

Giving Voice, Taking Voice

Nonwhite and Nontheatrical

JACQUELINE NAJUMA STEWART

When night comes, and she has had several drinks and sleeps, it is easy to take the keys. I know now where she keeps them. Then I open the door and walk into their world. It is, as I always know, made of cardboard.—JEAN RHYNS, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

When novelist Jean Rhys gives voice to Bertha Mason, the “madwoman in the attic” who makes brief, mysterious, and destructive appearances in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), she offers an intriguing model for revisionist historiography.¹ *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a postcolonial counter-bildungsroman. Rhys takes Mr. Rochester’s melodramatic, marriage-proposal-busting sob story from Brontë’s novel—the one about his ill-fated, secreted nuptials with Bertha during his days in Jamaica—as her starting point, and crafts an affecting account of the complex and brutal legacies of slavery and colonialism. In Rhys’s hands, Bertha’s Creole background becomes more than a self-evident marker of her bestial non-Englishness—as “monster,” “intemperate and unchaste” with a “black and scarlet visage”—that must be locked up in Thornfield Hall’s garret under the (sometimes inebriated) guard of Mrs. Poole.² Instead, when Bertha is at the center of the tale, we get her real name (Antoinette), and her Creole identity becomes a complex, crumbling colonial inheritance that brings a continuum of racial identities into relief, from an insurgent black Caribbean servant class to white English interlopers like Mr. Rochester scouring the edges of the British Empire for its resources, financial and human. More recently, Alice Randall attempts a similar re-orienting in her 2001 novel *The Wind Done Gone*, a retelling of Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 blockbuster novel *Gone with the Wind*, from the perspective

of a mixed-race slave, that pushes Scarlett O'Hara (renamed "Other") and *GWTW*'s other fabled white characters to the margins of the narrative.³

There are instructive connections between these literary works and the revisionist work of this collection. *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film* turns our attention away from the subjects and subjectivities that have long occupied the center of scholarly and popular film histories, using race as the fulcrum. Editors Allyson Nadia Field and Marsha Gordon posit that attentiveness to questions of race can illuminate a range of film production, distribution, exhibition, and reception practices that have gone underexplored in our focus on narrative, feature-length fiction films made for commercial release. This volume builds upon Field's and Gordon's previous, field-expanding scholarship on sponsored and educational films, work that has contributed substantially to the growing body of scholarship on orphan films of many types (including home movies, student films, medical films, training films, and others). In bringing these essays together, they continue to identify the pivotal but understudied roles race has played not just in (so many) individual orphan films, but within the larger systems of visual, cultural, and ideological production that constitute film in all of its forms.

The type of film considered in this book, nontheatrical film, is such vast terrain that it would require tremendous labor to gauge its scope, to trace its known paths and forge new ones, to excavate its layered, sometimes buried, histories. But perhaps this work should not be described with such violent language of exploratory empiricism. In scholarly efforts to account for nontheatrical film, we can be daunted by both the sheer amount and variety of films that fall under this umbrella (much of which actually survives in material form), and the lack of archival, methodological, and pedagogical guides available to us as compared with those that have been developed for theatrical film. Thus it may be tempting to take up the language, and methods, of explorers or pioneers when approaching nontheatrical works. One of this book's most valuable lessons, however, is that nontheatrical film is a landscape that will likely never be mapped definitively.

The essays collected here suggest ways of thinking about nontheatrical film that echo Jean Rhys's delineation of the "madwoman's" backstory as one necessarily fashioned (in its plot points and oblique narrative style) by racialized histories of repression and contradiction. That is, these wonderfully detailed case studies cannot simply transfer the same research and analytical methods long used for theatrical film, and thereby annex the nontheatrical as a new, and fully knowable, scholarly settlement. Instead, by foregrounding race, the contributors to this volume evoke nontheatrical film's polyvocal and

often enigmatic qualities, much as Antoinette's story opens onto a sea of evidentiary questions and interpretive possibilities that is both wide and deep.

Signal among these questions and possibilities are considerations of nontheatrical film's relationships to Hollywood and to theatrical film presentation. The term "nontheatrical" was used with clearly positive connotations by the makers and marketers of sponsored and educational films across the twentieth century. Embracing its differences from commercial, entertainment-oriented film product, this self-described nontheatrical film world did not understand itself as an entirely marginal one, particularly given the volume of work it generated and circulated, and the staggering numbers of viewers it reached in venues including schools, churches, factories, libraries, museums, world's fairs, and many, many more. Haidee Wasson makes the provocative claim that "the vast technological infrastructure and the expansive film viewing practices that have long existed outside of the idealized world of commercial movie theaters announces irrevocably that the idea of nontheatrical exhibition is so broad as to border on being meaningless."⁴ Wasson flags a terminological issue that begs further debate among scholars. We know that "nontheatrical" had great utility for the individuals and industries that produced works for noncommercial spaces (although nontheatrical films were occasionally shown in theaters and were shown widely in spaces—like department stores—where other things were being sold, or for the purposes of stimulating consumption more generally). We must ask, then, how the intentional act of combining multiple film practices under the nontheatrical umbrella functioned to serve the pedagogical, ideological, and financial interests of those who embraced it as self-descriptive.

We might consider this issue in relation to the use of the term "minority" to describe, within various U.S. political and institutional contexts, a shared status among multiple identity groups of people who are not white. "Minority" obviously attempts to call attention to legacies of racial discrimination within, say, corporate or educational institutions in which people of color have been underrepresented relative to their numbers in surrounding populations. But it is also a term that connotes a minor positionality, which can produce awkward if not disempowering effects. Would a group of college students interested in chemistry, or Ultimate Frisbee, or Russian culture organize themselves as a/the Minority Student Association? Moreover, as contemporary language about U.S. racial demographics—particularly in journalistic discourse—speaks straight-facedly of our transition to a "majority minority" population, we can see the "meaninglessness" (Wasson's term again) of hard numbers in the face of discursive traditions that have for so

long served to identify center and margins, to designate others, and/or to embrace one's own difference.

The way in which “minority” has become shorthand for multiple and intersecting issues of racial identification, oppression, and (potential) empowerment serves as a helpful guide for understanding how the term “non-theatrical” has functioned as a reflection on power. What the nontheatrical film community was marking then, and what we as film scholars are tracking now, is the issue of who controls the moving image as a means to shape the ways in which people see themselves and their place(s) in the world. In pointing to the places where nonwhite people and nontheatrical films have overlapped, this book displays a stunning array of moments and locations at which desires to understand racial identities, disparities, and subjectivities meet, with disparate effects.

Importantly, we learn across this book that nontheatrical film does not stand entirely in opposition to theatrical film, but rather is entangled with it and its racial ideologies on multiple levels. Despite the negation implied in the label “nontheatrical,” we see much crossover of personnel (writers, directors, and actors) between nontheatrical and theatrical film industries. Not surprisingly, then, we see important similarities in form and style. Nontheatrical films on the higher-capitalized end, such as educational and sponsored films, use storytelling and visual techniques that are familiar from commercial films, such as classical narrative structures, clear character motivation and psychology, and continuity editing.

And while it has been argued that most nontheatrical film types are linked in their bid for a kind of social usefulness (i.e., edification over profit), they can nonetheless reflect the limits imposed by the dominant thinking about race within which they are produced. *The Corner* (1962), for example, directed by Northwestern University film student Robert Ford, is a sponsored documentary about the Vice Lords social club (or street gang, depending on your point of view) that features a range of moving and insightful first-person accounts of the struggles of growing up black, male, and poor on Chicago's West Side. It also features extraordinary details of the spaces and styles of black youth interaction, demonstrating a clear rapport between Ford and his film subjects.⁵ *The Corner* sets up the presentation of the Vice Lords' voices with an anonymous male narrator speaking over a freeze-frame of the film's central character, Clarence Smith. The narrator tells us that what follows is “a description of their world as they see it.” The same narrator comes back at the end of the film to ask, over several images of Clarence squatting alone in front of the neighborhood hot dog joint, “When time comes for

them to leave the corner . . . who will have the patience to help them make the adjustment from the law of the streets to the laws of society?" This narrational bracketing seeks to establish the authenticity of the film's portraits, creating a sense of empathy for the plight of African American youth lacking adequate educational, recreational, and job opportunities. But this strategy also reveals the presence of the filmmaker as an outsider who is presenting and interpreting the film's visual and sonic information. The fact that *The Corner's* framing narration is performed by a voice that does not use the black teen slang or the West Side Chicago accent that is so pronounced in the Vice Lords' speech raises questions about the faith or interest this film has in the ability of the film's subjects to describe "their world as they see it," not to mention the expectations and needs of the film's presumably predominantly white audiences (likely social services professionals) who view this lower-class black world from the outside.

This is, of course, an issue that emerges in the wide range of theatrical, fictional social problem films about race produced by independent filmmakers and Hollywood studios, particularly during the civil rights era. From Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *No Way Out* (1950) to Shirley Clarke's *The Cool World* (1963), we get significant representations of the tensions seething within African American communities, communicated through a range of approaches attempting to achieve psychological and/or sociological realism in their renderings of black characters and their worlds. These filmmakers are grappling with nothing less than the country's failure to uphold the tenets of democracy and the urgent need to address the still-unresolved social and psychological consequences of slavery and systematic racial oppression. When social problem films prioritize white viewers in their modes of address, they risk objectifying their nonwhite subjects and simplifying their representations of the causes of racial troubles. Like their theatrical counterparts, nontheatrical films about racial issues routinely work to explain nonwhite subjectivity to white viewers, showing nonwhite subjects responding to the indelicate but perennially fascinating question (per W. E. B. Du Bois), "How does it feel to be a problem?"⁶

This is the question Rhys takes up in her rendering of the inner life of Bertha (real name Antoinette)—elaborating her first-person voice, her memories and dreams, her sensory experiences. Activating identification and empathy is of course one of the cinema's most compelling operations, so it comes as no surprise that nontheatrical films would use many of the strategies that engrossed viewers of commercial films in movie theaters. When it comes to "minority" subjects, we can watch how films made in both





FIGURES F.1–F.3. *The Corner* (Robert Ford, 1962). Stills courtesy of Chicago Film Archives.

modes negotiate the complexities of making suppressed subjectivities visible and marginalized voices heard. If nontheatrical films aspire to open up new and useful ways to look at a range of subjects—to inform, to educate, to spur to action—how exactly do they use their nontheatrical status to do so? Close analysis is one of the most effective methods used in the studies featured in this volume, marking the importance of considering questions of film style even for films that would seem not to understand themselves primarily as art or entertainment. These moments of close reading are important not just for what they suggest about the general approaches in educational or sponsored or activist films, but also for what they say about the individual texts being read, and the nuances of the representational strategies being brought to bear on the overdetermined subject of race in American society.

Stylistic analysis is also valuable for films on the lower-capitalized end of the nontheatrical spectrum, films not produced for broad markets or even for public uses. Footage of ethnographic research, church activities, or family rituals also rewards consideration of style (e.g., camerawork, editing, performance) for what it can tell us about the goals of the filmmakers and the relations between the filmmakers, their subjects, and their audiences. Films like these may not understand themselves to be making an argument or advocating changes in thought or behavior. And yet, of course, acts of documentation are never neutral, and films of these sorts are shaped by particular notions of culture and community, normativity and difference, that we can read in the ways in which the camera is positioned and footage is organized. Close readings of nontheatrical films need not aspire to identify auteurist tendencies or nail down generic codes, though it can help us to recognize patterns across works. Attention to nontheatrical film styles can also point us to aspects that have not been thoroughly interrogated in the study of theatrical, narrative films, such as the effects of incidental, accidental, and unplanned elements within the frame, the kinds of elements that are so evident in films with lower production values and films made by nonprofessionals.

I think about these seemingly incidental elements quite a bit in my work on the South Side Home Movie Project (SSHMP) in Chicago, an archival and community engagement program I founded in 2005 (thanks to Jasmyn Castro for the shout-out in her contribution to this book). The family films archived by the SSHMP illustrate vigorous effort on the part of black families to show themselves living well, loving their families, supporting their communities, and traveling across the country and around the world. Like all home movies, this footage not only documents concrete places and

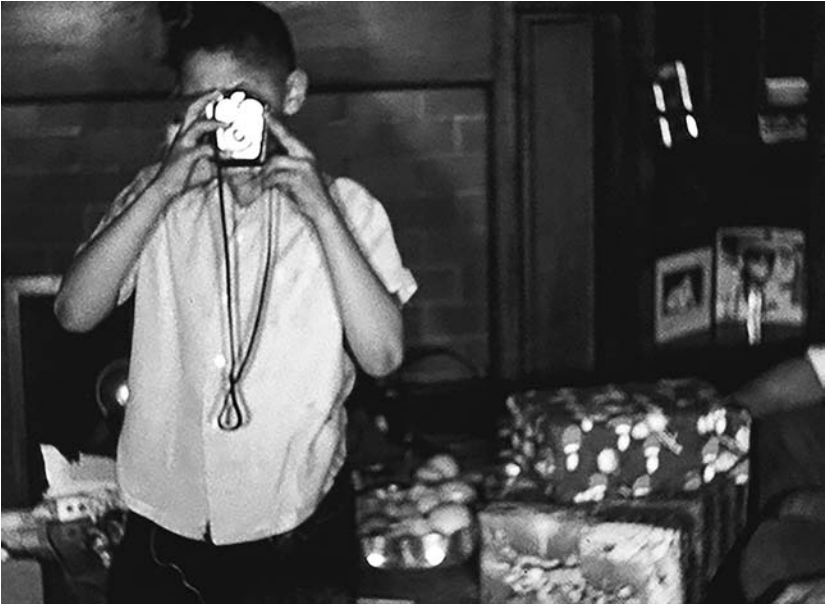
historical moments, but also displays more ephemeral practices such as glances and smiles, dances and hugs, cooperative poses and skeptical disdain for the camera. Home movie *mise-en-scène* is replete with objects, some placed by the filmmakers and their families (e.g., home decor), many outside of their control (e.g., elements of street and other public scenes). As we seek to make this footage widely available to the many constituencies we think it would benefit (including scholars, K–12 students and teachers, artists, genealogists, community residents), we are constantly asking ourselves how best to describe the contents of home movies, given their overwhelming detail. In constructing our catalog, we have been wondering how to provide a useful guide to this long undervalued body of work.⁷ Recognizing that people might search this footage for elements that extend far beyond the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) that govern cataloging practices, SSHMP archivist Candace Ming has been developing a taxonomy specific to home movies that draws on the important models offered by the Center for Home Movies, the Chicago Film Archives, and the Texas Archive of the Moving Image, modified to reflect the particularities of our collection.⁸

What we are learning is that, try as we might to anticipate what people might look for in home movies, our descriptive work is most effective when it is understood as an ongoing and interactive endeavor. We conduct oral histories with the families who participate in the project, eliciting information about what we are seeing on-screen. And we invite active, vocal participation at screenings that we host across the South Side, noting viewer comments that add helpful detail to our catalog descriptions. The dialogue engendered by home movies—which were, of course, accompanied by ample conversation in living rooms and basements during family gatherings—is a boon to researchers. We at the SSHMP have come to appreciate the ongoing, symbiotic relationship between the home moviemakers, subjects, and audiences (original and current), and the advantages to activating these relationships continually in our efforts to contextualize and interpret this material.

Here is a fundamental difference between theatrical and nontheatrical film: the wider spaces nontheatrical films provide for audience interaction. While lively fan cultures are certainly important aspects of theatrical film history, movie theaters—the idealized site for film exhibition—are designed for audiences to engage with the screen and not with each other. Even the orientation and fixity of movie theater seats is not conducive to conversation after a film. Proper audience decorum prohibits talking during film screenings (though laughter and screams are acceptable for certain genres). But films across the nontheatrical spectrum are designed to spark conversation, to



FIGURES F.4–F.6. *Easter 55 Xmas Party* (1955). Film held in the Jean Patton Collection, South Side Home Movie Project, University of Chicago, with gratitude to Ghian Foreman.



motivate audiences to speak. From classroom conversations sparked by educational films to postwar group discussion films on race relations described by Anna McCarthy to convivial private screenings of family films, viewers convened outside of movie theaters are invited to process aloud what they have seen, to verbalize the relationships between their lives and the worlds pictured on-screen.⁹ And when we consider the invitation to speak offered by nontheatrical films in tandem with traditions of vocal film viewing among marginalized viewers of many sorts (people of color, LGBTQ audiences, young viewers), we can see a striking range of reception strategies that may not be as nonnormative as classical film theories would lead us to believe.

We might say then that nontheatrical films made by, for, and about non-white people point to radical new ways of understanding film-viewer relations and open up key spaces for film and, by extension, social critique. Even when nontheatrical films struggle with the politics of giving voice to non-white subjects, their very mode is designed to facilitate the voicings of viewers. Now that we are paying closer attention to the ways in which nontheatrical film has coexisted with theatrical film, we are gaining new perspectives on what we have for so long taken to be the medium's most meaningful and influential iterations. *Screening Race* offers compelling new views of the landscapes of film history, in which Hollywood no longer dominates from the center. We learn in these pages of the myriad ways in which nontheatrical films both represented race and stimulated active dialogue about race among its viewers. Looking from these new, previously ignored vantage points, we begin to see Hollywood's treatments of race as Antoinette saw Thornfield Hall. They appear to be "made of cardboard"—vulnerable fictions far less equipped than nontheatrical films to accommodate the potentially destabilizing active participation of the Other.

FILMOGRAPHY

All available films discussed in the foreword can be streamed through the book's web page at <https://www.dukeupress.edu/Features/Screening-Race>.

Easter 55 Xmas Party (1955), 8 min., 16mm

ACCESS: Jean Patton Collection, South Side Home Movie Project, University of Chicago.

The Corner (1962), 27 min., 16mm

PRODUCTION: Northwestern University Department of Radio, Television, and Film.

DIRECTOR: Robert Ford. MUSIC: Carver Blanchard, Red Brown, Dick Carlson, Jim DiPasquale, Brad Epst, Paul Matheny, Rob McEnany. ACCESS: Chicago Film Archives.

NOTES

- 1 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).
- 2 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Dent, 1847; New York: Dutton, 1953), 309, 306, 310. Citations refer to the Dutton edition.
- 3 Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).
- 4 Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 36.
- 5 *The Corner* was preserved by Chicago Film Archives and can be viewed on their website: Robert Ford, dir., *The Corner* (1962), Robert Ford Collection, 1962–1964, F.2012-04-0005, Chicago Film Archives, http://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/15253.
- 6 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: McClurg, 1903; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7. Citations refer to the Oxford edition.
- 7 See South Side Home Movie Project, <https://sshmpportal.uchicago.edu>.
- 8 The Center for Home Movies, “The Center for Home Movies 2010 Digitization and Access Summit: Final Report” (January 2011), 9–23, http://www.centerforhomemovies.org/Home_Movie_Summit_Final_Report.pdf. Chicago Film Archives (founded in 2003 by Nancy Watrous) and the Texas Archive of the Moving Image (founded in 2002 by Caroline Frick) are pioneering regional film repositories documenting nontheatrical film histories.
- 9 Anna McCarthy, “The Politics of Wooden Acting,” in *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (New York: New Press, 2010), 83–118.