



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**

Guide for Curriculum Unit 96.03.14  
by Gerene Freeman

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 film makers 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. 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 both Micheaux and Rich and having them explore for themselves the political, social and historic climate from which these film makers 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
- 2) Music department
- 3) Art department
- 4) Video

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.

(Recommended for Writing and Film Study, grades 11-12)

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