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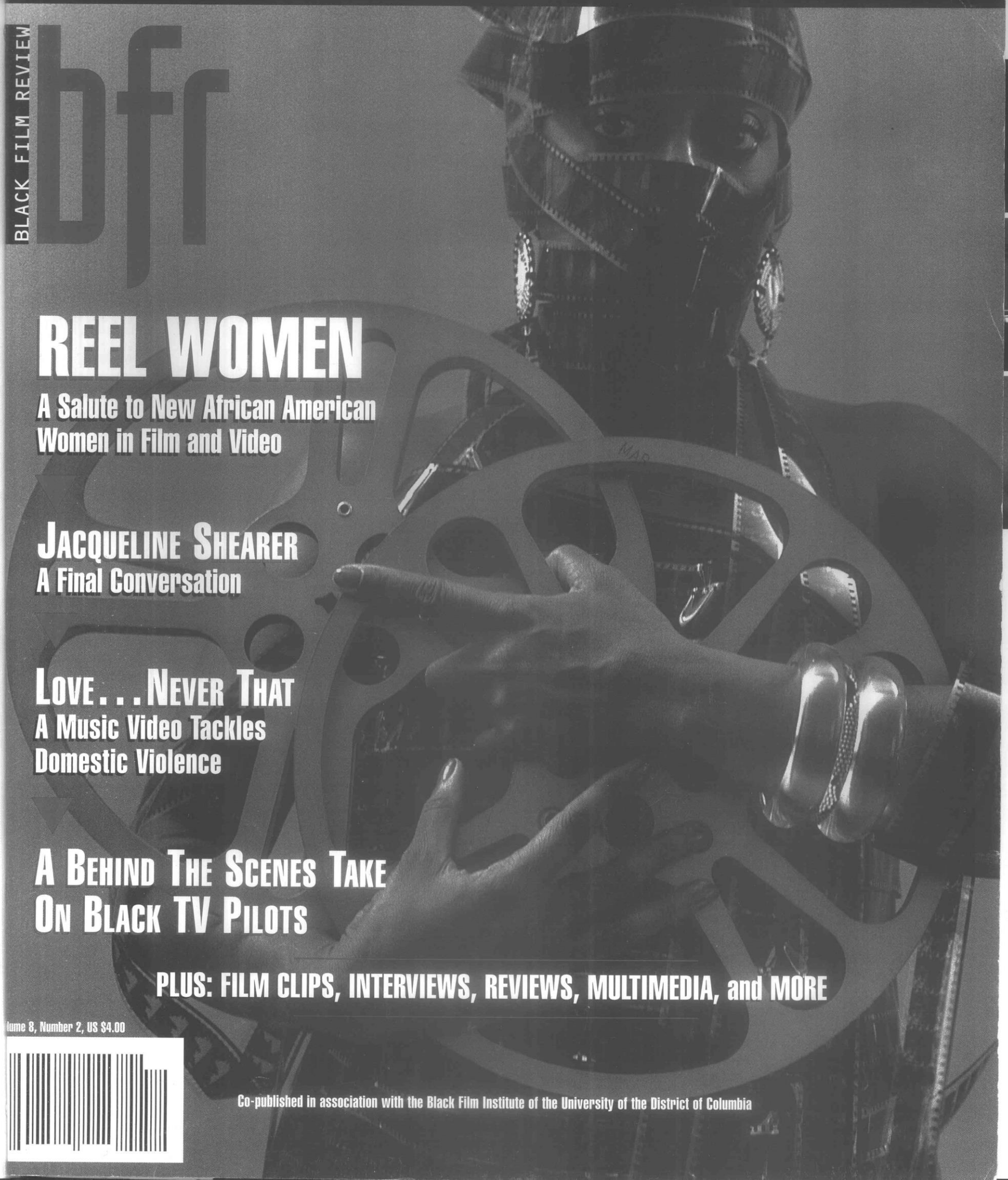

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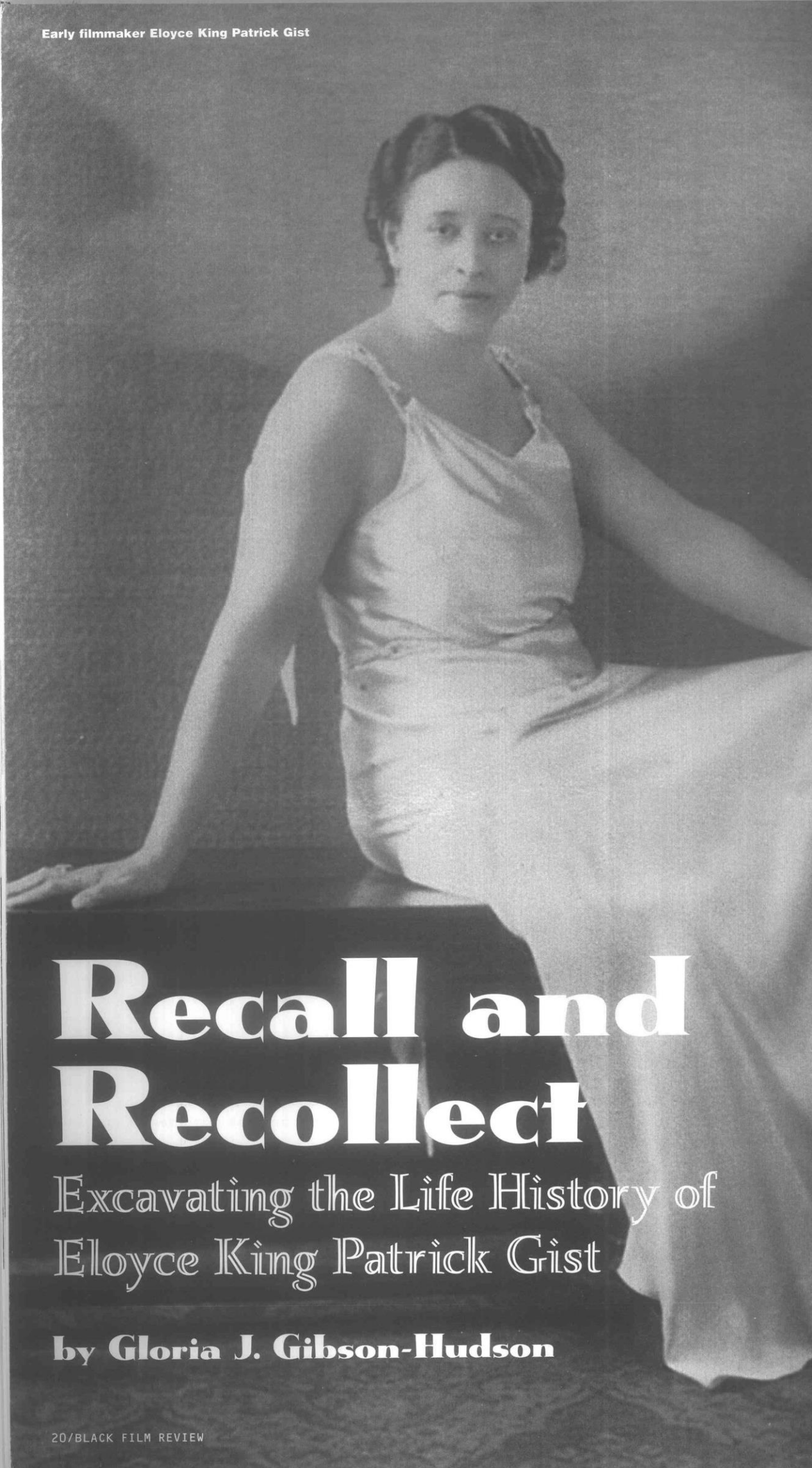

Early filmmaker Eloyce King Patrick Gist

Recall and Recollect

Excavating the Life History of Eloyce King Patrick Gist

by Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson

ELOYCE GIST'S NAME FADES IN AND OUT of the history of African American cinema. Although the complete story of her work may never be known, most recently her contributions have come more into focus. Eloyce Gist's story represents significant "frames" from the history of Black cinema -- unfortunately, these frames are figuratively and literally difficult to reconstruct.

Gist is also one of the "foremothers" of Black cinema along with Zora Neale Hurston, Eslanda Goode Robeson, and Alice B. Russell. These women, during the late twenties, thirties, and forties, recognized the power of a camera to preserve and communicate cultural stories. Ten small rolls of Hurston's film footage is available for screening at the Library of Congress. Robeson's footage, stored at another archive, was taken during one of her trips to Africa and is presently inaccessible because of its deteriorating condition. Hopefully in the near future it will be earmarked for restoration.

In regard to Russell, we may never know exactly where Oscar Micheaux's creativity began and Russell's continued or visa versa. However fragmented these women's unique stories, each must be unearthed and unraveled. Most importantly, a recognition that each women's story is worthy of documentation – worthy to be added to the annals of film history should be acknowledged. This brief essay serves as a beginning in the excavation and preservation of Eloyce Gist's contributions to Black cinema.

In the absence of printed materials, in-depth interviews can function as significant tools to unearth historical data. Although reluctant at first, Homoiselle Patrick Harrison, Gist's 82 year-old daughter, recalled the era when her mother and Mr. Gist travelled in their Ford with films and projector in tow. She subsequently realized the importance of her recollections and carefully reconstructed much of her mother's life story elaborating upon her contributions to the world of cinema. Listening to Harrison, it was readily apparent that Gist was an early feminist dedicated to God and to her people.

Eloyce King Patrick Gist was born October 21, 1892 in Hitchcock, Texas. Her parents were Walter and Josephine King. As a nuclear family the Kings migrated from Texas to Washington D.C. Like many Black families during the early part of the century, they believed more opportunities would be available in an industrialized urban area. Gist studied music at Howard University, but later realized she needed a way to make a living. She studied beauty culture and subsequently established the Patrick School of Beauty Culture and Personal Improvements. Similar to entrepreneur Madam C.J. Walker, Gist felt strongly that African American women should not only be well-groomed, but most importantly, have a means to financially support themselves. Down through the decades beauty culture has enhanced many black women's sense of self and afforded them financial independence. The course of Eloyce Gist's life abruptly changed, however, when she met and married her second husband James Gist sometime in the late twenties or early thirties.

In all likelihood, it was their devotion to God that brought them together. Harrison describes James Gist as a "self-made evangelist," while her mother was of the Bahai faith. She explains her mother's choice of religion:

Bahai was a *faith that embraced the idea that mankind is one - that there* is *no difference between black and white. They teach a doctrine by which you treat your fellow man with love.*

Despite the difference in denominations, the Gists agreed upon basic Christian principles that became deeply entrenched in their productions. One of the powerful religious concepts dramatized was the reality of punishment for evil deeds. In *Hell Bound Train,* which was already complete when they were married, specialized cars for distinct sins transport sinners to Hades. Modifications in the storyline title cards were made by Eloyce Gist that offered a more cohesive merging of religious doctrine with dramatic elements.

The second film, *Verdict Not Guilty,* was also a religious drama. According to Mrs. Harrison, Eloyce Gist wrote the script for Verdict and also directed it. She explains:

My mother was also directing the film, she was telling the actors what to do - directing them. Mr. Gist and another fellow would be filming.

Harrison's recollection of two cameras is signifi- cant since many African Americans found it difficult to secure one camera. However, Gist not only wrote and directed Verdict Not Guilty, but also appears in the film.

During the mid-thirties the couple toured with their two films in and around Washington D.C. [There has been speculation of a third film, but its existence has not been verified.] Their goal was not to simply entertain, but rather to try to deter destructive behavior of their people. Sinners featured in the scenarios are both male and female. Their mission was one of moral and spiritual education for men and women. *Hell Bound Train* and *Verdict Not Guilty* advocates Christian values and the importance of family.

Harrison occasionally travelled with her mother and stepfather to the various churches. She vividly remembers their visit to Abyssinia Baptist Church in Harlem. The usual format of the service was for Eloyce Gist to lead the congregation in hymns while playing the piano. The film would then be shown followed by a "sermon of sorts" by James Gist. Tickets were sold or a collection was taken at the close of the service which was split between the Gists and the church. Harrison specifically remembers the offering at Abyssinia sta- ting, "I remember the money - it was dollars, dollars not change. I do remember that!"

Programming of the Gist films encountered a broader venue than Black churches. Correspondence dated May through June of 1933 document the interest of the NAACP in screening the Gist films. The NAACP sponsorship guaranteed that its branches would cover the cost of advertisement while the Gists provided posters, tickets, the films, lectures, music and the projection equipment. Then field secretary of the

Homolselle Patrick Harrison remembers her mother's involvement in filmmaking.

NAACP Roy Wilkins writes to a potential sponsor:

Mr. Gist is a producer of religious motion pictures which have an entire Negro cast and for the past four days we at the Harlem branch have done business with him and have found him a *Negro of high caliber, also his picture "Verdict Not Guilty" represents an ambitious effort and one worthwhile seeing (5/11/33).*

Just how many screenings materialized in con- junction with the NAACP is unanswerable at this time. What is clear is that the NAACP respected the Gist's work and felt that a collaboration between the two could prove fruitful for both. A week later Wilkins sends Gist a list of NAACP branches near New York with the caveat, "the branches could solicit patronage directly from the churches in their communities" (5/16/33). Wilkins and other NAACP officials viewed the films as a potential means by which to increase membership.

In the surviving correspondence between James Gist and Wilkins, his wife is never mentioned directly by name. Her presence is implied in statements such as, "Thanking you kindly for the interest you have shown in our work," or in the biographical information prepared in which he remarks, "Mr. Gist lectures during the picture and some music is sung." The absence of Eloyce Gist's name from the correspondence reflects the era when negotiations were carried out by men and women remained in the shadows.

James Gist's health began to fail and he reports in a letter to Wilkins, "Because of a long period of stren- uous work and driving more than two thousand miles a month, without much rest, I was forced to stop and submit to medical treatment and a two weeks' rest." His health never improved substantially and several years later James Gist died of pneumonia.

According to Harrison her mother continued traveling with the films, a projector, and an assistant for a while, but soon realized she couldn't shoulder the diverse responsibilities alone. The work of programmer, manager, and exhibitor was too taxing. Additionally, amid the glamour and spectacle of the growing film industry, the appeal of silent film had diminished. From the decade of the forties to her death, Gist continued to live in Washington D.C. where she wrote a novel, occa- sionally published newspapers articles, and enjoyed her family. She died suddenly while on vacation in 1974.

The bits and pieces of the Gist films along with scraps of documentation were turned over to the Library of Congress film division after her death. According to Harrison many other documents such as newspaper clippings, posters, pictures, and correspondence were destroyed in a fire. The year following her death, Cripps writes the Library of Congress encouraging them to restore the films stating, "I believe there is strong reason for preserving the Gist films... as a unique record of a lost phenomenon in American social history." (7/16/75). Because of other priorities and reduced funding, the "scraps of cinematic frames" sat idle at the Library of Congress for almost twenty years.

With the emergence of several lost Micheaux films and increasing pressure from scholars has come a renewed awareness of the importance of restoring the Gist films. The Library of Congress film division has now made a commitment to give the films priority on their restoration schedule. As soon as the sequential order has been determined, negatives will be struck and 16mm prints will be made available.

The Gist films are indeed a unique record of a lost phenomenon in American social history. Unlike Micheaux and his contemporaries, the Gist films sought advancement of "Negro" people by teaching and preaching religious values and doctrines. Similar to other African American filmmakers of the time, they traveled "door-to-door" recognizing the potential of film to impact on attitudes and behavior.

From what has been uncovered about Eloyce Gist she qualifies as an early Black feminist - she was multi-talented and she had a vision of how to use cinema. Based on her religious faith, she believed cinema could unite Black people, promote Christian values and racial pride, and communicate a social message. Research must continue on this important collection and others to uncover diasporic and intergenerational connections. As researchers we are positioned in the present, but must continuously look backward for historical continuities as we develop criticism and a discourse of Black cinema for the future.

Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson is assistant professor in Afro-American Studies and Assistant Director of the Black Film Center/ Archive at Indiana University. A draft of this paper was presented at the "Black Cinema: A Celebration of Pan-African Cinema" conference held at New York University earlier this year.