FOOLS (1998) has the distinction of being the first postapartheid film to be directed by a black South African, Ramadan Suleman. This fact alone links it, somewhat nebulously, to the celebration of things “first,” that gripped South Africa’s public imagination from the early to mid-1990s: first black president, first racially inclusive cabinet, first black Miss South Africa, and so forth. These achievements are necessarily suffused with significance due to the historically overdetermining denial of opportunities to black South Africans. Its claim to fame, as a film that virtually inaugurated black filmmakers’ assumption of principal roles in cinema production post-1994, aligns Fools with the greater realization of the unconditional reentry of blacks into South Africa’s public life. Even so, as an adaptation of the Noma award-winning novella of the same name, the film realizes its pioneering status not through a celebration of the democratic moment of 1994, but by intervening, through a retrospective gesture, into the public engagements on gender relations. The novella (1983) by academic, critic, and author Njabulo Ndebele, is set in South Africa in 1966. This chapter discusses how from its inception, production, and extended public life, Fools stimulated critical engagements on gender relations particularly in relation to black identity. Two key concerns inform the chapter’s inquiry. The first concern is about the status of the problematic of gender relations in public debates that are engendered through the film. The chapter inquires into the kinds of public critical engagements on gender that Fools enables. Second, the chapter asks, as an auteurist film that stands at a critical distance from dominant articulations of a triumphalist nationalism, how does Fools animate public engagements?

The film opens with a long shot trained on a hillock. It follows the silhouette of Forgive Me, a tramp, walking among tall aloes. He descends from the hillock, shouting a Christian refrain: “Forgive them father for they know
Figure 5.1  Mimi holding chicken, courtesy of Natives at Large and Cedric Nunn.