

Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in  
Contemporary American Film

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# Contents

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Dedication: *For Our Parents*

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## CHAPTER 2

## Transactions in Race and Ethnicity: Positive, Negative and Interrogative Images of African Americans on Film

Power in contemporary society habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normal as opposed to the superior. This is common to all forms of power, but it works in a peculiarly seductive way with whiteness, because of the way it seems rooted, in common-sense thought, in things other than ethnic difference. The very terms we use to describe the major ethnic divide presented by Western society, 'black' and 'white' are imported from and naturalised by other discourses.

Richard Dyer, 'White'<sup>1</sup>

As these media representations of blackness take form, disappear, and reappear, they call up histories, effects, sentiments, and desires. In the process, they seem to generate a certain political urgency for African Americans to interrogate the past critically, locate themselves in the present, and come to terms with their desires for the future. In this moment of struggle over the sign of blackness and terms of a multi-cultural future it is more and more difficult to distinguish progressive political possibilities from neoliberal and conservative rewrites of the same old racial narratives.

Herman Gray, *Watching Race*<sup>2</sup>

The function of race in constructions of American ethnicity

What is at stake in representations of African Americans on film? It might seem that an obvious procedure for this chapter would be to erect

a definition of authentic blackness, against which Hollywood images could be judged. Such an approach is not adopted here for the reasons broached in the Introduction and elaborated upon below. With greater misgiving, we have also resisted grounding analysis of cinematic representations by reference to the lived experiences of African Americans, despite the usefulness of such a strategy in enabling the critique and unmasking of demeaning and erroneous representations. While such a procedure also risks fixating on a singular notion of blackness, and might tend to oversimplify practices of consumption such as, for example, via fantasy, recognition and misrecognition, pleasure and displacement, our reasons for foregoing it are largely strategic. By emphasising the nature of racial representations as encoded constructions of identity we aim to throw into relief the interdependence of blackness and other racial and ethnic identities in the production of meaning.

In this frame, 'race' is one category among several modes of identity construction. Nevertheless, as critics from W. E. B. Du Bois to Toni Morrison and Robert Gooding-Williams have shown, constructions of race in general and blackness in particular have been and remain crucial in structuring white-centred American literature and national identity.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore crucial, as Gooding-Williams has argued, that a critique of racial representations does not stop at contesting 'false characterizations', and instead

should also explore the ways in which explanations and other representations of black bodies function as forms of sociopolitical imagination ... it should investigate the ways in which these representations present themselves as allegories of social organization and political community.<sup>4</sup>

Because Hollywood representations of African Americans have been marked pre-eminently in terms of race and ethnicity, historical accounts of images of race and ethnicity have been couched in terms of the history of the representation of African Americans. Published as recently as 1987, Woll and Miller's historical and bibliographical guide to *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Film and Television* had no listing for Anglo-Americans or white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant representations. Of the ten (plus 'Others') ethnic and racial identities specified, the list is dominated by entries on 'Afro-Americans', which comprise 138 pages out of 312. The historical essay and bibliography on images of Italians, the next most bulky section, comprise only 32 pages. The implications

are twofold: first that all of the non-WASP ethnic and racial identities listed qualify in some sense as 'Others', thus inscribing WASP identity as both central and invisible in terms of specific ethnic associations and connotations. Second, the predominance of entries on African Americans implies a hierarchy of otherness, such that historically blackness has been its pre-eminent signifier. Thus we have chosen to examine representations of African American identities not just for their own historical specifics but because they were and continue to be used as an exemplary paradigm for ethnicity in America. We would hope that our reading encourages the examination of other ethnic identities within this paradigm.

Hollywood represents all ethnic identities according to semiotic codes, the most obvious of which are ethnic stereotypes such as the Latin lover, the lazy or lovable Irish. All of these have performed both representative and transactional functions, but blackness has fulfilled a specific function as the pre-eminent signifier of otherness, in defining the norm by what it is not, and thereby as a means of binding together disparate [white] ethnicities into a dominant American identity. As we discussed in Chapter 1, straight white masculinity has long occupied the centred, default position in American culture. Historically, as Cornel West has pointed out, in dominant American culture blackness has functioned to naturalise as American the diversity of ethnicities and nationalities that could be understood at any given historical moment as 'white', i.e. non-black.<sup>5</sup> Thus dominant notions of American ethnic inclusiveness have been predicated on the racial binary. Often the negative charge of blackness functions to secure the positively charged and apparent ethnic inclusiveness of whiteness. As Herman Gray's comments quoted above imply, the significances and transactional uses of ethnic identity have proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s due to the continued use of blackness in this way, alongside such developments as the increased visibility of African Americans on film screens and the demands for and the production of positive images of blacks. In line with Gray, Gooding-Williams and West, this chapter proceeds from the conviction that a concentration on the production of positive images alone is inadequate to deal with the strategic and transactional uses of ethnic identity in American film, uses which have become increasingly complex from the 1980s on.

An early filmic example of the paradigm identified by West is D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. From its release in 1915, it has

been the subject of protest and contestation for its negative representations of African Americans. The film's opening in Boston was met with pickets and violent protest, while it also provoked the production of films by African Americans to disseminate positive images of black Americans, as for example the African American film company that named itself *The Birth of a Race*.<sup>6</sup>

*The Birth of a Nation* has been seen as articulating a biological discourse of racial inferiority, whereby blacks are represented as happiest when dancing or working, and unable to cope with the responsibilities of citizenship. The work of exposing and critiquing these images, and the production and dissemination of positive images of African Americans, is very necessary due to the iconic status of *The Birth of a Nation* in Film Studies and American Studies courses, popularly, and for other filmmakers. At one level, through its representation of the fictional excesses of black-dominated legislatures, the film represents the granting of civil rights to blacks as catastrophic. At another, in bucolic scenes of slaves as plantation workers, black social existence is relegated to myth. In both respects the exclusion of African Americans from political agency and from history can be treated as a matter of negative images. However, an exclusive concentration on contesting negative images does not go far enough in understanding the strategic and transactional uses to which blackness is put in the film, and hence to explain, to unpack and to expose the structures that intersect with and help to reproduce racism. What has historically proved more difficult to contest is the transactional use made of blackness by Griffith, as the means by which whites are united.

The major aim of *The Birth of a Nation* attested to by Griffith was to explain and to justify the Civil War and its context from a truthful and Southern-orientated perspective.<sup>7</sup> The primary ideological project of Griffith's film was the production of a historical narrative of America that would unite white Southerners and white Northerners. Griffith accomplishes this explicitly by interweaving into the representation of historical events such as Civil War battles and Lincoln's signing of the freedom proclamation two romance narratives featuring Northern and Southern whites. The film ends with a marriage which unites the two families whose narratives occupy the bulk of the film: the Camerons of South Carolina and the Stonemans from Pennsylvania; the former plantation owners, the latter, originally, abolitionists. This heterosexual union plays out in romance terms the union between the South and the North

and defines both exclusively as white. Covertly, the exclusion and demonisation of blacks, as well as serving to defend the ways of the old South (i.e. slavery), were also a major means by which this work of unifying white identities was achieved. This double use of blackness overlaps with the two modes in which the film represents African Americans. Griffiths uses African American performers in some minor roles, but Gus, the former slave inflamed by carpetbagger rhetoric and lust for a white woman, is played by white actor Walter Long, in blackface.

In this context, the importance of representations of African Americans for Griffith's project lies primarily in establishing, by their otherness, the limits of whiteness as the limits of the American polity. Only secondarily are African Americans represented as such a threat as to require the demonising discourse of biological racism. Thus in a famous scene Gus, a so-called renegade slave, pursues Flora Cameron (played by Mae Marsh, the 'little sister' of the film's nascent Ku Klux Klan activist Ben Cameron) with apparently rapacious intent. She evades him by jumping to her death from a bluff. Extremely offensive as this representation is, its primary function in the narrative is to emphasise the need to reunify Northern and Southern whites rather than to justify and to elicit the racial oppression of blacks. Ultimate responsibility for Gus's behaviour, the film suggests, should be laid at the door of political manipulators, the carpetbaggers and scalawags who have misled him into thinking himself party to the post-war settlement and hence to full citizenship. This does not make the film any less racist, as critics such as William K. Everson have claimed; but rather it articulates racism in more than one way.<sup>8</sup>

### Negative, positive and interrogative images

A direct illustration of thinking about the multiple uses of blackness in representative and transactional modes is the work of James Snead collected in *White Screens/Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*.<sup>9</sup> While acknowledging the work of 1970s critics such as Daniel Leab, Donald Bogle and Thomas Cripps, who focused on 'the black image in films', a phrase Snead puts in quotation marks, he calls for thinking about African American identity to go beyond the binary of negative/positive images.<sup>10</sup> 'Such a method,' he argues, 'could not grasp what

closer rhetorical and discursive analysis of racial imagery can.'<sup>11</sup> Snead draws on the semiotic theories of Eco and Barthes to demonstrate how Hollywood blackness has functioned in coded terms, signifying a range of things including among others primitivism, the natural, and innocence, almost always as the negative or othered half of a binary opposition such as master/slave, civilised/primitive, enlightened/backward, good/evil. One of the great strengths of Snead's account is that he combines on the one hand a sense of the multiplicity of codifications associated with blackness with, on the other, an insistence on the power relation within which that multiplicity is inscribed:

From the very first films, black skin on screen became a complex code for various things, depending on the social self-conception and positioning of the viewer; it could as easily connote white superiority and self-regard as black inferiority ... Onscreen and off, the history that Western culture has made typically denies blacks and black skin of historical reference, except as former slaves or savages.<sup>12</sup>

These insights enable Snead to make detailed and highly perceptive readings of black images in films of classical Hollywood and in black independent films. However, as Colin MacCabe points out in a Foreword to *White Screens/Black Images*, a significant absence from Snead's work, due to his early death, is a consideration of contemporary mainstream pictures featuring African Americans in central roles and spaces.<sup>13</sup> These developments have the potential, arguably, to produce representations of blackness which are subject to different transactional uses, and, still more importantly, are not marginalised but are constructed in ways other than as the negative of a racial binary. At the same time, such films are subject to all the pressures of a crossover cultural form: financial, institutional, and the requirement to be readable by audiences used to Hollywood conventions. Some critics, such as Mark A. Reid and Manthia Diawara, regard these pressures as insuperable and emphasise the recuperative strategies of mainstream Hollywood films against the subversive potential of independent black cinema.<sup>14</sup> Reid begins his *Redefining Black Film* with the assertion that in mainstream film 'a black perspective that acknowledges differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality rarely surfaces', and emphasises the difference between what he terms 'commercial' and 'black independent film production'.<sup>15</sup> However, against the focus of the bulk of the book, Reid's brief comments on crossover filmmakers such as Spike Lee imply that his binary model

constructed out of 1960s and 1970s contexts may need some revision in the light of 1990s developments.<sup>16</sup> Therefore we set out here to take up the development implied by MacCabe of a third set of critical positions which go beyond both the negative/positive images debates and the semiotic analyses of blackness.

Like MacCabe, in order to come to terms with, and to effectively expose and contest both the representational and transactional uses of ethnicity and race, most critics tend to identify a three-fold development in the history of racialised images, which is thought of as roughly chronological. The first two stages are generally agreed upon: first the production by Hollywood of negative images, and their contestation and exposure. Second, the production by African Americans and some liberal filmmakers, of 'positive images' which were offered both as correctives to the dominant discourse and as foci of African American identity. Into this category can be placed the so-called 'race films' made by largely black crews for black audiences, many of which were inspired by the reaction against the racial grammar of *The Birth of a Nation*, and the black independent films dating back to the 1920s, and undergoing a resurgence from the late 1960s on. Related to this tradition are examples such as the liberal Hollywood pictures starring Sidney Poitier, the action roles played by black actors such as Danny Glover and Wesley Snipes, and the 1970s 'blaxploitation' films, which tended to be written, produced and directed by whites while featuring black casts, and were double-voiced in terms of their appeal to black and to white audiences.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, critics have identified a third term in this triad, whereby the production of positive images is largely displaced by an attempt to contest the ways in which race and ethnicity as such are represented by Hollywood. First appearing in 1970s independent black films such as Bill Gunn's *Ganja and Hess* (1973), these constructions of African American identity may be termed interrogative images, since they are engaged in contesting not simply the polarity of racial representation, but also the discourses of race and ethnicity – and often also those of gender, class and others; themselves. Theorists have conceptualised these developments in different ways. Here we will discuss two. Manthia Diawara theorises constructions of racial identity not in terms of positive or negative images but in terms of space. Diawara defines the third term in the triad in terms of the aesthetic relation between race and space, and compares the innovative and contestatory production of space in independent black film with what he regards as the continued

determination of Hollywood space by a dominant whiteness. Having discussed Diawara's account, we then turn to Cornel West's work on what he calls 'the new cultural politics of difference' to contextualise debates over racial representations on film with respect to the historical development of black diasporic culture. It should be stressed that the identity formation debates which these critics raise are neither separate from a reading of the films nor a revelatory superstructure for their explication, but an integral part of the cultural debate which directors and audiences are clearly aware of.

Manthia Diawara opens his edited collection *Black American Cinema* with a brief discussion of *The Birth of a Nation*, which he views as paradigmatic of Hollywood representations of African Americans, not necessarily for its overt racism but for its initiation of modes of representation whereby blacks are continually marginalised, and shown only in relation to whites. But, on the same page of 'Black American cinema: The new realism', Diawara points out that *The Birth of a Nation* initiated a counter-tradition of films that contested both its overt racism and its marginalisation of blacks.<sup>18</sup> For Diawara, the Hollywood tradition, however overtly liberal, perpetuates the marginalisation of African Americans through its continued representation of blacks in terms of a racial problematic. He therefore emphasises the importance of the black independent tradition in producing contestatory images and representations. Historically, this contestation has been contained in traditions produced and distributed almost exclusively for black audiences, such as the genre known as 'race films', dominated by the films of Oscar Micheaux, and latterly the black independents.

Diawara describes how recent independent African American films have adopted aesthetic strategies which, rather than constituting an alternative tradition, seek to intervene in and to contest the construction of race in Hollywood film. He discerns two aesthetic strands in independent African American film, both of which embody criticisms of Hollywood's racial hierarchy of space in which whites are centralised and blacks marginalised. Diawara connects black cultural production both to notions of modernism and of post-modernism, and refuses to overtly privilege one or the other. He defines the modernist strand as linear, time-based, active, and materially grounded, and embodied in films such as Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Cooley High* (Michael Schultz, 1975), *House Party* (Reginald Hudlin, 1990), *Chameleon Street* (Wendell B. Harris, Jr., 1991), *Passing*

*Through* (Larry Clark, 1977), *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991), *Juice* (Ernest R. Dickerson, 1992), and *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991). In comparison, Diawara discusses what he calls the post-modernist, space-based, symbolic, reflexive and expressive style of films such as Bill Gunn's *Ganja and Hess* (1973), and *A Powerful Thang* (Zeinabu Davis), *Losing Ground* (Kathleen Collins, 1982), *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1977), *To Sleep with Anger* (Charles Burnett, 1990), *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989), *She's Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1986), and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). He goes on to exemplify the differences in these stylistics, which he argues go so far as to constitute 'different imaginaries derived from the Black experience in America'; the one 'expressive and celebratory', and the other constituting 'existentialist performances of Black people against policing, racism, and genocide'.<sup>19</sup>

As stated, Diawara regards mainstream film and television production as continually dominated by paradigms that marginalise African American identity. He argues that the strategies of positive images and of symbolic representation have failed to challenge the dominant construction of space dominated by white power, and therefore have functioned to keep 'the real contours of the Black community outside Hollywood'.<sup>20</sup> For Diawara, the rare mainstream representations of African American narratives such as the television series *Roots* and Lee's *Do the Right Thing* have only reinforced structures of tokenism and exceptionalism despite what we would regard as the importance of their articulation of a historical or contemporary ethnic identity for a national audience. Diawara therefore looks to the expressive and realist styles of black independent film as modes of producing representations of black histories and of space not dominated by whites, and of contesting white spatial power.

On the face of it, Diawara's explicit privileging of black independent film appears to have little in common with the arguments made in our Introduction. His near absolute distinction between mainstream and independent modes of production seems to negate an interest in cross-overs and 'mainstreamisation'. However, there are several indications that his taxonomy is not so rigid as it may at first appear. Unlike that of critics such as Mark A. Reid, Diawara's definition of independent film production includes films that are made independently but distributed by non-black, commercial organisations.<sup>21</sup> Such definitions have been problematised by the role played by small, white-owned

independent distribution companies in releasing a large proportion of films by African American directors in the early 1990s. In addition, some contributors to Diawara's collection, including Richard Dyer, Jacquie Jones, Jacqueline Bobo, and to some extent bell hooks, emphasise the potential for anti-racist and black-centred readings of mainstream film. In fact, having made the distinction between mainstream and independent film, with its materialist overtones, Diawara's real interest lies in the strategic implications of the two modes of film he discusses. Close attention to this argument yields useful strategies for discussing both mainstream and independent black film production.

Diawara fulsomely praises Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, and he is careful to devote equal space to discussion of the expressive (post-modernist) and the realist (modernist) styles. Although he takes pains to trace the histories of both genres in equivalent detail, and to describe their strategies as securing alternate and complementary ends, without privileging one over the other, nevertheless a sense emerges from the essay, reinforced by its title, that he finds the 'new realism' most exciting and useful. The essay suggests a prioritisation whereby, while the expressive strand of African American independent films serves to construct a black cultural space for inspirational and rejuvenating dialogues with a dynamic black history and culture, it is the realist strand which actively contests dominant white representations of space.

In making a case for the latter, Diawara invokes the notion of a 'rite de passage', a mode appropriated from white culture to frame the difficult entrance into the public world of black youth. The very appropriation of the form highlights the special difficulties attendant on black maturity. Thus at the level of form as well as content, films such as *Boyz n The Hood* call attention to the white dominance of cultural space and set about contesting it. Though for various reasons Diawara does not do so, these formal considerations can be linked with a sense of the marketplace. The overt taking on and contestation of Hollywood conventions about space is more easily readable to mass commercial audiences than is the production of alternative representations of space and identity. Certainly the films listed in the realist category have proved far more attractive to commercial film distributors and are in general far better known and have reached larger audiences than those labelled by Diawara as expressive, with the exception of *Daughters of the Dust*.

Diawara never makes explicit this prioritisation, though some of his terms imply it: he does present the 'new realism' as an 'active' form,

which is orientated towards present and future, as compared with the concern with history evinced by the expressive strand. It may be that in part this is due to the compacted issues of gender that surround his categorisation. While none of the films listed as realist were directed by women, three female directors figure as examples of the expressive strand, which is exemplified by a detailed discussion of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Diawara's discussion of his taxonomy bypasses debates over gendered identity and the utility of essentialist versus deconstructive approaches. This is a useful strategy, in that he enables himself to validate both strands, avoiding the necessity of disparaging one to celebrate the other and evading presenting the two strands as fractured halves of an unrestorable whole. However, this does mean that his argument has certain limits. This matters less for Diawara's reading of *Daughters of the Dust*, which is sensitive and persuasive, than for his comments on *Boyz n the Hood*, and his use of the 'rite de passage' model. Diawara does mention one element of the sexism and patriarchalism of the film (in a footnote), but he fails to register the androcentrism of the 'rite de passage' mode, which is historically almost exclusively a genre concerned with young males, whose most obvious recent example from Hollywood is the acutely androcentric *Dead Poets Society*.<sup>22</sup> Diawara comes close to taking for granted the universal applicability of the experiences of young urban black males for all African Americans. This is not to undermine Diawara's categorical distinctions but to regret the omission on his part of explicit consideration of the workings of gender across and within them. Diawara's considerations could well have been forwarded by comparing *Boyz* with a film such as Leslie Harris's *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (1993), which narrates the rites of passage of a doubly marginalised protagonist: a young African American woman's pregnancy and subsequent enrollment in higher education as a single mother. The positive representation by Harris in narrative and cinematic terms of the difficulties of motherhood (her use of the direct address to camera providing, like Lee, an apparently unmediated access to femininity) contrasts with the negative stereotypes employed by Singleton in order to accentuate the importance of models of black masculinity. This makes any straightforward valorisation of such films as *Boyz* problematic. (Released in 1993, the film may have been too late for consideration in Diawara's essay published in the same year.)

Diawara's division of his book into two parts, considering in turn 'Black Aesthetics' and 'Black Spectatorship', allows the discussion of

independent and mainstream films alongside one another, but tends to inhibit both enquiry into the construction of blackness, and theorisation of the effects on production and consumption of the penetration of large numbers of black filmmakers and performers into Hollywood in the early 1990s. Diawara's procedure here echoes the flat statement of Clyde Taylor in a 1980s essay, that 'The best approach to black cinema as art is to see it in intimate relation to the full range of Afro-American art expression.'<sup>23</sup> Diawara's book does contain two essays on the work of Spike Lee, though tellingly both are situated in the section on Black Aesthetics, and neither is concerned to theorise Lee in terms of mainstreamisation or authenticity.<sup>24</sup> Commercial exigencies also open to question Diawara's discussion of *Daughters of the Dust* and *Boyz n the Hood* as black independent films. Although both were made independently, they were both picked up for commercial distribution. Whatever the benefits of such an approach, and these are by no means inconsiderable, they risk reinscribing what Cornel West has described as 'the innocent notion of the essential Black subject' or what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has called the 'transcendent black subject', whereby African American identity is assumed to be present, holistic, and fully realised outside the text.<sup>25</sup>

In his influential 1990 essay 'The new cultural politics of difference', from which the above quotation comes, Cornel West reviews the emphasis on black 'positive' images which was the initial response to and contestation of white supremacist stereotypes in American culture. West finds 'positive images' discourses problematic for several reasons, but principally because they proceed in an 'assimilationist manner' and they rest on a 'homogenizing impulse'. In his view, discourses of positive images are assimilationist because, since these cultural struggles for visibility and respect took place on white-dominated terrain, they could not help but aim to show that black people were 'really like' white people. They are 'homogenizing' because of the assumption that black people were all really alike, which not only negated the impact of other politics (especially of gender, but also of class, age, sexual orientation and so on), but also tended to reproduce the binary oppositional logic of black/white, thereby pre-empting an understanding of how, as West puts it, 'Whiteness' is a politically constructed category parasitical on 'Blackness'.<sup>26</sup> West therefore celebrates and recommends what he calls a 'new cultural politics of difference' in which black cultural producers utilise new strategies of deconstruction and interrogation:



Black cultural workers must constitute and sustain discursive and institutional networks that deconstruct earlier modern Black strategies for identity-formation, demystify power relations that incorporate class, patriarchal and homophobic biases, and construct more multi-valent and multi-dimensional responses that articulate the complexity and diversity of Black practices in the modern and post-modern world.

Furthermore, Black cultural workers must investigate and interrogate the other of Blackness – Whiteness.<sup>27</sup>

What West's argument offers is the possibility not only of contesting the demeaning effects of white supremacist stereotypes and the marginalisation of black representations but also the transactional uses of images of African Americans. The implication of this passage is that racism has to be understood not simply as a cause but also as an effect, and in this case as fulfilling a strategic function, the securing of alliances among whites of different geographical, cultural, and political affiliations. At the same time and no less importantly, West offers a way of coming to terms with the questioning from within African American culture of androcentric nationalism and of essentialist discourses of identity politics. He forcefully acknowledges the contestatory practices of black women cultural producers, in a manner which throws into relief Diawara's failure to problematise the model whereby black male youth is produced as typical of African American identity.

As well as acknowledging the complexity and diversity of black identity in terms of the internal debates over gender, class, and sexuality, West also looks to a model of black culture which engages with notions of racial hybridity, and which utilises theories and insights from what he calls 'the ambiguous legacy of the Age of Europe'.<sup>28</sup> While West makes very explicit the importance of numerous black diasporic writers, and above all Frantz Fanon, he also alludes in his essay to the European philosophical tradition, to Eurocentric cultural thinkers such as Marthe Arnold and T. S. Eliot, and he mines work by theorists such as Jacques Derrida to provide deconstructive strategies for black cultural production. He thus foregrounds the interrelationship between 'white' and 'black' critical traditions but is less concerned with the resultant modes of production and consumption of a racially hybrid American popular culture.

As we have illustrated, there are sound reasons for West's focusing

on the historical development of African American culture, not least in that it helps to redress the marginalisation and minimalisation of black culture. Because of his concentration on the internal dynamics of black culture, considering its relation with European culture only in terms of relation and appropriation, West is not concerned with the complex and ambiguous effects of commerce on the production of (African) American culture. For our purposes, this is particularly important as regards the prominence of black stars from the late 1970s on, such as Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman, Samuel L. Jackson, Whitney Houston, Angela Bassett and Will Smith. This is a comparatively new development in that these African Americans developed star personae, and with it some control over representation both as performers and in some cases directors and producers. The careers of such performers were driven, partly by individual talent and effort, partly by liberal concerns among some filmmakers, but partly also by the perceived need by Hollywood, in the wake of the 'blaxploitation' films of the early 1970s, to produce films that would appeal to the disproportionately high number (23 per cent) of African Americans who make up the moviegoing public.<sup>29</sup>

This development was itself followed by the coming to prominence of African American directors in studio-distributed pictures. The forerunner, and regarded by many as the archetype of this, is Spike Lee. Again, this was largely commercially driven, in that black directors appeared, with the ability to bring in low budget films which would earn reasonable box office returns, at a time when Hollywood was concentrating on making fewer, more expensive films, and the number of screens in America was growing.<sup>30</sup> Alongside variegated responses to Lee's films, occasional features on topics such as 'the current state of black film' and its relation to Hollywood appeared in the mainstream press throughout the late 1980s.<sup>31</sup> The breakthrough year is generally regarded as 1991, when in June an article in *Newsweek* proclaimed, 'New Jack Cinema enters screening: With 19 films this year, Hollywood fades to black'.<sup>32</sup> Although this number has not been sustained, and several directors have not repeated the critical and popular success of their first features,<sup>33</sup> the distribution and consumption of these films constitutes a significant development and requires to some extent a rethinking of a rigid binary distinction between black independent films and Hollywood. In the early 1990s such distinctions were further blurred by the

prominence of 'independent' distributors (i.e. independent from Hollywood studios, though often owned by or with theatre chains, cable and satellite television and other multimedia outlets), and the emergence of new sources of production funding associated with technological shifts in the modes of cinematic distribution, for example, cable and satellite television channels such as HBO, and the development of straight-to-video markets.<sup>34</sup>

West's essay is too early to grapple with the questions posed by this penetration of Hollywood itself by large numbers of African American performers and filmmakers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and in particular the implications of the circulation of negative, positive, and interrogative images of racial and ethnic identity to mainstream audiences. Mainstreamisation is not the only external problematic that needs consideration here. As well as considering the critiques of essentialist forms of identity politics from within African American culture and criticism, it is necessary to appreciate recent shifts in dominant constructions of race and ethnicity. The major contexts for the consumption of these 1990s films are threefold: distribution and consumption via more or less mainstream commercial channels; the internal criticisms of identity politics, as described by West and Diawara; and the multiple appropriations of politicised discourses of identity in dominant culture, including mainstream, white-centred, and right-wing modes. The first two of these have been discussed; we now move into our more detailed discussion of exemplary films via a consideration of the third.

### 'The new racism' and cultural politics in the 1990s

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a variety of critics discerned shifts in the construction of race and ethnicity in dominant American culture. Right-wing white commentators were perceived to have given up a racism based on biological essentialism, and instead appropriated some of the discourses of identity politics. Quoting Pat Buchanan's question 'Who speaks for the Euro-Americans?', Henry A. Giroux identified the following tendency in a 1993 essay:

[R]ight-wing Whites in America now echo a view of difference not as a marker for racial superiority but as a signifier for cultural containment, homogeneity and social and structural inequality. The

appeal is no longer to racial supremacy but to cultural uniformity parading under the politics of nationalism and patriotism. In this case, difference is removed from the language of biologism and firmly established as a cultural construct only to be reworked within a hegemonic project that connects race and nation against the elimination of structural and cultural inequality.<sup>35</sup>

Constructions of a 'bad' multiculturalism identified by Giroux here, and articulated by new right ideologues such as Buchanan and Rush Limbaugh, reconstrue and reinforce binaric constructions of ethnic identity such that whites are represented squarely within American traditions of synthesis and assimilation.<sup>36</sup> By contrast non-whites and especially blacks are continually 'othered', at best represented as victims of historical misfortune (cultural), at worst wilfully attached to separatist discourses which privilege their own racial identity (political). Conversely, on the one hand the 'filling in' of white ethnicity ranges between the overtly right-wing demand for a white identity politics (as exemplified by Buchanan's question quoted by Giroux) and a more liberal position whereby, as Giroux puts it, whites become 'self-conscious of race and otherness as central determinants in shaping the existing social, political and cultural landscape ... without having to give up power or privilege.'<sup>37</sup>

Giroux's article is generally downbeat in tone, and he presents the effects of these developments in somewhat monolithic terms via an acerbic reading of *Grand Canyon* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1991). As he shows, *Grand Canyon* makes visible the whiteness of central protagonist Mack (Kevin Kline) as 'a referent for self-sacrifice buttressed by the liberal assumption that as a privileged white man he can solve the problems of marginalised and subordinate Others'.<sup>38</sup> However, consideration of films such as those discussed in the previous chapter shows that the effects of the newly wrought multidimensionality of identity politics are more pluralistic and the power of new racism less absolute than allowed by Giroux here. Not only does a film such as *Falling Down* pluralise the racial typography rendered as a black/white binary in *Grand Canyon*, but its white male central character lacks the economic security from which Mack's power (invisibly) derives. For another thing, unlike in *Grand Canyon*, the right-wing commentators mentioned by Giroux (and again *Falling Down*), for all their power, depend on a logic of crisis which has proved difficult to sustain since it tends to imply a continuing

dysfunctionality without ideological focalisation. While successful in rolling back some of the gains made through civil rights legislation they have failed to mobilise permanently a significant proportion of whites. The career of the darling of the new right, Newt Gingrich, suggests the possibility that such politics are electable but lack the ideological framework to realise coherent and workable policies. The failure of Gingrich during his term of office and the poor showing by Pat Buchanan and the more moderate Republican Bob Dole in the 1996 Presidential campaigns has to some extent revealed the new right as, in Raymond Williams's terms, innovating within a declining ideology. As such, it is powerful as a destructive force but remains trapped within a logic of crisis which pre-empts its full elaboration and realisation as a constructive political and ideological programme. Even its futurism is 1950s-style, epitomised by Gingrich's aim to have a personal computer installed in every American home.

It is worth considering that the liberal version of 'new racist' discourse that is in Giroux's view adopted by *Grand Canyon* coexists in the film with more traditional symbolic appeals to ethnic inclusiveness. The film traces the development of a friendship between immigration lawyer Mack (Kevin Kline) and Simon (Danny Glover), a mechanic who saves Mack from being assaulted by a black gang when his Lexus car breaks down. The film is literally grounded by its closing scene, in which Simon drives his sister and nephew, with Mack and family, to the Grand Canyon. As Giroux puts it

It is here in the face of the wonder of nature that the immensity of the racial, cultural, political, economic and social differences that separate these families are erased in a New Age notion of unity and spirituality.<sup>39</sup>

In this case, although Giroux does not spell out the connection, New Age notions come to constitute a barely updated erasive transcendentalism, in which the landscape of the Grand Canyon is itself the means by which is produced the semblance of unity and equality among blacks and whites. It is of course a commonplace of critical American Studies that such appeals rest on the erasure of history (in this case racial difference, inequality and oppression) by the extra-social figure of the landscape as symbolic of American identity and nationhood.

The case of *Grand Canyon* also focuses debates over positive/negative images, especially concerning the Danny Glover character Simon, who

is described by K. Anthony Appiah as fulfilling a comparatively newly created African American stereotype which he terms the 'Saint', or the 'ethical principle' of the movie.<sup>40</sup> While the 'Saint' seems to be related to the historical stereotype of the Tom, Appiah argues that the recent developments of a black star system and the results of campaigns for positive images such as the NAACP's 'image awards' make it an ambiguous figure. For Appiah, this ambiguity is constituted by, among other considerations, rival readings of Simon as a 'positive image', and hence a victory for lobbying such as that of the NAACP; or via a Christian notion of the ennobling effects of suffering, recalling some versions of Martin Luther King's politics but played here as a means of assuaging white guilt and reassuring white audiences (a reading which Giroux might find substantially convincing).<sup>41</sup> Appiah goes on to route this ambiguity through an argument for the importance of consumers in the production of cultural meaning, as against the sometimes static systems invoked in critical interventions. These are timely considerations, but need not and, we would argue, should not obviate placing these ambiguities in the context of considerations of the usefulness of discourses of positive images, and a sense of the transactional nature of the 'Saint' role in its function to reassure white viewers. The question of the politics of a film's representations of identity is an explicit concern for many viewers, including not least those whose consumption of movies is explicitly or implicitly mediated through notions of racist or sexist representation. Care must be exercised here: as Appiah warns us, consumers are able to re-read subversively and to appropriate images that might be positioned by analysis in dominant and white-centred structures of meaning. However, any final conclusions regarding the cultural politics of *Grand Canyon* must include consideration of the tensioned relationship between Danny Glover's star status and filmic persona, and the significance of his performance both as 'positive image' and in transactional terms. Even so, *Grand Canyon* illustrates the continued white dominance over most Hollywood constructions of space.

Appiah is right to stress the overdetermined nature of the 'Saint' stereotype as being situated at the juncture of campaigns for positive images, the need to exorcise white liberal guilt, and the development of African American stars in Hollywood. However, Glover's power as a draw (an index of his star status) must work against the transactional uses of the 'Saint' stereotype, here defined principally by the need to reassure white audiences. In any case, it is clear that a consideration of

the transactional uses of such representations of identity must supplement straightforward considerations of positive and negative images.

What this might mean in terms of critical perspectives can be illustrated by a very brief discussion of *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990), a film which gives Appiah momentary pause since Whoopi Goldberg plays a petty con woman (though he is quick to point out her saintly qualities).<sup>42</sup> *Ghost* is also mentioned in passing by Robert Gooding-Williams, in an essay which seeks to utilise James Snead's 'rhetorical and discursive analysis of racial imagery'.<sup>43</sup> In 'Black cupids, white desires: Reading the recoding of racial difference in *Casablanca*', Gooding-Williams questions the basis on which earlier writers on black Hollywood had validated the representation of the pianist Sam (played by Dooley Wilson) as a positive image of African American dignity.<sup>44</sup> Gooding-Williams argues that the primary narrative function of the Sam role in Michael Curtiz's 1942 classic is that of 'mythical Cupid', facilitating the love affair between the white male and white female protagonists Rick and Ilsa.<sup>45</sup> Racial difference is thus encoded in terms of the functionality of the African American in a narrative of white heterosexuality. Thus for Gooding-Williams a straightforward concern with positive/negative images must be supplemented with attention to the transactional uses to which constructions of identity are put. We would go further, in arguing that the development of African American stars in Hollywood further complicates these representations.

In an aside, Gooding-Williams lists several other films in which 'black cupids' appear, among them *Ghost*, where Whoopi Goldberg mediates between the dead Patrick Swayze character and his wife (Demi Moore). There is much about *Ghost* that supports Gooding-Williams's positioning of the film alongside *Casablanca*. However, unlike Wilson, by 1990 in *Ghost* Goldberg possessed a strong screen persona which was primarily constructed out of Hollywood versions of race and gender politics (principally in *The Color Purple*, Steven Spielberg, 1985). Moreover, this persona was articulated in *Ghost* to explicitly contest, and to partially resist the supplementarity of the black cupid's narrative function. As amateur spiritualist Oda Mae Brown, Goldberg initially protests mightily against her use as mediator by the Swayze and Moore characters. Though this is usually turned to comic effect, even the comedy emphasises tension between Goldberg/Brown's autonomy and her mediating role in the romantic narrative of her co-stars. Unlike Wilson too, Goldberg's performance was rewarded with an Oscar, for best actress in a

supporting role. To some extent these differences are accounted for by accidentals. Goldberg was already an established name, though she had not matched the success of *The Color Purple* five years earlier, while *Casablanca* was only Wilson's second film, appearing in the same year as his debut. It is also possible to read Goldberg's performance through the stereotype of the 'sassy' African American female. However, it should be clear that the echoing presence of politicised notions of identity in Goldberg's persona does make a difference to the consumption of the movie.

Giroux, like many culturalist critics, calls for a revived understanding of identity contextualised with respect to histories, responsibilities and power relations, consciousness of all of which is evacuated by right-wing appropriations of the discourses of identity politics such as Buchanan's appeal to a privatised ethnic identity as the fount of political authority. Concerns about and attempts to work through essentialist modes of gender and racial identification predate the 'new racism' identified by Giroux, and can be found most markedly in the work of African American feminists and womanists such as Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and bell hooks, as West acknowledged.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the emergence of the 'new racism' has intensified the perceived need to contest racial essentialism and androcentric nationalism within academic and popular writing. Further impetus has come from the persistence of racial essentialism and androcentric nationalism in black popular culture (most obviously rap culture as well as film), which itself requires critical understanding.<sup>47</sup>

It is apparent that in certain social locations, essentialist and androcentric constructions of African American identity can function to have locally and unevenly empowering effects. Goldberg's portrayal of a separatist African American mother (Sarah Mathews) and bookstore owner in the comedy *Made in America* (Richard Benjamin, 1993) illustrates this. The film mediates the racial problematics of paternity and ethnicity by intercutting the narrative of her daughter's search for her sperm donor father, initially discovered to be the white Hal Jackson (Ted Danson), with a romance between Goldberg and Danson. The film's representation of this romance is clearly hesitant in showing any sexual element and plays it instead largely for comedic effect. The narrative is resolved as Danson is not the father, thus securing black essentialism. Nevertheless, the Goldberg and Danson characters will continue the relationship, therefore including a white audience. To call

for the deconstruction of these images may not necessarily yield immediately liberating results, especially in the context of a 'new racism' which denies or seeks to ignore the historical determinations of race.

The rest of this chapter will therefore concentrate on various constructions of African American identity in 1990s films. A major focus will be on two films starring Denzel Washington. This allows us to take account of developments such as the growth of African American stars in Hollywood, to discuss work by two directors, one Jewish and one African American, and enables implicit comparison with the performances of Michael Douglas as discussed in Chapter 1. Both Washington and Douglas play roles that engage explicitly and implicitly with politicised notions of identity. Because most of Washington's films depend on Hollywood finance and structures for production as well as distribution, and in order to focus issues of representations of African American women in independently produced film we will also review the constructions of identity in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Such independent productions counter the generic containment in comedy that the case of Goldberg illustrates.

Our focus is therefore not on the male-directed urban films most famously associated with African American cinema in the 1980s and 1990s. Like Lubiano, Michele Wallace has criticised the work of filmmakers such as Singleton and Lee as conservative, unreflectingly essentialist and dehistoricising through a reading of their representations of black masculinity.<sup>48</sup> Their choice of locations in contemporary urban space, dislocated from either the history of slavery or the migration north and the effect these contexts had on the formation of black identity, results in a representation of black masculinity whose power and stability tends to be shown through the negative othering of black femininity. While one response to this would be a valorisation of alternative feminist representations such as Harris, as bell hooks has warned in a discussion of the similarly misogynist genre of rap music, to either replace or suppress such representations is to miss the point. They must instead be understood in their larger social and historical frame:

The sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.<sup>49</sup>

Hooks contrasts rap music with a reading of *The Piano* (Jane Campion,

New Zealand, 1993) where she maintains a similar misogyny operates. While hooks's reading of rap is acute, her critique of *The Piano* does not recognise the reworking of the genre and romance narrative in a manner which historicises and counters the prevailing patriarchy. In fact we would argue that the history or period film is central to the understanding of contemporary ethnic identities since such films can articulate and contextualise narratives of oppression, while furthering efforts to reinvigorate the projects that began in terms of identity politics.

*Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989), *Daughters of the Dust*, and *Malcolm X* are historical films, which portray their subject matter through a sense of recent debates over race, identity and representation. As such they further the recovering or rewriting of histories previously marginalised or erased, a tradition associated with the self-consciousness of racial and gendered identity that developed in the 1960s. But they also do more than this. They are all concerned to produce corrective representations of African Americans which both engage with contemporary debates over racial identity and contest the effects of the white dominance of Hollywood. *Glory*, which represents the black soldiers who fought in the Civil War, attempts to explode Hollywood stereotypes of black masculinity, and goes some way to defamiliarising the white-centredness dominant in Hollywood. The independently funded *Daughters of the Dust* breaks more fundamentally with dominant Hollywood constructions of space and race. It focuses primarily on the female members of an extended black family in the Gullah or Sea Islands off the Georgia coast at the turn of the century. *Daughters of the Dust* was in fact the first feature-length film directed by an African American woman to be given national theatrical release, on which it proved widely popular, demonstrating the existence of a market for films which do not reproduce Hollywood film grammar and conventions. Like *Glory*, Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* routes concerns with representations of positive images and interventions in constructing history through a concern with the iconicity of black masculinity.

*Glory*: African American history as male rites of passage

*Glory* tells the story of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, one of the first black regiments ever raised in the USA, from their organisation in the winter of 1862–3 to their leadership of the assault on Fort

Wagner outside Charleston on 18 July 1863. This assault, as the closing scenes of the film portray, was unsuccessful, but the bravery of the African American soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts, who had suffered 50 per cent casualties, became well known. *Glory* can be regarded as an attempt to exorcise the influence of *The Birth of a Nation*. It embarks on a double project of accurately depicting a historical narrative and of problematising and correcting Hollywood representations of the Civil War in particular and African Americans in general. The issues of identity and representation that we have discussed above ensure that there is some tension between these aims. The privileging of historical accuracy implies the use of cinematic conventions in a naturalised way, so that audiences consume the film as a direct representation of history. This would imply that the film utilise a straightforward Hollywood realism. However, the problematisation of discourses of positive images, and the attention given to the ways in which dominant Hollywood conventions racialise space according to white domination, suggest that the film must go some way to undermine and even to defamiliarise the conventions of Hollywood realism in order to contest racist representations.

The scenario of African Americans being integrated into the fighting forces of the Union, which remained racist in culture and practice, crystallises this tension. It would have been possible to represent this narrative via the stories of prominent African Americans who played leading roles in the development and leadership of the 54th Massachusetts, such as Frederick Douglass and his sons. Such a narrative might fit reasonably smoothly into dominant Hollywood conventions which privilege a few heroic figures who function as active agents with important narratives. Interestingly, this is exactly the form taken by the documentary which accompanied the video release of the film, which is entirely concerned with the experiences of African Americans, and includes footage not used in the final cut of *Glory* which focuses directly on Frederick Douglass.<sup>50</sup> Yet this kind of integrationist narrative tends to ground a multiculturalist reading of American history in what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have called, in a different context, 'a narrowly national and exceptionalist grid, as when well-meaning curriculum committees call for courses about the "contributions" of the world's diverse cultures to the "development of American society"'.<sup>51</sup>

Instead of concentrating exclusively on black experiences, *Glory* re-constructs the story of the 54th Massachusetts through the interwoven

narratives of six main characters: the whites Col. Robert Gould Shaw (Matthew Broderick) and his second-in-command Cabot Forbes (Cary Elwes), and four black soldiers. The latter are carefully differentiated in terms of class, position and character, to such an extent that their representation is typological, as will shortly be discussed. They are the young escaped slave Trip (Denzel Washington, given second billing to Broderick), the fatherly onetime grave-digger Sgt. Rawlins (Morgan Freeman), the youthful, stuttering Sharts (Jihmi Kennedy), and Andre Braugher as Searles, well-educated (he quotes Emerson), and a boyhood friend of Shaw. The central figure is Robert Shaw. He is the only one of the principal characters who is not fictional, and the film uses passages from his letters, a fact announced in the opening titles to vouch for its historical authenticity.

The use of a white character to provide the central consciousness through which the film's narratives are mediated provoked some adverse comment, as for example in Roger Ebert's review available on the *Cinemania* CD-ROM, and has probably contributed to the film's failure to attract much critical attention in the context of black film. However, the film does incorporate two major strategies for problematising both the position of Shaw as a white viewer, and the white dominance of Hollywood space in general. A less radical strategy consists of a series of recognition and defamiliarisation scenes, when protagonists Shaw, Forbes and Trip are forced separately to confront their racial misperceptions and prejudices. By far the most numerous and striking of these scenes feature the whites Shaw and Cabot, who are shaken out of patronising attitudes and lack of belief in the capacities of the black soldiers, in order to inspire them both to fight for proper resources, and to demand hard standards of training which will enable the black recruits to reach battle readiness. These may be read as providing an object lesson for white audience members. Significantly also, but with much less screen time and far fewer point-of-view shots, Trip is made to confront his conviction that all whites are the same. In spite of the film's paralleling of these shifts in perception across racial lines, its primary focus on the narrative and the perspectives of a white commander cannot help but decentre African American history in a film which purports to be uncovering it.

Yet there are signs that the film is intended to engage with race, history, and representation in more complex ways than the direct telling of historic 'truths' or the production of 'positive images'. While Shaw's

narrative dominates, and his perspective is centralised, the film problematises the normativeness of the white gaze associated with him, representing his perceptions as limited and subject to error *because of his racial position*. As the central protagonist of *Glory*, Shaw is associated with the dominant white male gaze normalised by Hollywood. But many times in the film, instead of being represented as ostensibly universal and reliable, this white male gaze is shown to be racially inflected, limited and subject to misperception. In addition to this, the film undermines another set of Hollywood conventions; stereotypes of African American masculinity. These constitute a more cinematically radical set of strategies than the film's direct representation of Shaw's rite of passage as a change in his perceptions of African Americans.

The representations of the black soldiers relate to two sets of Hollywood stereotypes. The headstrong youth (Trip), the father-figure (Rawlins), the backwoods recruit (Sharts), and the bookish, middle-class recruit (Searles) are derived from classic war movies. In *Glory* these are brought up against Hollywood stereotypes of African American masculinity. Private Trip's talk patterns, his youth and his highly developed physique flirt with the Hollywood stereotype of the buck, an identification made explicit by both the racist Irish Sergeant, Mulcahy, and, in very different tones, among an exclusively black male group, by Rawlins. After Trip is found outside the camp, Shaw also reads Trip in this manner, and has him whipped for desertion. Later, it is made clear that this is a misrecognition when Rawlins explains that Trip had left the regiment in search of shoes. What Trip does do in black and in mixed race company is to assert verbally the existence of the power relation between whites and blacks. In the context of the army, this amounts also to an insistence on the persistence of racial difference against the integration along patriarchal lines that Shaw is attempting to achieve. Thus, for example, after Sgt. Mulcahy, having humiliated Searles during bayonet training, offers the reconciliatory 'Ain't no shame, son', Trip intervenes with an insistence on racial difference, 'Nigger jus' forgot to duck; that's all.' At one level, then, the 'buck' stereotype is demonstrated to constitute a misperception in the minds of the white protagonists. At another, it is associated with a separatist politics. During the film Trip undergoes a rite of passage in which he loses the racial chip on his shoulder, and gradually finds common ground with white commanders. Some trust is established in a one-to-one scene with Shaw directly before the climactic assault, though Trip continues

to insist 'I still ain't gonna carry your flag'. Much more powerfully, in the battle scenes he takes up the Stars and Stripes after Shaw is killed. Thus in his dying moments, Trip symbolically becomes fully American.

As the father-figure who mediates between whites and blacks, Sgt. Major Rawlins (Morgan Freeman) recalls that of the Tom stereotype. He encounters Shaw in the film's opening scenes, as a grave-digger on the battleground on which Shaw is slightly wounded. Due to his age, Rawlins is the sole one of the central protagonists not to go through a rite of passage within the film's narrative. At the other extreme is the youthful Southerner Sharts, whose rite of passage is quite directly to grow up. It is he who breathlessly intones after the exigencies of training that 'We men now.'

Searles (Andre Braugher) is what Private Trip, echoing a distinction made by Malcolm X, calls a 'house nigger'. His education, his physical appearance (he wears glasses, the sure Hollywood sign of a weakling, an intellectual, or both) and his middle-class affiliations mark him out from the rest of the soldiers. His rite of passage involves the very painful giving up of his personal closeness with Shaw, in order to conform to military discipline. The film represents this trajectory in terms of the development of personal independence.

The treatment of stereotypes and the rites of passage motif are used in *Glory* in ways which imply a rethinking of notions of positive images. As discussed above, Cornel West has identified two problematic elements of traditional discourses of positive images; the 'assimilationist manner' and the 'homogenizing impulse'. Although West's essay delimits its subject as African American cultural production, such tendencies can often be found in images produced by white liberals (Zwick is Jewish). It is possible that the story of African American recruits to the Union Army might reproduce these logics, but *Glory* decisively breaks with them. In terms of racial differentiation, the film pluralises black masculinity into the variety of types just described. Whiteness is binarised into the racially hostile (openly racist senior officers, including the quartermaster who initially refuses to provide the 54th with shoes), and the sympathetic but patronising (including Shaw and Forbes in the early part of the film). The film emphasises that the assault on Fort Wagner was a military failure and that the Fort was never taken during the Civil War. The central struggle that structures *Glory*, represented in the film with the most vivid antagonisms, is not against the Confederacy, but against racial prejudice within the Northern forces, and

the white Northerners themselves. The heroic trajectory of the black soldiers then is not constructed according to traditional notions of war heroism, but is played out in terms of rites of passage whose narratives are constructed explicitly in terms of racial sameness and difference.

Moreover, Shaw and Forbes, the white leaders of the 54th, also undergo their own rites of passage during the film which prevents them standing as static models of whiteness to which the African American characters may aspire. Both must lose their patronising sympathy for blacks, while Shaw especially is shown as having to deal also with his shyness and his fear of battle. In early scenes Shaw is established as lacking the bravery of the conventionally good soldier. Intensely anxious under fire, he succumbs to a minor wound at the battle of Antietam Creek. His injury, a piece of dialogue informs us, does not even need the attentions of a surgeon, and its treatment is pointedly accompanied by the agonised screams of a soldier having his leg sawn off. A few minutes later, while Shaw is recuperating at home, the camera dwells on a soldier in a wheelchair. Slightly shellshocked but growing in determination, Shaw is not the traditional commander, but, in keeping with the film's liberal positioning, he is a war hero acutely conscious of the horrors of war.

Significantly, the presentation of white and black soldiers in this way breaks with historical accuracy. The real Shaw was a much more powerful figure and there is little evidence in his letters of the self-doubt attributed to him in the film. Still more importantly, in purely historical terms the film misrepresents the nature of the black soldiers recruited to the 54th. The film represents them as mostly from the South, ex-slaves, and generally illiterate. On the contrary, the African Americans who volunteered for the regiment were mostly from the North, had been born free, were educated, and therefore left a historical record of their experiences in diaries and letters. This material is not used at all in *Glory* but features strongly in *The True Story of Glory Continues*, the documentary made to accompany the film's video release. The recruits included members of prominent black families, and in fact one of Frederick Douglass's sons was sergeant major of the regiment. One implication of this is that the history of the African Americans in the 54th was well known during the war and in the immediate post-war period. It was not lost due to lack of evidence, but erased by powerful myths of white solidarity like *The Birth of a Nation*. In falsifying their identities, Zwick and screenwriter Kevin Jarre did make the men of the 54th more typical

of the African Americans in service in the Civil War.<sup>52</sup> But we would suggest more strategic reasons for the change which privilege a project of contesting representations rather than filling in a historical gap. Instead of giving audiences what might be perceived by some as 'positive images' of educated, integrated middle-class blacks taking up arms against the South, what *Glory* shows is a series of rites of passage in which coming to manhood is a matter of self-revelation and military discipline. This structuring narrative of the film's representation of African Americans is summarised by Rawlins (Freeman) who stoops to explain to a group of Southern black children gaping at the African Americans in uniform. 'That's right', he says '— ain't no dream. We run away slaves and we come back fighting men.' High among the pleasures offered to both black-identified and white-identified audiences is that of observing the transformation represented in the film as from slavery to manhood.

In spite of these considerations, the prominence of Shaw in *Glory* tends to decentre the history and the experiences of African Americans even in a film which is directly concerned with restoring their historical prominence. Almost every scene features Shaw either as protagonist or as viewer. Rather than using the conventions of Hollywood realism to align audiences with the points of view of the black soldiers, *Glory* adopts the more ambitious, and perhaps more risky strategy of centring on Shaw's point of view, while demonstrating its limitations in a variety of ways. We have already pointed to his relationship with Trip, where Shaw's perceptions are shown to be fallible, according to realist conventions. Again, in several scenes the black soldiers are shown marching barefoot, while it takes Trip's example and Rawlins's explanation before Shaw realises the problem. Such examples might loosely be racialised; more striking in racial terms is the film's depiction of the distribution of arms among the soldiers. A white male figure hovers in the background while Rawlins gives out rifles. Then the film cuts to shots of soldiers play-acting with the firearms, and cuts again to Shaw looking on anxiously. Audiences may read the immediately preceding scenes in a variety of ways which might be more or less inflected by racial identification: Hollywood stereotype (blacks with guns are dangerous) or white fear. Whatever these reactions, the cut to Shaw's worried-looking face draws audience attention to the prominence of his perspective.

What is at stake here is the explicit identification of the taken-for-granted, supposedly universal and neutral gaze of Hollywood



convention with a privileged, and racially white position. This is enacted in subtle ways in many parts of the film, and is especially overt when passages from Shaw's letters are used in voice-over. The film's opening title, before even the production company logo sequence, introduces Shaw and announces that his letters are collected 'in the Houghton Library of Harvard University'. Seconds later, a panorama of exclusively white Union soldiers are shown cooking, receiving letters, playing baseball, preparing for battle, and Matthew Broderick's voice begins, 'Dear Mother ...'. There is consistency here between view and voice-over. What the audience hears is the voice both of a participant in and a relaxed observer of the human (actually exclusively white and male) pageant they are viewing. A little over half an hour later, the film offers a parallel scene of the newly enlisted African American recruits at ease, again accompanied by Broderick's voice-over reading what purports to be one of Shaw's letters. On this occasion, however, his point of view is ironised by what the audience sees. Broderick's voice describes the soldiers in terms of emulating white soldiers and in terms of racial difference:

Dear Mother, the men learn very quickly, faster than the white troops it seems to me ... the moment they are released from drill, every tongue is relaxed and every ivory tooth is visible and you would not know from the sound of it that this is an army camp ...

What the audience actually sees are soundless images of African American men engaged in such activities as petting a goat, reclining, sitting contemplatively, practising drill among themselves, teaching and learning to read (Searles and Sharts), shaving the head (Trip), and, for a few moments only, a couple of soldiers moving their lips in what looks like singing. Such discontinuities problematise Shaw's assumption of the dominant gaze. At the same time, they undermine any sense that the black soldiers' trajectory in the film is one of racial emulation and assimilation.

The scene is one of several that invoke and expose the ways in which Hollywood conventions (voice-over, point of view, camera work) have been organised along lines of white dominance. Often in *Glory* the cinematic gaze is particularised in terms of white power, and shown to have only limited perceptual accuracy. Perhaps the most striking of these takes place during the army's stay at Beaufort, South Carolina. The film cuts to a tight shot of rows of black children singing 'My

Country 'Tis of Thee'. As they sing, the camera pulls back to reveal the exclusively white audience, dressed in military uniforms and the dresses of Southern belles, for whom the children are performing. The invocation of *Gone with the Wind* serves to heighten the awkwardness of the scene and to point to the conventionality of Hollywood's production of white dominance of space. Another scene completely superfluous to the narrative makes a coded reference to racist Hollywood stereotypes of African Americans. It shows Shaw galloping a horse through a path lined by stakes, each of which has a watermelon stuck on top, slashing at each one with his sword.<sup>53</sup>

The film's cutting and editing foregrounds the power and the meaning of looking, from the black soldiers' keenness to get into uniform to the variety of looks elicited by them marching in uniform, from white civilians, white soldiers and blacks. The first public parade of the regiment is shot to emphasise a series of returned glances. Marching down Main Street at the head of his troops, Shaw makes eye contact with a group of dignitaries including Frederick Douglass, and then on a separate balcony his family. The camera then picks up Trip and Searles catching the eye of the Irish Sergeant Mulcahy, who is in the crowd, while Trip alone meets the gaze of the dignitaries. Searles, Sharts and Rawlins exchange glances with a variety of African Americans in the crowd, whose expressions range from proud to anxious. Still more striking, when the regiment travels south, are the looks of the black children who see African Americans in uniform for the first time. In these scenes, as with the episodes set in the tent shared by Trip, Rawlins, Sharts and Searles, the perspective of any protagonist is not much privileged over the others. When the centrality of Shaw's gaze is to an extent displaced, no authoritative position is supplied by the film's protagonists, but neither is the audience offered an easy voyeurism.

While the construction of visual images in *Glory* foregrounds issues of racialised space and power, its dialogue overtly references debates over racial identity. Some of the relevant passages have been quoted already, since the dialogue plays a major structuring role in defining identity. A major function of the words spoken in *Glory* is to construct the transformation being undergone by the men of the 54th as from slaves, or 'niggers', to 'men'. The rite of passage into manhood is used to invoke the military as an exclusively male family, which offers a structure of relation in which racial difference can be negated. It is hard to convey the number of times the notion of a standardising masculinity

is invoked in the film to transcend racial difference. Shaw discusses his men in the voice-overed letters and argues with Forbes over their development, while we have already mentioned its articulation by Rawlins and Sharts.

The limit case for the appeal to this discourse of transcendent masculinity is the Irish Sergeant Mulcahy, a strict and overtly racist sergeant major brought in by Shaw to instil military discipline. The bewildering range of jibes Mulcahy uses on the troops include 'bloody Hindus', and 'ugly Mexican African fuckin whores'. Trip and Searles come in for special abuse. The former is addressed as 'you half-wit black bastard; is it true they cut your balls off at birth? I'm gonna work on you you bastard 'till I get you ... broken'. Mulcahy calls Searles 'a prissy little schoolgirl', 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' and asks with high sarcasm, 'Are you a Senator ... or are you the bloody President of Africa?' Mulcahy invokes notions of growing up and making men to defend his harsh regime, asking Shaw to let his boyhood friend Searles 'grow up some more'. The Irishman makes an uneasy figure in the film. His racist language is alienating, yet he plays a crucial role in the rites of passage of the black soldiers. What holds these together is the invocation of manhood as a transcendent masculinity whose achievement negates the racial, ethnic, and gendered slurs made by Mulcahy. Trip alone remains hostile to this patriarchal discourse of masculinity which offers to transcend racial specificity.

Shortly after the training period, Trip challenges Searles's aspirations to something he identifies as whiteness. Trip explicitly rejects the possibility of emulating white soldiers, telling Searles with heavy sarcasm,

Yeah. Button up that collar, suck in that gut, tuck in them big black lips, lighten your skin, shrink up that nose ... Let me tell you something boy. You can march like the white man, you can talk like him, you can, you can learn his song, you can even wear his suits, but you ain't never gonna be nothing to him but an ugly-assed chimp in a blue suit.

Trip goes on to make noises like a chimp to provoke Searles into a fight. Breaking up the argument, Rawlins fiercely rejects Trip's diatribe in the name of a common masculinity, 'We have to be MEN,' and rejects also Trip's use of the word 'nigger'. He goes on 'You watch who you calling nigger. 'F any niggers round here its you. Smart mouth, stupid-ass, swamp-running nigger. 'F you ain't careful that's all you gonna

be.' After this stinging rebuke is delivered, the camera lingers on Trip's face for several seconds.

Obviously a direct reading of this scene would regard Trip's assertion of absolute racial difference as having been invoked only to be disavowed, with the long take on Washington's face as evidence of inner change on the part of Trip whereby his fierce anti-white sentiments are being mellowed. However, the film's continual evocation of racism among Northern whites, the incisiveness of Trip's comments and the power and flamboyance of Washington's performance all work to produce him as a possible separatist icon. Tellingly, for example, at one point he reminds Shaw that when the war is over, Shaw will take up again his middle-class, privileged position, in stark contrast to the African Americans under his command.

In the film's narrative Shaw will not return to his big family house in Boston at the end of the war as Trip has suggested; instead, he dies in battle. It is possible to read the whiteness produced for Shaw in *Glory* like that of Mack in *Grand Canyon*, in the terms described by Henry Giroux, discussed earlier; that is as 'a referent for self-sacrifice buttressed by the liberal assumption that as a privileged white man he can solve the problems of marginalised and subordinate Others'.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps many (white) viewers did so. However, this is not only to smooth over the formal discontinuities associated with Shaw's point of view in the film, but to dismiss entirely the insistent voicing of racial difference by Trip. That Washington's performance obtained the film's only acting Oscar (for best actor in a supporting role) implies that its force was often recognised. Ultimately these readings pivot on the film's final scenes, set in battle and its aftermath, where dialogue is dispensed with and image is dominant. The two dominant images are Trip's taking up of the Stars and Stripes banner after Shaw falls, and the last frames, which show first Shaw's and then Trip's body being tipped into an open grave. The two bodies come to rest in a position of intimacy which might symbolise an accommodation impossible while both men were alive. The question is whether Trip has had to renounce his politicised sense of racialised identity in order to find common cause with the white-led Northern Army. In refusing to explicitly settle this question, the film may be considered evasive. It might also be read as refusing reductionist notions of either integration or separatism. Instead, political relations between African Americans and white Americans are constructed as subject to continual negotiation.

Nevertheless, the constructions of racial identity in *Glory* remain problematic on two counts. The use of a version, even reworked and ironised, of the 'buck' stereotype to represent the separatist position implies a major limitation to its self-consciousness about Hollywood stereotypes. *Glory* might have been a different film again if the film-makers had been able to imagine the educated Searles, or the fatherly Rawlins, voicing separatist sentiments, having a double consciousness, or even as ever wavering in their affiliation with Northern white authority. Strangely enough, *The True Story of Glory Continues* documentary contains some scenes shot for the film which addressed comparable aspects of debate among African Americans over participation in the war, including a hotly contested debate at a recruitment meeting. However, along with other material featuring Frederick Douglass, these did not make the final cut. Still more strikingly, it is clear that *Glory* achieves its troubled negotiation of black/white relationships by construing racial relations in exclusively male terms.

#### Tensioned and interlocking identities in *Daughters of the Dust*

*Daughters of the Dust* has been celebrated by many critics for its innovative constructions of race and space.<sup>55</sup> While we have treated *Glory* as in some limited ways subverting the white-dominated film grammar of Hollywood, Julie Dash's film has been regarded as forging different modes of representation appropriate to histories of people of African descent in America, and of African American female identity in particular. Allied with this project *Daughters of the Dust* aspires to a more democratic kind of cinema which refuses to fetishise one or two central heroic protagonists. Dash's use of dual narration, multiple points of view, non-linear and layered unfolding, and cinematographer Arthur Jafa (AJ)'s utilisation of techniques such as wide depth of field, non-standard lighting, and shifting film speed, have all been remarked upon as marking *Daughters of the Dust* out from Hollywood conventions. Since these have been ably described by Toni Cade Bambara, Ed Guerrero, and by Manthia Diawara in the piece discussed above, we will not be primarily concerned here with these innovations. Instead, we will concentrate on some related achievements of the film: its sustaining of multiple tensioned and antagonistic discourses of identity.

In an interview with bell hooks published in the book *Daughters of*

*the Dust*, Dash stated that her priority in making the film was to address first black women, the black community second, white women third, 'and everyone else after that'.<sup>56</sup> These priorities have been maintained in the subsequent setting up of the *Daughters of the Dust* website which includes as well as material directly about the film and the Gullah people, hypertext linked material on black independent cinema, and a series of brief memorialisations of black women entitled 'Daughters of the Diaspora'.<sup>57</sup> Dash's hierarchy of audiences marks out the film as a product of civil rights feminism rather than feminist separatism or middle-class feminism. Black women are its primary audience, but they are seen as part of a heterogeneous viewing public. It is through these terms of reference that the film engages with multiple intertwined discourses of identity. Within an overall context of the historical Gullah people, and myths and narratives of African American history, we concentrate here on unpacking some connections between identity constructed according to geography, psychology, faith and gender.

Coincidentally, *Daughters of the Dust* is set in very close proximity to the southern action of *Glory*, around forty years later. By contrast, instead of functioning as battlefield, the South Carolina coast here has a crucial historical function. *Daughters of the Dust* concerns itself with the Gullah or Geechee people of the sea islands of the South, whose geographical isolation has ensured that the population has developed a distinct culture and dialect, such that customs and speech-patterns connect contemporary Gullah to West African culture. The film follows a Gullah family on the eve of their migration north at around the turn of the last century. This context sets up a series of family discussions, memorialisations, rituals and celebrations, and debates over identity, which are focused via a lengthy family picnic. The film climaxes in a series of arguments, reconciliations and a regeneration ceremony.

The overarching issue Dash sets up is the question of the retention of links with Africa, and in particular with the history of women of African descent, over the move from the geographically insulated space of the sea islands. Tensions between a historically conscious Afrocentrism and a turn to white-dominated society in search of betterment is incarnated by the female members of the family. Nana Peazant (Cora Lee Day) as the great-grandmother of the family is the one who most fiercely invokes the importance of links with ancestral African society and culture. The story is narrated by Nana Peazant and by the Unborn Child (Kai-Lynn Warren) who was conceived by rape, and is being