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### 'There is no gallery': race and the politics of space at the Capitol Theatre, New York

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## **‘There is No Gallery’: Race and the Politics of Space at the Capitol Theatre, New York**

**Pardis Dabashi, Bryn Mawr College**

### **Abstract**

This essay brings developments in Black film historiography and architecture studies to bear on the study of Northern picture palaces as the period of their prominence coincided with the Jim Crow era. Taking as my focus New York City’s Capitol Theatre—which opened in the immediate wake of the US race riots of 1919 and was the largest movie theater to date—I show how Northern middle-class film culture enforced racial segregation in the absence of legal protection. Southern movie theaters were able either to outlaw Black attendance or relegate their Black patronage to the gallery, a seating section closest to the roof of the auditorium and farthest removed from the screen. Northern movie theaters, on the other hand, had to find extralegal ways to ensure a predominantly white clientele—while also maintaining the image of the Northern picture palace as a shrine to New World inclusivity. They accomplished this, I demonstrate, through a combination of film-programming, strategically equivocal promotional language, and, most strikingly, architectural design.

**Keywords: African American; United States; race; segregation; movie picture palace; spectatorship**

Content warning: This article contains mention of racist terminology.

‘People want to feel primarily that it is *their* theatre.’

—Samuel ‘Roxy’ Rothafel, presentation manager for the Capitol Theatre

The news coverage announcing the October 24, 1919 opening of the Capitol Theatre on Broadway and 51<sup>st</sup> street in New York City commented persistently on the enormity of the auditorium. The *New York Times* called the theater ‘the biggest of its kind in the world’ (October 21, 1919, 13), the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* remarked effusively on the ‘vastness’ of this ‘huge new amusement palace,’ (October 25, 1919, 2), and the *Brooklyn Citizen* wrote that its ‘great dimensions’ and ‘sea of seats’ inspired ‘awe’ (October 25, 1919, 7). The January 1920 issue of *Photoplay* magazine featured an entire page that notified its readership of the Capitol’s opening, which the publication perceived as a significant event in US cinema culture. Entitled ‘The World’s Largest Theatre,’<sup>i</sup>

in reference to the promissory claim the venue’s managing director Edward Bowes made repeatedly in promotional material, the *Photoplay* article consists of four paragraphs dedicated to describing the theater in terms of its spaciousness, as well as two large photographs providing evidence of the theater’s freshly minted interiors (Figure 1). ‘The Capitol,’ it reads, ‘is the largest theatre in the world—including the famous opera houses of Europe, and the now equally famous Hippodrome of New York.’ The ‘decorations are elaborate in the extreme,’ and ‘[t]here is plenty of room to walk around on both floors, the mezzanine floor looking as if it had been designed for eight-day bicycle races.’ However, as if to signal to readers what that magnitude would mean for the composition of its patronage, the article specifies that while this gargantuan theater seats 5,300 people, ‘there is no gallery—only a main floor and balcony’ (*Photoplay*, January 1920, 87).

The gallery space in white-owned movie theaters during the era of the moving picture palace—popular between 1914 and the late 1920s—was the highest balconied seating section, and the area of the auditorium that was furthest removed from the screen and closest to the projector. While white patrons enjoyed views from the ground floor, Black patrons were usually required by white cinema managers to watch films from the more remote gallery—alternately referred to with racist and otherwise pejorative terms including the ‘peanut gallery,’ the ‘buzzard’s roost,’ ‘n\_\_\_ heaven,’ or ‘peanut heaven.’ The explicitness of racial segregation, though, depended on the location of the theater within the United States. In states that adhered to *de jure* racial segregation, theaters could openly, and with impunity, require their Black clientele to sit in the ‘peanut gallery.’ In Northern states, where Jim Crow regulations did not legally apply, theaters had to resort to more subtle means of segregating their audiences. New York City’s Capitol Theatre—at the time of its opening, the crowning achievement of the moving picture palace movement in architecture and popular culture—could not, by law, advertise itself forthrightly as an institution dedicated to white patronage. The 1895 passing of the Malby Law in the state of New York protected the right of all citizens to ‘full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, restaurants, hotels, eating houses, bathhouses, barber shops, theatres, music halls, public conveyances on land and water, and all other places of public accommodation or amusement,’ ‘without regard to color, race, or creed’ (*New York Times*, June 16, 1895, 16). The Capitol therefore resorted to alternative, more implicit, means of communicating its racial allegiances; it said them without saying them. It did so, I argue, through a combination of strategically defensive film programming, promotional language, and, most boldly, architectural design.

This article, then, considers the moving picture palace as it coincided with the Jim Crow era. It attends to how the language used by advertising and news media to describe the Capitol's vastness boasts luxury on the one hand, and a tacit discomfort with how to manage Black people's access to the auditorium on the other. The promise of magnitude, that is, spoke to the white bourgeois taste for space while also laying tacitly bare a fundamental anxiety about white supervision of that space. Thus, rhetoric concerned with size in the Capitol Theatre's architectural, discursive, and film-textual practices emerged as an implicit means by which cinema owners and managers could signal their exclusionary operations while nevertheless ensuring predominantly white patronage. As a result, the theater assured its middle-to-upper-class white target audience that although the Capitol was massive, it was nevertheless—to borrow the italicized euphemism of its head producer Sam 'Roxy' Rothafel from my opening epigraph—*theirs*.

In attending to the white nativist subtext of the architecture of the Capitol, I build on the pathbreaking work of scholars such as Mary Carbine (1990), Anna Everett (2001), Charlene Regester (2005), and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart (2005) (and more recently Allyson Nadia Field [2015] and Saidiya Hartman [2020]), which breathed life into what had long been the scant institutional historiography of Black film culture, encompassing everything from Black film and film criticism to Black-owned movie theaters and theater-goers. I bring this work into contact with that of Adrienne Brown (2017), Irene Cheng, Charles L. Davis, and Mabel O. Wilson (2020; 2019; 2012), which has examined the racialization of modern architectural design. These scholars demonstrate that architectural theory and the landscape of modern urban architecture (which includes cinemas) was not just informed, but was structured by race and nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century race thinking. Early-twentieth-century architectural modernity, Davis

argues, was one of many white responses to the increased racial and ethnic pluralization of the US during the period. The developing conception of a white nativist US ‘national character,’ he explains, was built into the design of modern buildings (2019, 6).

I bring this turn in architectural historiography to bear on the now-burgeoning research on Black filmgoing to bring to light underexamined segregationist practices at movie theaters in the Northern US, where it was *de facto* rather than *de jure* segregation that determined the racial makeup of film audiences. The work of Carbine, Register, and Stewart has explored the material history of segregation in Northern and Southern film culture, and shown how Black people generated and sustained their own film culture inside and outside the institutional confines of white-owned movie theaters in the US. Thanks to this work, film historiography had to acknowledge Northern film culture’s *de facto* segregation and has been disabused of the myth that white Northern popular culture was more racially tolerant than that of the South. Less attention has been paid, however, to the means by which that racial segregation in Northern film culture was put into practice. Thus, I focus here on the practical, discursive, and film-textual methods that the Capitol deployed in order to informally obstruct Black patronage. In doing so, I reveal how the white racial politics of the Northern moving picture palace were hidden in plain sight, and how Black patrons were effectively written, programmed, and designed, out of the picture. By examining how the white-owned Northern moving picture palace was predicated on white nativist strategies for the management of space, promotion, and film programming—the insidious, formal, euphemistic strategies that allowed the Capitol to reject the very social elements that its architectural ambitions gave the impression of letting in—this essay reveals the modes of racial exclusion such cinemas resorted to when that exclusionary ambition was not protected by the law.

[Figure 1]

### **The World's Largest Theatre**

Promotion for and news coverage of the Capitol was couched in the language of size. Aside from the nigh-compulsive reiteration of Bowes's 'world's largest theatre' locution, contemporary film magazines commented invariably on the enormity of its interior. 'Ascending the marble stairs,' reported *Moving Picture World*, 'the grand promenade is encountered—a spacious elongated chamber with an arched ceiling of great beauty and delicate ornamentation... On the wall is a mural seventy-two feet long' (November 8, 1919, 225). According to *Motion Picture News*, the Capitol 'is presenting musical novelties and motion pictures on a magnificent scale that has yet been approached' (November-December 1919, 3266). Even the 'generous proportion' of the '41 by 14 by 14' projection room did not go unnoticed, nor the immensity of the organ (*Motion Picture News* November 8, 1919, 3498). *Motion Picture News* (November 8, 1919, 225), for instance, devoted multiple pages to an article entitled 'Biggest Organ Placed in Biggest Theatre' (Figure 2). *Moving Picture World* also noted that the Capitol's instrument, designed and built by the Estey Organ Company, 'is so tremendous in size that it was delivered in installments of carload lots' and that 'more than 15,000 square feet of lumber were used in making the wood pipes' (November 8, 1919, 225).

The rhetoric of size that permeated coverage of the Capitol was symptomatic of a broader trend within the industry to correlate size with class. Because of film's history as a mass art form with working-class patronage, it was necessary for cinemas to vie for their cultural legitimacy through association with middle- to high-brow institutions. William Paul explains that the picture palace, for instance, was both an architectural and cultural extension of the legitimate theater.

Therefore, ‘size could clearly correlate with status since the largest and most expensive theaters were often those intended for grand opera’ (Paul 2016, 99). The bigger the theater, in other words, the wealthier the people, hence the tendency among contemporary industry journals to mention seating capacity and overall scale. But the problem with growing audiences, Paul notes, was what it meant for theater design. In store theaters, which preceded and were contemporaneous with picture palaces, the answer to expanding audiences was to deepen the space. And this worked – as in the case of the American Theatre in Salt Lake City, which was 165 feet deep and 90 feet wide, making it one of the “longest store theaters” and “twice as wide” (Paul 2016, 90-91 ). But at a certain point the strategy hit a wall; continuing to deepen the already elongated, rectangular shape of store theaters would start to place audience members at untenably remote distances from the screen. It was not until Thomas W. Lamb designed the Strand Theater on 47th Street and Broadway in New York City, which opened its doors on April 18, 1914 and inaugurated the era of the moving picture palace, that the architecture of the Northern movie theater would start to accommodate several thousand spectators. Doing so, however, demanded a significant rearrangement of theatrical space: the gallery was removed. Rather than deepen the auditorium, Lamb designed the Strand to be square, which he achieved by eliminating the gallery. The gallery, Paul notes, was often considered the worst seating in the house owing to its extreme distance from the stage, the dramatic angle it enforced vis-à-vis the screen, and its cavernous sense of enclosure (Paul 2016, 45). When designing the Strand, Lamb replaced the gallery with an enormous balcony that provided just as many, if not more seats, than the orchestra. Paul explains that by cantilevering the balcony—supporting it underneath by a bracketed beam connected only at the wall and thus projecting it outward—Lamb in effect pushed the cavernous space of the gallery forward into the center of the theater (Paul 2016, 45).



‘It was as if Lamb’, Paul writes, ‘had reintegrated an exiled second balcony back into the auditorium’ (Paul 2016, 107).

[Figure 2]

Paul’s language of ‘reintegration’ is significant because the gallery was a remote section of the theater where white management often seated their African American patrons. The gallery often had its own entrance for poor and Black patrons and, as Register argues, was rife with public humiliation and visual obstructions. In her study of the so-called ‘buzzard’s roost’ galleries in Durham, North Carolina for African American patrons during Jim Crow, Register describes the space as generating a ‘disengaged perspective.’ She argues that the gallery enforced a ‘different sightline,’ if not a ‘distorted “lens,”’ that likely disrupted Black spectators from having the immersive cinematic experiences that their white counterparts enjoyed from the ‘lower rows’ (2005, 114). By contrast, in designing a square theatrical space, Lamb created a giant, seemingly undifferentiated spatial magnitude. The ‘vast flowing space,’ Paul writes, ‘promoted a sense of community, unifying the audience in opposition to the hierarchical deployment of spaces in conventional theater design. The open spatial sweep suggested an abolition of spectatorial hierarchy that played directly into the notion of the movies as a democratic art form (Paul 2016, 107-8). But by designing the ‘first dedicated movie palace’ without a gallery (Paul 2016, 5), Lamb in effect created an auditorium embedded in the logic of racial exclusion given that the absence of the gallery also symbolically precluded a Black clientele.

That the lack of a gallery created merely a veneer of democratic communion—granted, a thicker veneer at the Capitol since it had only one balcony rather than the Strand’s two—is

reflected in the persistent contradictions that appear in the journalistic language describing the theater and its opening. Reporters cast the theater as a temple both to the republican promises of the New World and to standards of aristocratic distinction. On the one hand, the relentless language of size in the theater's news coverage evokes the discourse of the so-called melting pot that was, and remains, integral to the United States' self-image. In the context of its report on the enormity of the Capitol's projection room, for instance, *Motion Picture News* refers to 'those "movie" pilgrims who make a visit to the Capitol Theatre a part of their itinerary while in the city of New York' (November 8, 1919, 3498). The image of pilgrims is apt, considering the Capitol's branding icon, which clearly invoked Washington D.C.'s Capitol Hill. By extension, the icon affiliated the theater with the image of a "city upon a hill," which was what Puritan John Winthrop famously called the New World before setting out on his colonial mission to New England in the seventeenth century; the icon thus symbolically situated the Capitol Theatre within the history of the US as a colonial settlement whose economic prosperity and geopolitical power founded itself on the labor exploitation and political suppression of the very minoritarian subjectivities to whom it purports to offer sanctuary (Figure 3). Not only does the Capitol Theatre's very name position it as a cultural proxy, if not metonym, for the nation as a destination for a diverse public, but that ideology and imagery was also evident in journalists' choice to depict the theater in terms of a post-aristocratic sanctuary. The image of a teeming multitude seeking shelter at a highly-anticipated site of refuge emerges in the rhetoric describing the long-awaited opening night. After 'nineteen months of preparation,' one reporter writes, the 'crush for seats'—itself undermining the Capitol's image of elite entertainment—proved so great prior to the opening of the box office that the glass doors were broken down by the throng and considerable damage done. No one was hurt, however, in the shower of glass, although traffic

was interrupted' (*Motion Picture News* November 8, 1919, 3425). One among a number of its kind, this description harkens back to the famous literary images in Henry James's *The American Scene* (1907) of swarming immigrant masses, which effected in James both awe and disgust at the American democratic experiment. The enormity of the Capitol indeed reflects the ethos of magnitude and magnanimity fundamental to the ideology of inclusiveness informing the narrative of American exceptionalism.

These descriptions, however, coexisted with just as many others that referred to the Capitol as an aristocratic, particularly French, monarchic, enclave. 'Entering the auditorium a burst of color and gold meets the eyes,' one observer wrote in *Moving Picture World*. 'It is blended with the architecture with such fidelity to the empire style that the beholder is carried in imagination to Fontainebleau or Versailles, where the finest of this style exist [sic]' (November 8, 1919, 225). Repeating this endorsement almost verbatim, a reporter for *Motion Picture News* wrote that head interior decorator, A. Lincoln Cooper, had transported to the Capitol 'the beauteous and soul-inspiring art of Fontainebleau and Versailles' to embellish the theater's 'already gorgeous Empire architecture' (November 8, 1919, 3488). Even as the Capitol emerges in the literature as an integrating expanse for desperate throngs—an Ellis Island of the moving picture world—its architecture also led journalists to compare it systematically to the national edifices of French aristocratic regimes. It was thus depicted both as a welcoming expanse, and as a monument to distinction.

[Figure 3]

## Committed to Good Taste

It is clear that Bowes was far more invested in cultivating the image of the Capitol as a monument to distinction rather than a welcoming expanse. Nevertheless, he and his team needed to find surreptitious means by which to convey the theater's commitment to controlling its racial borders because they had neither the protection of the law nor that of the gallery. The elimination of the gallery conveyed, if not generated, an ambivalent racial politics; that ambivalence was reflected in the theater's news coverage. On the one hand, the absence of a gallery symbolically excluded African American patrons. But on the other, because Malby Law protected the right of Black citizens in New York to patronize the Capitol if they chose, the absence of a gallery also presented Bowes and his team with the problem of policing the frontiers of the legally egalitarian seating. In the absence of a segregationist law and a gallery, to either keep African Americans out of the theater or relegate them to a specific section, advertising and film programming were alternative media through which Bowes and his team attempted to preserve the white racial purity of the Capitol.

Ben H. Atwell, the head of the Capitol's publicity department, oversaw a series of announcements that were released in local daily newspapers prior to the theater's opening, in which Bowes assured audiences that the size of the Capitol would not compromise the quality of its patrons' experience. In a note 'To the Public' in the October 15, 1919 issue of the *New York Herald*, one announcement read, '[t]here is much gossip...concerning the tremendous size of the new Capitol Theatre. Size means nothing unless justified by attractiveness. Good taste is the foundation upon which the Capitol Theatre is to make its bid for public patronage. This is already visible in the beauty of its structure and its interior appointments' (4). Yet another announcement stated: 'Good taste has been described as the foundation of the new Capitol

Theatre. ... It is also the intention of the management to have this good taste manifest itself in a cordial and friendly atmosphere distinctive of the Capitol Theatre' (*The Evening World* October 18, 1919, 7). To understand the racial and class panic behind these ads' heavy reliance on the rhetoric of good taste, one must recall that in 1919, motion pictures had only recently been popularized among white middle-class audiences. Film did not start to steadily attract a middle-class patronage until around 1908; and even then, as Shelley Stamp has shown, cinema's legitimation project was complicated if not disrupted by the increased attendance, during the 1910s, of women patrons, whose conduct in movie theaters often disappointed rather than met the film industry's expectations for women's ability to bring more decorum (and thus money) to film culture (2000). So Bowes's shrill insistence that while the theater was huge, it nevertheless privileged 'good taste,' was a euphemistic assurance pitched to a relatively new, and thus still fragile, white middle-to-upper class moviegoing sensibility. It was an assurance that although the Capitol was a cube with no bad seat, it was still, to borrow Leslie Weisman's apt phrase, 'discriminating by design' (Weisman 1992, *passim*).

However, more urgent an issue, from the perspective of Bowes and his team, was that African Americans were still in the process of moving northward to Harlem at the time the Capitol was being built. Indeed, the location of the Capitol would have played significantly into Bowes's anxiety about the image of the Capitol and whom it would attract. The theater opened its doors during a transitional period in the geographical history of Black New York, before Harlem became its epicenter. Prior to their predominant settlement in Harlem in the 1920s, African Americans lived much further downtown. In the antebellum era, Marcy S. Sacks explains, most of what was still the relatively small population of Black people who lived in New York City were located primarily in an area of Lower Manhattan called the 'Five Points,'

an especially fraught and violent neighborhood at the tip of the island (Sacks 2006, 5). After being pushed into Greenwich Village primarily as a result of Italian immigration, Sacks explains, African Americans then moved northward still to settle in the 1870s and 80s in what became known as the Tenderloin District between 24<sup>th</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> streets. By the end of the nineteenth century, they had settled in the San Juan Hill neighborhood, whose borders were approximately 60th to 64th streets and 10th and 11th avenues. The mass immigration of African Americans to this neighborhood was also aided by the Great Migration, the mass movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North with the intention of fleeing Jim Crow law and finding better labor opportunities and economic conditions. The Migration's first major wave to New York City took place between 1880 and 1915, helping San Juan Hill become "among the most congested of any [neighborhood] in New York City; one block alone housed upward of five thousand residents' (Sacks 2006, 6-7). In other words, the Capitol opened right at the cusp of this geographical transition for African Americans—and a stone's throw away from San Juan Hill, which bordered the Theater District.<sup>2</sup>

What is more, the Capitol opened just as one of the most violent periods of twentieth-century US racial history was winding down. The so-called 'Red Summer' of 1919 was the apex of what had been several months of bloody race riots sweeping across Southern and Northern cities, including New York and Chicago. The riots were largely the result of white people's hostility toward the effects of the Great Migration on the Northern racial landscape, as well as their persistent refusal to acknowledge the humanity and rights of Black citizens even after the participation of African American people in US military efforts during World War I. The war did not generate the interracial solidarity that many, including African American veterans, thought it might. To the contrary, as Stewart writes, 'interracial animosity increased during and after the

war,' as white people attempted to ensure that Black people would not enjoy the freedoms symbolized in the US victory. 'The immediate postwar period,' she explains, 'saw a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and lynchings' (Stewart 2005, 216). The Capitol opened in the aftermath of the riots, right in the midst of a resurgence of white nativist panic that was hysterically, and infamously, portrayed in D. W. Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*.

It is clear from the theater's programming where Bowes and the venue stood in relation to postwar white nativist sentiment, for Griffith's relationship to the Capitol ran deep. The Capitol's opening feature film was the first offering of United Artists Corporation, which Griffith formed together with the other three of the so-called 'Big Four' figures in the film industry: Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks (Figure 4). The Capitol did not exclusively show UA films, and thus the connection to Griffith may have been primarily due to financial concerns, as the cost of film rentals were cheaper from independent production companies. But if there was any residual doubt that the Capitol was meant for whites only, Bowes made it crystal clear in its opening film program. Entitled *His Majesty, The American* and starring actor Fairbanks, the comedy leaned into the contradictory image of the Capitol as both a shrine to egalitarian spectatorship and a chamber of aristocratic discernment. The visual dissonance of the image of Chaplin and Griffith sitting next to one another on a UA film set in Figure 4 — two men often thought to occupy opposing political ends of film history—is manifest in *His Majesty, The American* itself, a film in which the politics of republican modernity and aristocratic stratification are jammed together uncomfortably and impossibly. The film tells the story of William (Bill) Brooks (Fairbanks), a mysteriously wealthy New Yorker and vigilante reformer who comes to the systematic aid of the police and fire brigade as they attempt to manage the city's crimes and conflagrations (a silent-film-era Batman, of sorts). After

district officials perform a definitive ‘cleaning up’ of the city, the ‘Thrill Hound’ Bill is left with no one to save. At the recommendation of the District Attorney, Archibald Church, Bill goes to Mexico to seek out social disturbances to quell. ‘If you’re really seeking trouble,’ Church tells him, ‘try Mexico. You can wallow in it there.’ Meanwhile, King Phillippe IV, the ruler of a fictional state in the Alps called Alaine, summons Bill to help extinguish an insurgent democratic revolution. Once a ‘peaceful populace,’ Alaine’s now ‘rioting succession of mobs’ have been fomented into rebellion by the King’s quietly traitorous Minister of War, the Grand Duke Sarzeau, who has been in cahoots with the ruler of a rivalrous state. Bill cuts short his reformatory escapade in the fictional town of ‘Murdero, Mexico’ to come to Phillippe’s aid. There, Bill learns that he is in fact the Queen of Alaine’s son and thus the heir to the throne. He falls in love with a young woman from the court and their union instantly puts an end to the republican uprising.

[Figure 4]

The film ends with Bill assuming his new political role and denouncing democracy. ‘My friends,’ he tells the now peaceful population of Alaine, ‘[a] countryman of mine once said — “A government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from this earth” — Believe me—that’s some dope.’ By endearing the audience to Fairbanks’s American-frontiersman-style masculinity and humor while also venerating monarchy as a benevolent form of government, the film reconciles New World affect to Old World social hierarchy. The ideological fantasy is evident, too, in King Phillippe’s depiction as a munificent ruler who was merely misunderstood by his people (he was about to give them the right to self-governance



before they started rioting) as well as the victim of malignant internal betrayal. The film pits the desire for democracy as an ungrateful and seditious response to the efforts of a paternalistic government to take care of its people. Thus, the film in effect replays the essential drama at the heart of *The Birth of a Nation*, but in a different historical and geographical context. The mobs of democratic revolutionaries wreaking havoc on Alaine at the end of the film evoke not only the specter of the Red Summer's African American rioters, but also the image of Union soldiers and unruly Northerners terrorizing the South in the famous final minutes of Griffith's film. *His Majesty, The American* even cites some of what had already become the most iconic visual imagery of *The Birth of a Nation*. Although Bill and his cavalymen do not adorn the white hoods of Griffith's Klansmen, they are nevertheless enveloped in swathes of whiteness generated by the agitated soil under their hooves—a whiteness threatened by an encroaching and faceless black mass (Figure 5). The contradiction in terms represented in the very title of *His Majesty, The American* is expressive not just of the strained and disappointing image of Chaplin and Griffith rubbing elbows over a joint product, but also of the Capitol itself, where the removal of the gallery allows the North and the South to collapse into a single space of shared economic and racial interests.

[Figure 5]

Furthermore, the Capitol theater became a crucial site in the revival of *The Birth of a Nation* (hereafter, *Birth*). The April 26, 1921 issue of the *Evening World* published an open letter from Rothafel to Griffith asking permission to rerelease his 'great spectacle' starting on Sunday, May 1. In Griffith's response, which was published along with Rothafel's open letter, he gave his

‘hearty consent’ and promised, too, that he would be there in person to watch it (April 26, 1921, 16). Consequently, the screening went ahead at the Capitol and Griffith apparently kept his promise. According to James Weldon Johnson, Harlem Renaissance author and contributing editor of the African American newspaper the *New York Age*, Griffith and a group of his friends ‘occupied a box’ at the theater, whose façade had been ‘profusely decorated with Confederate flags.’ During intermission, Johnson continued, ‘the spot light was thrown’ on Griffith’s box while he stood up and ‘acknowledged the plaudits of the audience.’ Rothafel had apparently promised officials of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who had opposed the revival that he would remove 2,500 feet of the film that were especially offensive—a promise, Johnson recorded, that ‘was not kept’. Disgusted with the display of pro-Southern sentiment at the opening night of the rerelease, Johnson wrote that: “‘The southerner boasts so much of his superior aristocracy—and generally this superior aristocracy is bolstered up by the boast of having had a black mammy—that many of these Northerners who have never been South of the Potomac River are Professional Southerners. They are the people who most generally begin to applaud ‘Dixie’ as soon as the first strains are played”’ (May 14, 1921). The revival of *Birth* at the Capitol led to outrage in the African American community. On May 7, the *New York Times* reported that a protest took place in front of the theater the night before: ‘Negro ex-servicemen in Uniform, flanked by negro women gathered in front of the Capitol Theatre last night to protest against the revival of *The Birth of a Nation*.’ The message on some of the picket signs evinces the indignation that Stewart describes about the war effort: ‘We represented America in France,’ the signs apparently read, ‘why should *The Birth of a Nation* misrepresent us here?’ Other protestors passed around material from the NAACP that stated, ‘[s]top the Ku

Klux Klan propaganda in New York' (*New York Times* May 7, 1921, 8). According to the newspaper report, protesters were arrested after refusing to obey police commands to stop.

## **Conclusion**

The October 26, 1919 issue of the *New York Tribune* reported that the Capitol 'now can be accepted as one of the real sights of the Gay White Way, which,' it assures its readers, 'is still White' (*New York Tribune* October 26, 1919, 5). The phrase refers to a 1907 musical written by Ludwig Engländer, but plays on what had long been Broadway's nickname: The Great White Way. Referring to the theaters' abundant electric lighting that came to distinguish Broadway from the rest of the city, the term nevertheless underscores how the experience of the Capitol was framed persistently within a racial framework. In assuring readers that the Capitol has not compromised Broadway's whiteness, the article confirms the spectacular quality of the new and enormous theater. But at a deeper register, it also linguistically entangles quality with color. The Capitol does not just provide good entertainment; it provides white entertainment. Of course, further research is vital in determining the extent to which African Americans did or did not attend the Capitol. Data on the racial makeup of the theater's audiences would reveal whether the strategies that Bowes and his team deployed to racially police the theater succeeded—or even needed to succeed. Indeed, if the *New York Age* article about the *Birth* revival demonstrates anything, it is that many African Americans likely saw through Bowes's tactics and preferred to attend venues that weren't so structurally, discursively, and textually predicated on their exclusion. Moreover, Regester and Stewart have shown how even in the various white supremacist contexts of the film industry and its exhibition venues, African American

moviegoers managed to develop ‘reconstructive’ spectatorial strategies that, in Stewart’s words, enabled them to ‘reconstitute and assert themselves’ (Regeester 2005, 114; Stewart 2005, 94).

Those throngs of people shattering the glass doors to get inside the Capitol—themselves unknowing doubles of the Red Summer rioters—were met by a ‘burst of color’ once they entered the auditorium (*Moving Picture World* November 8, 1919, 225). What many African Americans probably realized without having to go inside, was that beneath the veneer of those reds, golds, and blues, was always white. It is therefore not surprising that while news of the Capitol’s enormity spread across the country, the *New York Age*, New York City’s then top African American newspaper, did not announce the opening of the world’s so-called largest theater.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> *Photoplay* got the opening date wrong, in fact. The Capitol opened on October 24, 1919, while *Photoplay* reported it as having been opened ‘in November’.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the significance of African American migration to and throughout New York City as it related to Black film culture, see Agata Frymus (2023).

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## Notes on contributor

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