

4 Black-Audience Westerns

Race, Nation, and Mobility in the 1930s

How to be both free and situated; how to
convert a racist house into a race-specific
yet nonracist home? How to enunciate race
while depriving it of its lethal cling?

TONI MORRISON/ "HOME"

In *Midnight Ramble*, a 1994 documentary on early black cinema, actor-singer Herb Jeffries recalls his inspiration for the singing-cowboy role he made famous in black-audience musical westerns of the late 1930s. On tour in Cincinnati, Ohio, Jeffries saw a young African American boy crying in frustration. The boy explained that he wanted to play Tom Mix but that his white playmates insisted that he could not because Mix was white and there were no black cowboy stars. As a result of that encounter, Jeffries promoted the idea of black cowboy movies in Los Angeles and subsequently became the first African American singing cowboy in the movies. He was billed using various combinations of his first name Herb or Herbert, and his last name, Jeffrey or Jeffries (for consistency, this chapter refers to him as Herb Jeffries throughout) in a series of independently produced black-audience musical westerns and thus provided African American audiences with an on-screen role model of a black cowboy.¹

1 I would like to thank Susan Jeffords and Steven Shaviro for their enthusiasm about the earliest version of this essay, which was a chapter of my dissertation. Revisions came easily, thanks to the critiques, comments, and suggestions of the North American Studies Colloquium of the Dresden University of Technology,

Jeffries's anecdotal story illustrates the primary importance of racial and national identification to the development and reception of the black western during the late 1930s. His recourse to the role-model trope is not an unusual rhetorical move either, given the genre in which he was working. According to *The BFI Companion. to the Western*, studies conducted during the first half of the twentieth century found a trend toward younger boys in the audience at westerns: "Westerns became less popular as children got older," and findings further indicated that "pre-teenage children preferred westerns most, that boys liked them more than girls" (Buscombe 36).

Unfortunately, there are no data specific to African Americans; indeed, we can probably assume that audience studies were conducted with white subjects only. But, as the remarks of Jeffries and other veterans of race movies indicate, the audience for black westerns was imagined to be primarily African American boys.² Even more important, the late-1930s cycle of black musical westerns embodies a unique cinematic intersection of race, nation, class, and gender that should be of interest to scholars in the field of African American cinema as well as those working on the western film genre.

In the 1920s, race movies tackled controversial issues affecting African Americans, such as lynching, interracial relationships, and anti-Semitism. Some of the most frequently studied films from this decade include the

my audience and fellow panelists at the MELUS-Europe 2000 conference in Orleans, and the challenging and encouraging reviewers for *Cinema Journal*. My best editor remains Anneliese Truame. The revisions for this version could not have been completed without the seemingly boundless resources of the Seattle Public Library and Scarecrow Video in Seattle.

- 2 The trope of the young male African American spectator of cowboy movies is still a current one: in an advertisement for the soundtrack of *Posse* (Mario Van Peebles, 1993), on the video version of the movie, a young black boy sits in front of a television watching an old Hollywood western. The ad posits the soundtrack as a way to rebel against the inaccuracies of the white Hollywood version of the West by consuming the music associated with a revisionist black western made by an African American director. For more on this ad and for an illuminating discussion of characters of color in recent westerns, see Hoffman.

work of the prolific writer, producer, and director Oscar Micheaux,³ whose films are located within established genres such as the melodrama or detective story but center around specifically racial issues and other “social problems” of the African American community. In contrast to these explicitly political movies, the black-audience entertainment films of the 1930s consist of adaptations of popular white genre films that do not directly portray racism or white-supremacist violence. According to Henry Sampson, the black-audience “entertainment” films of the 1930s focused less overtly on racial politics and more on approximating the standard conventions of their genres and on generating cinematic pleasure. As Sampson notes, “Unlike the black features of the [1920s], they made no serious attempt to treat the unique aspects of the black experience in America” (13).⁴

Given these distinctions, the cycle of black westerns from the late 1930s cannot be studied using the same assumptions scholars have established in work on the 1920s race movies. First of all, black musical westerns appeared twenty years after Oscar Micheaux’s first feature in 1919. The target audience for these movies was different as well, aiming for children and adults, unlike some of the more serious dramas of the 1920s. Another difference is that the focus of the black musical westerns is on spectacle—music and action—more than on the story, which is rather skeletal. Yet, for this very reason—their alleged effort to be entertainment that does not consciously engage in the contemporaneous discourses on race—these films reveal a different approach to African American audiences and identifications of their time than earlier, more deliberately political films.

Because the racial politics is less overt, the dozens of black-audience westerns, gangster movies, and comedies of the 1930s remain largely unexamined. As a cultural critic, I am fascinated by this loudly proclaimed ab-

3 A small explosion of Micheaux scholarship occurred in the 1990s. Some of the best-known and most fascinating articles and book chapters from that decade and earlier include Bowser and Spence; Butters; Cripps, “Oscar Micheaux”; Gaines, “Fire and Desire”; Green; Grupenhoff; hooks; Jones; Leab; Reid; Register; and Sampson.

4 The historical data in this essay are drawn largely from two landmark studies: Sampson’s exhaustively researched film history, *Blacks in Black and White*, and Jones’s study, *Black Cinema Treasures*, inspired by the discovery in Tyler, Texas, of a cache of now-famous lost films.

sence of political intent and goal of being pure entertainment. This chapter will excavate the embedded meanings and traces of racial politics that even the westerns—or especially the westerns—as popular culture documents still bear.

Specifically, this chapter examines the complex negotiations necessary in the making of black westerns, across the conventions of genre, casting decisions, and path-ways of audience identification. The Herb Jeffries movies of the late 1930s will be the focus: *Harlem on the Prairie* (Sam Newfield, 1937), *The Bronze Buckaroo* (Richard C. Kahn, 1938), and *Harlem Rides the Range* and *Two-Gun Man from Harlem* (both Richard C. Kahn, 1939), although I restrict my close readings to the latter three films because there is no existing print of *Prairie*. First, I survey key terms and concepts as defined within the current literature relevant to this study, particularly in the fields of African American cinema and the study of the Hollywood western. In the second section, after describing and summarizing the movies and their production, reception, and exhibition, I look at their negotiation of and roots in preexisting genres, the western and the singing-cowboy movie in particular. In the third section, I examine representative sequences to better delineate the operations of race and nationality in black westerns, including the role of the “coon” character and the ramifications of having an all-black cast. The fourth section addresses the striking anachronisms and geographical juxtapositions in the films and the methods by which they encourage contemporaneous cultural identification through the deployment of gender roles as well as specifically African American social and cultural identities.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO BLACK-AUDIENCE MUSICAL WESTERNS

Black-audience movies, also called underground black movies, black-cast movies, and race movies, were made in the first half of the twentieth century—most in the 1920s and 1930s—and distributed to all-black cinemas. According to Sampson, in 1939, there were 430 “all-Negro” theaters in the U.S. (Sampson 642). Some critics have defined narrower categories to distinguish “black independent” films from those made by white-controlled production companies, so as to better discuss the different degrees of crea-

tive control, for example (Reid 17). For my purposes, however, I use the term “black-audience” to emphasize the movies’ reception by their intended viewers; I am less concerned with the possibilities of African American auteurism or the quasi-essentialist notion that an all-black team made more “authentic” race movies than black-white partnerships. After all, there is little “authenticity” in any singing-cowboy movie.

Another issue that has continued to interest scholars is whether race movies constitute a “separate cinema,” to echo the title of Kisch and Mapp’s 1992 collection of race-movie posters and a 1998 Turner Classic Movies film series. Certainly, race movies were excluded from the Hollywood studio system, awards competitions, and publicity machines. If black-audience movies do constitute a “separate cinema,” how can we discuss them in their multicultural, albeit racist and segregated, national context?

I would like to state my position within this debate by first rejecting what sounds like naiveté: how could any American making movies in the late 1930s not be affected by Hollywood cinema in some way? Moreover, how could film professionals hope to market movies while completely disregarding the reception of similar Hollywood products? Thus, I suggest that we took at 1930s race movies as a discrete but not isolated component of American cinema, of which Hollywood is also a part. Indeed, race movies borrowed from Hollywood, particularly in their improvisations on existing Hollywood genres, and, conversely, Hollywood stole from them (witness the all-black casts of King Vidor’s *Hallelujah!* and Paul Sloane’s *Hearts in Dixie* as early as 1929). This is not to say that race movies were not an important aspect of African American culture, although white Americans completely ignored them. Race movies, at least those of the late 1930s, cannot be studied without considering their context in both African American communities and the national culture of the United States, permeated as it was by Hollywood movies.

African American community support for race movies was unabashedly politicized and directly linked the success of black-audience films to the push for social and economic independence. Like many performers in the race movies of the 1930s, African American actor Theresa Harris, the female lead in the black-audience gangster film *Bargain with Bullets* (a.k.a. *Gangsters on the Loose*, Harry L. Fraser, 1937), went back to playing maid and waitress roles in Hollywood movies in the 1940s. Here she explains why black audiences should support the struggling black film industry:

We have tolerated so many rotten pictures made in Hollywood. [...] I do not see why our own people cannot be tolerant of the pioneering stage of this company. [...] I never felt the chance to rise above the role of a maid in Hollywood movies. [...] Hollywood has no part for me. (qtd. in Sampson 490-91)

Not only did black-audience films give African American talent a chance to play lead roles, but, Harris contends, the quality of these productions was not so far below that of the cheap Hollywood genre films that American audiences of all races attended. The popularity of the black-audience movies of the early twentieth century testifies to their value to their audiences, as Thomas Cripps has argued: “A plausibly rendered anatomy of black life often meant more to black audiences than aesthetic considerations” (“Oscar Micheaux” 72).

The debate over their technical “inferiority” and lower production values continues to interest scholars of race movies. While it is certainly true that they had lower budgets than Hollywood films and thus more uneven production values, this economic consideration must not serve as the basis for blanket value judgments. That is, by comparing black-audience movies to Hollywood movies, I do not mean to imply that the work of African American artists should be measured by specifically white standards; indeed, the departures from and improvements on Hollywood conventions in black westerns interest me most. I concur with Jane Gaines’s assessment of Micheaux’s style and believe it also applies to the movies I examine in this chapter:

Micheaux should be situated in the classical Hollywood tradition which, after all, he so carefully studied and emulated. It is not so much that he broke with Hollywood conventions [...] or even that he fell short of mastering them, but that he played ‘fast and loose’ with classical style. (“Fire and Desire” 63)

Black musical westerns can be read as creative interpretations of Hollywood B-westerns (star Jeffries called them “C-minus westerns”), with many of the same kinds of budget-inspired improvisations that are celebrated today in the movies of Val Lewton. The significance of these westerns in the history of American cinema is not that they were technically flawed or radically innovative, as Micheaux scholars have argued over in numerous

publications, but, rather, that they challenged the prevailing function of race as a signifier in American cinema, albeit in different ways from Micheaux.

For American audiences of Hollywood movies, as Manthia Diawara points out in his important revision of Laura Mulvey's thesis on visual pleasure, "the dominant cinema situates Black characters primarily for the pleasure of White spectators (male or female)" ("Black Spectatorship" 66). This race-specific pleasure in Hollywood cinema is often created by representing African American characters as nonthreatening, usually "deterritorialized from a Black milieu and transferred to a predominantly White world" (66). It follows from Diawara's thesis that, because black-audience westerns enact a reterritorialization of African American characters back into a predominantly black milieu, they at least attempt to sidestep this major hallmark of Hollywood cinematic representation.

Furthermore, this reterritorialization often took place within a physically and geographically reterritorialized theater setting, in which African Americans could watch black-audience films with positive images of black people in an audience of other African American viewers. Thus, an additional inducement to attend black-audience films may have been the chance to watch a movie without being constantly reminded of Jim Crow realities: at theaters catering solely to African American audiences, often the ushers, ticket takers, managers, and concessionaires were all black (not just the porters and maids as in white theaters), and unlike white theaters, entrances and seating were not restricted by race (Streible 227). At a time when most African Americans could not see a first-run Hollywood film except from balcony seats or at after-hours "midnight rambles," black-audience movies, including singing-cowboy features, created an on-screen America in which African Americans had access to all locations in life, both high and low and even tall in the saddle.⁵

5 According to Streible's study of African American film exhibition in Austin, Texas, first-run white theaters exhibited "colored midnight shows" and "admitted Black patrons on a regular basis, though customers there were limited to balcony seating and made to use a separate entrance." The alternative required some compromise, too, since "Black theaters were usually considered last-run possibilities for the major Hollywood studios' product," often running films one to two years after their initial opening. See Streible 224-26, for more on segregated exhibition practices; see also Sampson 11-12.

The battle over racial representation within her own writing that Toni Morrison describes in her essay “Home” expresses the dilemma implicit in these films as they struggled over the question of “how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home” (5). Black-audience westerns attempt to convert the house of the American western into a race-specific but nonracist home for African American audiences. Employing the metaphors of space and home, Morrison’s question touches the heart of the matter: the house, the cinema, and the nation are at stake for black audiences of these westerns. The question of ownership, entitlement, and citizenship is quite literal at the story level in the ever-present motif of land disputes, as well as implicit in the genre itself, which has often been a vehicle for expressing not only whiteness but also white supremacy. The visual and spatial transgressions in black westerns, picturing black men in the preserve of the white Hollywood cowboy, enact a geographic reterritorialization in addition to a cinematic one.

Yet, despite what this cycle of movies has to offer the field of black cinema studies, books by Ed Guererro, Nelson George, and Mark Reid make no mention of the black musical westerns. Only Daniel Leab’s *From Sambo to Superspade*, Henry Sampson’s *Blacks in Black and White*, and G. William Jones’s *Black Cinema Treasures* discuss these movies; in addition, Donald Bogle provides an entry on *The Bronze Buckaroo* in his 1988 *Blacks in American Films and Television* and mentions black musical westerns in other books. But these represent just a few mentions, and none is a full-length study of the cycle.

The recurring theme and setting of the American West in early African American cinema, most obviously in black westerns, suggests an embrace of the positive values associated with that region, values not typically ascribed to black characters in movies or for that matter in white-supremacist American culture: freedom, individualism, mobility, masculinity, and a patriotism rooted in a love of the land itself. Micheaux’s first silent feature, *The Homesteader* (1919), was an adaptation of his 1913 autobiographical novel with the same title. It is the story of a black American man establishing a homestead in South Dakota, a geographical and ideological location Micheaux portrayed as a promising alternative to the northern cities to which many African Americans moved during the decades of the Great Migration. According to Gerald Butters, Micheaux saw the West as a “fertile cinematic landscape in which [he] could demonstrate uncompromised

African-American manhood” (55). The land and home are also key issues in Micheaux’s *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), in which a black man fights to keep his oil-rich property despite efforts by the Ku Klux Klan to frighten him off. The next decade brought the Great Depression, when all Americans knew what it meant to fear poverty and homelessness and to value home and freedom; these issues come through in the recurring struggles over ownership of land in black-audience westerns.

Cowboys played a key role in the western expansion of the United States, and the male heroes in westerns provided Depression-era audiences with a model of the quintessential American man: independent, tough, and with a strong sense of justice. In his 1996 study of westerns and their constructions of American masculinity, Lee Clark Mitchell discusses an impressive assemblage of texts, from James Fenimore Cooper’s and Zane Grey’s novels to Sergio Leone’s movies, arguing that the various incarnations of the western participated in creating the nation’s imaginary picture of itself. Although the texts represent a wide chronological range, Mitchell convincingly shows that in each period of U.S. culture the reconfigured western models national fantasies of national and masculine identity. As the title of his book, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, emphasizes, the western is about “making the man,” building an ideal image of a distinctively American masculinity. Although his book includes readings of both high- and low-culture texts, Mitchell fails to mention the cycle of black westerns made in the late 1930s. Michael Coyne makes the same omission in his 1997 monograph, *The Crowded Prairie*, which opens with a discussion of John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939), released the same year as Richard Kahn’s *Two-Gun Man from Harlem*. These oversights are unfortunate because the authors could have provided a more complete account of raced characters as well as raced audiences.

The BFI Companion to the Western, published in 1988, has an entry entitled “Blacks” in its “Culture and History” section that provides a thorough overview of the history of the black West and its representation in movies, including three paragraphs on the Herb Jeffries movies. The entry includes some factual errors, such as the number of sidekicks the hero had, the name of his horse, and the names of directors, but the entry serves its purpose: to assert the presence of black cowboys in both the historical West and the

cinematic genre of the western.⁶ Unfortunately, in this same *Companion*'s sixty-five-page alphabetical filmography, called "A Select Guide to the Western Film," no black western is listed; nor are any of the directors or producers listed in the eighty-four-page section entitled "Dictionary of Western Filmmakers." Another egregious omission occurs in the 1994 book (that includes a CD) *Singing Cowboy Stars*, by Robert W. Phillips. Herb Jeffries is not among the twenty-five stars profiled, although the book bizarrely includes John Wayne, certainly a stretch considering that Herb Jeffries was a professional big-band singer who went on to sing with Duke Ellington's Orchestra.

Jeffries has also been ignored in collections of western music. The four-CD collection *Songs of the West* features a booklet that includes a number of short essays. Entitled "The Western: Through the Years on Film and Television," the booklet includes a color reproduction of the movie poster for *The Bronze Buckaroo*, with the caption "Herbert Jeffrey, Hollywood's only black singing cowboy," alongside posters for Gene Autry movies and photos of the Lone Ranger and Hopalong Cassidy, but the text never mentions Jeffries or his movies, and none of his songs is included on the CDs (Zwisohn).

From this initial research, one might conclude that the black westerns of the late 1930s are irrelevant or at best worthy of a footnote in the histories of African American cinema, the western genre, and cowboy music. That is the false impression that this chapter seeks to correct.

6 This is not to suggest that black cowboys did not exist. Rather, in the public imagination and in popular texts such as dime novels and Hollywood movies, cowboys were exclusively white. However, African American cowboy Bill Pickett was featured in a black independent film, *The Bull Dogger* (1923). For information about other black westerns, see the filmography at the end of this chapter. For an excellent history of African Americans in the West, see Katz.

BLACK-AUDIENCE MUSICAL WESTERNS: THE CYCLE AND ITS CINEMATIC GENRES

The first in the series of black musical westerns, *Harlem on the Prairie*, was made in 1937; however, no prints remain. The movie was produced by B-western Hollywood independent Jed Buell, who also made *The Terror of Tiny Town* (1938), a western with little people in lead roles. Buell reportedly phoned a Dallas distributor who handled segregated southern theaters to ask whether there was a market for such movies; the distributor said, "I'll take all you have. You mean you've got some?" (Davis). Jeffries cast the movie and billed himself as Herbert Jeffrey; also appearing were his back-up singers, the Four Tones, Spencer Williams (who acted in all four movies), Mantan Moreland, and several African American actors who worked in Hollywood Tarzan movies. The film was shot on location at N.B. Murphy's black dude ranch in Victorville, California (Sampson 387).

Harlem on the Prairie premiered at top cinemas, including the Rialto on Broadway in New York and the Paramount in Los Angeles, and met with good reviews in the trade press. There was apparently a strong market for this new black-audience movie; according to the entry in the *BFI Companion*: it cost less than \$10,000 to make and grossed more than \$50,000 in its first year (Buscombe 69).

The Bronze Buckaroo of 1938 was a Hollywood Productions movie. Directed by Richard Kahn, it featured Lucius Brooks as the comic sidekick to Jeffries's Bob Blake. The story involves a plot to buy out or scare off the owner of a land rich in silver ore. The villain resorts to kidnapping and extortion in his attempts to get the land. Luckily, Bob Blake comes to help his friend and get the girl. A sub-plot involves sidekick Dusty (Lucius Brooks) getting duped into buying a mule he believes can talk. The musical interludes include the song "Almost Time for Roundup" as well as a cowboy tap-dance number.

Harlem Rides the Range (1939) also featured Lucius Brooks as Dusty, with Jeffries, Williams, and other familiar faces; once again, Hollywood Productions backed the movie and Kahn directed. The story again revolves around a struggle for natural resources, this time a radium mine owned by one of Bob's friends, and, once again, Bob saves the day and gets the girl.

Made in 1939 by Merit Pictures, *Two-Gun Man from Harlem* was the last completed movie in the series. The story departs from the previous

movies in significant ways in that it is a contemporary western, with telephones, automobiles, and scenes set in Harlem as well as in an unspecified western locale. The generic conventions are also tweaked toward the crime melodrama: Bob Blake's employer, Mr. Steele, is murdered by his wife's lover, but she accuses Bob of the crime. He runs away to Harlem but then returns in disguise to solve the murder and bring the killer to justice. The story and plot are more complicated than in the earlier movies, and the camerawork is more daring: in one fight scene, the camera cuts from medium shots of the two men to several extreme close-ups of arms swinging and chins punched by fists. Some action scenes include a musical score, which is noticeably absent from the earlier movies. The sound in the three latter movies drops out in places during dialogue, and the editing is jumpy; these "problems" could be the result of the low budget or because the videos are copies of old and damaged prints.

A fifth movie, *Ten Notches to Tombstone*, was never finished, and no fragments remain. The most obvious reasons for ending the series had to do with the star's absence. As mentioned earlier, Jeffries began singing with the Duke Ellington Orchestra in 1939, recording his biggest hit song, "Flamingo," that same year. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Jeffries joined the American military and remained in France for ten years after the end of the war (Davis).

As discriminatory practices began to change, African American movie theaters suffered from competition with more accessible Hollywood movies and the market for black-audience films diminished. According to Mark Reid, the black independents also suffered because much of their talent started to appear in Hollywood movies, for which they were better compensated. Reid's example is Lena Horne, whose debut was in a black-audience movie but who then signed with MGM (16). The full history behind these movies does not sit comfortably, though, in the annals of African American race movies. There is another intersecting history crucial in this cycle: that of genre.

In "'Our Country'/Whose Country? The 'Americanization' Project of Early Westerns," Richard Abel argues that the westerns of the 1910s were represented in the press as a distinctive American genre, not least because of their white-supremacist and xenophobic ideologies. The press called the "Wild West subjects" the "foundation of an American moving picture drama" and noted the "educational (that is, ideological) potential" for the audi-

ences, made up mainly of young boys (Abel 83). In the context of the new masculinity of Theodore Roosevelt and other proponents of patriotic, expansionist “Americanism,” the western offered a white male hero who appealed to boys across class and immigrant distinctions, “something like a genre of their own to go along with the separate spheres of play, toys, and clothing that were becoming part of their training for manhood” (Abel 84). Abel does not theorize about whether African American boys might have felt included in this new genre, but he is very clear on the importance of American nationalist and racialist ideology in the iconography of early westerns.

The commercial success of the black westerns depended on their conforming to the western genre’s iconography: costume, props, plots, setting, and characters. Bob Blake rides the range on his white horse, Stardusk, decked out in a tailored western shirt with fringe across the chest, high-heeled cowboy boots, a white hat, and a shiny pair of guns. The story always involves a struggle over land, as mentioned above, and a battle to punish the villain, usually in a shootout at the climax of the movie. But the black westerns are not only westerns. They also belong to a specific subgenre, much neglected by film scholars: singing-cowboy movies. Exploring this subgenre is a crucial step in understanding the black musical westerns that are the subject of this chapter.

The *BFI Companion* informs us that the Herb Jeffries singing-cowboy movies were clear imitations of Hollywood westerns of the period, not only in their choice of hero—Jeffries’s singing cowboy was very much in the Gene Autry/Tex Ritter vein—but also in their highly derivative stories and plot devices” (Buscombe 69). Not calling it imitation but rather admiration, Jeffries himself has said that “Gene Autry was a big hero of mine and the morality of our pictures was based on Gene Autry films,” in that the hero, Bob Blake, “wouldn’t shoot anyone unless it was in self-defense. And he’d never smoke or drink” (Griffin).

Black westerns do resemble Hollywood’s singing-cowboy movies, which followed the mild-mannered, highly moralistic plots deemed appropriate for young children and included songs and action for spectacle. Jeffries admired Autry for his morality, which included the Ten Cowboy Commandments: the hero “(1) Never takes unfair advantage, (2) Never goes back on his word, (3) Always tells the truth ,” and so on through “(10) Is a patriot (above all)” (Buscombe 35-36). Bob Blake is a walking exam-

ple of this honor code, which Autry certainly did not invent but did much to popularize, especially among young audiences. Bob's theme song, "I'm a Happy Cowboy," opens several of the movies—"with my rope and my saddle and my horse and my gun, I'm a happy cowboy"—establishing him as a benevolent soul whose only desire is to work on a ranch, sing songs, and help people. Bob Blake succeeded in providing young African Americans with a brave, strong, and patriotic American hero by adopting many of the Hollywood conventions of the cowboy image.

While I do not want to suggest, as do many critics and historians, that the Jeffries movies are merely imitations of movies for whites, the decision to make black musical westerns must have been influenced by the enormous box-office success of the Hollywood singing cowboys, given that the western in its more serious versions was less popular at the time. White independent directors and white-owned production companies made the black musical westerns in the late 1930s, when Gene Autry was among the top-ten moneymakers in Hollywood for his musical westerns, including *Tumbler-Tumbleweeds* (1935) and *The Singing Cowboy* (1937). African American audiences, like white audiences, loved westerns, despite their frequently racist subtexts and plots. Jeffries recalls touring the South in the 1930s, where he noticed "there were thousands of small movie theaters where blacks went to watch the cowboy pictures of Tom Mix, Buck Jones, Ken Maynard, and Duke Wayne because they weren't allowed in white theaters" (Davis).

Perhaps for some of the same reasons, including access to the nationalistic myths of individualism, bravery, and adventure, audiences of all races found something to like in westerns. During the Depression, certainly, their core values reaffirmed demoralized audiences. Black-audience westerns could have functioned in a similar way, providing a happy ending to a story of heroic struggle, as bell hooks believes Micheaux's movies did:

Addressing the black public's need to have race movies reproduce aspects of white mainstream cinema that denied their presence, Micheaux incorporates into his work familiar melodramatic narratives. Just as the white 'master' narratives of cinema insisted that plots be structured around conflicts between good and evil, this became the usual ground of conflict in race movies. (135)

It is also likely, however, that the music was more of a draw than the acting or the story, since, as black-audience film veteran Harrell Tillman has said, Jeffries's performances were uneven in the cowboy movies: he was "an outstanding singer but a bad actor" (qtd. in Jones 169). In any case, American audiences were accustomed to musicals with thin plots, even expected them. For example, according to a review of *Harlem on the Prairie* in *Film Daily*: "There is little to the story, but it makes no difference as pix is designed as a musical" (qtd. in Sampson 384). Indeed, the 1930s black-audience singing-cowboy movie is important because of its unique musical expressions: the black country-and-western music provides a rare glimpse at the real diversity of what is often assumed to be a very "white" musical form.

Although the cinematic genre I am calling the black-audience musical western was constructed at least partially based on the conventions of Hollywood westerns and singing-cowboy movies, the music in black westerns is not easily traced to popular mainstream trends. After all, the label "singing-cowboy movie" may conjure up images and echoes of Autry or Roy Rogers, but no viewer of the black-audience "horse operas" can dismiss the music as derivative. With excellent songs and a variety of other spectacle, including dance numbers, these films provoke the question of whether the cowboy song really was a "white" form at all. In *The Bronze Buckaroo*, for example, the song "Almost Time for Roundup" echoes the well-established black forms of the blues and the spiritual in its plaintive sound and the call-and-response structure. So is Herb Jeffries as the singing cowboy a mere imitation of white stars like Gene Autry, whose cowboy code of honor he admired? Or is the music in these black musical westerns distinct from Autry's in some way, perhaps a specifically African American cowboy music? I answer this question by first looking at the scholarship on the singing cowboy that currently exists.

As Peter Stanfield points out in his fascinating genealogy of Gene Autry's oeuvre, "Dixie Cowboys and Blue Yodels: The Strange History of the Singing Cowboy," cinema scholars and critics, including Robert Warshow and Jon Tuska, "have systematically ignored or vilified Autry" and the other Hollywood singing cowboys on grounds ranging from their inauthenticity to their insufficient masculinity and even for not conforming to the generic ideal established around movies like *Stagecoach* from the same decade (13-14). As a result of this gap in scholarship, the shared connections

between black and white musical forms in country-and-western music, crucially popularized in the singing-cowboy movies of both Autry and Jeffries, have not been adequately examined; Autry's popularity rested on his singing, but how many fans of cowboy songs know that these songs' origins lie in blackface medicine shows of the rural South rather than ranch hands singing the dogies to sleep on the prairies of the American West?

Stanfield traces the history of the white singing cowboy, which is "intimately tied up in [the] process of making Country music respectable and therefore marketable" (100). He argues further that the cowboy image enabled the performers to escape the negative connotations of poor white rural southerners, "simultaneously suggesting a classless and uncontroversial image of white supremacy" (100). For the white southern musician, the cowboy stage persona was an escape from contemporary cultural conflicts over the rural/urban divide and the uneven results of the industrialization of the South:

The cowboy carried none of the overt racist or class connotations of the hillbilly or his white-trash cousin, [...] yet through deed and action the cowboy supported the concept of Anglo-Saxon superiority while also being incontestably of American origin. (Stanfield 104)

Retreating into an image of the mythical American hero, poor white country-and-western singers could smooth over their less-than-privileged origins by becoming cowboys.

The "white" form of the cowboy song has a more diverse origin as well, beginning in the medicine shows that toured the South selling snake oil and entertaining crowds with tales of the West; in fact, young Gene Autry traveled with the Field Brothers Marvelous Medicine Show and most likely performed in blackface (Stanfield 97). Moreover, by taking the role of the cowboy, country-and-western musicians avoided controversy over their poor white southern as well as their black southern musical roots, the evidence of a common stock of influences that constantly challenges our idea of racial segregation in the South (Stanfield 104).

The Herb Jeffries musical westerns reinforce Stanfield's point: whereas the cowboy persona is an effective way to avoid the specificities of racial stereotypes—white trash, in the case of white southern musicians—in the case of African Americans, the cowboy image symbolized what Abel calls

“the mantle of national identity” minus the limitations imposed on nonwhite Americans (Abel 83). Making an all-black musical western thus involved not only negotiation but also innovation: in negotiating the cowboy persona as a shortcut to American national identity and in blending the seemingly white musical form with its southern, African American roots via blues and jazz.

RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN THE BLACK-AUDIENCE WESTERNS

While black-audience films overall portray a vastly wider range of African American characters, some stereotyped roles do exist. For example, the singing cowboy’s sidekick in black-audience westerns was played up as a classic ‘coon’ by actors Lucius Brooks in *Buckaroo* and *Range* and by Mantan Moreland in *Prairie* and *Two-Gun*.⁷ Bogle details Moreland’s “daffy coon antics” in late-1940s “all-colored features that openly celebrated his wide-eyed manic energy” without the derisive edge of racism that pervades coon roles in white films (Kisch and Mapp xxviii). Bogle insists on recognizing the talent of African American actors even when they were hired to play stereotyped roles in Hollywood or in independents: “no one in his right mind could ever claim that the roles these performers played were anything other than flat-out deplorable. Yet no one can deny that the actors and actresses were significant talents” (Kisch and Mapp xxiv). My interest in the coon stereotype is not to categorize and thereby limit the interpretation of the character, or to discredit the endeavors of black-audience cinema in general. Rather, I propose to historicize the coon character in the specific context of the black western, encountering the following questions along the way: How might African American audiences at the time have read the coon character differently in race movies than in the context of Hollywood westerns, and what factors affected audience reception of this character within this particular context? What other racial issues did film makers have to consider in their scripting and casting decisions?

7 The entry for “Blacks” in the *BFI Companion to the Western* also makes this point, citing the “eye-rolling necrophobic negro” as its example (Buscombe 69).

For example, sidekick Dusty in *Range* and *Buckaroo* is always hungry, lazy, and joking, and he speaks black English. But the saving grace of the coon character in black-audience westerns is that he pulls in all the laughs. And instead of that laughter being associated with racist humiliation as it would in a white movie, in which the coon character was played by the only African American actor in the cast, audiences of race films could feel freer to enjoy the slapstick humor of the character without feeling betrayed, angry, or ashamed. During the 1930s, the presence of a coon character in a black-cast western that also featured a dashing cowboy hero, a villainous land grabber, and a beautiful damsel in distress must have been less traumatic for African American audiences than facing him as the only black character in a white-cast movie, as Barbara Bryant recalls: “In the black films, when a comic was being a comic, it was against a perspective which was balanced by the fact that he was being comical with other black people who were being sane, in control, and acting the roles of substantial citizens” (qtd. in Jones 170).

The complex forms of imitation and innovation implicit in these movies require a careful unpacking of the racial coding of the sidekick coon, demonstrating the negotiation of racial stereotypes involved in the task of scripting. First, the movie must replicate the authorizing aspects of the cowboy genre so that it appears to be legitimate within its genre and so that African American audiences can freely identify with the cowboy. Second, the movie must attempt to conform to the white genre in at least some respects, but without playing into its preexisting racial hierarchies. Caught in the middle of this negotiation, the coon character represents a vestigial racist film heritage that black-audience westerns want to escape but cannot completely avoid.⁸ Further marking Dusty’s behavior as stereotypical, the romantic leads are differentiated from him by speaking standard English and behaving like their counterparts in (white) Hollywood movies—that is, as though they were racially unmarked. Amplifying the racial codings, the coon character in these westerns is played by actors such as Brooks or Moreland, whose skin color is noticeably darker than that of the male and female leads, played by Herb Jeffries and Artie Young. What Bogle terms

8 The expression “vestigial racist film heritage” refers to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s notion of “vestigial thinking,” a Eurocentric, racist, and imperialist ideological inflection that persists after the official demise of colonialism (2).

“color coding” still reveals the marks of the racist culture in which these films were produced, even if there are no white actors and the movies were made in the spirit of race pride.

Yet, in many ways, the coon character is the star of the movie. In *Buckaroo*, for example, Dusty figures out how to trick the ranch hand who sold him a talking mule that will not talk. He also fires the shot that kills the villain during the climactic shootout, something that rarely happens in white westerns. Add to this heroism the fact that Bob Blake *is* very light-skinned, so much so that at first the star worried that black audiences would not believe he was African American (Davis). As Jane Gaines writes about *The Scar of Shame* (Frank Peregini, 1927),

Black and white film stock registered too much truth—on the screen racially mixed actors looked white. Conversely, the dark-skinned blacks preferred by white producers [for stereotyped roles] were unacceptable in star roles in race films. They were not idealized (i.e., white) enough. (“*Scar of Shame*” 75)

Given the convention in race movies of casting light-skinned actors in lead roles, assigning the darker coon sidekick such an important role shifted some of the heroism away from Bob Blake, the lighter-skinned “star.” Bob Blake is also the straight man to Dusty’s clown; as Jeffries has said, this is one thing that distinguished black westerns from white: “It was real vaudeville [...] I was the straight man and he was the comic relief” (Griffin). The highlight of the movie for some audiences may well have been the laughs Dusty generated, rather than the upstanding morality of Bob, compounded by Dusty’s heroic behavior in the shootout.

The paths of identification for other viewers of color were less clear, since the movies lack the usual western staple of Mexican and Native American characters. It is possible that the film makers neglected to include these characters for fear of reproducing negative Hollywood stereotypes for those roles. For a western, however, in which some degree of genre conformity is necessary for audience recognition, omitting the Mexican and Native American characters constitutes a risky move.

This omission is also significant because these stereotypes are crucial to a primary ideological function of the classical Hollywood western: to signify the consolidation of American identity at the frontier in which the white

race dominates and incorporates all other nationalities and identities.⁹ Indeed, as actor-director Ossie Davis pointedly recalls, “When we saw black folks in the [Hollywood] westerns at that particular time, usually the parts were so derogatory that we identified with the Indians rather than with the blacks!” (qtd. in Jones 167). The need to identify with a character of color enabled Davis to cross-identify with Native American characters rather than with the dehumanized African Americans, such as the coon in white westerns.

Given Davis’s remarks, the absence of Mexican and Native American characters is obvious in the cycle of black musical westerns and signals a questioning or rejection of the stereotyped roles for these identities in Hollywood westerns. With the hero Bob Blake playing a racially unmarked cowboy hero on a white horse, the movies managed to negotiate the presence of the stereotyped and racially marked coon, but adding characters of differently racialized identities would have upset the all-black world that the films posit. Historically and generically, the raced identity of a Mexican or Native American character in the context of a black-cowboy movie would also necessarily (if unintentionally) signify their oppression at the hands of white America, represented by the cowboys, who are all played by African Americans.

The incongruity of African American actors portraying American imperialists and oppressors of other people of color may have struck the film makers as too difficult to negotiate. Cowboy roles were important vehicles for imagining black men as serious, masculine American heroes, but that could only work in an all-black milieu. Davis recalls the thrill of seeing a black cowboy character “in chaps and spurs and with guns on, who knew how to get on a horse and how to ride off and catch the villain and knock the living daylight out of him” (qtd. in Jones 168). Notice that Davis uses the word “villain” rather than “Indian”; the villain had to be another black character rather than an Indian or a Mexican to maintain the illusion of a fictional all-black nation without the contradictions of overt racism.

Although black westerns performed an important function for their 1930s audiences—they invited black Americans to see black men as fully vested American citizens and as righteous heroes—this revision collided

9 For more on the role of the frontier in American national identity, see Slotkin. For more on the history of white supremacy in the West, see Drinnon.

with the function of race in the generic ideologies of the western as a representation of U.S. imperialism. As a nation-building narrative of “imperial-style adventures,” the western legitimates the American nation’s “manifest destiny” to permeate the borders of Indian and Mexican nations, while portraying any reverse movement as a ferocious attack on white civilized society, as symbolized by the sanctity of American land (Shohat and Stam 115). The geographical and historical displacements required for the black-audience western to succeed would have been overwhelmed if the overtly racist nature of U.S. western expansion were incorporated into the movies’ already-precarious appropriation of the Hollywood cowboy genre. Because of this conflict, and despite the ready availability of Chicano and Native American actors in Hollywood at the time, black-audience westerns steered clear of the maze of racial power relations that casting actors of another ethnicity would have involved.¹⁰

For audiences of black westerns, political affinities with the victims of American racist and imperialist aggression might have complicated their identification with a cowboy character who kills Indians, even if he were played by an African American actor: hence the significant omission of cowboy/Indian battles in these movies. This omission is underscored by the sole mention of Mexico in *Harlem Rides the Range*, which indicates how awkwardly a Mexican character would have been positioned were he included. The ranch cook, Slim Perkins (F.E. Miller), is cajoled into a target competition, shooting cans off a fence rail. Slim is a coon character like Dusty, a cowardly but comical buffoon. His shooting skills are appalling at first, but then suddenly he hits a can with every shot. With his change in luck, Slim becomes boastful, claiming he was famous for his shooting tricks in Mexico, where he sat in the stands at bullfights and secretly shot the bull to help out the ineffectual bullfighter. His bragging comes to an abrupt end when Bob Blake reveals that he has been secretly shooting the cans to make Slim appear to be a good shot; all involved, except Slim,

10 In the “late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, an increasing number of Hispanic actors [...] appeared in Latin-themed films,” thanks to the U.S. government’s Good Neighbor policies, which encouraged trade with Latin America, including exports to enormous movie markets (Reyes and Rubie 15). According to Abel, Native Americans were cast in Hollywood movies from the earliest silents, although their roles were usually predictable stereotypes (85).

laugh heartily. Slim shifts from being entertaining and braggardly to being humiliated as he is exposed as a liar and a bad shot.

This scene performs two functions: it establishes the light-completed hero Bob as superior to the darker, more comic coon character Slim, while setting up a similar (fantastical) relation of superiority between Slim and an unnamed Mexican bullfighter. Although the film's color coding portrays Bob as better than Slim, it also allows Slim to position himself (however temporarily) as superior to someone else, the Mexican bullfighter, who is as bad at bullfighting as Slim is at shooting. The reference to a Mexican character, though imaginary, models the hierarchies that remain embedded in the western even in its black-audience version.

STRATEGIC ANACHRONISM, GEOGRAPHICAL JUXTAPOSITION, AND CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION

In his exploration of shifting identity formations within a historically contingent and geographically diverse diaspora, Stuart Hall describes culture as “the terrain for producing identity, for producing the constitution of social subjects” (Hall 291). Black-audience westerns function as that terrain, particularly when we examine how their geographical and representational landscape first needs to be deterritorialized and unhinged from its white imperialist resonances and then reterritorialized as an African American national landscape.

To create believable black westerns, the movies employ several of what I call “strategic anachronisms,” which would have most likely struck audiences as out of place yet somehow appropriate.¹¹ The explanation for these

11 This phrase alludes to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's much-debated conception of “strategic essentialism.” Spivak's term works as a model for mine because she suggests that the relatively devalued concept of essentialism can be strategically employed as a basis for resistance in specific situations in which essentialist categories are mobilized as the basis for discrimination. In the world of cinema, anachronism is generally perceived as a flaw, as a lapse in the mimetic “reality” that the film attempts to create. I argue that these films strategically manipulate anachronism for purposes of cultural identification.

strategic anachronisms may lie in their common source: a publicly recognizable national black culture. While black audiences in the late 1930s may not have had full access to the histories of African Americans in the West—these histories having been largely suppressed until very recently—black audiences would have immediately recognized the twentieth-century signifiers of black culture that the films transpose into the western genre, particularly a black culture that was invisible to white movie audiences: the black middle classes. The anachronisms, along with the geographical juxtapositions of East and West, function as anchors for audiences to identify the movies and characters as “black.” Standing with one foot in the historical American West and the other in the Harlem Renaissance, the black westerns thus perform an impressive balancing act.

According to Mark Reid, the first race movies were set in middle-class northern black communities (7-8). The prevailing emphasis on class also struck Thomas Cripps as significant: “*The Scar of Shame* and every other race movie of the 1920s retailed a black bourgeois success myth, a manual for those on the make, and a caution to the weak-willed who might be diverted from success by urban temptations” (“Race Movies” 50). *Scar* addresses serious issues, including class mobility, passing, and color consciousness in the African American middle class. Gaines points out that race movies such as *Scar* “were created by the black bourgeoisie, often in collaboration with whites, for the entertainment and edification of the group below them,” a group that was divided along the lines of rural and urban environments and different levels of literacy (“*Scar*” 62). Many black-audience movies portray for national audiences the otherwise invisible world of middle-class African Americans. William Greaves, who acted in black-audience movies, including *Souls of Sin* (1949)¹² and *Miracle in Harlem* (1948), recalls: “You could see a black doctor, [...] a black lawyer, [...] a black gangster or a black whatever, and you could feel, ‘That’s right! We are people who can function in all walks of life!’” (qtd. in Jones 172).

One important function of the strategic anachronism in black-audience westerns is that they offered audiences representations of the contemporary African American middle class. In addition to well-spoken cowboy Bob, the characters who most clearly represent the middle class are the women—Miss Betty, Miss Dennison, and Sally Thompson—whose costuming and

12 The synopsis and stills from *Souls of Sin* appear in Jones 129-37.

appearance ground them firmly in the 1930s. For example, as Miss Dennison in *Range*, Artie Young has relatively little screen time and functions primarily as a fantasy love object for Bob Blake, who has seen only Miss Dennison's photograph when he falls in love with her. Later, when she finally appears in the flesh, Miss Dennison is the epitome of the beautiful young 1930s woman: her short hair is marcelled and she wears a string of pearls and a knee-length skirt. For an African American audience in the 1930s, the thrill of seeing a lovely black woman as a romantic lead, however abbreviated her screen time, must have been powerful, because the only roles for black women in Hollywood films were small and narrowly conceived, mainly servants.¹³ Not only is Young's character conspicuously not a servant but she is portrayed as fashionable, well-traveled, and educated. Furthermore, her fair skin contributes to the "color coding," as Bogle calls it, that dominates the black westerns and conspires with the social conventions of the time, which marked lighter skin as more beautiful. This point is underscored by the complete absence of any darker-skinned women in any of the movies. Young's modern, fashionable appearance invited a 1930s audience to identify with her precisely through the anachronistic incongruities of her costume and hairstyle.

Most likely, the low budget was a primary reason for the lack of period costuming in *Range*, but the result is a western that creates a dual present. The fictional characters appear to be in the classic western setting, in the nineteenth century, but the anachronistic dialogue, the titles, and the costumes place the film firmly in the 1930s. To deterritorialize the western from its imperialist bent and reterritorialize it as a "black" West, these films employ anachronism and geographical displacement. Throughout the series of black-audience westerns, the appearance of these strategic anachronisms signals the need to ground the films in a contemporary 1930s black culture in order to appeal to the audience. The constant references—verbal, visual, and formal—to the films' fictional present as well as the contemporary dialogue and costumes constitute the dual present that allowed 1930s African

13 Also in 1939, Hattie McDaniel became the first African American woman to win an Academy Award, in the role of the domestic Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. For an excellent discussion of how McDaniel and other African American performers brought dignity and humanity even to the most degrading roles, see Bogle (*Toms* 82-89).

American audiences to identify simultaneously with the western heroes of the nineteenth-century story and the cultural milieu of the Harlem Renaissance. This dual present extends the site of black western heroes as well as latter-day black heroes.

Twenty years after Oscar Micheaux's westerns, *The Homesteader* and *Symbol of the Unconquered*, African American audiences had been exposed to movies about black cowboys, including some with Bill Pickett in the early 1920s. But the incongruity, at least by Hollywood conventions, of African American ranchers and homesteaders in cowboy costumes feuding over valuable land is suggested even in the titles of three of the films: *Harlem on the Prairie*, *Two-Gun Man from Harlem*, and *Harlem Rides the Range*. These titles enact a geographical and temporal sleight of hand in which Harlem, the symbolic site of twentieth-century urban African American experience, is geographically transposed to the West, a place that in Hollywood movies is populated by land-owning whites, along with a handful of African American and Mexican laborers, cooks, and performers and by Indians whose main filmic function is to be shot at and killed. The "blackness" of the movies is proclaimed with the signifier "Harlem" in their titles, although the assumed time period of *Prairie* and *Range* predates any association of Harlem with black culture.¹⁴ Although audiences were thought to have problems with Gene Autry's contemporary westerns because their expectations were that a western should be a nineteenth-century story, the box-office success of the singing-cowboy movies do not bear out this assumption (Stanfield 114). As Peter Stanfield points out, Gene Autry's contemporary musical westerns "addressed the difficulties his audience confronted in making the socioeconomic change from subsistence farming to a culture of consumption, from self-employment to industrial practices and wage dependency, from rural to urban living" (115). The timeliness of the dilemmas around land and home ownership in black musical westerns must have also appealed to audiences in the 1930s; indeed, Cripps suggests that black audiences were already experiencing some of the same economic and

14 *Two-Gun Man from Harlem* is a "contemporary" western, as noted in the plot summary; however, the generic blending of a western with a melodrama and murder mystery also distinguishes *Two-Gun* from the other movies in which Herbert Jeffries appeared.

geographical dislocations during the 1920s that Stanfield attributes to the audiences of Autry's movies ("Race Movies" 48-49).

None of the characters in any of the black westerns is actually from Harlem. In *Range*, Bob says he is from "down Amarillo way," in the Texas panhandle. But one of the effects of the Harlem Renaissance on the national black culture was that it provided a geographical and imaginary site that was known, even to those who had never been there, as the capital of black America—a neighborhood that existed literally in New York City and metaphorically as the center of black cultural production. Thus, black-audience westerns ironically enact an expansionist movement of their own, fulfilling the western's generic imperative to appropriate land in a westward direction by extending the geography of black America beyond the borders of Harlem and into the archetypal American West.

Another strategic manipulation of convention in the black western can be discerned in the geographical juxtaposition of Harlem with the West in *Two-Gun Man from Harlem*. In Hollywood westerns, the East is traditionally invoked as the site of culture and civilization, whether positive or negative in connotation, in contrast to the wild, untamed West. In *Two-Gun*, the East is mentioned in a reference to singer and bandleader Cab Calloway of Harlem's Cotton Club, but the reference functions differently. The comic coon character, named Mistletoe (Mantan Moreland), constantly brags about the merits of his cooking. After signifying at length on his steaks, which he says are as "tender as a mother's lullaby," Mistletoe claims his chili is the "same as a swing tune from Cab Calloway's band—red hot!" Like Dusty's clowning in *Buckaroo* and Slim's in *Range*, Mistletoe's comedy is one of the high points of *Two-Gun*. But his reference to Cab Calloway's swing tunes also functions to ground the 1930s audience in a black urban cultural milieu—the imaginary site of Harlem. After all, members of the African American audience had at least heard of Calloway, and most probably knew a great deal about him. Mentioning a swing tune by Cab Calloway in an all-black western invited audiences to identify not only with African American cowboys in the West but also with a beloved well-known musician of the current day, thereby spatially extending the realm of black culture from the metonymic site of Harlem into the West.

HOME ON THE RANGE: MAKING SPACE FOR AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WEST

At first glance, the black westerns appear insignificant in the wider realm of film and cultural history; they are often formulaic and suffer from extremely low production values, and the performances and editing frequently lack the polish of Hollywood westerns. Nonetheless, I argue that the cycle of late-1930s black-audience musical westerns constitutes a unique moment in African American cinema: made during the Great Depression, they address the fears and insecurities of audiences facing national crisis. They also target a specific age group: young African Americans, primarily boys. This audience necessitated the heightened emphasis on spectacle, represented by the action and musical sequences. As perhaps another consequence of this younger audience, the movies had less overtly politicized subject matter: they did not thematize the kinds of “social problems” that many other race movies did, especially in the 1920s. That is not to say that they were not political, only that their politics was more implicit than explicit.

Because of these unique qualities, the cycle of black singing-cowboy movies calls for a slightly different critical approach from that taken toward other race movies, such as those of Oscar Micheaux. Black westerns are, unlike the work of an African American auteur like Micheaux, the collaborative effort of black singers, actors, and writers and white directors and producers. For this reason, terms such as “black independent cinema” and “separate cinema” do not apply. Whether or not auteurs such as Micheaux were influenced by Hollywood, the black-audience musical westerns definitely were. But that influence is only the beginning of the story, as I have tried to indicate. Perhaps because of their white backers and collaborators, or perhaps because they targeted a young audience and wanted only to entertain, black-audience westerns do not overtly—at the level of the story—challenge the imperialist racial hierarchies embedded in the Hollywood western. Rather than arguing that their collaborative origins make them less authentic or inherently compromised their political import, I maintain that black-audience musical westerns need to be placed in a wider context that accounts for their place in African American culture and in white American culture as well.

By arguing that black musical westerns imitate some of the generic conventions of singing-cowboy movies, I do not mean to suggest that the

former replicated the subtext of white supremacy inherent in Hollywood fare; on the contrary, black westerns represent a complex negotiation between the pitfalls of the existing genre and the utopian premise of an all-black nation. They prove that imagining oneself as a real American is not the same as imagining oneself as a white American; on the contrary, these movies assert the rightful place of African Americans at the moment and the location of the nation's most heroic embodiments, the western frontier. The constructions of black masculinity in these films do not simply echo Hollywood's images of American national identity but actively participate in the formation of an identity that is uniquely African American.

FILMOGRAPHY OF BLACK-AUDIENCE WESTERNS, 1919-1948

Saddle Daze. Wild West Rodeo. No studio or date.

The Homesteader. With Charles Lucas and Evelyn Preer. Written, directed, and produced by Oscar Micheaux. Micheaux Film Corp., 1919.

The Crimson Skull. With Anita Bush, Lawrence Chenault, and Bill Pickett. Norman Film Co., 1921.

Shoot 'em Up, Sam. No cast information. Black Western Film Co., 1922.

The Stranger from Way Out Yonder. No cast information. Tone Star Motion Picture Co., 1922.

The Bull Dogger. With Bill Pickett and Anita Bush. Norman Film Co., 1923.

A Chocolate Cowboy (short). With Fred Parker and Teddy Reavis. Cyclone Comedy, 1925.

Black Gold. With Lawrence Criner, Kathryn Boyd, Steve Reynolds, and "the entire all-colored town of Tatum, Oklahoma." Norman Film Co., 1928.

Harlem on the Prairie. With Herb Jeffries, Mantan Moreland, F.E. Miller, and Spencer Williams. Produced by Jed Buell, directed by Sam Newfield, and supervised by Maceo Sheffield. Toddy Pictures and Associated Features, 1937.

The Bronze Buckaroo. With Herb Jeffries, Spencer Williams, Lucius Brooks, Clarence Brooks, F.E. Miller, and Artie Young. Directed by Richard C. Kahn. Hollywood Productions, 1938.

- Rhythm Rodeo* (short). With Troy Brown, the Four Tones, the Jackson Brothers, Rosa Lee Lincoln, and Jim Davis. Produced by George Randol. George Randol Productions, 1938.
- Harlem Rides the Range*. With Herb Jeffries, Clarence Brooks, F.E. Miller, Lucius Brooks, Spencer Williams, and the Four Tones. Screenplay by Spencer Williams and Flournoy E. Miller and directed by Richard C. Kahn. Hollywood Productions, 1939.
- Two-Gun Man from Harlem*. With Herb Jeffries, Clarence Brooks, Margaret Whitten, Stymie, Spencer Williams, and the Four Tones. Directed by Richard C. Kahn. Sack Amusement and Merit Pictures, 1939.
- Look Out, Sister*. With Louis Jordan and His Caledonia Tympany Band, Suzette Harbin, and Monte Hawley. Directed by Bud Pollard. Astor Pictures, 1946.
- Come on, Cowboy*. With Mantan Moreland, Johnny Lee, F.E. Miller, Mauryn Brent. Toddy Pictures and Goldmax Productions, 1948.
- Sun Tan Ranch*. With Byron and Bean, Eunice Wilson, and Joel Fluellen. Norwanda Pictures, 1948.

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