Introduction: Migrations, Movies, and African American Cities on the Screen

Space, in contemporary discourse, as in lived experience, has taken on an almost palpable existence. Its contours, boundaries, and geographies are called upon to stand in for all the contested realms of identity, from the national to the ethnic; its hollows and voids are occupied by bodies that replicate internally the external conditions of political and social struggle, and are likewise assumed to stand for, and identify, the sites of such a struggle.

Anthony Vidler (1992)[1]

During the last half of the twentieth century, African American film was increasingly identified as city film in the public imagination. Its narratives were commonly assigned to specific urban settings, with New York's Harlem and Brooklyn neighborhoods associated with African American East Coast life and Los Angeles' South Central and Watts neighborhoods with the West Coast. The two most common genres associated with African American city spaces are blaxploitation films from the 1970s and, most recently, hood films from the 1990s. In both examples, genre is defined by urban visual and aural iconography, which is often engaged in a dialogue with its immediate socioeconomic, political, and industrial contexts.

The release in 1991 of Mario Van Peebles' *New Jack City*, John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood*, and Matty Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, along with the increased popularity and visibility of rap and hip-hop music, sparked renewed critical, intellectual, and aesthetic focus on African American urban-based popular culture. The popularity and profitability of hood films and rap music galvanized the production and release of an extraordinary number of films between 1991 and 1993 in particular, all of which capitalized on inner-city settings and a focus on male youth culture, and which referenced the films' fashion, the music, the personalities, and the look of contemporary African American urban life for both black and crossover audiences. The films' self-conscious presentation of black city spaces redefined both national and international cinematic and musical forms, and their influence continues even a decade later across a variety of genres.

One of the most striking elements of hood films like *Boyz N the Hood* was that their narratives were thoroughly anchored in the immediate moment. The fashion, music, and extradiegetic references to outside political and social personalities and events, like the Reagan and Bush (Sr.) presidencies and the LAPD's infamous beating of Rodney King in 1992, commentated on contemporary African American life. And yet the films rarely explored the history of black city spaces beyond the time frame of the 1990s. On occasion, such as the inclusion of footage of the Watts Rebellion in Allen and Albert Hugheses' *Menace II Society* (1993), the films referenced the relatively recent past. While such references acknowledged the sources of contemporary urban conditions, their historical analysis rarely extended beyond the life spans of their characters, their directors, or their primary audiences, which consisted of a cross-section of young people. Often, historical events were linked to the biography of a given character, like the Watts Rebellion for *Menace II Society*'s Caine in chapter 5. For many young African American and white filmmakers in the 1990s, therefore, black city spaces existed within limited historical parameters in which the city had always existed in its present form, or, perhaps, as it appeared in blaxploitation films from the 1970s.

In this book I expand the historical and the aesthetic borders of black city films beyond hood films and blaxploitation and argue that cities are highly politicized locations with a long history in African American and American culture. The roots of the most recent cinematic constructions of black city spaces stretch back through the history of black cin-

ematic signification to early race-film production during the silent era, and are closely connected to African American experiences of movement and migration throughout the twentieth century, just as film is a twentieth century technology and "the urban art par excellance."[2] This study outlines the relationship of African American film to migration and the growth of black urban populations, focusing on key periods and genres in film history: black-cast musicals produced between 1929 and 1943; race films from the early sound era; blaxploitation and related films from the 1970s; hood films from the 1990s; and African American filmmaking from the late 1990s, including Maya Angelou's *Down in the Delta* (1998) and John Singleton's *Shaft* (2000). I also discuss two periods in Spike Lee's filmmaking career; I trace the influence of his films on the city representations constructed by hood films in the 1990s in chapter 4, and, in a separate discussion of *Clockers* (1995) in chapter 6, the ways in which Lee, of all the contemporary black filmmakers, acknowledges the crucial influence that movement, especially migration (forced, coerced, and chosen), has had on African American cultural production.

I begin with Hollywood all-black musicals made between 1929 and 1943 and race films from the late 1930s in the first two chapters to provide insight into both the cinematic and literary responses to the massive movements of people in the early decades of the twentieth century which resulted in the majority of the country's African American population taking up residence in northern industrial centers like New York and Chicago. The two groups of film provide very different responses to this phenomenon, with Hollywood films failing to recognize the sociopolitical landscape by producing folk musicals that placed their black characters in a pastoral idyll, resembling a southern antebellum plantation, instead of the city. Race films, on the other hand, existed in a segregated independent sector that was adjunct to Hollywood and were made for black audiences who often screened the films in separate exhibition sites. While silent race films spoke of the ills of city life in order to warn the newly-arrived migrants in their audiences of potential urban evils, sound-era race films addressed, for the first time, the presence and the promise of the city, primarily Harlem, in contemporary black culture in ways that only previously had been seen in African American literature from the Harlem Renaissance and in black newspapers like *The Crisis*. These early chapters provide the historical foundations for my discussions of the later genres and filmmakers.

Although my chief interest is films directed by African American filmmakers, I also consider films that were not black-directed, just as I consider some texts that are not set in the city. This is especially the case in the first chapter, which analyzes films with "black-focused" themes and all-black casts. An examination of films such as Vincente Minnelli's *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) allows me to gauge assumptions about the country's growing African American urban presence by examining its inclusions, exclusions, and distortions in a wide variety of films and visualizations of American city spaces. This approach also offers a more complex understanding of the strategies behind historical stereotypes of African American people by relating them more closely to Hollywood's resistance to acknowledging the active engagement of the country's black population in the industrial growth of the United States. No film, even when a product of the segregated race film industry, is separable from a larger context; frequently, African American films responded to and dialogued with Hollywood images and, in the latter half of the century, vice versa. Therefore, an analysis of a cross-section of films provides the best understanding of the ways in which significations of black urban spaces transformed along with changes in their historical, political, and industrial contexts.

African American Film: Cinematic Fusions of Space and Time

My approach to examining the intersections between space and time, and between text and context, engages Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope as a model "for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented."[3] It is, as the term suggests, a *topos* (a place, person, figure) that embodies (or is embodied by) *chronos* (time). Places as disparate as roads, castles, salons, thresholds, and trains function as "materialized history," where temporal relationships are literalized by the objects, spaces, or persons with which they intersect.[4] In *Clockers*, for example, Lee's decision to add trains (both model trains and Amtrak) to Richard Price's original story was the director's way of referencing the history of African American social and geographic mobility. At the same time, the trains have a practical function in the film's narrative present—they move the characters from one place to another. This will be part of the focus of my discus-

sion of Lee's film in chapter 6, which also examines the increasing shift into historical narratives in black film during the mid-1990s.

Bakhtin's theory explaining how texts embody space and time is applicable to cinematic as well as literary narratives.[5] Besides the "time/space" of its actual materiality (film speed, for instance, is twenty-four frames per second), the cinema offers an expanded way of understanding Bakhtin's concept of dialogism or "the relation of any utterance to other utterances," because it acknowledges cinematic discourses, such as casting, performance, costume, setting, and sound, which are not as readily available to written texts.[6] In the cinema such discursive signifying strategies illuminate a text; for example, elements of the sound track play a major referential role in the construction of certain cinematic spaces and times, such as in black-cast musicals where the city is symbolically referenced through jazz-based musical motifs and the rural through spirituals. During the 1970s, the sound tracks for blaxploitation films became extradiegetic marketing devices that brought the rhythms and melodies of the films into the city, and vice versa (a strategy that was also used by hood films). In all these examples, the play between visual and aural signifiers contributes meaning to a film, anchors the narrative in an historical moment, and acknowledges the existence of complementary or contradictory spaces and times in a single text.

The chronotope's links to genre make it a salient theoretical construct for this study because particular African American genres are defined or enabled by certain spatiotemporal tropes, such as the antebellum South in black-cast musicals or the contemporary city in hood films. The places and times in which they are set often wholly define the genres I consider—so much so, in fact, that by the time we get to the hood film in chapter 5, the genre is explicitly named by the spaces mapped out in its films. Even earlier, blaxploitation films (as discussed in chapter 3) used particular constructions of the city, ones related directly to the contemporary urban conditions of the time period that had labeled black city spaces as "ghettoes." Without such a rendering of the city space, these genres would have had little meaning for their audiences who responded as much to the films' settings as they did to the films' plots. In what follows, the only exception to this pattern will appear in the Westerns made by race film producers in the thirties. Films like *Two Gun Man From Harlem* (Richard C. Kahn, 1938), use the trope of "Harlem" symbolically to place African American stories in the immediate context experienced by the film's urban audiences rather than

the historical space and time more commonly associated with the Western genre. The films sometimes referenced Harlem merely in name alone, and yet they addressed an urban audience in their contemporary look and sound. (This strategy was also used, as we will see in chapter 6, by Melvin Van Peebles in *Posse*.)

The chronotope offers a more complex understanding of the relationship between the actual world and the spatiotemporal systems that generate cinematic genres. For Bakhtin, there is a distinct relationship between the world *outside* the text and that *created by* the text. As he notes, "out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the reflected and *created* chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text)."[7] This feature of Bakhtin's concept is relevant to a consideration of filmic representation, which for much of its history has been bound up with interrogations of the relationship of the cinematic apparatus to reality. It is even more pertinent to the current discussion when we take into account the discourses of authenticity and "realness"[8] that frequently circulate around black film, as well as the concern for representational verisimilitude as related to a history of stereotype and caricature that stretches back to the beginnings of African American visual representation and that has been so effectively documented in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000).

While Bakhtin's theoretical construct links the actual world and the text, he cautions against confusing one for the other, because to blur the distinction between the two would result in a form of "naïve realism."[9] This caution bears directly on my consideration of African American film because it acknowledges the influence that exterior reality may have on a text—for example, the relationship between the Moynihan report and the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders and blaxploitation film in the 1970s—without mistaking cinematic representation for actual extradiegetic circumstance. Many of the filmmakers themselves caution against this naïve realism; for example, Spike Lee, Mario and Melvin Van Peebles, and Allen and Albert Hughes consciously underscore the constructed nature of their films in techniques such as montage editing, direct address, and the mixing of film and video stocks. These strategies remind audiences that what they are witnessing is not actuality, but a "refraction of a refraction" of reality.[10] In my consideration of the roles that African American history (migration, the growth of urban areas, civil rights, and the film industry) and American social policy (the Moynihan report and William Julius Wilson's discussions of race and

the "underclass") have played in the films under discussion, I stress that what is put on screen is a dialogue with and a refraction of the actual material world.

Particular cinematic chronotopes—antebellum idyll, Harlem, black ghetto, and the hood—are "historically situated 'utterance[s]' . . . addressed by one socially constituted subject or subjects [the filmmaker, the cinematic apparatus, the conditions of production] to other socially constituted subjects, all of whom are deeply immersed in historical circumstance and social contingency."[11] Ultimately, the films and the spatiotemporal tropes that define them help us to understand the pressures and the constraints that context brings to representation and its analysis. Yet they also remind us that the world presented onscreen by their diegesis should never be mistaken for the real world. Instead, the "spatiotemporal structures" of the films "mold a discursive simulacrum of life and the world."[12] No matter how accurate or realistic the films are in visualizing black urban life, they are always (to a greater or lesser extent) self-conscious, highly-mediated acts.

While part of this work examines how certain periods in film history are marked by the visualization of a specific rural- or urbanscape, a significant portion of my analysis considers that films may contain a variety of traces or motifs of other spaces and times in dialogue with one another. That chronotopes coexist and dialogue with one another in such a manner suggests an active relationship among discourses. As Bakhtin explains, a fundamental characteristic of chronotopes is that they are "mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace, or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex relationships."[13] In *Clockers*, for example, the train echoes the past, yet it also dialogues with the hood's contemporary spaces, expanding the borders of what, by 1995, had become a dominant and claustrophobic cinematic trope. I return to this repeatedly in my discussion of films across the decades, because such spatiotemporal polyphony is not simply a characteristic of Lee's films, but of a number of films with African American themes.

The films' relationships to social and film history are crucial considerations in this study because they help us to understand the ways in which African American cinema, especially many of the texts discussed here, engages with the world around it. Whether the films are "saturated with historical time,"[14] as in the antebellum idyll of black-cast musicals and the southern space of *Down in the Delta* in the epilogue, or

with the immediate moment, such as that found in either the black films from the 1970s or in hood films from the 1990s, they are political acts in which the city becomes the symbol of—sometimes the synecdoche for—African American political life. Over the course of this study, we will see the ways in which black city cinema initialized a change in African American filmic representation from ahistorical and static to a force that was fully imbricated in the modern, industrial progress of the nation. From early film production on, black films used narratives set in city spaces such as Harlem to pose "a challenge to contemporary limits and cultural terms within which personal being for both blacks and whites were imagined and defined."[15] City settings, therefore, are complex strategies which, in their interplay of space and time, comment upon the exclusions of film history in general and American history as a whole.

The transformations of the filmic representations of African American city spaces are linked to larger historical factors. At the same time that the black population of the United States was redefining itself through various migrations, from a mostly rural to a predominantly urban population and culture, American film was also transforming from novelty and nickelodeon to art and industry. African American films were also changing from their early forced status as segregated industry with very few resources to a box office powerhouse, with concomitant shifts in production values and audiences. The history of African American migration and urban life and its links to American and African American film history is, therefore, essential to our understanding of films by black directors or films featuring African American people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

A focus on the city, the cinema and African American representation also tells us much about the mythology of transformation that is so integral to American life. In their often conflicted attitudes toward the city as either promised land or dystopian hell, African American texts (film, literature, music, painting) explore themes of hope, mobility, and escape. City spaces such as Harlem were often meccas that, in their promise of decreased racial discrimination, offered social, economic, and political mobility. And yet these very same places trapped migrants who found themselves, at different historical moments, surrounded by poverty, crime, filth, and the lack of any concerted local or national policies to alleviate sub-standard living conditions. These extradiegetic circumstances ripple out from the texts, at various times and in differ-

ent forms, and remind us that the city is never, simply, the city. It has been an immense force in shaping American life and culture during the twentieth century. It also has been a crucial influence on African American life and culture and, as such, an analysis of the changing roles and presence of urban space in black city cinema can only expand and make even more complex the questions we ask about the power of cinematic representation.

1

The Antebellum Idyll and Hollywood's Black-Cast Musicals

Gillis set down his tan-cardboard extension-case and wiped his black, shining brow. Then slowly, spreadingly, he grinned at what he saw: Negroes at every turn; up and down Lenox Avenue, up and down One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street; big, lanky Negroes, short, squat Negroes, black ones, brown ones, yellow ones; men standing idle on the curb, women, bundle-laden, trudging reluctantly homeward, children rattle-trapping about the sidewalks; but Negroes predominantly, overwhelmingly everywhere. There was assuredly no doubt of his where-abouts. This was Negro Harlem.

—Rudolph Fisher (1925)[1]

From the bondage of the Middle Passage to present-day reports of the return of many northern blacks to the South, movement has defined the African American presence in the United States. This presence has also been linked to the terminal points of these movements and shifts, whether they are the antebellum South or the industrialized North or West. In a related and often paradoxical manner, African American images have been framed, marked, and understood in relation to these migrations and their destinations, such as Harlem, at particular times. This chapter considers one such

movement, the Great Migration, and its relationship to a selection of all-black musicals produced by Hollywood studios between 1929 and 1943: *Hallelujah* (King Vidor, 1929), *The Green Pastures* (Marc Connelly and William Keighley, 1936), *Cabin in the Sky* (Vincente Minnelli, 1943), and *Stormy Weather* (Andrew Stone, 1943).

The Great Migration radically redefined the nation's African American population, nearly reversing the ratio of urban and rural residents and removing some 40 percent of black residents from the Old South.[2] Between 1910 and 1930, an estimated 1.2 million African American migrants moved to the North, increasing the black populations in northern urban centers by 300 percent.[3] Northern industrial cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and New York often were final destinations because they were directly located on main rail lines. Also, their industries explicitly courted black workers as a source of cheap and abundant labor, especially as companies retooled for World War I. For southern blacks, northern wages, even when they were lower than the rate for white workers, were still substantially higher than what could be earned in the depressed agricultural market at home, a market beleaguered by boll weevil infestation, overfarming, and a feudal sharecropping system.

At the height of African American migration to the North, the city—Harlem in particular—was associated with a promised land, or, as Charles S. Johnson observed in 1925 in Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, "the Mecca of the Negroes the country over."[4] At the same time, the area's more negative attributes were becoming evident, especially to the newly arrived migrants. The tensions among different urban experiences were exemplified in Harlem Renaissance writing from the 1920s and 1930s. On the one hand, the central core of writers during this time concentrated on the liberatory potential of the city. Harlem Renaissance writers, mostly migrants themselves, "felt joined, not estranged, by their wanderings [prior to settling in Harlem], because they were part of the great migration of black people to the urban northeast. . . . Collectively, they developed a hopeful vision of an urban home that was at once an organic place, a birthright community, and a cultural aspiration."[5] This optimism belied the very real poverty, racial prejudice, and crime that many of Harlem's newly arrived residents encountered, and yet "the migrants themselves often came from backgrounds of such extreme poverty and oppression that Harlem, in contrast, seemed the promised land."[6] Soon, an attitude linking the city

with a dystopia replaced celebratory renderings of Harlem, as its residents, "generally precariously clinging to the bottom rung of the economic ladder, suffered especially hard" during the Depression.[7] Writers, artists, and working people were united in their disillusionment.

Even if much of the literary attention was focused on urban life, a rural presence continued to exist and define the "New Negro's" experience of the city. An interesting example can be found in the selection from Rudolph Fisher's short story, "City of Refuge," introducing this chapter. King Solomon Gillis travels to Harlem, fleeing the prejudice and poverty of his North Carolina home, as well as the police, who are seeking him in connection with the murder of a white man. King Solomon views Harlem as the one place where he can start fresh, maybe even become a policeman. Unfortunately, the first person he meets upon arrival is Mouse Uggams, a vaguely familiar and remarkably "helpful" man from down home. King Solomon succumbs to Mouse's charming influence, and is eventually caught by the police for unwittingly carrying Mouse's drugs.

The plot revolves around two central concerns from this time period, both of which will ultimately lead to King Solomon's downfall. First, King Solomon's attitude toward Harlem was common for the time, especially his awe at seeing so many black people in one place going about their business, a feeling echoed in Langston Hughes' memories of arriving in Harlem for the first time in *The Big Sea*: "Hundreds of colored people! I wanted to shake hands with them, speak to them."[8] Even more striking for King Solomon, however, is the sight of a "cullid policeman," who represents the defining difference between the North and the South.[9] The policeman's presence is so significant to King Solomon that when he is finally caught, he surrenders with a grin that "had something exultant about it" because he is led away by a uniformed, *black* policeman.[10] Second, King Solomon—most likely an urbane man in North Carolina—is felled by his naiveté and his willingness to put his trust in Mouse just because "he's from my state. Maybe I know him or some of his people."[11] Even though, as the story suggests, down-home mores are not easily translatable in Harlem, they are universal enough to be used at least as the foundation for a con game, a fact that fuels Mouse's plans.

King Solomon's fear of the southern white police, carried over to New York, identifies racial violence as another reason for many migrants' willingness to leave the South. While economic opportunity

may have been the primary "pull" for African American migrants, violence, especially lynching, had been on the rise in southern states during and after World War I and operated as a persuasive "push" factor. King Solomon's fear and hatred of northern white police points to one of the continuities of the migrants' lives; it implies that his biggest mistake might have been to regard the black policeman as different from his white brethren. What he learns is that the law is not for African Americans, regardless of who is wearing the badge.

Although African American literary production echoed the complexity of the tensions attending the massive population shifts in the early part of the century, Hollywood films from 1929 to 1943 utterly failed to recognize the sociopolitical changes in the American landscape. In black-cast musicals in particular, African American characters and stories most often appeared within a picturesque southern setting, largely ignoring the black city space and culture that figured in the lives and the imaginations of the vast majority of African Americans. For instance, in *Hallelujah*, *The Green Pastures*, and *Cabin in the Sky*, the bulk of the narrative unfolds within variations of a pastoral, southern setting. In these films the story space and time is overdetermined by a seemingly static rural space—the antebellum idyll—in which an indeterminate yet bygone past is signified through iconography of a rural, preindustrial southern agricultural economy. *Stormy Weather* ends the stream of antebellum idyll films, referencing the trope of the idyll but foregrounding issues of migration and the subsequent "modernization" of many black performative codes, including music, dance, costume, dialect, and filmmaking in general.

The Antebellum Idyll: Down-Home Space and Time

The antebellum idyll is specifically southern and rural, and is segregated from the remainder of the United States as represented in cinema. It is linked to Mikhail Bakhtin's theorization of the idyllic chronotope, especially in the relationship that time has with space in idyllic narratives. Idylls are self-contained and have the distinct characteristic of "not being related to the rest of the world,"[12] suggesting that their space is separated and segregated from other spaces. While the South, especially the "Old South," figured in many films, particularly in the late 1930s and early 1940s and culminating with *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), it was not a dominant setting for Hollywood productions,

as popular genres from the time included the Western (which is coded as rural but not southern), gangster films, melodramas, and a variety of musicals. Films directed toward crossover or white audiences sometimes contained all-black sequences or African American performers within a larger, often unrelated narrative, thereby further segregating black performers and stories. This liminal position had its practical aspects; by confining African American performers to a separate narrative, "offending" subject matter could be removed if deemed "inappropriate" by southern censors.

During the same period that the United States condoned the practice of segregation, black-cast films were the norm, echoing the larger, national ideology. In 1896 (coinciding with the first projected film programs in the United States), the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized the separate (but "equal") existence of the races. Ostensibly targeting railroad facilities, the ruling was also interpreted and expanded to include housing and educational facilities, and provided the foundation for southern Jim Crow policies. This judicial environment was extended to the practice of segregation in exhibition: by separating part of the theater (the "nigger heaven" of the balcony, for instance), by screening "colored only" shows, or by limiting runs to theaters located in the "colored" sections of town. The segregated space on the screen was replicated in the experiences of black audiences in the theater. With *Brown v. Board of Education*, the decision was reversed in 1954, coinciding with the release of *Carmen Jones*, the last of the black-cast musicals.[13]

Films with idyllic settings, such as *Hallelujah*, contain a complex construction of time that blurs the boundaries between temporal moments. Many of the films shift between rural and more urban spaces, and while the narratives are located in the idyll they are set in an unspecified post-Emancipation time frame. Nevertheless, the films, especially the earlier musicals, hearken back to the antebellum era with images associated with the plantation system. For example, *Hallelujah* opens with shots of black workers hunched over and picking cotton in vast cotton fields. Without explicitly identifying the time frame, the image identifies the narrative in a specific historical moment by referencing forms of preindustrial, and antebellum, labor, thereby erasing the distinctions between historical moments: it could be the early nineteenth century or it could be the early twentieth century.

In contrast to literary and (as we will see) race film representations of contemporary black life, black-cast musicals removed blacks from the

historical context that was witnessing the redefinition of a majority of African Americans as urban rather than rural. The result of positioning African American subject matter in the past was "an almost metaphysical stasis," in which "the black . . . is seen as eternal, unchanging, unchangeable" rather than as a part of the nation's progress.[14] This is more than a matter of stereotypes; ignoring discourses of progress and change, which were so central to African American life between the two World Wars, the musicals' overall effect was to reconfirm ideology that removed African Americans, and all peoples of African descent, from a "civilized" world that was urban and therefore modern. Urban black workers remained liminal to the expansion of an industrial economy.

Hallelujah and the Idyllic Promised Land

Three black-cast musicals in particular—*Hallelujah*, *The Green Pastures*, and *Cabin in the Sky*—are set in the time and space of the antebellum idyll and each incorporates some form of city motifs into its more rural spaces in order to construct a moral contrast between them.[15] Ostensibly set in some variation of the antebellum idyll, each film contains its own particular references to the city through iconography and motifs. That is, they incorporate motifs that "carry the [stylistic] aura of the earlier genre into the new one."[16] In these films the particular signifiers that function as motifs for the urban—through music, clothing, and behaviors such as gambling—would undoubtedly be read as such: by the time *Hallelujah* appeared in 1929, the city and the tensions between the urban and the rural were already familiar tropes in African American literature and journalism, in Hollywood film, and in race films aimed at black audiences.

Hallelujah tends toward realism. King Vidor made accuracy and attention to detail his personal project, inspiring him to shoot the film on location in Tennessee and Arkansas and to hire Harold Garrison, an African American studio employee, as assistant director, to ensure that southern black life would be rendered "faithfully."[17] The film's footage of actual cotton fields and sharecropper shanties adds to its mimetic qualities, and suggests Vidor's concern with creating an "accurate" rendering of "Negro life," one that was presented as real and was believed to be so even by Vidor himself, who felt that he knew black culture because he "used to watch the Negroes in the South," where he was raised.[18] Presented with a look based more on the tradition of docu-

mentary realism than on the fantasy world of the musical space that would define later black-cast musicals, *Hallelujah*'s white audiences were "appreciative of some sort of faithful rendering of black folk life."[19]

Hallelujah's plot narrates the temptation, downfall, and eventual redemption of Zeke (Daniel L. Haynes). The film presents a series of thematic oppositions—good versus evil, country versus city—which fascinated Hollywood at the time and appeared across genres. In keeping with the traditional Hollywood fascination, these oppositions are embodied by the two female rivals for Zeke's attention, Missy Rose (Victoria Spivey) and Chick (Nina Mae McKinney), representatives, respectively, of rural goodness and urban evil. In this the film recalls F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise*, released just two years earlier, in its focus on the hero's split loyalties between his rural wife and his city mistress. Combined with Vidor's efforts to achieve verisimilitude, these oppositions suggest two very different African American lifestyles, the country and the city, and in this cautionary tale, it is clear who and what will triumph at the film's conclusion.

Hallelujah's antebellum idyll articulates certain features of Bakhtin's idyllic chronotope in its focus on family and home, and it posits the regenerative value of family and agriculture through the activities performed in its rural spaces.[20] Zeke is introduced as he works with his family. Their labor, smiles, and performance of spirituals immediately signify that the family is hard-working, happy, and pious, even within their impoverished surroundings. While African American song and dance has a long history as political commentary on the conditions endured under slavery, there is no rebellious subtext here and, in fact, there are even a few scenes that echo the minstrelsy of early Edison shorts, as, for example, when Zeke's youngest brothers literally stop the narrative with a tap dance performance that bears little relation to the story. Additionally, the family sings whether they are working or at rest, suggesting that labor is as pleasurable as leisure.

The city makes no definite appearance in the film, but is implied synedochically through the women, music, clothing, and attitudes toward family contained within a rural southern town. The town is nothing more than a river boat landing and a single street featuring a bar; however, it both contradicts the antebellum idyll and contains all the evils of the big city. This symbolic rendering of city space continued with other black-cast musicals, like *The Green Pastures* and *Cabin in the Sky*, which attached city signifiers to places more closely resembling

The Pleasures of King Cotton (*Hallelujah*, MGM, 1929). Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

towns or, in the latter film, to a single site. The lack of an actual city space did not detract from Hollywood's packaging of *Hallelujah* as an urban film through suggestions of the city pleasures contained in its diegesis. The urban lures are exemplified in the film's original poster, which advertises *Hallelujah* on the basis of its symbolic relationship to the city.

Unlike the town, the antebellum idyll is a pure space, and this purity is personified in Missy Rose (the "good" girl), Mammy's and Pappy's adopted daughter, and Zeke's love interest. It is also symbolized in the family's religious piety, and is especially foregrounded in their singing of spirituals. Besides work songs and one Irving Berlin song (added late in the production), spirituals are the only music heard in this space. The piety suggested by the music is not only a running theme in the film, it also indicates that religion serves as both Zeke's nemesis and his savior. This role played by the spirituals will continue (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the film) in all of the films located in the

The importance of the city in *Hallelujah* (MGM, 1929). Courtesy of Separate Cinema Archive™.

antebellum idyll, with the performance of spirituals becoming a part of the conventions of the broader cinematic idyll.

Religion tempts and eventually saves Zeke from his desire for Chick, who represents the city in looks and action. After gambling away his family's money and (accidentally) shooting his brother, Zeke becomes a traveling preacher in an attempt to atone for his sins. Chick attends one of his revival meetings and is turned toward the path of righteousness by Zeke's words. Vidor makes the erotic pull between Zeke and Chick evident through editing, point-of-view shots, and the exchange of glances. Chick's rebirth, therefore, links religious and sexual ecstasy—a connection that is reiterated twice more: during her baptism and during another revival meeting later the same day. The "relationship between religious fervor and sexuality" is the "fundamental metaphor upon which the film depends."[21] It comes as no surprise, then, that the third time they meet, Zeke literally carries Chick off; they leave the church to start an ill-fated relationship (which includes living together out of wedlock).

The film's eroticized articulation of religion indicated in Zeke and Chick's attraction blurs the juxtaposition between the tainted and the pure and undercuts the antebellum idyll's piety by indicating the presence of temptation and sin in both characters. The merging of religious ecstasy with the urban is most explicit in a sermon Zeke delivers during Chick's conversion. In it he describes, in allegorical form, a train ride to the promised land (Zeke even dons an engineer's cap before beginning). In this example, the promised land is heaven, not the real-world space of northern cities, as it would be in many migration stories and novels of the time. The train symbolizes Zeke's dueling desires: the pulls of redemption and the pulls of the city (Chick serving as a representative of the city). Thus, in a sermon intended to convert sinners, Zeke succeeds in distancing himself, Chick, and the parishioners from the rural rather than bringing them closer to its idyllic spaces. In fact, he abandons the pulpit for Chick (and the city). This is one of the most interesting scenes in the film, for it is through one of the objects most associated with the Great Migration, the train, that Zeke's moral retreat from the antebellum idyll is symbolized, as if suggesting that even thinking of the urban leads to downfall. But this movement away does not last long because Chick betrays him, subsequently forcing Zeke back into the arms of Missy Rose and back within the borders of the antebellum idyll.

The town is marked by the visual and aural iconography of the Jazz Age, and Chick, as a town resident, exemplifies these factors. The jazz and blues-based musical numbers that are performed in the town (and by Chick) differ from the spirituals and work songs of the antebellum idyll. The town music is secular. Added to the music of the antebellum idyll, it supplies two competing versions of black sound that both signify and underscore the difference between the two spaces: the town is the location of evil and temptation while the idyll is a righteous space. The outfits worn by Chick and other town residents also support this dichotomy. Chick's costuming (especially when we are introduced to her) visually connects her with the urban fashions of the late 1920s favored by flappers: a long-waisted, fringed dress, dark stockings, and high-heeled shoes. The men wear flashy suits and porkpie hats. Such apparel is distinct from Zeke's tattered and dirty work clothes, Missy Rose's demure work dresses or Sunday best, or Zeke's mother's mammy-like apron and kerchief-covered head.

Chick reduces the distinctions between urban and rural to moral differences between women. Her aura of sexuality is obvious in her body

language and appearance. Her revealing clothes suggest moral laxity and literally associate her with the underworld of bars and gambling dens (she even has playing-card patches sewn into the breast of her dress). Chick wants money and will do and say anything to get it; her desires are evident to everyone but Zeke. As she and her partner, Hot Shot (William Fountaine), cheat Zeke out of all his money, they encourage comparisons between the rural and the urban, suggested by King Solomon's experiences with Mouse in "City of Refuge." For instance, Zeke's country demeanor marks him as an easy target and partially fuels what manifests itself as a sexual rivalry. However, Hot Shot's lack of respect for Zeke isn't directed at Zeke as much as it is at what he represents—a rural, black past known primarily through disenfranchisement and lack of agency. Zeke, like King Solomon, becomes a symbol of everything from which African American city dwellers would like to distance themselves: blackness and segregation. The city, on the other hand, signifies an undefined colorlessness and assimilation.

Hallelujah depicts the urban as an environment in which traditional relationships between family and labor cannot be sustained, and in this way the film undercuts the regenerative possibilities of the idyll that had been previously suggested by Zeke's family and the products of their labor. The family is literally destroyed when Zeke abandons his brother Spunk (Everett McGarrity) after meeting Chick and then accidentally kills him in a barroom brawl. Symbolically referencing the story of Cain and Abel (a running trope throughout African American city-based narratives in print and on screen), Spunk's murder banishes the family from the city space and suggests that the city leads brothers to kill brothers. What is even more significant about the absence of family in this space is that it is not only Zeke's family who cease to exist but *all* families because Zeke and Spunk were the sole representatives of family in the town.

The absence of the family is also illustrated by Chick's nontraditional role in the household. Neither Chick nor anyone else in this urban space is nurturing. Instead, Chick's energies are concentrated in her overt sexuality. Yet this sexuality is not directed toward reproduction (and therefore regeneration) but toward pleasure and personal gain, first with Hot Shot and then with Zeke. When Chick and Zeke live together, she fails to fulfill the traditional gender role of caretaker and plots to run off with Hot Shot, leaving one immoral relationship for another. In contrast, Missy Rose is shown repeatedly tending to Zeke's younger