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Judith E. Smith

University of Massachusetts Boston, judith.smith@umb.edu

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Civil Rights, Labor, and Sexual Politics on Screen in *Nothing But a Man* (1964)

Judith E. Smith

Abstract

The independently made 1964 film Nothing But a Man is one of a handful of films whose production coincided with the civil rights insurgency and benefited from input from activists. Commonly listed in 1970s surveys of black film, the film lacks sustained critical attention in film studies or in-depth historical analysis given its significance as a landmark text of the 1960s. Documentary-like, but not a documentary, it offers a complex representation of black life, but it was scripted, directed, and filmed by two white men, Michael Roemer and Robert Young.

This essay argues that the film's unusual attention to labor and gender politics as key elements both of racial subordination and liberation resulted from an unusual and productive, though not egalitarian, collaboration across racial lines. The white and Jewish filmmakers recognized that the black freedom struggle in the U.S. South, one of "the most dramatic changes happening in America," intersected with World War II-era mobilizations against fascism and postwar challenges to colonialism around the world. The filmmakers viewed black struggles for justice, dignity, and self-respect as integral to achieving a just society for everyone, which shaped how they conceived the social and familial effects of racialization and the cultural dynamics of white supremacy. Centering their film story on the struggles of a black couple drew on progressive strategies from the 1940s and 1950s to represent broadened democratic citizenship rights. Roemer and Young also had unusual access to the political debates of black activists because of Young's recent work filming television documentaries in Nashville and in Angola. Thus, Nothing But a Man offers a rare glimpse into shifting relations between race and labor and between political economy and gender at their formative stages.

The film *Nothing But a Man* opens with a long pan of a crew of black railroad workers laying tracks in a southern rural landscape. Its first sounds are those of the jackhammer, pounding in the spikes; the camera comes upon the man operating it from behind. The title appears, taken from the refrain of the folk ballad about the legendary black steel-driving man, John Henry. Then the camera shows the face of the jackhammer operator, Ivan Dixon, the film's steel-driving hero, in two long close-ups. Other black crew members come into focus, working to lay the rail being dropped into place by a white driver operating a large crane. An arresting riff from a blues harmonica joins the soundtrack as the jackhammer sound is dimmed. *Nothing But a Man* closes with a two-shot of Ivan Dixon embracing a pregnant, weeping Abbey Lincoln, in a modest living room, children's art on the wall behind them, reassuring her that "It ain't gonna be easy, baby, but it's gonna be all right," ambient sound giving way to the blues harmonica, which plays over the credits.

The opening sequence foregrounds the contradictory status of African American labor that lies at the core of white supremacy; the ending calls attention to male-female interdependency and familial solidarity as resources critical to the resistance to white supremacy. Produced just as a new civil rights insurgency was emerging, *Nothing But a Man* features labor and gender politics as key elements both of racial subordination and liberation. Watching the film now invites viewers to expand their imaginations beyond iconic images of King and Parks, youth, dogs, and fire hoses, to ask what "freedom dreams" animated the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, and in turn, what "freedom dreams" the civil rights movement set in motion.¹

An independently made black-and-white film released late in 1964, *Nothing But a Man* is often listed in the 1970s surveys of black film, but does not fit comfortably into that category. The film has not received sustained critical attention in film studies or in-depth historical analysis. It uses certain documentary techniques and offers a complex representation of black

life, but the film was scripted, directed, and filmed by two white men.² A fruitful, although not egalitarian, collaboration across racial lines produced the film's unusual framing of civil rights protests in response to white supremacy's assault on work and family life. Political frameworks borrowed from the 1940s inflected the film's distinctive representation of civil rights insurgency in the early 1960s.

The white filmmakers, Michael Roemer and Robert Young, embraced the black freedom struggle in the U.S. South as part of the broader World War II mobilization against fascism and the postwar challenges to colonialism around the world. Their perspective shaped how they conceived the social and familial effects of racialization and the cultural dynamics of acceding to and defying white supremacy. Centering their story on the struggles of a black couple drew on a strategy utilized by progressive artists in the 1940s and 1950s: to diversify the category of "ordinary family" in order to broaden the norms of democratic practices associated with the rights of expanded and presumptive citizenship.³

The film's black characters took shape in conversations Roemer and Young had with young southern black male and female students radicalized by the sit-ins and freedom rides in 1960 and 1961; with colleagues in New York's progressive black theater and performance scene, especially Charles Gordone, the playwright and actor who helped cast the film; and with limited and sometimes contested input from its extraordinary actors, professionals Ivan Dixon and Gloria Foster and first-time film actors Abbey Lincoln, the renowned jazz artist and activist, and Julius Harris, who worked as a nurse in New York. Roemer and Young's direct access to political debates within black communities was likely possible only in this historical moment, poised between grassroots direct-action mobilization and an intensified conservative racist backlash, before sharp partisan divisions emerged in response to the calls for black power and

the heightened debates over the domestic and international costs of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

The central character in *Nothing But a Man* is Duff, a railroad worker who meets and marries Josie, a minister's daughter who teaches school in a small town near Birmingham, Alabama. In order to find work that is decently paid and compatible with both self-respect and family life, Duff must give up the unionized but transient work of the railroad section gang conveyed in that first scene and try to break into the segregated low-wage work of the local economy. Talking to fellow workers even in the most coded language about "getting together" leads to Duff being fired from his job at a saw mill and lands him on an antiunion blacklist among local employers. Eventually his inability to find work that doesn't require him to demonstrate servility and accept his assigned place in the racial hierarchy spurs him to leave town, abandoning his pregnant wife. He goes to Birmingham, but what he sees there, in an encounter with his embittered, alcoholic father who has been disabled in an industrial accident, leads Duff back to Josie. He brings home with him a son from a previous relationship, renewing his commitment to Josie and to "making trouble" in the town where they live.

Featuring complex black characters who both acknowledge and resist class and racial constraints, and foregrounding black subjectivity, *Nothing But a Man* stood at the margins of cultural production in the United States in the mid-1960s. Its resolute distance from familiar black good-time film genres, especially minstrelsy and musicals, made it an unlikely feature film. It did not provide a sympathetic white character as a point of identification for white audiences. It did not presume the goal of assimilation into white society. Instead the narrative incidents represented the obstacles to and the possibilities for mobilizing black opposition to white supremacy. Although its title signified a central focus on the black male condition, the women characters command attention and demonstrate agency outside of conventional

representations of domestic labor or nurturing service to white households. Exploring the film's uncertain path to production and exhibition—thematic and stylistic choices of its makers, the terms of political protest it laid out, and how these were recognized by white and black viewers—offers a rare opportunity to listen in on public conversations about race and labor and about political economy and gender before anyone knew the outcome of the unfolding midcentury grassroots campaigns for civil rights.

World War II-era Antifascism and Interracial Solidarity in the early 1960s

The filmmakers Michael Roemer and Robert Young began the film project that became *Nothing But a Man* with a politics that framed World War II as a necessary opposition to fascism. This framework had broad currency during and for several years after World War II and was indelibly shaped by the racial equality demanded by the wartime double V campaign for democracy and freedom at home and abroad. Within this framework, racial injustice was a central, not exceptional, feature of society, resulting not from intolerance, prejudice, or misunderstanding, but from institutional forces driven by political economy. Principles of antifascism, internationalism, and interracialism comingled; black struggles for justice, dignity, and self-respect were seen as significant because they illuminated the path toward achieving a just society for everyone. Roemer later made a distinction between the early 1960s and a later period in which black cultural nationalism challenged white filmmakers who tried to narrate black experience: “In those days we had the gumption to think we could identify with blacks.”⁴

World War II-era antifascism—which opposed both Nazi racialization and manifestations of “domestic fascism,” including U.S. anti-Semitism, opposition to labor organizing, and southern defense of white supremacy—was a defining influence on Young and Roemer. Young's father Al, a film editor in the silent era, had started DuArt, which would become a successful film processing laboratory, with a partner in 1922. Young, born in 1925,

had grown up comfortable financially but as a social outsider on Long Island; he was a secular Jew in a community with few other Jews, at a time when excluding Jews from housing, employment, and public space was still common practice. Young dropped out of an engineering program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to serve in the navy in World War II as a photographer's mate in the South Pacific between 1943 and 1946. He later described himself as making the link between his position as an outsider and other outsider groups, developing "strong empathetic feelings and a strong identification with the underdog.... When I look back, there were a number of seminal experiences having to do with prejudices and people of color, and it definitely comes from being a Jew and being aware of the idea that people think you're inferior and have certain ideas about you."⁵

Roemer was born to a bourgeois Jewish family in Berlin in 1928, and through a child's eyes he watched how the Nazi racialization of Jews, the daily humiliations, economic appropriation, and exclusions, broke apart his family and replaced familial affection with passive but aching resignation to loss. Beginning in 1933, Nazis organized boycotts of Jewish businesses, publically burned Jewish and non-German books in Berlin, established quotas for non-Aryans in schools, and excluded Jews from public parks and swimming pools. Roemer remembered having to sit on separate yellow benches; when Jews were no longer allowed into movies theaters, the woman who took care of him and his sister sneaked them in anyway. But "it was fairy tales and myths, rather than the movies," that allowed him "to escape the unhappy life" of his family and "the oppressive reality beyond it." In November 1938, in the early morning hours of Kristallnacht, his mother's family shoe store was destroyed, along with thousands of businesses and hundreds of synagogues throughout Germany. Within a few days, Jews began to be arrested, laws were passed prohibiting Jews from participation in German economic life, and Jewish children were expelled from German schools. In May 1939, Roemer's family managed

his escape, putting him and his sister on a train to England with three hundred other Jewish children. He spent the war years at a boarding school in Kent and was only reunited with his mother in December 1944 in New York.⁶

Young and Roemer met each other in 1947 at Harvard College, where they were both fledgling members of Harvard's first film society. The film society offered a refuge for students excluded from mainstream collegiate life, which was framed by social pedigree and class privilege. Wartime filmmaking had popularized the use of cheaper and more portable 16 millimeter film stock and equipment; newly organized local film societies, multiplying from just a few in 1940 to over two hundred nationally by 1949, screened European films, including the electrifying new neorealist films from Italy and experimental independent films. In 1949 Young and Roemer collaborated on a student film scripted by Roemer and filmed by Young. Through the 1950s, both Roemer and Young continued to learn filmmaking outside of Hollywood: Roemer worked on educational films and Cinerama features for Louis de Rochemont, the creator of *March of Time's* filmed newsreels. Young worked for Willard Van Dyke, a leftwing U.S. filmmaker known for his social documentaries from the 1930s, and then for the documentary film unit at NBC.⁷

Young's stint at NBC exposed him to the new generation of black activists inside and outside the United States, to their sophisticated "freedom dreams" and provocative challenges to racial inequality and exclusion. Working on the NBC *White Paper* documentary *Sit-In* (broadcast December 20, 1960), Young traveled to Nashville, using raw news footage of the events at the local NBC affiliate to identify and meet the Fisk University student activists John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, Diane Nash, and James Bevel, the white exchange student Paul La Prad, the combative black minister C.T. Vivian, and the distinguished black economist Vivian Henderson. They helped him put together a riveting story that stressed the larger significance of the sit-ins

and explained their use of Gandhian nonviolent civil disobedience—an absolute refusal to accommodate the racial status quo accepted by an older generation of black and white leadership—and their related economic strategy of boycotting downtown stores. The interviews Young filmed also revealed a painful generational divide in the black community and a confident white insistence that racial boundaries could and should hold firm. *Sit-In* introduced its TV viewers to new forms of black protest but also revealed passionate local white resistance to racial equality in any form.⁸

Young relied on his international contacts among the African American civil rights leaders whom he met in Nashville for his next NBC assignment. From Africans fighting colonial rule, he would learn to understand white racial domination in institutional terms. Letters from U.S. civil rights activists enabled Young to make contact with the Angolans fighting Portuguese colonial rule and film *Angola: Journey to War* (broadcast September 19, 1961). Relying on these letters of introduction and accompanied by an African American camera man, Charles Dorkin, Young walked three hundred miles to meet a group of Angolan rebels who showed them villages destroyed by the Portuguese and introduced them to refugees in flight. The documentary laid bare the system of forced labor—pass books, contract labor, women’s and men’s labor gangs—at the heart of Portuguese rule in Angola. The Portuguese claimed that these demeaning structures helped Africans “learn the value of hard work.” The documentary showed the Portuguese using force as if “every African hand were against them,” flattening villages and strafing them with napalm (although the network insisted on cutting out evidence that the napalm bombs were made in the United States). The film also conveyed the chasm between colonizers and Africans, filming Portuguese people who were surprised at black calls for independence, including one who remarked, “The native has been so wonderful with babies and children....we know these people. We love them.” Although Robert Young’s dialogue asked, “how could the ragged group

of [rebel] men and boys hope to become an army” that could mount a meaningful challenge against superior Portuguese force, the final credits suggested a different possibility, as they scrolled in front of footage of the African troops, holding their rifles aloft, singing.⁹

Young won awards for both NBC documentaries; he was then allowed to choose the subject for his next effort and asked Roemer to join him in making a documentary exposé of poverty in Palermo, Sicily. Young was inspired by Danilo Dolci, a charismatic Italian reformer who employed the tactics of Gandhian nonviolent civil disobedience to mobilize the poor. Dolci and his followers demanded that local government, the Roman Catholic Church, and the local mafia take responsibility for the conditions of poverty and hopelessness in Sicilian slums. Young and Roemer concentrated on the everyday survival of families in a poor neighborhood. Their film, then titled *The Inferno / Cortile Cascino*, experimented with a neorealist technique within the documentary form, innovatively using images and sound to knit together a series of sequences exploring how the daily struggle with scarcity shaped relationships between men and women, parents and children, men and local political authority. At the last minute, NBC refused to broadcast *The Inferno*: its unflinching look at the lives of the poor was “unfit for the American living room.” Under suspicious circumstances, the negative disappeared, though a friend managed to smuggle a print out of NBC offices. Young later speculated that the film was dropped because of fears in New York or Washington that it condoned communist influence in Italy. Roemer and Young were devastated that their most creative and ambitious work to date would not be seen. “Here we were, we’d just done the best thing in our lives and it was taken away from us.” This experience pushed them to work independently of the major studios and to conceive the project that became *Nothing But a Man*. “We had to do something fresh that came out of both of us.”¹⁰

In 1962 Young invited Roemer on an eight-week trip to the American South to find background material for a film inspired by the students Young had met in Nashville, active in what Young recognized as the “most dramatic changes happening in America.” Roemer considered himself a stranger to the American racial regime: “I suppose I knew three African Americans before I went south. I had just never really met any.” To his surprise, he found that encountering the circumstances of segregation in the South was “like coming home.” White supremacy in some ways resembled Nazi racialization, especially in its impact on families, he observed. “The man who has no way of supporting his family turns his violence against those who are closest to him and against himself. My father was such a man. So you get the father who doesn’t stay, and a family raised by women.” He went on to comment that “destroying the family, which is such an old pattern in American race relations, isn’t simply a black experience.” Roemer’s European perspective did not reify race or color. In 1965 he asserted, “Bob and I don’t feel we went down south to make a film about somebody else. We felt very related to it.”¹¹

Young’s connections with civil rights leaders from his work on *Sit-In* gained him and Roemer entrée into small towns in South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. “We stayed with black families in their houses, going from family to family, in places where no white people had ever been,” he wrote. Roemer described how being “passed from one black community and family to another” gave them the chance to “learn as much as possible about their experiences, relationships, and feelings.” They attended a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) convention in Atlanta; they heard Martin Luther King Jr. speak and met his father and King’s associate, the fiery civil rights activist Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker. They established contacts among members of the Congress of Racial Equality and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The character Duff Anderson’s refusal to defer to white men, even at the cost of a job, developed partly in conversation with young activists Diane Nash

and James Bevel, now married and living in Mississippi, who pressed to keep the defiant male character committed to the southern struggle. Roemer remembered that repeating theme in conversations he and Young had with the younger generation of activists: “one thing we’ll ask of you—don’t let him go north.”¹² Roemer and Young listened. Duff, the defiant character they created, drew on shared experiences that were animating the new civil rights challengers—union membership, military service, travel outside small-town rules of segregation, and knowledge of the struggles in other communities—to motivate Duff’s commitment to “making some trouble in that [Alabama] town.”¹³

It’s difficult to excavate the terms of collaboration, especially in the context of film production hierarchy and across the fault lines of racial experience. Roemer and Young authored the script. They began with a screenplay Roemer had written in 1957 about a young married couple and the man’s violent, alcoholic father. What they had learned on their two-month trip through the South enabled them to transform the existing screenplay, which Roemer described as psychologically and dramatically sound, and to add the additional generational dimension of Duff’s son. They then filmed the script they wrote; Roemer noted that there were no improvised situations or lines of dialogue. “There were some unplanned things that were taken advantage of, but each scene was, otherwise, quite heavily prepared.”¹⁴

To cast their film, Roemer and Young looked to Charles Gordone, the black playwright, actor, and cofounder of the Committee for the Employment of Negro Performers.¹⁵ Gordone showed the script to the actors Ivan Dixon, Abbey Lincoln, and Julius Harris. The actors then brought astute observations from their own experience to the script and the characters. Interviewed in 2004, Dixon remembered his excitement when Gordone brought him the script: “I wanted to do it bad, it was me, what he was going through was what I had been going through.” Julius Harris was at the time working as a nurse. Although he had never acted before, he was a

friend of Gordone and was able to draw on what he had seen, not in his own family, but “every day, on the streets of Philadelphia and New York.” Roemer and Young were not immediately taken with Gloria Foster, but she came back and read a second time, insisting that she was right for the part of the common-law wife of Duff’s bitter father.¹⁶

On the set, possibilities for interracial collaboration were limited by the overlapping hierarchies of film production and race. Roemer talked through the emotional registers of Duff’s character with actor James Earl Jones, who wasn’t able to persuade Roemer to present Duff as more angry and less easy-going in the early scenes. Ivan Dixon fought as hard as he could for his conception of how Duff should look and act, winning some points, losing others. The set was contentious and thick with racial tensions, exacerbated by Roemer’s style of direction. Dixon commented retrospectively that “Roemer was a particular kind of director who used actors as puppets. So we did it his way, and there was nothing wrong with that. We played it in his style—very naturalistic, very realistic, almost documentary.” Looking back on the filmmaking, Roemer and Young thought they had earned respect from the actors both by holding firm to their interpretation and by conceding to the actors’ insights. Although retrospectively Roemer and Young were self-critical about not yielding to more of the actors’ suggestions for their characters, at the time they felt constrained by their aspirations to get their resisting black characters in front of white filmgoers who might otherwise remain unaware of what was at stake in dismantling segregation: “We went as far as we thought we could take a white audience at the time and still not lose them.”¹⁷

The sharpest racial conflict during the filming was not about script or character; it was sparked by the freedom struggle unfolding in the intense summer of 1963. Dixon, who had marched on Washington in the SCLC Prayer March in 1957, wanted to be at the March for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963, but the filmmakers, working on a tight budget, vetoed the delay. A

tense exchange led to blows between Dixon and Richard Rubin, the sound man. Dixon took off, but with the intercession of Clayton Riley, a black production assistant, Dixon rejoined the production, and filming continued. They were still filming in New Jersey on September 15, the day four young girls were killed by bombs at the Sixteenth Street Church in Birmingham, the starting point for many of the marches that previous spring. The actors were overcome with grief and rage, but somehow managed to finish the film.¹⁸

Ultimately, it was the left-wing framework and Jewish identifications of Roemer and Young that allowed them to view racial discrimination and black experience within segregation as part of a broader politics and struggle and helped sustain the commitment of filmmakers, actors, and crew to the final production. Abbey Lincoln remembered Roemer telling the cast, “‘This is not about black people necessarily. This is about oppression.’ He was a Jew.... He went through that. He knew something about oppression and the story was about how, when you are oppressed, you finally learn to oppress yourself. That’s the way it works, and he was right.” But she also noted the actors’ active participation in the collaborative effort: “It was his song that we made our own.”¹⁹

“Making it Real”: Documentary Style and Authority

In order to address with authority contested racial issues through the vehicle of storytelling, *Nothing But a Man* blended feature filmmaking with documentary style. Roemer and Young had learned their craft just after World War II, when a particular approach to film—combining location shooting, hand-held cameras, fictional reconstruction of nonfiction footage, and the casting of nonprofessional actors—announced the filmmakers’ social aspirations. Examples range widely across film genres, from John Ford’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) to Orson Welles’s experimental *Citizen Kane* (1941), from William Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) to works of Italian neorealism such as Roberto Rossellini’s *Rome Open City* (1945) and

Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948).²⁰ One film scholar has commented that this hybridity was so widely recognized in the 1940s that it was even given the name “newsdrama cinematography” by the motion picture industry and was commonly identified with social problem films (as well as with urban noir) in the late 1940s.²¹ These techniques were crossing between Hollywood and alternative filmmaking just at the moment when foreign films and independent cinema were becoming a more visible part of U.S. urban film culture, particularly in the smaller, second-run theaters that were experiencing new commercial viability as art houses in the 1950s and early 1960s.²²

“Newsdrama cinematography” is prevalent in the film. Roemer and Young were thoroughly committed to a documentary look, with underlighting and high-contrast photography, along with the style of acting that Dixon described as “very naturalistic, very realistic.” Some of the film footage came from the filmmakers’ trip south; they shot fields and townscapes from their car windows in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Maryland and photographed a railroad section gang working near where they were staying at the home of one of the Nashville sit-in students, in Eastover, South Carolina, that would become part of the film’s opening sequence. They recorded the blues harmonica playing of a local black musician, Wilbur Kirk, before his white landlord threw them off his property for sitting publicly, black and white, on the porch. The scenes with actors were all shot on location in New Jersey, with black neighborhoods and black churches in Cape May providing the look of a small southern town, and the black ghetto in Atlantic City passing for Birmingham. The experience of being tailed by sheriffs during the preparatory trip taught the filmmakers about the potential danger of filming in the South with an interracial cast and crew. Young filmed with a hand-held camera, refusing to use a zoom and preferring to move into the center of the action.²³ His attention to black faces in close-up

produced images of depth and intimacy rarely seen before in American filming of African American characters.

The film's authority to represent lived experience relies heavily on its use of everyday sounds, from jackhammers and other machines in the opening sequence to the clanking tailpipe of Duff's car when he's driving back, with his son, to Josie. The filmmakers used radio microphones, not yet common in feature films, to produce extraordinarily clear sound in everyday registers.²⁴ They also used sound to mark spatial and psychic shifts. The noise of the car engine gives way to the sound of a bell announcing the borders of town. We hear the jukebox playing "Heat Wave" as we see the pinball machine that tells us we are in a pool parlor; outside, on a dark street, "Heat Wave" fades and the first haunting notes of a woman singing a gospel song leads Duff to the doorway of the church. Documentary techniques are most obvious in the church scene; a devout congregation and a renowned revivalist create the cross-class space in which Duff and Josie meet.

A hit song in 1963, "Heat Wave" was produced by the black-owned Detroit record label Motown, a company name that referred to Detroit's significance in offering employment to black workers in the automobile industry. "Heat Wave" and other Motown hits in the film, with proven crossover appeal to white as well as black record buyers, introduce another set of powerful black voices and sounds into the film's created world, signaling the life of black neighborhoods and marking spaces of black sociability—low-down bars, crowded streets, and rickety back-alley tenements—in what the film shows as Birmingham's poor black district. In contrast to the blues idiom of black nightclub vocalists, the Motown songs project a forward-looking optimism, and as Roemer would later describe it, "say the thing that couldn't be spoken in the film." Black newspaper reviewers were especially excited about the film's use of Motown: "When you hear Martha and the Vandellas, Little Stevie Wonder, the Marvelettes, or the Miracles, you

automatically know that this movie is going to be for real: the honest to goodness everyday living kind of thing.”²⁵ The filmmakers’ approach to sound enhanced the film’s realist effects and supported its claims to verisimilitude.

Narrating Race and Class, Family and Resistance

Nothing But a Man showcased the interconnections between race and class exploitation and encouraged sympathy for the young civil rights radicals who were transforming deference into defiance in the early 1960s. In a press release the filmmakers are explicit about the social and generational location of its characters. “‘*Nothing But a Man*’ concerns a Negro rover, a carefree laborer on the railroad section gang in the Deep South, when he abandons the easy camaraderie of the bunk-car and the honky-tonk, and marrying the daughter of a Baptist minister, seeks to settle down and make his living in a small town near Birmingham, Alabama. The younger generation is weary of the pattern set by their parents. The young man’s cockiness soon brings him into conflict with his white bosses. He determines to fight the battle with dignity and independence.”²⁶

The film’s attention to the working conditions of black men illuminated issues of racial discrimination that had been raised by black and white progressives and trade union radicals since the mid-1930s. The narrative positions labor—its physical demands, racial hierarchy, and remuneration—at the heart of Duff’s situation; further, and the reference to the legend of John Henry identifies labor as central to the black male condition. The class distance between Duff and Josie is in play from the moment of their first meeting, when they quickly establish that he works on the railroad and that she is a schoolteacher who has been to college. The demeaning rules of white supremacy are shown to shape all public spaces, but they have their most devastating effects in the white-controlled workplaces in town, which offer Duff nothing more than a variety of opportunities for subservience and exploitation, filmed in near-documentary

detail. Unionization is shown to be the best protection for black workers, but the power of the bosses to exacerbate racial divisions in the sawmill that employs both black and white workers—and to blacklist even potentially prounion workers—makes this a precarious possibility at best. The conclusion of the film does not resolve the problem of exploited black workers, but Duff's comment, that he can always chop cotton if he has to, emphasizes the social necessity of working-class labor—part of the resolution in such familiar works as Sean O'Casey's frequently performed play *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), the film version of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and both stage and screen versions of *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959, 1961).

The film shows how the unfolding civil rights struggles in the early 1960s built on popular wartime ideals of antifascism, labor militancy, and racial equality. Duff's spirited refusal to defer to white supremacy is explained through references to these prior forms of resistance. Duff's mention of how his army service in Japan exposed him to other ways of life places him in the tradition of World War II veterans fighting for the double victory (against fascism abroad and against Jim Crow at home). His unionized job on the railroad section gang marks the collective accomplishments of A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Duff refers to Birmingham as an inspiring model of militancy: "if they can do it in Birmingham, and that's a mean town, we ought to do something here." Here the film uses multiple associations with the city: its organizing drives to unionize black steelworkers in the 1930s and 1940s; a voting rights campaign in the late 1940s; and the embattled desegregation campaign in the spring of 1963. These multiple references emphasize the wider significance of the black struggle in the United States. The repeated reference to the "lynching they still had here eight years ago" makes a chronological connection to the horrific 1955 murder of Emmett Till in nearby Mississippi, invoking both its violent repression of challenges to segregation and the widespread outrage in response.

At the same time, the film shows that collective resistance is a demanding, uncertain, and unfinished political project. Coerced forms of accommodation to white supremacy result in painful divisions among black people: a black sawmill worker's collusion with the white bosses costs Duff his job; Duff quits rather than accede to the boss's demand to repudiate his support for "getting together." Josie's minister father has made a deal with the white school superintendent to get a new black school in exchange for quelling any demands for legal school desegregation—a familiar white segregationist strategy to resist enforcement of the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown* decision. The film consistently frames Duff's personal defiance as "trouble" because of his potential as a leader/instigator of collective forms of racial resistance. At the same time it conveys that collective resistance should not be taken for granted or assumed to be inherent in the "black community."

Nothing But a Man emphasizes the importance of male-female sexual partnership as a critical source for sustaining resistance to white supremacy. The film conveys the cost of racial discrimination and exploitation in the workplace especially through its punishing effect on Duff's willingness to commit himself to marital intimacy and mutual dependence. The camera sharply juxtaposes a series of domestic alternatives: the all-male but temporary camaraderie in the bunk housing of the railroad section gang; the patriarchal rule and spirit-numbing respectability of Josie's middle-class dining room; the emotionally barren and crowded living space of the child minder in Birmingham who boards Duff's son after the boy has been abandoned by the mother; the alcoholic acrimony of the small room that Duff's father and Lee share; a beaten-down neighbor on his front porch, fending off his wife's enraged disappointment; an implausibly hopeful exchange between Duff and Josie, hanging clothes on the line and playfully shadow boxing.

Gender conventions ordinarily pose men as concerned about social and public good and women as defending private family well-being. But *Nothing But a Man* proposes that it is precisely the resources of marital and familial reciprocity that will enable Duff to go on “making trouble” in the public sphere. The radical message—that to sustain a marriage it is necessary to resist white supremacy, which requires the joint social efforts of wives and husbands, mothers and fathers—built on the precedent of an earlier left-wing film, *Salt of the Earth* (1952), itself the result of an unusual collaboration between blacklisted Hollywood filmmakers and Mexican American miners.²⁷ According to the film’s narrative, Duff is driven to leave his pregnant wife because of his refusal to accept the only work available to him, demeaning and structured by segregationist racial discrimination. When Duff, haunted by his father’s immobilizing rage but moved by Lee’s generosity of spirit, returns and chooses his family, it is because he has decided to accept Josie’s emotional as well as wage-earning support—which will enable him to go on “making trouble” in that town. Duff’s renewed commitment to family, including his son, clears away any alternative personal explanations for his fate, squarely blaming institutional forms of white supremacy for the black laboring man’s condition. This narrative resolution effectively shifts attention away from familial failures and disappointments, now resolved, and back toward the necessity for collective pressure to challenge segregation.

Black female agency is shown as central to the project of sustaining the resistant black family, although the film foregrounds the vulnerability and final assertion of black manhood. Duff’s wife Josie insists on her own subjectivity and sexual desire. From her first encounter with Duff, she rejects his efforts to pigeonhole her as someone shaped by middle-class standards of respectability. She acknowledges the class divide between them, but also lets him know she is interested in crossing it. She explicitly refuses her stepmother’s class-based characterization of her interest in Duff as sexual slumming. On their first date, in a crowded bar with dance music in

the background, Josie won't let Duff define her as a naïve and inexperienced good girl, instead describing her attraction to him as someone who shares her own resisting spirit.

Josie's agency in this first date contrasts vividly with another first date, between Terry Malloy and Edie Doyle, the lovers played by Marlon Brando and Eva Marie Saint in *On the Waterfront* (1954). Edie's innocence and naïveté have already been established when she replies to Terry asking her for a date: "What for?" When they do meet in a bar, she accepts several drinks, gets dizzy, and needs to be rescued by him from the wild wedding dancers spinning by. In contrast, Josie dances with Duff with pleasure on a crowded dance floor, makes it clear when she doesn't want another drink, and continues to convey her forthright interest in him. *On the Waterfront* represented the relationship between Terry and Eddie as ricocheting between her virginal innocence and his tragic, child-like vulnerability, her sexual awakening in the face of his passionate need. With vivid characterization, *Nothing But a Man* represents the relationship between Duff and Josie as growing out of their mutual sexual attraction and their developing openness to the possibilities of what a shared life drawing on their collective differences and resources might entail: rough times, economic uncertainty, but the potential for commitment to reciprocity. A delicately filmed bedroom scene and explicit dialogue depict shared delight, breaking new ground in the representation of romantic and sexual desire between a married black couple. Josie's repeated offers to parent Duff's other child expresses her expansive and generous view of kinship. Her choice of him and her support of Duff's oppositional stance suggest her rejection of privileged respectability. Josie's commitment to teach school in this town rather than find more remunerative work elsewhere enabled by her college degree and her unwavering support of Duff's defiance constitute her own commitment to "making trouble" where she lives. Her self-possession, determination, and personal agency are critical to the film's representation

of gender and family mutuality, which, despite unequal power dynamics, constitute a key resource enabling resistance.

Signifying to Audiences, White and Black

Many obstacles stood between this independent film and a mainstream audience. Roemer and Young had raised \$160,000 to make *Nothing But a Man* from a group of about forty investors. When they had a print to screen, thanks to the financial support of Young's brother (then in charge of Du Art, the family's film processing lab), the mostly white audiences from whom they hoped to raise money for postproduction found it "depressing," and left in silence.²⁸

Recent popular works associated with promoting interracial understanding would not have prepared potential contributors and Hollywood film viewers more generally for the film's sharp economic and social analysis. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) featured a story set in Alabama in 1932, comfortably distant from the hotly contested present, revolving around, as *Playboy* quipped, "children learning about evil and adults learning about good." With its focus on the motives and responses of white characters when a small town Southern black man is falsely accused of rape, the white family equipped with the requisite all-knowing and nurturing black maid, and the film narrated through the eyes and words of a child, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was "not likely to offend any but the most bigoted viewers," the Atlanta *Constitution* reviewer noted.²⁹ Another recent film, *Lilies of the Field* (1963), showcasing the unlikely mutual regard between a group of German-speaking nuns and an itinerant black carpenter who helps them build a chapel, was recognized with an Academy Award for Sidney Poitier's performance, but like Brock Peters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Poitier was the lone black character in a film that did not attempt to depict black subjectivity or the potential for collective resistance.

Nothing But a Man was only able to attract critical attention and viewership as a result of a chance opening created by the imperatives of Cold War civil rights, in which U.S. foreign

policy goals could be advanced by representing America with a primarily black-cast film. Because another entry generated controversy and was withdrawn at the last minute, *Nothing But a Man* was accepted as an official U.S. entry at the Second Venice Film Festival in August 1964. Enthusiastic applause from the audience there made film news in the black papers the *Chicago Defender* and the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and industry coverage in *Variety* and the *New York Times*.³⁰ Winning what Roemer later referred to as “two good-guy” awards, the Prix San Giorgio and the City of Venice award, translated into publicity material for the film as “the double prize winner at Venice.” Possibly influenced by the positive response from European critics, the audience at a New York Film festival in September “rendered its verdict with loud, prolonged applause.” Roemer and Young were finally able to make a distribution deal.³¹ A 1965 article on the film in *Ebony* observed that “American movies which attempted to treat racial matters in a realistic way” were often “discovered” and honored in Europe before being accepted in the United States.³²

Finding exhibition venues and audiences in 1964 for a film that showed defiant black characters presented a challenge to industry practices. With white audiences moving to the suburbs, watching more television, and going to the movies less frequently, distributors were already facing a decline in ticket sales. Former assumptions about how to attract a mass audience gave way to marketing to audiences differentiated by age, class, and cultural sensibility. Legal efforts to desegregate public accommodations meant that previously accepted norms of segregation at movie theaters were in flux. Demographic shifts produced new black majorities in neighborhoods adjacent to downtown movie theaters. The leaders of the Nashville student movement who were informally advising Young and Roemer had themselves led “stand-in” protests at local downtown movie chains. The many owners who wanted to retain the forms of exclusion the students were protesting would not have been likely to exhibit this kind of film.

Even the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act legislating the desegregation of public accommodations did not overturn the obstacles to commercial distribution of films depicting black life. Despite the increasing number of black moviegoers (10 to 15 percent of the general population, but 30 percent of the first-run movie patrons by 1967), the weight of past practices made white theater owners reluctant to encourage black patronage. In the North, theater owners assumed that white moviegoers would not attend films in theaters frequented by black patrons. Lawyer-turned-film producer Frederick Wiseman, involved with another independent film about black life, ridiculed the presumed assumptions of white theater owners that “if they show a movie about Negroes, they’ll have a riot on their hands.”³³

In the political context of desegregation Roemer and Young rejected the conventional wisdom that dramatic black characters would only appeal to black audiences. Their triumph in Venice garnered a distribution deal from Cinema V, a newly formed independent that was acquiring black-themed movies and marketing them beyond the “Negro market.” Cinema V’s strategy was to target downtown art house theaters that attracted both a culturally aspiring sector of moviegoers (to see European and neorealist films) and downtown grind-house audiences looking for exploitation films.³⁴ *Variety* described Cinema V’s previous 1964 publicity campaign for *The Cool World*, an independent film exploring the pressures on young black teenagers in Harlem, as emphasizing “sexploitation.” Although initially the film “played only in Negro theatres, with grind promo, in Washington [DC] and Philadelphia,” in Baltimore, *The Cool World* started out in an art house and then moved to a lengthy engagement at a black theater. In San Francisco, after considerable plugging from an enthusiastic radio disc jockey, the film drew both black and white ticket-buyers to a theater distant from the main black neighborhood, where it stayed for a two-month run.³⁵

The marketing campaign for *Nothing But a Man* bore the traces of a combined art house/exploitation approach. In New York City and Boston, most of the ads for *Nothing But a Man* in the daily newspapers featured the outline of a black couple's embrace, showing only the woman's face; black newspapers used these ads but also ran glamorous promotional stills of Dixon and Lincoln in many of the articles they ran about the film. Especially outside of New York City, Cinema V's ad campaign for *Nothing But a Man* emphasized sexual explicitness over racial struggle, with posters circulating the shot of Josie getting out of bed to take off her nightgown, her back to the camera, her silhouette and skin color indistinguishable. Roemer later wrote that the ad campaign "almost buried the fact that *Nothing But a Man* is about African-Americans."³⁶

Rather than emphasize the film's sexual explicitness or its provocative challenges to white supremacy, Roemer and Young promoted what they hoped would be *Nothing But a Man*'s universal appeal as a family story. Presenting black experience as a point of identification for white as well as black audiences offered the possibility of imagining a richer, more inclusive citizenship, undistorted by either the presumption of whiteness or by colorblindness. This promotional strategy also had the potential to avoid provocation while the film began to find its audience. On the other hand, a focus on the marriage-and-family story, conventionally associated with daytime radio and melodrama, could deflect attention away from the film's racial critique and focus on political economy.³⁷ Further, as Nikhil Singh has argued, struggles to claim universality for black people have rarely succeeded on their own terms, even when they have laid bare universalism's implicit whiteness, challenging "not only particularism masquerading as a universalism, but also a universalism distorted by its long monopolization against blacks."³⁸ The "common sense" that universality was white and blackness the problem was deeply ingrained. Roemer's public comments—that the filmmakers wanted to "make a good film about young

Americans' experience that people would like to go and see," about how "boys have to settle with their fathers before they can become men"—may have encouraged some white reviewers to emphasize the film's love story as private, positioning the film as outside of politics, especially the unfolding civil rights struggle.³⁹

To these reviewers the emotional resonance of the family story eclipsed the film's racial challenge to white supremacy. *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther, an admirer of the Italian neorealist films *Open City* and *The Bicycle Thief*, wrote that "on the surface it might seem a drama of race relations in the South...but essentially it is a drama of the emotional adjustment of the man to the age old problem of earning a livelihood, supporting a family, and maintaining his dignity." The review in the trade paper *The Motion Picture Herald* suggested that the universal dimensions of the love story outweighed its racial specificity: "first of all, this picture...is a realistic and solid drama about some likeable human beings. It is of secondary importance that the color of their skin happens to be black. Primarily it is a love story." A reviewer in Syracuse, New York, suggested that the family story could reassure white viewers unsettled by the social changes associated with desegregation, describing the film as "personal, without the violence of marches."⁴⁰

Other white reviewers who recognized the film's political protest applauded. One noted how the film explicitly probed "the question of equal rights without evasion or compromise," and praised it as "perhaps the best picture about Negroes made since the upsurge of the civil rights movement...a damning portrait of social injustice." Another recognized Duff Anderson as "an emotional spokesperson for his generation" and the film as revealing "the particularized lives of a young married couple faced with the problems common to hundreds of negroes like them—unemployment, poverty, humiliation."⁴¹ One white critic particularly appreciated the black subjectivity that distinguished *Nothing But a Man* from films limited by Hollywood's

imagination of civil rights; *Life*'s reviewer noted approvingly that there was "no Hollywood subtheme of white liberals in search of a Negro who is really white inside."⁴² Another white critic explicitly praised *Nothing But a Man*'s linkages between work, family life, and racial protest: "most people are so busy keeping abreast of life, earning a living, dealing with personal problems, that they don't want to take part in bigger issues, in this case, full Negro rights. But they are all connected. It is impossible to escape, even for the timid or temporizing among the oppressed."⁴³

Black press reviewers criticized white commentary that dichotomized racial experiences and universality or missed the film's political messages. *Ebony*'s coverage of the film dryly noted that "audiences and critics alike have expressed surprise that the story of a Negro can possess universal meaning." *Ebony*'s reviewer neatly reversed the formulation. "Though the theme (resolute man colliding with the silent invisible rules of his society) is universal, the tale is a very particular one, woven around a seemingly 'common' man who brings home to the audience just how uncommon the man is who must fight for his status as a man." What is "everyday" is the "struggle of a Negro man trying to live with dignity in a world which degrades him." A critic from a Cleveland black newspaper cleverly reframed white reviewers' response to the film as "no message" as a "credit to the acting talent and skill" of the principals, Dixon and Lincoln, expressing a guarded hope that the film "may increase understanding and diminish hatred where it exists." He questioned white audiences' capacity to acknowledge what they were witnessing on screen: "White theater goers will never admit it, the white assaults upon a Negro's dignity, the condescending timidity of his friends, and the patient understanding of his wife are the things Negro males live with every day—in the South and in the North."⁴⁴

Some black viewers did not like the film's presumption that black working people and family support were critical to public efforts to resist white supremacy. The black film critic

Albert Johnson regarded *Nothing But a Man* as too narrowly focused on the family drama, which he termed “familiar Americana.” He felt that the film’s representation of “heartbreakingly commonplace situations of married couples everywhere, the courtship, marriage, new home (or shack), the quarrel, separation, and reunion, and the imminent baby” pushed it into the terrain of “mere domestic tragedy”(he preferred *The Cool World*).⁴⁵ In contrast, the reviewer for the Cleveland black newspaper welcomed the film’s emotional catharsis, writing that “sensitive Negro men, viewing this picture, will undoubtedly weep as they see the daily frustrations of their lives so vividly portrayed. They will [r]ebel with Duff when insults are headed upon them.” This reviewer also praised the power of Abbey Lincoln’s portrayal of Josie: “Her contribution to ‘Man’ is full of warmth, sensitivity.... Josie in her quiet strength fairly screams to be heard, and Duff, finally, hears her.”⁴⁶ A viewer from East New York wrote to the *Amsterdam News* to say that she was deeply offended by the film, particularly its black characters, who seemed to her *too* ordinary, “uncultured...each generation of men are of the lowest status.” Six weeks later she was sharply answered by a reader from East Harlem who enthusiastically defended the film: “any Negro who has been in the south and many northern towns will easily recognize this picture as an honest conscientious portrayal of the conditions as they exist and the barriers that must be overcome.” She hoped that the film’s political framing would “enlighten many white people and unaware Negroes to the enormity of the struggle of our people.”⁴⁷

Radicals who were already committed to a political framework connecting labor and race welcomed the racial and class analysis embedded in *Nothing But a Man*. Reverend Malcolm Boyd, the white Episcopal minister and former Hollywood press agent who became a civil rights activist, wrote in the black newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* that whites would be “blind no more” if they watched Duff Anderson knock “his head against the stone wall of white supremacy, segregation, bigotry”; they would see a man who despite the risk of losing work and

the constant threats of physical danger, “will not buckle down to the system.” Boyd explicitly noted that the film “portrays Negro class differences and examines some of their meanings.”⁴⁸

Black writers and activists who were already involved in the struggle to broaden the representation of racial experience beyond demeaning stereotypes and the invisibility of mainstream culture were particularly excited by *Nothing But a Man*. Sylvester Leaks, long-time member of the Harlem Writers Guild, offered the film singular praise in the Nation of Islam’s *Muhammad Speaks*: “Never before has black life in America been so vividly portrayed and depicted with such stark realism.... Here is a blood and guts movie of black life as it is, without apology—now searing, now soothing, now scintillating, now ingratiating, now solemn and sad, now filled with laughter and joy.” Leaks quoted Duff’s description of the feeling of being unable to find a self-respecting job: “It’s like a lynching. They don’t get you with a knife. They get you deep down inside.” Although he singled out Lincoln’s “warmth, inner strength, and beauty,” he made the connection, for his Nation of Islam readers, between militancy and masculinity: “Nothing but a man, with the will to fight the system, will survive the ordeal of being black in America. One cannot run, or hide, or compromise. One must face it. One must fight it. Duff chooses to be nothing but a man.” It is likely that these qualities also appealed to Malcolm X, who stopped in the street in New York when he recognized Julius Harris (Duff’s father), introduced himself, and said how much he liked the film. After Malcolm X was killed, Wyatt Tee Walker described the film as “the story of another Malcolm, fictitious yet very real, who can be found all over this land.”⁴⁹ Alice Childress, an actress and writer whose writing about black working-class women since the 1940s foregrounded “so-called ordinary characters.... [T]hey represent a part of ourselves, the self twice denied, first by racism, and then by class indifference,” was reported to have wept when she first saw the film.⁵⁰

There's no way to tell how many people heeded Sylvester Leak's exhortation: "this is a you must see-don't dare miss movie," or the other rave reviews in national news and cultural magazines, and white and black newspapers. According to the trade press, New York City moviegoers bought enough tickets from "art house to nabes [neighborhood theaters]" to cover the film's costs by early February 1965, even before its limited release in twelve key cities in the United States and Canada, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. Given that its initial commercial exhibition was propelled by the presumably European audiences at the Venice film festival in 1964, it is noteworthy that in 1966 the film was one of the entries selected to represent the United States to the African diaspora assembled at the First World Festival of the Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in April 1966: both the film and the actors were awarded prizes.⁵¹

After its commercial release and festival showings, *Nothing But a Man* continued into the 1970s to circulate as an important black film, a powerful and provocative challenge to white supremacy. The film had a second life outside movie theaters, with screenings in churches, colleges, and community halls, largely to black audiences. Sometime after 1966, Tom Brandon, who had been active in the 1930s Film and Photo League and was interested in the distribution aspects of filmmaking, acquired the film for his company, Brandon Films. By the late 1960s, the film averaged twenty to thirty bookings a month during the school year in one regional office; by 1973 the film had generated rental fees ten times its purchase price. Screenings of *Nothing But a Man* took place at celebrations of black culture, such as the Watts Arts Festival and Grand Fiesta/Freedom Jubilee sponsored by the Centro Hispano and the National Negro Foundation in Los Angeles in 1967, a Black Cinema Series at the Afro-Arts Theater in Chicago, and an Images in Black Festival at the Afro Arts Cultural Center in New York, sponsored by Harlem CORE, both in 1968.⁵²

Nothing But a Man remains in circulation. It premiered on public television in February 1984; a restored print won a second theatrical release in time for Black History Month in February 1993, with special screenings in New York organized by the Black Filmmakers Foundation and the Coalition of 100 Black Women. There were bookings in Boston; Chicago; Washington, DC; Los Angeles; Minneapolis; Portland, Oregon; San Francisco; and Seattle. The film was released in video and selected for the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress. Its 2004 release on DVD garnered another round of reviews and rediscovery.

I have argued here that the lasting appeal of *Nothing But a Man* is explained less by timelessness or the universality of the family story than by the multiple points of identification embedded in a film created by a historically contingent, cross-racial collaboration. Audiences continue responding to how the film portrays the daily indignities and larger psychic costs of racialization; as Abbey Lincoln put it, “when you are oppressed, you finally learn to oppress yourself.” Further, it provides a tantalizing glimpse at alternative forms of mutuality enabling “making trouble” via various forms of collective resistance. The collaboration that shaped the film’s representation of its historical moment led to its focus on the centrality of working people in collective resistance, the critical resource of familial reciprocity as enabling solidarity, and the connections between racial and social justice. The film that resulted helps to explain how the civil rights insurgency functioned as the “burning struggle” then and continues to call attention to the multiple strands underlying struggles in our own time.⁵³

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¹ The phrase comes from Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002). There is an extensive literature on the history of the civil rights movement in the postwar period. On connections between labor, gender, and civil rights, see Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (December 1988): 786–811; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of History,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233–63; Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York: Norton, 2007); Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Want to Start a Revolution: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); and Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

² Edward Mapp, *Blacks in American Film: Today and Yesterday* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1972), 98–102; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (1973; repr. New York: Continuum, 2001), 202–204; Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 199–200; Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 115–27. Ed Guerrero does not discuss the film in *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), although he briefly comments on it in an essay, “The Black Man on Our Screens and the Empty Space in Representation,” *Callaloo* 18, no. 2 (1995): 395–400. The film does not appear in Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Valerie Smith, ed., *Representing Blackness: Issues In Film and Video* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Donald Bogle ranks *NBAM* as “one of the best black-oriented films of the era” and comments that “no other American film has treated a black male/female relationship with as much sensitivity,” although he wonders “what a black director might have done with the same material,” describing “an ambience more European than black American.” *Blacks in American Films and Television* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 157. Clyde Taylor is one of the few film scholars to write appreciatively about *NBAM* within the context of black screen representations in *The Mask of Art: Breaking the*

Aesthetic Contract—Film and Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), evaluating the film as “making a radical departure from conventional Hollywood treatments of African Americans on several grounds” and arguing that the film must be credited with “quietly overturning the cinematic traditions of Black representation” (200–201). An example of a recent dismissive film studies essay is John Nickel, “Disabling African American Men: Liberalism and Race Message Films,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 34–35.

³ For a fuller discussion of the left-wing project of representing the ordinary, see Judith E. Smith, *Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); on ordinary love stories, see pp. 242–80. See also Smith, “Talking Back to Hollywood: Ordinary Love Stories on Film, 1946–1964,” in *Understanding Love through Philosophy, Film, and Fiction*, eds. Susan Wolf and Christopher Grau (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁴ For a discussion of left-wing political concerns expressed within the loose category of antifascism after World War II, see Smith, *Visions of Belonging*, 109–204. Roemer is quoted in Clarke Taylor, “‘Nothing But a Man’ Classic on TV Tonight,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1984. In the 1980s and 1990s, Roemer consistently commented that he no longer believed white filmmakers should tell black stories because they couldn’t know enough about black life and because of the emergence of black filmmakers and their work. In an interview reproduced on the 2004 DVD, Young demurred from this view, noting that “sometimes coming from the outside, you see so much more that people on the inside can no longer see.”

⁵ On Al Young, Robert Young’s father, see Patricia Cohen, “At DuArt, an End to Film Processing,” compiled by Randy Kennedy, *New York Times*, August 13, 2010. Al Young edited DuArt’s introduction to documentary features, “The Fight for Peace” in 1938; DuArt’s website, <http://www.duart.com>, March 14, 2006. Young’s quote is cited in Jim Davidson, “Telling a Story: The Making of ‘Nothing But a Man.’” *Common Quest* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1998), 14.

⁶ Roemer, *Film Stories: Screenplays as Story*, vol. 1 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 1–3.

⁷ Roemer, *Film Stories*, 4–5; Nicholas Cull, “Border Crossings: *Alambrista* and the Cinema of Robert Young,” in *Alambrista and the U.S.–Mexican Border: Film, Music, and Stories of Undocumented Immigrants*, ed. Cull and David Carrasco (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 152. A photo essay in *Life* magazine about Roemer and Young’s student film, *Touch of the Times*, described its “conspiratorial businessmen” who “spy on workers who are flying kites, an activity they suspect is subversive.” “Harvard Movie: Student Film Has Kites and

Conflicts,” *Life*, October 1949, 63–64. Filmographies of Roemer and Young’s work to 1965 in Saul Cohen, “Three American Film Makers,” *Film Comment* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1965), 13.

⁸ My special thanks to J. Fred MacDonald, who provided me with a study copy of *Sit-In*. The documentary is also available for viewing at the Paley Center for Media in New York. The documentary does not name the black students interviewed, but other accounts of the Nashville sit-in movement make the identifications, such as David Halberstam’s *The Children* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), and John Lewis, with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harvest, 1999).

⁹ Nicholas Cull, “Border Crossings,” 152–53. According to Erik Barnouw, NBC executive producer Irving Gitlin told Young that this material could not be used because the Russians would “use it against us.” Cited in *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 227. *Angola: Journey to War* is available for viewing at the Paley Center for Media in New York.

¹⁰ Cohen, “Three American Film Makers,” 9; Davidson, “Telling a Story,” 8. In the DVD commentary, Roemer describes feeling “as if someone had hit me in the back of my neck, wounded and stunned...we said we would never make anything that anyone could take away from us.” *Cortile Cascino* is now available on DVD (Filmmakers Library), as is a follow-up documentary, *Children of Fate* (First Run Films), made thirty years later by Young’s son, Andrew Young, and his wife, Susan Todd, reinterviewing some of the women from the original documentary.

¹¹ Roemer, quoted by Jennine Lanouette, “Nothing But a Good Tale,” *Village Voice*, March 2, 1993, 56; Sheila Rule, “Black Film Portrait Back on Screen,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1993, C13, C16; Archer Winston, “Rages and Outrages,” *New York Post*, January 11, 1965. In the interview included on the 2004 DVD, Roemer says, and Young concurs, that “we were lucky; it was their story, but we were allowed to tell it, no one else was telling it.”

¹² Rule, “Black Film Portrait”; Roemer, *Film Stories*, 7; Davidson, “Telling a Story,” 9–10; Taylor, “‘Nothing But a Man’ Classic on TV Tonight.”

¹³ The screenplay provided Duff’s direct commentary on the difference between segregation in the North and South: “It ain’t that good up there neither. Might as well try to make it here.”

¹⁴ Cohen, “Three American Film Makers,” 11.

¹⁵ Early commentary about the film in production in Jesse Walker’s *Theatricals* column in the *New York Amsterdam News* refers to Gordone as producer or associate producer; later accounts and formal credits do not

acknowledge him in this way. See Walker's column on March 9, 1963, June 1, 1963, and "Gordone Returns to 'The Blacks,'" January 18, 1964.

¹⁶ Interviews with the actors, *Nothing But a Man* DVD, 2004. Esther Rolle, at the time the director of Asadata Dafora's African dance troupe and a New York dancer and stage actress, appeared on screen for the first time as the church member Sister Sarah.

¹⁷ Cohen, "Three American Film Makers," 10–11; Davidson, "Telling a Story," 12, 16–17, 21–22. In the 2004 DVD interviews, Roemer and Young note a number of instances where they later felt that they were wrong not to yield more to the actors' interpretations of their characters. Roemer's comment about the audience was quoted in Taylor, "'Nothing But a Man' Classic on TV Tonight"; he noted in the same breath that "black audiences and critics at the time and since seem to have liked it and thought it true to their experience."

¹⁸ Davidson, "Telling a Story," 22–32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11, 23.

²⁰ See John Grierson, "Postwar Patterns," and Philip Dunne, "The Documentary and Hollywood," in *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (January 1946), reprinted in Eric Smoodin and Ann Martin, eds., *Hollywood Quarterly: Film Culture in America, 1945–1957* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 91–108; David Forgacs, *Rome Open City* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 10–11. See also Paula Massoud's discussion of documentary and neorealism in "An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: *Killer of Sheep*, (Neo)Realism, and the Documentary Impulse," *Wide Angle* 21, no. 4 (1999), 20–41, esp. 25–32.

²¹ Tom Doherty, "Documenting the 1940s," in *Boom or Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 417–18.

²² Lauren Rabinowitz, "Experimental and Avant-Garde Cinema in the 1940s," in *Boom or Bust*, 447–48; Paul Monaco, *The Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 42–44, 54–55.

²³ This account of the documentary film techniques and choices used in the film draws on Cohen, "Three American Film Makers," Davidson, "The Making," and the interview with Roemer and Young on the 2004 DVD.

²⁴ Shirley Clarke used radio microphones in her film *The Cool World*, showing the pressures on young black men in Harlem, which was shown at the Venice Film Festival in Italy in September 1963 and opened in U.S. cities in the spring and fall of 1964: Clarke, "The Cool World," *Films and Filming*, December 1963, 8.

²⁵ Roemer quoted in Davidson, “The Making,” 12. Roemer had never heard Motown music, but a chance meeting with a college friend, Motown founder Barry Gordy’s lawyer, provided the opportunity to acquire the rights. On Motown and civil rights, see Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); on the optimism of doo-wop and the smooth R and B vocal music of singers including the Motown artists, see Stephan Talty, *Mulatto America at the Crossroads of Black and White Culture: A Social History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 151–71. The black press article quoted was “‘Nothing But a Man’ Identifies with Negro,” *Call and Post* (Cleveland), April 3, 1965; see also Phyl Garland, “Listening In: Big Sound from Detroit,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 10, 1965.

²⁶ “U.S. Film on Negro is Hailed in Venice,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1964.

²⁷ See Herbert Biberman, *Salt of the Earth: The Story of a Film* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965); Michael Wilson, *Salt of the Earth*, ed. Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Feminist Press, 1978); James Lorence, *The Suppression of “Salt of the Earth”: How Hollywood, Big Labor, and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999); Benjamin Balthaser, “Cold War Re-Visions: Representation and Resistance in the Unseen Salt of the Earth,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (June 2008): 347–71.

²⁸ Cohen, “Three American Filmmakers,” 12; Roemer, *Film Stories*, 9. By the 1960s, DuArt was run by Irwin Young, Robert Young’s brother, and he contributed substantially to the production costs of the film, with DuArt credited as a coproducer.

²⁹ “Movies,” *Playboy*, February 1963; Marjory Rutherford, “‘Mockingbird’ Film Has Truth, Integrity,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 21, 1963. The black newspapers called attention to Brock Peter’s performance as the wrongly accused black man: for example, in the *Chicago Defender*, see “Brock Peters Chalks Up New Laurels with ‘Mockingbird’ Role,” March 2–8, 1963; “Brock Peters Wins Foreign Press Award for ‘Mockingbird’ Role,” March 16–22, 1963.

³⁰ Robert Rossen’s provocative film *Lilith* was withdrawn as an official entry following criticism by the festival director; pressure from the United States Information Agency and the Motion Picture Association of America supported the official status of *Nothing But a Man*. See coverage of the film at Venice in Vincent Canby, “Italo Festival Ways Puzzling,” *Variety*, August 19, 1964; “US Film on Negro is Hailed in Venice,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1964; “Italians Acclaim Film on Life in Colored USA,” *Afro-American* (Baltimore), September 12,

1964; and Louis Davis Strong, "Theater Wing," *Chicago Defender*, September 15 and September 19, 1964. For a U.S. cinephile critic's account of the Venice Festival, and somewhat dismissive comments on the film, see Peter Goldfarb, "Venice," *Film Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1964): 35–38.

³¹ Bosley Crowther, "Film Festival Varied: 'Nothing But a Man' and 'Lilith' Presented," *New York Times*, September 21, 1964; *Cue*, January 2, 1965.

³² "'Nothing But a Man': Triumph on a Budget," *Ebony*, April 1965, 198. Other examples include *The Cool World*, shown at the first Venice Film Festival the previous year; and *One Potato, Two Potatoes*, exploring the contested terrain of an interracial marriage near Cleveland, Ohio, which premiered as an unofficial entry at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1964, garnering enthusiasm from foreign critics and the festival audience and a best actress award for its female star, Barbara Barrie.

³³ By 1960, weekly attendance figures had dropped from their 1946 high of 90 million by more than half to 40 million; Monaco, *The Sixties*, 40; Thomas Doherty, "Race Houses, Jim Crow Roosts and Lily White Palaces: Desegregating the Motion Picture Theater," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2008), 196–214; Kevin Heffernan, "Inner-City Exhibition and the Genre Film: Distributing *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 3 (2002), 62–63; Wiseman quoted in Michael Willis, "Puzzle Re Clarke's 'Cool World,'" *Variety*, November 11, 1964, 23.

³⁴ Heffernan, "Inner City," 61. Cinema V was also the distributor for *The Cool World* and *One Potato, Two Potatoes*. Its other films included Francois Truffaut's *Soft Skin* (France) and *The Hours of Love* (Italy): "Cinema V Looks at \$500,000 'Potato,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, July 14, 1964; "Cinema V's 'Potato' Could Lead to Meatier Things," *Film Daily*, July 14, 1964; "Cinema V Sets Plans for 'Potato' Release," *Box Office*, July 20, 1964. See also George Todd's article about Donald Rugoff, head of Cinema V, "Head of Movie Chain of 'Art Theaters,'" *Amsterdam News*, January 9, 1965

³⁵ Michael Willis, "Puzzle Re Clarke's 'Cool World,'" *Variety*, November 11, 1964. The exhibitor, Irving Levin, commented on *Cool World's* audience: "There is a good market for it in the art houses. We don't look upon it just as an action film; it has more to say than that. It appeals to the intellectual and all types of people, and the additional boost from the Negro community adds up to plus business."

³⁶ The same ad appeared in the *Boston Sunday Herald*, February 21, 1965, 10; *Boston Globe*, February 24, 1965, 24; *New York Amsterdam News*, December 26, 1964, 15. Other ads in the *Amsterdam News* featured a production still of Dixon and Lincoln, January 30, 1965, 15; and a line drawing of a male and female as classic Greek figurines, February 27, 1965, 15. Posters for the film are in the Black Film Collection Posters, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Roemer's comment appeared in *Film Stories*, 10.

³⁷ When Vincent Canby wrote about "The Race to Film Race Issues: Indies React to Negro News" for *Variety* in July 1963, he described *Nothing But a Man*, "on the planning board," as "a contemporary love story whose principals happen to be Negro," *Variety*, July 17, 1963, 3, 20. This is close to the common press description of *Raisin in the Sun* as "not a Negro play but a play about people who happen to be Negroes," in Nan Robertson, "Dramatist Against the Odds," *New York Times*, March 8, 1959; "Lorraine Hansberry: Her Dream Came True," *New York Times*, April 9, 1959; *Current Biography* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1959), s.v. "Lorraine Hansberry"; and in her obituary, "Lorraine Hansberry Dies," *New York Times*, January 13, 1965. Hansberry argued that she was misquoted, but she also did want to distinguish her play from earlier efforts at racial representation. See my discussion of this response to *Raisin* in *Visions*, 311–22. In one article about the film, Roemer was quoted as saying that he and Young "never looked at the film as a Negro film," *Boston Globe*, February 28, 1965.

³⁸ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 44.

³⁹ At the Venice Film festival, Roemer and Young described the film as "the story of many average couples, with the ordinary problems heightened and dramatized because of color. It is definitely not a sociological document." Canby, "Italo Festival Ways Puzzling"; Margo Miller, "A New Clark Gable: Film Director Describes Making 'Nothing But a Man,'" *Boston Sunday Globe*, February 28, 1965. See Miller's review, "'Nothing But a Man': Negro Cast, Universal Story, Make Great Film"; also Alta Maloney, "'Nothing But a Man' Opens," *Boston Traveler*, February 24, 1965; and her review, "The Awakening of a Negro," *Boston Traveler*, February 25, 1965; Elinor Hughes, "'Nothing But a Man' Begins New England Premier Today," *Boston Herald*, February 24, 1965; and Hughes's review, "'Nothing But a Man Adds Film Luster,'" *Boston Herald*, February 25, 1965.

⁴⁰ Bosley Crowther, "Film Festival Varied: 'Nothing But a Man' and 'Lilith' Presented," *New York Times*, September 21, 1964; "'Nothing But a Man,'" *Motion Picture Herald*, January 20, 1965; N.A., "'Nothing But a Man' Pictures Peep Hole View of 'New' South," *Post-Standard* (Syracuse, NY), March 18, 1965.

⁴¹ John G. Houser, "Of Our Time: 'Nothing But a Man' is Great Film," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, March 20, 1965; "'Nothing But a Man' Back for Local Run," quoting a prior review by Kevin Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1965; Herb Michelson, "Stage and Screen: Truth and Consequences: 'Nothing But a Man,'" *Oakland Tribune*, September 30, 1965; Linda A. Winslow, "'Nothing But a Man,'" *The Berkshire Eagle*, August 19, 1965.

⁴² Brian O'Doherty, "Classic of a Negro Who Stopped Running," *Life*, February 19, 1965. O'Doherty argues that *NBAM*'s realism "makes 'Lilies of the Field' look like a Negro 'Going My Way,' painfully exposes the cinematic self-consciousness of 'One Potato, Two Potato' and underlines the soap operatic aspects of the screen version of 'A Raisin in the Sun.' It also demonstrates the inadequacies of Le Roi Jones and James Baldwin's dramatic use of the sexual metaphor as a device to express the black man's superiority and hate." Mark Bricklin, writing for the black newspaper the *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 23, 1965, compares *NBAM*'s "record of 'the way it really was' ... showing you rather than telling" favorably in comparison with "fiery" plays such as *Blood Knot* (Athol Fugard, 1961), *The Blacks* (Jean Genet, 1961), and *The Toilet* (Le Roi Jones, 1961).

⁴³ James Powers, "'Man' is Timely, Meaningful Pic," *Hollywood Reporter*, March 24, 1965.

⁴⁴ "'Nothing But a Man': Triumph on a Budget," *Ebony*, April 1965, 198; "'Nothing But a Man' Identifies with Negro," *Cleveland Call and Post*, April 3, 1965.

⁴⁵ Albert Johnson, "The Negro in American Films: Some Recent Works," *Film Quarterly* (1965), 25–28.

⁴⁶ "'Nothing But a Man' Identifies with Negro," *Cleveland Call and Post*, April 3, 1965. This reviewer noted Abbey Lincoln's activist affiliation, referring to her as "a jazz singer who has been steadfastly identified with the freedom movement."

⁴⁷ Beatrice Ford, letter to the editor, *Amsterdam News*, January 30, 1965; Charshee McIntyre, letter to the editor, *Amsterdam News*, March 20, 1965 ("And if it doesn't instill pride in B Ford, it certainly moved a great many other people black and white including Charshee McIntyre.")

⁴⁸ Reverend Malcolm Boyd, "Blind No More," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 23, 1965. Boyd gives an account of his political radicalization in *As I Live and Breathe: Stages of an Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1970).

⁴⁹ Sylvester Leaks, “*Nothing But a Man*,” in *Muhammad Speaks*, January 20, 1965; Julius Harris interview on 1994 DVD; Wyatt Tee Walker, “*Nothing But a Man*,” in *Malcolm X: the Man and His Time*, ed. John Hendrik Clarke (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 67–68, cited by Mapp, *Blacks in American Film*, 101.

⁵⁰ Jim Davidson, “The Making,” 23.

⁵¹ “‘*But a Man*’ Books LA March Opening,” *Hollywood Reporter*, February 2, 1965; Mile Connolly’s column, *Hollywood Reporter*, February 3, 1965; “‘*Nothing But a Man*’ American Film Entry,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 2, 1966; “Jones Wins Second Place at Dakar,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 7, 1966.

⁵² Roemer refers to the nontheatrical venues and largely black audience in Clarke Taylor, “‘*Nothing But a Man*’ Classic on TV Tonight,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1984. According to Jennine Lanouette, “Nothing But a Good Tale,” *Village Voice*, March 2, 1993, 56, Brandon acquired the film for \$22,000 sometime after 1966 and made \$200,000 renting it over the next seven years. See also the distribution materials from Brandon Films (n.d. 1967?) in the production file for *Nothing But a Man* at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles. On Brandon, see Fred Sweet et al., “Pioneers: An Interview with Tom Brandon,” *Film Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (Autumn 1973), 12–24. The demand for the film was such that the office of Brandon films serving northern California and nine other western states had fourteen prints in circulation in the late 1960s, averaging around twenty to thirty bookings a month; former Audio-Brandon employee Tim Reagan, e-mail message to author, June 23, 2010. Notices of the film in connection with these events appeared in “Art, Drama Mark Watts Festival,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 23, 1967; advertisement for Grand Fiesta/Freedom Jubilee’67, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 1, 1967; display ads for the Afro Arts Theater, *Chicago Defender*, Big Weekend editions, July 20 and July 27, 1968; display ad for Images in Black at the Afro-Arts Cultural Center, May 4 and May 11, 1968.

⁵³ This phrase is from the Bernice Reagon interview, “The Borning Struggle: The Civil Rights Movement,” in *They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee: Seven Radicals Remember the Sixties*, ed. Dick Cluster (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 35–38.