



## The dark side of the farce: racism in early cinema, 1894–1915

Richard W. Waterman

To cite this article: Richard W. Waterman (2019): The dark side of the farce: racism in early cinema, 1894–1915, *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, DOI: [10.1080/21565503.2019.1674670](https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1674670)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1674670>



Published online: 09 Oct 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## The dark side of the farce: racism in early cinema, 1894–1915

Richard W. Waterman

Political Science, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA

### ABSTRACT

In its title sequences, the Keystone Comedy Studio referred to its films as a “farce comedy.” Farces are supposed to evoke laughter. Yet, from the very first images projected, dark racist images were prevalent and these representations contain violent imagery directed toward African American men, women and children. These images represent a time capsule of what I call the dark side of the farce. Because of the popularity and prevalence of certain types of films, it is conceivable that these films reflect consumer tastes unique to the time period in which they were produced. And while books, newspapers and periodicals are valuable resources for reconstructing past opinions, these sources may only have reached a limited audience. On the other hand, at its inception the motion picture was viewed by a diverse audience that included immigrants, the working poor, women and children. Hence, while films are not in any sense commensurate with polling, they are one tool that helps us to understand how people at the turn of the twentieth century perceived issues of race. Millions of Americans attended the movies daily. What they saw were the kinds of movies that were produced and these productions provide one valuable insight regarding public attitudes toward race. In this article, I examine films made between 1894 and 1915 as a reflection of the public attitudes of the time. I focus on comedy films because this was the only genre that existed literally from the projection of the first motion pictures to the middle of the twentieth-century’s second decade. I end the analysis with 1915 because after that year feature films became more dominant in theaters, while virtually all of the films discussed in this article are short subjects, ranging from 30 seconds to approximately 15 minutes.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 July 2018  
Accepted 9 August 2019

### KEYWORDS

Racism; African American; moving picture; violence; blackface

Colored people are funny. If colored people weren’t funny, there would be no plantation melodies, no banjos, no cake walk, no buck and wing dance, no minstrel show and no black-face vaudeville. **Moving Picture World**

Those who possessed culture were thought to be civilized; those who lacked it were philistines, or worse, savages. The latter category predictably, included an assortment of people that cultured whites feared or disliked – the lower classes, non-Europeans, and people whose skin color was not white. Such people were to be scorned because their behavior could only degrade, not elevate. Brundage (2011, 4)

In its title sequences, the Keystone Comedy Studio referred to its films as a “farce comedy.” A farce is defined as “a comic dramatic work using buffoonery and horseplay and typically including crude characterization and ludicrously improbable situations.” Farces are supposed to evoke laughter. They are not supposed to be dark or foreboding, and although the Keystones were replete with senseless cartoonish violence, they were not supposed to represent the dark side of our lives. Yet, from some of the very first images projected by the motion picture, dark racist images were prevalent, with violence illustrated and directed toward African American men, women and children. These images represent a time capsule of what I call the dark side of the farce.

While films are indeed creative works open to audience interpretations, and not the equivalent of polling (which focus on specific topics), even though these interpretations are not equivalent to the kinds of data that polls can provide, because of the popularity and prevalence of certain types of films, audience perceptions do reflect consumer tastes relevant to the time they were produced. And while books, newspapers and periodicals are valuable resources for reconstructing past opinions, these sources may only have reached a limited audience. On the other hand, at its inception the motion picture was viewed by a diverse audience that included immigrants, the working poor, women and children. Hence, while films are not in any sense commensurate with polling, they are one tool that helps us to understand how people at the turn of the twentieth century perceived issues of race. Millions of Americans went to the movies every day. As Lauren Rabinovitz (1998, 110) writes regarding attendance in Chicago,

By all accounts, there were at least 158 nickel theaters in operation by early 1907 and over 300 by 1908; in addition, approximately 20 vaudeville theaters had films on the bill. According to one report, there were 405 nickel theaters in 1909 with a seating capacity of 93,000. A social worker estimated that Chicago’s daily nickelodeon attendance was 200,000.

What the public saw, that is the kinds of movies that were produced, provide one valuable insight regarding public attitudes toward race. In this article, I examine films produced between 1894 and 1915 as a reflection of the public attitudes of the time. I focus on comedy films because this was the only genre that existed literally from the projection of the first motion pictures to the middle of the twentieth-century second decade. I end the analysis with 1915 because after that year feature films became more dominant in theaters, while virtually all of the films discussed in this article are short subjects, ranging from 30 seconds to approximately 15 minutes.

### **White and black American racial attitudes which infiltrated filmic representations**

Film portrays society’s attitudes about race during the particular period when a movie is produced.<sup>1</sup>As John Whitson Cell (1982) notes, the turn of the twentieth century was the “highest stage of white supremacy.” But even at this time, it is possible that there were alternative viewpoints, reflecting a more benign view of racial issues. Consequently, while we know that virulent racism existed at the beginning of the twentieth century, how can we determine the scope of public attitudes on racial issues? It may be that while white supremacist attitudes were dominant, a significant minority of the public may have held anti-racist attitudes. Movies represent not merely a mass form of entertainment, they also provide a window on the attitudes of the millions of people who viewed

them daily. This in turn can help us to understand just how prevalent these racist, white supremacist attitudes actually were.

Film is of special importance in this regard because it was indeed a technological marvel. While still photography had become a craze in the 1880s, inventors across the world sought the holy grail of a moving picture. With veritable bated breath, newspapers across the nation chronicled developments related to the possible addition of motion to pictures and when such images first became available, the public was startled to see such simple images as leaves blowing in the wind or puddles forming on water. Because it was such a startling new technology, movies held a particularly significant grip on the public's imagination and had a profound impact on the consciousness of people all over the world. The images the public viewed, therefore are important, not merely because they moved, but also because of how they provided many people with their first glimpse of cities, as well as different cultures. Movies provided many individuals with their first glimpse of African Americans and their communities. Positive images had the potential to ameliorate racist images, while negative images would reinforce white supremacist attitudes. How film portrayed African Americans therefore was of critical importance, more so than in other existing forms of entertainment that reached smaller audiences. So how did these early films represent images of African Americans? We can hypothesize that they reflected a white supremacist point of view, but were there alternative and more positive representations, if not by whites, then by African American filmmakers?

Racist, white supremacist views were reflected in all sorts of entertainment, including minstrel shows, vaudeville, plays, books, newspaper articles, and other communication venues. It is not surprising then that these images found their way into the moving picture. Ed Guerrero (1993, 9–10) writes,

commercial cinema in the United States, from its inception in Thomas Edison's 1890 "peep-shows" to the megabudget entertainment packages of present-day Hollywood, has pretty consistently devalued the image of African Americans and other racial minorities by confining their representation within an ideological web of myths, stereotypes, and caricatures.

Today, films such as *Get Out* (2017), *Moonlight* (2016), and *Black Panther* (2018) reflect a far greater tolerance for, critical examination of, and appreciation for diversity. During the period from 1894 through 1915, however, although there is evidence that African Americans were ardent moviegoers, the dominant audience for the moving picture consisted of white Americans. As Peter Noble (1970: 11) writes, "The problem of the Negro is really the problem of the whites. It is white people everywhere who have the power to change attitudes; it is they who could bring a new spirit of tolerance to the American scene." In this regard, the earliest filmmakers were white and the films they made represent a historical record of predominantly white attitudes about African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century in an age of Victorian morality. As Lary May (1983, 4) writes,

Victorianism was a way of life that provided the glue for the community, and ramified through work, class exclusiveness, leisure, and childrearing. All of this was contained in a synthesis which bound together the values of entertainment in popular literature, and practical aspects of everyday life ... In a nation of no formal aristocracy, the "best people" had a

profound sense of their own moral leadership. Unlike the immigrant workers or the Negro domestics in their midst, they had a sense of “ought” and a “concern for the future.”

Given these attitudes, it is not surprising that from its very inception the motion picture embraced racist images and comedy films reinforced the worst racist stereotypes from plantation days, including along with Uncle Tom, “the fanciful coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the brutal buck.” Comedy films portrayed “the American Negro ... as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey” (Bogle 2016, 1). Consequently, much of what appeared in the silent comedies was not funny; and here I am not referring to the quality of the humor. Racist images, often of a violent nature, were omnipresent. Yet it is possible that these negative images were offset by more positive ones in other films, particularly those produced by African American filmmakers. To test this possibility, it is necessary to examine the wide range of pictures with African American characters from 1894, when the kinescope peep shows first projected moving images, to 1915, the last year before the number of short subjects produced began to decline, thus giving way to the feature film, the star system and the development of vertical studio film production. As Hass, Christensen, and Hass (2015, 97; see also Sklar 1994) write,

Attitudes about race and ethnicity were more consistent in the silent era, a time when America’s white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority felt threatened by mass immigration. Movies mirrored this fear with ethnic and racial minority characters who were lazy, evil, and lustful. This was especially true of African-Americans and Asian characters.

These negative attitudes were reflected in the politics of the era. In the post-Reconstruction period, extralegal activities “were aimed at making sure that the new Jim Crow laws enacted across the land were enforced and that the popular racist attitudes of the Anglo-American public were enforced” (Nestey 1982, 12). The rise of the Ku Klux Klan further ensured that African Americans were stripped of their right to vote. Another severe blow was struck when, in 1883, the Supreme Court invalidated the Civil Rights Act of 1875. In May 1896, the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (162 US 537) provided a legal basis for segregation. As for lynchings, the NAACP reports that approximately 3500 African Americans were lynched between 1883 and 1968, which is certainly an underestimate.

Historical analyses also provide a view of the dominant white supremacist attitudes, that African Americans were unfit for equality or freedom. As historian Richard White (2017) describes, while this attitude was predominant in the South, it also was widely shared by Americans living in other regions. Childlike and irresponsible, African Americans required stern oversight by white Americans. Educating former slaves, therefore, was considered a waste of time and money. Consequently, it was in the best interest of the former slaves to be placed in a position of economic and political inferiority, for the best that could be hoped for was to create a new servile labor class. These racist attitudes were reflected in the images projected by early American cinema. As James Nestey (1982, 6) writes, “America’s film culture served as positive reinforcement of negative attitudes toward Afro-Americans. It is the supremacist attitudes of Anglo-Americans toward Afro-Americans, based on ethnocentrism and prejudice rather than fact, that defines the racism found in America.” And as Daniel J. Leab (1975, 17) writes, “the movie industry, like white America generally, gave little thought to the dignity of the black.” *This was particularly true of slapstick comedy*, “whose basis for comedy was confusion among the races, the humor, derisive and vicious, invariably at the expense of the Negro.”

It was within this hostile political and social environment that black filmmakers attempted to reflect positive images of African Americans. Not surprisingly, given the attitudes of the time, they confronted obstacles that white filmmakers did not. For example, they lacked a reliable *financial network* necessary to provide the capital for investment in motion picture production. While black entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and political leaders such as W. E. B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington provided funding for films, the commitments were far from sufficient to sustain any black filmmaking company's production throughout the silent film era. The lack of financing then led to yet another significant problem: there was no *distribution network* for African American filmmakers. Consequently, even the most prolific filmmaker of the entire silent era, Oscar Micheaux, was forced to revert to the practices of the very first filmmakers, traveling around the country with a limited number of copies of his films in hand, *exhibiting* them in different communities across the nation (see Bowser and Spence 2000). Without an effective distribution network, African American filmmakers made relatively few copies of their films, one major reason why so many African American made films are missing today. For instance, only three of Micheaux's silent films presently exist, and one of them is missing significant material.<sup>2</sup>

Missing material in existing films is due to another factor related to racism: *censorship* by white screening boards. While films were produced by African Americans, though often with white directors and investors at the helm, censorship boards controlled by whites, though sometimes including an African American, had the final say regarding the permissible material. Hence, African American made films were often altered significantly, with scenes added or deleted to satisfy white board members. Oscar Micheaux's attempts at racial uplift were impeded by white censors, requiring him to make changes that diluted the impact of his films, thus denying African American audiences the authority of his original intent (see Green 2000). *Body and Soul* (1925) was particularly mutilated, as Micheaux was forced to add a good twin (also played by Paul Robeson) to offset the evil pastor. The ending was then changed so that the entire story occurs as a dream. Whatever impact the original film had is lost in such ridiculous alterations of Micheaux's cinematic vision.

Factors related to exhibition and spectatorship also impacted the ability of African American filmmakers to reach a broader audience and to make the kinds of serious films that Micheaux and other African Americans intended to produce. While comedies with all-black performers were exhibited in white theaters, "all-black dramas were not" (Butters 2002, 184). *Even many all-black comedies were meant to appeal to a white audience*, considered the most profitable audience by film producers. Meanwhile, there was a paucity of theaters that allowed black films to be shown at either "midnight rambles" or all-black theaters that catered to black audiences.

Consequently, racially offensive themes and images are present in many all-black produced films, most notably in the comedies of the Ebony Company, which in its titles for *A Reckless Rover* (1918), even included an animated portrayal of its logo – a blackface monkey. Ebony made other films such as *A Natural Born Shooter* (1915), *Money Talks in Darktown* (1915), *Aladdin Jones* (1915), and the appalling *Two Knights of Vaudeville* (1916). The main character in *Spying the Spy* (1918) is named Sambo Sam. Due largely to these racist images and the backlash against them in the African American community, Ebony ceased production in 1919 (Butters 2002, 182–185). Still they were not alone in

making racist films. Mainstream companies such as Keystone produced *That Dark Town Belle* (1913) with Fred Mace in dark face “as a negro [who] has many rows with the dusky wooers who come to see his flirtatious intended” (Reeder 2017, 42). Another example is the films of Bert Williams, one of the most famous vaudeville stars. As I will discuss later in this chapter, his films also included numerous derogatory racist images. These films apparently delighted white audiences, while at the same time fueling anger among African American theatergoers and newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, which regularly railed against the racism in all-black comedies.

### Black spectatorship and black moviegoing

In terms of placing African American made films in context then, we need to consider the difference between white and black spectatorship. Films were made for white audiences and had to appeal to whites across the nation, especially in the South, which was established by early filmmakers as the bellwether of silent film morality, even though it represented a much smaller market for silent film. As a consequence, the films represented a southern view of the Negro – a former slave corrupted by freedom, requiring the oversight and control of a benign master. Black spectators received these images as an affront to their dignity, perpetuating the worst racial stereotypes, providing a clear motivation for African American filmmakers to produce their own movies as a necessary corrective to the harsh, insulting images designed for white audiences, or for white producers reaching out to a more tolerant northern audience.

There was another reason for African Americans to produce their own films. By the motion picture’s second decade, “African Americans were going to the movies in appreciable numbers, particularly in their own communities” (Stewart 2005, 114; see also Waller 1992). Yet, not surprisingly, African Americans suffered discrimination in front of the motion picture screen, just as they did in front of the camera. As Kevin Brownlow (1979, 46) records,

In the South, Nickelodeons experienced the restriction of the Jim Crow laws. Negroes entered the theatre from back alleys, sat in the balcony (“nigger heaven”) of theatres large enough to have them, and were banned altogether from others – a ban which applied to many Northern theaters, too. There were also theatres for Negroes only.

According to an African-American theater owner in the border state city of Lexington, Kentucky, the balcony seats in white theaters were far from heaven. At one theater, he described the seating accommodations “in the Jim Crow department where” a patron’s “legs are cramped, where there are poor sanitary conditions in the second gallery or rat hold.” Regarding another white Lexington theater, he asserted the

lofty perch in the roost where, with a little unbalance, they would fall over and break their necks, and there would be nothing done about it. In less time than a year three Negroes have been killed and slayers have been exonerated by the highest authorities . . . . (Waller 1995, 177)

It is important to note, then, that

African American migrants to Midwestern cities like Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Kansas City unfortunately found social conditions little different from what they had left in the South. They were usually barred from entering white movie theaters or were forced to sit in balconies. (Waller 1995, 42)

Even in Chicago, which instituted a de jure ban on discrimination, blacks were moved to the balcony or an aisle seat next to a wall because white patrons objected “to sitting next to them for an hour, or hour and a half. Offensive odor [was the] reason usually given.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, de facto segregation existed even in northern cities.

In response, so-called “race houses” were established. These black only theaters were especially controversial in the South. In Jackson, Mississippi, a mob of some two hundred white people forcibly closed a “No Name” theater when it was transformed into an African American only venue. According to reports in the *Chicago Defender*, “the mob cut the wires, disconnected the moving picture apparatus, and finally locked up the place” (Stewart 2005, 148). Theaters opened in other cities with less controversy. Waller (1995, 163) notes that the Frolic Theater in Lexington, Kentucky opened on September 28, 1907; the Princess Theater in Salisbury, North Carolina and the Odd Fellows Theater in Louisville in 1908; and in 1909 the Dixie Theater in Lake Charles, Louisiana, the Palace Picture Theater in Willington, Delaware, and the Pekin Theater in Cincinnati, Ohio (there were several Pekin theaters in cities across the nation). He then cites “Juli Jones,” a pseudonym for William Foster, – “the first African American to mobilize motion picture technology for entrepreneurial purposes” black filmmaker (Field 2015, 192) – as identifying 112 “colored” theaters in the United States as of 1909, “with those outside major cities being mostly ‘five and ten cent theaters, [combining] vaudeville and moving pictures,” with some of these white-owned establishments. Caddoo (2014, 66) notes, “More than two hundred black-owned and black-managed colored theaters opened in the United States between 1906 and 1914.” African American theaters were of critical importance to the development of what Field (2015) calls “uplift cinema” during a period of restrictive and repressive Jim Crow laws, even in the North. For example, in Chicago, where African Americans often were denied access to white theaters, the Pekin theater opened in 1906. In 1919, 300 “race houses” existed in America and by 1929, with that number later increasing to 461 (Stewart 2005, 155). While there was an increase in the number of theaters over time, many African Americans, particularly those living outside of big cities or in the South, where Jim Crow laws existed, had little opportunity to see a motion picture, unless they did so in a non-theatrical setting such as a church. In time this led to a vibrant African American film culture as the motion picture was integrated into ideas of racial uplift (Caddoo 2014).

While there were African American theaters, black theater exhibitors complained about “the irregular distribution of all-black films” (Stewart 2005, 155). Simply stated, there were not enough black made films to satisfy demand. Thus, many “race houses” showed the same films as white theaters, generally long after they had premiered in the white-only venues. Other theaters showed a mix of white films and movies made by African American filmmakers. Identifying the specific films that were shown in African American theaters in comparison to their white counterparts would be of interest, but since newspapers were less likely to report news about black theaters, empirical evidence in most of the country is unavailable. As such, the African American viewing experience is a subject ripe for scholarly research. As Mary Carbine (1996, 234) notes,

In scholarly work on early cinema, the tendency to neglect issues of black spectatorship is part of a more general theoretical problem. Most studies of mass culture employ theoretical models that downplay the possibility that minority groups can use commercial entertainment in culturally specific ways.



Carbine also notes that in studies of early cinema spectatorship, the main emphasis is on immigrants not African Americans:

... the emphasis on European immigrants presumes that the most significant shift in turn-of-the-century urban populations resulted from the second wave of European immigration between 1880 and 1920. In fact, the nickelodeon era (approximately 1904 through the early 1910s) and the rise of the picture palace, which by about 1914 attracted a larger middle-class audience, coincided with major population shifts among African Americans, as southern blacks moved to northern cities in a large-scale exodus known as the “Great Migration.” (See also Wilkerson 2010)

Films, especially slapstick comedies, contributed to “a desperate yearning for assimilation, consumption of mass culture [yielding] ingredients from which to construct a new, urban black culture” (Carbine 1996, 236). But this goal required the development of an African American film industry. Hence, the conundrum was circular: black audiences experienced prejudice from white made films, thus creating a need for black made films. But prejudice led to a lack of resources and censorship for both black made filmmakers and a prohibition on theaters where African Americans could view films. Furthermore, without a distribution system, films had to be rented or sold directly to exhibitors. Thus, while white made films were prevalent, perpetuating stereotypical images, there was a desperate need for African American made films.

### **Early film racially offensive images of African Americans: the dark side of the farce**

Thoroughly vicious racist images can be spotted on film from its very inception. As Butters (2002, xiii) writes, “The early silent era (1896–1905) was one of the most virulently racist periods in American filmmaking.” Several deplorable examples are from 1896. The *Watermelon Contest* (1896) shows two black men ravishing a large watermelon. Released in September 1896, *Dancing Darkies* portrayed blacks dancing, eating watermelons, playing craps, and stealing chickens. The *Los Angeles Times* reported on pictures from 1896 including one featuring “three pickaninnies [or black children], patting, juba and cutting up” (Musser 1991, 84; see also Musser 1994). Even the titles of films from this period were offensive: such as Edison’s *The Pickaninnies* (1894), Biograph’s *A Coon Cake Walk* (1897) and *The Gater and the Pickanniny* (1903), a British film – *Dancing Niggers* (1899), Selig’s *Prize Fight in Coontown* (1902), *A Night and Blackville* (1903) and *The Coon and the Watermelon* (1903), and a later film, Lubin’s *Coon Town Suffragettes* (1914) – one of Lubin’s “Sambo” series (Noble 1970, 29). *Sambo and Aunt Jemima: Comedians* (Edison, date unknown) feature “two handsome Negroes coyly kissing without gross racial overtones” (Cripps 1993, 12). And *Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1907) was described as “a genuine Ethiopian comedy.” Butters (2002, xvi) explains,

It is difficult for contemporary viewers not to be shocked by the overt racism contained in many of the shorts produced by all-white sources in the early silent era ... Definite patterns and themes in white representation of African Americans appeared. The majority of cinematic representations of African Americans were of African-American men, who were targets for the most overtly racist activities, including stereotyping behavior, ridicule, violence, and lynching.

These painful images validated popular stereotypes of black America, such as the 1913 Associated Motion Picture School's *How to Write Motion Picture Plays*, which "featured a 'shiftless, worthless, fat negro' whose eventual good fortune brings him quantities of chicken, pork chops, melons, and 'other things dear to a darky's heart'" (Cripps 1993, 97). Without positive images to counterbalance these negative ones, early cinema did much to disseminate and perpetuate racial prejudice and various forms of violent discrimination. Even apparently innocent films such as *Hard Wash* (the Biograph film company, 1896) and *A Morning Bath* (the Edison film company, 1896), both about black women washing black babies, contain racist overtones. For its contemporary audiences, the basic joke was that no matter how hard one scrubbed a black baby with white soap, the baby would still be black. It is in this sense that cameraman Billy Bitzer (1973, 29) described the Biograph film as "a big laugh-getter." Another so-called actuality (mini-documentaries, also called living pictures), *Laughing Ben* (Biograph film company, 1902), featured a toothless older African American laughing heartily. Lubin's *A Good Joke* (1901) was described in the company catalogue as featuring "three typical southern darkies each of which is over 90 years of age. One is engaged in telling a funny story and the facial expression of the three men will be enjoyed by everybody who witnesses it" (Butters 2002, 20). The sole joke was in watching aging "darkies" laughing. The film "had an equally unfortunate counterpart in 'Laughing Coon,'" a phonographic cylinder (George W. Johnson on Edison cylinder no. 4005) (Fell 1974, 43).

As previously mentioned, equally racist were the watermelon eating films. *A Watermelon Feast* (Biograph 1896) and *Watermelon Eating Contest* (Edison 1896) featured black men voraciously consuming watermelons, while the Lubin film company's 1903 film, *Who Said Watermelon?* featured women instead of men. As Lubin's advertisement for the film proclaimed,

The usual watermelon picture shows darkey men eating the luscious fruit. We have an excellent one of that kind of which we have sold quite a number, but the demand for a new watermelon picture has induced us to pose two colored women in which they are portrayed, ravenously getting on the outside of a number of melons, much to the amusement of onlookers. (Stewart 2005, 54)

*Making an Impression* (1903) is yet another film that glorifies the image of the watermelon eating black man.

The coon's love for a watermelon once more forms the subject of a film and, as usual, the result is very amusing and popular. A magical effect is also introduced, which adds greatly to the interest and still more the "mystification" of the audience. A big negro is seen devouring a ripe watermelon with much appetite and gusto. You look for the complete disappearance of the fruit in short order, but instead of diminishing in size it continues to grow larger until finally the magic prevails and the melon is whole once more. – Selig Catalog

Stewart (2005, 54) asserts, "These films ... tap into discourses on Black animalistic behavior and revive southern iconography (returning Blacks to the plantation)..." Other stereotypes were popular including the image of the dancing darkie. Black dancers performed in *The Pickaninny Dance* (the Edison film company, 1894), *Cake Walk* (Edison Co., 1898), *A Coon Cake Walk* (the Biograph film company, 1897), *An Up to Date Cake Walk* (Edison 1900), and *Dancing for a Chicken* (Lubin Co., 1903). Essanay's 1907 comedy, *The Dancing Nig* is about a black man who cannot stop dancing

whenever he hears music. African Americans often had to choose between two vices, such as gambling and chicken stealing. In Selig's *Interrupted Crap Game* (1903), "darkies" abandon a crap game to chase a chicken (Cripps 1993, 13). *The Tramp and the Crap Game* (Edison Co., 1900) combined two stereotypes, as a "number of darky boys and street arabs are engaged in a crap game just outside of the black entrance to a theater. The darkies suddenly give up the game of craps for the purpose of indulging in a Southern break down" (Stewart 2005, 54). Edison Co. (1898) and Lubin Co. (1908) made films titled *Buck Dance*, with the Lubin catalogue description,

Here is seen a number of "Smokes" dancing for their favorite "watermelon" and they pound the floor with their Cinderellas to beat the band. The luscious fruit is held by one of their number in plain view, and they finally stop dancing and engage in a tussle to see who can obtain the green fruit and devour it. (Butters 2002, 22)

Every imaginable pejorative stereotype was not only reinforced, but also legitimized for white society by the images presented in early cinema. Blacks were portrayed as inherently lazy, as in *Rastus in Zululand* (1910, Lubin), which portrays its main character as preferring sleep to work. Rastus was a coon character, described by Bogle (2016, 5) as "the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes. The pure coons emerged as no-account roustabouts, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language." *Rastus in Zululand* certainly fits this description. As the trade paper *Moving Picture World* delineates, Rastus "is looking for a soft spot when the scene opens and the picturesque banks of a small stream attract his fancy. It is in the open sunlight, but a darkey likes warmth and he composes himself to take a nap." Rastus was a popular character, appearing in several films including *Rastus and the Game Cock* (Keystone Co., 1913), *How Rastus Got His Pork Chops* (Lubin 1908), *How Rastus Got His Chicken*, also named *Rastus and Chicken* (1911). Rastus stole a chicken in *The Ranch Chicken* (American Film Manufacturing Company 1911). Demonstrating the popularity of the character, in 1917 Rastus was still running wild in *Rastus Runs Amuck*. There also were other comic versions of Africans in Africa including *The Zulu King* (1913) and *Queen for a Day*. In *Zululand* (Lubin Film Company, 1915), Zebo, "a good-for-nothing nigger," is easily frightened and eventually executed (Cripps 1993, 23).

African American heritage was the subject of ridicule in other ways. In *Burlesque Lions and their Tamer, Hagenbeck's Circus* (Lubin 1903), black men are presented in a cage snarling and biting each other "like wild animals," while a lion tamer appears to tame them (Butters 2002, 30). The film also plays on another stereotype – the easily frightened Negro is represented in such films as *Hallowe'en in Coontown* (Biograph 1897) and *Thirteen Club* (Biograph Co., 1905). In *Dixie Duo Down South* (producer unknown, 1910) African-American men are easily frightened by two young girls, thus demonstrating that black men are both childlike and even less mature than a little girl. Yet another stereotype is portrayed in *Georgia Camp Meeting* (Lubin 1903), when a black parson sneaks a drink of alcohol from a bottle, demonstrating that even devote African Americans were alcoholics and thieves.

Even black romance is belittled in such films as *Whose Baby Is You* (1902) and *Darkies Kiss* (1903). As Butters (2002, 35) writes, "African American romantic love is almost non-existent." Sometimes romance turns violent, however, such as in Keystone's *The Elite Ball*

(1913), where Rastus and Sambo tussle. In *The Black Prince* (Crystal Film Company, 1912) a wife chases after her cheating husband with a carving knife. In *A Night in Blackville* and *Prize Fight in Coontown* (both Selig Film Company, 1903) two blacks pull knives on each other. In *Darktown Duel* (Vitagraph Film Company, 1912) for Eph and Rastus the weapon of choice is watermelons. Even when violence is not involved, romance is nowhere in sight. In *A Bucktown Romance* (Kalem Film Company, 1912), “two African American gentlemen vie for the hand of the widow Lane only because they believe she has money.” And in *A Georgia Wedding* (Vitagraph 1912), “the bride is so tall that she cannot make it through the cabin door where the wedding is to take place” (Butters 2002, 36). Butters continues, “Making African-American romance strictly humorous dehumanizes black men and women by arguing that they cannot have real human emotions or connections.” Such images would not have been as pernicious had African-American romance been depicted in dramatic films, but those images were strictly forbidden. In those films, blacks were more concerned with the well-being of white families than they were with their own, that is when their families were portrayed at all. As noted, many films combined stereotypical images of African Americans. One example is *Eph’s Dream* (1913). As *Moving Picture World* described,

Eph is a black man of the crap shooting variety. He is industriously engaged in his favorite occupation of crap shooting and hoping for big winnings. He fares badly in the game and goes home. His mind still dwelling on his imaginary winnings, he goes to sleep and dreams. He finds money on the street, meets a “swell” girl, visits the swellest cafés and throws money around promiscuously and is the ideal of his class. But finally the crash comes. He awakens and comes back to the actual things. He realizes that all his fun was only in his imagination and is one disappointed coon. He wanders out from his hovel, passes the old crap game and hoping to realize something on his dream, he makes a “grab” at the “stakes.” He is successful only for a while. The “bunch” start after him and after a lively chase, catch him and give him a ducking in a nearby water trough.

This film portrays an African American man as child-like and irresponsible, gambling away his little money, living in a hovel and in the end driven to thievery and a violent end. While the hovel could be used as an excuse to discuss the poverty of turn-of-the-century African Americans, instead the unmistakable message is that the black man’s poverty is brought on by his own weaknesses. Furthermore, the little money that he has was probably secured acquired through illegal means, not through gainful employment and hard work. *These films absolve white America from any responsibility for the condition of the black man.*

For many reasons, watching these images today, or even reading the titles or catalogue descriptions of these films, is a painful experience. Given their popularity, however, and their devastating impact on African Americans, it is important for us to study these films. They tell us much about the root causes of racism in America. In this regard, it is imperative to note that the films did not represent the fringe attitudes of a few white supremacists. They were part and parcel of *mainstream American culture*. Their prevalence on the screen combined with a lack of positive counter images, reflects the attitudes of white spectators. As such, they provided a major obstacle to African American progress in society. But as disturbing as these images are, they were not nearly as dark as those that justified violence against African Americans as merely a good sort of clean fun.

## Violence against African Americans

No film is as offensive as *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904) for its depiction of violence against African Americans. The title derives from an old expression, referring either to something amiss or to a dark-skinned baby born to a white woman. The *Biograph Catalogue* describes the film's racist plot:

This is a clever comedy production in several scenes. In the opening scene the hired man is complaining to Farmer Jones that the woodpile is being depleted by thieves. Farmer Jones decides to adopt drastic measures and loads one of the sticks with dynamite. In the next scene a colored deacon, one of the shining lights in the African Church, is seen making away with the wood. The next scene shows the home of the deacon, where he is taking his comfort at the kitchen fire, while his wife is busy with the washing. The loaded stick is, of course, put into the fire, and there is a terrific explosion and the building is ruined. Farmer Jones and his man appear at the critical moment and the colored thieves are given a punishment they will not soon forget.

Jacqueline Najuma Stewart (2005, 1) critiqued the film:

This comedy ... demonstrates many elements that are typical of Black representation in early cinema. The three Black characters are played by white actors in blackface, wearing costumes signifying their traditional racial "types.": Mammy in apron and bandana; an uppity "colored deacon," striking a Zip Coon figure in top hat and tails; and his partner in crime, a harmless, shabbily dressed, white-haired Uncle Remus. The film depicts African Americans as habitual thieves ... And the film's "punitive" ending (a commonplace in early film comedies) functions to bring about narrative closure at the expense of Black transgressors.

Were this the only film portraying violence against African Americans, perhaps it could be dismissed as an offensive exception. But as Stewart notes, punitive endings indeed were common in early film comedies. Another example is from Edwin S. Porter's *The Watermelon Patch* (Edison Film Company, 1905). This time the "darkies" steal watermelons instead of wood. They take the watermelons home to their ramshackle shack to be consumed voraciously. Again, the shack could be used to emphasize their desperate poverty. Instead, it reflects their childlike behavior, as they celebrate while hiding their stolen goods from their white/adult supervisors. Violence again is at the film's centerpiece. In the final shot, as the darkies run from the shack to escape from their white pursuers, they receive a series of violent blows. Such punishment is perceived by its filmmakers as justified to punish these childlike beings for stealing.

Yet another example of violence inflicted onto blacks includes Edison's *Chicken Thieves*. One contemporary catalogue noted that the film was authentic because "all coons like chicken." Biograph's version, also called *The Chicken Thief* (1904) "was one of the largest grossing films of the year," as well as one of the first multi-reel films with *real* black actors. Lubin also made its own version of *The Chicken Thief* (1903) (Cripps 1993, 13). Other chicken stealing films include *C-H-I-C-K-E-N Spells Chicken* (Essanay Film Company, 1910) and *Mandy's Chicken Dinner* (Lubin Film Company, 1914). These films were so popular with white audiences that by 1914 Lubin released *The Tale of a Chicken* (1914), which *Moving Picture World* described as follows: "Sam Johnson & Raskus Hudson are suitors for Mandy Jones. When Raskus Bug gets the 'cold shoulder,'" his negro blood is aroused. Violence was justified in film against such transgressions as chicken thievery. In *A College Chicken* (Essanay Film Company, 1910), college students

beat an older black man who looks “suspicious” (Butters 2002, 27). In a twist on the formula, in *Chased by Bloodhounds* (Kalem Film Company, 1912) the black thief manages to escape because he is wearing clothes donated to him by the white farmer from whom he stole the chicken, thus creating confusion among the bloodhounds (Butters 2002, 27–28).

Violence directed African Americans is further evident in visual illustrations of lynching, rape, and destruction of the black body. Biograph’s *A Close Call* (1912), directed by Mack Sennett, makes fun of lynching. The film involves other acts of violence, including rape. African American children were subjected to violence in such films as *The Gator and the Pickaninny* (Biograph, 1900). Here a black child is swallowed by an alligator. While the father eventually saves his child, the image is truly frightening. As Butters (2002, 38) writes, “Black children were often considered ‘disposable.’” Edison’s *Ten Pickaninnies* (1908) is described by the trade journal *Moving Picture World* as:

Imagine ten pickaninnies turned loose and on mischief bent. Farmer catches one leaving but Nine. Nine Happy Snowballs on a Swing gate. One gets knocked out then there are Eight. Eight Black Cherubs, swimming at “Eleven,” Mammy catches “Rastus,” that leaves Seven. Seven Jolly Coons on a Tramp play tricks. Tramp wakes up and nabs one vamoose the Six. Six Bad “Chillun” fooling ‘round a Hive, Bees get busy now there’s only Five. Five Inky Kids crawl thro’ a hencoop door, Farmer scares one away that leaves Four. Four Smoky Kids hunting up a Tree. Gun explodes, whiz! “Skiddo” the Three. Three Black Lambs nothing else to do. Investigate a deep Well now there’s Two. Two Cute Ebonites with Auntie having fun. “Mandy” gets a ducking all gone but One. One Chubby Coonlet with a toy Pop-gun. Monkeyed ‘round a ‘gator now there’s None.

These films include such violence as children who “are knocked out, kidnapped, bee stung to death, shot, drowned, and eaten by an alligator.” The violence is “sadistic” reflecting “violent tendencies that a segment of the Euro-American population had toward the African-American population” (Butters 2002, 38–39). In addition to the films’ violence, the children are referred to as “snowballs, cherubs, coons, bad chillun, inky kids, smoky kids, black lambs, cute ebonies, and chubbie ebonies” (Bogle 2016, 5). Since children are our most vulnerable and valuable natural resource, images that not only portray but also present violence as pure fun certainly represents the darkest side of the dark side of the farce. In addition, misnaming children is designed to not only marginalize but impose a destructive identity with names such as “snowballs” and “cherubs.”

Sadly, there are few counter images. On only a few occasions was a black character portrayed as assertive and mixing in with white society. *Nellie, the Beautiful Housemaid* (1908, the Vitagraph Co.) also includes an assertive black character, as does *Mixed Babies*, with a confident black shopper grabbing items at a department store. In this regard, Porter’s *Laughing Gas* (1907) is an interesting film. A black woman visits a white dentist to have a tooth pulled. She insists on a pain killer, again an unusual act of black authority in a silent comedy. She is seen not merely as a servant in a white-owned house, but also as interacting within white society. Most prominently, she is seen riding on a streetcar. And as she laughs, the after effect of the laughing gas, others – black and white – are caught up in her mirthful spirit. These are remarkably positive images for this time in history. Yet, they are offset by negative images. When the dentist removes her tooth it is oversized, suggesting that African Americans have animal-like teeth. And “the fact that her persistent laughter is produced by nitrous-oxide administered by the dentist suggests that Black/

female bodies are particularly susceptible to intoxication ...” (Stewart 2005, 46). Thus, the image is not entirely positive, for laughing African Americans were still the main focus of the film’s humor.

In sum, Butters (2002, 26) concludes that we can determine two unintended morals from these early films: (1) “Violent action toward African-American men was apparently amusing, if not hilarious, to the early-twentieth-century viewer because the ‘coons’ deserved it” and (2) “the only apparent way that African-American men could feed their children was by thievery.” Because there was little reporting on African American attitudes toward these films, Butters concludes, “One can only imagine how African-American spectators felt when watching such a movie.” At the time, concerns about African American audience reactions did not matter, for these films were designed for white spectators. The *demographics of the audience*, which was overwhelmingly white, therefore defined the types of films that were *produced* and *exhibited*.

And it was comedies that contained the most vicious African-American stereotypes. As Butters (2002, 27) notes,

One can argue that violent depictions of African Americans were simply part of the slapstick tradition of comedy that dominated early screen portrayals ... Violence has been an important element in American cinematic humor, but its relationship to historical context has largely been ignored by film historians until recently. Racialized cinematic brutality was part of the larger slapstick tradition, but more important, it was an element of the Euro-American masochistic control of the black male body that dominated American race relations at the turn of the century ... Although this was the age of slapstick comedy, the physical maltreatment of African-American men closely mirrored real life, reflecting a presumption that African-American men must be restrained.

In other words, these images are no laughing matter. Comedy films presented vicious images that simply cannot be excused as mere slapstick falderal. They were dark – *as in foreboding* – images indeed!

### **Racial Masquerades create humor for whites and humiliation for blacks**

Although African Americans appeared in the very earliest films, by 1903 the presence of African American performers on screen abruptly declined in such films as Edison’s *Minstrels Battling* (circa 1897–1900), *The Edison Minstrels* (1897), and *The Minstrel’s Sacrifice* (producer unknown, 1908). Jane Gaines (2001, 25) comments,

The question of blacks in cinema, like the nearly parallel question of women in film, is often a problem in what I will call the “politics of mirroring,” a politics that asks why the bodies of blacks and women are missing from the screen, or why, if they are not missing, they are unrecognizable to the people they are supposed to represent.

Even an African American, Bert Williams (previously mentioned), appeared in blackface. There were two basic types of blackface characters; the so-called rural Sambo, slow of thought and action, and the urban Zip Coon, whose malapropisms reflected his low intelligence, while his sly behavior demonstrated that he was both dangerous to whites and blacks alike, and that he was of a decidedly inferior racial heritage (Butters 2002, 12). Although African Americans appeared in the very earliest films, Butters (2002, 7) concluded after screening nearly one hundred films produced between 1903 and 1915, that

only about five percent featured actual African American actors in male roles. Women also were played by white, usually obese actors.

While the prevalent use of blackface was reprehensible, it was not the only issue related to racial masquerade during the early cinema period. Many early films examined the idea that a black person might be mistaken for a white, with the clear insinuation that a white person was not only superior to a black person, but that even the simple act of kissing a black person was reprehensible. One of the most widely discussed films in this genre is Edwin S. Porter's *What Happened in a Tunnel* (1903). A young lover, played by G. M. Anderson (later famous as Essanay's Bronco Billy Anderson), attempts to kiss a pretty girl as a train enters a tunnel. What the man does not know is that during the dark interval the tunnel provides, the white woman changes seats with her black maid. As the train emerges from the tunnel, and light is restored, the man is embarrassed to discover that he is kissing a black woman, much to the amusement of both the black and white women. Films in which white men were embarrassed or, even more so, humiliated by an accidental kiss, were a staple of early cinema comedy. Another example is Biograph's *Under the Old Apple Tree* (1907), when an old man is tricked into kissing a black woman. The same year Edison made the similarly themed *Jack the Kisser*. Other films in this genre include Biograph's *The Misdirected Kiss* and *A Kiss in the Dark* (both 1904), and *In Black and White*, where a white girl uses a potion to darken her rival's skin. Lubin's *Love in a Railroad Train* (1902) is the story of a man who attempts to kiss a pretty girl. Again, the train enters a dark tunnel. When it emerges, he discovers that he is instead kissing a baby's bottom. Although the woman and the baby are white, the juxtaposition of the various films led early cinema historian Charles Musser (1991, 263) to comment, "The substitution of a black maid for a baby's bottom suggests the casual use of demeaning racial stereotypes in this period." Substitution was even more overt in Robert W. Paul's *The Haunted Curiosity Shop* (1901) directed by Walter Booth. A trick film, a floating skull is transformed into a charming lady. When a man attempts "to grasp the strange visitor around the waist with a view to stealing a kiss ... the fair damsel" changes "into a grinning negress. In anger," the man thrusts "her into an old wardrobe, where she becomes white again" (Talbot 1912, 203).

If kissing a black woman was forbidden, then marriage certainly was uncalled for. In *Advertising for a Wife* (Pathé Film Company, 1910), a man adopts a blackface disguise to avoid a mob of potential brides. *The Dark Romance of a Tobacco Can* (Essanay Film Company, 1911) featured one of the biggest stars of early silent cinema: Francis X. Bushman. *Moving Picture World* described the movie's plot.

Grace Williams, a little colored girl, working in a tobacco factory, slips a note into a can of tobacco. The note gives her address and her object, matrimony. Some years later young George M. Jackson buys the package of tobacco and hastens to his rooms, where he finds his lawyer, who hands him his uncle's will, in which is contained the information that young Jackson must marry within a week after his uncle's death if he wants his fortune. Nervously Jackson opens his pipe, and finds the note. With little hesitancy Jackson writes to the colored girl and tells her to come on. On the last day she arrives, to young Jackson's utter horror, astonishment and despair. She is put out, after which George proposes to the maid and drags her with all haste to the marriage license bureau, where the couple are married.

Alice Guy Blaché's *Matrimony's Speed Limit* (1913) involves a man who must marry in a matter of minutes or lose a fortune. He is about to propose to a



woman wearing a veil, until she removes it, revealing that she is actually black. Horrified, the man runs away. The film's message is clear: a white man would not marry a black woman even if he could inherit a fortune; that is of course if the laws allowed them to marry at all.

Confusing blacks with whites was common in another early film type. *Mixing Babies* (Biograph Film Company, 1908) involves babies that accidentally are switched. In *Mixed Babies* shoppers "are so preoccupied with their purchase that they do not notice that the claim tags have been switched on their baby carriages (by a young prankster) and they take the wrong infants home." Other films involving babies suggest that Blacks are not fit parents. In *Mammy's Child*, "a jealous white girl on a jaunt to a park trades her doll for a Negro baby, at least until the black mother cancels the deal with a baleful stare." And in *Cause of Thanksgiving* (produced by Tefft Johnson), "Jim trades his turkey to little black Lily Ann for her baby brother, Rastus, because her family has a surfeit of children but no holiday dinner" (all citations are from Cripps 1993, 24).

*The Valet's Wife* (Biograph 1908) provides another variation on the switching black for white joke. As Stewart (2005, 85) describes,

New York playboy Reggie Van Twiler must produce a wife and child to substantiate the stories he has been telling his benefactor uncle. Unfortunately, the nurse who is dispatched to the orphanage to procure a baby brings home a Black one, exposing Reggie's deception.

Sometimes, a white person pretends to be African American as in *The Subpoena Server* (Biograph Film Company, 1906), where a white man disguises himself as a black porter to avoid the long arm of the law.

Finally, in several films such as *Drawing the Color Line* (Edison Film Company, 1909), *Black and White* and *A Change of Complexion* (both Crystal Film Company, 1913), and *A Mix-Up in Black* (Edison 1916) "white characters experience race prejudice, even from members of their own family, until the 'Black' mask is discovered and removed" (Stewart 2005, 86). In some of these films, pranksters cover a man in blackface while he sleeps or during a drunken interval. Sometimes the switching process is done on purpose. In *The Colored Stenographer* (Edison 1909), "the skirt-chasing white boss switches the beautiful white typist he has recently hired with the Black scrubwoman to make his wife believe he has given up his womanizing ways." At the end of the film, however, the black woman is unwilling to give up her new job, suggesting "the problems that can arise when Blacks display increased assertiveness in the workplace" (Stewart 2005, 79).

Putting these images into perspective is a sad but important task for as Eileen Bowser (1995) notes that the comic images on screen reflected contemporary attitudes (see also Bernardi 1996; Musser 1991, 21). Similarly, David Mayer (2008, 133) writes,

the sketches and coda of *Fights of Nations* encapsulate current American attitudes on race and ethnicity. In a somewhat offhand and unfocused manner, the compilation [of different ethnic groups] gives vent to standing national prejudices and concludes with the myth of America's European heritage and innate purity, arguing that "other" or different cultures fight dangerously and sometimes ludicrously, whereas those of Western European origin or of American birth are more peaceful and benign in their action.

In other words, the image projected reflected the white supremacist view that African Americans were inferior to white Americans. As such, the images did considerable

damage, reinforcing racist images, while providing no positive counter images. Perhaps then, positive images could be found in films produced by African Americans.

### White companies produce insulting black images

While whites composed the majority of the movie going audience nationwide, there was a substantial market for African American patrons. It is therefore unsurprising that white filmmakers attempted to penetrate this market. For example, *Everybody Works but Father* (1905, Biograph), a popular song of the day, was made on the same set with a whiteface and a blackface version of the film. Otherwise, the two films were identical. On the other hand, *Everybody Works but Mother* (1905, Biograph) included only a whiteface version designed to be shown to primarily white audience. In addition to Biograph, other companies such as Lubin “employed a small stock company of black actors for several all-black cast one-reel comedy films” that were “released between 1913 and 1915” (Stewart 2005, 56–57). Alice Guy Blaché’s Solax Company also made films for African American Audiences, which includes *A Fool and His Money* (1912). The fool is an African American who comes into a large sum of money, only to gamble it away. Not only does the film propagate a common negative stereotype of black people as irresponsible and easily fooled, Solax advertised the film in *Moving Picture World* with a full-page-ad proclaiming, “Darktown Aristocrats Released Friday October 11th.” Darktown referred to black neighborhoods, as in the Historical Feature Film Company’s 1915 film *Money Talks in Darktown*. *Moving Picture World* described the film:

The story is a satiric comedy dealing with the pretensions of colored folks. The way they try to ape and imitate their white brothers forms the basis of the story. A negro labourer suddenly gets in possession of a lot of money and there goes the place.

Remarkably, the images on the screen were even more offensive than the advertisements.

Even films featuring famous black performers perpetuated negative stereotypes. Bert Williams, a black man born in the Bahamas, appeared on stage and screen in minstrel-like black face makeup. He was one of the most famous performers on the vaudeville stage, as well as one of its highest paid performers (see Brundage 2011, 20). He therefore seemed to be a natural for motion pictures. Yet, he did not make his first film until 1913: *Lime Kiln Club Field Day* with Biograph. IMDB notes that the film was, “Modeled after a popular collection of stories known as ‘Brother Gardener’s Lime Kiln Club,’ the plot features three suitors vying to win the hand of the local beauty.” The film no longer exists. A later Williams’ film, *A Natural Born Gambler* (1916, Biograph), while it includes Williams’ famous pantomime routine where he skillfully mimics playing cards with an imaginary deck and players, also displays a cornucopia of stereotypical images. The largely African American cast is seen stealing chickens, afraid of the devil in the graveyard, cheating at cards, and speaking garbled English. In the end, Williams is sent to jail, suggesting that *negroes* are unfit, dishonest and deserving of incarceration. There is nothing in the film suggesting that African Americans are to be respected or admired. Another film, *Fish* (1916), includes white actors in blackface, including an overweight woman who represents the Mammy stereotype. It also involves yet another example of *comic* violence against a black man. When Williams tries to sell a fish to a white customer, the white man sicks

his dog on Williams. He then stands laughing as Williams rolls down a hill into a nearby street. It is difficult to find respectable images in these white produced films.

### **Black filmmakers produce black comedies: some circulated offensive but entertaining images**

Consequently, the task of portraying African American uplift was left to African American filmmakers and the comedy film was at the forefront of a major development in the history of early cinema. As Stewart (2005, 192–193) writes, “Although comedy certainly appealed to many African American viewers, it is the genre that would seem, superficially, to be the most likely to feature offensive racial stereotyping, even in films produced by well-meaning, Black controlled companies ...” In fact, “some Black-produced films repeated blackface minstrel conventions that white filmmakers had been using since the earliest days of cinema.”

To counter the damage produced by Euro-American-made films, it was vitally important for African Americans to produce and market their own movies. To the best of our knowledge, William Foster was the first to do so. Foster used comedy films to address the “resentment” of African Americans to the negative misrepresentations that were “presented everywhere.” He advocated making films “for ourselves in our own best way and for our own best good” (Field 2015, 1). With his own scenario and under his roles as producer, director and performer, the Foster Photoplay Company’s comedy *The Railroad Porter* (1913) was the first African American fiction film (Stewart 2004, 126). The film, now missing, involves a porter and his wife. The wife invites a young waiter to have lunch with her. The husband returns, pulls out a revolver, which is followed by a comic chase. The film ends without violence, as the couple reconcile (Kirby 1997, 81). The film was criticized by the African American press for its theme of infidelity, thus portraying a black marriage in a negative light (Field 2015, 197–198).

Foster’s others films such as *The Fall Guy*, *The Butler*, and *The Grafters and the Maid*, all in 1913, received far more praise in the African American press and were part of the

uplift project [that] saw individual behavior as the key to communal success, emphasizing personal conduct over systematic critique. This was a view cultivated in the acknowledgment of white racist misperception and misrepresentation of African Americans, essentializing and dehumanizing perspectives that needed to be countered by a strict code of conduct. (Field 2015, 3)

Unfortunately, the audience for these films was limited to African Americans, and mostly those living in urban America. White Americans, those most in need of these corrective images, rarely if ever were exposed to them. Still, so-called *race films* provided the first corrective step in presenting a more realistic and positive image of African Americans on motion picture screens. While many uplift films served this purpose, comedy films continued to fall short of this lofty goal. As Field (2015, 13) writes, “Although most were ideologically aligned with the [Booker T. Washington] uplift project, some posited a challenge to uplift philosophy and its practical components (such as uplift comedies that were offensive to some while being highly entertaining to others).”

In an attempt at broader uplift, Foster attempted to mainstream his films to a white audience. As part of this effort, he was interviewed by James S. McQuade of the *Moving*

*Picture World*. McQuade quoted Foster: “Ah don’t want you to take mah word for it that these comedies are a big hit. Ah jus’ want yo to come an’ see one of them an’ laf yo head off.” McQuade translated his interview into a dismissive, mocking dialogue that translated an otherwise “straightforward report with a racialized caricature more commonly used for Black figures in front of the camera than for those behind it.” Field (2015, 200) continues,

Through the adoption of a minstrel accent, the *Moving Picture World* conflates the businessman and the filmmaker with the type of product he makes. In this article, Foster is presented not just as an agent of comedy but as a joke himself.

Hence, a major trade paper ridiculed an African American filmmaker by reflecting the vile prejudices of its time.

This was not the only example of such egregious behavior. When an announcement of a reel showing footage of “groups of colored people,” an assemblage of The National Negro Business League approved by Booker T. Washington, appeared in the *Moving Picture World*, it was juxtaposed next to a review for the film *The Haunted Bachelor* (Éclair Film Company, 1912). That film is described as

a very farcical picture in which Sambo, a burnt cork coon, and his master, the bachelor, have the chief roles. The master thinks he has killed Sambo. The idea might be made to furnish fun; but there is little that is spontaneous or very funny in it as given here. (Field 2015, 190)

Again, an important trade publication veritably mocked films about African Americans. The message was clear: On screen and off, African Americans were not worthy of respect.

At about the same time that Foster began making films, his Afro-American film company began producing movies. The company proclaimed that it would produce movies “with real negro characters” that would demonstrate “the rapid progress of the negro in every field of human activity.” Among the comedies made by the company were *Jim Dandy’s Dream*, *By the Help of Uncle Eben*, *Mandy’s Choice* and *One Large Evening*, with the famous African American actor Charles Gilpin (Waller 1995, 176; see also Waller 1992). *Lovey Joe’s Romance* and *The Tango Queen* were both released in 1914. A review in *The Freeman* was not at all kind to the former film:

This so-called “masterpiece” proved of the most amateurish class. The play is disconnected all through. The scenery is bad; is static, even in the announcements. The camera, in most instances, was out of focus and the gun used was a toy weapon that would not shoot ... The general action of the piece is absolutely absurd and that is to be regretted that the first production of the Afro-American Film Co. to come west should have shown such weakness. (Field 2015, 226)

While the Afro-American Film Company’s next comedy release, *One Large Evening*, garnered better reviews, it was rejected by the Chicago Board of Moving Pictures on the recommendation of a black board member, the Reverend Archibald J. Carey. The *Chicago Defender* opined, “Before” Reverend Carey “was a member the board only concerned itself with vicious portrayals but under the keen eyes of Rev. Carey even the ridiculous has been eliminated” (Field 2015, 227). The film was then re-titled for release to white audiences: *A Night in Coontown*. Hence, censorship was employed to prevent African American films from addressing in a more positive manner the racist images contained in slapstick comedies. Other films reflected negative images. The Afro-American Company released the first known two-reel comedy made by black filmmakers, *Uncle*

*Remus' First Visit to New York* (Haynes Photoplay Company 1914). Field (2015, 231) notes, “*Uncle Remus's Visit* turns the uplift narrative on its head, reimagining the before-and-after trajectory as temporally conflated. It highlights ‘two extremes’ of African American life ...” The film was popular and received positive reviews from the African American press. Yet again, the film’s very title and source material raises the tenuous balance between comedy and uplift, as does the names of two characters from the film: Rastus and Uncle Remus.

The relationship between positive images of African Americans and “uplift” was therefore complex. Dark, foreboding images of blacks were so pervasive that it was difficult even for African American filmmakers to negotiate the boundaries between comedy and race uplift. This was true of another African American filmmaker who began making movies as early as 1915. Peter Jones earliest films were actualities. Later he made comedy films such as *The Troubles of Sambo and Dinah* (1918), which had been a popular skit on the vaudeville stage. Field (2015, 217) notes, “These comedies were fraught with older traditions of racialized nation while concurrently working with uplift paradigms.” Jones went on to make a series of comedies directed by famous comedian Matt Marshall. Regarding these films, the *Chicago Defender* editorialized,

There will be no chicken-stealing scenes or crap games to be played by this company. The pictures will be placed upon a high order and the scenes will tend to awaken the consciences of men and women to do the right thing in life and will discourage drunkenness, dishonesty and licentiousness.

While this was Jones’ goal, other films of the time fell far short of this aspirational objective.

African American comedy films became more prevalent after the period covered by this article. Yet a few of them are worth mentioning here. In 1916, *Ebony* released *Two Knights of Vaudeville*. The film’s producer, Luther Pollard, noted that his pictures “proved to the public that colored players can put over comedy without any of the crap shooting, chicken stealing, razor display, water melon eating stuff that colored people generally have been a little disgusted in seeing” (Musser 2016, 8). Yet, at least by today’s standards, the film is replete with racial stereotypes. After two black men find three tickets to a vaudeville show on the sidewalk and invite a woman to join them. The first title card reads, “WE’VLL ALL DALL UP.” This is followed by: “SOME DOIN’S TO-NIGHT – SHO’ BROTHER.” Later in the film, after the two men are ejected for falling on stage during a juggling act, the title tells us: “WHAT YO’ GO AND MESS UP THE PARTY FO.” And “YES SAH – YES SAH – AM LEABIN HYAR RIGHT NOW.” The use of dialect is similar to that employed by James McQuade in his *Moving Picture World* interview mocking William Foster. When the two men advertise their own show, they do so as: “VODEVIL 5 2EN2E.” The film presents uneducated black men, images that the African American newspaper the *Chicago Defender* found to be similar to the racist images in films made by white filmmakers.

A much more interesting film is *Mercy, the Mummy Mumbled* (1918, produced by Luther Pollard). The film is a remake of Vitagraph’s 1914 film, *The Egyptian Mummy*, featuring Billy Quirk as man who needs money so that he can marry the girl he loves. His girl’s crazed father attempts to bring back the dead with an elixir he invents. Cleverly, Quirk disguises a tramp as a mummy, fraudulently receives his financial reward, and thus has the necessary money to win the father’s permission to marry his daughter.

*Mercy, the Mummy Mumbled* not only features far more action than *The Egyptian Mummy*, it also involves a subplot with Egyptian mummy hunters that provides the film with a more action-oriented conclusion. Finally, the young man who wishes to marry does not need to extort money from his father-in-law to be, only to prove that the old man's formula can bring a mummy back to life. While the film is in a dreadful state of decay, comically it is a much funnier and more interesting film than its Vitagraph predecessor. It reflects the savvy skill of its filmmaker, Luther Pollard, only one of two blacks employed by the otherwise all-white Vitagraph company.

## Conclusions

When we examine the films made during the period from 1894 through 1915 as a surrogate measure for public attitudes toward African Americans, we find little to suggest that virulent racism was not common across a wide swath of white Americans. It was not merely related to Southern attitudes on race. People across America watched the same films. Had there been a desire for more racially balanced attitudes from 1894–1915, certainly some more positive films would exist today, or at least some record of them would exist in film catalogues or the pages of newspapers or trade papers such as the then highly influential *Moving Picture World*. None exist! To date, there are no comedies from this period that portray African Americans in a positive light. Rather, not only are blacks reviled, they also are the subject of hideous violence (e.g., children swallowed by alligators). Even the African American made films I discussed are replete with harsh stereotypical images.

While we do not have public opinion polls to guide us in interpreting attitudes about African Americans, moving pictures provide a window into the minds of filmmakers and their audience. As such, they are a valuable tool for studying political, sociological and historical attitudes. The tragic story that they tell is not merely limited to prevalent public attitudes, the films and their titles also provide us with a clear means of understanding how the movies perpetuated such dark images. But is it possible that these early movies only reinforced negative attitudes? As Peter Noble (1970, 11) writes,

if the powerful Hollywood machine for moulding mass opinions had originally been turned full blast against all forms of racial intolerance, anti-Negroism, and other less prominent facets of Fascism, then who knows to what degree this might have affected the attitude of filmgoers everywhere?

Film therefore reflected and propagated racist images, not merely in the early years of the twentieth century, but for many decades afterward.

## Notes

1. I use a variety of sources for this article. Among those that are accessible to most readers, in addition to the materials presented in the reference section, are information that now can be found online. They include The *Edison Catalogue*: <http://edison.rutgers.edu/mopix/mopix.htm>, The *Media History Digital Library*: <http://mediahistoryproject.org/earlycinema/> and the Biograph Collection which can be found at: [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/filmstudycenter/BIOGRAPH\\_MoMA.pdf](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/filmstudycenter/BIOGRAPH_MoMA.pdf). In addition, three excellent sources that I rely on throughout this volume for basic titles and information, and

which I cite here with the greatest of reverence for the archivists who compiled them are Niver, Kent. 1985. *Early Motion Pictures: The Paper Print Collection in the Library of Congress*. Edited by Bebe Bergsten. Washington, DC: Library of Congress; American Film Institute (1995). *The American Film Institute Catalog: Film Beginnings, 1893–1910*. London: The Scarecrow Press; and La Fédération internationale des archives du film (FIAP) catalog; Magliozzi, Ronald S. 1988. *Treasures from the Film Archives a catalog of short silent fiction films held by FIAF archives*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press. Other films can be found at the *Museum of Modern Art*. Again, for more information on their circulating library see: <https://www.moma.org>. For information on the *Library of Congress' American Silent Film Database* see: <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/preservation-research/silent-film-database/>. The *New York Public Library* has an incredible source of films and documents. And of course, many of the films from this period are now available on DVD and Blu-ray, as well as YouTube and various streaming services, though one must be careful of the quality of these films, which can vary from astonishing to barely viewable.

2. The loss of Micheaux's silent films is particularly tragic, since Musser considers him to be one of the most important directors of the entire silent era. See Bowser, Gaines, and Musser (2001).
3. Quoted from a Chicago Commission on Race Relations (CCRR) report by Stewart (2005, 108).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## References

- Bernardi, Daniel. 1996. "The Voice of Whiteness: D. W. Griffith's Biograph Films (1908–1913)." In *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U. S. Cinema*, edited by Daniel Bernardi, 103–128. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Bitzer, Billy. 1973. *Billy Bitzer: His Story*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Bogle, Donald. 2016. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bowser, Eileen. 1995. "Racial/Racist Jokes in American Silent Slapstick Comedy." *Griffithania* 53: 35–42.
- Bowser, Pearl, Jane Marie Gaines, and Charles Musser, eds. 2001. *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. 2000. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Brownlow, Kevin. 1979. *Hollywood: The Pioneers*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. 2011. "Working in the 'Kingdom of Culture': African Americans and American Popular Culture, 1890–1930." In *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890–1930*, edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage, 1–42. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Butters, Gerald R., Jr. 2002. *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Caddoo, Carla. 2014. *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Carbine, Mary. 1996. "The Finest Outside the Loop': Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905–1928." In *Silent Film*, edited by Richard Abel. London: Athlone. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/camera-obscura/articleabstract/>.
- Cell, John Whitson. 1982. *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cripps, Thomas. 1993. *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Fell, John L. 1974. *Film and the Narrative Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Field, Allyson Nadia. 2015. *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gaines, Jane M. 2001. *Fire & Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Green, J. Ronald. 2000. *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Guerrero, Ed. 1993. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hass, Elizabeth, Terry Christensen, and Peter J. Hass. 2015. *Projecting Politics: Political Message in American Films*. New York: Routledge.
- Kirby, Lynne. 1997. *Parallel Tracks*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Leab, Daniel J. 1975. *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- May, Lary. 1983. *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mayer, David. 2008. "Fights of Nations and National Fights." In *Early Cinema and the "National"*, edited by Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, and Rob King, 132–138. UK: John Libbey.
- Musser, Charles. 1991. *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Musser, Charles. 1994. *The Emergence of Cinema*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Musser, Charles. 2016. "Race Cinema and the Color Line." In *Film Notes: Pioneers of African-American Cinema*, 6–29. Kino Classics.
- Nestebly, James R. 1982. *Black Images in American Films, 1896–1954: The Interplay Between Civil Right and Film Culture*. Washington, DC: University Press of America.
- Noble, Peter. 1970. *The Negro in Films*. London: Skelton Robinson.
- Rabinovitz, Lauren. 1998. *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Reeder, Thomas. 2017. *Mr. Suicide: Henry "Pathé" Lehrman and the Birth of Silent Comedy*. Albany, GA: BearManor Media.
- Sklar, Robert. 1994. *Movie-Made American: A Cultural History of American Movies*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Stewart, Jacqueline Najuma. 2004. "What Happened in the Transition? Reading Race, Gender, and Labor Between the Shots." In *American Cinema's Transitional Era*, edited by Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp, 103–130. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stewart, Jacqueline Najuma. 2005. *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Talbot, Frederick A. 1912. *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked*. Cornell: Cornell University Library Digital Collections.
- Waller, Gregory A. 1992. "Another Audience: Black Moviegoing, 1907–1916." *Cinema Journal* 31 (2): 3–25.
- Waller, Gregory A. 1995. *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896–1930*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- White, Richard. 2017. *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. 2010. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House.