



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1996 Volume III: Race and Representation in American Cinema

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## **In Their Own Words: African American Contributions to the American Film Industry”**

Curriculum Unit 96.03.14  
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I believe it is safe to say that a large majority of my high school students are avid movie-goers. Most of them, if not all have a VCR in their homes. Amazingly many students are quite sagacious concerning matters pertaining to the blaxploitation films generated in the Sixties. Few, however, realize that African American involvement in film making had its inception as early as 1913. Through this curriculum unit it is my intention to provide high school students, at Cooperative High School for the Arts and Humanities, with an overview of two African American filmmakers and their contributions to film. Oscar Micheaux will be utilized as an example of African American contributions made to the silent era by African American pioneers in the film industry. Matty Rich will be used as an example of contemporary contributions. I have decided to look at Matty Rich as opposed to Spike Lee, John Singleton and/or Julie Dash for very specific reasons. First because he was so close to the age (18) many of my high school students are now when he made his first movie *Straight Out of Brooklyn*. Secondly, he emerged from an environment similar to that in which many of my student find themselves. Lastly, I believe he could represent for my students a reason to believe it is very possible for them to accomplish the same thing.

I do not anticipate allocating an inordinate amount of time focusing on the negative aspects (i.e. the obstacles, omissions, distortions and stereotypes) prevalent in American society and film that very likely provided these film makers with the impetus to tell their own stories. However, it will be touched upon by looking at the stereotypes that were created as a result of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. It is my intention to have students examine and evaluate the accomplishments made by these individuals in spite of the roadblocks they faced. I will attempt to accomplish this by providing them with an overview of each of the aforementioned and having them explore for themselves the political, social and historic climate from which these filmmakers emerged. Additionally, they will be required to view and critique one of their films. They will also be requested to evaluate the efforts of these individuals in relationship to society's perception of and the media's portrayal of African Americans at the time. Needless to say this will require at minimum a brief examination of African American history relevant to each time frame in order to draw a clear perception of the place allocated to African Americans in the United States.

It is intended also that students will assess the methods utilized by each of the aforementioned to acquire capital for their projects. Students will be obliged to discern not only the commonalties and differences prevalent among these film makers in this regard but they will be expected to consider which methodology was most effective and why. Additionally, and of utmost importance students will be asked to ponder the role

of the media in determining the course of society and the ultimate reluctance to allow African Americans (and other minorities) a significant if not an equal voice.

Inherent in this curriculum unit will be the requirement that students in addition to viewing films, read at least one script i.e. Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, *School Daze* or *Mo' Better Blues*. It will also be mandatory that each student write one original scene (at minimum) for a silent movie in the prescribed format for a screenplay which will be provided to them. Once completed these scenes will be disseminated to the following art departments at the Cooperative High School for the Arts and Humanities for their assistance in transforming the scripts to 'films':

- 1) Drama/Dance department for casting, direction and production.
- 2) Music department where original 'soundtracks' will be developed by the music students to be utilized as scores.
- 3) Art department where students will be responsible for the development of graphics, sets and costume design.
- 4) Video department (as we presently have no film department) for taping, editing and final production by students in the video department.

This curriculum unit is designed for high school students who have had as a prerequisite of no less than one year of play writing. This is necessary in order to insure that students are adept at developing believable characters and dialogues. It is also vital that they possess a clear apperception of continuity of plot and motivation.

### **Pioneering Independent African American Films**

Although few of his works survive today, the distinction of being one of the most important African American independent film maker belongs to Oscar Micheaux. A writer turned film maker Micheaux was born to former slaves in 1884, in Cairo, Illinois. In addition to his personal experiences (including working as a Pullman porter) one can safely speculate that the experiences and stories recounted by his parents to Micheaux and his siblings influenced his perception of Euro-Americans and the American socio-political establishment in general.

Micheaux was born, came of age and emerged as an film maker at a time when the climate, institutions and policy of this country was one intent on dehumanizing African Americans. Reconstruction, the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution, as well as the Civil Rights Bill of 1875<sup>2</sup> infuriated most Southerners and more than a few Northerners. Their response was to initiate a vicious backlash that would have repercussions so far reaching that they would impact on every aspect of American life.

Jim Crow flourished. As early as "1841, there was a Jim Crow railroad car in Massachusetts."<sup>3</sup> The Ku Klux Klan, which held its first national meeting April, 1867, in Room 10 at the Maxwell Hotel in Nashville, TN<sup>4</sup> had been in existence for more than two decades when Micheaux was born. Although many other states such as "South Carolina in 1895 spent \$1.05 to educate an African American student as opposed to \$3.11 for every white student"<sup>5</sup>, the United States. Supreme Court in its decision pertaining to the Plessey vs Ferguson case

upheld the concept of 'separate but equal' facilities designated on the basis of race. When rendering its decision the Court went on to state:

*"The object of the [Fourteenth] Amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based on color or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either."*<sup>6</sup>

The ultimate product of this decision was an increase in bellicose efforts to reduce, if not eliminate, the rights of African Americans. This provided a basis for people who needed to feel superior to African Americans, for what ever reason, the legal justification to not only do so but to act out their feelings. This is evidenced by the rise in Jim Crow laws throughout the country, which legislated everything from separate facilities to curfews for African American citizens.\*

### **"Birth of a Nation's" Stereotypes**

The need for European Americans to feel superior was manifested in the media and the arts as well as politics and economics. The 1890's marked the first decade of film. The first generation of films were only ten to fifteen minutes long. They were for this reason labeled 'shorts'. These early films or shorts, while certainly not devoid of stereotypes had unlike literature or theater, yet to 'master' them as they would in later years. "It must be noted however, that this was the result of "circumstance rather than design." <sup>7</sup> Initially the capacity to edit was non-existent. Without the capacity to edit it was practically impossible to formulate a narrative or manipulate images. Therefore from 1890 until approximately 1913 (when editing techniques were developed) Hollywood was incapable of presenting the finely honed stereotypes we see today on film.

However, as time progressed technology in the field evolved. Film makers became increasingly adept at utilizing the nuances of their medium. It was not long before the films reflected the racial disposition of the times. Stereotypes of African Americans in film were germinated and nourished zealously. Such films as *The Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1905) <sup>8</sup> is typical of such undertakings. One of the most insidious and infamous, however, was (and remains) D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). In addition to being credited with possessing some of the most overtly racist images and messages to date it also marked a pivotal point in the film industry technically and financially.

Prior to this juncture the bulk of the industry's profits were derived from shorts. *Birth* was an overwhelmingly successful financially feature length film. Comprised of 12 reels, *Birth* had a run time of over three hours. It was rehearsed for six weeks. . . .edited in 3 months and released as a..\$100,000.00 spectacle. <sup>9</sup> Donald Bogle in his book *Toms Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, & Bucks* claims that Griffith "altered the course and concept of American movie making" when he utilized such techniques as: the close-up, cross-cutting, rapid fire editing, the iris, split screen shot, and realistic and impressionistic lighting. Additionally by utilizing an all-white cast (made-up in blackface when it was deemed necessary) Griffith introduced three types of "blacks". These caricatures would be given a life of their own and embraced by Hollywood for years to come.

\*According to Lerone Bennett, Jr. in his book *Before the Mayflower* it was at one time illegal for African Americans to be on the streets in Mobile, AL after 10 p.m.

Of the three types the one which inflamed and disturbed audiences the most was the "Brutal Black Buck." Apportioned into two categories this particular specification included the Black Buck and the Black Brute. The Black Buck was depicted as an atavistic, portentous, degenerate cur with the morals of a depraved savage.

Griffith's audiences were led to assume that the Buck's tenacity for violence served as a catharsis for sexual repression. The scions of the Buck appear decades later as insurrectionary slaves of the 50's, black militants of the 60's and 70's and drug crazed hoodlums of the 90's.

Even more disturbing for white audiences than the Buck was the Black Brute. One of Griffith's truly archetypal figures, the Brute was always big (almost monstrous) and always "baadd".<sup>10</sup> He was unquestionably oversexed, bestial and truculent. Both (the Brute and the Buck) are libidinous and hunger for white skin. Both are psychopaths. "One is either "panting and salivating . . . while the other is stiffening (his body) as if the mere presence of a white woman in the same room could bring him to sexual climax."<sup>11</sup> These two characters expose both the connection between sex and racism which has been haunting Griffith and white America for years. The crux of this connection is contingent on the myth that the white woman "was the ultimate in female desirability . . . [and] a symbol of white pride, power and beauty."<sup>12</sup> Clearly Griffith and his audience bought into the myth. And in so doing summarized that all African American men want a white woman.

In addition to the Buck and Brute Griffith presented for the first time the Mulatto. The concubine of a white abolitionist carpetbagger, Griffith's Mulatto hated whites. She demanded to be treated as an equal. Simultaneously she craved power and agonized over her plight as an African American woman in a malevolent white society. That Hollywood embraced Griffith's caricatures of black women is evidenced by the fact that after *Birth* every African American woman who was cast to play a sexy role was at most "a cinnamon colored gal with Caucasian features."

Likewise every dark skinned African American woman was cast as a Mammy. One of the "Faithful Souls" in *Birth* the Mammy was assigned very specific characteristics. Most significant was her total lack of sexual appeal. This "representative of the all-black woman"<sup>13</sup> was corpulent and middle-aged. She was supposed to be so dowdy that it was ludicrous to even imagine her as a sex object.

Both the Mammy and the Toms were 'faithful souls' 'house niggers' as Malcolm X would later label African Americans whose loyalty to the slave owner/oppressor was unwavering. Their very identity evolved around him and his well being. "Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved and insulted they keep the faith, n'er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind. . . .they endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts."<sup>14</sup> Included in this grouping also were the Pickaninny Slaves, the Coon and the Uncle Remus. Inherently lazy, according to Griffith. The pickaninny could be found singing and dancing in their hovels, or contentedly picking cotton in the fields. They were represented at best as simple minded children who required "close supervision." At worst they were wild animals who had become domesticated and docile. Before its demise the coon evolved into the most blatantly abject of all black stereotypes. "The pure coon emerged no-account [imbeciles], those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting craps, or butchering the English language."<sup>15</sup> Equally nefarious was the uncle remus. "Harmless and congenial, he is a first cousin to the tom, yet he distinguishes himself by his quaint, naive, and comic philosophizing. During the silent period he was only hinted at. He did not come into full flower until the 1930's and 1940's with films such as *The Green Pastures* (1936) and Disney's *Song of the South* (1946). Remus' Mirth, like tom's contentment and the coon's antics, has always been used to indicate the black man's satisfaction with the system and his place in it."<sup>16</sup> By utilizing the majority of these images of African American slaves Griffith propagated the myth that slaves were quite content with their lot. And if they weren't, at least slavery was a step up the evolutionary ladder considering their wild savage uncivilized ancestry.

Griffith's images were not only perceived as true by his audiences, they permeated the movie industry and can still be found in contemporary films today. *Birth* foreordained the manner in which Hollywood would depict African Americans for decades to follow:

"The racial conflict depicted in *The Birth of a Nation* became Hollywood's way of talking about Black people. . . whenever Black people appeared on Hollywood screens. . . they are represented as a problem, a thorn in America's heel. Hollywood's Blacks exist primarily for White spectators whose comfort and understanding the films must seek." <sup>17</sup>

*Birth* did just that by satisfying White America's greatest need, to feel superior. It also exaggerated society's greatest fear: that African Americans may not tolerate the brutality and injustice that they were experiencing and in response rise up in retaliation. In what may very well be its most inflammatory scene, *Birth's* all white cast dramatizes the suicide of a 'chaste white maiden' who opts to plummet herself from a cliff rather than be "soiled" by a brutish libidinous African American male. Needless to say this scene inflamed white audiences who provided *Birth* with a more than "six month run on Broadway". <sup>18</sup> In the same token the movie was banned in a number of states including Connecticut, Illinois and New Jersey <sup>19</sup> following strenuous public outcry.

As should be expected the African American reaction to *Birth* was anything but passive. The response of the African American Community was as varied as the sources from which they came.

*"At the film's New York premiere, the NAACP picketed the theater, calling the movie racist propaganda. Later the Chicago and Boston branches of the NAACP led massive demonstrations against its presentations. . . . Black critics such as Laurence Reddick said it glorified the Ku Klux Klan, and Reddick added that the film's immense success was at least one factor contributing to the . . . popularity the organization enjoyed during this period. At this time in history lynching in the United States reached the highest peak since 1908 ."* <sup>20</sup>

There were demonstrations, boycotts and in a few extreme cases riots. Community leaders, historians and various organizations condemned the film. Oscar Micheaux responded on January 12, 1920 with his second film, *Within Our Gates*. 'Premiering' at the Vendome Theater in Chicago <sup>21</sup>, *Within Our Gates* included a scene in which an innocent African American man and his wife are lynched by a frenzied white mob. As well as an incestuous "rape" scene in which the movie's heroine Sylvia Landry is attacked by her white biological father. While the controversy which surrounded *Within Our Gates* was just as great as that created by *Birth* the motivation was notably disparate. *Within Our Gates* "is the antithesis of *Birth*." <sup>22</sup> The controversy engulfing *Within Our Gates* "implicitly focused on fear of too much truth . . . [A]ttempt(s) to ban screenings of Micheaux's film, . . . was an attempt to silence the protest against lynching. . . also a law and order move . . . *Within Our Gates* was thus historically linked to fear of cataclysmic social change, a linkage obfuscated by the smoke screen of "race riot." <sup>23</sup>

### **Micheaux Responds to "Birth"**

One of the pioneers of "race movies"\* Micheaux like many of his contemporaries, often utilized film as a mechanism through which to make a statement. Micheaux spoke to such issues as lynching, the rape of African American women, politics as well as the economic stratification of African Americans in this society. A former farmer turned novelist/publisher, Micheaux established the Western Book and Supply Company through which he published, distributed and sold his books.

Micheaux was a statuesque man approximately six feet tall. He was a striking man who possessed an

imposing presence which he used to his benefit in business. His philosophy about literature and the publishing business later extended to films: “Learn from the masses; then teach them.” <sup>24</sup> This philosophical outlook was not the only thing which he carried over to the business of making films. Micheaux utilized the same techniques and strategies when promoting, distributing and financing his films that he’d successfully employed to market his novels.

\*As defined by Donald Bogle (“ *Blacks in American Film and Television: An Encyclopedia*” ) a “race movie” is an all black film made independently of Hollywood approximately between the years of 1919 to 1950.

Once a novel was published Micheaux scheduled aggressive tours to promote it. He traveled by automobile throughout the country, careful to stop in the black belts. There he arranged to meet with the prominent African American members of the community—businessmen, doctors, lawyers, educators etc. as well as the “common” working people—laborers, domestic workers and farmers. Micheaux conducted lectures and book signings at churches, schools and even private homes to promote himself and his books. It wasn’t long before he established a name for himself and a fairly loyal following.

A proposal from the Johnson brothers, owners of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, to purchase the screen rights to Micheaux’s first novel *Homesteader* fell through after he demanded to direct the film himself. However, Micheaux was not discouraged. He resolved to make movies. He traveled east, and along the way engaged the support of some Oklahoma farmers who had become regular customers of the Western Book and Supply Company. The exact amount of their financial support is not known. What can be documented is the fact that Micheaux did manage to amass enough monies to propel his project into motion. In 1919 Oscar Micheaux made his entrance into the film industry with the completion of his first movie, *The Homesteader*. He would go on to make more than thirty films.

When promoting his films Micheaux left no stone unturned. He even managed to persuade a few white Southern theater owners to screen his films. Initially they were skeptical. But their interest was piqued when Micheaux mentioned unexplored African American audiences and added income. It wasn’t long before a number of them “arranged to have Micheaux’s features shown at special matinee performances held for black audiences. “His movies were also sometimes shown at midnight performances for white audiences eager for black camp.” <sup>25</sup> With this in mind Micheaux on occasions inserted cabaret scenes into his movies that would appeal to whites.

Nonetheless he was often criticized by whites because he dealt with such sensitive subjects as passing, lynching, the status of African American male etc. Micheaux was not without his share of African American critics. His handling of religion and portrayal of African American ministers in a number of his films did not go unchallenged or chastised. Additionally, the fact the most of the thespians who Micheaux employed were “light-bright” African American and his films tended to represent middle and upper-class view points and experiences prompted some African Americans to criticize his films. Some of these critics expressed the opinion that by only focusing on the aforementioned view points Micheaux presented a narrow view of the African American experience. Such criticisms were indicative of the unique struggle African American filmmakers of Micheaux time and ours must face in representing the truth. “The African American filmmaker must struggle to depict the truth about [African American] life in [the United States] while being inextricably tied to the commercialized sensibilities of a mass audience that is for the most part struggling to deny or avoid the full meaning of the truth.” <sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, Micheaux in effort to provide his audience something “to further the race not hinder it” <sup>27</sup> seldom



focused on the ghetto. Instead “his films reflected the interested and outlook of the [African American] bourgeoisie.”<sup>28</sup> One reason for this was that he was determined to create a portrait that was devoid of the stereotypes perpetrated by Hollywood films. “He was determined to depict [African Americans] as just as affluent, just as educated, just as ‘cultured’ as white Americans.

Micheaux somehow made it through the Great Depression. He not only survived but converted to talkies when the industry changed. In 1948 “his last movie, *The Betrayal* , opened . . . at a white theater in downtown New York. Despite drawing major attention from reviewers the movie was poorly received by the public and in a word—bombed. In 1951 Micheaux died in relative obscurity in Charlotte, North Carolina. “In 1987 a star bearing his name was added to the Hollywood Walk of Stars.”<sup>29</sup>

### **One of the Scion**

Micheaux’s insistence to provide African American Audiences a depiction of themselves beyond Hollywood stereotypes, his fearless, unapologetic representation of social, racial and political ills noteworthy. Additionally, he left behind financing techniques that would modified and utilized by a number of African American filmmakers who would catenate him decades later. One such recipient of his legacy is Matty Rich.

“No other director of the 1990’s wave epitomizes the values and determination of the independent stance more than Matty Rich, from the Red Hook area of Brooklyn, who at age eighteen [became] the youngest person ever to make a film for U.S. commercial release. Rich credits much of his drive to a mix of the anger he felt about the subhuman conditions he experienced in the housing projects of his childhood, and what he feels is the urgent necessity of depicting that oppressed community’s daily reality through the medium of narrative cinema. Set in the grim apartheid of Red Hooks public housing environment *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991) depicts an obvious, ingenuous, but somewhat technically uneven tale of one family’s slow destruction under the pressure of ghetto life.”<sup>30</sup>

In order to finance his project Rich applied the classic guerrilla financing technique mapped out by Oscar Micheaux, Melvin Van Peebles, Robert Townsend and Spike Lee (to name a few) before him. “Rich drew \$16,000 on his mother and sister’s credit cards.”<sup>31</sup> This was sufficient to shoot an eight minutes of footage which he used as a fund-raiser. He then went to WLIB (an African American radio station in Brooklyn) and made a direct appeal for community support. This move garner him \$77,000 from African Americans of all walks of life. “To the enterprising start was added supplementary funds from the PBS ‘American Playhouse’ series, as well as a timely boost of recognition from a special jury prize at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival. Samuel Goldwin then picked up the films distribution, and Rich was on his way to what, by Hollywood standards was a sizable hit.”<sup>32</sup>

“[E]ventually I knew who Oscar Micheaux was and Gordon Parks, and Melvin Van Peebles, but I didn’t become a filmmaker because of them. . . I became a filmmaker because of me.”<sup>34</sup> I believe the same could very likely be the case for Matty Rich, who confessed to neither attending film school or taking a single class in filmmaking. To date Rich has made two films *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991) and *The Inkwell* (1994). Although it could be said that *Straight Out of Brooklyn* had some technical flaws it got favorable reviews from critics, and was well received by the public. Robert B. Ray stated, in his book *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* , “no film results from a single cause.” The validity of this statement certainly rings true when applied to *Straight Out of Brooklyn* .

*Straight Out of Brooklyn* emerged atmosphere in which “black filmmaking and filmic representation [had

begun] to gain momentum after almost of fifteen years of stagnation and subordination that for the most part had confined black cinematic talent and expression to a few major stars.”<sup>35</sup> The Blaxploitation era surfaced during a time of increasing identity consciousness militant political activity and a rise in social, political and financial expectations which grew out of the civil rights movement. There was a sense of hope. But it was to be short lived. The resurgence of African American movies in the 90’s have taken place in an atmosphere of sharply declining political and economic conditions. This decade has been shrouded in unacknowledged frustration and widespread urban blight laced with hopelessness. Drugs and gang warfare in the inner cities (although symptomatic of a greater problem) became the focal point of the entertainment and news media. Drug dealers and urban gangs became the new “black bucks” of the movies. The newest thorn in the white man’s side. Racism in this country “[was] engineered and encouraged by the intensifying tone of mainstream political rhetoric and discourse rooted in . . . backlash politics.”<sup>36</sup>

The resulting frustration “driven by the availability of cheap guns and crack cocaine”<sup>37</sup> transmuted into an internalized form of self destruction. Simultaneously it produced African American new voices of protest which emanated throughout literature, music, art and film. Seven films directed by African Americans were released in 1990. In 1991 there were twelve. Among them was Rich’s *Straight Out of Brooklyn*. Set in the Red Hook district of Brooklyn, N.Y., *Straight Out of Brooklyn* pivots around Dennis Brown, his family and two friends. Trapped in an environment of desolation, desperation, domestic abuse and drugs, Dennis talks his two friends (Larry Love (played by Matty Rich) and Kevin into holding up a drug dealer so they could finance their “escape” from Brooklyn.

Rich uses Dennis’ alcoholic father to express the frustrations of Dennis and many African Americans in the U.S. During an alcohol induced conversation with an “invisible” universal white ‘everyman’ Mr. Brown begins with a query:

“Hello, Mr. White Man, remember me? I’m the man you destroyed just like you destroyed my father. He told me I could be anything I wanted. . . .He told me I could even be President of the United States. . . But it was a lie. So what am I supposed to tell my son who wants to go to college? Where am I supposed to get the money from?

. . . . You don’t want me to provide for my family? You don’t even want me to be a man.”

Dennis’ parents urge him to study hard, so he can go to college and get a good job. But life in the projects full of drug lords, bullets flying and his family’s despair cause him to believe time is running out. So Dennis chooses not to heed his girlfriends’ warning and contends: “There is no *right way* out of Brooklyn.” The folly which transpires as a result of his decision is predictable. *Straight Out of Brooklyn* is in effect a modern day morality story or youths playing a deadly game of Robin Hood amid the harsh backdrop of urban crime and poverty.

Although Rich utilizes characters that could have easily been presented as stereotypes. This doesn’t happen. Mr. Brown for example a drunken batterer after thorough examination is much more complex. He is a human being who laughs, cries, experiences disappointment and cares deeply for his family. He is a human being who never wanted to be a failure in his family’s eyes. He is a person who used to have dreams of becoming a doctor. . . .when he believed in dreams. As far as he is concerned Mr. White Man had other plans for him. A gas station attendant Mr. Brown is bitter, hopeless, frustrated and angry. Unable to lash out at ‘Mr. White Man’ his personification of the establishment, in his drunkenness he “turns on the person closest to him”—his wife. He is quite pitiable and fears. He wants more for his son and fears this is all there is. Any love, hope or dreams he has for his family is overshadowed by his reality. He feels he is weighted down by the age old problem of



racism.

Likewise the drug dealers (characteristically the black brutes of the 90's in commercial films) could easily be portrayed as mindless, murderous animals. Instead Rich shows them to be mere mortals who have, in the instance of the young hoodlum, been abandoned or cast out by family. Or in the case of the kingpin a petty dictator who runs his organization with an iron fist in effort to eliminate any possible consideration of a 'mutiny' among his troops.

The characters themselves are not unique. Even by Hollywood standards. What is different about them is that Rich presents them as human beings who are flawed as all humans are. Not as animals. This alone provides fertile ground for student discussion which leads us to the subject of lessons. The purpose for examining the stereotypes that evolved out of *Birth of A Nation* is to provide a foundation on which discussions about the use of stereotypes may be based.

Students will be asked to consider the purpose and effects of negative stereotypes vs. reality based characterization. The objectives of these lessons are to develop strong communication skills, create an interest in films that enables students to consider movies as more than purely a source of entertainment, introduce an aspect of the history of movies, familiarize students with terminology used in the 'industry', provide students with the tools (i.e. format etc.) for writing a screenplay.

## ***Lesson #1—Vocabulary***

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Prior to any in depth discussion about the film industry students should be cognizant of the terminology often used in the movie industry. Chapter one of the *Elements of Screenwriting: A Guide for Filmmaking and Television Writing* by Irwin R. Blacker contains a list of thirty-nine vocabulary words and their definitions. The approaches applied in helping pupils learn these vocabulary words may vary.

For instance, three sets of flash cards will be made for classroom purposes. One with a word on one side and its definition on the other. A second set will have one of the 39 words on one side of a card and the other side will be blank. The third set of 39 flash cards will have one side of the card blank and the other will contain a definition. The flash cards that contain both the words and definitions can be used by students as study tools. While the standard homework assignment to study 10-15 words and be prepared to spell and define them on a quiz still holds. The other two sets of cards may be used as a quiz in lieu of the standard multiple choice, fill in the blanks etc. testing techniques.

What I plan to do is provide students with one card from each single-sided flash card set. They will then be told to put their name, the date, etc. on the blank side of the card in the upper left corner. Once they have done this they will be further instructed to complete each card (in other words supply the words for the definition and vice versa. Once they have completed the "quiz" pupils will be instructed to exchange cards with a classmate and to check the cards they have been given for correctness. When they finish evaluating the cards they are to sign the bottom right hand corner of the card and turn them in to the classroom teacher. Students will be graded twice. Once for their answers to the quiz and a second time for the accuracy with which they graded the classmates paper.

## ***Lesson #2—Synopsis***

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Students will be asked to write a first draft of their synopsis. The final draft will not be written until the screen play, itself, is completed. I intend to have students write the first draft of their synopsis at this stage so that they will have an opportunity to get a clear idea as to the direction they want their screen play to take. At the very least consider where they want to start. I have found that such an exercise, often helps those students who have no clue as to what they're going to write about develop a story line.

The synopsis should have a top sheet that contains the following elements: title, author, form (i.e. screenplay) # of pages, type (mystery, comedy), time (period in which the movie is set i.e. Ancient Greece), and lastly readers (one student from each department that will be partners in this project). The draft should be double spaced and written in the present tense. A description of the theme should be the first thing addressed in a synopsis. This description can be as short as one sentence long (see sample on pg. 86 of Blacker's *Elements of Screenwriting: A Guide for Filmmaking and Television Writing*). It should never exceed more than a paragraph. The description should contain only the pith of the story (i.e. The rise and fall of a mercenary soldier."

The first time a character is mentioned, the name should appear in CAPS and [they] should be clearly identified. This is necessary so the person reading the synopsis will not have to refer back to the initial 'introduction' when the character is mentioned later in the synopsis. When writing a synopsis it is a good idea to suggest that students select the key characters and explain their role in the story.

Once students complete the screenplay they will be instructed to proofread their synopsis and make any additions, adjustments or changes that they feel are necessary. The final copy should be single spaced.

## ***Lesson #3—Writing a Screenplay***

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Students will read sections of Spike Lee's *"Do the Right Thing"* as a homework assignment and be prepared to discuss the structure and format of the screenplay in class. Simultaneously, lectures and hand-outs pertaining to the content and format of a professional screenplay will take place. The next step will be for students to view Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* and Matty Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn* so they can participate effectively in a discussion about the differences between silent films and the high tech movies of today. They will then be instructed to write a 10 minute silent short or commercial. Arrangements have been made with the visual art, drama, music and video departments to pass the "screenplay" on to them or input by their classes.

A special screening of the finished projects will be planned for viewing by students, parents, administrators and teachers.

## Conclusion

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The majority of my students are African American. Some of whom have low self-esteem and expectations because they are unaware of the richness of their heritage. For far too many, students the magnitude of the rich contributions made to this country by African Americans remain unknown. Recently, I overheard someone of African-American decent say (quite in passing), "The only thing I knew about black people, until I went to college, was slavery."

I don't want *any* of my students (European-American, Asian-American, Latin-American or African American) to leave my class with such a limited view of the world or a group of people who has contributed so much to it. For this reason I chose to focus on African-American filmmakers and their struggle first to tell their stories and then to get someone to listen.

## Notes

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3. Ibid. 221.
4. Ibid. 196.
5. Thomas Cripps. *Slow Fade to Black* 8.
6. Lerone Bennett, Jr. *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America 1619-1964* 232.
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8. David Southern. *The Malignant Heritage: Yankee Progressives and The Negro Question 1901-1914* 43.
9. Donald Bogle. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films* 10.
10. Ibid. 13.
11. Ibid. 14.
12. Ibid. 14.
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14. Ibid. 7-8.
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18. Pierre Sorlin, *The Film In History: Restoring the Past* 106.
19. Peter Noble, *The Negro in Films* 39.
20. Donald Bogle. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films* 15.
21. Jane Gaines, "**Fire and Desire: Race Melodrama and Oscar Micheaux**" in *Black American Cinema* ed. Manthia Diawara 49.
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23. Ibid. 50.
24. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films* 110.
25. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks : An Interpretive History of Black in American Films* 111.
26. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* 169.
27. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films* .
28. Ibid. 115.
29. G. William Jones, *Black Cinema Treasures Lost and Found* 30.
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31. Ibid. 178.
32. Ibid. 178.
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36. Ibid. 161.
37. Ibid. 159.
38. Ibid. 159.
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