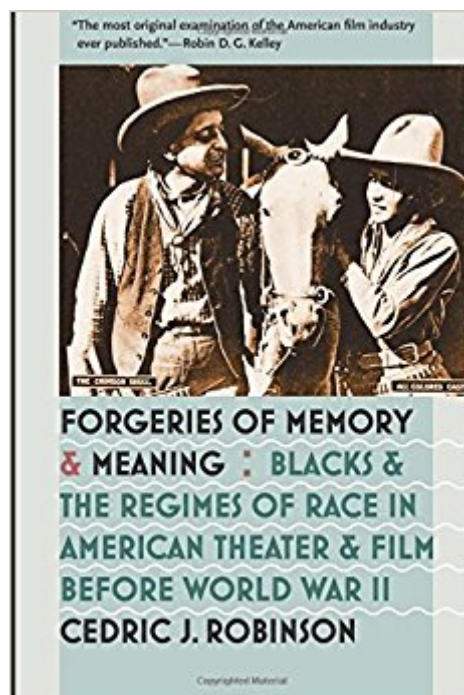




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# Forgeries Of Memory And Meaning: Blacks And The Regimes Of Race In American Theater And Film Before World War II



## Synopsis

Cedric J. Robinson offers a new understanding of race in America through his analysis of theater and film of the early twentieth century. He argues that economic, political, and cultural forces present in the eras of silent film and the early "talkies" firmly entrenched limited representations of African Americans. Robinson grounds his study in contexts that illuminate the parallel growth of racial beliefs and capitalism, beginning with Shakespearean England and the development of international trade. He demonstrates how the needs of American commerce determined the construction of successive racial regimes that were publicized in the theater and in motion pictures, particularly through plantation and jungle films. In addition to providing new depth and complexity to the history of black representation, Robinson examines black resistance to these practices. Whereas D. W. Griffith appropriated black minstrelsy and romanticized a national myth of origins, Robinson argues that Oscar Micheaux transcended uplift films to create explicitly political critiques of the American national myth. Robinson's analysis marks a new way of approaching the intellectual, political, and media racism present in the beginnings of American narrative cinema.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A call to action.--National Political Science ReviewOffers a copiously researched and compelling study. . . . A profoundly important and elegantly written historical study of a great artistic conflict.--Theatre Research InternationalInvaluable to scholars of popular culture, Marxist studies, and especially, black studies. . . . [Robinson] writes with the seldom-heard acumen of a social

scientist and is able to discern how and why the American entertainment industry represents--and misrepresents--class and race.--North Carolina Historical ReviewDeeply incisive. . . . Provides a fresh contribution to one of the most significant aspects of American cinema.--The Journal of African American History

Robinson explores an impressive variety of important films, sustaining his discussion with fresh, insightful angles on the political economy of each film. This book makes a significant contribution to several interwoven, discursive currents involving race and representation, social Darwinism and scientific racism, minstrelsy and modernism, the plantation and the jungle, and black cultural and political resistance to several 'racial regimes' working themselves out in politics, media, and the cinema in America.--Ed Guerrero, New York University Cedric Robinson provides us with a distinctive and distinguished intervention in discussions of race, representation, and performance in American cinema and theater before World War II. This informative and engaging study offers an array of new and unexpected insights.--Charles Musser, Yale University Robinson's assertions that capitalists controlled and manipulated the image of blackness . . . are a very important contribution.--Journal of Southern HistoryThis ambitious project, grounded in a broad historicity, will elicit some dissent, but Robinson's first-rate scholarship will be difficult to counter and will stand the test of time.--American Historical ReviewOne of the most important resources in years, this book is already a classic.--CHOICECareful, exhaustive scholarship and densely packed argumentation. . . . One of the most important resources in years, this book is already a classic. . . . Essential.--CHOICEA complex, thoughtful perspective on the protean nature of American culture and those who profited and suffered from its progression.--Journal of American HistoryThere is nothing like this book. At once a magnificent work of social and cultural history, an anthropology of race, and a political economy of racial capitalism and Empire, this is the most original examination of the American film industry ever published. But like all of Robinson's work, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning* does much more, extending over three centuries to reconstruct the roots of modern black representation in the works of Shakespeare, scientific discourse, and early minstrelsy. And his prodigious research has uncovered celluloid gems and theater works I never knew existed.--Robin D. G. Kelley, University of Southern California

This is one of the best works of African-American film studies to come out in years. Many of us who have found the work of David Bogle (*Toms, Mammies, Mulattoes, Bucks & Coons*) wanting on several levels will have their prayers answered with Robinson's impeccable scholarship and

far-reaching analysis of the changing perceptions and representations of African-Americans after the Civil War, Reconstruction and the release of Griffith's BIRTH OF A NATION (1915). What was important for me in reading this book was Robinson's astute ability to discern the origins of the specific caricatures of African-Americans in the traveling minstrel shows that circulated throughout the country before the invention of cinema. He also reveals how early American Cinema was predicated upon these caricatures of African-Americans as a revenue generating source of "entertainment". He then reveals how these caricatures were employed by African-American actors as a means to gain employment within the movie industry. The chapters on early American Theatre, Oscar Micheaux, and The Birth of a Nation are the best written efforts I've read in years: fresh and full of new insights. Robinson discusses the duplicitous nature of minstrelsy for whites and African-Americans. This was a thoroughly engrossing read and a book that will be referenced by scholars, students and filmmakers for years to come.

Husband liked it.

This book is flawless work because it goes beyond the basic critical analysis of film and race. Robinson paints a historical narrative of racial regimes that begin in Elizabethan England (16th century) that ends at WWII. For example, he notes that blacks were not the first to suffer from racism, but the Irish/Welsh/Scotts, who were phenotypically similar to the English. Ultimately, Robinson illustrates to the reader the origin of racial regimes, and their attempt to maintain power by using race, backed by capitalist interests. The cover was deceiving for me as it seemed like a simple book on blacks in film, but Robinson takes the reader on a historical journey that conveys the cultural, economical, and political consequences of the abuse of race on society. He also doesn't come from an American viewpoint, but from a global perspective of the victims of exploitation and the use of race to maintain power. Backed by superb and accurate research, this work is one of the most well-rounded books that one can simply learn about the issue of race itself. The racial regimes continues to attempt to cover up their past, in essence is their forgeries of memory, and Robinson uncovers these hidden truths to open our eyes to the reality of things.

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