

Preface

*Since dominance is always incomplete and monopoly imperfect,
the rule of every ruling class is unstable.*

— Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 1983

*"Truth" is linked in a circular relation with systems of power
which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it
induces and which extend it. A "regime" of truth.*

— Michel Foucault, *"Truth and Power,"* 1980

Perhaps the most pronounced tendency in American race studies is to mass around explicit or inferred explanatory models which are derivative of Marx or insinuated from Foucault's notion that "power establishes a particular regime of truth." In materialist terms the simplest rendering is that the commercial nexus of the African slave trade and the political apparatus of colonialism, the economies of securing and controlling African bodies, the sinews of patriarchy, and the trade in slave-produced commodities (relations of power) eventuate in the establishment of the Negro and discourses on race (admissible and possible knowledges). And since the historical and cultural African subject has been unimagined, there is no reason to suspect that some of the "imperfections" of domination might originate from the enslaved. Or, alternatively, that the manufacture of the slave might anticipate and absorb the availability of more tractable materials.

In its totality this account of race production is a seductive archaeology, securing revelation, elegance, and precision for the obscurity and chaos which are a constant threat in historical research. However, with it, one is obligated to a kind of unitarianism where *all* the relations of power collaborate in and cohabit a particular discursive or disciplinary regime. The coexistence of alternative, oppositional, or simply different relations of power are left unexamined or instantiated. The possibility of the coincidence of different relations of power colliding, interfering, or even generating resistance remains a fugitive consideration. Edward Said raised the alarm about this last possibility: "The disturbing circularity of Foucault's theory of power is a form of

rhetorical overtotalization. In human history there is always something beyond the reach of dominating systems, no matter how deeply they saturate society, and this is obviously what makes change possible, limits power in Foucault's sense, and hobbles that theory of power.¹ Placing resistance to the side for one moment, Said insists that Foucault's "textuality" insulated his inquiry from lived multiplicities, the several histories extant in even the most modestly constructed societies, and the resultant matrices of identity. Racial regimes are subsequently unstable truth systems. Like Ptolemaic astronomy, they may "collapse" under the weight of their own artifices, practices, and apparatuses; they may fragment, desiccated by new realities, which discard some fragments wholly while appropriating others into newer regimes. Indeed, the possibilities are the stuff of history.

Foucault, of course, was not quite the dolt Said makes him out to be.² But there is still the impulse in Foucault's thought to elect the dialectic as a privileged site of contestation (even his treatment of subjugated knowledges possesses that tinge: "naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity").³ It is as if systems of power never encounter the stranger, or that strangers can be seamlessly abducted into a system of oppression. In our own interrogations this amounts to the presumption that the exposing of the invention of raced subjects is a sufficient method for recognizing and explaining difference. To the contrary, the production of race is chaotic. It is an alchemy of the intentional and the unintended, of known and unimagined fractures of cultural forms, of relations of power and the power of social and cultural relations.

Racial regimes are constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power. While necessarily articulated with accruals of power, the covering conceit of a racial regime is a makeshift patchwork masquerading as memory and the immutable. Nevertheless, racial regimes do possess history, that is, discernible origins and mechanisms of assembly. But racial regimes are unrelentingly hostile to their exhibition. This antipathy exists because a discoverable history is incompatible with a racial regime and from the

realization that, paradoxically, so are its social relations. One threatens the authority and the other saps the vitality of racial regimes. Each undermines the founding myths. The archaeological imprint of human agency radically alienates the histories of racial regimes from their own claims of naturalism. Employing mythic discourses, racial regimes are commonly masqueraded as natural orderings, inevitable creations of collective anxieties prompted by threatening encounters with difference. Yet they are actually contrivances, designed and delegated by interested cultural and social powers with the wherewithal sufficient to commission their imaginings, manufacture, and maintenance. This latter industry is of some singular importance, since racial regimes tend to wear thin over time.

With respect to the social terrain, the degeneration of racial regimes occurs with some frequency for two reasons. First, apparent difference in identity is an attempt to mask shared identities. In the English North American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, white indentured servants and African, Native American, and Creole slaves frequently banded together in violent or passive rebellions against colonial authorities. Nearly two hundred years later, in the midst of the Civil War, insurgent slaves and renegade poor whites conspired against the Confederacy to create the free state of Jones.⁴ Like all such antinomies, particularly those of a routine, quotidian frequency, these occurrences sank into the mire of the unknowable. Their long disappearance faithfully represented Sandra Harding's observation that "any body of systematic knowledge is always internally linked to a distinctive body of systematic ignorance."⁵ A second source of regime entropy ensues from the fact that because the regimes are cultural artifices, which catalog only fragments of the real, they inevitably generate fugitive, unaccounted-for elements of reality. Abraham Lincoln's insistence that fugitive slaves were "contraband" (in effect, property which had illegally seized itself) did not prepare the president for their role in subverting his war aims. Lincoln believed reuniting the nation did not require the abolition of human property. As fugitives, troops, and sailors, that same property disabused him of his delusional political program. This was an instance of what Hegel termed the nega-

1. Said, *World, Text, and Critic*, 246–47.

2. See, for example, Foucault on "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges" in "Two Lectures," 81–82.

3. *Ibid.*, 82.

4. For the seventeenth-century example, see Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 250ff. For the Civil War episode, see Bynum, *Free State of Jones*.

5. Harding, "Comment," 516.

tion of the negation, flawed or delinquent comprehension colliding with the real.

Regime maintenance, however, takes precedence over wholesale reconstruction. Sometimes, though, the social chaos which is consequent to the failure of racial regimes renders maintenance moot. One early instance of a racial regime evincing evidence of failure is to be found in Aristotle's intervention in *The Politics*. Democracy vied with aristocracy, the former quarreling with slavery, the latter embracing it. Interestingly enough, it was the challenge to the racial justification for slavery which Aristotle chose to address. He conceded that enslavement might on occasion result from accident (that is, defeat in war), but he insisted that far more important was the fact that most slaves were slaves by nature. Inadvertently advertising the absurdities embedded in his proposition, he recommended that in his most perfect *polis*, in order to ensure the long-term exploitation and domination of slaves, slave masters diversify the ethnic mix of their slaves and institute regular manumissions.⁶

The Politics served as a rationale, a maintenance device. And in the service of a racial regime, its author maneuvered history aside, displacing it with the ideological reading of nature. Not unremarkably, the rationale outlasted the slave system for which it had been promulgated. In the modern era it melded with or complemented justifying belief systems spun from subsequent systems of human bondage. But whether slavery was principally rationalized by conquest, ethnic or religious distinctions, cultural differences, dramatic or slight phenotypic distinctions, the powerful classes consistently found their Aristotles, that is, intelligentsias, seduced into or compelled to invent forgeries of memory and meaning.

Moving pictures appear at that juncture when a new racial regime was being stitched together from remnants of its predecessors and new cloth accommodating the disposal of immigrants, colonial subjects, and insurgencies among the native poor. With the first attempts at composing a national identity in disarray, a new whiteness became the basis for the reintegration of American society. And monopolizing

6. It might very well be the case that since poor or impoverished Athenians themselves had been slaves less than two centuries before, Aristotle sensed that public consciousness of that history had not sufficiently dissipated. After all, it was the rebellions of the poor in Athens (and other *poleis*) which had propelled Athens toward the radical regime of democracy. See Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*.

the refabrication of a public sphere, with a reach and immediacy not obtained by previous apparatuses (museums, theaters, fairs, the press, etc.), motion pictures insinuated themselves into public life.

In the United States, the technical development of moving pictures in the late nineteenth century was soon enveloped in the formation of an industry, which, in turn, became an agency of power and wealth. Prior to these events, the disintegration of a centuries-long slave system had deposited a racial regime in American culture. Without a hint of irony, that racial regime had achieved its maturity at precisely the moment when its internal contradictions were most marked (the great slave rebellions of the nineteenth century) and domestic and international opposition was amassing. With the collapse of the slave system, a different racial regime was required, one which adopted elements from its predecessor but was now buttressing the domination of free labor.

This work is Black history written through the filters of film and capitalism. Establishing the early movie industry (actually *industries*) as an instrument of American capital, the book interrogates how the needs of finance capital, the dominant center of American commerce in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, determined the construction of successive racial regimes publicized by motion pictures. Racial constructs predate the arrival of moving pictures, and thus the representations of race and ethnicity (as well as gender) were transferred from the stage, literature, and popular culture. This was not an organic transfer, explicable in terms of persistent cultural materials. Racial protocols were contested and subject to deterioration (indeed, this study will examine Shakespeare's *Othello* as the earliest challenge to the emergent concept of the Negro). An alternative explanation rests on the economic, social, and political interests which conspired to arrange, and when necessary, rearrange interpretations of difference. The appearance of moving pictures coincides with Jim Crow and the development of American national identity in the midst of dramatic demographic and economic changes. The silent-film era and the first decade of sound allow us to map the forgeries of memory and representation which served the most powerful interests in the country and their cultural brokers. For instance, I link film minstrelsy with racial segregation, which, in turn, served the labor discipline of emergent industries. I conclude with a treatment of Black imagery in the movies during the Depression decade ended by World War II. Most important, I am concerned with Black resistance to each historical moment

of Negrophobic impulses. Thus Black minstrelsy countered blackface minstrelsy; race movies countered the misrepresentation of the Black middle class; and when the capitalization of films all but eliminated an alternative Black cinema, Black comedians produced an oppositional subtext, which they insinuated into "Hollywood" itself.

The present work attempts to alter the terms of interpretation: proposing constant trembles in racial regimes; persistent efforts to repair or alter race as an effective mechanism of social ordering; and a succession of alterations in race discourses (cultural, religious, scientific, etc.). Finally, as film studies becomes a more certain discipline, it is likely that most of the newer scholars will be directed away by specialized research from a consideration of the structural/economic issues raised by Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery (and less satisfactorily by David Puttnam. As a Black studies scholar trained in the social sciences, I am fortunately placed by field (interdisciplinary), historical immediacy (a decade of neominstrelsy in popular culture), and pedagogical mission. From this basis I hope to add some modest contextualization to the considerable efforts of those now dominating the investigation of Black cinematic representation.

In historical terms, the focus of this book extends from the early seventeenth century to World War II. Chapter 1 is concerned with the conditions for the emergence of modern racism in the era before film. Posing Shakespeare's *Othello* as the first contestation of blackness in English culture, I explore the varying constructions of race during the three hundred years which conclude with the appearance of scientific racism. The sheer volume and plurivocality of antiracism resistance set the stage for later oppositions.

The rest of the chapters treat two coincidental and conflicting phenomena: the economic, political, and cultural forces which determined Black representations in early American films; and Black political and artistic resistance to these imaginings. Chapter 2 sets the stage by examining D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* in the context of an emergent American national identity contested by sectional conflict, massive immigration, and dramatic economic arrangements of American capital. In the midst of these societal tremors and uncertainties, film appropriated the conventions of blackface minstrelsy and the racial protocols of American historiography in order to counterfeit whiteness and romanticize a national myth of origins. Chapter 3 proposes that an interrogation of Black minstrelsy, Black musicals, and the revival

of Black dramatic theater provides an understanding of the antiracial stratagems evolved from blackface minstrelsy. Challenging the dominant construction of blackness, these artists and intellectuals substantially appropriate blackface minstrelsy only to observe the revival of the form on the ethnic stage and in moving pictures. Chapter 4 reviews the multiplicities of race (Blacks, Latinos, Filipinos, Native Americans) which were insinuated into the movies during the silent era and how these intersected with changes in the control of the movie industry and a contested American imperialism. Inevitably, the Black petite bourgeoisie, forming in the cities, responded to their disfigurement in films as a renegade stratum. Race movies were dominated by "uplift" themes, but Oscar Micheaux pushed race movies into explicit political critiques of the American national myth. Micheaux's extraordinary performance (particularly in silent films) as a subversive was enabled by his adaptation of rhetorical structures gestated in Black music. Chapter 5 reconstructs the contests revolving around race coincident with the appearance of talkies and sound and new controllers of the industry. It proposes that in company with Ed Guerrero's "plantation genre," the jungle films provided the cultural cover required by dominant business interests in their domestic and foreign ventures. And rather than dismissing Black filmmakers of the late 1930s as low-production imitators of big studio productions, the chapter proposes their role as urban archaeologists and their complicity with comedic coons who became the most active and effective agents of Black resistance.