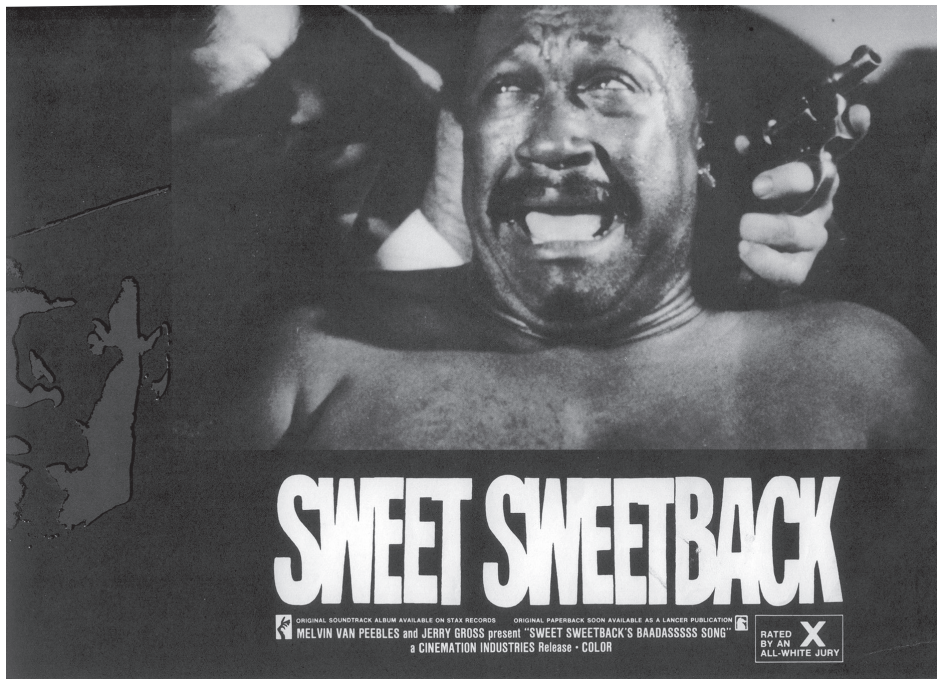


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4. In 1971, Melvin Van Peebles' confrontational *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* became the first African-American film created exclusively outside the dominant culture's control and trumpeted the end of the once powerful Motion Picture Production Code.

Introduction

“All the world’s a stage, /And all the men and women merely
players;/They have their exits and their entrances;/And one
man in his time plays many parts, /His acts being seven ages.”¹

As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7
William Shakespeare

“The power of black movies to affect our lives...[is] beyond
dispute. Whether that power brings life into our communi-
ties—‘life lit by some large vision,’ as Du Bois dreamed—or
whether it brings death is not up to Hollywood—it’s up to
us.”²

Ossie Davis

Reassessing the nation’s traditional values proved essential as my generation entered the disillusioned seventies. Moreover, an aroused electorate knew that the unrest enveloping us in the sixties and seventies went further back than the times signified. Nowhere was this fact clearer than in studying American film history. Many academics realized the need for changing a racist Hollywood was not only long overdue, but also had begun centuries before the rise of the civil rights movement confronted a racist society. So in preparing for what eventually became *The Interviews*, I kept reminding myself African-American film history did not emerge out of nothingness. Stanley Crouch spoke indirectly to the point, saying anyone seriously interested in black history could not “escape the past.”³

What does “looking at the past,” mean and how does it apply to this project? In oversimplified terms, examining *yesterday* involves

seeing film and its mores emerging, as Professor John Gennari reminded me, “within the context of larger historical narratives: migration, modernization, industrialization, and urbanization.”⁴ That is, the black film experience rises early in the twentieth century just as overconfident movie pioneers react to the industrial revolution’s developing technology.

But it is much more than that. Its story starts well before pictures began to move. Thus, if we are to understand the African-American film legacy, we should begin by considering the cultural effects of the U.S. slave trade, plantation life and culture, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow system.⁵ Only then, I suggest, and following Gennari’s lead, should we start examining an era “when [film], jazz and American culture itself were changing in response to World War II and the cold war, suburbanization, the democratization of U.S. higher education, and the first stirrings of the modern civil rights movement.” Accordingly, *Exits and Entrances* seeks not only to discover through the book’s seven interviews meaningful changes taking place in the black film experience, but also to use motion pictures “as a means of better understanding American history and culture as a whole.”⁶

In setting up such daunting goals, I, like many pilgrims before me, acknowledge a debt to the journey previously taken by Professor Constance Rourke. Her pivotal scholarly research established that the antebellum Yankee, the frontiersman, and the Negro functioned as prototypes of our national character. Years later, Albert Murray adopted Rourke’s work as a “bible” for his views throughout his life.⁷ He built his perceptions in part standing on her shoulders. Drawing upon her distinguished books such as *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931)⁸ and *The Roots of American Culture* (1942),⁹ the “Dean of Black Fiction” concluded that American culture was “incontestably mulatto.”¹⁰ He believed Rourke’s deductions about a composite national image confirmed his belief that we as a nation are “Omni-Americans.”¹¹ That is, in interpreting Rourke’s conclusions, Murray latched on to the notion that “each had been a wanderer over the lands, the Negro a forced and unwilling wanderer. Each in a fashion of his own had broken bonds, the Yankee in the initial revolt against the parent civilization, the backwoodsman in revolt against all civilization, the Negro

in a revolt which was cryptic and submerged but which nonetheless made a perceptible outline."¹²

I do no less by following Murray's wisdom in *The Interviews*. Like Rourke and Murray before me, I see what Ossie Davis labeled "The Struggle" as a movement by African-Americans for equal status and dignity in our country's life. *Exits and Entrances* reminds us of the powerful role played by individuals on the silver screen moving us toward those utopian goals.

But where to begin? By 1972, when the first interview in *Exits and Entrances* occurs, political and social revolutions were changing our cultural map. Since the end of World War II, we found ourselves fearing a nuclear holocaust, fighting two conflicts—one in Korea; the other, Vietnam—and being caught up in the Cold War. The fifties' witch-hunts made Americans paranoid, and the entertainment industry either out of fear or expediency caved in to McCarthyism. Broad-based blacklists targeted progressives, and, as a result, many promising careers came to a halt. Then came the even more divisive sixties. Adding to the national disorder were the civil rights movement, the women's liberation struggle, a passionate anti-war crusade, the black power crusade, and the stirrings of the Gay freedom drive. And throughout the disturbing decade, came riots, marches, sit-ins, boycotts, demonstrations, shootings, bombings, police brutality, and assassinations that shocked the nation as never before in the twentieth century. Not unexpectedly, a disillusioned America railed against its disgraced establishments and cries for reform echoed throughout the country. Yet for all that turmoil, America became stronger and her citizens more courageous.

For a young, white Jewish-American professor teaching at the University of Vermont in 1972, Hollywood's attitudes toward race relations seemed more confusing and irrational than usual. On one hand, a fragmented movie industry anxiously turned out quickly made, poor quality blaxploitation films, which, according to cultural commentators like Crouch, "were obnoxious, vulgar and crude."¹³ Although the critic cited no specific films, the following movies were playing in theaters at the time: *Shaft*, *Superfly*, *Slaughter*, *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (all in 1972), and *Shaft in Africa*, *Superfly T.N.T.*, *Cleopatra Jones*, *Coffy*, *Trick Baby*, and *The Mack* (all in 1973). *New York Times* commentator Clayton Riley seconded his

colleague's opinions, noting that the characters in these films "the cowboys and the sleuths, the dope traffic aristocrats and empty-headed women, the colored Keystone Cops' are products of the same Hollywood minds that made millions of dollars while excluding Blacks from the industry. Now they've discovered a latter-day vein of gold to rip off. That's not surprising. The help they are getting from Black film artists is."¹⁴ On the other hand, as *Encore* pointed out, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences looked at black-themed films from a wider perspective by championing three notable movies that collectively garnered eleven Oscar nominations. *Sounder* was considered for the Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay; its stars Paul Winfield and Cicely Tyson, along with Diana Ross (*Lady Sings the Blues*), for Best Acting. The Billie Holiday biopic also received nominations for Best Original Screenplay, Best Art-Set Decoration; Best Costume Design; and Best Scoring. Still further, there was a Best Documentary nomination for Warner Brothers' *Malcolm X*. Clearly, African-Americans had begun making breakthroughs in a range of new cinematic areas. Not surprisingly, however, given the times, black artists lost out in every category, and as *Encore* reminded us, "everyone in and outside the industry settled back to see what would happen next."¹⁵

This much we did know. A badly shaken Hollywood still dominated the movie business. But radical changes had occurred. For example, the late 1960s witnessed The Motion Picture Production Code being replaced by a ratings system. The new censorship policies resulted in such independent movies as Melvin Van Peebles' provocative *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), "the first American film in the black idiom made entirely outside the white power structure's control";¹⁶ and Gerard Damiano's sexually explicit hit, *Deep Throat* (1972). In the minds of many Americans, not only did no one know which movie was truly a "pornographic film," but also the public worried aloud about what was happening to the nation's values. In addition, and against the backdrop of an anti-colonial uprising worldwide, popular ethnic films showcased liberal views both on slavery and the Reconstruction era, as well as underscoring racial injustice in American cities North and South. These same films also emphasized black rage, provided racial exposés, created unfamiliar characters, added explosive idiomatic language,

and inspired us with new musical soundtracks. Understandably, artists like Van Peebles's son Mario who embraced these positions but disagreed with his more conservative colleagues, called these productions "Black Soul films," not blaxploitation movies.

Meanwhile, a nostalgia craze had swept the nation. A television channel like Turner Classic Movies promised Americans that the past would never become the past. The general population delighted in the fact it could forever watch their favorite films on the small screen in their living rooms, no matter how racially inappropriate such movies might be. All that was needed, optimistic viewers believed, was a well-meaning host suitably contextualizing the films.

Many academics also remained unconcerned. Not for one moment did they think that those who sought pleasure, information, and inspiration from traditional movies were fools, victims, or automatons "mechanically delivered into passivity and conformity by the monolithic channels of the mass media and the culture industries."¹⁷ Rather there were many contributing variables—e.g., sex, age, class, education, and status—that mediated between the films and us in what Marshall McLuhan described as "the medium is the message."

As for black audiences, while they certainly despised the by-now familiar film perversions, they almost from Hollywood's beginnings, so went the argument, had substituted their own "readings" to come up with alternative analyses that gave more satisfying connotations.¹⁸ So let the films live long and prosper!

However, an increasingly vocal community grew outraged by the nostalgia craze. They felt the civil rights movement had been betrayed. After all, as B. J. Mason explained, the movies of the civil rights era built their myths and stereotypes from rebellious attacks on the first sixty years of motion picture history. In the film critic's words, "...the past is not quite dead;...it is alive and grinning at us from the dark balconies of our modern movie houses."¹⁹ Professor William R. Grant went further, asserting, "The pervasive presence of stereotypes of Blacks in the culture industry at large and particularly in commercial film [and television] indicates that folk fallacies are not confined to bygone forms of entertainment [e.g., television; Turner Classic Movies]." He took aim at "The racist roots that influenced the popular imagination that created and sup-

ported vaudeville, burlesque, and the minstrel show” and argued these origins “have appeared, often thinly disguised, in the works of sociologist[s], historians, and folklorists. The fallacies embraced by the popular imagination about Blacks,” he reasoned forcefully, “can be found in nearly every area of the culture industry.”²⁰ The status quo had become Alice through the Looking Glass.

Thousands of miles away in Vermont, known in those days as the “whitest state in the union,” a totally different world survived. For example, in 1969, when John Schlesinger’s Oscar-winning, X-rated film *Midnight Cowboy* played at a local Burlington theater, *The Burlington Free Press* refused to say anything except that there was an X-rated movie in town. Rarely did a black film, let alone a blaxploitation movie, appear anywhere in the state, mainly I suspect because none of the exhibitors wanted to attract the “wrong type” of people into their theaters. And if you wanted to keep abreast of the radical black film experience, you often had to go outside of Vermont’s borders.

As for the open-minded UVM English Department that had recently hired me, the only departmental major a student could have was in English literature. American literature proved to be a second-class citizen for the moment. Writing was considered our sole responsibility college-wide, and those required courses were taught almost exclusively by marginalized part-timers, appointed without benefits on an annual basis. Except for audio-visual films, the only mainstream movies on campus appeared in a single course once taught in the controversial Department of Communication. Regarding the English Department’s two major rebels—a wonderful white Southern instructor named Mary Jane Dickerson who was leading an effort to introduce black literature into the college, and yours truly who was lobbying for mass media literacy and film courses—neither one met with much success at first. Vermont schools remained adamant that movies and black literature were not only trivial disciplines, but also their language and narratives and formats were inappropriate for decent educational programs.

My favorite anecdote for the times relates to Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*. Considered a milestone in black film history, the narrative tells of a young boy, nicknamed Sweetback,

who grows up in a Los Angeles brothel. One evening, the now mature and widely admired “stud” sees a black man unmercifully beaten by two white cops. Unable to control his outrage, Sweetback brutally murders the policemen. The remainder of the movie follows the police as they attempt to capture the fugitive, who eventually escapes over the Mexican border. As the film ends, the following words appear on the screen: “Watch out. Watch out. A Baadasssss Nigger is coming back to collect some dues.” According to the distinguished black scholar Lerone Bennett, “*Sweet Sweetback* is the story of the radicalization of a pimp.”²¹

For me, this movie was one my students and I needed to see. I was teaching an “experimental” course entitled “The Black Man in Film.” Keep in mind there were no DVDs, DVRs, or streaming, that not only was this a time when the only media possible for classroom use were badly mutilated film prints, but also our film budgets never exceeded \$250 per course. One good 16mm print, even if such a print existed, wiped out the entire semester’s funds. Thus we depended mainly on the local theaters for our seeing any contemporary film about the black experience.

The problem was how to get *Sweet Sweetback* to the Burlington area. As fortune allowed, near my home in South Burlington was Cinema 1 & 2, a now-defunct movie theater managed by Merrill Jarvis,²² who along with his late wife Lucille and family eventually became my lifelong friends. One day, Merrill mentioned that the Van Peebles movie would be coming to the theater. For several weeks I waited, but no *Sweet Sweetback* appeared. Finally, I went to Merrill and asked what was going on. He told me that the distributors nationwide had bought the film, but had no intention of allocating it. They would just put it on the shelf and hope that the movie vanished from the public imagination.

Refusing to accept that policy, I rallied my students and their friends, hundreds in numbers, and we organized a phone campaign. For every minute Cinema 1 & 2 was open, we dialed in asking for information about when *Sweet Sweetback* would arrive at the theater. This campaign went on for roughly two weeks, and Merrill and his bosses found it almost impossible to run Cinema 1 & 2 effectively. Finally, a settlement was reached. If we stopped calling, the Boston distributors would release the film for circulation, but

they made clear they had no intention of bringing it to any of their theaters.

The next challenge was to find a theater to screen the film. In downtown Burlington, on Bank Street, there existed a small mom and pop movie house called the *State Theatre*. By promising the owners that the University would guarantee them a sell-out audience for one showing of *Sweet Sweetback*, I succeeded in getting the exhibitors to rent the film. For several weeks prior to the special screening, posters appeared all over the campus explaining the situation and asking people to turn up at the *State Theatre*.

Finally, the big event arrived, and more than 600 ticket holders appeared at the movie house that had a seating capacity for about 400 patrons. Consequently, there were people sitting in the aisles, standing in the back and on the sides, all eagerly anticipating the showing of the film. To our utter amazement, the lights dim and we see flickering on the screen a "Slam-bang-thank you ma'am" porno film that ran for over fifteen minutes. It seems as if the owners were so grateful for the UVM turnout that they decided to reward us, free of charge, with another "porno" film they had in their possession. In other words, we got two "pornographic" movies for the price of one.

Once the "quickie" film finished, the Burlington Fire Department raided the Bank Street movie house, demanding that we strictly follow the *State Theatre's* mandated seating capacity. It fell to me to decide who should stay and who should leave. [For the record, *Sweet Sweetback* became the most successful independent film of the day.] And to paraphrase the late, great Walter Cronkite, "That's the way it was when you wanted to see a black film in Burlington in 1971."

It is against the backdrop of this disaffection in the early seventies that *Exits and Entrances* emerges. In hindsight, the task remained clear-cut from the start. A white regulated American film industry, described briefly in the Preface, had established a commercial system that proved damaging politically, socially, economically, and culturally to its naïve constituency and was seriously in need of reform. But despite the revolutionary changes that had occurred since World War II, no meaningful industrial restructuring could take place unless America itself changed. And few crit-

ics were certain that such a change would sustain itself. No one doubted, however, that those who had the courage and talent to mutiny against Hollywood faced great risks and could jeopardize their careers. *Exits and Entrances* offers one version of that story.

These seven interviews reveal the trials facing innovators who took up the torch of rebellion in their struggle to free multi-cultured Americans from the misrepresentations of a prejudiced culture. Denied an adequate outlet for their stories, the actors fought back and found their voices. They won some battles; they lost some battles! The performers' memories suggest the difficulties faced, but credit no one strategy for working best in reforming the prejudices of the nation and the film industry. Moreover, the artists' careers dramatically remind us how risky it was to endorse alternative ideas occurring from within the black community itself. No monolithic black consensus existed then or ever. And, as we discover, the seven performers faced many unnerving disputes from within and without the black community.

Among the many questions interesting me in approaching these representative entertainers included the following: during the film revolt that occurred, what special role did these individuals perform in the revolutionary process? What had their experiences been so far? What assets did they have that the earlier film pioneers lacked? What set of problems did they face as they forged forward? What dangers did they encounter if they dared defy the system? Should they dwell on black pride, black achievements, and a black aesthetic; or on industrial barriers, racism, oppression, and persecution? How practical was it to rock the boat? What responsibility, if any, did they have to African-Americans other than to do their best work in their chosen profession?

The last question is particularly relevant but seldom asked. No one addressed it better than one of Hollywood's legendary stars, Bette Davis. "What do we owe anybody?" she asked. "Just what is our responsibility to the rest of the world?" Then responding to her rhetorical query, she snapped, "If our primary concern becomes the protection of every race, every creed instead of producing entertainment—there won't be any time to even make pictures."²³ In the end, Davis decided, "We always get it in the neck. We're treated like criminals no matter what. Nobody seems to realize we're not

a philanthropic industry. Nobody ever thinks of us as people who have to earn a living."²⁴

Taken collectively, the interviews in *Exits and Entrances* offer an alternative reading to popular historical accounts describing an appalling African-African film experience. Mae Mercer, Brock Peters, Jim Brown, Ivan Dixon, James Whitmore, William Marshall, and Ruby Dee never discount the disgust they felt working in a prejudiced film industry. Nor do they ignore the stained national history of lynchings, church burnings, police brutality, and official racism as it related to their work. Instead, the artists stress the tests faced and the defeats experienced, as well as the victories won on their watch. And they are not naïve. In interview after interview, they explain what yet remains to be done and the barriers still to be removed. If nothing else, therefore, *Exits and Entrances* hopefully proposes a balanced look at the black film experience, of triumphs as well as failures.

What connects these celebrities to each other? Just as in *Every Step a Struggle*, the personalities chosen for *Exits and Entrances* seem dissimilar. Except for the fact that all the interviewees were actors, little uniformity appeared in their make-up and their social backgrounds. Three of the seven individuals came from the New York City area. Brock Peters and Ivan Dixon were born in or near Harlem; James Whitmore was born in White Plains. The other personalities were far more distant from each other. Mae Mercer was born in Brattleboro, North Carolina; Jim Brown, St. Simons, Mississippi; William Marshall, Gary, Indiana; and Ruby Dee, Cleveland, Ohio. Yet the influences these players had on the black film experience range from performing and directing to writing and producing, not just with film, but also in television, stage and musical theater. Equally significant, as you will discover, they personify a particularly relevant moment in history, the history I experienced.

As the reader also will discover in these interviews, the performers each answered Bette Davis' doubts differently. They advocated no one-way to get the job done. They all made daunting choices, and these selections did not always turn out successfully. You may judge their decisions; I do not. These artists followed their moral consciousness; they reacted intellectually to the civil rights movement arising from their personal history. Once committed,

they refused to be distracted from their goals. From their experiences, the actors realized change would be hard and long in coming. What mattered was that it would come, and they would be part of the process.

Once again, I remind my audience that *Exits and Entrances* acts as a recap of a bygone age. Times, circumstances, and settings were significantly different from the present. It was a racist era when strong-willed reformers faced intimidation, oppression, and isolation. Remember too that black employment in the film industry since the start had been minimal compared to the number of people seeking access. These actors lived in difficult economic, political, and cultural times. Thus these intrepid performers who spoke honestly to me in many cases braved the possibility of reprisals and unemployment.²⁵

In looking back at the early 1970s, as the interviews unfolded, I was not alone in seeing movies as mystifying. Particularly alarming was the belief that the black film legacy remained largely an account of stereotypes and distortions. Americans knew Hollywood had grown popular portraying “blacks as lazy darkies, happy slaves, cannibals and brainless phalli-negative images.”²⁶ The shame was that these spectators saw such viewpoints, according to one scholar, as “harmless entertainment.”²⁷ And because “yesterday’s movies” proved so pleasurable for millions of viewers, many careless viewers left their local movie theaters convinced that to be white was to be unquestionably good, but to be black was utterly evil.²⁸

Such “harmless entertainment” corrupted the American imagination, primarily because the stereotypes appeared to be a national consensus. Before moving forward, therefore, we should define what we mean by “stereotyping.” The gifted Richard Dyer speaks for many scholars: “The stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group, as if the agreement arose before, and independently of, the stereotype. Yet for the most part it is *from* the stereotype that we get our ideas about social groups.”²⁹ By failing to examine critically these typecasts, Professor Ellen Seiter cautions, “there is a danger of mistaking the PRESENCE of white, bourgeois values for the ABSENCE of stereotypes and, therefore, for mere truth and realistic representations.”³⁰

There is also the same danger of mistaking today’s new min-

strelsy for “truth and realistic representations.” Skeptical readers who doubt the dangers of such stereotyping need only consult Harvard psychologist Alvin F. Poussaint’s findings, which for close to four decades have deconstructed the harmful effects of media imagery and misrepresentation “on the young, disadvantaged and impressionable.”³¹ In his words, “Outside a few black sports heroes, movie characters and movie actors become the prime models for black youth to emulate.” Furthermore, he insists, “There is a high correlation between concept of self and fantasy among black youth.”³²

One more observation on stereotyping merits attention before leaving the topic. Central to the research in *Exits and Entrances*, as well as to the manner in which intellectuals see film as art, is the way in which both humanists and social critics traditionally perceive the concept of stereotyping. That is, humanists use the term disapprovingly to distinguish one-dimensional, flat, and false characterizations from, as Seiter points out, “well-rounded, individual ones.”³³ That mistake results in the false assumption that art and stereotypes are incompatible. Actually, they are not. Great novelists like Jonathan Swift, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and George Orwell often used stereotypes in their characterizations. The same is true of notable filmmakers like King Vidor, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, and Spike Lee. Social critics go even further in rejecting such elitist notions and argue instead that stereotyping is part of ALL forms of fiction. In essence, as Seiter maintains, the humanistic perspective is too naive: it oversimplifies “the relationship between culture and society by treating it as direct and unmediated.”³⁴ Moreover, the humanistic approach frequently fails to gauge the relationship between the works produced and the society that produced them. Even so, as Ossie Davis once explained to me, the problem is not so much the stereotype but who uses it and how and why.

Changing misperceptions and their consequences resulting from such efforts proved vital to the celebrities in *Exits and Entrances*. They evidenced extensive knowledge about screen distortions and thus tried throughout their careers to counteract the repugnant results of such mockeries. As the reader soon realizes, many of the interviewees, like blacks elsewhere, approached reforms in ways that, as Bennett insists, were appropriate for post-Watts era

African-Americans. In his words, blacks needed “to redefine themselves not just in relation to white racial history, or black history reacting to white influence, but in ways that focus not on attacking whites or evolving new black stereotypes, but in positive images of black people independent of white influence.”³⁵ Not everyone interviewed or people throughout the nation agreed with the noted commentator. As becomes evident midway through the discussions, different interviewees saw film reform differently. Even so, Bennett’s argument shows up surprisingly in Ivan Dixon’s progressive cult film *The Spook Who Sat by The Door* (1973).³⁶

Exposing why insufferable stereotypes made it impossible for Americans to reach the American Dream³⁷ turned out to be only one of our celebrities’ priorities. Artists like Mercer, Peters, Brown, Dixon, Whitmore, Jones, Marshall, and Dee did not preoccupy themselves just with revisiting and revising Hollywood’s racist film traditions; rather, they saw the times as an opportunity not only to tell their own black film narratives, but also to discuss the intellectual challenges of their profession. Thus in the works in which these artists appear and produce, audiences see stories about both black history and America itself.

That universal emphasis gave birth to a new perspective for African-American entertainers. From the post-World War II era forward, black performers fought for the freedom to be actors, not just black entertainers, and to access all their profession’s benefits and challenges. They fought for a voice, an outlet to express their ideas and experiences in a post-colonial world. Not all their dreams may have been realized, but at the very least, they put the industry on notice that times were a changing. Particularly important and frequently overlooked are the outlooks they provided for black America emotionally. By opening doors, they taught their audiences anything was possible for African-Americans. With each breakthrough, the artists encouraged their viewers not to quit. As described in *Exits and Entrances*, therefore, these seven performers played a significant role in leading the march to today’s multi-talented American film community.

To appreciate the steps they took and realize the risks they faced, let us briefly revisit the crucial post-World War II period and recall what hopes it presented minorities for reshaping the Ameri-

can film industry, when and why these possibilities materialized, what drawbacks limited change, and the era's relevance not only to black artists but also to me. The world was so much different fifty years ago than it is now. I especially want you to see how dissimilar I was from the performers I met. To paraphrase our sixteenth president, "If we know where we came from, we could tell how far we have come."

We begin by glimpsing back at our culture during the mid-1940s. Next, the narrative explores how those post-war times presented problems not only in studying black film history, but also in studying film in higher education. The text then introduces several influences on *Exits and Entrances* downplayed in *Every Step a Struggle*: the emergence of Television, the effects of a black pride movement on industrial reforms, and the ties between black music and African-American film history.

Once more I remind the reader, this book does not seek to replace other, more informed studies. I have neither the time, nor the space, nor the expertise to do more than rapidly reconsider the post-World War II era and its consequences for the black film experience. Any other ambitions go beyond the range of this undertaking.

I

The myth is that revolution in the black film experience took hold during the mid-sixties. It is a view I understand but do not share. My reservation is not so much about who is right, but which approach works best for the project at hand. Different contexts produce different priorities. For my purposes, the practical starting point for *Exits and Entrances* is in the days leading up to the end of World War II. It was a time when conflicts and pressures produced remarkable opportunities for breaking down racial barriers as well as offering new hope to marginalized artists. As a result, the mid-forties seemed ripe not only for democratic reform, but also to begin dreaming of things that never were.

America was changing. It had been decades since Southern blacks had left the rural South for industrial cities throughout the country. "From the moment the first migrants set foot in the North during World War I," Pulitzer-Prize winning author Isabel Wilk-

erson writes, “scholars began weighing in on the motivations of people...[as to] whether it was the pull of the North or the push of the South, whether they were driven by economics or by injustice and persecution, whether changes in cotton production started the Migration or merely hastened what was already under way, and whether the Migration would end, as some wrongly anticipated, with World War I.”³⁸ Many black migrants never found what they were searching for, and by the publication of *Exits and Entrances* were moving back South. But in 1945, these same migrants had brought about many changes in urban America, changes that would have widespread importance for the black film experience. “So, too,” Wilkerson continues, “came the people who might not have existed, or become who they did, had there been no Great Migration. People as diverse as James Baldwin and Michelle Obama, Miles Davis and Toni Morrison, Spike Lee and Denzel Washington, and anonymous teachers, store clerks, steelworkers, and physicians, were all products of the Great Migration. They were all children whose life chances were altered because a parent or grandparent had made the hard decision to leave.”³⁹ That tribute is reinforced repeatedly in *Exits and Entrances*.

In the latter half of the 1940s, President Harry S. Truman took important first steps toward addressing America’s ongoing racial struggle. Starting in 1945 with his special Committee on Civil Rights, the President seemed determined to eliminate “segregation, based on race, color, creed, or national origin, from American life.” Three years later he proposed legislation aimed at ending lynching, discrimination in interstate transportation, and insuring voting rights for all Americans. That same year, by executive order, he established fair-employment practices throughout the various branches of government, making merit and fitness the only qualifications for employment or advancement.⁴⁰ In another decision on July 26th, Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which ended segregation in the United States armed forces.⁴¹ America appeared different. Hollywood appeared ready to follow.

It may be worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the importance of dates and to understand the complexity of individuals, on what some intellectuals label “context dependent” moments in history. Why did someone like Truman, from the southern border

state of Missouri and known for countless ethnic blunders and bigoted behavior, reverse himself and make two of the most positive racial decisions in the second part of the twentieth century—declaring for the State of Israel and desegregating the armed forces—at precisely the same time? Historians provide no definitive answer, but many scholars speculate the President’s actions were linked to his 1948 re-election campaign. He needed both the Jewish and the African-American vote to stay in the White House. I mention this issue only to remind my readers how little we really know about the whys and wherefores of the world we inhabit. Reform comes in mysterious ways, nowhere more clearly than in the black film revolution.⁴²

Complementing Truman’s historic actions was the unexpected revolution surfacing in Hollywood. A white America, presumably ignorant and indifferent as to the ways its laws and traditions had oppressed blacks, was being transformed by mainstream movies. The change occurred because the war years had raised the nation’s consciousness about social injustice and inequality. Now something had to be done about the social injustice. This dramatic mission infused not only the lives and careers of the artists interviewed in *Exits and Entrances*, but also my journey. Here, I only summarize what has been discussed in greater detail elsewhere.⁴³

For over sixty-five years, intellectuals have debated whether what happened to mainstream movies from 1945 to the mid-seventies advanced our screen images of blacks or merely gave us a new minstrelsy. But African-Americans in the aftermath of World War II harbored no doubts. They were euphoric. A sense of brotherhood and common objectives permeated the land. People seemed organized to fight social inequality and intolerance. Long before the outcry for “Black power” in the mid-sixties, as historian Peniel E. Joseph insists, “there was a group of self-identified ‘Black Power activists,’ African American radicals [who came of age before and during the post-war years] such as Paul Robeson, Lorraine Hansberry, Malcolm X, Robert Williams, Gloria Richardson, and William Worthy....”⁴⁴ Returning servicemen like Ossie Davis and Harry Belafonte recall vividly how elated they felt having just defeated fascism abroad, particularly because of the Axis powers’ links to white supremacy. These black romantics anticipated a new nation awaiting them, one “open, generous, and rewarding.”⁴⁵