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From the Search for the American Dream to the Journey Back to Southern Roots

Cinematic Representations of Black Migrations

Abstract

African Americans are excluded from the myth of the 'nation of immigrants' due to the forced nature of their relocation to the American continent. Yet, this exclusion can engender an association of blackness with lack of mobility and agency in the national imaginary, which obscures historical constrictions produced by slavery, segregation, and racism. In the last years, new narratives, ranging from historiography to cultural productions, have emerged that highlight how black Americans, despite all odds, have always resorted to migration as a way to fight racism. Cinema has played a major role in the representation of African Americans' migrations as a fight to become masters of their own lives and has influenced the current reclaiming of the South in important ways.

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"Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history," Oscar Handlin famously wrote in *The Uprooted* (1951, 3), his mythical narrative of the immigrant past of the US. African Americans, though, are rarely identified with the paradigmatic immigrant of US identitarian narratives, that is to say as subjects actively engaging in relocating to the New World in order to better their life. In other words, they are not perceived as participants in what was considered, and still largely is, the defining, constitutive experience of US-American identity. Their movement across national and state borders is rarely interpreted through the traditional categories and paradigms used to read the ethnic experience in the United States, and when it is, it is usually to deny the applicability of those categories to the specificity of black American history, which is instead overwhelmingly narrated as marked by constriction of movement, lack of freedom, and social fixity.

Indeed, the Middle Passage cannot be told in the terms usually employed for migratory experiences, lacking as it did the intentionality and agency that, albeit in concurrence with push

factors, is taken to define migration. When not intentional, the noun is corrected by a qualifier that signals its not being the real thing, as in 'forced migration,' an oxymoron of sorts which does not lend itself to becoming a usable foundational myth. As Malcolm X famously stated, blacks did not land on Plymouth Rock, the rock landed on them, and the celebratory vision of the United States as a melting pot of peoples willing to take their destiny into their own hands and a promised land for the world's downtrodden has failed to include them to this day. They were captured and forcibly transported to the New World from Africa, and, once they were enslaved, their relocations were the consequence of white slaveholders' decisions, as they were purchased and moved from one state to the other following their masters, or they were sold down south as a form of punishment in the domestic slave trade. After Emancipation, black mobility in space and on the social ladder was restricted by Jim Crow and other forms of racial surveillance, such as the ghetto, which turned the color line from a metaphor for the separation of the races into a spatial—and socio-economic—divide.

Though generally true, this is not the whole story about African Americans and migration and in the last years new narratives have been emerging—both in historiography and in the cultural production of the US—that highlight how black life, though objectified by chattel slavery in what Saidiya Hartman defines the fungibility of the commodity (1997, 21), has always been predicated also on fugitivity. The established exclusion of blackness from the discourse of migration has erased black mobility from view. The focus on the ways US racialization has conscribed black access to American mobility, setting African Americans outside the myth of the 'nation of immigrants,' though, should not deflect attention from the myriad black acts of resistance to confinement, especially in light of the symbolic import of the immigrant in the United States. However under revision the myth of the immigrant may currently be, the fact that the 'nation of immigrants' paradigm, which has placed emphasis on willingness to become part of the US, enterprise, and dedication to social mobility as defining features of the 'true American,' is not perceived as pertinent to African American history naturalizes their exclusion from the American Dream. In other words, their sporadic mobility is understood as their own ineptitude by the mainstream, obliterating the role played by slavery, segregation, and racism in it. Erasing the fact that, despite all odds, blacks did indeed move across borders and chose migration as a way to become masters of their own lives ends up lending authority to the mainstream idea that African Americans are constitutionally different from other US citizens and do not fit the standard definition of an American. Therefore, it is important to challenge the idea of black conscription by bringing to light the many ways blacks have moved across and

relocated in the United States, without this implying a dismissal of the power of race to fix racialized subjects in space and time.

Indeed, African Americans have been active subjects of relocation and border crossing since the very beginning of their life in the New World colonies, and later in the United States, both as free and enslaved people. Not only were blacks among the Spanish explorers of the New World (Esteban, one of the few survivors of Panfilo de Narvaez's expedition to Cuba and Florida, and Juan Garrido, who was a member of Ponce de Leon's expedition, are two of a small number of black conquistadores), they also preceded European explorers, as, according to many scholars, Muslim Africans arrived in the American continent before Columbus. During the American Revolution slaves took sides with the British and became loyalists in order to gain freedom and reach Canada. Before the Civil War they resorted to flight to escape their bondage, relocating to Haiti, Canada, or the free states of the North. They purchased their freedom or manipulated their masters in order to obtain it and move away from the South. Free blacks migrated to Liberia. They left the country for the less stifling environment of the city. After the abolition of slavery and especially with the end of Reconstruction, some left the South to head West, in search of a place where they could escape racial violence and claim their citizenship rights. Exodusters was the name they went by, as they saw their migration as a search for the Promised Land. At the turn of the century, in increasing numbers they flocked to the cities of the North, pulled by the lure of economic opportunities and self-determination. And in the last four decades they have started to go back. According to historians, more than 6 million African Americans left the South between 1915 and 1965 and though they have continued to migrate North and West in the following decades, many have returned to their ancestral home (see Wilkerson 2010, 556).

In addition to the Great Migration, which at least since the 1960s has been an important subject of historiographic and sociological studies as a crucially transformative event in US history, black migrations have recently become an expanding area of research and are being given visibility through exhibitions and documentaries. *In Motion: The African American Migration Experience*, an online multimedia exhibition created by the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, lists 13 mass movements of African Americans, which range from the coerced migration of the Transatlantic trade and domestic trade, to the voluntary movements of runaways and emigrants, to present-day migration from Africa ("In Motion" 2005). Gretchen Sorin's recent book *Driving While Black: African American Travel and the Road to Civil Rights* (2020) was the inspiration for a documentary, *Driving While Black: Race, Space and Mobility in America* (directed by Ric Burns), aired last October on PBS,

which examines how African Americans navigated US highways in spite of Jim Crow restrictions of black mobility in the 20th century.

Of all these black migrations, however, only the early 20th-century Great Migration has been a favorite subject of literature, the arts, and film, probably because it lends itself to being interpreted through the well-established, familiar set of topoi characterizing the American migration narrative, the search for freedom and a better life, better than other instances of black mobility. To some extent it allows for the black revisiting and appropriation of the American Dream, setting Southern horrors against Western and Northern promises of deliverance, as testified by the titles of such studies as *Bound for the Promised Land* by Michael Cooper (1995), or *Black Exodus*, edited by Alferdteen Harrison (1991), or the documentary *Up from the Bottoms: The Search for the American Dream* (James Schaub, 2009).

In 1925, Alain Locke glorified the Great Migration as a rebirth in which the New Negro arose from the ashes of the past to become an actor in the modern urban world. To him the Great Migration was not merely escape but an affirmative resettlement, testifying to blacks' desire for and right to the American Dream. He described it as "a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance," "a deliberate flight […] from medieval America to modern" (Locke 1925, 6). In 1940 Jacob Lawrence, himself a Southerner who had moved to Harlem with his family as a teenager, celebrated it in analogous terms. His Migration Series, sixty panels depicting the epic movement North of millions of African Americans, highlights the economic, social, and educational opportunities luring blacks to the northern cities and underlines the importance of the press, as the caption in panel 20 reports: "In many of the communities the black press was read with great interest. It encouraged the movement."[1]

To paraphrase the title of an article by Alan D. DeSantis, the African American press sold the American Dream to black Southerners, as well as providing information on housing and jobs to the newcomers (1998, 474). As it frequently happens in migration, the decision to relocate was often encouraged by the reports from those who had already made the move, but the role of the media was crucial in constructing and spreading positive images of the migration north.[2]

[1] The panels, with their captions, can be browsed at https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org, a site which explores the social and cultural impact of the Great Migration through Lawrence's work.

[2] As Nancy Wood and Russel King underline in "Media and Migration: An Overview," the media influence migration processes by providing images from the destination countries that are an important source of information, reliable or otherwise, and act as a pull factor; they construct the 'migrant' in the host country, influencing the way he/she is received; media from the sending country play a crucial role in the cultural identities and politics of diasporic communities (2001, viii).

Cinema undeniably exerted a deep influence on the way African Americans came to see themselves as active agents of their destiny. There is, in fact, a deep link connecting black cinema and the early 20th-century mass movements of Southern blacks towards the North. As Jacqueline N. Stewart writes in *Migrating to the Movies*, they both asserted the race's right to urban modernity:

> African American film culture and Black urban migration emerged from a shared set of conditions and desires. For many migrants, the promise of "the North" and "the city" contained the dream of being liberated from the abuses and restrictions that characterized life in the South. The cinema held a related promise for Black migrants, offering a space for expressing and experiencing a new sense of freedom and participation. (2005, xviii-xix)

African Americans had become familiar with cinema since its earliest stages, and cinematic narratives figured prominently in the construction of their identity as a community. Paula Massood, in *Black City Cinema*, similarly argues that, contrary to the commonly shared idea that the city film became a staple of African American cinema in the last decades of the 20th century, with the blaxploitation movies of the 1970s and the hood movies of the 1990s, the cinematic construction of urban spaces stretches back to the early race films of the silent era and is closely linked to the black experience of migration (2003, 2-3). Black film was used as "a tool of protest and education for urban audiences that were increasingly populated by relocated migrants from the rural South," and the main tool through which they were exposed to the middle-class values endorsed by the northern African American bourgeoisie (Massood 2003, 47-48). Cara Caddoo, in *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Black Modern Life*, adds however that cinema shaped the cultural identity of Southern migrants even before they left:

> By the time most African Americans began packing their bags for the industrial North, cinema already figured into their sensibilities, alliances, and material interests. Afternoons at the colored theater and hours spent at church and lodge shows informed the expectations of those who continued along the pathways of migration. (2014, 10)

One of the earliest examples of films painting the North as a more benign part of the US towards African Americans was Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920), a response to D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, which opens with words that surely influenced black audiences' perception of migration as a new beginning, but also sounded a cautionary note: "At the opening of our drama, we find our characters in the North, where the prejudices and hatreds of the South do not exist—

though this does not prevent the occasional lynching of a Negro."[3] *Within Our Gates* was filmed just months after the infamous 'Red Summer' and the Chicago riots of 1919, exposing the growing racial tensions caused by the Great Migration in Northern urban centers and the limits of the emancipatory myth of the North. Boston, the place the protagonist travels to in order to raise funds to save an all-black Southern school from insolvency, is represented as the place where she finds love and help for her project, but it is also where her safety is threatened by a lower-class black man who tries to steal her purse. A minor event, compared to the lynchings her family members suffered and the rape she managed to escape in the South, but nevertheless it casts a shadow on the emancipatory promises of the northern city.

Indeed, the framing of the movement north as exodus to a Promised Land was not without ambivalence, and the focus on loss and the disruption of the black community, as well as the disillusionment and betrayal of the North, would become almost a staple of cinematic narratives of the Great Migration, especially when deindustrialization and the drug crisis turned the urban space into a site of dispossession.[4] In the 1970s the hope in the city as humanizing alternative to the horrors of Southern slavery and segregation for black Americans was confronted with the growing deterioration of black urban life, fueling a literal and metaphoric return to the South, which was increasingly depicted as a site of black authenticity against the racial alienation of the urban space.[5]

As Farah Jasmine Griffin argues in her study of the impact of the Great Migration on African American culture, *"Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative*, the story of the massive dislocation of Southern blacks in the 20th century has become one of the dominant forms of African American cultural production, tackling the possibilities as well as the limits and costs of black relocation (1995, 3-4).[6] Often in the genre of the migration narrative the South under the guise of the ancestor—his/her teachings and memory, a gift or an heirloom—lingers on and helps the migrants to adjust to their new environment without a traumatic cutting off of their roots. The ancestor theme is not equally present in all narratives,

[3] The film is available at https://www.loc.gov/item/mbrs00046435/. Lost for decades, a Spanish print was rediscovered in the 1970s, and the Spanish intertitles have been translated back into English in the 1990s by the Library of Congress (see Brundage 2010).

[4] *Daughters of the Dust* (dir. Julie Dash, 1991), for example, captures the moment before the scattering and disruption caused by the decision of some Gullah islands residents to move to New York in 1902, together with the sense of new possibilities for the Peazant family.

[5] As Lance Freeman notes in *A Haven and a Hell* (2019), the 1970s were the first decade in the 20th century to witness a positive net-migration of blacks into the South.

[6] While the theme of black urbanization in literature had already been explored by Hazel Carby (1992) and Charles Scruggs (1993), Griffin looks at a variety of cultural artifacts, ranging from autobiographies to letters, paintings, and music.

but, according to Griffin, in those where it is prominent, it softens the negative memories of the South and paves the way, so to speak, for its future reclaiming as a place to which the black subject has earned a birthright because of the violence he/she suffered there, and a site of prospective black wholeness and redemption (1995, 4-9).

In post-Civil Rights African American literature and culture, the claiming back of the South has emerged as a return-home narrative, paralleled by the actual reverse migration which started in the 1970s, boomed in the 1980s and 1990s, and still continues to grow. According to Griffin, actually African American culture's depiction of the South as true home for blacks, as a place of wholesomeness where they could escape the degradation, crime, and poverty of the urban North, preceded by a few years the reverse migration of African Americans and influenced it (1995, 181). The changed cultural connotation of the South is certainly not the only reason behind the reverse migration, but it has played a major role in motivating blacks to consider returning to the South, together with other factors such as family ties, the new economic opportunities offered by the New South, the relative improvement in racial relations with the concomitant awareness that racism is not sectional but systemic in the United States, and a less threatening urban environment.

Perhaps more importantly, the resemantization of the South has shaped the way the reverse migration has been discussed in the media and represented in the arts. In August 1971, the black magazine *Ebony* published a special issue entitled "The South Today," which, in spite of a few more cautionary articles, looks almost like propaganda inviting African Americans to go back to their true home, with a cover showing photographs of smiling modern black people on the move against a background of the engraving of slaves at work in the field. A statement by the publisher, John H. Johnson, explicitly describes the return as a claiming back of the land from which they had been exiled: "Nearly all blacks in the North, Midwest and West are only a generation away from the South. Today with the legal maneuvering almost complete and the long-sought civil rights laws firmly on the records, many blacks are looking backward to the land of their birth" (1971, 33). Several decades later, the narrative has not changed, as suggested by the section dedicated to return migration in the online exhibition *In Motion*, which states that "the lure of the region is saturated with complexities, familial and national histories, and personal emotion" exceeding economic opportunity, and that "by returning south, African Americans are reclaiming their heritage" ("In motion" 2005). An excerpt from actor Morgan Freeman's "Home," a memoir piece included in *America Behind the Color Line* (2004), a collection edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., as a companion volume to his PBS series of the same

title, sounds the very same note: "This is home. This is where my roots are. [… W]e built the South, and we know it."[7]

As the Great Migration for most blacks involved a severing of family ties and distancing from traditions, as well as offering many light-skinned blacks the opportunity to pass as white as a more secure and faster way to better one's life, many Great Migration narratives have focused on the costs of the mirage of freedom and economic mobility in terms of cultural loss. The diaspora from the South is represented as a threat to black authenticity, community values, and racial solidarity. In contrast to this negative depiction, the reverse migration is connoted as a homecoming in the black media and arts, a *nostos* that is both a reclaiming of blackness and a recovery of the values and traditions that the Great Migration and the cityscape have put under threat. This is certainly the message spread by *Down in the Delta* (1998), directed by dancer, actress, poet, writer, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou (1928-2014), to my knowledge the first black film to portray the return South on the part of an African American family as a journey to healing and redemption.[8]

Angelou's debut as a movie director, *Down in the Delta* is based on a contest-winning screenplay by Myron Goble,[9] and was well-received especially thanks to an extraordinary cast of actors, though the screenplay was criticized by some as too didactic. Angelou's directorial work was praised by critic Roger Ebert for the fact that it avoided turning the movie into an *auteur* film and kept it real without intruding with unnecessary visual touches (Ebert 1998). The film

[7] Indeed, Carol Stack, in her ethnographic study *Call to Home: African-Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (1996), an investigation of the countermovement based on interviews, maintains that economic opportunity was never a meaningful pull factor for African Americans, as they were "leaving cities where the economy [had] stagnated and returning to places where the economy [had] all but disintegrated." They were returning in a quest for home, family, and ancestral identity, which was more crucial to them than upward mobility (quoted in Commander 2017, 190).

[8] A decade later Tyler Perry directed *Meet the Browns* (2008), based on his play, whose protagonist leaves Chicago to attend her father's funeral in Georgia, where she discovers she owns a house and finally decides to stay. The same year also saw the screening of *Welcome Home, Roscoe Jenkins*, directed by Malcolm D. Lee, a comedy about a successful talk-show host who is uneasy about his Southern roots but learns to value them after he travels back to attend his parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. Several other movies do not tackle the return home *topos* in an explicit way but participate in the rehabilitation of the image of the South, often downplaying racism and poverty, reinforcing, as Zandria F. Robinson underlines, "the dichotomies of urban and rural, cosmopolitan and country," and obscuring "the workings of intraracial class differences" (2014, 55).

[9] Myron Goble is a first-time Georgian screenwriter who in 1993 won the Don and Gee Nicholl Fellowship for Screenwriting and apparently never wrote anything else. The film, co-produced by Snipes, Goble, and Woodard, interestingly was not shot in Mississippi, but in Toronto and the Canadian countryside.

recounts the Sinclairs' struggles against the dangerous urban environment of the Chicago South Side, where drugs and violence threaten the family's survival and their newly found wholeness in the land of their ancestors, the Mississippi Delta. Loretta (Alfre Woodard) is a young single mother of two children, one of them autistic. She has been abandoned by her partner and her inability to care for her children and to find a job because of her lack of basic math skills drives her to alcohol and drug abuse. As her dejection and negligence towards her children grow worse, her mother Rosa Lynn (Mary Alice), who moved to Chicago from the South in the 1950s with her now deceased husband, threatens to have them sent to foster care unless Loretta accepts to leave the city and spend the summer with her paternal uncle Earl (Al Freeman Jr.) in the Mississippi Delta, together with her children. Desperate to do something to save her daughter and grandchildren, Rosa Lynn pawns a precious family heirloom, an ancient silver candelabra they call 'Nathan,' to raise the money necessary for the bus fare. Loretta protests that they should not risk losing such a valuable object, but finally, even though she is not aware of its symbolic meaning, she takes on the responsibility of raising money to rescue Nathan during her stay in the South. Once she arrives in the Delta, she discovers that the Southern Sinclairs have fared much better than the Northern members of the family: Earl is the respected owner of a restaurant and has managed to buy a dilapidated big mansion from the white Sinclairs, who owned his ancestors, and restore it to its former beauty. He takes loving care of his wife Annie (Esther Rolle), who has Alzheimer's disease, with the help of Zenia (Loretta Devine), a cheerful and resourceful black woman, and has a son (Wesley Snipes) who is a successful lawyer in Atlanta. After a few initial difficulties, Loretta soon adapts to the new environment, learning a new work ethic and even becoming an activist when she leads the small community in the fight against the closure of the local chicken plant. Her children thrive in the healthy atmosphere of the countryside, Thomas being now safe from the dangerous streets of Chicago and Tracy more peaceful because she is surrounded by love and care. Loretta manages to save enough money to rescue Nathan and travels to Chicago to bring it back to the Sinclairs' home, the place it belongs to, where she decides to remain as the manager of her uncle's restaurant.

Goble's story of reverse migration was inspired by his reading of Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (1991), where he learned that African Americans who migrated to Chicago from the Delta strived to maintain their family ties: "I didn't really think much about it, but somehow out of that came my story—a story about women facing challenges in Chicago who find opportunities for redemption by moving the nuclear family back to the South" (quoted in Dreher 2018, 139). Maya Angelou was herself a Southerner who had reversed her family migration and Goble's screenplay resonated

deeply with her own view of the South as the true black home and antidote to the degradation of black life in northern ghettoes. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1928, she was sent to live with her paternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, when her parents' marriage collapsed, and spent there much of her childhood. She moved back to live with her mother in California when she was a teenager and after more than forty years wandering between San Francisco, New York, Europe, and Africa, in 1981 she finally accepted a position at Wake Forest University, North Carolina, where she remained until her death. The year after her move she wrote an essay for *Ebony*, in which her decision to settle in the South—still a controversial one, she seemed to believe, for most African Americans—is explained as a final capitulation to the 'sorcery' the land of their roots exerted on blacks despite its association with racial horror.

Most of the essay, however, is less on the reasons of her return than those which postponed it for so long. Angelou dwells at length on how she had refused to go back to Southern horrors, even temporarily as a lecturer and in spite of badly needing money, until 1971, when she accepted an invitation to lecture in West Virginia and North Carolina after realizing that she needed to face her denial of her past. The visit made her understand, she concludes in the final paragraph, that black people were crucial to the sea change that was taking place in the South. Going back, to her, was a political act and a reclaiming of African Americans' right to the country:

> The South had not changed. Yet it had changed, but not of its own accord. People cause people to change. […] I knew that morning, that one day, I would return to the South in general, and North Carolina in particular. I would find friends, join a church, and add my energy to the positive movement to make this country more than it is today. More than what James Baldwin calls 'these yet to be United States.' And I have done so. (Angelou 1982, 134)

Tellingly, the *Ebony* essay begins in an ambivalent mode, with words that highlight the paradoxical nature of blacks' connection to the land, conjuring the traditional pastoral view of the Southern landscape together with a gothic vision of how black bodies have occupied it: "The Southern moon rising pale over the swamps of Louisiana brings memories of Black stevedores stacking cotton bales on the levee, or Black bodies swaying, charred, from poplar trees" (1982, 130). It continues turning Southern violence against and oppression of black people into precisely the reason behind their deep connection with the South and their right to it: "Black people [… unlike white Southerners] comprehend the South. We understand its weight. It has rested on our backs. We recognize its violence. We have been its victims. We acknowledge its

history. It was first written with our blood […] Hence the South is an often bitter, and bitterly beautiful Black race memory" (1982, 130).[10]

For all her long experience with the stage, television, and cinema in her prolific career as an actress, writer, and director, Angelou had never engaged in a major film project until 1997, when Goble's screenplay offered her the chance to narrate in visual terms the "siren song" that the American South sings to all black Americans, as she put it in a later essay she wrote for *Ebony* in 1990, entitled "Why Blacks Are Returning to Their Southern Roots" (1990, 44). Again, her writing tackles the 'anomaly' of African Americans' reverse migration, which still seems to be problematic for the *Ebony* readership, and explains it as a return home answering the call of roots and ancestral identity, in spite of the place's association with pain and death. Like the earlier essay, *Down in the Delta* begins with a glimpse of the South during the opening credits, before contrasting it with the tough reality of the North. The bitter part of the South, though, has disappeared. The opening shots show pleasant views of a rural countryside and an elderly man, whom we later identify as Earl Sinclair, mailing a letter to a family member in Chicago (Rosa Lynn Sinclair), before the camera zooms in on the warlike urban setting of the South Side, riddled with sounds of bullets and images of violence, destitution, and cramped spaces, where Loretta and her son are in danger of losing themselves. The narrative strategy adopted in the essay is reversed, as after the brief Chicago section, the setting moves back to an entrancing, lush landscape, and a welcoming pre-Civil War southern mansion, which takes up most of the film except for Loretta's short return to Chicago to buy back the silver candelabra from the pawnbroker.

Apparently, there is no direct narrative space left for white supremacy and black poverty in Angelou's visual narrative of the South's power of redemption. While he drives Loretta and the children home after picking them up at the bus stop, Earl makes a cursory reference to the closing down of the local high school, after white people sent their children to private schools, presumably to avoid desegregation, and of the blue jeans mill. Towards the end of the film, the survival of Earl's restaurant, which only serves chicken, and of the whole town is threatened by the announced plans to shut down the chicken plant, the only remaining big business in the area. Other minor narrative clues of a racial history that continues to affect the present, however, come up, for example, in Annie's 'irrational' behavior, when she is terrified of the storm—floods having a deep racial history in the Delta—and scared by the white phenotype of

[10] In "Why Blacks Are Returning to Their Southern Roots," she again underlines the oxymoronic nature of black Southern identity, being as it is founded on memories of "ancient years of pain and pleasure" (Angelou 1990, 46).

her son's wife. Except for these few hints of racial conflict and the deindustrialization processes hitting many areas of the South, the story revolves around Loretta's process of regeneration in Marianna, the apparently peaceful, all-black small town where the Sinclair family lives, and her final acceptance of her legacy as a Sinclair.

This erasure of the racist history of the South has been stigmatized by critics as pitting a romanticized, anachronistic southern rural blackness against a wholly dysfunctional, pathologized urban ghetto, an opposition that both cancels southern poverty and violence, and completely dismisses the positive aspects of black urban modernity without really criticizing systemic racism and urban disinvestment. Zandria F. Robinson, for example, reads the film as a typical instance of a Southern trend in African American cinema which started out in the 1970s by reclaiming the South, and decidedly turned by the 1990s into a narrative situating it as "the optimal regenerative space for African Americans disconnected from their roots, alienated by the urban condition, or victimized by underemployment and poverty" (2014, 50). According to Robinson, *Down in the Delta*'s depiction of Chicago's "sterile housing projects, rampant drug use and dealing, poverty, and violence" does not offer a critique of US structural racism but only serves the function of indicting the Great Migration Project and urban modernity for endangering the more authentic and better blackness located in the South (2014, 51). Paula Massood, while acknowledging that the film does not advocate a return to a static, pastoral South but projects a utopian vision of a dynamic space of black possibility, condemns Angelou's view of the city as a sign of loss and arrested development because it equates black urban life with gangsta culture in a reactionary dismissal of the positive gains it granted African Americans (2003, 215).

While some of these charges are not without ground, as the clash between the urban space and the rural South, magnified by the film's photography, use of costume design, and soundtrack, seems at times too facile and clear-cut an opposition, in my opinion negative readings of the film's representation of the city underestimate the less than idyllic facets in Angelou's representation of the South. When they get off the bus that has taken them to the Delta, Loretta's full ghetto regalia and her daughter Tracy, who is screaming at the top of her lungs, are looked down on by a dignified Southern black woman, who calls them "trash." The scene points to the existence of intraracial class conflicts, which are further explored in Will's strained relation with his family because of his glamorous light-skinned wife.[11] While Will is reluctant

[11] As Carol E. Henderson notes, Loretta's favored outfits in Chicago are clear indications of both her marginality and lack of social skills: "Her fitted leather skirt and vest become a signal in the film not only of Loretta's economic status but also of her inability to understand the proper

to visit his family apparently because of his mother's disease, the audience is led to understand that it may also have to do with his upper-class white-looking wife, who is not interested in connecting with his parents and openly declares that they do not belong there. The northern city, on the other hand, is not altogether a wasteland. *Down in the Delta* does not condemn urban culture as a whole, but focuses on a specific generation, that of the crack crisis. Indeed, I agree with Massood that the film's conservative antiurbanism is mainly motivated by the desire to give voice to stories contesting the conventions of blaxploitation and hood movies. Its Chicago shots are openly a rejection of the inner-city stereotyped narratives that had become predominant in US cinema by the 1990s, and are used to advocate a return to family roots and community-held values fostered by black institutions such as the Church (Massood 2003, 211-218).

Most commentaries also undervalue the significance of Rosa Lynn's and Tommy's interactions with the urban space, which point to a more positive inhabitance of the city than Loretta's. Whereas the child's future may lead to his entry into the ghetto's violent culture, and he may end up having to get a gun for protection if he stays, what we see is a resourceful and creative boy who is not crushed by his environment: he takes pictures of tourists with his camera to earn some money, acts as a maternal figure to his mother, even trying to teach her some basic math skills, and takes good care of his sister. Rosa Lynn is depicted as a strong-willed, proud woman who has not succumbed to the violence and economic marginality of the ghetto and refuses to beg for help from her brother-in-law. She has managed to raise her daughter and care for her grandchildren after her husband's death and, in spite of reduced circumstances, keeps a neat, orderly apartment which she adorns with flowers and photographs. A brief shot shows her volunteering in a community kitchen, a hint of an active social life and healthy membership in a group, which may explain why, at the end of the film, she does not stay in the Delta but chooses to return to Chicago. She refuses to yield to Earl's request that she returns the silver candelabra to the family home, because the heirloom belonged to her husband, who was the oldest family member, and must stay in Chicago to watch over the family and be passed down to Loretta. She is not above threatening Earl with selling Nathan, when he refuses to host Loretta for the summer, as she is ready to do whatever it takes to save her daughter. Her decision to keep the candelabra in Chicago, as Kwakiutl Dreher underlines, "disrupts the family's patrilineal legacy," opening "a space for the black *female* firstborn to articulate a matrilineal narrative of (reverse) migration" in the story (2018, 139).

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protocol for job interviews" (2013, 347). Loretta's fashion choices change dramatically after a while, signaling her growing competence and ability to fit in.

While Earl is an important character, especially because he embodies a black masculinity that challenges the stereotypes of black manhood pervading American culture, the narrative foci of the film are Rosa Lynn, the resourceful matriarch, and Loretta, the lost woman who finds the strength to rise again. Due to this centering of women's subjectivities *Down in the Delta* participates in the cinematic turn to family, black history and the crucial role of women's experiential knowledge initiated by black women filmmakers in the 1990s, which is best exemplified by Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou* (1997). By way of the Nathan subplot, however, the film also powerfully participates in another turn in 1990s black Diasporic cultures, even more critical because of its scope: the urge to go back to the slave past. Most of the critical work on Angelou's film unexpectedly leaves Nathan's story unexplored or mentions it briefly without investigating the depth of its connection with the main storyline. Yet, the Nathan subplot is not just a clever use of the ancestor as a ploy to solve problems in the main plot, or a decorative addendum which does not alter the message of the film as a whole. On the contrary, when viewed from the perspective of the black cultural discourse on slavery that emerged in the last decades of the 20th century, it can cast a different light on the question of the film's erasure of racism in its representation of the South.[12]

In the 1970s, Black literature, arts, and popular culture initiated a trend, which boomed after the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), that triggered an engagement with a repressed major moment of African Americans' history, and of national history as a whole. This turn to the memory of slavery gradually gave the experience of bondage center stage in the formation of black cultural identity. It also placed the slave past and its legacy back in the public space, finally forcing an institutional acknowledgment of the role played by slavery in their national histories on the part of former slave societies, although the United States and some European countries have been reluctant to let go of self-congratulatory, edulcorated narratives foregrounding white abolitionists. Contemporary memories of slavery are diversified, fragmented, antagonistic, and at times controversial, ranging from boastful celebrations of white abolitionism to the notion of enslavement as a trauma which has shaped the identity of

[12] Henderson deals at some length with the Nathan subplot, but she does not connect it with the turn to the slave past that Stephen Best has termed "the *Beloved* moment" in African American Studies (2012, 465). To her the candelabra is nothing more than a "recursive touchstone that allows Loretta and her children economic and spiritual passage south," symbolizing the importance of ancestors (Henderson 2013, 350). More poignantly, Terrence Tucker underlines the importance of the silver candelabra as "a symbol of the family's resistance to the dehumanizing impact of slavery and white supremacist oppression," highlighting its role in Loretta's reconstruction of selfhood, but he too fails to note *Down in the Delta*'s participation in the contemporary discourse connecting slavery with the present (Tucker 2014, 96).

blacks as a community and needs to be reckoned with, to Afro-Pessimism's idea that slavery is *now*, denying that any significant racial progress has been made since the time of slavery. This memorializing turn has also been denounced as a strategic distraction from the systemic racism of contemporary America and as failed politics serving a neoliberal agenda. Nevertheless, the need to engage the slave past has been a predominant feature of black cultural production in the last decades and *Down in the Delta* fully participates in the black, and national, conversation on slavery, and more specifically in that strand of storytelling for which Toni Morrison has coined the word "rememory." Rememory—"as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past" (Morrison 2019, 324)—refers to both the contemporary black artist's duty of telling untold stories about the past and filling the blanks in the archive of slavery through memory and imagination, and black people's duty of knowing their past and using that knowledge to build a more equitable future. Nathan's story is unknown to either Loretta, because her mother believed she was not ready to fully grasp its meaning, or the film's audience, who until late in the narrative is to assume that the candelabra is nothing more than a precious object Earl and Rosa Lynn fight over. Tellingly, Nathan's story is split between two narrators, the two elder Sinclairs, because, like the candelabra, it belongs to the family and neither of them owns it. At the end of the film, Loretta, now aware of its significance and proud of her legacy, will pass it on to her son. Through a series of flashbacks, then, we learn from Earl that during the Civil War, their ancestor Jesse, a former slave and now a Union soldier, had taken the silver candelabra from the white Sinclairs' home and buried it under a tree to protect it from war pillage. He later rescued it and hid it in his home, taking it out from time to time to talk to it. This is the first indication that Nathan is more than a valuable appreciated for its monetary worth, but it is only after Loretta has bought it back from the pawn shop, proving that she has learned the importance of care and responsibility, that Rosa Lynn gifts her with the whole story, unveiling Nathan's symbolic value and its implication in the dynamics of black fungibility on which slavery was based. Rosa Lynn's storytelling is visually backed up by flashbacks of the moment when the white Sinclairs acquired the candelabra to adorn their home thanks to the sale of one of their slaves, when Jesse was only a child. The slave on display on the auction block, to be traded with a piece of silverware, was Jesse's father and his name was Nathan. The process of objectification he was reduced to under slavery, when his humanity was exchanged for a thing, is retrospectively overturned when the candelabra is turned by his descendants into a symbol of the family's will and ability to endure. Even more is Nathan's thingification undone and reversed when the ancestor has the power to overcome transience and enslavement, freeing Loretta from what held

her captive in the inner city. The Nathan subplot is crucial, then, to the analysis of *Down in the Delta* because it changes the return home story from a literal spatial return to the South into a movement back in time. That is to say, a Sankofa journey, a concept that through the Akan word meaning "go back and fetch"—or, reach back to reclaim that which is lost in order to move forward—refers to the importance of not forgetting one's history to change the future. The film's going back to the time of slavery makes the South not merely the sign of a geographic locale, however connoted as home for black Americans, but that of a common history and cultural identity rooted in the experience of chattel slavery.

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