



Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film

ALLYSON NADIA FIELD MARSHA GORDON EDITORS



WITH A FOREWORD BY JACQUELINE NAJUMA STEWART

**Screening
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NOTE ON THE COMPANION WEBSITE

Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film has a page on the Duke University Press website that provides links to streaming versions of all of the digitally available films discussed in the book. The companion website is organized by chapter to better aid readers in accessing the films discussed in this collection.

<https://www.dukeupress.edu/Features/Screening-Race>

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Giving Voice, Taking Voice

Nonwhite and Nontheatrical

JACQUELINE NAJUMA STEWART

When night comes, and she has had several drinks and sleeps, it is easy to take the keys. I know now where she keeps them. Then I open the door and walk into their world. It is, as I always know, made of cardboard.—JEAN RHYS, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

When novelist Jean Rhys gives voice to Bertha Mason, the “madwoman in the attic” who makes brief, mysterious, and destructive appearances in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), she offers an intriguing model for revisionist historiography.¹ *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a postcolonial counter-bildungsroman. Rhys takes Mr. Rochester’s melodramatic, marriage-proposal-busting sob story from Brontë’s novel—the one about his ill-fated, secreted nuptials with Bertha during his days in Jamaica—as her starting point, and crafts an affecting account of the complex and brutal legacies of slavery and colonialism. In Rhys’s hands, Bertha’s Creole background becomes more than a self-evident marker of her bestial non-Englishness—as “monster,” “intemperate and unchaste” with a “black and scarlet visage”—that must be locked up in Thornfield Hall’s garret under the (sometimes inebriated) guard of Mrs. Poole.² Instead, when Bertha is at the center of the tale, we get her real name (Antoinette), and her Creole identity becomes a complex, crumbling colonial inheritance that brings a continuum of racial identities into relief, from an insurgent black Caribbean servant class to white English interlopers like Mr. Rochester scouring the edges of the British Empire for its resources, financial and human. More recently, Alice Randall attempts a similar re-orienting in her 2001 novel *The Wind Done Gone*, a retelling of Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 blockbuster novel *Gone with the Wind*, from the perspective

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of a mixed-race slave, that pushes Scarlett O'Hara (renamed "Other") and *GWTW*'s other fabled white characters to the margins of the narrative.³

There are instructive connections between these literary works and the revisionist work of this collection. *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film* turns our attention away from the subjects and subjectivities that have long occupied the center of scholarly and popular film histories, using race as the fulcrum. Editors Allyson Nadia Field and Marsha Gordon posit that attentiveness to questions of race can illuminate a range of film production, distribution, exhibition, and reception practices that have gone underexplored in our focus on narrative, feature-length fiction films made for commercial release. This volume builds upon Field's and Gordon's previous, field-expanding scholarship on sponsored and educational films, work that has contributed substantially to the growing body of scholarship on orphan films of many types (including home movies, student films, medical films, training films, and others). In bringing these essays together, they continue to identify the pivotal but understudied roles race has played not just in (so many) individual orphan films, but within the larger systems of visual, cultural, and ideological production that constitute film in all of its forms.

The type of film considered in this book, nontheatrical film, is such vast terrain that it would require tremendous labor to gauge its scope, to trace its known paths and forge new ones, to excavate its layered, sometimes buried, histories. But perhaps this work should not be described with such violent language of exploratory empiricism. In scholarly efforts to account for nontheatrical film, we can be daunted by both the sheer amount and variety of films that fall under this umbrella (much of which actually survives in material form), and the lack of archival, methodological, and pedagogical guides available to us as compared with those that have been developed for theatrical film. Thus it may be tempting to take up the language, and methods, of explorers or pioneers when approaching nontheatrical works. One of this book's most valuable lessons, however, is that nontheatrical film is a landscape that will likely never be mapped definitively.

The essays collected here suggest ways of thinking about nontheatrical film that echo Jean Rhys's delineation of the "madwoman's" backstory as one necessarily fashioned (in its plot points and oblique narrative style) by racialized histories of repression and contradiction. That is, these wonderfully detailed case studies cannot simply transfer the same research and analytical methods long used for theatrical film, and thereby annex the nontheatrical as a new, and fully knowable, scholarly settlement. Instead, by foregrounding race, the contributors to this volume evoke nontheatrical film's polyvocal and

often enigmatic qualities, much as Antoinette's story opens onto a sea of evidentiary questions and interpretive possibilities that is both wide and deep.

Signal among these questions and possibilities are considerations of nontheatrical film's relationships to Hollywood and to theatrical film presentation. The term "nontheatrical" was used with clearly positive connotations by the makers and marketers of sponsored and educational films across the twentieth century. Embracing its differences from commercial, entertainment-oriented film product, this self-described nontheatrical film world did not understand itself as an entirely marginal one, particularly given the volume of work it generated and circulated, and the staggering numbers of viewers it reached in venues including schools, churches, factories, libraries, museums, world's fairs, and many, many more. Haidee Wasson makes the provocative claim that "the vast technological infrastructure and the expansive film viewing practices that have long existed outside of the idealized world of commercial movie theaters announces irrevocably that the idea of nontheatrical exhibition is so broad as to border on being meaningless."⁴ Wasson flags a terminological issue that begs further debate among scholars. We know that "nontheatrical" had great utility for the individuals and industries that produced works for noncommercial spaces (although nontheatrical films were occasionally shown in theaters and were shown widely in spaces—like department stores—where other things were being sold, or for the purposes of stimulating consumption more generally). We must ask, then, how the intentional act of combining multiple film practices under the nontheatrical umbrella functioned to serve the pedagogical, ideological, and financial interests of those who embraced it as self-descriptive.

We might consider this issue in relation to the use of the term "minority" to describe, within various U.S. political and institutional contexts, a shared status among multiple identity groups of people who are not white. "Minority" obviously attempts to call attention to legacies of racial discrimination within, say, corporate or educational institutions in which people of color have been underrepresented relative to their numbers in surrounding populations. But it is also a term that connotes a minor positionality, which can produce awkward if not disempowering effects. Would a group of college students interested in chemistry, or Ultimate Frisbee, or Russian culture organize themselves as a/the Minority Student Association? Moreover, as contemporary language about U.S. racial demographics—particularly in journalistic discourse—speaks straight-facedly of our transition to a "majority minority" population, we can see the "meaninglessness" (Wasson's term again) of hard numbers in the face of discursive traditions that have for so

long served to identify center and margins, to designate others, and/or to embrace one's own difference.

The way in which “minority” has become shorthand for multiple and intersecting issues of racial identification, oppression, and (potential) empowerment serves as a helpful guide for understanding how the term “non-theatrical” has functioned as a reflection on power. What the nontheatrical film community was marking then, and what we as film scholars are tracking now, is the issue of who controls the moving image as a means to shape the ways in which people see themselves and their place(s) in the world. In pointing to the places where nonwhite people and nontheatrical films have overlapped, this book displays a stunning array of moments and locations at which desires to understand racial identities, disparities, and subjectivities meet, with disparate effects.

Importantly, we learn across this book that nontheatrical film does not stand entirely in opposition to theatrical film, but rather is entangled with it and its racial ideologies on multiple levels. Despite the negation implied in the label “nontheatrical,” we see much crossover of personnel (writers, directors, and actors) between nontheatrical and theatrical film industries. Not surprisingly, then, we see important similarities in form and style. Nontheatrical films on the higher-capitalized end, such as educational and sponsored films, use storytelling and visual techniques that are familiar from commercial films, such as classical narrative structures, clear character motivation and psychology, and continuity editing.

And while it has been argued that most nontheatrical film types are linked in their bid for a kind of social usefulness (i.e., edification over profit), they can nonetheless reflect the limits imposed by the dominant thinking about race within which they are produced. *The Corner* (1962), for example, directed by Northwestern University film student Robert Ford, is a sponsored documentary about the Vice Lords social club (or street gang, depending on your point of view) that features a range of moving and insightful first-person accounts of the struggles of growing up black, male, and poor on Chicago's West Side. It also features extraordinary details of the spaces and styles of black youth interaction, demonstrating a clear rapport between Ford and his film subjects.⁵ *The Corner* sets up the presentation of the Vice Lords' voices with an anonymous male narrator speaking over a freeze-frame of the film's central character, Clarence Smith. The narrator tells us that what follows is “a description of their world as they see it.” The same narrator comes back at the end of the film to ask, over several images of Clarence squatting alone in front of the neighborhood hot dog joint, “When time comes for

them to leave the corner . . . who will have the patience to help them make the adjustment from the law of the streets to the laws of society?" This narrational bracketing seeks to establish the authenticity of the film's portraits, creating a sense of empathy for the plight of African American youth lacking adequate educational, recreational, and job opportunities. But this strategy also reveals the presence of the filmmaker as an outsider who is presenting and interpreting the film's visual and sonic information. The fact that *The Corner's* framing narration is performed by a voice that does not use the black teen slang or the West Side Chicago accent that is so pronounced in the Vice Lords' speech raises questions about the faith or interest this film has in the ability of the film's subjects to describe "their world as they see it," not to mention the expectations and needs of the film's presumably predominantly white audiences (likely social services professionals) who view this lower-class black world from the outside.

This is, of course, an issue that emerges in the wide range of theatrical, fictional social problem films about race produced by independent filmmakers and Hollywood studios, particularly during the civil rights era. From Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *No Way Out* (1950) to Shirley Clarke's *The Cool World* (1963), we get significant representations of the tensions seething within African American communities, communicated through a range of approaches attempting to achieve psychological and/or sociological realism in their renderings of black characters and their worlds. These filmmakers are grappling with nothing less than the country's failure to uphold the tenets of democracy and the urgent need to address the still-unresolved social and psychological consequences of slavery and systematic racial oppression. When social problem films prioritize white viewers in their modes of address, they risk objectifying their nonwhite subjects and simplifying their representations of the causes of racial troubles. Like their theatrical counterparts, nontheatrical films about racial issues routinely work to explain nonwhite subjectivity to white viewers, showing nonwhite subjects responding to the indelicate but perennially fascinating question (per W. E. B. Du Bois), "How does it feel to be a problem?"⁶

This is the question Rhys takes up in her rendering of the inner life of Bertha (real name Antoinette)—elaborating her first-person voice, her memories and dreams, her sensory experiences. Activating identification and empathy is of course one of the cinema's most compelling operations, so it comes as no surprise that nontheatrical films would use many of the strategies that engrossed viewers of commercial films in movie theaters. When it comes to "minority" subjects, we can watch how films made in both



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FIGURES F.1–F.3. *The Corner* (Robert Ford, 1962). Stills courtesy of Chicago Film Archives.

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modes negotiate the complexities of making suppressed subjectivities visible and marginalized voices heard. If nontheatrical films aspire to open up new and useful ways to look at a range of subjects—to inform, to educate, to spur to action—how exactly do they use their nontheatrical status to do so? Close analysis is one of the most effective methods used in the studies featured in this volume, marking the importance of considering questions of film style even for films that would seem not to understand themselves primarily as art or entertainment. These moments of close reading are important not just for what they suggest about the general approaches in educational or sponsored or activist films, but also for what they say about the individual texts being read, and the nuances of the representational strategies being brought to bear on the overdetermined subject of race in American society.

Stylistic analysis is also valuable for films on the lower-capitalized end of the nontheatrical spectrum, films not produced for broad markets or even for public uses. Footage of ethnographic research, church activities, or family rituals also rewards consideration of style (e.g., camerawork, editing, performance) for what it can tell us about the goals of the filmmakers and the relations between the filmmakers, their subjects, and their audiences. Films like these may not understand themselves to be making an argument or advocating changes in thought or behavior. And yet, of course, acts of documentation are never neutral, and films of these sorts are shaped by particular notions of culture and community, normativity and difference, that we can read in the ways in which the camera is positioned and footage is organized. Close readings of nontheatrical films need not aspire to identify auteurist tendencies or nail down generic codes, though it can help us to recognize patterns across works. Attention to nontheatrical film styles can also point us to aspects that have not been thoroughly interrogated in the study of theatrical, narrative films, such as the effects of incidental, accidental, and unplanned elements within the frame, the kinds of elements that are so evident in films with lower production values and films made by nonprofessionals.

I think about these seemingly incidental elements quite a bit in my work on the South Side Home Movie Project (SSHMP) in Chicago, an archival and community engagement program I founded in 2005 (thanks to Jasmyn Castro for the shout-out in her contribution to this book). The family films archived by the SSHMP illustrate vigorous effort on the part of black families to show themselves living well, loving their families, supporting their communities, and traveling across the country and around the world. Like all home movies, this footage not only documents concrete places and

historical moments, but also displays more ephemeral practices such as glances and smiles, dances and hugs, cooperative poses and skeptical disdain for the camera. Home movie *mise-en-scène* is replete with objects, some placed by the filmmakers and their families (e.g., home decor), many outside of their control (e.g., elements of street and other public scenes). As we seek to make this footage widely available to the many constituencies we think it would benefit (including scholars, K–12 students and teachers, artists, genealogists, community residents), we are constantly asking ourselves how best to describe the contents of home movies, given their overwhelming detail. In constructing our catalog, we have been wondering how to provide a useful guide to this long undervalued body of work.⁷ Recognizing that people might search this footage for elements that extend far beyond the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) that govern cataloging practices, SSHMP archivist Candace Ming has been developing a taxonomy specific to home movies that draws on the important models offered by the Center for Home Movies, the Chicago Film Archives, and the Texas Archive of the Moving Image, modified to reflect the particularities of our collection.⁸

What we are learning is that, try as we might to anticipate what people might look for in home movies, our descriptive work is most effective when it is understood as an ongoing and interactive endeavor. We conduct oral histories with the families who participate in the project, eliciting information about what we are seeing on-screen. And we invite active, vocal participation at screenings that we host across the South Side, noting viewer comments that add helpful detail to our catalog descriptions. The dialogue engendered by home movies—which were, of course, accompanied by ample conversation in living rooms and basements during family gatherings—is a boon to researchers. We at the SSHMP have come to appreciate the ongoing, symbiotic relationship between the home moviemakers, subjects, and audiences (original and current), and the advantages to activating these relationships continually in our efforts to contextualize and interpret this material.

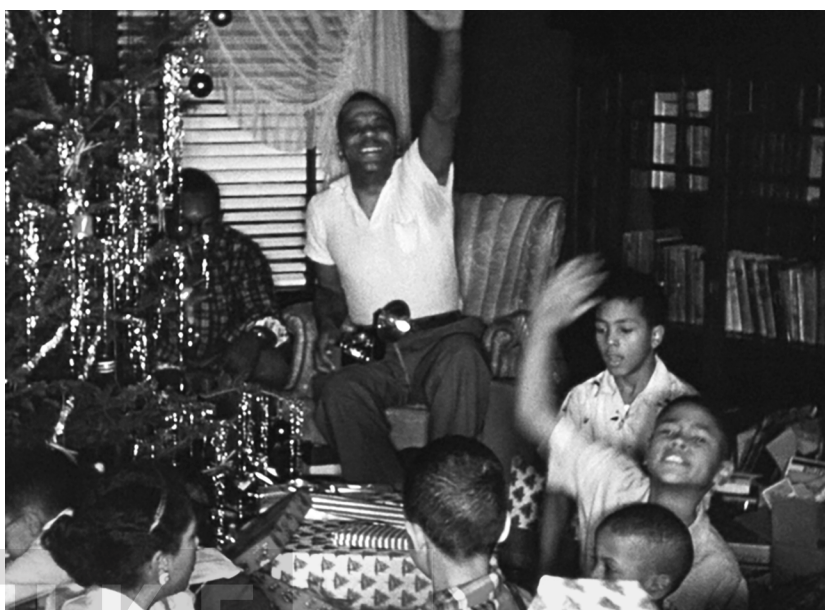
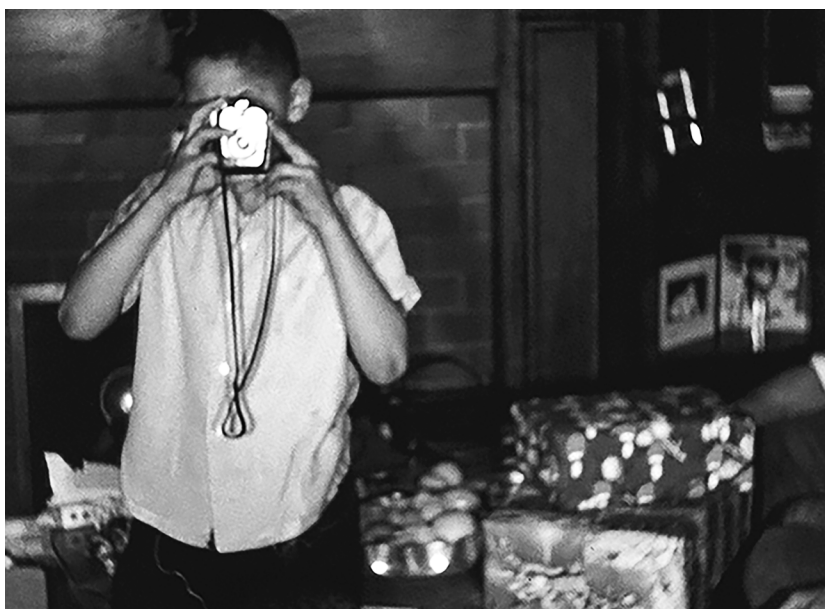
Here is a fundamental difference between theatrical and nontheatrical film: the wider spaces nontheatrical films provide for audience interaction. While lively fan cultures are certainly important aspects of theatrical film history, movie theaters—the idealized site for film exhibition—are designed for audiences to engage with the screen and not with each other. Even the orientation and fixity of movie theater seats is not conducive to conversation after a film. Proper audience decorum prohibits talking during film screenings (though laughter and screams are acceptable for certain genres). But films across the nontheatrical spectrum are designed to spark conversation, to



FIGURES F.4–F.6. *Easter 55 Xmas Party* (1955). Film held in the Jean Patton Collection, South Side Home Movie Project, University of Chicago, with gratitude to Ghian Foreman.

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motivate audiences to speak. From classroom conversations sparked by educational films to postwar group discussion films on race relations described by Anna McCarthy to convivial private screenings of family films, viewers convened outside of movie theaters are invited to process aloud what they have seen, to verbalize the relationships between their lives and the worlds pictured on-screen.⁹ And when we consider the invitation to speak offered by nontheatrical films in tandem with traditions of vocal film viewing among marginalized viewers of many sorts (people of color, LGBTQ audiences, young viewers), we can see a striking range of reception strategies that may not be as nonnormative as classical film theories would lead us to believe.

We might say then that nontheatrical films made by, for, and about non-white people point to radical new ways of understanding film-viewer relations and open up key spaces for film and, by extension, social critique. Even when nontheatrical films struggle with the politics of giving voice to non-white subjects, their very mode is designed to facilitate the voicings of viewers. Now that we are paying closer attention to the ways in which nontheatrical film has coexisted with theatrical film, we are gaining new perspectives on what we have for so long taken to be the medium's most meaningful and influential iterations. *Screening Race* offers compelling new views of the landscapes of film history, in which Hollywood no longer dominates from the center. We learn in these pages of the myriad ways in which nontheatrical films both represented race and stimulated active dialogue about race among its viewers. Looking from these new, previously ignored vantage points, we begin to see Hollywood's treatments of race as Antoinette saw Thornfield Hall. They appear to be "made of cardboard"—vulnerable fictions far less equipped than nontheatrical films to accommodate the potentially destabilizing active participation of the Other.

FILMOGRAPHY

All available films discussed in the foreword can be streamed through the book's web page at <https://www.dukeupress.edu/Features/Screening-Race>.

Easter 55 Xmas Party (1955), 8 min., 16mm

ACCESS: Jean Patton Collection, South Side Home Movie Project, University of Chicago.

The Corner (1962), 27 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Northwestern University Department of Radio, Television, and Film.

DIRECTOR: Robert Ford. MUSIC: Carver Blanchard, Red Brown, Dick Carlson, Jim DiPasquale, Brad Epst, Paul Matheny, Rob McEnany. ACCESS: Chicago Film Archives.

NOTES

- 1 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).
- 2 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Dent, 1847; New York: Dutton, 1953), 309, 306, 310. Citations refer to the Dutton edition.
- 3 Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).
- 4 Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 36.
- 5 *The Corner* was preserved by Chicago Film Archives and can be viewed on their website: Robert Ford, dir., *The Corner* (1962), Robert Ford Collection, 1962–1964, F.2012-04-0005, Chicago Film Archives, http://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/15253.
- 6 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: McClurg, 1903; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7. Citations refer to the Oxford edition.
- 7 See South Side Home Movie Project, <https://sshmpportal.uchicago.edu>.
- 8 The Center for Home Movies, “The Center for Home Movies 2010 Digitization and Access Summit: Final Report” (January 2011), 9–23, http://www.centerforhomemovies.org/Home_Movie_Summit_Final_Report.pdf. Chicago Film Archives (founded in 2003 by Nancy Watrous) and the Texas Archive of the Moving Image (founded in 2002 by Caroline Frick) are pioneering regional film repositories documenting nontheatrical film histories.
- 9 Anna McCarthy, “The Politics of Wooden Acting,” in *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (New York: New Press, 2010), 83–118.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Any collection of essays is only as good as its contributors, and we have had the great fortune of working with a group of top-notch, innovative, and also immensely patient scholars on this project. Throughout the process of putting this collection together, we have been impressed by our contributors' uncompromising investment in understanding how American film culture attempts to make sense of race. We thank them for their excellent scholarship, archival advocacy, and deep commitment to nontheatrical film studies.

Dino Everett, the Hugh M. Hefner Archivist of the University of Southern California, is the guardian angel of this project. He has been instrumental in identifying relevant films in USC's archives and making them available for scholarly research and exhibition during our collaborations at the Echo Park Film Center. He was also gracious enough to do so for many of the contributors to this volume as they worked on their essays. Dino's generosity and can-do spirit is unparalleled in the profession, and we are immensely grateful to have had him on our team.

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Finally, we want to thank Bob Dickson, Alan Gorg, and Trevor Greenwood, whose astounding film *Felicia* (1965) functioned as the catalyst for this project. We appreciate their work and their openness to us, as we do Felicia Bragg's, whose reaction to seeing herself as a teenager in their film so many years later continues to remind us of the lasting and affective power of moving images, theatrical and nontheatrical alike.

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Introduction

ALLYSON NADIA FIELD AND MARSHA GORDON

Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film is a collection of essays investigating representations of and engagements with race in American non-theatrical films of the twentieth century. This collection builds on existing scholarship in nontheatrical film studies but broadens the field to take up the treatment of race. Tracing the contours of race in nontheatrical film is neither a trivial nor an esoteric activity; over the course of the past century, these films have been a significant way that Americans encountered ideas about race, difference, and community. In a moment when discourses about and resistance to white supremacy are at the fore, this collection takes seriously the presence of race in nontheatrical forms—even when such considerations had almost no place in the dominant theatrical universe.

Taking up a range of contexts—educational, cultural, industrial, civic, and private—this collection shows that nontheatrical films tell a unique story about race and cinema, one that has been sidelined by the outsized importance of commercial feature films in the field of cinema studies. The topics covered here provide an instructive and sometimes surprising glimpse into the ways that audiences encountered such racially engaged films: as shoppers in Wanamaker's department stores in the early 1900s, as churchgoers in Tennessee in the 1920s, as television viewers in the 1950s, as police officers in the 1960s, or as students in a filmmaking class in the 1970s. The range of cases discussed here marks a radical and exciting disruption of the Hollywood model of production and distribution. If the big screens marginalized people of color, small screens often helped to balance the scales.

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This collection situates its intervention at the intersection of two important areas of scholarly inquiry. First, it contributes to scholarship that addresses the historical marginalization of films by and about people of color in film canons, classrooms, and critical inquiry. Second, the book achieves this correction by paying attention to another neglected area of scholarly attention, films produced for and exhibited in nontheatrical venues. Taken as a whole, this collection of essays enriches our understanding of the ways in which films were produced and circulated in a multiethnic culture trying to make sense of its not always welcome pluralism.

Rather than a comprehensive survey—which, given the sheer number of nontheatrical films produced in the United States, would be impossible—*Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film* offers a selective transhistorical and comparative lens. The films under discussion in the chapters that follow are critically appraised just as they initially circulated: as components of broader multiracial and multiethnic cultural spheres. Most scholarship on race and ethnicity in American film, theatrical or otherwise, tends to isolate its topic, whether it involves African American, Asian American, Latino/a, Native American, or other subjects. This collection's refusal to adhere to that compartmentalization reflects the way that the films themselves were conceived and projected, while also acknowledging the inequities that result from racial stratification. Each chapter traces issues relating to race, identity, politics, class, and environment at various moments in American film history across student films, educational films, sponsored films, anthropological and ethnographic films, community-made and -screened films, church films, home movies, and other types of useful films that engage with American multiculturalism. This collection begins to map a subfield, reframing the study of race on film to provide a more nuanced understanding of the role it has played in American life and providing a substantial new body of knowledge across a wide historical period and from a range of conceptual and theoretical perspectives.

American Nontheatrical Film History

Nontheatrical film had a significant presence in twentieth-century life, one that has recently received sustained attention by scholars seeking to understand American film produced beyond Hollywood's realm and reach. In *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, the editors argue that despite a history of scholarly neglect, nontheatrical films "tell us a great deal about the shape (and shaping) of the cinematic century."¹

[2] Field and Gordon

Similarly, in his work on “advanced” amateur filmmaking, one of the many types of noncommercial and nontheatrical film production that developed with the introduction of 16mm film in 1923, Charles Tepperman argues that such alternative practices “can provide us with crucial insight into American society’s collective visual imagination during the mid-twentieth century.”² Indeed, *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film* emerges from the realization that nontheatrical films vastly outnumbered their Hollywood counterparts for much of film history. As John Mercer observes, “In 1977 fewer than three hundred feature films were started by the major studios in Hollywood, but over 15,000 nontheatrical films were completed.”³ These films operated in many contexts—at schools and churches, for example—that intended to influence the thinking and behavior of their constituents. Nontheatrical films’ very different and less centralized means of production, distribution, and exhibition allowed for a fascinating diversity that was never possible in the more controlled, corporate, and white-male-dominant environment of Hollywood.

Nontheatrical films were not bound by the same kinds of commercial and political parameters as their theatrical counterparts, allowing for a more expansive conceptualization of nonwhite representation, among other things. As Haidee Wasson and Charles Acland observe, “Film technologies—screens, projectors, and cameras—were long ago integrated into a surprising range of spaces and situations, shaping the aesthetics as well as the display of and engagement with motion pictures. And these places, beyond conventionally defined movie theaters, . . . [have] been a key site for the formation and reformation of cinema itself.”⁴ In point of fact, the history of moving images in the United States has taken place largely outside of movie theaters. Nontheatrical films reformed the nature and purpose of cinema.

Responsive to the complex realities of nontheatrical film history, this collection of essays aims to correct the imbalanced nature of the discipline of film studies up to this point in time—privileging, on the one hand, theatrical films, feature films, and Hollywood studio films; on the other, films made by and featuring white people. Not only have theatrical film studies dominated much of scholarly film history, but the exclusion of scholarship about films made by, about, or for nonwhite people fails to do justice to the richness and breadth of racial representation in American cinema. There are, of course, some significant scholarly precedents for this collection. *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film* grows out of a body of research that was largely inspired by the Orphan Film Symposium, founded by Dan Streible and his colleagues at the University of South Carolina in 1999. That

symposium focused scholarly attention on a significant body of films that had previously been ignored, neglected, or relegated to footnotes and has inspired a recent wave of scholarship on nontheatrical film.⁵

While most scholarship of this sort tends to focus on a specific nontheatrical type—educational films, home movies, student films, documentaries, anthropological films, sponsored films, and so on—this collection deliberately unites these subcategories with the consideration of race as its organizing principle. This strategic move corrects a gap in the wider scholarship with regard to nontheatrical film and race, opening up possibilities for future work that builds on the branches of inquiry here. These chapters are united by a shared core value: prioritizing the way race was envisioned and mobilized on screens and by makers with very different agendas than their Hollywood counterparts.

Though there are some notable exceptions, by and large the body of scholarship on nontheatrical film is focused on white makers, subjects, and audiences, or addresses issues of race as secondary to other concerns, such as various sites of exhibition.⁶ What *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film* offers is a defining focus not on film types but on racial representation, identities, and politics across an array of nontheatrical media produced in the United States, and consequently across a range of producers, subjects, audiences, genres, and periods.

Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film asks readers to reconsider the ways that films were used to address, define, and grapple with race over the course of the twentieth century. Each contribution to this volume offers an alternative imagination of American film history, reframing accepted objects of study to consider how Americans produced and consumed race on screens that interacted with viewers far outside the reach of movie theaters. From department store to classroom to community center, nontheatrical films engaging with race allowed diverse audiences to experience narratives and encounter representations that they could not experience anywhere else. This collection, then, constitutes a cinematic remapping, encouraging readers to rediscover a world in which moving images were integrated in and reflective of lives that were excluded in most mainstream exhibition contexts.

The challenges of cultivating this kind of scholarly work are numerous, and the authors in this collection often reflect on these challenges, which include locating these materials (since so many nontheatrical films languish in the neglected corners of archives if they have been fortunate enough to survive deacquisition, a plight not dissimilar to that of silent film before the 1978 International Federation of Film Archives Congress in Brighton);

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researching them (since relatively little is documented and preserved in terms of primary resources about the nontheatrical universe); making them accessible (since so few of the films are readily available in their native format of 16mm or on DVD, though, increasingly, more are materializing in digitized forms online); and, last but not least, winnowing down their overwhelming numbers to form a manageable body of films that illuminate certain film historical and cultural issues. Studying nontheatrical films with race as the galvanizing focus also enriches our understanding of related theatrical works, such as those made by the L.A. Rebellion group of black filmmakers (whose work included theatrical and nontheatrical films) or even, often by virtue of their contrast, the stories told in mainstream theatrical narratives coming out of the Hollywood studios.⁷

This book proceeds along a chronological arc, starting with a discussion of films produced in 1908 and ending with recent remediations of historical home movies. Each chapter focuses on the ways that nontheatrical films offer contemporary students and scholars a unique perspective on the history of race in American culture, as well as a new window through which to explore film history. To that end, we have made every effort to provide access to digital versions of the films under discussion through the book's companion website. Each chapter stakes out its own framework within film history, cultural history, and critical race studies, offering readers specific lenses through which to view the films under discussion. The volume concludes with a comprehensive aggregated bibliography of scholarship related to race and nontheatrical film.

The essays collected here explore relevant, timely, and deliberately wide-ranging areas of study, from films produced by Puerto Rican teenagers as part of activist filmmaking programs in New York City in the late 1960s, to films made for department store exhibition at the turn of the century that offer a window into Native American representational and political issues, to a film made by Charles and Ray Eames focused on a Mexican folk tradition, to a now-forgotten 1960s film about African American life produced by the National Urban League that was seen by an estimated 4.5 million viewers during its nontheatrical distribution life. Still, this volume is far from exhaustive; its gaps indicate how much of film history remains obscured, and how much of that history might be marshaled to better understand the way race has been represented, negotiated, and figured at various points in American history. One need only think about contemporary nontheatrical media—for example, cell phone images of police violence or, for that matter, police body camera footage—to connect nontheatrical film's past to

present-day iterations of this legacy, and to understand why the study of such images is so urgently needed.

Finding *Felicia*

This collection grew out of relationships and archival discoveries. In 2005, Rick Prelinger, founder of the Prelinger Archive, acquired a set of deaccessioned 16mm educational films from the Buffalo, New York, school district. Rescuing these films destined for the dumpster, Prelinger sent the lot to A/V Geeks Archives founder Skip Elsheimer, who archives, digitizes, and exhibits educational film. When Marsha Gordon began researching educational films about race for her contribution to her coedited collection *Learning with the Lights Off*, Skip screened numerous titles from his collection for her. Among them was a thirteen-minute 16mm film from 1965 titled *Felicia*, about a sixteen-year-old African American high schooler, Felicia Bragg, living in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles.⁸

Shot over the course of a year and finished prior to the August 1965 uprisings that would bring national attention to the area, *Felicia* depicts a world that would become well documented in the aftermath of what the media at the time routinely referred to as the “riots.” Although it was made by three white UCLA film students, Alan Gorg, Bob Dickson, and Trevor Greenwood, the film relies upon Bragg’s unscripted ruminations as its sole narration, offering a poetic and poignant meditation on race, class, and urban community. Its formalism and open-ended narration are more reminiscent of art filmmaking than classroom films, and its thoughtful narrator comes across as wise beyond her years. Far from the objectifying lens of the news media or the sensationalizing frame of Hollywood’s portrayal of so-called ghetto life, *Felicia* presents an intimate portrait of a young girl and a neighborhood—both on the brink of change.

Made as a side project outside of the filmmakers’ UCLA coursework, *Felicia* was sold to educational film distributor Bailey Film Associates (BFA) and marketed as one of a series of films titled *Minority Youth* in the late 1960s and ’70s. It was under these auspices that the film came to Buffalo, and this is also how it would have reached high schoolers across the country whose schools had purchased the film and whose teachers opted to show it in their classes. When Marsha Gordon saw *Felicia* several decades later, she recognized in it an early instance of a broader trend of filmmaking in Los Angeles. Operating at the nexus of student film, documentary, educational film, and art film, *Felicia* intersects with a range of films investigating a city

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FIGURE 1.1. Frame enlargement of Felicia Bragg, the titular subject and narrator of *Felicia* (1965), a 16mm documentary educational film about a young woman growing up in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles.

marked by de facto segregation as well as questions of identity and belonging. In particular, it brought to mind the work of a slightly younger group of UCLA filmmakers known as the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers, or the L.A. Rebellion. *Felicia's* echoes of Italian neorealism and investment in filming an underdocumented Los Angeles community found a striking corollary in the work of Charles Burnett, Billy Woodberry, Alile Sharon Larkin, and other African American filmmakers who were at UCLA in the 1970s. Intrigued by the film's resonances with the L.A. Rebellion, Marsha shared the film with Allyson Nadia Field, who was working on the L.A. Rebellion project of the UCLA Film and Television Archive. Thus was born a multi-year, multicomponent collaborative research project of which this book is the culminating piece.

We interviewed the filmmakers and Felicia Bragg about the film's genesis, production history, and circulation—as well as the afterlives of its makers and subject. These encounters marked an important opportunity to create an extrafilmic record for a nontheatrical film, about which few documents and little production history typically survive. Theatrical films often

have copious extant documentation, allowing historians to make the kinds of rich, contextual arguments that are essential to scholarship that shapes the discipline. In our research on *Felicia* and other nontheatrical films, we have found that interviewing the makers and participants—whenever possible—greatly enriches our understanding of the films and the context of their production.

Our initial research into *Felicia*'s exhibition history, as well as the broader production and circulation of nontheatrical films about race, led to two further projects, one scholarly and one curatorial, both of which lay the groundwork for this volume. The scholarly component is a coauthored article that was published in *Cinema Journal* in 2016. "The Other Side of the Tracks: Nontheatrical Film History, Pre-Rebellion Watts, and *Felicia*" considers how *Felicia* is particularly suited to a discussion of the ways that urban spaces, and Watts in particular, were imagined in the 1960s. It also demonstrates how nontheatrical film can inform and reshape our understanding of film history and enrich discussions of documentary filmmaking, the role of student filmmakers, and other cinematic movements such as the L.A. Rebellion.

The curatorial component involved the broader universe of nontheatrical films about race. We collaborated on a series of 16mm film programs (in 2014, 2016, and 2017) at the Echo Park Film Center, a community-based filmmaking and screening cooperative in Los Angeles. With the assistance of archivist Dino Everett at the University of Southern California (USC), we selected films from the 1940s to the 1970s concerned with Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans around the theme of race and space in Los Angeles. Out of this experience grew the realization that *Felicia* is connected to a broader set of nontheatrical films of its period that approach questions of social inequity through the lens of race.

To give *Felicia* wider attention, we successfully nominated it to the 2014 National Film Registry of the Library of Congress. The Academy Film Archive, where codirector Dickson worked until his retirement in 2018, subsequently preserved the film in 2016. Considered collectively, our research, scholarship, and archival advocacy with regard to *Felicia* aimed to underscore the intellectual stakes of the film, and its institutional preservation has enabled it to reach a wider audience. In this way, *Felicia* serves as a model for the twin aims of the book, bringing scholars and archivists together to assess and preserve nontheatrical films, and to engage in rigorous research into their significance with a special focus on race.

While Hollywood's long history of racial (mis)representation is well documented, the corresponding academic focus on mainstream theatrical

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films had resulted in a disproportionate presumption about which films have significance and impact. This volume challenges that framework. It is an indisputable fact that the moving image landscape is far more varied and complex than the relatively small number of films produced for theatrical release, which means that any treatment of race and cinema must extend beyond the border of theatrical work. A guiding argument of this book is that nontheatrical screens exhibited their own perspectives on race, often in striking contrast to their theatrical counterparts. From the silent era to the displacement of film by video and digital media as the prevalent production and distribution formats in the late twentieth century, moving pictures permeated all aspects of American life outside of the movie theater, ranging from industry and government to the home, classroom, and community. Alongside—and often in distinct refutation of—the fictional narratives projected by Hollywood to moviegoing audiences, nontheatrical films provided wildly different visions, showing other subjects, addressing other audiences, and asserting other perspectives. Whether it's the educational framework of the classroom film and student film, the anthropological gaze of the ethnographic film, the entrepreneurial impetus of the sponsored film, or the intimacy of the home movie, these other perspectives often inform films made for audiences outside of theatrical entertainment. How these films have engaged with the complexities of racial formations in the United States is the concern of the essays collected in this volume.

Race and Nontheatrical Filmmaking in Los Angeles (and Beyond)

Felicia is far from being the only nontheatrical film set in Los Angeles to take on the topic of race. It was, in fact, part of a much wider tendency in filmmaking of the time, which we want to briefly consider here to set the stage for the contributions to this volume, which collectively assert the value of nontheatrical filmmaking's offerings on the subject of race. One of the films we included in the first "Race and Space" screening event at the Echo Park Film Center, *Akira* (David Espar, 1971), focuses on the experiences of another teenager, a relatable subject for its intended classroom audience. (Along with *Felicia*, *Akira* was marketed by BFA as part of the *Minority Youth* series in the late 1960s and '70s.) In contrast to *Felicia*, however, *Akira* is less rooted in its location, an unidentified California town. Instead, its perspective is explicitly generalizable: many aspects of *Akira*'s circumstances are presented as relevant to teenagers, irrespective of racial identity or location. However, race and national origin are key issues, as high



FIGURE 1.2. Teenager Akira Tana at prayer with his parents in the opening and closing sequences of *Akira* (1971).

school senior Akira Tana discusses his feelings of being caught in between cultures—the traditional Japanese values of his parents and the styles, activities, and interests shaping teenage life in California in the early 1970s (including rock music and marijuana). This ambivalence provided points of entry for classroom discussions concerning identity, generational conflicts, cultural differences, and what it means to be American.

Akira connects his ruminations about his life and family to broader questions of cultural identity and belonging. In one notable sequence, Akira talks about his parents' immigration to the United States in 1939–40 and their subsequent internment in relocation camps during World War II. His mother and older brothers were sent to Lompoc, while his father, a Buddhist minister seen as suspect by the U.S. government, was sent to New Mexico. Although the film slips in such undertaught aspects of American history through the prism of personal experience, it moves away from politics, concluding with Akira's high school graduation and his ruminations about his future beyond high school and college, one that promises more choices than were afforded to his parents. The final scene is a repetition of the opening sequence of Akira

and his parents at prayer, suggesting that the narration is a kind of internal dialogue of a thoughtful teenager at the crossroads of his life.

As this brief discussion of *Felicia* and *Akira* demonstrates, we soon realized through this process of research, curation, and exhibition that there was a rich universe of nontheatrical films that were made specifically to engage with issues of race, and that these films had gone largely unnoticed by scholars of film history. Along with this loss as accessible objects of study, the neglect of these films has contributed to an imbalanced history of American cinema. Film historical accounts have consistently privileged the presentation of race and class in theatrical cinema, produced largely by the Hollywood studios. To demonstrate the possibilities represented by the study of nontheatrical film along the prism of race, what follows in the remainder of our introduction considers a selection of films made in Los Angeles in the post–civil rights era. Using the example of Los Angeles in this period is purposeful: Los Angeles is the locus of the film industry, a city rich in racial and ethnic diversity, as well as one with a long history of racial oppression and conflict. Nontheatrical filmic engagements with the racialized geography of Los Angeles at this time represent a rich subset of American film production, one that is emblematic of the possibilities for social engagement, critique, and resistance that nontheatrical filmmaking embodies. These films offer a map of lived experience for the inhabitants of a dynamic yet deeply segregated city.

On the big screen, 1960s Los Angeles was imagined in films like the lighthearted teen musical *Muscle Beach Party* (William Asher, 1964), starring Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon; *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), featuring Dustin Hoffman's breakthrough role as an affluent but lost college graduate; *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (Sydney Pollack, 1969), a Depression-era fable about dreams and disappointment; as well as in other mainstream films that were as fantastically and impossibly white, marginal characters of color notwithstanding. While important exceptions to the imagined whiteness of the city did coexist alongside these theatrical films—most notably *The Exiles* (1961), Kent Mackenzie's story of Native American life in the Bunker Hill neighborhood of the city—such films were few and far between, with limited reach in the culture at large.

Nonwhite Los Angeles would not gain any significant commercial theatrical presence until the 1970s, with controversial results. The first concentration of nonwhite subjects in a Los Angeles setting occurred in films such as Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), which gave its black director and star the run of the city; a slew of blaxploitation

films, like the white-produced and -directed *Cleopatra Jones* (Jack Starrett, 1973), which flaunted crime, drugs, sex, and pimp culture, or the African American-directed *Dolemite* (D'Urville Martin, 1975), about a pimp on a revenge mission; comedies like *Car Wash* (Michael Schultz, 1976), about a diverse group of characters and their exploits; and the aesthetically intriguing, dignifying, but commercially marginal films of the L.A. Rebellion, such as Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1975) and Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977).

One need only look outside the movie theater in the same time period, however, to discover a wealth of films that correct the erroneous impression of Los Angeles's whiteness. As we dug deeper into the archives, we became especially interested in a body of nontheatrical films from the 1960s and '70s concerned with Los Angeles's nonwhite populations at a time in which the city was at an especially tumultuous crossroads, much of it revolving around race, class, and segregated neighborhoods. This locus of nontheatrical filmmaking energy is partly a result of the rich film school culture of the city, with UCLA and USC populating the region with students in need of local subjects for fiction and nonfiction film projects. Many of these students would go on to work in the motion picture industry following graduation, including the nontheatrical film industry. Some continued to work on personal projects, often garnering distribution for classroom or community use. As it turns out, these filmmakers frequently turned their lenses on parts of the city that were ignored in mainstream media, motivated in no small part by an emergent culture of student activism that encouraged equitable thinking about society and social privilege in particular.

As with *Felicia* and *Akira*, the struggle for self-identity in a sometimes hostile environment is also the subject of *The Eastside Story* (Morteza Rezvani, 1974), a fiction film shot with a neorealist aesthetic. *The Eastside Story* is a poetic adaptation of Danny Santiago's short story, "The Somebody," about a Chicano teenager's identity crisis after his gang has moved away following the demolition of their East Los Angeles neighborhood. Like *Felicia*, the neighborhood is introduced through the wanderings of the main character, who walks through largely empty streets and overgrown lots. Also like *Felicia*, the camera shoots this film's protagonist through the frame of abandoned buildings, figuring his movements as confined by the environmental degradation that surrounds him.

The story is narrated by an old man sitting at a bus stop who directly addresses the spectator: "This is a big day for Bulle—today he quit school and he's going to go to work as a writer." The optimism of this statement is quickly undercut by the clarification that Bulle is going to write on fences,

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buildings, “on anything that comes along,” with his gang name “Bulle de los Cerros.” A construction company has bought the land that constituted the gang’s territory, forcing them all to move away, apart from Bulle’s family and a few others. Despite the entreaties of the old man and a boy’s club community leader for him to straighten out, Bulle wanders the streets, desecrating a rival gang’s tags. He daydreams about having “the best damn funeral in East L.A.” The film ends with Bulle at an unresolved impasse, clutching the metal fence of a highway overpass. The last shot lingers in freeze-frame, like the concluding close-up of Antoine Doinel in *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959), with the ocean replaced by the highway leading to downtown Los Angeles. The film presents a changing city in which forces like urban development and gentrification have a direct impact on the self-identity of its most vulnerable inhabitants. Like *Felicia* and *Akira*, *The Eastside Story* represents both the private and public spaces inhabited by a character whose relationship to his environment and the film’s open-endedness invite various interpretations from classroom audiences.

The vulnerability of certain populations in Los Angeles is also the subject of *A Sense of Community* (Jeremy Lezin, 1976), which begins with a title card staking the film’s claim to the specific place and time during which the documentary was made: “Downtown Los Angeles, 1976.” The film’s director, Jeremy Lezin, was a film student at USC who used a class assignment to explore the subject of “‘home work,’ where garments were produced at workers’ homes for sub-minimum wages. It was essentially a sweat shop situation, but farmed out so the perpetrators couldn’t get caught easily.”⁹ What he documented was a church-owned sewing operation staffed by undocumented immigrants from Mexico.

The first images of the film show Mexican men and women entering a gate, walking down exterior stairs toward the basement in which they labor, and the gate being closed behind them. The camera lingers on a man who adds a locked chain to secure the gate, accompanied by amplified sounds of the chain, the first signal that the film intends to expose inequity without employing extradiegetic commentary. The film cuts to the interior of a Catholic church basement, where workers labor at sewing machines. Lezin explains that the church was “just a few blocks from USC,” where “shirts for Penny’s and Woolworth were being produced in the basement.” The first narrator of the film is Noe Falconi, the pastor of the church, who talks about his role as the leader of the “sewing center program.” As Falconi offers his perspective on the positive impact of the program, Lezin shows him entering the compound, using a key to open the gate and then to lock it again,



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FIGURES 1.3–1.5. The final sequence of *The Eastside Story* (1974).

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FIGURE 1.6. One of several recurring shots in *A Sense of Community* (1976) of a gate that leads to the church basement being locked, either to keep workers in or to keep immigration officials out, depending upon whose version of the story you believe, the pastor's or the laborers'.

indicating the pastor's freedom in contrast to the workers locked in below. Lezin explains that Falconi

was very proud that he provided a living for immigrants and even housed them on the premises. He showed me around, but had a very different perspective than I did on what we saw. . . . The first thing that I did was interview workers on their days off, away from the church. I learned that their reality was quite different than the one proposed by Noe. They had arrived years before, with promise that they would be trained and sent out into the real world to earn a decent living. But the truth was that they were never offered these outside opportunities. They lived and worked on the property and were chained in during the day.

The film proceeds to undermine Falconi's representation of the sewing center, weaving his narration into contradictory reports from the workers, who discuss their lack of opportunities to advance or earn minimum wage, and the threat of losing their jobs should they want to take a day off.



FIGURE 1.7. Pastor Noe Falconi preaching while the hat is passed for donations from his parishioners, many of whom work in the church sewing facility that he oversees.

By the end of the film, it is apparent that the film's title is ironic and that the church facilitated the exploitation of the most vulnerable members of the Mexican community in Los Angeles. We see Falconi, speaking from the pulpit, espousing the need for churches in poor communities to tie their existence to businesses in order for parishioners to have enough money to give back to the church. This is accompanied by a shot of the hat being passed in church, with parishioners dropping money into it. Lezin's film links race, religion, ethnicity, and immigration status to the confines of an exploitative space. While very different films, *The Eastside Story* and *A Sense of Community* depict the ways that cities trap their most vulnerable inhabitants in inescapable situations. The impasse Bulle feels at the loss of his gang is not unrelated to the church's exploitation of the undocumented laborers: Bulle clutches at the fence that demarcates zones of the city, and the garment workers are locked in the basement, unable to inhabit a free community. These films, focused on different kinds of people in different circumstances, both envision a circumscription of their subjects. This is a recurrent idea linking many nontheatrical films about race in Los Angeles, suggesting the degree to which a case study approach to analyzing such films reveals

connections to larger patterns of representation, which are often—as in this case—tied to social inequities that the filmmakers sought to document, and also, perhaps, to rectify.

The pessimism these films convey with regard to their subjects' limited social and physical mobility is also shared in a film about a different Los Angeles neighborhood. *The Savages* (1967), directed by Felicia codirector Alan Gorg, was shot in Venice, a neighborhood on the other side of the city from Watts and where Gorg lived at the time. It focuses on the ways that so-called ghettoizing serves to reinforce segregation, conflict, and underdevelopment. Venice is now a wealthy area of the city, but at the time, it and Watts were two of the poorest neighborhoods in Los Angeles, populated largely by working poor and un- or underemployed African Americans who could not afford to live elsewhere.¹⁰ *The Savages* proceeds as a series of fly-on-the-wall scenes with almost entirely nonsynchronous first-person dialogue set to a jazz soundtrack. Where Felicia is infused with both realism and a sense of hope, *The Savages* paints a much more fatalistic portrait of a community plagued by economic disenfranchisement, violence, and resignation. It also makes a strong statement about white perceptions about the so-called ghettos of Los Angeles.

The Savages begins with a framing device that situates the predominantly black neighborhood of Venice in relation to white spaces, imagined here as the verdant idyll of a park with a baseball field and small lake. Images of a white man napping on the grass are followed by another white man and his son throwing a football, accompanied by unsynchronized voice-over narration, implicitly from these men's points of view. One asks a series of questions: "Why shouldn't I want to strive and achieve a home in the suburbs? What's wrong with this? . . . Shall we take every person who makes more than so much money and take it away from him like he was a criminal? You want to go out directly and take half his paycheck and find some Negro down in the ghetto and say, 'Here, take half my paycheck?'" Another makes a more direct argument: "A Negro owes it to himself to try to better himself. Now he could try to learn to dress properly, to talk properly, to keep himself in a situation that will not say, 'Well, he's like a wild savage—look at him, he ought to go back to the jungle.'" ¹¹

The title of the film derives from this unsympathetic framing of the subject, with the derogatory perspective of white privilege articulated in tandem with images of a park backdrop that shifts to an urban setting for the rest of the film. Most of the remainder of *The Savages* is narrated—in unscripted documentary voice-over, as with Felicia—by Robert Castille, an African American man who often appears on-screen; the film also features, as the

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FIGURE 1.8. In *The Savages* (1967), the film's central narrator, Robert Castille, talks about his challenges and disappointments as he traverses his blighted neighborhood at film's end.

credits put it, the “Youth of West Venice.” While Gorg’s camera explores the neighborhood, Castille’s unsynchronized voice-over reveals another, opposing view on race and space: “If you grew up in Venice, if you were forced to come to Venice and live, if you don’t know it before you get here, you find out pretty soon that you’re coming right into nothing. Some people, they don’t want to live in Venice. I mean, uh, it’s either Venice or Watts is the only choice you have, if the guy’s even got a job, I mean, he’s just barely making it, you know? That, uh, it’s not the fact that he don’t want to do, it’s that he can’t do any better.”¹²

Gorg structures the opening portion of the film around this contrast in viewpoints about race and space, with voices of white privilege not just dismissing the black population of the ghetto as useless, but bemoaning the burden that their alleged savagery causes for presumably white, suburban achievers. Even this narration, however, points to a geographical disparity between suburban escape and urban confinement, which Castille essentially affirms when he describes Venice and Watts as traps. As images of Castille at home with his wife, Dorothy, appear on screen, his narration explains that

Dorothy wants to move out of Venice and that what “she doesn’t like is the living conditions of the people around her.”

Although this affirms the idea of Venice as a place from which to escape, the representation of the Castille family—mother, employed father, and two children—is an important refutation of the idea of unproductive so-called savagery with which the film opens. It is also an implicit rebuttal to the Moynihan Report’s critique of inner-city black family life.¹³ But the film also depicts a group of young, seemingly aimless African American men complaining about incarceration, racism, and the lack of options in their lives and futures. Cutting back to the Castilles at home, Robert’s narration implicitly comments on the youth just pictured: “The kids that hang around on the corner up there, at one time they had high hopes. I mean hopes as high as Jackie Robinson, but their hopes were killed. And I mean, to have to live in these conditions and there’s nothing you can do about it and you listen to the news and watch the T V, the reports about our great society, and you just drop down and go down farther, you lose your zest, you don’t want to continue.”

The film cuts back and forth between scenes of Castille, who tells his life story, and black youths at a party, dancing, smoking, and drinking. Their narration conveys a community plagued by hopelessness and futility, even paralysis, while Castille recounts a life of hardship and discrimination, recuperated only by a personal desire to obtain a better life for his family. Through this formal structure and despite his status as a white man living in a largely black community, Gorg was able to produce, as *Film Library Quarterly* observed, an “insider’s view of ghetto conditions,” one that goes beyond the film’s frame of incomprehension and lack of compassion: “The best way to look at life in the American ghetto is to go there. For those who cannot make the trip in person, this film is a fairly good alternative.”¹⁴

Many nontheatrical films about race and place are, in fact, urban films, puzzling through the limitations determined by geography in Los Angeles. Yet there were other models, too. *Cotton Eyed Joe*, shot by USC film student John McDonald in the fall of his senior year in 1970, is a twelve-minute hybrid film about an African American man named Joseph Wagner, who lives in a makeshift encampment near Chavez Ravine.¹⁵ Although employing documentary aesthetics, the film is presented as an artfully composed day-in-the-life narrative, with obviously reenacted scenes that recall Ivone Margulies’s theories about “the indexical value of reenactment,” which lends the film an evidential quality compounded by the fact that Joe is, in this case, playing himself.¹⁶ Unlike most other films made in this time period



FIGURE 1.9. Behind the scenes during the *Cotton Eyed Joe* shoot in 1970: (left to right) the film's subject, Joseph Wagner; director John McDonald; Jenova Caldwell, one of the five-person crew. Photo courtesy of John McDonald.

that depicted people of color in Los Angeles, *Cotton Eyed Joe* depicts life in a nonurban setting that is outside conventional society.

Cotton Eyed Joe consists of brief visual interludes showing Joe at the old Cornfield Railyard and in San Pedro on the train tracks as well as walking through the city and earning money at a blood bank. However, it primarily takes place in and around Joe's encampment near Elysian Park, where it dramatizes a real-life incident involving the vandalizing of Joe's camp. This reenactment scene is the emotional centerpiece of the film. A dynamic montage of quick cuts set to percussive music shows three young boys vandalizing Joe's homesite while he's away. When Joe returns and finds the boys in his camp, a series of silent shot-reverse shots ensues. Joe stares directly into the camera, implicitly at the young boys but also at the viewer; one of the boys stares back, conveying a sense of shame for what he has done. Nina Simone's song, from which the film's title derives, enters the soundtrack as



FIGURE 1.10. After his makeshift home site is vandalized, Joe puts his house back in order in *Cotton Eyed Joe* (1970).

Joe walks the rails at dusk. Simone sings a pointed question, confirming the film's interest in place: "Where do you come from?"

These train tracks signify in a very different way than they do in *Felicia*, where they are used to alert the audience that they are about to enter a section of Los Angeles that has been defined in the popular imagination by poverty and disenfranchisement, and about which they presumably have little experiential knowledge. Joe both walks and sits on the tracks, occupying them in the same way that he does the land he lives on. Joe's decision to remove himself from the city proper—he is literally a bystander as cars rush by on the freeway below him—allows the film to avoid many of the usual issues about race and space in this time period, such as police treatment. It also suggests a refusal by Joe to be circumscribed in ways seen in the other films under discussion here; think, for example, of the spatial containment at play in *The Eastside Story*, *A Sense of Community*, and *The Savages*.

In contrast to most of the socially engaged nontheatrical films of the time, which tend to highlight problems that often seem insurmountable, *Ujamii Uhuru Schule Community Freedom School* (Don Amis, 1974), a documentary film about an Afrocentric elementary school in South Central Los Angeles,



FIGURE 1.11. *Ujamii Uhuru Schule Community Freedom School* (1974).

offers an uplifting solution to the implicit problem of educating disenfranchised members of the African American community in Los Angeles. Amis made the film as his first major assignment while in film school at UCLA, a Project One film shot in 8mm with nonsynchronous sound. It is also one of the few Project One films made by an L.A. Rebellion filmmaker that is documentary in approach. Amis shot the film in an observational mode over three different occasions and then edited the footage together to present a day in the life of the school. To accompany the teacher's voice-over about the mission of the school, Amis filmed students and teachers through their day as they sang songs, wrote, participated in self-defense training, played, and learned self-affirming principles derived from Swahili concepts. In editing, he peppered shots of the young students with inserts of the students' art, inspirational quotes, and portraits of black leaders that decorated the classroom—all of which made the school “a good visual” for Amis's camera.¹⁷

Ujamii represents a community mobilizing for self-transformation through the instillation of cultural affirmation in its young people. For Amis, being a member of the community that he was filming, “looking and dressing like everyone else,” allowed access to the children's world without the self-consciousness

that might meet an outsider.¹⁸ (One might think here about the tense interviews in *Black on Black*, discussed by Joshua Glick in his contribution to this book, or even the slightly nervous shrug of *Felicia* in her brief on-camera interview sequence with the white filmmakers.) It is also distinctive for being celebratory rather than espousing the pessimism that characterizes the other L.A. Rebellion Project One films that focus on racism manifest through economic inequalities, drug use, sexual assault, and child abuse, or even films like *The Savages* and *A Sense of Community*.¹⁹ Amis's portrait of a school nearly a decade post-Watts Uprising affirms black cultural practices and the cross-generational instilling of self-respect that ran counter to the pernicious ideas about black inferiority that plagued inner-city public education.

As just this handful of films indicates, nontheatrical films offer ways of looking at Los Angeles that are absent from their Hollywood counterparts. Encountering such a diverse array of films amid the vast universe of forgotten educational, sponsored, and amateur films affirms the ways that nontheatrical (and mostly 16mm) films of this era offer a perspective absent from, yet complementary to, the theatrical universe of the time—one that contributes to a richer understanding of film history and of the pluralistic nature of American society. As the proliferation of educational films dealing with race post-1965 points to, 16mm film was a key way that people encountered questions of race and were exposed to issues of social inequity. These films were made at a pivotal moment during which sweeping changes to Watts, Venice, Bunker Hill, and kindred neighborhoods across the nation were transpiring; they were also distributed in the context of a national grappling with social issues that often pivoted back to the way the nation was reckoning with race.

Los Angeles is not a unique case. Far outside of the cities in which they were produced, 16mm films circulated widely, in schools, community centers, churches, and any other exhibition venue in possession of a 16mm projector. A survey of educational film marketing materials of the period indicates a need for films representing diverse populations. One of the oldest and largest educational film producers and distributors, Encyclopaedia Britannica, published an annual catalog that is instructive in this regard. Perusing their 1977–78 edition, one encounters many films seeking to engage non-white subjects and audiences. Such diversity was totally absent twenty years prior, and quite rare even a decade before.²⁰ Just one page of the Family, Friends, and Neighborhood section of the 1977–78 catalog advertises three films—out of only eight on the page—exploring African American, Chinese American, and Native American subjects: *The Blue Dashiki: Jeffrey and His*

City Neighbors, *Pamela Wong's Birthday for Grandma*, and *Shelley Whitebird's First Powwow*.²¹

Film historians can learn many lessons from such films. With just the small sampling discussed here, we begin to see how one of the nation's major cities was organizing and defining itself along racial and economic lines, as well as where resistance to the dominant social order was bubbling up. These short films render the politics of race and space visible. Taken collectively, they convey racial and geographical boundaries through the eyes of the people who inhabited—and were often contained by—them, even when the films made about these communities were produced by outsiders to those communities. For those who were unrepresented or misrepresented in the dominant theatrical cinema, nontheatrical films often provided their only filmic record.

As film scholars continue to push the canonical boundaries of the discipline, more and more such nontheatrical, ephemeral, and orphan films will be rediscovered, and this collection of essays contributes to the necessary process of contextualization and canonization. Some of these films will rightly be recognized as major archival finds. They certainly need to be considered vital to our understanding of film history and American culture. Despite varying foci and perspectives, such films often share as their generative principle the widely held belief that “prejudice may be tempered by education,” by conveying knowledge, asking questions about the social order, and encouraging empathy.²² Acknowledging the importance of the long-standing tradition of nontheatrical films to film history not only challenges the stability and primacy of established canons, it better reflects the ways in which spectators have consumed film as well as the multimodal media environment in which motion pictures have been produced. This collection of essays marks a long-overdue moment of staking out films worth watching, studying, and discussing that existed outside of the theatrical universe and that, instead of ignoring nonwhite America, dealt squarely with issues of race and identity.

FILMOGRAPHY

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

Akira (1971), 14 min., 16mm

DIRECTOR: David Espar. ACCESS: UCLA Film and Television Archive.

Cotton Eyed Joe (1970), 12 min., 16mm

DIRECTOR: John McDonald. WRITER: John McDonald. EDITOR: Maureen Smith.
CAMERA: John McDonald. ACCESS: USC Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image Archive.

The Eastside Story (1974), 17 min., 16mm

DIRECTOR: Morteza Rezvani. ACCESS: USC Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image Archive.

Felicia (1965), 12 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Stuart Roe. DIRECTORS: Bob Dickson, Alan Gorg, Trevor Greenwood.
DISTRIBUTOR: University of California Extension Media, Bailey Film Associates
(BFA). ACCESS: Academy Film Archive, USC Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image Archive,
A/V Geeks Educational Film Archive.

The Savages (1967), 28 min., 16mm

DIRECTOR: Alan Gorg. DISTRIBUTOR: University of California Extension Media.
CAMERA: Alan Gorg, Kit Grey, Ivan Craig, Joe Hanwright. ACCESS: UCLA Film and
Television Archive.

A Sense of Community (1976), 5 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Jeremy Lezin. DIRECTOR: Jeremy Lezin. WRITER: Jeremy Lezin.
CAMERA: Dennis Weinschenker. ACCESS: USC Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image
Archive.

Ujamii Uhuru Schule Community Freedom School (1974), 9 min., Super 8mm

PRODUCTION: Don Amis. DIRECTOR: Don Amis. WRITER: Don Amis.
DISTRIBUTOR: UCLA Film and Television Archive. CAMERA: Don Amis. EDITOR:
Don Amis. ACCESS: UCLA Film and Television Archive.

NOTES

- 1 Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, Introduction to *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, ed. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.
- 2 Charles Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Moviemaking, 1923–1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 13.
- 3 John Mercer, *The Informational Film* (Champaign, IL: Stipes, 1981), iii.
- 4 Haidee Wasson and Charles R. Acland, “Introduction: Utility and Cinema,” in *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.
- 5 For more on the orphan film movement and the related symposium, see Dan Streible, “Saving, Studying, and Screening: A History of the Orphan Film Symposium,” in *Film Festival Yearbook 5: Archival Film Festivals*, ed. Alex Marlow-Mann (St. Andrews, U.K.: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2013), 163–76. See also Orgeron, Orgeron, and Streible, *Learning with the Lights Off*; and Acland and Wasson, *Useful Cinema*.
- 6 Stephen Charbonneau, *Projecting Race: Postwar America, Civil Rights and Documentary Film* (New York: Wallflower, 2016), makes the most sustained interven-

tion in the scholarship to which this volume contributes. Charbonneau focuses solely on documentaries and sponsored educational films using “documentary approaches,” and his attention to style and meaning is a useful example of one way nontheatrical scholarship might employ some tools that undergird traditional film studies. Recent examples of scholarly treatments of nonwhite nontheatrical filmmaking or film representation include Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Cara Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Joseph Clark, “Double Vision: World War II, Racial Uplift, and the All-American Newsreel’s Pedagogical Address,” in Acland and Wasson, *Useful Cinema*, 263–88; Marsha Orgeron, “‘A Decent and Orderly Society’: Race Relations in Riot-Era Educational Films, 1966–1970,” in Orgeron, Orgeron, and Streible, *Learning with the Lights Off*, 424–41; Heide Solbrig, “The Personal Is Political: Voice and Citizenship in Affirmative-Action Videos in the Bell System, 1970–1984,” in *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, ed. Patrick Vonderau and Vinzenz Hediger (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2009), 259–82. Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema*, includes a discussion of James and Eloyce Gist’s religious films, the filmmaking projects of the Harmon Foundation, and the performance of African American vaudeville actor Leonard “Motorboat” Sturrrup in *Mr. Motorboat’s Last Stand* (John Flory, 1933).

- 7 For more on the L.A. Rebellion, see Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Stewart, eds., *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).
- 8 The 1965 version of the film is viewable online, courtesy of Skip Elsheimer’s A/v Geeks Archive, at the Internet Archive, <http://archive.org/details/Felicia1965>. For a more thorough account of the film and its production, see Marsha Gordon and Allyson Nadia Field, “The Other Side of the Tracks: Nontheatrical Film History, Pre-Rebellion Watts, and *Felicia*,” *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 2 (February 2016): 1–24.
- 9 Background information on *A Sense of Community* derives from an email exchange that took place between Marsha Gordon and Jeremy Lezin in March 2016.
- 10 Background information about *The Savages* is taken from a series of emails between Alan Gorg and Marsha Gordon over the course of January and February 2016.
- 11 In an April 26, 2015, email from Alan Gorg to Marsha Gordon, Gorg explains, “Those bigoted remarks came from white teachers [at Venice High School, ‘where the young guys in *THE SAVAGES* had to go’], but the two white men over whom their audio is played at the beginning of the film are myself and my friend, filmmaker Dan McLaughlin from UCLA, posing as if having done the voice-overs.”
- 12 In a February 26, 2013, email to Marsha Gordon, Alan Gorg remembered that “Robert and Dorothy Castille’s home address [was] at 621 San Juan in Venice, where we shot *THE SAVAGES* scenes with the Castille family. Bob had been working for a military weapons place down the coast south of Venice when we first met him. He was the head of the Venice Civic Improvement Union (VCIU), a primarily African-American non-profit in the Venice ghetto.”

- 13 Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965).
- 14 Philip Levering, review of *The Savages*, *Film Library Quarterly* (winter 1968/69): 51.
- 15 Background information on *Cotton Eyed Joe* derives from email correspondence and phone calls between Marsha Gordon and John McDonald that took place in January 2017.
- 16 Ivone Margulies, ed., *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 220.
- 17 Don Amis, oral history interview by Jacqueline Stewart, November 2, 2010, L.A. Rebellion Oral History Project, UCLA Film and Television Archive.
- 18 Amis, oral history.
- 19 For a thorough discussion of the L.A. Rebellion Project One films, see Allyson Nadia Field, “Rebellious Unlearning: UCLA Project One Films (1967–1978),” in Field, Horak, and Stewart, *L.A. Rebellion*, 83–118.
- 20 In 1968, Helaine Dawson bemoaned the fact that “educational film producers” were just starting to make films to correct the long-standing problem of “too few with multiracial representation.” Helaine Dawson, *On the Outskirts of Hope: Educating Youth from Poverty Areas* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 104. Thomas G. Smith, who started working for EB Films in the mid-1960s, recalls that change was afoot for the company in this period owing to a number of factors, including corporate concerns about being able to distribute racially pluralistic films in the southern United States. Smith recalls, “In the years before [ca. 1965] they deliberately tried to exclude African American faces from their films. One old time producer said if they were shooting a classroom full of kids, they’d frame the shot to exclude children of color. The EBF film *People along the Mississippi* (1951) was an exception and the filmmakers—Gordon Weisenborn and John Barns—had to fight to keep an episode showing an African American child playing with two white children. I don’t know if sales in the South were affected by this but the scene stayed in the film. When I began making films for them, the federal government was heavily subsidizing educational materials and they mandated that films be integrated. This meant that filmmakers had to search out minorities and make sure they were cast in the film.” Tom Smith to Marsha Gordon, email, May 22, 2017.
- 21 Encyclopaedia Britannica 1977–78 catalogue, collection of Marsha Gordon, p. 24.
- 22 Robert Conot, “The City’s Not for Burning,” in *Education and the Urban Crisis*, ed. Roger Woock (Scranton, PA: International Text Book, 1970), 51. Originally published in Robert Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (New York: Bantam, 1969).

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