CAPTURING SOUTHERN IDENTITIES: AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTARIES OF THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

Historically, Hollywood fiction films have presented the South through three representational lenses: the South as Old South, the South as other, and the South as battleground of the Civil Rights movement. In fact, by the mid-twentieth century, these fictional images began to seep into the public imagination of the region and its people. In *Framing the South*, Allison Graham claims, “By 1957, many white southerners knew their necks were red, and most black southerners knew they were voiceless images in a tale of blood and vengeance. They’d read it all before … They’d seen it in the movies” (1-2). It is not surprising, then, that with the emergence of accessible documentary filmmaking tools in the late twentieth century Southerners began to comment filmically on their cinematic image. In my project, I examine the ways in which auto-ethnographic Southern documentaries utilize the medium to respond the constructed nature of the abovementioned cinematic representations of the South. Moreover, I discuss how each auto-ethnographic Southern documentary highlights the ways in which films, including their own, manipulate cultural representation.

Specifically, I examine Ross McElwee’s *Sherman’s March* (1986), Elizabeth Barret’s *Stranger with a Camera* (1999), Andrew Douglas’s *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed*
Jesus (2003), Christie Herring and Andre Robinson’s *Waking in Mississippi* (1998), and Charlene Gilbert’s *Homecoming ...Sometimes I am Haunted by Memories of Red Dirt and Clay* (1999). By analyzing these films against their respective Hollywood representations, I illuminate the methods by which the directors take back their image through illustrating the constructed nature of depictions in their own films. In doing this, the auto-ethnographers undermine the representations in fiction films and highlight the fabrication involved in capturing Southern identities.
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Introduction

In the article “Jargons of Authenticity: Three Movements of the American Documentary,” Paul Arthur writes, “By now it is, or should be, standard wisdom that documentaries and Hollywood narratives do not issue from separate and pristine worlds but have over the course of their histories maintained a tangled reciprocity … in which each has, in part, defined its purview through cultural myths of what the other is not” (108). It is exactly this tangled reciprocity that emerges in the themes and construction of auto-ethnographic documentaries regarding the southern region of the United States. Historically, Hollywood fiction films have presented the South through three representational lenses: the South as Old South, the South as other, and the South as battleground of the Civil Rights movement. In fact, by the mid-twentieth century, these fictional images began to seep into the public imagination of the region and its people. In Framing the South, Allison Graham claims, “By 1957, many white southerners knew their necks were red, and most black southerners knew they were voiceless images in a tale of blood and vengeance. They’d read it all before … They’d seen it in the movies” (1-2). It is not surprising, then, that with the emergence of accessible documentary filmmaking tools in the late twentieth century Southerners began to comment filmically on their cinematic image. In this work, I examine the ways in which auto-ethnographic Southern documentaries utilize the medium to respond the constructed nature of the abovementioned cinematic representations of the South.

Before exploring the specific methods by which I discuss documentaries, it is necessary to define my terms and explain the contribution of this research to the fields
of documentary and Southern studies. First, the “auto-ethnography” has been categorized through a variety of definitions, and, because of this, I must specifically define my intentions in using the term. This work primarily understands Southern auto-ethnographies through the definitions of Bill Nichols and Mary Louise Pratt. Nichols defines auto-ethnographic documentaries as texts in which “I or we speak about us to you” (Introduction to Documentary 18). In this understanding of auto-ethnography, the documentarian “moves from a position of separation from those he or she represents to a position of commonality with them” (18). It is this attempt at communal representation that manifests in each of the documentaries in my study. Because of this, I find Nichols’ definition exceptionally useful for my purposes.

Pratt argues, “Autoethnographic texts are those that others construct in response to other dialogue with those metropolitan representations ...(they are) texts in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (qtd in Russell 277, Reed-Danahay 7). This is a particularly significant definition in that my work directly addresses the ways in which Southern filmmakers combat the cinematic representations of the South created by fiction films. The documentarians I examine unequivocally utilize their cameras to question representations created by other filmmakers. Here, it is important to define who are the “auto-ethnographers” and who are the “others” in this work. For my purposes, each auto-ethnographer is a filmmaker who considers him or herself to be Southern. While they may not all live in or have been raised in the South, every documentarian does consider the South to be their homeplace. In contrast, the “others,” in terms of Pratt’s
definition, are filmmakers outside the South, who have set out to create a cinematic image of the region. Most often, this will refer solely to Hollywood productions. In looking at both of these definitions of auto-ethnography, it is important to highlight the two most significant qualifications. The auto-ethnographic documentaries in this work engage in both a communal representation and a representation that engages previous filmic depictions of the South.

Additionally, this work often mentions the constructed nature of film, which refers to the fictive devices that films use to create narratives and representations. In *Theorizing Documentary*, Michael Renov writes, “The documentary has availed itself of nearly every constructive device known to fiction …and has employed virtually every register of cinematic syntax in the process” (6). He further argues that these fictive elements are “moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention” (2). It is the process and methods by which directors create these representations that I reference when discussing the constructed nature of film. As Renov mentions, it is important to recognize that these creative devices occur both in fiction and nonfiction films.

Now that I have defined my terms, it is also important to explain my work’s contribution to the fields of documentary and Southern studies. While there has been rather extensive research conducted regarding the cinematic representations of the Old South, the abject South, and the Civil Rights South, there has been little examination of Southern documentaries – auto-ethnographic or otherwise. In fact, with the exception of a small number of critically acclaimed documentaries like Ross McElwee’s *Sherman’s*
March (1986), Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1976) and films focusing on the Civil Rights movement such as Spike Lee’s *4 Little Girls* (1997), Southern documentaries have remained nearly unnoticed in the academy. Furthermore, analysis of documentaries directed by or filming people who consider themselves to be a part of Southern culture is nearly non-existent. Following the outpouring of films about the South, it is interesting that scholars have not addressed the South’s filmic reactions to its popular cinematic image. Instead, it has largely ignored what “Southerners” are saying about “their” South. Recognizing this void in academic scholarship, I have endeavored to address this issue academically. Primarily, my chapters utilize the works of Southern film historians like Edward D.C. Campbell, Warren French, Allison Graham, Jack Temple Kirby, and J.W. Williamson in order to establish the representations of the South in film. While I do utilize the previously mentioned scholarship regarding auto-ethnographic theory and Southern fiction films, much of my analysis directly engages the documentary texts.

My work is organized into three chapters, each presenting the ways in which one or two specific auto-ethnographic Southern documentaries address a corresponding Hollywood image of the region. As stated earlier, cinematic representations of the South fall into three main categories: South as Old South, South as “other,” and the Civil Rights South. It is not surprising, then, that the documentaries in question interrogate these depictions specifically. Moreover, instead of creating an opposing image, each documentary highlights the ways in which films manipulate cultural representation. In doing so, these documentaries reflexively address their own construction. In *Picturing*
Culture, Jay Ruby writes, “To be reflexive, in terms of a work of anthropology, is to insist that anthropologists systemically and rigorously reveal their methods and …reflect upon how the medium through which they transmit their work predisposes readers/viewers to construct the meaning of the work in certain ways” (152). Throughout the auto-ethnographies discussed below, the filmmakers overtly unveil the fictive elements of the documentary medium in order to show the viewer the cinematically constructed nature of Southern representations.

Chapter 1 examines Ross McElwee’s acclaimed documentary Sherman’s March (1986) and its response to the filmic depiction of the South as “the Old South.” In the early twentieth century, the antebellum South became such a common setting for films that Hollywood producers began to recognize it as “the Old South genre” (The Celluloid South 32). Moreover, these Old South films repetitively presented constructed images of Southern history, gender roles, and race relations. Interestingly, as McElwee sets outs to film a documentary regarding General Sherman’s March to the Sea during the Civil War, he conspicuously comes across these same issues. In his film, the director crafts the story of his life and Southern culture by re-framing the “Old Southern” representations of Southern history, gender roles, and race relations. In addition, I argue that by emphasizing the fictive elements in his own documentary while addressing these narrative topics, McElwee further emphasizes the fabrication of Southern identity in Old South films.

Next, in Chapter 2, I examine the ways in which Elizabeth Barret’s Stranger with a Camera (1999) and Andrew Douglas’s Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus
(2003) react to the representation of the South’s alterity. Beginning in the 1930’s and 1940’s, directors began to create a new “Southern – the hillbilly movies” (French 6). These films present a South very different from the lavish wealth and propriety of the Old Southern film. Instead, the hillbilly film creates the image of a rural, impoverished, and often violent region. Barret admittedly responds to this image in *Stranger with a Camera*, saying, “I didn’t want the rest of the world to think of us as hillbillies – to see us as ignorant, backward, or violent.” Like McElwee, Barret addresses the cinematic representation of film through showing its constructiveness. However, in *Stranger with a Camera*, she accomplishes this by unveiling a variety of representations of the southern Appalachian Mountains through newsreels, a Canadian documentarian’s work, and through her own film. By highlighting three different images of Appalachia through three film sources, she underlines film’s ability to construct an image of a region.

In addition to *Stranger with a Camera*, chapter 2 also analyzes Andrew Douglas’s *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (2003). While most of the documentaries fall under the typical definition of auto-ethnography, Douglas’s film falls outside of this spectrum. The director of the documentary, Andrew Douglas, is not Southern and, therefore, cannot understand his own life history in relation to the larger implications of Southern identity (Russell 276). In addition, Jim White, a Southern musician who acts as the principal social actor, admits that he “will never be a Southerner.” Despite this admission, *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* does encounter the staged nature of documentary as well as the filmic construction of the
Southern identity. Because of the film’s significance as a commentary on the documentary medium and its increasing importance amongst contemporary Southern documentaries, I am compelled to include it in my work. Furthermore, by examining fictive documentary elements (character construction, narration, and musical accompaniments), this chapter illuminates Douglas’s filmic confession of a constructed Southern identity. Like *Stranger with a Camera*, *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* shows the viewer the methods by which films create depictions of the impoverished, rural South.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I examine Christie Herring and Andre Robinson’s *Waking in Mississippi* (1996) and Charlene Gilbert’s *Homecoming ...Sometimes I am Haunted by Memories of Red Dirt and Clay* (1999). Because these auto-ethnographic documentaries address the filmic representation of the Civil Rights South, they approach actual events and struggles. However, it is Hollywood’s created representations and re-writing of these histories to which *Waking in Mississippi* and *Homecoming* respond. Specifically, in Hollywood’s depictions of the Civil Rights South, directors focus on the visual imagery of the struggle. Sharon Monteith argues, “The movies were released in the moment in which the South became synonymous with racist mobs, burnings, and bombings in the popular imagination, and they capitalized on the deleterious images of the South” (194). In order to address the visual and thematic representations of African-Americans fighting civil rights issues, these films re-conconstruct the image of the southern African-American by privileging the black voice over the harmful images and white narratives of the Civil Rights struggle. In particular,
Waking in Mississippi utilizes the interviews of African-American residents in Canton, Mississippi to explain race relations in a town election and the production of Civil Rights film A Time to Kill. Homecoming likewise incorporates the accounts of African-American southerners to explain the fight for access to land. In both documentaries, the auto-ethnographers re-construct the image of the Civil Rights south, and, specifically, of the black southerner, by picturing the African-American story over archival footage of previous events.

In this recent technological age in which self-representation is accessible through film, it is necessary to look at not only the reactions, but also the methods through which filmmakers represent themselves and their culture. Jay Ruby claims, “The right to represent is assumed to be the right to control one’s cultural identity in the world arena. Some people, traditionally film subjects, are demanding that filmmakers share authority and, in some cases, relinquish it altogether” (198). In the auto-ethnographic Southern documentaries in this work, the directors take back their image by directly responding to their depictions in Hollywood films. Moreover, by illustrating the constructed nature of images in their own films, the auto-ethnographers undermine the representations in fiction films and highlight the fabrication involved in capturing Southern identities.
Chapter 1 - Sherman’s March: Constructively Responding to the Old South in Film

At its inception, Southern films depicted the American South through representations of its history rather than its present. In fact, “magnolia-scented Old Southerns” became staples at movie theaters across the country, romantically highlighting the years before the Civil War, while also presenting a noble struggle throughout the conflict (Kirby 64). Although the most recognized Old South films are D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation (1915) and Victor Fleming’s 1939 masterpiece Gone with the Wind, Hollywood producers released “a steady stream of similar fare which perpetuated a myth of ambience, racial fidelity, and courtly idealism” (The Celluloid South 29). In fact, these films occurred so often and so similarly that film historians began to recognize them as films of the “Old South genre” with identifiable and repetitive characteristics (32). Southern film historian Edward D.C. Campbell defines the Old Southern as a genre that “presented an idyllic South … populated by refined ladies and gentlemen surrounded by faithful servants” (“The Plantation South in Film” 107). It is significant, then, that the foremost auto-ethnographic Southern documentary, Ross McElwee’s Sherman’s March: An Improbable Search for Love (1986), directly confronts an “Old Southern” representation of the South by re-framing its depictions of Southern history, gender roles, and race relations. Moreover, by underlining the constructed nature of his own filmic representations, he further emphasizes their fabrication in Old South films themselves.
Re-Creating a Questionable History of the Old South

Although Old South films approached a real past, directors and screenwriters often re-crafted the history of the South so much that “the distinction between a historical and fictitious South…became a particular(ly) difficult one” (Gerster and Cords qtd. in Telotte 120). Because directors often define the South against the northern United States, the Civil War regularly became a topic through which film narratives introduced the region. In fact, the first feature length film, Birth of a Nation, followed a Northern and Southern family as they eventually joined forces against the Union. Presenting the South as a triumphant victor or an ennobled loser in the Civil War became commonplace in Old South films. For instance, in Gone with the Wind, Fleming presents the Confederacy as courageous army facing a goliath and unjust Union army. One intertitle in the film reads, “Panic hit the City with the first of Sherman’s shells. Helpless and unarmed, the populace fled from the oncoming Juggernaut. And desperately, the gallant remains of the army marched out to face the foe.” In Gone with the Wind as well as in other Old South films, General Sherman’s name becomes metonymically associated with Northern evil. It is thus particularly significant when both the director and character of Ross McElwee follow General Sherman’s route through the South, re-writing that famous history. Interestingly, by illuminating the fictive devices of film, McElwee presents the constructed nature of his own documentary, which in turn highlights the manipulation of history in Old South films.
In Bill Nichols’s *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, the author writes, “The representation of the historical world becomes, itself, the topic of cinematic mediation in the reflexive mode” (56). Nichols is referring to a process of documentary filmmaking in which the viewers see the filmmaker “speaking to us … about the process of representation,” addressing “the question of how we talk about the historical world” (56-57). Essentially, reflexive documentaries, like Sherman’s March, comment in some way about the constructed nature of all film. For instance, even as Sherman’s March opens, the director makes an obvious comment regarding the creation of history in film. In the opening shots, the viewers watch what appears to be an educational video about Sherman’s March to the Sea. As photographic stills of the ruins of the march flash by, the British-accented voice says, “Traces of the scars he left on the South can still be found.” As the viewer hears the sensationalized language of “scars” in the South and the photograph of General William T. Sherman fades to black, the audience hears director Ross McElwee’s voice say, “Great. Do you want to do it once more?” This is followed by the voiceover saying as he clears his voice, “Do it all, yeah.” By beginning his documentary with an admittance of fabrication, especially in relation to the history of the Old South, McElwee calls into question of previous presentations of the history of the Old South in film.

In addition, by introducing the film in this manner, the director asks the viewers to see these historical constructions as the movie progresses. For instance, when Ross visits the museum at Fort Sumter, the viewers watch as he presses the button to hear the museum’s recorded account of history. While McElwee videos the cannons, the people,
the fort, and the American flag, the voice begins a description of “valiant lines of grey” (Confederate soldiers) and “long lines of brightly uniformed men advancing into battle to the sound of music and the roll of drums.” Here, although the speech does give credit to both the Union and the Confederacy, the director already trained the audience to be skeptical of historical representations of the Old South. These references to historical re-creation persistently occur and are highlighted throughout the film.

As the film progresses, McElwee implies that the viewers should question his representation of the Old South in addition to questioning the voiceovers of the historical narratives and Old South films in general. First, he uses words that incite the previous voiceovers, which have already been implicated as unreliable narrators. For instance, at Sheldon Church, he labels Union soldiers as “Sherman’s ruthless scavengers” similarly to the introductory voice’s vitriolic language about the troops who “plundered homes, destroyed livestock, burned buildings, and left a path of destruction 60 miles long” (emphasis added). Immediately following this, the director takes his viewers to an overgrown and marker-less plot of land where he claims that Sherman and his troops prepared to invade Columbia, South Carolina. At this point in the film, the audience is asked to be skeptical of even the director’s presentation of land as a historical space. While in reality this may be the place where Sherman’s troops amassed, it is devoid of markers or monuments and only appears to be a device that McElwee uses to further his film’s narrative.

It is important to note that, in scenes in which McElwee films markers of the Old South (whether museums, monuments or land), he always pairs the history of the
land with his present romantic struggles. Specifically, the Civil War history acts as a narrative device to move Ross’ plot forward in his search for romantic love. In doing this, he emphasizes the purpose of historical representations as narrative vehicles rather than efforts to present history accurately. Nichols suggests that reflexive documentaries like *Sherman’s March* create “an issue for the viewer by emphasizing the degree to which people, or social actors, appear before us as signifiers, as functions of the text itself” (*Representing Reality* 57). In *Sherman’s March* the viewers are not only asked to examine the extent to which the characters further the plot, but also the extent to which Ross’s presentation of Old South history advances the narrative. Throughout his film, the destruction of the South matches the dissolution of his romantic pursuits.

In addition, the strength of the Confederate soldiers works to underline McElwee’s relative masculine weakness. For instance, at the site of the last battle of the Civil War, McElwee moves from a description of the “amputated limbs” and the “thicker calves” of Confederate infantrymen to a discussion of his own failure to convince Karen to leave her boyfriend. Just as his description of the last battle between the North and the South centers around terms of masculinity, McElwee’s explanation of his final romantic failure revolves around the loss of Karen’s affection to her manlier boyfriend. In fact, at almost every historical marker, Ross first introduces the land in relation to the home of a romantic interest. Then, he presents the Civil War history associated with the marker; this is followed by a similar account of his own battle with the woman he previously located near the historical marker. By repetitively using this pattern, McElwee not only emphasizes the possible fallibility of historical accounts of
the Old South in film, but he also illustrates that the filmic loyalty of historical representations lies with plot advancement more than with a responsibility to present a complete and accurate re-telling of history.

Through his illumination of the unreliability of filmic historical accounts, McElwee creates a personal identity that tells not only his story but also a new story of the Old South. In her book *Autoethnography*, Catharine Russell explains, “Autobiography becomes ethnography at the point where the film or video-maker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is …a representation of the self as a performance” (Russell 276). Throughout the *Sherman’s March*, Ross embodies this ethnographic performance so as to draw attention to the historical processes and fabrications of history in his film, Old Southerns, and films in general. It is significant that McElwee does not present the history of the Old South by “correcting” previous mis-representations in Old Southerns. Instead, he unveils the unreliability of historical references in fiction films by overtly illuminating the untrustworthiness of historical references in his documentary – a medium that gives a stronger “impression of authenticity” than in fiction films (*Introduction to Documentary* xiii).

**Constructing Gender in the Southern Film**

In addition to narrativizing historical representations of the Old South, Old Southerns also introduce stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. Film historian Ida Jeter suggests that Old South films are associated with gendered perceptions such as “the cavalier and the belle” and “the code of chivalry” (31). These descriptions of
cultured and chivalrous men and women repeat multiple times in commentary of Old Southerns. It is important to mention that when film historians discuss the “refined ladies and gentlemen” of Old Southern films, they are neglecting to include any race aside from the dominant white race of the films. This obvious overlooking of gender association with other races, especially African-American characters who are almost always present in Old Southerns, will be discussed in further detail in the next section of this chapter. Of course, due to the obvious “tangled reciprocity” between Sherman’s March and Old South Hollywood films, McElwee addresses the gender perceptions and expectations in his documentary (Arthur 108). Moreover, just as he tackles Old South representations of history by showing the construction of his own accounts of history, he also illuminates previous filmic fabrications by presenting his own creation of gender and romance in Sherman’s March.

Throughout the documentary, the director addresses masculinity by presenting his own masculine failures as compared to the perception of men of Old Southerns as well as men of the contemporary South. First, McElwee presents the constructed nature of the masculinity of the filmic Old South by presenting his own gender “weaknesses” against the “vitality of Southern manhood” (The Celluloid South 10). He repeatedly accomplishes this by filming himself as visually veiled by the monuments and land while discussing the strength and valor of Confederate men in battle. For instance, when he visits Peachtree Creek Battleground, he mentions the deaths of 6,000 men fighting for the land. Immediately following this, he walks onto the screen and becomes almost indistinguishable from the landscape. Although the soldiers left a lasting impact on this
land, McElwee is barely recognizable even in the shot. Later, when standing on the edge of the Congaree River, McElwee explains Sherman’s preparation to attack Columbia while being physically overwhelmed by the landscape. In fact, the director places the vegetation in the forefront and background, while he stands in the overaken middle ground. After discussing the significance of the land, Ross walks away from the screen, becoming smaller in the shot. Then, the viewer watches and listens as he falls down the slope of the hill and disappears from the screen. While this scene is the most obvious instance of his lack of potent Southern masculinity, McElwee always films himself in compromising positions by appearing small on the screen, yelling while running from insects, or speaking to the camera alone in the dark.

When viewing and analyzing these scenes, it is necessary to remember that the director consciously included these self-representations into his film. In Michael Renov’s *Theorizing Documentary*, the film theorist writes:

> Indeed, nonfiction contains a number of “fictive” elements, moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention. Among these fictive ingredients we may include the construction of the character …emerging through recourse to ideal and imagined categories of hero or genius. (2)

Interestingly, while calling on “creative intervention” to construct his character, Ross does not build a character that could be conceived as either an “ideal” or “imagined” hero or genius. Instead, he only creates images of a blundering and sometimes scared middle-aged man failing at romance and Old South manhood. Not only does McElwee
present himself as a less than masculine Southern character by showing his own failings, but he also reminds the audience of what masculinity is “supposed to be” by pairing himself against quintessential Southern men. In fact, the “ideal and imagined” masculine hero is the actor Burt Reynolds. Before meeting Reynolds, who Ross calls his “nemesis,” he meets a Burt Reynolds look-a-like. By introducing the “ideal” man through a Southern actor and a person acting the role of that actor, McElwee further emphasizes the constructivity of masculinity in Southern films.

Just as Ross shows the fabrication of masculinity through his own gendered failings, McElwee also presents the creation of femininity in film. In Victoria O’Donnell’s “The Southern Woman as Time-Binder in Film,” the author suggests that Old Southerns create eight archetypes for the Old South woman in film: the feminine woman, the female woman, the real lady, the fallen woman, the sexual woman, the unfulfilled sexual woman, the rich spoiled woman, and the new female woman (158-161). Taking a cue from such stereotypes, McElwee highlights the act of performing the Old Southern belle in Sherman’s March. When attending the Costume Ball as General Sherman, he films Claudia’s daughter parading in front of the judge’s panel in a Southern belle costume equipped with hoop skirt and parasol; she is acting every bit of the “feminine woman” – “beautiful but more artificial than natural” (158). By underlining the act of “dressing up” as a Southern belle, McElwee demonstrates a backstage to Old Southern films and Southern femininity in the American imagination. Interestingly, almost every woman he films performs in some capacity – a model, an actor, a singer, a roller skater, a public speaker and teacher, an activist. This
arrangement not only emphasizes the performance of femininity in Old South films, but the presentation of femininity in his film. Bill Nichols uses the term “social actor” for documentary characters because they “retain the capacity to act within the historical arena where they perform. The sense of aesthetic remove between an imaginary world in which actors perform and the historical world in which people live no longer obtains” (Representing Reality 42). This is particularly interesting because McElwee shows the social actors in Sherman’s March performing the role of female in the historical period of the Old South rather than the present.

In addition to drawing the audience’s attention to the act of dressing up as a Southern woman, McElwee also shows the power of the filmmaker to mechanically construct femininity. In Lucy Fischer’s “Documentary Film and the Discourse of Hysterical/Historical Narrative,” the author claims that “women only function as stops along the way” and “obstacles” that “must be slain or defeated” in Sherman’s March (335). However, McElwee uses women as more than just obstacles; they are tools by which he proves that femininity is constructed on camera. From the beginning, he records women and “accidentally turns off my tape recorder,” creating suggestive scenes of Pat sexually thrusting back and forth or Karen cleaning her house; these scenes highlight stereotypical female behavior while also creating femininity for the characters in the film. Ross also shows the camera constructing womanhood when he visits Ashley Hall School for Girls, which he calls “the very cradle of Southern womanhood.” At the school, he watches his new love interest, Dede, performs a song for the schoolgirls, singing, “Don’t go trying some new fashion. Don’t change the color
of your hair… I love you just the way you are.” Immediately following Dede’s plea to “don’t go changing,” Ross films girls at Ashley Hall as they look at their school photographs. The audience hears more than one girl say, “They haven’t touched them up yet.” Then, one of the girls explains the possibility of air brushing, saying, “If you have crows feet on your eyes, they can airbrush those out. If you have a zit, they can airbrush that out. If you have a real prominent birthmark, they can airbrush that out. They can slim down your nose or widen it.” By including this scene, he underlines the power of the camera to create stereotypical femininity visually in addition to the showing the performativity of gender.

**Re-Creating Race Relations in the South**

Finally, in addition to approaching history and gender, films of the Old South also address race relations, primarily through presenting slavery and servanthood. Directors presented African-American slaves and servants as either willing and joyful participants in black bondage or ignorant and violent hindrances to a safe Southern life. Both the “acceptance of civility as a characteristic of the black race” and a slave’s predisposition toward violence often emerged in Old South films (*The Celluloid South* 35). Interestingly, in Ross McElwee’s “Director’s Statement,” he says of the making of *Sherman’s March*, “I assumed that racial relations in the so-called ‘New South’ would be a major theme – perhaps the major theme of the film. But other themes became more dominant, though the notion of how blacks and whites coexist in the South is still imbedded in much of the footage.” However, as Lucy Fischer points out, Ross never introduces a black woman as a love interest throughout *Sherman’s March* (341). In fact,
all African-Americans play seemingly small roles. However, because I have established that McElwee tends to address Old Southern themes through presenting their creatable nature, it is important to examine how the lack of appearance and the small appearances of African-Americans do construct race and racial relations in the documentary.

First, it is undeniable that the director does not include black Southerners in the prime narrative of his documentary. On the topic of race in *Sherman’s March*, Lucy Fischer writes:

> But the work’s focus on regional antagonism also invokes the fissure of race, both in contemporary and historic contexts. This topic enters only peripherally in the film, as McElwee encounters black people who play ‘bit parts’ in his autobiographical narrative: a car mechanic who knew his family, a domestic in the home of a friend, a blues musician who plays in Joy’s band. (341)

While Fischer is astute to acknowledge this relative absence, it is also important to examine what this lack could mean. It is interesting that in Old South films African-Americans were “doomed to play subservient roles,” while in *Sherman’s March*, they barely have roles at all (*The Celluloid South* 18). However, the lack of African-American roles does not go unnoticed in a film discussing the Civil War. In fact, the absence of black social actors actually draws attention to race relations. Whether intentionally or not, McElwee’s lack of African-American roles in the documentary emphasizes the incompleteness of a Southern film without these characters.
Film theorist Kaja Silverman explains the term “suture” as the “process whereby the inadequacy of the subject’s position is exposed in order to facilitate (i.e.) create the desire for new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good on that lack” (231). It is exactly this lack of African-American characters that creates a longing for innovative introductions of race into the cultural discourse of the South. McElwee cannot produce a film documenting the campaign of a Northern general through the South during the Civil War and not incorporate major roles for black Southerners without that absence being recognized as a lack that needs be addressed. In Sherman’s March, the absence of major roles for black characters acts as a catalyst to contemplate the African-American role in films of the Old South as well as the possibilities in films of the “so-called ‘New South.’”

Because African-Americans do play minor roles in Sherman’s March, it is important to examine the place that these smaller roles have in McElwee’s reconstruction of race and race relations. In Fischer’s abovementioned quotation, she lists the black social actors as “a car mechanic who knew his family, a domestic in the home of a friend, a blues musician who plays in Joy’s band” (341). In this list, she left out very important clientele – the African-American children that appear in the plotline of Claudia, Jackie, and Joy. These children act as an image of the future of Southern society and race relations. First, the viewers see Claudia’s daughter, Ashley, playing house with an African-American girl. The two girls impress created domestic roles of Claudia and Ross with “Claudia” yelling at “Ross” about sleeping late. Later, Jackie’s students ask about Ross and Jackie’s sleeping and sexual habits. This happens again
when the children at Joy’s band practice ask if Ross and Joy live together. The children’s repetition of the domestic sphere serves two purposes. First, the children point out an integrated domestic sphere. Second, they place physicality and sexuality, two traits commonly assigned to African-American characters in films of the Old South, onto the white social actors.

On the first point, although Ross does not include an African-American woman as a love interest, he does incorporate black children in the process of re-making the domestic household. For instance, Ashley and her friend place Claudia and Ross in the bedroom of Ashley’s dollhouse. In addition, the children Jackie teaches ask Ross, “What time do you and her (Jackie) go to bed?” This is amazingly similar to the children at Joy’s band practice asking the director, “Are you married? Do y’all stay together?” The emphasis here is on the domesticity of the couple. On the on hand, this shows the continued child-like understanding of heterosexual white couples. However, on the other hand, it gives the African-American children the same role as the adult white social actors, perpetually attempting to place Ross in a domestic love relationship. Because of this, McElwee gives the black children equal roles and responsibilities to create the domestic sphere as he gives to the white characters in Sherman’s March.

Secondly, the director uses film segments that show black children and teenagers impressing physicality and sexuality on the white characters. In Old South films, black characters were depicted physically through images of slave bodies and sexualized women. In her article, “Black Women in Film,” Lenora Clodfelter Stephens writes, “The two basic (black) female stereotypes – the seductress and the mammy –
were introduced at the birth of filmmaking” (162). Because of this, it could be potentially difficult for Ross to place a black woman in the role of love interest without connoting previous representations of eroticized black women in film. Instead, he gives the black children the ability to impress sexuality onto the white characters in the film. Although Winnie discusses sex and Pat is overtly sexual, these children are the only characters that bring Ross’s sexuality to the forefront of conversation.

After asking what time his teacher goes to bed, one of Jackie’s students says, “Well, now all you have to do is get serious?” When Ross asks him what he means by that, the student answers, “You know what I mean.” At this point, Ross and the viewer clearly understand the student’s sexual innuendo. After Ross tells him that he “shouldn’t talk about your teacher like that,” the student responds, “Oh, she don’t mind.” In this situation, we have a reverse racial role compared to that of Old South films. The African-American student marks the white Jackie and Ross as sexual characters. Moreover, by claiming that “she don’t mind,” he has the same disregard for her perception of herself as the previous filmmakers had of African-American actors. Later, the students again attempt to introduce power through sexual references when another student says, “Quit smoochin’ – you and Miss Carrie. I’ll put in a recommendation that y’all don’t get a job next year …for smoochin’ on campus.” Here again, an African-American student imposes a sexual relationship between the two white characters. This time, he (jokingly) threatens to punish them for this relationship, which he created. By allowing the children to bring his sexual life to the forefront, McElwee creates racial roles that are opposite from those in Old South films. Because
they are the only characters with this purpose, their roles move from minor roles to pivotal social actors.

In addition to this imposed sexuality, Jackie’s students also draw attention to physicality in the film. For instance, when the students take a field trip, Jackie shows them a statue of what appears to be a white/Greek man. The students say, “This is some serious hunk of man here. Look at that body. His feet look so real. Look at that body.” As one girl says, “Look at that body,” McElwee follows her instructions and tilts the camera upwards on the body. In this instance, the students, with the help of the director’s camera, highlight the constructed nature of the body. Immediately following this, the students return to the classroom and tell Ross, “Take my picture mister. Take my picture mister.” The students move from admiring and drawing attention to a sculpted body to asking that Ross take a picture of their bodies. In doing this, McElwee shows the creation nature of the body in art. Not only is the sculpture a piece of art, but the bodies in front of the camera act as at least a part of the art as well. As Ross turns the camera around to film them, the students begin to dance in front of the screen, performing and moving their bodies to become a part of the art in the film. In “‘Getting to Know You…’: Knowledge, Power, and the Body,” documentary theorist Bill Nichols explains the significance of the physical body in documentaries by discussing the “agency of representation” that a body has when they ask to represent themselves or an image (175). When the students ask to be photographed, they are asking to be filmed on their own terms with the agency to represent themselves or an issue. The students move from highlighting the created physicality of a white man to creating their own
physicality and image by representing themselves in film. By again giving authority to the African-American students, Ross again turns the racial relations and powers around in comparison to the “subservient roles” of African-Americans in Old Southerns.

Although McElwee’s construction of race and race relations is not as obvious as his constructions of history and gender, it is an important part of this film. In his director’s statement he claims that the coexistence of white and black southerners is present in much of the footage. He does not, however, highlight how the two races coexist in the South. By constructing and editing a space in which the black children have the most significant African-American roles through placing filmic black stereotypes on white bodies, McElwee not only addresses the stereotypes of the Old South, but also introduces the possibility of race relations in the future.

**Conclusion**

While the filmic constructions that Ross unveils could apply to any type of film, it is particularly significant that he addresses stereotypes widely associated with Old Southerns. In *The Celluloid South*, Edward D.C. Campbell writes, “The movies of the antebellum south with their increasingly familiar settings and character types reinforced an image shaped cinematically since 1903” (5). It is this repeated image of Southern history, gender roles, and race relations that McElwee reconstructs throughout *Sherman’s March*. By highlighting his own constructions of these ideals, he draws attention to the previous representations in film and the ease to which they were created myths rather than actual occurrences.
Chapter 2 – Stranger with a Camera and Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus: Re-Making the Image of the Abject South

While early films about the southern region of the United States produced an idyllic image of the region’s past, this quickly morphed into a perception of ignorance and poverty. In fact, in the late 1930’s and 1940’s, Hollywood producers pushed to create a new “Southern – the hillbilly movies” (French 6). These films changed the primary representations of the South from that of gentile and lavish society to one of impoverished and irreverent hollows and trailer parks. While the Old Southern seemed to go out of style along with the production companies’ ability to fund them in the late 1930’s, the new Southern of ignorance and otherness remains a popular representation of the South today. These representations reach from the almost cartoon-ish “hillbilly” characters in John Boorman’s Deliverance (1972) to the inherent lack of intelligence in Robert Zemecki’s Forrest Gump (1994) or even to the eroticization of the South and race relations in Craig Brewer’s Black Snake Moan (2006). In The Celluloid South, Edward D.C. Campbell argues that despite the numerous globalizing and boundary pushing changes in the South in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, “the South has remained and will remain a section apart, establish and sustained for better or worse by a popular culture of film” (191). It is this persistent representation of the South as a region that is both culturally and socially separated from the nation that documentarians Elizabeth Barret and Andrew Douglas address in their works, Stranger with a Camera (1999) and Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus (2003) respectively. Like Sherman’s March, these documentaries address the constructed nature of filmic representations
including their own, and, in doing this, combat the veracity of the “othered” Southern representation.

Multiple Identities: Three Representations of Southern Appalachia in Stranger with a Camera

What is the difference between how people see their own place and how others represent it? Who does get to tell the community’s story? – Elizabeth Barret, Stranger with a Camera (1999)

From the opening scene of Elizabeth Barret’s auto-ethnographic documentary Stranger with a Camera, the director presents representations of the mountain southerner through pictures and news broadcasts. As archived BBC images of an impoverished eastern Kentucky flash across the screen, Barret says, “I grew up in a place inundated with picture takers of the creek, hollows, the houses, and people of Appalachia … When I was growing up and saw Appalachia on national television, the images were of mining disasters, coal strikes, or poor people.” Anthony Harkins, author of Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon, admits that images from both fiction and non-fiction media sources create the public image of Southern Appalachia. He writes, “Inundated by stereotypical portrayals of shiftless, drunken, promiscuous, and bare-footed people, living in blissful squalor beyond the reach of civilization, many Americans outside the southern mountains came to see little or no difference between the ‘real’ southern mountaineers and their cultural image” (4). It is precisely this perceptual image that Barret combats verbally and visually in Stranger with a Camera. She accomplishes this by unveiling a multiplicity of representations of the southern Appalachian Mountains through previous newsreels, Hugh O’Connor’s
documentary, and her own film. By using these film sources to depict Southern Appalachia through varying representations (impoverished, “other,” and homeplace), Barret underlines film’s ability to construct the image of a region.

First, by constantly using mid-twentieth century newsreel that solely depicts Appalachia’s poverty, Barret presents the filmically manipulated nature of the Southern image. Specifically, she utilizes both national and international news footage that overtly highlights Appalachian paucity by mentioning the relative wealth in other areas. Before delineating specific examples of this, it is important to realize that “representations of class in film are both authentic – the visuals are accurate photographically – and problematic – ideological content may be open or suppressed. It is therefore essential to read films as text simultaneously …capable of both erasure and disclosure of the issues of class” (Zaniello 152). This is particularly interesting in regards to news footage because the images on the screen are “authentic” in that they depict actual people in real circumstances. However, the thematic and visual framing is capable of fabrication through the omittance and admittance of class issues.

Interestingly, the news footage in Stranger with a Camera presents only the working-class citizens of Appalachia while erasing the appearance of any class diversity. In fact, within the first five minutes of the documentary, Barret edits in two international television broadcasts that visually focus on dilapidated houses and abandoned cars in eastern Kentucky. These opening newsreels create their own establishing shot of the region – one in which the archived images introduce a landscape of poverty. The footage verbally supports this depiction as well when a BBC voiceover explains that the
setting of Whitesburg, Kentucky is “the center of America’s poverty belt.” He further says, “Only recently has America woken up to the shock that the American Dream had become a nightmare for many people.” Here, a British television program contrasts the poverty of southern Appalachia to the perceived wealth of the rest of the nation. By using a British program and a British voice as the first spoken words from archived material, Barret not only emphasizes the extent to which these filmmakers are “outsiders,” but she also highlights the ways in which they set themselves apart from the region’s poverty.

Interestingly, American news broadcasts in *Stranger with a Camera* present the poverty of Appalachia in a similar fashion to the international programs. However, they often accomplish the contrast between Appalachian destitution and national prosperity by featuring an American broadcaster or public figure on screen. For instance, in CBS’s “Christmas in Appalachia,” Charles Kuralt walks along an unpaved road in Eastern Kentucky with his clean clothes, new shoes, and kempt hair. As the camera focuses on the dirt underneath his feet, Kuralt points at the rundown houses around him. Immediately before the camera cuts to an image of a local primary school choir, Kuralt explains that these singing children walk through the water and mud to get to school everyday. Here, by placing Kuralt on the screen in contrast to the children, the news broadcast personifies the economic differences between Appalachia and the rest of the nation. At one point, the broadcaster even says that one Kentucky woman’s poverty creates a barrier to the United States “as if she lives in a country far removed from ours” (emphasis added). Through his phrasing, Kuralt again introduces the region’s
economic difficulties by contrasting them to “our” perceived prosperity. This thematic opposition occurs throughout the archived news broadcasts in order to present southern Appalachia as a solely impoverished region, erasing the possibility of the presence of any other social class. In fact, footage from all seven external network and government television programs (CBS, CBC, BBC, NBC, US Naval Office of Information, National Educational Television, National Council of Churches) present the southern Appalachian Mountains as solely a land of destitute and desperate people.

Before discussing the inclusion of Hugh O’Connor’s documentary, I would also like to point out the particular filmic devices through which the news programs visually presents the poverty of Appalachian people. In Robert Stam and Louise Spence’s “Racism, Colonialism, and Representation,” the film theorists examine the methods through which filmmakers represent minority and oppressed people. They claim that viewers “must pay attention to the mediations which intervene between ‘reality’ and representation” (11). One of these mediations is the close-up shot through which people/characters are “dignified” (13). Interestingly, in the news footage of Southern Appalachia in Stranger with a Camera, the Appalachian people are never “dignified with a close-up” (13). In fact, in the opening shots from both “The Crusader” and “All’s Right,” the images rarely present people at all, but primarily show poverty through the images of ramshackle houses. When the broadcasts do introduce Appalachian characters, they are either in groups or as a part of the landscape. In the scenes in which the newsreels present Appalachians amongst a group, the people often appear in contrast to a “more respectable” American. This occurs in “The Poverty
Tours” when President Johnson shakes hands with locals on a crumbling porch. The viewers watch the obvious class difference between the well-dressed President Johnson and the neighborhood of Appalachian people in homemade clothing. In addition, these group images likewise omit any possibility for individual representation. Instead, broadcasts uniformly represent the people of eastern Kentucky through their working-class similarities.

When appearing within the landscape in the news footage, the Appalachian people only inhabit a minor part in the long shot of the destruction around them. These images present the characters as objects in the background rather than as autonomous film subjects. Commenting on such image composition, Robert Stam and Louise Spence suggest, “Questions of image scale and duration, for example, are intricately related to the respect afforded a character … Which characters are afforded close-ups and which are relegated to the background? Does a character look and act, or merely, appear, to be looked at and acted upon?” (17). In the news broadcasts, the Appalachian people not only exist in the background of a group, but appear only to be looked at as a part of a desperate landscape. For instance, in “Appalachia: Rich Land, Poor People,” the camera focuses on a child playing by a creek, but zooms out and pans up to feature the junk yard of abandoned cars that surround him, focusing on the hopelessness rather than the individual. Significantly, when the news footage does present one sustained close-up of an Appalachian resident, it does not dignify the character, but instead it accentuates her poverty. Specifically, this occurs in “Christmas in Appalachia” as the weathered face of a mother, with front teeth missing, tells of her inability to provide
Christmas presents for her children. The close-up of her face does not function as a shot that creates respect for the woman, but it instead highlights the physical impact of poverty. As with all of the news broadcasts that Barret incorporates in *Stranger with a Camera*, this close-up only works to underscore the economic deficiencies in the southern Appalachian Mountains. In fact, whether visually or thematically, nationally or internationally, the news footage occurs only to show the dearth of resources in the region.

In addition to utilizing archived news programs, Barret also includes footage from Hugh O’Connor’s exhibition film *US*. While the archived footage admittedly aims at showing the poverty of a region, one of his fellow filmmakers claims that O’Connor’s purpose for filming was to capture the “common experience of the human race in different parts of the world.” However, while O’Connor’s intention may have been to film similar situations across the world, it seems that the common denominator of these experiences is their “other-ness” or their visual, economic, and ideological differences from the typical middle-class, white Western citizen (Stam and Spence 3). In fact, the only image that includes Caucasians (other than in eastern Kentucky) in *US* presents a group of people dressed in Eastern Orthodox vestments. In order to highlight their difference, O’Connor even presents a close-up of one man’s face, accentuating his long untrimmed beard and religious chimney-pot hat. Furthermore, to emphasize the idea that O’Connor documents experiences of cultural alterity, both his documentary team and his daughter discuss the “exotic places” where he filmed. In fact, his daughter nearly ties eastern Kentucky to third world countries when she says, “When my dad
talked about doing shoots in third world nations, it seemed to me that he had a real sensitivity to the people he was filming. As far as going to Kentucky, I think he was always there for the underdog.” Here, the daughter all but admits that, while his purpose may not have been solely to picture their poverty, O’Connor did expect to show their subaltern status.

On the screen, O’Connor (through Barret) presents eastern Kentuckians as “other” through his use of the Labyrinthe (a multi-screen, multi-projector system) and his composition of the images. Significantly, when discussing framing and angles in “Narrative Discourse and the Narrator System,” Tom Gunning says, “Whether on a conscious or preconscious level, the viewer recognizes this construction of the image as a powerful narrative cue” (476). In O’Connor’s documentary, he utilizes the image of Mason Eldridge in collaboration with the multiple videos of the Labyrinthe in order to create the narrative cue of marginalization from Western society. While looking at a Labyrinthe film, the viewer sees up to five framed video images forming a cross on the film screen. When picturing Eldridge, O’Connor conceptually places the images of eastern Kentucky alongside international images of difference by presenting each of the videos as visual segments on the five-screen system. Specifically, when presenting the labyrinthine images of Mason Eldridge, the viewers see only two or three video images on the screen, leaving room to edit in the images of the Ganges River or Australian aboriginal people. Although the viewer does not actually see the placement of Mason Eldridge physically amongst O’Connor’s other images of alterity, Barret does lead the viewer to this conclusion by bookending visuals of Eldridge with already finished
“exotic” images from *US*. From here, Barret leads the viewers to assume that the late filmmaker planned on placing eastern Kentucky amongst completed images of marginalized people groups in India, Africa, and Eastern Europe.

In addition to this conceptual implication of other-ness, O’Connor also cinematically frames the image of Mason Eldridge to highlight his difference. In one shot, the viewer sees a color image of a small house with a shirtless man walking onto the porch. Quickly, the film cuts to an image of a coal miner placing an infant on his lap as the remnants of coal remain on his skin and clothes. Tom Zaniello suggests that cinematic images of miners such as this “follow much of the mainstream stereotyping of Appalachia in general” (154). By presenting an image that obviously presents a coal miner, O’Connor introduces an Appalachian stereotype of both economic and occupational difference. Also, instead of a close-up or even medium shot, O’Connor frames the image so that the viewers see the naked, armless, and dirt-covered dolls that lay on the dirt floor beneath Eldridge and his daughter. In doing this, O’Connor highlights the similarities between the state of the infant and the dolls in the dirt. The filmmaker’s daughter even discusses her father’s desire to show the marginalized nature of this image when she says, “He …wanted to show America the big and America the beautiful, but perhaps it isn’t all what we see.” Here, she implies that the image of Eldridge is the unseen, “other” America. Clearly, this alterity occurs throughout the discussion and images of O’Connor’s *US*. Although the director does not represent the region as solely an impoverished area as the news footage does, he does present Appalachians through both their conceptual and visual difference.
Finally, while emphasizing two other forms of filmmaking that create distinct images of Southern Appalachia (one solely of poverty and one of other-ness), Barret also creates her own third image of the region. She says of previous images of Appalachia, “I found some of these films insulting when filmmakers focused only on the deprivation and didn’t look past it to the lives of the people that are the real wealth of the culture.” Through this comment and through her images, Barret attempts to create a new depiction of the region by combating previous filmic representations. Specifically, she utilizes home video, the landscape, and “dignified” framing in order to present Southern Appalachia as a diverse and respectable region. First, Barret includes home video and pictures from her middle-class adolescence and childhood in contrast to the images of poverty and alterity seen in the news footage and the US project. Initially, she features a home video of her sledding outside her middle-class home in contrast to images of impoverished children in “Christmas in Appalachia.” She says, “Growing up in a county seat town, I was comfortable. My family was well off - nice house, good clothes, plenty to eat, family vacations.” By including her own home video, Barret shows a different type of eastern Kentucky lifestyle than was shown in either the news footage or O’Connor’s film. In order to emphasize her close geographic proximity to the images of poverty and alterity, she presents images of her middle-class adolescence as she says:

While I was becoming more aware of these two contrasting worlds, my world was busy with cheerleading, riding around listening to the radio, the yearbook. Around the time that I was a candidate for homecoming
queen, there was talk about a filmmaker named Hugh O’Connor who was killed by a man just down the road in Jeremiah whose name was Hobart Ison.

By using the phrase “just down the road,” Barret emphasizes that the images of poverty and her image of wealth were not geographically separate. Instead of presenting Southern Appalachia as a land of poverty or other-ness, she shows a place with multiple class statuses and lifestyles. She even says, “Hobart was a part of my community.” With these images and words, Barret presents a multivalent Appalachian community.

The director also incorporates videos from Appalshop, the documentary filmmaking school and company out of which she made Stranger with a Camera. By including this footage, Barret shows her earlier self filming Appalachia as she wished others would. The viewers watch Barret as she films a fiddle player and talks with a quilt maker, which highlights the interests of individuals rather than the class or cultural commonalities of the region. She even contrasts these films from earlier broadcasts, claiming that they were “entirely different from the TV programs of CBS and Charles Kuralt.” In a sense, when Barret speaks of Appalshop documentaries she is speaking of Stranger with a Camera, a product of Appalshop as well. She is claiming that her documentary is “entirely different” from the other broadcasts in the film even if this difference occurs by incorporating archived images. Unlike the “TV programs of CBS and Charles Kuralt,” she presents a respectful image of Appalachian culture through religion, music, and hobbies like quilt-making. Interestingly, Barret always enters these home videos and stories in contrast to the other filmic representations of Appalachia.
When discussing autobiographical work like *Stranger with a Camera* in *Picturing Culture*, Jay Ruby suggests, “The author clearly has to be self conscious … to know what aspects of the self must be revealed to an audience to enable them to understand the process employed … and to know how much that revelation is purposive” (155). By only including her home videos in contrast to the news footage and O’Connor’s documentary, Barret purposefully underscores the possibility of an economically and socially diverse southern Appalachian region.

In addition to the Barret’s Appalshop and home videos, it is important to look at the ways in which her larger documentary visually counters previous representations of Appalachia. First, I would like to look at the way in which she uses the landscape. In *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies*, author J.W. Williamson claims that “hillbilly” films often present nature, and specifically the mountains, as “monstrous” (149). Not only do filmmakers present the mountains as dangerous, but also the “hillbilly” people are likewise monstrous because they are “from and of the mountains” (152). Through the filming of *Stranger with a Camera*, Barret responds to this Hollywood image as well as the news coverage and US projects, which only present the land through the dilapidated structures and impoverished people. In regards to the landscape, Barret consistently films the mountains as beautiful rather than presenting them as monstrosities. In both the opening and closing scenes, she captures landscapes of green mountains against blue skies and winding roads. As the opening images appear on screen, she says, “These are the mountains I come from in eastern Kentucky.” In presenting the landscape as a place of
rootedness rather than of danger, she creates a new visual of a Southern Appalachia as a beautiful *home* instead of a depressing image. Through these visually striking depictions of the mountains, Barret focuses on the wealth of the landscape instead of the poverty of the people.

Second, it is also important to examine the manner in which Barret films the people of southern Appalachia. As previously mentioned, the news broadcasts picture the people as either part of an impoverished landscape or as the face of poverty themselves. Hugh O’Connor pictures the area with an eye for aesthetic beauty, but also with an understanding of other-ness. In contrast, Barret interviews people of Southern Appalachia as they live in clean houses, wear clean clothes, and have washed faces. Through these images, she focuses on the individuals that form the community instead of highlighting their poverty or alterity. Moreover, by switching from “the author-centered voice of authority” (news broadcasters, O’Connor, Barret) to “a witness-centered voice of testimony,” Barret transfers the expertise from director to social actor (*Representing Reality* 48). Despite the perceived authority of the directors, the Appalachian people on screen now have the ability to relay information that is pivotal to the progression of the overall documentary. By including these interviews, Barret emphasizes the significance of Appalachian people in telling their own story.

Visually, Barret frames the people of eastern Kentucky in a similarly respectful manner in contrast to the archived and *US* images. One particularly intriguing example of the difference between her framing and that of the other incorporated footage emerges with the cross-cutting between O’Connor’s and Barret’s filming of Mason

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Eldridge. As Eldridge explains the occurrences of Hobart’s death, Barret cuts between the 1967 image of Mason Eldridge with coal-covered clothes and face and her present-day presentation of a clean and well-dressed Eldridge. Significantly, Barret “dignifies” Eldridge “with a close-up;” she does not picture him amongst a landscape or against a backdrop of poverty or other-ness (886). In fact, the close-up is tight enough that the viewer does not see any identifying class or status cues behind Eldridge. He alone is what is important in the shot. By constructing a new representation of Appalachia in the larger documentary, as well as including home video and pictures, Barret presents yet another image of eastern Kentucky. This image is wholly different from both the poverty of the newsreel and the abjection of *US*.

By presenting these three images of the region, Barret highlights the filmic construction of the Southern Appalachian representation. In fact, by including all of these representations in the concluding scene, the director emphasizes the construction of these various representations. Interestingly, when the film ends, Barret returns to O’Connor’s Labyrinthe technique by presenting images from the three sources’ representations of Southern Appalachia in the five-screen system. By visually placing these images on the same screen, Barret underscores their obvious differences, and, therefore, emphasizes the sources’ “creative intervention” in creating these representations (Renov 2). In fact, the concluding image places stills of both Ison and O’Connor on either side of a video of a young Barret filming the audience. By ending in this fashion, Barret not only presents the three representations of the South, but she also highlights the creators of those images. As Barret’s camera films the audience, she
reminds the viewers of the dangers and implications of filming a culture by threatening them with the similar fate to southern Appalachia.

**The Imaginary South in *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus***

Briefly, I would like to examine another Southern documentary that addresses the idea of the South as “other,” Andrew Douglas’s *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (2003). Although this film does not technically fall under my criteria for auto-ethnographic Southern documentaries, it does address a relevant point in the filmic construction of Southern identity. In the documentary, the British director follows Jim White, a self-proclaimed “imitation Southerner,” through the American South in order “to infiltrate the South and learn … something important about it” by talking to “poor folks.” Because the director is British and the character he follows admits that he “will never be a Southerner,” it is impossible for either of them to establish the identity of auto-ethnographer. As anthropologist David Hayano says, an auto-ethnographer must “possess the qualities of often permanent self-identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognized both by themselves and the people of whom they are a part” (qtd. in Reed-Danahay 5). In addition, *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* does not overtly respond to Hollywood and public representations of South’s alterity that I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter; however, it does make valuable comments about the fictional elements of the documentary medium. It also creates a hybrid fictional/ nonfictional structure to depict Southern identity, which has already spawned copycat Southern documentaries like J.D. Wilke’s *Seven Signs* (2007).

Because of *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*’ significance as a commentary on the
documentary medium and its increasing importance amongst contemporary Southern documentaries, I am compelled to include a brief examination of its production of Southern identity.

Throughout *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, White and Douglas infiltrate the poor, white South with an unabashed admission of visual and thematic fabrication. In fact, the film is almost solely and overtly composed of what theorist Michael Renov lists as the “fictive elements” of documentary, including the construction of characters, the use of poetic language and narration, and musical accompaniment (2). Because the film does not incorporate an expressed narrative storyline, sustained relationships or an ultimate goal, it relies heavily on the visual and verbal construction of the character of Jim White, the running narration, and the musical interspersals. By examining these three fictive documentary elements, I will illuminate Douglas’s cinematic confession to a constructed Southern identity; this, in turn, emphasizes the fictional nature of all documentary representations.

First, Douglas openly presents the process by which he constructs the only sustained character, Jim White. Before looking directly as White’s character, it is necessary to examine the ways in which Douglas implies that the musician’s surroundings are fabricated as well. As the documentary begins, the director creates a scene that appears to be from a fiction film with a child chasing a dog by swamp waters. As the child runs, the camera moves with him, suggesting that it is set on a dolly track in preparation for a staged scene. Essayist Tom Zaniello labels documentaries with these characteristics as “postmodern documentaries,” which are “hybrid forms, drawing
freely on traditional social realism but intercutting scripted or fictional scenes” (162). In *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed*, it is as if every scene draws on both social realism and fiction. In doing this, Douglas shows both the fictive nature of the character of Jim White as well as the visual fabrication of Southern society. In regards to White, Douglas overtly presents the construction of the protagonist through his transformation from musician to narrator. While White is an alt. country musician outside *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, he is an “imitation Southerner” and the viewer’s tour guide through the rural South inside the film. In the beginning of the documentary, Douglas nods to this character difference by unveiling the progression through which White transforms from one character to another. As the film opens, the viewer sees White playing the guitar while sitting on a porch in the middle of swamp waters. Without any visible means of transportation, Douglas offers no clear explanation as to how White came to be on this domestic island. By emphasizing the staged nature of the scene through a lack of information, the director also highlights the creation of the musician’s character. In addition, not only does White appear on an inaccessible island, but he also sits with only his guitar, underscoring the viewer’s initial perception of the protagonist as a musician.

As the film progresses, White transforms from country musician to docent through the South. Shortly following White’s initial introduction, the director films the musician walking toward an old car with a guitar in his hand. By picturing White in the frame with both his guitar and a new vehicle, Douglas visually presents the liminal stage of character construction in which his protagonist transitions from musical
performer to cinematic actor. As he walks closer to the car and his guitar moves off the screen, White says, “It seems to me, if you want to come and infiltrate the South and learn about it, learn something important about it, you’re gonna need the right car. You can’t show up in some Land Rover, some Lexus or something, and expect poor folks to talk to ya, tell you what’s in their heart.” Here, he puts his guitar away and dons an old car as an actor would put on a costume. Suddenly, the audience sees the created image of a visual and verbal narrator through the poor, rural South. White maintains this role throughout the film and only leaves the car to direct the camera towards what he deems to be scenes indicative of the South. By openly presenting the conversion from White’s public image to the director’s protagonist, Douglas illuminates the constructed nature of the documentary character.

Secondly, *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* not only highlights the creation of its primary character, but it also emphasizes the invented quality of its narration. In Tom Gunning’s “Narrative Discourse and the Narrator System,” the film theorist writes, “The primary task of the filmic narrator must be to overcome the initial resistance of photographic material to telling by creating a hierarchy of narratively important elements within a mass of contingent details” (474). Interestingly, it seems that nearly all of the verbal narration in *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* is nothing more than a “mass of contingent details” instead of a “hierarchy of important elements.” However, it is precisely the act of “telling” that is important in the film and not the elements being communicated. One of the most obvious moments in which the narration emphasizes the importance of telling over what is being said is with the introduction of Southern
novelist, Harry Crews. While mysteriously walking on a rural, dirt road, Crews says, “Truth of the matter was stories was everything and everything was stories. Everybody told stories. It was a way of saying who they were in the world. It was their understanding of themselves. It was letting themselves know how they believed the world worked – the right way and the way that was not so right.” These words explain the entirety of the documentary’s narrative in that White’s narration is nothing more than fabricated storytelling. In fact, although White claims that he chauffeurs the viewer through the region so that he/she can “learn something important about it,” the protagonist never presents information regarding the South that functions to transfer knowledge from the narrator to the listener. Instead, his words only craft stories about himself and the people he meets, emphasizing the constructivity of filmic narration.

Significantly, the protagonist uses this narrative style when he encounters “Southern behavior,” but does not engage in it himself. Although White introduces places and situations with narratorial authority, he only creates fictional accounts in order to understand the region and to understand himself as Crews says. For example, after refusing to enter the bar because “I got no use for a place like this,” White says, “Whatchya got here is your basic Deep South cut an’ shoot bar. And, to me, I look at it as a thing of great beauty. It’s a representation of the humanity, for all its good and bad, that lives there. It’s real. It’s a real place. To those people inside there, they don’t know, they don’t know it’s a real place. It’s just a place they go.” Essentially, White acts as a raconteur to make sense of a place for himself. However, the viewer does not gain information about the South from White’s words nor can they establish much meaning.
Interestingly, Renov claims that narration in documentaries works “to establish meaning and effect for audiences” (3). Instead, in *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, it simply acts as a poetic device that introduces the protagonist’s lack of knowledge and information regarding the South. Douglas’s emphasis on the performance of telling over the actual content of the words underlines the unreliability of the narration.

Finally, Douglas unveils the fictional element of musical accompaniment by placing the musicians in front of the screen and in the story rather than confining them to the soundtrack. In the typical documentary, there is “a desire for performance that is not performance, for a form of self-presentation that approximates a person’s normal self-presentation” (*Representing Reality* 121). However, in *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, the director emphasizes the showmanship of all characters in the film by moving the musicians into the frame while singing and playing. Furthermore, the musical segments often appear to be staged music videos, highlighting both the performative nature of the social actors and the visually constructed nature of the scenes. For instance, in the barbershop, the viewers watch musician Johnny Dowd singing while he appears to be waiting for a haircut. As the camera moves to the left, it focuses on a hairstylist, who is actually a female singer. While the social actors sing, the patrons sit ignoring the music, acting as if it is a normal situation at the barbershop. In this obvious attention to scene construction, Douglas utilizes the musicians to highlight the performance of the other characters in the scene as well as the singers themselves. In doing this, he obviously comments on the performative disposition of social actors.
While discussing the framing of the musical scenes, it is also important to note that Douglas consistently places the musicians on constructed country stages: in abandoned cars, on porches of dilapidated houses in the swampland, in junkyards, and in barbershops. By persistently placing the musicians in “country” settings, the director not only highlights the performances of social actors and the construction of the scenes, but he also comments on the created nature of Southern identity. If both the actors and the scenes are inauthentic, then the identity that they represent is fabricated as well.

In thinking about the creation of Southern identity through music, I also must examine Douglas’s paradoxical choice of musicians and representative music. Throughout the documentary, the musicians perform modes of music that are stereotypically “southern styles of music:” country, bluegrass, and rockabilly (Malone and Stricklin 155). These musicians appear with banjos and the “southern ‘twang’” that fans and critics use to “gauge a song’s authenticity” (162). However, the performers that Douglas includes are often well-known artists from other areas of the country. For instance, in one scene, The Handsome Family performs in front of a Confederate flag, utilizing the most undeniably Southern image in order to insinuate a rooted-ness in the South. Although Douglas frames this group as authentically Southern, The Handsome Family is based out of Chicago. Moreover, even though White claims that the film is about “infiltrating the South,” he consistently recreates this inauthentic rootedness by placing non-Southern musicians against stereotypically Southern backdrops, specifically with 16 Horsepower, David Johansen, and David Eugene Edwards.
In order to further deconstruct the use of “inauthentic” musicians, it is also necessary to examine the particular implications of the alt. country music they play. As previously mentioned, Jim White is a popular alternative country musician outside *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*. In fact, nearly all of the music and the musicians in the documentary are labeled as alt. country performers. This is particularly interesting given the perception of alt. country music as both rooted and rustic although consumed by a contemporary and often urban audience. In *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt. Country Music*, Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching write, “Alternative country, then, can be usefully and skeptically imagined as a cultural form deliberately swimming out of the mainstream into a newly dug backwater” (7). This is exactly what the musicians in *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* do. They appear in scenes as if they are natives, but in reality come to the rustic setting of this documentary by way of metropolitan cities and urban consumers. Moreover, these images of the South are as newly created as the rootedness of alt. country music. In understanding the nature of alternative country as rustic both in appearance and sound, but cosmopolitan in origin and consumption, it is easy to see the parallel between the inauthenticity of the music and the unreliability of the film in creating a audible and visual Southern identity. By infusing every aspect of musical culture in the documentary with an element of fabrication, Douglas cinematically admits to the construction of Southern identity in *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*.

Although Douglas’s documentary is not an auto-ethnographic Southern documentary, it is clearly significant to include due to its commentary on the fictional
nature of documentary representation. While the characters verbally claim to find “an essential truth” about the South, the director only highlights the documentaries falsehoods. Renov suggests, “It would be unwise to assume that only fiction films appeal to the viewer’s Imaginary, that psychic domain of idealized forms, fantasy, identification, reversible time, and alternative logics” (3). By unveiling the fictive nature of the primary elements of *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (character construction, poetic narration, and musical accompaniment), Douglas admits to the documentary medium’s inauthenticity and, in turn, plays into the viewer’s Imaginary. While *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* does not specifically combat the Hollywood representation of the South as “other,” it does illuminate the process by which all films create their own representations of identity.

**Conclusion**

By examining the methods through which Elizabeth Barret and Andrew Douglas highlight the filmically constructed image of the South as American “other” in their documentaries, the construction of identity in Hollywood films becomes more apparent. In James C. Cobb’s *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, the historian writes

Noting that Europe and the West once use the Orient as the “other” against which they identified themselves, David Jansson saw a similar process at work in the United States, a kind of “internal orientalism” that built and sustained a “privileged national identity” by consigning most of
the undesirable traits exhibited by Americans to “the imagined space called ‘the South.’” (3)

It is exactly this negative other-ness as well as the imagination of the Southern representation that these documentaries address. Moreover, by presenting a multiplicity of Appalachian representations in *Stranger with a Camera* and the obvious unreliability of all filmic elements in *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, Barret and Douglas comment on the impossibility of capturing one “authentic” representation of the working-class South in film.
Chapter 3: *Waking in Mississippi and Homecoming – Re-Fighting the Civil Rights Movement in Auto-Ethnographies*

While the previous two representations of the South emerged from fabricated histories and stereotypes, the depiction of the South as a battleground for the Civil Rights movement grew from very real occurrences. When Hollywood began to produce Civil Rights Movement fiction films in the 1960’s, it used the struggle as a “dramatic trigger” to instigate action from the nation (Monteith 194). While depicting actual events, the Civil Rights films also created a third filmic representation of the South that became a part of public perception. In her article “Exploitation Movies and the Freedom Struggle of the 1960s,” Sharon Monteith writes, “The movies were released in the moment in which the South became synonymous with racist mobs, burnings, and bombings in the popular imagination, and they capitalized on the deleterious images of the South” (194). The practice of exploiting the most heinous images of the Civil Rights Movement continues in fiction films today. For instance, Alan Parker’s 1998 film *Mississippi Burning* depicts a “sensationalized” version of the 1964 murder investigation of three Civil Rights workers, creating a generic expectation for voyeuristic lynchings and cross burnings (Graham 149). In Allison Graham’s book *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle*, she argues that *Mississippi Burning* marks the beginning of the new Civil Rights film that places a “redeemed southern white man” (usually a lawyer) against a white “cracker” in order to illuminate the plight of the African-American (148). Interestingly, while these films seem to create representations in which a Caucasian lawyer or “law
man” represents the interests of African-Americans, the auto-ethnographic documentaries in this chapter present African-Americans’ struggle to represent themselves. Moreover, by privileging the African-American voice over violent images, Christie Herring and Andre Robinson’s *Waking in Mississippi* (1998) and Charlene Gilbert’s *Homecoming* ... *Sometimes I am Haunted by Memories of Red Dirt and Clay* (1999) re-construct the representation of southern African-Americans battling Civil Rights issues.

**Waking in Mississippi: A Second Look at Hollywood and the Civil Rights Struggle**

At first viewing, *Waking in Mississippi* seems to be a disjointed documentary with multiple storylines. However, after further examination, Christie Herring and Andre Robinson’s documentary presents one narrative regarding the governmental representation of Canton, Mississippi African-Americans as well as the filmic representations of race relations in Civil Rights films. The directors open the film with the script:

In 1994, Christie Herring, a white college student, received several threatening phone calls and letters demanding that she cast her vote for a white candidate in a tense mayoral election in her home town. Upset by the public knowledge of her voting status prior to the election, she never cast her absentee ballot. A year later, when filming of *A Time to Kill* began in town square, many of the same emotions were rekindled.

Hoping to better understand race relations in the South, she and Andre
Robinson, a black political scientist, set out to investigate the effects of these recent events in Canton, Mississippi.

In this introduction, Herring and Robinson do not obviously link the events of the election to the production of the Hollywood film. In reality, their only expressed connection is that both events galvanized emotional responses to race related issues. The viewers later discover that these emotional responses often related to the lack of self-representations for African-American southerners. In Robert Stam and Louise Spence’s “Colonialism, Racism, and Representation,” they argue, “At times the ‘flaw’ in the mimesis (in film) derives not form the presence of distorting stereotypes but from the absence of representations of an oppressed group” (7). I would argue that this absence extends to allowing the oppressed group to represent themselves. By avoiding harmful images and privileging black oratorical accounts, the directors allow African-American Southerners to create their own representations through the Canton mayoral election, the production of *A Time to Kill*, and *Waking in Mississippi* as a whole.

First, Herring and Robinson open *Waking in Mississippi* with varying first-hand accounts of a Canton, Mississippi mayoral election. By doing this, she creates a space for African-American Canton residents to represent themselves filmically while discussing their governmental representation in the town. In this election, an African-American school principal, Alice Scott, runs against a Caucasian long-time incumbent, Sidney Runnels. Even though the town is seventy percent African-American, it is the first time that a black candidate opposes Runnels. It is significant that Herring and Robinson rarely interject into the election conversation, especially in the typical context.
of the auto-ethnography. While Deborah Reed-Danahay claims that the auto-
ethnographer is one who “places the story of his or her life within a story of social
context in which it occurs,” Herring introduces her life story only once into the election
narrative (9). She opens the film by claiming that she received threatening letters and
phone calls to vote for the incumbent mayor. In doing this, she inserts herself into the
social story of the election by cementing her place as a Canton resident. At the same
time, she recognizes that her story as a white citizen cannot represent the narrative of
African-American residents in the Canton. Instead, Herring uses the voices of
supporters and sympathizers of the black candidate in order to explain the events of the
mayoral appointment. Significantly, even when the directors introduce a negative view
of the African-American role in the election, they follow it with a rebuttal by an
African-American interviewee.

For example, after two interviewees who discuss the possibility of African-
American riots “if the white man steals another election” and the former mayor’s
decision to call state policeman, the directors introduce Mayor Alice Scott’s rebuttal.
She says, “It shouldn’t have happened…People who support me are not going to fight
about it. We’re going to vote at the polls. We’re going to get the ballots counted at the
ballot box, at the courthouse, at City Hall, and that’s going to be the end of it. I never
thought there would be a riot.” This debate-like interview style continues throughout
the election narrative, allowing for the African-American citizens to represent their
understanding of the election. Bill Nichols writes, “The interview testifies to a power
relation in which institutional hierarchy and regulation pertain to speech itself”
At first this seems to be a hierarchy in which the interviewer, i.e. Herring and Robinson, maintain power. However, in a “masked interview,” in which the interviewer is off screen and does not place him or herself as the sole receiver of information, then the interviewee maintains the “technologies of power” in which the “hierarchy is maintained and served while information passes from one social agent to another” (51). In other words, the speaker maintains power through possessing information that neither the interviewer nor the viewer would have access to otherwise.

In addition, by placing one set of interviewees in hierarchy over another (sympathizers of Scott over her opposition), the directors essentially underline the “winner” in the debate. By always rebutting the opposition, the information of Scott’s supporters is shown to be more valuable, and, therefore, more powerful.

Furthermore, the directors present the narrative structure of the election almost exclusively through interviews of residents that are sympathetic or at least understanding of Mayor Alice Scott. This is significant both thematically and visually. The interview structure not only proves the hierarchy of the interviewees, but it also claims that their words as more valid than images of the events. Obviously, valuing the spoken word over the image of an event is rare in film simply due to the medium’s characteristics. For instance, the directors do not visually present the state policeman and National Guards that stood in town square either through photographs, newspaper articles, or news footage. The National Guard and policeman thus became staple icons of the Civil Rights film – at integration events, marches, and rallies. In fact, some of the most famous and memorable images of the Civil Rights movement present police
officers beating protesters, such as the violent photographs of the Children’s March in Birmingham, Alabama and the Freedom March in Selma, Alabama. Because these images became a part of Americans’ memory of the Civil Rights Movement, it also worked its way into most Civil Rights fiction films. Instead of presenting this visual conflict, *Waking in Mississippi* only tells the story verbally through interviews, subverting the typical relationship of the law enforcers over African-Americans.

Visually, it is important that the image of African-American citizens is on the screen, but in a position of knowledge rather than oppression. Their physical bodies are present solely to impart information and to represent themselves as black southerners.

In *Framing the South*, Allison Graham suggests that the placement of the black southerner in fiction films often functions as “a voiceless image in a tale of blood and vengeance” (1-2). In contrast, by presenting the black body only through its connection to the voice, *Homecoming* reclaims the agency of an African-American social actor to represent him/her self and his/her story.

In addition to allowing for African-American self-representation in the election narrative, the directors also introduce the issue of filmic depictions in the filming of *A Time to Kill* (Shumacher 1996). Even though this segment regards the production of a visual art, Herring and Robinson still maintain their allegiance to the voice rather than the crafted image. Significantly, *A Time to Kill* is yet another example of a Civil Rights fiction film in which a white man legally represents the rights of an African-American, while also fighting against the white “Delta racist” (Graham 148). Furthermore, it presents issues of racism, legal injustice, and intimidation in a modern day courtroom.
instead of setting the narrative in the Civil Rights Movement of the 50’s and 60’s. In response to this depiction of Southern race relations, Canton citizens verbally express concern that the film will support the harmful perception of the South and southerner presents created in many Civil Rights films. Local historian Jim Lacey speaks to this, saying, “This movie, I'm afraid, is going to reinforce the stereotypes people have in their minds, which comes from the old days, which were bad enough. They just cannot get a true picture of how it’s changed when we go back and shoot these old times and go back and recreate these things in people's minds.”

In order to avoid this negative and oppressive representations of the South that trouble Canton residents, Herring and Robinson film African-American residents representing themselves and their roles in the production of the film. Although the actual narrative of A Time to Kill presents a Caucasian led campaign for racial justice, Waking in Mississippi primarily focuses on the southern African-American experience while making the film. For example, African-American community activist Clarece Coney recounts her experience as an extra, tearing the mask off a Klu Klux Klan demonstrator. Although she remembers it as a “funny” encounter, it is important that this is the only interview in the documentary that depicts a Canton actor’s experience in the film. Instead of using courtroom scenes or crosses burning at the white lawyer’s house, the directors include an instance in which an African-American citizen physically gains power over a white demonstrator. In doing this, the directors emphasize the literal and figurative power that their own documentary gives to Southern African-Americans. Moreover, it is significant that the directors present this segment of
filming through the self-representation of the social actor. This may seem like a minute
detail; however, because Civil Rights fiction films rarely allow African-American
characters to obtain primary agency, it is noteworthy that the directors of *Waking in
Mississippi* film both Clarece’s verbal self-representation as social actor and as
 cinematic actor in a Civil Rights film.

Although *Waking in Mississippi* rarely present visual images outside the primary
interviews, it is interesting to note that the imagistic representations of the filming of *A
Time to Kill* highlight the film’s fictive elements. Visually, Herring and Robinson
introduce *A Time to Kill* with the clash between KKK demonstrators and protesters. As
the documentary moves from an intertitle reading “1 year later,” the camera frames a
helicopter flying over robed Klu Klux Klan members and parked school buses,
insinuating a “real” march occurring in Canton. However, as the documentary
progresses the viewers quickly see the script in the frame reading “48 Hours: CBS
Television, Inc.” As the camera zooms out, the directors focus on a viewing camera,
forcing the viewers to watch this staged scene through two screens. Moreover, by
introducing the filming through a 48 Hours piece, Herring and Robinson add another
level of representation to the depiction of the South. Not only does the viewer watch a
staged depiction of the South with *A Time to Kill*, but he/she also watches a re-
presentation of that cinematic presentation, further removing the images from any
possible conception of reality. In effect, the inclusion of the fiction film’s images
further subverts the role of visual representation of Southern racial identity.

In contrast, by creating their own documentary with relatively few references to
its own visual constructiveness, the directors institute a hierarchy of authenticity and realism, in which the documentary voice is the “real” voice. When discussing filmic self-representation, Robert Stam and Louise Spence suggest, “Realism as a goal is quite compatible with a style which is reflexive and deconstructive …highlighting the historic realities …while at the same time underlining its own processes of construction as a filmic text” (8-9). Interestingly, Herring and Robinson emphasize historic realities through the “realistic” interviews of Canton’s residents instead of staged visuals. However, unlike previously examined auto-ethnographic texts, the documentary does not include obvious references to its own editing, script-writing, or constructed framing. Instead, it shows the creation of the filmic text through the making of a physical racial conflict in *A Time to Kill*. In doing this, *Waking in Mississippi* makes a comment on the validity of self-representation, suggesting that the interviewees’ oratorical accounts are less constructed than visual depictions in Civil Rights fiction films.

Lastly, I would like to look at southern African-Americans’ representative agency in the documentary as a whole. First, it is important to note that in order to make this film truly auto-ethnographic, it needs the presence of both Christie Herring, the resident of Canton, and Andre Robinson, a black political scientist. Theorist Mary Louise Pratt argues, “Autoethnographic texts are those that others construct in response to other dialogue with those metropolitan representations …(they are) texts in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (qtd. in Russell 277, Reed-Danahay 7). In order to react to the representation (or lack thereof) of southern African-Americans, the directors must be
both African-American and from Canton. Because neither Herring nor Robinson posses both of these qualifications, it is necessary that they work together in order to create an auto-ethnographic documentary. By specifying these characteristics in the opening slides (Herring with Canton as her “home town” and Robinson as “a black political scientist”), the directors emphasize the necessity that this film be received as an auto-ethnography responding to depictions of both the South and race relations.

In addition, as previously mentioned, Herring and Robinson react to the representation that others have made of them by not visually interjecting into the conversation of black residents of Canton. In order to go into further analysis of this ommittance, it is necessary to examine how this exclusion functions in the documentary. By remaining off screen, the documentary itself (filming, editing, producing) acts as the directors’ self-representation, while the interior interviews act as auto-ethnographies for each Canton citizen. In fact, by having both the external directors and internal speakers as auto-ethnographers of their own story, the African-American southerners are able to “take control of (their) own cinematic image, speak in (their) own voice(s)” (Stam and Spence 8). Furthermore, by utilizing the interview as the primary narrative structure, Waking in Mississippi acts as “both a method and a text” for the directors and the social actors (Reed-Danahay 9). The documentary performs as a text in that it tells the story of a town. But, methodologically, it allows for self-representation of a previously filmically oppressed group. Therefore, by being both a piece of art and a medium of agency, the documentary functions as a comment on race relations in the South while also producing a vehicle through which African-American
voices speak in their own voices about their own lives.

In the scheme of the medium of documentary, it is significant to look at the lasting impression of southern African-American self-representation in *Waking in Mississippi*. In *Limited Inc*, Jacques Derrida writes, “To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and rewritten” (8). In analyzing the qualifications for “writing” in this statement, the speech of the documentary’s interviewees “constitute a sort of machine which is productive” and with which the speaker’s physical disappearance will not stop its speaking. In other words, by using visual and audio self-representations that will not disappear with the speaker’s death, the documentarians and the interviewees write themselves into the discussion regarding representation of African-Americans. If the voice is spoken and the body filmed, they will live outside of other “mis-representations” in following fiction films, including *A Time to Kill*. Moreover, by utilizing the same medium that they find misrepresents them, the directors and the citizens of Canton maintain a cemented space in the conversation of the Civil Rights struggle in the South. This documentary and these speakers will “continue to ‘act’ and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed” (Derrida 8).

Throughout *Waking in Mississippi*, the directors create an auto-ethnography in which they are only present to establish their validity as auto-ethnographers. Instead, Christie Herring and Andre Robinson focus on the interior auto-ethnography of
African-American southerners. By creating a documentary that privileges the words of African-Americans over potentially harmful images, the directors respond to previous cinematic narratives of the Civil Rights South while transferring agency to black southern voices. In addition, by primarily including images that highlight the construction of racial representation in Civil Rights fiction films, Herring and Robinson create space for interviewees to verbally “correct” misconceptions created by Hollywood images.

Re-Claiming Black Southernness: The Civil Rights Struggle in *Homecoming*

In *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, James C. Cobb claims that until recently, African-Americans in the South were not considered “Southerners” (262-263). He writes, “Black southerners were denied their regional identity not only by the antagonist defenders of a southern racial system that rendered blacks virtually invisible, but even by their would be liberators who wanted to destroy that system” (262). However, in Charlene Gilbert’s 1999 auto-ethnography *Homecoming ... Sometimes I am Haunted by Memories of Red Dirt and Clay*, the director stakes claim in her Southern roots as well as the Southern roots of all African-Americans with a recent or distant history in the South. She edits in the words of African-American playwright, August Wilson, saying:

We were a land based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa and spent 200 years developing our culture as black Americans and then we left the South. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized
North. It was a transplant that did not take. I think that if we had stayed in the South, we would be a stronger people and because the connection between the South of the 20s, 30s, and 40s has been broken, it is very difficult to understand who we are.

This tie to the land continues to define African-American southernness throughout *Homecoming*. It even reappears in Cobb’s explication of African-Americans in the South. He explains, “Like their white counterparts, black southerners defined their southernness primarily in term of enduring attachments to community and place” (266).

This is particularly interesting in that Civil Rights fiction films often address sit-ins, marches, voting rights, but rarely access to land or farming. Instead, images of the Civil Rights in film are usually in urban cities or in rural courtrooms. By first defining African-American southernness in terms of a ineffable rootedness in the land, Gilbert tells the story of a different kind of Civil Rights movement – a struggle for African-American’s right to claim the identity of “Southerner.” Moreover, *Homecoming* privileges the knowledge of black southerners over images of racial strife through its narrative focus on voiceovers, expert interviews, and testimonies regarding African-American’s historical and contemporary relationship to the land.

First, I would like to look at the director’s presentation of African-American’s historical ties to southern land. I will first examine how she thematically and verbally presents connections to the land and, then, I will discuss her imagistic styling.

Significantly, Gilbert re-presents African-American farming histories through the voices and expertise of black southerners instead of through the lenses and history
books of Caucasians. In addition, rather than describing African-Americans’
Reconstruction account through images of submission, Gilbert presents this period
through voiceovers of African-Americans as well as through expert interviews. In one
significant voiceover, the viewers hear a freed slave’s letter to General Oliver Howard,
saying, “General, we want Homesteads. We were promised Homesteads by the
government … the man who tied me to a tree and gave me 39 lashes … who combines
with other to keep land from me, well knowing I would not have anything to do with
him if I had land of my own, that man, I cannot well forgive.” Here, Gilbert starts the
story of African-American self-representation in their right to southern land. Moreover,
she does so through the authoritative words of voice-over. Bill Nichols suggests, “The
recounting of a situation or event by a character or commentator in documentary
frequently has the aura of truthfulness about it” (*Representing Reality* 21). Nichols
includes the use of voice-over in his claim for documentary authenticity. And, by
introducing a voice that the viewer may no longer interact with or debate, the historical
comments further emphasize a perception of truthfulness. In doing so, these voice-overs
obtain a position of reliable historical narration and representation.

In order for the viewers to further understand the freedman’s words, Gilbert
interviews African-American professor Marsha Darling who explains that the Southern
Homestead Act set aside 45 million acres of land in the South, but “unfortunately, most
of that land did not get into the hands of black people.” By reiterating the voiceover’s
sentiments, Darling further creates a perception of the veracity of his accounts.
Furthermore, this structure of explaining history, which consists of a respected
voiceover paired with an African-American expert, continues throughout the documentary’s discussion of black agrarian history in America. Interestingly, shortly after Nichols explains the authenticity of voice-overs and commentators, he says, “In documentary, an event recounted is history reclaimed” (21). By persistently structuring the narrative so that two dependable sources recount the same event, Gilbert creates a historical support system through which the words of African-Americans are doubly valued as truth. Importantly, by introducing a historical tie to the land and a historical fight for it through the voices of African-Americans, Gilbert allows black southerners to filmically represent their own history.

When discussing the Civil Rights Movement, Gilbert adds in another significant element of self-representation: testimony. First, the director introduces Professor Marsha Darling saying, “The decades of the Civil Rights movement really made clear, I think, to black southerners, black people all around he country, but particularly to black southerners, that the stakes for standing one’s ground and for pursuing self-help and race uplift were increasing.” As the images of the Civil Rights Movement are still on the screen, the viewers hear Warren’s father Leroy saying, “Yeah. I can tell you about that now. That was in the, about mid-1950’s.” By adding a testimonial voice to a historical account, Gilbert adds another layer of verbal connection to the past. In addition, through including one more supporting medium to an account of the past, the director continues to establish her film as a work of “historical reconstruction based on oral history or witness testimony” (Representing Reality 48). Because she consistently presents her film to be a reclamation of black Southern history through its tie to the
land, it is noteworthy when the explanation of the Civil Rights Movements returns to the relationship to the earth. Ralph Paige, the director for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, suggests that black owned land on Highway 80 (from Selma to Montgomery) acted as both “safe haven” for marchers and as a bargaining tool. Not only was black farmland used as stops from Selma to Montgomery, but African-American landowners also were “able to go down and sign a bond and bail people out. You know, that was power.” Again, Gilbert not only re-constructs Southern identity through authoritative black voices, but she does so through mentions of the potency of land. Moreover, the emphasis on these now triply supported events (voiceover, expert, eye-witness) not only acts to support the veracity of each account, but also creates a forum in which African-Americans can relay their own past.

Imagistically, it is significant that the visual representations of African-Americans’ history are sparse in Homecoming. Throughout the documentary, there are relatively few archived illustrations, photographic stills, or videos regarding the historical discussions. In the few moments in which Gilbert presents photographic stills, she almost always superimposes them on the sky. As the images fade into the background of the sky, she visually reiterates their connection to the land. This illustration of history is particularly interesting because Robert Stam and Louise Spence claim, “A whole realm of Afro-American history …is rarely depicted in film or is represented (as in the television series Roots) as a man, already dead, in a ditch” (7). It is significant, then, that Gilbert largely represents African-American history by privileging authoritative words of black southerners over the presence visual images. In
the few instances in which she does utilize photographs, the director presents worn hands, close-ups of faces, and families instead of the usual stills of slaves bending over cotton plants or plows. Through this cinematic re-framing of black history, Gilbert gives dignity to historical black figures as well to the work they performed on the land. By not including many images, the director allows the speakers to re-tell history outside the confines of previously collected images and videos. Just like in *Waking in Mississippi*, the lack of archival images places a stronger emphasis on the speaker’s words. The viewer is given no other representation of history than that of the African-American historical, professional, or testimonial account.

In addition to delineating Gilbert’s reclamation of a historical southern identity, it is also important to understand the ways in which Gilbert oratorically and imagistically re-constructs the representation of the contemporary black southerner. Although her historical accounts rarely incorporate images, the director’s presentation of the modern African-American southerner relies heavily on both word and image. Interestingly, throughout the documentary, it is primarily the voice of the narrator (Gilbert) that comments on contemporary black southern identity. While Gilbert does utilize a number of African-American experts and family members, these speakers rarely discuss the contemporary black southerner, but instead focus on his/her history. Because of this relative lack of oral accounts of the modern identity, it is especially important to pay attention to the methods through which the director’s narration represents African-Americans as southerners.
Gilbert’s comments on black Southern identity are particularly intriguing because black southerners historically have not been considered full members of the South. In fact, in *The Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash considered white citizens of the South to be “southerners,” but he labeled African-Americans from the same region merely as “blacks” (Cobb 262). It is interesting, then, to examine the ways in which Gilbert uses her words to reclaim the South as her homeplace. She says:

Montezuma, Georgia, the only place I know where it seems that one out of every three people I meet are related to me by either blood or marriage. When people ask me where I’m from, Montezuma, Georgia is the only thing that comes to mind even though I’ve never lived here longer than a few weeks until I began this film. This is the story of my family. This is the story of black farmers in the 20th century. This is the story of land and love.

Here, she defines black southernness by land and familial ties. Furthermore, by omitting the need to inhabit the region to become a part of it, Gilbert opens Southern identity to all African-Americans that have a rootedness in the region, particularly in its land. If land and a feeling of attachment are qualifications to be a black southerner, then a lack of access to land and a homeplace erases the ability to claim a southern identity. Because of that, it is important that Gilbert verbally constructs her own cultural identity as a black southerner, so that she can also construct that claim for other African-Americans. Alexander Jaffe claims, “You cannot write the ‘I’ without that ‘I’ being read …as a representation of the collective, cultural identity” (150). Precisely by
claiming that her tie to southern land qualifies her as southern, she asserts the right for all African-Americans to claim that identity.

Interestingly, *Homecoming* relies much more heavily on the image of the contemporary black southerner than it does in representing the historical African-American. Black farmers in film have almost always been either visually presented through slavery and/or poverty. However, just as she re-con structs historical accounts, the director likewise re-introduces visual representations of African-Americans by placing them in positions of authority both through ownership or knowledge of the land. For instance, more than once, Gilbert frames Walter is in a position of ownership. In one scene, the viewer watches as Warren signs a loan agreement to purchase an irrigation system. Warren and the lender sign the papers on the hood of *his* truck as they stand in the middle of *his* land with *his* irrigation system in the background. Although Walter does not talk in this scene except for the few words we hear with his leasing agent, the image of him surrounded by his possessions re-positions the cinematic image of a black man in the South. Instead of being framed in an image that highlights his oppression, the director frames her cousin in a position that illustrates his agency as an African-American in the South.

Later in the documentary, Gilbert depicts African-American farmers as doubly viewed by framing their image both through her camera and the media lens. When watching Warren on his land, the audience learns that he and other black farmers in the South gained access to farm loans through their own self-representation. Warren says, “Several of us beginning farmers got together and we all had the same problem – we
were all denied. We got some media coverage. The situation changed and we were all granted loans.” It is interesting that not only does Gilbert present black farmers’ legal self-representation, but she also introduces a utilization of media and film coverage to gain this power. In Jay Ruby’s *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology*, he writes, “The right to represent is assumed to be the right to control one’s cultural identity in the world arena … The subjects’ demand for some control over how they are represented can be heard almost everywhere in the world” (198). Significantly, in this quote, Ruby is referring to the documentary medium; however, in this instance in *Homecoming*, black southerners are using their right to represent themselves in the news coverage. To a degree, Gilbert creates a second level of the auto-ethnography, one in which black farmers represent themselves in the media within their already established identities in the documentary. Just as *Homecoming* gives power and positive presence to African-American southerners, the media and news coverage within the film provides the same provisions. By legally and filmically representing their literal tie to southern land, Gilbert represents black farmers’ figurative connection to a southern identity.

It is also important to examine the visual aspects of Gilbert’s interviews of African-Americans. Throughout the film, the director frames nearly all the black speakers amongst farmland. This is particularly interesting in that the only Caucasian speaker, author Peter Daniels, sits inside while almost all of the remaining African-Americans sit or stand on the land. In fact, only three of the older interviewees are filmed inside. In each of these instances, they are framed in front of a window or
overlooking their farmland. In the only instance in which a black interviewee does not appear against a landscape, Gilbert filmically highlights his glimpse through an implied window. Specifically, when interviewing Leroy James, the director frames him sitting in a chair. However, Gilbert quickly cuts to a close-up of Leroy’s hand tapping against the seat. As this happens, the viewers see the sun from the window to his left shining off his hand. Immediately following, Leroy looks through the implied window to his left while Gilbert slows down the frame in black and white. This is the only time in the documentary in which Gilbert uses a constructed black and white image, highlighting the significance of Leroy’s look. Finally, it is important to note that when the director introduces Warren’s wife Tina inside, she does not consider this to be an interview. Charlene says, “This is the day I planned to film Tina James, Warren’s wife, but it rained all day so we decided to play spades instead.” Although this segment may seem to be an interview, Charlene does not consider herself to be filming because she is not outside. Clearly, by re-framing the image of the contemporary African-American southerner through a position of knowledge and power, the documentary re-imagines the representation of African-Americans in film.

Throughout *Homecoming*, Charlene Gilbert presents historical and visual situations in which African-Americans are tied to southern land. By claiming this connection, the director and the social actors claim the right to self-identify as black farmers and as southerners. Moreover, by her reclamation of both a historical and contemporary black image and her emphasis on the black narrative account, Gilbert re-writes the filmic understanding of the black southerner. At one point, Professor Darling
says of southern African-Americans, “They very much talked of farming and one’s ownership of a farm as having a homeplace, where you can sink your roots and hold on.” Through the documentary, Gilbert verbally and visually cements a representation in which southern African-Americans can establish their rooted-ness and a new cinematic image.

**Conclusion**

While they are two very different documentaries, *Waking in Mississippi and Homecoming* both address modern day race related issues that are commonly presented in fiction films. However, in these documentaries, African-American southerners visually and thematically create their own representations instead of allowing dominant Hollywood powers to shape them. Robert Stam and Louise Spence argue, “Racism is not permanently inscribed in celluloid or in the human mind; it forms part of a constantly changing dialectical process within which, we must never forget, we are far from powerless” (20). Christie Herring, Alex Robinson, and Charlene Gilbert recognize their potency through creating auto-ethnographic responses to the southern African-Americans in film. Moreover, by stripping the negative depiction of the black southerner of its power and heightening the significance of the voice, the directors and their social actors powerfully redefine African-American southern identity in film.
Afterword

After examining these texts, it is particularly interesting to recognize the auto-ethnographers’ refusal to negate completely cinematic representations of the South. As previously demonstrated, *Sherman's March* still shows moments of gentility and Southern pride, *Stranger with a Camera* openly depicts Southern Appalachia’s poverty, *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* takes hold of the poor South's strangeness, and both *Waking in Mississippi* and *Homecoming* admit to the continued presence of race related issues in the South. However, the significant difference in the cinematic representations of the South and the auto-ethnographic depictions of Southern identity is that these documentaries are aware that their representations are constructed. When discussing previous scholarship regarding representations of filmically oppressed groups, Robert Stam and Louise Spence say:

> While posing legitimate questions concerning narrative plausibility and mimetic accuracy, negative stereotypes and positive images, the emphasis on realism has often betrayed an exaggerated faith in the possibilities of verisimilitude in art in general and the cinema in particular avoiding the fact that films are inevitably constructs, fabrications, representations. (3)

It is exactly this avoidance of narrative possibility and representative accuracy that gives Southern auto-ethnographies their potency. By declining to join the conversation about the veracity of Southern cinematic representations, reflexive documentaries avoid the impossible dialogue regarding authenticity in filmic depictions of the South.
Moreover, by embracing the fictive elements of their own works, the directors undermine Southern representations in any cinematic production.
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