seemingly cure the black soldier’s illness, I argue that the trope of hysteria prevalent in turn of the century literary and psychoanalytic depictions of assimilating immigrants and women became, in the postwar period, Hollywood’s mode of representing racial integration. It also, quite ironically, came to reflect an assimilating America’s own racial hysteria.
Chapter Four, “The Last Black Soldier and A Blueprint for a Black Counterpublic in *The Spook Who Sat By the Door,*” argues that the black nationalist militant popularized and depoliticized by Hollywood blaxploitation cinema is the culminating figure in the evolving depictions of the WWII-era propagandist soldier. Focusing on one radical black independent film of the period, *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* (1973), I demonstrate how the iconography of the Black Power movements influenced the transformation of the WWII-era black soldier into the militant and enabled black independent filmmakers of the early 70s to address a new cinematic public sphere—what I call, extending Michael Warner’s notion, a black cinematic “counterpublic.” In my readings of *Spook,* I explore the film’s efforts to mobilize black Americans to political action by destabilizing the categories and meanings of race. By the end of the film, I argue, *Spook*’s creators have proposed a new practice of blackness, one no longer rooted in its American past but rather tied to a global future and Third World consciousness. *Spook*’s protagonist, unlike those of previous black-soldier films, is a shape-shifter, a new kind of black soldier who performs his politics through subterfuge, more invested in going underground than assimilating—the homeless black nationalist who, at the waning of the American Civil Rights Movement, is fighting his war on U.S. soil, looking to “collect some dues.”
Chapter 1: Race Travels: Black Bodies at War in Hollywood

“Three months ago they were all jerking soda!” Sergeant Dane complains to another soldier, Feingold, in the jungle of Bataan. “Do you see a soldier in the lot, Jake? I said soldier,” he insists, and looks over his shoulder toward the collection of men assigned to serve with him. And they are an unusual bunch—white Anglo, black, Jewish, Latino and even Filipino—at least unusual for the segregated silver screen in 1943.

In the background, out of focus through the dappled forest light, the black soldier Wesley Epps sings and washes his shirt bare-chested. The sound of his deep, rich voice seems to carry his image into foreground of the frame, and within seconds of Dane’s comments, Epps’ shirtless torso fills the screen, stomach glistening with sweat and expanding and contracting visibly with his breathing. He is perhaps the most unlikely soldier of them all, and the first of a new, carefully crafted figure: the integrated and dignified black soldier, the product of a collaboration between the United States Government’s Office of War Information, the Hollywood Studios and the NAACP. 24

Yet this intensely physical introduction to one of the first black soldiers in an integrated U.S. war film conveys the ambivalence surrounding this new filmic figure. While the dangers of such a hypermasculine image—a half-naked, glistening black man with a gun—might well be absorbed by Epps’ dedication to the nation and its protection, this black soldier remains nonetheless a risky figure. Indeed, the film both asserts and questions the presence of the powerful black body on the screen: the camera allows the image of Epps to fill the frame, but the sergeant wonders about the black soldier’s—and

24 This Cripps calls the “OWI-NAACP-Hollywood axis.” Cripps 62.
the rest of the unit’s—viability as representatives of the nation. Dane’s comments suggest that this diverse crew might, in fact, not be capable of becoming legitimate soldiers, and raises the unarticulated concerns circulating in popular culture at the time that they might be too weak, inexperienced or cowardly; that, like the jittery, jazz-focused Latino Ramirez, they might be unable to concentrate on battle; or that they might, like so many black American leaders of the late 1930s (Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois, to name two), find allegiances outside and beyond the nation, amongst separatists and revolutionaries. In 1943, with race riots spreading across the U.S., many involving both white and black soldiers, Wesley Epps at once signaled the cinema’s efforts at careful containment and the potential disruptiveness and volatility of this new and empowered figure for American blackness.

As I’ve described in the Introduction, Epps was not the only black soldier to suddenly appear in integrated Hollywood war films in the in the early 1940s. Crash Dive (1943), Sahara (1943) and Lifeboat (1944) also presented versions of this “new” black soldier with representations that served both to support their nation (in the fictions of the films) and to integrate their casts in both Hollywood and the public spheres of theaters across the United States. Yet while these soldiers appeared in integrated films’ integrated military units as part of the government’s program to counteract black disaffection and increase black and Allied support for the war, neither the United States

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25 Because these films were so identifiable, in her book on the WWII combat film, Jeanie Basinger has given them their own subgenre, titled the “group of mixed ethnic types” combat film. Jeanie Basinger. The World War Two Combat Film: Anatomy of A Genre. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003. 15. She also writes that, of the 1943 films, Bataan was seminal combat film of the year and the first to truly define the genre, in part because the others that emerged alongside it were not fully set in combat situations. Basinger 34.
nor its military were in fact integrated at the time of *Bataan’s* release. The gradual integration of the military didn’t even begin until Truman issued Executive Order 9801 in 1948. And so, these seemingly prescient films with their integrationist messages faced the dilemma of how to present these new relations in the cinema without alienating their viewers, most of who lived in and supported a segregated America.

In part, the films solved this problem by placing their black soldiers far from the continental United States, in strangely liminal spaces: far-flung colonies, peopled by ethnically diverse military units (in *Bataan* and *Sahara*), and sea vessels stranded in international waters (in *Crash Dive* and *Lifeboat*). “As though traced from template supplied by the OWI,” Thomas Cripps writes, “[*Bataan, Sahara, Crash Dive* and *Lifeboat* all] used the war to thrust lone black figure into a small white circle...[in order to] forecast an enhanced black status as a result of war while showing whites they had nothing to fear from change.”\(^{26}\) And indeed these films deftly delivered their black soldiers—and their part-integrationist, part-propagandist messages—within predictable and increasingly familiar narratives of the America’s victory over Japan and Germany, democracy’s victory over fascism, and civilization’s triumph over barbarism—and all in all, at far remove from domestic space.

However, in each of these films, and most evidently in *Bataan* and *Sahara* (which I will discuss in more detail below), the black bodies in uniform signified more than “enhanced...status” and the coming of integration for the subjects they purportedly represented. Telling the story of multi-national, cobbled-together military units struggling to stave off the encroachment of fascism, both *Bataan* and *Sahara* deployed the black

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\(^{26}\) Cripps 72.
soldier as an exemplar of (American) democracy in action. Thus, in *Bataan* where Epps played opposite a Filipino (colonized) native far less “integrated” into American culture and politics than he, and in *Sahara* where Tambul was himself the colonized native, serving as a guide *back* to democratic civilization, this new figure of the black soldier at one reflected and obscured the history of America’s imperial conquests—its plunder from the slave trade, its acquisitions in the Spanish-American War, and its increasingly frequent interventions in Africa and the Middle East. In these films, then, through the figure of the black soldier, histories of U.S. domestic and international violence were disavowed in service of the on-screen integration and the promotion of American nationalist and pro-war propaganda.

The new black soldier also appeared in one black-cast (and therefore still segregated) film during the war in which his performances as both soldier and entertainer made visible the “problem” of America’s racial history. Unlike *Bataan* and *Sahara*, this film, *Stormy Weather* (1943), was set in the United States and could/did not present an integrated image of the military. Rather, *Stormy Weather* staged much of its narrative in the past, during the aftermath of WWI, and offered a series of unreal/impossible spaces in which its characters practiced new modes of racial performance. During the film, the black soldier-cum-performer (played by Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, playing a version of himself) danced his way through American space, history and racial representation, revealing less about African America’s relationship to U.S. imperialism (as in the films above) than about black identity and cultural production at home. However, the soldier’s travels abroad to integrated spaces (in Europe) both prior to the start of the plot and during its many un-pictured ellipses also played an important yet unrepresented role in
the narrative, suggesting that in *Stormy Weather*, as in *Bataan* and *Sahara*, blackness came to be defined as much by its circulation abroad as by its production and consumption at home.

In this chapter, through readings of *Bataan*, *Sahara* and *Stormy Weather*, I explore Hollywood cinema’s construction of the black soldier as a figure of history, one whose presence encodes certain histories in the film text while disavowing others. I also show how the histories described in these black-soldier war films map race onto space, with integrated spaces appearing as extra-national and home/national spaces depicted as segregated. The different kinds of spaces in the films allowed audience members in the (largely segregated) spaces of the movie theaters to consider current racial organization as well as, perhaps, imagine another racial order. In my readings, I argue that, along with the handful of other war films and WWII-era documentaries (which will be discussed in Chapter Two) featuring the new figure of the black soldier, these three films inaugurated a cinematic vision of the African American man that required a new spectatorial relationship to black representation. While offering a complete history of the cinema’s depictions of blackness is outside the scope of my work here, in this chapter I consider the ways in which Hollywood’s wartime constructions of blackness delivered a reprisal of earlier images and ideologies that had dominated the silver screens before the war.

What follows begins with a discussion of the histories of U.S. interventionism occasionally referenced but more often elided in the films, and their connection to the development of black civil rights struggles in the United States. In the next section of the chapter, I offer readings of *Bataan* and *Sahara* that show how America’s transformed representations of African Americans were already invested with the nation’s changing
relationship to the international community; how, in particular, these representations worked to revise America’s cinematic record while at the same time repressing its military one. In the final sections of the chapter, I turn to the work of the hybrid black soldier-entertainer figure featured in *Stormy Weather*, whose story of success on the American stage between the world wars also reengages the history of black performance in the United States. Ultimately, I argue, *Stormy Weather*’s soldier demonstrates the importance of reading America cinema’s racial representational and spectatorial strategies as always-already bound up with the ways in which blackness has traveled space—across colonial and postcolonial military interventions as well as through circuits of international commodification and consumption.

**Locating Racial Politics in America**

World War II forced both white and black Americans to think about their roles in racial struggles across the globe. While African Americans debated the merits of joining a war movement that sought to protect minorities abroad without guaranteeing any rights to black citizens at home, mainstream America found itself defending the rights of Jews in Europe and Chinese and Filipinos in Asia alongside those of white Europeans. Because part and parcel with this defense came America’s increasing involvement in nation and empire building (and dismantling), “World War II elevated U.S. racial division to a question of national security, international relations, and global justice.”27 In other words, as the United States suddenly sought to establish alliances with non-European peoples and nations abroad, it faced the challenges of transforming its existing relationship with

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27 Singh 103.
racial minorities at home. Thus, according to Singh, “the imperative to include blacks within the nation was increasingly linked to the struggle to imagine the world-system and the future U.S. role within it—what might be called the international reconstruction of nationhood.”

This “reconstruction,” which I will explore further in connection to the concept of “reconstructive spectatorship” in Chapter Two, took place on at least three fronts: in the formation of new U.S. foreign policy; in U.S. domestic law; and, most germane to this discussion, in America’s national and international cinematic public spheres. The significant shift in black representation in Hollywood, in particular in films like Bataan and Sahara that were produced for export as well, was thus integral to this project. Indeed, Singh’s employment of the term “reconstruction,” directs us to connect these mid-20th century governmental efforts to the unfinished historical project of mid-19th century Reconstruction. But, whereas America’s post-Civil-War Reconstruction launched a (however incomplete) rebuilding of racial relations within the country, its reconstruction of nationhood during WWII was an international one, shaped then, and forever after, by America’s extra-national aspirations.

Black America, which by WWII was already invested in international alliances with Third World peoples, also recognized its significance in the “explosive, racialized geopolitics” now “at the center of the war.” So while what Cripps has called the “OWI-NAACP-Hollywood axis” rushed to depict African Americans in dignified, integrated roles in order to gain international support for the U.S.’s new role, “black activists and

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28 Singh 102.
29 Singh 117.
30 Cripps 62.
intellectuals increasingly came to view their own struggles as encapsulating struggles for equality and justice across the globe.”31 Indeed, since the 1930s, when black leaders like Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois began affiliating more with international leftist communities, including the CPUSA at home, African Americans were finding “the problems of the Chinese, the Indians, and the Burmese strangely analogous to [their] own. In this sense the Negro became more international-minded than the rest of the population.”32 In particular, “The economic crisis [of the 30s] and urban recomposition of black populations precipitated a sharp leftward turn among black intellectuals and across black political thinking and activist practice” so that, “by the onset of World War II, the militancy of blacks across the country was [already] pushing the NAACP in more radical directions”33 in favor of a coalitional politics that was globally minded, and which understood anti-racism and anti-imperialism as interconnected. While Hollywood and the U.S. Government concerned themselves with advancing America’s agenda abroad,

black thinkers went from skepticism about Allied war aims and rhetoric to embracing the war’s potential for intranational, as well as international, transformation. Rather than assume an uncomplicated standpoint of national unity, black activists used racial division as an interpretive lens upon broader problems of nationality and world order. The war thus sharpened the dialectic of race and nation—color and democracy—as U.S. blacks viewed their own struggles, in Himes’ words, as ‘the very essence of the fight for freedom of all the peoples of the world.’34

Thus, though Bataan and Sahara may have obscured the reality of anti-black racism in the military with false representations of multi-racial, multi-national integration, the films

31 Singh 103.
33 Singh 69, 101.
34 Singh 108.
also offered (however unintentionally) surprisingly accurate reflections of African American’s ideological alliances with other U.S. minorities and colonized peoples.

Even the nascent black Civil Rights Movement forged multi-racial, multi-ethnic political relationships, in particular on the west coast, where *Bataan, Sahara* and the other war films were being produced.\(^{35}\) These alliances were in no small part the result of violence—often perpetrated by white soldiers on leave—against various communities of color, including Mexicans, Filipinos and African Americans. During the Zoot Suit Riots, an infamous series of incidents that began in Los Angeles in 1943 (the same year *Bataan, Sahara* and *Stormy Weather* were released) and spread across the country, white soldiers and marines targeted and attacked primarily Mexican but also Filipino and black young men who were dressed in zoot suits—expressive clothing that had, during the period “become the sartorial sign of new public confidence among urban youth of color across the country.”\(^{36}\) The zoot suit outfits themselves (which violated wartime rationing restrictions on fabric usage) signaled a cultural, socio-political communion between black, Mexican and Filipino Americans, whose attire articulated their common refusal to align themselves with white America or the war movement. Thus, even though it was black Americans whose images were undergoing reconstruction in the cinema, the future of all Americans of color’s safety and rights were clearly at stake in these efforts as well.

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\(^{36}\) Singh 105.
Walter White, who was President of the NAACP during the war, has himself recounted what is now an oft-quoted story of black preference for a Japanese victory over the United States, revealing the depth of these trans-racial, inter-minority identifications. White describes trying to rouse a black audience to pro-war sentiment and hearing instead that leadership by Hitler couldn’t make things worse for blacks and rule by Japan might well make them better. So while films like Bataan and Sahara clearly aimed to align viewers with anti-Japanese sentiment, it is not clear, where black audiences were concerned, that they would have been entirely successful. Moreover, it seems likely that the films’ multi-racial casts, presented to camouflage the newly integrated black soldier, may well have encouraged against-the-grain readings of inter-minority alliance. In what follows, as I analyze key scenes from Bataan and Sahara for their unprecedented representations of dignified black men on screen, I also explore what kinds of meanings can be generated when we practice such transformative—or (to rephrase Singh’s terminology) “internationally reconstructive”—strategies of spectatorship and reading.

**Picturing the Philippines in Bataan**

Like most Hollywood films of the time, Bataan was the result of numerous conversations, collaborations and compromises. According to Cripps, “Bataan began in the summer of 1942 when Selznick took up the story, then stepped aside and sold it to Metro.” Soon after, a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer writer, Robert Hardy Andrews, decided to reconceptualize the generic war film as “a story about the only Army outfit ‘in which

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37 Singh 101.
38 Cripps 72.
Negro troops stand equal in every respect with white troops.” Andrews idea of “equal” was overwhelmed by a stereotypically mythic visual and historical iconography, and yielded up “a ‘towering Negro’ released ‘from a downriver chain gang’” and loosely based on the legend of John Henry as its hero. Soon-to-be head of production at Metro, Dore Schary (who would later become known for his “message movies”) tempered the film’s extremism, and transformed the story into a remake of Ford’s 1934 production, Lost Patrol, while still “‘breaking the color barrier in American war films.’” The film was incredibly well received by the studio, the NAACP, “which gave it an award as a ‘needed realistic picture’; OWI reviewers, who said it ‘deserved all the praise that can be showered upon it’”; black and white presses; and audiences as well.

But, as I’ve described above, in breaking the “color barrier,” Bataan also proposed a utopian model for an integrated America, one in which not only African Americans, but all races could work together to advance democracy. When we first see the military unit, assembled for role in the jungle, there are two Filipinos, a Polish American, a Jewish American, a black American, and a Chicano, played by the Cuban-born American Desi Arnaz, along with the handful of other less ethnically-marked soldiers. The men’s mission is to blow the bridge as many times as possible, not so they can beat the Japanese, who will surely kill them, but simply to slow the enemy down and buy General MacArthur time for his maneuvers. And, indeed, they spend the entire film blowing up the bridge and dying, one by one, until the film ends, with the last man standing in his own, self-dug grave, amidst a hailstorm of oncoming bullets. These men

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39 Cripps 72-73.
40 Cripps 73.
41 Cripps 73.
42 Cripps 76.
represent then the vanguard of the United States military, the troops preceding the troops, making space and time for them, and working alongside endangered allies America has decided to protect. They simultaneously reflect the long reach of the United States and its benevolence, obscuring, particularly through their multiculturalism, America’s colonial and imperial presence in the Philippines since the mid-19th century Spanish-American War.

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Before moving on to a discussion of the film text itself, I want to gloss some key moments in U.S.-Philippines history that bear on my reading, and which are elided from the film. In general, these narrate a double subjugation of the Philippines by the United States in the public sphere: militaristically/legally/economically and representationally. The U.S. began its official relationship with the Philippines through their mutual involvement in war with Spain in the last years of the 19th century. In 1898, the United States, which had, in service of its own war against Spain, helped Filipino revolutionaries throw off Spanish rule, decided soon after to annex Philippines and use the islands for labor, raw materials, and military bases. And, indeed, in the years following America’s conquest of the Philippines (after three years of warfare), Filipino immigrants to the U.S. provided a reliable source of cheap labor, particularly in California and farmlands near the West coast. But as many problems as Filipino immigration solved for the U.S., it created more—angering working class white Americans, who felt jobs were being stolen from them, and causing alarm among all ranks of white Americans, who were horrified to
see the largely male immigrant community dating, and even marrying, white women. Further, “using law to police sexual relations between Filipinos and whites was difficult because the racial classification of Filipinos was legally ambiguous.”\(^{43}\) It took years for white Americans to extend anti-miscengenation laws to include “members of the Malay race.”\(^{44}\) Thus, in Mai Ngai’s assessment, “Filipino migration lay bare contradictions between the insular policy of benevolent assimilation and the immigration policy of Asiatic exclusion, which had fully matured by the 1920s, and domestic racism generally.”\(^{45}\) Importantly for my analysis, it also demonstrated the complex interaction between anti-black racism and Asian American migration in the U.S. by revealing the ways in which Asian American bodies came into the United States as intermediary, or possibly even tertiary, terms in a racial polarity between black and white but were nonetheless subsumed within its dynamic.

So, in the wake of a series of anti-Filipino riots, mostly in response to labor shortages in the west, the United States passed legislation to repatriate, denaturalize and eventually decolonize Filipinos. The 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act transformed the status of the Philippines to a Commonwealth and set a ten-year transition period to full independence that also recategorized the U.S. territory as a foreign country. This allowed the U.S. to set an immigration quota that would stem the influx of Filipino men to the continent.\(^{46}\) It also rendered Filipinos who had previously been all-but invisible as alien non-citizens even further invisible and virtually without any national status. In her


\(^{44}\) Ngai 115.

\(^{45}\) Ngai 97.

\(^{46}\) Ngai 96.
chapter on the Philippines, Ngai describes Filipinos as “invisible subjects” who, as migrants, “were the corporeality of contradictions that existed in American colonial policy and practice.” These subjects’ bodies were at once, and seemingly paradoxically, racialized and rendered invisible through mechanisms similar to some of those during slavery used to mark and dehumanize African Americans: laws that deprived them of citizenship status or rights but nonetheless held them accountable for agency (for instance, votes in the case of black Americans, and consent in the case of the Filipinos) they could not effectively exercise.

Not surprisingly, then, the conquest, annexation and ultimate decolonization of the Philippines were all staged nearly as much in the public sphere—and for multiple media—as on the islands themselves. Even the American victory over Spain in Manila was orchestrated to perform the erasure of Filipino presence on the island. According to Amy Kaplan, the U.S. and Spanish leaders agreed on a staged moment of victory—from which they would exclude the Filipinos—in which Americans would “conquer” the city of Manila at a prearranged time and the Spanish would, among other acts of defeat, raise a white flag. “Here,” Kaplan comments, the theatricalization of U.S. power worked to render ineffectual Filipino opposition to Spain and the United States. Throughout the joint U.S.-Philippines battles against the Spanish, the Filipino presence went wherever possible unreported (in the presses as well as in the emerging technology of film) or reshaped as a political indeterminacy because, in Kaplan’s words, the “invisibility [of indigenous soldiers] also had to be produced ideologically, to deny…Filipinos

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47 Ngai 97.
representation as equal contestants in political struggle.” This early invisibility could then create the conditions of possibility for the kind described above by Ngai, and which, as I describe below, ‘appears’ in *Bataan* as well.\(^{49}\)

According to Ngai, the production of Filipinos as particular subjects, “tribal,” and “denationalized,” for instance, was initially essential in the 1890s to justify annexation and cast the American mission as benevolence—the United States had not denied national self-determination because no nation existed...[there was] no contradiction [for President McKinley] in announcing the United States’ commitment to individual freedom for Filipinos but not their national freedom.\(^{50}\)

By the 1940s, these representations could be redeployed to suggest the Philippines’ vulnerability to Japanese tyranny, and the responsibility of the United States to protect the soon-to-be-independent nation. However, as Kaplan points out in her description of how the American-Spanish plan for the staged conquest of Manila went awry, “If the spectacle of American manhood has the political import of denying national agency to the conquered, this repression can never be complete, for the theater itself is open to contest, to improvisation, as it was in Manila.”\(^{51}\) Indeed, in *Bataan* as during the final battle of the Spanish-American War in Manila, Filipino figures perform both not only their historical importance and presence but also the violence of their near-erasure.

**A Civilizing Mission in *Bataan***

Despite film’s elision of any account of U.S. conflict with the Philippines, *Bataan* begins by insisting on the specificity and historicity of its setting. These it will use, over the course of the movie, to segregate out the Japanese, integrate its black soldier, and

\(^{49}\) Kaplan 115.  
\(^{50}\) Ngai 99.  
\(^{51}\) Kaplan 116.
dramatically lynch its unassimilable Filipino. The first image of the film is a map of the Philippine Islands with Manila clearly marked. As the camera slowly moves toward the region of Bataan in on the map, a dedication including the history of the battle of Bataan is superimposed. It reads:

When Japan struck...Ninety-six priceless days were bought for us— with their lives— by the defenders of Bataan, the Philippine army which formed the bulk of MacArthur’s infantry fighting shoulder to shoulder with Americans. To those immortal dead, who heroically stayed the wave of barbaric conquest, this picture is reverently dedicated.

While maintaining its primary focus, offering pro-American war propaganda, *Bataan* clearly presents itself from the get-go as a film about multi-national military collaboration against “barbarism.” Despite this introduction, the film does not show the Philippine army, but rather a few stray Philippine fighters incorporated within the American military—and indeed, the question of Filipino incorporation comes back to haunt and finally shape racial representation in the film. Though there are some significant representations of Filipino culture and bravery, they appear here in *Bataan* alongside other non-white racial representation, precisely to integrate and normalize images of the black American soldier, Wesley Epps, who himself helps to normalize the deployment American colonial and imperial power.

MGM’s decision to frame the film with a dedication was not an unprecedented one—numerous war films of the time began this way— nonetheless, it does suggest an effort to find and direct the film’s spectators. Reminiscent of the prefaces to slave narratives, it asks its spectators to believe what they see, even if culturally the signs and symbols seem inappropriate. It works to lend authenticity and legitimacy to the story proper, which will indeed be a whopper of a tale about an integrated military unit
operating five years before the appearance of even nominal integration. The dedication also at once identifies its spectators as an American public and asks them to see themselves as endangered, like the Filipinos, by Japanese actions in the Pacific. Curiously—given what will be the film’s derisive treatment of its Filipino characters—it seems to align viewers with not only Filipino subjects but also with their subject position as well, in a broader effort to create “barbari[ans]” of the Japanese. In this respect, it sets the stage for a trans-racial collaboration (between whites and Filipinos) that will be surpassed by a more radical multi-racial concert.

In keeping with the dedication, the next image, which seems to be the first image of film proper but in fact remains unnarrativized, is a low-angle shot of the raising of the Japanese flag against the sky, as though from the perspective of the subjugated Filipino. Though the experiences of Filipino civilians do not become part of the plot of *Bataan*, their subjugation by the Japanese nonetheless frames both the narrative and the ideological work of the film. The raising of this flag at the opening of the film draws attention to the violence of Japanese imperialism while exonerating the United States of any responsibility for its own colonization of the Philippines. It also signals the film’s agenda: putting aside all potential racial tension between allies—whether black and white Americans or Americans and Filipinos—in service of unified opposition against Japanese power. And, indeed, after a moment, the shot dissolves into a story of American-Filipino alliance with an American-led mass migration of Filipinos and Americans towards the end of the peninsula during Japanese attack. As the American soldiers help the many Filipino women and children on their march, Captain Lassiter, Sergeant Dane and another soldier, Feingold, meet and learn that their unit will be composed of a motley crew—
some Filipino, some American, and all from different branches of the military—and that they will all have to find a way to get along.

The first section of the film is devoted to proving Dane—the soldier in the scene quoted at the beginning of this chapter—wrong by showing how a multi-cultural, multi-racial group of men, united only by their willingness to fight their Japanese and die for democracy, can grow together into an effective military unit. This thematic is introduced with the first roll call, where it becomes clear that each of the soldiers hails from a different branch of the military and offers a unique, important set of skills. For instance: one of the Filipinos, Salazar, is a famous boxer in civilian life, the other is an aerial engineer; Ramirez is a medic and Purkett is a sweet, green sailor from the Midwest who plays the trumpet; Epps, the black soldier, is a demolitions expert and studying to be a minister at home. That each can contribute to the unit in some essential way integrates the soldiers—figuratively and racially—into one community.

Nonetheless, the non-white characters are marked as racial others either by the camera or by the narrative itself. For instance, Epps is primarily pictured half-naked and singing (“The St. Louis Blues,” a famous composition by W.C. Handy), and thus connected visually and aurally to a representational history of African Americans as primitive and musical—rather than civilized—beings. That said, after his dubious introduction as a shirtless singing soldier, Epps turns out to be a highly competent demolitions expert. In a series of shots that keep him in the center of the frame, Epps works—still shirtless—tying explosives to the bridge the unit has been ordered to blow up. As usual, he is singing, and his voice spills over into the next series of shots of Dane and Todd, the other demolitionists. Dane and Todd, it turns out, have known each other
before when Todd, then under a different name, went AWOL and ruined Dane’s chances for promotion. This story of criminal, un-soldierly conduct is interwoven with shots of the singing, shirtless Epps. Here Epps’ competence and moral goodness appear through contrast with Todd’s incompetence and immorality—but they also appear bound up with his physical innocence and power, and with his musical, perhaps spiritual (soon his singing will be connected to his religious ministering), soulfulness. In this scene, written to offer Dane and Todd’s motivation for what will be a complex, contentious relationship, Epps is represented as a physically and spiritually innocent and good soldier. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, Epps’ soldierliness becomes defined by his undressed, elemental body and his pure, soulful spirituality.

Epps’ physical, emotional, and spiritual purity remain central to his representation of black soldierhood—and to the new figure of the black soldier in *Bataan*. Epps digs graves and conducts funeral services for the other troops singing and shirtless all the while. He prays to God on behalf of a dead comrade and with an uncommon yet simple wisdom, “long as we know that what goes out of graves is the best part of what goes into ‘em, we know he’s all right.” He never seems to get hungry and stays at his post longer than the rest, allowing others to eat first. And he becomes, quite radically, a point of identification for the viewer when the next soldier dies. He smiles, center screen, when a comrade manages to climb to the top of a tall palm tree for lookout, begins humming when he settles himself in to stay, and fills the frame completely, with welling tears in his eyes, when the soldier is finally shot dead by the enemy. Here, Epps is not only a dignified black soldier in an integrated unit, he is also the spiritual leader for the men and the emotional guide for the viewer, no small accomplishment for a figure all but absent
from the screen the year before. Thus, in these scenes, Epps successfully presents a non-threatening yet potent blackness on screen.

However, Epps’ blackness is also safely contained in the film: uniformed in American nationalism, directed against Eastern fascism (rather than, say, U.S. racism) and, perhaps most importantly, differentiated from colonial backwardness. Epps’ status as an American and not a colonial subject is shored up when Yankee Salazar, one of the Filipino troops, is ordered to “get civilized.” Interestingly, Salazar draws criticism for his dress—a loincloth, supposedly traditional Filipino clothing—while nobody seems the least perturbed by Epps’s rather similar perpetual shirtlessness. Indeed, Salazar’s problematic attire reflects as much on Epps as it does on Salazar himself, positioning Epps as already incorporated into modern nationalism and Salazar as only marginally so: without military clothing, Salazar again becomes “uncivilized,” whereas Epps remains a contributing member of the community, so civilized that, even shirtless, he can conduct the unit’s funerals.

In this scene, the soldiers are anxious and desperate for reinforcements, and wondering aloud what they should do. Suddenly Salazar appears in his loincloth and camouflaged in mud. In broken English, he explains, “I go tell General MacArthur, General sends planes, planes drop bombs on Japs. Bang, Fourth of July…” His proposal to go for help is expressed comically by the film, with Salazar representing himself as a Filipino native (“I know this country all over…I come from a one-time very murdering family, Sergeant!”) and yet at the same time referencing a U.S. national holiday, Fourth of July, as if it were his own. One critic comments that “his demonstration of patriotic faith also recapitulates the popular American rationale for domination in the Philippines,
that the Filipinos were incapable of self-rule and in need of American protection."

Dane’s condescending response, “Wait a minute. Put your clothes on. Get civilized again,” clearly excludes Salazar from the version of Americanness he attempts to assume, yet asks him to continue fighting in the American-led battle. This contradiction—exacting military service without granting citizenship—curiously mirrors the longtime predicament of black Americans, whose years fighting for the U.S. were never rewarded with the rights they fought to protect. Here, however, the problematic of racial exclusion is shifted onto colonial subjects, like Salazar, and away from the newly dignified black soldier, Epps. Thus this scene, in which Salazar is disciplined for his nativism, works to establish Salazar’s exclusion from the nation and, even more importantly, to insist upon Epps’ inclusion.

At the end of the scene, Salazar has slipped away, unnoticed, in his traditional garb. Later he is found tortured and hung by the Japanese, though at first his own unit takes him for a Japanese soldier in hiding—further emphasizing his difference from the rest of the Americans. He is the only soldier – Japanese or otherwise—to receive such brutal treatment in Bataan, perhaps because his punitive exclusion from the U.S. is so important in defining Epps’ admittance. Salazar’s hanging certainly does reference the most common demonstration of American anti-black violence, lynching, from which the wartime U.S. government was trying, unsuccessfully, to distance itself. Such violence seeps through the façade of racial inclusion in Bataan, by proxy in this case, but without jeopardizing Hollywood’s important new representation of black masculinity.

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Or does it in fact jeopardize this representation? What we cannot know, because no mention appeared in the presses of the time, is how black audiences might have read these problematic stereotypes of Filipinos amongst the changing images of African Americans. Did some viewers identify Salazar as the scapegoat for racialized violence usually directed (in films as well as in daily life) against black Americans? Did they read Salazar’s exile from the community of “civilized” Americans as part of the film’s mechanism for Epps’ inclusion? And did those with a more global awareness and knowledge read America’s imperial history back into the film’s depiction of U.S. stay in the Philippines? If so, then these viewers were at once reading with and against the film text—practicing new processes of identification encouraged by the films reconstructed representations of African Americans while focusing a selective strategy of what Diawara has called “resisting” spectatorship towards not black, but rather “brown” representations on the screen.\footnote{Manthia Diawara. “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance.” \textit{Black American Cinema}. Ed. Manthia Diwara. New York: Routledge, 1993. 211.}

What \textit{is} clear is that the Filipino colony and people, however underrepresented in the film, allow \textit{Bataan} to redefine filmic blackness as fully American without threatening domestic racial practices. Hollywood’s use of the globe here anticipates its new interventionist international politics and offers filmmakers American-ish spaces—not properly American, not quite un-American—in which to present new and potentially risky images of Americanness without undermining the stability of the representational status quo.
“We both have much to learn from each other”: The Foreign Black Body in *Sahara*

Produced at the same time as *Bataan* by Columbia Pictures, *Sahara* uses international space and the transitional identity of the colonial subject to even more rigorously manage its integrated army troop. *Sahara* was also, like *Bataan*, well received, with the NAACP “praising it as an ‘outstanding contribution toward the objective stated by Mr. White’” and, “in Harlem, kids st[anding] and cheer[ing] Tamboul,” the black soldier.\(^{54}\) It was scripted by John Howard Lawson, a communist, who envisioned the film as an “internationalized” version of Mikhail Romm’s *The Thirteen* (1937), a propaganda film for the Red Army with essentially the same plot.\(^{55}\) Ironically, Lawson’s *Sahara* preserves *The Thirteen*’s collectivist thematic even while offering a pro-Western democratic message.

Set, like *Bataan*, in a nebulous colonial space in which both history and race become detached from socio-political material reality, *Sahara* offers an even more extreme example of the same kinds of representational politics of inclusion and exclusion depicted in *Bataan*. In *Sahara*, a collection of lost military men joins together in an undefined desert-scape in an undefined part of Northern Africa, take prisoners, find water, and ultimately defeat an entire German brigade. As the international alliance of soldiers grows together into an inclusive, multi-ethnic family, surviving successfully off of the seemingly deserted desert, the violent and racist histories that produced the regional politics and peoples remain suppressed. Tambul, the British-Sudanese black soldier and the one character at all representative of the continent, aligns himself with Western values throughout the film, explaining in one scene why he is monogamous in

\(^{54}\) Cripps 77.  
\(^{55}\) Cripps 73.
spite of his polygamous culture and upbringing. He knows the place—the vague, undefined space of the desert—and presents himself as part of it and its vague, symbolically non-Western ambience. Yet he offers it and himself up for Western use not as foreign place and subject but as if both had always been peaceably within the West rather than subjugated by it. He likewise explains his personal history as though it were not a product of international history, telling one of the British soldiers that generations of men in his family were also soldiers, that this is a family profession, while staying silent on the histories of slavery, colonization and enforced military inscription that must have made these Sudanese into soldiers for the British. Not only, then, is place a kind of no-place in this film, reduced to its physicality and drained of its history, but the black soldier too is little more than a body, a symbol of blackness unable to testify to its real origins.

_Sahara_ begins, like _Bataan_, with a dedication to the armed forces that incorporates them, as well as its potential spectators, into American patriotism and the U.S.’s democratizing mission. The dedication, which concludes, “a film dedicated to the IV Armored Corps of the Army Ground Forces, United States Army, whose cooperation made it possible to tell this story,” lends authenticity to _Sahara_ before the film has even started. Shifting the film from fiction toward fact, the dedication gathers both affective and historical weight for the film, suggesting that _Sahara_ was produced in cooperation with the armed forces and thus will be historically and factually accurate. But _Sahara_ is not as concerned with history or facts as it is with presenting a positive image of the Allies’ alliance and establishing the Germans as the sole obstacle to democracy and racial harmony. And, as in _Bataan_, its representation rests on misrepresentation of the history
and politics of colonial space—here that of the Sahara (or somewhere in Northern Africa).

Even without its history, the Sahara becomes something of a character in the film, creating both the obstacle and the solution to conquering the German forces: a character that will, through its assimilable foreignness, allow the black soldier to become, himself, almost assimilable. The story begins with Sergeant Joe Gunn (played by Bogart) leading a group of stranded soldiers through the desert on a lone tank and turns into a pitched battle against the German forces, with the outnumbered Allies defending a dry well and an old fort, the Germans surrounding them in the sand, and everybody nearly dying of thirst. During the trek through this vast desert, out of which people appear suddenly, inexplicably, the Americans pick up a number of other, wandering soldiers: first some British, then a Frenchman, then an Italian captured by a British-Sudanese soldier, Tambul (the black soldier, played by American Rex Ingram), and finally a German as well. Through the staying power of the Americans and the heroics of the black soldier, the Allies win the battle, but not before *Sahara* depicts the deep concert of all peoples, far and wide, British, American and African, who love freedom.

Tambul, the British-Sudanese soldier, is increasingly humanized across the film, though as his similarity to the Western soldiers grows, his historical and cultural specificity diminish. By the end of the film, Tambul is dead, transformed from an African native to a history-less hero. His first appearance in the film depicts a powerful racial reversal: Tambul holds a captured white soldier at gunpoint, marching him across the sand and forcing him to carry both soldiers’ packs and equipment. At war, Allies versus Axis are the only identities, the film seems to suggest, and race is no longer
important. And so Tambul appears out of the African desert, master of a white man, and as he does, American racial mores seem to disappear. Of course, it is only through the appearance of the “foreign”—Sudanese and Italian filmic characters and non-American, non-Western filmic space—that these cultural codes can fall away. Thus, while this reversal can perhaps signify a new racial politics to an American audience, it nonetheless does not present itself as an American phenomenon (or problem).

Paradoxically then, Rex Ingram, a well-known black American actor, can play a dignified, powerful black character in *Sahara* whose significance rests on his real relationship to American race laws, but whose incorporation into the narrative rests upon his fictitious “foreignness.”\(^56\) So while Tambul enters the history of the war—here as an American actor playing a doubly foreign British-Sudanese soldier—he enters at most a symbol of contested and shifting race relations projected outside of the (American) nation he reflects. In this film, Tambul is not so different from his film nation, Sudan, a colony occupied by an empire under siege as well (by Nazi Germany), and identifiable only as a pawn in an international struggle between world powers themselves fighting over a politics of race and human rights.

Indeed, Tambul’s foreignness is repeatedly emphasized across the film, and becomes integral to his ability to help the American and British troops he teams up with. First, because of his native knowledge of the region, Tambul is able to lead the soldiers to a well and a fort where they can make camp. While his knowledge empowers Tambul and in fact makes him *the* character instrumental in the group’s survival, it also

\(^56\) Ingram is probably best known for his role in *Green Pastures* (1936), an early Hollywood race film. He also played in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940) and *The Talk of the Town* (1942).
essentializes him as a native African and separates him from all of the other, clearly Western, troops. Tambul is the only one who knows how to manage in the desert, and even the only one able to capture the slow trickle of water from the well. He is the provider of water and shelter, the captor of their prisoner, and the man who will sacrifice his life to kill a dangerous German spy—but he is definitively like the other men. Down in the well, one of the others asks him about Muslim polygamy. Tambul describes the codes of marriage in Islam and answers all the soldier’s questions. When asked how many wives he has, he answers, only one, and explains his rejection of multiple marriages in very Western terms. “Yes, we both have much to learn from each other,” he tells the other soldier, insisting at once on their cultural similarity and their cultural difference. Because the differences between them—the laws of polygamy versus monogamy, Islam versus Christianity—turn out to be a simple matter of false assumptions by the Western soldier, Sahara seems to suggest Tambul is indeed just one of the guys, despite being African, no different from the others after all. (Indeed, all are from such different countries.) But again, he is not: he is a colonial subject of England, whose “father and his father before him were soldiers” for a country that defeated and oppressed them. He is more a conscript, more a prisoner than an equal, and he only appears an “ally” because this history—of the West’s relationship to Africa—remains suppressed in the film.

In Sahara, as in Bataan, the black body enters history, but neither as a subject of history nor even as its object. Both Tambul and Epps are black soldiers who play important roles in their respective film dramas, and who radiate both moral and physical dignity, but they can have no authentic history. Epps is a magically integrated soldier in
an unintegrated American Army. And while Tambul explains that his father and his father’s father were soldiers, he doesn’t offer any kind of context for their soldiery—that his father’s father was surely a slave soldier and that both his father and himself are not only soldiers in an empire that discriminates against them, but that their own nation, Sudan, is an occupied colony within that empire and, in and of itself, has been compelled to play pawn in an international war between empires. While Tambul is empowered by the false history in the script, his black body presents another history, that of war and forced conscription.

Such suppression of historical narratives is precisely how dignified black bodies were able to appear in integrated American films. The false historical scripts and war propaganda that shaped representations of actors like Rex Ingram and Kenneth Spencer in their films *Sahara* and *Bataan*, nonetheless propelled their black bodies into the first powerful black supporting roles in mainstream American cinema. Thus while such scripts may have erased the various histories of slavery, colonialism and American racism through their representations of black soldiers, they also made visible for the first time in integrated cinema “the [American] color barrier” and its soldiers.

**Black Histories and Home Space in *Stormy Weather***

*Stormy Weather* is a musical that tells the story of a black soldier’s love and pursuit of the American dream rather than of his participation in nation-building and international struggle. And, unlike *Bataan* and *Sahara*, its fiction takes place almost entirely on American soil (except for some non-diegetic shots that could, hypothetically, be anywhere) rather than in an occupied and contested colony—and was thus
significantly more bound by American cultural mores to depict the racial status quo. Though I believe *Stormy Weather*’s concern with the figure of the black soldier is quite similar to what I have shown was the shared concern of *Bataan* and *Sahara*—to demonstrate his importance to the war effort and the nation itself—*Stormy Weather* does not (or perhaps cannot) offer as potentially radical or ‘new’ a representation of black masculinity as do the two combat films. Rather, part of the same OWI-Hollywood-NAACP axis project of releasing films about black soldiers, *Stormy Weather* operates as a counterpoint to the combat films by working to (re)imagine the history and import of black life in America. While the film does not offer any significantly alternative options for the black soldier than those audiences would have already assumed while heading into the theaters, it does critically investigate the history of black representation and performance in the United States, and bring its legacy (and a critique of that legacy) to bear on the future of the powerful black icon.

Thus, further unlike *Bataan* and *Sahara*, *Stormy Weather* focuses on history. It in fact takes history as its theme and structures its narrative around a series of flashbacks that eventually break into the present of the diegesis. It is set primarily in the past and tells, in rather broad strokes, the story of veteran soldier Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson (who plays a version of himself, Bill Williamson, in the film) and his rise to fame. Interweaving this story and a (false) romance with Lena Horne (who also plays a version of herself, Selina Rogers, in the film), *Stormy Weather* watches Bill come home from war, find himself as a musician, succeed, fail and finally succeed in love.

The film opens with a series of shots that mark its narrative’s moment in time and significance in American culture. In a low angle mid-shot that eventually pulls up and
back to reveal bodies and faces as well as feet, *Stormy Weather* begins by presenting Bill Williamson teaching a group of neighborhood children to tap on the porch of his suburban house. In a wide shot, a young latecomer pulls a magazine out of Bill’s mailbox and tries to read its cover. The camera cuts to a close shot of “Theater World,” featuring a picture of Bill’s smiling face and subtitled, “Celebrating the magnificent contribution of the colored race to the entertainment of the world during the past twenty-five years.” The little girl runs the magazine over to Bill and asks him to read it. Sitting on the porch, with the whole group gathered and looking over his shoulder, Bill (in a point of view shot) reads out, “‘Bill, Jim Europe would have been proud of you, Ex-Drum Major Nobel Sissle.’” After explaining to the kids that Jim Europe had “the greatest band in the world, attached to the 15th Regiment” (which Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson himself served in as the Drum Major), and that they’d all received the *Croix de Guerre* in France, Bill begins to reminisce and the first flashback in the film commences.

As this opening anticipates, in *Stormy Weather* the history of black participation in the armed forces is inextricable from that of black performance. Indeed the first shots of the flashback intercut these two historical narratives—intermixing culled documentary footage of WWI soldiers’ (the 15th New York National Guard) triumphant welcome-home parade with shots of famous black musicians (Noble Sissle, James Reece Europe and Eubie Blake) and musical venues (Beale Street in Memphis and the Pekin Theater in Chicago). At times, the narrative of the development of black performance (in particular of Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson’s and Lena Horne’s rises to fame) comes to dominate that of the black soldier, suggesting that the only role for a black man at home in America is

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57 Cripps 83.
as an entertainer; at others, Bill’s tale seems to enable and give voice to the otherwise suppressed history of the black soldier. Indeed, across the film, Bill tells the story of his efforts to become a successful musical performer even as he looks back on his time as a soldier and forward to the challenges of the current war effort. Though *Stormy Weather* doesn’t depict the struggles faced by the many black soldiers who returned from WWI to a rising tide of racial violence and the rebirth of the Klu Klux Klan, it does present Bill reflecting on the difficulties he faced finding a job and building a life for himself in a segregated postwar America.

*Stormy Weather* also provides Bill with a range of willing and engaged audiences in the fiction of the film (from children to soldiers), staging for the screen the act of spectatorship and challenging the film’s viewers to consider their own spectatorial strategies. Indeed, *Stormy Weather* rehearses for its viewers a history of black cultural production including: blackface minstrelsy, a cake walk and renditions of famous black performances from the 1920s and 30s, including a revue of the *Cotton Club Parade of 1933*. In so doing, it requires its viewers to recall the hardships of black performers who sought dignified roles as well as the many ways in which black artists expressed carefully camouflaged criticisms of the racist societies in which they lived. Necessarily, then, it also asks viewers to develop and practice a range of ways of watching and engaging with the images on the screen: from identification to critique to a more involved oscillation between the two (which I have described in detail in the Introduction as a mode of reconstructive spectatorship). In what follows, as I contextualize *Stormy Weather* in its production history and offer a series of scene analyses, I will argue that *Stormy Weather* offers more than a complex, compromised representation of the “new” figure of the black
soldier. It also presents a calculated critique of black cinematic representation and reception that, I suggest, gestures toward alternative modes of black expression and identitarian practice as well.

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_Stormy Weather_ was a popular film whose broad appeal at once underscored the centrality of black representation to American screen entertainment and raised questions about how African Americans should be presented to the nation at large. The film was one of the last of Hollywood’s black-cast films, which were quickly going out of fashion, but packed with stars that attracted white and black viewers alike. It was developed as an original story—a rare occurrence in the Hollywood studios of the time—by Hy Kraft at 20th Century Fox. According to Cripps, “Kraft’s working title, _Thanks, Pal_, wore its theme like a bumper sticker: A birthday party for an old hoofer who becomes a lead-in to a national voice of gratitude for black participation in past wars, but encased in ‘the magnificent contribution of the colored race to the entertainment of the world.’” ⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the biggest controversy surrounding the production of the film revolved around _Stormy Weather_’s representation of this “contribution” and focused in particular on the choice of musical score.

During production, an argument between Le Baron, another producer at Fox, and William Grant Still, the first black composer hired to score a Hollywood film, led to a broader disagreement about how to portray black musical talent in _Stormy Weather_—

⁵⁸ Cripps 83.
disagreement which ultimately found its way, albeit in new form, into the film text as well. After weeks of arguing, Still quit the film after Le Baron complained that he was composing music that was “‘too good [because] black musicians didn’t play that well.’”\footnote{Cripps 84.}

So, despite featuring internationally acclaimed black formers including Dooley Wilson, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, Flournoy Miller, Johnny Lee, Zutty Singleton, Ada Brown, Mae Johnson, Katharine Dunham, Nicholas Brothers, *Stormy Weather* was crafted to contain and constrain not only its representations of black masculinity, but also its depictions of black musical talent as well.\footnote{Cripps 84} And, as I’ll describe in more detail below, the film’s depictions of black musical talent do indeed vary radically across the film, becoming emblematized in the casting itself; the early performer Bill Robinson playing across from the rising star Lena Horne (who was also reinventing musical standards popularized by Ethel Waters) created a “struggle between two styles of black performance, between those who could ‘cross over’ into white theaters and those who had played out their lives on the ‘chittlin circuit.’”\footnote{Cripps 81}

The same debate over representation that shaped both the film’s score and cast, also affected *Cabin in the Sky*, the other Hollywood black-cast film produced during the war. Also released during 1944 and also starring Lena Horne, *Cabin in the Sky* seemed a far less conflicted film where black representation was concerned: its characters, like the more traditional black characters of the 1930s, were rural black folk concerned with
singing and dancing rather than war and politics. Nonetheless, studio executives and critics alike were concerned that, as black-cast films, both *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky* “begg[ed] the questions of whether or not they merely exhibited blacks as though at a zoo (as Agee would write), or only reflected the segregated facts of real life, or were a retreat from the moguls’ pledges” to offer more dignified and integrated images of African Americans. Ironically, because *Stormy Weather* was released during the Zoot Suit Riots, rather than suppressed by the studio which apparently was quite concerned about the film inciting more violence, the film and its producers “earned praise from blacks of all political sectors.” So the charges of racism that haunted the film during its production—including that it “impl[ied] a retreat from integration,”—were assuaged by the timing of its release.

Recently, a handful of contemporary scholars have taken up the sixty-year-old disagreement about representation in *Stormy Weather*. Attempting to resolve the inherent contradictions in *Stormy Weather*’s black-cast and seemingly retrograde images and its historicizing, potentially-politicizing gestures, they have argued that the film is at its most critical of the status quo during its musical numbers. Arthur Knight, for instance, claims that in its very form as a musical, *Stormy Weather* focused productive attention on the concerns of black America. In *Disintegrating Musicals*, Knight explains how *Stormy Weather*, like many musical films of the period, “became a locus around which crucial debates about the sound, sight, and stories of black music—and, thus, symbolic debates

62 In fact, *Stormy Weather* was the only all-black studio musical that was not set in the country. See Shane Vogel, “Performing *Stormy Weather*: Lena Horne, Ethel Waters and Katherine Dunham.” *South Central Review* Volume 25 No 1 (Spring 2008). 104.
63 Cripps 80-1.
64 Cripps 85.
65 Cripps 80.
about African Americans and their culture(s) in America—could play out.” He insists that:

In the musical and its use of black performers, final judgments of the (in)authenticity or (im)purity of the music they perform are less at stake, in my view, than are the circumstances under which, the mechanisms through which, and the debates around how African Americans and blackness can be seen, heard, and understood at all—particularly in relation to the American mainstream that film, especially in its economically integrated Hollywood mode, aims to penetrate.

Here, Knight argues that the musical film both allows African Americans to be heard and seen and, at the same time, engages debates about in what roles and by what processes blackness comes to be defined and admitted to the public sphere. In essence, he suggests that the power to critique the status quo lies both within the genre form and the director and producer’s decisions about how to depict their characters.

However, in his essay, “Performing Stormy Weather: Ethel Waters, Lena Horne and Katherine Dunham,” Shane Vogel insists that the power of critique in Stormy Weather lies within the actors themselves, whose choices comment upon and at times transform the musical numbers they perform. Offering a reading of Stormy Weather’s staging of its title song, “Stormy Weather,” Vogel argues that the film demonstrates “how an African-American modernist impulse and racial critique could be posed, voiced and circulated through the sounds, movements, and mise-en-scene of popular performance.” His reading goes on to reveal the myriad ways in which Stormy Weather encodes a history of black performance and black performers’ efforts to take control their own representational and professional destinies. I want to take a moment here to rehearse

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67 Knight 13.
68 Vogel 93.
Vogel’s argument because of the ways in which it overlaps with and, at times, provides a basis for my own—that Stormy Weather’s critique of race and racial representation is transmitted to its audience through both its historicized black soldier and an imperative to establish new modes of black film spectatorship.

**Theorizing Stormy Weather: A Review of Criticism**

Central to any reading of Stormy Weather, Vogel insists, is a reading of the history of its title song, “Stormy Weather,” which was written in 1933 by Harold Arlen and Ted Koehle. In Vogel’s words, “Songs…accumulate multiple meanings as they are performed, reinterpreted, and improvised by different artists, meanings that exceed the textual record as either printed lyric or musical notation. In their instantiation, songs may inscribe their historical moments with echoes of past performances.”

And indeed, “Stormy Weather,” like the figure of the black soldier in Stormy Weather, is historically significant for black America. Born in Tin Pan Alley—a collection of New York City music publishers and songwriters who sold cheap songs to Broadway show producers, vaudeville performers and singers in need of music from the late 19th through the early 20th centuries—“Stormy Weather” had been sung many times before Ethel Waters made it famous in The Cotton Club Parade of 1933 at the Cotton Club in Harlem. By the time Lena Horne sang it as part of Stormy Weather, it had accrued layers of meaning—cultural, racial and historical. Indeed, according to Vogel, such Tin Pan Alley’s and stars’ musical “collaborations made popular songs rich sites for the sonic articulation and negotiation of dynamic social processes inaugurated by migration, immigration, and

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69 Vogel 97.
in no small part because “Tin Pan Alley itself adapted the sounds of ethnic white neighborhoods and black music and urban blues into a musical public sphere.” And so, even while encoding a history of black representation, “Stormy Weather” also references the broader, and radically integrated, history of musical production in the United States as well.

This history becomes most visible through a look back at The Cotton Club Parade of 1933, which made “Stormy Weather” a truly popular song, and during which, according to Vogel, black performers were already at work using musical performance to critique the history of black representation in the public sphere. The Cotton Club Parades were musical revues attended by both black and white audiences and filled with fast-paced scenes of plantation songs, choral routines, comic bits and ballads, much in the style of vaudeville. Ethel Waters’ famous first performance of “Stormy Weather” in the twenty-second edition of the Parade, produced by Dan Healy, worked against this stylistic convention and against the ambiance of the club itself, which “combined jungle designs with antebellum plantation motifs in its décor and publicity.” Refusing the numerous props and noise-making machines with which Healy wanted to stage the song (dubbed “Cabin in the Cotton Club”), and “resist[ing] the aesthetic conventions of vaudeville,” Waters chose instead to produce meaning through the sparseness and simplicity of her performance. According to Vogel, Waters’ choice and her performance went beyond a “sonic…mark[ing]…by a kind of citation and circulation that folded Tin Pan Alley standards into [her] compositions and reformed them,” and even beyond

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70 Vogel 95.  
71 Vogel 94.  
72 Vogel 98.  
73 Vogel 98.
“marking blackness as both containing and contained by—both before and after—American popular music as such.” Rather, he claims, it was expressive of a black modernism, one that attempted to reshape the aesthetics of black performance—a project that Vogel argues was taken up in the similarly reflexive and transformative performances of Lena Horne and Katherine Dunham in the film *Stormy Weather*.

What Vogel calls “modernism” is characterized by reflexivity and an aesthetics of interiority, one exemplified by Waters’ decision to perform “Stormy Weather” without props. According to Vogel, in this rendering of “Stormy Weather,” “bringing psychological depth and affective realism to the segregated nightclub stage, [Waters’] redirected the revue away from spectacle and toward interiority,” and thus expressed what Paul Gilroy has called a “‘topos of unsayability.’”\(^74\) And it is Vogel’s argument—and to an extent Gilroy’s as well—that “‘this topos of unsayability,’ found in instances of black music, refers to the expression and transmission of pained histories and experiences that are rendered unspeakable by both the historical conditions that produced them and the overwhelming heartache that they produce.”\(^75\) Such pained histories bear with them in their unspeakability the very historical conditions that made them unspeakable—and thus convey not only African American experience, but black American history as well.

In short, Vogel’s argument is that “Stormy Weather,” properly contextualized, presents a history of African American experience and critique as well, and provides a productive entry to a politicized reading (or a reading for the politics) of *Stormy Weather*. Further, because “Waters, Horne, and Dunham reinscribed ‘Stormy Weather,’” through their unique and resistant performances, they were able to “articulate a modernist

\(^{74}\) Vogel 100.

\(^{75}\) Vogel, 101
perspective on the nationalization of American music and its racial unconscious.” How this “racial unconscious” is given expression in the film *Stormy Weather*, both through its actors’ re-inscriptions of various popular performances and through the figure of the black soldier—and what the relationship of this unconscious might be with the “nationalization” of American culture—are the focus of the readings I offer below.

In what follows, I provide three scene analyses from *Stormy Weather*. The first focuses on the representation of blackface and slave performance, and demonstrates how the film and/or its actors offer a critique of black representation precisely by revealing its “pained histories” and insisting on new strategies for viewing them. The second returns to “*Stormy Weather,*” analyzing not only Lena Horne’s adaptation of Ethel Waters’ famous performance, and the film’s relationship to the *Cotton Club Parade of 1933*, but also Katherine Dunham’s dance interlude and its transnationalist intertext. I show how, during this number, the film continually references and repositions its spectator—teaching her the limitations and possibilities inherent in her viewing practices. And the third, offering a reading of the film’s final musical number, finds in its *mise en scene* the explosiveness of the revolutionary racial politics of the moment. Together, these readings return us to the history-less figure of the black soldier in *Bataan* and *Sahara*, and demonstrate that, on home soil and contextualized within an historical narrative, this new figure of the black soldier can reflect critically on its own conditions of existence.

**The Cakewalk and Its Pained Histories**

The first song and dance number *Stormy Weather* establishes both the history and the potentially problematic legacy of black representation in America with a cakewalk. (It
also establishes the central couple of the film, Bill Williamson and Selina Rogers, and the origins of what will become their narrative struggle: that Selina wants a career and Bill wants something more effortless). The cakewalk is a popular dance performance that has its origins in slavery, when the master would hold regular dance parties for his slaves and award a cake to the couple that he judged danced the best. Ironically, however, slaves would perform exaggerated imitations of their white masters’ dance moves, both as resistant mockery and in an effort to deliver up to the master what he seemed to want. Thus even at the time, the cakewalk articulated both subservience to a racist system and resistance in the form of a parody of those perpetrating the racism. In Stormy Weather, however, the cakewalk becomes doubly parodic. Bill dances it in military uniform at a welcome-home party for WWI troops, offering his performance to other soldiers as a diegetic, integrated musical number even while presenting the spectacle of the cakewalk—reminiscent of slave dances and vaudeville performances—to film audiences across the world. The parody implicit in the dance itself then gets staged twice by the film: once, in the diegesis, for the soldiers viewing the performance, and a second time for the film audience as well. Further, the fact that Bill performs this dance in his soldier’s uniform, as an icon of America’s vested trust and interest in the African American masculinity, offers an ironic counterpoint to the historical symbolism of the cakewalk.

When the cakewalk begins, it is presented as a fabulous spectacle for the soldiers. But it very quickly becomes a conversation with enlightened viewers as well. A short fifteen minutes into the film, in mid-shot, a man in uniform announces, “the cakewalk!”. The stage curtains part, and the camera offers a long shot of a two-tiered cake of women
dancers, framed by the opened curtains, the stage, and the pianists to the left and right.
The film presents the female dancers on the cake as doubly objectified—on the one hand, because they are the cake, the prize to be won by the best dancer; on the other, because they are dressed in a unique kind of blackface, one that perhaps offers a representational critique but also dehumanizes its wearers. The dancers are dressed in white-ruffle dresses with, caricatured black smiling faces, seemingly made out of felt, pasted on the backs of their heads and crowned by enormous fake sun-flower petals. With fake black faces on the backs of their heads, these women appear in costumes at once referencing and reproducing blackface costumes of old. Around them, men in long white coats with exaggerated fake flowers, looking like gentlemen or perhaps butlers, dance in a circle around the cake-flower-women, lifting their top hats to the rhythmic instrumental rendition of “Camptown Races.” Stormy Weather’s score, here, also adds to the dance number’s dual function of rehearsing and critique the history of black representation. The song was created in 1850 by Stephen Foster, who wrote the lyrics in mock African American dialect of the time, and collected the song, along with others in his book, Foster's Plantation Melodies as sung by the Christy & Campbell Minstrels and New Orleans Serenaders. The song itself then mocks black slaves and freedmen of the time even while becoming incorporated, in Stormy Weather, into a dance historically used by the very same subjects to mock their oppressors. The incorporation of “Camptown Races” into a mock-blackface performance in a black-cast film concerned with the changing representations of African Americans directs viewers ‘in the know’—spectators
with intimate knowledge of black culture and history—to read it, and the entire performance, ironically, against-the-grain—or “reconstructively.”\textsuperscript{76}

When Selina Rogers and Bill Williamson join the cakewalk a few moments later, the dance offers an additional layer of commentary on black representation—again, primarily directed at viewers ‘in the know.’ Soon after the women come down from their cake and join arms with the male dancers, and the whole troop abandons the stage for the dance floor of the large party-room, the announcer invites audience members to dance along. Selina and Bill quickly take over the dance, in a series of mid and long shots presented as if only to the film viewing audience (with no possible point of view shots from the soldiers), and chat with each other as they tap. Selina tells Bill, after remarking on his dancing skills, “I’ve always been ambitious. Haven’t you, Bill?” she asks him. “Never have been,” he replies, “But I begin to see things different now.” The characters’ differing ideologies about (and seeming access to) success match up to their different vernaculars and dance styles: the polished, ambitious Selina dances smoothly, anti-parodically, and speaks standard English; while the easy-going veteran Bill dances like the other cake-dancers, in movements drawn from vaudeville, and speaks in dialect.

While these differences are explained as class differences in the diegesis, with Bill saying that he’s going down south to return to his pre-war job in Memphis but will come back “When [he] get[s] to be somebody,” to the knowledgeable viewer, the dancing/speaking/ideological differences also reference a transformation in the

\textsuperscript{76} According to Knight, blacks have appeared in blackface in only four films up to and during WWII, Micheaux’s \textit{The Darktown Revue} (1931) and \textit{Ten Minutes to Live} (1932), \textit{Dimples} (1936) and \textit{Stormy Weather} (1943), all of which “suggest ways in which black blackface could be wielded as a critique of repressive racial categories in general and whiteness in particular” (94, 18).
opportunities and performance styles available to black artists, like Lena Horne and Bill Robinson. Thus it seems that Bill’s desire to become a successful man—or “somebody”—here emerges out of the stark contrast between his and Selina’s performances, performances that, particularly in the “Cake Walk” number, cannot be disarticulated from race and the ways in which it, too, is performed. And indeed, whereas Bill came into stardom first on the “chittlin circuit” as a “hoofer,” and then as a vaudeville performer, and next as a star in a black revue, *Blackbirds of 1928*, for white audiences, and finally settled into Hollywood productions opposite Shirley Temple as a genre of Uncle Tom, Lena Horne followed the somewhat more dignified path afforded her by the changing socio-political mores of her later moment and fairer skin, becoming an icon of a “‘cross over’” style of black performance marketed primarily to whites. Thus, with her “middle-class background and image of sophistication and refinement, civil rights organizations were eager to use Horne’s success in Hollywood to expand possibilities for black actresses beyond the existing stereotypes that marked Hollywood’s color line,” and, not un-coincidentally, she was cast in both *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky* as the lead in the same year.79

In all, the cakewalk scene, particularly when viewed alongside later scenes—like one where Bill plays an African cannibal for a Broadway audience, or another where two performers present a genuine vaudeville, blackface skit—demonstrates *Stormy Weather’s* invitation to its audience to critique the images the film presents. Though there are very few point of view shots from the in-film audience (of mostly soldiers) during the

77 Cripps 81.
78 Cripps 81.
79 Vogel 103.
cakewalk and other theatrical scenes, *Stormy Weather’s* layering of references to black performance history with performative critique nonetheless offers spectators multiple points for identification with the on-screen images and speaks to different potential viewers in different registers. Thus, as it rehearses black representational history, it also invites its audiences to review that history from new, and more critical perspectives.

**“Stormy Weather,” Fantasy Spectatorship and Black Diaspora**

Selina’s big number, “Stormy Weather,” also offers commentary on black performance history, citing the *Cotton Club Parade of 1933*, but this time with less focus on its representational politics and more on the new possibilities for black representation and spectatorship made possible by film. Selina’s performance is part of a variety show for WWII soldiers, one that brings the viewer back full circle to the cakewalk dance, which was part of a similar show for WWI troops. Bill and Selina are, as they were at the cakewalk, single rather than a couple, but by the end of Selina’s number, they will be together. And just as the cakewalk dance created the romance between Bill and Selina, so the “Stormy Weather” number will reunite them. As the song begins, the camera offers a rare point of view shot of the stage from over Bill’s shoulder, locating the spectator very clearly in the audience of soldiers, as well as somewhere within the love between the estranged couple. Selina is singing mournfully, a stage-set, two-wall house behind her, curtains blowing with the stage-wind. Thunder rumbles and she runs to her window to close it. As she does, the camera follows her, panning down over her shoulder and out her stage-set window. Quickly, camera takes us to a uniquely filmic space, one impassable to
the in-film audience: a non-diegetic space outside Selina’s window where, under an elevated subway, men in zoot suits seduce women into dance.

Though perhaps the most “fictional” of spaces in the film, because impossible in the diegesis, this streetscape outside Selina’s window offers one of the more literal depictions of contemporary black experience. With their zoot suits, the men outside the window wear also their politics, their connection to the growing black resistance to the war. By emphasizing the cinematic quality of this very politicized space, *Stormy Weather* reminds viewers of the political possibilities inherent in a cinematic public sphere: that how they watch, what images they “read” and bring meaning to from the film, are political choices reflective of values that can also be translated into action. After the camera returns to the diegetic space of the theater, it continues to accompany Selina’s singing with a series of eyeline-matched shots between her and Bill. In so doing, it draws an implicit connection—or, more precisely, contradistinction—between the anti-patriotic, politicized, non-diegetic space she has just left in which only we, the film’s audience, are spectators, and the patriotic diegetic one, where Bill (and the figure of the black soldier) exists. *Stormy Weather*’s assignment of potentially disruptive politics to the formal (rather than narrative) realm of filmic expression thus requires the aspiring in-the-know spectator to read askance—to eschew narrative, eschew patriotism, at least at times, and view the images historically and critically.

Soon the camera again moves through the window, again taking the audience away from the diegetic space of the performance, and this time into a series of new, fiction-scapes—ones that give expression to a more expansive history of black identity. This history disrupts more than the seemingly patriotic, utopian politics of the film by
gesturing not only to violence of African American experience (with the zoot suits), but also to the endurance of the trans- or extra-nationalism of the diaspora as well. In this series of shots, Selina walks among the zoot suiters and dancers below her window—but it is not Selina any longer. It is instead a woman played by Katherine Dunham who refuses an invitation to dance and gazes upward at the sky.

Lightening flashes, and Dunham—and we, the viewers—enter yet another space, a concert stage with a cast of dancers, dressed in leotards and billowy, flowing cloth that evokes a water scene or some sort of tropical environ. The cast dances on the stage together for some time, to a syncopated, instrumental version of “Stormy Weather,” before the camera returns us first to the street—where Dunham walks alone—and then back to Selina, singing in her living room. Describing the scene, Vogel writes, “Here, in place of storm effects, torn muslin strips billow cumulonimbously over the stage, suggesting both storm clouds and the sails of great ships.” These impressionistic sails, coupled with the fusion of modern African and Afro-Caribbean ritual dance, African-American vernacular dance, and European classical dance and ballet, reference a black experience and identity that encompass far more than African American blackness, and which contextualize any history of black American performance and representation in a far broader sweep of communication and ritual. Indeed, Vogel comments that here, “Dunham’s kinesthetic rewriting of ‘Stormy Weather’ situates the song and its racial inscription within a diasporic rather than a national horizon.” This “diasporic horizon” is offered not to the black soldiers in the audience, who cannot be privy to this extra-diegetic space, but rather to those who are willing to dis-identify with the in-film

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80 Vogel 106.
81 Vogel 107.
audience, to look ‘reconstructively’ at the eyeline matches between Bill and Selina, and to regard critically and historically the images before them.

This same informed viewership might notice also that the struggle between Bill and Selina over their different ambitions—hers to travel with her music, and his to stay at home in the U.S. and raise children—also reflects the film’s divergent expressions of black experience. While Bill tows the normative, even assimilationist line of black American patriotic identity, Selina desires to go to Paris, to become part of an ex-patriot circuit of black transnational identity, connected historically with the diaspora and imaginatively, futuristically with the new possibilities for social and political self-determination.\(^82\)

**The Final Number: The Black Soldier As Historical Repetition or Improvisation?**

The final number of the film at once resolves any threat to the patriotic, love narrative and offers a final critique of black representational practices of the past. It also formally unites Bill with a humbled, compromising Selina, one who gives up her stage success and her new mode of performance in order to be the older and old-fashioned Bill’s wife. Bill and Selina’s union again becomes interconnected with the figure of the black soldier—indeed, it is this time sorted out over the literal body of a young soldier, Cab Calloway’s son, who is heading off to Europe to fight. After “Stormy Weather,” Selina interrupts Bill and Cab (who plays himself) backstage talking to the young soldier. When Bill says, “So you’re going over…Oh, I envy your dad. I wish I had a boy like

you,” Selina answers, “And so do I.” Using the symbol of the young soldier, Selina communicates to Bill that she will acquiesce to his wishes, give up her career, settle down and have children. In their final dance Bill is his same old self, but Selina has regressed, as it were, from a modern black performer to an old-fashioned singer-turned-housewife. When Bill, tapping around the stage, rings the doorbell of his stage house—designed exactly like the real house he has built earlier in the film in hopes of marrying Selina—Selina emerges dressed like a completely different woman. Looking like a southern belle in a white frill dress and bonnet, she exits the house singing the song she first sang the night she met Bill (just after WWI), “There’s No Two Ways About Love.” The two dance together, for the first time in the film seeming more or less of the same moment and style. They happily act out their re-unification—under the joint signs of marriage, economic success and American military patriotism.

While Selina and Bill’s dance works to elide any resistance to the U.S. military effort from black communities and soldiers angered by America’s response to civil rights efforts following WWI—and relieves Selina of her internationalist connections and aspirations—Cab Calloway’s final performance offers an alternative history and black identitarian practice for soldiers in the audience and film spectators alike. Ascending the stairs to direct the dancers and musical, Cab rises from the orchestra pit as if he were the viewer, the director, or the very camera itself, rupturing both the image and its fictitious seamlessness. He enters the frame from beneath it in an extreme close-up, but with his back to the viewers. First the back of his head, then his shoulders, then his whole torso fill the screen, moving and jumping and rising until he has entered the show. On entering, he instructs the whole ensemble to dance a jive version of the ensemble number from the
first soldiers’ ball at the beginning of the film. The men are wearing zoot suits and Calloway is moving like crazy as he directs—and the circular structure of the film, moved forward in time and imagery, is complete. The theater curtain closes, Calloway sings “Hep, hep, the jumpin’ jive,” while Williamson and Selina dance on stage together, the only couple without a zoot suit, and in this way consummate their union. Cab’s connection to contemporary black culture and politics—in his slang (throughout the film, and in his songs), his movements and his attire—here, in the final number joined by the rest of performers, marks as anachronistic the aesthetics and culture displayed in the first scenes of the film, and symbolized at its conclusion by Bill and Selina. Thus, even with a patriotic and utopian ending to the narrative, Stormy Weather gestures beyond its representations to the alternative representational and political practices of the black diaspora.

Conclusion

How much do these gestures—to politics, to the diaspora—really achieve? They certainly don’t enable Stormy Weather, or any of the films, to offer viewers plausible narratives besides those of patriotic assimilation. But did they help the films to reach concerned black Americans with their subtle counter-messages about the new possibilities for black identity? Yes, Bataan and Sahara brought numerous viewers (like the standing audiences in Harlem) pride by shifting the image, but at the price of excluding the truths of black and Asian history. And Stormy Weather perhaps tutored already in-the-know spectators in new ways of looking, in critical thinking about black representation in Hollywood. But what was the effect of these small interventions?
One answer is that in presenting viewers with the new figure of the filmic black soldier, the three films discussed in this chapter demonstrated clearly the transnational nature of the actual black soldier soldiers. As I’ve argued above, even the seemingly domestic narrative in Stormy Weather begins with shots of soldiers who have returned from abroad—and of one of their heroes, named, appropriately, Jim Europe. In other words, the studios’ deployment of space in Bataan, Sahara and Stormy Weather—and, arguably, the entire slew of OWI-Hollywood-NAACP axis productions—did more than simply manage or contain the new representations of black soldiers. It also, however unintentionally, underscored the fact that black soldiers—and the black civil rights they represented in the public imaginary—were very often shaped by their experiences outside of the United States. Their power and potency as individuals and as icons came not only from their appropriation of the uniform of the state, but also from their relationship to other nations and their (quite different) racial cultural politics.

Yet the transnational experience and global politics of broader black America would be suppressed in later Hollywood productions—as in the mainstream Civil Rights Movement itself. The cost of assimilation—in so far as it was to be achieved—was an across-the-board rejection of international alliances with Europeans, and particularly, the Third World. Leaders like Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey were prosecuted by the U.S. government and disowned by the NAACP and general black public as the Cold War wore on. Films like Steel Helmet (1951), Pork Chop Hill (1959) and The Manchurian Candidate (1962) (which I will discuss briefly in Chapter Three) depicted the black soldier as torn between his American identity and international Communist influences—influences he must reject to maintain any hope of integration.
These early war films—*Bataan, Sahara* and *Stormy Weather*—with their emphasis on place, in their new figure of the black soldier, thus bear the traces of an old model of the black movement for equality.
Chapter Two: A Broader Nationalism: Reconstructing Memory, National Narratives, and Spectatorship in Black-Audience Propaganda

Though the mass-marketed Hollywood films discussed in Chapter One met the government’s race-relations agenda by creating dignified, integrated representations of black soldiers in remote, war-torn lands, they did not offer black Americans at home any real reason to join the war effort. As white-scripted, -directed and -produced films, crafted entirely within the Hollywood studio system and predominately for white audiences, *Bataan, Sahara, Stormy Weather* and the handful of other similar films, spoke largely to *white* America’s needs and fantasies for representations of black men in uniform. And so, though these Hollywood films might have emerged as compromises between American governmental war agendas, the Hollywood studio system corporations, and leftist political agitators (like the NAACP), they nonetheless did not in any direct way express black America’s understanding of the historically important, ideologically powerful, figure of the black soldier.

A handful of government- and independently-produced films did, however. These films, unlike their Hollywood counterparts, were direct propaganda, produced in part in response to government requests and with the stated intention of increasing black support for the war. While each was released under different circumstances, and through a different configuration of interracial collaboration (which I will discuss in some detail below), these three films were developed both for and, at least in part, by black Americans concerned about the war. Because the films were marketed specifically to black communities, many of which were in fact organizing *against* the war, their
filmmakers had to find ways to acknowledge and transform black ambivalence without undermining the films’ otherwise patriotic narratives. And so these films, *Marching On!* (1943), *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* (1943) and *The Negro Soldier* (1944), distinguished themselves from their mass-marketed counterparts by foregrounding (rather than simply including) their black soldiers, and crafting complex representations of African Americans committing to the military while coming to terms with their American histories.

Representing black military history itself was one of the primary means by which these propaganda films addressed themselves to their audience. Their fictional soldiers, unlike those of *Bataan, Sahara* or even *Stormy Weather*, had long histories—military and, in the case of two of the films, familial as well. They belonged to communities, had fathers and grandfathers who were also soldiers, and participated fully in the construction and defense of the nation. At moments—albeit moments largely swallowed by the broader narratives—these film’s soldiers also reflected the affective and material histories of real black soldiers in America: the heroism and deep disappointments of black soldiers of WWI who had hoped for greater acceptance upon their return home; the violence against black soldiers between the wars; the frustration of other WWII-era black soldiers fighting fascism under Jim Crow; as well as the growing anxieties and aspirations of black civilians seeking civil rights across the nation.

In all three of the films, the soldiers’ personal narratives are interwoven with older and broader historical narratives that reflect their inclusion in the two-hundred-plus-year creation of the United States—narratives of black men fighting during the War of Independence and the Civil War, stories of men building railroads, tales of black families
homesteading, documents of men fighting for Cuba with Teddy Roosevelt, stories of families during WWI and of women raising children. Placing the black soldier within this long sweep of black American history, *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* demonstrate how cinematic renderings of black collective memory can reconstruct American history to include the contributions of African America. However, these older, broader narratives that work to enfold African Americans in the story of the nation at the same time exclude other coconstitutive histories: of Chinese immigration, labor and exclusion; of Native American genocide; of black-Native collaboration; of Japanese internment; and of Mexican-black coordinated resistance against the U.S. government. These targeted inclusions and exclusions allow the films to articulate from within the black community why blacks should fight for a Jim Crow America against a racially integrated Axis—and to implicitly suggest that if African Americans join the war effort, they will escape their place alongside the other oppressed communities in America and become, finally, fully American. Indeed, by recreating an American history in which black American identity is validated, consolidated (but strategically separated out from that of other Americans of color), and essential to the progress of the nation, *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* recall for their audiences the promises of the long-unfinished project of Reconstruction itself.

Nonetheless, as much as possible, the propaganda films were careful to present America—and its history—as essentially equitable overall, and to offer viewers opportunities to align themselves fundamentally with the aims of the United States. So even as their protagonists give voice to their knowledge of racism, they also describe
seemingly more powerful experiences of participation in the nation and acceptance in the military. Though all three of the films seem to successfully absorb the potentially disruptive representations of oppression within their nationalist messages, the very presence of these representations points insistently beyond the film texts to the histories and politics out of which they emerged. *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier*’s similar efforts to reach and persuade black audiences seeking reparation thus produced films in which both stories about the nation and its military (and their exclusivity) joined uneasily with narratives of black inclusion and civil rights. Ultimately, then, these films had to rely upon their audiences’ ability to reconcile the seemingly contradictory narratives without rejecting or disavowing either, and to move between identification and disidentification\(^{83}\) with the images on screen, so that they could feel acknowledged in their ambivalence as well as encouraged in their patriotism.

According to Jacqueline Stewart’s analysis of black film audiences watching the entertaining but often racist images in Hollywood films during the Great Migration, such complex viewing strategies were already a fundamental part of black cinema experience long before the 1940s. She explains that in order to use the cinema to learn to be modern, urban Northerners, 1920s migrant African American audiences developed strategies different from mainstream (white) practices of “absorbed looking,” which involved engaging “reconstructively”—reading at once with *and* against—the racial

\(^{83}\) My use of the term “disidentification” here is primarily drawn from Judith Butler’s discussion of disidentification in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. A compelling newer theorization of the term, which I will discuss in Chapter Four, can be found in Jose Esteban Munoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
representations on the screen. Extending Stewart’s thesis, it is my argument that WWII black audience war propaganda—with its seemingly contradictory patriotic messages and representations of segregated black America—drew upon these spectatorship practices to reach and transform their viewers. Indeed, *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* functioned as black-audience propaganda precisely by tutoring their viewers in this practice of “reconstructive spectatorship”—in particular, by teaching them how to use the cinema to re-imagine American history as an integrated one, in which proud, successful African Americans were always already an essential part of the nation. In so doing, these propaganda films played a role in producing a black America that could pursue the radical and internationalist efforts of the Civil Rights Movement even while participating in the conservative patriotic politics of the Cold War.

In what follows, I take up the theme of “reconstruction” in my analysis of the conception, production, distribution and (to a lesser extent) reception of *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier*. I describe the convergence of political, economic and filmic events that led Spencer Williams, Jack Goldberg and Stuart Heisler to direct *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* respectively, and explore the effects of the different conditions of production on the films’ representations—and deployments—of their black soldiers. After a brief discussion of “reconstructive spectatorship” in the context of broader theories of black film spectatorship, I offer a series of readings from *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier*. These readings, like those in Chapter 1, explore the

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films’ use of their black soldiers, but they also focus in particular on how these black-audience films invite their viewers to identify both as black Americans and with the U.S. nation—seemingly encouraging assimilation, but also, through this black cinematic public sphere, creating the political consciousness necessary to foment the coming movements for civil rights.

The Stuff of Propaganda: Reconstructing Film History

In 1943, both Roosevelt’s Office of War Information (OWI) and Claude Burnett, founder and editor of one of the larger black newspapers, the Associated Negro Press, published statements testifying to the importance of using the moving image to mobilize black support for the war. After surveying the representations of black Americans in Hollywood cinema, the OWI concluded in an internal document, “‘Negroes are presented as basically different from other people, as taking no relevant part in the life of the nation, as offering nothing, contributing nothing, expecting nothing,’” and thus were unlikely to feel they should participate in defending the country. A change in representational practices, the OWI survey argued, would be imperative for persuading black Americans to participate in the war.85 In his article, “The Role of the Press, Radio, and Motion Picture and Negro Morale,” Burnett insisted that this change would need to be substantial because “the Negro remembers that in 1917-18 he was promised certain rights when peace came and these promises were never lived up to. This has made him cynical and he is of a disposition to fight for his normal rights as an American while he goes along

85 Kinney 101.
instead of waiting until later.” Many black men, women and families had lost faith in the United States’ commitment to improve conditions for African America. And so film, if it were to successfully boost black morale, would have to depict black folks with “increased facility of expression.” According to Cripps and Culbert in their article on the making of *The Negro Soldier*, the combined pressure of four discrete interest groups invested in transforming black America through the cinema—the Research Branch of the U.S. Government, the black public, social scientists interested in the role of media, and liberal Hollywood filmmakers—, resulted in just such a film: *The Negro Soldier*.

While the creation, production and distribution of *The Negro Soldier* have all been carefully documented (and I will discuss these in detail below), both by film scholars and by the U.S. government itself, less is known about the histories of *Marching On!* and *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way*. What we do know about *Marching On!* and *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* is that they were produced under very different circumstances from *The Negro Soldier*—though ostensibly for similar reasons. Indeed, these two films have fallen between the cracks in scholarship in part because they were the products of the dying industry of so-called ‘race films,’ cheaply made black-cast, black-themed films for black audiences, which became anachronistic with the increasing integration of audiences and films following the war. Making them further difficult to study, *Marching On!* is only available through the James Wheeler Collection at the University of Texas at Austin and *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* has been long out of circulation and the only extant copy has been held in the basement of a stock-footage

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87 Barnett 474.
company, McDonald’s & Associates, for many years. In fact, it has been scheduled to be
donated to the Library of Congress in the fall of 2011, which may restore and archive the
film.

As evidenced by its current status, *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* was the least
commercially successful of the three propaganda films, but less because of its content
than because it was overshadowed by the forcefully promoted and better-quality
government film, *The Negro Soldier*. *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* was developed,
directed and produced by Jack Goldberg, who, along with his brother, owned two
companies that produced race films, The Negro Marches On and Million Dollar Movies.
According to Rhines’ study of black films financed by white money, the latter of these
two “was also the first major independent film company to give African Americans ‘a
substantial amount of control over production.’” They even had an internship plan
whereby Tuskegee, Howard, and Hampton Institute students were paid the fair wage of
$100 per week for principals, $60 for supporting actors.”88 Perhaps more importantly,
“the Goldbergs’ pictures differed from the Hollywood all-black fare in that they allowed
non-stereotypical African American characters and stories.”89 In fact, while *We’ve Come
A Long, Long Way* was the product of The Negro Marches On, it was created with
intensive input by a black celebrity radio evangelist, Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux,
and presented an inclusive account of black military history alongside brief sketches
highlighting the accomplishments of African America.

88 Jesse Algeron Rhines. *Black Film/White Money*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University
89 Rhines 34.
Despite the Goldbergs’ dedication to black film production, and to involving community members in their filmmaking, The Negro Marches On was unable to successfully distribute *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* because theaters that might have been interested in the race film had booked *The Negro Soldier* in its place. Goldberg’s film stood no contest with the more expensively produced, government-backed *The Negro Soldier*. In a last ditch effort, Jack Goldberg sued in federal court to stop bookings of *The Negro Soldier*, claiming that the government’s film competed unfairly with his own. Unfortunately for Goldberg, the NAACP joined forces with the government, which, with the production of *The Negro Soldier*, it now believed to be its best ally in the circulation of dignified black moving images. By decrying Goldberg’s film as “‘insulting to Negroes,’” inducing major Hollywood producers and black stars (like Lena Horne) to provide blurbs for *The Negro Soldier*’s promotional material, and persuading Thurgood Marshall to file an *amicus curiae* brief insisting that *The Negro Soldier* far better represented the integrationist potential of the film medium than *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way*, the NAACP effectively curtailed circulation of the Goldberg production.\(^9^0\)

The battle between *The Negro Marches On* and the government over distribution of their propaganda films actually reveals less about the shift in black representation in the cinema—because the films’ images really are quite similar—and more about the new directions the cinema, the government and black civil rights organizations like the NAACP would take in the postwar period. These included working uneasily but productively together on integrating civil rights concerns into a national security agenda. Despite the obvious requisite compromises, the success of the NAACP’s efforts, both

with the government (more on this below) and against Goldberg, demonstrates the increasing impact of black Americans on the U.S. government and Hollywood. Indeed, the alliance of the NAACP with the government during the Goldberg suit, anticipated the primary mode of black political advocacy throughout the rest of the 1940s, when small, incremental civil rights gains were the result of collaboration and compromise between black political leaders and the government. And, the NAACP’s success in getting “their” film press and distribution—rather than, say, Goldberg’s—reflects the organization’s growing influence in Hollywood as well.

Goldberg, who “was termed a longtime exploiter of black audiences” by the end of the debacle, became representative of the old way of ‘doing’ black cinema. Whereas *The Negro Soldier* appeared incredibly well-made to black audiences accustomed to seeing black actors either in shoddy race films or as buffoons in Hollywood releases, *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* seemed to reflect a low investment in—and thus low opinion of—its subject matter. Its images of black soldiers—many culled from the same recycled WWI Signal Corps material as used by *The Negro Soldier*—were shaky, faded and, at times, awkwardly edited, and thus seemed, by comparison to *The Negro Soldier*’s, not dignified at all. Nonetheless, Goldberg’s film was, in some ways, more representative of the actual contemporary political stance toward black America. “Based on the OWI pamphlet *Negroes and the War,*” produced by OWI nearly two years before *The Negro Soldier* to raise black morale during the War, *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* in fact followed closely the government’s own plan for transforming the images and discourse

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91 Cripps and Culbert 635.
around black participation in the nation. The poster advertising the film, which insisted, “In every walk of life, the Negro has broken the chains of slavery,” in and of itself expressed a more radical take on black history than anything that appeared in *The Negro Soldier*—but still, the NAACP, and the majority of black Americans with them, chose the government’s production. And instead of being hailed for coming out ahead of the government with a documentary about black contributions to the nation, Goldberg was maligned, and forced to pull his film early from theaters.

Producer Alfred Sack and director Spencer Williams’ film, *Marching On!* also suffered from the declining distribution of race films. With Sack’s financing, and almost total directorial authority, Williams had been making quite popular films for nearly a decade by the time of *Marching On!*’s release and had become one of the most popular and prolific black filmmakers of the first half of the 20th century. Working primarily in Texas and for Sack Amusement Enterprises, Williams wrote and autonomously directed ten films, including: *The Blood of Jesus* (1941), *Brother Martin: Servant of Jesus* (1942), *Marching On!* (1943), *Go Down Death* (1944), *Of One Blood* (1944), *Dirty Gertie from Harlem U.S.A.* (1946) and *The Girl in Room 20* (1946), *Beale Street Mama* (1947) and *Juke Joint* (1947), *Jivin' in Bebop* (1947). Though all of these were given some sort of commercial release in black theaters, the films primarily circulated in black community centers and churches throughout the south. According to one of the rare articles published on Williams, “the alliance of Sack and Williams resulted in a unique opportunity to make race movies outside Hollywood and New York, thereby inspiring a fleeting black genre,

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made outside the established circles of technological skill.”  

Most popular were Williams’ religious films, which were more fantastical than realist, and in this way quite distinguished themselves from the now better-known racial uplift films of Oscar Micheaux. The most successful of these, *The Blood of Jesus* (1941), a dramatic, anti-realist story about the struggle for a dying Christian woman’s soul, also became a commercial success, and counted by *Time Magazine* among its “25 Most Important Films on Race.”  

In 1991, *The Blood of Jesus* became the first race film to be added to the U.S. National Film Registry.

*Marching On!* was one of Williams’ less successful films—no doubt, in some part due to the almost contemporaneous success of *The Negro Soldier*. While the only remaining evidence of the *Marching On!*’s circulation is in black newspaper archives, we do know that the film remained in some sort of distribution for at least a decade, as, sometime in the 1950s, it was re-cut with additional black musical performance footage, and rereleased as *Where’s My Man To-nite?*. Currently, the only extant copies of the film are a longer, but far more marketable 72-minute version. Unlike *We’ve Come A Long*, *Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier*, *Marching On!* was made far from Hollywood and both visually and thematically reflected the wide expanses of American space and history outside its urban context. It is also a more narratively-driven film than its counterparts (which are quasi-documentaries), though it otherwise employs and encodes many of the

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94 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spencer_Williams_%28actor%29#cite_note-AA-1  
95 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spencer_Williams_%28actor%29#cite_note-AA-1
same visual and spectatorship strategies apparent in *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* (and which I will discuss shortly).  

Needless to say, distribution of *The Negro Soldier* far exceeded that of both *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *Marching On!*, primarily because of the unique circumstances of its creation and production. The project truly began when the Chief of Staff in the U.S. Army, George C. Marshall, who “believed that film should play a major military role in wartime,…concluded that film could present serious material in a lively and interesting fashion.” At his insistence, the Army hired Frank Capra to head “an elite film unit assigned to make feature-length morale films intended to build enthusiasm for official war aims.” Leading social scientists employed by the Army’s Information and Education Division (I&E) “felt that scientific research could identify precisely what kind of film might bring white and black America closer together” and “realized that a morale film about race relations was the perfect place to test ideas about social engineering.”

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96 I have not been able to find what is purported to be the original copy of *Marching On!* Most records of *Marching On!* list it along with a re-release name, *Where’s My Man To-nite?*, and it seems, according to G. William Jones, that the preserved copies of the film are actually the re-released and lengthened version, *Where’s My Man To-nite?*. Jones writes, “It is probable that the original running-time of this film, as directed by Spencer Williams, was approximately 63 minutes. However, Jenkins and Bourgeois, a distribution company in Dallas, apparently made a new version of the film, re-titled *Where’s My Man To-nite?*, to which they added twenty minutes of orchestra and dance performance—uncredited except for the subscript ‘featuring the Brown Skin Models’—boosting the total running time to 83 minutes, which was a more marketable feature length in the 1950s. It was this later version—and title—which was found in the Tyler, Texas, warehouse.” G. William Jones. *Black Cinema Treasures: Lost and Found*. Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1991. 85. The “problem” of how to read *Marching On!* testifies to the larger problem of studying black cinema in general: the absence of records and copies of so many of the films.

97 Cripps and Culbert 617.

98 Cripps and Culbert 617.

99 Cripps and Culbert 620-621.
Working closely with Capra’s unit and the research branch I&E, these scientists began helping put together a script for *The Negro Soldier*.  

While the first drafts of the script were crafted by white writers known to be sympathetic toward African Americans, once Capra chose Stuart Heisler to direct the film, *The Negro Soldier* became a deeply black-influenced production. Insisting that he needed “‘somebody that *really* knows the background of the Negro,’” Heisler collaborated with Carlton Moss, who had earned limited fame working for the Federal Theater Project under John Houseman. After visiting nineteen army posts in the United States with large numbers of black trainees, Moss wrote a new script for a film that would finally offer “visual proof that America owed its freedom to its entire population.” It was this script that ultimately yielded *The Negro Soldier*, military film OF51.

The controversy surrounding *The Negro Soldier*’s distribution is perhaps even more reflective of the country’s shifting race relations than the unusual coincidence of its creation. Despite allotting the manpower and funds to create OF51, the government wasn’t sure whether or not to actually screen the film to black soldiers. OF51 was initially intended only for black troops, “but even before the film was released, two of the four groups [involved in lobbying for its production], the social scientists and the blacks, began to agitate for wider military and civilian distribution.” According to Cripps and Culbert, though “representatives of more than fifty federal offices screen[ed] the rough cut and read…revisions of the script, nobody seemed sure what the impact of the film

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100 Cripps and Culbert 620.
101 Cripps and Culbert 623.
102 Cripps and Culbert 627, 626.
103 Cripps and Culbert 628.
might be on black soldiers” and all were worried about rioting. And, responding to pressure from all fronts, the government went ahead and organized a preliminary screening at an Army post in San Diego, with a hundred military police standing by in case of violence. After a massive success at San Diego with black troops around the country, the government began to consider requests to distribute the film more broadly—demonstrating not only that the cultural shift the film aimed to effect was already underway, but also that the feedback from black soldiers in fact mattered to the Army, at least in terms of the distribution of its wartime propaganda.

But while the government managed to overcome resistance against creating and screening positive images of African Americans for African Americans, it remained unconvinced that whites would be willing or able to tolerate these same new representations, and continued to show the film only at basic orientation for black soldiers until “OF51 became ‘mandatory’ viewing for all troops at replacement centers within the United States [in 1944]. Between February 1944 and August 1945, when the order was rescinded, almost every black in the Army and AirCorps” and millions of white soldiers as well saw this film. Eventually, after a private showing at the Pentagon for 200 black journalists in January of 1944, the “NAACP and the National Negro Congress praised the film as ‘the best ever done’ and called for its widespread distribution.” The film was quickly released to broad civilian audiences and eventually—after being cut into a shorter version and rereleased on the more inexpensive and easily projected 16mm film—became a statistical success. What remains

104 Cripps and Culbert 628.
105 Cripps and Culbert 630.
106 Cripps and Culbert 631.
fundamentally important about the progressively wider and wider circulation of *The Negro Soldier* in the 1940s is how powerfully it was determined by black interests and actions. The story of this documentary that—perhaps single-handedly, perhaps in collaboration with others like *Marching On!* and *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way*—transformed black filmic representation in the postwar period, was a new kind of narrative for mid-century U.S.A.: that of the power of black-organized advocacy to change the goals and practices of American media.

**Black Spectatorship and Representational Reconstructions**

But the broader story of the production of the three propaganda films, *Marching On!* *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* tells yet another tale: that of the narrowing of the distance between Hollywood and black independent film production during the war. (Ultimately this gap collapsed altogether, with the folding of the black independents during the postwar period until the 1960s, and the rise of new black filmmakers like Melvin Van Peebles abroad in France, William Greeves and Richie Mason in New York, and what has been called the LA School and the LA Rebellion in Los Angeles, including Charles Burnett, Larry Clark and Haile Gerima. [I will discuss this industry shift in Chapter Four.]) The wartime overlap of black independent and Hollywood filmmakers exemplified in the production of the propaganda films offers a compelling explanation for the profound aesthetic and formal similarities between the three propaganda films that hail from such different origins. Neither fully fiction nor documentary, but rather mélanges of the two genres, *The Negro Soldier, Marching On!* and *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* interweave various kinds of cinema (including
archival footage from the U.S. government Signal Corps, moving images of photographs, and recordings of marching bands) into direct exhortations to black America to participate in the war effort. Their self-conscious privileging of American nationalist propagandistic concerns over specifically black American ones—evidenced in part by all three films’ usage of U.S. government documentary footage of its military—reveals their common ideological project of interpolating black viewers into a broader American community and identity/subjectivity. But their exclusive address to black audiences, their employment of black artistic talent both before and behind the camera, and their deliberate representation and reconstruction of the black American history that the Hollywood films of the period elided, also reflect their efforts to create and consolidate black cultural and political identity.

As I’ve described above, *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* all address the same subject: they tell stories of black soldiers who clearly contribute to the success of the nation, and who are visualized within a long history of black American nationalism. All three emphasize, both formally and thematically, the importance of black collective memory, and stage within their dramas, the retelling—or revising—of this memory so that formerly oppressed African Americans can become, instead, successful, integral members of the nation. And, perhaps most importantly, all three presume audiences who practice what a number of scholars have called “black spectatorship,” and what I am calling “reconstructive spectatorship.” Before I describe the ways in which these films seek to engage their audiences in particular viewing strategies, I’d like to clarify what I mean by “black spectatorship” and offer a working
definition for the practice of “reconstructive spectatorship” in which I believe *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* tutor their viewers.

Theories of black spectatorship largely derive from psychoanalytic, semiotic and post-structuralist theories originated by scholars including Christian Metz, Leo Baudry and Laura Mulvey, whose work in turn is based on the insights of Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure. But whereas these 1970s theorists generally argue that, since the development and consolidation of Classical Hollywood Style (continuity editing that works to condense space and emphasize linear time while rendering invisible the work of the editor) in the 1920s, viewers have found themselves sutured into the action of the film by their identification with the gaze of the (invisible) camera and its protagonists, black film theorists have insisted otherwise.

Following the path of departure trod by Laura Mulvey’s famous intervention in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which argues that the cinematic gaze with which Hollywood’s viewers necessarily identify is inherently gendered (heterosexual) male, black cinema theorists have claimed that Hollywood’s implied gaze is in fact not only male but white as well. In an essay published in 1988, Manthia Diawara, one of the first of these black film theorists, writes:

Laura Mulvey argues that the classical Hollywood film is made for the pleasure of the male spectator. However as a Black male spectator, I wish to argue, in addition, that the dominant cinema situates Black characters primarily for the pleasure of White spectators (male or female).107

Here Diawara implicitly likens the black male viewing experience to Mulvey’s formulation of the (white) female viewer’s. However, rather than correct Mulvey’s narrow prescription of how a viewer might look, Diawara simply adjusts who might look.

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107 Diawara 215.
And with the who, comes another look altogether. In the place of Mulvey’s injured female spectator, Diawara argues for the “interchangeability of the terms ‘black spectator’ and ‘resisting spectator’,” suggesting that the power of the cinema is no match for the pain and consciousness of racial difference. Watching *Forty Eight Hours*, for instance, the “Black/resisting spectator [will know] clearly that he is only there to complement the White character as an authority figure,” Diawara insists.  

Diawara’s argument, much like Mulvey’s, interrogates the assumption of a “universal” spectator and suggests that different subjects, because of their material conditions, watch—and therefore identify—differently. However his concept of black spectatorship poses significant problems for understanding black viewers of the propaganda films *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier*. Rather than explain, for instance, how pro-war, pro-American propaganda might reach these viewers, Diawara’s theorization suggests that many spectators would simply resist any potentially racist representations on screen. And while the images in *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* offer far more dignified depictions of African Americans than the standard fare of the time, the films also (and I will discuss this in further detail in my readings below) present conservative narratives and all-black milieus that, at best, eclipse the racism of their moment.  

bell hooks’ early 1990s theorizations of black spectatorship move beyond the binary both Mulvey and Diawara erect, and offer a more compelling explanation of how black audiences might have viewed *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier*. Unlike the scholars before her, hooks imagines viewers to be dialectically engaged with film texts through their gazes, watching and re-imagining the cinema they consume, rather than simply accepting or resisting it. Proposing that female  

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108 Diawara 215.
black audiences not only “resist” but also re-invent the racist cinema they watch, she writes, “Manthia Diawara’s ‘resisting spectatorship’ is a term that does not adequately describe the terrain of Black female spectatorship. We do more than resist. We create alternative texts, ones that are born not solely in reaction against.” She also argues that, for African Americans, whose looks have been suppressed during years of slavery and Jim Crow, to gaze at white bodies in a darkened theater is an act of empowerment. Insisting, “even in the worst circumstances of discrimination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency,” hooks proposes that black looks can be powerful and generative irrespective of the texts they are viewing. So, for instance, beholding racialized or racist representations in Marching On! and the other propaganda films, hooks’ spectators might find themselves able to re-script the texts, to read for moments of representational equality and revise the films’ messages productively in terms of these—rather than either settle for the films’ inherent exclusions or accept their deceptive messages.

Writing more specifically about this suppressed, or “repressed” gaze, hooks also suggests—returning to Mulvey—that filmic spectatorship has an erotics that is racially coded. She argues,

Given the real-life public circumstances wherein Black men were murdered/lynched for looking at White womanhood, where the Black male gaze was always subject to control and/or punishment by the powerful White other, the private realm of television screens or dark theaters could unleash the repressed gaze.

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110 hooks 289.
111 hooks 290.
In hooks’ theorization, the black male gaze, while perhaps resisting in the manner described by Diawara, is also *liberated* by dominant cinema, privy as if for the first time to unpunished voyeurism of the white world. hooks’ “oppositional gaze” and “repressed gaze” are not easily disentangled and, together, I believe, present the essential elements of the more fluid, complex process of looking and identifying that all of us, and particularly minorities, experience through cinema. Importantly, hooks’ writing also suggests that the erotics of spectatorship emerge not only from their inscription within the cinema but also from the social pressures and laws outside it. The black man’s desirous gaze, she implies, is forged in the social, suppressed and consequently repressed there, and only *released* in the theater. In hooks’ formulation, as I read it, the processes of identification engaged through film spectatorship bridge the social and the private, bringing together the desires of these very different realms. Thus hooks’ approach seems to me to begin to open cinema spectatorship to more human, more complex, and more fluid identifications capable of sustaining the discomfiting paradoxes present in films like *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier*.

While film scholars from Jane Gaines to Clyde Taylor to Jacqueline Bobo have considered how best to read black cinema, and its viewers, it is in Jacqueline Stewart’s more recent scholarship, which looks back to the earlier cinematic moment during which mainstream Hollywood viewing practices were consolidated, that I find the most nuanced theorization of black spectatorship—one which I extend in my own concept of “reconstructive spectatorship” below. In her 2005 book, *Migrating to the Movies*, Stewart argues that black migrants moving to Northern cities during the Great Migration of the 1920s learned at the cinema how to assimilate—both with more sophisticated African
American city-dwellers, and, to the extent it was possible, with white Northerners as well. Focusing in particular on the viewing practices of black spectators watching Hollywood films during the height of the movie palaces and the consolidation of Classical Hollywood Style, Stewart claims that the “modern” visual semantics of classical Hollywood cinema taught black audiences how to be modern subjects themselves. Her theorization of black spectatorship, although not radically divergent from hooks’ or her interlocutors’ general approaches, historicizes black viewing practices in the context of the evolution of Classical Hollywood Style, and demonstrates how, from the very beginning of the cinema’s consolidation, black audiences were not fully incorporated into mainstream viewing communities and strategies. Rather, Stewart explains, black viewing practices developed in response to Classical Hollywood Style and the vicissitudes of being black in segregated Northern theaters.

Stewart’s theorization is compelling not just because of the ways in which it productively rehearses and unifies the contributions to black spectatorship theory that have come before it but also because it identifies black spectatorship as an historically specific phenomenon. It also, in ways only gestured at by Diawara, hooks and others, understands spectatorship as a social phenomenon, one that occurs en masse as well as individually, and thus can, like discussion in the public sphere, transform identity. While my concept of reconstructive spectatorship is, as I will explain below, rather different from Stewart’s because it also accounts for (and in fact focuses on) how the experiences of black audiences viewing black films has influenced viewing practices, I want to take the time here to highlight Stewart’s argument, and to show how it offers a basis for my own.
Stewart begins by differentiating black viewers from white by their material conditions, insisting that these alone can determine spectatorship practices. She argues that, in the space of segregated theaters in particular, black spectators could not easily forget their “social selves” to become absorbed into the “increasingly enclosed narrative[s]” that characterized classical Hollywood cinema. Rather, she continues, black prewar viewers must have “read…alternately with and against disparate racial identities being performed on screen,” moving between identification with the filmic images and detachment from the screen in favor of identification with other audience members around their common situations. In so doing, black viewers necessarily resisted the “absorption” that defined the classical Hollywood cinema experience. Thus, she claims, “in terms of the cinema’s development as a social institution, rhetoric about cinema as a ‘universal language’ or ‘democratic art’ (as propounded by D.W. Griffith and others) did not fully extend to Black spectators.” Rather, black spectators invented their own hybrid gaze, one which implicitly compared the images on screen to those in their real lives.

Despite Stewart’s refusal to see the cinema as a “democratic art” for African Americans, her account of black cinema-going seems to describe the beginnings of a black cinematic public sphere, one in which African Americans learned together how to

113 Stewart 113. While both Miriam Hansen and Tom Gunning have written at length about this phenomenon in their work on Early Cinema and Cinema of Attractions, Stewart’s use of unabsorbed looking in *Migrating to the Movies* underscores the difficulty a black spectator in particular, who was aware of her status as a segregated minority precisely because of her placement in the theater, would experience in becoming entirely absorbed by the film drama.
114 Stewart 110.
be modern black Northerners. Without actually mentioning the public sphere, Stewart traces its contours, writing that viewers came to theaters not only to experience the ambiguous pleasure of watching (largely segregated) cinema, but also to “feel connected to a group identity that was both familiar and new.”\(^\text{115}\) She claims that, and particularly during the moments in which viewers did not identify with on-screen images, black viewers experienced a sense of community and (black) identity in the cinema. This experience she calls “reconstructive spectatorship,” because, during it, viewers “reconstructed” their absence in the films’ narratives into the presence of (similarly reconstructed) community and identity. This viewing practice, Stewart argues, offers “a set of numerous complicit and resistant possibilities for Black agency and activity, and for the reconstruction of the negated black viewing subject on psychic, social and public levels.”\(^\text{116}\) Thus, according to Stewart, this moment in which black migrants flooded urban cinemas and taught themselves how to view film, often by watching ‘against the grain,’ as it were, is significant because such spectatorship spurred “the creation of literal and symbolic spaces in which African Americans reconstructed their individual and collective identities in response to the cinema’s move toward classical narrative integration, and in the wake of migration’s fragmenting effects.”\(^\text{117}\) In Stewart’s argument, African Americans’ spectatorship and their response to Hollywood’s “move toward classical narrative integration,” or the continuities of time, space and character-focused narrative that characterize Classical Hollywood style from the late 1920s onward, co-constituted African American urban modernity.

\(^{115}\) Stewart 104.
\(^{116}\) Stewart 104.
\(^{117}\) Stewart 94.
But what of the viewing strategies—and experiences—of black audiences watching *black* films? How might have these influenced spectators in their reconstructions of identity, community and the film texts? While Stewart’s argument positions Hollywood film as central to the development of black modern, urban subjectivity, it leaves out the role of the quite popular race films of the time and their influence on black identitaria and spectatorship practices. Most black viewers of the 1920s and 30s would have watched race films quite frequently, in no small part because they were cheaper to attend. And race films did not uniformly deploy Classical Hollywood Style. Rather, most addressed their audiences with narratives and aesthetics drawn from black culture—music, dance, literature, folk culture and religion—and Hollywood-style imitation. And because production quality was so poor, and many of the technicians involved in the films’ productions were relatively untrained, the majority of race films hardly resembled their Hollywood counterparts. With their digressive and often overwhelming complex narratives—which were at some times interrupted by totally unintegrated musical scenes, and at others overwritten by the soundtrack—these films required viewing strategies that were different from those described either by SLAB theorists or any of the black film scholars above.

According to Gladstone Yearwood, these marked differences between Hollywood film and black cinema have their origins in black arts culture in general. In his study of black film aesthetics, Yearwood argues that “through time, a formal mechanism privileging performative values and the existential playing out of events in space evolved as an integral part of the black cultural tradition…shifting attention away from what was being said to how it was being expressed,” and thus, that cultural products and films from
within the black tradition focus as much, if not more, on performance, play and, what he calls (after Henry Louis Gates, Jr.) “signifyin’” than on character and plot.\footnote{Gladstone Yearwood. \textit{Black Film As A Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African American Aesthetic Tradition}. New York: Africa World Press, 1999. Yearwood draws his concept of “signifyin’” from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s excellent discussion of black literature and vernacular in \textit{The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism}. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.} In Yearwood’s assessment, black cinema doesn’t simply require new viewing strategies, it in fact \textit{teaches} these strategies as it involves viewers in co-creating the filmic text. Yearwood describes how, “In the black cultural tradition, the audience takes an active role in the production of meaning…Using a performative model of black cultural expression, the audience relationship in the best examples of black film is constructed in such a way as to require the viewer to engage the text as though it were a sermon or a musical performance.”\footnote{Yearwood 136-137.} Not surprisingly, then, both \textit{We’ve Come A Long, Long Way} and \textit{The Negro Soldier} are structured as sermons in which the audiences must engage (and \textit{Marching On!}, though rather different formally, also turns on moments of religious and musical conversion.) In Yearwood’s schema, then, films produced for black audiences must encode these practices—developing their formal and narrative elements around assumptions of particularized audience engagement.

Watching race films—such as the non-linear \textit{Within Our Gates} (1920), the narratively-bewildering \textit{The Flaming Crisis} (1924) or the heavily symbolic, semi-musical \textit{The Blood of Jesus} (1941)—black audiences would have been cued to engage performatively. They would have been asked to “read” songs for narrative significance, manage interruptions and digressions in the narrative by filling in the details or
connecting the parts, to incorporate discontinuities of time and place into coherence, and
to supply their own knowledge of black and American history and the films’ intertexts
(\textit{Birth of A Nation} and \textit{The Bible}, to name two) in order to make sense of the films before
them. By the time that these viewers could have found themselves in Stewart’s northern
movie theaters, watching Hollywood films, they would have already had viewing
practices shaped by watching \textit{black} films as well as Hollywood ones. They would have
already been used to transforming incoherencies and disruptions into usable texts, and
may well have “reconstructed” not only “the negated black viewing subject,” but also the
Hollywood films themselves—into characters and narratives that spoke to their own
experiences.

Not surprisingly, then, the propaganda films, \textit{Marching On!}, \textit{We’ve Come A Long, Long Way}
and \textit{The Negro Soldier}, which were produced in the tradition of race films,
relied upon their audiences to practice “reconstructive spectatorship,” to produce
meaning in two fundamental ways: first, by stitching together the narratives themselves,
which are fairly fractured across the film texts; and second, by reading within their
messages of American patriotism expressions of black cultural and political identity. In
order to do the latter, these spectators had to “reconstruct” not only the significance of the
films’ messages—holding together the differing, at times seemingly mutually exclusive
meanings—but also the African American histories to which the films make (often
inaccurate) reference. Their spectatorial reconstructions, then, occurred across multiple
discursive registers and, as I demonstrate in what follows, enabled viewers to find in
these films messages of American patriotism, a sense of black political identity and
community, as well as an invitation to re-engage the historical project of Reconstruction itself.

My readings of the three propaganda films, which follow below, demonstrate how *Marching On!, We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* use the polysemic figure of the black soldier to invite their viewers to recall and reconstruct black history even as they invest in an American future. Though each of the films can be fruitfully examined as a paradoxically separatist and nationalistic text that engages its audience in complex viewing strategies, my readings below focus on the development of one particular thematic by which each reaches its audience. I begin with *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way*, reading it in terms of its presentation of the black film spectator as a subject of history with agency; then I trace *The Negro Soldier’s* representation of the black community as an historic formation, at once within and outside of U.S. history; and, finally, I show how *Marching On!* offers its spectators a new collective memory, one that reconstructs black American familial history into military history.

**Reconstructing the Spectator in *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way***

Intercutting a history of the “progress of the race” in America with exhortations to join the war effort and evidence of Hitler’s racism and violence, *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* seems to be a simple pro-American propaganda piece. The film is narrated by radio evangelist Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux, who plays himself in the pulpit, delivering an extremely digressive, extended sermon urging black Americans to defend the country in which they have been fortunate beneficiaries of boundless white generosity (Lincoln’s, Roosevelt’s and the U.S. military’s as well as others’). The film’s meandering
narrative, which is composed of a series of films within films, bio-pics of famous black figures, and culled documentary footage, is held together primarily by Michaux’s performance. Also, as if concerned that black audiences might not accept his film’s message, Goldberg stages scene after scene of black viewers watching and responding positively to presentations on the importance of American patriotism. It is in these scenes, in which Goldberg represents the black spectator evaluating the images before him, that *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* moves beyond simple propaganda and offers a tutorial in “reconstructive spectatorship” as well.

Though the entirety of *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* presents an exercise in re-reading, or re-contextualizing a brief history of Hitler through black American experience, one specific moment in the film lends itself to a discussion of its internal audience’s labor as reconstructive spectators. This moment, during which the church-goers watch an animated film of a hanging, functions in the fiction of *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* to construct its internal audience as anti-fascists, aligned with the Allies’ cause. But it also visually references the violent racism in black American history, and in so doing models a black spectatorship based on the simultaneous acknowledgement and disavowal of black historical trauma.

Fittingly, the scene stages both the transformation of its internal spectators into black-identified American patriots, suffering with, yet moving on from American racism, and the constructedness of the historical propaganda itself. For, as *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* works to create its spectators, it also animates for them a series of photographs into a mini-film, demonstrating that spectatorship and the cinema are co-constituted—and that history and historical fiction are all but impossible to disarticulate. The scene is
marked off from the previous thirty-some minutes of *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* with a title, “THE FIVE MEN OF VELISH,” and the preacher’s voice-over explaining, “The photographs that you are about to see were radioed from Moscow. They were not taken by a Russian. They were found in the pockets of a Nazi, perished on the battlefield. He had taken them and kept them as souvenirs of an interesting experience.” As the images are animated for the camera and the two audiences (the church-goers and those in the theater), Goldberg directs the gaze; Michaux offers historical interpretation and narration for the images; and together they transform still images into a narrative film and a church-audience into witnesses to the crimes of war.

The staged creation of *The Five Men of Velish* emphasizes for *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way*’s viewers the process of (re)creating history and becoming a (re)constructive spectator, capable of interpreting history by filling in the blanks between images. An iris opens onto the first shot of *The Five Men of Velish*, where five men in uniform cling to ropes tied into nooses and hung from a large wooden A-frame, a small crowd of soldiers surrounding them. Michaux’s voice-over itself draws attention to yet another act of spectatorship as the camera dissolves to a close-up of the left side of the photo, describing, “The scene is Velish, a Russian village. It might have been in Britain or the USA. The invaders are preparing for an execution. It might have been here. The Nazi officers look on. There is one more onlooker you cannot see. The one who took this photograph, perhaps to show his family.” Rather than comparison, Michaux offers a contrast between the now multiple sets of viewers: whereas *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way*’s audience, like its internal-viewers, watch to learn, to respond to the violence of the scene, the photographed Nazis look expectantly, waiting for the killing. And, unseen by
all, a cameraman perpetrates what Michaux seems to identify as the ultimate cruelty, by documenting the scene for his own (or his family’s) pleasure.

Michaux’s implicit comparison of the different spectators seems to advocate for a particular mode of spectatorship, an active, responsive one, in which viewers become militarized—rather than pleased or satiated—by the images on screen. But it also references, as do the images themselves, a history of the spectacularization of racialized violence in America through the photographs of lynching. And therein lies another comparison: the historical powerlessness of the black community to the spectacle of lynching with the black viewing community’s sudden agency in their ability to take action against the images before them. While *The Five Men of Velish* does not explicitly suggest that its audience should rise up and respond to the racist lynchings spreading across the United States at the time, it does attempt to rally its viewers by referencing their experience with lynching—and it insists that critical spectatorship is a powerful act, one capable of forging community alliances and political action.

In the final shots, this film within a film—like the film frame itself—urges spectators to draw upon their personal and collective historical experience as they interpret and respond to the movies. In so doing, it also ironically creates spectators invested as much in black identity as in any American or Allied sensibilities. Panning across the initial image and then a photo with the ropes hanging empty, the camera directs viewers to behold the horror of the image as if they were there themselves, and to note both the many onlookers and the five men waiting to die. A final series of shots

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conveys action by dissolving between images of the men climbing onto the scaffold, of the men standing with nooses around their necks, and finally of the executioner jumping from the platform on which the men stand. Over the animation, Michaux narrates action in the present tense, “The executioner loops the noose around their necks. Here they stand ready, the five men of Velish, not criminals, not guerillas, but simple civilians whose homes were coveted by the German fascists…The facist hangman jumps off the platform. Another Nazi is pulling the plank away from under the feet of the victims.” For a moment, the screen goes black and dramatic music thunders. Afterwards, panning down to the dead bodies, the camera shows the spectacle, and the voice-over concludes, “All is over. The five men of Velish. They are not the only ones. There are tens of thousands of such victims in every land where fascism has set its foot. It might have been you.” Though the film declares that victims such as these appear in “land[s] where fascism has set its foot,” its assertion, “It might have been you,” would ring quite true for any African American who has struggled to survive U.S. racism. The film’s targeted call to this audience to identify with the onscreen images, in particular its victims, creates a sense of American unity and patriotism out of black unity and nationalism. In urging its black audience to practice American nationalism, it also, however paradoxically, requires them to invest in black civil rights as well.

Creating Community in The Negro Soldier

The Negro Soldier delivers its propagandist message—that African Americans should support the war effort—by presenting the black soldier as the definitive representative of the black community. In so doing, however, it offers viewers a
redressing of previous representations of black soldiers—and the black community in
general. Heisler begins by placing the film, and the American history of black soldiers
that it will narrate, in the heart of black cultural and political exchange: the church. The
opening shots of the film—after the superimposition of the title, “The Negro Soldier,” on
top of the U.S. military logo visually integrates the segregated armed forces—are of a
series of churches. These churches, filmed in different towns, at different angles, and
with different folks flowing into them, together seem to stand for a whole cross-section of
black America and its traditional gathering spaces. Soon the camera chooses one church
and enters, cutting from congregant to congregant, recording the hymn sung by the
congregants, and resting finally on the figure of a soldier, standing in the balcony and
singing the final solo. With these shots, the camera at once establishes the centrality of
the church to black America and the centrality of the black soldier to the church.

In *The Negro Soldier*, the space of the church offers spectators a revisioning of
the spaces black soldiers occupy in Hollywood films. There, most of the soldiers live on
removed battlefields, largely estranged from the black community. But the church,
according to Houston A. Baker, Jr. in his essay “Critical Memory and the Black Public
Sphere,” is a space of collectivity that “sustains and expresses the tensions of black
American group life. It is at once a social and a religious center, a site of material
ownership, a place of frenzied spiritual regeneration, a mecca for intellectual leadership
and a bright oasis for the musical ministry of those who cannot read and write.”

121 Here, in this filmic church, black soldiers, and the black public in general, gather in a hybrid,

121 Houston A. Baker, Jr.. “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere.” *The Black
Public Sphere*. Ed. The Black Public Sphere Collective. Chicago: University of Chicago
plural space of cultural production—a vibrant place that, according to *The Negro Soldier*, is not forfeited by military service. Presenting its message by way of the preacher’s (Carlton Moss’) sermon, before a congregation in a church, *The Negro Soldier* attempts to direct itself to African America with a new image of its possibilities for participating in the nation.

The job of reimagining the black soldier as a representative of the black community is modeled for *The Negro Soldier*’s spectators by the film’s church congregants. Beginning with the visual description of this Sunday congregation, composing shots of individuals and groups into one unified, singing, speaking and listening community, *The Negro Soldier* at once collapses the distance between its audience and the folks it depicts in the church while also authorizing itself as the product of the black community. During the film, the image of the preacher who delivers his sermon to the congregants becomes temporarily replaced by the vision of the camera, offering its message to the viewers, and we, the film audience, are sutured into the film as church-goers and the black public in general.\(^{122}\) As in *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way*, then, the film’s internal (church) audience stands in for the theatrical audience. And, throughout the film, this audience, along with the church-goers, envision multiple versions of who and how the black soldier might be.

In its first twenty minutes, the film invites viewers to witness and participate in a revision of previous historical and cinematic renderings of the black soldier. As the preacher begins telling his congregants about the efforts of the many black soldiers across the United States’ history, the film creates for its audience not only new images of the

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black soldier, but a new cinematic history as well. Using “transparencies of ‘glass shots’ made from contemporary illustrative materials, while white and black actors dressed as soldiers passed in the foreground carrying powder and shot their cannons,” Heisler offers a mock-documentary of black soldiers’ “role in earlier wars, along with the settlement of the West.” Along with the preacher, the audience is asked to engage in a visual re-remembering of the black historical record of participation in American progress.

As in *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way*, an extended film within a film is offered to viewers, this time to reconstruct American history. Together, we bear witness to a picture of history as a personalized, embodied past in which particular images, people and moments emerge to speak their piece. On screen, the soldier appears through images of obscure and famous American monuments memorializing his contribution; he shows up in paintings, drawings, on ledgers of names, and in the words of archival letters. From a close up on a page from George Washington’s war diary, describing the horrible conditions faced by soldiers during the Battle of Valley Forge, the camera cuts to another form of mock-documentary, a reenactment of the American Revolutionary soldiers’ struggles. In this reconstruction of the black soldier, American history and cinema itself, black soldiers march through the snow, fully integrated with white troops. The camera shows their battered, frost-bitten feet, dissolves to the Liberty Bell ringing, and dissolves again to a Betsy Ross flag. Together, the series of images—injured, integrated black soldiers, ringing Liberty Bell, Betsy Ross flag—urge the viewer to see the actions of the self-sacrificing black soldiers as resulting in the ringing of the bell and the ascendancy of

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123 Cripps and Culbert 626.
124 Cripps and Culbert 626.
the flag. The film continues to elaborate on this narrative in the next series of shots, where black soldiers and civilians cut down trees, build log cabins and turn bricks into buildings and forts in order, in the words of the film, to make “territories into states.” *The Negro Soldier* seems to argue, visually, that it is black Americans who have made, transformed, and produced America.

In an important shift, *The Negro Soldier* insists that the project of re-imagining and re-membering the black soldier’s role in America is not only a collective project, but also a familial one, and one in which the soldier himself can lead the charge. The sudden changes in narrative and narrator—which mark a decisive departure from classical Hollywood strategies of narrative continuity—occur as the preacher begins naming the regiments in which black soldiers are fighting and a member of the church congregation calls out, “Don’t forget the infantry… My boy’s in the infantry!” Rather than incorporate this woman’s interruption into the narrative, *The Negro Soldier* simply switches narrator, presenting, as the woman reads a letter from her son, the son’s experiences in the military. But the film doesn't stick with this new narrator—it quickly shifts again to a series of point of view shots and voice-over narrations by the soldier-son himself. Again, a sort-of film within a film is offered to *The Negro Soldier*’s spectators, as if the product of the church-audience’s collective imagining in response to the soldier-son’s letter. The story of his military participation that follows, then, is accepted first by the church audience and then, with their modeling, by the spectators in the theater as well. While *The Negro Soldier* itself offers a presentation of the new black soldier to its viewers, this film-within-the-film insists that the black soldier is himself a leader in a new kind of narration: that he can tell the story of his people and teach us, collectively, to reconstruct
history and the future with him.

This film-within-a-film is presented as an informational documentary (with some actual documentary footage from Heisler and Moss’ trips to military bases) and thus another reconstruction of “history” or “fact” for audience members to integrate. In it, the soldier-son, Robert, details his months in the military including gaining acceptance to the officer’s training program. He opens, “Dear Mommy, at last it’s happened. I’m an officer.” As the camera narrates with him, we see what Robert’s voice needn’t even describe – that he is in a racially-mixed group of men, learning along with them how to become a soldier. Though the soldiers do become segregated as the film continues, in these opening shots of Robert’s narrative, black and white soldiers mingle together completely naturally and with apparent equality, formulating another new image of black soldier-hood. As Robert becomes part of the armed forces, the viewer learns with him how to salute, how to get fitted for military boots, how to wear a military-issue hat, how to make a bed – all in one long, instructional montage. Next, we learn about marching, hiking, pitching tents, shooting rifles, playing sports and reading (the “Anthology of Negro Literature” is pictured). Robert explains – while the film shows – that soldiers get free, high quality medical care, hospital stays and even dental treatment. And they get to dance, date and go to church on days off. He describes one woman as a “very nice mama, a real apple pie girl…just the kind you’d like.” Life for the black man in the military, according to The Negro Soldier, is as good if not better than civilian life – free food and medical care, physical fitness training, access to good women and a nice church, and, according to an “official statement from the war department,” a five-fold increase in
black officers and thus opportunity for professional and economic advancement.

Following an image of black cadets at West Point, Robert’s letter concludes, “Mama, the next time you see me, I’ll be wearing an officer’s uniform.” In short, Robert’s letter depicts the military as the solution to black oppression in America rather than, as many blacks saw it, a vehicle for such oppression. The military of *The Negro Soldier* reproduces the best of black civilian life, while offering the lure of full citizenship and national inclusion in exchange for enlistment.

In order for audiences to fully digest Robert’s story, they would have to—as with *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way*—sustain the paradox of two all-but mutually exclusive narratives: of the United States’ refusal to fully accept and acknowledge black soldiers and the U.S. current promotion of black participation in the war effort. In other words, viewers would have to recognize the history of U.S. racism in order to appreciate the film’s suggestion that all that is now changing. Indeed, by its conclusion, *The Negro Soldier*, through the figure of the preacher and the words of Robert’s letter, and through mining political history and personal memory, has offered a reconstruction of collective historical memory and the black soldier’s role in transforming America. But this reconstruction—for the spectator—rests upon a legacy of racism. As the spectator allows herself to be transformed by *The Negro Soldier*, she must also see herself as a black viewer, one who has suffered under the nation to which she may now—however cautiously—pledge allegiance.
Forging Family and Reconstructing Memory in *Marching On*

While *Marching On!* delivers a propagandistic message similar to those of *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier*, it utilizes fiction to emphasize the collective nature of its tale rather than documentary form. Telling the story of Rodney, Jr., a young man who reluctantly joins the military but feels that the war effort does not include him, goes AWOL, and finally returns to the Army after encountering a long-buried truth about his past, *Marching On!* suggests allegorically that the memories of one would-be soldier can stand for those of the entire community and re-script black American history itself. Unlike in *The Negro Soldier*, where memory is merely a lens for visualizing history, in *Marching On*, memory is not only the mode for expressing black history, it also becomes the essence of black generational existence, and, ultimately, the route to finding a black home and family in the American military.

*Marching On!*’s basic propaganda strategy is to interweave domestic life with life in the military, and suggest that, figuratively, the two are one. Aiming to produce a view of military service persuasive to segregated black audiences steeped in the traditions of the south (where the film was produced), *Marching On!* approaches the problem of black military service with a thematic and formal focus on familial memory, insisting that the capacity to remember, mourn, and “march on” are at the heart of a successful black American identity. And as the film leads its protagonist to encounter his own repressed family history and into full knowledge of who he is and what he is capable of as a black American man, it asks its audience to reconstruct the legacy of black participation in the nation into a family affair.
In *Marching On!*, knowledge and revision of black history are imparted to the spectator through a kind of cueing that engages the audience in the project of reimagining black political identity of the moment. The film recalls for its viewers important, emblematic moments in black history, but endows them with new or reworked significance. Offering a narrative structured by simultaneously personal and historical memories, with heavy doses of archival footage edited into the drama, *Marching On!* insists that the personal experiences of its characters are collective, historical experience as well. Three particular, important memories (which I will discuss in more detail below) demonstrate the film’s reconstructive project, its insistence that individual memory is in fact collective, and its consequent imperative to its spectators to reconstruct black American history together. The first is Rodney’s memory of his father’s desertion of the family which turns out to have been the result of war trauma suffered by countless numbers of WWI (black) soldiers. In the second, Rodney’s father recalls his son and his lost memories of WWI. His memories here reconstruct Rodney’s painful personal memories, repair a broken patriarchal line (broken since slavery times), and represent the military as black family kin. In the third, at the end of the film, Rodney’s grandfather’s memories of serving with Teddy Roosevelt and of Native American history create narrative resolution, enable Rodney to link himself to a history of black military service, even within his own family, and at the same time iterate the historical legacy of black American soldiers. All of these memories, though reparative, reference losses not only personal but also historical and political, and suggest that at the heart of this film are not only the problems of Rodney’s feelings and identity, but also those of black American affect and identity at large. These three memories structure the larger parable of the film:
that blackness is already American, and the memories and histories of blackness and Americanness are inextricable.

_Marching On!_ integrates these three powerful instances of memory (and forgetting) into the story of Rodney Tucker, Jr.’s initial missteps and ultimate success in the U.S. Army to plot an allegorical movement from an exclusively black identity to a broader, inclusive American identity. The basic plot, sans instances of memory, follows Rodney first resisting joining the army and losing his girlfriend and the respect of his family because of his unwillingness to enlist, then getting drafted and faring poorly during training exercises; going AWOL and meeting a strange hobo in the desert who turns out to be his long-lost father; meeting up with his grandfather to locate and capture a group of seditious Japanese in an old Native American stronghold; and finally rejoining the military without penalty. However, the powerful turning points of this narrative revolve entirely around Rodney’s confrontations with personal and historical memories to which he did not know he had access. These memories transform Rodney from a melancholic young man to a loyal believer in God, family and American nationalism. And they integrate him into a repaired paternal line of patriotic black Americans.

Thus, I am proposing that memory in _Marching On!_ metonymically and structurally stands in for black history and community, and becomes the cinematic invitation for black audiences, along with Rodney, to identify collectively as a family and with a broader American nationalism. It is through cinematic representations of memory that _Marching On!_ creates a community it aims to assimilate into a multi-racial American nationalism. In his study of black diasporic cultural modernity, _The Black Atlantic_, Gilroy suggests that narratives like _Marching On_’s that revolve around “love and loss
systematically transcode other forms of yearning and mourning associated with histories of dispersal and exile and the remembrance of unspeakable terror.”126 His argument here is that black narratives of “love and loss” reflect both the affective and material histories of “dispersal,” “exile” and “terror” the black community has suffered since slavery. Gilroy draws particular attention to the psychoanalytic dimension of these histories, proposing that “remembrance,” “yearning,” and “mourning” take “form” in the wake of history, and then find final shape in “systematically transcode[d]” narratives. His claims here urge readings of films like Marching On! as symptomatic of both black diasporic history and black collective memory and grief, and also mark the tropes of memory and mourning as significant, telling instances of code requiring interpretation. Along these lines, I read memory, and moments of memory, in Marching On! as part of a project of yearning and mourning particular to black experiences of diaspora, slavery and discrimination in America that haunt the black family. Indeed, the double loss of Rodney’s father, which organizes the narrative structurally and thematically, occurs both because of, and as another instance of, the history of black “dispersal.” And, while the first loss of his father evokes mourning, even melancholia, in Rodney, the final loss (when his dad actually dies) enables Rodney to imagine other loves and losses, and ultimately find kinship with the military and American nationalism.127

The opening scene of the film demonstrates for its viewers what happens when the nation, military service and the family are separated. In the first shots, Rodney, Jr., is

a character out of place, uncomfortable in the domestic and nationalistic worlds in which his family and the other filmic characters are embedded. While the narrative suggests that Rodney’s discomfort has to do with his lack of manhood, the *mise en scene* links Rodney’s failure as a man to his failure as a country-man and a *family*-man as well. The film opens with a static shot of the dinner table, a tableau, with three generations in the process of sitting down to dinner. Everyone in the extended family is figured—both grandfathers, mother, sister, and Rodney—but Rodney is shown only from behind, his back filling the foreground of the frame. And he is the butt of a series of family jokes during the meal. Ribbing Rodney about showing up for dinner without his girlfriend, Grandpa Tucker prods, “Maybe he was so busy thinking about the war and about the calling that he just didn’t think about asking her.” Rodney, who looks up at the word “war,” responds angrily, “Can’t you think of anything else to say?” Pushing away his plate and jumping to his feet, Rodney exclaims, “War! War! All of you, that’s all I hear around this place!” Rodney’s failure to ask his girlfriend to dinner, jokingly discussed at the table, suddenly becomes part and parcel of his anxiety about the war and what role he might have to play in it. Cutting back to its earlier angle, the camera frames the family at the table, again showing Rodney, now standing, and still from behind. He does not fit into the shot, except as an image of that which must be excluded—or must exclude itself—for the family to function. “I suppose you’d all be glad if I *was* in the army,” Rodney says bitterly, with his family staring up at him. With Rodney’s back in the foreground, Rodney’s dwarfed mother says softly, “Rodney, you never spoke that way to us before.” Turning away from his mother, into the camera, Rodney leaves the table and moves quickly out of frame. In this scene, it seems that Rodney’s inability to participate
in the war has made him unable to coexist with his family as well. To heal the family, the rift between black America (emblemated here in Rodney) and the military will have to be repaired.

The next part of the scene works both to explain Rodney’s disillusionment with the U.S. military and to demonstrate for viewers the film’s concern with the fundamental familial and political problems facing black America. Offering the spectral image of the missing Tucker, Rodney’s father, this conclusion to the opening scene suggests that Rodney’s incompatibility with this family—and with the larger family of his nation—is the product of the African American legacy/memory from slave times: the absent father. Though the viewer doesn’t learn, in these early shots, why Rodney’s father is missing, Rodney Tucker, Sr.’s absence seems somehow wrapped up in his military status, and thus to echo the historic destruction of black family integrity by the State. In the next shots, Rodney and his mother move into the parlor and have a brief conversation about the military. Sitting next to him on the sette and placing her hand on his shoulder, Rodney’s mother begins, “Rodney, bless your heart. I’m like any other mother who gives her son to the army…” Rodney looks away from her as she describes her feelings of pride, and her fears, as if he were already enlisted. “I’m sorry, Mom. Guess I’m a little jittery, that’s all,” he offers, looking up, not at his mother, but rather at a framed photograph of a seated man in full uniform. “Your father was a soldier, Son, and a good one,” Rodney’s mother says, following his eyes. Still looking up at the photograph of his dad, Rodney echoes sarcastically, “Yeah, Dad was a good soldier.” “Why, Rodney!” his mother exclaims. “I’m going out, Mom. Think a walk’ll do me good,” Rodney answers as he stands and
walks toward the camera before leaving the frame completely. The shot fades out on Rodney’s mother, still seated, with lowered head.

In a later, key scene of *Marching On!*, we will find out that Rodney’s father was not simply a soldier, but one who never returned to his family after WWI. Rodney’s discomfort with the war and enlistment seems to center around this figure of his father, and to suggest that the psychological trauma of his loss might be at stake in Rodney’s feelings about the war, about the nation, about his family, and about himself. However, Rodney’s feelings are not his alone—many black Americans suffered losses in the aftermath of WWI. Soldiers returned not to increased civil rights but rather to increased lynchings; discrimination in the armed forces continued, intensified, despite the loyal service and sacrifices of black soldiers; and black families lost husbands, brothers and sons to waves of anti-black riots across the States. While Rodney’s anger toward his father and the armed forces seems to disappoint his mother, and perhaps distance the viewer, it also is reflective of that of a wide swath of the African American world, and acts as a possible point of identification for the film’s less patriotic viewers. Indeed at this moment, as in numerous instances in *Marching On!*, the viewer is invited to maintain two competing narratives: one of black civil rights concerns (expressed in Rodney’s disillusionment) and the other of black American patriotism (exemplified by Rodney’s mother and in the photograph of his soldier-father).

In a later scene, during which Rodney meets his missing father, *Marching On!* again offers its spectators the possibility of identifying simultaneously with seemingly mutually exclusive narratives or points of view about being black in the United States. Insisting upon the importance of the reconstruction of familial *and* historical memory to
black political identity, this scene serves as both a turning point in the plot of the film and a tutorial for the viewer in how to experience and reconstruct black history in service of American patriotism. The scene opens with Rodney in the middle of his escape from the military, sharing a train car with a hobo who happens to be his father, but whom he doesn’t recognize. The two talk and sleep together in the barren box of a car for some time, and, because Rodney, Sr. has never seen his son and the only memories he has are fragmentary and incomplete, he likewise fails to recognize his child. In fact, the film reveals, Rodney, Sr. has developed amnesia from injuries sustained in WWI. And his amnesia has been the “problem” in the film all along: for the patriotic viewer, the reason Rodney grew up without a father and blamed the U.S. government for his hardships; and, for the resistant spectator, a symbol of the violence done to the black community and black families by U.S. government after WWI.

As the scene continues, we learn that both Rodneys, senior and junior, are alike not only in their conscious lack of knowledge, but also in their unconscious actions as well: Rodney talks in his sleep, revealing the secret of his military AWOL status; and the hobo walks in his, and will in this way ultimately reveal the secret of his identity. When Rodney, Sr. sleepwalks off the train one night, Rodney, Jr. jumps after him to help. He finds the hobo lying in the dirt in a wide expanse of Texan desert, dying. In an altered state, Rodney, Sr. believes he is talking to a doctor in the aftermath of WWI, and insists to his son that he must get home to his wife and his new baby Rodney Tucker, Jr. In a two-shot, he hands Rodney the photo of his son and wife that he has carried throughout the war, saying, “I’ve got to get out of here. I’ve got to go home to the baby. I’ve got to go home to Ellen. Ellen’s my wife. She wrote me in France telling me we had a baby,
that she named him after me. She named him Rodney Tucker, Jr. . . . I’ve got to get out of this hospital, doctor. I’ve got to go home. The war is over . . . I’ve got to go home to Ellen.” After he closes his eyes and dies moments later, the camera shows Rodney looking at the photo, framed in a shot almost identical to the earlier one of Rodney, Sr.’s photo in the Tucker family home. Looking up from the photo, Rodney, Jr. says to himself with recognition, “So he was my father. That’s why he didn’t come back home. He didn't know where to come to . . . Lost his memory . . . That’s why I’m not going back to the army. No! I’m not going back!”

This production of memory—the memory of the Tucker family and of black participation in WWI—seemingly resolves Rodney’s grieving and questioning, but strangely does not clear psychic space for him to rejoin the military. It references black military participation in WWI, but only ambivalently, suggesting, as Rodney believes, that the military might not have been the best choice for Rodney, Sr. Rodney will change his mind about this later, but now, in the wake of his father’s death, Rodney decides that because the army hurt his father and prevented him from raising his family, he, the abandoned son, will reject it. The military becomes the enemy that broke the patrilineal transmission of love and knowledge, and replaced it with yearning and amnesia. This moment of the film, in which the problem of memory is allegorically and literally represented as both a problem of black American history and participation in the military and the trauma of black familial disruption, also demonstrates the complexity of the film’s address to its public. The return of the (repressed?) father rewrites the traumatic black American history of broken families and underwrites the film’s more general project of reconstructing collective black history/memory—and Rodney, Sr., for both son
and viewer alike, becomes a symbol of both the problem and the solution to black patriotism and collective history and identity.

It is also in this scene that *Marching On!* most clearly presents its project of cinematic reconstruction. By representing visual and aural records of the past together through Rodney, Sr.’s testimonial and photograph, the film offers uniquely filmic strategies for remembering and revising history. In this way, *Marching On!* shows how the past on the one hand continually informs the present, and on the other, becomes meaningful only in the future. More specifically, through the magic of cinema, the history of black participation in the armed forces, and Rodney’s family history, can be made visible in the present, and can thus offer Rodney and viewers alike the opportunity to reconstruct their understanding of the black family and its relationship to the United States. In other words, both versions of American history—as inclusive and protective of African American families, and as dangerous to them—coexist as viable resolutions to the film’s narrative, its characters’ problems, and the audience’s experience.

Remembering—and specifically cinematic re-membering—is then central to *Marching On!*’s transformative address to its public. Remembering changes Rodney: by discovering his own personal history—the story of where his father went after the war—Rodney also uncovers black military history in general. And it is through this discovery, though he initially rejects it, that Rodney will finally transform into his father’s son and a true American nationalist. Even as he runs away from the army, Rodney runs into the discovery that his father was, indeed, a good soldier, one who neither perished on, nor fled from, the battlefield; that Rodney himself is the third generation of soldiers in his family; and that being a soldier is his inheritance. Memory, and the fragile boundary
between remembering and forgetting, serve both as the conduit and the obstacle to Rodney’s self-knowledge and his willingness to participate in American nationalism. Recovering his father, and his father’s memory, enable Rodney to complete his melancholic mourning, but not to immediately accept his place in his family or American patriotism. Refusing his role as the next generation of soldier, and thus his family legacy as well, Rodney instead wanders in the desert like a man in exile.

The final instance of memory in *Marching On!*, which at once gives great historical depth to Rodney’s identity struggle and brings narrative resolution to the film, focuses on another generation of the Tucker family: Grandpa Tucker’s military service and his knowledge of an old, bygone America. The scenes with Grandpa Tucker, which bring into play yet another era of United States war and nationalism, work to shore-up the film’s patriotic, propagandistic message as well as demonstrate the costs of national allegiance. In these scenes, to “remember” his patriotism and re-align himself with the nation and its military, Rodney Jr. (and his audience) will have to again reconstruct American history—though this time through a process of *forgetting* or repression.

En route to visit Rodney in the army, and unaware that his grandson has gone AWOL, Grandpa Tucker heads off-road into the desert and into what will become a landscape of memory. Lost in this same landscape, Rodney, Jr. begins hallucinating the

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129 Spencer Williams is most famous as a director for his religious films, particularly *The Blood of Jesus* (1941). Though *Marching On!* isn’t an overtly religious film, instances of prayer and religious reference do find their way into the narrative. Rodney, Jr.’s exile, miraculous rescue, and conversion in the desert, complete with visions and prayer, seem to mirror the experiences of the biblical Hebrews after their escape from Egypt and idol worship.
war coming “home” to American soil. Imagining Japanese paratroopers, fire, fighting, and his mother in a bombed-out shell of the family home, he is terrified into unconsciousness. Finding Rodney dehydrated and nearly dead, Grandpa Tucker revives him and bears witness to his grandson’s sudden religious conversion into a nation-loving penitent. When Rodney insists that he wants to fight for his “family,…home,…freedom,…democracy,…everything,” Grandpa Tucker encourages his grandson to pray for a second chance in the military. Rodney’s hallucinations, and his encounter with his soldier-grandfather, are perhaps the most visual presentations of propaganda in the film. In a careful series of shots superimposing hallucinated scenes of horror and destruction over the black soldier’s prone body and the barren spread of desert, Marching On! argues in a truly cinematic language that failure to fight will be the death of black America. It is here, during Rodney’s near-death transformation, that Marching On! begins to suppress its multiple identificatory possibilities. No longer is there a voice of opposition in the film, nor do there appear to be opportunities for reading against the grain, as it were, of the imagery, narrative or thematics. However, as Marching On! stages its final reconstruction of memory/history, the stakes of reading only with the grain—that is to say, patriotically—become clear.

In one of the film’s final scenes, in which Grandpa Tucker and Rodney fight side by side against America’s enemies, the viewing audience learns both how and why history must undergo constant revision—and how such revision can change the spectator as well. In this scene the film’s address is both racialized and markedly racist. At once referencing the specificity of black American history, recalling the discrimination against Native Americans and characterizing Japanese Americans as seditious “Japs” who repeat
the word “bansai” over and over again, *Marching On!* attempts to hail a viewership defined not only by its marginalization but also over and against other communities of marginalized races.

The scene opens with Grandpa Tucker and Rodney driving through the desert toward home. When their car overheats, Grandpa, who seems to know every inch of the Texan wilderness and to be a repository himself of America’s history, recalls a water source hidden deep in the nearby hills. He tells Rodney that these hills were “Old Geronimo’s Stronghold…where half a dozen Indians held off soldiers.” The men leave their car and head toward the water but are distracted when they come across a series of items marked, “Made in Japan,” in the dirt. Climbing over great boulder-like rocks, they find a cave, investigate, and ultimately capture Japanese spies in their lair. Though Grandpa dies in the struggle (after expressing his deep joy at being able to defend his country one last time), Rodney’s success is observed by a passing group of soldiers and their officer, and earns Rodney what he had prayed for: re-admittance to the Army without prejudice. While Grandpa’s brief memory/knowledge of the U.S. government’s wars against the American Indians is given but a moment of dialogue and no visual representation, it gestures at once toward the nation’s founding moments and the kind of forgetting, or repression, required to sustain any nationalism. Both the war against Native Americans and the Spanish American War, which Grandpa Tucker fought under Teddy Roosevelt in Cuba, were foundational in defining America’s national borders and sovereignty. They were, arguably, the last of America’s domestic territorial struggles, and in that way, part and parcel of America’s policy of Manifest Destiny and establishment as
a nation. However, these wars were also explicitly racist, in that they were essentially fought to support America’s status as a white nation with brown colonial subjects.

At the heart of Grandpa’s memories, then, which will ultimately lead to Rodney, Jr.’s assimilation into American nationalism, is the racial paradox of America’s founding. Grandpa Tucker’s memories in this way exceed any imagination of a multicultural, inclusive America pitched propagandistically to the film’s public, and reveal instead, however unintentionally, the racial violence at the heart of the American project. And, indeed, the Japanese that Rodney and his grandfather capture, are as stereotypically portrayed as any black buffoon of any race film. Hidden in Geronimo’s Stronghold, and sacrificed for Rodney’s final inclusion in the nation, in *Marching On!* the Japanese are America’s new Native Americans, the “new” racial other.

And so, *Marching On!* has restored the great loss of paternity and patrilineal legacy in the American black world through military enlistment. However, it substitutes this affective gift for the real, owed debt of political citizenship in the national family. While the film offers blacks an emotional home in the army, it cannot guarantee real rights. And while it may substitute affectively for the loss of fathers, it will not offer any real inclusion in the body politic, but will rather refocus the issues of exclusion and excision onto the Japanese Americans hiding out, all but unseen, in the American landscape.

By its conclusion, the affective dimension of *Marching On!*’s narrative comes to supplant the real politics of the film: why Rodney, or a young black American man like him might not want to join the armed forces during WWII; why Rodney’s father, or a mid-life black American man like him might not have returned from WWI, or might not
have encouraged his son to join the armed forces after him; and why Rodney’s grandfather, an elderly black American man who fought with Teddy Roosevelt might have every reason to hate the U.S. military and the nation itself as well. Rather than express these race politics, the film represses them, allowing them to appear only as absences, as forgetting, as the disavowed relationships and memories of three generations of the Tucker family. By staging such forgetting and disavowals, the film does, however, model a reconstructive process for its spectators. Though *Marching On!*’s reconstruction arrives at a patriotic, nationalist resolution, it does not unequivocally tutor its viewers to do the same. Rather, it offers multiple reconstructions of American history, American space and the Tucker family itself, presenting its public with divergent opportunities for narrative—and semantic—interpretation. Its audience might transform into patriots, like Rodney Tucker, Jr., or into revolutionaries, as civil rights advocates aligned with a politics of color rather than assimilation. Through its cinematic presentation of memory, *Marching On!* engages its audience in identifying at once with black Americanness and with a potentially separatist black politics.

**Conclusion**

Though conceived, produced and distributed quite differently, *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way, Marching On!* and *The Negro Soldier* deliver similar patriotic messages to their black audiences. At once expressing the most conservative goals of the American wartime government and the efforts of a fading black American independent cinema, *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way, Marching On!* and *The Negro Soldier* present uniquely ambivalent representations of the black soldier, even as he is leaving his home in black
America to take on national importance in the global arena. These films’ soldiers are steeped in the history of black America’s struggles for citizenship and assimilation, and insist, even as they launch themselves into new, integrated, multi-racial battles, that the memories and histories of African America remain visible. As representations, these figures exceed their propagandistic purpose, unlike the figures of black soldiers in the Hollywood films of the same time, and perform both their own historicity and the history of race in America. Their production of this excess relies not only on the alternative narrative and aesthetic practices of these films—their similar projects of signifying—but also on the active and reconstructive engagement of their (black) spectators, who were versed in reading with, against, and altogether outside of the filmic grain.

As films, *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way, Marching On!* and *The Negro Soldier* display their hybridity; as cultural products, they reveal an entire network of filmmaking and viewing practices that moved constantly between hegemonic and counter-cultural signification. And between them, they present the range of stakes, ideological, material and affective, that black Americans encountered in their commitment to the U.S. war effort. If *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way* and *The Negro Soldier* reveal the historical problems of racism and political disenfranchisement, *Marching On!* insists on the emotional predicaments, showing us the pain, mourning and melancholia that seem to make safe racial identification impossible, yet simultaneously sustain it.

By reconstructing filmic representation and American history, these three films also offer their spectators opportunities to reconstruct their own identities. Like Stewart’s 1920s viewers, *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way, Marching On!* and *The Negro Soldier*’s audiences sat together in the spaces of segregated theaters, military bases’ screening
rooms, churches and community centers identifying and dis-identifying with the nationalist images and narratives on screen. Separately and together, these audiences found themselves persuaded to be patriots or assured in their separatism. But all of them learned to look anew at an icon of American blackness, and to see him as expressive of the hopes and tensions of both black and mainstream America’s national security. Indeed, by together imagining, hailing and prevailing upon disaffected black American cinema audiences, *The Negro Soldier, Marching On!* and *We’ve Come A Long, Long Way,* created a new sphere of discursive circulation with a common set of imagery and ideology—one that used the cinema to engage black audiences in debates around military enlistment and nationalism that were ongoing in the black presses but had been absent in both Hollywood and black independent cinema of the time.
Chapter Three:

Psychic Seditions: Black Interiority, Psychoanalysis and the Mise en Scene of Resistance in Cold War Cinema

In John Frankenheimer’s 1962 classic, *The Manchurian Candidate*, the black soldier Corporal Allen Melvin shares a recurrent nightmare with the film’s central character, Major Marco. In both of their dreams, surrounded by women at a garden party, the men watch as their Lieutenant murders a fellow soldier. Like the dreaming Major Marco and Corporal Melvin, Lieutenant Shaw is acting under hypnotic suggestion of the Chinese and Russian Communists, who at times appear as themselves, and at others as the hallucinatory women in the garden party. Though similar enough to convince authorities of the existence of a communist plot early in the film, the men’s dreams differ in one apparently insignificant way: while the “women” standing in for the communists in Marco’s dream are white, in Melvin’s they are black. Somehow the men’s racial difference has transformed their common hypnotic suggestion into different memories, differently raced experiences. Though a seemingly small cinematic moment, this scene nonetheless inspired critics Gonzalez and Jacobson to argue, “The *Manchurian Candidate* is among the very first—and it remains among a very few—‘white’ Hollywood productions that attempt to convey a black consciousness or to see the world through African American eyes.”\(^{130}\) Gonzalez and Jacobson’s comment, though, as I will

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show below, incorrect in its historical timeline, raises a series of important questions I hope to address in this chapter, namely: What does a cinematic representation of black consciousness look like? When and why might the cinema attempt to “convey a black consciousness”? And what does it mean when so-called “‘white’ Hollywood productions” depict such consciousness—what are the representational and political consequences?

The question of black consciousness was certainly important to both government and independent social scientists during WWII, as I’ve shown in the preceding chapters. High profile scholars like Gunnar Myrdal and Franklin Frazer brought to attention the psychological dimensions of racism and the dangerous consequences of failing to redress the injuries of racial injustice through equitable integration. And, in the literary world, various black and white writers alike presented African Americans as fully developed and complex human beings. But it is my contention that mainstream Hollywood cinema finally began to represent black interiority anew (if not for the first time) though the depiction of a new incarnation of the filmic black soldier in Mark Robson’s popular film, *Home of the Brave* (1949). In this chapter, I claim that *Home of the Brave*’s figure of the troubled and resistant black soldier, sickened from his experience in the military, helped to establish the trope of the new, post-war and Cold War incarnation of the far less dimensional black soldier discussed in Chapters One and Two—and the template for early representations of black consciousness on the silver screen. Appearing in box office hits *Home of the Brave, Steel Helmet, Pork Chop Hill, Bright Victory*, the later Western *Sergeant Rutledge*, and, of course, *The Manchurian Candidate*, the post-WWII filmic black soldier struggled consistently against his own psychological and physiological
resistance in his service to the United States. In each of these films, with the possible exception of *The Manchurian Candidate*, the black soldier was forced to negotiate the psychic effects of racism—both within the military and before his military service—in order to overcome or “heal” his resistance. And in each of the films, in order to show the illness and the cure that became essential to preserving both the soldier’s and the nation’s well-being, the old, purely iconic black soldier of WWII-era films was presented anew: as a full person, with a consciousness and a subjectivity.

This new black soldier’s appearance in postwar films was not coincidental. As the United States citizenry and government struggled with how to integrate the hundreds of thousands of black soldiers returning from WWII, and the millions of black Americans who had migrated to cities in search of wartime jobs, Hollywood’s representation of black soldiers changed dramatically. No longer confined to functioning as mere tokens of integration for the purposes of rallying troops as they had during the war, filmic black soldiers were presented as characters in their own right. And, as President Truman passed his famous Executive Order 9981 integrating the armed forces and proposed a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, anti-lynching legislation, and the abolishment of the poll tax a year earlier in 1948, this new multidimensional black soldier began showing up repeatedly in industry films.\(^\text{131}\) This soldier, unlike the dignified but simple soldiers of WWII films, was both complex and troubled. Wherever he appeared—at home, in Korea, trudging through the surreal battlefields of the Cold War—this integration-era soldier found himself haunted by the problem of his racial identity. He no

longer ‘fit in’ with the other troops. He did not readily do what was asked of him. Instead, again and again, he grew upset, sick, and resistant. Rather than successfully performing integration, he troubled it. And the films that starred this new black soldier consistently found the trouble, though perhaps not originally his fault, certainly to be his problem: it was a disease, predominantly a mental one, that had to be cured. In order to represent the complex psychological dimensions of his disease, the postwar films I discuss in this chapter did more than simply offer a new figure of the sick and resistant black soldier, they also attempted to depict his (sick) subjectivity.

As the strange progress of the fifties and the Cold War wore on, and anxieties over integration and national loyalty intensified, questions about black interiority loomed large. Filmic forays into black consciousness—and the black unconscious—raised and sought to address mainstream white America’s concerns, both in social problem films and through the war film genre. But it is in the films presenting black soldiers that the stakes of exploring black interiority become most clear: as the symbol for nationalism and masculinity par excellence, the filmic black soldier at once emblematizes the ideal, patriotic black American and gives figure to the danger and violence a renegade black masculinity might embody. Indeed, this virile, dissenting, but not yet politically active soldier became a transitional figure in cinematic representations of blackness: no longer the assimilationist one-dimensional soldier of WWII, but not yet the psychologically complex black nationalist of the 70s. This sick soldier and the films that presented him drew their force from the imperatives of an integrating America—and, in keeping with the social and political developments of the times, from white Americans’ need to imagine black experience anew. In *Home of the Brave*, as in *Steel Helmet* (1951), *Bright
Victory (1951), Pork Chop Hill (1959) and Sergeant Routledge (1960), the black soldier’s mind, rather than his body, is at stake: what he thinks, how he feels, and what he remembers from the (strangely) conjoined traumas of war and being black in America become the urgent problems of the narrative. Both in the films, and in the broader social sphere into which these films were released, if the black soldiers could not somehow leave behind their sadness, trauma and anger, they would remain a collective threat to white society. These films present a soldier, a black man, who must be somehow integrated into white America, and whose racial anger and trauma must be acknowledged, treated and cured in order for integration, and new Cold War American nationalism, to succeed.

In this chapter, I read Robson’s Home of the Brave as a film that renders explicit Hollywood’s new project of investigating black interiority. In both its narrative and its form, Home of the Brave attempts to represent and contain the hurt and rage it imagines black Americans to be experiencing in the wake of segregation. In particular, I argue, the deployment of psychiatric and psychoanalytic concepts becomes one of the Robson’s primary strategies for depicting this “hurt” black consciousness, although ultimately Home of the Brave’s psychoanalytic narratives fail to account fully for its black soldier’s experience.132 Drawing upon notions of guilt, trauma and hysteria popular in psychiatric

132 Home of the Brave is not unique in using psychoanalysis to attempt to represent and explain soldiers’ difficult adjustments to civilian life after WWII. According to Michael Rogin, “soldiers are ubiquitous in post-World War II films, and they typically have home-front adjustment problems…read both through the psychological tests administered to soldiers during the war and through the pervasive wartime discourse about the psychological disabilities that made so many soldiers unable to fight.” Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996. 237. However, in Home of the Brave psychoanalytic explanation also aims to account for the effects of racial trauma—or the conjunction of
discourse of the day, Robson uses the idea of a psychologically “sick” black
(un)consciousness to represent both the identity and effects of race in America as a-
political, individualistic psychological phenomena. Presenting his black soldier as an ill
individual—rather than a symptomatic member of a legitimately angry or injured
community, for instance—also enables Robson to provide, in the figure of the army
psychiatrist, an idiosyncratic cure. Indeed, while the sick black soldier argues that his
illness is the result of racism, his doctor insists that it is the product of a combination of
the far more universal war trauma and the soldier’s individual psychology, and that
traditional treatment (rather than social change) will cure the young man. Ultimately, it
could be argued that Robson uses the discourse of psychoanalysis to account for and
dismiss as uniquely individual, rather than socio-political, the black soldier’s illness; and
that, in doing so, the director offers a successful fictional model for both treating black
malaise and readying African Americans for a smoother, more peaceful process of
integration. Nonetheless, in attempting to present a “treatment” for his black soldier,
Robson also offers a representation of black consciousness as trauma—a trauma on one
level curable through psychoanalysis, and, on another level, utterly incurable, unsayable
within the deracinated discourse of psychoanalysis itself. This trauma, I argue, results
both from struggle to survive racism in America and from the more specific and
longstanding injury to black masculinity with which, in particular, black soldiers were
forced to contend. In taking as its subject a trauma that it can only partially represent and
only partially cure, Home of the Brave stages not only the challenges of depicting black
consciousness in the late 1940s racially stratified America, but also the failure of mid-
race and war trauma—on the specifically black soldier, and this is, at least for Hollywood
cinema, quite new.
century psychoanalytic theory to account for the psychic structures and effects of prejudice.

In the following chapter, I provide a brief history of scholarship on *Home of the Brave* and readings of a series of scenes which, I argue, present the Robson’s attempt to represent black consciousness. I analyze these scenes not only in light of their use of film language to show this consciousness, but also their engagement with psychoanalytic theory. Focusing particularly on the moments at which the film’s deployment of psychoanalysis/psychiatry creates confusion or alternate and potentially mutually exclusive readings, I argue that Robson struggles but ultimately fails to use traditional psychoanalysis to describe racialized (un)consciousness. Rather, I demonstrate, the film’s narrative repeats psychoanalytic history in creating of its marginalized subject an hysteric who can only be “cured” through his submission to the dominant order, and, in so doing, presents a demasculinized figure of black manhood.

Indeed, the soldier’s illness, which the doctor calls hysteria (an illness with a psychological rather than physical cause), opens the film’s representation of black consciousness to two very different, if not mutually exclusive interpretations: the one in which hysteria is a figure for the black soldier’s own inherent weakness, disease and misplaced sensitivity to racism, and the other in which his hysteria is a form of racial and political rebellion. Reading this figure of the hysteric in light of recent psychoanalytic literary criticism by scholars concerned with representations of race and gender, I show how, with *Home of the Brave*, Hollywood began to develop a psychoanalytic vocabulary
for depicting and denaturing black experience.\textsuperscript{133} This vocabulary was distinctly cinematic and largely gestural. It is part of what cinema scholars call the \textit{mise en scene} of the film—or all of the elements we can see in the frame, like lighting, camera angle, depth of focus, props, even costume; anything besides editing and sound that give the film its meaning. In \textit{Home of the Brave} the \textit{mise en scene} works to express the sick black soldier’s anger and resistance to both his doctor’s attempts to “cure” him and the narrative resolution of the film.

Bringing to my discussion of cinema David Eng’s, Daniel Boyarin’s, Anne Pelligrini’s and other post-structuralist scholars’ arguments about representations of raced and gendered hysterics in literature and history, I demonstrate that even as \textit{Home of the Brave} inaugurated one of the first mainstream cinematic representations of black interiority it also called up what is in fact an old figure from history: the politically marginal, racially and sexually coded hysteric, who has appeared repeatedly at tense moments of racial integration and assimilation. This hysteric finds voice in \textit{Home of the Brave} primarily through the \textit{mise en scene}—bearing witness there to the failures of postwar integration—while both the figure of the authority in the film, and the narrative resolution of the film itself, express themselves in teleological psychoanalytic master narratives. In this chapter, I demonstrate how reading \textit{Home of the Brave} as a film struggling to represent black interiority exposes the limitations of both cinema’s representational strategies and psychoanalysis’s epistemological narratives in conveying racialized experience.

Critical Reception and an Alternative Reading

*Home of the Brave* and the other box office hits that tumbled out upon its heels in 1949 have been famously credited with opening the “message movie cycle…that carried the central metaphor of integrationism into the civil rights movement: the lone Negro, or small cell of them being introduced into a larger white group who would be told that they will be better for the experience.”\(^{134}\) Transformed from Arthur Laurent’s WWII-era play about anti-Semitism into a post-WWII film about racial integration, *Home of the Brave* stood out not only for its smooth conversion of international cultural battles into domestic racial ones, but also because of its targeted, candid approach to racial tension in both military and civil society at a moment when “a sharp rise in violence against returning black soldiers echoed the disillusion of the post-World War I period.”\(^{135}\) It was praised in both black and white newspapers, and “Americans everywhere, North or South, black or white, urbane or folkish, generally liked the film.”\(^{136}\) “Self-consciously promot[ed]…as the first postwar picture to deal with the ‘race problem’” by its producer Stanley Kramer,\(^ {137}\) *Home of the Brave* has been read variously as “promoting integration by

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\(^{134}\) Cripps 210-220.

\(^{135}\) Von Eschen 96. That *Home of the Brave* was transformed from a play about anti-Semitism to a film about anti-black racism is actually less surprising than we might think. The postwar period saw a profusion of film addressing anti-Semitism and the Holocaust—from *Crossfire* (1947) and *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947) in Hollywood to *Night in Fog* (1955) in France, to name a few—and in the United States it became clear quickly that the market was ripe for social-issue cinema, or what Cripps has called “the message movie.”

\(^{136}\) Cripps 225.

“carr[ying] the central metaphor of integrationism into the civil rights movement,” as
“disabling African American men” on screen, as “crippling” its hero and as
presenting a “deflection of attention away from an analysis of systemic racism both in the
army and in white society at large by focusing instead of personal and/or universalist
solutions.”

Unfortunately, by and large, discussions of *Home of the Brave* have centered on
the film’s presentation of progressive versus regressive representations of black
Americans at tense and crucial moment of integration, rather than on its innovation in
attempting to depict black experience. For instance, reading *Home of the Brave* as
speaking “not only for the liberal center…but also for conservatives,” Cripps argues that
“in the end, in too neat a wrapping, the formula offers up racial integration as an antidote
to [the black soldier] Mossy’s angst...[and] marked the first postwar insistence of a
visually argued assertion of a social need for ‘integration.’” In a similar vein, Nickles
insists that, “mov[ing] one step forward only to take a step back,” in *Home of the Brave*
and the handful of other social problem films, “African American men are either
presented as disabled or equated with disabled white Americans…illustrat[ing] the
promises and pitfalls of liberalism during the postwar era: its potential to engender
progressive ideas on racial issues and its ability to recirculate demeaning myths about

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138 Cripps 220.
140 Rogin 234.
141 Andrea Slane. “Pressure Points: Political Psychology, Screen Adaptation, and the
Management of Racism in the Case-History Genre.” *Camera Obscura* 45 (Vol 3 No 3)
2000. 70-113. 78.
142 Cripps 224.
African Americans. These movies were liberalism encapsulated."\textsuperscript{143} While these readings describe the racial "politics" of the film in relation to its narrative resolution, they don’t address its thematic or formal preoccupations.

Only a handful of scholars have even touched upon \textit{Home of the Brave}’s focus on psychoanalysis. Among them, Glen and Krin Gabbard write, “the cathartic [psychoanalytic] cure is central to the film, and not just because it provides a dramatic climax. The way in which the cure is administered asks the audience to confront the harsh effects of racial prejudice upon black people while at the same time supporting the politically complementary idea that something can be done to heal the wounds inflicted by racial hatred.”\textsuperscript{144} And Michael Rogin, in his book-length argument about intersecting cinematic representations of Jewishness and blackness, insists that, “as a doctor film, \textit{Home} participates in the postwar turn to psychology and the faith in the professional expert to solve the country’s postwar maladjustment…\textit{Home} consciously shifts [from finding a causation in racism] to survivor guilt so that Moss can share with white soldiers a common humanity; the unconscious desire is to evacuate the divisive racial ground.”\textsuperscript{145} All of these interpretations, even these engaging with the film’s psychoanalytic structure, read \textit{Home of the Brave}’s in terms of its use of the black soldier in relation to the crisis of integration rather than considering how the film \textit{imagines} its protagonist. Indeed \textit{Home of the Brave}’s narrative of a white army doctor “curing” a black soldier sick with what he believes to be the ill effects of racism but what turns out to be simply war trauma provides a neat and potentially progressive parable for how to move forward with

\textsuperscript{143} Nickle 26.
\textsuperscript{145} Rogin 235, 239.
integration in late 1940s America. Nonetheless, it is my argument that, in focusing primarily on the integrationist politics of the film, scholarship on *Home of the Brave* has by and large failed to account for the important complexities of the film’s representation of its black soldier’s psychology. Rather than read *Home of the Brave* as a film in which the black soldier Moss finally yields his version of events, his explanation of his illness, before the doctor’s authority and is subsequently cured (in order to serve the political agendas described above), I understand the film to also stage its black soldier’s furious bodily and mental resistance to his doctor’s narrative. Moss is, in my reading, not ever “cured” but rather subdued, forced to submit both his body and his epistemological framework to the doctor’s psychoanalytic techniques and master narratives so that he can return home to (an integrating) civilian society. As I demonstrate in what follows, this alternative reading becomes most visible when we read *Home of the Brave* not simply for its “politics” but also for its struggle to give cinematic shape to black consciousness.

**Consciousness and the Flashback**

In *Home of the Brave*, Sergeant Moss is paralyzed and amnesiac not for physical reasons but because of some unknown psychological trauma that has occurred on his recent mission to scout a South Pacific Japanese island. As the film opens, Moss is about to undergo psychiatric treatment, called “narcosynthesis,” with an army doctor who hopes to help him. The action of the film takes place primarily in the past through Moss’s flashbacks, which the doctor alternately elicits and at times forces from the black soldier. Many of Moss’s recollections present the black soldier’s experiences of his comrades’ racism during their mission—and Moss believes, contrary to his doctor, that it is this
racism that has made him ill. Through these memories placement in the past, and the film’s placement of its action in 1944 instead of 1949, Robson keeps the racism Moss describes at safe remove from what was, in the year of its release, an integrated army and a rapidly integrating nation. At the end of the film, after much struggle between the doctor and the black soldier, Moss walks and appears to have been cured. At first blush, it seems as if *Home of the Brave* is a film that represents and then seeks to “cure” or otherwise resolve the damage done by racism. However, I will argue instead that Robson’s representations of racism and the impact of racism on black consciousness far exceed the film’s ability to narrativize or contain them.

Shortly after the film opens, with a montage of scenes from WWII naval battles and a voiceover announcing that this will be “the story behind one incident in that war, one island, one American,” *Home of the Brave* orients its viewers to its complicated narrative structure. In his bungalow office somewhere in the South Pacific, the army doctor informs Major Robinson and TJ that in order to cure their paralyzed comrade, Moss, he will need their help. “Let’s try again,” he urges, “Let’s go back. Let’s start before the mission. How did it begin?” As the men talk together, beginning to reconstruct the days before the onset of Moss’s illness, the film offers the first of what will be a series of flashbacks. Importantly, these flashbacks come from a variety of sources: the soldiers from Moss’s mission, Moss himself, and a seemingly omniscient narrator. The memory-flashbacks from Moss’s fellow soldiers are offered willingly, while Moss’s are the drug-induced results of psychiatric treatments with army doctor. Not only, then, does the film require its viewers to “get inside” the (willing and unwilling) characters’ heads in
order to piece together the narrative, it also marks its narrative as a hybrid collage of
different, potentially contradictory, points of view.

Managing these various points of view is the doctor, whom critics have called a
“tireless superego.”146 But rather than act as synthesizer, the doctor plays the role of
commentator and interpreter, constructing, as the film progresses, a narrative of how and
why the black soldier has become ill. While none of films’ flashbacks overlap
temporally, and thus, at least visually, there is no contention about how any particular
course of events has unfolded, *Home of the Brave* does stage an extended debate between
Moss and his doctor over the meaning of Moss’s recent history and resulting illness.
When Moss presents his interpretation, the doctor pushes another. While, ultimately, the
doctor’s version of events prevails—or at least so it would seem, as the black soldier
finally walks again in the end of the film—*Home of the Brave*’s strange narrative
construction, its presentation of multiple points of view, and its staging of a debate
between its two primary narrators all serve to foreground the presence of Moss’s
individual experience. But this—and Moss’s—presence is clearly marked as problematic.
Although the film appears to privilege Moss’s experience by taking it as the subject of
the narrative, in the final analysis, Robson subjects Moss’s feelings and interpretations to
the doctor’s overriding interpretation and revision.

That said, despite the doctor’s power over the narrative, formally, Robson seems to
find ways to support Moss in his efforts to express himself. Because Moss’s experiences
are conveyed to the viewers at least in part by way of the flashback structure, the film’s
form appears to represent an unmediated account of black subjectivity. While the black

146 Rogin 221.
soldier’s flashbacks are not marked as differently raced, or different in any other particular way, from the white soldiers’ memories (unlike, for instance, the Melvin’s dream in *The Manchurian Candidate*), they most certainly are presentations of Moss’s consciousness. Shaped by flashbacks—most of them Moss’s—*Home of the Brave*’s very structure thus attempts to convey not only the story but also the experience of its black soldier.

The doctor himself indicates both to Moss’s comrades and to the viewers that, in fact, the black soldier’s (un)consciousness—his psychology—is the film’s primary focus. Explaining that he must find out what, “deep inside [Moss]…caused all this,” the doctor tells the other soldiers that he must work quickly. He only has a few days left with Moss to satisfy his “scientific curiosity,” and “it’s hard to be a detective so far from the scene of the crime.” Invoking at once the language of criminal investigation and medical science, the army doctor deftly introduces the soldiers and the audience to a very new object of inquiry: the black (un)conscious. Not only does black consciousness exist, the doctor insists, but it is important, curious, and, with the right strategies, knowable.

**The Mise en Scene of Black Consciousness**

Though coming to know the black soldier’s (un)consciousness is the doctor’s self-professed goal, Robson shows the doctor to spend most of his time arguing with his patient, insisting on the inaccuracy of Moss’s memory and interpretation. And indeed, with his medical tools and interpretive apparatus with which to elicit and then “read” Moss’s experience, the Army doctor seems to be the authority in the room. The camera shows him setting up tools, preparing to give Moss a shot and begin the “narcosynthesis,”
during which, he claims, the patient “will relive the experiences immediately preceding shock if the doctor leads him. Usually one or two treatments are enough for him to recover physically.” Insisting that he will make sense of whatever Moss says under the influence of narcosynthesis by putting the clues together like a detective, the doctor seems to suggest he will take an objective view of Moss’s life. But, reading for “guilt” and repressed pleasure, or “glad[ness],” in Moss’s history and stories, the doctor clearly chooses psychoanalytic strategies over detective work. And, as he becomes Moss’s psychoanalytic interrogator and interpreter, the doctor transforms in the *mise en scène* into something of a mad scientist: quirky, experimental, driven and, by the end, nearly violent.

When TJ and Major Robinson, two of the other men from Moss’s unit, first talk with the doctor, asking him about Moss, the camera cuts smoothly between a series of static mid-shots edited together in classical Hollywood style. After the first flashback (Robinson’s), which relates the racism Moss encountered upon meeting his fellow soldiers, the doctor—and the camera—becomes more animated. At first, when the doctor gets up to prepare his medical tools for the narcosynthesis procedure (removing them from a sterilizer with thongs, as if he were going to perform some kind of surgery), the camera follows him. Finally, it comes to rest on a mid-shot in which Major Robinson is in the foreground, and the doctor, his back turned toward the camera, occupies the background. Well lit, the doctor is not quite a *noir*-ish figure, but, arguing with the Major about the young soldier’s unacknowledged racism and insisting on the gravity of Moss’s illness, he slowly becomes a more mysterious and more agitated version of himself. For the rest of the brief scene, the camera attempts to follow the doctor as he moves rapidly
into the various corners of his office—first into the camera, which spins to accommodate him, then into a far corner off screen, and then again into yet another previously off-screen corner. Both the movements and the images the camera relates are disorienting, and one shot, which finds the doctor just after he has moved across the room, breaks the 180-degree rule, rupturing spatial continuity. In this shot—a long take, with the doctor in the foreground, facing the camera but looking down at a syringe he is slowly filling with serum—the doctor establishes himself as a forceful authority: able to compel the gaze, move the camera (even disorientingly), and, soon, with the use of the loaded syringe, his patient as well. The brief destruction of spatial continuity in this shot further insists upon the doctor’s force and ability to command both the space and the look.

In the following scenes, as he administers his “cure,” the doctor is framed in increasingly odd shots. In one, the longest shot of the first twenty minutes of the film (lasting over a minute), the doctor sits still, at the head of the drugged soldier, moving only his eyes. As he interrogates his patient, asking him what he thinks of his fellow soldiers and what he feels about his dead friend, Finch, the doctor raises and lowers his eyes repeatedly. He flicks his eyes up at Moss’s sweating face (and the camera positioned near it) and then down at his hands (with which he is purportedly administering the drug) again and again. Completely still, brightly lit but casting dark shadows on the drawn curtain behind him, commanding the frame and even the duration of the shot, reeling off question after question, and refusing to look back at the camera trained upon him, the doctor is the picture of controlled power. Moments later, when Moss drifts into a high school memory and becomes agitated, sitting up and asking over and over where Finch is, the doctor moves behind Moss’s stretcher and transforms himself into the black soldier’s
dead friend. Chirping, “Hi, Mossy, what’s up,” he subdues the soldier both psychologically and physically. Placing his hands on Moss’s shoulders and lowering him back into a prone position, the doctor convinces Moss that he is the disembodied voice of his best friend and that, together, they are in the (idyllic) past. He now controls the soldier’s mind as well as his body. And, over the course of the film, as the doctor grows pushier, more active and more insistent in his questions and interpretations, his techniques and his curative apparatus and transform him from the centered listener and protector of the film’s opening scenes into a noir-ish psychoanalyst-mad-scientist, whose strategies and narratives oppress his patient.

Quickly, Robson establishes a dichotomy between the doctor and Moss: their modes of speaking, their power over the narrative, their interpretive apparatuses, even their commands of the frame. The doctor reels off questions, probing, seeking knowledge; the black soldier resists, hesitates, stutters, says he doesn’t know. The doctor has a series of point of view shots during his first treatment-interrogation with Moss, with the camera positioned over his right shoulder, looking down at Moss; Moss has none. Indeed, in the scene with the doctor, Moss’s eyes are closed, and the camera looking back at the doctor hovers by the soldier’s chest, framing and foregrounding Moss’s impotent, immobilized body. Toward the end of the film, the doctor offers his diagnosis of war trauma (and, very pointedly, not race trauma), urging the soldier to accept it, and Moss answers with a series of negatives: “but I’m colored”; “I can’t”; and “I don’t know whether I really believe it down here,” thumping his chest. Powerless over the camera, and the doctor’s final exhortation, “Walk, Moss. Get up and walk! You dirty nigger, get up at walk,” the black soldier fails in his attempts to resist the doctor’s interpretation and
finally finds himself, in the penultimate scene of the film, “cured” and sobbing in his doctor’s soothing arms.

Despite Moss’s narrative impotence, Robson does give its black soldier an alternate mode of expression besides the flashback, one that becomes central to the film’s project of representing black consciousness: the close up. And, in these frequent shots, Robson offers the radical and self-contradictory cinematic suggestion that Moss’s “consciousness” is filled with resistance, hurt and anger resulting from American racism.

Moss’s first close up is presented only moments after he enters the film (and before the scenes I’ve described above with the doctor). Importantly, in his first shots, Moss is not yet paralyzed but is rather depicted as a self-possessed and imposing figure. Entering the room in which Mingo, TJ, Finch and Major Robinson are waiting to discuss their mission, Moss is framed in mid-shot as a tall, forceful figure, the only one in the room in full uniform, helmet, and gear. By contrast to the other men, who are all in more casual attire, Moss appears put-together and professional. Indeed, both his placement in the frame and his own gestural language figure him as an important character. However, after Moss salutes Major Robinson and announces that he is reporting for duty, the Major, in a quick two shot, shocked by what he sees, simply stares at him. Incredulous that he has been assigned a black soldier, the Major asks, “You’re the man to do the surveying?” The camera cuts to a close-up in which Moss registers discomfort and then drops his eyes to avoid the Major’s awful look. This shot, in which, in close up, Moss drops his eyes in response to a fellow soldier’s racism, recurs multiple times before the end of the film. One of these times is only moments later when, as Finch and Moss (who are old childhood friends) get reacquainted in the background, TJ and Mingo argue about
whether or not to go on the mission. Centered in the frame with Mingo, TJ insists they should withdraw from the mission. “We’ve got our out,” he says, “right there it is, big and black!” The camera cuts quickly to a mid shot of Moss and Finch, embracing each other, to a second shot of Finch approaching TJ with anger, and then a close up of Moss, again dropping his eyes. In this scene, to say the least, the camera presents Moss ambivalently. He transforms from the seemingly most powerful man in the room into a series of emasculated figures: a man who cannot meet the gaze of his fellow soldiers; a man who remains in the background, silent, while others debate; a man at home in the embrace of another man. Giving him the close-up, keeping him nearly at all times within the frame, the camera nonetheless progressively emasculates Moss.

Moss’s (racialized) social impotence in the room and amongst the other soldiers is reflected and repeated by the montage. In the following shots, as the men absorb Moss’s presence, argue about conducting a mission with a black soldier in their midst, and finally decide to go ahead, Moss’s figure, and particularly his facial expressions, remain center frame. Indeed, even when he is not significant in the narrative, he remains integrated into the *mise en scene*, forming either a meaningful backdrop or a focal point in the foreground, unspeaking yet communicating through his presence in the shot. Amidst arguments both about the mission and the racial make-up of the unit, Moss is consistently quiet. These early shots of Moss, center frame, physically imposing, but repeatedly with eyes averted, work to establish his importance both to the plot and to the film’s formal construction of meaning. They also show the film’s ambivalent use of the figure of the black soldier: he is central to the film’s dramatic development but cannot be its agent, and thus requires both constant representation and constant repression.
While, particularly in the retrospective light of his diagnosis of war trauma from the doctor, Moss’s repeated looking away seems to signal an internal or psychic vulnerability inconsonant with the soldier’s evident physical strength, I rather read his dropped eyes as a sign of Moss’s refusal to be sutured into the semantic structure of the film. In a later scene, toward the end of the film, when the doctor tells Moss he is not suffering from racism but rather war trauma, the black soldier refuses to look at either his physician or the camera—an extreme example of what I’m calling a *mise en scene* of resistance. Such looks away from the camera are, in my argument, evidence of the black soldier’s internal dissidence, his silent disobedience to the cinematic structure of shot-reverse-shot, of suture itself—which works in this film not to provide space for the black soldier’s experience but rather to establish the dominance of the doctor’s psychoanalytic diagnosis and narrative.  

What happens, then, to the film’s representation—and instrumentalization—of the black soldier if we understand his looking away as symbolic of non-verbal, but nonetheless articulate, resistance: of a dissident black consciousness? Not only does the film establish the existence of Moss’s consciousness in these early shots, but it also, I believe offers a *mise en scene* of black consciousness that acts as a counter narrative—a resistant narrative—to the doctor’s psychoanalytic one.

### The *Mise en Scene* of Hyste

The following scene, which takes place in the “present” of the film and in which TJ and Major Robinson see the now-hysterical Moss for the first time since their mission, presents what appears to be an utterly different version of Moss. Wheelchair-bound,

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amnesiac and abject, Moss appears to be a far more impotent version of his flashback self. Yet Robson uses the *mise en scene* and the sound track to portray him rather as a terrifying character—terrified, yes, but able to incite fear as well. Unwilling (and unable) to acknowledge his racist fellow soldiers, unwilling (and unable) to walk, exhibiting with his body the effects of racism (at least, so he will argue before his claims are suppressed by the doctor), Moss’s mode of being present in the room reflects the violence of white racism that TJ, Robinson and ultimately the doctor seek to contain and suppress with their various narratives. He is literally the return of the repressed: as I will argue later, he is the tortured black soldier who returns alive to haunt and terrify his oppressors with the evidence of their violence.

After the establishing shot, in which a stiff and all-but immobile Moss is wheeled into his doctor’s bungalow by TJ, and accompanied by intensifying eerie music, as if from a horror film score, the camera cuts to a close up of the black soldier’s face. Disembodied, surrounded by the taller figures of the other soldiers, who press in with concern and cover Moss with shadows, the black soldier’s frightened face sharply reflects the bit of light in the dim room. The *mise en scene* here is no longer that of a war film, but rather of a noir or horror flick, cut by shadows and narrated by an ominous score. As his former comrades, the Major and TJ, try to talk to him, Moss becomes increasingly adamant and afraid. He insists he doesn’t know them and grows more and more upset at their requests that he acknowledge them or remember his dead comrade, Finch. Shining, sweating, centered in a close-up, and repeating, “No, no! Doctor, doctor!” in a trembling crescendo, the black soldier veers toward out-and-out terror. While he himself is clearly not a physical threat, the men’s responses to him—and the *mise en scene*—suggest that he
cuts a frightening figure. His fear, initially reflected only on his face and in his voice, gets figured as well by the frightening score, a quick, tension-building series of cuts, and the horror in the other soldier’s eyes. Monstrous either because of his physical and psychic deformity or his own anxiety, Moss disrupts not only the narrative but also the visual and aural continuity of the film in this early appearance. Though his earlier and later looks away from the camera perhaps signal a more visible, more conscious resistance on part of the black soldier, this representation presents a body that cannot be completely absorbed by the filmic narrative, that is horrifying precisely because it is unexpected and unincorporated, and which acts out the dangers of an injured, unintegrated black body.

At the end of this scene, after yelling at his former comrades to stop and begging the doctor to help him, Moss is lifted by the men onto a stretcher in the doctor’s bungalow and quarantined off, with the doctor, by a drawn curtain. Very quickly, he is administered the shot, which, according to the doctor, will simultaneously make him feel better and help him to remember what has made him so upset to begin with. Physically unable to defend himself or enact his own desires—which in this scene seem center around getting the hell away from both his fellow soldiers and any memories of his mission on the island—Moss is captive first to his comrades’ casual curiosity and next to his doctor’s “scientific curiosity” and persistent questions. Moss’s enforced physical passivity, his extreme anxiety, and his required submission to the doctor’s treatment—in this scene and the interrogation scenes that follow it—together serve to highlight the soldier’s frustrated desire to resist the military within the fiction of the film, as well as parallel contemporary real-life black men’s resistance to the American military (and its narratives of causation, progress and cure) outside the film. Moreover, they reflect the
contradictory pliability and potential disruptiveness of a black man who has temporarily forgotten the American traumas that have rendered him impotent and disabled. Moss’s body in this scene act at once acts out a kind of resistance, what I’m calling a *mise en scene* of resistance, and the destructiveness of his illness. Interestingly, hysteria, with which he is diagnosed with by the doctor, is at once at polyvalent and polysemic disease: expressing itself through various and shifting symptoms, hysteria has also historically lent itself to multiple and often contradictory interpretations. Moss’s hysteria in *Home of the Brave*, I believe, at once allows the doctor to offer a narrative explanation of trauma that suppresses the reality of American racial violence of the 40s *and* enables the black soldier to express his resistance.

**The Politics of Hysteria**

In his first book, with which he founds the “science” we know as psychoanalysis today, Freud postulates that the hysterics’ physical symptoms are the manifestations of their suppressed or repressed memories. He describes hysterics as wounded not by their bodies but rather “suffer[ing] primarily from reminiscences.” Freud’s ideas about the etiology of the disease were quite new at the beginning of the 20th century. According to David Eng, “Unlike earlier uterine theories of the disease, Freud’s notion of the unconscious introduced for the first time an insistently psychic basis for the disease. His psychoanalytic account of hysteria proffers the unconscious as a type of third-term mediator between the psychic root of the symptom (the traumatic memory) and its
corporeal expression (the hysterical sign)." The doctor in *Home of the Brave*, like Freud, expresses his focus on the unconscious dimensions of hysteria when he explains to Major Robinson that, even if he is able to help Moss walk again, the black soldier may not be cured. He insists, “Suppose he can walk. Suppose he can remember. That’s only half the battle. There’s still something inside him, deep inside him that caused all this. And it could cause something else even worse.” The doctor’s assertion that, “deep inside” Moss, even deeper than where he can remember, lies the origins of his disease not only paints the black soldier as an hysteric suffering from repression, but also suggests (as do most psychoanalytic narratives) that the cause of the black soldier’s pain is within the soldier himself. This narrative, in and of itself, replaces the socio-political argument Moss will offer for his illness (“but I’m colored”) with an individualizing explanation. (The doctor will later claim in an important scene that I discuss towards the end of this chapter, that Moss had a “sensitivity” to racism which he later turned into “a feeling of guilt,” all of which, when combined with the trauma of war, made him ill.) In addition, the doctor’s argument implies that, if Moss is cured, the problem—because it is not racism, but rather the feelings of the victim of racism—will be cured as well. Finally, tellingly, the doctor also draws attention to the danger of the untreated sick black soldier. If not cured, his disease—and he himself—“could cause something else even worse.” The doctor’s warning seems to reflect his concern not only for the soldier but for the society he lives in as well: not only might Moss’s illness cause something worse for *him*, but it might also result in a problematically unintegratable, still-angry, still-wounded black soldier returning from combat to a rapidly integrating American society.

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Though, ultimately, the doctor will prevail in diagnosing Moss’s hysteria as an a-political response to the horrors of war, Robson presents at least a partial counter-narrative of causation suggesting that not only the stakes but also the origin of Moss’s disease might be socio-political. This narrative finds support in the black soldier’s own assertion and his repeated recollections (which surface during his narcotherapy with the doctor) of racist treatment in the military, as well as with Moss’s comrades’ memories of their racism toward Moss (offered apologetically to the doctor). It also is conveyed through the *mise en scene* with which *Home of the Brave* represents the onset of Moss’s paralysis in a scene which I discuss in the next section of this chapter. And finally, perhaps most curiously, this counter-narrative finds support in both psychoanalytic scholars’ revisions of Freud’s theories and some of Freud’s own little-known and largely abandoned early theories as well.

In his critique of Freud’s theories on hysteria in *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes internalized racism—such as Moss’s—as both the colonized subjects’ introjection of his oppressors’ violence *and* the platform for his emerging resistance. Unlike Freud, however, Fanon theorizes that racialized anxieties are *not* the result of repression. The oppressed minority’s unconscious does not hold his feelings of inferiority. Since the “racial drama is played out in the open, the black man has no time to ‘make it unconscious.’” [Rather,] the Negro’s inferiority…is conscious.”

Fanon calls this consciousness the “third person consciousness” of the raced subject who not only knows he is black but also understands his blackness through its construction and perception by whites. As such—as a raced subject living in a racist regime—like the

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hysteric, and like Moss, he is vulnerable to a cleaving of his mind from his body in which he must jettison his own experience of his physical self in order to take in the white world’s vision of him. This cleaving of mind from body at once signals his disempowerment and becomes the basis for revolutionary, cathartic action.\textsuperscript{150}

Other early critiques to Freud’s ideas about his (largely female) hysterical patients came from feminist psychoanalytic scholars in the 60s and 70s, who also argued against Freud’s diagnosis of hysteria. In a famous complication, \textit{In Dora’s Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism}, released years later, scholars of the time condemned Freud’s handling of a young female hysteric, Dora, whom he believed was ill because of her desires for acceptance and love from the men in her life. “As brilliant as Freud was in constructing a narrative of Dora’s desire,” the introduction argues, “he essentially represented [instead] his own.”\textsuperscript{151} Rather, feminist scholars since have insisted, for Freud’s turn of the century female patients, hysteria functioned as “a language that allow[ed] the subject to voice both personal and cultural discontent” in a sexist society.\textsuperscript{152} Beginning in the early 1990s, Judith Butler’s post-structuralist criticism further revised the cannon of psychoanalytic scholarship by theorizing new conceptualizations of gender and sexuality as performances of self rather than expressions of stable identities or

\textsuperscript{150} It is interesting to note that one of the ways in which Fanon describes this consciousness is through his description of the Antillean at the movie theater watching Tarzan. See pages 150-160 in \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}.


truths. Her work not only supported earlier feminist discussions of the (female) hysteric as a resistant subject, but also paved the way for a further critique of psychoanalysis in terms of its (lack of) understanding of race.

Though as early as the 1950s, Franz Fanon had reconceptualized Freud’s work to offer a racially-specific theory of psychoanalysis and a preliminary mapping of the psychic structure of racism, it took the gains of feminist and queer scholarship to produce sustained exploration into the ways in which race and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity were in fact coconstitutive. Starting in the late 1990s, building on Butler’s interventions, scholars from within various fields of ethnic studies, including Anne Pelligrini, Daniel Boyarin and David Eng, began to do precisely this. In Racial Castration, David Eng explain, “In producing whiteness as an unnamed and invisible category, the symbolic order [and psychoanalysis] projects the burden of racial difference onto those bodies outside a universalizing discourse of whiteness.” Eng suggests that racial difference is in fact already inside whiteness—both as society and psychoanalysis understands whiteness— but has been made invisible by a kind of “universalizing discourse.” According to Boyarin, the work of reading race back in to psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity was already begun by the founder of psychoanalysis himself. Apparently concerned with the effects of ethnicity/race and prejudice on the psyche, in a letter to Arnold Zweig in 1933 Freud identified the Jewish tradition of circumcision as

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154 While Fanon wrote extensively about psychoanalysis and race, he believed that racial minorities did not become hysterical because of racial trauma, as the trauma remained conscious and repression is the necessary precondition for hysteria. For a further discussion of race and hysteria by Fanon, see Black Skin, White Masks.

155 Eng 141-42.
one of the primary causes of castration anxiety, which he believed was also a frequent
cause of hysteria.\footnote{For a further discussion of Freud’s letters, see Daniel Boyarin’s \textit{Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Male}. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997.} Though he doesn’t make explicit in his letter the full import of his
claim, Freud here offers a blueprint for a racialized anxiety disorder. According to his
own logic, the diseases Freud identifies as castration anxiety and hysteria may well be
causèd as much by socio-political factors as by psychic ones. In other words, hysteria can
develop both in response and in resistance to oppression. Thus it seems that
psychoanalysis offers, as I’ve suggested the \textit{mise en scène} of \textit{Home of the Brave} does as
well, a theory of hysteria in which the disease is also a form of (political) resistance. Like
the film’s \textit{mise en scène}, hysteria has the capacity to work—using a language of \textit{the
body}—against its own (psychoanalytic) narrative of containment.

In Moss’s case, hysteria at once \textit{dis}ables and \textit{en}ables the black soldier; it also
allows the film to commit to the radically new project of exploring his consciousness in
literal terms. Though imagining black consciousness on the Hollywood screen might
have been unprecedented, representing minorities on the verge of integration as hysterics
was not a new phenomenon in the late 1940s. In his study of what he calls the “racial
castration” of Asian American men, David Eng argues that, particularly at tense moments
of integration and assimilation, both dominant and minoritarian U.S. cultural institutions
(he focuses primarily on the non-cinematic arts) have figured Asian Americans as
hystersics in order to “castrate” and contain these potentially threatening subjects. Asking,
“what is the relationship between assimilation and illness, between assimilation and
hysteria,” Eng wonders if the hysteria in one text “results from the narrator’s individual
yet thwarted attempts to ‘fit in’ socially? Or does hysteria function, in fact, as a larger social symptom of the torturous psychic constraints and sobering material realities under which Asian Americans—female as well as male—are assimilated into the public domain?¹⁵⁷ Recalling that the character of Moss was in fact transformed from a Jewish soldier in Laurent’s play into the black soldier of Home of the Brave, Michael Rogin insists that “as an hysterical body, Moss […] blackened an anti-Semitic stereotype that troubled the assimilating Jew.”¹⁵⁸ His argument here is two-fold: first, like Eng, Rogin argues that the figure of hysteria arises to characterize and contain the “assimilating” racial/ethnic other; second, he claims that the cinematic origin of the black hysteric is the Jewish hysteric, and thus that Moss both drew from Freud’s Jewish template and inaugurated a new black filmic (stereo)type. Taking Rogin’s argument to its logical extension, then, Moss’s figuration of an hysterical on the verge of integrating/assimilating into white America is a new iteration of the older figures Eng, Rogin and Boyarin discuss—yet distinct because African American and cinematic. So what does it mean if Moss’s presentation of one of the first black men with interiority on the Hollywood screen is hysterical? Does his hysteria damage his assimilability, “mark[ing] off as well as create powerless bodies”?¹⁵⁹ Does it rather allow for Moss’s integration? Does it “broadcast…a message about…the vulnerability of the symbolic (the fallibility of paternal law and social bonds); the vulnerability of identity (the insecurity of gender, ethnic, and class designations)” and enable us to read resistance on part of the black soldier—and black consciousness—to teleological narratives of psychoanalysis, racial

¹⁵⁷ Eng 167-8.
¹⁵⁸ Rogin 235.
¹⁵⁹ Eng 168.
progress and assimilation? With both legal and social integration underway in the States, Moss’s hysteria can be read to function all at once as a sign of his oppression, an attempt at his resistance, and a representation of his social and political powerlessness. Indeed, it is my contention that Home of the Brave’s figure of the black hysteric is the cinematic outcome of the film’s dual explorations into the anxieties of racial integration and the vicissitudes of black consciousness.

**Hysterical Lynching**

After a series of narcosynthesis sessions, in which the doctor manages to elicit flashback-memories from his patient—but never the memory exposing the cause of the soldier’s illness—the army doctor begins pushing harder. In the following scenes, he seemingly *compels* Moss to remember the painful experiences leading up to his “shock.” However, the memories Moss offers him become, rather than answers to the doctor’s questions, objects of debate, subject to the two men’s differing interpretations. It is in these scenes that the Moss’s hysteria most visibly serves at once as a method of containment (by the doctor) and a strategy of resistance (to the doctor)—and it is here as well that the disease becomes the ultimate expression of and figure for black experience, history and consciousness.

The scene begins with a high angle close-up shot of Moss’s face glistening with sweat. With his eyes closed, and his brow furrowed, the black soldier struggles with the commands of his increasingly dominant doctor, who leans over the prone soldier until his face is within inches of the Moss’s. “Come on, Moss,” he insists, “You’ve got to tell me

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160 Bronfen xiii.
about the boat.” As the scene dissolves into the black soldier’s flashback, Moss begins offering his account of the experience that precipitated his paralysis: the repressed memory seemingly responsible for his hysteria. In his retelling, he and Finch are looking for maps that the white soldier has accidentally left behind in the jungle. The two men are jumpy and frightened in the enemy territory, and Moss keeps insisting that they leave. Finch is determined to retrieve the maps and, when Moss tugs on his arm, the white soldier turns angrily toward his friend and snaps, “I’m not asking you to stay, you yellow-bellied ni-.” Capturing both faces in the close shot, the camera shows Moss’s shock and horror at the half-uttered epithet. After a quick reaction shot of Finch, who registers his mistake and offers “nitwit” in the place of “nigger,” the camera cuts back to a close up on Moss, dropping his eyes. Suddenly shots ring out and the two men are on the ground, with Finch hit. Asking forgiveness, Finch pushes the now-found maps toward Moss. He begs the black soldier to return to the Major with them, and insists that he will follow. However, as soon as Moss reluctantly exits the shot, the camera cuts to two of the rare point-of-view shots in the film. The first is from Finch’s perspective, and shows the retreating Moss, while the second is from that of enemy—the Japanese, whom we never see—moving in on the cowering Finch. These two final shots of the scene seemingly disrupt film’s diegesis by extending beyond what Moss could possibly have seen. Alternatively, they could also be read as suggesting Moss’s emotional oscillation: from empathizing with his friend and his friend’s pain to identifying with his friend’s attackers and the violence they plan for him. It is this ambivalence, this combination of pain and pleasure that Moss will later tell the doctor made him ill.
Indeed, Moss exhibits such ambivalence in his feelings toward Finch a number of times in the film. In his first session with the doctor, under sedation, Moss cycles rapidly between loving comments that “Finch is a sweet kid,” and angry retorts that, “He’s just like all the rest of them…the white people.” In a later discussion with the doctor, when he doctor asks Moss, “Now why can’t you walk?...Did you first get that bad feeling right after Finch was shot? What did you think of when Finch was shot?” the black soldier answers, “I knew he hated me because I was black, so I was glad when he got shot.” Though the doctor refuses the soldier’s account of his feelings, Moss insists repeatedly that the trauma of seeing Finch shot combined with his guilty pleasure catalyzed his disease—and indeed the camera, with its two extra-diegetic shots, seems to support the soldier’s assessment.

It is during the following narcosynthesis treatment that the battle between Moss and the doctor over the stakes of the soldier’s hysteria become most clear. As this next treatment begins, Moss is on his stomach, eyes open, with the doctor leaning over him, asking, “When did you find you couldn’t walk?” To Moss’s repeated protestations, “I don’t know! I don’t know!” he responds with force. “Think!” the doctor yells, as the camera cuts to a high angle shot of Moss with the doctor towering above his immobilized body. The shadows on both men’s faces and cutting across the ceiling seem to join the two in dark struggle. Reduced to something less than a man—first because of his amnesia and paralysis, and now because of his tears as well—the soldier pleads, “I can’t, Doc! I’m trying but I can’t…Gee Doc, I think I’m gonna cry…Guys don’t cry.” Cutting to a tilted shot of the anguished soldier, the camera emphasizes, if not the off-balance battle between the men, then at least the off-kilter experience of the black soldier. And the
memory that the black soldier recovers and relays to his doctor depicts not only the scene(s) of the onset of his illness, but also his further emasculation. And it also, I argue, offers Home of the Brave’s ultimate representation of the material basis of black consciousness in the figure of a (hysterical) lynching.

Suddenly, in the midst of the struggle with the doctor, there is a breakthrough. Moss begins to remember being “there on the beach,” knowing that Finch has been abducted, and starts to describe the final moments leading up to his paralysis. Together with the remaining three men in his unit, Moss is “waiting, hoping” that Finch will somehow return. As his voice over fades into flashback, and Moss begs the Major to let him go look for his missing friend, awful sounds of torture fill the air. The black soldier paces the beach, overwhelmed by Finch’s screaming. The other soldiers try to distract him, suggesting animals might have made the noise, but Moss will have none of it. “That was no bird…that’s Finch…they’re killing him,” Moss yells at his comrades. But, strangely, it is not Finch who appears to be dying. Finch’s screams on the soundtrack seem to take their toll on the body and psyche of Moss. During a series of close shots of the black soldier’s anguished face, the Major urges Moss to listen to him and not the awful sounds. Mingo, a sympathetic white soldier in the unit, recites a poem to refocus Moss, and reminds him that he is from the city, Pittsburgh, which is daily filled with strange sounds citizens simply ignore. And, indeed, the white soldiers do ignore Finch’s screaming; but Moss cannot. Instead, Moss’s body reacts to every sound Finch makes. With each scream, the black soldier contorts visibly. As the scene continues, Moss paces in circles, yells, sobs, throws himself on the ground, picks himself up, falls down again, and finally, after yelling, “so who cares about Finch?!?” he drags himself off into the
jungle and lapses into unconsciousness, leaving the visual frame (much like Finch) for nearly a full ten minutes of action. Though Moss is not yet paralyzed in this flashback, the black soldier’s body has begun to exhibit symptoms for which, again, there is no physical etiology—that is, unless we can credit the white soldier’s bodily pain with causing the black soldier’s psychic and eventually hysterical physical anguish. And, indeed, not only are Finch’s screams on the sound track matched by Moss’s visible contortions as he throws himself about the clearing, but they cease as soon as Moss becomes unconscious—as if they were in fact Moss’s and not the white soldier’s at all. And as if racialized violence were responsible for the dualist nature of the black subject.

The hysterical transfer of Finch’s torture onto Moss’s body and psyche peaks during the black soldier’s final recollections of his mission. In his flashback, Moss stays in the clearing to continue to wait for Finch while the rest of his unit goes off to hail the boat that will return them to base. Night has fallen, and Moss stares out into the jungle, unseeing. Every movement sounds to him like Finch crawling through the underbrush. He calls his friend’s name again and again, hoping for some sort of sign. Finally, in a fit, he falls to his knees, beating his body and head with his fists, and yelling “Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger!” Robson clearly marks as racial—and as part of a history of racial violence—the fused torture of the black and white soldier friends in this scene. Robson’s characterization of the black soldier’s identification with his white counterpart’s torture—and his response with a violent expression of internalized racism—presents for Home of the Brave’s viewers the un-visualized but rather embodied legacy of violence against African Americans. (It is also reflected in the soundtrack,
which is dominated by a choral rendition of the slave spiritual, “Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child.”)

Indeed, this instance of seeming self-abuse acts out the merging of the white and black soldiers’ experience. Hitting his own body as his friend is being abused, recovering the racial epithets that have been used against him, even by that very friend, Moss identifies with and appropriates Finch’s torture. Reproducing for the camera the off-screen nationalist attack on Finch’s body, and refiguring it into a racial attack on his own body, Moss enacts not only the always-already general racial violence of war, but also the very specific racial violence of an American lynching. And, in so doing, he reveals—like the dreaming black soldier in The Manchurian Candidate who changes only the color of the women in the dream he shares with his Major—the particularity of black consciousness.

The lynching—which I am calling an hysterical lynching—does not occur in the plot or appear in a readily recognized form on screen. My argument is that Moss experiences it rather as the culmination of two forces at work in the film: the racism he has been suffering at the hands of his comrades, and his identification with the tortured Finch. And he expresses it (as all hysterics express themselves) through his body—and with the help of both the film’s soundtrack and its mise en scene. Thus, in the final, very slow ten minutes of action remaining in the scene, while the plot presents an injured, dying white soldier, the mise en scene instead portrays the black soldier’s eerily parallel hysterical death. During this part of the scene, in which Finch finally crawls out of the jungle and Moss gathers his bloodied, tortured body into his arms, the darkness of the shots make it difficult to discern where one man begins and the other leaves off. In a
nearly seven-minute-long series of shots the men in a pietas, Home of the Brave shows Moss wrapping the white soldier in his embrace and merging with him: visually, through the mise en scene, as the men’s faces and bodies blend in extreme intimacy while Moss cradles, rocks and caresses the dying Finch; and physically and psychologically, as Moss experiences unconsciousness and finally paralysis like his fading friend. Indeed, in his attack on himself, his unconsciousness, and his hysterical paralysis, Moss manifests physically the violence perpetrated off-screen on Finch’s body. In other words, through what will later be called his hysteria, Moss experiences the same violence Finch does—he is, in effect, abducted, tortured, and, with “nigger, nigger, nigger” echoing through the clearing, killed. Moss’s consciousness, his experience of the violence of war as racial violence, transforms Finch’s abduction and murder into the hysterical lynching of Moss—a lynching that corresponds to the continued racial violence occurring the States in the post-war period. As the both the ultimate result and ultimate spectacle of American racism, lynching is—both in this film and in the culture in which it was released—central to the construction of African American identity and the black consciousness Home of the Brave seeks to represent.

This scene, in which the trauma of racism and the violence of war together paralyze both the black soldier’s psyche and his body, politicizes Moss’s hysteria. By demonstrating how the legacy of racism and racial violence, in particular, shape black consciousness—here represented as hysteria—Home of the Brave undoes its own structuring narrative (that expressed by the doctor) that the black soldier is “just like everybody else.” Rather, it shows the specificity black experience. Indeed racial violence and its specularization are central to the creation of both African American narratives and
subjects. Writing about representations of slave subjectivity in *Scenes of Subjection*, Sadiya Hartman argues the witnessing of racialized violence is for the slave “a primal scene…the terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another.”

161 Tracing the recurrence of such spectacles in literary narratives chronicling the transformation of humans into slaves and, ultimately, slaves into freemen, she notes the “centrality of violence to the making of the slave and [its use in the narratives] as an original generative act equivalent to the statement ‘I was born.’” Like these literary narratives, *Home of the Brave* also constructs both its narrative and its representation of African American subjectivity around its protagonist’s witnessing of violence. Because Finch here serves as the split-off figure of the black soldier—the body onto which racial violence can be projected without visualizing for an integrating America the true violence of lynching, the scene of his friend Finch’s death and his subsequent paralysis are at the heart of the film’s story. Thus, in *Home of the Brave*, and the particular scene I have described above, I believe it is Moss’s painful witnessing—and psychic and physical identification with such violence, albeit displaced onto his friend—that render the black soldier the “subject” both in and of the film.

162 Along with his order to integrate the armed forces, Truman also passed the anti-lynching act of 1948. Hundreds of soldiers were still being lynched following WWII, so the atrocity was certainly not far from the public imaginary.
Assimilating Black Consciousness

Moments after Finch dies in Moss’s arms, the other soldiers return to bring Moss to the boat. But Moss cannot walk. As the men carry him toward the shore, the scene fades back into the present of the film, in which the doctor is excitedly preparing to deliver his final diagnosis and cure his patient. It is in this scene that Moss—with the mise en scene supporting him—stages his last attempts at resistance, refusing the doctor’s interpretation by arguing the specificity of racial difference. It is also here, as the doctor seemingly “cures” Moss, that price of integration becomes clear: Moss will have to give up his illness, his last mode of resistance.

“Walking [won’t be] enough,” the doctor explains. The soldier’s mind will have to be changed. Moss has “got to be cured, really cured, or something like this might happen to you again.” Arguing with his still prone patient, the doctor argues that the black soldier’s ambivalent feelings about Finch’s shooting had nothing to do with the white soldier’s racist outburst (or any of the white soldiers’ racists outbursts), but rather because “deep down underneath he [was] think[ing], it wasn’t me, I’m glad I’m alive[…]At that moment, you were glad it wasn’t you that was shot. You were glad because you were alive[…]You’ve got to realize something, you’re the same as anybody else. You’re no different Peter, no different at all.” Though moved because it’s the first time anybody in the military has called him Peter, Moss resists: “But I’m colored,” he insists.

The doctor’s diagnosis—and intervention—is to point to Moss’s identity as the problem. According to the doctor, it is his black consciousness that has made him sick. That which the film has been seeking to represent—black consciousness—is precisely the
problem. “There,” the doctor explains, “that sensitivity. That’s the disease you’ve got. It was there before anything happened on that island…You had that feeling of difference pounded into you when you were a child. And being a child, you turned it into a feeling of guilt.” Moss continues to refuse. “I’m no different,” he parrots in response to the doctor’s demands, but thumping his chest, continues, “I don’t know whether I really believe it down here.” Frustrated by the soldier’s refusal, the doctor sweeps aside the curtain that has demarcated the treatment space for nearly the whole of the film, and commands, “Alright, Moss, walk!” Unmoving, the black soldier refuses. Then, sitting up and attempting to swing his legs off the stretcher, again he insists, “I can’t.” To the doctor’s continued exhortations, each one louder than the previous, the black soldier finally simply turns his back. Very quickly, Moss stops trying to argue with his doctor. Instead, he continues resisting bodily, acting out rather than speaking his refusal of the doctor’s cure. Thus, though in this scene, *Home of the Brave* ultimately deprives Moss of both language and control over the narrative, the film nonetheless empowers its black soldier through the *mise en scène*. Moss’s gestures and hysteria in and of themselves act out the soldier’s resistance. Refusing to move or and ultimately even look at the doctor during this part of this scene, Moss registers his resistance formally where he cannot narratively.

Moss is sobbing into his bed, his back to the camera, when, from across the room, the doctor delivers the final dose of his treatment by yelling, “Walk, Moss! Get up and walk! You dirty nigger, get up and walk!” Finally Moss gets up. Walking, responding with rage and determination to the doctor’s epithet, he moves lock-kneed and Frankenstein-like into the fixed frame of the camera until he fills it with a fuzzy,
unfocused image. His strange body language and his rage—real rage for the first time in the film—present a picture of a black soldier fighting back. And his image, filling and, for a moment, distorting the frame, destroys the ability of even the camera to accurately depict the action of the film. Unable to achieve agency in the narrative, called “nigger” by his own doctor, Moss nonetheless presents an alternative mode of resistance—a *mise en scene* of resistance—comprised by his hysterical paralysis and his desperate, ultimately non-verbal attempts to retain it. While the doctor and the film very quickly manage to suppress Moss’s potentially dangerous advance, it nonetheless remains as the representation of the black soldier’s consciousness—a consciousness shaped and angered by American racism. It also, depicts what will become the next incarnation of the black filmic soldier: the angry black man.

Despite his anger, in the final moments of Moss’s treatment, the soldier suddenly realizes he can walk, becomes overwhelmed with emotion, and collapses in the doctor’s waiting arms. As the doctor holds and soothes his patient in a tight mid-shot, he murmurs, “Alright, Peter. Time, if only we had more time,” suggesting foreclosed opportunities in the relationship or possibly the work. In a frightening repetition, Moss ends up sobbing and cured in the doctor’s arms, just as the last man to call him nigger, Finch, ended up sobbing and then dying in the black soldier’s arms. And in a striking harmony with Freud’s early theories that reliving the trauma will cure the patient, the doctor confirms not his own, but rather Moss’s theory of his disease. If being called “nigger” finally enables the black soldier to walk, then it was being called “nigger” that ultimately paralyzed him.
This word “nigger,” by virtue of becoming both part of the disease and the nearly-missing part of the doctor’s cure, haunts *Home of the Brave*. Like the all-but-suppressed lynching at the heart of this film, American racism returns from repression to undo *Home of the Brave*’s narrative of successful integration and assimilation. Though in the final scene of the film Moss departs with a crippled white soldier and dreams of opening the first interracial bar, social integration appears as a virtually unachievable stop-gap for the irresolvable problem of recognizing and integrating black consciousness in white America. At the historical moment of post-war integration, assimilation (and miscegenation), Moss’s painful witnessing, and his psychic and physical identification with extreme, paralyzing, bodily violence become the ultimate expressions of black consciousness in *Home of the Brave*. Resistant through his sickness, Moss expresses a consciousness not only of racial difference but of history and its legacy of racial violence as well. It is this consciousness, history and legacy that *Home of the Brave* presents but cannot resolve in the figure of Moss, the black soldier.

**Conclusion: An Exploitation Film?**

My argument in this chapter has been three-fold: first, that the postwar period marked the beginning of Hollywood’s focus on black interiority (this would be born out in particular in the narrative portrayals and acting style of Sidney Poitier, the preeminent black Hollywood actor of the 1950s and 60s); second, that *Home of the Brave* expressed as war trauma what it also understood to be racial trauma—and, conversely, implied that war trauma itself is always already racialized; and third, that *Home of the Brave* expressed concern that the integration of African Americans into mainstream America
would be a psychic project as much as a socio-political one, quite similar to the work of re-integrating soldiers returning home from war. These arguments could be equally well supported by a very different reading of *Home of the Brave* than the one I’ve proposed above, namely: that *Home of the Brave* is a response to—if not adaptation of—John Hurston’s suppressed film *Let There Be Light* (1946), which he directed for the U.S. government’s Signal Corps.

While little has been written about John Huston’s unusual documentary, most likely because it was out of circulation for so long, it was apparently created to educate a broad audience about the problem of mental illness in soldiers returning from war, then called “psychoneurosis.” Confiscated by the U.S. Army Signal Corps, the agency that commissioned the film, just before its scheduled premiere at the New York Museum of Modern Art, *Let There Be Light* went all-but unseen until 1981, when a group of Hollywood filmmakers and studio executives prevailed upon the Army to release it. Since its official release, it has screened primarily at festivals and in educational settings. However, according to John Bailey, a Hollywood cinematographer, duped copies of the film were in circulation during the film’s suppression. Bailey himself writes about seeing *Let There Be Light* from such a print during his time in film school at USC in 1965.

*Let There Be Light*, Hurston’s third of three films developed for the Signal Corps

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165 While I can’t know for sure without talking to Stanley Kramer or Mark Robson whether either of them saw *Let There Be Light* before creating *Home of the Brave*, the latter overlaps considerably in some scenes with the former. At any rate, Kramer would certainly have known about Huston’s production, and may well have been influenced by the fact of its subject matter alone.
(where he began working soon after the release of his promising feature, *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941), documents the psychiatric treatment of shell-shocked WWII soldiers. It is composed of a condensed series of individual and group therapy sessions between soldiers and psychiatrists in the Army hospital, and shows the near miraculous recoveries of a number of men with significant neurotic disorders, from a chronic stutter to paralysis of the legs to total amnesia. The opening scroll of the film, superimposed on shots of a docking ship, reads:

> About 20% of all battle casualties in the American Army during World War II were of a neuropsychiatric nature…The special treatment methods shown in this film, such as hypnosis and narcosynthesis, have been particularly successful in acute cases, such as battle neurosis. Equal success is not to be expected when dealing with peacetime neuroses which are usually of a chronic nature[…]. No scenes were staged. The cameras merely recorded what took place in an Army hospital.”

From its opening shots, *Let There Be Light* thus establishes itself as a documentary expose of the psychic experience of soldiers. It also raises right away a series of questions also suggested albeit more implicitly, by *Home of the Brave*, namely: What does it mean to watch interiority on the screen? What does the film intend us to see—or learn—about traumatized soldiers?

Like *Home of the Brave*, *Let There Be Light* indeed concerns itself with interiority—though in the Huston film, the interiority of any and/or all (rather than just black) shell-shocked soldiers is represented: black, white, Latino and East Asian soldiers all appear with speaking roles in the film. Though the Huston film does not at any point address the issue of race specifically, it does offer extended scenes with a number of black soldiers, who like in *Home of the Brave*, are fully integrated into the majority of white soldiers. (This is indeed curious, given that the Army itself was not integrated in
1946. Perhaps, somehow, the psychiatric treatment facilities were. I have not been able to conduct this research at the time of this writing.) As in the fiction film, *Home of the Brave*, in *Let There Be Light*, the traumatized black soldier’s interiority is framed and (re)presented in the narrative, and becomes the subject of the plot; unlike in *Home of the Brave*, the black soldier’s experiences around race are not explored or thematized. However, *Let There Be Light* does show the astounding case of a (white) soldier paralyzed from the waist down by war trauma and whose psychiatrist is able to help him walk again by recovering with him a series of traumatic memories.

Irrespective of how this might have occurred, *Home of the Brave* presents a soldier quite similar to one depicted in *Let There Be Light*. The fiction film’s psychiatrist conducts similar sessions with his patient to those documented in Huston’s film. *Home of the Brave*, like *Let There Be Light*, deploys the psychiatric strategy of “narcosynthesis” to cure its ill patient. And both films focus on the problem of integrating their soldiers back into society. Though the broader American population, into which Moss will “integrate” when he leaves the military hospital, is not shown in *Home of the Brave*, in *Let There Be Light*, the shots of the ship bearing the injured soldiers docking and the men departing the ship are almost all from the point of view of shore—of those who will be forced to meet these men, care for them, re-integrate them into society. Thus the government film raises directly an issue of audience that could likewise be addressed with *Home of the Brave*.

In a sense, we might say that both *Home of the Brave* and *Let There Be Light* are exploitation films, concerned with the pathology and treatment of mental illness and willing to exploit the stories and lives actual soldiers to explore this interest. However, their objectification of soldiers becomes also an objectification of racial trauma in
Robson’s film, where neither the filmmaker nor the plot make totally clear whether Moss’ neurosis is generalized shell shock or a variation of Fanon’s so-called “dependency-complex.” If both films make of their audiences voyeurs, then Home of the Brave also offers us an opportunity to “spy” inside the “black” mind, to look at African America’s response to war and to a legacy of racism at home. Such an unusual—at the time, unprecedented—opportunity would become increasingly prevalent with films like Pinky, Los Boundaries and No Way Out, which Cripps has categorized as part of the Hollywood “message movie cycle,” and which also dramatized the traumatic experiences of African Americans looking to integrate into broader postwar society. Unlike the films discussed Chapters Two and Four, these films about black experience did not demand that viewers reconstruct their spectatorship practices so much as that they truly re-imagine their world—as a place rife with the many kinds of living, breathing casualties of integration.
Chapter Four:

The Last Black Soldier and a Blueprint for a Black Counterpublic

in The Spook Who Sat By the Door

During the long stretch between WWII and the tail end of the Vietnam War, black independent cinema all but disappeared. With the coming of integration after WWII (in so far as it came), and the success of the wartime black-soldier films and what Cripps has called the Hollywood “message movie cycle,” both film theaters and screens began serving black and white America together.\(^{166}\) Or, in Cripps’ words, “World War II, having raised the prospect of a Double V [victory against both fascism abroad and racism at home], rendered race movies an anachronism, turned black critics against them, and forced black audiences to opt for joining or not the spirit of the times.”\(^{167}\) There was no longer a market for the cheaply-made, technically-unsophisticated race films of the 30s and 40s, nor did African Americans want to sit in segregated theaters when they could go to integrated ones. Without theaters to screen their films, the few black independent film production companies that had survived the expensive conversion to sound in the 1920s (like Micheaux Pictures Corporation), finally disappeared in the late 40s.

Nominal integration notwithstanding, until the 1970s Hollywood did not promote any African Americans to the director’s chair. So, in the fifties, despite the considerable

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\(^{166}\) Cripps describes this cycle of films as beginning suddenly in 1949 with the releases Home of the Brave, Lost Boundaries, Pinky, Intruder in the Dust and No Way Out (all released that year). He writes, “Together they [the films] signaled the opening of an era warmed by a sense of urgency arising from not only the money being earned by Crossfire or Gentleman’s Agreement but also a sense that the four years of maturing since the war placed them on the verge of the most important peacetime era of race relations since Reconstruction” (220).

\(^{167}\) Cripps 129.
popularity of black representation, moving images of African Americans were white-scripted, white-directed and marketed to mainstream (predominantly white, but also mixed) audiences. This pattern continued into the 60s, and though a number of black artists were training to become filmmakers in universities (most notably at UCLA) and experimenting with independent shorts on their own, there remains no record of any commercial release of a black-directed film in the United States (after 1950) before Melvin van Peebles’ 1967 French-produced film *La Permission*, rereleased in the U.S. in 1968 as *Story of A Three-Day Pass*.168 *Story* picks up where the Korean War black-soldier films—like *Home of the Brave* (which I discuss in Chapter Three), *Steel Helmet* (1951) *Pork Chop Hill* (1959), and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962)—leave off: with a confused and disgruntled black soldier questioning his relationship to an integrated but still racist military. Though *Story*’s black soldier, Turner, is still interested in integration, he becomes angry and violent—rather than sick and paralyzed, like Moss in *Home of the Brave*—in the face of racism. With the success of *Story* in the 1967 San Francisco Film Festival, and a subsequent three-picture deal from Columbia Studios, Van Peebles wrote, directed and produced the radical financially successful *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* in 1971 and became one of the founders of the new black independent film movement in the United States—a movement which, I argue, rests on the conservative shoulders of the filmic black soldier.169

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168 *Story of A Three Day Pass* is a film about a black soldier stationed in France after WWII. He dates a white woman while on leave in Paris and is demoted because of it. In a longer work, I plan to include a discussion of *Story* and its representation of the transnational black soldier.

169 Because of conflict with the studio, Van Peebles ultimately financed *Sweetback* privately.
After *Sweetback* demonstrated the financial viability of filmmaking for black markets again, black American cinema expanded rapidly. In particular, the popularity of Hollywood blaxploitation films generated demand for black screenwriters and directors.\[^{170}\] Even independent black filmmakers like William Greaves and UCLA-trained members of the LA Rebellion—from Haile Gerima and Larry Clark to Charles Burnette (and later, Zeinabu Irene Davis and Julie Dash)—began gaining notoriety by the mid 70s.\[^{171}\] With these films also came new audiences—black audiences, arguably for the first time since the end of race movies, gathered in the North as well as the South; and white Americans curious about black culture. While a number of these films, for instance *Sweetback* and *The Mack* (1973), sought to present the realities of black urban post-Civil-Rights-Movement experience, the majority of the popular releases participated in the circulation of a whole new set of black filmic stereotypes as well. These new audiences watched new kinds of black characters, primarily “baadassss” men and “foxy” ladies in films like *Superfly* (1972), *Foxy Brown* (1974) and *Dolemite* (1975): black men with potent sexuality; angry men; men with guns who were definitively not wearing uniforms of the state, but who rather represented the ghettos in which they were raised.

Though few of these early 70s films actually identified their protagonists as the products of the American military, the filmic black soldier was their representational father. With the coming of blaxploitation, he traded his uniform for civvies, his rifle for a revolver, and his ambivalent patriotism for post-Civil-Rights nihilistic anger. In *Slaughter* 

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\[^{170}\] Dunn offers an excellent definition of the blaxploitation genre in her book *“Baad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* on page 46.

(1972), he no longer uses his Green Beret training to defend the nation because he is busy avenging his family. In *Gordon’s War* (1973), he and a small army of veterans turn their focus from Vietnam to Harlem, Vietcong to dope pushers. And in *Bush Mama* (1979), his sacrifices to the state unrewarded, he wanders, drunk and out of work, through a post-apocalyptic Watts. Integration has come, and perhaps gone; the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements have ended; and the utility of the integrationist, propagandist filmic black soldier is over.

This chapter focuses on one of the few black-soldier films of the early 70s produced before the soldier-icon’s disappearance. In this film, Ivan Dixon’s 1973 eponymous adaptation of Sam Greenlee’s novel *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, Korean War veteran Dan Freeman joins the CIA in order to launch a paramilitary revolution against the United States government. His aim is to deliver black America into freedom as a new people while forcing the U.S. to stop the war in Vietnam. And, in order to achieve his goal, Freeman trains street-gang members in a guerilla warfare where one of the primary weapons is the resignification—reuse and reappropriation—of black identity itself. In my readings of scenes from *Spook*, I argue that as Dixon’s soldier-spy-militant tutors his soldiers (and viewers) about their new cause, new nation and new selves, *Spook* presents not only a new representation but also a new *practice* of blackness. Blackness, *Spook* tells us, is a *performance* rather than a stable truth. Though blackness has been forced into all kinds of representational and social contortions by white America, *Spook* insists, black freedom fighters must take it back, reclaim it, and deploy it as a strategy for their own survival. In so doing, I argue, *Spook* uses the theater as a training ground, a
public sphere in which by learning to look anew, spectators can transform their society as well.

**History: The End of the Civil Rights Movement**

*The Spook Who Sat By the Door* is as much an historical allegory as a fictional story; its plot and protagonist seem to comment directly on the progress of the final years of the Civil Rights Movement. With its action set in inner-city Chicago (though primarily filmed in Gary, Indiana), the film presents a visual and narrative iconography of the post-Civil Rights Era black ghetto that would have been well-known to television viewers of the time. Its images of civil rights struggles and black urban insurrection both reflected and, in instances, revised those circulating nationally and internationally in the news.  

And *Spook’s* tale of the Cobra gang’s transformation into a paramilitary revolutionary force anticipates (if we go by the novel’s first publication date in 1966) or recalls (if we go by the film’s release in 1973) the birth and growth of the Black Panther Party. As Dixon and Greenlee show in their film, by the mid-1960s, “A growing army of idle and desperate black men and women began to appear in the industrial centers of the nation, driven to the edge by poverty”—an “army” that would become the basis for a widespread militant black nationalist movement. *Spook* not only depicts this “army” in numerous shots—inside the pool hall; at the cafeteria; on the streets; on the basketball

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courts; during widespread rioting—but the film also imagines them as an army, telling the story of both the failure of the Civil Rights Movement to bring about sufficient and lasting social and political change and the possible future success of a globally-oriented black revolutionary left.

The story *Spook* tells is also the outcome of what Penny Von Eschen describes as the failure of “Truman liberalism,” which left black America without “a vibrant black press, a vigorous labor movement or cross-class coalitions uniting liberals and the left.”¹⁷⁴ The black characters that people *Spook* (although eventually Freeman manages to convert a number of them to his cause) are the products of this destruction of pre-war black intellectual and political culture: African Americans who believe they’ve won the battle for civil rights but who have instead appropriated the purchasing power of the white elite (Freeman’s girlfriend), men who have assumed the badge of the state (Freeman’s best friend, a policeman), working class folks who have become each other’s short-sighted oppressors in the urban squalor of the inner city (the Cobras, Shorty the drug dealer, and Dahomey the prostitute). Freeman’s revolutionary efforts focus not only on transforming these demoralized characters into organized, military freedom fighters *a la* the Black Panthers, but also on reviving “anticolonial, anticapitalist and anti-imperialist cross-class coalitions,” which Von Eschen argues were destroyed by the Truman administration’s “severing of international and domestic politics.”¹⁷⁵

While *Spook* doesn’t look backward to the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, it does show black American life at a political standstill that was perhaps

¹⁷⁵ Von Eschen 187-188.
characteristic of the beginning of the movement’s end—unable to wage effective
struggles for increased opportunity and freedom because of a lack of effective organizing. According to scholars of the period, from Manning Marable to Mary Dudziak, the kind of standstill *Spook* depicts was in fact the result of a narrowing of the Civil Rights Movement’s pre-war and wartime goals and political base. Though there were numerous gains in civil rights struggles during the late 1940s and 50s—from the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954 (itself the result of a number of other anti-segregation legislative victories), to the success of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, to the passage of a weak Civil Rights Act in 1957, initially designed to ensure voting rights and protect desegregation efforts—the period also saw the continued erosion of the black left, with the marginalization and persecution of former African American leaders Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, among others. According to historian Manning Marable, despite the seeming strides taken during these integration-focused decades, “The impact of the Cold War, the anti-communist purges and near-totalitarian social environment had a devastating effect upon the cause of blacks’ civil rights and civil liberties.” Because, as Singh has described, “From the highest levels of government and social policy, it appeared that the stability of the expanded American realm of action in the world was linked to the resolution of the crisis of racial discord and division at home,” race politics came under increased scrutiny during the Cold War. While the U.S. government’s hyper-focus on race relations had some positive effects—for instance, encouraging congress and the president to pass

176 Marable 44, 45.
177 Marable 18.
178 Singh 7.
legislation quickly—its ultimate goal was to “silence […] the black left.”¹⁷⁹ In Marable’s words, “It is not an historical accident that the demand for racial reform in the late 1950s paralleled the temporary decline of the Cold War[…] [and] […] the Red Scare.”¹⁸⁰

Like the new CIA agent Freeman in Spook, whose training and integration into the upper echelons of the United States government is used in the fiction of the film to help promote a racially-equitable image of the U.S. government, black Americans and racial integration itself became tools in the spread of U.S. military and ideological imperialism during first decades of the Cold War. As Mary Dudziak describes in her study of race and Cold War politics, “When Brown v. Board of Education was decided, the opinion gave the U.S. government the counter to Soviet propaganda it had been looking for, and the State Department and USIA wasted no time in making use of it.”¹⁸¹ In the same vein, according to Marable, “Kennedy’s […] actions [including delivering to congress a civil rights bill] were directly influenced more by cold geopolitical facts [in particular the struggle with the Soviet Union for global domination] than by warm idealism.”¹⁸² “Accordingly,” writes Von Eschen, “the Truman administration saw racial discrimination in America as its Achilles heel in Asia […] Thereafter, black protest, not segregation itself, came to be seen as the threat to U.S. security.”¹⁸³

Von Eschen’s claim is evidenced not only by J. Edgar Hoover’s allocation of seemingly unlimited FBI resources to fight the Black Panthers, but also, albeit more subtly, in U.S. efforts to contain and quickly quell national and ultimately international

¹⁷⁹ Marable 63.
¹⁸⁰ Marable 63.
¹⁸² Marable 80.
¹⁸³ Von Eschen 126.
concerns about racial segregation. The suppression of certain kinds of black struggle during the Cold War that Von Eschen describes meant that when the range of black protest did finally reappear, it did explosively, performatively and hyper-visibly. As Singh points out:

Rather than seeing the Panthers as the vanguard of a visible, guerilla insurgency in the country, they might be better understood as practitioners of an insurgent form of visibility, a literal-minded and deadly serious kind of guerilla theater, in which militant slogan-eering, bodily display, and spectacular actions simultaneously signified their possession and yet real lack of power.  

Thus, Von Eschen concludes, “the reconstruction of race, from the rejection of formulations of international solidarity by black American liberals such as Walter White as early as 1947 to the government’s attempts to win the hearts and minds of Africa and Asia, began with the Cold War itself.”

Spook itself, like Home of the Brave (discussed in Chapter Three) before it, reflects this “reconstruction” in new narratives about race, ones emblematized by the promotion of individual black men in exchange for their silence (and that of their communities) on the persistent problem of systemic racism. Both Dudziak and Von Eschen trace the play of these new story-lines in the global arena, describing how, in the 1950s: “the State Department developed a clear strategy that acknowledged that discrimination existed but hastened to add that racism was a fast disappearing aberration, capable of being overcome by a talented and motivated individual.” At the same time, then, “the rewriting of race and racism involved a shift away from a sophisticated

\[184\] Singh 203.
\[185\] Von Eschen 126.
\[186\] Von Eschen 126.
\[187\] Von Eschen 128.
analysis rooted in history and toward psychological and social psychological research on race relations.”

This kind of ‘rewriting’ is staged in the early scenes of *Spook* where both CIA supervisors and black CIA candidates alike describe Freeman as exemplary, “the best of his race,” and fail both to understand his anger towards systematized racism and to guess his political dedication to collective (rather than individualistic) action. When Freeman makes his move from the CIA to the streets of Chicago, and begins establishing those “cross-class coalitions” with gang and community members and preaching a globalist vision of anti-imperial protest, he likewise moves from the Cold War model of civil rights action into what Marable has described as “The Second Reconstruction,” or the militantism of the Black Power movement. Marable argues that this phase of the Civil Rights Movement, during which what had previously been a united front of civil rights activists fractured into increasingly radical and internationally-minded militant organizations (and during which some previously less militant organizations became more militant like CORE, SNCC and the Organisation for Afro-American Unity (OAAU – Malcom X’s New York organization), sought, like the first Reconstruction following the Civil War, to redress racial disparities and reconstruct the nation.

This final period of the Civil Rights Movement, marked by the highly publicized student sit-in revolts and a series of bloody marches as well as the peaceful March on Washington in 1963, also saw the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, outlawing segregation in all public accommodations across the country and ensuring voting rights to all, respectively. However, because “the adoption of

188  Von Eschn 155.
189  Marable 66.
the 1964 Civil Rights Act increased the institutional, political and vigilante violence against blacks across the south,” the limits of reform became increasingly clear to black activists, leading to the radicalization of those on the left as well as the popularity of new leaders, including Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X and George Jackson.\(^{190}\) The rebellions that rocked America’s northern cities in 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967 and 1968 (in part under these men’s leadership), and made evident to the world the failures of desegregation, are visualized in the jumbled climactic scene of rioting in *Spook*.

Though, in the film, the rioting is unplanned, Freeman appropriates it as part of his larger insurrection. Describing his strategy as drawn from the lessons of guerrilla warfare around the globe, most notably in Kenya and Algeria, Freeman articulates a revolutionary ideology and program quite similar to those espoused by both Panthers and radicals like Robert Williams and Malcolm X who came before them. Like theirs, Freeman’s plans “redraw the coordinates of the intranational struggles of black Americans in light of events within the decolonizing world [and] strain the borders of U.S. liberal-nationalist discourse” of the time.\(^{191}\) And, as would be increasingly reflected in cinema of the period, like these black revolutionaries, *Spook* itself “embraced the black urban space as the basis of a renewed and very different kind of radical vision: the site of a radically dispersed black nation and the model of the internal colonization of America’s black people.”\(^{192}\) And, in fact, during the film’s production, and in the very location of its production—Gary, Indiana—the largest black political gathering in United States history convened, with more than 12,000 attendees yelling the slogan of the black nationalist

\(^{190}\) Marable 90.
\(^{191}\) Singh 191.
\(^{192}\) Singh 193.
movement, “‘Nationtime! Nationtime! Nationtime!’”\textsuperscript{193} Though obscuring its production location and excluding mention of the popular movement or its convention by name,\textit{ Spook} nonetheless bears quite visible traces of their influence.

\textit{Spook} ends without predicting whether or not the militant, pan-national ideology it espouses will yield success—for Freeman or for black Americans in general. Instead, the film concludes in the midst of rioting and semi-organized rebellion, as though warning its viewers about the sacrifices they will have to make for change.

**Blaxploitation and A Black Counterpublic**

In her recent book, \textit{The Witch’s Flight}, Kara Keeling begins where the history figured in \textit{Spook} leaves off: in the aftermath not only of the Civil Rights Movement, but also of the militant Black Power movement it spawned. Describing the broader audience for blaxploitation cinema as a “surplus” public, “identifiable as young, urban, and black[,] when it is targeted by films that themselves actively solicit those characteristics,” Keeling finds that the young men and women identified with Black Power by the mid-70s are no longer the politically-organized radicals of the late Civil Rights Movement.\textsuperscript{194} Rather, they are a community concerned with the aesthetics—and not the ideology of Black Power—called into being by capitalist cultural production. She argues that “from the film industry’s [Hollywood’s] perspective, the black audience in general is simply a surplus population held in reserve to be consolidated \textit{as such} in times of crisis,” and that

\textsuperscript{193} Marable 137.
it became “intensifi[ed]” as an audience by the profusion of blaxploitation films during Hollywood’s late 60s economic restructuring.\textsuperscript{195} Thus, she insists:

Theories of blaxploitation’s conditions of possibility that posit the pre-existence of a young, urban, black audience whose black nationalist sentiment is ripe for exploitation obscure the extent to which that audience is called into being by blaxploitation as a population that might be isolated as an audience that is in excess of the audience Hollywood assumes exists for its mainstream feature films.\textsuperscript{196}

Her claim, then, is that blaxploitation created its own audience—out of economic imperatives (Hollywood’s) and the iconography of the Black Power Movement. Further, she insists, this audience is one whose affective labor supports, rather than undermines, capitalist hegemony. While Keeling writes about the deleterious effects of this audience—created in large part by the mediating force of its filmic messages—on the development of a progressive black nationalism, I remain curious about the political potential inherent in this public. While I don’t disagree with Keeling that Hollywood blaxploitation’s (re)packaging of black nationalism did damage to the movement’s revolutionary ideology, I also believe that the power of a mass gathering—even one looking only to be entertained—can often exceed its containment. Moreover, Keeling’s insistence that “by encouraging the articulation of Black Power to proceed according to those strictures of common-sense black nationalism which lent consent to U.S. white bourgeois sociality, blaxploitation forestalled the elaboration of the kernel of good sense in common-sense black nationalism” does not leave room for the possibility that blaxploitation’s audience may well have read against as much as with the films’ generic

\textsuperscript{195} Keeling 105, 96.  
\textsuperscript{196} Keeling 105.
Indeed, to the extent that the audience did precede its filmic interpellation, it was already a politically motivated number of individuals, looking for filmic reflections of their sentiments. Thus within this surplus audience, I contend, was also the kernel of a revolutionary community—one which Hollywood blaxploitation may have sought to subvert, but which Greenlee and Ivan Dixon hoped to hail and mobilize through their film, *Spook*.

Both Sam Greenlee’s 1966 novel and Ivan Dixon’s adaptation were created with the intent of reaching and transforming just such a black audience. Though by the time of *Spook*’s theatrical release in 1973, the Black Panthers and the Black Power movements were all but over, Greenlee had initially hoped that his work would help in their struggles. Greenlee himself explains, “I decided to write *[The Spook]* so that the people who would do it [wage revolution], would do it right. *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* […] is a handbook on urban guerilla warfare, organization, supply and propaganda. All of it’s in there, and that’s what made it so threatening.” Greenlee came by his knowledge of warfare honestly: like his character Dan Freeman in both book and film, he learned how to fight from the U.S. government. An Army ROTC Commissioned Lieutenant assigned to the 31st Infantry Dixie Division National Guard out of Mississippi in the 1950s, Greenlee joined the Foreign Service and in 1957 moved to Baghdad, Iraq as part of a mission to prevent regime change. During his time in revolutionary Iraq, Greenlee

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197 Keeling 101.
198 Dunn gives a good description of the black power movements and their role in cinema on page 37 of “Baad Bitches” & Sassy Supermamas.
200 Acham 115.
was regarded by Iraqis as “a brother who also lived under a repressive state government,” and so “it was at this time that Greenlee truly began to understand the global connections between African Americans and other oppressed colonial bodies around the world.”

Perhaps because Greenlee’s novel indeed emphasized the similarity between black American liberation and Third World liberation movements, including those in Asia, where the U.S. was embroiled in multiple military offensives during the 1960s, *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* remained unpublished for a number of years. Finally, in 1969, three years after Greenlee finished his novel, a British publisher, Allison and Busby, released the book in England, where it became a bestseller. An underground phenomenon in the U.S., *Spook* nonetheless wasn’t published in America until after the release of the film in 1973 (by Bantam Press), and after the Black Power Movement was over.

Efforts to produce and distribute the film version of *Spook* also met with resistance. Working closely with Greenlee, Ivan Dixon, the director, raised money from the black community (particularly in Chicago, where Greenlee lived), but was unable to secure permits to shoot the film in Chicago. Only the support of the black mayor Richard Hatcher of Gary, Indiana enabled the production of the film to continue (the majority of the “Chicago” scenes were actually shot in Gary). However, even after the film was released by United Artists, Greenlee and Dixon continued to encounter problems. Though there remains considerable mystery surrounding the who, how and why, *Spook* uniformly disappeared from U.S. theaters within a week of its release and all distribution copies

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201 Acham 116.
202 Acham 118.
were apparently destroyed (except for one print negative which Greenlee hid in a vault under a false name). Both Greenlee and Dixon blamed the FBI.²⁰⁴ Given that even the *New York Magazine* regarded *Spook* at the time of its release to be “a completely irresponsible film in its advocacy of black guerrilla warfare throughout the nation, its urging violence and slaughter of whites and middle-class blacks in the name of freedom,” it isn’t difficult to imagine that the U.S. government, already struggling to contain race riots in major urban centers, might have decided to surreptitiously shelve the film.²⁰⁵ It was only in 2004, after Tim Reid, a wealthy television producer, met Greenlee, bought the film rights to *Spook* and paid to have the hidden negative restored, that the DVD version (or any version, for that matter) of *Spook* was finally released for home distribution.

True to Greenlee’s own philosophy, “if you’re gonna be outsiders, man, take advantage of being outside,” *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* re-imagines marginalization as a position of potential power.²⁰⁶ Like many of the products of the Third Cinema movement—with which I believe *Spook* has almost as much in common as it does with blaxploitation cinema—*Spook* is a didactic film, intended to instruct its viewers.²⁰⁷ In the words of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, authors of the manifesto, “Towards A Third Cinema, “Third cinema is, in our opinion, the cinema that recognises in that struggle the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation of our time, the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people

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²⁰⁴ See Acham 123, Sheppard, 14, and Greenlee in DVD preface.
²⁰⁶ Greenlee, in the DVD preface.
as the starting point - in a word, the decolonisation of culture.” In a similar spirit, “the purpose of the film [Spook] was” according to Greenlee, “to encourage Blacks to create an action plan to ‘survive in the belly of the beast’ rather than always reacting as victims of a racist society.” To that end, “Spook recodes the ‘nightmare’ of Watts as the first step in Black liberation” and proposes that black Americans, like oppressed people around the world, can use their experience as all-but invisible subjects to become ‘spooks’ or spies, and their intimate knowledge of how to survive violence and disenfranchisement to become effective revolutionaries.

Insisting that viewers read beyond facile blaxploitation iconography (of gun-toting “baaadassss’s” and half-clothed “ho’s”), Greenlee foregrounds the connection between black liberation and Third World anticolonial movements and, in so doing, urges his audience to align themselves with revolutionaries as well. In one scene, Freeman instructs his student-soldiers, “If you don’t think [my revolutionary plan] will work, look at Algeria, Kenya […] Vietnam.” In another, in which a military commander comments at a press conference on his strategies for fighting Freeman’s paramilitary soldiers, Dixon presents a careful visual echo of the influential pro-revolutionary Third Cinema film Battle of Algiers (1966). Thus, though widely considered a blaxploitation film (one of the only published critical essays on Spook is included in a special issue Screening Noir “Blaxploitation Revisited”), and though likely to have attracted Keeling’s “surplus

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208 http://documentaryisneverneutral.com/words/camasgun.html. Their ideas, no doubt like Greenlee’s as well, were deeply influenced by readings of Fanon’s works—from which they quote at the beginning of their manifesto.


210 Sheppard 25.
audience,” I believe that The Spook Who Sat By the Door hailed a unique public within Keeling’s “surplus,” one ready and willing for what Fanon has called “decolonization.”

While the term “public” was first theorized by Jurgen Habermas to describe a distinctly literary and bourgeois sphere, a handful of scholars (including Miriam Hansen, Alexander Kluge and Stewart Hall) have used it in relation to the cinema as well. According to Habermas in his seminal 1962 study, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, there are multiple public spheres, defined by different media. Since the 50s, he writes elsewhere, “newspapers and magazines, radio and television [have become] the media of the public sphere.”\(^{211}\) These spheres can be either concrete sites, in which people gather to debate ideas, or imaginary spaces in which representations and ideas circulate discursively—“realm[s] of our social life in which something approaching a public opinion can be formed [where] [a]ccess is guaranteed to all citizens.”\(^{212}\) Among the first to identify the cinema as such a potential realm, Miriam Hansen also proposed that the public sphere need not only be created by and for a literary bourgeoisie, but could in fact serve the working classes as well. In Babel and Babylon, Hansen describes what she calls an early alternative public sphere centered on nickelodeons and movie halls catering to largely immigrant working-class audiences.\(^{213}\) She explains, “The film industry’s aim was not…to exclude the working class but to integrate them, allegedly into the democratic melting pot, yet more effectively into a consumer society of which mass culture was to become both agent and


\(^{212}\) Habermas, Lennox and Lennox 49.

object.” She argues that through early cinema’s short instructive films, which focused on hygiene, manners, and middle class American customs as well as entertainment, the Nickelodeon became “democracy’s theater,” “the laboring man’s university.” Thus, according to Hansen, the early cinema was also a place in which American identity itself became consolidated.

Like Hansen, Michael Warner argues that the public sphere is a site for identitarian transformation. But the sphere Warner describes is not “alternative” because minorities either gather there or are hailed by its circulating discourse, it is rather *counter*—or a “counterpublic”—because in this sphere subaltern identity is acknowledged and supported rather than assimilated. In Warner’s words:

> like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers […] socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene […] A public of subalterns is only a counterpublic when its participants are addressed in a counterpublic way—as, for example, African-Americans willing to speak in what is regarded as a racially marked idiom.

Presenting the visual and aural iconographies of contemporary black culture, blaxploitation cinema—and in particular films like *Sweetback* and *Spook*, produced outside Hollywood—hailed viewers engaged in the cultural politics of black identity and provided a visually-constituted, discursive space in which African Americans could debate projects of black separatism, nationalism and revolution.

215 Hansen 148.
In this counterpublic sphere, African American didn’t simply learn, like Hansen’s early immigrant cinemagoers, how to integrate into the American mainstream. Rather, like the reconstructive spectators described in Chapter Two, black viewers found opportunities for identitarian transformation beyond those pictured in the films themselves. Irrespective of the failures of the majority of blaxploitation cinema to imagine a world beyond capitalist, racist hegemony, those films of the period—like *Spook* and a handful of others—that staged the deconstruction, or decolonization, of the black soldier, and his reconstruction into the nationalist militant, found a ready audience for whom they could model political transformation *en masse*. Beyond simply allowing African Americans to “reinsert themselves into the channels of public discourse [ … ] [by way of] an active counterpublic,” then, these films created of the cinema a politicized, counter-hegemonic space.  

**Multimedia Uncle Tom: Decolonizing the Icon**

With this space and counterpublic in mind, *Spook* begins its instruction in militancy through a series of lessons about how to deconstruct black representation and performance. Early on in *Spook*, Freeman wrestles with the title of “Uncle Tom,” demonstrating in successive scenes and settings how appropriating rather than rejecting the persona can be strategic. In some he kowtows to his white bosses various decisions

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217 Other institutions central to African American counterpublics of the time included “organizations such as the Negro Women’s Club Movement, the journals, meetings and activities of the fledgling civil rights organizations, the small but active literary cycles among Black women and men, the activities and debates of Black academics and through the Black church.” Michael Dawson. “A Black Counter Public?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics.” *The Black Public Sphere*. Eds. The Black Public Sphere Collective. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. 199-228. 204.
and evaluations; in another, lighting his supervisor’s cigar, he insists of his race, “we have a long way to go.” But all the while, the audience will soon learn, he has been acting, gaining the power and knowledge necessary to effect a revolution. With these scenes, *Spook* also insists that representation and even identity itself are performances, established through repetition rather than any fixed or essential connection to truth.\(^\text{218}\)

In an early powerful scene—the first to provide a close up of its protagonist—*Spook* shows Freeman’s awareness of the oppressive context in which racial categories and performativity get shaped. As the scene begins, Freeman sits in profile, writing at his desk, glasses on and tie loosened. When three other CIA recruits enter his room, he moves his chair back to make space for them in the frame. In a series of shot-reverse-shots, Freeman refuses his colleagues’ invitation to Washington D.C., insisting he has too much studying to do. One of the men, seemingly speaking on behalf of the other two, urges, “Maybe you oughtta cool it…If you weren’t so eager to please the *white* man and send the grading curve up there’d be three times as many of us here […] What kind of Tom are you anyway?” Accepting rather than rejecting the epithet, Freeman answers in an empowering high-angle reverse shot, “Same as you, I guess, except that I don’t try to

\(^{218}\) In so doing, *Spook* anticipates Judith Butler’s definition of performativity as “not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition.” Butler. *Bodies that Matter*. 13. “In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces and effects what it names” (2) she talks about performativity as part of the production of the subject. She explains that “the process by which a bodily norm is assumed, appropriated, taken on [is] not, strictly speaking, undergone *by a subject*, but rather that the subject, the speaking ‘I,’ is formed by virtue of having gone through such a process of assuming a sex” (3). In a longer work, I would like to think more about how *Spook* seems to suggest a particular mode of subversive performativity, as a way of practicing—and asserting—black identity.
have it both ways [...] None of us were picked for a militancy, now were we?” Now in a whisper, Freeman urges the men in his room to keep it down because of the likelihood that the place is “bugged.” His concern seems to be less that the potential listeners might hear the four fighting and more that their debate about being an “Uncle Tom” go unheard. Freeman insists that all four men are masquerading as Uncle Toms, but that doing so is an art, a practice with performative limitations—one being not to let on to the audience that you’re performing. The scene ends after Freeman’s guest angrily challenges him to a fight, which Freeman refuses, and the CIA-agent-secret-militant returns to his studies.

The listeners Freeman imagines are shown to be surveilling the men visually as well, though, in the case of Freeman, they are unable to understand what they see—primarily because Freeman is aware of how to use his race performatively. Freeman’s ability to manipulate the men’s gaze is demonstrated in a couple of brief scenes in which the CIA supervisors watch Freeman and the other men during their trainings and downtime. In both scenes, the supervisors’ looks are mediated and framed by various looking apparatuses, emphasizing their role as spectators as well as potential deceptiveness of the filmic apparatus itself. In one, the audience watches Freeman practicing swimming and SCUBA techniques in a pool with a number of other black recruits. But then, after zooming through a seemingly opaque window, the camera reveals him to be the object of others’ gaze: two white supervisors commenting on his progress and making racist comments. It appears that Freeman is a player in a game that he does not know about. However in a subsequent scene, it becomes clear that Freeman is not only aware of the game, but is in fact performing for the camera. In this scene, the camera cuts from a happy gathering of black CIA trainees, who are agreeing to keep their scores
low and earn “gentleman’s C’s for everybody” so that all of them can become spies (during which Freeman stands quietly in the background), to a mid-shot of the white CIA agents laughing as they watch the men on a small television. Not only have they undermined the trainees’ planned performance by discovering it ahead of time, but they have also turned the would-be spies into the spied-upon by out-gaming them at their own game. In the scene, the power appears to rest with those who have the capacity to read or interpret what they see. However, it is in fact Freeman who has the upper hand, because he has played his part so well. Rather than act the Uncle Tom, he has embodied the character fully, and gone completely unnoticed in the CIA’s surveillance—become invisible. Later, when the CIA supervisors realize that they have forgotten to trip up Freeman in his qualification tests, they will remark with frustration that he managed to “fade into the background.” In so doing, he will become the country’s first black spy.

The lesson to viewers is about how best to use their knowledge as African American subjects and film spectators. While at first the film does not offer a powerful or potent depiction of black masculinity, Spook does deconstruct the figure of the Uncle Tom, suggesting to spectators that such iconography can be manipulated for gain, and that they, themselves, control the power of the performance. Indeed, it tells them, in the famous words of Ellison’s invisible man’s grandfather, to “overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction.”\textsuperscript{219} This man, too, was “a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country,” but unlike him, Freeman does not “give up [his] gun.”\textsuperscript{220} Instead, about half way through the film, lest spectators think that only by acting servile can a black man achieve his goals, Spook shows Freeman

\textsuperscript{220} Ellison 16.
manipulating yet another apparatus of mediation to present himself as an Uncle Tom—this time a Tom capable of transforming the meaning of the appellation itself. After Freeman leaves the CIA and becomes a social worker in name and a militant revolutionary in practice, he takes on the code name of “Uncle Tom.” It is as this “Uncle Tom” that Freeman delivers his rallying cry for revolution over the radio waves and plans and executes the bombing of the major of Chicago’s office. Knowing the instability of visual representation and its dominance by the government and white elite, Freeman takes control of the more egalitarian radio to get his message across clearly. When he is finally discovered by his friend Dawson, whom he has also tried to convert to the cause, it is because the police have matched a voice print of the terrorist leader, “Uncle Tom,” with the social worker Freeman. In these scenes of Spook, Dixon develops his portrayal of a new kind of black man and soldier, one who neither internalizes nor rejects his Uncle Tom status, his uniform, threats to his masculinity, or even his allegiance to the state, but who rather sees these identifiers—formed by social codes to which he does not adhere—as weapons in his fight for freedom. At once spook, Uncle Tom, and Free-man, the protagonist of Spook performs a new mode of warfare reliant on his capacity to manipulate others’ perceptions.

**The End of Hate and The New Black Soldier**

The film most forcefully deconstructs visual representation and iconography in a series of scenes that demonstrate the instability of race itself. In these scenes, Freeman begins training the Cobras, the street gang that he has recruited for his paramilitary black-nationalist army. The first step in the Cobras’ education as black soldiers is a de-
education, or decolonization, of their ideas about how race works in society.\textsuperscript{221} In the first scene of their decolonization, with the gang members all sitting on their knees at the edge of a mat in a basement gym—looking very much like the black CIA agents in training during their Judo instruction scenes earlier—Freeman begins teaching his students the art of subterfuge. Unlike earlier in the film at the CIA, where agents were trained to identify with their roles as spies, and thus to act like spies, here in this gym, Cobras are taught to productively perform white society’s assumptions about black men by acting like anything but spies. Freeman begins:

The next stage of your training program is to learn how to steal. Yes sir, I know, you’re all experts in stealing from your black brothers and sisters. Now you’ll learn how to steal from the enemy. Remember, a black man with a mop, tray or broom in his hand can go damn near anywhere in this country. And a smiling black man is invisible.

As Freeman describes “a black man with a mop, tray or broom,” the camera cuts from the wide shot of the Cobras to a mid shot of Studs, one of the gang, dressed as a janitor, squeegee in hand, entering the office of the President of Chicago Edison. As Freeman, off-camera, narrates the details of the mission—stealing the President’s pipe collection—Studs executes it on camera. Here the film’s form emphasizes the transformative capacity of Freeman’s (and Spook’s) lessons, and models the success of philosophy for its viewers. Through point of view shots, Spook also positions the spectators as students learning from Freeman’s teachings. What we watch is the explanation and illustration of

the training—a training in how to appropriate blackness as a practice, as a strategic weapon, rather than as a truth. While, as I’ve described above, particularly in reference to *Invisible Man*, such practice and strategy are not new to black America, but have in fact been used since slavery as means of survival and resistance, their codification in the cinema and as the weaponry of the new black soldier is significant—in no small part because of the cinema’s unique capacity to critique the visuality of racial representation and performance.

In the next stage of their education, Freeman teaches the Cobras—and *Spook* insists to its viewers—that their own investment in race as a category stands between themselves and their ability to fight for racial liberation. It is this lesson that inaugurates the process of militarizing the former street gang, and which offers a direct intervention to the audience. The scene opens with Freeman sitting on a piece of rattan furniture in a room decorated entirely with African art. Fingering a small African sword, and facing the young, fair-skinned Cobra sitting across from him, framed on one side by an African flag and wearing traditional African clothing, Freeman begins, “I want to talk to you Willy.” He tells the Cobra that he needs a writer-propagandist to spread word of the mission to “the people” and gives him the title of “Minister of Information.” This reference to the Black Panther Party connects Freeman’s efforts with an actual nationalist movement in the U.S., lending the fictional Freeman ‘party’ (which he will name the Black Freedom Fighters) the symbolic weight of the Panthers and their ten-point platform—as well as signaling viewers to understand the film as participating in real, material, and contemporary revolutionary practice. Just as the reference to the Panthers links Freeman’s militance to a globally-minded, Third World liberation movement, so the
Africanist *mise en scene*, connects *Spook*’s representations of blackness with the diaspora.

At the end of the scene, Freeman shows Willy (as *Spook* shows its audience) both why and how the icon of the black soldier must be reconstructed. When Willy asks him, “What you in this for, man? You want power, revenge?” Freeman answers, with the portrait of an African revolutionary behind him, “It’s simple Willy, I just want to be free. What about you?” When Willy responds, “So do I. And I hate white folks,” Freeman explodes into words central to the philosophical project of the film “Hate white folks? This is not about hate white folks. This is about loving freedom enough to die or kill for it if you have to!” Insisting loudly that hate cannot sustain revolution, Freeman explains the confusion and emptiness he felt when he killed an enemy soldier in Korea. “When you kill and man and spill his guts in the dust you see how fast hate disappears,” he tells Willy. Hate and a categorical separation from your enemy, Freeman implies, are the strategies of conventional, nationalist (state-based) warfare, the kind he fought (unsuccessfully) in Korea. Revolutionary warfare, the struggle that will unite the Cobras with the history of the African objects and portraits in Willy’s room, should be about love—of freedom. The problem with the old model of black soldier, *Spook* points out through this scene, is that it has been co-opted by the state and focused, politically, on the wrong agenda. Rather than fighting for (his) freedom, this old-model black soldier has been fighting for hatred.

*Spook* will paradoxically require Willy—and those committed to the struggle for freedom—to give up an investment in blackness, in the dominant categories of oppression, in exchange for black liberation. To give up the old military model and trade
it in for militancy instead, Willy will have to recognize that even amidst a room of African icons, blackness itself is based on reiterative performance, and consolidated only as its effect. In a series of shot-reverse-shots, during which, in low-angle, Freeman replaces the African sword on the wall and Willy becomes seemingly smaller and smaller in higher and higher angle framing, Freeman explains the plan: to raise funds for their war, the light-skinned Cobras will rob a bank while passing as white. Despite the fact that his plan would seem to rely on a retrograde racial categorization, and one that separates the light-skinned folks from the darker ones, the mise en scène suggests that Freeman has both the moral authority (with the low angle shots) and the symbolic connection to blackness (with the African sword) to insist on this ultimate de-centering of racial identity. As Willy rages, “All the yella niggas, right?! Look man I am tired of that! I am not passing! I am black! I am black! I’m a nigga, you understand me? I was born black, I live black, and I’m gonna die black!” the camera holds on a low angle shot of Freeman, just barely containing his laughter. Quickly the camera cuts away to the heist in action, with Willy and the other men, light-skinned, hair straightened. During their ride in the get-away van, the radio announces the manhunt for five Caucasian bank robbers and is met with smiles all around.

In this short five-minute scene, Freeman demonstrates both the dangers and the advantages of allowing prevailing perceptions of race to determine African American practice. He suggests that information about black Americans and their quest for freedom should be produced by black Americans themselves (through his appointment of a Minister of Information). His insistence here is that the perceptions of others, if allowed to register, might distort both the experience and breadth of African American
accomplishment—and thus should be defended against. In his final lesson of the scene—racial masquerade—Freeman teaches not only that race is not only constructed, but also that the construction comes from without, from social norms which we assume, iterate and thus can reiterate through what Jose Munoz has called “performative disidentification.” This performance is a mode “of dealing with dominant ideology…that neither opt[s] to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly oppose […] it [but] rather…work[s] on and against dominant ideology […] to transform a cultural logic from within.”

Unlike the Du Boisian concept of “double consciousness,” in which the black “soul” is divided and fractured by American racism, Freeman’s Fanonian understanding of race provides protection for the ‘soul’ from, not so much the pain of race and racism, but rather their internalization. In Freeman’s philosophy, race as a structure, as a categorical construct, and a performance, remains distinct from its practitioners, separable by those with the consciousness to distinguish ‘race’ from selfhood. Freeman’s black soldiers are thus transformed from black soldiers to disidentifying soldiers—real revolutionaries.

And the Black Woman?

Blaxploitation, and The Spook Who Sat By the Door along with it, has been roundly criticized for their treatment of black women. The actual Black Power movements themselves have received similar reviews. In her book on women in what she calls “Black Power Action Films,” Stephane Dunn argues that in Spook, at best, “black women [are figured] as key devices of mediation in the war between black men and white

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women; hence, the conquest of them, so to speak, is crucial.” While I whole-heartedly agree with Dunn’s assessment, as well as with her analyses of the classed roles played by Freeman’s the black nationalist prostitute and assimilationist bourgeoisie girlfriend, I also find significant Spook’s revision of Black Power’s masculinist iconography, which otherwise generally “left undisturbed the hegemonic common-sense notion that the struggle for liberation was a decidedly masculine enterprise.” In Spook, the transformation of the character of the prostitute into an Africanist Queen and spy for the revolution, offers another image of the black soldier: the female militant.

In fact, Spook portrays Dahomey as Freeman’s first convert—his first soldier in the cause for black liberation. Freeman’s approach with Dahomey, whom he meets in a bar where he goes looking for sex, is virtually the same as his efforts with his male recruits (minus the sex). He shows his student that her gender and sexuality (like race) are malleable and important strategies of self-representation and warfare. After presenting Freeman meeting Dahomey in the bar in a long shot, the camera cuts to a series of mid shots of the couple drinking and talking in a hotel room—and quickly begins to reveal the pressures of gendered and racial assimilation to which Dahomey has been yielding. As the prostitute checks her hair in the mirror, Freeman tells her that she reminds him of a queen. A series of over-the-shoulder, shot-reverse-shots capture the prostitute’s reflection and efforts to beautify herself, including attending to her straightened hair. Less powerful queen and more commodity in the mirror, Dahomey insists, “Look baby, all you have to do is give me my bread. You don’t have to talk no trash.” Soon, however, she becomes interested in Freeman’s vision of her. Looking away from the mirror in favor of staring at

223 Dunn 81.
224 Keeling 79.
Freeman, she finally asks, “What kind of queen?” Pulled away from her mirror image and engaged instead by Freeman’s transformative imagination, Dahomey listens intently as Freeman describes the African queen she reminds him of and her beautiful, “natural” hair. Dahomey’s project of making herself over into a commodified version of Western femininity in service to the demands of black American masculinity begins to yield to a fantasy of being “natural” and powerful, like the African queen. In the mise en scène of the film, Dahomey begins to assert herself as an empowered woman.

But, suddenly turning away from both Freeman and the camera, Dahomey rejects the momentary fancy, quipping “look honey, if you a hairdresser, maybe I can get you a boy.” Freeman responds calmly, “No, you’ll do,” parrying one of what will become a series of impotent challenges to his masculinity. Again attending to her image—lipstick and hair—in the mirror, Dahomey argues, “Then why don’t you just be a trick and stop talking all that shit about queens and kinky hair?” Freeman assents and offers her another drink. Moving to the bed, he nonetheless promises to bring a picture of the look-alike African to their next meeting. The scene ends before the sex begins—or possibly begins after it has ended—suggesting that Freeman’s exchange with the prostitute is more political than libidinal—that Freeman, and Spook itself, is more excited and satisfied by internal, political transformation than superficial, sexual (ex)change.

This first scene with Dahomey is one of a series in which Dixon shows both femininity and sexuality to be constructs of the dominant (white) capitalist culture, and therefore potential tools for waging war against it. Freeman himself, despite picking up Dahomey for sex, seems uninterested in accepting her role as a prostitute—or in adequately performing his as a john. Rather, he spends his (on-screen) time with
Dahomey attempting to persuade her to let her hair grow naturally, demonstrating to both Dahomey and the viewers the implicit connection between the prostitute’s gendered/sexual commodification and her racial assimilation to white norms (of, for instance, straightened hair). Later in the film, a less-assimilated Dahomey will not only use her sexuality differently, for a political cause as well as for her own monetary survival, but she will do so as a double agent working against the CIA. Freeman’s lesson in disidentification, at least whatever of it he is able to convey to Dahomey, transforms her into a practitioner herself. While Dunn’s claim that “the association between Freeman and the ‘Dahomey’ prostitute personifies the narrative’s sexist idea of black male and black female unity, which [in turn] hinges on the latter’s sexual support of the black male,” seems correct, Dahomey nonetheless joins the ranks of the battle as a soldier in Spook—and in so doing offers yet another revision to the WWII-era figure.

**Conclusion: The Revolution Televised**

The film winds its way to a conclusion with a series of violent, traumatic events. Civilians riot. In montages, black militants blow up buildings and attack the National Guard. Freeman must kill his best friend, a black cop named Dawson, because he discovers the militant’s true identity. Freeman is wounded, perhaps fatally. And the rioting continues. In one critical scene, the film positions its viewers in the crowd. And it is in this liminal, interpellated position that the film leaves us.

Shot after shot fills the frame with hands, arms, fire, faces, bodies all tangled. There is no sky, no wide view available, no mid or long shots, nor even any recognizable figures, and thus no opportunities for the kind of omniscience or broad perspective of the
apparatus. The viewer is compelled to witness the action of the riot as arioter, to either reject so completely the images on screen that she will be unable to make sense of them, or to allow herself to be, however briefly, interpellated into the violence of the riot. Identification, both cinematically and politically, is effected here through suture, by withholding mid and wide shots, and by Spook’s insistence that the audience recognize itself not so much as a part of the narrative, but rather as one of the crowd. We are encouraged to identify with the film’s urgency, with its message, and with its cause, and, in so doing, to form a cinematic community that might also double for a revolutionary sphere.

Unfortunately, by the time of Spook’s release, the Black Power movements were largely over. So those who might have been successfully hailed by the film’s message would have had only the tail end of a leaderless movement to join. Worse, the inexorable movement of capital would have pushed them to turn their politics into products, their global revolutionary sensibility into dashikis and other African-chic clothing instead of revolution. According to Keeling, American culture had entered a moment characterized by a terrible irony: the “coexistence of a visual cultural terrain wherein ‘Black aesthetic commodities’ figure prominently and an ethicopolitical terrain wherein ‘Black citizenship is increasingly devalued.’” Spook’s insistence on praxis, and (what I have argued is) global revolt, would have run the risk of getting lost in the crowd (as it were) of aesthetically-focused, politically-vacuous blaxploitation films. And its radical effort to redefine blackness as series of performances and political practice would not have been well received by those concerned with aestheticizing or appropriating blackness for

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225 Keeling 68.
economic ends. In fact, *Spook* was to have a very limited release, to circulate only in bootleg copies for some thirty years before its re-discovery and restoration. Who saw the film and how it affected its imagined public remain open questions.
Conclusion: Looking Back, Looking Black

Despite my insistence in Chapter Four that the figure of the black soldier I’ve described in this dissertation disappears with the emergence of the blaxploitation hero, the filmic figure continues to be quite popular, today perhaps more than ever before. Denzel Washington alone has played more than flour black soldiers in feature-length movies in the last twenty years. Films like Glory (1989), Tuskeegee Airmen (2002), Hart’s War (2002) and Miracle at Saint Anna (2008) are just a few of the recent productions that focus on the history of the black soldier, and there are scores of other popular and independent films with black soldier characters as well, from Apocalypse Now (1979) and Platoon (1986) to Forrest Gump (1994), The Manchurian Candidate (remake, 2004) and The Hurt Locker (2008).

Nonetheless, it is my argument that the black soldiers appearing in films from the 70s through to the present moment are not part of the legacy of the WWII-era, propaganda-born black soldier. None of the soldiers in these more recent films were created to answer the challenges of a struggling Civil Rights era America, or to transform black cinematic representation. Rather, with the end of the race riots of the sixties, the failure of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, the return of the troops from Vietnam, and the fast dominance of the filmic black militant by the a-political black renegade of blaxploitation cinema, the black soldier of WWII cinema who was developed to reshape the nation, became anachronistic.

So what does the persistence of the history and character of the black soldier in contemporary American cinema mean? How are we to read their presence in popular
culture? And does the filmic black soldier still *work* for the cause of civil rights, as he did in the three decades following the war that brought him to the screen? In his brief article on Melvin Van Peebles, James Surowiecki writes, “The significant but limited success of Van Peebles’s model shows how American capitalism can offer a chance for radical work to surface, but little opportunity for it to stay afloat.”\(^{226}\) The black soldier of WWII appeared in Hollywood films in response to the Roosevelt government’s mandate, but he became a very profitable figure, as an increasing number of black and white Americans grew concerned about the politics of integration and civil rights. In other words, for decades the semi-radical figure stayed “afloat” because, as he changed along with the socio-political imperatives of the Civil Rights era, he remained financially viable. After the end—or, as many would put it—success of the Civil Rights Movement, this soldier could no longer play his role, ideologically or financially.

And nonetheless, he has come back in what strikes me as two clearly differentiated forms: as the stock character, in war films and dramas like *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now* and *The Hurt Locker*; and as an historical figure, in films about black history and race relations, like *Buffalo Soldiers* (2001) and *Miracle at St. Anna*. Though the former has been, and could further be, the subject of sustained analysis by cultural studies, African American studies and film studies scholars for its continued expression of the racial politics of the day, its representations do not, in my mind, work to advance or describe any particular, consistent socio-political cause. The latter form—the historical figure—seems part of a more widespread cultural project of investigating black history, represented by cultural events like the 1997 TV mini-series *Roots*, Henry Louis

\(^{226}\) Surowiecki 179.
Gates, Jr.’s “The Root” project, which traces genealogical histories of African Americans, and recent celebrations of Buffalo soldiers across the country.

This black soldier—the historical figure—bears resemblance to the WWII-era filmic figure, in that his work seems to be centered on understanding the place of African Americans in a white-dominated nation. No longer, however, does the black soldier reflect radical sensibility; organized struggles for integration and civil rights have died out. Today, rather, he seems to reflect a nostalgia, a reaching back for a time when there were collective movements and political resistance—goals and paths toward those ends. He remains a figure of what black America has been willing to give up in order to gain citizenship and of black American dedication to its Americanness. He stands as a witness to the struggles and challenges of liberatory black efforts as early as the Revolutionary War and Martin Delaney’s mid-19th century novel *Blake*; the continued specularization of American racism with the figure of Gus in D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of A Nation* (1915); and the radical assertion of justice in *Hart’s War*.

In short: whereas the filmic figure of WWII signified a compromised attempt at redress or some sort of reparations, the cinematic black soldier of today instead pays homage to America’s failure to give Sweetback his dues.
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