

INTRODUCTION

Nothing has done so much to awaken the race consciousness of the colored man in the United States as the motion picture. It has made him hungry to see himself as he has come to be. —WILLIAM FOSTER, “News of the Moving Picture”

Writing in the Indianapolis *Freeman* in 1913, the filmmaker William Foster expresses a kind of critique common in African American newspapers throughout the 1910s. He assesses the contemporary status of African American representation in moving pictures and the “resentment” that Black moviegoers feel against their egregious misrepresentation “presented everywhere.” Foster attributes the “hunger” of Black moviegoers for self-recognition to a direct response to the prevalence of grotesque caricatures of African Americans on American screens. Drawing on the uplift philosophy’s emphasis on self-reliance, Foster then shifts from a critique of misrepresentation to a call for self-representation. Although he celebrates Black movie patrons’ protests against such images, he argues for film production “for ourselves in our own best way and for our own best good.” For Foster, as for many others, the goal was not to rely on white filmmakers to change their characterization of Black people but to provide a model for Black filmmakers—and an emerging Black filmmaking practice—that would avoid the representational problems evident in mainstream films. In his article, Foster captures the power of moving images and their potential for resistance and affirmation.¹

In the early decades of the twentieth century, moving pictures served as both a mechanism for the misrepresentation of Black humanity and a tool for asserting it. The former use has persisted, and its history is well documented. However, too little is known about early endeavors toward Black self-representation in moving pictures, or the ways in which this dynamic medium served the interests of African American advancement. To fill this gap, this

book is about early African American film practices, focusing in particular on films made in the 1910s. It is also about the role of cinema in the larger social, political, educational, and economic project of African American uplift. Lastly, it is about film history and its methodologies, reconstructing a history of uplift cinema entirely out of surviving archival ephemera. As a whole, this book contributes to a historical understanding of the multimedia operations of the uplift project and brings to the fore alternative uses of the medium of film at a time when its forms and functions were being widely explored by amateurs and professionals alike.

In the 1910s the relatively new medium of motion pictures played a key role in promoting and chronicling the African American experience, especially the broad idea of uplift—the movement of racial advancement based on self-help, service, and the promotion of middle-class ideals that began in the late nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth. Beyond recording instances of African American achievement, moving pictures participated in the self-definition of Black people at a time of vast change and challenge. The uplift project informed early Black filmmaking and provided the impetus for its engagements with the medium. In this way, uplift filmmakers embraced cinema as a useful medium for promoting the interests of African Americans and conveying the possibilities of Black citizenship for both Black and white spectators. *Uplift Cinema* recovers this significant legacy of Black cinema and situates African American uplift filmmaking in the context of African American history, American film history, and the role of visual culture in social and political struggles.

This introduction has three main tasks: first, to provide an overview of the uplift project as a foundation for understanding how Black cinema functioned at the beginning of the twentieth century; second, to put forth critical frameworks for thinking about uplift cinema as an explicitly useful form of cinema; and third, to articulate a methodological imperative that takes up the stakes and challenges of writing film history about only nonextant films. To this end, I conclude the introduction with a call to look beyond decayed and combusted nitrate stock as victims of time and neglect, arguing that we have as much to discover and learn from absences as we do from surviving artifacts. The film itself is but one component of an expansive network of cultural traces that lead to its myriad functions. Uplift cinema is not only best explained in this way, it also provides a test case for a broader methodology of film history.

African American Uplift

Uplift films reflected, informed, and participated in the larger movement of African American uplift that was, at the time, the predominant social and political ideology concerning African American progress. The program of racial uplift emphasized individual initiative, mutual assistance, social respectability, interracial cooperation, and economic independence as components of a general strategy for promoting the advancement of African Americans. The uplift project saw individual behavior as the key to communal success, emphasizing personal conduct over systemic critique. This was a view that was cultivated in the acknowledgment of white racist misperception and misrepresentation of African Americans, essentializing and dehumanizing perspectives that needed to be countered by a strict code of conduct. Uplift, Jane Gaines writes, was “a conflation of social and moral elevation [that] sent the message that moral advance meant social advance, as though the one were the effect of the other.”² As W. Fitzhugh Brundage notes, “by adhering to a code of temperance, thrift, polite manners, sexual purity, cleanliness, and rectitude, blacks contradicted racist stereotypes about their alleged inferiority.”³ In post-Reconstruction Jim Crow America, uplift was not just a strategy for advancement; in the minds of the project’s leaders, it was an imperative for survival.

Early twentieth-century Black uplift is inseparable from the figure of Booker T. Washington and the institutions with which he was associated: Hampton Institute (where he was educated), Tuskegee Institute (where he was principal), and the National Negro Business League (NNBL, which he served as president). Though the nerve center of the uplift project was in the South, at Tuskegee, uplift reached into the consciousness of upwardly mobile and would-be upwardly mobile Black northerners as well. Middle-class African American homes across the country commonly featured a portrait of Washington, and his ideals of individual initiative, service, and moral respectability gave a generation of African Americans a model of conduct for them to emulate. Washington popularized uplift, served as its ambassador among whites, and functioned as an image of the uplifted.⁴

Washington’s politics of uplift was complex and by no means universally embraced. He agreed to a postponement of social equality in favor of more immediately possible economic remedies, “casting down the bucket” in industries directly connected to an individual’s environment. As Washington stated in his 1895 address at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, “when it comes to business, pure and simple, it is in the South that the Negro is given a man’s chance in the commercial world.”⁵ (The speech was famously

labeled the “Atlanta Compromise” by W. E. B. Du Bois, due to Washington’s postponement of demands for political rights and claims for social equality in favor of support for vocational education and economic security.⁶) Washington saw the locus of “chance” for the unskilled and disenfranchised former slaves and their offspring in the mastery of a trade so that they would become indispensable to the larger community and thereby justify their right to rights. His emphasis on chance was further underscored in the address when he asserted that African Americans must begin at the bottom and not permit “our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.”⁷

Washington’s diplomatic disposition emphasized the usefulness of the Black freedman to the defeated white southerner in improving southern industry and creating an economic situation beneficial to both races, one that would also allow the white population to maintain its desired distance from its previously (and, in fact, currently) subjugated neighbors. Appealing to the broad audience at the Atlanta Exposition, Washington stated that like the “loyal” slaves, Negroes would be a “patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people” who would give their lives to protect their white neighbors. In this vision, social segregation would not preclude Black labor and enterprise from benefiting northern and southern whites, just as Black uplift would not presume social integration. The goal of the uplift project was to “make the interest of the races one” and thereby bring about gradual improvement to the status of the Black citizenry. But the white man need not fear that Washington was suggesting integration: “in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”⁸ The tempered possibility and potential of Black uplift that underlie Washington’s measured rhetoric were presented in the service of the “mutual progress” of white and Black Americans. Yet in practice the result was a kind of Faustian pact in which progress was rarely “mutual.”

Education was a major component of these efforts, and the “pedagogy of uplift” was a central—and polarizing—component of Black social and political thought at this time.⁹ The Hampton-Tuskegee idea of education emphasized normal school education (that is, pertaining to the establishment of standards or norms in education) and training in practical trades. Hampton, Tuskegee, and other normal and agricultural institutes trained teachers and offered students agricultural and industrial training to prepare them to be productive and self-sufficient laborers. Though many groups and individuals, both Black and white, celebrated this model of education for African Americans, others found it controversial. Criticism came both from more progressive Black groups and

from socially conservative white southerners. Kevin Gaines argues that the Hampton-Tuskegee philosophy “clashed with the freedpeople’s emancipatory vision of education” as well as the views of white southerners who were wary of the potential for Negro education to foster a sense of social equality.¹⁰ To alleviate such concerns, the southern institutional models of uplift emphasized education as a tool for making “useful citizens” rather than social equals or political adversaries.¹¹ As a result, this educational program, combined with a missionary commitment to service, obfuscated “the brutal realities of conquest and political subordination.”¹² This is what made Washington’s model of education untenable for Du Bois.

This opposing perspective on the function of education is where Du Bois and Washington diverged most sharply.¹³ For Du Bois, education for African Americans should focus on “developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”¹⁴ To this end, he advocated higher education for a “talented tenth” of Black elites. Education practically and symbolically highlighted the differences between the two leaders as it played a large part in any vision of the future for African Americans. Quite directly, the form of education (agricultural and industrial or higher education in the liberal arts) anticipated the future role of the Black citizenry.

Faith in education as the gateway to advancement and upward mobility is the cornerstone of the uplift project, and it functioned as a kind of “liberation theology.”¹⁵ As Kevin Gaines argues, “describing a group struggle for freedom and social advancement, uplift also suggests that African Americans have, with an almost religious fervor, regarded education as the key to liberation.”¹⁶ Although the type and purpose of education was contested, the fact of education as fundamental to uplift was promoted across ideological lines. Gaines shows that “uplift encompassed the tension between competing philosophies of black education orchestrated by the vision of economic development and racial accommodation advanced by white industrialists, reformers and philanthropists.”¹⁷ These competing philosophies of education diverged with regard to social class and reflected a fundamental tension in uplift philosophy between the shared effort toward collective advancement and the entrenchment of a “racialized elite identity,” through which uplift depended on class stratification as the mechanism for advancement.¹⁸ Fred Moten sees in this tension an uneasy concern with Black criminality, a critique that acknowledges that “the assimilationist cultural politics of normative uplift can never be fully separated from the white supremacism it is supposed to combat.”¹⁹ Anxieties about racial

advancement were intertwined with challenges to the social order. Education, in whatever form, constituted a threat to Black dependency and therefore had to be advocated with care.

The uplift philosophy focused its strategies for advancement on the notion of the autonomous individual, positing individual self-help as key to communal improvement, which was largely understood as economic independence. To this end, Washington argued that education should facilitate economic self-sufficiency. If agricultural and industrial educational institutes were designed for the educational advancement of African Americans, ultimately this was in the service of economic advancement. The NNBL, founded by Washington in 1900, was the professional nexus of this aspect of the uplift project. Along with “useful” education—or, as the founder of Hampton, General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, termed it, “education for life” (epitomized by Hampton and Tuskegee)—the NNBL represented the significance of economic independence at the heart of the uplift project.²⁰ The educational institutes, Washington, and the NNBL each promoted the advancements of African Americans in various professions and chronicled examples of demonstrated progress through publications targeted primarily at philanthropists and other members of the nation’s economic and political elite. For example, the 1904 pamphlet published at Hampton titled *What Hampton Graduates Are Doing in Land-Buying, in Home-Making, in Business, in Teaching, in Agriculture, in Establishing Schools, in the Trades, in Church and Missionary Work, in the Professions, 1868–1904* exemplifies the uplift philosophy’s emphasis on education as the way to affect communities through different forms of labor and public service.²¹ The emphasis on economic independence also fostered an encouragement of entrepreneurialism. Black businessmen emerged in all types of enterprises, and higher education was seen as a training ground for businessmen as well as for farmers.

Although the work of the educational institutions and that of the NNBL were central to the uplift project, of equal significance was its public façade. Just as the individual was seen as the key to communal success economically, each person also carried the burden of representing the race through his or her actions and conduct. In an environment saturated with grotesque racist caricatures and representations predicated on racialized ridicule, reclaiming the image of African Americans was an important aspect of the uplift project; the perception of upward social mobility and respectability matched economic advancement in importance. Uplift leaders crafted a rhetoric of uplift to appeal and appease: a rhetoric that thereby reflected the project it represented. To this end, the uplift project communicated its ideals through carefully designed and persuasive uplift narratives.

The idea of the uplift narrative plays a central role in this book. At its most basic level, an uplift narrative is one that presents African Americans as achieving a status as modern, independent, and self-sufficient. It strategically presents a trajectory of progress through a logic of before-and-after examples. Washington's second and most famous autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, is an example of an extremely popular uplift narrative.²² Chronicling Washington's rise from a slave to the most powerful African American of his time, *Up from Slavery* is an autobiographical narrative that William Andrews has called "one of the most compelling personal myths in the history of American literature."²³ As a postbellum slave narrative at the beginning of the twentieth century, it presents a revisionist account of the so-called peculiar institution that represented "slavery and its significance to the advancement of black people in an increasingly pragmatic perspective."²⁴ Andrews explains the rhetorical logic in these terms:

What slavery was in the past is not so important as what slavery means, or (more importantly) can be construed to mean, in the present. A factual view of slavery, for Washington, is concerned less with a static concept of historical truth, frozen in the past, than with the need for rhetorical power in the ever-evolving present. To the postbellum slave narrator, particularly Washington, slavery needed to be reviewed and reempowered as a concept capable of effecting change, of making a difference ultimately in what white people thought of black people as freedmen, not slaves. The facts of slavery in the postbellum narrative, therefore, are not so much what happened *then*—bad though it was—as what *makes* things, good things, happen now.²⁵

This harnessing of the narrative of the past to serve particular goals of the present not only necessitated a revision of the slave narrative; it also required a circumscribed presentation of goals. A major component of Washington's accommodationist strategy was, in effect, to reposition the relation of African Americans to whites. Instead of a rhetoric of blame, rights, justice, and restitution, uplift rhetoric emphasized independence and self-help for the "mutual progress" of both races.²⁶ Throughout Washington's chronicle of his development, he reiterates the principle of service: "The great and prevailing idea that seemed to take possession of every one [at Hampton] was to prepare himself to lift up the people at his home."²⁷ As an uplift narrative, *Up from Slavery* models a trajectory of progress while carefully negotiating the presentation of its aims and expertly navigating the potential concerns, prejudices, and sensibilities of its intended audience.

Of course, uplift narratives were not simply literary. One of the central points of this book is that uplift was a prescriptive program that was articulated through—and constituted by—a range of media. Uplift discourses traveled across forms, emerging in speeches, literature, pamphlets, pageants, photographs, music, and moving images. In doing so, the broader uplift project encountered new problems at the same time that the multimedia strategy allowed for new possibilities. Uplift cinema in particular conveyed an argument for—and functioned as proof of—African American progress through the most modern form of mass communication, targeting both white and Black (and sometimes mixed) audiences. It aligned African Americans with technological progress while offering a broad-reaching platform from which to vividly project the race’s potential for advancement.

Uplift Cinema and Race Film

The dominant way in which historians have studied early African American engagements with moving pictures as producers, subjects, and spectators has been through the discourse on race film. Although race film has received critical scholarly attention since the 1970s, it is a concept contemporaneous to the films’ emergence in the 1910s, designated as a term for filmmaking practices by, for, or about African Americans. There were filmmaking concerns owned and operated by whites that sought to appeal to Black audiences with Black cast productions, but African American filmmakers saw themselves as participating in the uplift of the race through motion picture production. Black filmmaking entrepreneurs understood themselves as race men, and the term *race picture* or *race movie* functioned as shorthand for the press, exhibitors, and audiences to understand films made about and for African Americans. In 1920 in the *New York Age*, the arts critic Lester Walton championed “colored motion pictures” as a “new and fertile field offering wonderful opportunities.”²⁸ And, as Jane Gaines has shown, Geraldyn Dismond, an African American writing in *Close-Up* in 1929, defined “Negro films” as films—made by Black-owned or white-controlled companies—with a common “motive”: to both present a humanizing portrayal of African American subjects, “showing them not as fools and servants, but as human beings with the same emotions, desires and weaknesses as other people,” and to “share in the profits of this great industry.”²⁹ The term *race film* reflected the notion of a separate cinema for a largely segregated audience, but it did not indicate a shared style, genre, or singular point of view.

Since the late 1970s, film historians have endeavored to chronicle and critically assess race films, focusing primarily on narrative fiction films exhibited in theaters to Black audiences. Thomas Cripps defined *race movies* as “films made for exclusively black audiences between 1916 and 1956,” following the historical usage of the term.³⁰ Henry Sampson identified over five hundred films featuring African American casts shown in theaters that catered to an African American audience.³¹ Subsequent scholars have built on Cripps’s and Sampson’s foundational research. Although the focus of scholarly attention has largely been on the Lincoln Motion Picture Company and Oscar Micheaux, other researchers have added to our understanding of lesser known ventures and figures. For example, Christina Petersen has researched and produced a filmography of Reol Productions; Barbara Lupack and Matthew Bernstein and Dana White have traced the history of the Norman Film Manufacturing Company; Pearl Bowser and Charles Musser have researched the Maurice Film Company; and Jacqueline Stewart is producing a comprehensive account of Spencer Williams, including a full survey of his career as an actor, director, and producer.³² Furthermore, Charlene Register and Anna Everett have shown that film criticism in the Black press was a constitutive part of race filmmaking at the same time that it critiqued perceived misrepresentations in the films themselves.³³

The most prolific and successful race filmmaker, Oscar Micheaux, produced nearly forty feature films from 1919 to 1948. His silent era films, only three of which survive from the more than twenty he made, were explicitly oriented by uplift ideals. For example, in *Within Our Gates* (1920), the protagonist Sylvia Landry teaches at a school for Black children in the rural south and is forced to go north to appeal for funds from wealthy white philanthropists to keep the school in operation. *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) centers on a Black frontiersman, and the hero of *Body and Soul* (1925) is an aspiring inventor. At the same time, these films also exhibit inherent ambivalences about the uplift project.

Though Micheaux saw himself as a Bookerite, he did not hesitate to turn his lens on less respectable aspects of Black social life, choosing themes that, as Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence note, were “explosive in their time.”³⁴ His representations of corrupt ministers, rapists, gamblers, and hypocrites drew vociferous criticism, and his portrayals of miscegenation and lynching were nothing short of shocking. Furthermore, as Bowser and Spence note, “Micheaux’s notions of racial uplift and individual responsibility challenged white definitions of race without actually changing the terms.”³⁵ Even here, Micheaux’s filmmaking project aligns with Washington’s philosophy of racial uplift, which

was similarly critiqued for setting aside systemic change in favor of modest, incremental challenges to the status quo.

Race film, as it has been historically understood, is nonetheless a category that is too limited for the films under discussion here. Uplift cinema productively expands the epistemological coordinates of race film. This book contributes to the study of race film by introducing uplift cinema as an important component of early Black filmmaking, and then by using that move to reconsider the defining aspects of that filmmaking. The makers of uplift films employed motion pictures as a medium of persuasion and representation in the service of African American advancement and self-definition. Uplift cinema and race film overlap in terms of strategies and practices that extended into the 1920s and beyond. However, unlike race film, uplift cinema was primarily imagined as a form of useful cinema, discussed below. Uplift cinema adds to the historiography on race film by expanding its locations, genres, periods, production and exhibition contexts, and motivations.

Although uplift films have been critically overlooked, uplift itself is not a new concept in the study of race film. Scholars of early Black cinema have described how filmmakers mobilized aspects of uplift to assert the modernity of Black subjects, particularly in northern urban locations.³⁶ Speaking of race films in their “heyday,” Jane Gaines asserts, “in every way imaginable they espoused uplift.”³⁷ She writes: “Like much of the black literary production of the day . . . race movies were thoroughly imbued with the spirit and the letter of uplift, the mode in which race consciousness was publically articulated in the early part of the twentieth century.”³⁸ Uplift cinema may be a distinct practice, but it has implications for how we understand race films, shedding light on the complexities of Black filmmaking in the early decades of the twentieth century.

One consequence of the predominance of the race film model has been an almost exclusive focus on the films made in the north. In this book I show that the emergence of a cinema practice related specifically to African American concerns is rooted in southern rural areas as well as northern urban centers, and that the south played a significant role in engagements with modernization and media culture.³⁹ African American filmmaking emerged in the south at the same time as it did in the north, in the early years of the second decade of the twentieth century, but it developed in significantly different ways in the two regions. Both northern and southern filmmakers combined popular entertainment with the positive representation of African American life at a time when its prevailing screen image was the visual manifestation of distorted white perception. In the north, Black filmmaking entrepreneurs sought to monetize Black audiences and provide appealing moving pictures for Black

theaters. In the south, filmmaking projects aiming to support African American interests emerged from educational institutions rather than commercial ventures. The faculties and trustees, both Black and white, of southern African American agricultural and institutional colleges saw themselves at the forefront of modernity with their proposed solution to the so-called Negro Problem of economic and racial subjugation. To this end, they enlisted moving picture technology by using film as a mechanism for fund-raising, addressing northern white philanthropists who supported the endeavors of Washington and his conservative circle as well as southern Black communities (I examine this practice in chapters 2 and 3).

Attention to race films has focused on narrative fiction, including such genres as comedies, westerns, mysteries, dramas, and musicals. The genre that has received the most attention in race film historiography is melodrama, largely because these films directly engaged with African American social and political issues. In her discussion of the uplift narratives of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company and of Oscar Micheaux, for example, Gaines focuses on melodrama as a form for “the race movie betterment narrative.”⁴⁰ Other aspects of film culture that have only received brief mention (such as actuality footage, nontheatrical exhibitions at venues such as churches and meeting halls, and versions of the local film) deserve more focused research and sustained discussion because they expand our focus to include a fuller range of the production and reception practices of this period.⁴¹ It is in these broad areas that uplift cinema took shape. Beyond narrative fiction, uplift films extend the uses of moving pictures into other cinematic modes and genres, most notably nontheatrical practices, hybrid forms, and nonfiction filmmaking, such as actualities and local films (discussed below). Films made of Black colleges combined narrative and actuality forms aligned with the rhetorical strategies of fund-raising materials. Even northern Black filmmaking entrepreneurs who made fiction films prior to 1915 were as invested in other forms (such as actualities) that documented aspects of Black civic life, demonstrating the achievement of uplift ideals.

A more overt focus on uplift cinema likewise expands the historiography on race film to include its pre-1915 instantiations. Although scholars do acknowledge that some Black filmmakers were producing films before the 1915 release of *The Birth of a Nation*, Gaines is typical of a broader trend when she argues that “early black filmmaking is inextricably tied to the release of this film, and Griffith’s offensive epic was the irritant around which a pearl formed.”⁴² Yet, as Gaines herself notes, scholarship has repeatedly challenged the notion that Black filmmaking was born as a response to *The Birth of a Nation*.⁴³ Even if

Griffith's film has a hold in the popular imagination as a flashpoint for Black film history, by the late 1970s historians—most prominently Henry Sampson, Thomas Cripps, and Phyllis Klotman—had traced the filmmaking practices of figures who had worked earlier, such as William Foster, widely considered (until now) the first Black film producer.⁴⁴ Still, since not even any fragments of race films made prior to 1915 survive, it became a convenient narrative to posit that Black film endeavors followed from Griffith's film. Such a narrative is supported by the widely publicized efforts to counter *The Birth of a Nation* with films such as *The Birth of a Race* (1918) and, relatedly, by what Cripps calls the notable “failures” of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company and the *Birth of a Race* company.⁴⁵ What I show throughout this book is that the landscape of early Black filmmaking practice was far richer than has been understood and offered powerful models of success for filmmakers in the 1920s.

This expansion of the period matters not just because it makes the historiography more accurate but also because it broadens our understanding of the motivation of race film practitioners. Accounts of race film have posited it primarily as a response to representational racism and as the manifestation of a desire to capitalize on a perceived untapped market, African American spectators. The notion of a separate cinema necessitated by a segregated culture is a logical inference. Yet it is only part of the story. The impetus for early Black filmmaking is more nuanced and complex than the familiar narrative of race film suggests: it comes from a wider—and more explicitly multimedia—context.

Along these lines, it is important to recognize that early Black film culture was not an entirely segregated experience. Rather, it was deeply imbricated with the influences and participation of white sponsors. This goes beyond the inclusion of white capital for race film production, or the race film production of white-owned companies.⁴⁶ When Gaines discusses the interracial nature of American silent film culture and the “uncanny parallels and volatile intersections of black and white American cultures,” she notes that “the race pioneers carved something significant out of nothing—race movies were an audacious invention that helped to make an audience that most white entrepreneurs did not see, that helped to imagine a separate community into existence.”⁴⁷ Gaines is referring here to the theatrically exhibited films targeting an African American audience produced by figures such as Oscar Micheaux. But such “race pioneers” also included institutions and filmmakers (both whites and African Americans) who thought more expansively about the use of the medium of moving pictures as an agent of uplift. Rather than appearing out of

nowhere, these films were the logical extension of already existing multimedia campaign materials promoting African American advancement. As such, their production and exhibition were inherently — though not unproblematically — interracial, as well as intermedial.

Although *The Birth of a Nation* brought the issue of the filmic representation of African Americans to national attention, the leaders of the uplift project had already been using motion pictures to disseminate the message of agricultural and industrial training for several years. As early as 1910, moving pictures were integral parts of the uplift campaigns of the Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes. Speaking generally, African American uplift cinema in the south subordinated entertainment to message, loosely constructing narrative (both fiction and nonfiction) as a means of showcasing Hampton's and Tuskegee's endeavors. The product was Negro education, and the films were vehicles for its sale. In contrast, northern African American cinema was a business venture aimed at visual entertainment for Black audiences. African American entrepreneurs produced and exhibited motion pictures for Black audiences in cities such as Chicago, New York, and Boston. In the north, Black urbanites were "migrating to the movies," as Stewart has argued, to see a reflection of their lives that was positive, realistic, and engaged with contemporary debates concerning Black urban life.⁴⁸ The filmmaking projects of uplift filmmakers encompassed various modes of production and different regional requirements, through which they explored alternative possibilities for cinema in the service of African American social and political advancement in the early 1910s.

Myriad in form and content, uplift films shared a cultural context but not necessarily generic characteristics or types of exhibition venues. Uplift cinema included films that spanned several modes of production, were articulated through various genres, and were shown in different exhibition contexts. Although most were ideologically aligned with the Bookerite uplift project, some posed a challenge to uplift philosophy and its practical components (such as uplift comedies that were offensive to some while being highly entertaining to others). Despite their heterogeneity, these films informed, contributed to, responded to, and were otherwise critically engaged with uplift. In all of its forms, uplift cinema functioned as an agent of Black self-fashioning in the early twentieth century.

Frameworks for Conceptualizing Uplift Cinema

USEFUL CINEMA

Uplift cinema is one example of the Progressive Era's response to motion pictures. The National Board of Censorship spoke of using cinema to enact uplift in all audiences, film advocates proclaimed the possibility of using motion pictures as an educational resource, social problem films of the 1910s addressed domestic issues, and the film industry advocated the use of cinema as a tool for the promotion of international understanding—and trade—in the era of the League of Nations.⁴⁹

Along with discourses surrounding theatrical entertainment cinema of the 1910s, recent research on nontheatrical cinema provides a helpful framework for approaching uplift cinema across modes of production and in relation to myriad exhibition practices. As Rick Prelinger has shown, from cinema's emergence moving pictures have been used “to record, orient, train, sell, and persuade.”⁵⁰ The multiple functions of moving pictures beyond theatrical entertainment are broadly gathered under the category of *useful cinema*. In their discussion of the “multidimensional and flexible concept” of useful cinema, Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson write: “The concept of useful cinema does not so much name a mode of production, a genre, or an exhibition venue as it identifies a disposition, an outlook, and an approach toward a medium on the part of institutions and institutional agents.”⁵¹ Acland and Wasson take the term “useful” from Tony Bennett's concept of “useful culture,” in which culture is formulated through institutions as a mechanism of power. They extend Bennett's concept to “a body of films and technologies that perform tasks and serve as instruments in an ongoing struggle for aesthetic, social, and political capital.”⁵² Useful cinema is an effective rubric for considering a broad range of films and film practices that have been receiving greater scholarly attention in recent years.

Useful cinema is not a retronym, however, but rather the restoration of a way of characterizing films that served a purpose beyond entertainment. The notion of utility was a part of the discourse about moving pictures in the early twentieth century. For example, trade publications such as the *Moving Picture World* advertised films like *Adrift* (Lucius Henderson, Thanhouser, 1911) with the slogan: “A picture with a lesson!” The advertisement even spoke to the utility of the film not just for the audience but for the exhibitors themselves: “ADRIFT is a useful film with a big, simple moral that would do much to reconcile the Church to the Motion Picture—if the former knew that this sort of film was so much in evidence.”⁵³ Films were also sometimes explicitly characterized

as not useful, as in this review of *The Refugee* (Lux, 1910): “A war story which does not convey any information; nor does it amuse. Its usefulness as a motion picture may, therefore be questioned.” The reviewer concluded that *The Refugee* “serves no useful purpose.”⁵⁴ Utility was also designated for half-reel films that could round out a program, as in the Lubin Manufacturing Company’s advertisement of “Those Useful Half-Reel Comedies.”⁵⁵ Discussions concerning the utility of moving pictures for educational purposes were prolific in the pages of the trade press. For example, in an issue of the *Moving Picture World* from 1911, several articles and notices proclaim the educational value of moving pictures: “The Picture as a Teacher,” “Teachers View Historical Films,” and “Simplifying the Teaching of History.”⁵⁶ Similarly, moving pictures such as *The Awakening of John Bond* (Oscar Apfel and Charles Brabin, Edison, 1911) were championed as answers to the current wave of criticism of films. The *Moving Picture World* noted: “These pictures were the entering wedge that pierced the hard shell of conservatism and in less than a year have pried it wide open and forced the recognition of the motion picture by the press, university, state, church and laity as the greatest educational agency since the discovery of the art of printing.”⁵⁷ The burgeoning film industry thus championed moving pictures as powerful agents of education as well as reform, an argument made most effectively by useful films that explicitly served the greater public welfare.

Sponsored by corporations, governmental agencies, social welfare organizations, and private groups and institutions, useful films were “made to persuade”—functioning as educational films while also striving to entertain.⁵⁸ They display industrial processes, technological advances, and lessons in personal and social conduct. Industrial films of this period show industriousness of various sorts: raw materials being turned into products, such as *From the Field to the Cradle* (Lubin, 1911) on milk production and *The Making of a Shoe: From Cowhide Pelt to Goodyear Welt* (Edison, sponsored by United Shoe Machinery, 1915); buildings and infrastructure being built, such as *The Greatest Engineering Feat* (Kalem, 1911) and *Building the Great Los Angeles Aqueduct* (American Film Manufacturing, 1913); the benefits of technology, such as *The Stenographer’s Friend: Or, What Was Accomplished by an Edison Business Phonograph* (Edison, 1910); models for conduct, such as *The Little Mothers’ League* (Kalem, sponsored by the New York Health Department, 1911) and *The Cost of Carelessness* (Universal Animated Weekly, sponsored by Brooklyn Rapid Transit, 1915); or lessons in hygiene, such as *Boil Your Water* (Pathé Frères, sponsored by the New York City Department of Health, 1911).⁵⁹

Useful cinema is an important lens through which to consider uplift cinema not only because of the historiographical foundation established by Acland

and Wasson (and the contributors to their volume), but also because utility is basic to uplift cinema in two unique and fundamental ways. First, the films were produced and exhibited with a specific purpose in mind—namely, the social and political advancement of African Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century. Second, the films were made with the goal of promoting the idea of African Americans as useful citizens. Thus, in uplift cinema utility is doubly inscribed.

As a form of useful cinema, uplift cinema employed the medium of motion pictures to assert the humanity, respectability, modernity, and utility of African Americans for white and Black audiences at a time when such propositions were, more often than not, challenged by cultural and political norms. In this sense, uplift cinema at once was a public relations project targeting whites and functioned as an agent of positive self-definition for African American participants and spectators. Considered as a kind of useful cinema, uplift cinema can be understood in relation to its social purpose and varying degrees of pragmatism. The uplift project forms a constellation of discursive practices, the filmic components of which are theatrical and nontheatrical, industrial and entrepreneurial, and overlapping iterations of these modes. Uplift cinema is part of this practice of using film as a useful medium, but it extends the stakes of that usefulness to its subject: African Americans as useful citizens. Through various forms, uplift cinema argues that African Americans are modern and industrious citizens, and in this sense, uplift cinema operates at the intersection of making films useful (not just an entertaining frivolity or novelty) and making Black people useful (as workers and citizens). The raw material for many of these films is the Black population.

This fact is explicit in the case of the films made at Hampton and Tuskegee. One such film, *Making Negro Lives Count* (Hampton Institute, 1915), clearly plays on this dual meaning in its title and in a narrative structure that showcases Hampton's ability to transform individuals and, as a result, communities. *Making Negro Lives Count* chronicles the conditions in poor rural communities, the training provided by Hampton to meet the challenges of those conditions, and the results of improvements made in the communities by Hampton graduates. More broadly, the institutes' films were part of the rhetorical arsenal of their multimedia publicity campaigns. With other publicity materials, these films constructed an uplift narrative that was central to the mission of Hampton and Tuskegee: they followed a narrative trajectory of personal and communal transformation in a purported documentary discourse to demonstrate the power of the institutes to bring about concrete change. Following a before-and-after logic—which I will discuss more extensively in chapter 1—

the publicity visualized the transformation that a student would presumably undergo during his or her tenure: what the student was when he or she arrived, and what he or she would be on leaving the school. The publicity materials often featured students (both real and fictitious) living in rural squalor prior to entering the institute, learning how to overcome the disadvantages of their birth through agricultural and industrial training, and then—in the “after” section—returning home to uplift their communities.

The narrative logic of before and after, however, is not exclusive to uplift films but is a mainstay of the rhetoric of useful cinema and, in addition, the rhetoric of advertisements more broadly. It is found in contemporary social welfare and sponsored films such as *The Man Who Learned* (Ashley Miller, Edison, 1910) on the dangers of unsanitary milk production told through the transformation of a stubborn farmer set on the old—and dangerous—ways, and *An American in the Making* (Carl Gregory, Thanhouser, 1913) on the assimilation of an immigrant into a steelworker (featuring lessons on safety procedures).⁶⁰ *The Moving Picture World*, for example, championed *The Man Who Learned* as “a very practical as well as useful film” for conveying its lesson concerning sanitary milk production practices by showing “the dangers inseparable from the old order” followed by the details of the “improved methods.” Sponsored by the New York Milk Committee, the film also “partially explains the recent advance in price,” presumably by telling consumers about the necessity and value of milk safety procedures.⁶¹ In *The Man Who Learned* the modernizing of the production of milk is the subject, while *An American in the Making* combines an assimilation narrative with the showcasing of safety devices and was produced under the auspices of the United States Steel Corporation and distributed by the National Association of Manufacturers (and later by the U.S. Bureau of Mines).⁶² The didacticism of these subjects is conveyed through a narrative structure that aims to elicit empathy from the spectator while alerting the audience to the consequences of inaction.

The before-and-after rhetoric, in uplift cinema and in useful cinema more broadly, carried as its subtext an insidious threat: the possibility of failure. In the case of uplift films, the photographic documentary evidence of the before-and-after periods becomes a rhetorical tool for both the promotion of advancement and the cautionary threat of impending downturn. From 1900 to 1917 (when its rhetoric shifted to emphasize Hampton’s war efforts), the “what if” scenario featured prominently in Hampton publicity, always calling attention to the other possible paths that might befall a student who did not manage to receive industrial training. This may seem a strange focus on failure in Hampton’s publicity, but it is in fact a carefully constructed rhetorical strategy that

insists on the need for the institute, a message that would be aimed at both northern philanthropists and southern Black communities.

The double address of the materials meant that the threat of failure was doubled as well. For white audiences, the threat was of the criminal licentiousness of the uneducated Black male who would be governed by “an unbridled body, an ignorant mind, and an undeveloped soul,” in the words of one northern white sympathizer.⁶³ For Black audiences, the threat was the status quo of poverty, dependency, and racial subjugation, highlighting the possibility of failure; for uplift to be a viable goal, there must always be the threat of the impending downturn of a precariously positioned people. The double address thus required a form with which to articulate the social mission of the institutes that would appeal to otherwise conflicting constituents. To this end, the publicity projects used a rhetoric in which formal representational strategies were foregrounded in the service of a political project. In the Hampton and Tuskegee publicity, the iconography of uplift is underscored by ambivalence; failure is always inherent in the promotion of progress.

The rhetoric of before and after that constituted the dominant strategy of the publicity materials of these southern institutes intensified in 1915, after the incendiary release of *The Birth of a Nation* and the ensuing response by mobilized African American groups. In April 1915 Hampton administrators allowed *The New Era*, a film compiled from reedited footage of one of the institute’s publicity films, to be appended as an epilogue to *The Birth of a Nation*. *The New Era* was added to the feature to placate the censors and critics of the epic’s misrepresentation of American history and African American humanity, and constituted, as I will argue in chapter 4, an “after” to the “before” that was *The Birth of a Nation*. The resulting outcry in the African American press and among the institute’s supporters and detractors caused heated arguments over the role of film in Black social struggles. The criticisms were twofold. First, Hampton was faulted for being involved in this project at all, and thereby giving legitimacy to *The Birth of a Nation*. Second, the material Hampton had contributed was described as being not strong enough and not used effectively enough to actually counteract Griffith’s film. These two criticisms are related, but they addressed different concerns for the use of motion pictures as an agent of uplift—exhibition context, reception, and efficacy of the material. Indeed, this incident demonstrated the possibility that Hampton’s industrial filmmaking could go awry when recontextualized and placed adjacent to such a reviled work.

Yet uplift cinema encompasses filmmaking practices that extend beyond the itinerant screenings in the interest of Hampton and Tuskegee to the more systematic engagement with moving pictures as a business venture by Black entre-

preneurs in the north. Apart from the films made at Hampton and Tuskegee, the films discussed in this book were made by entrepreneurs who produced them with the primary goal of financial success. (For example, the *Chicago Defender* referred to the exhibition of William Foster's first film, *The Railroad Porter*, as having been "placed on the market" by Foster.⁶⁴) To call the individual producer-director production mode of uplift cinema *entrepreneurial* is to encompass the three meanings of *entrepreneur*: the director or manager of a public musical institution, the nineteenth-century sense of "one who 'gets up' entertainments," to quote the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and the sense of owning and managing a business and assuming the risk of profit or loss. In this sense, the business and entertainment definitions of *entrepreneur* bring uplift into alignment with itinerant exhibitors like Lyman Howe.

Black film entrepreneurs worked with relative autonomy, unhindered by regulation or patent restrictions. There is no evidence to suggest that the Motion Picture Patents Company, which controlled licenses for exhibitors, took any notice of Black film enterprises because they operated outside of the exchange system monopolized by the Patents Company.⁶⁵ The term *entrepreneurial* also allows for an understanding of filmmaking that includes narrative and nonnarrative, fiction and nonfiction, theatrical and nontheatrical modes of film production. Although the southern institutes that engaged with motion picture technology did so for a variety of reasons, entertainment was not the primary objective; for independent Black film entrepreneurs, in contrast, the goal was to cultivate and sustain a paying audience through entertaining motion pictures and actualities pertaining to African American life.

Even in entrepreneurial films primarily designated for commercial exhibition, there is still a strong element of useful cinema (which I discuss in chapter 5). In their engagement with nonfiction and actuality forms, in addition to their fiction filmmaking, entrepreneurs explicitly employed moving pictures as agents of race pride and community self-recognition. By filming uplift, and creating uplift through film, they provided an image of Black people that countered the distorted projection of racist paranoia prevalent on American screens and asserted African Americans' humanity and civic belonging through moving pictures.

LOCAL FILM

Among the early moving pictures produced and exhibited by African Americans were iterations of a practice of filmmaking and exhibition known as the local film. The local film—also known as local topicals, local actualities, and

local views—was a type of film produced and exhibited for spectators drawn to the theater (or other exhibition site) by the possibility of seeing themselves, their acquaintances, and their communities on screen. Local films appealed to spectators' vanity as well as to their curiosity about how their image would appear when publicly projected. With their targeted address to specific audiences, local films proved to be very popular in the early cinema and beyond; the addition of local views was a common means of increasing audience interest in a moving picture show.⁶⁶ In the United States, Edison, Biograph, William Paley, and traveling exhibitors such as Lyman Howe were among early local film producers. And in 2012 Melton Barker's local talent film *The Kidnapper's Foil* (1930s–1950s) was named to the National Film Registry, garnering more attention for the local film.

One of the important features of the local film is that it is often a political gesture of self-recognition as well as a description of a popular practice of early filmmaking. In 1904 American Vitagraph advertised a traveling moving picture show by quoting the Scottish poet Robert Burns, "O would some Power the small gift give us / To see ourselves as others see us!"⁶⁷ There is a curious irony in this choice of verse to advertise local films. The Burns poem from which it is taken is titled "To a Louse, on Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet at Church," and it tells of an upper-class lady in church who does not notice a louse in her bonnet. If we saw ourselves as others see us, the verse continues, "What airs in dress and gait would leave us." To see oneself through the eyes of others, in the poet's imagination, frees the subject from vanity and pretensions. Lice are not discriminating in their prey, whether "beggar," "cattle," or "such fine a lady"; as the poem humorously laments the "impudence" of the louse, it celebrates the creature's democratic reach by gently mocking the lady's assumption that her beauty, rather than the nesting louse, is what has attracted others' eyes. For Burns, to see yourself as others see you is a humbling experience, made all the more so by the divine "Power" that affords this impossible perspective. When applied to moving pictures, however, this "small gift" takes on a broader significance: it allows us to see some of the issues involved in local film practices.

In Burns's poem, class is a central element of the need for self-recognition: the upper-class woman is not able to see herself as others see her (as a host for a louse). Although local film retains an interest in class, it moves in an opposite direction, affording working- and middle-class spectators the opportunity to see an image of themselves projected on a screen in a collective viewing experience—to see themselves as participatory members of a community and as subjects of a film. Thus, in their work on the Mitchell and Kenyon collection

in Britain (films largely involving working-class people), Vanessa Toulmin and Martin Loiperdinger point to this act of self-recognition as the central feature of the local film, a phenomenon that Tom Gunning has described (also in reference to the Mitchell and Kenyon films) as “the cry of recognition which baptizes this cinema of locality, as the amazement of a direct connection marks the viewing process.”⁶⁸ In Martin Johnson’s work on American local film in the transitional era and classical Hollywood era (such as home talent films and civic films with largely middle-class participants), he extends the attraction of seeing oneself on screen to consider place recognition as a constitutive aspect of the local film.⁶⁹ Where Robert Burns describes a mechanism of humility, the local film offered a means of publicly affirming the individual as an enfranchised member of a particular community.

African American uplift cinema is part of the tradition of local filmmaking, but it is more than that, using more than novelty as the primary draw for its audience. Put simply: African American local film demonstrates a more explicit awareness of existing in response to other images. African American filmmakers were presenting aspects of Black life to audiences (Black, white, and mixed) at a time of prevalent caricatures and degrading misrepresentation of African American images in popular culture. The act of seeing oneself on-screen as a dignified member of a community, then, functioned as a way to counteract the prevailing representational tendencies that existed in the broader culture of circulating images.

When the first film made at Hampton Institute, *John Henry at Hampton: A Kind of Student Who Makes Good* (1913), was shown to students and workers at the school in January 1914, the institute’s monthly publication reported: “Nothing is more vitally interesting than ‘to see ourselves as others see us’ and laughter and applause testified to the intimate appreciation of scenes showing the trials and triumphs of a Hampton student.”⁷⁰ I discuss this film in more detail in chapter 3. Here, I am interested in how the brief account of the screening refers not only to Burns’s poem but also to the definitional discourse of the African American condition theorized by Du Bois as “double-consciousness,” the idea of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, an “other” that is necessarily racially posited. Du Boisian double consciousness is an apt metaphor for the cinematic experience. Referring to Du Bois’s famous passage in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Gaines writes: “Suddenly one of the foundational statements in race theory appears as film theory, addressing the question of the execution of power through the trajectory of the eye.”⁷¹ Du Bois’s passage reads as follows:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁷²

Gaines posits race films—films with Black casts produced for Black audiences—as a kind of antidote to Du Bois's diagnosis: “For blacks there is the hegemonic absurdity of looking at themselves through the same distorted lens that eyes them so contemptuously. For blacks within white society who have historically been looking through the wrong lens, race movies offered a corrected view of things, not a radically new view but certainly an improved one.”⁷³

There is historical evidence to bear this out. Almost a century after Du Bois's famous formulation, Ossie Davis evocatively described the experience of watching race films in Black theaters, emphasizing the impact of this separate cinema in a space designated for Black spectators:

There were black people behind the scenes, telling our black story to us as we sat in black theaters. We listened blackly, and a beautiful thing happened to us as we saw ourselves up on the screen. We knew that sometimes it was awkward, that sometimes the films behaved differently than the ones we saw in the white theater. It didn't matter. It was ours, and even the mistakes were ours, and the fools were ours, and the villains were ours, and the people who won were ours, and the losers were ours. We were comforted by that knowledge as we sat in the dark, knowing that there was something about us up there on that screen, controlled by us, created by us—our own image, as we saw ourselves.⁷⁴

As Gaines suggests and Davis describes, race film “corrects” the skewed perspective of “the social dimension of looking relations” that is definitional to American hegemonic order.⁷⁵

Uplift cinema, in its interracial foundation, complicates this model. The local films, actualities, and industrial films present images that are at once aspiring and inspiring, but the meanings of the films shift depending on their ex-

hibition context and audience. The practices of entrepreneurial uplift cinema may have more in common with those that race films were known to use, yet the interracial collaboration that defined many of the entrepreneurial ventures also troubles the straightforwardness of Davis's evocative recounting. Double consciousness was not just a mode of spectatorship; for certain uplift films, it was a narrative assumption as well. Beyond this, the terms applied to African American psychology at the beginning of the twentieth century, and to the film experience more broadly, reflect the specific representational or spectatorial structures of the local film. The ideal of the local film is central to uplift because it is the literalization of the principle of seeing yourself as others see you.⁷⁶ The imperative of respectability and public presentability that marks the uplift project is mobilized in the reflecting capacities of the local film.

The Archive of Absence: A Manifesto for Looking at Lost Film

Film history is a history of survivors, and scholarly writing is consequently disproportionately weighted toward extant films. However, with more than 80 percent of films made in the silent era considered lost, it is irrational to perpetuate extant-centric film history.⁷⁷ Statistical rates of survival and loss are lamented but not presented as a rationale for broadening the scope of analysis. To invoke an Akan proverb, we should not leave the history of hunting to be written by hunters rather than the hunted. I propose that we apply the same scholarly curiosity and inquiry to so-called lost films that we do with extant film artifacts: we must go beyond accumulating filmographic data to ask the same questions of nonextant films, with adapted methodologies, as we would ask of film history's survivors. *Uplift Cinema* is meant to be a model of such a project. To my knowledge, it is the only book-length monograph devoted to nonextant films.⁷⁸

At the same time, as Stewart warns in her work on the Tyler, Texas Black Film Collection, we should get away from celebrating finds at the expense of critical engagement with the way in which the archive produces meaning.⁷⁹ This is not to downplay the incredibly important efforts of archivists and scholars who have doggedly labored to find, collect, repatriate, and preserve extant exemplars of early Black cinema or pieces of film history as a whole. Nor is it a call to deprive the film print per se, as others—such as Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin in *Looking Past the Screen* and Jennifer Bean and Diane Negra in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*—have explicitly and implicitly done. Rather, it is a call to not further bury the so-called losers of history by schol-

arly indifference, a call for work that complements efforts to find, preserve, and restore prints by paying increased attention to films that are, for whatever reason, considered lost. This work should also remind us of the possibilities afforded by extrafilmic research on surviving films. As the increasing scholarly attention to nontheatrical film demonstrates, there is much that we still do not know about surviving films and their history, the cultures in which they circulated, and the audiences for whom they were screened. As I hope to show in this book, we have much to learn from such “losers” if we look beyond what is no longer there.

What does it mean to talk about lost film? This requires a necessarily relational stance. To whom is a film lost? Films and film artifacts that are considered lost to us did, of course, once enjoy projection (beyond the fantasy that our desires might conjure up). Though obvious, it bears reminding that just because we can't see a film does not mean that someone else hasn't, or didn't, see it. But before we start talking about those producers and spectators—the subject of this book—we should think a bit more about our own vantage point. How has the field of film studies dealt with the problem of lost, fragmentary, unreliable, and disappearing print sources?

Language surrounding nonextant film largely falls into three categories of terms, often invoked in combination: the historical artifact, the perishable organic, and the spiritual. In the first category we find analogies and metaphors such as *ruins*, *buried*, *archaeology*, *excavation*, *vacuum*, *holes*, *voids*, *gaps*, and *lacunae*. In the second category are *evolutionary*, *condemned*, *perished*, and *morgue*. The last category answers the perceived lack evoked by the first two, and thereby establishes film restoration and preservation as a near-messianic solution, invoked with terms such as *saving* and *resurrection*. Spatial concepts meet organic metaphors to invoke a divine (or mad-scientist) promise of bringing what was once dead back to life. Once found (and hopefully preserved), a film is then engaged with as a social and material entity. “Excavation,” Gaines asserts, “is only the first stage of reclamation.”⁸⁰

In *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, Giuliana Bruno writes that in an environment where “absence is dominant,” one must reflect “on loss and destruction.”⁸¹ Discussions of loss in cinema often use terms like *archaeology* that conjure up images of digging through layers of sediment left by time; excavating among ruins; reconstructing fragments; and imagining the past through its artifacts, detritus, and ephemera. This is not wrong. But emphasizing the loss of the object reifies its status as artifact. To effectively address what has been lost to us, we should think of absence a little differently. Instead of defining something by what it is not, this project—and, indeed, the vagaries of film

history more broadly—require us to look for the presence in the absence.⁸² For those of us who study nonextant films, absence is the archive. Instead of perpetuating a binary of lost and found, we must take as the objects of our inquiry the imprint left by the films' existence and the traces left from conception to production and circulation. Instead of praying for resurrection, we should spend more time with absence. Absence is defined by the object it regrets; it is marked by the location, position, positing, and emplacement (both in time and space) of the missing piece. It is just as temporally and spatially situated as its presence. In a very real way, absence has presence. I propose we look at the presence of absence.

The 1978 International Federation of Film Archives conference in Brighton has become a milestone moment for film historians, what Thomas Elsaesser has called “the beginning of a new era of research.”⁸³ Nearly six hundred films—all produced prior to 1907—were screened at this landmark gathering of archivists, scholars, and enthusiasts, challenging many perceptions about early cinema.⁸⁴ As Musser recalls, Brighton “signaled a new integration of academic and archive-based history and fostered tendencies that contributed to the formulation of a new historiography.”⁸⁵ The historical turn that came out of the Brighton conference shifted the emphasis of early film historians toward empirical research. Going beyond the analysis of a film's aesthetic values, scholars interrogated aspects of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. It has been increasingly recognized that the film itself is only one element of a broader media universe. As Janet Staiger aptly notes, “being sheltered by studying only film is to work with blinders on.”⁸⁶ The consideration of films has been bolstered by attention to extrafilmic materials and contextualizing research; historical work is now unthinkable without this broadened perspective.

Even here, however, in the context of the “demotion of intrinsic filmic evidence,” film remains the reified object.⁸⁷ Although scholars have increasingly engaged with nonextant materials as contextual sources for the study of film, my contention is that even in the best examples of this work, they nonetheless deal with films that serve as models for what such a film ought to look like. That which is extant grounds, orients, and models our understanding of the nonextant. This has varying implications. Almost as a rule, the further from mainstream theatrically screened productions we get, the sparser the surviving evidence becomes, and the more the few extant films gain authority. In terms of African American film history, how we understand race film has been informed by its surviving exemplars. For example, only three of the more than twenty films made by Oscar Micheaux in the silent era are extant, yet they receive almost all of the scholarly attention. This emphasis on surviving material

is understandable, yet just as important are the films that are not available to us except as references in contemporary extrafilmic discourse.

Without extant film elements or even surviving photographic evidence, what claims can we make about a particular film? Lost to us today, nonextant films nonetheless existed at a given time and place and functioned in particular contexts, had actual effects on specific audiences, and consisted of certain formal properties. To ignore the formal aspects of these films is to reduce them to their status as facts of history, separate from the effect that they had on real spectators. Just because we cannot see them does not mean we cannot talk about them or about how they affected those who did have the privilege of seeing them. This book argues that nonextant film should be an object of study in its own right, not just a reference point for surviving fragments or items to round out a filmography. Here, too, I believe we can be bolder and assert that nonextant films can be studied, to varying degrees, for their formal aspects. I don't mean to say that these formal elements have been simply denied, but that scholars have been cautious about making claims about them. Although such study does involve speculation, there are solid grounds on which we can base our speculation. Part of the work of archival contextualization is precisely to refine our judgments about what these nonextant films would have looked like and how they could have appealed to spectators. This is the challenge that this project on uplift cinema aims to address. I treat the nonextant body of films that I term *uplift cinema* not merely as products that participated in historical events as facts of the past (events of history), but also as formal works that mobilized various aspects of moving picture technology and cinema's exhibition regimes to create an effect of uplift on producers and spectators.⁸⁸

The context of films' production and exhibition and accounts of their reception provide clues to indicate how they were formally constituted. These formal properties of all lost films fall on a spectrum of known to unknown.⁸⁹ Data on such properties as length, format, and narrative elements are often more available, whereas aspects of composition, framing, editing, and *mise-en-scène* are more difficult to discern—depending on surviving evidence, inferences must be made with caution. We can account for the broader cultural context in which these films were made and functioned (visual culture, discursive engagements, aesthetic properties, and so on). But this means that we have to look adjacently—that is, beyond cinema—to the broader culture of the time. Lewis and Smoodin talk about “looking past the screen,” but in the absence of projected images to fill that screen, a composite picture must be proffered from its surviving social, cultural, and economic attendants. More broadly, looking and thinking adjacently mean immersing ourselves in the cultural context of

such screenings. Instead of being defeated by the seemingly overwhelming lack of information concerning nonextant film, I propose that we not let this deter us from sustained scholarly inquiry.

Although uplift films may be lost, there is an abundance of archival ephemera that constitute, in the aggregate, a composite portrait of rich filmmaking practices. Three kinds of primary sources make up the raw material for the new model of historiographic study that I am proposing. The first two concern institutional internal discourse. First, at Tuskegee's and Hampton's archives, institutional records and surviving ephemera provided indispensable context for approaching the motion pictures produced at and by these institutes. The materials include the letters and papers of the secretaries of the Boards of Trustees and those of the principals of the institutes from this period; materials related to the institutes' involvement with domestic and international expositions; materials related to the choirs and tours of the singers who accompanied the films; principals' reports; materials related to the Hampton Camera Club, run by the school photographer-turned-filmmaker; records of the photographer/filmmaker; records of special meetings of the Boards of Trustees; and the two most valuable items at Hampton, minutes of faculty meetings and a file on *The Birth of a Nation*. The D. W. Griffith Papers and the NAACP Records have been valuable sources for behind-the-scenes discussions concerning the Hampton epilogue. By connecting the dots across disparate sources, I have been able to piece together the origins of Hampton's filmmaking project, its evolution, and its vexed intersection with the most famous film of its time. The second kind of primary materials concerning Hampton and Tuskegee are the publicity materials, brochures, publications, pamphlets, photographs, and annual reports of the institutes, all of which provide valuable context for their filmmaking projects. These materials demonstrate the rhetorical structures of uplift narratives and provide insights into the way the films would have been designed to work in the fund-raising campaigns of the institutes.

The third group of materials encompasses the public discourse produced by institutions as well as the African American, mainstream, and trade press. This includes published print material such as issues of the *Southern Workman*, the Hampton publication that reported fairly extensively on Hampton's motion picture production and exhibition process, and the Tuskegee student newspaper. African American newspapers have been central in reconstructing the production and exhibition histories of entrepreneurial uplift films. Mining the mainstream press, including trade publications like the *Moving Picture World* and *Motography* as well as regional and national newspapers, provides crucial information, however disparate, on how these films were considered by main-

stream—white—writers and exhibitors, how they circulated, and how they were exhibited. The George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection at the University of California, Los Angeles, contains important materials that have fortunately been archived, such as the incorporation papers of Black film companies.

The fact that there are no known extant examples of Black cinema prior to 1920 does not diminish its significance to Black film culture, social life, economic strivings, and issues of self-representation and self-fashioning.⁹⁰ It is our responsibility, as scholars of Black film, silent era cinema, and American film and culture, to treat nonextant films as having the same concerns and import as their extant counterparts. If we do not look adjacently at these elements of film history that have fallen into the interstices of dominant narratives, we risk rehearsing the same myths about our cinematic—and, indeed, our cultural—past. Worse, we risk missing the rich, albeit ephemeral, archive of the majority of films produced in this period. Part of the project of media archaeology, as I understand it, is to excavate these forgotten aspects of cinema's trajectory as a means of reassessing the ways in which it took shape, worked in relation to broader concerns, and persisted or disappeared. Uplift cinema is rife with instances of possibilities for the medium of motion pictures as an agent for the social, economic, educational, and political advancement of African Americans. And it includes striking examples of innovative engagements with film form that are part of the era's experiments with the formal possibilities of moving pictures. The fact that some of these possibilities persisted into the race film era and beyond, while others did not, merits further understanding. My hope is that this book will encourage others to look past extant films to the traces that are abundant even in the absence of survivors. Only when we do this will we begin to correct the imbalance of scholarly emphasis and give the so-called losers of history their due and restore their presence.

Uplift Cinema

This book contains five chapters. The first explores the visual culture of uplift in which the motion pictures functioned. This involves, centrally, the campaigns of Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes, both print and live (such as fundraising meetings, concerts, and special events), in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These campaign materials are important precursors to the uplift films as they established the institutes' multimedia rhetorical strategies that conveyed their political and social program. I examine the role of pamphlets, publications, photography, stereopticon displays, pageants, and singing

designed for the promotion of the institutes in their fund-raising campaigns. These campaigns were designed to demonstrate that African Americans were modern, economically self-sufficient people and constituents of what Washington called a southern “new era of industrial progress.”⁹¹ Although these materials were primarily targeted toward white philanthropists in the north, they also were circulated among African American communities in the south as models of uplift. The presence of such a double audience and the double address it necessitated was quite prevalent but also complicated. To understand it, I trace the ways in which uplift cinema is rhetorically related to its multimedia precursors by establishing the existing rhetorical strategies that informed the emergence of uplift cinema and that constituted its exhibition context.

In the second chapter, I look at the two films made by northern entrepreneurs at Tuskegee Institute, *A Trip to Tuskegee* (1909) and *A Day at Tuskegee* (1913). The first film was produced by the George W. Broome Exhibition Company of Boston, owned by a filmmaking entrepreneur who made actualities for Black audiences, including scenes of local churchgoers and a film on the Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Ethan Allen, in Vermont. I show that Broome’s filming of Tuskegee in 1909 began as a collaboration with the institute, but his entrepreneurial exhibition projects (which were beyond the control of the Tuskegee authorities) led Tuskegee to distance itself from the filmmaker. Thus, for the second film, Tuskegee collaborated with a different company, the Chicago-based Anderson-Watkins Film Company, which screened its film of Tuskegee for northern philanthropists as well as southern Black audiences. In tracing these two histories, I argue that the institute sought to exert greater control over the filming and circulation of these moving pictures. Yet, despite these efforts, the uplift model came into conflict with the ways in which spectators consumed—and wanted to consume—these images.

In the third chapter, I focus on the industrial film production of Hampton Institute, which made three films between 1913 and 1915. Two of the films were fictionalized narratives of a student’s progress through the institute; the third was a nonfiction exhibition of the work done at the school. Reading them together with the sponsored filmmaking at Tuskegee, I propose that the motion picture productions made at Tuskegee and Hampton are important components of the history of sponsored and industrial filmmaking. These historical excavations lead to a new account of how cinema functioned in the broader uplift project, serving as a complexly functioning component of uplift education that appealed, successfully and unsuccessfully, to a variety of audiences.

In chapter 4, I discuss the Hampton short *The New Era* and its use as an epilogue for certain screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Here, the industrial

filmmaking of Hampton met mainstream commercial filmmaking, which led to a barrage of criticism of the institute for its association with Griffith's racist epic. I show how this controversy brought to the fore the underlying tensions in the representational aspect of the uplift project and underscored the immediacy of the problem of cinematic complicity in the perpetuation of social inequity. I argue that the controversy over the epilogue belied Hampton's naïve faith in the power of a positive image (*The New Era*) to challenge a negative one (*The Birth of a Nation*), producing a sustained crisis in the cinematic promotion of African American modernization. In looking at the controversy the chapter also provides a fuller picture of how Griffith's film was received and responded to by contemporary Black audiences and communities.

In the fifth chapter, I shift my focus to look at early motion picture entrepreneurs working in northern cities. Along with George W. Broome and Louis B. Anderson, filmmakers such as Hunter C. Haynes in New York and Peter P. Jones, Alfred Anderson, and William Foster in Chicago embarked on moving picture ventures. Broome and Louis Anderson made nonfiction films, but Foster, Haynes, Jones, and Alfred Anderson made both nonfiction and fiction films. I discuss how these entrepreneurs engaged with the uplift project through their filmmaking and how their work operated discursively to promote Black modernity through cinema. In this chapter, I trace the rhetorical and social effects that these entrepreneurial films attempted and, to varying degrees, achieved. I consider the connections forged by Black filmmaking entrepreneurs with the broader film industry and the possibilities—both attempted and realized—for African American professional advancement behind the moving picture camera.

I conclude with an epilogue that considers the afterlife of the issues raised in the book, especially those concerning race film and later useful films made in the service of African American causes. Through the example of Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul*, I point to a legacy that uplift cinema left for, and that was used by, later filmmakers. Uplift cinema thus becomes a model for alternative uses of motion picture technology that opened up other possibilities for African American engagements with cinema.

My discussion of uplift cinema seeks to demonstrate the importance and vibrancy of Black film culture, however tentative and circumscribed, in the period prior to *The Birth of a Nation* and the proliferation of race filmmaking that began in the late 1910s. With this study, I aim to do two things: first, to complement the rich body of scholarship on African American theatrical fiction film with a thorough consideration of both nontheatrical and nonfiction forms of filmmaking that emerged in this period; and second, to emphasize

the major role that cinema played in the self-fashioning of Black civic life in the 1910s, in both northern cities and the rural south. This work entails reconstructing the cultural artifacts that have been lost to history and using them to broaden our understanding of American film history; early Black film culture; and the myriad functions of moving pictures in the promotion of, struggle for, and enactment of African American advancement in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Along with this film historical project, I aim to contribute to critical engagements with the status of modernity, especially in relation to the role of moving pictures and discourses on race. In the context of Black film history, modernity has been understood as concurrently constituted by cinema culture and the color line. This has led to a recognition of different values of modernity. In the early twentieth century, the south was the site of “antimodernity,”⁹² issues of race marked a distinctly modern phenomenon,⁹³ and film was the medium of modernity par excellence.⁹⁴ Yet these factors are rarely brought together in critical discourses surrounding Black modernity.⁹⁵ As I show, uplift cinema represents an aspect of Black modernity that complicates these divisions and that can be usefully added to genealogies of American cinema and African American engagements with film. Southern institutions for African Americans fiercely fought the ideology of antimodernity, promoting their fight with the most modern means of mass communication. Through this and other case studies—not least, the role of northern Black entrepreneurs—this book places uplift cinema at the center of the debates over Black visual culture, self-determination, the role of moving pictures as a means of social and political protest, and the negotiation of ideologies of racial representation.