

Gregory Waller: So what we're going to do is we're going to move through all three and then take questions after.

Matthew Bernstein: Matthew Bernstein. So I'm here as a digital immigrant, not digital native. Also, unlike Cara's [Caddoo] fascinating project, focusing on one particular locale with my colleague, Dana [White], is the city of Atlanta. So in a number of ways our work represents a shift in focus in exhibition history from the Northeast and even Chicago to the South, which is a great area to be explored, especially when talking about early black audiences.

Our project has been to reconstruct black movie culture in a major black center in the South. We've been doing research in the kinds of resources that I think is familiar to everyone in this room, which is to say we've been looking at newspapers, drawing a great deal from the *Atlanta Daily World*, which was the only black daily newspaper for a number of decades and trying to also ascertain from reaching the *Daily World* what that readership is and who's reading it and paying attention to the particularities of Atlanta's situation, which is that it had historically black colleges, a very solid black middle class and trying to trace what movies meant to this community at this time.

So what someone at a conference long ago called newspaper studies, right, as a sort of synonym for cultural studies, right, to read through the papers insofar as they pay attention to film. So one of the challenges with that kind of resource is that the attention to film in these publications waxes and wanes. In the 1930's, just to give you an example, the *Atlanta Daily World* had daily coverage of movies. It was a topic of extreme fascination, something Dana and I wrote about in a piece about the 1934 "Imitation of Life," in which an anticipation of that film's showing both at a white segregated theater and in the black only theaters, the paper was covering the film and its stars almost daily.

We find as we go through the *Daily World* as our main source of information about black film culture, that the *Daily World* loses interest in the movies as things progress. That is, by the heart of World War II the movies are not getting their own page any long. So one of the things we're looking at is what causes that shift so that by the time I get to a major event in Atlanta film history, which is the premiere of Walt Disney's "Song of the South," which is probably the second largest premiere in the city since with premiere of "Gone with the Wind" in 1939. "Song of the South" is 1946. The *Daily World* provides only one article, one review on the front page. So obviously one reads this one review very carefully to see what is coded, as Cara [Caddoo] was saying, and in particular always looking at these newspapers what is the context in which these films appear and how we can reconstruct that.

At the same time we're doing a comparative study because, of course, we're looking at movies in white Atlanta as well. So it becomes necessary to do compare and the topic of resources Cara [Caddoo] brought up is very apparent. But we find fascinating differences even in the white newspapers, which have so much more resources to cover what they're covering. So that, for example, "Imitation of Life" in the white newspapers

in Atlanta don't even mention that there are black characters in the film whereas in the *Daily World* that's all they want to talk about and for very good reason.

So in a way this is participating in this idea of new cinema history, this idea of the importance of movie going as a cultural activity where some new cinema historians such as Richard Maltby would say, the film is not really important as an object of study or is secondary in importance. We are very much paying attention to the films themselves.

Then also as a way of organizing this to try and look at both flashpoints in the history of movies but also major film premieres. By flashpoints I mean controversial films that open in a particular point of time. The fact, for example, that Atlanta's censor bands Oscar Micheaux's "The Gunsaulus Mystery," cuts "Murder in Harlem" in half because both films were about the Leo Frank case, which occurred in Atlanta in which a Jewish man was lynched. The authorities do not want these films shown.

We can't get at that censorship analysis so much through the newspapers so then we go to some primary documents that we have been reconstructing, which are censorship records for the city in conversation with the censorship records at the Breen office and the studio relations committee and in Hollywood. In constructing that correspondence between Atlanta's white film censors and the industry representatives we get a wonderful portrait of what white film culture was like. So you have instances in which, for example, our censor doesn't notice in "Stage Door Canteen," that while we're seeing black soldiers or white soldiers dancing with their sweethearts on the dance floor at the canteen, this is 1943. In the background you can also see black soldiers dancing with their sweethearts. A detail like this in the background actually evades the Atlanta censor until she gets complaints from Atlanta moviegoers about this and then she writes to Joseph Breen. So we're constructing that mindset as well.

And then finally, a key issue is looking at the primary documents we can find in the archives. So the Norman Papers here in Indiana are in this sense an incredible resource because looking at the Norman Papers for the article we wrote, "'Scratching Around' in a 'Fit of Insanity'," we could actually find receipts for films that were shown in Atlanta. Norman's "The Green Eyed Monster," and learned, for example, that it played for a full week in one of the theaters in Atlanta and then also trace its playing across the different theaters. Some of them were high toned, including one built by a lodge association and some are not so high toned, first run, second run, Top Hat, less prestigious. Then also, looking at archival material to look at how films were promoted in their press books versus how they appear in the black newspapers and the white newspapers. So, example, again from "Imitation of Life," the doctoring of Universal's ad of for "Imitation of Life," which has a profile of Claudette Colbert, but changing the print so that it's Freddy Washington and Louise Beavers who get top billing.

In terms of looking at what digital databases of newspapers make available I would add to Cara's comments about what the search engines are not equipped to look for. I also think there's a problem of losing a sense of context when one is simply using the databases to search for particular films or particular filmmakers. To go back to "The Song of the South" example, that one short review on the front page has a certain

meaning taken in isolation. But things I learned that I could not have learned just using the search engine placed that review in context, which is to say that there had been just two months before the premiere of “The Song of the South” a lynching outside of Atlanta, the first major lynching to occur after the war in which an actual African American World War II veteran was killed. So for Disney then to be presenting this image of happy harmony after the Civil War on a plantation with Uncle Remus takes on a certain added resonance.

So while we are beginning to explore these elements of digital tools to do the research we’re also trying to keep in mind the importance of what the context is for the creation of culture. I would say the other challenge that faces us as we are focused on a locale is to be able to create comparative studies or to be able to consult comparative studies. So for us it’s very important what Robert Allen is doing in studying movie going in North Carolina. It’s important for us to study what Terry Lindvall is doing in looking at black film audiences in Norfolk, Virginia. We welcome the digital tools that are provided but we approach them with some caution.