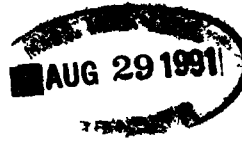


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"Melodrama Across Cultures"

May 3, 1991

**MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM**

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Seminar Notes

Prof. Martin Marks, M.I.T. Department of Music and Theatre Arts

Ms. Lisa B. Rofel, M.I.T. Program in Anthropology/Archaeology

Prof. Jane M. Gaines, Duke University

Prof. Robert C. Allen, University of North Carolina

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Today's session of the M.I.T. Communications Forum was devoted to the theme of Melodrama Across Cultures.

Prof. Jane Gaines' paper is part of a forthcoming book, *The Black and White of It: Feminist Film Theory Looks at Race and Gender*, and is entitled "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama and Oscar Micheaux.

Gaines began her paper with remarks about Oscar Micheaux, a little known figure in literary circles. He wrote twenty to thirty novels before he became a filmmaker between 1918 and 1948; he produced and directed scripts for between 35 and 38 films. He left a body of work that has disappeared and, according to Gaines, the film she is discussing today, "Within Our Gates", is one that most people would not have seen. It was a film that was only recently rediscovered in Spain, and was returned to the Library of Congress in 1988. Gaines originally saw the film in 35mm. She explained that the descriptions she gives of the film may become clearer with a discussion of cross-cutting and after she shows a clip of another Micheaux silent film, "Body and Soul" (1924).

Moving on to discuss the reasons for the film's disappearance, Gaines explained that in January 1920 the film was premiered in Chicago. The Chicago critics were extremely nervous because the film contained what they said was a lynching scene that conceivably could start a riot. The summer before had been the notorious summer of the "Red Scare", which presumably referred to the communist organizing activity as well as the many fires. Gaines noted that the 1915 Chicago incidents had been echoed by incidents around the country; the Chicago censors had ordered parts of the film cut and, although it was shown more than once, people generally stayed away from the film. In those places where it was shown, it was often surrounded by negative publicity and by inaccurate descriptions. For instance, although one account from New Orleans claimed that nine negroes were lynched in the film, one extant version of the film features only the lynching of a man and a wife.

Gaines pointed out the importance of remembering that the film was actually a narration about a young mulatto woman, a school teacher, who goes to Boston to raise money for a Black school in the South. The film is an uplift drama, very typical of race movies of that period and of Micheaux. She went on to discuss the lynching sequence as having been dropped into the film as a flashback meant to explain a particularly troublesome past period in the main character's life and to explain to the character's fiance, a young light-skinned doctor from Boston, why she is reticent to marry him. According to Gaines, there are discrepancies between the lynching sequence as viewed today and the publicity it received at the time of its release. Gaines discussed the film's billing as "a spectacular screen version of the most sensational story on the race question since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*", and the advertising cuts which continually referred to the murder in the film.

In Gaines' view, in the tradition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, spectacle and emotion go hand and hand. She explained that the film within the film in "Within Our Gates" is also a small, sentimental melodrama. She claims that the film's rhetorical structure produces the exact antithesis of "The Birth of the Nation", which is the history of reconstruction from the black point of view, and contends that one of the reasons the film was run out of town was precisely because it was the antithesis of "The Birth of the Nation."

In a brief discussion of the film's plot, Gaines explained that the character Phillip Gridlestone is unwilling to settle accounts with black sharecropper Gasper Landry, who has earned the money needed to repay his debt to Gridlestone. A fight ensues when Landry urges the white villain to treat him fairly. We see that Landry isn't alone in his feeling of animosity toward the landowner, who gets shot by another person, a "poor white" waiting in ambush. The blame for the aristocratic landowner's murder falls on Landry, however. Gridlestone's meddling black servant-butler, had been watching the interview with the sharecropper, but didn't see the shooting and therefore sounded the alarm that it was Landry who had committed the murder. Landry, his wife, and his young son, Emile, and his grown daughter, Sylvia (the heroine of the film), flee to the woods with the lynchmob on their trail.

In Gaines' view, what is interesting in the above sequence is the way that Micheaux portrays the lynch mob and the way that mob justice came down in an utterly arbitrary way. Through the utter arbitrariness of the trumped up justification for lynching, the nonsense of charges against southern negroes is portrayed. Citing historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall's work on the anti-lynching crusade, Gaines observed that "the transgression of a whole range of nebulous taboos could result in brutal beating or even hanging for the incredulous blacks during this particular period." For Gaines, Micheaux's portrait of the lynch mob is his signal achievement in the film, for what he chooses to show the audience is what blacks knew and northern whites refused to believe - that is, the total barbarism of the white mob. The more astounding reports collected confirm that lynch mobs invented obscene tortures and burned

victims after hanging them. Women and children were not sheltered from these horrors but participated in the horrid revelry. Gaines observed that this is where Micheaux is at his boldest. The mob he portrays is not the usual caure of town bullies shown in the 1930's-1940's Warner Brothers films about lynching. Instead, Micheaux's films show white men, women, and children wielding sticks and torches in what Gaines described as some of the most unsettlingly beautiful scenes in the silent cinema of its time. Gaines emphasized that this film, in terms of what is called production values, is on an exquisite plain.

According to Gaines, it is all the better that the scenes actually were shot in 35mm, with crisp focus, because they portray for us nothing more than white people as primitives. In this way, the accusation of savagery is turned back onto white southern culture. While acknowledging the lynching as sensational spectacle, Gaines emphasized that we should consider how it is significantly different from the white-staged lynching as public spectacle - the white perspective shows lynching as social control and warning to blacks. Micheaux's screen representation of the horrors of southern lynching was intended to work in the exact opposite way on black audiences. For Micheaux, to reveal these horrors was not to contain and control through terror; as the publicity asserted, this was "preachment of race prejudice and the glaring injustices practiced upon our people," and it was intended "to hold you spellbound" in addition to offering details that "would make you grit your teeth with silent indignation." In these publicity quotes, Gaines pointed out that the film was projected to black audiences; the anticipation was that it would be for those audiences and not for white audiences.

In Gaines' understanding, Micheaux's film, in the same spirit as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was meant less to inspire action to racial solidarity than to work as a kind of moral self-affirmation. She argued that much of the appeal of race movies had to do with their melodramatic structure, that is, the fictional scheme of things in which the power structure is inverted. Melodrama elevates the weak above the powerful by putting them on a higher moral ground. Micheaux's spectacle of lynching was rhetorically organized to encourage the feelings of righteous indignation in the black spectators. To these ends, Micheaux makes exceedingly haunting uses of cross-cutting, alternating the lynching scene with the attempted rape of Sylvia, the heroine.

The pattern of cross-cutting was an important focus for Gaines' analysis, since it tells so much about the way that African-American artists historically have used melodramatic devices. Micheaux characterizes the white mob as crazed and barbarically cruel, so cruel that even women and children are its victims. Landry's wife is beaten by the mob, and a noose is placed around her neck and the neck of her young son, although the son wriggles out and narrowly escapes on a horse. That the man and the wife are to be hung together is signalled by one of the most unsettling images in the history of African-American cinema. Gaines noted that some people would view this as an extremely modernist moment, very abstract. What we have in the film is a low angle close-up of a wooden bar frame; from this frame, two ropes dangle against the clouded sky. That's it, that's the representation of the hanging. The abstraction stands in for the whole of the tragedy, and was used by Micheaux as a kind of gruesome punctuation in the cross-cutting sequence that culminates the lynching scenario. In other words, he cross cuts this abstract representation of the lynching with the attempted rape of Sylvia, which takes place in a house somewhat further away.

The fate of the family is thus established as one line of action, a line that splits into two when the film cuts from the lynchers starting a fire to Sylvia returning to the family's house for provisions; she is unaware, of course, of the plight of the family. In the same shot of Sylvia gathering supplies, she is discovered by Gridlestone's elderly brother, Armando. He has joined in the search for his brother's killer. From the shot establishing Sylvia's danger, the film cuts back again and again to this ghostly post and, with the second cut back, there is only one noose dangling. Although Armando Gridlestone's taunting of Sylvia is alternated with shots of the hanging, the systematic cross-cutting pattern begins with the conflict between the characters. Here, the struggle is interrupted five times with shots of the mob burning the bodies and the raging bonfire. According to Gaines, what's interesting about this sequence is that it doesn't pay any attention to the order (burning, hanging); it just alternates, using images of that lynching to "up the ante" in the attempted rape scene. So, it's the interruption that builds the suspense.

In the struggle, Sylvia and her attacker circle the table. Her clothes are ripped from her shoulders and finally she faints. Gaines described the scene as symbolically charged because it's a re-enactment of the white patriarch's ravishment of black womanhood, reminding viewers of all of the clandestine, forced sexual acts which produced the mulatto population of the American south.

Considering how the lynching sequence might or might not have been cut, Gaines discussed certain questions related to cross-cutting and melodrama as form. What does it contribute to the affect?

How does this device manage melodramatic material? How is it like music, or how does it work rhythmically with the music? Cross-cutting as a form may have special meaning for the disenfranchised because of the way the device describes power relationships. Although it's often noted that melodrama empowers the socially inferior by awarding them moral superiority, there are ways in which, contrary to this, cross-cutting puts the viewer in a kind of helpless position. Gaines considered which of these two possibilities applies to the Micheaux film. Some authors discuss the technique of cross-cutting as one that is clearly marked by the intervention of the storyteller who is in a position to manipulate the narrative and to play on audience sensibilities by withholding parts of the story. So, cross-cutting works by refusing to advance. If, in this case, withholding pieces of narrative information doesn't put black spectators in a controlling position, Gaines argued, it might be placing them in a familiar position. This could mean that Sylvia's fate, in which they can not intervene, allows a replay of the futility of the African-American historical condition. Once more, blacks look on while the white patriarch asserts his sexual prerogative. Gaines observed, however, that the scene may still afford pleasure for blacks because, although the white master appears to be prevailing, Sylvia effectively resists and alludes him again and again. Characteristic of much African-American and abolitionist literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there is this narrative "piling on" of the overwhelming odds against freedom and safety.

One of the features that abolitionist fiction borrows most effectively from the melodrama form which predates it, is an almost mathematical measurement of outcome. Gaines explained how life's agonies are played back as embattled forces of virtue versus the vile antagonists of virtue, but timed to the second and rhythmically orchestrated. Her view was that no device exemplifies this mathematical feature of melodrama more than narrative coincidence. Cross-cutting, at its most effective, is really an exercise in coincidence. To return to coincidence, however, is to return to the very device which has been cited so often as proof of the lowness of melodrama form. Gaines considered whether the form was maligned because audiences were insulted by what they thought was an affront to realism and whether the use of coincidence implies a naive reader. She remarked that, in spite of the critical dismissal of narrative maneuvers, certain theater critics have claimed that outrageous coincidence is the essence of melodrama and they have likened it to farce in the way that it revels in absurdity. Gaines agreed with the likening to farce, although she took issue with the categorization of absurdity. In the list of melodramatic devices which might be seen by some film theorists as exceeding the constraints of classical narrative economy, certain theorists mention a reliance on coincidence along with spectacle and episodic presentation. But if these theorists are right in saying that coincidence is problematic excess that is not characteristic of the classic text, Gaines (who agreed with this claim) considered whether or not they mean that coincidence is just illogical, overblown, or just indulgent. Her claim was that coincidence, in fact, is actually a highly economical solution to storytelling in that it is incidents accidentally coinciding to bring about swift change. The importance is on the swiftness as much as the change, since coincidence brings about an astonishing narrative quickening which some film theorists say is produced most effectively by supernatural forces.

In terms of the argument about the appeal to the powerless, Gaines discussed coincidence as a secular version of divine intervention, the only intervention which can rescue the powerless from the unjust world of social realist fiction. Illustrative of this point are the series of coincidences by which Sylvia quickly comes to receive the much-needed money to keep open the school in the south. In this example, the miracle of coincidence is indifferent to marketplace measures of measure and worth. Instead, melodramatic coincidence dispenses awards and punishment according to the motive of the heart, a standard directly at odds with work world values. So it may be that this redistribution drags melodrama down in the cultural regard.

There is still some question of whether the cross-cutting is equal to the job necessary for a socially conscious African-American cinema. Gaines discussed these issues, cross-cutting and the politics of African-American literature and film, in relation to Sylvia, who was cornered by the patriarch. Micheaux's scene uses the classic-double play of silent film melodrama, that is, a parallel concurrence of events - the rape and the lynching are temporally coincidental. He also uses coincidence to unite the two lines of action, and this is a coincidence which asks viewers to accept an improbability which is so far-fetched that it could only be seen to happen if it were indeed the truth: in the act of ripping Sylvia's dress, Griddlestone discovers a sexually telling birthmark on Sylvia's breast. The mark is proof that he is sexually assaulting his own daughter who he had in legitimate marriage with a woman of her race and who was later adopted by the Landrys. Gaines observed that the question then becomes whether or not Sylvia is saved from incestual rape. Conventions of interpretation dictate that we not take inter-titles at

their word, especially in this period when titles are so often at odds with the dramatic thrust with the silent scene into which they are inserted. But interpreting Micheaux's scene as rape also has a certain political significance, since it can be understood as a reaction to that other controversial scene within which it situates itself and with which, according to Gaines, it is in dialogue - that is the chase scene. Since in "The Birth of a Nation" Flora Cameron's flight from the free black man, Gus, and her leap to death from the edge of a cliff historically has been called a rape scene (she would jump rather than submit), Gaines claimed that it seems only logical to call Micheaux's point of view a representation of rape. This allows us to see it as the long-muffled African-American retort to what some have called "the old, threadbare lie that negro men rape white women." Gaines saw as even more pertinent the parallelism of the rape and the lynching scene, which exert the historical connection between the rape of the black woman and the lynching of the black man, as reflecting the double reaction of the U.S. reconstruction period to whites' nightmare vision of blacks voting and owning property.

In representing Sylvia's deflowering as incest, this goes deeper than the specific historical moment of lynching. This attacks the connecting root of race, gender, and sexuality. Gridlestone's attack on Sylvia stands in as protest against all of the master's sexual encounters as acts of symbolic incest. Hence, the paternalism of the plantation master encircles slaves in the concept of what some have called "my family, white and black." Gaines also pointed out that Micheaux gives us a rescue sequence with no heroic rescue, no race to protect female honor and purity. There is a title telling us that Gridlestone has paid for Sylvia's education but, even after his attack on her he did not reveal to her that he was her father. The abrupt cut from this title to the present suggests that Sylvia's fiancé is offered as a kind of savior, that is the new professional class is to rescue the black race. But this also could mean, in Gaines' analysis, that although the white patriarch cannot ride to the rescue when he himself is the real threat to the sanctity of the family, paradoxically, in the strategy of the black middle class he can still "save the day" by paying for Sylvia's education.

Gaines concluded with a discussion of whether or not she had been making an argument for the radical nature of "Within Our Gates", which she then takes back: Has she argued that Micheaux's film counters the white supremacist ideology of "The Birth of a Nation" in its images of the white lynchmob and the white patriarch's sexual assault on black women? Gaines answered that she has done that. She noted that there is also the historical evidence of the attempts to ban the film, which suggest that the hanging of innocent negroes was indeed disturbing imagery for blacks as well as whites - although in different ways. But Gaines claimed that she also wanted to ask whether there is a kind of formal temporizing of the material, which is the work of the device of melodrama in the hands of the black bourgeoisie. The most obvious criticism of the use of the tradition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (and this is a tradition in which the early African-American novelists all worked) has been that its sentimentality is dishonest and that its catalogue of brutal acts is without justification. According to Gaines, this criticism is identified with James Baldwin, whose fury at Harriet Beecher Stowe had to do with the way he said she left "unanswered and unnoticed the only important question, which was what was it that, after all, moved her people to such deeds?" The presentation closed with a clip from another Micheaux film, "Body and Soul," the only silent Micheaux film in 16mm distribution. Gaines described it as another cross-cutting sequence, similar to the sequence discussed in her paper.

The next speaker was Dr. Lisa Rofel, from the MIT Program in Archaeology and Anthropology. Her upcoming book is called *Imagined Modernities: Work, Gender and Identity in Contemporary China*, and deals with the interaction of culture and political economy as exemplified by a study of female laborers in the silk industry in China. Today's paper is a result of her recent visit to the same factory in China where she had done field work for her book.

Rofel began with a narrative of a Chinese heroine called Hwey Fong, who is seated in her one room wooden home. She lives there, in Beijing, with her husband and children. She is intensively studying for the college entrance examinations, though she never finished high school and has not studied in the past ten years that she has worked in the local factory. The time period is the late 1970's, the aftermath of the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution. During that period, colleges and high schools had closed, and students were sent down to learn from the peasants and workers. Many young people had no formal education in those years, and now the government was giving them one last opportunity at a national examination, before the barred those generations as too old for college. Her husband, Hushung, from a highly intellectual background and working at a prestigious institute, has ridiculed his wife's efforts. He has refused to help her, and complains continually that she is taking too much time away from her family house chores and child care.

This evening, Hushung is away, for he has spent an increasing amount of time in the sumptuous Wang family home in which he grew up and which has been restored to his family now that the Cultural Revolution's attacks on intellectuals have ended. Thus we see Huey Fong, our heroine, all alone. Suddenly, the five year old daughter whom Huey Fong took in when she was an abandoned baby, is overcome with a high fever. Huey Fong grows frantic, for she must get her daughter some proper medical care before the situation becomes too serious. She calls her husband on the public phone, but he testily tells her that he is much too busy with his work to be bothered with such minor affairs. Her daughter's moans of discomfort make Huey Fong more desperate. With no transportation available, Huey Fong, a frail woman whose current pregnancy has made her even more frail, decides to carry her daughter on her back to the hospital.

We see her struggle through the elements to arrive at the hospital, where she sinks to the ground in pain with an oncoming miscarriage - which will force her to miss her last and only opportunity to take the college exams.

Concluding the narration, Rofel explained that this episode appeared almost half way through a television drama named "Yearning," which seemed to grip the vast urban audiences of China when it aired in January 1991. At that time, Rofel had been in an east central coastal city of China in order to pursue more research for her ethnography on imagined modernities in China. She had watched "Yearnings," whose air time was increased in response to the explosion in its popularity. There was a very wide scope to the viewing audience - from academics to factory workers. The local newspaper printed its theme song, and central government party cadres had made pronouncements about the importance of the show's message as they interpreted or appropriated it. According to Rofel, people heatedly discuss the plot as they simultaneously were engaged in and deconstructed the implications of plot and character.

Rofel explained that "Yearnings" had aired in a specific cultural and historical space of television viewing that differs from that of the U.S. Television is relatively new in China; introduced only a decade ago, television sets can now be found in almost every urban household. In Rofel's view, the television set is a piece of cultural capital through which households mark out their claims to prestige through color versus black-and-white and foreign made (preferably Japanese) versus domestic. Clearly, television is also part of the commodification of Chinese social relations, as the imagined vision of the economic reform instituted by the state in 1978 has led to an increasingly consumer oriented social life, as mediated through a burgeoning market.

From the mid-1980's when there were only a few state-owned t.v. stations, by 1991 Chinese television had grown to eight or nine stations (run by both central and local governments). Rofel pointed out that, for many in China, the activity of t.v. viewing is an over determined one. First, it signifies a quest for modernity, an elusive and ever-changing trope whose meaning itself is continuously reproduced in the larger context of an unequally balanced world system. Modernity resides in the activity itself, for television viewing seems to speak of that quintessentially good life that is loosely associated with the kind of modernity for which so many in China now yearn. Modernity also resides in the multitude of programs, about and from Western countries, through which many satisfy their interest in the outside world. Of those countries which stand as icons of modernity, the U.S. heads the list.

According to Rofel, television viewing represents a critically important space away from the state and socialist policy. This is a complicated relationship. The state is involved not simply in approving programs but also in creating discursive representations that find their way into programming. Nonetheless, for most in China, the t.v. is experienced as at least the partial withdrawal of the state from domestic life, which carried heightened political reverberations in the Cultural Revolution. Rofel discussed the fact that the activity of viewing has replaced political struggle sessions, and the programs themselves (except for the news) do not quite carry the kind of weighted political messages found in the cultural productions of the previous era. She hypothesized that because t.v. is experienced as situated at least partially outside the realm of socialist politics and therefore as a haven from the state, intellectuals in China have developed neither the condescension for nor the Frankfurt School critique of the medium. She also conjectured that the way that people in urban areas tune into a hot program is related to the ways that people are trying to speak to one another, as a nation, around the edges of the state.

As an anthropologist of contemporary China, Rofel described her aims as trying to understand "Yearnings" as a hegemonic cultural practice, as a process through which differentially situated viewers both get interpreted into discourses that create available subject positions and live through those

subjectivities to unexpected ends that contest state power. The questions she focused on were why people in China were so seduced by this particular narrative, what constituted this narrative desire, and what it means for this type of melodrama to become so popular in China at this point in time. Finally, she wondered what the vociferous arguments about the drama say about the possibilities for consumers of images and meanings to read against the cultural economy of state power.

In puzzling out possible answers, Rofel attempted to situate "Yearnings" in its intertextual space, one in which the identity of the nation is being reimagined. She also wanted to situate herself as a seduced viewer of the show and as a viewer weaned on American melodrama.

Rofel moved to a brief plot summary (Insert Graphics here). "Yearnings" has several subplots and many characters. The core narrative centers on the intertwined vicissitudes of two families, the Wangs and the Lius. The drama begins in the late '60's in the midst of the Cultural Revolution. The Wangs, a highly placed intellectual family, are now one of the nine categories under attack. The family begins to crumble and come apart as the father is sent down to the countryside to learn manual labor from the peasants. The son is sent down to a local factory, thus bringing his college education to an abrupt end. The mother, frail with heart trouble, sinks to her death. The daughter, already working as a doctor, loses her fiancé to a Red Guard labor camp after she has become pregnant by him in defiance of the state's refusal to allow them to marry. She gives birth to a baby girl, but loses her baby shortly thereafter; when her fiancé, returning for a brief visit, is pursued by the Red Guards, she flees with the baby and must abandon the baby to an unknown woman at the bus station. Meanwhile, the younger brother, Hushung, has met a coworker in the factory - a young woman named Huey Fang. She comes from a humble working class background, and feels a great deal of empathy for Hushung although he is supposed to be a class enemy. She takes him under her wing. He feels an increasing attachment to Huey Fang, but she is already engaged to an older coworker. Through another set of plot developments, Huey Fang eventually marries Hushung. But Hushung's sister warns him that she believes he is marrying down, into the wrong class. Shortly before the marriage, Huey Fang returns home from elementary school one day with an abandoned baby in her arms. This, of course, is the baby that Hushung's sister had lost. Huey Fang begins to nurture the baby, though she lives in difficult circumstances.

After the baby, Hushung refuses to give the baby his name, so Huey Fang gives the baby her own name, meaning Little Fang. When Hushung's sister meets with the adopted Little Fang, and has a certain feeling in her heart for her. But the child rejects her, sensing the condescension she has in her heart for her mother, Huey Fang. The aunt becomes hard hearted toward the child.

After the Cultural Revolution, Hushung and his sister have their father and home restored to them. Hushung would like to move his family, which now includes a young boy, into the spacious home, but his sister refuses to allow him to bring Little Fang into the home. She argues that the child is not of the Wang family blood. Huey Fang, true to her nurturing character, refuses to abandon the child and, instead, returns to her mother's cramped home with the child.

A serious accident leaves the child disabled at the tender age of seven. Huey Fang then sacrifices her secure job at the factory to attend to the child. By now, she also divorced from Hushung over their daughter and also over the return of Hushung's old college girlfriend, with whom he renews a passionate friendship. In the final segment, Huey Fang is rescued by Hushung's sister's old fiancé, now restored to his former position as Assistant Professor at Beijing University. Through a series of plot twists, he writes a book of his bitter experiences in the Cultural Revolution. The book becomes a best seller and his students are filled with adulation. One of his sister's is Huey Fang's younger sister. Again, through a series of events, he hears about the adopted child and becomes a devoted uncle to the child and develops a deep interest in Huey Fang. He and Huey Fang eventually discover the identity of the child. Huey Fang insists that he take the child and form a family with Hushung's sister, refusing the professor's expressions of attachment. Eventually, Huey Fang becomes disabled in an accident, Little Fang declares that she will return to her true parents and be their filial daughter only after she can care for her adopted mother for a short time.

"Yearnings" ends at this point, with no one having realized their desires and everyone having experienced tragedy. Clearly, "Yearnings" carries many of the formal signs of what is known as the melodramatic imagination - especially those to which we are attuned in the west. Rofel noted the excess of heightened dramatization, an extravagance of representation, and an intensity of moral claim on the characters' consciousness. These were evident in the opening scene of sacrifice. Also present are the familiar narrative pressures on the surface of reality to yield deeper significances, those involving the

most basic questions of desire. According to Rofel, this is a grandiose, ethical superdrama, constantly tensed to momentous turns of events that will reveal the essential conflicts of good and evil. "Yearnings" is filled with the conventional melodramatic repertoire, including coincidences of fate, hyperbolic figures, mysterious parentage, romance and tragedy, and the quintessential location in domestic space. Rofel went on to describe it as having the genre character of episodic serials, with various narratives running parallel to one another and with cliff hangers at the end of each episode in order to whet the viewers' narrative desire. Finally, it addresses the symbolic construction of woman, the maternal, and the feminine, through narrations of desire, personal relations, and daily life. However, Rofel notes, this melodrama (as will all melodramas) has its specific cultural and historical location. She explains that the show does not just speak to other dramas of women in the home. The "New York Times" titled the show "Aspirations," as the dawn of the soap opera epic in China and the hopeful end of communist themes. In Rofel's opinion, the "Times" is indulging in a bit of cultural hegemony in its definition of the drama, for soap opera and melodrama have been a quintessential form of socialist aesthetic production since the Revolution - however, they have revolved around heightened dramas of economic development and around dramas of imperialism. In his respect, Rofel emphasized the significance of the fact that the media in China did not state that this was the first melodrama to appear, but that this was the first largescale serial drama to take place in an interior space.

From Rofel's perspective, the question is not to specify how melodrama now exists in China, but to figure out how it got into the space of the home and how the construction of subjectivity, the heights and depths of emotions, have turned away from stories about workers *qua* workers and into stories about domestic life and personal fate - and, above all, how the symbol of the nation has become associated with the domesticated woman rather than a working class hero. Thus, remaining at a formal level or engaging in just a textualist reading will mislead us as to the significance of "Yearnings."

The show's importance, its seduction, is not merely an issue of the text. Nor, on the other hand, is the show a discursive phenomenon of pure reader responses that come from outside discourse, outside the hegemony of common sense about what constitutes the really real. Privileging the authenticity of the voices of experience will not suffice to trace the complex processes of meaning-making that occur in China.

As a starting point to understand the power of this melodrama, as well as the ways that people talk back to the show, Rofel examined the intertextual interlockings that weave together other discursive contexts. She maintained that it is through this field that people explain "the passion for meaning" that animated their consumption and interpretation of the show. Through this process, people formed their identities and their relationships, sometimes contestatory and subversive, at other moments accommodating toward the state. At the most specific level, Rofel viewed "Yearnings" as trafficking in icons of national identity. Narrative form is critical here. The form that pervades the drama is one that is known as speaking bitterness. Speaking bitterness is a genre that the communist party has honed and popularized since the early days of their revolutionary practice. It entails encouraging oppressed groups to tell stories of the bitterness that they've experienced under the previous system. To the practice of framing their experiences within this particular signifying system, many peasants and workers came to embrace the party's political goals. Thus, narration and signifying have been a crucial part of revolutionary practice.

The presentation moved to a discussion of the 1950's Land Reform Campaign shortly after the revolution. At this time, party cadres encouraged the poorest peasants to speak bitterness. Later, this older generation of peasants, as well as workers, were periodically gathered together to tell young children and foreign tourists of the bitter days before the revolution. The Cultural Revolution struggles witnessed factions of workers and students, screaming their bitter accusations against former capitalist managers and intellectuals. Finally, in the initial years after the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals poured out their bitterness about the sufferings they had endured, as they reconstructed themselves as victims of what, in its revisionist guise, has come to be known as "The Ten Years of Chaos." These intellectuals wrote a form that came to be known as scar literature, some of which has been written directly in English for an American audience. This is how we found the hero of "Yearnings," writing his scar story.

In Rofel's perspective, the importance of speaking bitterness is a form which lets us discover who are the national heroes of any particular political moment. In the context of revolutionary class politics, those who claim to have suffered and to have been denied the potential for a better life can be construed as having sacrificed for the socialist nation. Therefore, they are seen as having furthered, or bearing the capability of furthering, Chinese socialism. Thus, for the greater part of the 1980's, the

voices of intellectuals predominated, as they claimed to speak for the nation as a result of their bitter lives in the previous era. The state generally provided the ideological space for those voices -at least until the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations.

Within this analysis, Rofel explained that "Yearnings," at least in the early segments, reopens this space for viewers. It reinvigorates their memory, reminds them of old traumas, and pulls them into implicit support for the current regime by reminding them of the bad old days that are, implicitly, worse than these post-Tiananmen times. Just as these bitterness stories have always done, they interpolated intellectuals into once again constructing their lives in this genre. Rofel told of watching several episodes of "Yearnings" in the home of an old party cadre member who worked at the university. After the program, this cadre member and her daughter's fiance recounted to Rofel the story of the fiance's family during the Cultural Revolution. He insisted that his own story was just like that of the Wang family in "Yearnings." Rofel interpreted this to mean that "Yearnings" was reinforcing identities that intellectuals had begun to leave behind. But as "Yearnings" further unfolded, a further twist occurred and a tension began to build. Rofel pointed out that, if the story had faithfully recapitulated the speak bitterness tale of intellectuals, then the Wang family would be the obvious heroes: Their characters would have been sympathetic, their motives avenged, the tragedy all theirs. Instead, moving through the episodes, the Wang family becomes selfish, sharp tongued, arrogant, temperamental, and petty. These villainous characters emerge in juxtaposition to the selfless, if crude, characters of the working class. "Yearnings," then, begins with the sufferings of intellectuals but moves beyond it. According to Rofel, it might be accurate to say that "Yearnings" has turned away, at least partially, from the post-Cultural Revolution project of constructing intellectuals as icons of the nation. As a socialist realist narrative, "Yearnings" would have portrayed the Wang family as larger than life heroes with sterling characters who can do no wrong. But instead, there is a certain narrative tension between the sufferings that the Wang family endures, on the one hand, and their selfish and arrogant behavior. This is an unacceptable paradox for socialist realist stories.

Rofel explained that this tensions in "Yearnings" allowed for contested readings among its viewers. There was no singular fixed meaning to the text, for the show was created in and through the ways that specifically situated viewers took up and interpreted the story. Because the intellectual characters did not represent classic socialist realism, Rofel found that some of the people with whom she spoke about the show were committed to the idea that the show was about individuals' fate. This discursive fate of the individual is one that the state has opened up with its past decade of economic reform. Class labels were officially abolished in 1978 and the individual body, rather than the collective body, began to be measured for talent and productivity. Others, however, had a different critique of the show. She told of a discussion about "Yearnings" with a group of economics professor from the university. One of the young men declared emphatically that he would no longer watch the show, which he understood as a story about how intellectuals have pretty words on the outside but bad hearts on the inside and the reverse for workers. He argued that the program was seriously detrimental to intellectuals. Rofel observed that, in China, as in the U.S., the stakes for the icons of national heroism are high.

Rofel went on to explain that intellectual scar literature was not the only genre claiming the sign of the nation. Simultaneous with and vying against this literature was a hero called Lei Fung. He was a young worker-soldier in the People's Liberation Army. In the early '60's, he gave his life for his country. His posthumously discovered diaries spoke of his undying love for the revolution, his country, and his comrades, as well as of his unswerving devotion to Chairman Mao. He died selflessly in a truck accident. During the Cultural Revolution, the study of Lei Fung's diary was introduced on a wide scale, as the party underscored the revolutionary values of self-reliance and sacrifice that the Maoist faction feared had already been lost in China. "Learn from Lei Fung" became a well-known slogan. Several years after the Cultural Revolution, the Party once again revived the figure of Lei Fung; Rofel suggested that this move reflected their concern that the introduction of market reforms had made material gain the national desire. By this time in the 1980's, however, Lei Fung had become a satirical figure in the eyes of many whose cynicism about the state was only partially assuaged by material comforts.

Also in the '80's, many in China had begun to search for what it means to be Chinese outside of the context of socialist politics. A rift appeared between the signifiers China and socialism, through which people searched for the essence of their national subjectivity. While Lei Fung became the butt of much ironic reconfiguring, self-sacrifice has remained as one important sign of the Chinese nation. According to Rofel, it is from this perspective the Huey Fang, the heroine of "Yearnings," embodies the

quintessential characteristics of national identity. Fragile in build and thus visually identified as good, she never gets angry and always puts others' needs before her own. She sacrifices her future for her family, when she goes to work in the factory after her father's death. She is willing to sacrifice her reputation, when she cares for Hushung while engaged to another man. She sacrifices a comfortable life and she sacrifices her son to the Wang family and, of course, she sacrifices the most for her daughter - this sacrifice includes the loss of the opportunity to become an intellectual. Finally, she loses her physical abilities.

These events constructed Huey Fung as the heroine of the nature. Rofel noted that the tragedy of the character's life led many to identify with her as Chinese people who had lived through hard moments and lost opportunities. Analysts working in feminist film theory have made the point that film as a system of representation constructs women as a sign, and "while the signifier of the sign is the actual person (woman), the substance or meaning of the sign is signified as not the concept (woman)." Rofel pointed out that other analysts have seen discussions of widow burning in the period of Indian colonial rule, were less about women's lives and more a discursive construction of Indian womanhood as representing the Indian nation.

Similarly, Rofel argued that Huey Fong as woman operates within a specific signifying system, that of nationalism and its relation to socialism. The heroine is constructed as representing the Chinese nation, while rendering that identity apart from socialist politics. The domestic sphere has come to represent that space in which people believe they can remove themselves from the reach of the state. This specific form of melodrama is thus both a salient and effective signifying practice within these concerns. As an icon of the nation, Huey Fong is problematic in the end. Too much sacrifice by China in the world of nations will lead to the kinds of crippling that Huey Fong experiences. For this reason, China and Huey Fong must be rescued by the intellectual hero, the old boyfriend of her nemesis. He finally embodies the hope that China will move forward out of suffering and will strive to succeed. If Huey Fong represents the nation, her character and that of her sister-in-law presented actual women who viewed the drama with powerful gendered subject positions, through which they attempted to make sense of their inchoate experiences of the past decade. Rofel noted, however, that the message is that, if women want to don the mantle of national heroism, self-sacrifice when joined to gender, leads to a literal crippling of one's self.

The material effectivity of these televisual representations are evident in the fact that the most vociferous debates about "Yearnings" revolved around these two female characters. According to Rofel, everyone she knew (but especially women) had something to say about the characters. Those women in the universities or with college educations and intellectual careers tended to disparage Huey Fong. They saw her as insipid and uninteresting and as certainly not a model to be followed. Others thought that she bent too far to efface herself. Others felt that she represented a feudal womanhood, old fashioned, and only worth being left behind. Rofel observed that the most vociferous criticisms of women intellectuals came from several doctors she knew. Once such person declared that Huey Fong was the selfish one, and reinterpreted all of the character's actions according to this framework. In discussions with women workers, Rofel found that they felt differently. They identified with Huey Fong being stuck in the factory because of the college exam structure, and many thought that she represented the best of the Chinese people. They empathized with her dilemmas and saw her as a true to life character.

Rofel claimed that "Yearnings," as a new version of melodrama in China, seems to be devoid as socialist content. Viewers, in part, experienced it as a realm separate from the state. Clearly, the show does not contain those scenes most easily associated with the state - e.g. celebration of the Party, heroics of communist revolutionaries, etc. One could have changed the channel on any night that "Yearnings" played and could have found just that on other stations. Certainly, the safe agenda and the directors were not unified for "Yearnings." The directors stressed their desire to create individual character types and personal relationships. Central Party cadres, on the other hand, midway through the show's showing, proclaimed "Yearnings" to be the perfect example of socialist morality. However, Rofel argued that the state, in the process of the past decade of economic reform, has created and instituted visions of the modern national body politic that resonate in the drama. The deep ambivalence about intellectuals is evidence of this. Further, gender has been central in China to the creation of something called personal life. That which was once class has now become nurturant women and striving men. One could argue that gender has replaced class as the mode through which the state has naturalized the relationship between the knowledge they have created and power.

More than this, Rofel conceived of the reconfiguration of class through gender as pushing class completely into the realm of personal relationships. Claiming that this personal sphere is the state's project, Rofel explained that one of the major visions of the state about itself since the Cultural Revolution is its claim of not interfering in that space which we can questionably call personal. This personal activity of romance and tragedy is quite political. "Yearnings" is a form of political allegory, in this sense. As such, it speaks of class and gender and of the state and its citizens. Even making the space for such a personal activity as watching a t.v. drama is part of the state's project for a certain kind of modernity. The question is not whether people have more freedom from the state, but in which ways does the state assert itself into people's lives.

Prof. Robert Allen, a Professor of Radio, T.V. and Motion Pictures, gave the response to the two talks. Allen noted that he found the two papers to be both fascinating and frustrating, the latter because of the many directions that they pointed to for response. He summarized some of the possible points of response for Rofel's paper as follows: the current political situation in China, the relationship between state ideology and state-run broadcasting, the role of t.v. in the construction of national identity and in the construction of national histories, the relationship between both constructions and the construction of woman as discursive figure, as well as methodological issues circulating around the relationship between textual structure and reception, interpretation, and ethnography. In the case of Gaines' paper, Allen noted that we are pointed in different, but equally fascinating, directions: the immediate social and political context of the release and initial reception of Micheaux's "Within Our Gates," its relationship to other films of that moment in American history, its place in the history of alternative cinema in America and in the history of African-American film and literature, and the aesthetic and ideological place of Oscar Micheaux in his work in both of those histories.

In Allen's view, any of these topics could provoke extensive discussion. He sought to discuss the relationship between the two papers and the organizing theme of the lecture, "Melodrama Across Cultures." As an aside, Allen remarked that his own most recent work has been on American burlesque, a form that he characterized as the quintessence of anti-melodrama. The two issues that he raised as relevant to both papers are (1) the relationship between melodrama and narration, particularly serial narration, and (2) the related but separate issue of the relationship between the melodramatic form and ideological determination.

Allen explained his interest in the two topics as generated by analysts who remind us that narrative or dramatic fiction always harkens back to the face to face performance situation from which it is ultimately derived. Every story implicitly entails a contract between teller and listener, by way of which the teller demands, "Listen, and I will tell you a story," and the listener, by taking up the terms thus proffered, responds, "I'll listen, but on the assumption that I'll find some justification for listening to what you tell me." In other words, the listener agrees to submit as listener to the terms of the contract and agrees to endow the teller with narrational authority, because he assumes that the story will have some point. In some situations (e.g. church and school), the teller might be able to enforce extra-narrational pressure to enforce the contract on his terms. In such situations, the object is to attempt to ensure that the listener comes away with no doubt that the point of the story is that which the teller claims.

According to Allen, in many cases (those apart from those in which overt coercion or social pressure is used to frame the story telling situation), the listener must be persuaded that there is something in it for him. He noted that some analysts have characterized the teller-listener relationship as erotic and as involving a seduction of the pre-existing desire for narration in favor of the desire to narrate. The power of the other is not challenged, but used.

Allen emphasized the importance of noting that the point of the story need not be that anticipated either by the teller or the listener. Further, the point can change with the transactional shifts and swings that make up any narrational exchange. He claimed that melodrama is a type of narration that defers, displaces, and frequently hides its points. He noted that Rofel had discussed several of the well-known criteria for melodrama, but he suggested that there is still another that is germane to both of the papers. In this vein, Allen cited analysts who comment on the prevalence of hidden relationships and masked powers in novels, where the sight of the drama and the ontology of the true subject is not easily established. The narrative must push toward it and the pressure of the prose must uncover it. The center of interest in the seeing of the underlying drama reside in what might be called the moral occult, the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality.

Melodrama, then, can be understood as presenting us with a social world that constantly implies that it should not be taken at face value. The true significance of events, circumstances, and choices in the narrative are not apparent to the characters themselves, nor are they immediately apparent to the reader or listener. Allen observed that melodrama inevitably involves suffering - that of the characters, and that of the reader who endures the depiction of one hardship, injustice, miscalculation, mistake, and misfortune after another. Allen cited analysts who caution that we must not underestimate masochism as a desire responsible for our willingness to submit to the narration of suffering: "The enthusiasm of readers and spectators for self-punishment provokes the constant amazement of the literally minded and didactic." In Allen's view, this point has relevance to "In Our Gates." He pointed out, however, that as far as melodramatic narratives are concerned, we expect that the point of relating instances of suffering is not entirely sadistic, nor is our willingness to listen or watch that narration entirely bound up with our masochism. Rather, we assume that all the suffering we witness means something beyond its literal meaning within the digesis of the story - there is some point to it, some larger pattern whose outlines we can discern and within which individual instances of suffering somehow can be made to fit.

Certain analysts argued that in 19th century theatrical melodrama, the ideological point of the drama was very much tied up with its narrative closure. In the comic mode of melodrama, the point of the story was embodied in an exemplified by the final actions of the protagonist - for example, the marriage of the virtuous heroine to the noble hero. In the melodrama's tragic mode, the death, madness, or final degradation of the heroine who succumbed to or was tricked by the forces of evil provided a moment of narrative closure beyond which retrospective meaning could be imposed back upon the preceding events - either implicitly or with the help of voices of surviving secondary characters. Allen commented that early 19th century melodrama's point was intimately bound up to the workings of a definite moral and metaphysical order, which the melodrama initially concealed in order to reveal, unflinchingly, at the end. However, analysts discussed the fact that, as the 19th century melodrama's vision became less and less tenable, the melodrama had to construct alternative ideological underpinnings. They concluded that, by the mid 20th century, the melodrama had turned away from religion to seek other means of affirming transcendent moral truths in a secular, naturalistic world. In the 19th century theatrical melodrama, the timeframe within which the listener had to wait for the point of the story to be made was no longer than the running time of the play itself - a few hours. Although the moral indeterminacy of the melodramatic novel lasted a bit longer, the conventions of the form and the expectations they provoked assured that the point would eventually, if more slowly, be revealed.

Turning the case of a melodrama like "Yearnings," where the story's ideological indeterminacy is stretched out and the telling of the story itself is suspended between episodes, Allen considered what happens when melodrama is accommodated to the serial narrative form. He suggested several possibilities. First, serialization opens up gaps in the text, and it is in these gaps that meaning-making resides, as the reader brings to bear upon the text his own experiences with other texts, knowledge of the form's conventions, and extra-textual experiences. The reader makes the text speak where it is silent in these gaps, and makes the text speak to him. In Allen's view, this process of gap filling is a part of all interpretations, but he argued that it is exaggerated by serialization and that its effects are redoubled when the textual material is melodramatic and, by definition, initially silent as to the point of it all.

Further, Allen understood serialization as encouraging reader or viewer response. The pleasures associated with serialized melodrama on t.v. would seem to reside as much in talk about the narrative as in watching the actual narrative. Citing a study of the relationship between work and leisure among female office workers in Birmingham, Allen cited Dorothy Hobson's discovery that the opportunity to talk with one's coworkers about a soap opera was seen as more important to some of her subjects than watching the program itself. The central role of viewer discourse in making sense, relevance, and pleasure out of those texts has been confirmed by studies of American daytime soap opera viewers, viewers of Latin American tele-novellas, and others. He acknowledged that this kind of talk about text occurs with popular books and movies as well, as it did with the viewers of "In Our Gates" and even amongst those who had not seen the film. But in Allen's view, the difference is that with serial melodrama on t.v., the viewer is speaking from a position within the syntagmatic flow of the text and not from a point outside or beyond the end of the text. The viewer, then, can speak not only about what happened and what that might mean, but also about what might, could, or should happen, and about the relationship between the two.

Allen argued that serialization opens up a melodramatic text, not just narratively but ideologically as well. The interruption of the narrative flow opens up opportunities for viewers, in their talk about the

program, to share their understandings and to contest others' understandings. It exposes them to readings of the texts that neither they, nor the program's producers, might have anticipated. The negotiation between textual structure and reading that both Gaines and Rofel spoke of as inherent in all interpretation occurs with a vengeance in serial television narratives - not just between textual structure and viewer but between viewer and viewer as well. Allen saw as significant Rofel's observation about previous serialized melodramas in China had attempted to limit the degree and kind of negotiation that might have gone on, by focussing on life at work and by keeping the point of the story very unsuccessfully hidden. But neither was the case with "Yearnings." Serialized melodrama always contains within it the seeds of a discursive process that neither the text, nor the text producers, nor ideological financial sponsors, may be able to control. Whether the producers of "Yearnings" used the melodramatic form and the serial structure in a calculated attempt to open up public discussion about all sorts of issues, or whether this entertainment program presented in an arena perceived as set apart from the political sphere set into motion a discursive process that got out of control, is something that Allen encouraged Rofel to comment on.

With respect to the relationship between seriality and melodrama, Allen emphasized that it is important to distinguish between narratively closed melodrama such as "Within Our Gates," serialized melodramas, and genuinely open serials. He suggested that "Yearnings" fits into the second category. It is a narrative that eventually is brought to closure. "Yearnings" shares the serialized structure with the now seemingly moribund mini-series on American t.v., but also with the Latin American tele-novella and with Japanese soap opera. By contrast, the open ended serial (e.g. U.S. daytime soaps) is the only form of narrative that Allen cited - except for the serial comic strip - that is predicated upon the impossibility of its ever coming to an end.

In his argument, Allen claimed that the true serial further opens the ideological work of the melodrama by further deferring the point of the story. There are no final events in relation to which the text to that point can be seen as having meaning.