Chapter 4

Race and Ethnicity: Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*

Although it is a bit embarrassing to admit now, the thing I remember most about first viewing Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing* was being afraid. The film had been surrounded by incendiary press accounts and reviews since its debut at Cannes. While Lee's film lost out for the top award that year to Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape*, it certainly received the most press attention, and critics like David Denby—who claimed Lee was "playing with dynamite in an urban playground"—and Jeanne Williams were soon condemning the film as nothing but a provocation to racial violence.[1] Jack Kroll, writing in *Newsweek*, worried that the film would put "dynamite under every seat." Joe Klein, in *New York* magazine, objected to "the dangerous stupidity of Spike Lee's message."[2] Those warnings echoed in my head as I sat in a theater crowded with patrons of various races. Lee would later comment that the negative publicity surrounding the film had hurt it at the box office because "it scared white audiences away from the film"—and as one of the white audience members who overcame the negative hype, I can understand Lee's assessment.[3] Of course, fear has always been at the heart of race relations in America, both the fear of people from other races and, for white liberals like myself, fear that our actions might be perceived by others as racist. Trapped within these conflicting sets of fear and guilt, I recall glancing around the audience at the urban cinema where I had come to watch Lee's incendiary polemic, and it seemed to me that others were experiencing a similar sense of trepidation.

Of course, the dire predictions of critics—and my own personal fears—did not come to fruition as there were no major incidents of violence or unrest attached to Lee's film, but that fact should not lead us to

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immediately dismiss those apprehensions as baseless. The controversy over Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, as with the controversies over many films representing race and ethnicity, was largely driven by these predictions of unrest that come from and fuel the fear of the film as harbinger of violence. But, where does this fear come from? Given the already tense racial climate in America in the late 1980s—a state of tension existing arguably since the nation's inception—why would a movie be perceived as particularly dangerous?

At this point in this book, these questions should seem familiar. Throughout the history of cinema, films have been perceived as dangerous and provocative, and the cinematic messages about sex or violence or race as somehow more potent and potentially disruptive than those rendered in other media. Of course, controversies over race and ethnicity in film have their own unique history, and the dangers perceived in these films are also unique. Whereas controversies over sex have seemed to orbit around notions of morality and identity and controversies over violence tend to engage issues of social stability and order, controversies over race invoke their own unique sense of danger—a danger centered on the issue of difference.

As Gerald Butters Jr. notes, "The trope of race has been a powerful form of difference in American film. Racial differentiation creates societal Others."[4] In this sense, the "Other" is not simply someone who is not Us, but someone who is distinctly not *like* us—whose presence makes our similarities clearer by their dissimilarity, or at least our perception of their dissimilarity. As cultural critic Kenneth Burke perceptively observed, one of the most powerful ways to create a sense of "us" is to contrast "us" with "them." In American culture, and certainly in American cinema, race and ethnicity have been among the most common visual means of demarcating "us" from some Other. Following Burke's thinking, the creation of an Other is not merely a demarcation or a means of defining "us" but also creates a sense of fear of that Other whose difference from us defines them. The separation created by this division between "us" and "them" and the fear it generates, in turn, lead to anger and resentment directed toward those who are, by definition, not like us.

These observations, of course, are probably not especially earth shattering, and I acknowledge that critics of race relations over the past hundred or so years have made abundantly clear the ways that representations of various races contribute to our deeply stratified society. Writing in 1903, renowned African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois declared, "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line"; sadly, his assessment may be accurate for the next century as well.[5] But one additional idea—though, again, not one that is especially unique to this writing—should help to push our thinking about race and film a bit further. The idea is this: There is a fairly clear cinematic sense of who "we" are

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versus who "they" are, and this unspoken and generally taken-for-granted assumption of who constitutes the "we" is those of European ancestry, whom I will call whites.

The privileging of a white point of view is not unique to cinema, but it is pervasive. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have noted that in most American media, "Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world's center of gravity."[6] Even though the United States is one of the few nations not founded on a notion of ethnicity or race—but rather on a constitutional framework of law—it is a nation that has consistently and aggressively privileged the perspective and social position of those descended from particular European ancestries.

Of course, even this sense of what constitutes "European ancestry" has been a moving target. At time, those of Irish or Italian descent were not considered "white," nor were those from Portugal or from eastern Europe. The fluidity of the boundaries around this privileged European social position is telling in two regards.

First, it reminds us that the very notion of "white" is constituted not by some essential quality or lineage that delineates a White race, but rather, as noted above, is constituted by the Others who are defined as not white.[7]

The second idea suggested by the fluid boundaries around whiteness is the degree to which whiteness is a privileged site. The reason the lines demarcating "white" from "nonwhite" are important is because of the level of privileges and social currency given to those considered white. These unstated privileges range from very real and powerful protections, such as not having to fear being pulled over by the police solely because of one's race and not having to fear being denied housing, to more mundane but still potent issues such as always being able to consume media written by and for white people.

The notion of "white privilege" is a powerful concept because it reframes debates about issues of race and racism so that these debates no longer focus attention solely on the victims of racial oppression. There has been for many years an unfortunate tendency for discussions of racism to focus primarily on how the victims "fail" to achieve social and economic parity. This insidious logic of "blame the victim" also allows members of the privileged race to relieve themselves of responsibility. If, many of us think, we don't actively deny housing to members of another race or use racial slurs, then we are, by our definition, not "racist." Defining racism solely in terms of active behaviors allows the vast majority of us who are not actively involved in acts of discrimination to ignore the problem and, in that insidious logic noted above, to leave the problem of racism for those oppressed by it to solve.

Conceiving racism in terms of white privilege reminds us that systems of racial oppression and racial privilege are inextricably linked, so the privileges enjoyed by one group are necessarily implicated in the oppression

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endured by another. In this way, as sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant famously declared, our understanding of race creates a "racial formation" that is involved in almost every social institution, ranging from the symbolic (like films and television) to the material (like housing and health care). As Omi and Winant observed, "Race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation."[8]

Understanding this racial formation through the notion of white privilege also underscores the ways in which white privilege is rendered invisible by both the social institutions that provide it and the cultural representations that support it. White actors, for instance, are never called "credits to their race." Indeed, in many ways, whiteness is not even considered a race at all but is defined instead as the "norm" against which all other races are contrasted. This invisibility allows the privileges of white people to be perpetuated and institutionally supported without calling attention to them because there is no white race to privilege, just other races who are "behind."[9]

This brief consideration of white privilege brings us to an important implication of white privilege for controversies over film. The boundaries around the invisible formation of white privilege are constant sources of conflict and controversy, although, given the invisible nature of white privilege, these contests are almost always defined in terms of the Others who object to their position in society. But, conceived in terms of issues of whiteness and white privilege, the controversies over race and ethnicity in film are not solely about how a certain group is represented in film but about who has the authority over representation of the Other and, for that matter, who gets to define "the Other" in the first place. In American society, this authority has centered almost exclusively within the cultural privilege of whiteness, and it this authority that has been at the center of most debates about race and representation.

A HISTORY OF CONTROVERSIES OVER RACE AND ETHNICITY IN FILM

As David Bernardi observes, "Race has been and continues to be a fundamental part of U.S. cinema."[10] Sadly, this history has not always been a positive one. Racist depictions are evident from even the earliest short reels of the 1890s, in films like *The Chinese Laundry Scene* (1896) and *Chicken Thieves*, an 1897 Edison film built around the stereotype of a thieving African American male and concluding with a white farmer firing his shotgun at the retreating thief. While the racist roots of American film cannot be justified, in some important ways they can be understood to be derived from broader cultural trends occurring during the birth of the modern cinema.

The turn of the nineteenth century was a particularly turbulent period in American history and one in which the pressing questions of

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enfranchisement were being posed in dramatic and difficult ways. If the eighteenth century was the revolutionary point of origin for the American idea, articulated in the Declaration of Independence and later the Constitution, then the nineteenth century was the period in which the revolutionary idea was being brought into practice. Founding a government on the idea of universal legal and political equality was relatively easy in concept, but in practice it was difficult. The Civil War represents, perhaps, the most dramatic moment in which the principal of "liberty and justice for all" was tested and, while the war and Lincoln's proclamation of emancipation were successes, the subsequent period in which racist social institutions and practices were allowed to essentially recreate a plantation system in the South put the American ideal to great test. As Butters notes, "The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also witnessed some of the worst racial violence in U.S. history."[11] He cites racial riots in such towns as Wilmington, North Carolina; Springfield, Illinois; and Brownsville, Texas as well as the rapid growth in lynchings of African Americans during this period.

Of course, American racial tensions were not solely about relations between whites and African Americans but also included those of most other races considered nonwhite. While Chinese immigration had been encouraged in the 1860s and '70s in order to facilitate western expansion, by 1882 Congress had passed a law barring Chinese immigrants from entry into the country. A similar concern was raised about Japanese immigration into western American cities. The fear of Japanese immigration reached its peak in 1906 when a controversy over segregated schools in San Francisco—where Japanese students were not allowed into schools designated "whites only"—led President Theodore Roosevelt to negotiate his famous "gentlemen's agreement" with the government of Japan to voluntarily limit Japanese emigration into the United States. Tensions with those of Latin American descent were also high, as the United States engaged in the Spanish American War in 1898, and the destruction of Native American cultures was rapidly reaching its zenith during the late nineteenth century.

As early as 1912, the film western was romanticizing the killing of Native Americans with particular emphasis on the death of Col. George Armstrong Custer in 1876. Of the rapid growth in films depicting Native Americans as villains, Allen Woll and Randall Miller observed that "little attempt has been made by filmmakers to understand Indian motivations for action, as virtually all activities are characterized from the white man's point of view," and, in general, we can take that tendency as a given in almost all the depictions of other races in the earliest decades of American cinema.[12]

The dominance of the "white man's point of view" relates to the fact that early cinema, dating from the rapid growth of nickelodeons in 1905, was primarily a venue for the lower classes and immigrant populations.

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Sharon Kleinman and Daniel McDonald note the "strange irony that many of the early silent films, which were heavily viewed by immigrant audiences, reflected the xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Black views prevailing in the American zeitgeist."[13] The gross caricatures of nonwhite races thus functioned to reinforce the broad assimilationist ideology in America—all are welcome so long as they give up their cultural traditions and meld into mainstream American society.

Regarding the ideological function of early films, Butters contends:

> As a "poor man's entertainment," therefore, these films need to be considered in relationship to issues of class. Appearing in a decade in which millions of first- and second-generation immigrants were attempting to climb the American ladder of social mobility, films with African American portrayals [though I think we can also add Latino, Chinese, Japanese and Native portrayals] tended to solidify "whiteness," stretching the boundaries to include the masses of newcomers who were attempting to become "American."[14]

Even a cursory glance at the depiction of nonwhites in these early films reveals a staggering array of the most base and horrific stereotypes imaginable—from the series of "watermelon" films from Edison and Lubin studios, with their crude caricature of voracious African Americans played for "comedic" value, to the use of the racial slur "greaser" in relation to Latino Americans.[15]

It is worth noting here that films did not necessarily invent these early vulgar stereotypes. Vaudeville, pulp novels, magazines, cartoons, and folktales all contributed to the cardboard-cutout caricatures of various races and ethnicities—from the Irish being drunks to Polish Americans lacking intelligence to Native Americans being murdering savages.[16] Early films made these stereotypes more striking and visually marked. Silent films, of course, work almost exclusively in the nonverbal, visual medium wherein physical appearances and actions stand in for characterization. While the roots of these stereotypes were laid in American popular culture long before the advent of cinema, the growth of silent films disseminated them in a highly efficient mass system that would create a visual typology of racism that has continued in American cinema to this very day.

As I hope to demonstrate in this historical survey, this racism did not go unnoticed or uncontested. The history of racial representation in American films, as I suggested earlier, is a history of contests over the authority to craft representations.

At the outset of this history, it is worth acknowledging one of the difficulties unique to considering controversies over race, namely, the multiplicity of issues invoked with the mere mention of the word *race*. Notions of sex and violence are, as I suggested in the previous chapters, fluid and dynamic, but at any given point in time, discussions of "sex" generally

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point toward the same set of issues. In discussing race and film, there is a difference. Discussions of representations of, say, African Americans may have a very different valence than conversations about Latinos—and, indeed, this was often the case.

Until relatively recently, there were few discussions of "race," as a general concept, in relation to film. Rather, the particular controversies over racial representations tended to be specific to the representation and the race represented. As such, it will be necessary to move among different racial communities and consider the various trajectories of their struggles over representation. As noted above, at the heart of all these discussions is the unstated and taken-for-granted centrality of white privilege, and it will be important for us not to lose track of that, either. Indeed, as I think will become clear throughout this section, the various, often diverging paths of struggles over racial representation tend to have one thing in common: their paths are largely dictated by the efforts of the white majority to maintain its authority over issues of representation and privilege.

1897–1914

Among the earliest films with racist depictions were those aimed at Chinese and Japanese immigrants. The backlash against the Chinese, who had been eagerly brought into America in the early 1800s but then banned from immigrating in 1882, created a host of culturally biased stereotypes. As Eugene Wong argues:

> Culturally biased perceptions of the Chinese as uniquely non-Western in dress, language, religion, customs and eating habits determined that the Chinese were inferior.... The assumed unassimilability of the Chinese was attributed to their racial and cultural characteristics, with scant attention paid to the fact that few whites encouraged them to assimilate, while many active discouraged their assimilation by legal and illegal means.[17]

This cultural bias against Chinese immigrants translated easily onto the screens of early nickelodeons in films like *The Yellow Peril*, a 1908 production depicting a Chinese servant who provokes his master's violent scorn. The tension surrounding cultural assimilation was also evident in films like D. W. Griffith's *That Chink at Golden Gulch* (1910), in which a Chinese character (played by a white man in "yellowface") is rescued from cowboy bullies by a young woman to whom he then pledges his loyalty. He later thwarts a bank robber by cutting off his braided hair in order to subdue the robber and subsequently turns the reward money over to the young woman and her fiancé. Beyond the visually stereotypical depiction of the titular protagonist—including intertitle cards reading, for example, "Charlie Lee wishee much glad you two"—the narrative's story line

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underscores the assimilationist ideology at work in these early films. The acceptable place in American society for Charlie Lee is one of subservience to the whites whom he both serves and fears. Perhaps the most important part of this subservient depiction is the erasure of any hint of sexual desire on the part of the Chinese character. Miscegenation, a topic that looms large in early fears about racial depictions in film, was deeply taboo in American culture, and depictions of nonwhites had to be either desexualized or have their sexual desires punished. In Griffith's early film, the prior strategy is utilized. As Daniel Bernardi reads this film, "Less a character and more a caricature, the Chink is de-masculinized in a way that justifies his eventual servitude and ensures that his intentions are not read as sexually transgressive."[18]

While Chinese communities in America did not accept the racial slurs and demeaning depictions, the more dramatic protests against early racist cinema came from the Japanese community, who had the advantage of being supported by a more powerful home government. By the early years of the twentieth century, the nation of Japan had transitioned fairly smoothly to westernization and had itself become a major geopolitical power—engaging in extensive military campaigns throughout the Pacific, including the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, in which Japan gained control over Korea, Taiwan, and other principalities of China, and perhaps more dramatically, the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–5, in which Japan essentially defeated the Russian military in China. In the United States, the growing power of the Japanese government led to slightly more delicate treatment. As Wong observes, "Although there was a limit to which the Japanese might resort against persecution of Japanese nationals in America, the Japanese government's willingness to protest strongly any demonstration of anti-Japanese behavior or sentiment was seriously acknowledged by American officials."[19]

Although the U.S. government took a more cautious stand in dealing with Japan, American cultural racism saw little distinction between Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, or others from the Pacific region. The blurring of nationalities into a single Asian stereotype, unsurprisingly, did not sit well with the Japanese government, which sought to maintain Japanese superiority in the eyes of the American government. However, these efforts met with a clear rebuff in the Immigration Law of 1924, which excluded Asians from any nation from citizenship in the United States.

The legal exclusion of people of Asian descent was motivated by numerous economic, racist, and political factors, and the depiction of these peoples in American cinema contributed to the general racist attitude. This cultural bias against those of Asian descent was wrapped up in an older Western myth of the "Yellow Peril." Gina Marchetti describes this myth:

> Rooted in medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe, the yellow peril combines racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and

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> the belief that the West will be overpowered by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East.[20]

The theme of the Yellow Peril led Hollywood films to portray characters of Asian descent as, in the worst cases, threatening or, in most other cases, either bumbling clowns or subservient exotics. In almost every instance, the depiction of Chinese or Japanese characters emphasized their difference and provided a cultural foundation for other institutional forms of discrimination.

Not surprisingly, these cultural forms of prejudice did not go without response. In addition to various protests by the Japanese government against instances of discrimination against its émigré population, the Japanese American community began forming a strong alliance against discrimination and prejudice through connections with both the Japanese government and groups of prestigious pro-Japanese white Americans.[21]

Another development was the use of film by the Japanese government in other parts of the world to propagate its own vision of Japanese supremacy in Asia. Thomas F. Millard, writing in a 1907 edition of the *Washington Post*, remarked upon the spread of films depicting Japanese victory over the Russians. His concerns reveal the strange dynamics surrounding race and film:

> A Chinese or Indian coolie cannot be reached by literature as a rule, except indirectly; but he is absolutely open to impression from pictures which represent action, the authenticity of which he does not dream of questioning, and which shows the white race he has so long respected and feared beaten at war by a dark-skinned brother.[22]

There is an odd irony in an American commentator condemning the Japanese government for seeking to use cinematic images to create a vision of racial superiority—a condemnation that required turning a blind eye to the similar American efforts both at home and abroad.

These two examples—protests against racist depictions and the use of film to provide counterdepictions—are indicative of the general responses to controversies over race and film. The first response was to vocally condemn the slurs depicted on the screen, and the second was to take up the instruments of cinema and seek to initiate a new filmic discourse through which to create a different vision. In the case of Japan, this effort was facilitated by a strong national government that could both lodge official protests against unfair representations and produce counterpropaganda.

A similar situation arose in relation to Latin Americans during this early period. As early as 1907, American films were referring to Mexicans with the derogatory racial slur "greasers," and the depiction of Mexicans and other Latinos as violent, deceptive, and barbaric soon became a staple of the burgeoning western genre.[23] By 1913, the Mexican government had

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lodged its first official protest of an American film, condemning the 1913 Universal documentary picture *Madero Murdered*, about the murder of revolutionary leader Francisco Madero at the order of military leader Victoriana Huerta, who later became leader of Mexico. The Huerta government's protest of *Madero Murdered* was not the only objection to Hollywood depictions of Mexico and Mexicans, and these protests would set the stage for a complete Mexican ban on U.S. films that took effect in 1922, beginning a period in which America's cultural attitude toward Mexico and its Latin American neighbors would change dramatically.

Before turning to some of the dramatic sea changes that occurred during the 1920s, one other racial group deserves attention: African Americans. With little doubt, in the long history of American racism and the mechanisms of white privilege, those of African descent have been among the most oppressed. The tragedy of the enslavement of Africans and the horrible legacy of continued institutionalization of racism has marked this nation's history perhaps more than any other theme. The period following the Civil War and the end of legalized slavery led not to enfranchisement of the freed African Americans but instead brought about deep levels of resentment and animosity through the failed efforts of Reconstruction and the passing of Jim Crow laws, ordinances that served to reinstate economic, political, and cultural oppression against African Americans. It was during this period of the late nineteenth century that American cinema was born, roughly thirty years after the end of the Civil War and fewer than twenty years after the abandonment of the civil rights efforts of Reconstruction.

Early cinema, as mentioned earlier, borrowed heavily from existing forms of popular culture and adopted their racist stereotypes of African Americans. In his influential book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, Donald Bogle traces the history of various stereotypes of African Americans, ranging from the ostentatious urban "Zip coon" to the overly sexualized "buck," and observes the way these figures emerged from vaudeville and pulp novels to take their place as cinematic representations of African Americans. Arguably the most popular form of American vaudeville entertainment was blackface—a show derived from minstrel shows in which white performers would darken their face, often with burnt cork, and engage in "comedic" skits denigrating African Americans. In his book *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott argues that blackface entertainment served as a means of protecting white power and privilege by symbolically controlling and containing the cultural practices of African Americans through theatrical modes of ridicule. As he puts it, for white audiences, blackface entailed "a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror and pleasure."[24] This desire to contain African American culture through the lampooning it flourished in American cinema.

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The cinematic representation of African Americans often took on a strikingly ghoulish and vicious tone. Thomas Edison's studio, for instance, distributed a short film entitled *Ten Pickaninnies* in 1908 in which ten African American children are killed by various means (one is eaten by an alligator and another stung to death by bees). More disturbing still was a film released by Biograph in 1898. Titled *An Execution by Hanging*, the short documentary depicts the execution of an African American male in a Florida jail and demonstrates not only the fascination with death in early silent films—discussed at more length in the preceding chapter—but also the degree to which violence visited upon the body of African Americans, especially males, fit in with a broader cultural form that helped to shape both American racism and American cinema.

During the first decade of cinema, these depictions were in some ways countered by other comparatively uplifting depictions of African Americans—such as Edwin Porter's 1903 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or documentary reels featuring African American soldiers, including Lubin's 1898 *Colored Invincibles*, which depicted troops aiding Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders. However, these depictions were overwhelming outweighed by negative depictions, particularly after the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War brought a wave of nostalgia for the "Old South." As Thomas Cripps, one of the true pioneers in the study of African Americans in film, observes:

> After 1910 the celebration of the Civil War removed almost all authentic depiction of black Americans from the nation's screens, the semicentennial serving as an inspiration to put aside realism in favor of romantic nostalgia as a mode for presenting Negroes in film.[25]

While the often shockingly racist depictions caused some outcry among the African American community, by far the most controversial films of this period were those depicting African American heavyweight boxing champion of the world, Jack Johnson. As noted in chapter 1, Johnson's rise to global prominence as the world champion caused shockwaves in American culture, and one of the chief points of concern was the films that captured his dominance and allowed it to be disseminated throughout the country.

Johnson achieved prominence in 1904 when he became the number-one contender for the heavyweight title, but current champion Jim Jeffries refused to fight the African American. However, when Canadian Tommy Burns became champion in 1906, Johnson followed the new champion and persistently demanded his title shot, which he got on December 26, 1908, in a fight that left Burns bloodied and on the canvas and Johnson the first African American champion of the world.[26]

Johnson's victory was enough to cause turmoil in the white-dominated American culture, but his personality added considerably to the consternation.

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Protests against *The Birth of a Nation* helped to establish the NAACP as a major force in cultural politics. © Corbis.

During the mid-1970s, some women's organizations framed pornography as a violation of women's rights. © Bettmann/Corbis.

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Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* became an early battleground in the culture wars. © Gary Wagner/Sygma/Corbis.

Charges of anti-Semitism were leveled at Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ.* © Chip East/Reuters/Corbis.

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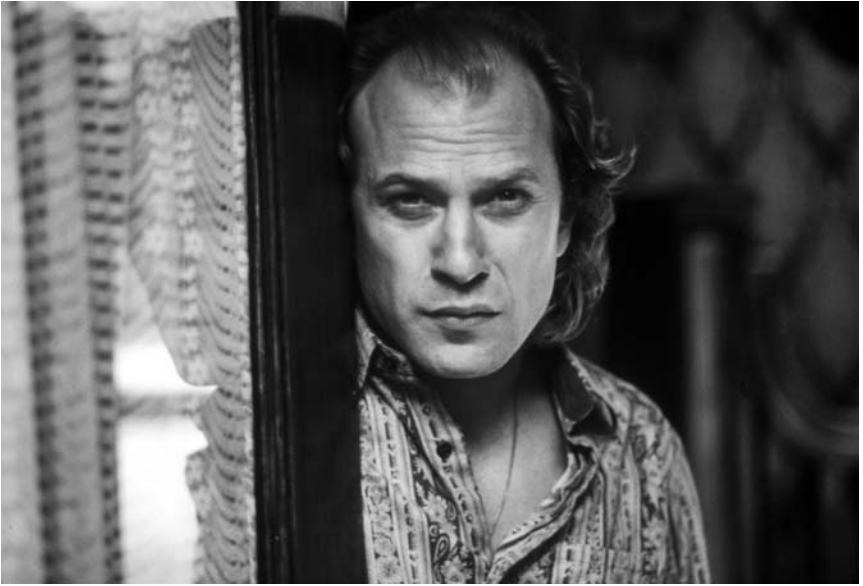

The character Jame Gumb, played by Ted Levine, was seen by many critics as a homophobic stereotype. Orion Pictures Corporation/Photofest. © Orion Pictures Corporation.

Oliver Stone's critique of American violence was accused by some of promoting the very violence it sought to condemn. Warner Bros./Photofest. © Warner Bros.

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Mookie (Spike Lee) and Sal (Danny Aiello) face each other after the film's dramatic climax. Universal Pictures/Photofest. © Universal Pictures. Photographer: David Lee.

The graphic suffering of Jesus, played by James Caviezel, raised questions about the film's spiritual aims. Newmarket Films/Photofest. © Newmarket Films. Photographer: Philippe Antonello.

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In an era when the only "positive" roles for African Americans were as servants or soldiers, Johnson was a decidedly more provocative and flamboyant character. As Butters observes:

> Jack Johnson also presented a public persona that was absent from the American cinema and almost nonexistent in mainstream American public life.... Johnson liked to wear colorful clothes and drive sports cars. He regularly flashed around money and frequently kept the company of white women. Johnson was boastful, proud, arrogant, and loud, qualities that defied how white society wanted the African American to behave.[27]

White commentators were quick to call for a "great white hope"; even writer Jack London made an explicit appeal to Jack Jeffries to come out of retirement and face Johnson.

What made Johnson's victory even more troubling to whites was that it was captured on film, and in 1909 *Johnson-Burns Fight* was being distributed around the country. The film caused a growing level of concern among white audiences, who had conceived the heavyweight boxing championship as the exclusive purview of their own kind. Out of this assumption of superiority, the *Johnson-Burns Fight* film was generally withheld from distribution in African American communities, but such was not the case with the second Johnson fight film, *Johnson-Ketchel Fight*, in which Johnson again demolished a white opponent, this time producing an iconic image of the champion standing against the ropes, hand on hip, while the white fighter lies unconscious beneath him.

The defeat of Stanley Ketchel by Jack Johnson led to the showdown that most commentators had been hoping for since Johnson became champion. The fight between Jack Jeffries and Jack Johnson was arranged in the dusty town of Reno, Nevada, and held on July 4, 1910. Publicity for the fight made it clear that this was to be considered a racial showdown between Johnson and Jeffries, who was described by columnist James Corbett as "all that is powerful and brutish in the white man."[28]

After fifteen rounds, Johnson defeated Jeffries and retained his heavyweight championship. Throughout the country, the fight had been closely followed by those huddled around radios and in theaters where the fight was announced round by round, and with its culmination, celebrations broke out throughout African American communities. Tragically, these celebrations were accompanied by violent riots aimed at African American communities in many major cities and, as Butters puts it, "innocent black men and women were beaten because Johnson had defeated Jeffries in the ring. At least eighteen African Americans were killed."[29]

By most accounts, the calls for the banning of *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* began within twenty-four hours. American cities from Cincinnati and Baltimore to New Orleans and Atlanta quickly moved to ban the film. The

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reasoning provided for these bans is instructive in thinking about the controversies over race and film in terms of white privilege. In Baltimore, for example, a spokesperson for the Board of Police Commissioners insisted, "We have a large colored population here and the exhibition of the pictures might cause racial troubles." This fear seemed largely unfounded, given that most of the trouble caused on the night of the actual fight was directed at the African American community, but even in Washington, D.C., a city that did see unrest on the evening of the fight, there was fear that the exhibition of the fight film might provoke a repeat of violence.[30] Indeed, this fear that the images would provoke another round of unrest was at the heart of a national campaign against the *Johnson-Jeffries* film led by the Christian Endeavor Society. Its secretary, William Shaw, proclaimed in a widely circulated message, "Race riots already have followed the announcement of the negroes [*sic*] victory. Moving pictures of prize fighting will create more violence."[31] In a particularly graphic version of this argument, the mayor of Louisville, Kentucky, contended, "It is not difficult to foresee what will happen if the fight pictures are shown. Prejudice existing for scores of years will rear itself and flourish again in crime and blood," and the governor of Missouri sought to ban the film in order to avoid "race controversies and disturbances."[32] While the direction of the violence is not explicitly stated, the continued invocation of the "colored population" and the "prejudices existing for scores of years" suggested that the real fear was that Johnson's victory would incite African American violence against white oppression.

The efforts of white authorities were generally successful. The *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* film was banned in virtually every part of the South, as well as in many major cities throughout the rest of the country.

In locales where the film was not banned, the rationale given by authorities was as instructive as the reasons given for banning the film elsewhere. For instance, the chief of police in Milwaukee claimed, "There is no specific law by which to stop promoters from bringing the fight pictures here." This was an excuse invoked by a number of municipalities—although many others were not troubled by their lack of statutory authority and banned the film anyway. The governor of Indiana, Thomas R. Marshall, complained, "Personally I think the exhibition of the Jeffries-Johnson pictures should be prevented. They will lead to trouble, riotous conditions and, possibly, murder. But as governor, I doubt the utility of an executive to issue an order or proclamation not authorized by statute." A different reason for allowing the fight was offered by the acting mayor of Omaha, Nebraska, who exclaimed, "I have seen innumerable views at moving picture shows which tend more to moral decadence than the views of the fight would."[33]

The African American press, however, recognized that the banning of the film had less to do with fears of violence than with the desire to limit

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images of an African American proving his superiority to the Great White Hope. No such hue and cry had been issued in protest of the violence done to African Americans through harassment, murders, and lynchings—a point driven home by a headline in the *Richmond Planet*: "Hypocrisy That Shames the Devil." The editors of the *St. Paul Appeal* contended that

> the apparently country-wide objection to the exhibition of the Johnson-Jeffries fight pictures comes more from race prejudice than from a moral standpoint. Who believes for one minute, that had Jeffries been the victor at Reno, there would have been any objection to showing the pictures of him bringing back "the white man's hope"?[34]

While the *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* film did appear on screens throughout the country, the long-term impact of the controversy was severe. Motivated by fears that Johnson's prowess would continue to grace the silver screen, Congress pushed for legislation outlawing the importation and interstate transfer of fight films, in what would become the Sims Act. Much of the rhetoric surrounding the Sims Act, as discussed in earlier chapters, dealt with issues of violence and the impressionable nature of children. However, the main focus of the act was, with little doubt, on Jack Johnson and the particularly dangerous images of African American empowerment. In debate concerning the bill, a representative from Ohio specifically questioned the racist motivation for the bill, asking if "it were more indefensible for a white man and a black man to engage in a prize fight than two white men," to which a Georgia supporter of the bill responded, "No man descended from the old Saxon race can look upon that kind of contest without abhorrence and disgust."[35]

As noted in chapter 1, the passage of the Sims Act opened the floodgate for legislative regulation of films and helped to solidify the definition of film as commerce, which could thus be regulated by federal bodies. The controversy surrounding the Sims Act reveals the broader struggle over who would have authority over representations of Others and how deeply implicated the notion of white privilege was with issues of film regulation.

1915–1930

The first two decades of American cinema had seen numerous controversies surrounding race and film—ranging from protests by national governments like Mexico's to the efforts of African American communities to be allowed to view films of their heavyweight hero's boxing triumphs. But, in many ways, the foundational moment for controversies related to racial representations in film was, with little doubt, the 1915 epic by David Wark Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*. *Birth* has rightly been hailed by film scholars as a seminal film in the history of the medium, pushing the boundaries

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of cinematography, plot structure, and editing further than any film beforehand. That said, the film is also one of the most revolting and pernicious statements of American racism that has ever been captured on film. While earlier films had laid out a vile caricature of African Americans, Griffith's film crafted a visually stunning and compelling narrative in which the emancipation of African slaves was the "original sin" from which the nation must free itself. Indeed, one of the opening scenes depicts Africans being auctioned at a slave sale and the intertitle card reads, "The introduction of the African to American shores laid the seeds of national tragedy."

The effectiveness of Griffith's film lay in both its epic scope and its ability to focus on a core set of characters with which the audience established an intimate relationship. The story of the Civil War and Reconstruction is told through the lives of two interrelated families—the Stonemans, a Northern family that favors abolition, and their Southern cousins the Camerons, who own a plantation. In part 1 of the three-hour-plus film, originally shown in two parts separated by an intermission, the Stoneman and Cameron families meet in the Camerons' South Carolina home and the idyllic conditions of the antebellum South are depicted. The Civil War then divides the families, and the action is often intercut between male members of the two families as they engage in various large-scale battles. The first half ends with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the rise of the Radical Reconstructionists.

The second half continues to follow the fortunes of the two families. The Camerons are reduced to poverty and harassed by the horrifying caricatures of African Americans—all the principal African American characters were played by white men in blackface because, Griffith claimed, he could find no qualified African American actors to play the parts—while the Stonemans come to South Carolina to oversee Reconstruction and support the villainous freed Africans and their cunning mulatto leader Silas Lynch as they turn the South into a land of chaos and barbarism. The climax of the film comes with a typical melodramatic rescue, though this time it is the Ku Klux Klan, led by one of the Camerons, who rides in to save white families, especially women, from the horrible clutches of the brutal former slaves. The film ends with two marriages between the Stoneman and Cameron families and a vision of Christ leading the nation to peace.

Whatever its place in film history as innovating narrative structure and filmmaking technique and helping to set the foundation for the predominance of feature-length films, at the time of its release, *Birth of a Nation* was seen by many as a film about one thing: a defense of white privilege and dominance. From it source material—two novels, *The Clansman* and *The Leopard's Spots*—by white supremacist Thomas Dixon, to its casting of only whites in blackface for the principal African American roles, *Birth* was a visual depiction of a harsh brand of "race radicalism" in which the

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only solution to America's racial problems lay in removing African Americans from American soil.[36] The sad legacy of the film is that it led to a rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, which used the film as a recruiting tool throughout the 1920s.[37] In the longer term, as Manthia Diawara argued, "*The Birth of a Nation* constitutes the grammar book for Hollywood's representations of Black manhood."[38] Thus, both politically and cinematically, *Birth* solidified a visual and cultural framework of white racism and established a cultural narrative in which whiteness had to be defended against the danger of African American blackness.

But there is another legacy of Griffith's *Birth*, a legacy of protest and response that galvanized the African American community in ways the filmmaker could not have foreseen. As Butters argued, "The controversy over *The Birth of a Nation* marked a radical change in the relationship between African Americans and the cinematic medium."[39] On both the political and cinematic fronts, the African American community was strengthened by its response to this film to a degree that previous films and previous controversies had not even begun to approach.

In terms of the political response, the controversy over *Birth* led numerous public figures to denounce the film—the Chicago social reformer Jane Addams, for instance, called it a "pernicious caricature of the Negro race"—and solidified the foundations for the recently formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).[40] Established in 1909, the NAACP quickly grew to a nationwide organization with a widely circulating journal, *The Crisis*, that served to disseminate the organization's opinions. In 1915, however, the organization was still generally scattered and fragmented across its various branches. The inflammatory nature of *Birth* prompted these various branches, as well as other related organizations, to form a unified front.[41]

The African American newspaper the *Chicago Defender* called the film "one of the most infamous assaults upon the womanhood and manhood of the Afro-Americans ever attempted to be presented" and conjectured that it was "designed to stir up race prejudice." The paper also noted that it would be the NAACP that "will undoubtedly be called upon to exert every effort to prevent the production of 'The Birth of a Nation' in Chicago."[42] In Boston, the NAACP organized an effort to buy up all the tickets, but when "several thousand Afro-Americans gathered early in front of the theater, money in hand, to buy tickets … they were refused," leading to a conflict that saw hundreds of uniformed police beat the crowd back.[43] Formal protests were also organized in other cities, and the NAACP published various tracts and pamphlets denouncing the film and questioning its historical accuracy. Interestingly, the protests were strong enough to lead Griffith to meet with NAACP president Moorfield Storey and even to offer him $10,000 if he could identify any historical inaccuracies—an impossibility given the way the film fictionalizes most of the historical figures.[44]

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Much of the protest sought to ban the film from exhibition, and in some states this was successful. The organization pushed the National Review Board, the early voluntary censorship board, to ban the film outright and also worked to pressure state and city censorship boards to ban the film. The NAACP and related groups expressed fear that the film would stir racial hatred and further encourage white violence against African Americans, already at horrific levels nationally. However, in spite of the unprecedented level of organized resistance provided by the African American community, *Birth*'s overwhelming popularity among white audiences led many municipalities to allow its exhibition.

In thinking about controversies over race in film in terms of white privilege and the symbolic creation of whiteness, the defense of *Birth* from members of the dominant white community becomes more interesting. For example, when the NAACP and other organizations pushed for the city of Chicago to ban the film, the courts were called upon to intervene, and in his decision, Judge William Fennimore Cooper provided a telling argument in favor of the film:

> This ground that it will engender race animosity is based purely on assumption. To find that this is a good objection to the allowing of the injunction this court will have to assume that our white citizens will not know or appreciate the fact that the days as presented in the play were early in the first years of the last half century. This court will have to assume that they who will witness the play will be so stupid that they will be unable to comprehend that the people represented on the film were of two or three generations ago. And that they do not, and will not, appreciate the fact that in the succeeding time the negro race has advanced almost immeasurably.[45]

The reasoning here stands in stark contrast to that employed by governmental institutions just three years earlier when the topic had been whether or not to allow the screening of the *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* film. In that earlier instance, the assumption that the filmic images would provoke unrest and violence had seemed more credible, where in considering *Birth*, the images of racial violence were presumed innocent until there was actual evidence of their inflammatory nature. On another level, it is also revealing that the white audience is afforded a greater capacity to see beyond the illusion of film and separate the dramatic actions from real life, while in the previous controversies numerous public officials had openly feared that the boxing film would deceive African Americans with the illusion of social superiority.

In those municipalities where *Birth* was banned, public officials faced harsh criticism from their white constituents. In Lowell, Massachusetts, the mayor's decision to ban the film was characterized as pandering to the African American voters, "for nobody is to be offended during these campaign days."[46] Numerous residents of Ohio chose to bus to other states to

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view the film and subsequently publicized their praise of Griffith's film and their consternation at the decision of the Ohio Board of Film Censors to ban the film. Coretta Coblentz of New Madison, Ohio, for example, wrote to the *Lima Sunday News*, "Why such a clean, moral play should be barred from the State of Ohio is beyond my comprehension," and she and many of her compatriots provided overwhelming praise for the film, almost universally declaring it the greatest film they had ever seen.[47]

In fairness to this praise, many writers seemed to focus on the film's antiwar message. Edna Simmons, for instance, wrote, "Who would not choose peace rather than war after seeing this wonderful play?" But other defenses of the film embraced its racist attitude. Bessie Smith of Gibonsburg, Ohio, wrote that the film "showed how brutish negroes can act," and Catheryn Dyer confessed, "I was always against the Ku Klux Klanners until I saw the play. If it had not been for them I don't know what would have come of the world."

Interspersed within this praise for the film's racist depictions and the Ku Klux Klan were assertions that the film was not racially biased. In a front-page piece praising the film, Utah's *Ogden Standard* boldly proclaimed:

> There is nothing in the whole production to stir up race hatred. There is bound to be resentment against the radical abolitionists who took advantage of the poor and bleeding south but there is nothing to stir up hatred toward the black race.[48]

What becomes clear in even a cursory examination of these responses is that the criteria for determining whether a film might "stir up race hatred" are based on the broader culture of white privilege. Films that threaten the supremacy of whiteness are considered too dangerous, while films that depict white dominance are not.

Efforts to halt the exhibition of *The Birth of a Nation* were largely unsuccessful, and the film would go on to become not only one of the most successful films of that era but also one of the most influential. In some ways, the most interesting impact of the film was on African American filmmaking. May Childs Nerney, a leader of the NAACP who had pushed for the film to be "suppressed altogether," soon recognized that the only real response to Griffith's film was to produce equally spectacular motion pictures as a counterpoint, and soon numerous African American filmmakers began taking up the challenge of rebutting Griffith's racist vision.[49]

The first African American filmmaker, William Foster, had been making films since 1912, and his vision of making films that were simultaneously profitable and uplifting of his race became a founding principle for most African American production companies. Within five years of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, fledgling African American production companies such as the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, the Colored and Indian Film

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Company, and the Frederick Douglass Film Company were producing films like *Realization of the Negro's Ambition* (Lincoln, 1916), which tells the story of a young African American civil engineer who, after various melodramatic adventures, discovers oil on his father's farm and ends up married with family, farm, and wealth, and the Douglass Company's *The Colored American Winning His Suit* (1919), in which Bob Winall, an African American law graduate from Howard University, thwarts a plot to frame his fiancée's father and wins her hand.

The push for African American–produced films grew out of the controversies over representation, which motivated much of the public pressure put on African American audiences to patronize these films. For example, in a 1921 edition of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, readers were told:

> The worst enemy of the race producer is the race movie fan himself. Colored Americans are governed by the standards set by white producers and because the films have not measured up to these standards, they are scoffed at and sometimes boycotted altogether. The cinema game within the race is in its infancy and it is within the power of every race fan to crush it in the cradle.[50]

The challenges facing African American–produced films, and even African American–themed and –cast films produced by white independent producers, were substantial. White theaters would generally not book such films, and while there would eventually be dramatic growth in the number of theaters catering to the African American community, the growth was relatively slow. But in spite of these difficulties, by 1921 there were more than three hundred theaters in the United States catering primarily to African American audiences; this year also saw the highest level of African American films in distribution.[51]

It is not the case that all the films produced by African Americans were universally accepted as uplifting and appropriate. In some instances, white community members protested certain African American films, and in other instances, the African American community found itself divided by questions of the appropriateness of the filmic representation of their race.

Arguably the most provocative, popular, and divisive African American filmmaker was Oscar Micheaux, a fascinating historical figure who went from a successful stint as a South Dakota homesteader to best-selling author and then pioneering filmmaker. Micheaux's silent films focused on such controversial topics as lynching and the practice of light-skinned African Americans "passing" as whites. As an example, Micheaux's 1920 film *Within Our Gates*, which deals with racial violence and lynching, was intensely controversial in both white and African American communities and faced numerous challenges from local censor boards. But, of all the films produced during the post-*Birth* period, *Within Our Gates* can be seen as the most direct response.

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In his masterful exploration of Micheaux's body of work, J. Ronald Green argues that this unflinching depiction of racist violence can be "reasonably accepted as a direct rebuttal to Griffith's sensibilities and politics," and Butters has called this film "a turning point in the history of African American cinema in its bold and frank presentations of race relations in the United States."[52] Tellingly, this view was shared by some contemporary audience members. In a letter to the editor of the African American *Chicago Defender*, Willis N. Huggins not only declared Micheaux's film the embodiment of "the spirit of Douglas [*sic*], Nat Turner, Scarborough, and Du Bois, rolled into one" but also observed the way the film provided a clear and compelling response to Griffith's earlier film:

> "The Birth of a Nation" was written by the oppressors, to show that the oppressed were a burden and a drawback to the nation, that they had no real grievance.... "Within Our Gates" is written by the oppressed and shows in a mild way the degree and kind of his oppression.[53]

The film is an intricate story involving an African American woman, Sylvia, who seeks to better herself through education, and a dispute between an African American cotton farmer and a wealthy white landowner that leads to murder and a horrific sequence of lynch mob violence against the innocent African American family. One of the later sequences, in which the lynching of the African American family is intercut with an attempted rape of Sylvia, seems markedly similar to the dramatic cross-cutting that characterizes the climax of *Birth of a Nation*.

Reactions to *Within Our Gates* were dramatically mixed. The film faced considerable problems with censorship boards and was edited and reedited throughout its distribution period to accommodate the various board concerns.[54] Reactions within the African American community were also mixed. In part because of the violent race riots that had engulfed Chicago in the summer of 1919, the release of *Within Our Gates* seemed poised to reignite the still-smoldering racial tension. The end of World War I had seen many African Americans returning from military service to find themselves back among violent racial oppression and limited economic opportunities. For some commentators within the African American community, Micheaux's representation of tension and violence seemed too close to the mark for comfort.

These concerns were shared by the Chicago censorship board, which struggled over the film for two months—viewing edited and reedited versions before finally approving the film for exhibition. The film premiered in Chicago on January 12, 1920, at Hammond's Venodome and by all accounts drew record-breaking crowds, in part due to the clever marketing by which Micheaux exploited the film's trouble with the censors. In a piece about the film appearing in the *Chicago Defender*, the film was touted:

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> This is the picture that it required two solid months to get by the Censor Board, and it is the claim of the author and producer that, while it is a bit radical, it is withal the biggest protest against Race prejudice, lynching and "concubinage" that was ever written or filmed.[55]

The record crowds were accompanied by some African American protestors who believed the film too radical and inflammatory—although many of these protestors had not seen the film and were relying on secondhand information. There were even reports that some of these protestors, upon seeing the film, changed their minds and embraced it as "perfect in-as-much as the showing up of a certain class of both the white and our Race is done."[56]

The success of *Within Our Gates* helped to solidify Micheaux's place as America's most prestigious and most provocative African American filmmaker, and his later films, especially during the silent era, would continue to provoke controversy. He took up issues such as religion, in the 1924 *Body and Soul*, which was the debut film for Paul Robeson, and passing in *The House behind the Cedars*, also from 1924.

The two strategies outlined above are indicative of the general trend of African American responses to filmic racism during the 1920s: Organizations such as the NAACP continued to protest films with negative racial depictions, and African American filmmakers produced a variety of films designed both as critiques of white racism and as moral lessons for the "uplift" of the race. These two trends were part of a major effort to contest the white culture's claim to represent not only itself but also other races, and the voices of protest—whether from picket lines or pamphlets or the silver screen—created an important dynamic in which African Americans would both contest and compete with filmic representations of race relations.

The first tactic, political protest, would survive unabated through to the present day, but the second, African American filmmaking, became almost completely dormant by the end of the decade. There were many causes for the decline in African American–produced independent films, including difficulties acquiring financial backing, competition with better-funded white films, and the Great Depression. But perhaps the greatest single cause was the advent of sound technology in films. The increased cost associated with filming with sound was more than most African American production companies could afford. Furthermore, the expense of outfitting theaters with sound technology was greater than most theaters catering to African American communities could bear. By 1931, the age of African American silent film was at an end, and the next decades of American filmmaking would see a dramatic consolidation of filmmaking in the white studios of Hollywood.

While the emergence of the African American response to racist film was perhaps the most dramatic of the era, there were major controversies

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surrounding other racial and ethnic communities during this period as well. In New York City, for example, Joseph V. McKee, president of the Board of Aldermen, introduced an amendment to the censorship code barring films in 1927 that "are immoral, indecent, or tend to ridicule, disparage or hold up to obloquy or contempt any race, creed or nationality, or are calculated to arouse racial, national or religious prejudice." The amendment was supported by various Irish organizations, including the United Irish American Societies and the American-Irish Vigilance Committee, and was motivated by their perception of negative Irish portrayals in contemporary films such as *Irish Hearts* and *The Shamrock and the Rose*.[57]

Another ethnic group also had considerable problems in the aftermath of World War I: Germans. Animosity toward Germans and German Americans was high in the years after the war, and German films became a target. The debut of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in 1920 was met by an angry mob of veterans, who became so threatening that the screening was scrapped by the theater owner out of fear.[58] A similar fate met the Ernst Lubitsch film *Madame DuBarry* (aka *Passion)* in 1919. The controversy over its German origin in St. Louis led to the film being "hurriedly taken off and hushed up like a scandal in the family," according to a 1921 edition of the *Lincoln State Journal*.[59]

Controversies over other racial representations were also complicated by national ethnicities and even more so by the intricacies of geopolitics. Hollywood was engaged in increasingly distorted caricatures of Chinese and Japanese villains, especially in serials such as *The Yellow Menace* and *The Exploits of Elaine*. The tensions around this anti-Asian sentiment came to a head with the popular serial *Patria*. Produced by William Randolph Hearst, who had developed intensely anti-Japanese sentiments, *Patria* recounts a supposed Japanese plan to invade the United States with the assistance of Mexico. The serial, released in 1919, came at a particularly difficult time in U.S.–Japanese relations due to tensions over Japanese immigration as well as struggles over Pacific hegemony. In an unprecedented move, President Woodrow Wilson wrote to Hearst, arguing that the serial was "extremely unfair to the Japanese and I fear that it is calculated to stir up a great deal of hostility."[60] Hearst bowed to the pressure, and the films were withdrawn and reedited to downplay the focus on the Japanese invasion plot and, instead, emphasize Mexico as the principal villain.

While shifting the focus from Japanese villainy to Mexican scheming helped to alleviate tension with Japan, it did not do much for relations between Hollywood and Mexico. Hollywood films had long portrayed Mexicans and other Latin Americans in negative terms, typically as cunning and violent outlaws and thugs. The prominence of these racist depictions led in 1922 to a sweeping Mexican ban on U.S. films with racist depictions. In February of that year, the Mexican government issued a statement to Hollywood companies declaring, "The Government of Mexico will find it

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necessary to stop the importation to Mexico of all films produced by companies which may continue to manufacture films derogatory to Mexico." The ban was sweeping enough to include all films produced by a company, even those not exported to Mexico, in an attempt to prevent films sent to other countries from including negative portrayals of Mexicans. This harsh measure was designed to stop what one Mexican official described as "the usual portrayal of the Mexican in moving pictures ... as a bandit or a sneak."[61] The measure had an immediate impact on Hollywood, which was involved in strong efforts to increase their importation of films into Mexico and other Latin American countries, and the potential of a Mexican ban was seen as a potentially devastating economic blow.

Before the end of the year, however, the ban was rescinded after Hollywood sent a delegation to Mexico to insist that American films would curb their anti-Mexican tones, declaring that "no pictures which would be offensive to Mexicans would be exhibited." Members of the delegation included John C. Flinn and John L. Day Jr. of Famous Players–Lasky Corporation, which had produced a number of the offending films, and B. J. Woodie, personal assistant to the newly appointed president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, William Hays.[62] Hays's office had worked hard behind the scenes to arrange this promise of better treatment in order to hold off the economic consequences of a total Mexican ban, but during the 1920s, his office had virtually no power to enforce this promise and, as such, the depiction of Mexicans and other Latinos saw, as Gary Keller puts it, only "shallow and cosmetic" changes.

The superficial response to Mexico's concerns about Hollywood racism would be transformed in the 1930s by two important factors. One would be the creation of a new enforcement mechanism for Hays's office, the advent of the Production Code Administration in 1930. The second would be the increased emphasis on U.S. alliance with its southern neighbors with the reemergence of conflict in Europe and around the world.

1930–1956

The Production Code Administration held deep yet ambivalent views about racial representations. On the one hand, for some groups, the PCA showed considerable concern. As I discuss in more detail presently, Latinos were afforded substantially more cinematic protection than other groups, due to economic and, later, political concerns. On the other hand, some groups, such as African Americans, received remarkably little support from Hollywood's new regulatory agency. As well, existing racial tensions were dramatically transformed by other major historical events—first by the tumult of World War II and later by the dramatic increase in the visibility of the civil rights movements. Yet in spite of the changes to the American film industry—both internal and external—controversies over racial

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representations continued to emerge, and these can be seen as related mainly to questions of white privilege and the authority of white culture to dictate the terms for representation of other racial groups.

The Mexican ban on derogatory Hollywood films in 1922 had a longer-term effect than the initial and largely empty promises of William Hays in the same year. The development of the Production Code Administration, discussed in more detail in chapter 1, provided a more effective mechanism for enforcing restrictions on Hollywood representations, and the economic incentive to maintain good relations with the Latino market provided an impetus for change. Alfred Charles Richard Jr. concludes from his comprehensive study of PCA documents related to Latino imagery:

> In the twenty years between 1935 and 1955, the Hays Office shaped the silver screen's Hispanic image by insisting on the removal of what was currently considered to be offensive Hispanic imagery. Literally thousands of script changes were suggested to and forced on film makers which affected the stereotype.[63]

In the early years, the PCA's work consisted mainly in removing the racial slur "greaser" and softening the stereotype of the Mexican bandit. Additionally, the PCA was heavy-handed in enforcing changes to films like *Heroes of the Alamo*, in which it required that scenes of Mexican soldiers slaughtering Texans be removed as well as other scenes demeaning to Mexicans, including the line "Any Texan [could] lick ten Mexicans, single-handed."[64]

The incentive to promote a more positive representation of Latinos was increased with the beginning of military tensions in the Atlantic and Pacific. President Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural address announced the desire to implement a policy of being a "good neighbor" to the nations to America's south. The "Good Neighbor Policy," designed to foster positive relations, began taking an effect in Hollywood as early as 1938, and it became a more fundamental part of the Production Code in 1940 with the creation of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA). Headed by Nelson Rockefeller, whose family had extensive holdings throughout Latin America, the CIAA established the Motion Picture Society for the Americas (MPSA), whose membership paralleled that of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) but also included government-appointed officials and heads of various professional guilds. While the MPSA was a voluntary nongovernmental agency, its influence on Hollywood studios was immense and immediate. As Richard notes, "Within a month all of the major production companies instituted subcommittees which met weekly to exchange information about their studio's respective pictures with Latin content."[65] In 1941, Addison Durland, a Cuban-born journalist working with NBC, was recruited to become the

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Latin American specialist with the PCA, and soon Durland's influence led to a reduction of the more vulgar stereotypes and provided a more nuanced authenticity to Hollywood representations of the varied countries and cultures of Latin America.[66]

The CIAA and MPSA changed the images of Latinos not only through censorship and enforced editing but also by promoting more positive images. One of the more prominent forms of this positive good neighbor policy was in the growth of Latin American musicals during the final years of the war and into the next decade. The Latin musicals encouraged a positive image of Latinos and also allowed for cinematic romantic relationships between North American whites and Latin Americans—something that was strictly forbidden between whites and other races in other Hollywood films. As Richard observes, "Possibly the most important metaphor [the Latin musicals] projected was that of one people within two hemispheres, individually different, but who could share love and friendship to ensure inter-American security."[67] Interestingly, while the MPSA was disbanded at the end of the war and the CIAA absorbed into other governmental agencies, the Production Code Administration continued to foster the Good Neighbor Policy—now that the positive image was written into the PCA's regulations, it would continue on until the mid-1950s. Indeed, Durland remained in his post until 1951.

The war created numerous complications surrounding the representation of race, many of which were indicative of the nebulous nature of the conception of whiteness. Germans, for instance, became an increasingly popular target for ethnic slurs and negative representations. Indeed, the negative depiction of Germans before the U.S. entry into the war was so prominent that the Senate held subcommittee hearings on whether or not Hollywood was "war-mongering." Wendell Willkie was hired by Hollywood to represent its interests, and he turned the tables on the isolationist senators by insisting that if the main question was whether Hollywood hated Hitler then "there need be no investigation. We abhor everything Hitler represents."[68] Concerns about Hollywood's negative depictions of Germans in general and Nazis in particular were also taken up by U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain Joseph Kennedy. Kennedy was greatly concerned that the United Kingdom would not hold out long against the Nazis and that the United States needed to be prepared to make peace with Hitler. He brought this message to various Hollywood studio executives during private dinners in which he lectured them on the importance of maintaining peace with Germany and of American films remaining neutral.[69]

The events of December 7, 1941, put an end to these concerns, and the floodgate of negative depictions of America's enemies was opened. Perhaps not surprisingly, the negative images of the Japanese were even more vicious and derogatory than the depictions of the Germans. Given a history of some sixty years of racist caricatures of the Japanese, Hollywood had a

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backlog of images of the "yellow peril," and the 1940s saw these released at a furious pace. Films such as the 1942 Paramount release *Wake Island*, a Pacific battle film featuring Marines, were used in recruiting, and the ruthlessness of the Japanese characters depicted in the 1944 film *Purple Heart* led critic Louella Parsons to proclaim, "I defy anyone to see this picture and not want to go out and kill, single-handed, every Jap."[70] Interestingly, however, even the unrelentingly negative portrayal of the Japanese during the war was influenced by the subtleties of racial politics, as the Office of War Information put pressure on Hollywood to drop the racial slur "yellow" from its vocabulary for fear of offending the allied Chinese.[71]

Concerns about keeping allied nations positively inclined toward the United States also impacted the Hollywood image of Latinos; however, the favorable image of Latinos crafted under the auspices of the CIAA, MPSA, and PCA was not without racial controversies. One sensitive issue was the presence of people of African heritage in films set in Latin America. Cultural elites in Argentina, for example, were offended by one of the first Good Neighbor musicals, *Down Argentine Way* (1940), starring Carmen Miranda, whose Hollywood career was instigated to further the policy. The offensive content was the inclusion of a musical dance number featuring the African American dancing duo the Nicholas Brothers, which Argentinean officials feared would give the impression that Argentina was a nation of "Indians or Africans." A similar scene in Miranda's second feature, the 1941 *Carnival in Rhythm*, was subsequently cut.

As Brian O'Neil notes, the policies of Addison Durland, intended to promote a more positive view of Latin America, led him to "reconfigure Latin America as modern, clean, and especially in the cases of Brazil and Argentina, European in complexion."[72] This observation is informative with regard to the broader notion of whiteness and white privilege that lies at the heart of many controversies over racial representation, namely, the fluidity of the notion of whiteness as a racial category. The "whitening" of Latin America during the Good Neighbor Policy years suggests the degree to which the notion of whiteness is always open to negotiation and amendment, but perhaps more importantly, the alterations or expansions of who gets to occupy—even temporarily—the position of white cultural privilege are made with an eye toward maintaining that white privilege. The efforts to "clean up" the image of Latin Americans—which, in fairness, consisted of both eliminating some vile stereotypes as well as the far less noble process of erasing people of African descent from representations of these nations—was undertaken with the specific goals of, first, maintaining strong sales in the region and, second, preserving strategic political alliances during the period of the war.

Another unfortunate aspect of whiteness revealed in the controversy over Carmen Miranda's first film was the clarity with which whiteness was

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countered most clearly by "blackness"—the representation of African Americans. While the PCA and its various governmental collaborators found it useful to promote a positive image of Latinos, the same was not the case for African Americans, who continued to receive unfavorable representations on film. In the period surrounding World War II, some of the more harsh stereotypes disappeared, but so too in many cases did the portrayal of African Americans on-screen at all. Roles for African Americans were so limited that in 1942 leaders of the NAACP met with Hollywood studio executives to discuss the dearth of opportunities for African American actors. In spite of the promise by studio executives to create more African American roles, the promise yielded only a handful of all-African American musicals such as *Stormy Weather* (1943) and some roles in war films like *Bataan* (1943). As O'Neil observes, "As far as the vast majority of Hollywood's wartime films were concerned, African Americans simply did not exist and when they did, it was almost always in short musical numbers."[73]

Illustrative of the difficult position African American actors faced was the situation surrounding David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* in 1939. While the production offered numerous employment opportunities for African American actors, the roles were largely distasteful in their re-creation of plantation-era slave positions. As Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons recount, "By February 1939, black publisher Leon Washington had circulated a petition among 'colored maids' to boycott *Gone With the Wind*."[74] Controversies surrounding *Gone with the Wind* also encompassed the use of the "n-word," which Selznick seemed insistent upon featuring in the film. PCA head Joseph Breen resisted the inclusion of the racial slur out of concern that it might spark protests and relented only when Selznick promised that the offensive word would be used solely by African American characters. This compromise, however, met with considerable resistance from the African American cast members themselves. Butterfly McQueen complained so much that she later recalled being told "Mr. Selznick would never give me another job." But the resistance proved effective, and Selznick later relented to using instead the slightly less offensive term "darkie."[75] He also wanted to avoid too much confrontation with the PCA in anticipation of the battle he would later fight, and win, over Rhett Butler's famous exclamation that he did not "give a damn," another controversial term.

The complexity of racial politics also ensnared Hattie McDaniel, whose turn as Mammy would earn her an Academy Award and mark her as the first African American to receive this honor. Her long career included numerous performances as matronly servant women, but while these roles were outwardly demeaning and subservient, there was also a clear sense that each performance of the role saw McDaniel as more forceful and independent. Still, in spite of her success, McDaniel became a discordant figure

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in postwar Hollywood. On the one hand, she was a respected actress and a generous patron to other struggling African American actors; on the other hand, she was thought by some as a traitor to her race for accepting a career of performing African American subservience.[76] The African American *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper complained that McDaniel and the other African American performers were playing "unthinking hapless clods."[77]

McDaniel's difficult relationship to Hollywood stardom would embroil many of those who followed in her footsteps. Lena Horne, for example, became a kind of Hollywood star in the 1940s in part through the pressure put on Hollywood by the NAACP. However, Horne's roles were almost always as herself in a small singing role. Horne's rise to fame was as a singing sensation rather than an actress, and her long career as a touring performer assured her of stardom without ever being embraced by Hollywood films. The ambivalence of Hollywood towards African American stars, especially women, would be a recurring cause of controversy and protest during the postwar years. As an example, the explicitly sexual nature of Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones* (1954), a film that garnered an Academy Award nomination for Dorothy Dandridge, was protested so vehemently by the NAACP that the producers donated the opening night proceeds to the organization in an effort to mute its complaints.[78]

The ambivalence with which Hollywood engaged the African American community extended beyond the studio treatment of performers to the way in which the African American experience was depicted. During the war, for instance, several films sought to galvanize African American support for the war effort. The 1943 film *We've Come a Long Way* was produced by a white independent producer, Jack Goldberg, but also received support from African American minister Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux and the War Department. The film's central conceit was that the African American community had been given many opportunities in America and that things would be much worse under German or Japanese domination. The NAACP called the picture "disgusting and insulting" and refused to aid in its distribution to African American theaters. Similar controversies surrounded another War Department–supported film, *Negro Soldier* (1944), which featured the story of African American soldiers throughout U.S. history.

During and immediately following World War II, Hollywood depictions of African Americans continued this trend of painting a rosier picture than seemed warranted. To some extent, the removal of depictions of racism and racial violence was due to the influence of the Production Code, but as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note, the ban also foreclosed "any portrayal of racial and sexual violence toward African Americans ... implicitly wiping the memory of rape, castration, and lynching from the American record."[79]

This reimagining of America's racial past was most blatant, and most protested in Walt Disney's animated tale of the Reconstruction period,

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Song of the South, released in 1946. The musical animated film with live actors was technically innovative, but by the account of numerous African American protestors, the film was reprehensibly politically regressive. Commentators condemned the film's main character, Uncle Remus, as an ineffectual "Uncle Tom," and the *Chicago Defender* declared, "As long as Hollywood refuses to portray modern Negroes truthfully, flights into the servile past, no matter how sincere, will always be resented."[80] Local 27 of the American Federation of Teachers in Washington, D.C., issued a statement declaring the film "insidious and subtle propaganda against the Negro—insidious because the Negro is presented treacherously and slyly in conventional stereotypes."[81] Prominent African American leaders soon called for the film to be banned. Representative Adam Clayton Powell targeted both *Song of the South* and *Abie's Irish Rose*, a romantic comedy focused on the culture clash surrounding the romance between a Jewish man and his Irish fiancée, as inappropriate and publicly called upon Benjamin Fielding, New York City's commissioner of licenses, to "immediately take steps in your department and to initiate steps in any other department of the city to immediately close 'Abie's Irish Rose' and 'Song of the South.' " "These two pictures," Powell complained, "are not only an insult to American minorities, but an insult to everything that America as a whole stands for."[82] Along these lines, many theaters catering primarily to African American audiences also shunned the film.[83]

In part due to protests such as these, Hollywood began taking up African American concerns in the series of postwar films often referred to as "social issue" films—those films that looked at various social problems ranging from alcoholism and drugs to racism and anti-Semitism. This period saw the emergence of such films as *The Man with the Golden Arm*, which dealt with drug addiction, and *Gentlemen's Agreement* and *Crossfire*, which engaged anti-Semitism. Films taking on issues of racism and the treatment of African Americans included *Home of the Brave*, *Lost Boundaries*, *Pinky*, and *Intruder in the Dust*, all from 1949. *Variety* termed these the "Negro tolerance pix," and as Margaret McGehee contends, they were among the first to make "manifest the racial climate immediately following World War II" and "signaled a growing opposition to the Jim Crow system on the part of many whites across the country, including those in charge at Hollywood studios."[84] Not surprisingly, these films were plagued by controversy and even protest. In Macon, Georgia, a cross was burned in front of a drive-in theater screening *Pinky*.[85] Several of these pictures also faced bans and heavy censorship, especially in the South.

One of the things that made films like *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries* so controversial was the way they challenged one of the longest-standing dictums related to race relations on film, namely, the ban on miscegenation. The Production Code explicitly declared, "Miscegenation (sex relationship between the white and black races) is forbidden." While concerns about

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miscegenation had been raised in previous codes, including the 1927 "Don'ts and Be Carefuls," the Code turned the concern into an unequivocal ban. Interestingly, Susan Courtney's research into the miscegenation clause suggests that, unlike much of the Code, it was not derived from Catholic beliefs or even the racial politics of the drafters of the Code, but rather arose out of censorship practices by state, especially Southern state, censorship boards. The restriction of the Code did not prevent Hollywood from depicting interracial relationships—indeed, as the history of film controversy reveals, the restrictions of the Code rarely eliminated any of the items it prohibited—but the Code did serve to limit the degree to which such relationships could be overtly portrayed on film.

But times were beginning to change. The emergence of the broad civil rights movement during the postwar period shook the very foundations of the racist institutions of Jim Crow and other cultural forms of oppression, and in 1957 the Production Code bowed to the changing tide and removed the ban on miscegenation, opening up a period of increasingly explicit engagement with American race relations.

1957–1989

The period between the late 1950s and the 1980s was a remarkably vibrant time in the struggle for civil rights across a wide spectrum of people living in the United States and around the world. These three decades saw remarkable triumphs—the Voting Act of 1964, desegregation of the schools, Martin Luther King Jr.'s march on Washington—as well as horrific tragedies—the assassination of King, violent race riots throughout the nation, and the assassination of Malcolm X. The nation as a whole was reformulated during these tumultuous years as the cultural codes were fundamentally and at times violently changed. Mainstream films followed these trends—sometimes a bit far behind and at other times in the forefront—and, not surprisingly, many of the films tackling the broader questions of racial representation during this turbulent time courted controversy. Arguably there were at least as many controversies over racial representations in film during this period as there had been in any previous period.

Within the context of this book, what becomes interesting about this time frame is the ways in which these controversies and disputes mirrored those in previous eras. This period saw continued protests by civil rights organizations, protests of films seen as either too conservative or too progressive in their representation of race relations, and the reemergence of various racial cinemas with the coming of filmmakers of color in the late 1960s who began reclaiming their own filmic image. For our present purposes, it is useful to trace these patterns during the thirty-year period leading up to Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, which, as I argue at the end

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of this chapter, serves as a uniquely provocative articulation of racial representation.

The lifting of the ban on miscegenation in films was greeted with the first major studio film to engage the topic directly: the 1957 film *Island in the Sun*. Starring prominent white actors Joan Fontaine and James Mason and prominent African American actors Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge, the film is set on a fictitious Caribbean island during the waning days of British colonial rule and follows the complex political, romantic, and familial relationships of the white and Afro-Caribbean characters. Of course, for most reviewers and publicists, the film's central selling point was its interracial romances and even a controversial on-screen interracial kiss. Reactions to the film were deeply mixed, but the controversy helped to make it one of the top money earners at the box office that year. Some critics felt the film pushed boundaries too far and too fast, while others thought, as Douglas Robinson wrote in the *New York Times*, that "motion picture exploration of the previously taboo field of miscegenation and its peripheral areas seems to be progressing cautiously."[86] Still, in some areas the film was met with protests. In Charlotte, North Carolina, for instance, the film was protested by more than a hundred members of the Ku Klux Klan, and in Jacksonville, Florida, the film was picketed by members of a "White Citizens Council."[87]

The controversy over interracial romance on-screen extended into the lives of the actors off-screen. Lead actress Fontaine reported that the day after the Los Angeles premiere, she received hate mail in which "most of the letter-writers termed me unprintable, filthy names. One of the letters had 'KKK' written on it."[88] Similar slurs were visited upon Belafonte from both whites and African Americans, which was especially ironic as the actor had controversially married a white woman—causing some to question his commitment to the African American cause. Belafonte would, in fact, produce his own controversial take on interracial relationships in his film *The Word, The Flesh and the Devil*, a tale about the last people on a post-apocalyptic Earth and their struggle with racial relationships.

Belafonte's difficult position as an African American star whose appeal crossed racial boundaries was shared by one of his contemporaries, Sidney Poitier. Poitier, the star of such provocative and controversial films as *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) was also subjected to public criticism for the ways he represented the African American community. In his autobiography *This Life*, Poitier recalls an article in the *New York Times* entitled "Why Do White Folks Love Sidney Poitier?" The article, written by Clifford Mason, "ripped to shreds everything I had ever done," Poitier recalled, "I was an 'Uncle Tom.' "[89]

On a broader level, these critiques of Belafonte and Poitier were the continuation of a long-standing theme in controversies over racial representations in film. Given the remarkably limited number of roles for people of

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color, any actor who gains notoriety in one of these roles comes to bear the burden of standing for the entire race. The same burden that had fallen on filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux and actors like Hattie McDaniel now fell upon stars like Horne, Dandridge, Belafonte, and Poitier. They were left in the unenviable position of either being too "stereotypical" and thus playing into long-standing racial caricatures or defying these stereotypes and losing mainstream acceptance.

The lack of roles, especially varied roles, for African Americans had been a point of tension for decades. As early as 1940, the Negro Actors Protective League had organized to push for more roles for African American actors, and in 1942, as mentioned earlier, the NAACP had held a special meeting with Hollywood studio heads to push for more African American roles. In 1962, African American actors picketed the Academy Awards ceremony, urging producers to take up African American issues and characters, and that same year the NAACP threatened legal action as well as a boycott of Hollywood films if television and film producers did not expand the range of African American characters.[90]

To an extent, these efforts were successful, as Hollywood began slowly expanding the roles for African Americans. However, the most dramatic, and perhaps most controversial, changes in African American representation on-screen came through the return of independent African American cinema in the form of the "blaxploitation" films of the 1970s. However, if Poitier and his cohort were faced with the problem of being too mainstream or "white," then these films saw the other horn of the dilemma. African American stars like Jim Brown, a prominent athlete who had won respect at Syracuse University and in the National Football League, faced criticism for being too assertive and aggressive. As Ed Guerrero writes about Brown, "Jim Brown was able to do what Poitier was denied in his career to that point, to act in a violent assertive manner and express his sexuality openly." This difference also extended to their personas offscreen, where "Poitier was reserved and well mannered [while] Jim Brown was a turbulent personality who entangled himself in offscreen escapades, fist fights, and rancorous feuds."[91]

African American filmmakers such as Mario Van Peebles, whose 1971 *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* overcame its X rating to become a smash independent hit, and Gordon Parks, whose *Shaft* followed Peebles's film by a few months, reappropriated the image of the African American ghetto and produced films that immersed themselves in the cultures of crime, drugs, and urban poverty. A struggle soon ensued between the two sides of this difficult question of representation. On the one side were older and more established African American actors who felt that the new blaxploitation films from the likes of Peebles and Parks were degrading to the African American community. On the other side were those who embraced these new grittier films as being more authentic and politically charged. As

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Donald Bogle argues, this movement was "the first time in film history [that] the studios produced black-oriented films pitched directly at pleasing blacks."[92] Yet the new movement created considerable debate within the African American community. A forum in *Ebony* magazine in 1973 demonstrates the feelings on both sides. In one letter to the editor, the writer argues that films like *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback's* are "literally MURDERING a generation of black youths," while another letter contends, "All the black organization leaders who are against a black movie such as *Super Fly* obviously moved from the ghetto and forgot 'what's going on.' "[93]

Controversies over representation on-screen were, of course, not isolated to African Americans. Asian Americans were facing similar struggles throughout these decades. One unique dimension of the issues surrounding Asian actors was Hollywood's racist tendency to treat all people from Asia identically. This problem proved particularly sensitive during and immediately after World War II. During the war, Japanese parts were almost always played by Chinese American actors, due in part to the internment of most Japanese Americans. However, by 1950 there were growing protests from Chinese American actors that they were being displaced for Japanese American actors. As an example, when Japanese actor Shirley Yamaguchi was being hailed as "the Bette Davis of Japan," Chinese-born actor Iris Wong complained publicly, "We are all miffed about Shirley and the other Japanese actors who are being promoted by Hollywood. During the war when Japanese were sent in concentration camps, they used Chinese actors to portray Japanese villains. Now they are casting Japanese in Chinese parts."[94] Sadly, Hollywood's refusal to distinguish between Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and other Asian ethnicities continues, as seen in recent protests over the use of Chinese actresses in Japanese roles in the 2005 film *Memoirs of a Geisha*. As Howard French put it, "The problem with 'Geisha' is that it has cast the wrong Asians in its leading roles, specifically placing three major ethnic Chinese actresses in the role of geisha, one of Japan's most rarefied cultural products."[95]

Another controversy related to Asian actors was the continued use of "yellowface"—the use of makeup to present white actors as Asian characters. While the practice of blackface had become taboo by the 1950s, the use of cosmetics to allow white actors to portray Asian roles continued well into the 1970s. In 1976, Asian actors organized a protest of both their limited roles and the practice of yellowface. As one protestor put it, all "major sympathetic Oriental roles of any intelligence, prominence and esteem" ended up being played by white actors. Writing in 1977, Eugene Wong objected that "the sustained use of slant-eyed makeup [is] especially serious and retrogressive in the midst of an era of undeniable progress for minorities, particularly for racial minorities, in general."[96]

In addition to losing "respectable" Asian roles to white actors, the Asian communities also protested against the continuation of racial stereotyping

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in Hollywood films and television. In 1977, for example, the Association of Asian/Pacific American Artists demonstrated outside the set of a Dodge car commercial that featured a white actor playing Charlie Chan. The association argued that "the character is stereotypical, affected and negative, as well as being a continuation of the use of racist cosmetology."[97]

Disputes over the roles available to minority characters were also taken up within the Latino community. Following the lead of African American organizations, Latino groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens and the National Council of La Raza pushed during the 1960s and '70s for the elimination of various egregious stereotypes, including corporate advertising characters like Frito-Lay's Frito Bandito and the Chiquita Banana. Various groups were organized during those decades to protest these caricatures including Nosotros, a group organized by popular actor Ricardo Montalbán. Pressure was also put on Latino actors to abandon their stereotypical, if lucrative, stage personas. As Gary Keller reports:

> Bill Dana, the creator of the comic bellhop, dim-witted speaker of fractured English, José Jiménez (who was the most popular Hispanic TV character of the 1960s among the general public, surpassing Desi Arnaz and Duncan Renaldo's *Cisco Kid*), agreed at the 1970 meeting of the Congress of Mexican American Unity to shelve the persona.[98]

For other Latino actors, the pressure to refuse the kinds of stereotypical roles being offered by mainstream television and film meant severely limiting their careers. For example, Rita Moreno, the first Latina to win an Academy Award, reported great difficulty finding worthwhile roles: "It's really demeaning after you've won the Oscar to be offered the same role over and over again. They only wanted me to drag out my accent-and-dance show over and over again."[99]

In another response borrowed from the African American community, Latino protestors soon began taking up cameras and scripts and producing their own films in an effort to reappropriate their own representation. For example, Moctesuma Esperanza, who would go on to produce such feature films as *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988) and *Selena* (1997), was a Latino activist who helped organize UCLA's Media Urban Crisis Coalition program to recruit minority filmmakers in the 1970s.

The emergence of prominent Latinos within film and television production soon led to efforts to consolidate their new place and formalize the growing Latino cinema movement. In 1974, the Latino Consortium was established to help promote Latino programming on public television stations, and in 1978 the Los Angeles Chicano Cinema Coalition was formed to solidify a "Chicano cinema esthetic" and "create an alternative to the 'commercial' influence of Hollywood film."[100] These movements were accompanied by various cinematic manifestos, such as Francisco X.

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Camplis's, which in 1975 called for a Latino cinema that would "not merely dust off the cobwebs from moldy relics of our pre-Columbian past but provide a viable connection from the past to the present and beyond into the future."[101]

These diverse efforts have created a more vibrant dialogue surrounding the various ethnic identities that make up the Latino community—here it is worth acknowledging that, for example, Mexican, Cuban, and Brazilian identities and cinemas are not identical—but sadly, by the 1990s, Rosa Linda Fergosa concluded that the dominant cinematic representation of Latinos was of poverty, gangs, and drugs—not entirely different from the bandit characters of the early twentieth century.[102]

After the end of the 1980s, another evolution in African American cinema emerged, one that would largely embrace the images of gangs, drugs, guns, and violence. The astounding success of John Singleton's 1991 *Boyz n the Hood*, which garnered both box office and critical acclaim, sparked a new round of African American filmmaking. These new pictures paralleled the films of the blaxploitation era but in many ways were seen as even more violent and celebratory of criminality. Norman Denzin, for instance, argues that these "New Black Cinema" films embrace a "post-civil rights racial politics" and that "this politics shapes a cinema of racial violence."[103] In films like *Menace II Society* (the Hughes Brothers, 1993) and *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson, 1992), young African American filmmakers embraced this violent new racial politics and presented an unflinching view of life in West Coast urban ghettos, replete with guns, gangs, and drugs.

In many ways, the film that opened the door for this new era of militant and violent African American films was the most controversial of this era, and while it did not celebrate West Coast gang culture, it did call out in explicit terms the underlying questions of race, representation, and authority. The film was Spike Lee's 1989 *Do the Right Thing*.

RACIAL REPRESENTATION IN SPIKE LEE'S *DO THE RIGHT THING*

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, from the time of its Cannes debut, Lee's film about racial tensions in a Brooklyn neighborhood was provoking controversy. Various critics feared that the film, while cinematically strong, was too politically incendiary. One anonymous distributor declared in an interview at Cannes, "People are going to walk out of theaters across America and throw trash cans through pizzeria windows, there's no doubt about it." This same commentator noted, "It's a great movie, but its coming out at a very questionable time."[104] Even director Spike Lee seemed to acknowledge the possibility that his film could strike a dangerous chord in the American summer of 1989. "I did not make this movie to incite riots: that's the thing people are going to hang me for," the director declared,

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and while he expressed doubt that the audiences would be provoked to actual violence by the film, he admitted, "I'll go on the record right now saying that whatever happens I won't shrink from the responsibility. You can't predict the effect of any film."[105]

Of course, critics who were raising the alarm about the threat the film posed were making a prediction and, as the preceding history should suggest, this prediction was not uncommon in relation to films about racial representation. From the fears that "prejudice existing for scores of years will rear itself and flourish again in crime and blood," as the mayor of Lexington declared in response to the 1912 *Johnson-Jeffries Fight*, to concerns that the 1957 *Island in the Sun*'s depiction of miscegenation would cause riots among angered whites, the history of racial representations on film has been one heavily flavored with trepidation of social unrest and violence.

Much as with Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*, which came hot on the heels of the Chicago race riots of 1919, Lee's *Do the Right Thing* came at a time of heightened racial tensions in New York City and the nation as a whole. Indeed, Lee explicitly cites many of these sources of racial tension—graffiti on one wall declares "Tawana told the truth," a reference to accusations from an African American woman named Tawana Brawley who claimed she was attacked and raped by a group of white men. The film is even dedicated to five African Americans who had been killed under racist circumstances in New York, including Michael Griffith, whose murder at the hands of a white mob in Howard Beach in 1986 inspired the story line.

Despite the provocative timing and nature of Lee's film, however, the predictions of violence proved wrong. There were no major incidents related to the film, and on the contrary, most audiences who saw the film reported a positive reaction to it. Sylvia Castillo, a Los Angeles resident who was interviewed after seeing the movie, chastised the critics who forecast violence, explaining that the film "just puts dialogue right on the table." Others responding to the film observed the way it offered a more realistic portrayal of race relations than other contemporary "race issue" films. Karen Bass, also interviewed outside a Los Angeles theater, expressed her opinion: "It showed life from the black community's perspective. It wasn't like 'Mississippi Burning,' where black people were just nameless, helpless victims."[106] Felicia Harden, a nineteen-year-old Bostonian, concurred: "It really impacted on me because it was just like the stuff that happens every day, all the time, in Boston."[107]

This is not to suggest that everyone viewed Lee's film positively. Some critics decried Lee's portrayal of his African American characters, many of whom are shown drinking on the street corners and using obscenities. One *New York Times* letter writer, for instance, objected, "I've never seen blacks portrayed so offensively. They are foul-mouthed (and loud-mouthed) idlers,

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bullies, brawlers and drinkers whose main interests are feckless gossip, ghetto blasters and spotless sneakers, and there is hardly a hint that any of them aspire to anything else."[108] Others complained that the film provoked difficult questions but fell short of offering any sense of a solution. Another Boston audience member said, "I see a lot of issues being brought up but I don't know what to think about the issues, to do about the issues. That was the biggest disappointment about the movie for me."[109] Confronted with these concerns, Lee protested, "It's very unfair to expect me to have the answer. I don't think that's my job as a filmmaker. But I think I can at least try and get people to start talking about it and try and discuss ways that we can live together."[110]

In many ways, Lee's response—that he saw his role as one of raising questions rather than answering them—provides a useful way for beginning to think about *Do the Right Thing* in relation to the long history of racial representations on film. One of the arguments I advanced at the beginning of this chapter—and hope I've elaborated throughout my historical narrative—is that controversies about race and film have often revolved around the question of who claims, or has, authority to decide how other races are represented. This issue certainly stood out in the early days of popular cinema. The contradictory responses to the *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* and *Birth of a Nation* suggest that the question was not really about causing social unrest—a charge leveled at both films—but about whose interests are served by a particular racial representation. As I have argued, the questions of authority over representations have typically been wrapped up in the broader cultural web of white privilege. So, the *Johnson-Jeffries* film was dangerous because it depicted images of racial violence that were threatening to white dominance and privilege, while the images of racial violence in *Birth of a Nation* were not; thus, the former film was banned, and the latter became one of the most popular films of its day.

Spike Lee's film, of course, is not the first movie to engage the topic of white privilege, nor even the first created by a director of color. But what I find particularly notable about *Do the Right Thing* is that it is very much a film about the precise issue of race, representation, and authority. While numerous film critics have debated the merits of the film's ambivalence—especially the lingering, and unanswered, question of whether Mookie "did the right thing" and Lee's use of quotations from both Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—there has been less attention paid to the idea that Lee's film is ultimately about the question of who has authority to control the spaces of representation.[111] Specifically, my argument is that the way in which Lee raised this question both provoked the fears that the film would cause violence and led audiences to respond to the film in a more reflective and contemplative way. It was, in other words, the artistry of the film that allowed it to present its polemical concerns without precipitating inappropriate reactions.

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As those who have viewed the film will recall, the entire story takes place during one particularly hot day in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant. The multiracial nature of the neighborhood is soon established as the film settles on the principal figures. Mookie, played by Lee himself, is a young African American who works delivering pizzas for the Italian American Sal, played by Danny Aiello, and his two sons. Surrounding these two are a variety of characters, including the neighborhood elders, Da Mayor and Mother Sister, played by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee; a radio-toting Public Enemy fan named Radio Raheem; and an increasingly militant friend of Mookie's called Buggin Out.

Existing racial tension in the neighborhood begins to simmer as the day's heat arrives—angry confrontations between African American patrons and a Korean grocer, for example, and between Buggin Out and a white man who has recently moved into the neighborhood. Tensions reach their boiling point when Buggin Out complains to Sal that his "Wall of Fame" consists only of Italian Americans and contains no "brothers." A second angry confrontation between Radio Raheem and Sal—this one over the blaring volume of Raheem's radio—sets the stage for the film's eventual confrontation.

Late in the evening, Raheem and Buggin Out return to the pizza parlor, along with another aggrieved resident named Smiley. In the ensuing argument, Sal destroys Raheem's radio with a baseball bat, leading to a physical fight that escalates and soon pours out of the pizzeria and into the streets. When police arrive, officers restrain Raheem with a choke hold that is held too long, resulting in his death. Police quickly retreat and leave the angry African American residents to confront Sal and his two sons. The tense standoff is broken by Mookie, who picks up a trash can and—in the action often debated as the "right thing"—throws it through the window of Sal's Famous Pizzeria. The ensuing riot sees the pizzeria burned to the ground.

In the film's denouement, Mookie returns to Sal's to demand his money, and the two men have a tense discussion in which Sal insists the pizzeria was his—that he had "made it with his own hands"—and Mookie condemns the murder of Radio Raheem. Mookie leaves with his money and the film ends.

Surrounding this central plot are numerous subplots that help to add to the reality and complexity of life in this small block: Mookie's relationship with the mother of his son (played by Rosie Perez); Sal's affection for Jade, Mookie's sister; the long-running feud between Mother Sister and Da Mayor; the tension between Sal's two sons, one of whom (played by John Turturro) is blatantly racist and the other of whom feels more connected to Mookie than to his brother; and the running commentary by the local disc jockey (played by Samuel L. Jackson). These various subplots help the film establish a realistic "three-dimensional" setting for the primary action and the moral complexities involved in all human relationships.

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At the heart of the action in *Do the Right Thing* is the question of representation and authority, and it seems clear that Lee's film is designed to raise this question in explicit and forceful ways. Even the opening music of the film suggests the complexity of the film's reference to the long history of racial representations. A single saxophone wails a low and almost mournful version of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the African American National Anthem, as the opening credits begin, but soon the screen is filled with bright colors and the figure of Perez dancing to the Public Enemy song "Fight the Power." Even the first words of dialogue suggest that this film is designed to approach issues of film and race in a unique way—"Wake up!" the radio disk jockey shouts into his microphone as the film begins.

That *Do the Right Thing* is concerned with the question of representation is made clear with the central struggle of the film. Whose pictures should be displayed on Sal's "Wall of Fame"? Sal argues that, as the pizzeria is his, only he can decide who will appear in this space. However, Buggin Out and later others contend that, as the pizzeria is patronized primarily by people of color, the wall should represent the diversity of the neighborhood.

In another interesting, and often remarked upon, segment of the film, various characters break the "fourth wall" and turn to the audience while spewing out a string of racial epithets aimed at Italian Americans, African Americans, Jews, Koreans, and Puerto Ricans. Here Lee brings all those unstated racist stereotypes that have long been the "visual grammar" of Hollywood into their harshest and most explicit articulation, and rather than have these exchanged between characters in moments of anger, he has these angry words spoken from the screen directly at the audience. Through this move, Lee pulls back the curtain from the racism inherent in many representations of the Other and forces the viewer to recognize what underlies so many familiar ethnic stereotypes. Interestingly, the scene immediately preceding—and therefore seemingly provoking this excursion into the spewing of racial slurs—is a discussion between Mookie and Sal's older, racist son Pino. Mookie asks Pino who his favorite basketball star, movie star, and rock star are, and in each instance, Pino names an African American. When asked how these could be his heroes while he continued to see the African Americans in the neighborhood in such demeaning and racist ways, Pino finds himself trapped in a quandary and retorts, "They're more than black." It is the painful disjuncture between representations that has Pino trapped; he cannot see the reality behind the idealized African American sports and entertainment stars he idolizes, nor can he see past his own racist representation of African Americans to engage with those around him.

Somewhere between the representations on the screen and those we use as filters to navigate our everyday life is the reality of human beings

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struggling to find their way in the world. Lee's film does not explicitly take sides on the various questions he raises on the film. While it would have been easy to paint someone—Sal or Buggin Out or Radio Raheem or even Pino—as the unequivocal villain of the film, Lee chose to leave the situation open, ambiguous, and complex, and it seems to me this is one of the reasons that the predictions of the film provoking angry, perhaps even violent, responses proved wrong. Lee's film may be provocative, even inflammatory, but it is so in such an intelligent, complex, and aesthetically confident way that, as many audience members attested, it places difficult questions on the table rather than forcing any particular answer.

My focus here was on the actual film—rather than, as in previous chapters, on the reactions to the film—because, in many ways, the controversy over *Do the Right Thing* was a controversy that never came to fruition. The fears were circulated primarily before the film's release. Upon its release, however, the film was received in the intelligent and thoughtful manner in which it was made. In this way, arguably, Lee's film helped to diffuse its own controversy by explicitly raising the question that often goes unstated in controversies over race and film.

CONCLUSION

Not surprisingly, while Spike Lee's film elegantly raised the issues underlying the controversies about racial representation in the movies, it did not end such controversies. In the years immediately following *Do the Right Thing*, the next wave of African American filmmakers embraced Lee's militancy but combined it with a grittier and more violent West Coast urban aesthetic in various films exploring, and at times glorifying, gang violence. These films were both praised and condemned by those who saw in them either a substantial break or a substantial continuation of the racist representations of the past.

Lee's film also predicted the increasingly complex racial politics that would emerge throughout the turn of the twentieth century. By the early years of the twenty-first century, protests against Hollywood representations of race embroiled not only African Americans, Latinos, and Asians but other groups, as well. For example, Arabs protested Disney's 1992 animated film *Aladdin*, which initially contained the lyrics "they cut off your ear, if they don't like your face" before protests forced a change.[112] In 2007, people of Persian descent protested the special-effects epic *300* claiming it was another example of Hollywood painting Middle Easterners as monstrous villains.[113] In the context of the American war in Iraq, some protesters also feared that the film was laying a symbolic foundation to justify an attack against Iran.

The controversies over films like *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *Aladdin*, and *300* suggest that the struggles over racial representation will become even more

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complicated in a rapidly globalizing world. While there is a long history of international struggles over film representation, dating back to Mexico's ban and Japan's protests in the early 1900s, the increasingly global market for Hollywood films and the more rapid movement of peoples around the world suggest that issues of racial representation and the underlying question of who has the authority to craft such representations will continue to be contentious.

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