

The history of this project begins with the phenomenal rise of film in the two decades that preceded the Harlem Renaissance. As early as 1909, Harlem's *New York Age* encouraged black performers to seek employment on the stage in moving picture theaters. African-American filmmakers William Foster and Hunter C. Haynes produced comedies like *The Pullman Porter* (1913) and *Uncle Remus' First Visit to New York* (1914), respectively; and the white producer-director Alice Guy Blaché employed a black cast for her short *A Fool and His Money* (1912). America's most powerful theatrical organization, Klaw & Erlanger, which had a history of engagement with black artists, allied with the prestigious Biograph film studio to exploit "by the means of motion pictures, the biggest dramatic successes of the age," and, in 1913, a "race subject" was added to its film production roster, featuring the best-known black star of the period, Bert Williams.

The film's plot, which centers on Williams's membership in a black social club, provides clues to its literary and theatrical sources. The widely syndicated *Lime Kiln Club* stories had already been adapted for the stage by black performers seeking to invest characters created by white writers with racial authenticity. The film also drew from the Harlem musical *Darktown Follies*, which featured a transitional blending of minstrel stereotypes and contemporary black representation. At a moment when minorities struggled to assert their visibility, the film's highlights included a high-energy example of African-American vernacular dance and scenes of black romance, then considered unacceptable for white audiences.

The seven reels that resulted from this initiative were among a cache of nine hundred Biograph negatives taken from the bankrupt studio's vaults in 1938 by Iris Barry, MoMA's founding film curator. After restoring the readily identifiable films, in 1976 archivists discovered the unedited footage from the Williams film: multiple takes for various scenes and nearly one hundred photographic and moving image fragments documenting the activities of the interracial cast and crew on set.

Although no official record has been found to explain why this ambitious production was never completed, lingering delays in post-production were initially to blame. Then, in 1915, the release of the divisive blockbuster *The Birth of a Nation* incited race riots and protests nationwide. In this climate, it appears the studio judged their high-spirited Negro project too risky for release. One hundred years later, however, its singular imagery is a testament to the achievements of a little-known community of performers and serves as an example of how interracial collaboration might have developed much sooner in the history of American film.

The exhibition is organized by Ron Magliozzi, Associate Curator, Department of Film

