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So This Is Censorship: Race, Sex, and Censorship in Movies of the 1920s and 1930s

FRANCIS G. COUVARES

Abstract. The curious case of *So This Is Africa* (Columbia, 1933) shows that both Hollywood's in-house censors and state and local censors took seriously cinematic violations of racial and sexual norms. This spoof of "jungle" films exploited audience interest in a cycle of fictional and nonfictional depictions of "primitive" life. These films claimed partial exemption from taboos against sexual and racial boundary-crossing, and usually showed unclothed "native" women. But *So This Is Africa* went further. However farcical, its suggestions of adultery, interracial sex, homosexuality, and even bestiality raised an unusually large storm among the censors. Cut by one-third, the film still outraged many and helped precipitate the industry's creation of the Production Code Administration, designed to police the screen more tightly.

In March of 1933, Columbia studios released *So This Is Africa*, a forgettable B-movie spoof of recent "jungle" films. Were it not for its trouble with the censors, the film would have left almost no record beyond a couple of reviews. But precisely because it came in for extensive censorship from both Hollywood's in-house watchdogs and state and local censors its story is worth recovering. That story demonstrates that, in the 1920s and 1930s, treatments of racial and sexual boundary-crossing found a curious home in movies – fictional and nonfictional, dramatic and comic – about "primitive" life.

The film's fate at the hands of the censors also reinforces what film historians have made clear in the last several decades: that censorship demanded the continual efforts of a wide range of interested parties and was never fully successful.[1] Those efforts, moreover, were part of the much longer *Kulturkampf*, reaching back to the arrival of Catholic immigrants and the emergence of the penny press and the cheap variety stage in

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[1] Gregory Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

mid-nineteenth-century America.[2] Protestants versus Catholics and Jews, small towns versus cities, traditionalists versus modernists, evangelicals versus "sporting" men – in a variety of guises, conflict over popular culture was endemic to a society that was at once capitalist, pluralist, and, however imperfectly, democratic. Entertainments that depicted the crossing of sexual and racial boundaries evoked especially intense outrage.[3] At stake was power: to assert one's class and ethnic interests over those of others, to take symbolic control over public space, to defend gender and family norms against the disruptive and relativizing force of the marketplace. This long history helps to explain why so trivial a text as *So This Is Africa* aroused so exaggerated a reaction from those who saw themselves as custodians of public morality.

Fashioned by competent professionals – director Edward Cline and writer Norman Krasna – *So This Is Africa* was intended to make the sort of small profit deemed acceptable for a B-film by a second-rate studio (which is what Columbia was before Capra made *It Happened One Night* the runaway hit of 1934). The movie starred Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey, whom Columbia had borrowed from RKO. Vaudeville comedians who made a hit with the Ziegfeld Follies in 1928, Wheeler and Woolsey achieved modest success after crossing over to motion pictures in 1929.[4] The coming of sound had led Hollywood to "scoop up Broadway actors of all kinds, the comedians prominent among them."[5] Compared to the Marx Brothers, however, historians of film comedy rate Wheeler and Woolsey "pale fare,"[6] whose "time-worn stage routines were used up immediately" in the new medium.[7]

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[2] David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Daniel Czitrom, "The Politics of Performance: Theater Licensing and the Origins of Movie Censorship in New York," in Francis G. Couvares, ed., *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, 2nd edn (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 16–42.

[3] See Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002); Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Francis G. Couvares, "The Good Censor: Race, Sex, and Censorship in the Early Cinema," *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 7 (Fall 1994), 233–51.

[4] Edward Watz, *Wheeler and Woolsey: The Vaudeville Comic Duo and Their Films, 1929–1937* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1994); Leonard Maltin, *Movie Comedy Teams* (New York: New American Library, 1970), 85–104; also Donald W. McCaffrey, *The Golden Age of Sound Comedy: Comic Films and Comedians of the Thirties* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1973), 15, 82, 95, 110; Gerald Weales, *Canned Goods as Caviar: American Film Comedy of the 1930s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 65–66. The Library of Congress holds a heavily censored print of the film.

[5] Weales, 58.

[6] McCaffrey, 82.

[7] Maltin, 100.

The film told the story of two hapless vaudeville lion tamers, Wilbur (Wheeler) and Alexander (Woolsey), who, having fallen on hard times, accept a motion picture assignment from the Ultimate Picture Corporation. They are sent to Africa to help Mrs. Johnson Martini (played by Esther Muir) to complete a stalled safari documentary. In Africa, Mrs. Martini becomes aggressively amorous toward Alexander, while Wilbur falls into the lustful grasp of Tarzana, an "Amazon" (played by Raquel Torres). Tarzana's companion, an ape named Josephine, who imitates her mistress in embracing the hapless Alexander, who is still being pursued by Mrs. Martini. The latter discovers her beau in this embarrassing liaison just in time for the white explorers to be captured by the "native girls" of Tarzana's tribe. Mrs. Martini warns that at nightfall these unfriendly Amazons will be seized with "amorous" inclinations; when a fortuitous eclipse shortens the wait, the Amazons become, as the script puts it, "sullen, passionate, heaving, gasping women."[8]

While the Amazons perform their "passion dance," Mrs. Martini convinces the boys to dress up as native women and thereby elude their captors. This ruse nearly succeeds, but Alexander is recaptured and prepared for the "honeymoon bed." Mrs. Martini convinces the boys that the only way out is for Alexander to choose Wilbur (still in disguise as an Amazon) as his mate. While Wilbur plays his part, Alexander steps out of character, thereby alerting the Amazons to the ruse. At the same time, the eclipse passes and the love-starved night creatures turn into spear-wielding, daytime man-haters once again. A mad chase ensues but, just as the odd couple are about to be killed by the enraged women, a "terrific combined yell of a hundred voices" alerts all to the arrival of the Tarzans.

Arriving, the script says, "all in step, all look[ing] identical and all dressed in the regalia of MGM's genuine Tarzan," the men are on their annual expedition to "kidnap Amazons and make them their wives." After a brief fight, "Each victorious Tarzan throws an Amazon over his shoulder … and takes her toward a certain … hut." Unfortunately, Wilbur and Alexander, disguised as Amazons, are treated to the same fate. In the final scene, one year later, the lads are washing clothes "on primitive washboards," both still dressed as women. Called by "two masculine voices," they simultaneously respond, "All right, we're coming!" A "papoose" on each of their backs, they turn to the hut, where Mrs. Martini and Tarzana emerge, take the babies and smile.

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[8] The script is in the *So This Is Africa* file, Records of the New York State Motion Picture Commission (after 1927 the Education Department, Motion Picture Division), New York State Archives, Albany, NY (hereafter NYSMPC). All subsequent quotes from script are from this file.

Despite its unprepossessing pedigree and its silly plot, *So This Is Africa* could hope to win an audience because it rode a wave of interest in two related genres of film: the documentary–travelogue recounting explorations in "primitive" locales, and the "jungle and stunt" picture, most notably the 1932 hit *Tarzan the Ape Man*.[9] In a December 1932 letter to Columbia studio chief Harry Cohn, James Wingate, head of the Production Code Administration, certified *So This Is Africa* as acceptable, describing it as "an amusing burlesque on the recent craze for African animal pictures."[10] Hollywood's internal censor would have cause to regret that judgment before long, but noteworthy here is his clear sense of the genre conventions within which *So This Is Africa* operated. The movie had been preceded by several years of silent and sound documentaries on the "dark continent" and other "exotic" locales.

An obvious point of reference was *Congorilla*, released by Fox in July of 1932 and made by Martin and Osa Johnson, a husband–wife team experienced in the production of travelogues.[11] *So This Is Africa*'s Mrs. Johnson Martini is clearly a parody of Osa, who was always referred to as Mrs. Martin Johnson. The *New York Times* reviewer described *Congorilla* as neither a predictable "travelogue, nor an 'animal film' in the connotation usually given to those words." It included such standard elements of the African documentary as wild animals and "life among the pigmies," and added the authoritative voice of Mr. Johnson (Mrs. Johnson played no part in the narration, although featured in the filmed action, sometimes as a sharpshooter). What most impressed the reviewer, however, was the fine camera work and the fact that the "various diversified incidents are strung together into a smooth whole." He also noted that in the opening night audience "explorers, scientists and officials" abounded. This very combination of virtues – narrative seamlessness and the pretense of scientific authority – provoked the crew at Columbia pictures to spoof the Johnsons' enterprise.[12]

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[9] Review of *Tarzan, the Ape Man*, *Variety*, 29 March 1932.

[10] James Wingate to Harry Cohn, 29 Dec. 1932, *So This Is Africa* file, Production Code Administration collection (hereafter PCA), Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.

[11] Review of *Congorilla*, *New York Times*, 22 July 1932; also *Variety*, 26 July 1932. On the Johnsons see Pascal James Imperato and Eleanor M. Imperato, *They Married Adventure: The Wandering Lives of Martin and Osa Johnson* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

[12] Review of *Congorilla*, *New York Times*, 22 July 1932. On impositions of narrative form on South Sea documentaries see reviews of *Mawas*, *Variety*, 4 June 1930, and of *Isle of Paradise*,

The *New York Times* and *Variety* reviewers heaped contradictory praise on *Congorilla*. On the one hand, they lauded it as "authentic," "genuine," "realistic"; on the other hand, they acknowledged its "entertainment value." They noted the Johnsons' efforts to inject humor into the documentary's narration (e.g. a scene in which the sounds of "the Johnsons' American jazz phonograph records" evoke the natives' "natural rhythmic reaction"). *Variety* also noted that the "flirtation between a jungle swain and flapper is great camera stuff." Since Martin Johnson began his career as a companion and understudy to Jack London, and thereafter as a vaudeville lecturer who traded on his relationship with the famous writer, it is not surprising that he filled his travelogues with moments of vaudevillian "entertainment."[13]

Still, reviewers praised the Johnson's film more for its "scientific" value. They compared it favorably with the slipshod efforts of documentarians who lacked both technical skill and scruples about staging events or intercutting original and stock footage. In contrast to these, *Congorilla* seemed "a good model … for the rest of the camera and gun brigade," the "real McCoy," before which "[o]ne loses all skepticism."[14] Moreover, *Congorilla* offered something Hollywood sought more generally in the 1920s and early 1930s: a way to pass moral muster with censors and critics, under the rubric of "educational value" or "social relevance," while at the same time guaranteeing "box office" appeal. The latter could mean many things, but sex and violence were among the chief guarantors. While violence drew male viewers to western, crime, and other adventure films, displays of the female body lured them even more reliably into the theater. For women, heterosexual romance seemed the required ingredient. If a movie combined elements of adventure and at least minimal display of the female body (for men) with romance (for women), the royal road to profit might open up before the studio executives.[15]

Jungle movies satisfied many of these criteria. Bits of comic business with animals or "natives" could be worked into "authentic" sequences. More importantly, action was plentiful in tales of exploration and hunting.

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ibid., 26 July 1932; on ones centered on the western hemisphere see reviews of *Voodoo*, *New York Times*, 27 March 1933, and of *Savage Gold*, ibid., 25 July 1933.

[13] See reviews cited in note 11.

[14] Review of *Congorilla*, *Variety*, 26 July 1932. Criticism of inferior documentaries appears in reviews of *Up the Congo*, *Variety*, 22 Jan. 1930; *Ingagi*, ibid., 16 April 1930; *Africa Speaks*, ibid., 24 Sept. 1930; *Wild Men of Kalihari*, ibid., 26 Nov. 1930; *Ubangi*, ibid., 2 June 1931; *The Truth about Africa*, ibid., 18 April 1933, and *New York Times*, 17 April 1933. The Imperatos (*Congorilla*, 167–68) say the Johnsons used staged footage shot at his African compound.

[15] See Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of Historical Adventure Movies* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1993).

Reviewers noted the nature and degree of violence, rating documentaries according to their likelihood of scaring the "femmes."[16] The Johnsons almost never showed prey being killed by humans or animals. Likewise, the famous Frank Buck's films passed critical muster because, although he showed animals preying on one another far more graphically than did the Johnsons, he never killed them; his purpose, after all, was to "bring 'em back alive" and profit from selling animals to zoos. Even when Buck showed scenes that might disturb audiences, he lightened them with bits of animal humor and a "breezy running microphone comment."[17]

Travelogues also permitted a greater display of female nudity than did any other kind of film. Reviewers regularly mention the "three-quarter nudes of African debs," "ape women … seen completely naked," and the suggestiveness of "native dances."[18] Presumably, science trumped morality in decisions by distributors and censors to allow such displays.[19] On this subject, Thomas Doherty quotes one exhibitor who, "with fear and trembling" over possible censorship or protest, booked the 1932 South Sea "nature story" *Virgins of Bali*. "Sold as entertainment," he observes, "it would be highly questionable, but it went over beautifully sold as highbrow. I made a month's salary trying it."[20]

Robert and Frances Flaherty's *Moana*, while far more committed to documentary authenticity, nonetheless showed semi-naked female bodies often, and in close-up, thereby attracting the notice of viewers and reviewers. Unlike *Nanook of the North*, in which Robert Flaherty focused on the adventures of a male hero, *Moana* offered what the filmmaker himself described as less "drama" and more "beauty." The latter meant more than just the female body offered up for the male gaze. Jeffrey Geiger argues that the film's scenes of semi-nude male dancers and hunters might have satisfied "the desiring female gaze." Furthermore, since, as Geiger suggests, "the pleasure of visual ethnography might be seen as analogical to the more explicitly voyeuristic pleasures of pornography," Paramount's prerelease publicity alerted audiences to the more broadly erotic and manifold pleasures of the Polynesian Garden of Eden. Unlike the "rough rugged heights" that civilized Westerners must negotiate in everyday life, the press release said, Samoa is "a beautiful plain, sun-blessed, fertile, flower-spread, balm-kissed, a plain where life runs in and out and in and out like an unending repetition of a song."[21] On the other hand, *White Shadows in the South Seas* (MGM, 1929), which Flaherty abandoned and left in the hands of his collaborator, W. S. Van Dyke, focused more on naked women. This is no surprise, since, after seeing a preview, a disappointed Irving Thalberg exclaimed, "Boys, I've got a great idea. Let's fill the screen with tits!"[22]

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[16] See reviews cited in note 14.

[17] Review of *Bring 'em Back Alive*, *New York Times*, 18 June 1932.

[18] Reviews in *Variety* of *Up the Congo*, 22 Jan. 1930; *Ingagi*, 16 April 1930; and *Wild Men of Kalihari*, 26 Nov. 1930.

[19] In the case of *Ingagi*, the trump did not always work; Chicago's censors passed it, but Little Rock's banned it as "lewd, lascivious and indecent," and the Dallas City Council was moved by it to "consider the need [for a] censor"; on the other hand, a New Orleans newspaper opined that while Little Rock "was violated in all its finer sensibilities … New Orleans was merely bored." Quoted in Daily Reports, 5 April, 26 April, and 15 May 1933, Will Hays Papers (Microfilm Edition, University Publications of America).

[20] Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930–1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 235.

Travelogues sometimes allowed audiences to explore one of the biggest taboos, interracial sex. For example, *The Blonde Captive*, narrated by Lowell Thomas, followed an expedition to Australia designed to track down a white woman rumored to be "living among the brown barbarians." The woman, once found, turned out to be a sea captain's widow, long ago shipwrecked and adopted by the "Neanderthal" aborigines. Offered by the expedition's leader the chance to return to "civilization," she chose to remain with spouse and child.[23] The partial exemption from such taboos granted to documentaries passed in some measure to fictional adventures set in faraway places. Nevertheless, any doubt that miscegenation was a dangerous subject for movie treatment had vanished after the enormous negative reaction to *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. The protests against Griffith's racist epic powerfully reinforced the assumption that erotic relationships between whites and blacks could not be depicted on the screen under any circumstances.[24] In local and state censorship boards, the National Board of Review, and Hollywood's Hays office, unanimity on that point never wavered. Despite that unanimity, however, the urge to "go native" remained strong. For those who could barely acknowledge that urge, the documentary offered a safe opportunity to imagine the unimaginable. Fictional jungle films gave similar scope to interracial fantasies, offering "numerous variations on racial identity mix-ups as screenplay solutions to forbidden romance."[25] Moreover, in the 1920s and 1930s, serious literary and stage treatments of miscegenation, as for example Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*, and the Broadway musical *Showboat*, brought new and more nuanced attention to a subject that had been seldom addressed except in racist diatribes against "race-mixing." Less highbrow, but doubtless more influential in the 1920s, were Harlem nightclubs and dance halls in which the color line stretched and often vanished. Similarly, Mae West's Broadway stage shows, which made her famous before she headed for Hollywood, exploited "black primitivism," as well as homosexuality, for their shock value.[26] Whatever was true in "Mongrel Manhattan," however, few films addressed interracial romance directly.[27]

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[21] Jeffrey Geiger, *Facing the Pacific: Polynesia and the US Imperial Imagination* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 137, 143–44, 156.

[22] Quoted in Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 132.

[23] Review of *The Blonde Captive*, *New York Times*, 28 Feb. 1932.

[24] On reactions to *The Birth of a Nation* see Couvares, "The Good Censor," *passim.*

[25] Stanford M. Lyman, "Race, Sex, and Servitude: Images of Blacks in American Cinema," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 4 (Autumn 1990), 53.

One exception was *White Cargo*, an English production of 1930. It could not have been made in the United States because, under the Production Code's "Formula," Hollywood studios agreed to drop film projects derived from novels or plays deemed unacceptable by Hays's censors.[28] Set in Africa, the movie tells of Tondeleyo, an "African Circe" who wins the hand of an English trader, Langford. However, Langford marries the African only to spite his archenemy Weston, whom he believes also desires Tondeleyo. However, Langford proves to be mistaken; Weston has no interest in the girl, who, learning that she was no more than a pawn in their game, poisons herself. Though noting that the "exceptionally fine cast" (which included Maurice Evans as Langford) compensated for the use of stock jungle footage, *Variety*'s reviewer expressed the well-founded worry that the "[i]nterracial marital angle is the one which censors in many parts are apt to pounce upon."[29]

Stories of Western men romancing non-Western women to tragic result, i.e. the Madame Butterfly scenario, were common enough in the early 1930s for one reviewer to call them a "cycle." This comment was contained in a review of the film *Aloha*, in which an American sailor impregnates then abandons a Hawaiian woman, a plot that the reviewer called "familiar to every honky tonk theatre in the land."[30] It is worth noting that the Hawaiian woman here is played by the same Raquel Torres who portrayed Tarzana in *So This Is Africa* and also starred in *White Shadows of the South Seas*. The role of the African in *White Cargo* is played by an actress named Gypsy Rhouma, possibly a Roma in fact, and almost certainly not an African or African American. In these movies, non-Western women who attracted Western men could only be portrayed by generic Others – "swarthy" Latin Americans, southern Europeans, and Middle Easterners – of a suggestively half-caste sort.[31] Although stories of racially transgressive relationships ordinarily provoked censors, the films discussed above may have made it to the screen because they were produced by either a European or a small American independent; neither was subject to the "Formula," and neither expected to win first-run distribution in the chain theaters owned by the major studios, which accepted only releases passed by the Hays office.

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[26] Marybeth Hamilton, "*When I'm Bad, I'm Better*"*: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 157–67, 162. On Harlem in the 1920s see David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1982).

[27] Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1995).

[28] Lyman, 55. On the Formula see Richard Maltby, "'To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book': Censorship and Adaptation in Hollywood, 1924–1934," in Couvares, *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, 97–128.

[29] Review of *White Cargo*, *Variety*, 26 Feb. 1930. For a broader look at this theme see Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903–1967* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

The same outfit that produced *Aloha*, Tiffany Productions, turned out another jungle romance that aspired to attract a better-heeled and more respectable audience, *Mamba*, starring Jean Hersholt. Unlike *Aloha*, which opened at Loewe's, New York, for one day only, and which the *Variety* reviewer judged to be designed only for theaters he labeled "the 10-15-25c grinds,"[32] *Mamba* opened for a regular run at the Gaiety, with a top admission price of $1.50. In line with its ambition to draw a bigger, better-paying audience, the film treated the miscegenation theme obliquely. Mamba – called "the Beast" – is a German who exercises dictatorial power over a tribe of Africans. Although he has engaged in miscegenation with at least one "native woman," the center of the tale is his purchase for $40,000 of a young German noblewoman from her impoverished mother. In the end, the Beast is slaughtered by the Zulus and the young woman escapes with a

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[30] Review of *Aloha*, *Variety*, 29 April 1931.

[31] In *Daughter of the Congo*, the African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux followed the same racial code, distinguishing between dark-skinned "savages of the jungle" and the "beautiful mulatto girl" who falls into their clutches: Gary Null, *Black Hollywood: The Negro in Motion Pictures* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1975), 44–45. New York's leading African American newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, condemned Micheaux's "intraracial color fetishism … All the noble characters are high yellows; all the ignoble ones are black." Quoted in Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977), 51. In "Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness," *Black American Literature Forum*, 25 (Summer 1991), 351–60, bell hooks claims that beneath this apparent fetishism was a subtextual strategy affirming "an unbroken diasporic bond with Africa." See also Thomas Cripps, "'Race Movies' as Voices of the Black Bourgeoisie: *The Scar of Shame*," in John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson, eds., *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image* (New York: Ungar, 1979), 39–56.

[32] Review of *Aloha*, *Variety*, 29 April 1931.

German officer, but far more interesting than the plot is the use of a character dimly reminiscent of Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to explore the sexual implications of "going native." Had Mamba been an African, rather than an African manqué, the suggestion of sex between him and the German woman would have evoked repulsion and outrage. But viewers could enjoy the fantasy of tabooed sex as long as the "wild man" proved to be a Westerner, albeit one degraded by the jungle.[33]

A few years later, a major studio, Metro, produced a variation on the Kurtz theme in *Kongo*. In this drama, Walter Huston plays Flint, a "crippled tyrant who rules the natives with voodoo buncombe." Lupe Velez, another Hispanic actress regularly called on to play the female Other, portrays Flint's "woman." Supposedly Portuguese, the Velez character serves as a sort of halfway admission of the lure of the female Other for the imperial man. The primitive environment degrades the white male characters, leading each to violate the other's patriarchal rights over women. The plot of *Kongo* hinges on Flint's selling into a "Congo house" of prostitution a young white woman whom he believes is the daughter of his archenemy, Gregg, who has stolen Flint's wife. The victim of the twisted tyrant's plot, however, turns out to be his own daughter. True to the Production Code, miscegenation is never actually a theme in *Kongo*, but the violation of both racial and sexual rules is at the heart of the savage experience it portrays. Indeed, one reviewer noted that, especially in the segment dealing with the daughter's sale into prostitution, the movie seemed to have been badly cut to satisfy the censors.[34]

Of all the "jungle" films of the 1930s, none succeeded more than *Tarzan the Ape Man*. Released by MGM in March of 1932, it spawned many sequels and imitators. It succeeded because of certain distinctive virtues: a large budget, an Olympic star, a quite competent director, and a story whose print audience was already enormous. But it also embodied the broader appeal of that cycle of documentaries and fictional films already mentioned (which also included RKO's big hit of 1933, *King Kong*). Central to these films was the tale of the white man or woman thrust into contact – sexual and otherwise – with the Other, and discovering, for good or ill, the "primitive" power of that Other. Also discovered by those whites – although seldom acknowledged forthrightly – is the pathos of their own civilized state.

The most important predecessor to *Tarzan* was *Trader Horn* (Metro, 1931), which *Variety* described as a "[g]ood looking animal picture," but which was a bit more. An early effort to combine fully the thrills of the African documentary with the narrative conventions of the adventure–romance, it was produced by the same studio, directed by the same director (W. S. Van Dyke), scripted by the same writer (Cyril Hume), and shot by the same cameraman (Clyde De Vinna) that would film *Tarzan the Ape Man* a year later.[35] Van Dyke had also taken over *White Shadows in the South Seas* in 1928, having added his own documentary footage to Flaherty's, and so was experienced in submitting location footage to the demands of adventure and romance. In *Trader Horn*, the protagonist is not a "king of the jungle," but Nina (played by Edwina Booth), the "white queen of the savages and as wild as her followers." *Variety*'s reviewer found the movie's chief lure in two sorts of spectacle: its expensively mounted animal sequences, and those scenes in which Edwina Booth is shown "scampering about adorned by less than a Roxyette." While the latter spectacle might guarantee a large male audience, only a strong "femme reaction" could turn it into a "smash," and the flimsy romantic plot seems to have helped the movie achieve a decent box office success. After Nina rescues her lover, the title character played by Harry Carey, from the rage of her kinsmen, the final scene shows her traveling upriver on "a steamer bound for civilization."[36] Although women may have enjoyed the conventional resolution, as in innumerable movies of the 1920s and 1930s which permitted women characters to transgress gender stereotypes only to repent in the end, the image of a dominant, sexually assertive woman may have made as strong an impression on women viewers as did the ritual denouement.

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[33] Review of *Mamba*, *Variety*, 19 March 1930.

[34] Reviews of *Kongo*, *New York Times*, 17 Nov. 1932, and *Variety*, 22 Nov. 1932.

However successful, *Trader Horn* came nowhere near matching the smash success of *Tarzan the Ape Man* one year later. Why? The difference can have little to do with production values. The very same forces, using footage from the same African expedition, produced both. Johnny Weissmuller's fame and the prior appeal of the Tarzan stories may certainly have had something to do with it. But the "wild woman" was inherently more dangerous a subject for Hollywood than the "wild man" and therefore better addressed in the form of burlesque. Just as *Tarzan* permits fantasies of transgressive sex in the jungle without evoking too many disquieting worries about the sort of power granted to Nina, so the makers of *So This Is Africa* spotted an opening for comic titillation in turning the tables once again. The "absurd" idea of a female Amazon ruling apes and Africans and demanding sexual attentions from timid white men could be entertained more comfortably as burlesque than as drama. In more serious fare such as the Tarzan stories, as Marianne Torgovnik has noted, "women really parallel the Africans and the African landscape … always vulnerable, always in danger." Moreover, the Tarzan stories are part of a wider cultural project "to imagine the primitive as a source of empowerment" for men. Many Western men, threatened by the "new woman" in the early twentieth century, suggests Torgovnik, found Tarzan a compelling representation of the natural superiority of white men over both female and non-white Others.[37]

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[35] "Woody" Van Dyke, after directing several Tim McCoy silent westerns, was picked by MGM's David O. Selznick to take over a stalled documentary about the South Seas being made by Robert Flaherty. Van Dyke used Flaherty's footage "to provide a sense of atmosphere" for a movie that became "the story of a down-and-out American whose latent idealism is brought out by the love of an unspoiled native girl"; Van Dyke's success in this assignment led to *Trader Horn* and *Tarzan the Ape Man*, and, in 1934, his finest year, to *The Thin Man* and *Naughty Marietta*. Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Film Making in the Studio Era* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1988), 54–57, 169.

[36] Review of *Trader Horn*, *Variety*, 11 Feb. 1931.

Given this context, the unusually large paper trail left by *So This Is Africa* in the files of the Production Code Administration Collection and the New York State Motion Picture Commission becomes more explicable. The trouble began in October of 1932, when Jason Joy, outgoing head of the PCA, asked Columbia chief Harry Cohn to cut from the script scenes in which the comic leads peek under nighties and strike a match on a woman's posterior: this warning was par for the course – producers were accustomed to sparring with censors over such bits of risqué business. Joy noted more serious problems with "comedy sex situations," especially when the leads are romanced by Mrs. Martini, Tarzana, and the female gorilla. If sex occupied Joy's attention, so did ethnicity. He warned Cohn not to make an Italian street cleaner – whose early scene was eventually cut from the film – one of "a race of excitable, hand-waving comics" because Italian Americans had complained about such stereotypes. Finally, Joy advised Cohn to take care in depicting native dances: "Lately censors have been deleting any number of scenes wherein colored women have been shown in detail doing the dances you describe."[38]

Before 1934, when the Catholic Legion of Decency's crusade forced Will Hays to tighten the Code and to install Joseph Breen as Code enforcer, the internal censors relied mostly on persuasion to convince the studios to avoid antagonizing Hollywood's critics. They also used an elaborate public-relations apparatus to coopt those critics, especially representatives of Protestant churches and women's groups. Thus Joy spent much of his time compiling and codifying the responses that specific scenes predictably evoked in the censorship boards. He then sought to turn disparate objections into a set of simple rules that producers could follow to ensure that their products got to market without snags or controversies. These several dozen rules were collected in 1927 into the so-called "Don'ts and Be Carefuls," predecessor of the more thoroughly articulated Production Code of 1930.[39]

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[37] Marianne Torgovnik, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 68, 45, 66. Cecil B. de Mille had given this theme the full treatment in *Male and Female* (1919).

[38] Jason Joy to Harry Cohn, 12 Oct. 1932, *So This Is Africa* file, PCA.

So This Is Africa was one of the last scripts Joy worked on before departing the PCA. His successor, James Wingate, an experienced censor plucked from the directorship of the New York State Motion Picture Commission, arrived in Hollywood in December of 1932 just in time to view the movie that Columbia had made from the revised script. Wingate and his assistants found *So This Is Africa* conformable to the Code and predicted that it would face no censorship problems.[40] Within two months, however, a storm had broken about the film. In New York, a member of the National Board of Review thundered, "Nothing as salacious has ever come before [me] in the eight years of my reviewing … It outrages every standard of decency."[41] Subsequent to its release, editorials, citizens' groups, and censors in dozens of towns and cities across the country execrated the film, some banning it outright. Many critics included it with recent films starring Mae West and Jean Harlow as part of a discernible trend in Hollywood toward portraying sexuality as "raw," "filthy," "vile," "rotten," "sordid," and "vulgar."[42] Most important, the New York State censor's rejection of the film brought the controversy to the attention of Will Hays in New York City.

Going over the head of Wingate, Hays's representatives told Columbia that *So This Is Africa* might not after all be acceptable under the Code. They then brokered a series of meetings between Columbia and the New York censors to hammer out an acceptable print. By 9 March, after two weeks of work, the ninety-minute film was cut by a full thirty minutes; this version, Hays told Wingate, was "satisfactory for general distribution." Two days later, the movie "czar" wrote to his man in Hollywood demanding to know who, beyond the studio, was responsible for the mess of the last several weeks:

> There is also responsibility on us for passing the script, if we did, and for passing the picture … I will thus be glad if you will review the matter and let me know

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[39] On the rules of Hollywood self-regulation – the "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" of 1927 and the more elaborate Production Code of 1930 – see Richard Maltby, "The Genesis of the Production Code," and "Documents on the Genesis of the Production Code," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 15 (1995), 5–63.

[40] James Wingate to Harry Cohn, 12 Oct. 1932.

[41] Carl Milliken to James Wingate, 18 Feb. 1933.

[42] Daily Reports, 28 March, 4 April, 19 April, 26 April, 28 April, 1 May, 8 May, 15 May, 27 May 1933, Will Hays Papers.

who read the script and what eliminations were suggested … also, who saw the picture.[43]

Finally, after a month during which condemnations of the already censored film poured into the New York office, Wingate informed Hays that the script had been reviewed and approved, with suggestions for editing, by his predecessor, Jason Joy, and an assistant. Nevertheless, Wingate admitted, "I personally reviewed picture with whole staff during my first month in charge … In view of recent difficulties encountered by picture realize now we were too liberal for which I accept responsibility."[44]

Wingate's abject apology marked the beginning of the end of his short tenure in Hollywood. In June of 1933, the press widely reported the findings of the Payne Fund Study, which claimed to offer social-scientific proof of the baneful effects of movies on children. In July, Hays received a letter of resignation from Alice Ames Winter, a member of his public-relations team who had curried favor with women's clubs and Protestant organizations. Citing *So This Is Africa* among several films recently approved by Hay's censors that left her with a feeling of "mental nausea," Adams declared Hays's effort to reform the studio moguls a "hopeless" failure.[45] Within a year, the Catholic Church had organized its Legion of Decency and Hays had strong-armed the studios into submitting to a more rigorous censorship regime. More frightening than the divided Protestants, the Catholic Church seemed to exercise unquestioned moral authority over the urban masses that flooded the movie houses every weekend. To appease them, Hays installed as head of the new Production Code Administration Joseph Breen, a journalist and public-relations man with close ties to the Catholic hierarchy. Breen promptly banned scores of former releases that had offended critics, denied Code seals to unacceptable new productions, and cut scenes and edited scripts for unfinished films.[46]

Although Breen's interventions sometimes led to genial negotiations with the studios, they often took the form of blunt ultimata. And although studios occasionally won appeals before Hays's board of producers in New York, the "czar" backed his lieutenant in Hollywood most of the time, lending

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[43] Carl Milliken to James Wingate, 18 Feb. 1933; J. J. Pettijohn to Will Hays, 20 Feb. 1933; [Hays office] to Jack Cohn, 23 Feb. 1933; Will Hays to James Wingate, 9 March and 11 March 1933, *So This Is Africa* file, PCA.

[44] Telegram, James Wingate to Will Hays, 14 April 1933, in ibid.

[45] Alice Winter to Will Hays, 10 July 1933, Will Hays Papers.

[46] Francis G. Couvares, "Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies before the Production Code," in Couvares, *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, 129–58; Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Breen the muscle that neither Joy nor Wingate ever possessed. Still, those who saw themselves as Breen's constituents – religious and women's groups, in particular – regularly complained of the censor's laxity, in response to which he begged for both their support and their commiseration as he contended with "the Jews" in Hollywood.[47] What cannot be doubted is that the ubiquity and seductiveness of the screen fueled powerful elite and grassroots campaigns to control Hollywood and that Breen forced the studios to accommodate these critics by finding less "vulgar" and "indecent" ways of attracting audiences.

Although *So This Is Africa* neither solely nor directly caused these reorganizations of the industry's system of self-regulation, its fate reveals a good deal about what producers and censors thought they were doing – and what they might not have realized they were doing – in the early 1930s. A look at the work of the New York State censors shows that what offended them was, first, partial nudity and sexually suggestive physical gestures, especially dances; and, second, two kinds of humor only recently imported onto the screen from the burlesque and vaudeville stage: the sexual double entendre and, even more troubling, the humor of gender role reversal (both of which were about to get Mae West in deep trouble[48]).

When the New York censors demanded numerous cuts of scenes of "native girls dancing and wiggling bodies in indecent manner,"[49] Columbia tried to defend itself by claiming the authority of ethnography, as if *So This Is Africa* might share the exemption from ordinary standards of decency conventionally granted to documentaries. Writing for Columbia, studio chief Nate Spingold called the censors' attention to the fact that "these dances are presented as tribal dances and it must be borne in mind that … the performers … are presumed to be native young women … no less clothed than characters ordinarily used in depicting various other forms of native dancing."[50]

Addressing the censors' second line of attack, i.e. against the film's humor, Spingold reversed himself, saying that the censors were taking the film too seriously. Nothing but a series of "gags and laughs," the movie had no "theme construction." Indeed, although basically a "satire on African hunt pictures," in this picture "the theme is valueless because it is in reality a continuity of amusing dialogue," just "low comedy" and nothing more.[51] This is, of course, exactly the way that Joy and Wingate had read the picture, but the New York State censors were made of sterner stuff. They found particularly offensive what the *Variety* reviewer tagged "blue" or "sickly" or "semi-stag elements."[52] One small example will suffice, although the censors marked many others in the script. The following censored dialogue occurs after Wilbur emerges from the hut in which he has spent the night with Tarzana:

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[47] On Breen's anti-Semitism see Walsh, *Sin and Censorship*, 84–90; Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor*, chapter 10.

[48] See Hamilton, "*When I'm Bad, I'm Better*", chapter 9; also Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928–1942* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), chapter 2.

[49] Report of Examiner, 16 Feb. 1933, *So This Is Africa* file, NYSMPC.

[50] Nate Spingold to NYSMPC, 25 Feb. 1933.

WILBUR: That was the best night's sleep I've had in years.
TARZANA: Moh? Moh?
WILBUR: No – no. I've had plenty. Plenty! Ah! Some people may like nine or ten – but eight's enough for me …

More offensive to the censors was the movie's play with gender and racial identity – what the *Variety* reviewer called "a lot of very mussy material surrounding the love making of savage women and the two comics going into feminine get-up" – which was, notwithstanding Spingold's demurral, the film's central theme.[53] From the earliest segments in which the aggressive Mrs. Martini pursues the timid Alexander, to Tarzana's assertive lovemaking with the more willing Wilbur, to what the script calls the "strange interlude" between Alexander and the gorilla, to the climax in which both comics don female garb and, at least by suggestion, make love to the Tarzans who capture them, the movie is fairly obsessed with the theme of gender role reversal. And these reversals, in which women pursue and subdue men, or in which men adopt "female" roles, are never fully recuperated, as they would have to be in a "serious" adventure–romance. There is no steamer headed back to civilization here; rather, both male leads remain feminized in the end, doing the family wash, tending the babies, and dressed in native skirts.

In this film, as in other jungle movies, the primitive environment allows civilized people to strip away those identities that alternatively protect and restrain them. Whether seen as ludicrous or repulsive, and whether experienced as alluring or frightening, such stripteases clearly engaged moviemakers, censors, commentators, and viewers in the early 1930s. It may be precisely because Wheeler and Woolsey and *So This Is Africa* were so second-rate that they let slip so many outrages. Never taking their task seriously enough to require rigorous self-censorship, the moviemakers left it to the censors to make the film conformable to gender and racial hierarchies. In carrying out their work, the censors asserted confidently that they were protecting children from corruption, women from insult, and society from the lowering of moral standards. But it seems fair to suggest that the censors, most of whom were white men, were also protecting themselves from acknowledging that the social arrangements that made them Tarzans derived not from nature but from the parochial, sometimes laughable, and therefore potentially vulnerable conventions of their tribe.

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Review of *So This Is Africa*, *Variety*, 25 April 1933.

[53] Ibid.

In the end, this nervousness about sexual and racial arrangements reflected both twentieth-century American social hierarchies and the fissures that made the maintenance of those hierarchies a difficult and continual project. Although cleansing the screen of tabooed sexual and racial images did not guarantee the maintenance of those hierarchies, it is no coincidence that the civil rights and women's movements emerged at roughly the same time that the censorship apparatus forged in the first three decades of the century fell apart in the 1950s and 1960s. Of course, ending the censorship of controversial films did not directly cause fundamental social change. Still, it is not unreasonable to suggest that ending censorship – even of movies as silly as *So This Is Africa* – might have widened small chinks in the edifices of patriarchy and white supremacy. The censors certainly thought that might happen and worked hard to make sure it did not.