

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

NO LONGER 'ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN': OSCAR
MICHEAUX'S ROLE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF A BLACK
AMERICAN FILM FORM

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ABSTRACT
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by Niamh Doheny

This thesis investigates the part played by Oscar Micheaux's films, between 1919 and 1939, in the construction of a black American film form, whose narrative system responded to the concerns of African Americans in a style that diverged from traditional Hollywood cinematic forms. As well as studying Micheaux's extant films, this thesis examines black newspapers from the 1920s and 1930s to identify trends in public discourse within the African American, urban communities of Harlem and Chicago, thus allowing an understanding of Micheaux's reception context and socio-cultural context. Although research on Micheaux's work has become more common in recent years, little work has been done on the effect that Hollywood black cast movies had on his films' reception and on the part played by the black press in influencing public reaction to his movies. Nor has any attention been paid to the way in which Micheaux employed public discourse in his narratives or the manner in which his films played with forms developed in white culture to create a new cinematic form, more appropriate to the telling of African American stories.

This thesis contributes to Micheaux scholarship in several substantive ways. In it, I look at the role played by the black press, particularly the *New York Amsterdam News*, in the development of a black American film form, focusing on the paper's contrasting treatment of Micheaux's work and Hollywood's black-cast movies of the early sound period. I then consider the ways in which Micheaux's films developed a narrative system that reflected upon prevalent debates in the black newspapers, particularly those debates that centred on the nature of African American identity. This leads to the exploration of the manner in which Micheaux's film narratives responded to this discourse and, in the process, constructed a positive racial identity for his audience. My research also concentrates on the ways that Micheaux expropriated elements of two traditionally 'white' modes of representation, minstrelsy and melodrama, to construct a narrative system and style that rewrote the African American past and present from a new, African American perspective. To conclude, I explore the convergence of Micheaux's film form, as evidenced in the previous chapters' discussion, with that devised by blaxploitation era African American filmmakers, to argue that Micheaux should be regarded as their cinematic ancestor who developed a film form that spoke for, and to, African Americans alone.

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Note: I have made every effort to ensure that the footnotes appear on the relevant page. Unfortunately, due to formatting problems, it has not been possible to achieve this in every case.

Introduction

In 1996, as an exchange student in America, I took a class on the history of film narrative. One week we were shown a film by an obscure, independent African American filmmaker from the early twentieth century. This was my introduction to the work of Oscar Micheaux. My first impression of the film, *Within Our Gates* (1919), was that it was shoddily edited and riddled with errors in continuity, but contained images (particularly of a black family's lynching) that were too vivid to forget. Back in Ireland, my curiosity about Micheaux grew. Was he prolific? How well was he known? How did African Americans receive his films?¹ From various Internet sites I learned the basics of his biography: born in Illinois in 1884, he was a former homesteader - turned novelist - turned filmmaker who made over 40 films between 1919 and 1948. Working independently of Hollywood on a shoestring budget, his productions centred on the struggle of African Americans to improve their lot in the face of opposition from the white establishment and intra-racial conflicts. These narratives were often adapted from newspaper reports, his own novels and those of the African American novelist, Charles Chesnutt. He was the only African American filmmaker who managed to sustain a lengthy film career, despite a bankruptcy in 1928² and a decline in the popularity of his films (and race films in general)³ throughout the 1930s. The late 1910s and early 1920s saw his greatest success, with distribution outlets in New York, Chicago, Texas, London and Paris. More significantly, at this time African American audiences were urged by the black press to support his work. Although research has suggested that *Within Our Gates* (1919) and *The Brute* (1920) were exhibited in Europe, his films were not marketed to a white audience in America. His last film, *The*

¹ For the purposes of this thesis, the term 'African American' is used to denote both Caribbean- and African-Americans, as essentially they were not differentiated by American laws in the early twentieth century, segregation extending to all people of (black) colour, and both groups being considered to be 'Negroes'.

² This was the second time he went bankrupt, the first was caused by the failure of his homestead in the early 1900s.

Betrayal (1948) signified his return to filmmaking after an eight-year hiatus, but unfortunately it received uniformly bad reviews and Micheaux was bankrupted once more, dying in obscurity in 1951. He was largely forgotten until the 1970s when the Black Filmmakers' Hall of Fame began to award pioneering black filmmakers the Oscar Micheaux award. Subsequently, his name has been added to Hollywood Boulevard's stars, and the Director's Guild of America awarded him a posthumous lifetime achievement award. As more of his films have become available for retail through specialist video stores on the Internet, such as Facets and Discount Video Tapes, interest in Micheaux's work has grown considerably.⁴

Consequently, we have learned quite a bit about early black cinema's industrial context and, more specifically, the operations of Micheaux's organisation. Sampson's *Blacks in Black and White* (1977, 1995) included a list of the many race film companies that sprung up (and collapsed within a year or so) in the late 1910s and 1920s. This list illuminated the difficulties that faced race filmmakers of this period, financial and organisational: most did not have the necessary infrastructure to survive and so generally failed after the production of only one feature. The lack of any central distribution exchange for African American independent producers severely impeded their opportunities to exhibit: each film company was obliged to set up its own vertically integrated system. However in the face of Hollywood's might and their own lack of financial wherewithal it was unlikely that they would be successful.

Thomas Cripps' *Slow Fade to Black* (1977) contained a more detailed look at Micheaux's only real competitors in race filmmaking: the Johnson Brothers. According to Cripps, the Los Angeles-based Lincoln Motion Picture Company, run by Noble and George Johnson, was the most successful film company after Micheaux's. Incorporated in 1916, with capital of \$75,000, it was headed by the (black) actor Noble Johnson, his

³ The terms 'race movies' and 'race films' signify films about and for African Americans, generally produced by an African American team.

⁴ For a more detailed account of Micheaux's biography and industrial context see the Chronological Table in Appendix One. For detailed plot synopses, see Appendix Two.

brother George Johnson, the (black) actors Clarence and Dudley Brooks, Dr. J. Thomas Smith, a wealthy (black) druggist and Harry A Gant, a (white) cameraman. George Johnson organised a distribution circuit of black theatres, employing Tony Langston, the editor of the *Chicago Defender*, and Romeo L Dougherty, editor of the *Amsterdam News*, to set up exchanges in Chicago and New York. Distribution elsewhere was handled by 'wild cat' advance men who brought the films from town to town to show the exhibitors, who in turn booked them for later dates. Generally the average daily rental was \$25 or, in the case of theatres that could not afford this rate, a 60-40 split of the box-office, favouring the film company. However, this latter approach was not always profitable, dependant as it was on the weather (Sampson 1977, 1995: 140). According to Cripps, more than any other contemporary race company '[they] carried the notion of a black aesthetic to its limits as a social force' (76). A self-sufficient company, they printed their own advertising handbills to promote each new release and established their own, all-Negro film exchange. Cripps (1977) has noted that, by 1917, they had exchanges and press agents in most black ghettos in the United States (80). The Johnsons produced several films in the late 1910s, 'genteel stories [that] pictured larger-than-life, exceptional individuals,' praised for their valour rather than their industry (Bowser and Spence, 2000: 183-4), in contrast with Micheaux's films that worshipped the industry and diligence of average African Americans. Nonetheless, although these Lincoln movies were popular, it still proved impossible for the company to turn a profit. Their film *A Man's Duty* (1920) was the first race movie to run two days in Oakland and Atlanta, yet it only recouped one hundred dollars gross per day (Cripps 1977: 85). Cripps' research has revealed that the brothers watched Micheaux's emergence anxiously (82). In the early 1920s the company folded and, in effect, Micheaux's competition in the race film field disappeared.

These two books also offered insight into the working practices of Micheaux's film company. Working in isolation of Hollywood and other race producers, Micheaux wrote, directed, cast, produced, advertised and distributed his own movies from 1919 until 1940. Entering the race movie business at its inception and producing nearly fifty

films over thirty years, his films played a hugely significant part in the development of the race movie. His first film, *The Homesteader*, was financed by his fellow farmers, black and white, the budget of \$15,000 raised by selling stock in his production company at \$100 per share to the same farmers that had previously bought his books. Aided by the black press's exhortations to its readers to patronise Micheaux's films, the movie was a box-office success. Endorsed by the press as the sole producer of relevant films for African Americans, Micheaux's career went from strength to strength through the early 1920s. Distribution in the early years was arranged in a similar manner to that employed by the Johnsons, except that it was usually Micheaux who travelled among the theatres, inveigling them to hire his movie and promising that the next would be even greater. On the strength of these claims, he often got exhibitors to invest in his next feature. By 1921, he had distributing agents in Virginia, Texas, Chicago, London and Paris (Sampson 1977, 1995: 151). Infusing some glamour into the industry, Micheaux built up a star system, promoting his stars (many of whom were members of the prestigious Lafayette Players of New York) and organising elegant premiers for his films, complete with limousines and spotlights. A tireless self-promoter, the advertisements for his films that appeared regularly in the black press were eye-catching and large, and he was a frequent contributor to the black newspapers, writing on topics ranging from the future of the black community to the need for race movies. Nevertheless, working within such a limited market – by 1921, at the height of race movie popularity, there were only one hundred and twenty one theatres that exhibited an 'exclusive colored product,' 84% of which had an average of only two hundred and fifty seats, in contrast with the twenty two thousand white theatres available to Hollywood throughout the country – Micheaux had to file for bankruptcy in 1928. Even though he established a new film company almost immediately, his films were never to regain their former glory, a point that will be explored in greater detail in Chapter One. His budget seldom rose above fifteen thousand dollars and it became increasingly difficult to compete with Hollywood once it began to make black-cast movies, as I will display in Chapter One. By 1941,

Micheaux had returned to novel writing, returning to filmmaking only once more, in 1948, to make *The Betrayal*.

The study of Micheaux's work and early black American cinema in general, has gathered momentum over the past ten years, with the increased availability of Micheaux films and better understanding of Micheaux's cultural context resulting in a more nuanced sense than before of Micheaux's significance in the history of black American cinema, by which term I mean a cinema in which the creative force, narrative and cinematic structures and market were controlled by African Americans. Research on Micheaux, to date, has largely fallen into three general areas. The most enduring subject for scholarly dispute has been the movies' treatment of race. Since the mid-1980s this has been the topic for many articles, all of which vary in their reading of Micheaux's depiction of the African American character. For some, Micheaux's films represented an exercise in 'white racism' (Young 1989), propagating traditional negative stereotypes of the African American. For others, these movies signified an attempt to 'celebrate blackness' (hooks 1991). Another site of dynamic academic debate has centred on Micheaux's movies' narratives and visual style. Within this area there has been considerable discussion of the merits of Micheaux's visual strategies and use of genre: critics and filmmakers have offered several ways to view the films, ranging from 'primitive' and 'amateur' (Cripps 1993) to deliberately anti-classical (Green 2000, Jaffa 2001). The aspect of Micheaux studies that has received most attention in recent years, however, has been the filmmaker's cultural context. Research on the Lafayette Players (Thompson 2001), the African American press (Regester 2001), uplift literature (Gaines 2001b) and popular stage plays of the 1920s (Musser 2001) has increased our knowledge of Micheaux's cultural environment, which in turn has aided me in my understanding of his audience's cultural context. The objective of this thesis is to develop and expand on the research undertaken by my predecessors to investigate the confluence of socio-political conditions, genre adaptation and contemporary reception in Micheaux's movies.

The central aim of my research is to determine the role played by Micheaux's films in the construction of a black American film form in the period between the two World Wars; by which I mean a film form that reflected upon African American concerns for black American audiences, using cinematic and narrative techniques that departed from classical Hollywood conventions. More specifically, by 'form' I mean Bordwell and Thompson's (1997) use of the term to signify both style (the cinematic techniques of editing, cinematography, *mise en scène* and sound) and narrative system⁵ (narrative structures and content, characterisation). It will become evident that Micheaux's narrative system developed characters and themes that reflected contemporary African American society and its concerns, as well as refuting white American cinema's (in other words, Hollywood's) delineation of African American identity. Looking at Micheaux's style, we will see that his use of editing, cinematography, sound and *mise en scène* signalled an attempt to break from and challenge classical stylistic conventions. Thus we will see how Micheaux developed his own unique film form that differed from white American cinema in both its narrative system and style.

Literature Review

Overall, in the 1970s, literature on Micheaux appeared only in anthologies of early black American cinema that traced the development of race films in general, rather than focusing specifically on any one filmmaker. Thomas Cripps (1977, 1979), Henry Sampson (1977, reprinted in 1995), Daniel Leab (1975), Gary Null (1975) Donald Bogle (1973, reprinted in 1997) James Murray (1973) and Jim Pines (1974) provided invaluable accounts of race films and Hollywood race movies. Their success was in building an overview of the development of race movies without the benefit of such indexes and resources available to later scholars. These books were useful in the early stages of my research in providing a general picture of the race film industry in its infancy and Micheaux's place within the American film industry. However, driven as they were by a desire to paint in broad strokes, these books could not examine black

⁵ I have replaced Bordwell and Thompson's term 'formalist system' with 'narrative system' in order to avoid confusion between 'formalist' and 'form' throughout the thesis.

American cinema or Micheaux's films in any depth, leading to debatable assessments of their artistic merits such as Cripps' description of race films in general:

[Most black film companies] operated on the lowest level of a black aesthetic, merely presenting Negro images on a screen, often little different from their counterpart in white movies. Rarely did they depart from comedic forms, and practically never did the black protagonists have a stake in the denouement (1977: 83).

In the case of Micheaux at least, this is an unfair evaluation. His movies may have borrowed from white modes of representation but they did so in such a way that they constructed a separate, new film form, divorced from white concerns. In addition, as can be seen from the plot synopses in Appendix Two, very few Micheaux films could be categorised as comedies and in every film Micheaux's black protagonists are fully responsible for the denouement. Thus, with the benefit of improved access to Micheaux's films and contextual archive material, this thesis will fill in the cracks of 1970s scholarship.

Between the late 1980s and late 1990s, critical opinion of Micheaux's work shifted radically. Initially, Grupenhoff (1988), Green and Neal (1988) and Young (1989) followed the 1970's lead in dismissing Micheaux's artistic ability. As Grupenhoff wrote,

Micheaux was not a film artist, nor was he a meticulous craftsman; at best he was a novelist working as a filmmaker (44).

Green and Neal's piece was relentlessly critical of Micheaux's films, listing the 'racial slurs' and instances of a caste system that they saw endorsed by his narratives. A similar argument was put forth in the following year by Joseph Young's (1989) book, *Black Novelist as White Racist*. As the title suggests, Young contended that Micheaux,

rather than attempting to improve the lot of African Americans, was struck by a need to despise them. This book focused primarily on Micheaux's novels (with only one chapter on his films) and was ridiculously excessive in its criticism of Micheaux's work: nothing was redeemed, no alternative reading of books or films was allowed. This criticism was one-dimensional and failed to note the subversive element behind Micheaux's employment of stereotypes. Still, Young's book marked a watershed of kinds in the criticism of Micheaux, representing the first time a lengthy study of his work had been attempted.

By 1998, however, Green had reconsidered his earlier criticism of Micheaux's use of caricature, arguing instead that Micheaux's use of caricature and negative racial portraits stemmed from a desire to challenge them, not accede to them. Yet his reading of Micheaux's use of minstrelsy persisted in seeing the tradition's caricatures as something in need of reprobation. This is an interpretation that I dispute; minstrelsy in Micheaux's films is more ambiguously treated than Green suggests, as will become evident in the course of Chapter Three. Nevertheless, Green's change in attitude is indicative of an increasingly positive, nuanced reception of Micheaux's movies that became evident throughout the 1990s.

The very title of bell hooks 1991 article, 'Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness,' indicates an interpretation that diverged from her immediate predecessors, as did her view that Micheaux's films interrogated, rather than endorsed, the traditional intra-racial caste system, calling for a 'celebration of blackness in all its diversity and complexity' (360). This revised opinion of Micheaux, which I share, was reinforced by a plethora of material, published in 1993, which focused on Micheaux's films. For example, Mark Reid's (1993) *Redefining Black Film* contained a section devoted to Micheaux and black action films. According to Reid, Micheaux's films catered to the urban African American audience, reflecting a 'proud, aggressive New Negro' (12). Reid also perceived a combative stance in these films that, he maintained, paved the way for the more revolutionary black cinema of the 1970s. Reid's perception of a link between

Micheaux's work and black cinema of the 1970s is interesting, yet he failed to analyse it in any depth. Redressing this oversight in Micheaux studies, I have developed Reid's idea in Chapter Four, examining the similarities and differences between Micheaux's work and the film form espoused by African Americans such as Melvin Van Peebles in the 1970s. 1993 also saw the publication of Manthia Diawara's *Black American Cinema*, in which Thomas Cripps (1993a) and Ronald Green (1993) engaged in a debate on the merits of Micheaux's style. Cripps valued Micheaux's films as social documents rather than stylistic accomplishments, while Green insisted that Micheaux's 'rough' style was wholly appropriate to his narratives. The schism between these two approaches has persisted in Micheaux studies; scholars have discussed either the social value of his films or the aesthetic merit without combining the two methodologies. This thesis aims to bridge this gap by looking at the interplay between narrative system, style and Micheaux's socio-cultural context. Other works on Micheaux's films by Jane Gaines (1993, 1996) and Susan Gillman (1999) have depicted the filmmaker as a commentator on the realities of life as an African American in the South. I concur with this idea but I take it in another direction, to see how his films commented on the socio-political conditions of black life in the urban areas of the Northern United States.

Throughout the 1990s, knowledge of Micheaux's work and context gradually increased. The past three years, in particular, have seen an increase in the interest shown in Micheaux's films, with the publication of three books devoted to exploring his movies. These books, combined with other recent work on race movies in general,⁶ have continued the trend begun in the 1990s of offering less polarised interpretations of Micheaux's films and their value, and situating them in their contemporary contexts.⁷ Bowser, Gaines and Musser (2001) and Bowser and Spence (2000) have looked at Micheaux's films within their historical and cultural context. Ronald Green (2000) has argued for a less condemnatory reading of Micheaux's use of caricature. These works have offered interesting insights into Micheaux's movies that I have considered in my

⁶ See Jane Gaines (2001). *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press).

own reading of Micheaux's movies. However, on the whole, they have neglected Micheaux's extant sound movies and limited their study by focusing on the three silent films in circulation. This decision to limit the scope of their research is based on the hope that 'future work will be done on Micheaux the novelist and on the director's sound-era films' (Bowser, Gaines and Musser 2001: xix). This thesis aims to take up the latter part of this directive, giving equal attention to his films from both the sound and silent eras. My aim is to provide as comprehensive a critique as possible of Micheaux's cinematic oeuvre, hence my thesis spans from 1919 to 1939.

The favourable re-assessment of Micheaux's oeuvre in the 1990s was undoubtedly aided by the recent growth in research of early race movies in general, which has called for a more complicated understanding of early race films than the 1970s surveys allowed. Valerie Smith (1997), Stuart Hall (1997) and Tommy Lott (1997) have argued against the essentialism impulse that defines 'black' and 'white' cinema as mutually exclusive, a position that has influenced my study (see section on hybridity, below). The more notable trend in race film studies has been the focus on reception, namely the relationship between African American audiences' relationship and black American and Hollywood films. Clyde Taylor's (1993) 'Crossed Over and Can't Get Black' researched the period from 1937 to 1939, a time that he argues saw the demise of independent black cinema at the hands of Hollywood, not to re-emerge until the late 1960s due to the increasingly sophisticated, urbanised black audiences' demands for 'high quality' features over race movies. While Taylor's piece is illuminating, my research has suggested that the crisis in independent black cinema occurred earlier than he claims. I argue that the release of the Hollywood black-cast films, *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and *Hallelujah!* (1929), signalled the beginning of the end for race movies' popularity both with the black press and their black audience. Thus, James Snead's (1994) theory that the race films industry, and Micheaux's career in particular, declined due to the rising popularity of Hollywood films appears quite true. However Snead does not consider the reason behind this change in black audiences' preference; he

⁷ See Bowser, Gaines and Musser (2001), Bowser and Spence (2000), and Green (2000).

claims that it was a simple partiality for the slicker production values in the Hollywood products. This was undoubtedly a factor but my research indicates that it was more complicated than that: the black press urged these black audiences to embrace Hollywood as the site that promised the cultivation of a black American film form. In the same way that the press had insisted, in the 1920s, that patronising a Micheaux films would develop the race's chances of advancement, in the early 1930s it argued that Hollywood films were the way of the future for a black American cinema.

Mary Carbine's (1996) article, 'The Finest Outside the Loop,' offered an excellent insight into African American reception of early Hollywood products and race movies. Using contemporary newspaper articles, she contextualised the black spectatorship experience in Chicago during the silent period arguing that, despite the predomination of Hollywood products screened, African American audiences created a culturally distinctive and race-conscious space for themselves in the theatre. Her article depicted an audience that was capable of reading against the (Hollywood) grain, transforming the cinema theatre into a site of race consciousness and an 'expression of difference' (253). Although her research did not include reference to Micheaux's work, this article led me to a better understanding of his audiences and their willingness and ability to engage actively with the issues raised in his narratives, and laid the foundations for my own work on the African American reception of Micheaux's films from 1919 to 1940. My research of the decline in press and audience support of Micheaux's work in the 1930s contrasted so starkly with Carbine's depiction of an enthusiastic and engaged press and audience in the preceding decade that it lead me to investigate the reason for this change in attitude. This resulted in my study of the black press's reception of Hollywood black-cast movies in the 1930s, which forms the basis of Chapter One.

Research on Hollywood's treatment of race and its African American talent during the inter-war period can be placed in two categories: the general survey and the specified analysis of specific character types or employees in the Hollywood system. What both have in common is their depiction of a studio system in which any identity other than

white was uneasily handled, if it was dealt with at all. Donald Bogle's (1973, 1997) survey criticises Hollywood for relegating its actors to the stereotyped roles of servants and jesters. In his view, Hollywood cinema did not allow for a fully realised portrait of African American life. Catherine and John Silk (1990) paint a similarly bleak and simplistic portrait of a racist Hollywood. They claim that Hollywood's racism derived from laziness and a desire to appease the Southern box-office, rather than conviction, however they offer no primary analysis to substantiate this assertion. While his overarching argument runs along similar lines, Thomas Cripps' (1977) consideration of the position of African American in the studios contains a more detailed picture of the small successes that black actors achieved instead of lambasting the studios for their colour bias.

More useful to me were the articles that focused on individual case studies. Phyllis Klotman's (1993) essay on black writers employed by Hollywood, focussing particularly on the short-lived career of Wallace Thurman, highlights the studio resistance to producing any work that dealt with African Americans in a more rounded, humanised manner than usual in the 1930s. Thomas Cripps' (1978) appreciation of the work of writer Spencer Williams presents a similar picture of African American impotence against studio resistance to change. Both Cripps (1977) and Anna Everett (2001) have examined the outrage experienced by black Americans on the release of *Birth of a Nation*, neither work attempting to recover the film from its position as racist diatribe. Similarly, we have James Snead (1997) rather generalising claim that in Hollywood cinema, 'Blackness in motion is typically sensed as a threat on screen, so black movement in film is usually restricted to highly bracketed and confinable activities, such as sports or entertainment' (3). Ian Jarvie (1991) has pointed out that such racial relegation was not limited to African Americans. As his study of the top 10 box-office attractions between 1931 and 1952 concludes, stars were invariably white and possessed (or claimed to possess) an Anglo- or Irish-American lineage. Although my work approaches the issue of Hollywood and race from a different angle in my consideration of African American treatment of Hollywood and its convention, these

works helped me to situate myself in the viewing context of African Americans of this period and understand its repercussions for race films. The potential appeal of a race movie in which black instead of white was the norm became clearer to me and increased my appreciation of the importance of Micheaux's movies.

Little has been written on the confluence of melodrama and race in the cinema. Even though melodrama has been recovered by scholars such as Peter Brooks (1976), Thomas Elsaesser (1972, reprinted in 1987) and Christine Gledhill (1987), so that it is now recognised as an ideal form for providing a voice for repressed emotions and oppressed social groups, the use of this mode of representation in black American cinema in Hollywood race films has not been similarly reassessed. Bowser and Spence (2000) have briefly commented on Micheaux's use of the melodramatic trope of mistaken identity to challenge the idea 'that racial identity might be knowable' (164). This is undoubtedly true, yet it does not go far enough. Jane Gaines' (2001) work on the use of melodrama in early race movies is the primary text on the subject and contains some useful observations. Echoing Brooks and Elsaesser, she attributes much of the race movies' appeal to its use of a form that offered a voice to the socially marginalised population that was African Americans. Yet her study of melodrama is limited by her refusal to look beyond the silent era and her evident bias against race films of the sound period. This neglect of the 1930s has left a considerable gap that my research aims to address. Linda Williams' (2001) work represents the only comprehensive study of Hollywood's treatment of race melodramas, constructing a binary of Tom/anti-Tom (i.e. sympathetic to African Americans/ not) that she claims Hollywood race melodramas veered between. This is an interesting book but I feel that the binary she proposes is unnecessarily restrictive, it does not allow for any fluidity between the two options, nor does it consider this binary from an African American perspective. Nevertheless, it has served as a helpful starting point in my consideration of Micheaux's use of melodrama, as have all the above texts.

Literature on minstrelsy entered its most productive phase in the early 1970s with the publication of work by Nathan Huggins (1971) and Robert Toll (1974), in which both attempted to address the signification of the performance blackface minstrelsy. Both distanced minstrelsy from its racial connotations, Huggins by pointing out the intrinsically subversive potential for social comment and parody that the mask of the blackface offered African American performers and Toll by his research into the mode's nineteenth-century origins. Toll emphasised the social and geographic mobility that minstrelsy offered African American performers in the nineteenth century and suggested that black audiences' reception of African American minstrels differed from the reaction they accorded white performers at that time. In addition, he suggested that minstrelsy provided white audiences with 'one of the only bases that many of them had for understanding America's increasing ethnic diversity' (169): minstrels often bore Irish and German accents and discussed the new immigrants for their white viewers. These ideas have been reinforced by more recent revisions of minstrelsy, such as the work by William J. Mahar (1985), Michael Rogin (1994), and especially Eric Lott (1991 and 1995) and Dale Cockrell (1997). Lott has argued that minstrelsy's origins lay in nineteenth-century white Americans' simultaneous wish to sublimate their fears of black sexuality and their admiration of black cultural traditions (hence hit title, *Love and Theft*). Dale Cockrell (1997) also considered the origins of minstrelsy, locating them in nineteenth-century white European and West Indian folk traditions whose function was social regulation and in which the assumption of a mask, such as a black face, bore no racialised or racist connotation. My work has drawn from each of these works in combination with my research of primary materials. However, I have changed the focus somewhat to look at their implications for minstrelsy during the inter-war period of the twentieth century, a period neglected until now. From my examination of the articles on minstrel shows and their advertisements printed in the black newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, in the 1920s and 1930s, I substantiate Toll's reading of a varying black reception of minstrelsy. In addition, my analysis of cartoons from the same paper suggests that Eric Lott's characterisation of minstrelsy as a form of fetish could be extended to the 1920s and 1930s. Examination of Micheaux's use of minstrelsy forms

leads me to conclude that the positive, regulatory values of nineteenth-century minstrelsy asserted by Cockrell were also still in evidence in the inter-war period.

Another important element in my research has been the study of the black press in the inter-war period, particularly that published in New York and Chicago. Remarkably little has been written on this area to date. Since I. Garland Penn's examination of the emergence of a black press and its editors in the nineteenth century, published in 1891, there have been only two works that addressed the subject in any detail. Armistead Pride and Clinton Wilson's *History of the Black Press* (1997) represents an ambitious chronicle of the function and development of the press, including newspapers and magazines, from 1827 to the end of the 1990s. Accessible and well illustrated, this book provides a celebration of the press as the champion of black civil rights over the decades. However, inherent in its broad historical scope, like the 1970s anthologies of black American cinema, it has by necessity painted a general picture of the press with no space given to the detailed exploration of any specific newspaper.

This is also the case with the other work on the black press, Anna Everett's genealogy of film criticism in the black press between the years of 1909 and 1949. Her study works on the general level; the microcosm is ignored. As a result, I would argue, her relegation of 1930s film criticism to two discrete categories of 'accommodationist' and 'radical' is rather simplistic and not necessarily accurate. Her cultivation of this binary is not productive, leading as it does to an excessively reductive understanding of the stances available to the press in their discussion of Hollywood and race films. In addition, her claim that those 'accommodationist' papers became a 'shadow auxiliary of Hollywood's promotional machine' as the 1930s progressed (198) is not held up by my close examination of leading black papers such as the *New York Amsterdam News*, a paper she nominates as 'accommodationist.' As such, my research contests many of her findings. My analysis of the *Amsterdam News* indicates that, contrary to Everett's claim that the press displayed a 'largely favorable predisposition' to race films (199), this was not the case. The black press's attitude to race films was complex and

changeable throughout the 1930s. Additionally, Everett (201) argues that Oscar Micheaux's films were positively received by the black press throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but my research has found that his relationship with the black press was a volatile one. Finally, her reading of the 'accommodationist' press's relationship with Hollywood presents no recognition of the downturn in support given by the papers from circa 1936 that becomes evident from close scrutiny of the *Amsterdam News*.

Other research on the black press by Charlene Regester (2001) and Clyde Taylor (1993) has looked more specifically at its relationship with Micheaux and between 1919 and 1927, and its treatment of race movies in general between 1937 and 1939, respectively. Regester sees Micheaux's treatment by the press as characterised by three distinct phases, changing from positive in 1919 to increasingly critical in the mid 1920s, to hostile by 1929. My research of the *Amsterdam News* and other prominent black papers such as the *New York Age* and *Chicago Defender*, however, contends this claim, arguing that in fact until 1929 there is no perceptible freezing in the relationship between the filmmaker and the press. Similarly, my work contests Clyde Taylor's theory. My research of the communist weekly the *Daily Worker*, the paper on which he bases his claim that the press's rejection of race movies occurred between 1937 and 1939, shows that this rejection had emerged many years before and was motivated, primarily, by the desire to promote a communist alternative cinema.

Crucially, little research has been undertaken on the black press's reception of Hollywood black-cast films in the early sound period. Nor has the press's treatment of Micheaux's work through the 1930s been addressed. Through my study of the New York black press I have been able to add to our understanding of the role played by the press in shaping public reception of Micheaux's work from 1919 to 1940. My research has revealed that the black press's reception of Micheaux's oeuvre was profoundly influenced by its reception of contemporary Hollywood black-cast films. Additionally, drawing from the discourses evident in the articles and readers' letter in the black press of the 1920s and 1930s, I have been able to explore the way in which Micheaux's work

responded to a key question in the African American community in the inter-war period: 'Who Is a Negro?' Consequently, this has assisted me in determining the extent to which Micheaux's films offered a forum in which pressing issues in the black community could be debated. Looking at the way his movies both fed into and drew from the social discourses of his time has thus allowed a closer understanding of how these films constructed a film form that catered exclusively to the black community.

Having used the word 'exclusively' I now need to qualify it. It is not my intention to argue that these films would be inaccessible to anyone other than an African American, after all I am a white Irish person and they appealed hugely to me. Rather, I mean to say that the movies catered exclusively to a black American audience in as much as that was the only audience available to them in the United States and there is an evident effort to place the narratives within a distinctly African American context, rather than a broader American context. I want to avoid cultivating an essentialist myth of 'authentic blackness' around Micheaux's movies, as this is neither helpful nor true to his work. To adapt Jane Gaines' (2001) response to the concept of 'realism,' to promote an essentialist idea of a 'real' black identity is only to foist upon the black American population an empirical claim as limiting as any previous racial delineations constructed by white culture. Moreover, as my research of his treatment of uplift and passing for white displays, Micheaux's films emphasise the diversity of African American identity and ambition within the black community. His films do not prioritise one ideal African American identity: there is no distinction made between the men who work within the white-lead police force or collaborate with white producers and those who do not associate with whites. More crucially, although I argue that his films contributed to the construction of a black American film form that was divorced from white concerns or interests, I do not contend that they were equally divorced from white influences. In short, Micheaux's films tackled issues that were of interest to the black community and addressed themselves to black audiences through their in-jokes about current events and trials in the black community, but to do so Micheaux made use of performance traditions and modes of representation that had their origins in

white culture. For example, I will address the way in which Micheaux's films expropriated the racial stereotypes of African Americans that had been circulated by white culture, particularly early Hollywood cinema, to exorcise and reconstitute them in a manner more favourable to black Americans. Additionally, we will see how he adapted minstrelsy and melodrama to construct a form that diverged from white traditions to speak to and for African Americans.

Micheaux's hybrid of white American traditions and African American culture enabled him to construct and disseminate a positive racial identity and constitute a proud, equal African American community, contrary to claims by writers as varied as the African writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993) and post-colonialist theorist Benita Parry (Loomba 1998) that such a conjoining of cultures should only negate his efforts. Although Ngugi wa Thiong'o might claim that any association with a dominant white culture could only reinforce feelings of 'colonial alienation' in a black person in colonial African, we will see that Micheaux's engagement with the minstrelsy tradition and previous white melodramas fulfils Chinua Achebe's (1993) prediction that such an exercise allows for the representation of the African American experience from an inclusive, positive African American perspective. To wit, Micheaux's inhabitation of traditional racial stereotypes and white modes of representation works to subvert those modes' previous distortions of African American history and characters. In this way, Micheaux's movies appear to fulfil Henry Louis Gates' suggestion that African American culture has been at least partly built on the subversive imitation of white culture (Childs and Williams 1997: 81). Like T Thomas Fortune's pastiche of Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden' that asks 'What is the Black Man's Burden,/ Ye Gentile Parasites,/ Who crush and rob your brother/ Of his manhood and his rights,' Micheaux's hybrid interrogates preceding representational injustices meted out by white culture to black Americans.

In Micheaux's hands, racial stereotypes, minstrelsy, melodrama and Hollywood conventions of narrative structure and style came to signify new meanings for the black audiences that they addressed. As such, it is interesting to recognise the parallel

between Micheaux's 'extra-colonial' hybrid (deriving from outside any colonial setting) and Roberto Retmar's (1970) delineation of the hybrid as an anti-colonial tool in the hands of the self-conscious colonised (or post-colonial) subject. This collision of Micheaux's hybrid and post-colonial theories, and even the similarities between the African American's position in the United States and that of the post-colonial subject, is an interesting and as yet neglected proposition. Yet it is a parallel that I have been reluctant to develop in this thesis, aware as I am of the dangers of grafting theories concerning one culture and period onto a completely different context. As Ania Loomba (1998: 14) has noted, 'African-Americans and South African blacks, for example, may both be engaged in the reconstruction of their cultures, yet how can we forget that blacks in South Africa are the marginalized majority of the population or that African-Americans are citizens of the world's mightiest state although their own position within it might be marginal?' For this reason she argues that each nation must be considered on its own merits and in its own context and stresses the importance of 'specificities of locale' over any universalising impulse (17). This is by no means an uncommon opinion. Robert Stam and Louise Spence (1985) also contend that the analysis of racial stereotypes must consider cultural specificity, pointing out that North American stereotypes of blacks differ from those in South America. I would add that the cultural context is also vital in establishing what constituted a positive or negative image in a specific society at a given time – my research of the inter-war period has revealed that black reception of minstrelsy varied massively from its present day equivalent. Equally, we have Frantz Fanon's (1967) assertion of the necessity of temporal and cultural specificity in examining various colonised cultures as, '...in some circumstances the social is more important than the individual' (105).

Yet, despite this trepidation over cross-referencing oppressed cultures and colonised nations' cultures, such a transgression of contexts is sometimes both inevitable and helpful. Fanon himself, having expressly said that African Americans should not be compared with colonised Africans (1985: 173), proceeds to use 'African American jazz' as an example to illuminate his point on the way in which colonialists struggle to

defend native style (arguing that they do so in the hope that the culture works as a catharsis for the colonised people, without leading them to inciting rebellion) (195). The similarities are sometimes too self-evident to be denied: Ossie Davis' (1991) claim that the Hollywood images of African Americans affected their construction of their own self-image resonates with Stuart Hall's discussion of Caribbean blacks and the power of 'dominant regimes of representation' to 'make us see and experience *ourselves* as "Other.'" Nonetheless, it is not the purpose of this thesis to deliberate on the vagaries of post-colonial theory in general. My focus remains on Oscar Micheaux's films and their specific socio-cultural context and as such, only where reference to post-colonial theories can illuminate this subject will I engage with them.

On the whole, apart from my engagement with hybridity and Chapter Four's discussion of post-colonial theories of resistance in cinema, post-colonial theory has played only a minor role in my methodology. The psychoanalytically based variant employed by Bhabha (1983), Kaplan (1997) and Fanon (1967), with its assumption of an 'ideal viewer,' was discounted as I preferred to posit a culturally-specific approach that let the primary material speak for itself outside the parameters of a given theoretical framework and subsequently extrapolate a variety of readings and viewers (bourgeois, Communist, essentialist etc). For reasons explored above, Teshome H Gabriel's (1993) and Stam and Spence's (1985) essentialist distinctions between 'African' and 'Hollywood' conventions and 'Third World' and 'Hollywood' cinema, respectively, were equally unacceptable to me. Yet, there are convergences between my own methodology, outlined below, and that proposed by Edward Saïd (1978) in the introduction to his *Orientalism* in which he advocated a multi-disciplinary approach that placed the author of a text in his full socio-political and cultural context (12-14). Like Saïd, I believe that the contextualisation of the limitations (be they social, political or cultural) placed on Micheaux in this study will facilitate our appreciation of his ability and textual brilliance. Having defined what my methodology does *not* consist of it would perhaps be an opportune moment to delineate what it does entail.

Methodology

As Barbara Klinger (1989) has noted, a film text is never 'just itself,' surrounded as it is by other contextual factors, such as its reviews, its industry promotions and specific historical conditions (1994: xvi). A viewer's reading of the film is inevitably influenced by outside factors, thus opening the text to multiple readings. In this way the commercial epiphenomena (advertisements, promotions, interviews) and contextual factors (historical conditions) combine to produce 'distracted' viewers who take 'inferential walks' out of the diegetic plot to contemplate some external point that relates to the unfolding narrative (1989: *passim*). This notion of a distracted viewer is particularly relevant to African American audiences of the inter-war period. Mary Carbine's (1996) research on early film exhibition in Chicago's black communities reveals a lively interaction between audience members and the movies they watched as they commented to one another on the action unfolding on screen and shouted advice to the movies' characters. Indeed, Bowser and Spence (2001) have even suggested that certain race filmmakers encouraged this distraction, inserting scenes that would provoke a reaction.⁸

I will explore the nature of some of the 'inferential walks' available to African American viewers of Micheaux's films in the 1920s and 1930s. But rather than focus solely on the epiphenomena attached to his films' release I will also look at those themes in his films that engaged with contemporary events or debates in the public domain that would have been recognisable to his audiences, thus prompting probable digressions. The two central questions that this approach raises, then, are how the films were discussed and disseminated (more specifically, how did the press treat his films' release?), and what pertinent social issues were debated in Micheaux's work?

⁸ One such example, according to Bowser and Spence, is to be found in Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1919) in which a scene depicting the murder of the white planter by a disgruntled white farmer cuts to a newspaper headline in which the innocent black Landrys are charged with the crime. The discrepancy, they argue, between the truth and the headline is designed to encourage audience response. (84)

This methodology is similar to that employed by Klinger (1994) in her research on Douglas Sirk, but it is used to different ends. Like Klinger, I examine the way that institutional contexts, such as film reviews, star publicity and academia create meanings and ideological identities for films. I also share her interest in the contextual factors that create meaning. However, Klinger's book on Sirk examined the way in which his changing status as an *auteur* influenced the critical interpretation his films received; although my final chapter addresses the changing reception of Micheaux's work through the twentieth century, that is not the central focus of this thesis. I address the changing attitude to Micheaux only to ascertain the degree to which his films can be said to have constructed a black American film form that could be employed by subsequent African American filmmakers. I ask how his films, not the man, were viewed. Mine is not an *auteurist* study, although in as much as Micheaux's appears to have been the guiding voice of his films I invariably call his work 'Micheaux films.' My argument offers an explanation of how his films can be read, but it does not argue that Micheaux was always aware of these readings. What interests me is not his intentions, which on most topics cannot be determined with any certainty, but the end product. Unlike Klinger or Bowser and Spence (2000, 2001), I have no interest in ascertaining the interaction between Micheaux's 'biographical legend' and his movies, I simply want to understand how his films might have been perceived by his contemporaries and how they engaged with white American (Hollywood) film form. Thus, I hope to establish their significance to his audiences, which will then allow me to account for his part in constructing a black film form that spoke to and for African Americans of this time.

In general, although film analysis is essential to any film studies research, as this thesis progressed I felt myself drawn more to situating the generalities of Micheaux's form in its cultural context to see how it diverged and converged with contemporary social discourse and culture. Consequently, although it is his films' form that lies as the heart of this thesis I have discussed it rather more broadly than might have been expected. Yet I feel that in delineating its place in Micheaux's large-scale socio-cultural context I

have been able to highlight the importance of his form in providing a narrative system and style that diverged from white concerns and, at times, challenged Hollywood conventions.

Consequently, depending on the nature of the question each chapter asks, the role of textual analysis varies in my thesis. Close readings have been organised around themes rather than vice versa. For Chapter One there is no place for a close reading of Micheaux's films as the aim of that chapter is to account for the varying responses of the black press to his work. As such, close readings of the newspaper reviews that I have selected have assumed primary importance. In the second chapter, where I argue that Micheaux's narrative systems engaged with contemporary African American issues, the focus necessitates that I look at the newspapers of the day in order to establish exactly what those issues were and how they were discussed before I look at the movies for traces of these discourses. Consequently, my readings of the newspaper articles share centre stage with my analysis of the narrative tropes evident in Micheaux's films. Additionally, as the subject under scrutiny is the narrative system, there is little place for close readings of the visual elements of the focus films; instead I focus primarily on the dialogue and narrative structure of his work. I have avoided monolithic readings of the texts, preferring instead to extrapolate possible readings available to Micheaux's contemporaries, as the point of this exercise was, after all, to determine the significance of his narrative system to African American audiences in the inter-war period, not impose a twenty-first century reading on his texts.

The next chapter's purpose being to determine the degree to which Micheaux's borrowing from white modes of representation, specifically minstrelsy and melodrama, compromised his efforts to address African American issues for his black American audience, the nature of the close reading of the texts included has been dictated by the issues that arose in my study of those modes. For example, logic dictates that I set up the cultural and reception context of minstrelsy and melodrama, so once again black newspapers have been the focus of my attention and close analysis of the film text has

been momentarily sidelined. As the chapter develops, the spotlight necessarily returns to Micheaux's films, focusing in particular on a minstrel scene from *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932) to analyse the costumes, blocking, framing, music and dialogue of the blackface performers. However, a more detailed analysis of the specificities of other elements such as make-up, lighting and camera position is beyond the scope of this study. This analysis is supported by reference to other Micheaux films' use of these elements. In the chapter's discussion of melodrama, analysis of the editing tactics and use of setting as well as the narrative structure of Micheaux's films come to the fore in a comparison of Micheaux's work with *Birth of a Nation*. I have chosen to approach the films holistically rather than adopting a more schematised reading of the details of Micheaux's editing, thus examining as wide a range as possible of Micheaux's thirteen extant films in order to ascertain whether this hybridity could be said to be characteristic of his entire oeuvre. In the final chapter, as the focus turns more to Micheaux's style accordingly there is an emphasis on close reading of individual scenes. In the final chapter's investigation of Micheaux's style and the extent to which it diverged from classical Hollywood conventions I have examined key scenes with shot by shot analysis. In this chapter, although journals and newspapers are still instrumental to my construction of context, close textual analysis is prioritised.

Fundamentally, my methodology could best be described as an historically-grounded reception approach, using primary material (mainly newspapers) of the 1920s and 1930s to identify trends in public discourse within African American urban communities. I have restricted my core research group to urban audiences in Harlem and Chicago, as both were communities with which Micheaux was familiar, having based his film company in both locations at various points in his career. However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to differentiate between African American audience members on the basis of gender, sexual bias, class and ethnicity - it is too vast a range of subjects to cover in depth. Instead, I have relied on the discourses apparent in the film reviews, editorials, cartoons and readers' letters evident in the black press in

the 1920s and 1930s to appreciate the varying readings available to Micheaux's multiple viewers in the black American community.

Chapter One examines what Klinger (1989) calls 'the social and intertextual agencies within mass culture seeking to structure reception beyond textual boundaries' (4). I look at the role played by the black press, particularly the *New York Amsterdam News*, in the development of a black American film form, focusing on its treatment of Micheaux. As I have already mentioned, no detailed analysis of the relationship between the black press and Micheaux in the 1930s has been attempted, nor has the press's concurrent reception of Hollywood films been scrutinised. Beginning with a rationalisation of my choice of focus papers, I then trace the black press's coverage of several key 'race films' produced by Hollywood in the 1930s and compare it with the reception the same press accorded Micheaux's films in that period, from which an interesting dialectic becomes evident. As Chapter One will argue, this correlation is not one that can be characterised by a simple preference of Hollywood production values over the less refined qualities of Micheaux's movies; nor is it always fuelled by an uncomplicated choice of Hollywood over Micheaux. This chapter establishes a connection between the press's insistence on the emergence of a black American cinema within Hollywood and the decline in popularity of Micheaux's work and so displays the influence that the press yielded in the shaping of reception 'beyond textual boundaries.'

Having established the reception context of Micheaux's films (influenced as it was by their treatment by the black press), Chapter Two moves on to consider the way in which his films' narrative system provided a forum in which to debate the topics that were discussed in the black newspapers. This chapter is constructed around Micheaux's attempts to engage with the prevailing question of his era: 'Who Is A Negro?' Discussion of this issue filled the pages of black newspapers, such as the *Amsterdam News* and *Chicago Defender*, during the inter-war period. This chapter explores the way in which Micheaux's films responded to this debate and, in the

process, constructed a positive racial identity for his audience. His movies' treatment of 'passing,' traditional racial stereotypes and W.E.B. DuBois's concept of 'twoness' offered an engagement with matters that undoubtedly resonated with his audience, encouraging them to take 'inferential walks' from the diegesis. The films existed as more than entertainment, their ideas on African American identity reached beyond the diegesis to provide commentary on contemporary social reality. By engaging in this debate and by challenging traditional racial stereotypes, as well as encouraging 'inferential walks' Micheaux constructed a narrative system that addressed African American concerns, in this way providing an important step in the construction of a black American film form. The originality of this chapter is to be found in its methodology and subject matter. No research to date has looked at the contemporary debates on twoness, passing, the 'New Negro' and racial caricatures and their correlation within Micheaux's work. Nor has this correlation been placed in its socio-cultural context, as evident in the black press.

Chapter Three moves on to an area that has been neglected by previous Micheaux scholars: the function of the traditionally white modes of representation of minstrelsy and melodrama in his movies and the extent to which they enabled him to construct a form that addressed black American issues. To date, most scholars have ignored the blackface sketch in *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932), as well as Micheaux's more subtle borrowings from the minstrel tradition. Perhaps this is due to the taboo associated with blackface and minstrelsy in recent times. Ronald Green's work (1998, 2000) contains the only discussion of this area that I have found. His analysis of minstrel caricatures in *Darktown Review* (1932) argues that the diegetic and non-diegetic audiences are invited to 'stand above' and despise the caricatures despite their enjoyment of them (1998: 20). My view of minstrelsy differs somewhat from Green's. Developing Dale Cockrell's (1997) thesis that minstrelsy's origins lay in the desire both to maintain the status quo through social regulation and to provide a voice for the disenfranchised working-class, I argue that Micheaux's films incorporated features of minstrelsy to construct a sense of community among their African American viewers. Looking at the

advertising and coverage of blackface performances evident in the black press of this time, this chapter re-evaluates Micheaux's incorporation of minstrelsy in his films. Basing my research on black attitudes to minstrelsy in the inter-war era, I have found that it was possible for Micheaux and his audience to embrace the blackface tradition without compromising his efforts to build race pride.

In the second half of Chapter Three I develop Linda Williams's theories of the Hollywood race melodrama to investigate the treatment melodrama receives in Micheaux's films, focusing on their use of traditional 'spaces of innocence' and pathos to undermine the ideology of previous Hollywood race melodramas, such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915). My reason for adapting theories constructed around mainstream cinema is to demonstrate the way in which Micheaux appropriated a mode of representation sometimes associated with the unsatisfactory characterisation of the African Americans and transformed it into a means of exalting the black American community and identity, as he did with minstrelsy. My analysis suggests that his films developed a new form, what I call the 'New Negro melodrama.' Overall, this chapter argues that Micheaux, by combining minstrelsy and melodrama, created a form that challenged previous misrepresentations of African Americans and created a socially-motivated, politically-engaged narrative system and style for race films that maximised potential audience involvement.

In Chapter Four I focus more on Micheaux's deviation from Hollywood conventions of narrative and style and establish the degree to which Micheaux's film form remained relevant to African American expression in later black American cinema. To do so I develop an idea expressed by Mark Reid (1993), that Micheaux's films 'paved the way' for the independent black American cinema of the early 1970s. No one has explored this idea and the filmmakers of that time denied any connection with his work. Yet my study will demonstrate the many confluences in the style, narrative system and objectives of the work of Micheaux and 1970s filmmakers such as Melvin Van Peebles and Haile Gerima. This suggests that Micheaux did in fact create a film

form that could articulate the African American experience. The question that arises from this is why the 1970s filmmakers denied Micheaux as their cinematic ancestor and why, despite their rejection of Micheaux, did such a similarity exist between blaxploitation era filmmakers' work and his? To answer this I will place Micheaux's films in the debate on the function and nature of a black American film form that existed in the 1970s, the time known more generally as the 'blaxploitation period.'¹ Although the blaxploitation period is generally conceived to have run from 1970 to 1975, the period that saw the rise of blaxploitation films, I extend it from the 1969 to 1982. The late 1960s is chosen as the starting point as it was then the first academic article on race movies, written by Thomas Cripps (1969), was published, thus marking the birth of Micheaux criticism. 1982 is the cutting off point as it was in that year that many of the influential filmmakers and theorists of the early 1970s held a colloquy on the nature of black American cinema, at which Micheaux's work was discussed. Finally, this chapter closes with an exploration for his recovery in the past twelve years, and discusses why modern black American filmmakers, such as Arthur Jaffa, now recognise their debt to Micheaux and hail him as the father of black American cinema.

According to Dale Cockrell (1997), the early nineteenth-century African Americans experienced a feeling of being 'on the outside looking in' when viewing minstrel shows (19). They were faced with images that were meant to represent their race but which, in fact, were merely mouthpieces for white American concerns. Ossie Davies (Jones 1991: 6) has testified to a similar sensation when watching Hollywood films as a child in the 1920s and 1930s (see epigraph of Chapter One). It is the ultimate aim of this thesis to argue that Oscar Micheaux's films reversed this position. His black American film form removed African American viewers and concerns from their celluloid margins and placed them instead on the inside looking out, inspecting their world through their representatives on the screen.

Chapter One

The Press, A Black American Cinema and Hollywood

For years, the Micheaux productions were easily as good as the average film produced by white companies, and only a step or two behind the best offerings of the Hollywood producers. But that was before white movie magnates became Negro-conscious.

– Review of Micheaux's *Daughter of the Congo*, in *Amsterdam News*, April 16, 1930

We were confronted by the knowledge as we sat in the dark, knowing that there was something about ourselves up on the screen, controlled by us – our own image, as we saw ourselves...When we wanted the reality of how black people truly reacted to death, we came to our own theatre and there we were able to get the truth of our own experience.

– Ossie Davies on race movies in the 1920s and 1930s (Jones, 1991, 6)

Rather than cast yet another jaundiced look over the depiction of African Americans in Hollywood up to 1940, this chapter will explore why African Americans, throughout the 1930s, were encouraged by the black press to turn away from race movies, such as those by Micheaux, in favour of Hollywood fare, as is evident in the *Amsterdam News* review above. The derogatory stereotypes that were circulated within the Classical Hollywood product and the need for a successful black actor to appear humble have been well documented in recent years.¹ It is not the aim of this work to retrace the steps of these scholars, or even to launch an invective on the shortcomings and racial prejudice of Hollywood and its movies. Instead, the focus of this chapter will be the exploration of how, in the 1930s, the black press encouraged its readers to look to Hollywood fiction features for the best expression of African American life rather than to the race movies that had proved so popular previously, despite Ossie Davies's point that, for black people in the 1920s and 1930s, Hollywood did not present a relevant depiction of their lives. This examination of the black press will lead to a better understanding of Micheaux's reception context: we will see the way in which African American audiences in the 1930s were encouraged to regard Hollywood as a site of

¹ For interesting work on ethnicity and classical Hollywood cinema see also Bogle (1997); Cripps (1977); Sampson (1995); Friedman (1991); Gomery (1992); Griffiths and Latham (1999); Jarvie, (1991); Snead (1997) and Pines (1996).

potential employment and self-expression for African Americans, consequently, how they were advised to receive Micheaux's films. Before we begin, however, there are two questions that we should address: why did Hollywood studios start to make black-cast movies in the late 1920s and early 1930s; and why did African Americans go to see these films?

1927 marked the beginning of Hollywood's transition to sound with Warner Brothers' hit, *The Jazz Singer*, a film that centred on Al Jolson's minstrel numbers. That the film's minstrel sections, sung by a man in blackface, were hugely popular suggested that other representations of blackness and African American life might also draw in multi-racial crowds. In the same year, according to Thomas Cripps (1977: 219), Hollywood studios began to make short films featuring all-black casts, comprised mainly of jazz performers, capitalising on the popularity of race records and black performers, such as Bessie Smith, in contemporary America. In Donald Bogle's eyes (1997: 26), the advent of sound brought increased opportunity for African Americans in Hollywood musicals as studio executives, believing the age old myth that blacks were the most rhythmical, musical people in America, prepared a place for them in the firmament of jobbing actors, if not stars. In addition, as profit margins dropped in the wake of the Wall Street Crash the main Hollywood studios recognised that they needed to identify and exploit heretofore neglected markets. The popularity of race records and the short race movies that the Christie Studios had been producing since the late 1920s² indicated a black, urban market which could be exploited by the studios. Consequently, having the advantage of sound technology at their command, in comparison with a race movie-maker like Micheaux who could not finance a 'talkie' until 1931, Hollywood was in the position to make more novel and entertaining race movies for black audiences than were the race movie-makers. Added to this, the fact that the studios were vertically integrated with a nation-wide exhibition circuit and thousands of

² In the 1920s, the Hollywood-based, independent Christie studios used to 'grind out' two reelers based on short stories of Octavius Roy Cohen's short stories, featuring members of New York's Lafayette Theatre. The films were 'satires on black middle-class pretensions' and contained exaggerated dialect (Cripps, 1978:129).

theatres at their disposal allowed them a huge advantage over race movie-makers such as Micheaux whose exhibition circuit extended to at most two or three hundred theatres in the country.³ Hollywood films were more visible, more technically advanced, more lavish, providing overwhelming competition for Micheaux. Even if Micheaux's movies got distribution, for a black audience well versed in Hollywood conventions they marked a significantly less sophisticated viewing experience in terms of sound technology and mise-en-scène. Thus, from these various conditions came Hollywood's first all-black feature films: Fox-Movietone *Heart in Dixie* (1929), followed soon after by MGM's *Hallelujah!* (1929), then United Artists *Emperor Jones* in 1933 and Warner Brothers' *Green Pastures* which was released in 1936.

As we will see in the course of this chapter, the black press was highly gratified by the early black-cast movies produced by Hollywood, although as the 1930s progressed they became more critical of the studios' representations of African Americans. What I find interesting about the reviews printed in the black papers of these, and other, Hollywood 'race' movies such as Universal's *Imitation of Life* (1934), is the way in which the reviewers exulted in the new-found opportunities enjoyed by African Americans in the film industry. Quite apart from the reviewers' enjoyment of the movies' technical advances, there was an excitement at the opening of a new field that would allow for the broad dissemination of African American issues and black expression. It is this excitement that leads me to argue that, in fact, the black press can be seen to have encouraged African Americans to discern a burgeoning black cinema in Hollywood that spoke to, and about, African Americans. But why and how was such an idea disseminated? The answer to these questions should, in turn, provide us with an explanation for the decline in the black press's support of Oscar Micheaux's movies in the 1930s, which we will discuss later in the chapter.

Essentially, with this chapter, I will explore the role of the black press in creating a black audience for Oscar Micheaux's films and, later, its part in his fall in popularity

³ In 1921 there were 121 black theatres in the United States compared to 22,000 white theatres (Gaines

with that same audience. This chapter represents an attempt to understand why the black press, which supported Micheaux so fervently at the beginning of his career, should distance itself from him as his career developed, preferring instead Hollywood's representations of African Americans. This necessitates a bilateral approach. First, I want to look at what made the black press turn to Hollywood's films. To do this I will examine the growth in the press's apparent belief that Hollywood and its productions offered a growing opportunity of expression to African American artists and audiences in the early 1930s and look at the way in which it encouraged its readers to internalise this view. With that in mind, we can begin to appreciate the effect that this belief might have had on the black press and public's reception of Oscar Micheaux's race movies. In short, if African American reviewers were persuaded that the black experience could find expression in Hollywood films, the necessity and novelty of Micheaux's movies could easily be neglected and their popularity dwindle. To close the chapter I will trace the way in which Oscar Micheaux's film career faced an inverse trajectory to that of Hollywood's black-cast films. Charting the declining fortune of Oscar Micheaux's film career against Hollywood's rise in popularity with African American papers, I want to explore the changing reception that Micheaux's movies received from the black press which I believe contributed to his films' neglect by their black audiences. I do not intend to suggest that negative press reception alone led to the death of Micheaux's movie career. Nevertheless, this chapter will argue that the black press's portrayal of Hollywood as an industry that dealt in stories relevant to the African American public and offered a mouthpiece for African American issues, provided an extra impediment to the success of Oscar Micheaux's movie career. As box-office reports of Micheaux's films are not available, in order to gauge the reception of his movies on their release I have chosen to rely primarily on the coverage his films received in black newspapers of Chicago and New York, cities with large black communities. Looking at the *Chicago Defender*, *Chicago Whip*, the *New York Amsterdam News* and *New York Age*, I will examine the way in which Micheaux's movies were discussed in these papers' reviews and reports. Where reviews in these papers are not available I have extended my

2001: 305, n38).

research to the *Baltimore Afro American* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*,⁴ papers from two other cities in which a large, concentrated black population was also in existence.

Comparing Black Press and White Press Reception of Hollywood 'Race' Movies

As Barbara Klinger (1989) argued in 'Digressions at the Cinema,' the creation of a film is not the sole objective within the film industry. Looking at the other forms directly associated with the process of defining a movie as a product, such as the attendant advertisements, trailers, star stories, or 'commercial epiphenomena,' Klinger concludes that these elements,

...produce multiple avenues of access to the text that will make the film resonate as extensively as possible in the social sphere in order to maximize the audience...it raids the text for features that can be accentuated and extended within its social appropriation (10).

This idea of 'raiding' the filmic text to be able to present it in such a way as to make it an attractive narrative for a variety of audiences is one that I will explore in this chapter. I will trace the way black audiences were often presented with a different angle on Hollywood films by the black press to that which white audiences received, in an attempt to make an otherwise irrelevant film appear to have social significance for the African American community. I have worked solely from newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s, examining the photographs, star stories, production gossip and, most importantly, the film reviews which were clearly aimed at contemporary black audiences. There are several key questions that needed to be addressed with regards to this 'commodified epiphenomena': who were the various pieces/Advertisements directed at; what elements of the film did they emphasise; how did they influence an audience's perception of a particular movie; was there any attempt to depict the stars/films as relevant to the viewers' lives; what was the aim of the piece; and imperatively, who placed the piece in the paper? With relation to the papers

⁴ I found reviews from these two papers reprinted in Sampson (1995).

themselves, several other elements required attention: did the paper (or its writers) subscribe to a particular ideological position; how prominent was its film section (or, indeed, did the paper have a regular film section); was the paper in any way reliant on the film industry for revenue (this is necessary to know in order to ascertain the paper's relationship with Hollywood and its products, for example was it wary of biting the hand that fed it?); and what was the paper's stance on racial issues, specifically African American issues?

Although my research on Oscar Micheaux in the latter half of this chapter will extend itself to four urban black centres, for this first half, I have limited my research area and source materials to four New York publications: the *New York Amsterdam News* (black); the *New York Times* (white); the *Daily Worker* (Communist); and *Variety* (trade magazine): New York was chosen on the basis that, from circa 1923,⁵ this was the city in which Oscar Micheaux was based. As this chapter, in essence, aims to determine to what extent the black press depicted Hollywood movies as the purveyors of as the most popular and socially relevant expressions of the black experience in preference of Micheaux's films, it seems appropriate to focus on an audience with whom he was well acquainted. Using five films as case studies, we will see that for the (black) *Amsterdam News*, between 1929 and 1936, any black involvement in a Hollywood production was construed as a sign that the studios were committed to cultivating a black American cinema, designed by African Americans for African Americans, which offered a new image of black life acceptable to African Americans, divorced from the caricatures of yesteryear. However, it will also become evident, by the advertisements placed by the studios in *Variety* and the way in which the white press such as the *New York Times* received the same films, that this claim was based more on desire than evidence. This will inform my subsequent exploration of the black press's reception of Micheaux's films in the final half of this chapter. Before we begin, however, we need to look briefly at the four newspapers that will form the basis of this section's argument.

Rationalisation for Focus Newspapers

I selected *The Amsterdam News*, a black weekly newspaper, in an effort to redress its neglect in previous studies of the black press. With a national circulation of well over one hundred thousand and a history of production extending from 1909 to the present day, its place as one of the foremost black newspapers of its time is obvious and merits study. As Armistead Pride and Clinton Wilson (1997) have noted, the *Amsterdam News* ‘had taken a front position in the Harlem newspaper sweepstakes from its start on December 4, 1909...’(142). Yet, to date, no such study has been attempted. Anna Everett’s (2001) overview of the black press between 1909 and 1940 discusses the *New York Age* in considerable detail but, inexplicably, largely omits any discussion of the *New York Amsterdam News*. Similarly, Pride and Wilson’s (1997) study of the black press only refers to the *Amsterdam News* intermittently. As its circulation figures and longevity suggest, this paper was the popular choice for a large swathe of New York’s black population and, as such, I felt it offered a new route into understanding the issues that were important to the black community it represented. Also, its inclusion of an entertainment page from its inception, which focused increasingly on the film industry from the beginning of the 1910s, it offered an insight into the way in which the black press engaged with the cinema. Besides this was the influence that it held over its readers. In her discussion of the ‘dialogic relationship existing between black publishers and black readers,’ what she calls the ‘textual community,’ Anna Everett (2001) argues that despite the different socio-economic background and varying levels of literacy, the ““textual community” was unified by a common “structure of feeling” organized around racial and socio-political uplift’ (5). Similarly, Pride and Wilson (1997) point to a collaboration between papers, editors and readers in efforts to improve the African American lot in the 1920s and 1930s. Tracing the *Amsterdam News*’ exhortation to its readers ‘Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work,’ they note its success in producing a community boycott of various merchants, observing with some satisfaction that ‘Within a short time Black clerks and salespersons peopled the offices

⁵ See Charles Musser (2001:127). Bowser and Spence (2000) argue for an earlier date - they say he

and shops' (142). Equally, the impressive scale of boycotts and pickets of *Birth of a Nation* on its release reveals the influence wielded by the press that had instigated them with the assistance of the NAACP. Clearly the *Amsterdam News*' readers responded proactively to their paper's call for action and in turn regarded it as a forum for the black community, as evidenced by their lively engagement with the press on subjects it covered ranging from film reviews to racial policy to sport.⁶ This evidence suggests that the readers of the *Amsterdam News* paid close attention to the articles and reviews it published and, conversely, that the paper contributed greatly to the shaping of public opinion and taste: any support the paper accorded to a cause contributed significantly to the venture's success. Thus it is fair to assume that its reception or neglect of Micheaux's films would have had considerable impact on the movies' box-office returns, a point that will become central in the later section of this chapter.

Variety was examined in order to attain an understanding of the images and meanings that the Hollywood studios circulated about their movies. The advertisements placed in *Variety* by the studios highlighted the narrative or visual elements and the stars that the studios considered to be of most value to the film. In this way the studios' attitude to its African American talent could be gauged and compared with the *Amsterdam News*' reading of the studios' treatment of black America(ns). As we will see in my discussion of *Imitation of Life* (1934) below, the comparison between the adverts in *Variety* and the way in which the film was advertised and discussed in *The Amsterdam News* reveals the extent to which the black paper had raided the text

The *Daily Worker* offered a novel perspective on the Hollywood black-cast films. Although run by whites, it was motivated by its Communist agenda and demonstrated a clear attempt to attract a black readership. The paper's employment of the African America, Carlton Moss, to cover black union meetings and address black issues such as their status in the workplace and in the law, as well as the paper's criticism of

moved to New York in 1920 (13).

⁶ See for example *Amsterdam News* May 22, 1929 p12; January 5, 1927; May 15 1929; January 1, 1940 p16.

Hallelujah! and *Gone With the Wind* on behalf of the African American community, bespeaks a conscious decision to address a black reader. Thus, its left-of-centre reviews of the Hollywood movies under discussion offer an alternative reading to the perspectives on show in the more centrist *Amsterdam News* and *Variety*, respectively.

Finally, the *New York Times* was selected because I wanted a white broadsheet that was also distributed nationally to compare with the *Amsterdam News*. Both papers reported on a wide spectrum of subjects ranging from politics to fashion and sport to business and both contained film pages. Yet while the *Amsterdam News* reported almost entirely on black people, issues and events, the *New York Times* focused on whites. Of the three white papers it had the most in common with the *Amsterdam News*, centring neither on left wing politics, the film industry, thus providing a base of comparison in which the only variable was the colour of its staff and readership.

Although it might seem self-evident that these papers, with their different readerships and approaches, would show a wide disparity in their reactions to films, still a comparison of them yields an interesting, and novel, dimension in the reception of race in Hollywood and 'race' films. As each paper differed from the *Amsterdam News* in one major way we can learn the degree to which a bias based on politics, colour or economics could influence a critic's reading of a film in the *Daily Worker*, *New York Times* and *Variety*, respectively. In addition, no such comparison of the various papers has been attempted in the past and, as such, it is vital that this examination should be attempted, rather than relying on assumptions and instincts. As we will see, the comparison sheds considerable light on the position of the black entertainer in 1920s America as viewed from varying perspectives, which will allow us to gain a more nuanced appreciation of Micheaux's reception context. But first we need to consider each paper in more depth: what was its relationship with Hollywood; how did it represent race relations?

The *Amsterdam News*: pro- or anti-Hollywood?

The Amsterdam News, a weekly broadsheet established in 1909,⁷ geared to a black readership, with its sections on current affairs, society news, sports and entertainment, served as my means to examine the way in which Hollywood and its films were presented to African American New Yorkers. The film section, edited by Romeo L. Dougherty, a former agent for the Johnson brothers' Lincoln Film Company, was supportive of black American cinema. Nevertheless, the paper was not blind in its championing of independent black film. Although it publicised the various race movies on exhibition, it was not averse to criticising these films if they did not satisfy their taste: an article complained, in 1925, that white theatres were labouring under the illusion that

they should exhibit in a colored community [without regard for] the worth of the pictures. With an opportunity of viewing the best things along picture lines, it is hard to expect colored people to accept these Micheaux pictures here in Greater New York (December 23, 1925).

This trumpeting of discerning taste was also evident in the letter from a reader, Elsie Spillman, which the paper printed in 1929. Mrs. Spillman praises *The Scar of Shame* (1929) for its 'smoothly told and well directed theme,' 'well chosen' cast, which she contended was a 'refreshing achievement,' in contrast with 'the incoherent and poorly directed stories without reasonability or plot that are released by another well-known colored motion picture company...'⁸ Obviously, the writers and readers of the *Amsterdam News* were a discerning group with high expectations of the race movies they watched.

The *Amsterdam News*'s advertising revenue came from the local black theatres (the Mornington, Lafayette, Roosevelt, Renaissance and Loew's Victoria) rather than directly from the studios, unlike such magazines as *Variety*. Although the revenue these advertisements generated contributed to the survival of the paper, the *Amsterdam*

⁷ It was published bi-weekly from 1936.

News appears not to have felt that such revenue necessitated favourable reviews of the films on show; a policy that does not appear to have harmed the paper, as is evident from the large advertisement for *Gone With the Wind* (Selznick/MGM, 1939) placed in the *Amsterdam News* on March 9, 1940, in the wake of Dan Burley's acidic review of the film.⁹ Thus, in keeping with the paper's claim to address a discerning readership, we can assume that favourable reviews of a film, be it an independent black production or a Hollywood feature, could not be ascribed simply to being held hostage to income-generation.

The Hollywood films that caused most excitement within the pages of the *Amsterdam News* were, understandably, those that featured African American players. However, as this chapter will argue, there was a tension underscoring the regard in which the paper held Hollywood; the relationship between paper and studios was ambivalent. This tension is mirrored in the letters sent in by viewers as well as in articles such as two written by Romeo L. Dougherty entitled 'The Picture Game,'¹⁰ and 'Bootblack Gets Role on Screen – Paramount Raises Second Humble Worker Notch in Film World.'¹¹ In 'The Picture Game' Dougherty argues that African Americans need to start up a Negro film studio in competition with Hollywood, selling their products directly to theatre chains in the manner of white independent studios based in California, rather than simply handing their money over to view Hollywood productions. The 'Bootblack' article, in contrast, cheers with pride the appointment of 'a bootblack simply called Sam', who was given a part in Paramount's *Young Man of Manhattan*, even appearing to accede to an implicitly racist tone by noting that, although Sam's surname is Fisher, 'like Oscar [another bootblack brought to brief fame], whose last name is seldom remembered, Sam will be content to continue his screen career under the short, easily remembered first name'. Here, entry into Hollywood is celebrated

⁸ May 22, 1929.

⁹ January 6, 1940.

¹⁰ July 31, 1929, 12.

¹¹ April 23, 1930, 11.

wholeheartedly, with no trace of Dougherty's earlier dissatisfaction with the African American's relationship with Hollywood.

Thus, we get the image of a paper ambiguously positioned in relation to Hollywood's treatment of blacks and black issues: sometimes it displayed gratitude for the least concession (an *Amsterdam News*' review of *Showboat*¹² is pleased to note that Paul Robeson is merely seen a lot in the film), yet as we will see, it often betrayed resentment of the studios as it used the paper to retaliate against Hollywood and its publicity machine (see discussion of Romeo L Dougherty's review of *Hallelujah!* below).

The *New York Times*: blissfully oblivious to race issues in film?

The New York Times, a daily, has been described by Wahneema Lubiano (Valerie Smith 1997: 118, n1) as being 'not exactly famous for its in-depth analysis of African American cultural life or production.' The paper was aimed at the middle class, with its extensive coverage of the latest fashions and lengthy financial section. While it does not appear to have been deliberately bigoted against African Americans, its pages contained virtually no coverage of black American issues, which leads me to assume that it held little to attract African Americans. In general, the paper displayed little interest and limited understanding of 'those dusky sons of Ham', as it called the black characters in *Hallelujah!* (MGM, 1929)¹³ or in their films.¹⁴ Having said that, it must be noted that this paper complained when it felt *Imitation of Life* (Universal, 1934) had neglected its most interesting plot-line, that of 'the race question.'¹⁵ In short, for the *New York Times*, African Americans were of interest as exotic spectacle (as in *Hallelujah!*) or as social problem themes (*Imitation of Life* 1934) and otherwise they were forgotten rather than purposely ignored, as is evident from the paper's review of *Gone With the Wind* (1939). The paper's relationship with Hollywood was, on the

¹² June 20, 1936.

¹³ August 21, 1929, 33.

¹⁴ Seldom did an advertisement, or any other form of recognition, for a race movie appear in the pages of the *New York Times*.

¹⁵ November 24 1934, 19.

whole, a serene one; it was content to print the back-stage gossip provided by the industry's publicity machine and excitedly supported the industry's technological development (this is particularly evident in Mordaunt Hall's reviews in the late 1920s/early 1930s).

The *Daily Worker*: Champions of the African American?

The same cannot be said of *The Daily Worker*. This Communist daily regularly printed indignant stories on black persecution and the persistence of Jim Crow in the United States. A series of articles, begun in 1929 by Otto Hall (an African American) sought to give voice to the African American experience.¹⁶ The paper's explicitly anti-Hollywood stance meant that rarely did advertisements for, or reviews of, Hollywood movies appear in its pages. It dismissed Hollywood movies as 'merely an excuse around which to weave a series of events "for-art's-sake,"' privileging 'beautiful patterns on the screen' over a cinema that exposed social inequalities.¹⁷ As the paper declared,

there is hardly a film made [in capitalist countries] that in any way justifies the use of the screen medium for any useful, serious purpose. The construction of the film as a commercial entity, as a commodity, guarantees the continuation of this condition under capitalism (August 30, 1929).

Advertisements for independent American features did not appear either, the paper generally preferring to publicise the exhibition of Sovkino movies instead.

Nonetheless, on occasion, the *Daily Worker* happily railed against Hollywood and its 'insipid' [sic.], capitalist products¹⁸ in its infrequent film section. Free from any dependency on Hollywood and its local exhibitors for advertising revenue, the paper launched several scathing attacks on what it saw as the shortcomings of Hollywood and

¹⁶ The articles focused on Hall's organisation experience among the Negroes; the effect of the communist election campaign among the Negro masses; and interviews with black Americans about the structures of black and white society.

¹⁷ August 30, 1929.

¹⁸ March 18, 1929.

its treatment of the ‘Negro masses’, as viewed from its Communist ideological position. The paper was alive to potential discrimination against African Americans by Hollywood and was vociferous in its objections, as will be discussed below in relation to the scathing reviews it printed of *Hallelujah!* and *Gone With the Wind*, which, in the paper’s view, did nothing to acknowledge the harsh reality of life as an African American in America. Of course, as we will see, more often than not such intractable criticism was fuelled more from a desire to denounce capitalist American institutions, Hollywood included, than from any deep-seated allegiance to black civil rights.

***Variety*: Tool or critic of Hollywood?**

Unlike the *New York Times*, *Variety* spelt Negro with a capital letter, as was preferred by African Americans at the time, yet in its treatment of *Hallelujah!*, for which it printed reviews by three different writers (two men and a woman) in order to present as fully realised an assessment of the film’s appeal as possible, no move was made to print a black perspective on this film about black life in the South. Insofar as *Variety* acted as a mediator between the Hollywood industry and exhibitors, it played a powerful role in the commodification of a movie: it printed the studio advertisements, consequently reaping great financial benefit and was provided with back-lot stories which built up expectation about a production. Nevertheless, the magazine had an obligation to present an honest assessment of the movies, or risk losing its readers’ loyalty. Thus, *Variety* negotiated the line between moulding public perception of a film (in tandem with the studios) and critiquing that same interpretation for its readers (asking if the movie would perform well at the box office and which viewers it would attract). For the most part, from my analysis *Variety* cannot be accused of having any racial or political axe to grind. As Peter Steven (1985) has noted, the magazine represented the ‘voice of dominant cinema,’ lacking any political criticism of the cinema (15). Although it often neglected African American issues and black reception of the movies it reviewed, when it did discuss black Americans it generally discussed them in terms of their professionalism, as equals, unlike the more sensationalist viewing of blacks often evident in the *Times* reviews.

Films for the Case Studies

In my examination of Hollywood features I have once again found it advantageous to restrict my source material. My criterion in selecting a film was twofold. I chose to look at films that featured black actors in prominent roles in the sound period, rather than fleeting appearances as jesters or servants,¹⁹ and films that generated interest in the black press. Finally, I decided upon three ‘All-Negro, All-Talking’ productions – *Hearts in Dixie* (Fox-Movietone, 1929), *Hallelujah!* (MGM, 1929) and *The Green Pastures* (Warner Bros., 1936) – and two movies that feature black actors and plots to a varying degree: *Imitation of Life* (Universal, 1934) and *Gone With the Wind* (Selznick/MGM, 1939). By examining the reviews these movies received from the four chosen papers we will see an interesting contrast between the white and black reception: the *Amsterdam News* deliberately focused on the African American elements of the movies, often exaggerating their significance to the plot. Hence, this chapter will argue that black newspapers played a key part in encouraging the African American community of New York to view these white-financed, white-run films whose profits were enjoyed by white people, as triumphs for the African American and as relevant expressions of Negro life, past and contemporary. In the process, we will see how the black press encouraged its readers to view the Hollywood studios as being committed to establishing and fostering a black cinema preferable to that developed by race films, thereby diminishing the significance of independent race filmmakers such as Micheaux.

Hearts in Dixie: The mythmaking begins

The first ‘all-colored’ feature released by a Hollywood studio in the sound period was Fox-Movietone’s *Hearts in Dixie* (1929). Fox, like Warner Brothers, had decided in the mid-1920s to introduce sound as a way to compete with the major studios.²⁰ While

¹⁹ Donald Bogle (1997) argues that, typically, black actors in Hollywood features in the 1920s and 1930s were confined to the roles of jesters and servants, respectively.

²⁰ According to Bordwell and Thompson (1994: 214-215), both Fox and Warners saw sound as a potential attraction for the smaller exhibitors that could not provide the live, in-house entertainment employed in the first-run theatres.

Warners formed Vitaphone in 1926, Fox launched its Movietone News a few months later. Both ventures enjoyed popular success. By 1928, most major studios had followed suit, adjusting their production and theatres to accommodate the move into sound. Fox-Movietone's first all-black movie made good use of its experience with sound technology. Originally intended to be a short film that would showcase some spirituals and minstrel comedy, *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) got extended into a feature film filled with singing, dancing and talking (Bogle 1997: 27).

Set on a Southern plantation in the wake of the Civil War, the narrative follows the travails of old man Nappus (Clarence Muse) and his family: his daughter, Chloe, who dies; her no-account husband, Gummy (Stepin Fetchit); and her son, Chinquapin (Eugene Jackson), who Nappus eventually sends North to seek his fortune. Interspersed throughout are picturesque scenes of 'darkies' crooning spirituals and Stephen Foster melodies, 'mindlessly contented' (Bogle, 1997: 27) with their impoverished lot. For modern African American critics such as Donald Bogle, apart from the fact that it gave temporary employment to black Americans, there is little reason to celebrate this movie. Bogle argues that it sustained previous stereotypes of the 'perpetually happy-go-lucky Negro', a role that persisted throughout the 1930s.²¹ He contends that Muse's Nappus was too submissive to excite a contemporary audience (not in fact the case, as evidenced by the *Amsterdam News* article below) and that Fetchit's performance was the strongest in the picture (curious, given Fetchit's caricatured role as the shiftless black clown). What Bogle finds particularly objectionable is what he calls the film's 'blackface fixation':

Directed by whites in scripts authored by whites, the Negro actor, like the slaves he portrayed, aimed (and still does aim) always to please the master

²¹ According to Paul Robeson this caricature endured beyond the 1930s into the 1940s: his chief objection to *Tales of Manhattan* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1942) was that it, too, presented an image of 'the Negro solving his problems by singing his way to glory. This is very offensive to my people,' he protested, in the *New York Times* (September 23, 1942). 'It makes the Negro child-like and innocent and is in the old plantation tradition. But Hollywood says you can't make the Negro in any other role because it won't be box-office in the South.'

figure. To do so, he gives not a performance of his own, not one in which he interprets black life, but one through the eyes of white artists. The actor becomes a black man in black face (1997:27).

Following this argument, although the stars of *Hearts in Dixie* were African Americans, for Bogle their performances were completely dictated by a white authority and thus the actors were stripped of any power they might have gained.

Criticism of the film was also extended in a contemporary *Variety* review, but for a different reason. *Variety*'s reviewer paints a discouraging portrait of the production, very nearly warning theatres off booking it.²² In general, it focuses on those who will not like the film, and why, more than on those who will enjoy it. Its language is negative throughout; it warns that the film's success rests on the viewer's 'ability...to stick it.' Repeating what it sees as the shortcomings of the movie (slow-paced, rather dull narrative, limited appeal) it argues that although *Hearts in Dixie* is technically accomplished, it will not be vastly popular. The review briefly mentions the cast's performances as 'highly creditable', but even this praise is tempered by criticism: for example, Clarence Muse is declared to be too intelligent for his part (and is only a replacement for the original choice of Charles Gilpin). Stepin Fetchit is the only other actor singled out, and indeed he does receive fulsome praise – the reviewer finds his caricature as a 'lazy, careless, indifferent, middle-aged idler' amusing. At this point, it becomes obvious that the reviewer prefers the black jester to everyone else in the script, which does not signify any great change from the past. Similarly, while the reviewer finds the singing 'good and interesting' the only song he truly enjoys is, tellingly, Stephen Foster's 'Swanee River'. This reviewer would have the film follow minstrel traditions of representation instead of producing a new, more realistic form that aimed (even if it failed) to represent modern black life. The review contains nothing that celebrates the film as the first 'all-colored' feature and, overall, displays

²² March 6, 1929, p15, 21.

little interest in ascertaining the reception or accuracy of the film's depiction of an idyllic life for blacks in the South.

In contrast, the *New York Times* received the film more enthusiastically. The March 10, 1929 edition contains three pieces on *Hearts in Dixie*. On page 6 (section 10) there is a selection of seven reviews from other papers, each more glowing than the other, to substantiate the headline's claim,

Hearts in Dixie wins the Hearts of New York

– Critics sing praises of this novel and fascinating all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing musical drama of Dixieland(March 10, 1929).

This jubilant tone is sustained throughout the paper's own review of the film (7), in which Mordaunt Hall praises the movie's 'outstanding achievement in dialog [sic.] and singing'. Understandably, this delight in the new sound technology that provided the dialogue and singing notably takes up half of the review, as Hall exults in the film's 'fidelity to detail' and accomplished sound manipulation.²³ The novelty of sound, introduced only slightly more than a year before in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), takes precedence over the accomplishments of the action, initially. When, eventually, Hall discusses the performances, he is wholehearted in his praise: he claims Fetchit is a 'remarkable comedian' and applauds Muse's 'skillful work', a rare compliment at a time when black actors were generally represented as having a natural talent, as opposed to a consciously developed skill (a point that Chapter Three's focus on black-performed minstrelsy will expand on). The review also tells us quite a bit about white reception of the film: according to Hall, 'Fetchit's dislike for physical action elicited many a round of hearty merriment mingled with applause' and Muse's performance 'resulted in many a tear'. Such a positive review would encourage its reader to believe that a new attitude to blacks in film had emerged. Yet, on closer inspection, it becomes

²³ Hall is impressed with the realism of the steamboat constructed for the set and marvels at the way in which its whistle increases and decreases in volume as the boat approaches and retreats from the camera.

apparent that Stepin Fetchit's role is no progression from previous 'coon' stereotypes,²⁴ his name alone indicates a willingness to play up to racial stereotypes, rather than discredit or challenge them;²⁵ Clarence Muse plays an old, inoffensive man, close in nature to the self-sacrificing Uncle Tom (although with a creditable twist in that he sacrifices his happiness for his own, black family); and in no place does the narrative address the discrimination and Jim Crow laws endured by African Americans in the post-Civil War South. Indeed, the extent to which this film's representations of African Americans departed from previous representations on stage or screen is debatable.

So, what for *Variety* was a dull, poorly plotted narrative with very limited box office appeal, was heralded by the *Times* as a technological achievement for Hollywood that offered a 'gentle,' 'restful' image of plantation life that the reviewer appears to have been happy to accept without question. But how did the *Amsterdam News* represent the film?

For a film that supposedly ushered in a new era of black success in Hollywood, *Hearts in Dixie* got relatively little coverage in the *Amsterdam News* (and none at all in the *Daily Worker*, unusual given that publication's lengthy reaction to *Hallelujah!* and *Gone With the Wind*). My research discovered only three pieces on *Hearts in Dixie*, which were overshadowed by the production stories, photographs and previews of the upcoming *Hallelujah!* There was a brief mention of the production as 'highly successful' in a preview for *Hallelujah!*;²⁶ one short review (which focused on Muse's performance) from April 10, 1929; and one advertisement, placed by the Renaissance Theatre.²⁷ The advertisement appeared as follows:

²⁴ See Donald Bogle (1997) for a discussion of the primary traits of the coon.

²⁵ Cultivating his relationship with the white press, Fetchit's description of himself drew from traditional racial stereotypes: 'He typifies his race. All the traits and talents that legend gives to colored people are embodied in him. He has their joyous, childlike charm, their gaudy tastes, their superstitions...And would probably steal chickens if he hadn't promised the Lord never to do anything illegal again' (reprinted in Cripps, 1977, 285).

²⁶ May 22, 1929.

²⁷ May 10, 1929, 12.

Renaissance Theatre
Commencing Sat. May 18
'Hearts in Dixie'
with
Clarence Muse
Stepin Fetchit
And an All Star Colored Cast
100% Dialog-Singing-Dancing

Hear and See This
All-Negro, All-Talking
Screen Epic

'The Home of Better Talkies' (April 10, 1929).

Looking at the order of information in this piece of publicity gives an indication of how the film was meant to be perceived by the black community. There is no equivocation about the star status of the cast (of course, many were familiar to Harlem theatre-goers), and their precedence over the technical aspects of the film contrasts sharply with the *Times* and *Variety* reviews: the advertisement establishes the 'All Star Colored Cast' before it touts the movie's technology, and again declares it to be 'All-Negro' before it mentions 'All-Talking'. Also, the advert's description of the film as a 'screen epic' contrasts with *Variety*'s depiction of an unappealing, poorly structured narrative. There is no mention here of Stephen Foster songs, romantic images of the Southern plantations, or the white studios that produced the film. Instead, this advertisement highlights the black aspect promising an African American extravaganza, implying a black creative control over an authentically black epic narrative, made with the most modern of technology.

Similarly, the short review of the film, printed in the *Amsterdam News* on April 10, 1929 (p13) presents a divergence from the views expressed in the *Times* and *Variety*. The article focuses predominately on the performances of Muse and Fetchit (again downplaying the film's white input). As the headline remarks, in the reviewer's opinion 'Muse is an inspiration,' embodying 'that spirit which motivated Booker T. Washington and others who have achieved something for the race.' For this reviewer,

‘Mr. Muse is really the star’ and ‘his interpretation of the role of Nappus far excels the low-comedy of Stepin Fetchit.’ In praising Muse over Fetchit, this review overtly rejects the persona adopted by the latter who ‘plays the Negro as he is liked and thought of, indolent, shiftless...and lazy.’ In fact, its closing line is ‘The colored race in America bows to Mr. Muse’s art.’ There is considerable mingling of star and character here – Nappus is praised for sending his grandson North yet it is Muse who is applauded for ‘demonstrat[ing] well how parental sacrifices on the part of former slaves and plantation workers of Dixie is responsible for the splendid colored doctors and lawyers who are making reputations all over the country.’ In this article we see a very different presentation of the movie (and its stars) emerging: it concedes that ‘there are parts in the film which are objectionable’ but, rather than focusing on the romantic ideal of the South that the film represents, the piece is resolute in looking beyond that period – Nappus’s contribution to a better future with greater opportunities for blacks is the aspect that is ‘raided’ from the narrative. The film that the *New York Times* praised for technical advancement and romantic Southern imagery is here presented as a symbol of hope, a paean to black uplift as the result of hard work, and a depiction of the embodiment of modern African American success, signalling the different agendas at work in each paper’s film review. The *New York Times* records the developments in film technology employed by Hollywood while the *Amsterdam News* focuses on the opportunity for African American expression and employment in Hollywood arising from *Hearts in Dixie*.

Hallelujah!: Black or White production?

Shortly after the release of *Hearts in Dixie* there came another ‘all-colored’ Hollywood feature, this time made by MGM: *Hallelujah!* (1929). This movie provided several novel spectacles for its viewers. The film’s use of sound in the dialogue, as well as in the song and dance numbers, still a novelty in itself, was heightened by its location shooting in the swamps of Tennessee and Arkansas, highly unusual for its time. In

contrast with the norm of studio-bound musicals with their rather immobile cameras,²⁸ the free style shooting that was required of location shooting was as much of an achievement as the out-door locations were an attraction. Even today, *Hallelujah!* is regarded as a landmark in sound films.²⁹ The plot concerns a young black man, Zeke (Daniel L. Haynes), who, in a brawl over a light-skinned ‘temptress’ Chick (Nina Mae McKinney), accidentally kills his brother, subsequently becomes a preacher, and briefly converts Chick before she returns to her former lover, Hot Shot (William Fountaine). By the movie’s close Chick is dead, Hot Shot has been hunted down and killed by Zeke who subsequently returns home and settles down with his virtuous former girlfriend. Once again, the narrative presents an all-black world in the South. This production, however, enjoyed considerably more publicity than *Hearts in Dixie*. The studio’s publicity department courted African American support, inviting the black Congressman, Oscar dePriest, on a tour around the set and appointing the African American, Harold Garrison, as assistant director on the production – although Cripps (1977) maintains that this appointment was in name only.³⁰ The studio also organised a dual premiere in white New York and Harlem and fed production and star stories to the black press. This strategy proved successful for the most part. The *Amsterdam News* reported that at the grand Harlem opening Congressman dePriest, addressing the black audience about the film’s role in establishing the African American as an equal to all in the United States stated,

We are standing on the threshold of civil and cultural emancipation in America. Tonight we have seen how far our race has progressed culturally and artistically since the Emancipation Proclamation (August 28, 1929).

²⁸ With the introduction of sound, camera movement became more limited than previously: the noise of the moving camera would appear on the soundtrack. Even when encased in sound-proof, movable booths, camera movement was curtailed by the need for silence.

²⁹ See Bogle (1997: 28).

³⁰ Certainly the significance of Garrison’s appointment was compromised by his having to sit in the Jim Crow Gallery at the picture’s premiere.

Also, as noted above, the publicity around *Hallelujah!* in the *Amsterdam News* completely overshadowed the release of *Hearts in Dixie*, generating plenty of anticipation among its readers up to a year before its release.

White critics such as the *New York Times*' Mordaunt Hall saw in *Hallelujah!* 'a most impressive audible film,' and *Variety*'s three reviewers agreed that it was an artistic success (though they were uncertain about the black reception of the movie). However, not all the press supported the film: *The Daily Worker*³¹ leapt in to the fray with a remarkably lengthy and critical review of the film, which merits detailed attention here.

On first viewing, the *Daily Worker* article appears to have the Negro cause close to heart, as the title proclaims, “‘Hallelujah’ at Embassy Don’t Portray Real Negro’. However, on closer inspection this perception changes. Arguing that the ‘all-colored’ spectacle is merely the latest in a series of vogues used by Hollywood to combat an ‘ever-narrowing market,’ the reviewer accuses Hollywood of feeding the American public with caricatures and stereotypes in the pretence that these images are based on a racial truth. He objects to the shallowness of a plot that refuses to investigate why the Negro gambles, dances and ‘is easy prey for religious bunkum.’ Nonetheless, this objection appears to be founded in an irritation caused by such obvious art ‘for-art’s-sake,’ more than in any concern for the African American characters. He argues against the romanticisation of plantation life of blacks,

How easy it is to forget that Tennessee, where the action takes place, holds a record for lynchings when we hear those loving “darkies” singing their spirituals (August 30, 1929).

But, again, this disapproval stems from a desire to criticise Hollywood fiction films in favour of a Soviet documentary style, rather than any civic outrage, as he laments that

³¹ August 30, 1929, p4.

Vidor and others ‘cannot learn anything from the Russian method.’ The reviewer declares that,

Any attempt to portray the American Negro in the movies will have to be as close to the documentary as possible. There is so much living dramatic material in Black America! What a pity that men like Vidor, who gave us ‘The Crowd’, cannot learn from the Russian method of applying the fertile art of the screen to something more than studio clichés (August 30, 1929).

Vidor is further criticised for choosing his cast from nightclub performers instead of non-professionals, and preferring dramatic, cinematic images to verisimilitude. The article lambasts *Hallelujah!*’s refusal to explore the origins of its racial stereotypes. At this point, the reviewer vows that it is not an epic, as advertised, ‘No more than the ‘Big Parade’ was an epic of men in war.’ Vidor and Hollywood are found guilty of trading in superficiality, ignoring the economic and sociological truth of life in America in preference of artistic images that romanticise the struggles of its citizens.

The final paragraph is preoccupied with what the reviewer sees as the ‘ravages of sound’ that afflict the movie. Displaying his Eisenteinian bias, he presents a theoretical tirade against the preference of dialogue over rhythm in determining the time value of the images. The reader is, thus, distracted from *Hallelujah!* in order to ingest yet another party political broadcast, until the final line asserts, ““Hallelujah” – a failure.”

Unlike the paper’s later reviews, written by the African American Carlton Moss,³² this review is interested in pointing out the shortcomings of the film’s treatment of Negroes only as part of a treatise on the theories of Communist filmmaking. In a way, this review is as guilty of commodifying African Americans as the film it criticises. For the reviewer, the criticism of the misrepresentation of blacks and black life is not the objective but a means to an end, which is the airing of party beliefs (he even quotes

from 'The Resolution Adopted by the National Conference of Cinema Workers, Moscow, April 1928'). He is not criticising Hollywood's fetishisation of black life, with its focus on 'religious hysteria', gaudy black people and spirituals, but capitalism's use of cinema in general; the African American has been forgotten. At no point is this film presented as a progressive step in Hollywood's depiction of African Americans or as a triumph of black American culture. Yet, as we will see, the *Amsterdam News* saw it differently.

Variety's three reviews of *Hallelujah!* did not offer much more hope to a black American reader.³³ The first review (a substantial fourteen hundred word piece) concentrates chiefly on assessing potential white reception; it only briefly speculates on possible black reaction. This focus on white reception is understandable, as the exhibitors to whom this was directed expected to be advised on the film's appeal to the general majority of the population.³⁴ In general, however, this review sensationalises an already sensationalist account of black life down South and presents a picture of unruly African Americans hurtling between 'religious hysteria' and murder. This latter image is insidiously reinforced by the way in which the review discusses the relationship between director and actors. Dwelling on director King Vidor's authority on and off set he writes,

Apparently in the massed or ensemble group Vidor had a mighty tough job holding that bunch back. Yet he held them under remarkable restraint and still brought out the efforts desired (August 28, 1929).

In this extract, the fictional unruliness of *Hallelujah!*'s African Americans has bled into reality as the black actors are portrayed as an unrestrained mob who needed to be

³² This reviewer is obviously white: he saw *Hallelujah!* at the white Embassy theatre, sitting beside a white man. Given the segregation laws of the time, he could not be black.

³³ August 28, 1929. Two reviews were by men, one of them reporting on the Harlem premiere of the film, the third was written by a woman to provide 'the woman's angle.' None of the reviewers was black.

³⁴ Two surveys of the population trends in the U.S. from the years 1920 and 1950 estimated the Negro population at both periods to be only around 10.5 - 11% (Jarvie, 1991: 100).

kept under control by the director. At six different points the reviewer credits Vidor's restraining hand for an actor's performance; no acknowledgment is made of the actor's skill. For example, the lead, Daniel L. Haynes, is said to have 'apparently followed Vidor's direction *blindly* and made something of the character' (my emphasis). The impression given of African Americans and their contribution to *Hallelujah!* is rather regressive – clichéd roles in a sensationalised narrative played by unskilled actors who relied on white guidance. James A Jackson's complaint, printed in an *Amsterdam News*' article on the stage play *Green Pastures*,³⁵ that 'Press Agents and White Newspapers Continue to Regard Every Producer as Originator of Artists, Ignoring Previous Work of Experienced Casts – Is Negro Performer Never to Be Regarded as Hard-Working and Accomplished Professional?' appears to be justified in this case.

The second and third *Variety* reviews agree on the limited box-office appeal of the film; one even asserts that the most likely candidates to enjoy *Hallelujah!* are 'Methodists and Baptists in smaller communities.'³⁶ As was the case with *Variety*'s review of *Hearts in Dixie*, the reader is left with the impression that a black narrative has little to offer the public, regardless of the presence of technical brilliance. This reviewer argues that 'If the picture is limited, its boundaries are inherent to the subject.' The story of what he calls 'credulous children of Cotton' is merely 'a worthy novelty,' valuable only as 'ammunition with which to meet those who contend that they never try anything new in the film industry.'

For contemporary black readers, there was very little in those *Variety* and *Daily Worker* reviews of *Hallelujah!* to encourage them to see any progress in the way in which the African American was perceived, both on and off screen, or in the cultivation of a black cinema in Hollywood in which African Americans would have creative control over their own images.

³⁵ March 12, 1930.

³⁶ August 28, 1929.

The *New York Times*' *Hallelujah!* review³⁷ received the film more positively, although its references to 'darkies' and 'dusky sons of Ham' and the 'natural' humour of the negro (sic.) risked offending African American readers. However, this article praises Daniel Haynes's 'capital work' and Nina Mae McKinney's 'clever performance' – here the artistic contribution of the black actor has been recognised alongside with the director's good work, rather than as a by-product of Vidor's control. Still, this promising representation of the film is undermined by its accompanying MGM advertisement in which the only three elements that are emphasised are MGM's participation, Vidor, and the use of sound. In this advert there is no mention of the film's black cast and once again this 'Drama of Negro Life' is presented in relation to its white creators, and the movie is recognised as a white, rather than black, American achievement in filmmaking.

The *Times* also included a brief piece by Hall on the Harlem premiere in which commented that 'the spectators voiced their feelings during the comic situations and often they laughed at the dramatic moments.' This sentence, as we will see, prompted a lively response from the *Amsterdam News*, clarifying that paper's aim to raise African Americans' pride in their race through the exaltation of any black presence in Hollywood.

Just seven days after the *Times* printed its account of the Harlem opening, almost an entire page in the *Amsterdam News* was devoted to two retaliations: the first by James Gow on 'A milestone in Negro Culture'; the second, a piece by Romeo L. Dougherty, entitled "Hallelujah" Film Continues to Draw.³⁸ Gow's article is a review of Harlem's first ever premiere, rather than an account of the film. The film and its attendant technological wizardry are deemed unimportant in comparison to the significance of Harlem being the first location in which the film was shown, particularly as this was a film in which, he maintained, the black audience could

³⁷ August 21, 1929, p33.

³⁸ August 28, 1929, p15.

recognise themselves.³⁹ Reflecting on the reception the film got, he addresses the claim that the audience laughed at inappropriate junctures in the narrative, concluding that

The laughter of this Harlem audience depended little upon the immediate situation ... these people, overwrought with the joy of coming into their own, eased themselves with self-expressive laughter (August 28, 1929).

In a brilliant stroke Gow provided a sharp rebuff to the *Times* article and invited black audiences to see this film as an authentic expression of their experiences. At his suggestion, the black audience was encouraged to watch the movie with 'a subconscious appreciation of the fact that a part of their heritage had been sympathetically and sincerely portrayed in a popular medium.' Here we see a contrast to *Variety*'s insistence on the whites' accomplishments in making *Hallelujah!* As far as this article is concerned, this is a film for and by black Americans – Vidor and MGM are ignored completely while the actors are at the centre of the attention. As with *Hearts in Dixie*, the *Amsterdam News* has represented the film as a triumph of black cultural expression and a further step in the development of a black film form in Hollywood.

Dougherty's article in the *Amsterdam News* is more confrontational but shares the same goal. This review, like Gow's, is very positive in its reception of the film. Of the cast he writes, 'they all lived up to what had been said and those expectations aroused in the people of Harlem by what had been said in these very columns were lived up to.' Here we can note not only pride in the cast's achievement but also an awareness on Dougherty's part of the role his film section has played in cultural myth-making and public perception of the movie.⁴⁰ In contrast to the *Variety* and *Times* reviews, King

³⁹ He chastises Oscar dePriest for giving 'no evidence of appreciating how truly auspicious were the purely external aspects of the evening.' Gow's attitude indicates how rarely a Hollywood premiere was held in Harlem.

⁴⁰ From the initial story that Vidor was planning an all-Negro film, printed in August 1928, the film section in the *Amsterdam News* published a steady stream of previews and star stories. For example, there was the story of Nina Mae McKinney's collapse from exhaustion, reported on May 15, 1929, in

Vidor is mentioned only twice, the second time being Dougherty's remark that Nina Mae McKinney 'must make the heart of King Vidor expand with pride.' Noticeably, here the reviewer has reversed the white papers' insistence on the director's omnipotence over his malleable cast. Emphasising the relevance of the film to the individual African American (in its representation of the family) and to Harlem blacks in general (the narrative having 'taken [the *Hallelujah!* audience] back a quarter of a century to Bridge Street in Brooklyn'), Dougherty excuses the tears that were shed on viewing the film. This has the dual benefit of making the film seem even more appealing to a black audience and provides a sound logical explanation for such heartfelt reactions among the Harlem viewers, thus eschewing the *Times*' intimation of highly emotional, non-intellectual Negroes.

In the final paragraph, Dougherty invokes a history of black cultural success, thus discrediting again, insinuations, such as those made in *Variety*, that blacks could not produce decent performances without the close direction (or moulding) of whites. As Dougherty rallies pride in his race, he reminds his readers that 'the Negro race in these United States can give to the world everything in the theatre. All we need is the opportunity.'

So, unlike *Variety* and the *Times*, the *Amsterdam News* portrayed *Hallelujah!* as an exercise in racial exultation, and by minimising any mention of Vidor and MGM, they implied a black control over this representation of black life, that would lead to 'Vast Possibilities for the Future,'⁴¹ echoing the earlier, misguided claim by Daniel Haynes, that, 'as Moses led his people from the wilderness, [*Hallelujah!* would] lead ours from the wilderness of misunderstanding.'⁴² In contrast with the *Daily Worker*'s review, the

which she was very much posited as the conventional star – all shooting was cancelled until she recovered. An excited preview, on May 22, 1929, predicted that this 'beautiful and, at times, screamingly funny story is to determine the status of the Negro in the pictures.' One week before its eventual release the *Amsterdam News* printed a glowing review in which it claimed 'No cast has ever made a picture with greater ability than the colored players who made "Hallelujah".'

⁴¹ This phrase was printed underneath the photographs of the stars of *Hallelujah!* (August 28, 1929, p15)

⁴² February 27, 1929.

Amsterdam News heralded *Hallelujah!* as an African American achievement that would inevitably lead to the flourishing of African American filmmaking in Hollywood.

Imitation of Life: A Star is Born?

By 1934, African Americans were still confined to roles as servants or comic caricatures. However, with the release of Universal's *Imitation of Life* a new black star emerged, feted by white and black newspapers alike: Louise Beavers. Although her role was that of a maid, the significance of her part within the narrative was great. Playing a single mother, maid to Bea Pullman (Claudette Colbert) and her daughter, Beavers's character (Aunt Delilah) provides Bea with a pancake recipe that the latter uses to create a successful business. The narrative follows the troubles the two women experience as a result of their daughters: Bea's chance to marry is ruined by her daughter's love for the mother's fiancé, and Aunt Delilah dies of a broken heart over her daughter's attempts to cross the colour line, denying her racial and filial ties. For Universal, the main attraction of the movie lay in Colbert and the film's director, John M. Stahl. The advertisement they placed in *Variety*,⁴³ an entire page in size, read as follows:

Another glorious triumph by the man who directed "Back Street"

IMITATION OF LIFE
Starring CLAUDETTE COLBERT
With WARREN WILLIAM
Rochelle Hudson
Ned Sparks, Henry Armetta, Baby Jane, Alan Hale

FANNIE HURST'S GREAT NOVEL MADE INTO THE BIGGEST ATTRACTION IN YEARS!
A JOHN M. STAHL PRODUCTION

A UNIVERSAL PICTURE Presented by CARL LAEMMLE

⁴³ October 23, 1934, p30.

There are three photographs: a large one of Colbert, looking grave; on her left, a smaller one of Warren William; and on her right, Rochelle Hudson.

The cast and photographs that Universal chose to display were uniformly white. In fact, it appears that the studio deliberately excised the black element of the film: in the cast list leading the review printed in *Variety*,⁴⁴ Louise Beavers's name is printed fourth from the top. Given that, it is her name rather than Ned Sparks's that should have appeared on the advertisement. Evidently the studio's publicity department did not consider her inclusion to be beneficial to the film's popularity. The press, however, white and black, felt otherwise – it is they who made her the star and highlighted the story of Delilah and her 'passing' daughter as the film's greatest strength. *Variety*'s review, in stark contrast to Universal's ad, focused almost entirely on Louise Beavers's 'masterly' performance, and on the race aspect of the film. Its appraisal of the depiction of race in the movie was, perhaps, excessively sanguine: it remarks that Aunt Delilah and Bea are business partners⁴⁵ and comments that this is the first time the situation faced by the American mulatto has been addressed on screen, conveniently forgetting *Birth of a Nation*'s Silas and Lydia. Nonetheless, there is no mistaking *Variety*'s admiration of Beavers and Fredi Washington (who plays Peola, Delilah's daughter) whose performance is described as excellent. It appears that the placing of the black narrative within a social context recognisable to white audiences has been enough to allay this reviewer's fears, which he expressed in his earlier critique of *Hallelujah!* for *Variety*, that a black narrative would have only limited box office appeal.⁴⁶ Only in the final paragraph is the white cast mentioned and, although they are praised, the language is notably less effusive, the reviewer using such words as 'convincing' and

⁴⁴ Nov. 27, 1934, p15.

⁴⁵ In fact, although Bea offers Delilah a one-quarter share of the business, the maid is so distressed at the idea that such wealth and status would put an end to her days caring for Bea and her house that she 'makes [Bea] a presents of it' and refuses to accept the cut. The social status of the black woman has not been raised, she remains in the kitchen, cast in the traditional mould as the white family's faithful retainer.

⁴⁶ This reviewer, 'Land,' was the author of the second male review printed by *Variety* on *Hallelujah!*, discussed above. He argued that *Hallelujah!*, with its black subject matter, would appeal only to Baptists and Methodists in small towns - in other words, religion, not race, would sell the movie.

‘competent’. From this review, African Americans would have had great reason to hope for increased opportunities and attention from Hollywood.

The *New York Times*, if not quite so enthused, also dwelt for the most part on Aunt Delilah’s and Peola’s story, acknowledging its potential social relevance. The reviewer’s chief reservation about the movie was its shallow treatment of the blacks’ narrative but he, too, praised Beavers’s ‘capable’ performance.

With these reviews, *Variety* and the *New York Times* created a space in which the black audience was invited to read *Imitation of Life* as a film centred on Louise Beavers and ‘the race question,’ and the black theatres (with the assistance of the *Amsterdam News*) actively encouraged such a perception. Indicative of the anticipation the film had generated within the African American community, several black theatres exhibited the film: the Regent and Proctor ran it through the end of December, 1934 and the Roosevelt and Lafayette both showed it a month later – the film being popular enough to be held seven days by the Roosevelt, beginning January 23, 1935. The publicity organised by these theatres included advertisements in the *Amsterdam News* and a brief review of the film. The Lafayette and Roosevelt adverts read as follows:

Lafayette Theatre showing
LOUISE BEAVERS
Fredi Washington
with
Claudette Colbert
in
IMITATION OF LIFE (January 26, 1935).

The advertisement included a still from the film of Beavers and Washington

*

Roosevelt Theatre
Seven Days – Beg. Wednesday Jan 23
LOUISE BEAVERS

FREDI WASHINGTON
CLAUDETTE COLBERT
in
IMITATION OF LIFE (January 9, 1935).
*

In both adverts, Louise Beavers is clearly heralded as the star of the show. The film, particularly in the Lafayette advertisement, has become her star vehicle; narrative and technical merits are ignored. Beaver's photograph and her name are prominently featured at the head of the cast list, her character is posited as the consumer highlight, which consigns Claudette Colbert and her story line to the margins. Once again, the white elements in control of production (MGM, Stahl) have been ignored. Also, with the photo of the two black women included in the Lafayette ad we have a classic case of a black theatre 'raiding' the text for a socially relevant element that should lead a black audience to assume that the Delilah-Peola storyline is the central one, thus resulting in a collective reading against the grain.⁴⁷

The paper's preview of the film⁴⁸ exemplifies an even more specific raiding of the film's text. The sole focus of attention is placed on Fredi Washington's character, Peola, as the short review relates her cry, 'I want the same things other people enjoy' to 'the hearts of twelve million Negroes throughout the United States.' Peola's line is politicised as the piece deems it the cry of all African Americans since 'the so-called emancipation from chattel slavery.' Through this brief article, Peola's struggle has been invested with symbolism, emblematic of the struggles of the entire race, thus positioning her as the central figure in the narrative with whom the audience has been prepared to sympathise.⁴⁹ Given the widespread positive reception of Beavers and the Delilah-Peola storyline, for once the black theatres' and paper's claims to the inevitable

⁴⁷ This practice is also evident in the ad placed by the Morningside Theatre in the *Amsterdam News* for *Showboat* (Universal, 1936) in which Paul Robeson's name is second from the top (July 25, 1936), and in that paper's review of the same movie, in which the central focus is placed on the 'miscegenation' plot and Paul Robeson's performance, thus inviting the black reader to view what the studios presented as the sub-plot and a minor character as the points around which the film revolved (June 20, 1936, 19).

⁴⁸ December, 29, 1934, p15.

⁴⁹ Given this, it would be interesting to investigate black reaction to the eventual defeat the film inflicts on Peola.

emergence of a black cinema in Hollywood did not seem completely exaggerated. Their mythmaking continued, undeterred by the fact that the roles offered to blacks were still limited to servants or slaves and even a ‘star’ such as Louise Beavers was expected to adopt a Southern drawl and force-feed herself (in order to ‘plump up’) before she was considered an acceptable image of black womanhood,⁵⁰ contrasting with the slim, white leading ladies.

Green Pastures : A Change in Direction

However, in 1936, a change occurred in the attitude of the *Amsterdam News* to black-cast Hollywood productions. Reviewing Warner Brothers’ *Green Pastures* (1936), a film that received a glowing review from *Variety* for being ‘the first all-Negro film to click,’ with a ‘well-nigh inspired’ black cast and an ‘audience-captivating cinematic fable,’⁵¹ the *Amsterdam* columnist, Roi Ottley was less than enthusiastic. In a lengthy *Times* review the film also received praise for its elaborate sets and special effects and the film’s ‘admittedly daring departure [from] Hollywood [convention],’⁵² yet this did not please the *Amsterdam News* reviewer either. In fact, Ottley wrote that Hollywood had ‘Produced Opus in Grade B,’ calling the film ‘the phoniest panorama of hocus pocus that has yet come out of that mad town of Hollywood.’⁵³ The reviewer objected to several things about the film, focusing primarily on the photography which he described as ‘dark, unconvincing and amateurish’ and the make-up on the actors’ face (to blacken them up further) which, in Ottley’s eyes, resembled nothing more than ‘mud smeared over their faces.’ In an interesting development, in another piece on *Green Pastures*, quoted in Cripps (1977: 260-261), Ottley declared that he would prefer to see a Micheaux film, with all the inferior technology it used, than watch another Hollywood movie.

⁵⁰ See Bogle, (1997:63).

⁵¹ *Variety* July 22, 1936, p17.

⁵² *New York Times*, March 8, 1936, section 10 p4.

⁵³ *Amsterdam News*, June 6, 1936.

From this, it appears that as the 1930s progressed, *Variety* grew more excited and enthusiastic about black-cast Hollywood production while the *Amsterdam News* followed the opposite trajectory, displaying a new, more demanding approach. Roi Ottley's criticism of the black newspapers' 'false sense of values' (qtd in Cripps 1977: 260-261) that permitted them to praise a Hollywood film regardless of its merits simply due to the inclusion of a black actor in the margins of the cast, points to a new approach in film reviewing in the *Amsterdam News*. Although it did not signal an immediate break with tradition,⁵⁴ Ottley's piece does indicate a new attitude to Hollywood, in which the paper no longer deferred to whatever concessions Hollywood offered, but made its own demands and looked for the studios to accede. Perhaps this change in attitude can be attributed to the change in management at the paper.⁵⁵ In any case, this more combative attitude is evident in several other black newspapers by 1937: the *New York Age Dispatch* published a criticism of Louise Beavers for accepting servile roles instead of demanding more positive, proactive parts,⁵⁶ and threatened to withdraw its support if she did not change her roles. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, never Hollywood's greatest fan, printed several articles that overtly criticised Hollywood's persistence in racial stereotyping. This defiant air continued in the *Amsterdam News* into 1940. In December 1939, the paper printed a lengthy article by Nell Dodson whose byline read:

Because the Lord put too much white paint in the bucket some of our best theatrical talent has been cooling its heels in the outer sanctum of stage and screen casting offices (December 16, 1939).

⁵⁴ The review of *Showboat* from June 1936 (the same month that Ottley's review was printed) appears content at the mere presence of Paul Robeson in the film, remarking that 'while [Robeson] isn't given much opportunity to display his acting talents, he is amply seen in the production.' The *Amsterdam News* also printed a more favourable review of *Green Pastures* several weeks before Ottley's piece appeared, on May 30, 1936. Consequently, it appears that any rupture with Hollywood was not complete, at least in 1936.

⁵⁵ In 1936, two West Indian physicians bought the *Amsterdam News*, and set about making it the first fully unionised African American newspaper in the country.

⁵⁶ February 12, 1937.

In this, Dodson criticised the ban against light skinned African Americans in Hollywood as the studios preferred to hire people with 'Negroid features'.⁵⁷ This is not the article's sole concern.

'Not only that,' Dick [Huey, a light skinned actor] remarked. 'There's the problem a cultured black actor has to face. He has to play Uncle Tom, uneducated or jitterbug roles if he wants to work in the average legitimate show' (December 16, 1939).

The black actor's silence had been broken⁵⁸ and the *Amsterdam News* was prepared to print what (s)he had to say. Shortly after Dodson's article was published, beside a lengthy review of *Gone With the Wind*, in which the reviewer lambasted the film's racism (see below), a reader's poem was printed:

'A COLORED MOVIE FAN
(BY ANDY RAZAF)
I always leave a picture show disgusted - Holy Smokes!
Don't they know colored people are just like other folks?
Why do they always think that all we know is sin and strife,
Tho we have many of our race in every walk of life?

Are Hollywood producers mindful of their harmful acts,
Or are they just plain ignorant and do not know the facts?
They show us all as comics, wasters, gangsters and slow pokes,
Don't they know colored people are just like other folks?' (January 6, 1940).

⁵⁷ This practice was observed in Hollywood as the studios desired a clear distinction between black and white characters on screen (see Snead's observations on 'marking' in Hollywood features, 1997:27-29).

⁵⁸ Even Clarence Muse, the studios' defender through the early 1930s, who had consistently urged caution to those who objected to the black roles on offer, finally spoke out in condemnation of Hollywood's depiction of African Americans in the *Pittsburgh Courier* on January 27, 1940.

The *Amsterdam News* and its readers appear to have assumed they were now in a position to demand more than was being offered. Despite their disgruntlement, the *Amsterdam News* and its readers continued to invest their faith in the belief that the African American had a voice in Hollywood. This sense of militancy further encouraged a black readership to see itself as an integral part of Hollywood and to feel that the studios must listen, and eventually develop a proper black American cinema. In this context, the *Amsterdam News*'s ambivalent reception of *Gone With the Wind* (hereafter referred to as *GWTW*) does not appear as surprising as it would have, had it been printed in the early 1930s.

A Deferential Black Press is *Gone With the Wind*

The signs were promising when Selznick wrote in his now famous memo that he wanted African Americans to come out on the 'right side of the ledger' in the film version of Margaret Mitchell's *GWTW*.⁵⁹ On its release it appeared that, for some, he had succeeded and that Hollywood was indeed in the process of reassessing its treatment of black actors and narratives. *Variety* and the *New York Times* hailed it as a landmark film. *Variety*⁶⁰ included a glowing review of Hattie McDaniel's performance as Mammy, arguing that her scene with Melanie in which she begs the latter to persuade Rhett to bury his child was 'The most moving scene... Time will set a mark on this moment in the picture as one of those important bits of histrionics long remembered.' The *New York Times*⁶¹ also praised McDaniel saying she, Clark Gable, Olivia deHavilland and Leslie Howard were 'equally, or almost equally, assured' and that 'Mr. Selznick's cast could not have been bettered.' Jimmie Fidler, in a syndicated column, also singled out McDaniel's 'acting at its artistic best' while he lamented that there would be no opportunity for her to move beyond 'playing incidental comedy

⁵⁹ With this in mind, the film altered several contentious incidents in the novel: Scarlett's black rapist became a lower class white and the black man (Sam) became her saviour (Rogin, 1994: 2); the film script gave the word 'nigger' only to black characters; the script cut a scene in which Prissy was seen eating watermelon in the time-honoured tradition of black stereotypes, and omitted a slap delivered by Scarlett to Prissy (Taylor, 1989:186). Unfortunately the script left another slap in, to the chagrin of many African Americans.

⁶⁰ December. 20, 1939.

⁶¹ December. 22, 1939.

maids.⁶² All were good omens, as was Hattie McDaniel's Oscar, the announcement of which reputedly brought members of the Academy to a standing ovation and brought tears to the eyes of George Raft, among others,⁶³ and her placement at Selznick's table at the ceremony. Indeed, a Loew's representative in New York (Oscar Doob) declared that McDaniel's Oscar was a sign of the improved times that confirmed Hollywood's growing racial tolerance and heralded new opportunities in film for African Americans. It could be said that between Fidler and Doob, the white press and studio management had assumed the *Amsterdam News*'s role in reassuring the African American public that greater chances for blacks in Hollywood lay just around the corner.

However, this happy picture was not accurate. *Variety*'s review, praising McDaniel as it did, contained no observations on the film's treatment of race. Neither did the *New York Times*. McDaniel's inclusion at the Oscar ceremony was a gesture made by Selznick to make up for her exclusion from the extravagant Atlanta premiere (the account of which, printed in *Variety*,⁶⁴ did not query her absence). And Helen Taylor (1989: 175) alleges that awarding McDaniel the Oscar may have been a political move rather than a decision based on thespian merit (she notes that the studio was keen to avoid accusations of racism and a repetition of the protests that followed the release of *Birth of a Nation*). *The Daily Worker*'s 'Open Letter to Mr. Selznick,'⁶⁵ written by the African American writer, Carlton Moss, objected to the movie on three counts: the film's misrepresentation of blacks as happy to remain as chattel instead of seeking liberty and joining the state and local governments; its inaccurate representation of Sherman's army as marauders; and the movie's propagation of stereotypical black characters. In short, this review argues that

⁶² Strangely, having made this point, Fidler refuses to criticise the studios, writing 'No one's to blame, least of all the producers who would ask nothing better than to capitalize on her ability' (reprinted in the *Amsterdam News* December 30, 1939, p13).

⁶³ *Amsterdam News*, March 29, 1940.

⁶⁴ December 20, 1939.

⁶⁵ January 9, 1940,

Whereas “The Birth of a Nation” was a frontal attack on American history and the Negro people, “GWTW”, arriving twenty years later, is a rear attack on the same (January 9, 1940).

The *Amsterdam News* clearly felt the same way as Moss: in no way did it embrace *GWTW* as representative of a positive change in Hollywood’s attitude to the Negro. While *Variety* and the *New York Times* ignored the film’s depiction of African Americans, the *Amsterdam News* focused on little else. Even the paper’s pride in McDaniel’s accomplishments did not stop its demands for change. Its reproduction of Jimmie Fidler’s review of *GWTW* contains only that which pertains to McDaniel, ending with Fidler’s lamentation of the inadequacy of parts open to African Americans:

I don’t think it will be easy for me to laugh at Hattie’s comedy in the future, for I’ll never be able to overlook the tragic fact that a very great artist is being wasted (December 30, 1939, p13).

This tone of regret was replaced with a blatantly outraged attitude in the paper’s review of *GWTW*, printed one week later. In a remarkably impassioned and bitter diatribe, Dan Burley raged over the film’s ‘anti-Negro propaganda,’ the inclusion of negative stereotypes such as the ‘indolent’ Prissy,⁶⁶ and, particularly, the slap Scarlett gives Prissy in the ‘birthing’ scene. For Burley, the entire film ‘drives home the diverting belief of southern die-hards that all Negroes are “darkies” with their “place” – the cotton patch, the kitchen, the stable and the henhouse unmistakably presented...’ Of Scarlett’s slapping of Prissy, he argued that ‘In that slap was Miss Mitchell’s and the Old South’s answer to everything the modern Negro has done... She has slapped Negro suffrage.’ Even the substitution of white rapist for black was seen as inadequate by Burley. In common with Carlton Moss’s denunciation of the film in *The Daily*

⁶⁶ Prissy, in Burley’s opinion, ‘should convince most the audiences who see *GWTW* that Negroes are ignorant, incapable “darkies.”’ This is in direct contrast to *Time magazine*’s praise for her ‘sly humor’ (December 25, 1939, p30) and, more recently, Helen Taylor’s (1989) argument that the character’s clumsiness is, in fact, a form of resistance to white domination (179).

Worker, Burley took umbrage at the film's 'besmirch[ing] [of] the name of President Lincoln' and 'slander[ing] [of] the Union Army of Emancipation,' which he regarded as the film's way of implicitly 'thumb[ing] its nose on behalf of the disillusioned South at the march of American democracy.' The article ended on a more positive claim that the Southern ways and discriminations are 'certainly "GWTW" [sic.]' and this, with its effusive praise of McDaniel as brilliant, softens the article's attack slightly. Still, it is impossible to ignore the anger in this lengthy piece, which is even more pronounced than that evident in *The Daily Worker*.

Tellingly, the paper did not print anything else on the film until the news of Hattie McDaniel's victory at the Academy Award ceremony, which it splashed over the front page.⁶⁷ Above the front page photo of McDaniel receiving her Oscar it reads, 'For Her Meritorious Performance.' In light of what I've noted earlier on the *Amsterdam News*'s insistence on black Americans' skillful performances rather than 'natural' ones, it is interesting to see the paper's choice of the word 'meritorious.' The paper's insistence that black actors be recognised as hardworking professionals, aired in the film section in 1930, had made its way to the front page of the paper by 1940.

From this date onward, most editions contained at least one piece on *GWTW*. However, this coverage lacked enthusiasm. One piece described the film as 'much discussed' in its piece on McDaniel's Oscar win.⁶⁸ The only article on the film from that week was one placed by Loew's Victoria Theatre announcing the Harlem release date and it is accompanied by a large advertisement (placed by the theatre) which said, 'See Hattie McDaniel in the role which won for her the Academy award for best performance of the year,' with a photo of her as 'Mammy' beside it. Nevertheless, there was no celebratory editorialising tone in the theatre's write up as was the case with *Imitation of Life*, in which the paper focused on the relevance of the latter film to its black viewers' experiences. The piece from the following week was slightly more positive about the approaching Harlem premiere of *GWTW*, which promised to be the 'biggest thing in

⁶⁷ March 9, 1940.

Harlem.' In this article, there was an interesting one-upmanship underscoring the celebrations as the writer boasted that the Harlem premiere 'bids fair to rival the Atlanta and Broadway premieres.' Yet, the inclusion of an article, directly below this one, entitled 'Crowds Pass "Wind" Pickets – Handbills Fail to Halt Throngs at D.C. Movie,'⁶⁹ deflated the triumph of the film somewhat. The tension between this deflation and the paper's comment that 'Consensus of opinion was that there was no reason for Negroes to feel indignant over the film' displays a curiosity about the movie, to be expected after three years of hype and Hattie McDaniel's Oscar triumph.

Possibly worried by such a tepid build-up, Loew's Oscar A Doob gave an interview to the *Amsterdam News* in which he insisted that Hollywood was growing increasingly racially tolerant, that Hollywood loved McDaniel and were thrilled at her success and that African Americans were not at all negatively portrayed in *GWTW*. This was an obvious attempt to appeal to black New Yorkers and cultivate within them a positive preconception of the movie. What is interesting in this article is the dry reportage – it quotes Doob but does not comment on anything he says, one way or the other. The only aspect of the article that does not issue from Doob's quotations is the paper's elucidation on McDaniel's rise to fame. The article's refusal to comment on Doob's claims is similar to its coverage of the pickets: it displays the paper's unwillingness to commit itself to either side of the fence. Having printed such a vituperative account as Burley's it now appears content to wait for the public to decide for itself. Also, in the face of the Washington pickets there could possibly be a desire to present an image of an intellectually-driven, rational community that is willing to keep an open mind. This impression is sustained in the paper's description of the movie's eventual Harlem premiere on April 8: the headline states ' "GWTW" [sic.] DREW WELL IN HARLEM.' Beneath this is a photograph of Scarlett giving Pork her father's watch, under which is written:

⁶⁸ March 9, 1940.

⁶⁹ March 16, 1940. Placards read 'You'd Be Sweet Too, Under the Whip!'

Gone with the Wind had its long-awaited premiere in Harlem last week at Loew's Victoria and the misgivings on the part of producers and booking agents that Harlem would react to it violently were unjustified as the community went to see for itself what it was all about. A majority of comment showed that Harlem felt the picture showed a true stage in the development of the South and of the U.S. and that the scenes showing Negro slaves were necessary to the portrayal of Miss Mitchell's story. Above picture is Vivian [sic.] Leigh giving the family watch to faithful Pork (Oscar Polk). Miss Leigh was Scarlett O'Hara. Victoria Theatre audiences applauded work of Hattie McDaniel as Mammy' (April 8, 1940).

This review is steadfast in its depiction of a reasonable, curious crowd who could detach themselves sufficiently to say that slave scenes were 'necessary,' who behaved civilly, despite 'misgivings on the part of producers and booking agents.' The article, apart from its praise of McDaniel (notably the only character praised – the paper appears to have maintained Burley's viewpoint on the stereotyping of Pork, Prissy *et al*), concerns itself primarily with painting a picture of a well behaved crowd (that is, not rioting savages, as was expected) and implicitly dismissing the film (the only thing the audience reacted to was McDaniel – the other cast members and even the Technicolor were not of sufficient interest to be applauded).

Gone With the Wind provoked a very different response to that given to *Hearts in Dixie*, *Hallelujah!* and *Imitation of Life* by the *Amsterdam News*. The enthusiasm and optimism with which the paper reported any success of black entertainers in Hollywood, such as that enjoyed by Louise Beavers and Nina Mae McKinney, had all but disappeared by 1940. In the early 1930s, the *Amsterdam News*, through its reviews of *Hearts in Dixie*, *Hallelujah!*, *Imitation of Life* and *Showboat*, encouraged its black readership to see any black involvement with a Hollywood feature film as a positive step towards racial equality in Hollywood and, subsequently, the creation of a system in which African Americans would have control over the representation of black

Americans and black American life. Black theatres assisted in this process with their advertisements that placed the African American element to the forefront, regardless of how incidental it was to the film. As can be seen from the advertisement for *GWTW* placed by Loew's Victoria, this practice continued even after the paper changed its approach, circa 1936 when, whether from frustration or a heightened sense of power, the *Amsterdam News* and its readers began to demand a more discerning appreciation of Hollywood's treatment of 'the race question' and African Americans. No longer content to wait for Hollywood to provide more true to life images of black life, the paper and its readers became more proactive: articles, such as Burley's critique of *GWTW*, exposed instances of racism and demanded equal opportunities for African Americans. Unfortunately for the producers of race movies, such as Oscar Micheaux, despite the persistence of stereotypes in Hollywood features and regardless of the irritation such racial slurs engendered in the *Amsterdam News* and its readership, it was to Hollywood features they still generally looked for a black film form, drawn by the high production values, the promise of widespread recognition for black stars and, perhaps, the chance to reach a national crowd. Micheaux, working on a fraction of the budget, could not compete with the lavish sets praised in *Hallelujah!* or the technological advances admired in *Hearts in Dixie*. Yet, as we shall now see, it had not always been so for him.

Micheaux and the Black Press

Little has been written about the relationship between race movies and the black press in the inter-war period. Charlene Regester's article (2001) is the most comprehensive study to date and that stops at 1929. She argues that between 1918 and 1929, the black press went through three stages in their response to black filmmaking, moving from an initial celebration of black filmmaking, through an increasingly critical and thorough review of each film's merits and demerits in the years between 1922 and 1925, to a highly critical stance, from the mid- to late 1920s. As we will now see, this pattern was evident in the black press's relationship with Oscar Micheaux, which Regester has rightly characterised as 'turbulent' (44). Nonetheless, as her research ends at 1930 she

was not able to note the parallel trajectory that characterised the black press's relationship with Hollywood black-cast films, between 1930 and 1940. Neither did she have the opportunity to discuss the black press's return to race films in the late 1930s, as they argued that,

Certain pictures are boxed out of the money-making areas by what appears to be a syndicated effort to cash in on and to control the colored field. This should not be. Negroes have a right to see their own in films as any other group (*Amsterdam News*, September 30, 1939).

This contrasts with Clyde Taylor's (1993) claim that, between 1937 and 1939, the black press rejected race movies. However, Taylor's argument on this point is flawed: he bases his opinion that the black press rejected Micheaux on an article from a 1939 article in the *Daily Worker*, entitled 'Negro Films Must Tell the Truth' which demanded that race films expose the truth of racial discrimination in America. But, as we have seen in its response to *Hallelujah!*, the *Daily Worker* was not representative of African American papers; its criticism of films was based on its loyalty to Soviet techniques, not racial allegiance. Furthermore, the black press's criticism of race movies was not unique to this period, as we will see. My research offers an alternative reading to the black press's reception of Micheaux's work and race films in general. The focus of this section extends to black newspapers in New York and Chicago with occasional references to Baltimore and Philadelphia. My analysis is based primarily on four publications: the *Amsterdam News*, the *New York Age*, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Chicago Whip*.

In short, this last section will trace the way in which the black press, in its first flush of excitement about Hollywood's black-cast films in the late 1920, moved away from its support of Micheaux's race films and how, concurrent with the press's increasingly combative responses to *Green Pastures* and *Gone With the Wind* in the late 1930s, they returned to Micheaux's work. In the process we will see the way in which Micheaux's

films were discussed by the main agency within African American mass culture that could ‘structure reception beyond textual boundaries,’ as Klinger (1989) might say. Thus it will be possible to gauge how Micheaux’s contemporaries were encouraged to receive his movies.

When Oscar Micheaux entered the race movie industry in 1919, African American entertainment and performers were in demand with black vaudeville audiences who, as early as 1914, had made their desire to see ‘real Afro-American shows and acts’ clear to theatre managers in Chicago.⁷⁰ The wish for more black involvement in the entertainment industry gained momentum in the 1910s: in 1915, the *Chicago Defender*’s Juli Jones argued that ‘in a moving picture, the Negro can offset so many insults to the race.’⁷¹ Following similar ideals, the *Amsterdam News* throughout the 1920s regularly complained about the absence of African Americans in the projection booths of cinema theatres and urged its readers to support race movies.⁷² Consequently, with the release of Micheaux’s first film, *The Homesteader*, in 1919, black papers showed excitement at the emergence of a new black talent. *The Chicago Defender*’s review opened with the following:

There is a saying, and perhaps, very true, that the ‘road to hades is paved with the best intentions in the world.’ So in saying that the public has awaited a demonstration on the part of the Negro in the silent art it is well to explain that demonstration awaited is a creditable, dignified achievement and in Oscar Micheaux’s THE HOMESTEADER this has at last come (February 22, 1919).

With the *Chicago Defender*’s national circulation figures being as high as they were (160,000-250,000 in 1920)⁷³ such a glowing review could not have marred the film’s chance of success. Indeed, the film’s reception in Chicago was excellent. It opened to

⁷⁰ *Chicago Defender* August 28, 1914.

⁷¹ October 9, 1915.

⁷² See ‘About Things Theatrical’ column, June 17, 1925 and Romeo L. Dougherty’s ‘The Picture Game,’ July 31, 1929, both in the *Amsterdam News*.

⁷³ Jane Gaines (2001: 242).

large, enthusiastic crowds at the Vendome Theatre with 5,700 paid admissions, a ten-cent price increase, a five-day holdover and a return engagement at Hammond's Pickford Theatre, all of which Micheaux listed in letters designed to entice exhibitors to book his film (Gaines 2001: 121).

Micheaux's second feature, *Within Our Gates* (1920) met with a less positive reaction from certain members of the black community. In Chicago, where the memory of the previous summer's race riots was still fresh, concern was expressed by the censorship board and members of the Methodist Episcopal Minister's Alliance Committee (comprising white and black people) that the lynching scene in the film would spark a recurrence of inter-racial hostilities. According to Jane Gaines (2001), the request for a permit to exhibit the movie was denied after its first showing, until a second viewing with a more liberal group granted the film a reprieve. On its release, it did not fare as well as its predecessor. Several theatres refused to exhibit it on the grounds of it being a 'nasty story' and audience figures were down somewhat from the previous year's hit, as audiences did not want to be reminded of the previous year's atrocities. Still, the *Chicago Defender* came to the film's defence,⁷⁴ arguing that it did much to show the race in a good light, 'show[ing] that the colored race had never practiced anarchy and there never was a slacker,' and defending its lynching scene, with the declaration that 'There is nothing in the picture but what is true and truly legitimate.'

Similar press support of Micheaux's films was in evidence on the release of his next feature, *The Brute* (1920), which placed it above Micheaux's previous achievements in terms of style and production. The *New York Age* vowed that,

Its photography is more meritorious than any of Oscar Micheaux's pictures... As a play produced by Negroes, 'The Brute' is the best of its kind that has been offered for the amusement of the colored movie devotee. Aside from the valuable service it renders as a medium of entertainment it gives a true index as

⁷⁴ See *Chicago Defender* February 7, 1920.

to what kind of photo plays we can expect in the near future (September 18, 1920).

The *Chicago Defender* was no less enthused. In an article from October 28, 1920, it praised the film unreservedly, commending the actors and direction. Its final paragraph reads like a rallying call to exhibitors and patrons for further support of the movie:

“The Brute” is a picture that holds your interest from the first introductory title to the final fade-out; there isn’t an impossible nor uninteresting moment throughout its entire 8,000 feet... Exhibitors all over the land should book this wonder-play; their patrons are entitled to a showing of it.

In this review, Micheaux’s film was credited as an example of the race’s versatility and ability. The film and the filmmakers’ success were inextricably bound with the success and accurate representation of the race. In these reviews the reader was urged to patronise the movie, indeed the wording of the *Chicago Defender*’s closing sentence above suggested that a viewing of *The Brute* was their right and duty. And indeed, as recorded by that paper, viewers attended in their thousands in Chicago, leading to the movie enjoying a record-breaking run at the Vendome⁷⁵ and making approximately three thousand dollars in the first four days of its release (Bowser and Spence 2000:179)

Looking at the *New York Age*’s reviews of Micheaux’s next feature, *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), we see several interesting claims made for the picture. The paper ran two articles on the film: a preview and a review, spaced a week apart. Commending the film as ‘most timely,’ the preview then listed the attractions of the film, promising ‘thrilling scenes,’ and favourite actors.⁷⁶ Obviously the anticipation was great as the film was booked in for an entire week. This piece is highly persuasive in its praise of the film. Similar praise recurred in the paper’s review of the movie printed a week

⁷⁵ *Chicago Defender* October 28, 1920.

later. The reviewer commended the ‘general excellence of the picture,’ reiterating the relevance the movie had to contemporary African American life. As it noted, ‘The production of “The Symbol of the Unconquered” is most timely in that it graphically shows up the evils of the Ku-Klux-Klan.’⁷⁷

Once again, the paper stressed the movie’s ability to reflect the African American experience, and the race movie was heralded as a permanent fixture in the future of black expression:

The race photo play is here to stay... As a concrete example of its alluring powers, see the large audiences assembled and note the unbounded enthusiasm (*New York Age*, January 1, 1921).

The only reference to Hollywood here was in the concluding point that the photography in *Symbol of the Unconquered* was of an equal to ‘screen successes put on by leading producers...’ In no way was Hollywood presented as a viable competitor in the quest to give expression to a recognisable African American experience – that exercise was exclusively granted to race movies, particularly those produced by Oscar Micheaux. Similarly, the *Amsterdam News*’s review of *The House Behind the Cedars* (1924) defined it as a film that reflected African American concerns effectively. Micheaux’s film, rather than being upstaged by Hollywood productions, was posited as the ideal vehicle for the discussion of racial matters in the United States. Micheaux encouraged this sentiment in his advertising. For example, publicity for *The House Behind the Cedars* (1924) declared the film’s

remarkable parallel to the famous Rhinelander Case... It tells the story of a beautiful mulatto girl who poses as white, and is wooed and won by a young white millionaire. Although worried, she does not betray her secret. Then

⁷⁶ December 25, 1920.

⁷⁷ *New York Age*, January 1, 1921

comes the discovery as in the Rhinelander Case (qtd. in Jane Gaines 2001: 157).

The Rhinelander Case was a recent, infamous trial in which the wealthy white Rhinelander family sued for the annulment of their son's marriage to a mulatto on the basis that she had concealed her racial identity from him. They lost their case. In the days before televised trials (such as OJ Simpson's), the promise of a film that exploited the case must have been appealing to a crowd that had followed its progress in the newspapers. Similarly, Micheaux's *Marcus Garland* (1925) was a reconstruction of the life of Marcus Garvey, a race leader whose trial for corruption covered the front pages of the black press throughout 1925 and 1926. Never averse to exploiting the headlines, Micheaux's publicity positioned his films as forums for the exploration of topical issues particular to African Americans, and as we have seen, in the early days at least, the black press reinforced this idea.

Looking at reviews for *The Gunsaulus Mystery* (1921), we see that the black press's support of Micheaux continued unabated into the 1920s, as Regester (2001) has argued. The *New York Age* contained a short article stating that the premiere of the film was to be held at the Lafayette Theatre in New York. The tone of this piece is almost boastful: the Lafayette had been selected because it was 'the most desirable house in the United States.'⁷⁸ Quite apart from the paper's pride that the 'most desirable' theatre is housed in the paper's own city, there is an intimation here that holding a Micheaux premiere is a privilege – his films require the best theatres because they are the best race movies. In this short sentence both the theatre and the movie are exalted by their association with each other. There is an alliance of sorts established between the theatre, its city, the *New York Age* and Oscar Micheaux's film in the preview's anticipation of the thrills to come. In Chicago a month later, during a five day run at the Vendome Theatre, the film's 'interesting story' was praised by the *Chicago Whip* which grandly stated that 'Mr Micheaux this time has surpassed all of his previous

⁷⁸ April 16, 1921.

efforts in the production of this picture.⁷⁹ This reviewer's approval stretched beyond this film to Micheaux's back catalogue, the use of the word 'surpassed' instead of 'improved,' indicating an appreciation of those that have come before.

The Dungeon (1922), released the following year, marked a pause in the unquestioning support of Micheaux by the *Chicago Defender*. In D. Ireland Thomas' review of the film we see the introduction of a complaint that was to reappear much more frequently in the 1930s. Thomas objected to what he saw as Micheaux's preference of light skinned to dark skinned actors, suspecting that Micheaux aimed to book the film in white theatres as well as black. Perhaps the latter part is true. An article in *Billboard*⁸⁰ contained a notification that as of the release of *The Ghost of Tolston's Manor* (1923) the next four Micheaux films would be 'handled' (distributed) by a 'big white association.' However, there is no record that any such convergence of the Micheaux Film Corporation with a 'big white association' occurred. In any case, what I find interesting in Thomas's article, apart from his objections to a colour-based hierarchical system at work in Micheaux's movies, is the almost territorial way in which he mentioned the filmmaker. Micheaux had clearly been demarcated a black filmmaker who caters to black audiences. Any dalliance with white theatres that he might consider was, therefore, looked upon with disgust. Obviously, Thomas felt that Micheaux's depiction of African American life might be compromised by it, which in turn implies that Micheaux at this point was still regarded as the maker of accurate, socially relevant dramas of the African American experience. That his films were still received favourably by the black populace is evident from the reception of the following year's *Ghost of Tolston's Manor* (1923) which ran for a week in the Douglas Theatre in New York, where the seating capacity was 2,200.⁸¹

In the mid-1920s, critics varied between wholehearted celebration and reserved praise of Micheaux's films, but overall, as Regester (2001) noted, their attitude to his movies

⁷⁹ May 7, 1921.

⁸⁰ May 5, 1923, reprinted in Sampson 1995: 309.

⁸¹ *Billboard*, April 7, 1923.

was positive. In a review of *Son of Satan* (1924) printed in the *Chicago Defender*,⁸² D. Ireland Thomas liked the cast and praised 'the one and only Oscar Micheaux.' His endorsement of the film was qualified, however, as he admitted that the film's depiction of black people swearing, crap-shooting and drinking troubled him, although he then conceded that

It is true to nature, yes, I guess, too true. We have got to hand it to Oscar Micheaux when it comes to giving us the real stuff (January 31, 1925).

He tempered this slight criticism with the following,

This is all the criticism that I could find and I am a hard critic when it comes to Race pictures... it is not what we want that gets the money; it is what the public clamors for that makes the coin jingle (January 31, 1925).

This piece is significant for several reasons. First, it represents a foretaste of the major criticism that Micheaux would face in the 1930s as some critics demanded a more respectable depiction of African Americans, finding Micheaux's incorporation of 'reefer addicts' and prostitutes objectionable. Micheaux attempted to appease these objectors, writing in the *Pittsburgh Courier* at the end of 1924 about the need for critics to temper their 'constructive criticism' with 'fairness.'⁸³ He defended his aims to 'lay before the race a cross section of its own life...' with the following plea,

it is only by constructive criticism, arising from an intelligent understanding of the real problem, however, that the colored producer can succeed in his efforts and produce photoplays that will not only be a credit to the race, but be on a par with those of the white producer.

⁸² January 31, 1925.

⁸³ December 13, 1924 reprinted in Sampson, 1995: 168-169.

Secondly, Thomas's article reveals that the film enjoyed good box-office, which means that black audiences were not averse to seeing unromanticised depictions of the race on the screen. This echoes Ossie Davies's sentiment, printed in this chapter's epigraph, that

When we wanted the reality of how black people truly reacted to death, we came to our own theatre and there we were able to get the truth of our own experience (Jones 1991:6).

In addition, it is interesting to note that at no point did Thomas see a problem with Micheaux's films' style. Hollywood was never mentioned as a preferable option, in fact there is no reference to Hollywood at all; the idea that Hollywood could produce a movie that would give expression to the African American experience had yet to be conceived. Finally, it suggests that the notion that Micheaux's films represented honest, relevant portraits of African Americans and their communities, or as Thomas puts it, 'the real stuff,' was still accepted by the press and the public at this point. So when did this change?

No Longer on 'Easy Street'

Charles Musser (2001) has argued that the black press, particularly in New York, began to reject Micheaux's films in the wake of *Body and Soul* (1925), largely due to the film's negative treatment of its popular star, Paul Robeson.⁸⁴ Pitching it as a choice between supporting Robeson or Micheaux, Musser contends that the press chose the actor over the filmmaker and relations between Micheaux and the black press were strained from then on. However, the reviews of *Body and Soul* (1925), *The Devil's Disciple* (1925), *The Spider's Web* (1927), *The Millionaire* (1927) and *Wages of Sin*

⁸⁴ Comparing the narrative of *Body and Soul* to *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, Musser argues that *Body and Soul* satirised and implicitly condemned Paul Robeson's roles. Examining press reception of Micheaux's film, he maintains that the press rallied around Robeson and abandoned their support of Micheaux forthwith. See Musser (2001: 97-131) for more.

(1928) that appeared in the *Amsterdam News*,⁸⁵ *New York Age*⁸⁶ and *Chicago Defender*⁸⁷ were positive, to the point of effusive. For example, in the *Amsterdam News*, *The Devil's Disciple* was described as 'really the first story of Negro life in Harlem brought to the screen'; the *Spider's Web* was declared to be 'one of the finest all-colored productions ever produced'; and *The Millionaire* was called 'a rare treat.' Similarly, the *Chicago Defender* heralded *Body and Soul* as a 'powerful story brought to the very heights of filmdom.' After the release of *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and *Hallelujah* (1929), however, there was a subtle change in the papers' treatment of Micheaux's oeuvre. Reviews were less effusive. The previews of *Easy Street* (1930) that appeared in the *Amsterdam News* and *Pittsburgh Courier* reported, respectively, that '[the film] is said to be by far the best which the country's only colored producer has created',⁸⁸ and 'the picture is said to be the greatest race film ever produced...',⁸⁹ Nonetheless, with the inclusion of the words 'said to be' there is a hint of detachment, or a distancing effect. The papers no longer automatically vouched for a Micheaux film. Additionally, the careless error in the *Pittsburgh Courier*'s typing of the film's name (they call it *Easy Money*, the title of a 1921 Reol Productions film) bespeaks a more casual attitude to Micheaux's product, in contrast with a time when it offered its pages as a forum for Micheaux to defend his work.

This distancing was repeated in the *Amsterdam News*'s review of *Daughter of the Congo* (1930) filed by Theophilus Lewis.⁹⁰ Complaining of the film's 'persistent vaunting of intraracial color fetishism,' Lewis took the point made in D. Ireland Thomas' (*Chicago Defender*) review of *The Dungeon* (1922)⁹¹ to a new level by comparing Micheaux, unfavourably, with Hollywood's treatment of non-white people. After expressing his great admiration of Micheaux's previous films, Lewis compared

⁸⁵ Previews of *Devil's Disciple* (1925), *Spider's Web* (1927) and *The Millionaire* (1927), October 14, 1925, January 5, 1927, and December 7, 1927, respectively.

⁸⁶ Review of *Body and Soul* (1925), November 11, 1925.

⁸⁷ Reviews of *The Spider's Web* (1927), *The Millionaire* (1927) and *Wages of Sin* (1928), January 22, 1927, November 19, 1927, December 8, 1928, respectively.

⁸⁸ *Amsterdam News*, July 23, 1930.

⁸⁹ *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 6, 1930, reprinted in Sampson, 1995: 301-302.

⁹⁰ April 16, 1930.

the native Africans in the Hollywood production of *Three Feathers* with those in Micheaux's *Daughter of the Congo* writing,

Almost all of them possessed courage and none were so preposterously stupid as not to be able to distinguish death from swooning, as Mr Micheaux makes his chief appear in 'A Daughter of the Congo' (April 16, 1930).

Hollywood had, at last, usurped Micheaux's role as the preferred race filmmaker. Presumably heartened by such 'sympathetic' depictions of African Americans in Hollywood's black-cast films, the *Amsterdam News* no longer credited Micheaux with the greater ability to depict the black American. This point was compounded by Lewis's assertion that white producers were 'ever more diligent [in] search for realism...' in contrast with Micheaux's 'kindergarten ethnology.' Rejection of Micheaux was baldly stated by Lewis:

... the picture is thoroughly bad from every point of analysis, from the continuity, which is unintelligible, to the caption writing, which is a crime [sound, of course, was common in Hollywood features by now]... For years the Micheaux productions were easily as good as the average film produced by white companies, and only a step or two behind the best offerings of Hollywood producers. But that was before white movie magnates became Negro-conscious (April 16, 1930).

From a press that had previously supported Micheaux, even when it did not condone his representation of African Americans, to one that openly preferred Hollywood products we can see quite a downward spiral in the reception of Micheaux's films in the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Amsterdam News*.

⁹¹ In this review he criticised what he saw as Micheaux's preference of light skinned actors over dark.

This continued through the early 1930s. The *New York Age*, in its preview of *Harlem After Midnight* (1934),⁹² projected a positive image of the film, focusing on the black performers' singing and dancing displayed in the film. However, the way in which the paper abruptly ended the review with an unrelated and excited announcement about *The Emperor Jones* suggested that its interest in Micheaux's production was limited. The *Baltimore Afro-American*, a staunch supporter of Micheaux in the 1920s provided a similar case of damning with faint praise in its review of *The Exile* (1931).⁹³ Admittedly, it did enthuse that 'Micheaux has made a wonderful effort in producing "The Exile."' On closer inspection, however, this review seems more enamoured with the performers and the use of sound than anything else in the movie. The reviewer praised the film not for the narrative but for its inclusion of black song and dance acts. Obviously, the use of sound was well received but what is missing in the review is the focus on the film's narrative and its relevance to African Americans that drove the same paper's review of *Birthright* in 1924. Micheaux, the director of pertinent race movies, had become little more than the floor manager of adequately recorded song and dance acts. While none of these papers appears to have set out to destroy Micheaux's business, their rather tepid responses to his films post-1929 imply that, in their eyes, Micheaux no longer produced a viable product compared to the efforts of Hollywood studios. As Theophilus Lewis wrote in the *Amsterdam News*,⁹⁴

When Mr Micheaux first launched out as producer the movie industry had not reached anything near its present high stage of development... Today white producers are not only making honest efforts to present Negro character as faithfully as they present Caucasian character... They are also spending huge sums of money on all Negro productions. Such films as 'Hearts in Dixie' and 'Hallelujah' have set an exacting standard in the quality of colored pictures. All of which means that if Mr Micheaux is to do as well in the future as he has

⁹² December 22, 1934.

⁹³ March 14, 1931 reprinted in Sampson, 1995: 371.

⁹⁴ April 16, 1930. Review of *Daughter of the Congo*.

done in the past he must have the support of Negro business men... (April 16, 1930).

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that there was a significant withdrawal of support of Micheaux's movies by the major black newspapers in the early and mid-1930s. As they began to substitute Hollywood's black-cast movies for Micheaux's, Micheaux was no longer acclaimed as 'the one and only.'⁹⁵ Distribution of Micheaux's movies had been quite extensive in the 1920s, reaching Kansas City, Atlanta, Houston, Virginia and Sweden,⁹⁶ as well as the larger black urban centres of New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia and Baltimore. As the only extant copies of *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) were recovered in Spain and Belgium, respectively, it is possible that at least some of his films were distributed in those countries also. In fact, Henry Sampson (1995: 151) has recorded that Micheaux, in 1921, had distribution managers in London and Paris, as well as in Roanoke, Virginia, Texas and Chicago. Yet, it is notable in the advertisements that I have found that the week long runs in theatres that sat 2,200 people that Micheaux's films enjoyed in the early 1920s, were replaced with three and four day engagements in smaller theatres, averaging about 250 seats by the 1930s: for example, *Ten Minutes to Live* (1931) had only four days in Kansas City. Though quite respectable runs for race movies, they were shorter engagements than Micheaux had enjoyed in the early 1920s, indicating that although there was still an audience for Micheaux's films in the 1930s, it was considerably diminished.

However, as mentioned in the discussion of *Green Pastures*'s reception by the *Amsterdam News*, in the late 1930s, black papers began to reassess the value of both Hollywood and Micheaux's black-cast movies. Although they still looked to Hollywood to provide progressive depictions of African Americans, from 1937 onwards, Micheaux's films began to enjoy something of a revival. Lengthy reviews and

⁹⁵ *Chicago Defender*, January 31, 1925.

⁹⁶ Henry Sampson has recorded that in 1925 Micheaux travelled to Sweden to promote the distribution of his work, with *The Brute* getting released under the name *Mr Bull Magee*.

previews, accompanied by stills from the movies, began to reappear in the pages of the *Amsterdam News*, culminating in the paper's enthusiastic response to *The Notorious Elinor Lee* (1940):⁹⁷ two stills were printed on the entertainment page along with a lengthy, well positioned article on the film which praised it as 'true to life' and an 'exceptionally well-made talking picture.' Once again, Micheaux was seen to produce movies that spoke to, and for, the African American public. Unfortunately, by this time Micheaux's productions were only enjoying three-day engagements and even the press's revived interest could not prevent Micheaux's retirement from film in 1940 to concentrate on his writing. Clyde Taylor's assumption that race movies died due to the popularity of Hollywood films in the period of 1937-1939 seems slightly misjudged. I would argue, instead, that it was Hollywood's dominance in the early 1930s that stifled Micheaux's efforts. The black public was systematically persuaded to accept Hollywood films as the true expression of African American life from 1929; by 1936 this opinion was ingrained to the degree that even the press's renewed interest in Micheaux's work, from 1937 to 1940, could not stem black patronage of Hollywood movies.

Every film, regardless of its studio's financial status relies on the press for a good review to ensure its success. For a filmmaker with such limited resources as Oscar Micheaux good reviews were even more essential. A glowing review was essential to a man whose distribution circuit was severely limited by his race and lack of finances.⁹⁸ Given that Micheaux's budget for a film was between ten and twenty thousand

⁹⁷ January 13, 1940.

⁹⁸ Although Sampson (1995) claims that Micheaux was not averse to screening his films to white audiences, he notes that any such effort was vanquished. He does not offer any explanation for this failure but it can probably be attributed to Micheaux's limited resources which curtailed the expansion of his distribution operations and white audiences' reluctance to view movies about blacks, evidenced in the white press's reviews of the early black-cast Hollywood productions *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah!* Green (2000), also, argues that the audiences for Micheaux's films were all black: he writes that 'All the known business letters for his film companies are in pursuit of distribution arrangements for the black-only and historically black film screening venues' (223). In addition, he points out that virtually all known advertisements used by Micheaux were placed in black newspapers (223).

dollars,⁹⁹ his publicity campaigns were necessarily limited in comparison with that which the major Hollywood studios could afford. Nor did Micheaux have at his disposal the extensive theatre chains available to his Hollywood competitors, thus limiting his chances of making a profit. With no block booking strategy at his command, he could not force theatres to exhibit his less popular movies on the promise that they could then gain access to a more popular feature. If the press printed a negative review or, worse, ignored the release of his films it lessened his chances of drawing a crowd, which in turn limited the film's appeal to an exhibitor. In the early years, the black press championed his films as relevant documents of African American life but, during the early to mid-1930s, his films were condemned or ignored by the black press and enjoyed shorter engagements in fewer theatres. There are several possible explanations for his declining fortune. One reason for his films' decreasing popularity could be his audience's increasingly sophisticated taste that required something new, rather than a sustained diet of race movies focusing on the underworld and uplift. I think that another factor was the diminution of press support in the 1930s, due to their apparent confidence that Hollywood could provide a more relevant depiction of African American life than could Micheaux. Although his audiences were not sheep, they were obviously influenced by the black press's exhortation to look beyond Micheaux in the early 1930s. By the time the press had revised its position, in the late 1930s, it was too late to stem the tide of African Americans patronising Hollywood productions, to the detriment of Micheaux's already straitened finances.

Ronald Green (1993:32) has argued that 'it is pointless to blame criticism [such as that provided by African American film critics] for contributing to the demise of Black independent "race movies."' Charlene Regester (2001) agrees, arguing that although bad reviews in the black press may have 'unwittingly harmed' box office returns (49), the black press never fully abandoned race movies (43). As we have seen, Regester is correct in her assertion that the black press did not turn their backs completely on Micheaux. Nevertheless, the reduction in support must be seen to be one of the factors

⁹⁹ Sampson (1995: 160).

in the declining fortunes of Micheaux's career and the life of race movies. Ironically, as black papers such as the *Amsterdam News* and black theatres began to perceive a burgeoning black American cinema in Hollywood during the early sound period, they turned away from Micheaux's films which were in fact, as the next three chapters will now argue, much more instrumental in the establishment of such a cinema. The newspapers' neglect could be attributable to their excessively simplistic concept of a black cinema: the merest appearance of a black actor on the screen appears to have signified the birth of a black cinema for them, hence they were satisfied by Hollywood's films. Yet, as the next three chapters will argue, the development of a black cinema was much more complex a procedure, requiring the construction of a film form that diverged from white cinema's (Hollywood's) precedents. The remainder of this thesis will examine the way in which Micheaux's films developed a film form (narrative system and style) that concerned itself exclusively with African American narratives and characters in a style to challenge Hollywood's stylistic conventions and traditional representations of African American life. As we will see, Micheaux's films developed a narrative system that was based on contemporary popular discourses within the black community and concerned itself exclusively with depicting African American narratives in a style that modified Hollywood's continuity style. In the next chapter I will explore the way in which Micheaux's films' narrative system can be seen to have been active in the dissemination of a positive African American identity and engaging with popular discourses of the time, such as passing and 'twoness.'

Chapter Two

‘Who Is a Negro?’: Micheaux and the Discourse on African American identity

One of the greatest tasks in my life has been to convince a certain class of my racial acquaintance that a colored man can be anything.

– Oscar Micheaux, *The Conquest*, qtd. in Green, 1998: 26

Examination of the black newspapers the *Amsterdam News* and the *Chicago Defender* in the early twentieth century reveals a common preoccupation with the nature of African American identity. One letter sent to the *Chicago Defender* in 1910 came from J.W. Anderson, a man with a remarkably convoluted racial lineage: his grandfather was born in French Guiana to French parents; his grandmother was born in Costa Rica of Spanish parentage; and his parents and he were born in Jamaica. Following these details Mr. Anderson concludes with the question, ‘Will you please tell me what am I?’¹ This desire to delineate a black American character was still evident in black newspapers in the late 1920s: 1929 saw the *Amsterdam News* publish an article by Kelly Miller entitled, ‘Who Is a Negro?’² In his piece Miller acknowledges the complexity of this question arguing that,

There can be no scientific or legal definition that will hold water. The judgment depends wholly upon individual observation. Blood composition cannot be definitely determined.

It is the African American’s uncertain legal position within the United States that particularly interests Miller. Conscious as he is of racial discrimination and segregation he asks,

¹ *Chicago Defender*, June 11, 1910, p1.

² *Amsterdam News*, May 15, 1929, editorial page, p20.

Who is a Negro? How does the jury know that any given person of color has the requisite quota of white blood?³ What right have the authorities to make an unintelligent [train] conductor a judge of ethnological values?

Miller answers his opening question with the less than scientific conclusion that a Negro was ‘any who would be jim-crowed in Virginia.’⁴ Here he has suggested that race is determined not by rationale but by the level of prejudice that exists within any given society. Such a conclusion points to the ephemeral nature of African American identity in the 1920s and ‘30s. According to Miller, an African American identity could vary from location to location, depending on the extent of the racial prejudice it encountered. In this way, J.W. Anderson’s earlier query as to the nature of a black American identity appears to have remained unanswerable.

In a case of art imitating life, African American culture in the early twentieth century in its various forms also meditated on the nature of African American identity. As will become clear in the course of this chapter, racial identity was a central theme linking the work of black American novelists, playwrights and poets alike. As we will see, W.E.B. DuBois asked how the African American was different to the white American in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903); Nella Larsen considered whether loyalty to the race was a factor in determining a person’s racial identity in her novel, *Passing* (1929); and both Larsen and Langston Hughes investigated the mulatto’s fate in *Quicksand* (1928) and ‘Cross’ respectively. In their efforts to address these questions African American artists advanced an alternative discourse on black American identity to that which had been previously provided by white American culture, providing a new perspective on the way in which African American identity could be determined.

³ As Miller points out in this article, in several Southern states at this time a person was deemed ‘Negro’ if s/he had anything between one- and sixteen-sixteenths of ‘African blood’ in them. He also argues that as there was no ‘exact blood tester’ in existence that could determine the composition of one’s blood to this degree, the Southern states must rely on guesswork alone to determine who should and should not be deemed coloured.

⁴ This conclusion was still relevant in 1940 when W.E.B. DuBois wrote, ‘... the black man is a person who must ride “Jim Crow” in Georgia’ (qtd. in Jane Gaines 2001).

Although I am aware of critics' reluctance to draw any parallel between Harlem Renaissance texts and those of contemporary race movies, as we will see there were certain topics that crossed over from literature to black American cinema. Like the texts of the Harlem Renaissance listed above, Oscar Micheaux's films display a lively engagement with the contemporary discourse on aspects of black identity. Conscious as I am that critics, such as Jane Gaines (2001) and Jayna Brown (2001), have argued that there is little basis for comparison between the Harlem Renaissance and race movies, my aim in this chapter is not to establish a connection between Micheaux and those artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Rather, my interest lies in the issues that were addressed across the artistic spectrum. By examining the literature as well as the newspapers of the period, we can attain a more nuanced understanding of public discourse on African American identity during the inter-war period and the way in which Micheaux's films contributed to it.

As Chapter One aimed to establish the reception context of Oscar Micheaux's movies this chapter will explore the films' response to some of the more pressing intellectual and cultural issues of the inter-war years, those issues being the nature of African American identity and the way in which it could be created and disseminated, once again focusing primarily on the black urban centres of Harlem and Chicago.

Ultimately, the aim of this chapter is to assess the way in which Oscar Micheaux's film narratives engaged with African American concerns and discourses, both drawing from and feeding into them, contributing to the construction of a film form that spoke to and for its African American viewers. First, I will examine how Micheaux's films responded to ideas of African American identity that were circulated in the inter-war period and then I will explore the way in which they responded to the negative characterisations of African American traditionally disseminated by white culture. We will see that his movies deliberated on several key concepts of the time, such as W.E.B. DuBois' concept of an African American identity beset by a 'double consciousness,' the contemporary discourse on passing for white, and the pros and cons of the 'New

Negro' as promoted by Alain Locke and various black newspapers of the period. This chapter will also argue that we can see in Micheaux's movies a challenge to contemporary attempts within the black community to elevate a 'talented tenth,' the films displaying more trust in the 'common man' to guide himself without deference to a cultural elite than has been perceived by recent critics such as Horace Neal and Ronald Green (1988). I will also reconsider Joseph Young's (1989) claim that Micheaux's films manifested a blatant bias against dark-skinned characters. Finally, I will examine the way that the films' apparent appropriation of the negative racial stereotypes (such as the tragic mulatto and the coon), traditionally circulated by white culture, represents an exorcism of, rather than collusion with, these earlier caricatures in an attempt to disseminate in their place a more positive formulation of African American identity in all its diversity for their black audience. We will see how, by trading on his black audiences' familiarity with Hollywood movies such as *Imitation of Life* and traditional racial caricatures, Micheaux's films represented an attempt to counteract those images circulated by white culture.

African American Artists and the Search for a Black Identity

Nathan Huggins (1971), in his discussion of the Harlem Renaissance, says the task of Harlem intellectuals in the inter-war period was to 'delineate Negro character and personality in the American context. Did the Negro belong? Was he distinctive? How?' (139). Looking at the work of black writers, poets and artists of the inter-war period, as well as the films of Oscar Micheaux, the recurrence of one key question becomes apparent: how best to express their difference to white Americans? One of the problems in self-definition and image-making that black American artists and intellectuals faced in the inter-war period was the question of how different they really were from white Americans. This question posed a dilemma. If there was no difference other than skin colour between black and white Americans, then there was nothing the black man/woman could claim to have contributed that was distinctive: as Huggins pointed out 'Without distinct Negro character, there could be no Negro genius' (151). If, on the other hand, they did not accept this scenario, black people could be seen to

have justified the presence of racial discrimination. Thus, African American artists had to cultivate an African American character that stood apart from mainstream, white American identity at the same time as it promoted racial equality.

James Weldon Johnson attempted a clear delineation in his novel, *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), with a rather simplistic division of character traits along racial lines. In it he distinguished between a humane and artistic spirit that comes from black Americans and one of hardened materialism that comprises the whites'. Aaron Douglas, Claude McKay and Countee Cullen attempted to locate a separate black identity in Africa and African culture: Douglas's murals borrowed heavily from African design and mysticism; the poets Claude McKay and Countee Cullen dedicated several poems to the subject of Africa and their own relationship with it. For these artists, Africa represented the source of the essential Negro spirit, as can be seen from a passage in McKay's novel, *Banjo* (1929) in which one of the main characters declares that the Africans he has met on his travels gave him a feeling of

...wholesome contact with racial roots. They made him feel that he was not merely an unfortunate accident of birth, but that he belonged... to a race weighed, tested, and poised in the universal scheme (qtd. in Huggins 1971:177).

However, as Huggins (1971: 186-189) has pointed out, for these and other artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Africa was a generality; there was no consideration of the various languages and cultures to be found on that continent, instead it was an amalgamating force and provided a connection to a distinctive Negro identity and culture that could not be easily found in white American society. Jean Toomer's book of vignettes, *Cane* (1923), offered a less escapist means to establishing African American identity: it was to be found by living in America and facing up to the past without shame or fear. This approach appears to have been favoured by Sterling Brown also: his 'Children of the Mississippi' offers a picture of the 'Children, stepchildren/Of the Mississippi' who

‘know fear, for all their singing... know grief... for all their vaunted faith, know doubt... know fear, now, as a bosom crony’ (reprinted in Ford 1996: 260).

Probably the most renowned formulation of African American identity from the early twentieth century was constructed by the editor of the NAACP’s paper, the *Crisis*: W.E.B. DuBois. A prominent black intellectual in Harlem during the first half of the twentieth century (he co-founded the NAACP), his formulation of an African American identity in eternal conflict with itself is still employed by modern scholars, for example, Green (1993) and Reed (1997). DuBois’ theories proved far-reaching and, as I will address in the next section, Micheaux’s films can be seen to display a lively engagement with his key theory of a black American identity beset by double consciousness, or ‘twoness.’ Looking firstly at DuBois’ writing on the nature and consequences of African American double consciousness, I will then examine the way in which Micheaux’s treatment of ‘twoness’ can be seen as a response to DuBois’ views. Ultimately, I feel that Micheaux challenged DuBois’ theories, presenting a more favourable attitude to African American double consciousness by employing it to construct a positive, stable racial identity that was equal yet different to that of white Americans, thus resolving the dilemma mentioned earlier in this chapter: how to delineate a distinctive African American identity without excusing racial discrimination by whites.

Twoness

1903 saw the publication of W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, a highly influential appraisal of the black person’s identity and position within American culture. The most enduring idea that emerged from this book was his description of a black American identity that was forever troubled by a double-consciousness, otherwise known as twoness, which he described as follows:

...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second - sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the

revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (DuBois 1903, reprinted in 1989: 5).

In this famous passage, DuBois discusses what he sees as the 'warring' impulses within every African American: the desire to belong to mainstream white (American) society and the wish to reject that society completely in order to define the world completely from a black (African) perspective. DuBois wishes to find a way to accommodate both impulses but remains resigned to the fact that they will forever be 'unreconciled strivings'. Hence this double-consciousness, in the eyes of DuBois, is a curse, condemning the African American to a life of inner struggle and what Adolph Reed (1997) describes as 'bifurcated identity' (125). For DuBois, America signifies white and Africa signifies black, with no compromise or intersection between the two countries' cultures or racial identities. For this reason DuBois implies that African Americans, being part African, do not fit into white American society, and by imitating or attempting to assimilate into white American society (as is their right as American citizens), they merely emphasise their difference. The implication is that for African Americans assimilation is impossible and so they will never have 'complete' identities; their twoness can never be resolved, as they can never belong fully to either society, African or American; they will always be displaced and their racial identity, consequently, will inevitably be a site of conflict.

Although my research has uncovered no explicit condemnation of DuBois by Micheaux, there is a general perception (see Young, 1989 and Green, 2000) that in the schism between DuBois and another black leader of the time, Booker T Washington, Micheaux sided with the latter, signalled by the inclusion of Washington's portrait,

prominently featured, in the mise en scene of *Body and Soul* (hanging in the primary set of the film, the heroine's sitting room).⁵ Overall, Micheaux's views on DuBois are difficult to ascertain. Bowser and Spence (2000: 228) claim that DuBois is praised, indirectly, in Micheaux's *Deceit* (1923), but Jayna Brown (2001) alleges that he is mocked in Micheaux's 1945 novel, *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* (136). Certainly, Micheaux's version of twoness offers a different perspective to that proposed by DuBois. In Micheaux's films the African American characters, in general, exhibit no signs of internal conflict or physical displacement. His movies present a society unimagined by DuBois, in which compromise between African and American identities has been achieved through the establishment of a black American community. This society offers professional and emotional fulfilment to African Americans without a concomitant absorption into a white American or black African society. A society in which blackness is the norm has, thus, been formed within the United States. Living within such a separate, African American society of their own making, Micheaux's characters are not forced to assimilate into either individual culture, they have found a space in which both aspects of their racial identity can be accommodated. In other words, Micheaux's films create a black American community separate to the white community in which self-definition is not constructed upon a choice between being a white American or black African. Twoness, rather than being a divisive element of African American identity, has become the stable identity that distinguishes African Americans from white Americans without carrying with it a sense of inferiority (from incompleteness) or conflict. Also, Micheaux's view of twoness incorporates an element of choice not granted by DuBois. His characters can choose freely whether to position themselves inside or outside white society. However, any attempted integration into white American society by an African American in Micheaux's movies engenders within that character the internal conflict over his/her identity and sense of displacement that was described by DuBois. For this reason, it is

⁵ DuBois fought for black suffrage and integration whereas Washington was seen as an appeaser, prepared to excuse segregation and the lack of a black vote. As we will see later in this chapter, Micheaux also celebrated segregation but I feel that a distinction should be drawn here: for Micheaux the segregation was chosen, not enforced.

only those characters who attempt to pass for white that suffer thus in Micheaux's films.

This attitude to twoness is particularly evident in *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), in which the Driscoll/Van Allen dynamic dramatises Micheaux's slant on DuBois' concept. Here, the two versions of twoness can be seen to be mapped by two characters who provide a literal reading of their individual battles and trajectories. The light-skinned hero, Hugh Van Allen, represents the African American who chooses to remain within the black community instead of passing into white society. He appears to be confident of his racial identity: he is prepared to help anyone, regardless of colour, yet is always careful to preserve the distinction between the races (he will not marry the girl he loves until he knows she is black). Driscoll, an exaggerated example of DuBois' African American, is the one that battles with his place on the colour line as he passes for white and even joins the Ku Klux Klan in his attempt to assimilate. Driscoll's internalised self-hatred and persecution of his race, the film implies, is the consequence of his efforts to live within the white world, a move which in Micheaux's movies is only ever deemed possible by the total denial of one's black roots. Van Allen, in contrast, displays no interest in joining white society, thus he is comfortable in his own ethnic identity/self-definition to the point that he can interact with other ethnicities without feeling compromised, as seen in his equally considerate treatment of the dark-skinned mother of Driscoll and the light-skinned Eve, whom he believes to be white. Eventually, we see Van Allen make his fortune, learn that Eve is not white and marry her in a happily ever after scenario. In comparison, we see Driscoll murdered, it is implied, by the same whites he had attempted to befriend. The moral is simple: remaining in an African American community will lead to the African American's fulfilment and self-realisation; leaving the African American community the African American must foster only one side to his/her racial identity to the neglect of the other in order to assimilate into white society and this leads only to self-hatred and rejection, as DuBois suggested. However, unlike DuBois's African American, Micheaux's characters belong in black America, not Africa. Twoness is not problematic when both

sides of the African American identity are balanced, and the only location that allows for this in Micheaux's movies is the African American community.

This representation of a separate black American society in which the African American can rise to whatever heights he desires may appear Utopian but, while it is a world free of white hegemony it is not an idealised, unrealistic world that Micheaux creates for his audience. Like Sterling Brown, he recognises the fear and grief as well as success experienced by African Americans. He acknowledges that whites occupy the highest positions of authority and although Micheaux displays the success of black characters in achieving qualifications or social position he always reminds the audience of the difficulties they faced in their journeys, thus we have the struggling lawyer, the former bouncer turned aspiring policeman and the eager prospector in *Murder in Harlem* (1935), *Lying Lips* (1939), and *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), respectively. Yet, although Micheaux's films often present white figures of authority, agency invariably remains within black hands and the whites rarely have any impact on the narrative. For example, in *Lying Lips* a white policeman appears in the plot intermittently, but it is the black policeman and an aspiring black policeman who carry out the detective work. This is a community in which the African American is the arbiter of taste, morality and justice, working outside white hegemony despite the occasional appearance of a white American. Although whites may occupy the highest seats of power, they did not impinge on Micheaux's black American society.

In brief, Micheaux's films challenged DuBois' theories on African American identity by negotiating a position in America in which the African and American aspects of their double consciousness could be not only reconciled but accepted as the norm. Being a black American was no longer a source of conflict, but of distinction, that the African American should strive to protect and preserve within an all-black environment. While twoness, for DuBois, represented only an inevitable, unceasing flux within the psyche of the African American, within Oscar Micheaux's movies it became the basis for a stable, proud racial identity. This idea that self-realisation and

the construction of a positive African American identity is dependent on immersion in black culture and society was reinforced by the films' treatment of passing.

Passing for white was a controversial issue within black society in the 1920s and '30s and the discourse surrounding it merits some analysis before we begin an examination of Micheaux's treatment of the subject. To do this we will examine, briefly, the varying responses it provoked in literature of the inter-war period, which will provide a basis for understanding the complexity and topicality of this subject within African American communities of this time. With this basic awareness of Micheaux's cultural context we can then turn to his films to see how they dealt with the topic.

Passing and Racial Identity

By 1920, *The Competitor* magazine estimated that more than half a million African Americans were passing for white in the United States (Bowser and Spence 2000: 168). An editorial from the *Chicago Defender*, printed in 1920, offers an interesting perspective on the topic. Rather than condemning the act of passing, it is the act of the black person who informs on the passer to the white authorities that is chastised here. As the editor writes:

We cannot find words strong enough to condemn this degraded practice... We cannot understand the state of mind that would prompt one of these individuals to become a party to the 'Jim Crowing' of one of his own kind (August 7, 1920).

Reasoning that if passing is a sin, '[i]t was the white man that made such a sin possible,' the article states that passing should be seen as a means of cheating white prejudice and the passer should be seen as implicitly battling Jim Crow, not upholding it. The article concludes unequivocally:

If white prejudice can be cheated by the spasm of its own misdoings and social rottenness, be the last to wake it up... No man of Color should

lend himself in any way to the scheme of color-prejudice in this land
(August 7, 1920).

This article is indicative of the conflicted responses that passing aroused in black American communities: condemnation, pity, admiration and a wish to protect the passer from exposure are all evident within this short passage.

Looking at African American fiction from the inter-war period we see a variety of perspectives on passing and those who pass. One such work is Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923). This work contains a story about a black student who passes for white. He falls in love with a white girl who eventually rejects him as she wants him for his 'Negroness' and he insists on denying his colour. This story furthers the theme of the book which, as Huggins (1971) describes it is '...all is denied to those who deny themselves' (185).

Nella Larsen's award-winning novel⁶ from 1929, *Passing*, complicates the characterisation of the passer, tying it inextricably to the question of who is a 'Negro.' In her novel, we are confronted by two light-skinned, female, black Americans. Clare Kendry has married a white man and passes for white; Irene Redfield has married an African American and is, ostensibly, a self-professed African American. However, Larsen has not confined her characters to their conventional roles of passer and black American. As Nell Sullivan (1998: 374) has noted, Irene Redfield also passes, not by adopting a white identity as Clare does but by adopting white values, including white standards of beauty. We see Irene's reluctance to align herself with her black servants who she sees as her social inferiors; she identifies herself along class lines rather than any colour line. Clare Kendry, on the other hand, although passing for white has kept herself abreast of developments in black culture and is more comfortable than Irene in the company of African Americans, regardless of class. As Jennifer DeVere Brody

⁶ She won the Harmon Foundation's bronze medal, as well as favourable reviews, for *Passing* in 1929. That she won, in the same year, the first Guggenheim Fellowship awarded to a black American woman indicates the novel's renown.

(1992: 1060) has argued, Clare's passing for white acts 'perhaps, ironically, to move her closer to the Black middle-class that once rejected her for being part of the "poorer brethren.'" By becoming white, Clare has been enabled to join black society that was not open to her when she was a poor black girl. In this novel, racial identity has been complicated: who are we to say is the 'real' Negro, the passing woman who immerses herself unreservedly in black culture or the 'black' woman who rejects and distances herself from any expression of blackness? We see in this question a reflection of the *Chicago Defender*'s reluctance to condemn, automatically, those who pass for white. Although passing evoked feelings of betrayal and resentment in some black Americans it appears that for others those who passed were variously figures of admiration (for tricking white society) and pity. Looking at Micheaux's films we will see that passing was, in the filmmaker's hands, a means by which to discuss the advantages of belonging to an African American community.

Passing in Micheaux's Films

Jane Gaines (2001) has argued that Micheaux's films condemned passing (134-135), but as we will see this is too reductive an analysis. Like Nella Larsen's novel, Oscar Micheaux's films exhibit a refusal to condemn passers unreservedly; they are judged by their actions as 'white' people and not simply by their desire to cross the colour line. Hence, we have the sympathetic depiction of the passing mulatto, Naomi, in *God's Stepchildren* (1938) as she has brought unhappiness on herself alone by her charade, in contrast with the cold depiction of Driscoll in *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920).⁷ Driscoll is condemned not because he passes for white but due to his hatred of and discrimination against, African Americans to the point of associating with the Ku Klux Klan. These films, similarly to Larsen's novel and the *Chicago Defender* piece, complicate passing and the characterisation of the passer, but they also query the ability of the passing black American to achieve fulfilment and contentment in their

⁷ Green's (2000) claim that the film presents Naomi as a 'pariah,' evoking no pity for her is misjudged, in my view (198). By contrasting the girl's isolated figure in the dark with the happy family in the comfortable sitting room and crosscutting her suicide with the children's game, Micheaux heightens the pathos of Naomi's situation inordinately. She is presented as a victim of circumstance, not a pariah.

masquerade. As this section aims to display, passing in Micheaux's films represents a tool used in the movies' quest to promote a sense of racial pride within the African American community. Furthermore, Micheaux's screenplays incorporate the issue of passing to advance the assertion, already discussed, that self-realisation and, consequently, self-identification for a black American is to be found by his/her immersion within a black society. Consequently, rather than undermining Micheaux's attempts to disseminate this theory, the narratives centring on characters who reject their black community and black identity actually reinforce the philosophy expressed in Micheaux's films. Engaging with contemporary discourse on identity, thus, enables Micheaux's films to promote race pride and a sense of community for his African American viewers.

This idea that passing prevents self-fulfilment for the African American is evident in several of Micheaux's narratives. As I have already argued, Micheaux's version of twoness appears to assert that the complete capitulation of the African American to one or other side of his/her identity is unnecessary and fruitless. Within a predominately black community an African American can pursue an identity that is not founded on conflicting choices between being white American or black African. Those who choose to embrace one aspect of their identity to the neglect of the other, such as Naomi, are shown to be dislocated: they may be capable of passing in white society but only through subterfuge, suppressing their whole identity. Although their act of passing has acknowledged the possibility of a black person's absorption into white American society, their inability to find happiness or fulfilment on the white side of the colour line underpins Micheaux's argument that absorption in a black American environment is preferable for the African American. In *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) we have a light-skinned brother and sister, John and Rena. John has passed since he was a teenager; Rena, under the urging of her mother and John (and even her 'coal black' fiancé) also attempts to pass for a period, but eventually she rejects this way of life in which every day is spent pretending to be someone she is not, awaiting exposure. Thus, Micheaux examines this particular mode of assimilation, only to reject it categorically as a denial

of the self – John has cut off all family ties, denies his history and, the film implies, denies his culture (as represented by his isolation from his black servants' singing and dancing). Passing results in nothing but pain and a lack of self-knowledge for the African American, as Rena's fiancé tells her: 'I'm sending you with your brother 'cos I know what he plans is vain and impossible. And will not make you either successful or happy. But you've got to go with him to prove it that way.'

Veiled Aristocrats was based on Charles W. Chesnutt's novel *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900, reprinted in 1995) and the alterations made by the filmmaker highlight Micheaux's stance on passing and its relation to racial identity and race pride. Looking at Rena, we see a striking divergence from the novel in Micheaux's movie. Chesnutt's Rena longs to live in the white world. For her it is 'the golden vision that lay beyond' life in Patesville (22). This idealisation of life in the white world contrasts strongly with Micheaux's Rena who sees only heart-ache and unfulfilment in store for her if she passes. Nor is John shown to be particularly happy in the rarefied white society that he inhabits: his loneliness has caused him to seek out his sister's company, in contrast with the novel in which he simply wishes for Rena to care for his baby son. With the change in motivation of the two siblings it becomes obvious that Micheaux intends to use Rena and John's experience of passing as an exemplar on the disadvantage of mixing in white society, ultimately promoting race pride within the African American community and expressing a positive black American identity.

Even more interesting, with the character of Rena, *Veiled Aristocrats* enacts the black person's rejection of the white person's privileged world. Chesnutt's Rena desperately wishes to pass with her brother and she only ceases to pass once her true identity has been discovered. Even after this exposure, she cannot accept her black identity. Despite her determined efforts to help the impoverished black community through education she is torn by her desire to return to white society and her white ex-fiancé, George Tryon. Unable to reconcile the two desires, she dies. In Chesnutt's Rena we see the beginning of race awareness but it is tempered by her sense of innate superiority to

other, darker African Americans who have not passed. Micheaux's Rena, however, varies greatly from this depiction. Opposed to her brother's plan for her to pass, we do not see her attempt to ingratiate herself with the white elite she encounters, unlike Chesnutt's heroine whose introduction and acceptance into white society is minutely, triumphantly detailed. Also, the girl's reception of George Tryon's marriage proposal has altered in the transition from novel to film. In the novel, George is represented as the epitome of the charm and grace that Rena perceives in white society and she accepts his proposal with delight. *Veiled Aristocrats* does not show the courtship of Rena and the eligible George Tryon, cutting straight from her final meeting with the 'coal black' fiancé, Frank, to Tryon's proposal. Unlike Chesnutt, Micheaux is not interested in establishing a relationship between George and the audience, thus making his proposal as shocking to us as it is unacceptable to Rena. Rena is obviously miserable with the prospect of being assimilated into white society and so it comes as no surprise when she finally escapes back to her old home and black identity. Her rejection of white society empowers her and reverses the events of the novel in which it was she who was rejected due to her colour. Through Rena's successful passing, the white characters have become the 'other,' something to be examined but ultimately discarded.

Thus, with Rena and John, Micheaux presents a morale-boosting message to black American audiences that although they could trick white society, they were better off remaining in their own world. In this way the film can be seen to offer a narrative model that attempts to empower its black audience. Additionally, the undesirability of entering the white world is reinforced in *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), *The Exile* (1932) and *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) by the fact that it is the dark-skinned African Americans who refuses to marry their love because they believe them to be white. In reality, although it was rare, interracial marriages did occur,⁸ but Micheaux's films consistently reject this option. Instead, once again, the movies stress the necessity for

⁸ Through the 1910s, '20s and '30s, several stories appeared in *The Chicago Defender* and *The Amsterdam News* in which various interracial marriages remained sound in the face of parental objection (for example see *Chicago Defender* February 2, 1925, part 2 p1).

the black characters to remain loyal to their race and thus empower African Americans, as it is the dark-skinned characters that refused to allow the romance to carry on until their love's 'blackness' is established. The right of refusal is no longer confined within a strictly white domain. Correspondingly, these movies counter the black person's alleged lustful obsession with the white body, as presented in *Birth of a Nation*'s Silas Lynch and Gus (1915): no black character manifests a desire for a white suitor in a Micheaux production.

In short, within Micheaux's films passing is shown to be unfulfilling; only the passer's return to an African American society will lead to his/her self-realisation. In this way, a character's rejection of the race and the black community is transformed into the filmmaker's celebration of both. By revealing the conflict and loss of any sense of self resultant in passing, Micheaux once again presents an African American society as the only location that allows the black American to achieve self-realisation. Thus, Micheaux's films offer an alternative view to African American identity than that presented by Kelly Miller in the *Amsterdam News* in this chapter's opening. An African American identity is defined not by white bigots and Jim Crow but by African Americans alone.

A 'New Negro' in Micheaux's Movies

Another striking divergence from Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars* (1900, reprinted in 1995) is evident in Micheaux's transformation of the character Frank in *Veiled Aristocrats*. In the novel, Frank is a kind and devoted friend in love with Rena but thwarted by his poverty, his dark colour and his lack of 'finesse.' His ekes out a living as a barrel maker and the dialect he uses contrasts with the upwardly mobile, middle-class, rather pompous Frank of Micheaux's film who speaks, without dialect, on the need for the 'Negro race to individualize its efforts by which I mean that each and every one of us must constantly drive towards success...' His relationship with Rena, in Chesnutt's novel, is one of devoted and willing servant to a benevolent mistress, not a meeting of equals: describing a childhood accident the narrator writes,

‘When [Frank] had made the scar upon her arm, by the same token she had branded him her slave forever’ (112). In Micheaux’s hands, though, Frank has become the epitome of what Alain Locke termed, in 1925, the ‘New Negro’: articulate, upwardly mobile, possessed of vision and ambition, intent on uplifting himself and the race, characteristics that define all of Micheaux’s heroes and heroines, even in the years before Locke coined the term. For Micheaux, the heroes/heroines are recognisable by their triumph over past injustices to the race to the point that those injustices and the racial prejudice that engendered them have become irrelevancies in the characters’ lives, and they have become impervious to outside prejudice.⁹ In this way, pride in their racial identity thrives and the films present a formulation of the ideal African American character: independent, self-aware and concerned with the improvement of the African American lot in America.

This promotion of an ideal African American was also in evidence in other forms of African American culture of this period, proving to be the source of vigorous public debate. For some it represented a means of advancing the race, for others it represented an apologia for elitist segregation within the black community. Recent work on Micheaux has tended toward the latter view, with critics such as Green and Neal (1988) and Joseph Young (1989) have alleged that Micheaux’s films exhibit an elitism in their preference of light-skinned heroes and an apparent collusion with traditional caricatures such as the coon and the mulatto. However, I disagree with this assessment: examination of his films reveals no desire to divide the black community into a hierarchy of pigmentation or to degrade African Americans. Consequently, the next section will demonstrate that even as Micheaux gloried in the advances of his ‘New Negroes,’ his films clearly repudiated elitism within the African American community, whether based on class or colour, championing instead a black society that cultivated a proud, distinct racial identity for the black American. Before we look at Micheaux’s

⁹ Micheaux was outspoken on the need to confront and triumph over racial prejudice. In his novel *The Conquest* (1913), he complained about those who allowed past discrimination to encroach on their present and tried to thwart his ambitions to be commercially successful: ‘I became so tired of it all that I declared that if I could ever leave M___s [sic.] I would never return. More, I would disprove such a theory’ (qtd. in Grupenhoff 1988: 41).

use of the ‘New Negro’ figure we need to understand what this nomenclature signified in the public during the 1920s and 1930s. Following that, I will examine the appearance of the ‘New Negro’ with his attendant values in Micheaux’s films. This established, we can address the accusations of elitism and racial degradation directed at the movies which originated, I believe, in a misinterpretation of Micheaux’s employment of uplift ideology, and his apparent collusion with traditional racist caricatures of black Americans.

The ‘New Negro’: Elitist or Egalitarian?

The idea that the black American should and could advance through self-improvement and a determination to achieve his ambition was prevalent in the public discourse of the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁰ Looking at figure 2.1 (on next page), a *Chicago Defender* cartoon from 1920,¹¹ we see the endorsement of such African American self-advancement. The illustration urges self-improvement coupled with caution in its story of one man’s path to success through diligence and a tunnel vision that does not bow to external hindrance such as racial discrimination or entertaining distractions. The focus of the cartoon is not to celebrate the man’s financial success but to extol the virtue of his ‘Fighting against [the] odds!’ and the fulfilment of his long-time ambition. As we will see, this man represents an exemplum for the paper’s readers, echoed five years later in Alain Locke’s publication, *The New Negro*, one of the most famous formulations of the direction in which the African American character should develop of the inter-war era.

¹⁰ This desire to improve oneself was not a specifically African American phenomenon. A similar ethos was also notable in white American society of the nineteenth century, linked to the rise of the bourgeoisie and revealed in the increased popularity of self-help and self-improvement books. Here, we see that Micheaux and black American society were not averse to borrowing from white precedents where they could see its benefit to the African American.

¹¹ *Chicago Defender*, October 9, 1920.

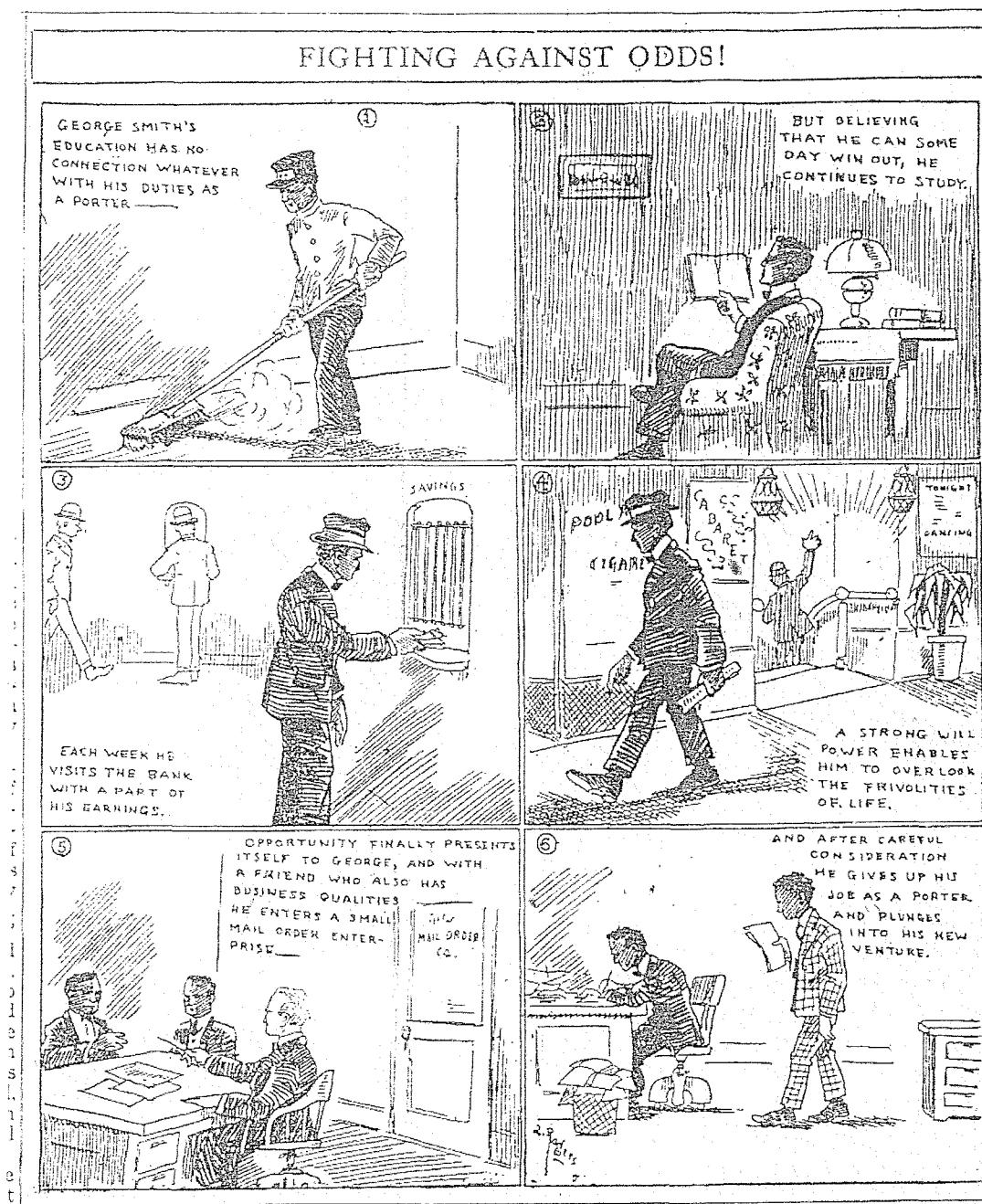


Figure 2.1 *Chicago Defender*, October 9, 1920

During the 1920s, black newspapers grew increasingly involved in disseminating a polemic on the ways in which African Americans could redefine themselves and reconsider their opportunities. Post-World War One, papers such as the *Amsterdam News* and the *Chicago Defender* manifested a determination to raise racial pride and social awareness among their readership. Both papers covered their pages with

enormous photo spreads of the returning black troops and the front page regularly featured stories that honoured and defended the reputation of the black soldiers who served in the war. For example, in 1922, the *Amsterdam News* dedicated a page one article to refuting allegations that black Americans, in particular an officer named Edward J. LeBlank, had committed sex crimes in the Rhine area during the war. The article reprinted a letter from the War Department that confirmed the allegations were false and that no man by the name of LeBlank had been commissioned by the army.¹² Other frequent front page stories in the *Amsterdam News* in the early 1920s sought to mobilise its readers to fight against racial discrimination, an issue that the *Chicago Defender* also covered extensively. In 1925, the *Chicago Defender* openly declared its position in an article on the paper's manifesto:

We want to see members of the Race in every line of professional endeavor... and the best way they help themselves is to become proficient in every way (October 24, 1925).

Another editorial printed in the *Chicago Defender* on the same day deliberated on the obstacles to racial self-realisation facing African Americans arguing that,

The fact is that we have been cowed for so long that we have not yet rid ourselves of the notion that the white man is inherently superior to us in some form or another... But the further we become removed from the dark days of involuntary servitude and its accompanying inhumanities, the less excuse we may offer for our cowardice (October 24, 1925).

This piece concludes with a call for the paper's readership to overcome this inferiority complex, which it claims to be the 'greatest of all [the race's] defects.' Clearly, these papers aimed to convince their respective readership that in self-improvement and racial awareness lay a means to the construction of a strong black community and a new, positive African American identity.

¹² *Amsterdam News*, Dec. 13, 1922, p 1.

W.A. Domingo, a Jamaican, came to a similar conclusion in his discussion of this ‘New Negro’ in the August 1920 issue of Marcus Garvey’s *Negro World*:

[The ‘New Negro’] cannot be lulled into a false sense of security with political spoils and patronage. The job is not the price of his vote...[He insists on] absolute and unequivocal *social equality* (qtd. in Huggins 1971: 53).

Accordingly, no longer were black Americans to be non-resistant; through education and political awareness they could help themselves and their fellow African Americans to confront and defeat unjust race relations.

Echoing these sentiments, Alain Locke published *The New Negro* in 1925. In it he outlined the way in which he thought the black American should develop. This ‘New Negro’ refused to accept or ignore the injustices doled out by white society and constituted a necessary evolution in the progress of the black population. He wrote that

For generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being – a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden (3).

Similar to the *Chicago Defender* editorial of October 1925 printed above, Locke argued that black Americans had assimilated this view of themselves as inferior. Locke saw the black man¹³ as having capitulated to, and even assumed, the negative stereotypes as a form of social protection to the point where ‘His shadow, so to speak, was more real to him than his personality’ (1992: 4). Nevertheless, he contested that with the new self-respect that African Americans were experiencing, they would be able to cast off the old stereotypes and insist on the integrity and honour of their race and themselves. One element that contributed to the creation of the ‘New Negro,’ in

¹³ Locke writes about the black man only but it is fair to assume that he also addressed the black woman.

Locke's eyes, was the migration of the majority of blacks to urban centres: such a move from the simple rural existence to a complex urban life forced the black man to see himself in broader terms and grow more sophisticated. Life in the urban centres allowed for a diversity that was needed to create the group expression that would lead to self-determination and, ultimately, to building a race. As Locke (1925, 1992) wrote,

...the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast. Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another (6).

It was the 'New Negro's' mission to rediscover and redefine his culture and contribution to American society. Locke (1992) outlined the next step for the black population:

[The Negro] now becomes a conscious contributor and lays aside the status of a beneficiary and ward for that of a collaborator and participant in American civilisation (15).

The 'New Negro,' according to Locke, would no longer apologise for his existence or consider his social position in accordance with white social dictates. As he wrote (1992),

The day of "aunties," and uncles" and mammies" is... gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on... it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts (5).

Yet, Locke also valued the old forms of expression which were exclusive to the black American. Thus, the African American artist needed to create an artistic form that acknowledged its roots in previous black cultural traditions without incorporating the demeaning elements of previous racialised stereotypes of the black American.

Locke's 'New Negro' represented one of the clearest efforts of an African American to delineate a black American identity in the inter-war era. As Nathan Huggins has noted (1971), it was tantamount to a public relations exercise in convincing African Americans of their worth and potential, and represented a promise reminiscent of Micheaux's assertion that 'a colored man can be anything,' quoted in the epigraph to this chapter. Nonetheless, Locke's philosophy was open to interpretation. We have seen above that in his discussion of the 'group expression' that would direct the race toward self-definition, Locke valued the contribution of the 'peasants' as much as that of the professionals. Yet his work has been accused of providing the basis for elitist theories such as the need for a 'talented tenth' to guide the black community. In 1929, the communist paper, *The Daily Worker*, published a scathing piece on the 'New Negro' in which it claimed that,

...these [New] Negroes represent only a rise in the Negro capitalist class and together with them exploit all the workers. There is not much that is 'new' about this Negro that they refer to at all. Many of his type are the same old 'handkerchief heads' who have only exchanged the cotton bandanna for a silk one... The real 'New Negro' is to be found among the workers who have been drawn into the industries (March 27, 1929).

Another article, published in *The Daily Worker* three weeks earlier, alleged that such discontent was prevalent within the black working class in New York. Otto Hall quoted one disgruntled black worker thus:

These so-called 'Big Negroes,' doctors, lawyers, don't care anything about us workers, all they are concerned about is to get themselves a swell home and a car. When they get a little money, they can't see us 'for the dust' when they meet us on the street (March 1, 1929).

This is possibly an overstatement of black reaction to the 'New Negro.' As we saw in Chapter One, the *Daily Worker*'s primary aim was to increase membership of the Communist Party rather than present objective truths; it was not beyond exaggerating



racial grievances in its own interest. Nevertheless, these articles indicate that the ‘New Negro’ was a matter of discussion and occasionally a source of disillusionment within the black American community of the inter-war period and if we compare them with an extract from Langston Hughes’ autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940, reprinted in 1986), we see a similar attitude to the ‘Big Negroes’ who had followed Locke’s exhortations to improve themselves:

...the “better class” Washington colored people, as they called themselves, drew rigid class and color lines within the race against Negroes who worked with their hands, or who were dark in complexion and had no degrees from colleges. These upper class colored people consisted largely of government workers, professors and teachers, doctors, lawyers, and resident politicians. They were on the whole as unbearable and snobbish a group of people as I have ever come in contact with anywhere... [and] seemed to me altogether lacking in real culture, kindness, or good common sense (206-207).

Although the idea of a ‘New Negro’ bent on self-improvement, as promoted by the black newspapers and Alain Locke, was intended to strengthen the African American community and offer inspiration and the hope of new opportunities to previously disenfranchised black Americans, we can see that within the public domain it was not necessarily received as such. If we look again at figure 2.1, the *Chicago Defender* cartoon of 1920 on ‘Fighting the odds!’, we can see a cause for possible disgruntlement. Box four contains an implicit condemnation of the ‘frivolities of life’ with a concurrent admiration of George Smith’s ability to withstand temptation. For any readers who enjoyed the ‘frivolities’ listed, such as dancing, music, and pool, this was potentially alienating and laid George Smith’s narrative open to accusations of middle-class bias. George’s self-improvement has covertly been associated with a distancing from his fellow African American and black culture. It is this same accusation that we see reflected in Langston Hughes’ and the *Daily Worker*’s assessment of those educated African Americans among them. Education and self-

improvement, in the eyes of Hughes and the *Daily Worker*, appear to equate middle-class status, which in turn seems to equate social segregation within black society

But what of Micheaux's films? Did their incorporation of 'New Negro' characteristics warrant similar accusations of elitism and social segregation? Was ambition expressed only in terms of an ascent to middle-class values? And was self-worth accorded only to 'Big Negroes' to the neglect of non-professional black Americans? It is these questions that this next section aims to address.

Elitism in Micheaux's Films?

Although Oscar Micheaux's films did not glory in African American folk materials as Locke did, preferring the black population's more modern contributions to culture such as jazz and the blues, from examination of his movies it appears that his central characters' vocation and that of Locke's 'New Negro' were one and the same.

Micheaux's heroes and heroines display the same refusal to bow to racial prejudice, whether it means fighting the Ku Klux Klan (*Symbol of the Unconquered* 1920), judicial travesties of justice (*Murder in Harlem* 1935, *Lying Lips* 1939, *The Girl from Chicago* 1932), or economic disadvantage (*Body and Soul* 1925, *Swing!* 1938).

Micheaux, like Locke, presents the black urban centre as the site of potential growth for the black man in all but one of his extant movies (the exception being *God's Stepchildren* (1938) in which the hero buys a farm to make his fortune). It is to the city that Sylvia, the school teacher in *Within Our Gates* (1920), goes in order to find a means of supporting the black school at which she teaches; in *Swing!* (1938) and *Lying Lips* (1939) it is a place in which the arts flourish. In *Underworld* (1932), although the city lures its clean-cut hero into a den of temptation, it eventually provides him with the opportunity he needs to advance himself, socially and commercially. Locke's exhortation to the 'New Negro' to become a 'conscious contributor' rather than remain a beneficiary is echoed in Micheaux's narratives which applaud all the characters who contribute to their surroundings, regardless of rank or stature. Mandy's job in *Swing!* (1938) as a seamstress and cook is valued just as much as that of her friend, Lena, who works as a personal secretary.

Admittedly, Micheaux's films do evidence a pre-occupation with attaining middle-class status; most narratives are driven by a character's attempts to gain a qualification and/or respectability. Yet, Micheaux does not deride or patronise the working class in favour of a 'talented tenth': the domestic servants in *Swing!* (1939) are shown to have an intelligence and dignity equal to that of Lena, the upwardly-mobile secretary.

Similarly, Micheaux's films do not display unease about unskilled labour: in *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) Hugh Van Allen, the hero, spends most of his time digging in his fields; and in *God's Stepchildren* (1932), it is through the acquisition and working of a farm that the hero achieves self-realisation. His movies applaud the potential of the black person to achieve whatever he/she wants, regardless of social status. Although professionals are well respected in the diegeses, they are never exalted at the expense of the working class. In fact, we are generally introduced to the professionals before they have garnered riches and so are still members of the working class themselves. Once educated, these professionals dedicate themselves to helping their fellow African Americans without any attending condescension. The lawyer and Federal Agent in *Murder in Harlem* (1935) and *The Girl From Chicago* (1932) respectively, display a faith in the power of education to improve the lot of the black community but it must be noted that neither character reveals any superciliousness in his dealings with his unfortunate black clients, regardless of their education, class or colour. In *Lying Lips* (1939) the hero is an unemployed 'bouncer' and the heroine is a singer at a seedy night club. Micheaux does not seem interested in using his films to prioritise one social group over another or to divide the black community in terms of class although, as we will see below, his films have been accused of promoting middle-class values. Neither do his films betray elitism with regards to art: there is no preference for high art in evidence. The only brush with high art in the movies of Micheaux is the use of classical music in the score, but there is also a strong presence of jazz pieces and blues songs in the score. In truth, if either category of art is glorified, it is the jazz and blues, specularised as they are for the audience in the form of the night club set-pieces that are incorporated within the diegesis. Overall, accusations of elitism by contemporary and

modern critics are ill-founded where Micheaux's films are concerned. As Ronald Green (2000) has argued, Micheaux argued for a 'leadership class' that would not create a false aristocracy or leave the race behind (179). After all, Micheaux declared that 'a colored man can be anything,' not that a 'colored man ought to be a professional.'

Yet Green (2000) has described Micheaux's work as 'middle-class cinema' (xv) and Jane Gaines (2001) has argued that his films present a 'vision of an irredeemable black underclass' (183). These allegations of a class-based elitism in Micheaux's work are probably due to his movies' adoption of an uplift ideology that Gaines (2001) sees as 'nothing more than the white point of view from a different source,' arguing that the black middle-class values in Micheaux's films represent a 'classic example of the function of hegemony, embracing the dominant culture as its own' (144). According to these critics, Micheaux's films support middle-class values to the neglect of the working-class, resulting in the promotion of a class-based elitism. Nevertheless, as this next section will reveal, although some uplift strategies in the inter-war period could be seen to have encouraged such an elitism, Micheaux's version of uplift cannot be accused of a similar elitist bias.

Uplift in Micheaux's Movies

The 1920s saw the African American community begin the process of social realignment with the late nineteenth-century model of the enlarged middle-class. According to Jane Gaines (2001a), the upwardly mobile middle-class strategy of uplift was based on

...proving that blacks could be equal to whites in their cultured tastes and their achievements, hence the tight circle dedicated so fiercely to pursuing "finer things" (111).

As Kevin Gaines (1996) has noted, for these black 'respectables' in the 1920s and '30s, the projection of a middle-class image provided the route to success; accordingly, they

felt that after centuries of enduring negative stereotypes and representations it was time for cinema to project uplifting, wholesome and moral portraits of African Americans. In short, these ‘respectables’ wished race movies to be a cinematic equivalent to the photographs middle-class blacks had taken of themselves in all their finery for publication in the newspapers: they must promote an image of a clean-living, hard working people on the road to improvement. No mention should be made of any social conditions, such as prostitution or peonage, that might upset this portrait of refinement.

In accordance with the aspirations of this ‘uplift’ school of thought, there should be no use of dialect or patois as this would suggest that the plantation stereotypes were accurate, as is evident in a 1921 review in the *New York Age* that criticised a race film’s representation of black doctors who spoke in a patois. According to the paper’s reviewer, this proved the producer, Harrison Dickson, to be ‘unconscious of the fact that there are thousands among us who possess dignity, education and refinement’ (qtd. in Cripps 1977: 85). This desire to sanitise all representations of black America threatened to strip the cinema of realistic themes and confine African Americans to a new, equally confining stereotype: that of the successful middle-class business man and wife. Additionally, Jane Gaines (2001) has written that,

In disguised form, [silent era] race movies dealt with embarrassment – the embarrassment that the upward moving group felt toward the lower-classes, the group that the middle-class despised over but that they also ‘needed,’ that they ‘required’ in an ideological sense (108).

Looking at Lincoln Film’s *The Trooper of Troop K* (1916) Gaines sees an example of what she calls a ‘betterment narrative’ in which middle- and upper-class blacks aligned themselves with white aspirations and distanced themselves from the lower-class. The issue in *The Trooper of Troop K*, according to Gaines, is the middle-class’s role in ‘help[ing] to solve the problem of every “Shiftless Joe”’ who wants to be ‘improved’ (109). Ultimately, the race movie uplift narratives championed by the respectables set one class against the other.

Another approach was simply to deny the existence of a colour line and sever ties with the lower-class blacks in favour of cultivating a relationship with white society (as we saw Irene Redfield do in Nella Larsen's *Passing*), taking the 'as good as whites' aspiration to its ultimate level. W.E.B. DuBois condemned this approach and the middle- and upper- class blacks who were too self-interested to extend a helping hand to lower-class blacks. As early as 1899 he wrote of Philadelphia upper- and middle-class African Americans,

the class which should lead refused to head any race movement on the plea that thus they draw the very color line against which they protest (qtd. in Jane Gaines 2001:111).

However, Micheaux's version of uplift differed from these two approaches. He argued that black American cinema should raise the aspirations of the predominately working-class audience through the recognition of the obstacles faced by black people who struggled to improve their economic and educational lot. As he wrote in 1924,

I am too imbued with the spirit of Booker T. Washington to engraft false virtues upon ourselves, to make ourselves that which we are not. Nothing could be a greater blow to our own progress. The recognition of our true situation will react in itself as a stimulus for self-advancement... (*Pittsburgh Courier*, December 13, 1924).

Here, Micheaux argues that uplift can only be achieved through the exploration of the colour line and the representation of the less exalted lives of the majority of African Americans who did not belong to the upwardly mobile middle-class. Uplift and a grim 'realism' do not appear to be irreconcilable in his view; in fact they are inextricably bound to each other. He recognised that he must send his audience home 'with a feeling that all good must triumph in the end, and with the words "Oh! Want [sic.] that just wonderful!" instead of a gloomy muttering' (letter from Micheaux to Charles Chesnutt, January 18, 1921, quoted in Cripps 1979: 48). But equally he wrote in 1925,

‘[i]t is only by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my pictures, in the light and background of their true state, that we can raise our people to greater heights’.¹⁴ As we will now see, although Micheaux’s narratives often incorporate an apparently middle-class version of uplift, driven by an ambition to upward mobility, in these films the setting is almost relentlessly working-class, with no attendant privileging of the middle- and upper- classes over the working-class, despite Bowser’s protestations to the contrary (Yearwood 1982c: 58).

Swing! (1938) provides an unromanticised portrait of the domestic lives of working women who live in high rise flats in the ghetto, chatting to each other from their kitchen windows as they prepare dinner and swap gossip and words of solidarity. In the words of the reviewer at the *Baltimore Afro-American*,

The film at no time spares the stark and realistic side of life, bringing a vivid picture of a woman who loves not too wisely – but too well
(October 1, 1938, reprinted in Sampson 1995: 430-431).

Similarly, *Underworld* (1937) takes the viewer on a tour of the more lurid side of African American urban life, with its prostitutes, pimps, leeching men, ‘bad liquor’ and ‘reefer’. Although the profession of the women is never stated clearly, it is obvious from their clothes, language and behaviour. One scene even shows Lorenzo Tucker at the centre of a cat-fight between two hookers whom he has requested to ‘make Sam’ (a rich pimp/bar owner) so he can buy himself a new car. This appears to place Micheaux’s films in opposition to the black ‘respectables’ who had set themselves the task of instructing the less wealthy and/or less educated African Americans in the more refined ways of black middle-class society. As one letter to the *Baltimore Afro American* complained, in Micheaux’s films ‘... only the worse conditions of our race

¹⁴ *Philadelphia Afro American* January 24, 1925, qtd. in Grupenhoff (1989: 48). According to Sampson (1995) it was also published in *The Pittsburgh Courier* of December 13, 1924.

are shown and the very worse [sic.] language is used with no attempt whatever to portray the higher Negro as he really is.'¹⁵

This unromanticised view of African American life, however, is tempered by a more hopeful picture of African American prospects that leans towards uplift's aspirations as delineated by the upper- and middle-class African Americans of the time. Inevitably, in each film the central characters try to get themselves decent jobs and live respectable lives. This has led to Micheaux's appointment to the camp of the black, middle-class establishment. For example, Thomas Cripps (1979) has alleged that middle-class aspirations are prevalent in Oscar Micheaux's films after *Body and Soul* (1925), and claimed that the director used his films to wage war on Marcus Garvey to counter the latter's attempt to 'win the black proletariat away from the tutelage of race leaders' (43). I think Cripps is guilty of over-stating his case here: Micheaux's views on Garvey appear less driven by a personal aversion when viewed in the context of his time. Studying *The Chicago Defender* from 1925 and 1926, it becomes obvious that Garvey was widely held to be untrustworthy: the front page headline from February 7th, 1925 reads 'GARVEY TO PRISON', Garvey having been convicted of defrauding the public, bigamy and owing eight thousand dollars to a former officer in his organisation. Over the course of the following year, more banner headlines on the front page kept Garvey in the public eye.¹⁶ In New York, Garvey received equally prominent coverage in the *Amsterdam News*. It was not merely the black middle- and upper-classes who would have been wary of Garvey. In this light, *Marcus Garland* appears to be more of an attempt to capitalise on the zeitgeist, as Micheaux also did with *Within Our Gates* (1920),¹⁷ than a bourgeois cry of fear.

In Cripps's defence, several other, clearer manifestations of middle-class uplift are notable in Micheaux's oeuvre. A case in point is Frank, the dark-skinned suitor of Rena

¹⁵ *Baltimore Afro American*, September 11, 1926, qtd. in Bowser and Spence (2000: 178).

¹⁶ See, for example, *Chicago Defender* February 7, 1926.

¹⁷ *Within Our Gates* (1920) was released the year after 'red summer', when Chicago and other cities experienced a wave of race riots and white exploitation of African Americans became a prominent feature in the newspapers.

in *Veiled Aristocrats*, who delivers a speech in which he attests that African Americans have

permitted the grass to grow under our feet... Times have changed and it's up to the Negro race to individualise its efforts, by which I mean that each and every one of us must constantly drive towards success along the many individual lanes...

This may seem to be driven by middle-class values with its emphasis on individual endeavour and prioritisation of 'success,' but it is important to observe that nowhere does Frank qualify what he means by success. Success, thus, is not necessarily to be equated with money or social status. In a film that shows the heroine reject a life of riches (through passing as white) in favour of relative poverty and a feeling of belonging in the black community, truth and race pride are the most valued commodities. *Lying Lips* (1939), with its privileging of the hardworking singer and her upwardly mobile boyfriend also gives the impression of acceding to a bourgeois vision of uplift in economic terms. That said, this film also includes several prolonged, gratuitous, risqué scenes of the 'good' girl (Elsie) undressing. This is an element that almost totally negates any bourgeois pretensions of respectability that could be attributed to the movie, as are the many references to prostitution that occur at the 'parties' run by the club in which Elsie works. Similarly, Elsie, while undressing, delivers an extended monologue about her intentions to support her new, unemployed boyfriend financially. This does not appear to be the conduct of a 'cultured' middle-class heroine. Also, in *Underworld* (1937), the narrative's championing of the self-employed, respectable, college girl over the amoral prostitute is undermined by the fact that the prostitute (Dinah) is accorded much more screen time and has a much more interesting personality than the college girl, who only gets to utter a couple of lines and appears in only four scenes. As Charlene Regester (2001) has noted, Micheaux's vision of elevation was consistent with exposing social ills (46).

In fact, Micheaux's films can be seen to discourage class-based elitism. While his movies praise their heroes/heroines who have entered a profession, they never portray these characters as self-congratulatory or elitist. Although others, generally a mother or spouse, may attempt to put these characters on a pedestal, the heroes/heroines resist.¹⁸ This is most clearly seen in *Swing!* (1939). The diva of the show for which Mandy is making costumes is a drunken, self-promoting misanthrope and does not fit in with the etiquette fostered by the show's producer. Having told his chorus line to 'do your best... give me all that's in you... But don't, oh please don't begin thinking how good you are and all that. Just hope you're fair and try to get better...', he must deal with a tantrum from his star. Eventually, she loses her spot to Mandy, the warm-hearted, strong-minded, unassuming costume lady who never elevates herself above any one else. The exaltation of the 'star' has been rejected in place of a recognition of the equal ability of one of the 'masses.' Here we see an egalitarian belief in the potential of all African Americans to capitalise on their varying talents, regardless of their economic or cultural background.

Micheaux's work, then, remains more concerned with working-class African Americans than their middle-class counterparts. Thus, Ronald Green's assertion (2000: xv) that Micheaux's films adhered to 'middle-class values' appears misjudged. Rather, these movies recognise the reality of the working-class African American's struggle in society; a character's success represents an attempt to instil hope and ambition in the viewers, thus avoiding the creation of a 'victim culture.' This can be seen in *Swing!* when Mandy praises her friend, Lena, for getting a good job as a typist/personal assistant 'like a white girl'. Lena immediately remonstrates 'Oh there are plenty of colored girls operating typewriters now, Mandy.' This scene is important to note as it strives to show that there is no need to identify with white people any longer; now there are African American precedents (and representations) to follow. By placing Lena, with her working-class origins, in a socially respected position Micheaux has appropriated that professional success for all working-class African Americans. He has

¹⁸ See Federal Agent Alonzo in *The Girl from Chicago* (1932); the lawyer in *Murder in Harlem* (1935);

presented an inspiring example of African American triumph over adversity, in line with his films' attempts to construct a positive racial identity for black Americans.

Consequently, I would argue that Micheaux's characterisation of well-positioned African Americans is more innovative and less driven by simply middle-class principles than critics have previously noticed. Cripps (1979), in a discussion about early race movie heroes, noted that '[i]n a racist society, luck always seemed to matter more than pluck,' they were rarely educated and their success was attributable to good fortune or coincidence, rather than application (44). However, Micheaux's heroes and heroines are more forceful than this type, in general they are aspiring students or non-professionals who, with hard work, gain entry into their chosen field. Their success in films such as *Within Our Gates* (1920), *The Girl from Chicago* (1932), *Swing!* (1938), etc. is a result of their perseverance, not luck. Nonetheless, Micheaux's narratives do not dwell on any subsequent prosperity experienced by his heroes and heroines (*The Girl from Chicago* is the only extant exception). The viewers always meet these characters at the beginning of their careers, when their livelihoods are in jeopardy and their roots are still very much located in the working-class, hence, they remain recognisable to a working-class audience. The lawyer in *Murder in Harlem* (1935) is a case in point. We watch him struggle to finance his studies, and then witness the difficulty he has in getting his first clients, remaining as poverty-stricken as he was while a student. In this way, Micheaux's heroes/heroines provide realistic hope (in addition to melodramatic entertainment) for the black cinema-goers by being placed in a recognisable working-class milieu where they battle difficulties. Contrary to promoting a middle-class vision of black American life, these movies are studies of the hindrances faced by those African Americans who educated themselves, not a paean to the great luxuries and status they might eventually achieve. Invariably, the final scene in which the heroes/heroines begin to enjoy success is remarkably brief and flimsy. Micheaux's movies are far more preoccupied with presenting a realistic image of the

and Lena the secretary in *Swing!* (1938).

African American experience in its all its grimness and glory, than with projecting a middle-class fantasy.

So, how to reconcile Micheaux's incorporation of 'uplift' strategies in tandem with his refusal of middle-class principles that demand economic success and upward mobility at all costs? Jane Gaines (2001) has devised a useful framework within which we can reconceptualise uplift in a way that is more appropriate to Micheaux's apparent agenda. Utilising Ernst Bloch's theory of the 'utopian consciousness that anticipates, looks hard at the world and expects more, that hopes beyond hope for the better life,' Gaines suggests that uplift in silent era race movies can be paralleled with this form of utopianism as both are driven by a 'world-improving dream' (138-139). It is in this idea of a 'world-improving dream' that Micheaux's interpretation of uplift becomes clearer. Bloch states that this dream arises from the knowledge of the worst conditions:

Above all revolutionary interest, with knowledge of how bad the world is, with acknowledgement of how good it could be if it were otherwise, needs the waking dream of world-improvement (quoted in Gaines 2001: 139).

There appears here no inclination to present a refined picture of the world in this dream, yet it is driven by an undeniable uplift impulse in its desire for 'world-improvement.' Essentially, for Bloch, uplift can be expressed outside the economic framework in terms of a more spiritual uplift that contends, as Micheaux did, that a 'colored man can be anything' (*The Conquest*, qtd. in Green 1998: 26). Thus, Micheaux's uplift, in keeping with Bloch's concept quoted above, can be seen to be all the more powerful when allied with an all-encompassing recognition of both the good and bad (or respectable and disreputable) aspects of society, rather than being tailored by propaganda of the race's economic and social success. Uplift in Micheaux's films is divorced from social standing and material accumulation and thus can articulate the harsh conditions experienced by its working-class African American audience even

while it offers them hope for a better future. Uplift, removed from its economic framework, encourages an egalitarianism that calls for the recognition of every individual's potential, regardless of status.

Nevertheless, despite this evident wish for egalitarianism, accusations of elitism have been directed at his films' treatment of African American identity by his contemporaries and modern critics. Besides that, Micheaux's films have been accused by both contemporary and recent critics of incorporating an elitism based on skin colour which, according to modern scholars, ultimately colluded with traditional, racist depictions of the African American character circulated by white culture. Should this be the case it would suggest that Micheaux engaged with the contemporary discourse on African American identity only to further degrade black Americans. For the remainder of this chapter I will address the accusation that a hierarchical system based on skin colour was promoted in Micheaux's oeuvre. First, I will deal with Micheaux's supposed use of a hierarchy of pigmentation, by which I mean the elitism that caused Langston Hughes' 'Big Negroes' to reject dark-skinned Americans as inferior. Following that, I will investigate the claim of modern critics that Micheaux's films colluded with and sustained traditional negative caricatures of the African American such as the coon and the Mammy. This analysis will reveal the way in which Micheaux's films repudiated colour bias within the African American community and complicated traditional, stereotypically negative portrayals of the African American.

A Pigmentation Hierarchy in Micheaux's Work?

D. Ireland Thomas, in his review of Micheaux's *The Dungeon* (1922), complained bitterly about Micheaux's favouring of light-skinned actors.¹⁹ Similarly, in 1930, Micheaux's films were condemned for what the *New York Amsterdam News* labelled his 'High Yaller Fetich' in a review of *Daughter of the Congo*.²⁰ *God's Stepchildren* (1938) drew more abuse: it was picketed by the Young Communists' League and the National Negro Congress for reputedly splitting the black community into a hierarchy

¹⁹ *Chicago Defender*, July 8, 1922.

of light and dark skin. Also, an article from the *Amsterdam News* on the film noted that several other groups, including the New England Congress of Colored Youth, South End Progressive Club and the New England Congress for Equal Opportunities, had objected to the movie for similar reasons.²¹

Such contemporary attitudes appear quite damning and support Joseph Young's (1989) claim that Micheaux was a 'white racist' who celebrated white superiority through his vaunting of light skin (141). Similarly, Haile Gerima, in a colloquy on the development of the black film movement held in 1982, claimed that Micheaux's films 'used a white criteria of beauty to oppress black women...' (Yearwood, 1982, c: 58). In 1988, Green and Neal damned Micheaux with faint praise when they conceded that his 'light bias' was 'only a tendency, and is not consistent throughout his films' (70). Thomas Cripps' (1993) list of the three defining characteristics of Oscar Micheaux's films²² included Micheaux's preference for lighter skinned African Americans.²³ And as recently as 2001, Jane Gaines wrote that African American movie-makers, including Micheaux, justified the use of pigmentation hierarchy as a 'perhaps necessary evil' on the basis that

In order for these new entrepreneurs to succeed in business, they could not buck the white-like aesthetic... [it was] a means to an end (269).

Yet close examination of Micheaux's films challenges these claims. The heroines may, in general, have light skin but so too do the vamps and female villains of such films as *Underworld* (1937) and *The Girl from Chicago* (1932). A similar case can be made for

²⁰ *Amsterdam News* April 16, 1930.

²¹ *Amsterdam News*, Dec. 9, 1939.

²² The first two features were surprise switches in identity and trick endings.

²³ Cripps, in fact, does not find fault with race movies and Micheaux's use of a caste system, arguing that it was merely a reflection of society where a light skin was seen as attractive in the African American community, a claim that appears to be sustained by the many advertisements for bleaching soap that promised to deliver 'the wonderful effect of lightening, bleaching or brightening up your dark brown or sallow skin' (*Chicago Defender* December 5, 1925, 'Bleach Skin Light Overnight - Or no Cost'). The wording in this ad suggests that dark skin was held in low esteem in black American communities. Similar ads were placed in the *Chicago Defender* and *Amsterdam News* regularly throughout the 1920s.

the male characters. With this in mind, Micheaux's films cannot appear to be elitist in the way the above critics contend. In *Within Our Gates* (1920), the division of good from bad characters is made, instead, by the mise-en-scène: Sylvia, the light-skinned heroine, frequently wears white while Alma, her villainous cousin who is the same colour as she, usually wears black or dark clothes.²⁴ Larry, Alma's criminal brother, is light-skinned but greases back his hair, smokes and gambles, as opposed to the honest Dr. Vivian who is equally light-skinned, and is usually seen in a sober suit and reading uplifting columns in the newspaper. In *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), as noted above, the hero is a 'coal black' man, as is the case in *Murder in Harlem* (1935). In addition, *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) altered the relationship between the dark-skinned Frank and the fair skinned Rena. In the novel upon which the film is based, Rena feels superior to Frank and Frank realises the futility of his love for the girl as he is 'only' a dark, therefore hopeless, Negro. In Micheaux's version no mention is made of the difference in hue between the two and it is the darker Frank who is more noble than the light-skinned John.

Looking at *The Girl from Chicago* (1932) and *Body and Soul* (1925), it appears that one's place in the social hierarchy is determined more by a character's aspirations than by his skin colour, and colour does not determine aspiration. In *The Girl from Chicago* (1932), the heroine, Norma, complains that she saw a 'dirty old Negro' looking in her window. This man is the stooge of the white villain, and is depicted as a shuffling buffoon. However, she says this to her fiancé, an FBI agent, who is the same shade of black as the peeping tom. How can Micheaux be accused of utilising a pigmentation hierarchy when his villains and heroes are of the same shade of black? The same can be said of *Body and Soul* (1925), in which the hero and villain are played by the same man, Paul Robeson, so obviously share the same colour. For these reasons, despite the protests of disgruntled critics, there is very little basis for accusing Micheaux's films of supporting a system that favours light skin over dark: a character's villainy is based on his deeds, not his pigmentation. Elevation of light at the expense of dark skin is thus

²⁴ In later films, this equation of white clothes with good and black with bad was modified.

rejected as a factor in the construction of an African American identity in Micheaux's films.

Consequently, it is difficult to grasp why Micheaux's contemporary critics protested the opposite. Some critics, such as D. Ireland Thomas, genuinely believed in what they wrote, as they attempted to mould black American films into uplift propaganda for the race, as we saw in Chapter One's examination of their relationship with Micheaux. However, in the case of the Young Communists' League's picketing of *God's Stepchildren*, a film in which being light-skinned is seen as nothing more than a curse to Naomi, this could be attributed to the Communist Party's efforts to recruit black Americans at any price. As I noted above, the party's paper, *The Daily Worker*, was not averse to using racial issues to promote Soviet superiority over American democracy, as we saw in its review of *Hallelujah!* in Chapter One. Of Micheaux's modern critics, Young, Green and Neal and Cripps, perhaps their examinations were limited by the lack of Micheaux films that were available for viewing at the time of publication (some were not widely available until the mid-1990s). Accusations of a colour-based elitism in Micheaux's films, then, were clearly misrepresentative, but what of recent critics' claims that his movies fostered traditional racial stereotypes?

The Function of Racial Stereotypes in Oscar Micheaux's Films

Joseph Young (1989) has written that Micheaux's work is marked by what Fanon described as psychological colonisation: he claims that the filmmaker blamed the failure of the race not on bigotry or slavery but on the fact that African Americans did not try hard enough to improve themselves, thus 'internalising a desire to be white, or a self-hatred of one's blackness and a revulsion from the majority of Blacks' (1989: 141). Furthermore, Young has attributed Micheaux's use of traditional black caricatures to this revulsion. Micheaux's films have also been excoriated by Horace Neal and Ronald Green (1988) for their apparent inclusion of traditional racial stereotypes. Among the examples they list are the numbers man in *The Girl from Chicago* (1932) who exclaims 'I'm a monkey's uncle!'; the black man leeching off his

woman in *Swing!* (1938); the vamp/prostitute in *Underworld* (1937); and the black man who is frightened into confessing the truth behind a crime by the threat of having to spend a night alone in a haunted house in *Lying Lips* (1939). They claim that Micheaux aimed to insult his audience and air his own grievances against such character types. This is a bizarre theory: Micheaux was in the business of attracting as many people as possible to his films, he would hardly take the occasion to berate his audience and risk diminished box-office takings for his own personal amusement. Green and Neal have, at least, conceded that a factor in this exercise to insult was probably a wish on Micheaux's part to urge his fellow African Americans to improve their lot. This latter explanation does seem more likely, but its implied disapproval of Micheaux's approach is misplaced. Had they examined contemporary newspapers they would have seen that a combative approach was commonly taken: for example, *The Chicago Defender* printed a front page article which attempted to rouse its readers into public protest with 'Are you going to continue to sleep at the switch? Wake up, ye fools.'²⁵ Micheaux's style, in comparison, was sugar-coated.

In truth, there are some less than flattering examples of African Americans in Micheaux's films that could be taken to signify an inherent criticism of all black Americans. Possibly the worst abuse of a derogatory stereotype is found in a scene early in *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920). The setting is a barn at night in which the light-skinned, 'passing' black hotelier, Driscoll, forces his African American clients to stay. Having deposited dark-skinned Abraham in the hayloft, Driscoll then directs the light-skinned Eve to the same location. A storm erupts and both of the barn dwellers wake up, startled. There follows some extreme close ups from a low angle of Abraham as he rolls his eyes at the rain, and some middle distance shots of Eve as she recoils in fright when she sees the face of Abraham, falling down a shaft in her desperation to escape him. There can be no question that Abraham is portrayed negatively in the visuals – the extreme close up is unflattering, to say the least, and with his rolling eyes and smile he is the perfect embodiment of old, negative, black stereotypes used by

²⁵ *Chicago Defender*, January 1, 1910, p1.

whites: infantile, vaguely mad, slightly threatening, something to be avoided. Eve reinforces the distastefulness and threat of Abraham's appearance in a scenario which positions her very much as the Lillian Gish-esque, defenceless heroine being threatened by the big black buck.²⁶ In this instance Micheaux appears to be in favour of maintaining old stereotypes and promoting a colour-based hierarchy at odds with any alleged uplift agenda.

Yet, if one sits through to the end (not something Micheaux's contemporary critics always did), one sees that the light-skinned passer, Driscoll, is murdered; Abraham is shown in a more favourable and intelligent light; and Eve's happiness can only be secured by the hero's realisation that she is actually black and thus they can be married. Micheaux has compensated for any racial insult and revised the meaning attached to the stereotypes of dark and light skin: those with the dark skin are to be admired and respected, those with light skin who deny their African American roots are to be punished or pitied, and those light-skinned characters who embrace their African American identity, such as Hugh Van Allen, are rewarded.

Given Micheaux's evident endorsement of the 'New Negro' figure, it seems unlikely that Micheaux intended to offend to his black American audience, especially as he wished to provide a positive representation of his race. Indeed, close examination of the racial stereotypes apparent in Micheaux's films reveals that, although they maintain sufficient negative features to be recognisable to their audience as the traditional black caricatures, Micheaux has modified them to subversive and potentially liberating effect. Micheaux's incorporation of traditional negative racial stereotypes can be looked upon as an exercise in the disavowal and destruction of the old caricatures. As the next section will argue, mimicry does not necessarily signify collusion with the values being imitated: in his appropriation and mimicry of traditional stereotypes of

²⁶ Parallels between this scene and the scene in 'Chinky's' attic room (in D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, 1919) in which we see the non-white man loom over the sleeping white girl are notable, pointing to a fascination with miscegenation that existed beyond the boundaries of black/white relationships. To date, no research has been done on the similarities between these two films, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to embark on such a study here.

black characters, Micheaux's films can be seen to offer more favourable interpretations and representations of African Americans than was thought by Young, Neal and Green.²⁷

'Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke'²⁸

In 1934, Zora Neale Hurston's wrote that

The Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself. If it is not, then all art must fall by the same blow that strikes it down... Moreover, the contention that the Negro imitates from a feeling of inferiority is incorrect. He mimics for the love of it. The group of Negroes who slavishly imitate is small... let us say that the art of mimicry is better developed in the Negro than in other racial groups. He does it as the mocking-bird does it, for the love of it, and not because he wishes to be like the one imitated (reprinted in 1970: 28).

This piece is by no means without its problems, presenting as it does a potentially condescending image of the African American. Nevertheless, Hurston's point that mimicry does not indicate assimilation of the imitated values offers a new way to view Micheaux's film. Her claim that African Americans enjoyed mimicking, and that it provided enjoyment to the black mimic and audience without jeopardising their identity or self-worth proves useful in the consideration of Micheaux's apparent use of negative stereotypes. Rather than being compromised by the black performer's use of negative racial stereotypes, according to Hurston a black audience would be more likely to recognise the imitation and find it amusing, an idea that we will examine in more depth in the next chapter's discussion of minstrelsy's popularity in black

²⁷ In this way, Micheaux can be seen to pre-empt Melvin Van Peeble's assertion that it is not the images that are problematic, but the meanings attached to them (Yearwood 1982c: 65-66)

²⁸ I have borrowed this phrase from Ralph Ellison's (1958) article of the same name.

communities during the inter-war period. Certainly, black reception of racialised caricatures was much more complex than simple hostility or absorption.

Bearing this in mind, a more nuanced reading of the negative stereotypes present in Micheaux's films, such as the 'coon', the 'buck', the 'Mammy', and the 'tragic mulatto', can be attempted. The presence of these stereotypes in his films has given previous film historians, such as Young (1989), the impression that Micheaux is working to uphold white hegemony. Nevertheless, I maintain that Micheaux's employment of racial stereotypes was more complex than Young suggests. It appears that Young's reading of racial stereotypes in Micheaux's films has ignored the complexity in black reception of demeaning caricatures. My research of minstrelsy has led me to believe that traditional, negative caricatures, performed by African Americans elicited a very different response to those performed by whites in blackface, a point that I will develop in greater detail in the next chapter. The former was seen as both a source of amusement and the chance of work for African Americans, the latter was not warmly received (hence the failure of the Amos and Andy feature, *Check and Double Check* in 1932). So, minstrel shows performed by black Americans, despite their undesirable caricatures, were a popular form of entertainment in black communities in the inter-war period. This suggests that Micheaux's use of apparently racist stereotypes, performed as they were by African Americans, would not necessarily have evoked resentment in his audience. This in turn offers a possible explanation as to why his contemporary critics, although incensed by his 'high yaller fetich,' appear to have been unconcerned by the stereotypes employed in his movies.

Ronald Green (1998), a Micheaux scholar, argues along similar lines. He, too, maintains that the black audience would have recognised the caricatures and would have been entertained by them, while simultaneously disapproving of them. In his analysis of one particular 'coon', Lem Hawkins in *Murder in Harlem* (1935), Green (1998: 29) asserts that Hawkins' buffoon caricature has no bearing on his true identity, that he has assumed this persona as one of 'the necessities of survival under white

oppression.' In Green's eyes, the negative stereotype is a guise assumed by the black character to protect him from his murderous white boss and thus is a subversive exercise, influenced by the historical relationship between whites and blacks in America. The character is a figure of ridicule among the black audience in the diegesis, just as it is meant to be for its non-diegetic audience.

Accordingly, the aim of this final section is to analyse Micheaux's role in the expropriation of traditionally negative caricatures of the African American that had previously been circulated within white culture. Looking at his employment of such figures as the coon, the buck, the Mammy and the 'tragic mulatto,' we will trace the metamorphoses of these demeaning, limited caricatures into useful instruments in the active reconstruction of racial pride and African American identity. As we will see, within Micheaux's movies the coon becomes a tool in the cultivation of racial pride and the buck is used to present an African American perspective on historical accounts of miscegenation and inter-racial desire in America. His films reconsider the source of the tragedy in the 'tragic mulatto,' humanising a character that had become a cliché and with his modification of the Mammy stereotype, Micheaux frees the African American domestic servant from the confines of the white home.

The Coon: Dancing to his Own Tune?

The first stereotype we will examine is that of the coon: the clownish black man who usually ends up collaborating with the whites, embodied in the characters Rastus and Topsy and played in Hollywood features of the 1930s by Stepin Fetchit and Sleep 'n' Eat. This caricature appears in *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *Murder in Harlem* (1935) among others. In *Within Our Gates*, we have Effrem who spies on the Landrys for the white landowner, and is at the root of their doom. In the company of white people he puts on a show of shuffling ineptitude. However, he is shown to suffer for this treachery: when the white mob cannot find the Landry family to lynch, they grab the first available African American, who happens to be Effrem, and hang him to pass the time. In *Murder in Harlem* (1935), we have the ridiculous, shuffling, dark-skinned

sidekick to the white villainous murderer. He aids the murderer in framing an African American but eventually repents and reveals the truth on the witness stand.²⁹ The preacher, Ned, in *Within Our Gates* also assumes a coon's persona in his bid to ingratiate himself with white society. His actions, however, lead to self-loathing as he chastises himself for 'selling out [his] birthright for a mess of pottage.' As Ronald Green (2000) has noticed, this self-disgust endows him with a heretofore absent humanity; he is no longer just an empty stereotype (154). With these characters, Micheaux has taken a negative stereotype of African Americans used by whites and attached to it a new meaning. It is clear that these men have assumed their roles as 'coons' to manipulate white people for their own benefit; this is not their true identity. Additionally, these traitors who 'coon' for the white man are no longer seen to flourish: if they do not cease role-playing they die. It is an extreme but simple point: an African American who degrades his race in the attempt to improve his own position within white society will be punished.

The Buck: Threat to White Female Virtue?

Another representation of the African American in early Hollywood cinema was that of 'the buck,' most famously incarnated by Gus and Silas Lynch in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). The bucks, as described by Donald Bogle (1994: 13), are 'always big, baadd niggers, over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh.' This caricature appears occasionally in Micheaux's films, but with an interesting moderation. The preacher in *Body and Soul* (1925) is the closest Micheaux gets to a buck: we see that he is over-sexed from the way that he rapes Isabelle, and his brutality is evident when he beats a man to death. In *Swing* (1938), Mandy's good for nothing boyfriend is another example of over-sexed manhood, although he displays no traces of violence or brutality. In fact, he is beaten by his lover and threatened with a bullet in the head by her best friend (also female), marking a deviation from the stereotype. The most significant moderation that Micheaux makes is in making the buck lust for black

²⁹ It is this character that Green feels is using his buffoonery as protection from his white boss: for as long as he appears ignorant, the boss will not feel threatened by the fact that Lem knows of the boss's crimes.

women alone. In none of his films does a black man pursue a white woman. Indeed, the most overt negation of this aspect of the stereotype is seen in *Within Our Gates* (1920), in which we witness (white) Armand Gridlstone's attempt to rape the black heroine, Sylvia, only to discover that she is his child through a relationship with another black woman. Not only do the bucks appear to prefer black women, but white men's lust, too, is directed at black Americans.

By reappropriating the buck stereotype, Micheaux's films can be seen to subvert it: while some black men in his films are oversexed and violent, most are not. More crucially, the supposed 'frenzied' black preference for white rather than black women, displayed most memorably in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), has been refuted and the historical account of inter-racial relations has been rewritten from the viewpoint of the violated African American in Gridlstone's attempted rape of Sylvia. In addition, those black 'bucks' that do exist in Micheaux's narratives are punished from within the black community – white authority has been denied once more.

The 'Tragic Mulatto': 'Victim of Divided Racial Inheritance'?

The 'tragic mulatto' has been a recurring character in American culture of the early twentieth century, in literature and in film. Generally the plot revolves around a light-skinned girl's attempts to pass for white. As Donald Bogle writes,

Usually the mulatto is made likable [sic.] – even sympathetic (because of her white blood, no doubt) – and the audience believes that the girl's life could have been productive and happy had she not been a 'victim of divided racial inheritance' (1994: 9).

Mary Ann Doane (1991) has defined the mulatto's role thus: 'in moving back and forth between the black and white worlds, [she] could express their relation' (234). In this way, she appears to act as something akin to a barometer of race relations. This character type was a popular feature in the work of black American artists of the inter-

war period, one of the most famous works on the subject being Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928). This novel, which follows a woman of mixed race in her unsuccessful quest to find a community to which she can belong, wandering between small town America, Harlem and Copenhagen, opens with a quotation from Langston Hughes' poem 'Cross':

My old man died in a fine big house.

My ma died in a shack.

I wonder where I'm gonna die,

Being neither white nor black.

This problem of delineating a racial identity for the mulatto evident in the poem is the focus of Larsen's novel and, in keeping with Doane's definition above, Helga, the mulatto, does operate as a kind of yard-stick of race relations in the various communities that she inhabits: in Harlem there is a comfort and pride in being black, but this ease in one's identity is confined within the narrow borders of the Harlem district, the rest of New York offers little or no sanctuary for the black person. The small town, Naxos, offers no freedom to the black person; and although Copenhagen society accepts her, Helga realises that they see her not as an equal but as an exotic curiosity. As Hutchinson (1995: 418) has written, the mulatto character rarely appeared as a viable possibility in Harlem Renaissance (or indeed, white American) literature.

According to Donald Bogle (1994: 9) the 'tragic mulatto' theme made its first appearance in American cinema in *The Debt* (1912),³⁰ a two reeler about the old South. Bogle declares that white audiences generally responded sympathetically to the mulatto theme,³¹ but what treatment did she receive from a black audience, or from a black filmmaker such as Micheaux? In *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), Rena, the mulatto, is shown to have no interest whatsoever in passing for white. She rejects white society in

³⁰ This film is recorded as a 1916 release by the Library of Congress.

³¹ A notable exception would be the highly unsympathetic treatment of Lydia, the power-crazed mulatto in *Birth of a Nation*.

favour of her ‘coal black’ fiancé and thus represents a step beyond the traditional role of the mulatto, privileging her ‘black’ blood over her white colour with ease. As I have already argued, Rena demonstrates that the only community that allows for her self-expression is the black American community. Rather than a ‘tragic victim’ Rena is a living endorsement of ‘divided racial inheritance,’ settling happily within an African American culture and community.

The film that provides the closest approximation to the stereotypical ‘tragic mulatto’ theme is *God’s Stepchildren* (1938). Indeed, the trailer for *God’s Stepchildren* drew heavily on its similarity to other films in which mulattos featured prominently. The advertisement declared it was ‘A combination of events that shocked, but gripped and held you in *Imitation of Life* and *These Three*.’ This trailer is interesting on three counts. First, it places itself on equal footing with Hollywood features. Secondly, it implies that Micheaux’s mulatto is a conventional victim of her complex racial lineage, doomed to eternal displacement, as was Peola in *Imitation of Life*. In some respects this is the case. The narrative centres on Naomi, a light-skinned girl who was left in the care of the kindly, dark-skinned Mrs. Saunders and her son Jimmie in Coloredtown. Almost half of the film is devoted to Naomi’s childhood, during which she avoids the company of other black children and is persistently ‘haughty, insolent and downright mean’ to all black people. After spreading a scurrilous rumour about her (black) teacher, who had just punished her, and the (black) principle of the school, Naomi is packed off to a convent to repent and become less of a sinner, while her mother laments ‘I’m afraid she’ll never come to any good end, but it’s a mother’s duty to try and make her do right’. The narrative resumes roughly twelve years later. Naomi is released from the convent – it is likened to a prison sentence throughout the movie – having grown into a beautiful, very light-skinned woman. She falls in love with a confused Jimmie who is already engaged, and, though attracted to Naomi, apparently unaware that they are not blood related. Eventually, Jimmie and his mother arrange for Naomi to marry his neighbour, a man who in whom Naomi has no interest. A year later she leaves her baby with her mother and quits Coloredtown to ‘leave the colored race’

and go to ‘the other side,’ claiming that her only other choice is suicide. Her mother warns her that this is a ‘fool’s errand’ and prays that God will forgive her. Cutting to five years later, we see that Jimmie and his wife have raised Naomi’s son with their own. Naomi peers in their sitting room window, then leaves before the adults spot her. The final scenes comprise effective intercutting between the children singing ‘Ring a ring a Rosie, we all fall down’ and shots of Naomi climbing, and then jumping off, a bridge to her death. As her hat floats down the river the words ‘As ye sow, So shall ye reap’ appear on the screen and the film ends.

This plot contains the staple elements of the tragic mulatto narrative: the girl is different, she tries to pass for white and is doomed for her efforts. However, it would be a mistake to think that Naomi was a straightforward tragic mulatto and it is here that the trailer provides its third point of interest. With its explicit relating of *Imitation of Life* to *God’s Stepchildren* it presents us with a clear case of Micheaux’s borrowing from Hollywood tradition at the same time as he re-casts it from a new angle that is more relevant to African Americans.³² While it is Naomi’s racial prejudice and inability to reconcile the two aspects of her identity that initially causes her downfall (being sent to the convent) just as was the case with Peola in *Imitation of Life*, her later undoing stems from a very different source. On her release from the convent she falls in love with Jimmie and wants to marry him; she displays no wish to leave the colored race. Jane Gaines (2001:264) claims that Naomi rejects her husband because he is black, but there is no evidence of this in the script. It is her family’s fear of her beauty, and ultimately of her sexuality, that leads to her doom. In a telling scene between Mrs. Saunders and Jimmie we hear the following dialogue:

Jimmie: [he feels guilty for pushing her to marry his friend, feeling it might not be completely fair to her] ‘But she is still a dangerous

³² Similarly, he appears to have drawn from the previous year’s hit *Stella Dallas* (1937) in the final scenes of Naomi watching her lost child through a window. However, unlike Stella’s tearful joy at having done the ‘right thing’ as she watches her daughter’s wedding from the street, we see no such relief on Naomi’s face to alleviate the misery of her situation. This refusal to lessen the pathos of the heroine’s plight will be the subject of further debate in the next chapter.

problem to us. She hasn't changed, she's simply restrained... and if we can get her off on Clyde, who worships her already and get a family started...'.

Mother: 'It's the only way, Jimmie. Of course, Clyde is so blinded by her beauty and that pretty colour until he'd be her slave. Otherwise, he's crazy and I'm not so sure she'll stay with him even if we succeed in getting her married to him.'

Jimmie: 'It's better this way than to let her pick. She'd be sure to pick some worthless good looker in the city and they'd part in due time. She's too pretty to leave to her own fate. It's a risk marrying her off to Clyde but since he's doubly anxious to have her he can't blame us if it doesn't turn out all right.'

From this exchange it becomes clear that it is not Naomi, or even her colour that is the problem. Ultimately, it is her guardians' fear of her exercising her right to liberty and freedom of choice that condemns her to misery. They are prepared to marry her off to a man who they acknowledge to be crazy, and their sole concern seems to be whether or not they will be held responsible when she leaves him. There is a blatant double standard at work here. Jimmie and his fiancée, Eva, may choose who they wish to marry, they may even choose their careers, in stark contrast with Naomi. In this film, Micheaux appears to be more concerned with exposing the threat posed by the patriarchy to women's independence. Naomi's suicide is not the result of passing; in truth, 'passing' was her only route to avoiding suicide. In fact, her suicide has been heavily foreshadowed only from the moment she agrees to make 'this sublime sacrifice, for to marry a man I don't love is, to me, like committing suicide'. That she kills herself in the end is related to her unrequited love for Jimmie and her harsh treatment at his hands. We are shown nothing of her life in the white world because it is irrelevant, in keeping with Micheaux's central thesis that life outside the black

community offered nothing to the African American.³³ This ‘mulatto’ does not conform to Doane’s earlier definition. She is not tragic because of the light colour of her skin, but because she was forced to bend her will to others’ desires: she highlights the precarious relations between male and female worlds rather than between black and white.

In short, with Naomi, Micheaux has changed the focus of the mulatto: she is no longer ‘tragic’ because she cannot reconcile both ‘white’ and ‘black’ aspects of her identity but because she is denied her liberty. Her case becomes a feminist outcry.³⁴ The moral of the mulatto’s tale has been altered radically as has the traditional stereotype: this mulatto has been humanised and her problems shown to stem from a very different source to those of the cliché. There is no drive to be white in Naomi once she has matured; this mulatto is not merely emblematic of the unbridgeable divide between the races. The audience sympathises with her unrequited love and lost freedom rather than her status as ‘victim of divided racial inheritance’ (Bogle, 1994: 9). In the process, Micheaux has also reinforced the idea that abandonment of the African American community in favour of white society leads to discontent for the black American. In *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), the audience and the black servants in the narrative sympathise with Rena because she has been unwillingly isolated from the African American community. Like Naomi, the tragedy of this mulatto stems from her exclusion from a black community rather than any inability to accept her complex racial identity. Both Naomi and Rena display that being a mulatto need not necessarily equate dissatisfaction with one’s identity. Being classified as black is no longer represented as being tragic.

³³ However, Henry Sampson’s (1995: 377-378) synopsis of the film suggests that my version is missing original scenes in which we see Naomi pass in the white world, marry a white man, have her racial identity discovered and receive a beating from her husband, thus motivating her return to her mother and Jimmy’s home. It is unclear if these scenes were ever shot. Nevertheless, this version still sustains my idea that the white world is shown to offer nothing to the African American.

³⁴ Still, his inclusion of scenes such as the one in *The Girl from Chicago* (1932), in which the female tells her lover to ‘Go ahead Wade, smack me in the mouth with your fist so I can love you’ makes one hesitant to celebrate Micheaux as an unquestioning champion for women’s rights.

Uncle Tom: Missing in Action?

One Hollywood staple that Micheaux omits is the Uncle Tom figure. This self-less, hearty, submissive stoic who remains faithful to his white Massa regardless of the treatment he receives is notably absent in all of Micheaux's extant movies. Nowhere do we see an African American who is beholden to a white employer. Any white benefactor included in a film's narrative is dealt with as an equal by the black petitioner.³⁵ Micheaux's interest appears to lie in presenting a world in which the African American succeeds by his/her own merits, unfettered by past and present racial prejudice or a sense of inferiority.

The Mammy: Happy to be a 'Handkerchief Head'?

Similarly, the Mammy is dealt with briefly in only one of Micheaux's extant films: *Swing!* (1938). As depicted in films such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) or even *Gone With the Wind* (1939), the Mammy runs the white family's house with an iron hand and a soft heart. She is 'with no apparent needs or desires of her own... a constant source of emotional and physical solace' (Taylor, 1989: 169). The key to the Mammy is that she is sexless and has no life outside that spent with her white family. As Pearl Bowser (1982) has noted, the black personal maid/Mammy in Hollywood films is presented as a sort of 'mule': she functions as a contrast to her white female employer to prove the latter's superior femininity and the former's suitability to drudge work such as clothing, birthing and rearing the white lady's children (45). However, in *Swing!*, Micheaux has reversed the traditional representation of the female servant. Mandy, the main female character, works as a maid in a white family's house, as do her female neighbours. But we never see Mandy or the others at work in their employers' houses, instead Micheaux locates them solely within their own domestic milieux. They are no longer the white woman's sidekick but central characters in their own right. Additionally, they clearly consider their jobs to be employment, not a vocation. In an exchange between two of the women one says,

We working women all stand together and Mandy's one of us. I never was for slaving in the white folks' kitchen, taking my money, giving it to some ol' stinking yella man to carry aroun' and give it to some stuck up yella hussy.

There is no sense of working for the love of the white family; these women 'slave' in the kitchen in order to receive financial remuneration, not thanks. Also, these women are presented as attractive, sexual beings. In this way, Micheaux inverts the Mammy stereotype completely, humanising and sexualising the female servant and placing her within a social context completely at odds with that demanded by traditional representations. Once again, his films have modified the traditional delineation of African American identity with one recognisable and appropriate to contemporary black Americans.

In conclusion, Micheaux's decision to include what had been traditionally demeaning stereotypes of black Americans can be seen more as a confrontation and destruction of previous slurs than as a capitulation to the traditions of white prejudice or any latent bias against blacks, as suggested by Joseph Young (1989). Although the inclusion of traditional racial stereotypes in Micheaux's films may appear to run counter to DuBois's exhortations to use art in an attempt to form a positive African American identity,³⁵ we can see that this appropriation and mimicry of negative stereotypes represents an act of self-assertion and, thus, racial liberation, not self-deprecation. Micheaux's 'New Negro,' coon, buck, Mammy and 'tragic' mulatto all contributed constructively to the formulation of a new, positive view of African American identity and culture. Consequently, his movies offered an alternative construction of African American characterisation to that previously evident in white culture.

³⁵ See Sylvia and Mrs. Warwick in *Within Our Gates* (1920); Mr. Gregory, the black producer, and his white colleague in *Swing!* (1938).

³⁶ W.E.B. DuBois argued that 'all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists... I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda' (1926, reprinted in Baker, 1988: 51).

Nathan Huggins (1971), writing on the Harlem Renaissance's quest for a distinct black culture and identity, offered the following:

Negroes had to see whites – without the awe of love or the awe of hate – and themselves truly, without myth or fantasy, in order that they could be themselves in life and in art (1971: 307).

Once the black artist and audience stopped looking to white norms and conventions as a measuring stick, then their identity and culture could be deemed to be truly distinctive and 'Negro.' Micheaux had no difficulty in presenting an unromanticised portrait of black life when the case called for it: as much as his narratives follow the paths of professionals, his plots abound with pimps, prostitutes, gamblers and crooks. Similarly, he had no fear of using racial stereotypes. By appropriating and modifying the racial stereotype cultivated in white culture, Micheaux's films offered a new expression of African American characterisation that engaged with ideas on black identity evident in the black press at the time. In this way, his movies' narrative system provided an alternative to 'always looking at one's self through the eyes of others' (DuBois 1989: 5).

In his efforts to convince his fellow African Americans that they '[could] be anything,' Micheaux attempted to construct a positive racial identity and sense of community for the African American. His films projected a society within the United States in which the black American could live in peace, undeterred by obstacles to his/her personal, cultural and professional development. In *Within our Gates* (1920) Sylvia, the school teacher moves from the South to Chicago to find a niche for herself; the nightclub scenes in *The Girl from Chicago* (1932), *Murder in Harlem* (1935), *Swing* (1938), *Lying Lips* (1939) and many others provide a space in which jazz, tap and black comedy acts are given free reign for the benefit of its diegetic and actual black audiences. These two narrative tropes (that of the black professional who searches for a society in which to thrive and the prominence given to nightclub entertainment in Micheaux's films) provided Micheaux with the means to explore black identity and

culture. The performance of jazz and tap dancing, both looked on as originating from black American culture, highlighted the black community's distinct contribution to American culture and outlined a distinct and separate identity for black Americans, while the depiction of black professionals provided a portrait of how the black American could pursue self-fulfilment, regardless of class or colour. Finally, as the professional characters were shown to frequent these night-clubs and applaud the black performances, Micheaux made it clear that the acquisition of qualifications and a profession did not compromise a black person's distinct 'Negro' identity, thus refuting claims that self-improvement lead automatically to intra-racial social segregation.

Comparison with contemporary black American artists and theorists, such as Nella Larsen and W.E.B. DuBois, leads to the conclusion that although Micheaux differed in his approach or philosophies on certain theories such as twoness, his films must be looked on as being very much of their era, discussing popular ideas circulated in contemporary black American culture. By engaging with contemporary debates on the nature of African American identity and challenging traditional white characterisations of black American identity, Micheaux's films offered a mirror to contemporary African American life.

James Weldon Johnson saw a way in which African American art could contribute to the cultivation of a black American identity. As he wrote in his introduction to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in 1922:

What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like Synge did for the Irish; he needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and punctuation (qtd in Kostelanetz 1969:24).

As we will now see in Chapter Three, Micheaux's films attempted to do just this by appropriating popular (white) modes of representation to create a specifically African American cinematic form that could speak to his black audience.

Chapter Three

The Use of Popular Modes of Representation in Micheaux's films: Minstrelsy and Melodrama

In Chapter Two we have seen that Micheaux's films engaged with contemporary debates, providing their own unique perspectives on the issues of African American identity and its place in African American art. The aim of this chapter is to investigate whether Micheaux engaged, similarly, with popular modes of representation of the time. Focusing on minstrelsy and melodrama, two modes that were popular with urban black communities in the inter-war period but which had their roots in white culture,¹ I will examine the way in which Micheaux adapted aspects of these modes' forms (in the case of minstrelsy, its characterisation, tone, mise en scene and staging techniques; from melodrama, its narrative structures, cinematography, mise en scene and editing) to create a film form that spoke directly to and for African Americans. Contrary to essentialist claims that any adoption of white/dominant cultural forms compromises the 'blackness' of a work, I will explore the ways in which his use of these forms signalled a new approach in the representation of the African American experience. Through their adoption of minstrelsy and melodrama's style and narrative systems, Micheaux's films offered a new 'black' form insofar as they addressed African American issues from an African American perspective, providing a voice for a previously marginalised and misrepresented social group. Although minstrelsy and melodrama may appear to be strange bed-fellows, I will argue that both represented the logical choice for the African American filmmaker, both being traditionally associated with marginalised social groups, an association that will be explored in more detail in this chapter.

Briefly, minstrelsy in the nineteenth century was often employed as a mode of representation by newly arrived immigrants in the United States for whom the black mask offered a way of proving their 'whiteness' and, thus, their way to assimilate into white American society (see Toll 1974: 162, 169). Melodrama, to paraphrase Peter Brooks (1976, reprinted in 1995), has been long associated with the 'mute' in society, an idea that we will explore in greater detail in the second

half of this chapter. This chapter will argue that the incorporation of two such apparently dissimilar forms provided Micheaux with a means of both redressing the distortion of black history by earlier white culture and providing a new perspective on contemporary African American life.

Ronald Green's (2000) book contains the only discussion of minstrelsy in Micheaux's films to date.² He has looked at the manner in which Micheaux used the minstrel caricature of the coon in *Murder in Harlem* (1935) and *Darktown Revue* (1931), arguing that these caricatures represent a guiding example for the diegetic and non-diegetic audiences of how not to behave. However, Green neglects other, more positive, elements of minstrelsy's form; nor does his argument consider the nature of African American reception of minstrelsy in the inter-war period. These are areas that I have researched in order to come to a better understanding of the way Micheaux's adaptation of minstrelsy contributed to the construction of a specifically African American film form. It is this subject that the first half of this chapter will address. Some work has been done on melodrama in Micheaux's oeuvre, particularly by Jane Gaines (1993, 1996, 2001). However, my interest differs from previous research in that I aim to concentrate on two specific substructures of melodrama (spaces of innocence and pathos) within the context of the Tom/anti-Tom melodrama recently devised by Linda Williams (2001). With her introduction of the Tom/anti-Tom binary she has brought a new concept to the field of melodrama studies with relation to Hollywood's movies on American race relations, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927) and *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and I want to see how appropriate this theory is to melodramas produced by African Americans, such as Oscar Micheaux. For this reason, I will focus almost exclusively on Williams' approach. The section on melodrama will centre, in particular, on the way in which Micheaux initially used the two melodramatic substructures of Tom and anti-Tom to confront the racial imbalance of *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and then, post-1920, to move beyond the fixed black-white relations of previous melodramas to a consideration of the complexity and diversity of African American identity and behaviour within the African American community.

¹ By this term I mean culture that was created by, for and about white American people.

The objective of this chapter, in brief, is to trace the way in which Micheaux adapted two cultural forms that were traditionally involved in disseminating a limited, and sometimes degrading, image of the black American to construct a form that gave voice to the previously muted African American experience, and laid to rest past representations in its drive to engage with the African American present.

Minstrelsy in Micheaux's films

In Micheaux's *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932), the narrative consists of two discrete plots, connected through the device of a night-club in which all the characters congregate. In keeping with this setting, the film includes a floor-show, the acts of which provide relief from an often garbled storyline. Each routine is prominent, in fact the narrative appears to be more of an excuse to view the floor-show than vice versa. Interspersed between the song and dance acts is a curious sketch, performed by a couple of African American men in blackface. Aside from their painted white faces and white mouths, George and Galley are dressed in suits and black gloves; one (the funny man) wears a small bowler hat and tie, the other (the straight man) a fedora and a dickey bow. They look rather similar to the Georgia Minstrel in the advertisement from the *Amsterdam News* (see figure 3.1), with the exception of the Georgia minstrel's tails and top hat.



Figure 3.1. *Amsterdam News*, February 11, 1925

² The chapter on minstrelsy is a reproduction of his 1998 article on the interrogation of caricature.

The camera consistently shows them in the same frame, in long shots or in mid-shots, refusing either one a close up, making it clear that the two form a single unit. Although their exchange is lengthy it merits printing in full (as the film does not specify which is George and which is Galley I've resorted to describing them in terms of their roles: the funny man and the straight man):

Straight man: You need to stop talking 'bout goin' to jail. Uplift yourself.
Elevate. Be somebody. Follah in the footsteps of great men.'

Funny man: 'Now what is the use of me bein' somebody and elevatin'? What good's it goin' do me? I want to go head and eat.'

Straight: 'Well that's all right. You elevate and then you can eat.'

Funny: 'I can't enjoy the fresh air. Fresh air means nuthin' to me. Give me less liberty and more food than a whole lot of freedom and starvin' to death.'

Straight: 'Shore, you oughta be satisfied.;

Funny: 'I never will forget the words my Granma used to tell me...'

Straight: 'What was that?'

Funny: '...when I was little, she used to hold me on her lap and look into my big blue eyes [Here we cut to a reaction shot, the only one of the sequence, of two men in the audience, raising their eyebrows at what they hear and laughing] and push my golden locks back from my forehead and say "Son, where there's a will there's a way."'

Straight: 'She was right.'

Funny: 'I got a will to eat, but I can't find a way.'

Straight: 'Keep on lookin,' you'll find a way.'

Funny: 'But now, since you said that elevation, now that's somethin' good.'

Straight: 'Yeah.'

Funny: 'We oughta do that.'

Straight: 'Sure.'

Funny: 'Git outa the gutter and git on the sidewalk.'

Straight: 'Now you're talkin'.'

Funny: 'Follah in the footsteps ob great men.'

Straight: 'Yeah.'

Funny: 'Men who's gone before.'

Straight: 'Yeah.'

Funny: Men whose name has gone down in posterity as men who meant sumpin' for the community where they resided.'

Straight: 'There you are.'

Funny: 'Men like Booker T Washington.'

Straight: 'That's a great man.'

Funny: That's a man his name is known everywhere.'

Straight: 'Yeah.'

Funny: 'The chillun know it. His picture's in the books and papers and why? Because he was a man that done sumpin.'

Straight: 'Yeah. What'd he do?'

Funny: 'I dunno but whatever it was he done it.'

Straight: 'Yeah.'

Funny: 'And then look at that other noble man.'

Straight: 'Who?'

Funny: 'Frederick Douglass.'

Straight: 'Yeah.'

Funny: 'Put his gun on his shoulder and walk out on the battlefield and said "Gi' me liberty or shoot me..."

Straight: 'Mm-hmm.'

Funny: '... and they shot him.'

[Straight man does a double take and there's a pause while the two look at each other]

Straight: 'Yeah.'

Funny: 'And that othe' noble man.'

Straight: 'Who that?'

Funny: 'Marcus Garvey.'

Straight: 'Let him rest, he's gone.'

Funny: 'He's gone.'

[He laughs, the straight man smiles.]

Funny: 'But there's a man.'

Straight: 'Who that?'

Funny: 'Abraham Lincoln.'

Straight: 'That's a great boy.'

Funny: 'Now that's a man that's known everywhere too.'

Straight: 'Yeah that's the...'

Funny: 'He was a man that done sumpin.'

Straight: 'Yeah that's the boy that cut down his pappy's cherry tree.'

Funny: [Addresses a wide eyed look at the camera, looks at his partner, then looks back at the camera. Then says,] 'Yeah. He takin' his hatchet and walk out to the forest and started choppin' on this tree and his Mama walk out and...'

Straight: 'Yeah. Who was his mother?'

Funny: 'Ahh. Betsy Rawlin.'

Straight: [Looks at his partner, confused and disbelieving]

Funny: 'His Mama says "Abraham, your father wants you," and walk in the house and his Papa looks him in the eye and his Papa says [in what sounds like a German or Russian immigrant accent] "Abey, Abey, did you cut down the tree?" And he said "Father I cut it with my little hacked." He said "Son, go ye and cut no more" and he ain't cut no more since.'

Straight: 'Yeah.'

Funny: 'Then look at that boy, Lindenburgh.'

Straight: 'Yeah that's a great man.'

Funny: 'Now that Lindenburgh...'

Straight: 'Yeah greatest man out of all of 'em.'

Funny: 'Yeah.'

Straight: 'Me and you can be just a great as him.'

Funny: 'Huh?' [his jaw drops]

Straight: 'All you got is to help me out. Right here and now in my pocket, I got a song I write no more, no longer 'n yesterday and ain't nuthin' to do but for you to find some endings. I got the song but I can't get the finish.' [brings out a piece of paper]

Funny: 'Oh, you want me to he'p you.'

Straight: 'Yeah you rhyme it with me.'

Funny: 'Go ahead.'

Straight: 'Right.' [Begins to sing the following to the tune of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic.' The funny man joins in with harmony]

Both: 'You can make love in a flower garden, daisies will not tell.' (x3)

Funny: 'And stepins can't step out.' [Not sure I heard that properly.]

Both: 'A lion is a vicious beast, that we all can tell.' (x3)

Funny: 'And hot dogs cannot bite.'

Both: 'Did you ever see a pig washin' in the summer time?' (x3)

Funny: 'No, but I have seen pig eyes.'

Both: 'What is it that an elephant that no other animals can?' (x3)

Funny: 'And it must be little baby elephants.'

[Straight man does a double take]

Both: 'You can tell when the willow's gone the trees begin to burn.'

(x3)

Funny: 'Willow's gone summer draws on.'

Both: 'Why did the boy stand on the burnin' gate?' (x3)

Funny: 'It was too doggone hot to sit down.'

[Straight man does double take]

[They walk out the room and the audience claps]

This appearance, in a Micheaux film, of a minstrel scene which apparently perpetuates the negative stereotypes of African Americans being obsessed with their appetite of whatever nature, and being intellectually shallow (complete with malapropism)³ appears to contradict the argument of the previous chapter. At first glance, this sequence seems not only to condone but to sustain the traditional racist caricatures endured by black Americans of this period. Why did Micheaux include a blackface minstrel act in his film? Did he not risk provoking outrage and alienation in his audience of primarily working class blacks? And did this minstrelsy not invalidate his films' efforts to modify these racial caricatures and promote the 'New Negro,' as outlined in Chapter Two? On the contrary, as this

³ It should be 'Lindbergh' instead of 'Lindenbergh'.

chapter will argue, black urban audiences' reception of minstrel acts, especially when performed by fellow African Americans, was more complex than simply hostile, for a variety of reasons; and, far from being incongruous, Micheaux's films' borrowing from this mode of representation was totally in keeping with their attempts to replace traditional racist stereotypes. Focusing primarily, once more, on the black urban community in New York, this chapter will examine the evidence of, and reasons for, the popularity of black minstrelsy⁴ among black audiences and trace the cultural positions that minstrel acts offered the black community at large and Micheaux's films in particular, linking its findings with recent theoretical debates on the subject. From this point we will see that minstrelsy offered African Americans a chance to address each other on the issues of the day; it presented a means of reappropriating their past and succeeded in fostering a sense of belonging in the black community. For Micheaux, as we will see, the staging and narrative system of this mode of representation represented a way for him to address his black audience within a structure that they recognised and enjoyed so that, as with stage minstrelsy, he could edify while still entertaining. As we will see, minstrelsy's humour and staging techniques were adopted in Micheaux's films to make political points without preaching and to direct the audience toward actively challenging the socio-political status quo.

Minstrelsy: An Exercise in Racial Degradation?

Minstrelsy has, in the past sixty years, been characterised as a mode of representation that was constructed by whites in the nineteenth century as a rationalisation for a racial hierarchy and racial prejudice that existed in the United States, making slavery and racial caste appear to be a 'benevolent fulfillment of, not a contradiction to, the American creed...[with] contrasting caricatures of inept, ludicrous Northern blacks and contented, fulfilled Southern Negroes' (Toll 1974: 272). Eric Lott (1995) has made the point that, after the economic disasters suffered by the United States in the 1840s, minstrel shows increased in popularity as they attempted to 'shore "white" class identities by targeting new enemies such as immigrants, blacks and tipplers' (137). Going back in time even further, Dale Cockrell (1997) has conceded that in the early nineteenth century, minstrel acts

⁴ By 'black minstrelsy' I mean minstrelsy performed by African Americans.

functioned as a mechanism of group aggrandisement for working class whites who needed to have a class of less fortunate people than themselves in order to gain a sense of control over an ever-changing society (61, 91). Kevin Gaines (1996) has argued that, even into the twentieth century, minstrelsy existed to allow its white male viewers to maintain a sense of moral and racial superiority. In addition, he claims that it laid ‘the intellectual and emotional foundation for the assumption by social sciences, clergy and jurists that African Americans were biologically inferior, disorderly, appetitive at the expense of reason and, finally, unassimilable’ (70). Similarly, J Lemons (1977) has argued that the racist stereotypes generated by minstrelsy of sexual promiscuity, gambling, drinking and razor fighting persisted in popular culture as late as 1920. This appears to be corroborated by the white press’s persistent depiction of the black cast of *Hallelujah!* (1929) as wild cats who had to be controlled by director King Vidor, as discussed in Chapter One. The *Charleston Gazette*, for example, described the cast as a motley crew who ‘clustered about card tables, gambling, crap-shooting, losing, winning... shuffling nervous dancing feet between scenes.’⁵ Additionally, as late as 1929, only three years before the release of *Ten Minutes to Live*, the *Amsterdam News* had cause to publish an article complaining about white writers’ continued tendency to

slur the Negro masses as loafers, who hate pick and shovel work... instead of sneering at men for not working, why not blame the labor unions and the employers who refuse to give them work? (May 15, 1929, p20).

All things considered, then, surely Micheaux’s inclusion of a minstrel act was impolitic and ill-considered? To answer that question we need to gauge, firstly, how exactly African American audiences responded to minstrelsy performed by both whites and blacks, then consider the significance of minstrel shows for black performers in the 1920s and 1930s. This understanding of African American reactions to minstrelsy will, in turn, explicate why and how Oscar Micheaux chose to incorporate features from this potentially incendiary mode of representation in his movies.

Correspondingly, ‘white minstrelsy’ denotes minstrelsy performed by whites.

Black Reception of Minstrelsy

Frederick Douglass, writing on white minstrel acts in October 1848 in the *North Star*, was less than enthusiastic, labelling the performers 'filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens' (qtd in Lott 1995: 15). This comment is interesting insofar as its vitriol was directed at the white men playing the parts of blackface entertainers, rather than at the caricatures of African Americans their performances embodied. Indeed, a year later in late June of 1849, in a *North Star* review of a show given by the black minstrel troupe Gavitt's Original Ethiopian Serenaders, Douglass made a similar point in his praise for the show:

It is something gained, when the colored man *in any form* can appear before a white audience; and we think that even this company, with industry, application, a proper cultivation of their taste, may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race (qtd in Lott 1995: 37, my emphasis).

Evidently, in mid-nineteenth century America, blackface was embraced as a means of triumphing over and eventually eradicating the colour line.

This sentiment appears to have survived into the twentieth century. The *Amsterdam News* contains numerous advertisements and favourable reviews of black minstrel shows through the 1920s, evidence of black minstrelsy's enduring popularity among black communities in Harlem. As late as 1928, the *Amsterdam News* published a collection of photos of five black comedians (all male), three of whom were in blackface,⁶ with the headline (in bold print): 'Give the Boys a Hand, Fellows.'⁷ And in 1922, a review of Harvey's Greater Minstrels vowed that

⁵ 1928, qtd in Cripps (1977: 246).

⁶ These blackface performers were Roscoe Mantella, 'Dusty' Fletcher and John Mason. These three and the others were appearing at the Alhambra theatre at the time.

⁷ *Amsterdam News*, August 22, 1928.

On the whole, the performance as offered by Harvey's Minstrels this week is something out of the ordinary [it included female performers; the article does not clarify if they too were in blackface] and a real novelty and minstrelsy with its vaudeville bits will easily hold its own at the Lafayette during the run (December 20, 1922).

Other evidence suggests the popularity of black minstrels with black communities: reputedly, the demand among black communities for minstrel shows was so high that several theatres catering to mixed audiences extended the section available to African American viewers (Toll 1974: 227, 256). In addition, one of the *Chicago Defender*'s most popular cartoon strips of the 1920s featured a character, Bungleton Green, that was an apparent cross between minstrelsy's two most renowned characters: Jim Crow and Zip Coon (see figures 3.2 and 3.3). Zip and Jim, as described by J Lemons (1977), are characterised as follows: Zip Coon wears a 'swallow-tail coat, with wide lapels, gaudy shirt, striped pants, spats and top hat,' he has a pompous mode of speech, riddled with malapropisms; Jim Crow wears 'tatters and rags and a battered hat' (102).



Figure 3.2. *Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1922

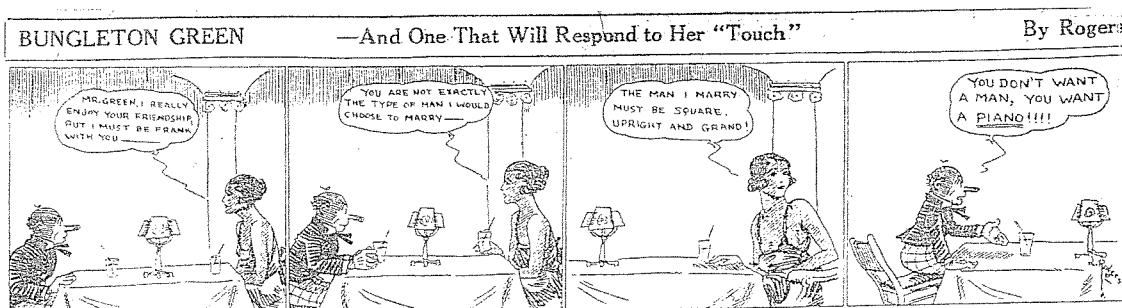


Figure 3.3. *Chicago Defender*, August 19, 1922

Between Jim's battered hat and Zip's pants and swallow-tail coat, Bungleton Green is recognisable as a reference to both minstrel types. His comic one-liners would

not be out of place in a minstrel exchange such as the one printed above between George and Galley, and his jacket and check trousers, exaggerated nose and feet were obviously reminiscent of traditional minstrel types. As Lott (1991: 1995) has noted about the nineteenth-century minstrel type, such exaggerations of nose and foot size are in keeping with traditional minstrelsy's fetishisation of the black male body, which in itself represented a sublimation of the fear and fascination black male sexuality held for white males. Lott sees this fetishisation as a trope that rendered minstrelsy 'nothing less than a carnival space devoted precisely to excesses outgrown in the service of [white] workday rationality' (1995: 145). In other words, such fetishisation both acknowledged and neutralised the threat posed by powerful black bodies. Similarly, Bungleton's ability to attract a virtually white, upwardly mobile woman is neutralised by his comic appearance – huge feet, extended nose, tatty clothes and a ridiculously shrunken body. Yet the longevity of this cartoon (running from 1922-1925) suggests that this caricature of black manhood served as a popular source of fun rather than offence for the all-black readership of the *Chicago Defender*. The stereotypes promulgated by black minstrelsy appear to have provided entertainment for its audience (and readership), which leads us to ask how they were perceived by the African American performers who embodied them?

Minstrelsy and the Black Performer

Similar to black audiences, African American entertainers did not seem reluctant to accept these laughable caricatures, as blackface entertainment offered virtually the only means they had of entering show business. To quote W.C. Handy,

The minstrel show at that time [late nineteenth century] was one of the greatest outlets for talented [Negro] musicians and artists... All the best [black] talent of that generation came down the same drain. The composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers – the minstrel show got them all (qtd in Toll 1974: 195).

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw African Americans finally seize the opportunity to form their own black minstrel troupes, although Robert Toll estimates that from the 1870s onward most were owned by whites. As Toll (1974)

points out, there was little these black performers could do to alter the racist caricatures that minstrelsy demanded of them, but at least it proffered the chance of social, geographic and economic mobility (195, 223). Still, they were faced with a reluctance on the part of white promoters and critics to accredit their performances to skill: they were referred to as ‘participants’ rather than entertainers on handbills and praised for their spontaneity rather than their expertise (see Toll 1974: 201-2, 262-3). As noted in Chapter One, this was a tendency that persisted well into the 1920s in the white press’s reviews of black performances in *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and *Hallelujah!* (1929). For black stage performers in New York in the 1920s, the situation was no different. The *Amsterdam News*, in 1923, provided a grim picture of white unwillingness to accept blacks in anything other than comic roles.

Reproducing two reviews, one by the *New York World*, the other from the *Daily News* (another New York publication) of the Ethiopian Art Theatre’s production of *Salomé*, the readers were faced with the following assessment of Negro ability:

Theirs is an imitative art at best, in its present state of development. Only in the reading of their own most simple dramas are they able to create and sustain an approximately complete illusion. In ‘The Chip Woman’s Fortune,’ for instance, a one-act comedy written by a Negro author, Willie Robertson, they reveal as many flashes of a true histrionic art as their white contemporaries. But the minute they are plunged into the formal and foreign atmosphere of *Salomé* they become alien performers seeking to counterfeit something they have heard spoken and seen performed...It would be a great pity if this Ethiopian Art Theatre were to fail for want of a proper folk drama to sustain it (qtd in *Amsterdam News*, May 16, 1923, p5).

Little wonder, then, that black minstrel shows were so prevalent, as well as popular: as late as the 1920s, black performers in serious drama would not be accepted by a wider audience than local black communities and this was not sufficient for long-term economic survival. And, according to Clarence Muse, black audiences often preferred minstrel acts to straight drama (Thompson 2001: 22). As a minstrel, a performer could play in black, mixed and white theatres alike, as Billy Kersands’ widespread popularity proved. Bert Williams may have complained that minstrel

acts equated the ‘lynching [of] one’s soul in blackface twaddle,’⁸ but it was that act that saw him earn fifty two thousand dollars per annum by 1915, working for Ziegfeld. Also, by the 1920s, appearing as a minstrel amounted to a rise in status for any black performers who had previously worked only in vaudeville. As the advertisement for the Georgia Minstrels displays (see figure 3.1), this was a respectable, as well as exciting, show and its entertainers cultivated a refined bearing. All the same, it must have been exasperating for black performers to be criticised by white reviewers for being ‘alien performers seeking to counterfeit something they have heard spoken and seen performed,’ when exactly such a strategy had been not only tolerated, but celebrated, in the whites’ construction of minstrelsy. As can be seen from the following *Amsterdam News* article, this double standard was noticed by African Americans, to the point that a black minstrel show, by the 1920s, had become a quasi-political reclamation of a black culture that had been loved and thieved by whites a hundred years before, to paraphrase Eric Lott. As the writer observes,

[The Negro actor] is not an imitator, as is generally believed. He is conscious that minstrelsy is his own property and that the whites have taken away something that is his by imitating his drolleries, his color, his articulation (*Amsterdam News*, July 31, 1929, p18).

Another, albeit more oblique, echo of Douglass’s resentment of white minstrel performers’ appropriation of black culture is evident in a review of ‘Black Boy,’ a 1926 play starring Paul Robeson. The *Amsterdam News*’ reviewer exulted in Robeson’s voice, claiming that

When he opens his mouth and that organ-like voice comes forth you know that this is the real thing, no Al Jolson-Eddie Cantor imitation – but the real thing (October 13, 1926).

It would seem that in the 1920s, black audiences’ enjoyment of blackface entertainment still extended only to that performed by African Americans, although

⁸ *Negro World*, April 21, 1923, qtd in Bowser and Spence (2000: 251).

a piece in the *Chicago Defender* of April 9, 1910 suggests that Jewish American minstrels were tolerated by some.⁹ Evidently, in the 1920s, black audiences on the whole responded with pride to the success of their fellow African Americans on stage, even if Douglass's hope that these black minstrel performances would dissolve the colour line did not appear to be nurtured.

African Americans and Minstrelsy Reconsidered: The Complexity of Reception

As this suggests, black enjoyment of minstrels, black or white, was complex, arousing contradictory responses of pleasure and resentment. The *Amsterdam News*, in 1929, reprinted a *New York Sun* article that addressed the practice of black performers wearing burnt cork. As the article asks

Why don't Negroes paint their faces red? Why don't they resort to the comedy make-ups of old-time comics? (July 31, 1929).

The writer implies that this accommodation to a white tradition was unnecessary and stood in the way of black performers being accepted as white performers' equals. As he repeats, with mounting frustration, 'Negro actors think the same as white,' the implication being, why should they not behave and be treated in the same way by making their faces into grotesque versions of white people's faces.¹⁰

⁹ The *Chicago Defender*'s 'Musical and Dramatic' writer, Sylvester Russell, argued that there was a closeness between African Americans and Jewish blackface entertainers, stating 'They are always good singers and nimble dancers, and nearer like the colored people than any other race of white actors.' Michael Rogin makes the point that blackface offered immigrant Jews (and newly arrived Irish immigrants) the occasion to assimilate into American culture and overcome prejudice. Basing their acts on colour united whites, and smoothed over ethnic differences within the white community (2), a point also made by Toll (1974: 162, 169). As Linda Williams (2001) has written of Al Jolson's initial reason for using the minstrel persona: 'The blackface mask promised to hide the discomfort of the embarrassed Jew' (140). Nonetheless, although also a mask for African Americans, they could not remove the blackface to the same degree after their performance, so minstrelsy did not offer them the same opportunity; it could not dissolve the colour line.

¹⁰ This sentiment appears to have gathered momentum as advertisements for, and favourable reviews of, minstrel shows disappear from the pages of the *Amsterdam News* in the early 1930s. Similarly, the popularity of Amos 'n' Andy waned considerable after their film *Check and Double Check* (1930) was released and black audiences were confronted with the fact that the characters were in fact played by two men in not very convincing blackface, a fact they could ignore when the two appeared on radio.

Here we see the co-existence of conflicting admiration and frustration, a conflict that is also evident in Micheaux's responses to the mode, as we shall see below.

That black minstrelsy aroused such antithetical feelings among its viewers and black performers is not surprising. As Eric Lott (1995) and Dale Cockrell (1997) have argued, central to minstrelsy since its inception has been a sense of ambiguity and paradox. As mentioned above, the minstrel image of the black body was a 'fundamental source of minstrelsy's threat and fascination for its predominately white male audience' (Lott 1995: 231). Similarly, Cockrell has noted that for white audiences minstrel shows carried with them the promise of entertainment along with an underlying possibility of violence. Indeed Lott has characterised the white reception of the blackface image as a 'dialectic of misrecognition and identification' (152). The title of Lott's book on minstrelsy, *Love and Theft*, best illustrates the paradoxical nature of white reception of blackface. As much as Negro culture and the black body appealed to nineteenth-century whites, they also elicited a need to control and appropriate them so as to contain their difference. In short, whites were drawn to and, simultaneously, repulsed by this 'other' culture, desirous yet afraid to identify with these light-hearted, larger than life characters. How much more intense must have been the African Americans' sense of identification and disavowal as they were torn between resenting the grotesque caricatures of their race and enjoying the reappropriation of their own cultural heritage long denied them. Certainly this duality is apparent in Micheaux's use of the minstrel tradition, as I will argue below. Perhaps the best evidence of the complexity of the relationship between blacks, whites, and minstrels is to be seen in the case of Ernest Hogan (a popular black minstrel at the turn of the twentieth century), and his popular song, 'All Coons Look Alike to Me.' According to J Lemons (1977), Hogan's composition caused him to be vilified by most of the black intelligentsia, yet he was listed as one of the twelve greatest Negro comedians of all time in Langston Hughes's history of black entertainers in American entertainment, published in 1967 (107). Likewise Hogan's infamous song was both a huge popular hit and a 'fighting tune' for New York City African Americans: they considered it an insult and a call to fight if they heard a white person whistle or sing it (107). Depending on the circumstances of the performance of the song, it could inspire recognition, alienation, a call to arms or camaraderie.

Dale Cockrell (1997) has suggested that minstrelsy's paradoxical nature stems from the form's origins, which he claims were European and West Indian folk traditions such as Mumming, Charivari, carnival, John Canoe and Callithumpian bands.¹¹ These traditions worked both to provide a vent for the community's frustration with the social order and as a protector of that same social order, a dual function that he sees carried into minstrelsy. Cockrell's theory is an interesting one that offers some explanation of minstrelsy's popularity and role within the black urban community and in Micheaux's movies. Disregarding the apparently racist undertones of blackface entertainment, Cockrell argues that blackface in early minstrelsy was merely another form of the mask used in carnival and Mumming. It was used to disguise oneself in order to inhabit another/the other self, not as a form of racial delineation. Thus, Cockrell concludes that patrons of early minstrel shows had a very different understanding of blackface, based on their cultural heritage: many working class (white) patrons donned blackface in the streets to participate in Callithumpian bands to chastise errant Lords and layabouts equally, with the purpose of protecting the community's best interests. Effectively, these folk traditions and, by extension, minstrelsy

distort[ed] reality, thereby unsettling social norms, which allowed for the possibility of reordering. The community obtain[ed] a mechanism to express its displeasure with some social conditions, perhaps even to remedy it (Cockrell 1997:46).

So what we must now address is threefold: what needed 'reordering' in urban black American society of the early twentieth century; how did minstrelsy approach this task; and how did Micheaux's movies respond to this?

With the inception of the Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the early twentieth century was a period of increasing black militancy in demanding social equality. As a 1910 *Chicago Defender* article declared,

The Negro must learn to contend for his rights. If you can't get them peacefully, go to the courts and fight for them... and the color line will soon be wiped out (June 11, 1910, p1).

Minstrelsy, then, with its ability to entertain and challenge the social order, was a mode of representation entirely appropriate for the time. Victor Turner has claimed that the public display of blackface represented a 'public reflexivity,' which allowed society to contemplate its own form and function in a sublimated manner (qtd in Lott 1995: 27). In keeping with that idea, this next section aims to explore how minstrelsy, on stage and in Micheaux's films, tackled social regulation and African American socio-cultural reclamation, along with its conscious cultivation of a black community and common black heritage.

Masks, Songs and Satire: Minstrelsy's Regulation and Creation of a Community

As argued above, minstrelsy's original aim was to provide a means for the community to regulate itself. In one Callithumpian ritual, a man from the locale was made Lord for the Day, during which the actual Lord of the area served him and withstood the symbolic Lord's criticism of the way he treated the community. Another folk ritual (Charivari), involved a group of young men dressing in masks and costumes in the middle of the night and standing outside the house of a local wrongdoer. There they proceeded to make enough noise to rouse the community and draw attention to the fact that their 'victim' has committed some transgression that threatened the well-being of the group by wife/husband beating, laziness, and so forth. In this way, everyone was encouraged to be on his/her best behaviour and work for the good of the community. In Chapter Two I discussed how a similar effort to discourage undesirable behaviour drove the characterisation in Oscar Micheaux's films. By holding up the coon stereotype to the light and then modifying it, Micheaux's films aimed to construct a positive self-image for black Americans. In the process, some other traditional minstrel characteristics appeared in Micheaux's films. As Lemons (1977) has argued, minstrelsy's coons were

¹¹ Eric Lott also sees minstrelsy's roots lying in European traditions of clowns and

renowned for drinking, gambling, fighting and sexual promiscuity, and we can see these traits reflected in Harry and Big Sam from *Underworld* (1937) and Mandy's boyfriend in *Swing* (1938). Harry shamelessly encourages his two prostitute girlfriends to try to 'make Big Sam' so that he can afford a new car. Big Sam, the local pimp, beats his girlfriend and deliberates on the relative qualities of 'bad liquor' and 'bad reefer.' Mandy's boyfriend, like Zip Coon, revels in pompous speech and prefers to chase women than work, content to live off Mandy's earnings. The list goes on. However, these characters are more subtle delineations than their minstrel predecessors. Content to sustain the minstrel coon's character flaws, Micheaux refuses to dress them in swallow tail coats or check trousers.

Green (1998) sees this as an interrogation of caricature that aims not to denigrate the entertainers or the entertainment but to interrogate the mode of entertainment that produced these caricatures. I think that it is more likely that Micheaux, recognising the popularity of minstrelsy, incorporated aspects of its narrative system (narrative tropes, tone and characterisations) and style (mise en scène) in his movies as a way to please his audience. Nonetheless, as the minstrel show declined in popularity and receded in people's memories, Micheaux's films were subject to increasing criticism for being racist and anti-black. A case in point is the criticism levelled by Green and Neal (1988). The two film historians have criticised, wholeheartedly, Micheaux's inclusion of a scene in *Lying Lips* (1939) in which a black man is persuaded to give a confession under threat of being left in a haunted house. According to Green and Neal, the 'victim' of this scene is a true 'coon' as they see the sequence as an instance of racial degradation. However, what they have ignored is the popularity of similar comic 'ghost scenes' in minstrel shows as well as more dramatic ghost scenes that appeared in certain melodramas, as late as the 1920s. Indeed, the dramatic ghost scene in the melodrama *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Vitagraph, 1907) can be seen to empower the slave: it is the slave Cassy's 'haunting' of her Master (in a white sheet) that leads to her escape and the rescue of the slave Emmeline from rape by Legree. The 1927 version (Universal) alters this only insofar as it is Uncle Tom's real ghost that appears to Legree, causing him to

jump out a window to his death. Also, in a review of a minstrel show at the Lafayette in Harlem, the critic commented on the comic ghost scene thus,

Reverting to the much-used ghost scenes are [sic.] also bound to draw the major part of the laughs in any kind of show by our people and this is worked up to a nice degree that gives [Bubber] Mack an opportunity to get in some of his best work (*Amsterdam News*, February 11, 1925, p7).

What is notable here is the way the review privileges Mack's performance over the ostensible content of his act. Such equanimity in the face of the ghost scene gives little reason to believe, then, that the inclusion of a similar scene in a film seven years later would cause much offence among its African American audiences. Micheaux uses the minstrel caricatures to investigate community values, not to investigate the value of minstrelsy's form as Green (2000) suggests.

In another, more emphatic attempt at social regulation we have George and Galley's piece, as printed above. 'Uplift yourself. Elevate. Be somebody. Follah in the footsteps of great men,' one tells the other. This sentiment is placed in opposition to the statement 'Gi' me less liberty and more food than a whole lot of freedom and starvin' to death,' a sentiment befitting any stereotypical coon figure. Immediate chastisement is dealt to this man who so flippantly would trade hard won liberty for something to eat. Nonetheless, this is not delivered heavy-handedly. After all, minstrelsy's first goal was to entertain. Throughout the George and Galley piece, we can see a sly subversive humour at work. In what should be a sentimental reminiscence on the advice his Grandma gave him, the funny man (George from here on), sets himself up as a parodic figure with his reference to his 'golden locks' and 'blue eyes.' Clearly this is a man who plays with words and images. The only reaction shot of the sequence emphasises this: as George's comments on his appearance provide a voice-over we see two men laughing in response. George and Galley's best use of subversive humour, though, is their appraisal of all the 'great men' who have inspired them. They build up their characterisation and praise of each man, from Douglass to Lincoln, only to puncture the noble image with a joke at the expense of their heroes; most notably, Abraham Lincoln is lauded for having cut down a tree. Apart from being praised

for such a ridiculously underwhelming achievement, the fact that it was actually George Washington who reputedly cut down the tree doubly undermines Lincoln's reputation. Lincoln, in the skewed logic of George and Galley, has been acknowledged as a 'great man' only under false pretences. The joke continues to build to a climax when they reveal that it is merely celebrity that is being celebrated: Lindbergh (or as they call him, 'Lindenbergh') is said to be greater than all the leaders who liberated the race. The apparent uplift of the passage has been negated and is abused further with the revelation that to become as great as these men, George and Galley need only write a nonsense-song. The sequence has delivered an off-kilter value system and logic that are punctuated by the song that closes their act. Set to the tune of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic,' a song famous for its uplifting qualities and stirring emotion, the two sing about hot-dogs, hot fences and pigs washing in the summer time. A hymn that has traditionally placed righteousness in a specifically American context is mocked here by the replacement of the original, uplifting lyrics with the minstrels' nonsensical words. It is tempting to see in this version an indictment of the image of America as the land of the free, committed to the protection of the world's 'huddled masses.' In fact, given the minstrels' willingness to address and mock political figures, it does not seem unlikely that this song should have a political, regulatory dimension, in effect rewriting the past from a black perspective, a feature that, as we will now see, was in keeping with the traditions of black minstrelsy.

The Past is Re-Written

As mentioned above, another function of black minstrelsy was to re-represent the past. In contrast with the white minstrel songs that romanticised the plantation and slave life, black minstrel songs endeavoured to provide a more honest picture.

Robert Toll's (1974) research has uncovered that black minstrel songs rarely, if ever, mentioned their masters or mistresses. Instead they focused all their affection on their black relatives (245). Also, many black minstrels slipped anti-slavery sentiments into non-protest songs (hinting that Heaven was a place 'where there is no overseer') and dwelt on the pain of family separation as some member was sold away (246). According to Toll (1974),

Since such indirect and covert jibes were common in black folk culture but not in white, many blacks in the audience would have been sensitized to hear and enjoy such surreptitious barbs, while most whites might not even have noticed them (246).

As we saw in the previous chapter's discussion of Micheaux's uplift, Oscar Micheaux's films were similarly intent on reproducing black life in America as truthfully as possible. In fact, his films were criticised for showing the less uplifting side to life in the black ghetto (see for example *Underworld*, *Lying Lips*, *Ten Minutes to Live*). According to Micheaux,

The recognition of our true situation [would] react in itself as a stimulus for self-advancement (*Pittsburgh Courier*, December 13, 1924; qtd in Sampson, 1995: 169).

A similar refusal of plantation songs' tendency to romanticise the past is subtly handled in a scene from *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932). One of the maids sings 'River Stay Way From My Door' and in between verses the piano accompaniment plays the main line from 'Swanee River,' an ironic commentary on the latter's dewy-eyed sentiment: in 'River Stay Way...' the river threatens to tear away all her meagre belongings and ruin her cabin. Despite the jaunty tune, there is no romanticisation of life down South allowed here; the Swanee River is no comfort or place of rest but a source of torment. The girl's song expresses no nostalgic wish to return to or idolise the Swanee's banks. In her rejection of the river there is also a rejection of the romanticising impulse of white minstrel songs that would cover up the hardship and suffering upon which that graceful plantation life that they lamented was founded. This refusal to romanticise Southern life is most clearly exemplified in the earlier *Within Our Gates* (1920). Set in the recent past somewhere in the South, this film presents a startlingly graphic display of lynching and inter-racial rape suffered by an innocent black family. There is no benevolent Master or happy slave here: the Master is hated by white and black tenants alike for his corruption and the (free) black family meets its doom at the hands of an organised, bloodthirsty white mob that consists of men, women and children.

A Sense of Belonging

Mention should be made here of the similarity in the ways in which the audience is arranged in both early minstrel shows and Micheaux's films. Several of Micheaux's movies include musical or dance sketches that provide respite from the plot. What is noticeable about the majority of these scenes is the way in which the singer/dancer's diegetic audience cluster between him/her, swaying to the music and occasionally dancing among themselves. In *Lying Lips* (1939), as Elsie sings in the night-club the crowd joins her at the piano in such a fashion, despite the obvious presence of tables and seats at the front of the stage floor. In the less formal setting of an impromptu sitting room soirée, in *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), *The Girl from Chicago* (1932), the audience congregates in the same manner. Discussing the role of the diegetic audience in Micheaux's *Murder in Harlem* (1935), Ronald Green (1998) argues that it acts as a sign of reprobation of the buffoon-ish Lem Hawkins who embodies the characteristics of the 'coon,' providing a guiding example for the non-diegetic audience as to how they should receive his outlandish behaviour and clothes. For Green this is a 'cutting gaze,' designed to distance both diegetic and non-diegetic audience from the performer. However, I see it differently. The audience's clustering suggests a social cohesiveness in the group where all are friends, more significantly it is also reminiscent of the way in which the audiences of early minstrelsy used to spill onto the stage, crowding around the performer (see figure 3.4).

It could be argued that Micheaux is attempting to create a similar atmosphere for his non-diegetic audience to make the effect of the performer's act more immediate. In fact, his use of the reaction shot in George and Galley's routine works to a similar purpose of embracing the non-diegetic audience and creating a sense of accessibility and identification with the film, its form and its characters. In addition, Galley's constant interjections of 'Yeah,' 'Now you're talkin,' etc serve as a surrogate for the non-diegetic audience, as well as recalling jazz's call and response structure. His heckling and participation guide the audience's response – as Carbine (1996) has noted, African American audience interaction with movies was customary and lively. Furthermore, George's look to the audience in disbelief at Galley's analysis of Lincoln's character acts as an invitation to share in his

reaction. This rapport with the audience was an important trait of minstrelsy. As Cockrell (1997) has written,

more than, perhaps, any other form of American theatre in the period, minstrelsy involved the audience. The most successful actors were those who could sense the needs and moods of the audience, and play to them (58).

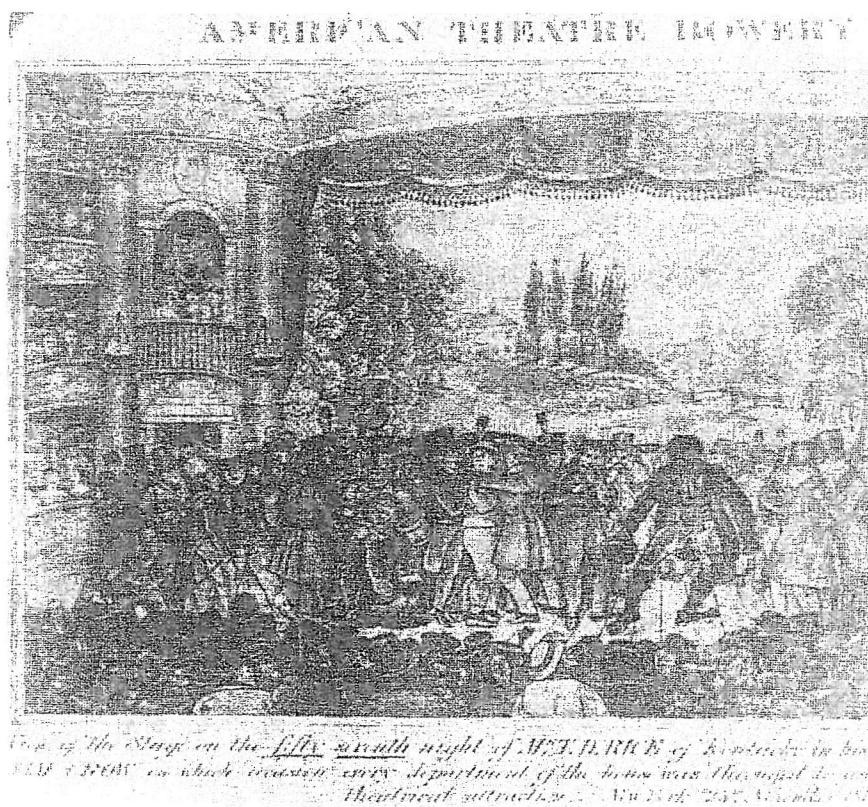


Figure 3.4. T.D. Rice as 'Jim Crow', 1833, from the New-York Historical Society

This attempt to incorporate the audience is one more feature that connects black minstrelsy with Oscar Micheaux's feature films. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, in 1910 the *Chicago Defender* printed a series of articles and letters debating the racial composition of a true Negro. One letter, from a person of mixed race, put the issue most succinctly when, having listed his complicated racial lineage, asked 'Will you please tell me what I am?'¹² The debate was obviously close to the heart of many African Americans as it was still raging in 1929 when the *Amsterdam*

¹² June 11, 1910, p1.

News published Kelly Miller's article on 'Who is a Negro?'¹³ These various articles bespeak a desire to create a community of African Americans. Black minstrelsy, perhaps surprisingly, offered a means of achieving this by instilling in its black audiences a sense of belonging and inclusion. As Toll (1974) has argued,

African Americans laughed at the familiar in exaggerated form [at black minstrel shows]. At least in part, theirs was in-group laughter of recognition, even of belonging... They did not worry about what whites thought of it. Feeling a common bond with the performers, they laughed and cheered (258).

Black minstrelsy was enjoyed by African Americans because it created a shared black world, with jokes about prominent figures in the black community. To wit, in George and Galley's exchange, they slyly include Marcus Garvey as one of the great men, only to revoke this privilege with a snigger. He is a figure of ridicule to the two, but they need not say why. His court case having been followed avidly by the black press, providing front page headlines on a regular basis, there is no doubt that the black audience would understand the joke, but it is debatable whether a white audience would have recognised his name. Being au fait with the Garvey case permitted the black audience to snigger along with the two blackface entertainers.¹⁴ There is one other interesting touch in the George and Galley exchange that would have increased a black audience's sense of belonging: George's mimicry of a European immigrant accent in his representation of Lincoln's father. This mimicry recalls nineteenth-century minstrelsy's tendency to use minstrels to personify immigrants, in an attempt to assimilate the newcomers (see note 9 on Jewish assimilation through blackface). Here, though, George reverses the previous marginalisation of blacks through blackface – here, the whites are outsiders and the African American performers and audience are no longer 'on the outside looking in'.¹⁵

¹³ May 13, 1929, p20.

¹⁴ This 'up to dateness' was another feature of the minstrel show, as will be discussed below.

¹⁵ Dale Cockrell's (1997) description of the nineteenth century black position within minstrelsy.

Finally, there is the most notorious aspect of blackface entertainment: the blackface mask. As mentioned above, there was considerable discourse around the use of burnt cork by African American performers. Traditionally, according to William Mahar (1985), white minstrels employed the blackface mask not to poke racist fun but to ‘attack the weakness of white attitudes and behaviours’ (281). But what function did blackface have for the African American performer?

‘Acting the Nigger’

As mentioned above, minstrelsy was constructed around the notion of assuming a distancing mask, based on a racial stereotype, used by whites to explore the difference between their normative and natural selves. Whites wore a black mask to enter a part of themselves they feared (the ‘primitive’ side) while maintaining a distance from the alter-ego that emerged. In Nathan Huggins’ eyes (1971), when black people assumed black masks there was no difference in the affectation involved, as in general blacks shared the values and expectations of the white middle classes.¹⁶ Success was vital as it reflected not just on the individual but also on the ‘race.’ So, with such a pressure to succeed on the shoulders of the black people, the black masks that they wore externalised and objectified those qualities that would lead to failure in the business world; the masks distanced their black wearers from themselves and their dreaded possible alter-egos. Yet, as the mask still bore racial connotations, the use of a mask by a black person was naturally more problematic than a simple exorcism of one’s undesired character traits. For this reason, Huggins argues, blacks tried to use blackface as ‘an instrument of satire’ (1971: 258). George and Galley’s act suggests that Huggins’ remarks are accurate. Their assumption of the blackface mask has freed them to make disparaging comments about the most respected members of their community, ridicule uplift and invert the accepted value system of the black community with impunity.

For Micheaux, minstrelsy represented a popular mode of representation that had long been associated with the African American experience, and for that reason

¹⁶ This is not as surprising a claim as it might first appear; taken in the context of the times, this is not unexpected. As we saw in the previous chapter, some

proved a logical mode to use in addressing African American issues. To wit, he drew on the minstrel's subversive qualities to rewrite the past (de-romanticising the South); challenge his contemporary socio-political climate (for example, in George and Galley's call for blacks to 'elevate' themselves); and cultivate a form that created a sense of community among his black audience. Borrowing from minstrelsy's staging techniques, for example crowding the audience around the source of entertainment, Micheaux's films' mise en scène worked to implicate their audiences directly in the action on-screen, encouraging the audience to involve themselves in the dilemmas of the movie characters. This, along with the exorcism of minstrel character flaws, encouraged the black audience to challenge not only their own social behaviour but also the socio-political conditions in which they lived. George and Galley's irreverence also invited the audience to query the power structure and challenge traditionally held truths (as did the minstrel duo's parody of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'). And yet, this borrowing from minstrelsy was not without conflict and discomfort. Characters who deported themselves in the way of Zip Coon or Jim Crow were chastised and then discarded: Effrem in *Within Our Gates* was murdered by the white people for whom he performed; the preacher in *Within Our Gates* who sold his race out for 'a mess of pottage' was condemned by the narrative and himself; the shiftless boyfriend in *Swing* was emasculated by the narrative's close, threatened by a diminutive woman with a bullet in the head if he should ever again be unfaithful to his girlfriend. These narratives reflect frustration with, and rejection of, these stereotypical characterisations that minstrelsy disseminated, even as the more positive features of the tradition were embraced and adapted.

However, despite Micheaux's occasional frustration with the images circulated by minstrelsy, black minstrelsy on stage and in Micheaux's films generally succeeded in undermining and lampooning the standardised pathos of conventional minstrelsy's sentimental songs. George and Galley's satirical swipe at minstrelsy's nostalgia for a lost idealised home in George's humorous recollection of life with his Granny and blonde curls is a prime example of such parody. The minstrel form in Micheaux's films also offered a means of satirising black culture, as George and

upwardly-mobile African Americans appeared to aspire to assimilation into white,

Galley's piece on the 'great men' of America ably demonstrated. And even when the blackface mode was not adopted literally, Micheaux's films displayed a consciousness, and refusal of, the white minstrel's nostalgia for ante-bellum life, as we saw in *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) response to 'Swanee River' in its inclusion of the 'River Stay Way From My Door' number. Ultimately, minstrelsy offered Micheaux the perfect tool with which to parody and reclaim previous white culture's distortion of African American history.

Nonetheless, it must be admitted that minstrelsy's humour and light-hearted banter was not particularly prevalent in the films produced by Micheaux. It appeared primarily in vignettes such as George ad Galley's piece in *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932). A more common feature of these movies was that of melodrama. In fact, melodrama subsumed all the genres in Micheaux's movies. Among the murder mysteries, backstage musicals and social problem genres adopted in various Micheaux films, the melodramatic mode was the overriding genre in evidence. Judging by the way he marketed his movies, Micheaux obviously saw melodrama as a strong selling point with his audience, as the advertisement of his *The Virgin of the Seminole* (1922) suggests. His plot summary reads thus,

How a young mounted police shoots it out with a desperado. A pretty young girl caught in the net of a jealous woman (*The Chicago Defender*, December 2, 1922).

This promises both the action (the shoot-out) and pathos (the young, victimised girl) that have traditionally been accepted as the key features of melodrama. This advertising strategy continued into the 1930s, as we can see from the original trailer for *God's Stepchildren* (1938), which placed the film in the tradition of *Imitation of Life* (1936) and *These Three* (1936) – two recent popular Hollywood melodramas. But if, as I have argued, the appropriation of minstrel forms allowed Micheaux's films to provide a black audience with the exhortations to 'Elevate. Be somebody' that Micheaux desired, then why did he not content himself with this form alone? We have seen above that through the use of minstrelsy's subversive humour

middle-class society.

Micheaux's films began to construct a film form that gave voice to previously marginalised African Americans and their culture. So what need did he have for melodrama? Considering *Variety*'s advice, or plea, for him to avoid drama and restrict himself to comedy following the release of *The Exile* (1931),¹⁷ it appears a somewhat wilful decision to persist in producing melodrama. And did not the use of melodrama, with its pathos and sentimentality, negate the parodic power of the minstrelsy incorporated in these film narratives?

The aim of the remainder of this chapter is to address these questions to ascertain first, the reasons why Micheaux chose to amalgamate two such apparently dissimilar dramatic forms as minstrelsy and melodrama in his movies. After this I will examine how exactly Micheaux's films used the melodramatic narrative system and style. And finally, I need to consider the implications and repercussions of the combination of minstrelsy's and melodrama's forms. But before I begin, I must examine the popularity of melodrama in early twentieth-century American culture to understand the way in which it was received by African American audiences, as well as how this influenced both Micheaux's use of the mode in his movies and his black audiences' reception of this adaptation.

The Popularity of Melodrama in the 1920s and 1930s

As with minstrelsy, melodrama was a mode of representation that was familiar to, and popular with, black and white audiences and performers alike in the early twentieth century. For black performers, melodramas offered them the opportunity to develop and exhibit their range in ways that minstrelsy could not. Hence black theatre groups, such as The Ethiopian Art Theatre, persisted in staging the melodramatic *Salomé*, even when advised to restrict their repertoire to comedy and folk drama. Judging from the plethora of black stage melodramas advertised in the *Amsterdam News* in the inter-war period, melodrama obviously enjoyed popularity among the paper's black readership. The publicity for one such drama, *The Girl Outcast*, provides an insight into the form's appeal to African American audiences:

¹⁷ *Variety*, May 13, 1931 and May 27, 1931, qtd in Cripps (1977: 323).

Human Drama of the Young Girl's Mistake in Life and the Condemnation of the Neighbors – Until the New Pastor Demands to Know Who Is Without Sin? Let Him Cast the First Stone (April 16, 1930).

This advertisement's insistence on the plot's recognition of virtue as well as its emphasis on the pathetic situation of the victim-heroine places the play firmly in the tradition of nineteenth century melodramatic narrative, as delineated by Linda Williams (2001), Thomas Elsaesser (1972, reprinted in 1987) and Jane Gaines (2001) among others. Two of melodrama's most marketable features were the ability to evoke pathos and allow viewers to enjoy, vicariously, the experience of recapturing a lost state of innocence. As I will argue below, the appeal of these traits was recognised and absorbed by Oscar Micheaux in the construction of his films. But first I want to consider what it was that attracted black spectators and, consequently Oscar Micheaux, to the melodramatic mode.

The African American Experience and Melodrama

According to E Ann Kaplan (1998) and Peter Brooks (1976, reprinted in 1995), melodrama promises 'ethical recentring' (Kaplan: xii), which brings to the fore previously marginalised social groups such as women and African Americans, giving them the opportunity for self-expression and offering its viewers a sense of 'moral legibility.' By this term, Brooks means that melodrama creates a belief that there is an inherently good and moral value system at work in society, despite its general invisibility. With its 'ethical recentring,' as Jane Gaines (2001) has noted, melodrama offers a 'fictional scheme of things in which the power structure is inverted' (169), which she argues was the primary reason for race drama's appeal among its African American audiences in the 1920s.¹⁸ Such an inversion of the power structure must have held appeal for black Americans, beleaguered as they were by lynching and racial discrimination. Also, with the inversion of the power structure, race melodramas were capable of displaying black characters in roles that were not traditionally open to them. As Clyde Taylor (2001) has noted, race melodramas presented the black woman as a 'treasured object' in need of

¹⁸ Gaines also claims that another melodramatic device, that of coincidence, is one which held particular appeal to dispossessed groups as it represented 'a secular

protection, in contrast with white melodrama's prioritisation of the white female only (9). African American audiences, through race melodramas, were offered the chance to raise their sights beyond the limited economic and career positions furnished by white productions and were provided with new role models to replace their traditional options as white man's stooge or domestic servant. This desire to broaden their horizons was perceived by Micheaux in his early novel *The Homesteader* (1917) where he noted that '[the] race needed examples; they needed instances of success' (qtd in Butters: 2000). Subsequently, his films offered a glimpse of African Americans as teachers, lawyers and entrepreneurs, as well as performing traditional roles of maids, cooks and chauffeurs.¹⁹ Thus, Jane Gaines' (2001) suggestion that melodrama appealed to Micheaux because it 'tended toward the hyperbolic and the grandiose' (9) seems inappropriate. It seems, rather, that it was the 'recentering' and restructuring of the social order, proffered by melodrama, that appealed to the filmmaker. Similar to minstrelsy, the melodramatic mode, with its power to invert traditional power structures, was a natural tool of any marginalised social group and Micheaux, recognising its potential, availed himself of the avenues it opened.

Also, according to Micheaux, the idea of a 'moral legibility' appealed to African Americans, providing another explanation for melodrama's popularity. In a letter he wrote to Charles Chesnutt:

... so far as our people are concerned, send them out of the theatre... with a feeling that all good must triumph in the end (August 1921, qtd in Cripps 1979: 48).

As I will discuss below in my examination of *Body and Soul* (1925), he achieved this through the melodramatic device of the recognition of virtue.

version of divine intervention, the only invention that can rescue the powerless in the unjust world of social realist fiction' (1993: 58).

¹⁹ It is the movies' refusal to deride those who work as domestic servants, for example Mandy in *Swing* (1938), the servants in *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) etc. that recovers these films from any accusation of elitism or embourgeoisement, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Having established a basic understanding of melodrama's potential attraction for African American audiences, and consequently a reason for Micheaux's adoption of the form, the next issue to be addressed is that of the dialectic that existed between the minstrel and melodramatic forms within Micheaux's films. At first glance these forms appear to be in opposition to each other. Minstrelsy's reliance on mimicry and parody could not be more different to melodrama's reliance on sympathy and pathos: the first evokes a distance between the audience and the subject; the latter aims for an emphatic bond between the audience and the characters' travails. Yet, this is not an entirely accurate assessment. As this next section will argue, minstrelsy and melodrama, as Eric Lott (1995) suggested, are in fact two points along the same spectrum. In this section there are three issues that I aim to address. First, I will examine the similar narrative systems of minstrelsy and melodrama and, secondly, I will trace their confluence on the mid-nineteenth century American stage. I then want to arrive at an understanding of how exactly the pathos found in the plantation songs of minstrel shows led to an acceptance among whites of the melodramatic mode that, in turn, humanised the African American. That established, it will become clear how the two modes of representation have worked in tandem to provide a sympathetic voice for the African American since the 1850s, eventually providing a counter to D.W. Griffith's substitution of the white for black as endangered social group deserving of audience sympathy in *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Thus, Micheaux's position within a popular American melodramatic tradition, which was familiar to his audience, will become apparent as will his films' efforts to reclaim melodrama as a mode that spoke for the beleaguered black American populace, not for white supremacists.

Minstrelsy and Melodrama: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

One element common to the two modes is a sense of 'up to dateness.' As we saw in George and Galley's ridicule of Marcus Garvey, minstrelsy had a flexibility that allowed for the insertion of topical jokes. In fact, given Cockrell's (1997:58) earlier comments on the minstrel's success being proportional to his ability to read his audience, it was essential that a blackface performer was au courant with the topical issues in his spectators' community. Melodrama, according to Linda Williams (2001), has a similar propensity to ride the zeitgeist:

Part of the excitement of the [melodramatic] mode is the genuine turmoil and timeliness of the issues it takes up and the popular debate it can generate when it explores controversies not yet placed on the agenda of liberal humanism (19).

This same ‘up to dateness’ is notable in Micheaux’s *Marcus Garland* (1925), a thinly veiled biography of Marcus Garvey, released to capitalise on the furore over his court case. Although by its nature film can be said to lack the flexibility of a live performance that can be altered on a daily basis, Micheaux’s repeated attempts to address controversial themes throughout the 1920s and 1930s can be seen to offer a flexibility of sorts, as each film considers the issue at hand from a new perspective. Indeed, this drive to provide a fresh perspective was used as a promotional feature in the publicity for *Harlem After Midnight* (1934):

Gangdom in Action – but from a new angle – the Angle of the Kidnapper!
(qtd in Peterson 1992: 136).

Passing as white was one such controversial subject within the black community. As discussed in Chapter Two, it was alternatively viewed as an act of defiance in the face of white prejudice and a betrayal of the race. African American attitudes to passing were varied and this complexity was reflected in the varying perspectives offered on the subject by Micheaux’s *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) and *God’s Stepchildren* (1938). *Symbol of the Unconquered* presented its viewers with a thoroughly unsympathetic and untrustworthy ‘passer’ in Driscoll. He is relentlessly depicted as a villain who will betray his race at every opportunity, refusing African Americans a bed in his hotel, severing ties with and nearly murdering his dark-skinned mother and leading the Ku Klux Klan in their pursuit of a black prospector. As one intertitle informs us, ‘Driscoll had developed a ferocious hatred for the black race from which he was born.’ Eventually, Driscoll is punished for his treachery, we see him crawling on the ground, presumably dying in the midst of the Ku Klux Klan attack. Details are sketchy as the only extant version is missing several scenes at this point but it appears that the Klan turned on

him, ‘with bricks being a big factor,’²⁰ presumably after having discovered his true colour. There is no call for sympathy for this man, his own treachery has led to his death. In *Veiled Aristocrats*(1932) we are presented with a less trenchant critique of passing. Although the only character who willingly passes for white, John, is the villain of the piece, breaking his mother’s heart and almost destroying his sister’s chance at happiness, there is an equivocation here: although his black servants are aware that he is passing and scorn him for it, they do not inform on him, demonstrating a similar position to that promoted in the *Chicago Defender* editorial from August 7, 1920, discussed in Chapter Two.²¹ Also, even though he denies his race the viewer is not openly invited to hate him, as the case with Driscoll. In addition, we are permitted to sympathise with the ‘passer,’ Rena. Over and over again we are informed of how unhappy her status as white has made her and we are invited to join in the servants’ pity for the girl. In her wish to return to her mother we see the desire to acknowledge and embrace her racial lineage. Although her eventual return to the black community negates her previous attempts to pass, the fact remains that with this character Micheaux offered a new insight on the difficulties and fears experienced by those who pass for white. Unlike Driscoll, this mulatto who passed for white was humanised. *God’s Stepchildren*(1938) was less intransigent again: the girl who passes, Naomi, is depicted as a tragic victim of circumstance. She passes for white, not due to a hatred of her race – that has been exorcised – but because the only position offered to her in the black community, that is marriage to a man she dislikes, is unacceptable to her. Passing results in certain unfulfillment for the passers in these films, but Micheaux by revisiting the subject repeatedly, complicates the issue of passing in a way that allows for a variety of viewpoints to be reflected. With Driscoll, John, Rena and Naomi, Micheaux has given a voice to a range of responses to passing that were evident in African American society in the inter-war period.

Eric Lott (1995) has written that minstrelsy was constructed by two representational strategies: ‘hard-edged ridicule,’ which I discussed above and

²⁰ The film at this point reproduces a review from the *New York Age* to fill in the missing plot details leading up to Driscoll’s death before it returns to the filmed narrative.

‘sentimentalism... [and] the radical uses lurking in it’ (220). It is this second feature that has proved to be the strongest link between minstrelsy and melodrama since the nineteenth century and is a narrative strategy that was well employed by Micheaux, as I will discuss below. For these reasons, it merits close attention here.

Pathos as the Missing Link: The Confluence of Minstrelsy and Melodrama

The most explicit connection between the two forms of melodrama and minstrelsy can be found in early attempts to transfer Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to the stage in the early 1850s. For white audiences, faced with a blackface performer with whom they were supposed to sympathise instead of ridicule, this play initially provided a baffling experience: accustomed as they were to minstrel performers such as T.D. Rice²² signalling a riotous, funny night out, it took some time to change their attitudes to blackface performances in the melodrama *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Lott 1995:211-233). To wit, Williams (2001) has noted that it took several attempts before a non-comic stage version of the play could finally be produced (78). However, as a *Times* reporter noted in 1853, spectators learned to re-adjust their expectations and were drawn into the play’s deliberations on the evils of slavery and the suffering of black slaves. In a review of popular blackface performer G.C. Gamont’s appearance as Uncle Tom, the reporter wrote that the audience was geared up to laugh at

that accent which, in the theatre, is associated always with the comic... The accent, a broad and gentle negro accent, but the voice deep and earnest – so earnest, that the first laugh at his nigger words from the pit, died away into deep stillness (qtd in Lott 1995: 217).

Here we see that any manifestation of blackness – here it is the ‘negro accent’ – initially signified comedy but that this preconception was replaced by an openness to the representation of the black experience. Similar reactions were frequently

²¹ The editorial in question argued that those who passed for white should not be betrayed by their fellow African Americans as to do so would merely support the racial prejudice that was meted out by whites to blacks.

²² Rice performed as Uncle Tom in the Bowery Theatre’s 1854 production of the play (Lott 1995:211).

noted, as journalists marvelled at the sight of anti-abolitionists reduced to tears by the plight of Tom and his fellow slaves.²³

It is this sympathy, derived from the pathos of the slaves' situation in Stowe's melodrama, that offered the 'radical uses' that Eric Lott mentioned above. With this sympathy, the previous emotional distance maintained between white audience and black(face) characters disappeared. As Elaine Hadley has noted in her discussion of nineteenth century, albeit British, melodrama, '... sympathy is what might be called the recognition of sameness in difference' (307). Although minstrelsy's use of blackface has led to an equation of 'black' with 'funny' or 'ridiculous,' the undermining of such an equation and the establishment of inter-racial sympathy also had its roots in the minstrel form, namely the sentimental plantation songs. As W.M. Thackeray admitted, a minstrel's sentimental ballad a 'happy pity' in him (Lott 1995: 187). Needless to say, racial caricatures did not disappear from American culture: blackface, as we saw earlier, persisted well into the 1920s. But, as Williams (2001) has observed, it should not be assumed that blackface minstrelsy's popularity nullified melodrama's 'radical racialism' (57). The relationship between the two was much more complex:

For it was ultimately the familiarity occasioned by the grotesque parodies of minstrelsy that made possible the recognition of virtue so basic to melodrama... To put on blackface was always to be susceptible to minstrel caricature, but not to put on blackface was to preclude any popular reception (positive or negative) in the performance of race (Williams 2001: 83-84).

Melodrama's sympathetic 'radical racialism' did not provide an egalitarian, or even realistic, depiction of African Americans. As Williams (2001) has noted, it led to another limited stereotype of African Americans as a gentle, child-like race that should be protected from the harsh, capitalist Anglo-Saxon temperament. All the same, this sympathetic, if condescending, representation of African Americans was vastly preferable to its alternative. Describing the melodramatic narratives

²³ See also Williams (2001: 83).

propelled by such sympathetic views as ‘Tom’ narratives, Williams (2001) argues that the Manichean forms of bad, white oppressor and suffering, virtuous black remained, for the most part, intact into the early twentieth century surviving the transition to the screen.²⁴ However, she sees this as having changed radically with the release of Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), the epitome of the ‘anti-Tom’ narrative. In her excellent reading of the film she argues that this movie succeeded in reversing the Tom narrative and its inherent structures with its outright rejection and replacement of melodrama’s suffering black man. Nonetheless, Williams does not see any retaliation to this anti-Tom structure until the post-Civil Rights era, with the screening of the television series *Roots*. Consequently, she has omitted an important aspect of the Tom/anti-Tom dialectic: that is, its handling by African American filmmakers and the way in which it was remodelled in independent black American films in the inter-war period. By examining the anti-Tom strategies at work in Griffith’s film it will become possible to trace the way in which Micheaux’s movies are constructed as a disavowal of the anti-Tom form.

Birth of a Nation: Anti-Tom and Auntie Jemima

The narrative of *Birth of a Nation* is well known and thus requires no elaboration on my part. Examined for an anti-Tom perspective, numerous examples emerge, none more infamous and clear than Gus’s pursuit of Flora, and the closing cross-cutting between the small group of whites and their two black loyal servants in a cabin, besieged by marauding black men, Elsie Stoneman’s attempts to escape the lascivious mulatto, Silas Lynch, and the Ku Klux Klan riding to the rescue. As Williams has rightly pointed out, this film contrived to convert the traditional Uncle Tom style sympathy for the suffering of blacks to an ‘anti-Tom antipathy for the black male sexual threat to white women’ (2001:98). White women’s threatened virtue became the object of admiration and ‘happy pity,’ and the black man became, once more, an animal driven by his appetites (à la Zip Coon), epitomised by Gus, or a comic figure whose life derived significance solely from his loyal contact with white superiors, such as the ‘faithful souls.’ Black women fared little

²⁴ Williams’s argument is in danger, here, of painting an excessively rosy picture of African American representation on film by ignoring the comic short films and series such as Biograph’s *Fight of the Nations* (1907) and the Rastus series in which the black characters were persistently marginalised as unassimilable figures of fun and ridicule.

better: they were carnal, exotic objects that could lure a principled white man into betraying his race and beliefs, as Lydia almost does with Mr. Stoneman; they became sexless Mammies; or they disappeared from the screen completely, as is the case by the film's final climactic scenes. Indeed, as Williams (2001) observes, Griffith effects a complete whiteness of the frame in the triumphant close, as all black faces (painted or not) run out of the frame, leaving only white characters in white robes of varying type, bathed in the glow of white sunshine, on a white street.

The film's anti-Tom strategy is developed by the appropriation and reversal of the traditional melodramatic 'space of innocence' celebrated in Stowe's novel: the cabin. As Williams (2001) argues,

As the American *locus classicus* of honest and humble beginnings, the cabin has now become in Griffith's film as important a mantle of virtue for the former masters as it once had been for the former slaves (116).

By placing the besieged group in a cabin reminiscent of Tom's, with sufficient exterior shots to emphasise its relative frailty in the face of intruders, the audience is made aware of the scant protection extended to the 'victims' of this racial attack. Surrounded by multitudes, the whites and their former slaves are outnumbered and have become the underdog. We witness their virtue in their spirited, grim defence of their space against the invader. This violation of the 'space of innocence' is explicitly linked with the violation of the white woman's virtue by cross-cutting between shots of the muzzle of a gun pressed against the white girl's temple, the gun held by her own father, and the cabin doors and windows being breached by the black interlopers/rapists. There is no room given here for sympathy or identification with the unidentified black men. Nor do we mourn Gus. His identity has been decided as a rapist, again defining him solely by his relationship with whites, and the space of innocence has been expropriated for white people and white virtue alone.

Faced with such a completely anti-Tom form of melodrama as this, Oscar Micheaux's use of the melodramatic mode can be seen as a response to the injustices of the anti-Tom structure. Griffith manipulated audience sympathy in

Birth of a Nation and thus emerged the anti-Tom narrative. Micheaux's films, through their re-appropriation and reconstruction of the melodramatic mode from a black point of view, redressed the balance. For example, Ronald Green (2000:1) has pointed to Micheaux's 'replication... of melodramatic structures and Griffith-like scenes,' citing Sylvia's rescue of the child from the approaching car and her consequent beneficial relationship with the car's owner in *Within Our Gates* (1920). But what sort of melodramatic mode emerged in Micheaux's films, was it a simple reversion to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s image of black, virtuous suffering? Did it change with the years? And what victim-heroes populated Micheaux's melodramas? This is where the need to rethink Williams becomes clearest. Obviously the anti-Tom narrative and its characterisation were unacceptable in any African American art, but Micheaux's movies display little interest in simply recreating the traditional Tom narrative system. Williams's binary of Tom/anti-Tom no longer seems functional when applied to Micheaux's race movies. Consequently, what remains to be examined in this chapter is three-fold: to what degree did Micheaux's use of melodrama combat *Birth of a Nation*'s anti-Tom melodramatic structure; what type of melodrama emerged in Micheaux's films; and what were the implications of the melodramatic form developed in his movies?

Melodrama in Micheaux's films

As I have discussed, *Birth of a Nation* can be seen to have recast the structures of nineteenth-century melodrama; it appropriated the cabin of the dispossessed black in order to establish the 'innocence' of the socially advantaged white heroes; it decimated the notion that a black person's life could be of interest independent of a connection with white masters; and worse, it reversed nineteenth-century colour-coded symbols of good and bad, resulting in the new dialectic of virtuous white person and evil black person. The recognition of virtue is the central tenet around which melodrama is generally built. Put simply, to he who is recognised as the virtuous goes the sympathy, and as we have seen, sympathy is the essential element that decides whether a text is pro- or anti-Tom. Little wonder then that Micheaux's retaliation to anti-Tom structures should be located in the battle for the mantle of supreme virtue. The most effective melodramatic strategies employed in the recognition of virtue include the construction of the afore-mentioned 'space of innocence' and as noted earlier in relation to Micheaux's advert for *The Virgin of*

the Seminole, a heavy reliance on pathos. We have seen how these features were engaged in *Birth of a Nation*'s structure, now it becomes necessary to examine their function in Micheaux's melodramas.

(Re)Constructing a Black 'Space of Innocence'

According to Christine Gledhill (1987) and Linda Williams (2001), melodrama's 'space of innocence' both signifies a tangible idealised home that offers the virtuous a place of peace and comfort and represents a more ephemeral sense of refuge, located in a 'golden past' (Gledhill 1987:21), to which the hero/ine will dream of returning. There is an association of virtue with these 'fragile and fleeting spaces of innocence... often suffused with nostalgia for a virtuous place that we like to think we once possessed' (Williams 2001: 28). Accordingly, Williams has noted that melodramas such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Birth of a Nation* and Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920) open with scenes of 'virtue taking pleasure in itself' (28), as virtuous people rest and frolic in their tranquil homes and gardens, safe in the bosom of their family, before events disturb this equilibrium. From the point of rupture until the melodrama closes, Williams argues, the main thrust of the narrative will be to provide a feeling of returning to the beginning, or what feels like the beginning's space of innocence. The physical nature of this space is of some importance: the humbler the house the more virtuous its inhabitants appears to be the general understanding. For this reason we see, in an exterior shot of the 'little Colonel's' family home in Piedmont, a moderate, homely house that very much belies the grandeur of its interior proportions, as noted by Williams (2001). Griffith's set downplays the wealth and status of the family mansion and deliberately places it in a middle class setting with its picket fences and small front garden looking onto the street. Eventually, Griffith plays his ace and reduces the family shelter to a cabin, a key icon of virtuous suffering traditionally associated with Uncle Tom, transferring audience sympathy, inevitably, from Tom to his former masters. This family has usurped the black slave as the king and queen of virtuous suffering. The question to be asked here is whether Micheaux's films display an awareness of the iconography attached to home and a concordant space of innocence, and is melodrama's desire to return to the past apparent in these film narratives? Can his films be seen to refute *Birth of a Nation*'s demarcation of virtuous suffering and a space of innocence as white?

Although Micheaux's films reveal a flexibility in the choice of home for the narratives' various heroes and heroines, it is interesting that his first films, released between three and five years after *Birth of a Nation*, often employed the image of the log cabin under siege, and in defiance of Griffith's film, these cabins invariably housed virtuous blacks beleaguered by blood-thirsty or money-grabbing whites. In *The Homesteader* (1918), *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) we see a reconsideration of the cabin as a white space of innocence. As there is no extant copy of *The Homesteader*, this section will focus on the other two extant films. In *Within Our Gates*, the extended flashback account of the Landrys' lynching and murder opens with a scene of them sitting in their cabin, revelling in each other's company, the epitome of domestic bliss. Subsequently, the cabin becomes the location of Sylvia's rape, following the death of her parents at the hands of a white lynch mob. As Sylvia is chased around the cabin by her white attacker, Griffith's depiction of the lust-crazed black man is exorcised. In her torn slip, with her dishevelled hair, overcome by her white male assailant and would-be rapist, Sylvia reclaims the crown of virtuous sufferer from *Birth of a Nation*'s family. *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) provides another humble cabin for the narrative's kind-hearted heroine.²⁵ The film contains an even more blatant retaliation to *Birth of a Nation*'s anti-Tom structure with its scenes of the marauding Ku Klux Klan attacking a black homesteader who, in this case, lives in a tent, not because he threatened white women's virtue but because the Klan's chief wants the land the black prospector owns. There is no glorification of the Ku Klux Klan here as the film re-appropriates the traditional 'icon of home' which, as Williams (2001) notes, 'is thus essential to establish the virtue of racially beset victims...' (8).

From 1920, the home of the virtuous in Micheaux's films becomes less fixed in terms of physical appearance. Several films, including *Body and Soul* (1925), *Veiled*

²⁵ Although D.W. Griffith reversed the victim/sufferer and violent persecutor model in *Broken Blossoms* (1919) by presenting a scenario in which the white heroine is protected from her abusive white father by an Asian man, this proves of little relevance to the depiction of black/white relations. And indeed, although Griffith changed one model of the ethnic other, he maintained another, playing into the stereotype of the feminised Asian man – see Sumiko Higashi (1991) for a delineation of the Asian stereotype in early American cinema.

Aristocrats (1932), and *God's Stepchildren* (1938) place their beleaguered heroines in private houses, varying in grandeur. Others, such as *Swing!* (1938), *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932), and *Murder in Harlem* (1935) have their spaces of innocence in apartment blocks. Physical location is no longer as important as the tales no longer revolve around physical attacks. From *Body and Soul* (1925) onward, it is the symbolic 'space of innocence' that becomes the concern. As I have noted above, melodrama's main narrative thrust is generally turned toward an idealised notion of past happiness, and the narrative attempts to create the feeling within the viewer of having returned to this time of virtue rewarded. This desire is expressed literally in *Body and Soul* (1925). Having traumatised the audience, and the narrative's heroines, with the trials and misrecognition of virtue, as well as the unjust death of the main victim-heroine, the film closes on a scene in which we are told that it was all merely a nightmare and we are treated to mother and daughter and son-in-law happily reunited in a comfortable home.

This attempt to return to a happier moment in the past also drives the narrative of *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) as the victim-heroine, Rena, refuses the new opportunities that passing as white offers her, desperate as she is to return to her previous life in a black community. An interesting development of this drive to past images of innocence is evident in my favourite sound melodrama produced by Micheaux: *God's Stepchildren* (1938). Never having been content in her adoptive mother's home, and having spent her teenage years locked up in a convent, Naomi has no sense of a 'golden past' (Gledhill 1987: 21) to which she can return and thus a space of innocence is unimaginable for her. She attempts to create such a space with her adoptive brother with whom she has fallen in love but, with his rejection, it eludes her. Consequently, we see her driven into the white world, in a quest for contentment. This fails also and so we witness Naomi's furtive return to the family home where she peers through the window to watch her son who has been cared for by her mother, brother and sister-in-law for most of his life. It appears that Naomi has come to recognise the home and family life of her past as her elusive space of innocence. However, unlike conventional melodrama, this recognition offers no comfort to either the character or the audience as Naomi immediately leaves the scene and commits suicide by jumping into the river. In this case, although a brief retreat to a symbolic and physical space of innocence is offered to Naomi and the

audience, the next scene reminds them of the impotence of such spaces.

Crosscutting between the children's singing of 'Ring a Ring a Rosie, we all fall down' and Naomi's fateful jump serves as an ironic counter to conventional melodramatic attempts to return to the beginning to reassure the characters and audience alike of a 'moral legitimacy.' In this melodrama we are presented with scant hope: the space of innocence has been denied us all. Melodrama's 'promise of human life,' based on a return to a golden past rather than a revolutionary future (Gledhill 1987: 21) has been complicated. However, Naomi's recognition of her past mistake in rejecting her home and her race confers a virtue on Naomi that the film has heretofore more or less denied her (a point I will return to later). Also, although it proves futile for this victim-heroine, the narrative's space of innocence is identified, in true melodramatic form, as a vision of cosy domesticity. Thus, with Naomi, Micheaux complicates this key structure of conventional melodrama, although he retains sufficient characteristics to keep it recognisable and accessible to his audience.

Despite having appropriated the space of innocence as a black space and having relegated the anti-Tom version projected in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), Micheaux stops short of recreating a Tom-style space of innocence. In the five years following the release of *Birth of a Nation*, Micheaux's films successfully reclaimed the cabin as an African American space of innocence, which in turn allowed for the rewriting of the history of racial persecution between whites and blacks (for example, in *Symbol of the Unconquered*), and a recasting of the anti-Tom villain and hero of *Birth of a Nation* in *Within Our Gates*. However, given the urban locales of Micheaux's later films the humble cabin of the nineteenth-century slave was no longer tenable and so was abandoned in favour of houses and apartments that had more resonance for Micheaux's contemporary black viewers.

Reclamation of the cabin as a melodramatic icon of black virtue having been established, I need now to consider the purpose to which melodrama's other powerful element, pathos, was put before I can gain an understanding of where Micheaux's melodramas stood in relation to the Tom/anti-Tom tradition that preceded them. As I discussed above, the introduction of pathos in the representation of African Americans led to the humanising of characters that had

previously existed only as sources of ridicule and fun. The pathetic suffering of Uncle Tom and the other black slaves evoked sympathy in their white spectators, a response that was unprecedented. Sympathising with the black characters led to white audiences' identification with the victim-heroes, explaining why, for many, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was seen to have heightened the discord between pro- and anti-abolitionists, paving the way to the American Civil War. Later, Griffith's adept handling of melodrama's pathos lead to a reversal of this white sympathy and thus recast the black person as a figure with whom no white or black spectator would want to identify. We have seen that Micheaux directly confronted *Birth of a Nation*'s seizure of the black space of innocence, the question here is whether or not Micheaux also reversed and reclaimed the strategies of pathos employed by Griffith. To this end, I will focus primarily on *Within Our Gates* (1920), *Body and Soul* (1925) and *God's Stepchildren* (1938), the three most interesting of Micheaux's melodramas. I also aim to establish if Micheaux uses pathos in the same way as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did to garner sympathy from an unprepared and potentially reluctant audience, overcoming possible audience prejudice to win sympathy for his victim-heroines.

Pathos in the Micheaux Melodrama

Birth of a Nation (1915), as argued above, presented a limited, degrading picture of African Americans in its desire to celebrate white brotherhood. Sympathy in *Birth of a Nation* is the preserve of the white characters – and indeed solely those whites who follow the thinking of the Ku Klux Klan. Segregation of the races and the strict patrolling of the colour line are the ideologies with which the audience is encouraged to sympathise. Such apportioning of sympathy is not to be found in Micheaux's work. However, his films do not constitute merely a simple reversal of this strategy; post-1920 they display more interest in exploring the spectrum of morality within the African American community than in demonising white Americans. The presence of the white rapist and Ku Klux Klan leader in *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) respectively, is balanced by the presence of a kindly white benefactor and open-minded judge in *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *Murder in Harlem* (1935) respectively. His early movies, with their reversal of the black demon/white hero presented in *Birth of a Nation*, paved the way for a subsequent transcendence of this binary in the 1920s and 1930s, with

the exception of *Murder in Harlem*. From 1920 onward, Micheaux's films, in a manner reminiscent of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, sought to generate audience sympathy for previously marginalised groups in the African American community, once again complicating the conventional features of melodramatic structure, as an examination of *God's Stepchildren* (1938) will reveal.

As I mentioned in the earlier brief discussion of *God's Stepchildren*, Naomi is not a characteristic victim-heroine insofar as the audience is given no opportunity to sympathise with her for most of the movie's duration. As a child she is spiteful and quite malevolent. While that makes her a fascinating character it by no means calls for sympathy for her. If anyone is a victim-heroine at this point it is the girl's teacher, against whom Naomi begins a whispering campaign. However, as soon as Naomi is sent to the convent to mend her ways the teacher disappears from the narrative. The only other candidate for victim-heroine is Naomi's adoptive mother – a kindly woman who cares for the foundling as her own and despairs of the girl's 'badness.' However, any sympathy for this woman is dissipated in the latter half of the film when she conspires with Jimmy, her son, to make Naomi marry a half-wit, simply to stop her finding a 'handsome good for nothing' for herself. Naomi's pleas to Jimmy to spare her from this fate kill all sympathy for the mother: she may be trying to protect her daughter but, in the process, she has become as dangerous to Naomi as she thinks Naomi might be to herself. As soon as Naomi assents to her mother's plan she speaks of suicide²⁶ and, as we see at the film's close, she has followed through with this idea. Thus, mid-way through the film the audience faces a switch in sympathetic allegiance from the beleaguered mother to the doomed daughter. Yet even this is not maximised. Naomi's years of self-imposed exile in the white world are not shown. Nonetheless, the scenes approaching her death and the suicide itself are filmed in such a way as to maximise the audiences' sympathy for what has proven to be a not conventionally likeable character. The pathos of this scene before the suicide is achieved through the mise en scene and editing as we cut from Naomi outside the house in the dark to the contrasting domestic scene of comfort, light and warmth. Disconnected from such contentment by much more

²⁶ When Naomi agrees to the marriage she likens it to committing suicide and later, before she leaves home for the last time, she says to her mother, 'I know it

than a pane of glass, Naomi has become a pathetic creature, longing to see her abandoned son but unable to communicate with him, even when he spots her. The juxtaposition of familial comfort and inclusion and the desolate exclusion of Naomi is punctuated by the scenes of her death, crosscut as they are with shots of happy children playing together harmoniously, basking in the admiration of their parents and grandmother. Naomi's ascent and plunge from the bridge is starkly lit and the only mark she leaves behind her is her hat floating on the water's surface. Denying herself a grave which her family could visit, her death sets the seal on her loneliness and renders her a truly pathetic figure. So, unusually, through the use of pathos, the mulatta who had denied her race by passing for white is positioned as an object of pity for her black audience, unlike her male counterparts in *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) and *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932). In this way, as well as offering flexibility of the issue of passing, it could be argued that Micheaux followed in Stowe's and Griffith's footsteps by evoking sympathy for a previously marginalised character type.

In stark contrast with *Birth of a Nation* we have *Within Our Gates* (1920). Much has been written on this film's flashback sequence in which we see Mr and Mrs Landry get lynched, intercut with scenes of their daughter Sylvia's rape by a white male who, as it turns out, is her father. Crosscutting works particularly well here to heighten the pathos of the situation: as we realise that Sylvia's family has been killed, we also realise that there is no hope for her – those who care for her are dead. Thus, as her situation grows increasingly desperate – overpowered by a white man intent on raping her – so the audience's sympathy and fear for her grows. As Jane Gaines (2001) notes, Sylvia's rape

allows a replay of the futility of the African American historical condition. Once more, blacks look on while the white patriarch exerts his sexual prerogative (172).

is hard but for me it's the only way, the only other is suicide and I still want to live mother. I want to live!

The pathos of Sylvia's helplessness is clearly evoked and serves to reverse the colour-coded victim-violator binary established in *Birth of a Nation*.²⁷

Body and Soul (1925), like *God's Stepchildren*, provides an interesting departure from *Within Our Gates*' (and *Birth of a Nation*'s) racialised pathos. Judging from the extant movies, by 1925 Micheaux's films appear to have abandoned the exploration of race relations to focus, instead, on intra-racial issues. In this movie we see the African American conman-preacher, brilliantly played by Paul Robeson, and the effect he has on the relationship between the young Isabelle and her mother. Time and again, we are witness to Isabelle's distress at her mother's persistent efforts to push her into a courtship with the preacher, despite the daughter's dislike of him and love for his respectable brother, Sylvester. Early in the narrative, the audience sees the preacher beat Isabelle, who subsequently leaves home with no word of explanation.²⁸ Broken-hearted, her mother sets off to find the girl. Several months pass, we see Isabelle, hollow-eyed and obviously destitute, living in Atlanta. Her mother finds her living in a sparse room and it is at this reunion that the pathos is raised to almost unbearable heights. The mother picks her child up and cradles her in her arms while Isabelle reveals that the preacher raped her and stole the mother's life savings. The mother puts the girl to bed, and Isabelle dies. The next scene brings us back to the preacher's church where he enthrals his congregation. The mother enters the room and reveals the truth behind his façade and blames him for her daughter's death. The crowd turns on the preacher, who somehow escapes, eventually killing a man in his flight. Although the closing scenes claim that this was only a nightmare and that Isabelle is happily married to Sylvester and living with her mother, the pathos of the earlier scenes is difficult to forget. As Laura Mulvey (1987) has pointed out, 'the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road...' (76), even if there is a happy ending to the plot. This scenario has employed several strategies of melodrama to enhance the pathos of the narrative. We see the 'non-communication' and 'talking at cross purposes' that Elsaesser (1987: 66) sees as major factors in the

²⁷ Gaines does also argue that the audience could have derived pleasure from the sight of Sylvia's repeated, successful attempts to rebuff her attacker's advances (2001:172-173).

evocation of pathos, as Isabelle repeatedly fails to awaken her mother to the preacher's corruption. This is made all the more pathetic as the audience is made aware from the opening scenes of the preacher's guilt²⁹ but is powerless to help the girl. The pathos of this situation is compounded by the fact that diegetic recognition of the girl's virtue arrives too late to save her, following in the tradition of conventional melodramas.³⁰ Also in keeping with nineteenth-century melodramatic tradition, the recognition of Isabelle's innocence empowers her mother to take action against the source of her daughter's torment. As Williams (2001) has observed,

... the powerlessness of tears that flow too late can be the proof of a virtue that, at another point in the narrative, can give moral authority to action... The pathos of suffering thus not only ensures virtue, but also seems to entitle action (32).

Through Isabelle's suffering, and the mother's recognition of her daughter's virtue the bereaved matriarch gathers the moral strength that allows the narrative to arrive at the most satisfying feature of the melodramatic structure: the naming and shaming of the villain. Although the preacher manages to effect an escape, it is not before he has been hounded and chased in a manner commensurate with his foul deeds. Here as with typical melodrama the audience has been assured of the existence of a moral legibility. In the scene where the preacher begs, on his knees, for Isabelle's mother's forgiveness we are given a fleeting glimpse of justice.³¹ Nonetheless, the preacher's escape after murdering a man tempers this reassurance somewhat. Once again, Micheaux has denied the audience complete satisfaction, in the same manner that he displayed the impotence of a recognised space of

²⁸ We later discover that the preacher had forced her to give him her family's savings and, convinced that her mother would never accept the preacher's guilt, Isabelle left home.

²⁹ One of the opening scenes comprises a flashback of the preacher's experience in prison.

³⁰ Williams (2001) observes that common to the woman's film, family melodramas, sad musicals and sad-ending melodramas, the 'victim-heroes, following in the footsteps of the nineteenth-century melodrama's Uncle Tom and Little Eva, achieve recognition of their virtue through the more passive "deeds" of suffering and/or self-sacrifice' (25).

innocence to save Naomi from her suicidal impulses. This complication of the melodramatic structure offers the viewer an interesting divergence from previous traditions of Tom/anti-Tom melodrama. Insofar as his films refuse to idealise the past and are always set in a recognisable present,³² it is not surprising that the melodramatic urge to provide a space of innocence is not always indulged. In addition, Micheaux's refusal to guarantee a just result to his victims, as in the case of the Landry family, lends a realistic quality to his work that would have had more resonance with his viewers than the platitudes offered by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. So, if Micheaux challenged these central tenets of the Tom melodrama, within which category can his films be placed? It is here that Linda Williams's Tom/anti-Tom binary becomes too prescriptive and an attempt to move beyond her dual construct becomes more useful.

Categorisation of the Micheaux Melodramatic Form

Analysis of Micheaux's films has displayed an awareness and interesting use of melodrama's pathos. In *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *Body and Soul* (1925) the audience was encouraged to pity the black victim-heroines of white and black male attacks, respectively. *God's Stepchildren* (1938) offered a more complex use of pathos as the black audience of 1938 was led to identify and sympathise with the plight of a girl who had rejected the race repeatedly. Thus Micheaux's narratives demonstrated great aptitude at manipulating pathos to direct the audience's sympathy, following in the melodramatic traditions of the nineteenth century.

However, insofar as his characters, after *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), are no longer subject to racial attacks by whites, fighting only immorality and criminality within a black community,³³ they can no longer be seen to suffer at the hands of the evil progeny of Simon Legree. Capable of fighting for themselves and generally buoyed up independence and self-confidence, they are no longer bound by the master-slave/beneficent white saviour-black victim dialectic.

³¹ This idea of moral legibility at work is also apparent in the court-room dramas produced by Micheaux, including *The Girl from Chicago* (1932), *Murder in Harlem* (1935) and *Lying Lips* (1939), all of which are also melodramas.

³² The only extant exception is the flashback sequence in *Within Our Gates* (1920). However, this return to the past is not pleasurable, containing as it does the lynching and rape of an innocent family.

³³ *Murder in Harlem* (1935) provides the sole exception, having as its murderer-villain a white man.

Consequently, I would argue that it is impossible to classify these films as Tom melodramas. In fact, I think that it would be more appropriate to categorise them as 'New Negro melodramas.' Post-1920, they are no longer concerned with black/white relations, instead they explore and give voice to the various social groups within the African American community that had heretofore been muted in American culture. These movies display a determination to encourage racial pride and self-development, traits in keeping with Locke's theories of the 'New Negro.' Moving beyond a simple refutation of the anti-Tom narrative, Micheaux's melodramas forge a new vision of a melodrama whose characterisations, narrative structures and visual representations of African American life are no longer defined by their relationship with white counterparts. Micheaux's achievement was in creating a melodramatic structure that worked within a black context to recreate a modern world that was recognisable to his contemporary African Americans, in which the characters' dilemmas were familiar and whose black characters were rounded, independent people. His melodrama was no longer tied to a Tom/anti-Tom dialectic.

Indeed, Micheaux's melodrama can also be seen to challenge Thomas Elsaesser's (1987) comment regarding the mode's 'ambivalence about the structures of experience' (47). Elsaesser argues that the suffering experienced by the characters in melodrama's narratives is realistic and constitutes one structure of experience that is then placed in conflict with the mode's contradictory structure of experience evident in the characters' ignorance of wider socio-political concerns (47).

However, such a socio-political vacuum is not to be found in Micheaux's films. His narratives focus on the personal suffering of the characters, but with this comes a concurrent recognition of the part played by the characters' socio-political circumstance in causing this suffering. For example, *The Girl from Chicago* (1932) and *God's Stepchildren* (1938) consider the effect of the 'numbers game' on black Americans; lynching is openly discussed by the black characters in *Within Our Gates* (1920); the threat of the Klan is explored in *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920); prostitution is flagrantly displayed in *Underworld* (1937) and *Lying Lips* (1939); and peonage is the subject of the federal agent's investigation in *The Girl from Chicago* (1932). In each of these movies, the characters display an acute

consciousness of the wider socio-political concerns which are at least partly responsible for their suffering, in contrast with Elsaesser's prescription of melodramatic form. Micheaux's 'New Negro' melodramatic form is one that recognises the truth of the African American experience in America, rewrites previous white-penned constructions of the black American character and does so within a contemporary, realistic, black world.

In this chapter I have argued that claims such as James Snead's (1994) that Micheaux's films were routine melodramas that contained no overt political or social 'substance' (114) do not do these movies justice. Melodrama, regardless of a film's budget, has proven to be a powerful means of addressing the concerns of the socially marginalised, such as African Americans in the early twentieth century. As Thomas Postlewait (1996) has argued, melodrama has the capacity to 'distort and report, conserve and criticize. And both articulate and challenge the ideologies of the time' (56). Apart from entertaining his audience, I have shown that Micheaux's use of melodrama lead to the creation of a melodramatic form that broke free from its predecessors, a feat that Linda Williams claimed was not achieved until the post-Civil rights era. In addition, I have traced Micheaux's use of minstrelsy. A mode of representation allied with marginalised white people in the nineteenth century, minstrelsy became, in the twentieth century, relevant and useful to the disenfranchised African Americans in the country. Despite our misgivings at the start of the twenty-first century, this mode of representation was not simply a racist instance of white supremacy. Neither was the black community's reception of it straightforward or easy to categorise. But, with its roots in social dissidence and its longstanding association with the powerless, it represented one of the most accessible and appropriate modes of representation for a black entertainer, such as Oscar Micheaux, in his attempts to construct a film form that could belong to African Americans alone. As I have argued, black minstrelsy in Micheaux's films created a sense of belonging and social regulation, as well as offering a means to subvert and invert the racist caricatures traditionally associated with blackness in American culture.

In conclusion, by combining elements of minstrelsy and melodrama, Micheaux equipped himself with the powerful tools of satire and sympathy. Rather than opposing one another, the two work well together. I have noted the way in which Micheaux's use of minstrelsy to punish those who indulged in racist caricatures tied in with melodrama's traditional tendency to punish the transgressor. In addition, I have argued that Micheaux used minstrelsy and melodrama to rewrite the black experience of the past, refusing to indulge the plantation and 'happy nigger' fantasies of white minstrelsy and *Birth of a Nation*, and to rewrite the black experience in the present in retaliation to the distortion provided by *Birth of a Nation* and minstrelsy's Zip Coon. As such, Micheaux's innovation was in reformulating these two traditionally white cultural modes of representation within an African American context without capitulating to a previous white (negative) perspective, as essentialists might have feared. Minstrelsy's nostalgia for the plantations was transformed into a black rejection of, and satire on, the nostalgic distortions of black history as told by whites, for example in 'River Stay Way from My Door' number and in George's mockery of a sentimentalised past characterised by golden curls and benevolent grandmothers. Melodrama's use of pathos, by whites, to generate a patronising sympathy for the simple African American, later twisted in an effort to demonise black Americans, was first transfigured into a demonstration of black virtue without the attending condescension³⁴ and later offered a medium for the African American community to reflect on issues pertinent to black American society, such as attitudes to those who passed for white. No longer tethered to a white/black or Tom/anti-Tom binary, Micheaux's films offered social guidance through minstrelsy's use of satire and inversion to regulate group behaviour, married to melodrama's promise of reward for the virtuous. Micheaux's fusion of minstrelsy and melodrama's structures worked to create a socially-motivated, politically-engaged audience that refused to follow blindly the dictates of an unjust hierarchy – as George and Galley point out, anyone could be a 'great man' – thereby anticipating the black American film form of the post-Civil Rights era, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

³⁴ Black victims in *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) are shown to triumph over adversity due to their own intelligence and application, unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom who is forever at the mercy of his white Massah's whims.

Chapter Four

Micheaux's Films and the Changing Ideas of a Black American Film Form

In Chapters Two and Three we have seen something of Oscar Micheaux's contribution to the creation of a narrative system that addressed African Americans on issues pertinent to them, such as racial identity and the black American experience, from the viewpoint of a fellow African American. In both chapters we have seen Micheaux's technique of borrowing from and referencing Hollywood's style and narrative systems in order to rework them from an African American perspective, leading to their reformulation to the Negro's advantage. For example, he borrowed racial caricatures evident in certain Hollywood movies in order to exorcise these images and he incorporated conventions of pathos and 'spaces of innocence' apparent in *Birth of a Nation* to represent an alternative version of inter-racial relations.

As such, I find it strange that, between the late 1960s and early 1980s, as black American filmmakers and theorists launched a debate on the nature of a film form that catered to African Americans, Oscar Micheaux's movies were, on the whole, discounted or completely ignored. One of the aims of this chapter is to point to the convergence of Micheaux's film form with that of these later African American filmmakers. Mark Reid's (1993) comment that the combative nature of Micheaux features paved the way for black American cinema in the blaxploitation period (early to mid 1970s) is one of the few acknowledgements of a similarity between race films of the two eras. Ronald Green (2000), on the other hand, has dismissed such a connection, categorising Micheaux's films as middle-class rather than militant (34-35). Yet, as we will see, although the language and imagery is less militant than that of the 1970s, Micheaux's films expressed similar sentiments and employed similar techniques to those evident in blaxploitation era films by Melvin Van Peebles and Haile Gerima. The central aim of this chapter is to determine the extent to which Micheaux's films can be said to have established a film form that could be retrieved by future filmmakers to express the African American

experience. In short, this chapter shall ascertain the degree to which Micheaux can be said to be the ancestor of black American filmmakers of the 1970s and beyond.

In the process there are several areas that need to be addressed. First, I will explore briefly the concepts of a black American film form that predominated in the blaxploitation period, as articulated by African American filmmakers and theorists, to establish the degree to which it can be seen to diverge from, and connect with, Micheaux's own concept of black film form. Next, I will look more specifically at the narrative system and style advocated by 1970s African American filmmakers and theorists and trace their roots back to Micheaux's movies, exposing the continuities in the form and objectives of the filmmakers of both periods. I will then address why blaxploitation era filmmakers were seemingly blind to Micheaux's innovations and why, despite this, they arrived at a similar film form to his, pointing to the continuities in context between the two periods and employing post-colonial theories of resistant culture/cinema in the process. Finally, I will offer an explanation for why more recent critics and African American filmmakers such as Arthur Jaffa have begun to hail Micheaux as a seminal figure in the construction of a black American film form. But first, a brief introduction to the genres that prevailed among African American filmmakers in the blaxploitation period is necessary.

Discussing the Terms of a 'Black American Film Form'

The early 1970s saw the emergence of a black American cinema that varied in scope and style. The most famous instances of black filmmaking at this time were to be found in 'Blaxploitation films' and in the more overtly politicised work of black students at UCLA (known collectively as 'the Los Angeles School'), both of which operated, for the most part, outside the parameters of the major Hollywood studios. As Manthia Diawara (1993a) has argued, these films worked 'to put on the screen Black lives and concerns that derive[d] from the complexity of Black communities'(7). One of the most prominent filmmakers within blaxploitation was Melvin Van Peebles, whose *Sweet Sweetback's Baaadasssss Song* (1971) is generally lauded as the first blaxploitation movie and whose opinions on the nature and function of black American cinema will inform this chapter.

Blaxploitation films were low budget movies, created in the early and mid 1970s for an African American audience eager to see black characters on the screen. One of the first blaxploitation films, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971), was financed by a fifty thousand dollar personal loan from Bill Cosby. This low budget became a consistent trait of blaxploitation films, which played a part in defining the style of these films – their location shots of the streets of Harlem became a (cheap) staple of the genre. Recurring narrative tropes included tough black detectives who worked on the fringes of the law, bending the rules when necessary (for example *Shaft*, 1971); realistic shots of life in Harlem; the notion of ‘sticking it to the Man’ as defined in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971); sex and violence (*Sweet Sweetback*, 1971; *Superfly*, 1972). Although films within the genre varied in ambition and scope Mikel J Koven (2001) has identified one consistency among blaxploitation films:

... the representation, not just of black people, but of people as BLACK – a defiant African-American identity. ‘Am I black enough for you?’ is this attitude’s rallying cry, and throughout Blaxploitation, from *Shaft* through to *Blacula*, this attitude is right in one’s face (17).

These films represented a counter to the neutralised images of African American identity in previous Hollywood films such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), despite the fact that some were produced by the studios (for example, *Shaft* was produced by MGM). With the reordering and diversification of the Hollywood studio system in this period, opportunities for black independent filmmakers within the system had become more plentiful, leading to the possibility of what Toni Cade Bambara (1993) later called ‘guerrilla cinema,’ in which black filmmakers, under the guise of making a Blaxploitation film, created subversive, counter-hegemonic texts. One example of such guerrilla tactics, according to Bambara, was Bill Gunn’s abuse of his contract with a Hollywood studio to direct a blaxploitation horror film: instead he made two socially conscious films, *Ganja and Hess* (1973) and *Stop!* (1970), in which she sees an aesthetic in keeping with Third Cinema policies. Of course, not all films made by African Americans within the studio structure

subscribed to these tactics, but the fact that the studios were willing to finance blaxploitation films, such as *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972), offered access to a distribution network and sizable budget that was never available to Oscar Micheaux or his contemporaries. Additionally, the studios' realisation that a winning formula should not be changed led to few limitations being imposed on the blaxploitation films they produced (Leab, 1975). Thus, although studio-produced films like *Shaft!* lacked some of the bitterness and explicit sex scenes that resulted in *Sweetback* being awarded an X rating, the main tropes of blaxploitation hero, plot and style were still evident in order to appeal to its target market of African Americans.

Within the genre, Koven (2001) has noted an interesting difference in the films directed by blacks and those directed by whites, regardless of whether the films were studio-produced or independent ventures. The white-directed films generally attempted to curtail the movements and triumphs of the black characters within white parameters (the black outlaw was represented as a criminal, the rebellious black hero was tamed or leashed by actually working within law enforcement). However, within the black-directed films a different ethos was evident: the black outlaw became a folk hero (*Superfly*, 1972); crime was represented as the only avenue of opportunity for young black men, as opposed to the exciting option that it was in white blaxploitation films; and the detective heroes, such as John Shaft, frequently crossed the line to express their alignment with African Americans over the white establishment. As such, John Shaft, a private investigator who somewhat begrudgingly helps the police force maintained his heroic image, 'giving attitude to the Man ... [and who] still cannot get a taxi in New York; a phenomenon that most African - Americans could probably relate to' (19). Clearly, for black American filmmakers of the early 1970s, the blaxploitation genre represented a means by which to create a vision of African American life and characterisation that was recognisable to contemporary African American audiences.

Less concerned with 'giving attitude' and more interested in devising new techniques that eschewed Hollywood's influence, the black students at UCLA also attempted to represent the common African American. Ntongela Masilela (1993) argues that this group, known as the Los Angeles School, began in 1967 and 1968

with the arrival of Charles Burnett and Haile Gerima, respectively, and disbanded by 1978 (107). The group was mainly comprised of film students studying at University of California, Los Angeles' Theater Arts Department. Driven by an ideological agenda, their manifesto declared the black filmmakers' 'accountability to the [black] community,' with a 'task to reconstruct cultural memory not slavishly imitate white models' (Bambara 1993: 119). Their subject matter was pronounced thus: '... it is the destiny of our people(s) that concerns us, not self-indulgent assignments about neurotic preoccupations' (ibid: 119). Their collective attempt to develop an alternative cinema to that of Hollywood led to their rejection of classical conventions, preferring to create an alternative film form and

...establish an independent black film enterprise that was true to their cultural roots and contested the falsification of African-American history by Hollywood (Masilela 1993: 108).

One of the most vocal and influential members of this group was Haile Gerima, whose thoughts on a black American film form we will discuss in this chapter.¹

Thus, a broad spectrum of black filmmakers of the early 1970s urged the cultivation of a form in which the narrative system and style of Hollywood were challenged or substituted. However, although black filmmakers and theorists agreed on the need for a cinema in which the creative force, the cinematic structures and market were controlled by and for African Americans, they differed in some of their approaches to realising this ambition.

Filmmakers such as St Clair Bourne (1982) advocated a politically aligned cinema that worked for practical change and, rather than working in a 'pure creative vacuum' (105), supported the aims of progressive political groups. Alternatively, in a colloquy on *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Haile Gerima was joined by Melvin Van Peebles and the film theorists Pearl Bowser and Gladstone Yearwood

¹ Although Haile Gerima originally came from Ethiopia and thus cannot be described as African American, I have nevertheless included his views in this chapter as he was so heavily involved in the

in advocating a film form that ‘consciously [sought] to develop outside the traditional perimeters of Hollywood’ (Yearwood 1982c: 11). In this way, Yearwood saw the possibility of developing a ‘radical’ black film form (1982a: 47). He rejected previous attempts to characterise black film form based on iconic, indexical and intentional criteria, arguing that the definition based on iconic criteria, which includes films with black actors, no matter how small the part was merely ‘vulgar empiricism’ and did not challenge old Hollywood conventions. The indexical criterion, which saw the socio-cultural context of the filmmaker’s experience as the decisive factor was also discarded as, for Yearwood, one’s socio-cultural background could be superseded by the specific articulation of an artistic language, as in the case of Michael Schultz’s *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Heart Club Band*, which was not a black film although the filmmaker was. The intentional criterion, which consisted of a proclamation as to the film’s classification as black cinema, was deemed unsatisfactory as it moved the focus from the film itself to ‘self-laudatory proclamations, which serve to devalue the work’ (1982d: 70). Instead, he called for a black American film style and narrative system that would refuse the illusion of realism and the star system, jar the viewer and create a new set of ‘symbolic images’ (1982d: 67). For him, black American film form constituted

Any film whose signifying practices or whose making of symbolic images emanates from an essential cultural matrix deriving from a collective black socio-cultural and historical experience and uses black expressive traditions as a means through which artistic languages are mediated (1982d: 70-71).

A ‘black film’ was one that was rooted in the African American experience, involving black Americans on every level of production, that did not work within what Haile Gerima (1982) described as ‘white American ethnic expression’ (109), and re-educated African American audiences in the appreciation of anti-classical, anti-escapist techniques in black American cinema (112). A black American film form needed to be rooted in ‘revolution,’ countering classical cinema’s conventions and rejecting white cultural forms.

debate on the need for, and nature of, a black American film form and has been based in the United States since he was in his teens.

It is not surprising, then, that in this climate Oscar Micheaux's work, which borrowed from forms evident in traditional modes of representation used in white culture, such as melodrama and minstrelsy, even as it inverted them, might be rejected as ineffective. His characters' apparent adherence to white, middle-class aspirations and modes of speech contrasted with modern tastes, and his use of classical conventions in the visuals and narrative did not commend him to artists of the blaxploitation era. For example, Pearl Bowser criticised Micheaux's promotion of middle-class characters and values (Yearwood 1982c: 58); despite Masilela's (1993) vague claim that the Los Angeles School '[drew] on Micheaux's work' (108),² Haile Gerima rejected Micheaux's films for being influenced by a traditional white criteria of beauty (Yearwood 1982c: 58); and Yearwood ignored Micheaux's work in his formulation of a history of black American cinema (1982d), claiming early race movies were only 'a reaffirmation of traditional ideologies in the cinema and a denial of a radical black American cinema aesthetic' (1982a: 47).

Yearwood's dismissal of early African American filmmaking was supported by claims such as Thomas Cripps' (1969) that the plot of Micheaux's *The Exile* (1931) moved on white terms, providing a portrait of African American life that did not challenge Hollywood depictions. This critique seems bizarre when one considers the controversial subject matter with which this film deals: it includes a frank discussion of the 'one drop of black blood' rule between two boys, one white and one of mixed blood.³ Yet the notion that Micheaux's work did not diverge from Hollywood conventions persisted. No critic of the blaxploitation period, apart from J. Hoberman (1975), considered the innovation of Micheaux's form and Hoberman's claim that Micheaux's style (that is, his cinematic technique) was 'avant-garde' was not developed by him or any other critics at the time. None of

² Masilela goes into no detail on this claim except to say that they shifted Micheaux's focus from middle-class to working-class subjects. Yet, as I have argued in Chapter Two, the view that Micheaux's films favoured middle-class issues and milieux over working-class is misrepresentative.

³ The 'one drop of black blood' rule, devised in the nineteenth century, argued that a person with even one drop of 'black blood' in his/her veins should be considered to be a black person. The 'one drop' rule was a recurring concern in Micheaux's films: *The Exile* (1931) contains a scene in which a

them acknowledged the similarities between his work and that of blaxploitation era filmmakers such as Melvin Van Peebles. Hence, Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), which presented a black anti-hero who placed himself in opposition to white authority, spoke in Ebonics of a sort and represented an angry retaliation to earlier representations of blacks in white culture, was praised as the first step in the cultivation of a black American film form (Yearwood 1982d).

However, subsequent research carried out by scholars such as Houston Baker (1988), David Levering Lewis (1981) and Cary Wintz (1996) on the Harlem Renaissance has lead to a revision of opinion on the extent of black artistic experimentation during the inter-war period. Although the black newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s do not appear to have prioritised artistic experimentation,⁴ recent research on the Harlem Renaissance has suggested that black artists in the 1920s and '30s were fully aware of the need to change form. Musically, too, jazz challenged (white) classical music forms. It seems disingenuous, thus, to argue that black filmmakers did not also recognise the need to create a new form for their medium. Although many may not have had the resources or the skill required to experiment with form, Oscar Micheaux's films cannot be dismissed in this regard. Judging by his extant films, it is clear that his narrative systems and style did, in fact, dismantle several white conventions. That this contribution to the development of a black American film form has been overlooked by filmmakers and critics of the blaxploitation period is curious, but perhaps understandable as none of Micheaux's films were in circulation by then, and existed, for the most part, only in people's memories. As more of his films were recovered as the late 1980s and 1990s progressed, Micheaux's work suffered less from this neglect.

Yet availability alone cannot explain his neglect and rejection by Yearwood, Gerima and Van Peebles. In their 1982 debate they discuss his work only to dismiss it for following Hollywood conventions too closely, arguing that his oeuvre lacked

light-skinned African American boy tells his incredulous white friend that he is considered black by society because he has a little black blood in his veins. The white child finds this ridiculous.

⁴ When an article criticised a Micheaux's film, such as *Daughter of the Congo* (1930), it was the perceived misrepresentation of the Africans and not the lack of formal innovation that troubled the critic. See *Chicago Defender* review of *Daughter of the Congo*, April 16, 1930, p10.

the radicalism necessary to be credited as the progenitor of the revolutionary black film form promoted by blaxploitation filmmakers and members of the ‘Los Angeles School.’ The remainder of this chapter will argue that this rejection warrants reconsideration. What I want to show is that, decades before these filmmakers formulated their ideas, Micheaux’s films had anticipated many of their requirements and so pre-empted them in their conception of a black American film form. Initially, we will examine the manner in which the subjects covered in his movies’ narratives incorporated several themes that were of interest to blaxploitation era black filmmakers, charting the ways that Micheaux resolved a representational problem that troubled Van Peebles and Gerima thirty years later. Additionally, we will trace the parallels between blaxploitation era delineations of black narrative function, and the function of narrative in Micheaux’s films from the 1920s and 1930s. Finally, we will move on to an examination of Micheaux’s style and the challenge it posed to Hollywood conventions.

Breaking with White Traditions

One feature of black art and cinema of the blaxploitation period was the push for cultural separatism. As we have seen, Gerima and Yearwood et al called for a split from classical Hollywood practices. Likewise, in 1969, Carolyn F Gerald described the form she claimed was emerging in black literature concurrent with this:

...what is new [in black literature] is the deliberate desecration and smashing of idols, the turning inside-out of symbols... (*Negro Digest* January 1969: 42).

This rather extreme method of creating new narratives rather than expropriating traditional ones may not at first glance seem an appropriate appraisal of Oscar Micheaux’s narratives, especially in the light of the previous chapter’s argument. All the same, on reflection it becomes clear that his films do smash idols and turn symbols inside out. To wit, miscarriages of justice are frequent subjects in Micheaux’s oeuvre. In *Lying Lips* (1939), the myth of an impartial and just judicial system is exploded when the police arrest a black girl, simply because they lack any other suspects, even though they all agree that she can not be guilty. More damning

than this travesty, however, is the attitude of the girl as she is taken away: she understands they have to hold *someone* and it might as well be her. Worse still, no black character appears to be surprised by this. Her boyfriend's reaction is simply to go find the real murderer. This depiction of the justice system certainly does nothing to commend it: no African American expects fair treatment at its hands. Similarly, in both *The Girl from Chicago* (1932) and *Murder in Harlem* (1935), the judicial system sentences an innocent black woman and man to death, respectively. The fallibility of the legal system is exposed in these films in a blatant manner not often seen in Hollywood products in the 1930s.

Although Hollywood films such as Mervyn LeRoy's *They Won't Forget* (1937), dealt with racism and political opportunism and Frank Capra's *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) addressed the issue of corruption within the political machine, any corruption or travesty of justice was, generally, attributed to the fault of one or two individuals, not the system at large. For example, in Capra's *Mr Deeds Goes To Town* (1936) we have Cedar, the corrupt lawyer who manipulates the law to serve his own selfish interests as he tries to commit Mr Deeds to an asylum in an attempt to get a share of Deeds' inheritance. Yet, justice wins through and the judicial system is vindicated as the wise judges eventually put their faith in Capra's 'little man' instead of in the wily attorney. In a similar vein, in Capra's *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), it is Senator Paine's corruption that is condemned, rather than the ease with which the Senate can be manipulated by big business interests.

Limited by the Hays Code and the Production Code Authority, Hollywood filmmakers were generally unable to launch a direct attack on the government or on the federal judicial system, although they sometimes succeeded in imbuing their movies with implicit condemnation, as in the two cases above. For Micheaux, faced with City and State Censorship Boards, his narratives were not unlimited in what they could depict, however Boards could be overruled occasionally (as was the case with the Chicago exhibition of *Within Our Gates*) and tastes varied from Board to Board. Unlike those working within the studio system, Micheaux faced no internal censor and if Thomas Cripps (1977) is correct, censorship of black movies that were destined for black audiences was not always quite so rigorous as it was of

white movies.⁵ Therefore, a more jaundiced view of the American justice system could be presented in his movies than in Hollywood products. Admittedly, as bleak a view as Micheaux presents, it is notable that in each case, the innocent are always acquitted. Yet, it is not through the efficiency of the state-run institutions that this occurs but through the independent investigations led by fellow African Americans. We learn of the characters' release through black newspapers, for example, the *New York Age* in *The Girl from Chicago* (1932, not from a final court scene – no judge or jury is seen to have delivered the verdict. The judicial system gets no credit for justice's triumph; it is placed purely in an independent, black context.

Probably the most famous instance of the 'smashing of idols' by Micheaux occurs in *Within Our Gates* (1920). As Susan Gillman (1999) has pointed out, this picture exposes the myth that lynching was a spontaneous anomaly that occurred only when the white men were impassioned and justified. In this movie, we see that the lynching of the Landrys is entirely premeditated and, worse still, has among its participants women and children. Jane Gaines, comparing *Within Our Gates* (1920) with Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), has decided that Micheaux is by far the more realistic filmmaker of the two with his honest depiction of rape, lynching and poverty in the South.

As has been discussed in the previous chapters, Micheaux's films addressed many other topical subjects which affected the African American community; for example, many of his films deal with 'passing'; he was not averse to drawing his inspiration from newspaper stories, such as Marcus Garvey's double dealing and the Rhinelander Case. Similarly, in *Within Our Gates* (1920) he highlighted the government's lack of support for black children's schools, *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) showed the workings of the Ku Klux Klan, and *The Girl from Chicago* (1932) contained a sub-plot about peonage in the African American community. Micheaux's narrative system (themes, characterisation, and narrative structure), despite the assertions of Cripps (1969: 27), does not merely follow white

⁵ Cripps (1977) has argued that films such as Dudley Murphy's *St Louis Blues* (1927), which featured blatant eroticism, illicit sex, and gambling, were untouched by the National Board of Review on the basis that it was an authentic representation of black life (205).

conventions; it is clearly immersed in exposing the difficulties and dangers experienced by African American communities, debunking white myths and icons such as the ‘one drop rule’ and the colour-blind efficacy of the American judicial system.

Discussing alternative narrative systems to those evident in classical cinema, Robert Stam and Louise Spence (1985) warned against ‘a naïve integrationism,’ that allowed for the simple substitution of blacks into traditional white heroic roles. They argued that such a substitution only reproduced and reinforced the status quo. Criticising *Shaft* (1971), they contended that its substitution of a black hero for a white one was done only to flatter the largely male black audience, and promoted an elitism among African Americans, seen more clearly in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) (639). In my view, any ‘integrationism’ in Micheaux’s movies was not ‘naively’ effected, nor did it act as a simple grafting of black principle onto white. As Chapter Two argued, inhabitation of roles or stereotypes was subversive rather than collaborative. For example, in several Hollywood features such as *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) and *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), representations of the urban underworld were dependent on signifiers associated with the African American community. For example, the presence of jazz and black jazz musicians in George Bailey’s local bar reinforces the narrative’s point that his town, in the parallel universe, has become seedy and corrupt. Micheaux’s representation of the black underworld goes beyond such signification by his humanisation of the night-club singer and bouncer in *Lying Lips* (1939). African Americans may live and operate in the underworld, but in his films they do not represent automatic signifiers of it.

For early race filmmakers, such as Micheaux, there was little point in making an avant-garde movie that divorced itself completely from traditional conventions of film style and narrative, as it was doubtful that they would find an audience that would enjoy or support it. For example, Kenneth McPherson’s film *Borderline* (1935), though starring Paul Robeson and promoting racial equality, was regarded as an art film and did not get distribution beyond private showings. Similarly, European films featuring expatriate African Americans often had Marxist overtones

with which black Americans were reluctant to identify. A film form somewhere in the middle was the answer: one that dismantled traditional conventions of Hollywood cinema to promote a black culture, yet stayed within the realm of accessible enjoyment; one that promoted racial self-respect but did not sermonise or over-intellectualise. As we will see, Micheaux's films succeeded in developing such a form.

Developing a Black Narrative System

One of the primary functions of a black American narrative system, according to a forum on its development held in 1982 (Yearwood 1982c), was the projection of 'black stories,' employing subjects that reflected the stories and lives of African Americans. However, the manner in which these themes should be represented was a matter of contention. While Melvin Van Peebles favoured a realistic depiction of life in the ghetto in all its harshness, Haile Gerima argued that 'when black people, who don't have much money make a movie, they should make movies that uplift our people intellectually. We should not be shadow-boxing' (Yearwood, 1982c: 60). For Van Peebles, black American films needed to portray working-class African Americans; any construction of an idealised middle-class society served only to feed the oppression of lower-class blacks as it represented an attempt to make them forget their history of slavery and 'cultural dislocation' (Yearwood 1982b: 15). Conversely, Tony Gittens, in the same year, argued that black American films should 'provide moral uplift and advancement for black peoples,' charting only black success stories. In this way, he argued, black American cinema could become 'a vital tool in building cultural institutions and reinforcing cultural pride' (118).

This debate on the merits of 'realism'⁶ over 'uplifting' portraits was not new. As we saw in Chapter Two's discussion of uplift, although African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s agreed on the necessity of representing black stories, in the early

⁶ Of course, the word 'realism' is problematic in itself. As Jane Gaines (2001) has noted, to argue that 'real black people are not like the image presented' is to substitute one empirical claim with another, as the idea of what is 'real' can be seen as highly subjective. However, it is not the objective of this thesis to digress into a polemic on the nature of 'realism.' For the purpose of this chapter, I

days of African American filmmaking, they failed to reach a consensus on the nature of a desirable narrative system. All agreed that new subjects particular to the African American experience had to be introduced and alternative narrative structures invented to create a narrative system that was independent of white storytelling forms. For some, like Van Peebles after them, the themes that dealt with life in the ghetto, the obstacles faced by those who attempted to leave it, and the lifestyle of those who remained there were essential to the articulation of the African American experience. For others who, like Gerima and Gittens, preferred images of success, such unromanticised images represented a backward step in the progress of the race. As we saw in Chapter Two, however, Micheaux's films reconciled these apparently oppositional aims of middle-class uplift and 'realism,' in effect pre-empting and solving the later debate between Van Peebles and Gerima and Gittens. Uplift, in Micheaux's movies, was disassociated from social distinction and material wealth and, for this reason, allowed for the depiction of the harsh reality of the working-class, African American experience desired by Van Peebles, while simultaneously offering hope for the future, in line with the wishes of Gerima and Gittens. In this way, we can see how Micheaux's films constructed a narrative system that found a way to tell 'black stories,' while addressing and resolving the various concerns of blaxploitation era filmmakers.

Three other narrative structures judged by Gerima (1982), Yearwood (1982) et al, to be essential to the creation of a black American narrative system were a celebration of low-budget material (in contrast with lavish Hollywood spectacles); the creation of anti-establishment heroes; and the construction of anti-establishment narratives. While it might appear strange to celebrate the fact that a filmmaker such as Oscar Micheaux could often only afford one take per shot, according to Gerima and Yearwood anything different to Hollywood convention was a step closer to the realisation of a separate black American film form, so it seems inconsistent of them not to have celebrated Micheaux's work, if for this reason alone.

will work from Gaines' (2001) point that the idea of realism can be linked to the attempt to represent the 'truth about the world.'

The issue of an 'anti-establishment hero' is more ambivalent, since the 'establishment' is never clearly characterised by Gerima or Yearwood. However, Gladstone Yearwood's claim (1982a) that the best black hero should be from the working-class (44), suggests a class-based antagonism of the middle-class blacks as much as it was a fight against the white establishment. Looking at a black newspaper such as *The Chicago Defender* from the 1920s and 1930s, it becomes obvious that, despite some resentment of the 'Big Negroes' described by Langston Hughes, the only 'establishment' that was cast as truly reprehensible and in need of challenging was the dominant, white society (see figure 4.1).⁷



Figure 4.1. *The Chicago Defender*, September 26, 1925, p.1.

⁷ *The Chicago Defender*, September 26th, 1925, p.1.

As we see in this cartoon, there is a striking contrast between the frenzied excitement of condemning a ‘black brute’ for murder, and the apathy with which the news of his exoneration is received, as a white man had committed the crime. This suggests that the black community expected no fair treatment from white society. As such, Cripps’s assertion (1977) that early black audiences found it difficult to cheer wholeheartedly for the white hero hardly seems surprising. As he asks, why cheer Tarzan’s victory over the African tribesmen? In addition, he points out that some successful blacks were afraid of being ‘whitened’ by their success and so were doubly reluctant to cheer on or identify with the white Hollywood hero (171). For this reason, similar to Gerima and Yearwood, Micheaux’s audience required a new African American hero who could be placed at a distance from his white counterpart.

Micheaux’s heroes, by virtue of their vocational success, ambition and pride in their race, display characteristics denied them in Hollywood films such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and *Imitation of Life* (1934) in which black characters refuse economic equality with their white employers.⁸ In addition, Yearwood’s call for the anti-establishment hero to be working-class was pre-empted in Micheaux’s movies: Sylvia Landry in *Within Our Gates* (1920) is a teacher but originally came from a poor Southern family of farmers. As noted previously, though Micheaux’s heroes are often lawyers or detectives, as in *Murder in Harlem* and *Lying Lips*, they are usually seen at the start of their careers without qualifications or money: the lawyer in *Murder in Harlem* writes novels and sells them door to door to finance his studies; the aspiring detective in *Lying Lips* works as a bouncer in a very seedy nightclub while he waits to be accepted onto the police force. In fact, in many of Micheaux’s extant movies, the black hero actively confronts white society with the error of its ways and wins the day. To do this, however, Micheaux’s heroes must work alone, outside the system, if they are to be effective. Even Alonzo in *The Girl from Chicago*, although a member of the Secret Service, works in isolation: he investigates each case on his own, and never receives back-up from his colleagues;

⁸ In *Imitation of Life* (1934), despite the fact that Delilah has invented the pancake recipe that makes her white employer rich, she refuses any share in the company preferring, instead, to stay at home and keep house for her employer.

he is not visibly tied to the organisation. Similarly, Sylvia in *Within Our Gates* (1920), must launch a one-woman crusade to raise the necessary funds to maintain her school for black children as the government support for such schools is inadequate and government agencies are apathetic. In this way, Micheaux's central characters can be seen as anti-establishment heroes, in line with Gerima and Yearwood's delineation.

This device of a lone hero operating in the margins of society was, of course, also employed in Hollywood films of the 1930s and '40s, such as *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Lawrence Levine (1985) has written that in the 1930s, as the American populace grew frustrated and bored with the excessive bureaucracy of Roosevelt's 'alphabet soup,' Hollywood's heroes developed a tendency to operate outside the law. He notes that Superman, created in 1938, was hugely popular because

Nowhere is it recorded that Superman stopped for a writ of habeas corpus before breaking down a wall to capture the criminals (185).

In the hands of (white) Hollywood directors such as Frank Capra and John Huston, the lone (white) hero stood as a testament to the social alienation experienced by the populace: society, with its regulations and limitations, appeared to offer them no opportunity for progress or self-fulfilment. In reality, this sense of frustration and disillusionment extended beyond the colour line to African Americans. Although FDR's New Deal had no fixed racial policy and did in many ways benefit African Americans, due to centralisation substantial power was left to local officials. Thus, some racial discrimination persevered and black Americans found they were rarely awarded anything better than blue-collar jobs from work relief. It is interesting to note that, although the anti-establishment, lone hero is evident in Micheaux's films from 1920, as the 1930s progressed and the American population's impatience with the increasing bureaucracy in the nation grew, Oscar Micheaux's hero changed from being an agent in the U.S. Secret Service in 1932's *The Girl from Chicago*, to the independent lawyer of 1935's *Murder in Harlem*, ending with an unemployed hero who had not yet been accepted by the police force in *Lying Lips* (1939). Any

connection with the white powers of authority has been disavowed. Although this lone hero structure was also employed by white movies' narratives, its appearance in Micheaux's movies should still be considered truly anti-(white) establishment, as the black American lone hero gives vent to the frustration and disenfranchisement felt by black Americans of the time.

Micheaux's narratives consistently breached Hollywood conventions, 'smashing idols' and creating a new hero for African Americans, thus pre-empting Yearwood's call, in 1982, for the construction of a new, anti-establishment narrative and hero. But what of his point on the need to create an alternative visual language to that employed by Hollywood? This following section will investigate Micheaux's style to ascertain the degree to which it anticipated the demands of blaxploitation era filmmakers.

Dismantling Classical Visual Conventions

Creating a black American film form, as Yearwood (1982d) pointed out, relied as much on dismantling traditional visual conventions of camera work and editing as it did on the written narratives that challenged the white status quo. As late as 1988, Richard Grupenhoff, emphasising what he saw as Micheaux's preoccupation with narrative construction, summed up the director's abilities as a filmmaker thus:

Micheaux was not a film artist, nor was he a meticulous craftsman; at best, he was a novelist working as a filmmaker (44).

Grupenhoff attributed any difference in style between Micheaux's work and that of Griffith or Porter to Micheaux being 'technically inept' and his films 'poorly structured' (44). While it is true that, due to a limited budget Micheaux was sometimes prepared to accept a less than perfect scene, it is not an accurate assessment of his abilities to claim he was a novelist posing as a filmmaker. Quite apart from the fact that Micheaux worked as producer for all his movies and therefore was intimately acquainted with the business side to filmmaking, on the artistic level his films can be said to have contributed some extremely innovative visual elements to black American cinema not recognised by Gerima et al.

One element of Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) that was praised by Yearwood (1982d) was the film's use of the camera to jar the viewer and provide an alternative to conventional cinematography, forcing the audience to reformulate their ideas of film style, thus posing a challenge to classical Hollywood conventions. He described Van Peebles' technique as 'a refusal to reproduce Hollywood's cinematic grammar and syntax' (76). Yet, this same refusal of convention can be seen over fifty years earlier in Micheaux's *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920). This film's propensity to omit establishing shots leads to a jarring effect as the audience must try to fathom where exactly the characters are situated. Of course, this unsettling use of spatial relations might be attributed to the fact that many scenes from this film have been lost or destroyed – the movie has only recently been discovered and restored by Turner Classic Movie and many important scenes near the end are missing. In addition, some critics may be tempted to credit this alternative approach to spatial relations to Micheaux's incompetence as a filmmaker. But other scenes, such as the crosscutting near the end of the film, between Eve riding for help and the Ku Klux Klan riding to lynch Hugh Van Allen, are skilfully executed, with good use made of screen space to set up the opposition between the two. As Eve rides to the right of the screen, the Ku Klux Klan ride left and vice versa. The crosscutting increases the excitement and tempo in an ironic counter to the final scenes in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). As mentioned in Chapter Three, Griffith used similar cross-cutting near the close of his movie, cutting between the marauding blacks, the besieged whites in the cabin and the Ku Klux Klan riding to the rescue. The intercutting aimed to glorify the Ku Klux Klan and increase the audience's sympathy for their cause, in strong contrast to *Symbol of the Unconquered*'s criticism of the Ku Klux Klan. Additionally, *Body and Soul* contains an interesting montage sequence in which the shot dissolves from the preacher's hand holding the stolen money to the mother's hand ironing (to earn it), to black hands picking cotton, then finally back to the preacher's hand. This neatly connects the preacher's theft with other instances of oppression and mistreatment suffered by black people in America over the centuries. Using cotton as a recognisable symbol of slave labour, Micheaux positions the preacher on a par with the white slave owners and solidifies his status as villain. This montage

demonstrates how skilful a filmmaker Micheaux could be; any so-called lapses in style can thus be read as decisions to veer from the conventions of Hollywood continuity style.

As the modern black filmmaker, Arthur Jaffa, recently pointed out, if ineptitude drove Micheaux's visuals the 'mistakes' would have tapered off, but they didn't. For this reason, Jaffa has argued that Micheaux simply had a different agenda to that of classical Hollywood (2001: 14-15). Trained as they were by their viewing of Hollywood films in the construction of filmic 'space' through shot/reverse shot sequences and establishing shots, Micheaux's audiences were faced with a visual experience that challenged their preconceptions. One instance of this is notable in *Within Our Gates* (1920) in a scene that plays with the audience's traditional understanding of spatial relations to good effect. As Sylvia, whose family is being hunted by whites for the alleged murder of a white landlord, is creeping into her house one night to gather supplies for her family, we see a shot of the lynch mob on the left of the frame, looking to the right. The next shot shows Sylvia on the right of the frame stealing into her house. Then, another shot of the men, looking right. The viewers assume the innocent girl has been spotted and become tense in anticipation of her capture. But, they then find out that their reading of the narrative has been erroneous. In a conventional shot/reverse shot the audience sees that the object of the men's gaze is, in fact, the true (white) murderer of Gridlstone, concealed in the bushes (who they subsequently shoot). Micheaux has manipulated camera work and editing to mislead the audience in two different ways. Having challenged the viewers' understanding of the shot/reverse shot to indicate a spatial connection between the two shots, he has also capitalised on the viewers' assumption that cross-cutting signifies a temporal relation between the shots, instilling in the viewer a distrust of classical editing techniques and providing a radical challenge to classical style.

This 'disjunctive quality' (Musser 2001: 114) is also evident in *Body and Soul* (1925), in which the mise en scène works to confuse the viewers as they attempt to unravel the plot to discover where the mother's nightmare began; classical conventions of continuity are abandoned here. The viewers see her awake at the end

of the film, but there is nothing to clarify at what point in the narrative she fell asleep: there is no early scene where the costumes from the scene in which we see her wake up are matched exactly, despite Bowser and Spence's (2000) claim to the contrary (193). Because the audience is unsure where the dream began, they are left with the question: which part of the narrative was a dream and which was 'real'? Narrative closure has been complicated by the *mise en scène* – the audience cannot be certain that the happy ending of the last scene is real or the fiction of a delusional mother.

Although Yearwood, Gerima and Van Peebles et al did not acknowledge it, the innovative visual quality of Micheaux's films has been commented on by recent filmmakers and theorists of black American cinema. As Arthur Jaffa (2001) has argued,

Some of the most interesting aspects of Micheaux's films are their refusals, what they don't do – refusal as act; how they resist certain Hollywood tropes and ways of organizing things (14).

Ronald Green (2000) sees these 'refusals' as a deliberate effort by Micheaux to challenge the Hollywood style evident in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. For Green, Micheaux's discontinuity editing and the 'breaches of illusionism' inherent in the actors' occasional, furtive glances at the camera were an attempt to confront Griffith's films and Hollywood in general. As Green notes,

Since the defining qualities of Hollywood professionalism (larger than life spectacle; seamlessness; illusionistic continuity, broad aesthetic and ideological assimilation), as developed and exemplified by Griffith, seemed to be Micheaux's target, such professionalism could not, without contradiction, have served as Micheaux's stylistic goal (6).

Micheaux's films, in this way, can be seen to have modified classical continuity conventions, even as they borrowed from these same traditions. Thus, Oscar Micheaux's films were intelligible to an audience schooled in classical style, but

also represented a distinct reconsideration of this style, in effect re-educating his spectators' viewing expectations, as advocated by Gerima, Van Peebles *et al.* So what we must ask now is why these 1970s filmmakers and theorists did not recognise Micheaux as their cinematic predecessor? And why have more recent critics and filmmakers reversed that dismissal?

Micheaux's Reception by Blaxploitation Era Critics and Filmmakers

It is impossible to say for sure why Micheaux's work was neglected during the blaxploitation period. However, there are several factors that could be responsible. In part, it might be attributed to the change in language used in the expression of the African American experience that occurred between the 1930s and 1970s. With the development of the Civil Rights campaign in the United States, a more self-assured, radical language began to emerge as artists and critics considered the changing role of black culture in America. For Amiri Baraka, in 1966, black art needed to be revolutionary if it was to be effective. Baraka complained, in 1966, that 'literary works by blacks [had] been fashioned after an aesthetic which flies in the face of the black experience [i.e. a white aesthetic]' (qtd. in Rose 1982: 29). Black artists were thus summoned to break completely with forms that were traditionally associated with white culture; hence the move to reconsider the use of the English language, as artists and theorists, such as Sonia Sanchez⁹ and Peter Bailey, set about 'developing totally new and different methods of communication' (Bailey: 69). Any incorporation of white forms was seen as compromising black culture, politically and artistically.

This of course had repercussions for the role of the artist. As Barbara Ann Teer declared, in 1969,

[Black artists] must consciously and willfully commit themselves to change... Black artists must sing new revolutionary songs. Songs which will force black people to turn into themselves – into the really real of themselves – not the full fearing/fear of themselves... but the fiery/fire of

⁹ Sonia Sanchez's 'TCB' and 'Right on: white america' experimented with form and conventional English spelling.

themselves – the sparkling/sparkle of themselves – the man/woman of themselves (8).

Teer's piece suggested that previous art, by whites and blacks, had succeeded only in distracting African Americans from their true, racial selves and black artists were exhorted to redress this by creating a culture that would fuse revolution with a joyful recognition of their racial identity. Black critics also joined this revolution, as they began to reconsider their criteria for artistic merit. Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic*, published in 1971, addressed the matter succinctly:

The question for the black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play or novel made the life of a single black man? How far has the work gone in transforming an American Negro into an African-American or black man? (1876).

In this piece we see black culture being posited as a means to educate and transform the African American. From this desire to transform and revolutionise black life in America there emerged a bid for cultural separatism and the formation of what the *Negro Digest*'s back cover piece called,¹⁰

a kind of “nationalism” which draws its energy from reaction to the intransigent establishment.

This separatist impulse permeated all forms of black culture, as black artists stressed the need to overthrow white structures in art and society alike. In 1969, Amiri Baraka formulated his concept of ‘The Revolutionary Theatre’ in which radical language combined with radical militancy to promote the establishment of a new theatrical order in the United States whose mandate was to,

¹⁰ April 1969.

...EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these humans, look into black skulls. White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them. Because they themselves have been trained to hate. The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for hating. For presuming with their technology to deny the supremacy of the Spirit. They will all die because of this... This is a theatre of assault. The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA. The heroes will be Crazy Horse, Denmark Vesey, Patrice Lumumba¹¹... these will be new men, new heroes and their enemies most of you who are reading this (1899, 1902).

The confrontational nature of this piece was matched in many other articles on the function of black art as well as in poems, plays and novels of the time. For example, Haki R Madhubuti's introduction to *Think Black*, published in 1967, contained the following:

America calling.
negroes.
can you dance?
play foot/baseball?
nanny?
cook?
needed now. negroes
who can entertain
ONLY.
others not
wanted.
(& are considered extremely dangerous) (1979).

The anger and sense of disenfranchisement that is prevalent in this poem was actively encouraged by various black critics, writers and artists of this period. As Maulana Karenga, the black activist and scholar wrote in 1968,

¹¹ Sioux war chief, leader of failed slave revolt in Southern Carolina in 1822, and an African Nationalist Leader, the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, respectively.

Black art, like everything else in the black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution... We have always said, and continue to say, that the battle we are waging now is the battle for the minds of Black people, and that if we lose this battle, we cannot win the violent one... Let our art remind us of our distaste for the enemy, our love for each other and our commitment to the revolutionary struggle that will be fought with the rhythmic reality of a permanent revolution (1973, 1977).

As we can see from this piece, alongside the push for revolution came a determined effort to mould African Americans into a cohesive community: as the 1960s drew to a close, articles appeared frequently in journals such as *The Negro Digest* on the need for social unity.¹² The individual was called to ally him/herself with all African Americans in the struggle for racial equality and separatism. A black person who chose to follow a middle-class route, in isolation from his fellow black Americans was subject to criticism, as we see in figure 4.2 (on next page), taken from the back cover of *The Negro Digest*.¹³ Chauncey Warrington Hildreth III, Esq. is held up to ridicule due to his WASP¹⁴ name, his insistence on his professional, middle-class lineage and, primarily, his refusal to rock the boat, racially. He is not only mocked but criticised for standing aloof from his roots, refusing to join the struggle in his desire to assimilate into white society. This piece signals derision and chastisement of his values, especially the ironic tone as the piece apologises for embarrassing him with the fight for equal rights. For African Americans, such as Barbara Ann Teer, Reverend Albert Cleage, Jr., Dr Alvin Poussaint and Linda McClean, writing at various points in the late 1960s, blacks needed to unite in order to think collectively about how to bring about change in society:

We are no longer just individuals. We are becoming a Nation. You know the rest of us are going to support you in every way we can... (Cleage: 31).

¹² See Poussaint and Cleage (writing in 1968 and 1969, respectively).

¹³ May 1969.

¹⁴ White Anglo Saxon Protestant.

Clearly, many black writers, activists and artists in the 1960s and 1970s saw themselves as soldiers on the front lines of a race war and artists who did not join them could not, in their view, be described as African American.

*Sorry to discomfort you,
Chauncey Warrington Hildredth III, Esq.*

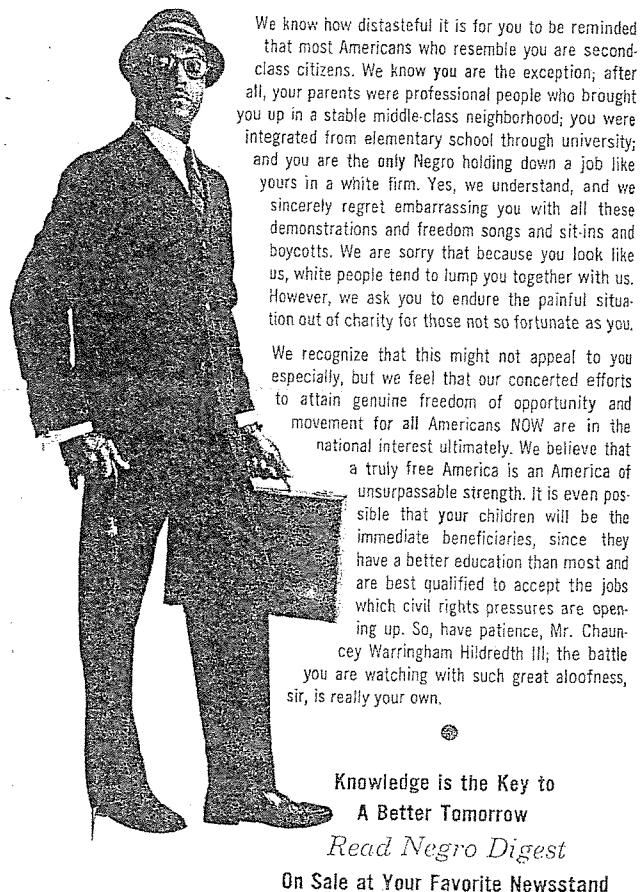


Figure 4.2. *Negro Digest*, May 1969

The confrontational manner in which these artists demanded a break with white traditions appears to be wildly divergent from Micheaux's melodramas that followed the upwardly mobile African American to an eventual happy ending. Micheaux's characters' exhortations to 'elevate yourself' lacked the anger and militant language required of blaxploitation era art. Furthermore, some of Micheaux's heroes look slightly similar to the Chauncey Warrington Hildredth III figure, although they do not share his prejudice against fellow African Americans. His films' adoption of elements of melodrama and minstrelsy could hardly be

described as ‘a theatre of assault,’ and appeared to prove Baraka’s point that previous African American culture acceded to white values. However, Micheaux’s films did, in fact, encourage a type of cultural separatism, as I discussed in Chapter Two’s analysis of the prioritisation of the black American community over the white. Nevertheless, they lacked the emphatic nature of Maulana Kerenga’s assertion that black art should ‘remind us of our distaste for the enemy.’ Although Micheaux’s movies succeeded in forging a black American cinema that addressed a separate African American community in a new cinematic form, his films lack the extremism that characterised the critical aesthetic debates of the blaxploitation period and perhaps for that reason they were dismissed as irrelevant.

In addition, with such clearly delineated battle-lines, the idea of cultural hybridity was clearly anathema to black American artists of the blaxploitation period. Their prioritisation of such an essentialist code of what was and was not the ‘really real’ of black identity and culture disavowed the possibility that the reproduction of white cultural forms could contribute positively to the construction of an indigenous culture. Little wonder that Micheaux’s employment of Hollywood’s narrative tropes – like the lone hero – and stylistic conventions of continuity editing was condemned as a collusion with white, ‘traditional ideologies.’ For example, Gladstone Yearwood was very precise in his position on the need for a black American film form to challenge and confront Hollywood conventions if it was to be considered successful. And he was equally specific about the form’s function, arguing that it must challenge social and economic fixed power relations by altering previous iconography that equated black with bad, re-educating the viewer’s taste away from traditional conventional cinema. Most essentially, according to Yearwood, it must employ ‘black expressive traditions’ (1982d: 71) and be controlled by a black filmmaker. Yet, I feel that Yearwood’s delineation is too prescriptive. His insistence on using only ‘black expressive traditions’ appears limited and has led to the unfair neglect of Micheaux. Despite Yearwood’s neglect of Micheaux, his films come very close to, and occasionally fully succeed in fulfilling this criteria, employing a cast and crew that was almost exclusively comprised of African Americans, and depicting the social conditions and milieu of every day life in the black ghetto. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, Micheaux borrowed

from white modes of representation very effectively to develop a black American film form. To insist on the use of black expressive traditions seems unnecessarily limiting (as well as ambiguous, Yearwood does not specify what he means by the term) when the incorporation of white styles and narrative systems could be used to good effect, as proven by Micheaux.

As I discussed at some length in the introduction, subsequent post-colonial studies of hybridity have offered a new, alternative way to read Micheaux's use of Hollywood conventions to the perspective offered in the blaxploitation era. Chinua Achebe's (1993) discussion of the unifying effect of British intervention in Africa becomes useful here to recover Micheaux from the somewhat essentialist criticism of the 1970s filmmakers. Achebe has argued that the British, with their infliction of English on their subjects, provided a common language that unified African tribes that, due to the plethora of tribal dialects, could not otherwise have communicated with each other to share their common history. As such, Achebe contends that, 'If [British occupation] failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue, for sighing' (430). Moreover, he insists that the version of English spoken by the Africans differed extensively from that of the native speakers, thereby resisting Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1993) claim that by adopting the dominant culture's language the minority culture assumed their cultural and racial values also. If we consider Micheaux's work in light of Achebe's claim, we can argue that the language of the dominant cinema, Hollywood, also provided African Americans with a framework for the expression of their own identity and history that could be moulded into a distinct black American film language. Jane Gaines (2001) has made a similar point in her discussion of silent era race movies:

The significance of race movies would be the way in which they could be counterhegemonic without symmetrically 'countering' white culture on every point... And yet, at the level of the building blocks of culture, all-black had to be premised on all-white, the one effectively deciding the other by the process of inclusion and exclusion, by addition and elimination (13).

As Gaines has noted, black and white American cinema were inextricably intertwined, but that did not necessarily compromise the ‘blackness’ of early race movies. However, in a 1970s African American society that called for unequivocal war with white culture that would make ‘White men cower,’ such negotiation with the old (white) guard of Hollywood was untenable. Such a clash of ideals between Micheaux and filmmakers of the 1970s leads to a question that must now be addressed. If African American filmmakers refused or neglected Micheaux’s work, what connects his films to theirs? Put more baldly, how did they all arrive at such a similar form, coming as they did from such varied perspectives? It is these questions that the proceeding section will address.

Confluences of contexts

My overarching argument in this chapter has been that Oscar Micheaux’s film form in the 1920s and 1930s anticipated that of African American filmmakers in the 1970s. I have argued this despite the fact that the socio-cultural contexts of both periods appear to have been completely at odds with each other and in the face of the later filmmakers’ overt criticism and rejection of his work. How then can I say they followed his example? The answer to this is complex and necessitates both broadening the scope of my study beyond the historical specificities of African American culture and delving more deeply into the two African American contexts in question.

First, I need to point out that, despite appearances to the contrary, there were several important continuities in context and aesthetic between the two periods. With regard to black reception of Hollywood cinema, little had changed by the 1970s. Toni Cade Bambara (1993) has noted,

By 1972, headlines in the trade papers were echoing those from the twenties – “H’wood Promises Negro a Better Break.” I could wallpaper the bathroom with *Variety* headlines from the days of *Hallelujah!*, through the forties accord between DuBois/NAACP and Hollywood, through the “Blaxplo” era, to this summer’s edition covering Cannes and the release of works by Lee, Rich,

Vasquez, Duke, and Singleton and still ask the question: Never mind occasional trends, when is the policy going to change? (118)

The opportunities for black actors and filmmakers within Hollywood had improved slightly by the 1970s, but the distinct marginalisation of African American stories among the studios' output that had characterised the 1930s still existed. As a result, as Manthia Diawara (1993a) has argued, it was still to independent black cinema that African American filmmakers must look for the chance to 'provide alternative ways of knowing Black people that differ[ed] from the fixed stereotypes of Blacks in Hollywood' (7).

We have also seen that Van Peebles et al encountered the same debates on the nature of black representation as Micheaux in the pull between bourgeois uplift and grim realism. Moreover, Diawara (1986, reprinted in 1993b) has pointed to the continuity of black spectatorship through the twentieth century. Using Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure as a base, he has contended that 'the dominant cinema [Hollywood] situates Black characters primarily for the pleasure of White spectators (male or female)' (215), and he traces the subordinated spectator position offered to African Americans in films ranging from *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, to *A Soldier's Story* and *Forty Eight Hours* in the early 1980s. Discussing the representation of African Americans in *Forty Eight Hours* (1982), he finds that there is a 'textual deracination or isolation of Blacks' in the Eddie Murphy film that denies the African American spectator the possibility of identifying with black characters as credible or plausible. 'Thus,' he argues, 'it cannot be assumed that Black (male or female) spectators share in the "pleasures" which such films are able to offer to White audiences' (216). Throughout all Hollywood representations of blackness, he writes, the black spectator has been unable to identify with the black images on screen as those images are created only as sidekicks, foils or justification for white characters or rules. In short, black spectators, throughout the twentieth century, have been forced to identify with white heroes.¹⁵ Although an essentialist article by his own admission, what is useful in this essay is the way it has

¹⁵ See Kaplan (1997) and hooks (1992) for similar methodology and conclusions.

highlighted the continuity in reception contexts between the inter-war period and blaxploitation period. His discussion of 1980s movies echoes Thomas Cripps' (1977) claim that 1930s black audiences were expected to identify with Tarzan over the black Africans. For black audiences in the 1930s and 1970s alike, Hollywood films offered little that could be claimed as representative of African American life.

In terms of continuities in aesthetic, this chapter has already documented many similarities in narrative structure and visual techniques employed by Micheaux and those African American filmmakers that followed him. But the question remains, why did such disparate groups of filmmakers arrive at such similar formulations of the ideal black American film form? It is at this point that casting the net outside the African American community becomes illuminating.

Post-colonial literature on the process of cultural decolonisation in Africa and the Caribbean offers a framework within which to examine African American film form in general. The aims and techniques that drove Micheaux and his 1970s descendants can be seen to have followed a similar trajectory to various post-colonial nations' attempts to create an indigenous culture. Both have their foundations in a quest to define their own self-image outside the influence of a dominant cultures' constructions of racial identity. As Stuart Hall (1993) has observed, for black Caribbeans it was only through the recognition and confrontation of the colonial structures of racial identity that the residual influences of the dominant culture could be disempowered. In a similar vein, Gordon Park (the director of *Shaft*) has described his desire to use cinema to combat the stereotyping of African Americans in Hollywood cinema that had made him 'ashamed of being black' as a child, and Micheaux systematically substituted Hollywood's racial caricatures with humanised black characters in his work.

The development of a resistant culture has been widely recognised as a tool in the battle fought by natives to move towards, and beyond, colonial influence. For instance, Frantz Fanon (1985) writes of the colonised: 'The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of the psycho-affective

equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native' (169). This change occurs, according to Fanon, because traditionally the native has had the past obliterated or distorted by the colonialist who aims at 'devaluing pre-colonial history' (169). Fanon recognises the importance of reclaiming a national heritage that exists outside the sphere of the colonial culture in the decolonisation of a nation. Likewise, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993) has acknowledged, 'To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition' (442). A similar sentiment can be observed in Micheaux's films, in which cinema becomes a way to represent the reality of the African American past and present that contradicts the distortion that characterised white culture's depictions, as evidenced in Hollywood movies. Additionally, the difficulties faced by post-colonial filmmakers in Africa in their quest to find a way to represent their native culture mirror those difficulties faced by Micheaux, Van Peebles et al. To wit, Robert Stam and Louise Spence's (1985) recording of the propensity within African post-colonial cinema to veer between representations that are exclusively 'positive' and excessively 'negative' recalls the bourgeois versus 'grim realist' debate encountered by African American filmmakers in the inter-war and blaxploitation periods. These similarities are illuminating but the most useful work on post-colonial cinema that offers a framework in which to consider the connection between Micheaux, Van Peebles et al, is Teshome H Gabriel's schema of the three phases in the creation and evolution of post-colonial cinema in Africa (1993: 341-344).

Phase one he calls 'The Unqualified Assimilation,' which is characterised by its adherences to Hollywood style and 'sensational adventures for entertainment's sake' (341). The next phase, 'The Remembrance Phase,' marks the progressive indigenisation of the control of talent and movie production, exhibition and distribution. Its themes return to the Third World's past in a manner that prioritises romanticised nostalgia over 'the true nature of culture as an act or agent of liberation' (342). Its style remains indebted somewhat to Hollywood but increasingly breaks from dominant cinema's conventions. The third phase, 'The Combative Phase,' focuses its narratives on the lives and struggles of the Third World population. Films in this phase criticise conventional classical themes and styles and in so doing create an alternative film language.

Gabriel points out that there is no linear development through the phases; filmmakers characteristically move between them. An attempt to situate Micheaux in this framework (substituting African American for Third World) concludes that his work contains an element of phase two in terms of style, but more predominant are the third phase's theme and style. Judging from the agendas of Melvin Van Peebles, Haile Gerima et al discussed above, black American cinema of the 1970s, similarly, incorporated elements of phase two's style and the third phases's style and themes. This would suggest that Micheaux and his descendants were at the same stage in developing a black American film form. More significant is Gabriel's assertion of the fluidity between the phases – while each stage might appear to be discrete, in fact there is considerable intermingling, they are all points on the spectrum in the development of a native cinema. Thus, even if one phase, or group of filmmakers, might maintain its difference to another, while they all share the common goal of establishing a native cinema they will be implicated in each other's work.

The above appears to suggest that there is a fundamental mode of representation for oppressed cultures. To a degree this is true, certainly we can see recurring structures and aims. However, we must also be conscious of Childs and Williams' (1997) warning that, 'The location from which post-colonialism is studied fashions the questions of identity that will be asked, and therefore the kinds of answer that will be found' (89). As such, although the central issues (identity, representation) for oppressed cultures may mirror one another, we must be careful not to apply the 'answer' found by one culture to another, unrelated culture. Bearing this in mind, as we have seen there are marked continuities between the inter-war and blaxploitation periods: the questions of identity, expressed by Miller as 'Who is a Negro?', remained consistent between the two eras. As did Hollywood's marginalisation of the African American experience, in general. For these reasons, Micheaux's determination to defy Hollywood representations of African American characters survived him into the 1970s. Furthermore, as he, Van Peebles et al were all resisting the same Hollywood structures and themes it was inevitable that they should have arrived at a similar form of resistance, even if their individual routes

might have appeared to differ. As such, I would agree with Mark Reid that Micheaux's film form anticipated that of the 1970s. At the risk of sounding trite, Micheaux can be seen as the father whose children may have broken off communication but retained his cinematic genes. But what of those filmmakers and theorists of more recent times? We must now ask why Micheaux's work has been critically recovered in the past twelve years.

The Changing Reception of Micheaux's Films

In this chapter I have argued for the similarity between the philosophy of black filmmakers and theorists of the late 1960s/1970s and the achievements of Micheaux's films. We have seen how his films re-educated black audience expectations through their manipulation of editing and camera work, and it has become obvious that, although Micheaux borrowed from classical conventions, in doing so he succeeded in challenging and, indeed, replacing them. His films offered realistic portraits of black American life that stood in contrast to the depiction evident in Hollywood features, and queried the merit of supposedly infallible white institutions. In all these ways they can be seen to accede to the demands of blaxploitation era black artists who called for 'revolutionary' contributions that would 'smash idols' and formulate a new cinematic form specific to African Americans. And yet, as we have seen, for filmmakers of the 1970s, Micheaux's films represented none of these things. As I have argued, this could be attributed to the lack of Micheaux films available for re-viewing or it could be that his use of classical conventions was enough to blind them to any subversion inherent. Or, perhaps, it was the mildness with which Micheaux urged his black audiences to raise racial pride, which appeared at odds with the radical speeches of the 1970s, despite their similar aims. In any case, it was not until the 1990s that Micheaux's films enjoyed a renaissance of sorts.

Several factors combined to allow for the recovery of Micheaux's work. The rise in popularity of early film and reception studies within the field of film studies certainly contributed to a fresh approach to Micheaux's work. Since the 1980s early film has become recognised as an area of study in its own right, not just as a dress rehearsal for the classical period, thus more research has been undertaken on the

industrial and cultural context, as well as the form, of early cinema. This has lead to a growing enthusiasm for the recovery of early films that were traditionally neglected by earlier film studies. Early film scholars have urged for the reassessment of the term ‘primitive’ traditionally associated with early films, arguing for its divorce from its pejorative origins. Rather than condemn a film for lacking the high production values of classical cinema, they argue early film should be celebrated for its difference. This sentiment can be seen to have informed Ronald Green’s (1993) defence of the ‘rough’ quality of Micheaux’s movies and Jane Gaines’s (2001) call for a new language with which to discuss the merits of race movies, replacing the ‘value-laden language vocabulary of high culture criticism’ (5).

The emergence of reception studies has also opened up new avenues in film studies that have been influential in the reading of Micheaux’s films. One of the defining features of reception studies is its move away from what Maltby and Craven (1995) call, ‘the totalizing theories of Metz and Mulvey’ (446). Its emphasis on reading a film within its original socio-cultural and political contexts offers a more nuanced reading that opens the text to a variety of interpretations as it acknowledges the many factors that influence and create a text’s meaning.¹⁶ As we have seen in the course of this thesis, the different social and cultural contexts of the inter-war and blaxploitation periods lead to conflicting readings of Micheaux’s films. While a psychoanalytic reading of Micheaux’s work might posit one reading and one reader, the reception approach acknowledges the diversity of viewers and values that govern interpretation. This allows for a better understanding of what a film meant to its original audience and such an understanding can often help in the recovery of a film’s reputation. For example, by exploring the meaning African Americans attached to minstrelsy in the inter-war period, this thesis has offered a new explanation of its appearance in Micheaux’s films, defending the filmmakers against accusations of his being a ‘racist’ whose use of caricatures derided the race. By going beyond the text to explore its context we can attempt a new reading of the text and its devices.

¹⁶ See Carbine (1996), Staiger (1989), Urrichio and Pearson (1993) and Waller (1995).

The 1990s also saw a reconsideration of the nature of artistic ‘value’ within film studies. Valerie Smith (1997) has argued that 1970s surveys of early black American cinema were guilty of legitimating a ‘binarism in the discourse around strategies of black representation that has outlived its usefulness,’ as it presupposes a consensus of opinion on what is ‘positive’ or ‘negative,’ ‘authentic’ or ‘fantastic’ (4). Stuart Hall has agreed, arguing that in the age of postmodernism such binarisms are misplaced (1997: *passim*). Still, in the 1970s, such binarisms were not only allowed but also actively encouraged, as we saw in the black artists’ pursuit of separatist, anti-white goals that rested on a desirable black/undesirable white binarism. In contrast, the new century has seen Jane Gaines (2001) argue for more open-minded critique of early race films:

Ideally we should be devising different critical tools in our attempt to draw significance from these works since we already know that the value-laden language vocabulary of high culture criticism will never be able to grasp the aesthetics of necessity, the production of mass culture against incredible odds and under impossible economic conditions (5).

Additionally, for black filmmakers at the turn of the twenty-first century, successful black American cinema is defined not by its revolutionary qualities but its ability to create what African American filmmaker, Arthur Jaffa (2001), calls ‘the alien familiar’:

When [black films] are successful, they will be both alien and familiar. And the whole idea is that they should become both more alien the farther they develop and also more familiar because people will begin to see the relationship between the films and the more familiar modes of Black cultural experience (18).

The aims and language of modern black filmmakers are less incendiary or ‘revolutionary’ than those of their immediate predecessors, in fact, Jaffa’s call for an ‘alien familiar’ echoes the practices of Micheaux as he took familiar forms and

transformed them. This idea that a black filmmaker could adopt Hollywood forms without succumbing to their white-centred values undoubtedly owes a certain debt to studies of melodrama since the mid-1970s. As more work has been undertaken on melodrama's potential to critique, implicitly, the social values that it represented, the idea that it and other traditional white cultural forms could offer subversive qualities to a black filmmaker became more acceptable than it was to blaxploitation era critics and filmmakers. Similarly, Miriam Hansen's (1999) idea on the coexistence of both classical and modernist techniques in classical Hollywood films has signalled a readiness on the part of recent film scholars to move beyond binary oppositions in their classification of movies and genres. Hence, for modern filmmakers and critics, Micheaux's adoption of classical, white cultural forms need not prohibit formal experimentation and subversion, or represent collusion with white values, as it did for their blaxploitation era counterparts.

Beyond developments in the field of film studies, the rediscovery of several Micheaux films enabled critics to form a more nuanced and positive view of the merits and demerits of Micheaux's work than that of their predecessors. Although Joseph Young's book (1989) on Micheaux's novels had declared the artist 'a white racist' who rejected his own race in preference of assimilation into white society, most recent pieces on Micheaux have argued differently. Corey Creekmur (2001), for example, has revised Young's view in his discovery of a letter written by Charles Chesnutt's complaining that his 'most popular novel was distorted and mangled by a colored moving picture producer [Micheaux], to make it appeal to Negro race prejudice' (reprinted in Creekmur 2001: 148). According to Chesnutt's account, there is no reason to suspect Micheaux of 'reject[ing] both his racial kinsmen and himself' (Young, 1989: ix). In fact, Chesnutt presents Micheaux as a race propagandist. Increased access to archival material, such as the New York State Censorship Board's records, has aided this reassessment of Micheaux and similarly helped Ronald Green (2000) to contest Thomas Cripps's allegation that Micheaux's films placed white cupidity off-limits (1977: 6). Green argues, instead, that it was white censorship boards that were guilty:

Micheaux fought such censor boards for years and still managed to treat white oppression both directly and indirectly in films such as *Within Our Gates*, *Symbol of the Unconquered*, *Girl from Chicago*, *Birthright* and others (45).

Needless to say, this radically changes the way in which Micheaux's role as architect of a black film form can be viewed.

As we have seen in the course of the last three chapters, through Micheaux's incorporation of elements of the forms evident in minstrelsy, melodrama and Hollywood features, and the racist caricatures that they often circulated, he created a black film form that combated the derogatory images that had been disseminated in the past and present. His use of minstrelsy and melodrama contributed to the creation of a film form that allowed for the discussion of salient African American issues by and for African Americans. Visually, Micheaux's films offered innovation as well as conformity to classical Hollywood conventions, as they did on the level of narrative themes and structures. Consequently, I would argue that his films fulfil the criteria laid out by the blaxploitation era filmmakers, as they discussed issues pertinent to black Americans in a form that differed from the forms of Hollywood cinema, offering a uniquely African American perspective on the world they represented and working to raise race pride among the African American community. Hence, this chapter has contended that Oscar Micheaux, despite his neglect by the 'revolutionary' black filmmakers of the 1970s, was a director who developed a black film form that remained pertinent beyond his lifetime, developing a tradition for subsequent African American filmmakers.

Conclusion

At the start of this thesis I stated that my central aim was to determine the role played by Micheaux's film in the construction of a black American film form. My research was designed to examine the part played by Micheaux's films in the construction of a narrative system that responded to the concerns of African Americans in a style that diverged from traditional, Hollywood cinematic forms; a cinema that rewrote the African American past and present from an African American point of view.

To do this, I structured my thesis around several questions. First, in a bid to understand Micheaux's reception context, I asked what role the black press played in shaping reception of Micheaux's work. Researching the coverage the press accorded Micheaux's films between 1918 and 1940, I discovered that it changed substantially over the decades, moving from an initial enthusiasm, through a gradual disenchantment in the early 1930s, to a revived interest and renewed backing in the late 1930s. My efforts to explain this waxing and waning of support led me to investigate the press's response to Hollywood's black-cast movies of the early sound period, from *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) to *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Accordingly, I discovered an inverse relationship between the press's response to Micheaux's films and to these Hollywood movies during the 1930s: when one was posited by the paper as the potential developer of a black film form that would engage with African Americans artistically and socially, support for the other diminished. Micheaux's films, acclaimed as the 'real stuff' of African American life by the *Chicago Defender* in 1925,¹ were largely dismissed in the wake of the release of *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and *Hallelujah!* (1929) by Fox-Movietone and MGM, respectively. By 1930, the *Amsterdam News* had reached the conclusion that it was the Hollywood studios who were 'ever more diligent [in] search for realism,' rather than Micheaux, who relied only on a 'kindergarten ethnology.'² Yet, by the end of the 1930s, Micheaux's films' reputation was restored: the *Amsterdam News*

¹ January 31, 1925.

² April 16, 1930.

praised *Notorious Elinor Lee* (1940) as ‘true to life’³ a week after its reviewer lambasted what he saw as *Gone With the Wind*’s ‘anti-Negro propaganda.’⁴ Noting the dwindling box-office returns of Micheaux’s work in the 1930s, I suggested that the press’s insistence that a black film form was to be found in Hollywood products, rather than in race movies, persuaded black audiences to transfer their allegiance away from Micheaux.

My research of the black press’s reception of Hollywood’s black-cast movies and its repercussions for Micheaux, coupled with my examination of the press’s reception of Micheaux’s work through the 1930s, comprised the originality of the chapter. To date, no work has been done on the either of these areas; studies of Micheaux’s relationship with the press, as undertaken by Charlene Regester (2001), have heretofore stopped at the end of the silent era.

Having established Micheaux’s reception context, I moved on to his social, political and cultural context to ascertain the degree to which his movies’ narrative systems (themes, characterisation etc.) engaged with contemporary African American concerns. I asked to what extent Micheaux’s films offered a forum for debate, and a mirror to, the black community. Returning to the pages of the black newspapers of New York and Chicago, I traced the way in which issues and events that were discussed in their articles and letters to the editor were seized upon by Micheaux. Notorious legal battles, such as the Rhinelander trial and the Marcus Garvey case, informed the plots of two films and were blatantly referred to in the movies’ advertising, in an attempt to attract viewers who had followed the cases’ coverage in the media. Even more apparent in the press and Micheaux’s oeuvre was the debate on various aspects of ‘Negro identity,’ such as DuBois’s concept of twoness, passing for white, the ‘New Negro’ and traditional characterisations of African Americans in white culture. My analysis of Micheaux’s films revealed a lively engagement with the discourses that centred on each topic and, in that way, reflected upon the concerns of their African American viewers. My research suggested that Micheaux’s movies challenged the prevailing thought, both black

³ January 13, 1940.

⁴ January 6, 1940.

and white, on the nature of African American identity, rescuing the ‘New Negro’ from contemporary accusations of elitism, reappropriating and modifying traditional racist caricatures, and replacing DuBois’s rather gloomy prediction of eternal displacement for the African American with a portrait of a cohesive, distinct black community.

The contribution that this chapter has made to Micheaux scholarship is in its methodology and subject matter. No research to date has looked at the contemporary debates on twoness, passing, the ‘New Negro’ and racial caricatures and their correlation within Micheaux’s work. Nor has this correlation been placed in its socio-cultural context, as evident in the black press. By taking my approach it became possible to appreciate the force of emphasis these films’ narrative systems placed on the construction and dissemination of a positive racial identity that refused any elitism within the black community, which has added to our understanding of Micheaux’s films’ engagement with contemporary African American concerns.

The third subject that came under scrutiny in my research was the way in which Micheaux’s use of traditional white modes of representation contributed to his construction of a form that spoke to and for African Americans, breaking from white traditions to develop a black film form. My methodology comprised the investigation of the function of two traditionally ‘white’ modes, minstrelsy and melodrama, within Micheaux’s oeuvre. My work on minstrelsy, and its representation in the black press, led me to the surprising realisation that minstrelsy, particularly when performed by African Americans, was popular with black audiences in the inter-war period. This, in turn, led me to reconsider the significance it had for black performers and audiences of the time, and their understanding of it. Drawing from recent research by Dale Cockrell (1997) and Eric Lott (1995) on the origins of the minstrel tradition, I was able to re-evaluate Micheaux’s incorporation of minstrel tropes. As such, I developed a new understanding of this area, which contrasted with Ronald Green’s (2000) assumption that minstrelsy appeared in Micheaux’s films solely as a corrective. Although this is a feature of the form minstrelsy took, Green missed Micheaux’s

utilisation of minstrelsy's positive attributes in his construction of a coherent, cohesive sense of community among his African American audience. Looking at Micheaux's use of melodrama, I came to the conclusion that his use of this mode of representation represented, initially, an attempt to interrogate the negative depiction of African Americans evident in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and, later, to explore and give expression to the various social groups within the African American community that had heretofore been denied a voice in American culture. In doing so, Micheaux's films developed a new form, which I called the 'New Negro melodrama,' that both encouraged race pride and created a representation of an African American community that was recognisable to black viewers. My formulation of the 'New Negro melodrama' modified Linda Williams's (2001) assertion that race melodrama could be categorised in a Tom/anti-Tom binary, arguing for a third kind of melodrama that need not be defined by white culture. The 'New Negro melodrama' reflected on a distinct black culture, with no reference to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

My examination of the confluence of minstrel and melodrama structures in Micheaux's films enabled me to explore the way in which Micheaux's films succeeded in developing a form that could re-write the African American past and present from an African American perspective. Minstrelsy and melodrama, in Micheaux's films, broke from their original, white contexts to contribute to the development of a distinct, new, black American film form.

In my final chapter I considered two questions. I investigated Mark Reid's (1993) claim of a lineage extending from Micheaux to African American filmmakers of the blaxploitation era. Secondly, I offered an account for the changing reception Micheaux's films received from the 1970s to the present day. Studying the debate among African American filmmakers on the nature and function of a black American film form that began in the late 1960s and continued to the early 1980s, I was curious as to why Micheaux's contribution had been neglected. Reading the blaxploitation era filmmakers' ideas on black film form, it struck me that although Micheaux's films contained many of their formal strategies no work had explored this connection. According to Haile Gerima (1982), Melvin Van Peebles

(Yearwood 1982c) and Gladstone Yearwood (1982c), no attempt to develop a black American film form had been made before the blaxploitation period. The main purpose of my last chapter, thus, was to redress this oversight and propose Micheaux as a kind of cinematic predecessor to those later filmmakers, and to explore why they had been so blind to his films' development of a black film form. In attempting the latter, I decided to contrast blaxploitation era reception of Micheaux's work with the reception it received from more recent African American filmmakers and critics. It was at this point that I encountered what I felt was the best characterisation of Micheaux's films to date in Arthur Jaffa's (2001) use of the term 'the alien familiar' (18).

In this phrase, everything that my research had revealed was expressed. Micheaux's films' use of familiar modes of representation, such as minstrelsy and melodrama, paved the way to a new film form that lay beyond any relationship with previous white forms. Similarly, using familiar topics from popular discourses of the time enabled Micheaux's films to reconsider white and black formulations of African American identity. Finally, although his films often conformed to classical Hollywood style, on other occasions they challenged its conventions of continuity editing and seamlessness. With these innovations, Micheaux's audiences were offered a new form that could represent African Americans in a new manner but which retained sufficient 'landmarks' to avoid audience alienation or confusion. Hence, Micheaux's development of a black American film form was smoothly effected; so smoothly that it was not fully credited until roughly sixty years afterwards.

My analysis of Micheaux's films was largely based on my research of the black newspapers of the black urban centres of Harlem and, to a lesser extent, Chicago, and what they revealed about his movies' socio-cultural context and reception in their articles, reviews and advertisements. While I believe this thesis has contributed to the progression of Micheaux studies, our understanding of his work and context is far from complete. In the future, it might be beneficial to look more closely at the distribution strategies and reception of his films on the West Coast, an area that has been somewhat neglected in Micheaux scholarship. I would be

particularly keen to focus on Los Angeles, dominated as is it by the Hollywood sign, to examine the local black press's reception of Micheaux's movies and Hollywood's black-cast films.

Finally, we know very little about European reception and distribution of Micheaux's films. Being Irish, I am particularly interested in examining whether or not Micheaux's films were exhibited in Ireland. According to Donald Bogle (1997), Nina Mae McKinney, the African American star of *Hallelujah!* (1929), performed in Dublin in the mid-1930s, suggesting an Irish interest in Hollywood's race movies. Using the same methodology as I developed for this thesis, I would like to investigate the reception she received, as well as exploring any possible coverage of, or advertisements for, Micheaux's work in the Irish press. Little is known about Irish reception of ethnicity in the 1920s and 1930s, and I think it could be interesting to see if Irish audiences and newspapers distinguished between Hollywood features and independently produced race movies, or if they regarded them all as equally foreign. In substituting Irish for African American audiences, we could study whether the issues covered in Micheaux's films, such as passing and racial caricatures, resonated in the same way with international, white audiences, far removed from Harlem, as they did with Micheaux's films constructed a black cinema form that addressed African Americans alone.

Appendix One:
Chronological Table of Industrial and Biographical Background of Oscar
Micheaux

1884

- Birth of Oscar Micheaux in Metropolis, Illinois.

1891

- Edison takes out patents on the Kinetograph and the Kinetoscope.

1894

- The first Kinestoscope parlour is opened in Broadway

1895

- Release of Edison's short film *Watermelon Contest* in which 'four grinning Negroes wolfed watermelons and spat seed with a will.' (Cripps 1977: 12)

1896

- Lumière's Cinématographe and Mutoscope's American Biograph both exhibited in New York City.

Early 1900s

- Micheaux acquires 500 acres of land in Gregory County on the Rosebud Indian Reservation. He is recorded as having been the only black person to have done so.
- Extensive migration of African Americans to the major urban centres of New York, Chicago, Detroit.
- Establishment of new (white) film companies such as Pathé, Essanay, Selig and Méliès

1901

- President Teddy Roosevelt invites W.E.B. DuBois for dinner at the White House. For this he was criticised by some white southerners. He never repeats the invitation.

1903

- Publication of W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*.

1905

- Release of Edison's *The Wooing and Wedding of a Coon*.
- The standard length of a film is between 800 and 1,000 feet (roughly 13-16 minutes).

1907

- Release of Biograph's *The Fight of the Nations*.
- An unnamed showman in *Motion Picture World*, on June 8, muses on why black attractions and films are not thriving in parallel with the success of white ones: 'the average negro wants to see a show with an abundance of noise, something like a plantation minstrel, with lots of singing and dancing and horseplay... when a negro goes to a show it pleases him most to see black faces in the performance. But no pictures are made with Senegambian faces.' (Qtd. in Waller 1995: 161)
- More than 125 (white) film exchanges in the United States supplying seven to eight thousand nickelodeons.

1909

- Harlem's first racially integrated theatre, The Crescent Theatre, is opened (though sold in 1911).
- Organisation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

- Release of Edwin S. Porter's short film, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

1910

- Release of the short film *Confederate Spy* (producer unknown), in which an Uncle Tom figure (named Uncle Daniel) is executed by the Yankees but dies happy in the knowledge that he 'did it for his massa's sake and little massa' (qtd. in Donald Bogle 1997:6)
- Release of Lubin's *How Rastus Got his Turkey*; this was the beginning of a Rastus series.
- The National Urban League is founded to help city blacks. By 1925, there are fifty one branches in the country. It urges employers to hire black workers and urges African Americans to work hard and grab any opportunities that arise. It also helps to find homes and jobs for newly arrived black Americans.
- The (white)General Film Company is set up as a subsidiary of the Motion Picture Patents Company. It buys up the film exchanges. Its most successful company is Vitagraph.

1911

- Release of *For Massa's Sake* (producer unknown) in which a former slave sells himself back into slavery to help his former massa to triumph over financial difficulty.

1912

- Release of what Donald Bogle claims to be the first Hollywood film about a mulatto: *The Debt* (Rex Company). (The Library of Congress records this film's release date as 1916)/
- The Motion Pictures Patent Company is brought to court on anti-trust charges. It is outlawed in 1914, giving way to independent companies.

1913

- Micheaux publishes *The Conquest; The Story of a Negro Pioneer*, a thinly veiled autobiography that recounted his experiences homesteading his farm. He sells them door-to-door, eventually selling approximately 2,500 copies.

1914

- Lester Walton buys the lease on the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, starts a stock theatre company that grows into the famous Lafayette Players (many of whose stars would appear in Micheaux's films).
- Establishment of the Peter P. Jones Photoplay Co., a black film company. It has no film releases (Sampson 1995: 183).
- The first (white) distribution network in America, The Paramount Pictures Corporation, is set up, distributing 104 films per annum through its members' circuit. Introduces block booking to ensure distribution of all of their movies.
- Release of William Robert Daly's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, starring an African American actor, Sam Lucas, in the role of Tom

1915

- Micheaux's second novel, *The Forged Note; A Romance of the Darker Races*.
- Release of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. Its estimated total cost is an unprecedented \$110,000. By 1916 it has sold a million tickets in New York alone. The National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People (NAACP) organises pickets across the country.

1916

- America enters World War I. According to Ben Quarles, of all African Americans registered for the draft 31.74% are called up, in contrast with 26.84% of whites. Segregation persists in the army.

- The (black) Unique Film Company is formed in Chicago, by Miles Webb (company director). It produces one film, *Shadowed by the Devil*, based on an original story by the wife of the company director.(Sampson 1995: 179)
- Incorporation of the (black) Lincoln Motion Picture Company, with capital of \$75,000, headed by (black) actor Noble Johnson, his brother George Johnson, (black) actors Clarence and Dudley Brooks, Dr. J. Thomas Smith, a wealthy (black) druggist and Harry A Gant, a (white) cameraman. George Johnson organises a distribution circuit of black theatres, employing Tony Langston, the editor of the *Chicago Defender* and Romeo L Dougherty, editor of the *Amsterdam News* to set up exchanges in Chicago and New York. Distribution is handled by ‘wild cat’ advance men who bring the films from town to town to show the exhibitors who in turn book them for later dates. Generally the average daily rental is \$25 or, in the case of theatres that could not afford this rate, a 60-40 split of the box-office, favouring the film company. This latter approach is not always profitable, dependant as it is on weather(Sampson 1995: 140; Jane Gaines 2001: 101-103).
- Lincoln Motion Picture Company releases its first feature, *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*.

1917

- Micheaux’s novel, *The Homesteader*, is published.
- Release of the (black) Frederick Douglass Film Company’s first film, *The Colored American Winning His Suit*, which claimed in its press book, ‘Void of all bitterness... In it are shown the true American white man with a spirit of charity and justice of whom there are many such to whom the race owes a debt of gratitude which is in no ways withheld. The play at no point seeks to enhance the value of one race at the expense of the other.’(qtd. in Sampson 1995: 181).
- Twenty seven of the largest first-run (white) cinemas combine to form the First National Exhibitors Circuit. By 1921, it is in league with three and a half thousand film theatres in the United States. In 1922 it adds production studios to its existing distribution and exhibition portfolio.

1918

- Release of D.W. Griffith's *The Greatest Thing in Life* in which two soldiers, one a white bigot, the other black, are forced to share a shell hole in the first world war, eventually leading to a camaraderie of sorts. The film failed at the box office (Bogle 1997: 20).
- World War I ends.

1919

- Release of Micheaux's first film, *The Homesteader** financed by his fellow farmers, black and white. The budget is \$15,000, raised by selling stock in his production company at \$100 per share to the same farmers that bought his books.
- 'Red Summer' in Chicago (race riots). Results in 38 dead, 537 wounded and hundreds of black families burned out of their homes (Quarles 1971: 192-193). President Wilson declares that 'the white race was the aggressor... the more censurable because our Negro troops are but just back from no little share in carrying our cause and our flag to victory' (qtd. in Quarles 1971: 193).
- By end of the year, membership of the Ku Klux Klan has reached one hundred thousand.(Quarles 1971: 192).
- According to Ben Quarles, there are over 20 races riots in this year.
- Marcus Loew, a (white) nickelodeon owner in possession of a chain of theatres, moves into production, acquiring Metro, and then buys Goldwyn Pictures (a production company).
- Black and white troops return to America.

1920

- Release of Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*, *Symbol of the Unconquered* and *The Brute*.

1921

- Release of Micheaux's *The Hypocrite*, *The Shadow* and *The Gunsaulus Mystery*.
- The Renaissance Theatre in Harlem is bought by a black entrepreneur.
- The Afro-American Film Exhibitors Company is set up in Kansas City. It distributes, rather than produces, black films. Among its products is the first film to be produced by a black woman in the United States, *A Woman's Error*, directed and produced by Tressie Saunders (Sampson 1995:188).
- Founding of (black) Monumental Pictures Corporation which makes newsreels for black theatres between 1921 and 1923(Sampson 1995: 189).
- Richard Norman(director of the race movie *The Flying Ace*) writes that there are 121 theatres that will use an 'exclusive colored product,' 84% of which have an average of only 250 seats, and many of which are at present closed. He contrasts this with the 22,000 white theatres in the country (Jane Gaines 2001: 305 n38).

1922

- Release of Micheaux's *The Virgin of the Seminole*, *Fool's Errand* and *The Dungeon*.
- The Hays Code issues its recommendations, including the prohibition of (racial) name-calling and miscegenation (Cripps 1977: 119).
- Richard Norman writes that there now exist 354 black theatres in the United States with an average seating capacity of 250 but that many are closed at present and, in any case, he can do business with only 84 theatres, 'a condition due to opposition and petty jealousy among the negro theatres'(qtd. in Jane Gaines 2001: 305 n38).

1923

- Release of Micheaux's *Jasper Landry's Will*, *Deceit* and *The Ghost of Tolston's Manor*.
- Collapse of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company.

1924

- Release of Micheaux's *Son of Satan*, *The House Behind the Cedars* and *Birthright*.

- Oscar Micheaux's *Son of Satan* banned by Board of Censors, Norfolk, Virginia (Sampson 1995: 16). New York censors object to the mulatto villains' corruption being attributed to his white inheritance and the film's reference to miscegenation (Jane Gaines 2001: 234). An intertitle from *Birthright* reading 'Legal-hell-anything a white man wants to pull over on a nigger is legal' is cut by New York and Chicago censors (Jane Gaines 2001: 235).
- Black citizens of Seattle, Washington petition the mayor for the appointment of a black member to the city's movie board of censors (Sampson 1995: 16).

1925

- Release of *The Devil's Disciple* (though some claim it was released in 1926), *Marcus Garland* and *Body and Soul*.
- Micheaux travels to Europe to promote the distribution of his films. *The Brute* is released in Sweden as *Mr Bull Magee* (Sampson 1995: 16).
- *The House Behind the Cedars* breaks all attendance records at the (black) Roosevelt Theatre in New York City (no figure given) (Sampson 1995:16).
- The Ku Klux Klan gets government approval to stage a march in Washington D.C., walking past the White House (Quarles 1971: 192).
- Marcus Garvey, a black founder of the Back-to-African movement is arrested and convicted of defrauding the public, bigamy, and owing eight thousand dollars to a former officer in his organisation.
- The Elkhorn Baptist Association argues that '60 percent of the fallen women attribute their downfall to the [jazz] dance, mostly the public dance hall' (qtd. in Waller 1995: 230).
- Adolph Zukor merges with Balaban and Katz (a Chicago-based theatre chain that virtually controlled mid-western exhibition) leading the way to what Bordwell and Thompson refer to as the first vertically integrated firm with a truly national theatre chain.

1926

- Release of Micheaux's *The Conjure Woman*,

1927

- Release of Micheaux's *The Phantom of Kenwood*, *The Spider's Web*, *The Millionaire*, and *The Broken Violin*.
- Premiere of *Showboat* on stage.
- Release of the first 'talkie,' *The Jazz Singer*.
- Release of *Topsy and Eva*, a variation on *Uncle Tom's cabin*, by Universal Pictures.
- Release of Universal's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, starring black actor James B Lowe.
- The emergence of all-black cast, two reelers produced by the Hollywood studios, mainly featuring jazz performers to the screen. For example, Warner Brothers financed *St. Louis Blues* (1929), a short directed by Dudley Murphy, starring Bessie Smith. According to Cripps (1977) these shorts were very popular, though he does not specify with whom.
- Organisation of the (black) Rosebud Film Corporation, based in Hollywood. It has one release, *Absent* (1928). One of Micheaux's former road managers, Ira McGowan is in charge of distribution, along with the *Chicago Defender* columnist, D. Ireland Thomas (Sampson 1995: 191).

1928

- Micheaux Film Company files for bankruptcy on February 28 (according to George Johnson's files). The company's liabilities were listed at \$7,837 and assets were recorded as totalling \$1,400 (Jane Gaines, 2001: 120).
- Release of Micheaux's *The Wages of Sin*, *Dark Princess* and *Thirty Years Later*.
- Founding of (black) Paragon Pictures Corporation. Initially housed in Long Island where it had a studio it moves to Harlem in 1933. Produced many features and musicals and, according to Sampson (1995) was listed in the leading motion picture journals, an unusual feat for a black-controlled company at the time. Distributes Oscar Micheaux's final feature film, *The Betrayal*.

1929

- Micheaux establishes a new film company, called the Micheaux Film Corporation.
- Release of Micheaux's *When Men Betray*.
- *Wages of Sin* temporarily banned by the Chicago Board of Censors (Sampson 1995: 17).
- Release of Fox-Movietone's *Hearts in Dixie* and MGM's *Hallelujah!*, both of which were the studios' first full length all-black cast movies.
- The Wall Street Crash occurs, leading into the Great Depression

1930

- Release of Micheaux's *Easy Street*, *Daughter of the Congo* and *Darktown Scandals*
- Release of *Check and Double Check*, a vehicle for Amos 'n' Andy that flopped at the box office despite their huge popularity on radio. Introduction of Hollywood's intra-studio self-censorship board, the Production Code.

1931

- Release of *Darktown Revue/Review* and Micheaux's first 'talkie,' *The Exile* which premiered in New York City, March 14 according to Sampson (1995: 18)

1932

- Release of Micheaux's *Black Magic*, *Ten Minutes to Live* a.k.a. *Ten Minutes to Kill*, *Veiled Aristocrats* and *The Girl from Chicago*.
- The screening of *The Exile* is halted in New York City due to objections to an apparently inter-racial marriage (Sampson 1995: 18).
- Evelyn Preer, the heroine in Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* and *The Brute* dies.
- 21 movie players leave for Moscow to appear in a Russian film depicting Negro life in racially segregated America. The production of the film is later cancelled by the Russians (Sampson 1995: 18).

- Election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt for President. He promises a ‘New Deal’ for Americans of all colour.

1933

- Release of *The Emperor Jones*, starring Paul Robeson with a mainly black cast, based on the Eugene O’Neill play.

1934

- Release of Universal’s *Imitation of Life*.
- The Studio Relation Committee is replaced with the much stricter Production Code Authority, responsible for reviewing 95% of US-exhibited films (Cook 1987: 8).

1935

- Release of Micheaux’s *Lem Hawkins’ Confession* a.k.a. *Murder in Harlem*, one of the few race movies released that year, according to Sampson (1995: 18).

1936

- Release of Micheaux’s *Temptation*
- Release of Warner Brothers’ *Green Pastures*.
- Release of *Showboat* (Universal).
- The *Amsterdam News* is bought by two West Indian physicians, Phillip M.H. Savory and Clelan Bethan Powell. Under this new management the paper becomes semi-weekly, instead of weekly, and is the first African American newspaper to have all of its departments unionised. (http://www.pubs.org/blackpress/news_bios/nwsppr/amsterdam/astrdm.html)

1937

- Release of Micheaux’s *Underworld* and *Miracle of Harlem*.

- Approximately 250 theatres in the United States cater to blacks (Sampson 1995: 19).

1938

- Release of Micheaux's *Swing!* and *God's Stepchildren*
- Black screen actors demand that Charles Butler, the first black casting director in Hollywood, be retained by the main office at Central Casting Bureau, Hollywood.
- *God's Stepchildren* is picketed by the Young Communists' League in New York City.

1939

- Release of Micheaux's *Birthright* and *Lying Lips*.
- Pickets led by Communists, the New England Congress of Colored Youth, the South End Progressive Club and the New England Congress for Equal Opportunities at various screening of *God's Stepchildren*.
- Release of *Gone with the Wind* (Selznick/MGM).

1940

- Release of Micheaux's *Notorious Elinor Lee*. According to Sampson (1995) this is the last film released under the banner of the Micheaux Film Corporation.
- Hattie McDaniel becomes the first African American to win an Academy Award (for her role as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*).

1941

- Micheaux's novel, *The Wind from Nowhere*, is published (by 1943 it has run into its fourth edition).
- United States enter World War II.

1946

- Publication of Micheaux's novel, *The Story of Dorothy Stanfield, Based on a Great Insurance Scandal, and a Woman.*
- William D. Alexander, the only black director and producer to cross over into Hollywood from race movies, founds the Associated Producers of Negro Pictures. It has several releases (Sampson 1995: 198).

1947

- Publication of Micheaux's *The Masquerade: An Historical Novel.*

1948

- Release of Micheaux's final film, *The Betrayal*, distributed by Astor Pictures, based on his novel *The Wind from Nowhere*. It bankrupts him. He retires.

1951

- Micheaux dies.
-

1964

- In July the Congress of Racial Equality report that they have found no theatres in which theatre owners enforce audience segregation.

* For more detailed information on Micheaux's films see Appendix Two.

Appendix Two

Micheaux Filmography

1919 - *The Homesteader* (d, p, w)¹

Not viewed. A semi-autobiographical tale penned by Micheaux in which the African American Jean Baptiste meets and falls in love with the white Agnes in South Dakota. Resigned to the fact that they cannot be married due to social barriers, Jean Baptiste returns to the East, marries the black daughter of a minister, Orlean. The minister, Justine McCarthy takes offence at his son-in-law's refusal to praise him and organises a hate campaign against Jean Baptiste that results in the insanity of Orlean, her murder of her father and her eventual suicide. Jean Baptiste returns to South Dakota, learns that Agnes is, in fact, black. They marry and live happily ever after (synopsis from the AFI Catalogue of Ethnicity in American Feature Films).

1920 - *Within Our Gates* (d,p)

Viewed. According to Peterson this was also known as *Circumstantial Evidence*)

The narrative follows Sylvia Landry in her quest to find financial backing in Chicago for a Southern school for black children. In the process she meets and falls in love with Dr Vivian. In an extended flashback sequence we see the lynching of her parents by a frenzied white mob in the south and her own lucky escape due to the fact that a would-be (white) rapist recognised her as his daughter from an earlier 'legitimate marriage' to an African American woman.

1920 - *The Brute* (d,p,w)

Not viewed. According to *The International Film Index, 1895-1990*, this should be dated 1925. According to Henry Sampson, it was released in Sweden under the title of *Mr Bull Magee*. The film tells the tale of Herbert Lanyon and his fiancée, Mildred Carson. Lanyon is presumed dead after a shipwreck and his fiancée is forced by her aunt to marry a gambling underworld boss called Bull Magee. After Lanoyon's return Magee experiences financial difficulties, blames them on Mildred and Lanyon and swears revenge. Lanyon and Mildred's aunt succeed in freeing Mildred from Magee and the old lovers get happily married. Contains a subplot about a boxer in Magee's employ (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1920 - *Symbol of the Unconquered* (d,p,w)

Viewed. According to *The International Film Index, 1895-1990*, its pre-release title was *The Wilderness Trail*. The narrative focuses on three light-skinned African Americans: Hugh Van Allen a prospector/farmer; Driscoll, a hotel owner who passes for white and

¹ d signifies director, p stands for producer, and w represents writer. This information is solely dependent on the internet site IMDb and I've included it so as to show the discrepancy between one source and another. For example, IMDb claims that while Micheaux directed and produced *The Girl from Chicago*, they do not list him as scriptwriter, despite the opening credits on the film that assert that 'Story, Adaptation and Dialogue: by Oscar Micheaux.' No other sources have made the distinction in their filmographies, leaving the reader to assume that Micheaux wrote, produced and directed all of his feature. Also, in my filmography we see the difficulty in compiling a definitive filmography of Micheaux's work as so many sources contain conflicting information.

hates black people to the point that he has joined the Ku Klux Klan; and Eve, about whom the narrative is unclear - is she attempting to pass for white? By the end of the narrative, Van Allen has struck oil, realised that Eve is not white and is set to live happily ever after and Driscoll is killed. As the film is missing some scenes around Driscoll's death the restored version has had to borrow from a contemporary film review that explained that Driscoll was murdered by his own branch of the Ku Klux Klan.

1921 - *The Hypocrite* (IMDb has no record of this film)
Not viewed. Henry Sampson has recorded it as a 1922 release

1921 - *The Shadow* (IMDb has no record of this film)
Not viewed. The only reference I have found to this film is its inclusion in a Micheaux filmography in *The International Film Index, 1895-1990*)

1921 - *The Gunsaulus Mystery* (d,p,w)
Not viewed. Henry Sampson claims that this film is a silent version of *Lem Hawkins' Confession*, featuring a different cast. He's right. This contains the same plot as the second half of *Lem Hawkins' Confession* a.k.a. *Murder in Harlem* (1932). A girl is found dead in a factory and an innocent man, Arthur Gilpin, is charged with her murder. His sister, Ida May, engages an ex-suitor, Sidney Wyeth, as lawyer to defend the man. Eventually the truth is revealed during the trial. The white factory owner, Anthony Brisbane, killed the girl and threatened the janitor, Lem Hawkins, not to divulge the truth. Hawkins names Brisbane as the killer in his testimony. Arthur is cleared, Sidney writes a novel, he and Ida May are reunited and live happily ever after.

1922 - *The Virgin of the Seminole* (d,p,w)
Not viewed.

1922 - *Fool's Errand* (IMDb has no record of this movie)
Not viewed. The only reference I have found to this is in Henry Sampson's source book. I suspect it is an alternative title for *Darktown Revue/Review*. It is mentioned at the back of the book under 'Micheaux Film Corporation.' Sampson does not indicate in what capacity Micheaux was involved.

1922 - *The Dungeon* (d)
Not viewed. Henry Sampson has noted that the screenplay was written by Micheaux. A girl, Myrtle Downing who is engaged to a young lawyer, Stephen Cameron, dreams that she has instead married an underworld boss, called Gyp Lassiter. In fact, she has, having been drugged and imprisoned in a dungeon by Lassiter. She learns from her new husband that he has been married several times, killing each of said wives as they attempted to escape their jail. Threatened that if she exposes him she will face a similar fate, Myrtle stays put in the dungeon. Meanwhile, Cameron has become discouraged, emigrated to Alaska and become rich. He becomes friendly with a prizefighter, Chick Barton, who

informs him of a new act that has allowed for blacks to run for office in his home town of Cartersville. Cameron returns home, competes with Lassiter for office, the latter of whom has agreed to allow racial segregation in return for his election. Myrtle learns of Lassiter's segregation plans, escapes and exposes him in the local press. Lassiter pursues her, brings her back to the dungeon with the intention of torturing and killing her only to be prevented by Cameron. Cameron kills Lassiter in the ensuing struggle (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1923 - *Jasper Landry's Will* (d,p,w)

Not viewed.

1923 - *Deceit* (d)

Not viewed. Alfred DuBois and his secretary form a film production company but run into difficulty with the censors on the release of their first film, *The Hypocrite*. The most vocal censor is a local minister who persuades the committee to ban the film. DuBois argues for a second viewing for a less biased committee. His wish is granted (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films). This appears to be autobiographical.

1923 - *The Ghost of Tolston's Manor* (IMDb has no record of this film)

Not viewed. According to the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films, this was the working title for *A Sons of Satan*, released the following year.

1924 - *A Son of Satan* (d,p,w)

Not viewed. According to Henry Sampson the cast of this feature included chorus of the Broadway hit, *Shuffle Along*. Centres around the experiences of a black man who stays in a haunted house overnight as the result of an argument. The New York State Archives describes it thus: 'This picture is filled with scenes of drinking, carousing and shows masked men becoming intoxicated. It shows the playing of crap for money, a man [Captain Tolston] killing his wife by choking her, the killing of the leader of the hooded organization and the killing of a cat by throwing stones at it.' (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1924 - *The House Behind the Cedars* (IMDb has no record of this)

Not viewed. According to *The International Film Index, 1895-1990*, this should be dated 1927. This is an adaptation of Charles Chesnutt's novel with one or two twists. A brother and sister pass for white. A white man proposes to the sister, she accepts but does not reveal her racial identity. Unhappy she returns to her former lover, Frank, who has risen to some power. She admits that although she fooled the world she did not fool herself (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1924 - *Birthright* (d)

Not viewed. Henry Sampson claims that the screenplay, written by Micheaux, was an adaptation of a novel written by T.B. Stribling. The only account I have found of this narrative (and the 1939 remake) is in Sampson's *Black in Black and White* (1995), but it is

an unfinished summary. An African American graduate, Peter Siner, arrives in Cairo, Illinois, planning to open a colored school. On his arrival he meets with a returned war veteran, Trump Pack.ⁱ Pack is welcomed by the community but then arrested on a four year old charge of shooting craps by the constable Dobbs. Soon after Dobbs sets Peter up for a petty crime. Peter meets and falls in love with Cissie, who happens to be the girlfriend of Trump Pack. Siner and a local lodge raise a thousand dollars and buy a plot of land only to discover that the papers Siner signed in the sale had a clause prohibiting the occupation of African Americans on the land. He is angrily discredited by the community, with the exception of Cissie who supports him still. Trump Pack learns of the relationship between Cissie and Peter and beats the latter. Later, on his way to shoot Peter, Trump is arrested and sent to work on a chain gang. Peter and Cissie get engaged and soon after Peter's mother, with whom he lives, dies. He is visited by a wealthy old white man and goes to live with him. The night before the scheduled wedding, Cissie tells Peter that she is immoral and not fit to be his wife. The denouement of the film is not recorded by Sampson (284-285; 354-355).

1925 - *The Devil's Disciple* (IMDb has no record of this film)

Not viewed. Henry Sampson's filmography of Micheaux's work lists this film as a 1926 release. The narrative concerns a beautiful, vain African American woman, living in Harlem who falls in love with a degenerate, tries to reform him, fails and is dragged down because of him (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1925 - *Marcus Garland* (IMDb has no record of this film)

Not viewed. Believed to be a dramatisation of Marcus Garvey's corruption.

1925 - *Body and Soul* (d,p,w)

Viewed. This movie contains the film debut of Paul Robeson, in a dual role as twin brothers: one a lecherous, murderous sociopath posing as a minister, the other a mild inventor. We see a young girl called Isabelle, who is in love with the good brother, encouraged by her mother to accept the minister's attentions. The minister rapes her and, unwilling to tell her mother, Isabelle flees to the city. Months later the mother finds her, Isabelle reveals the true nature of the minister, then dies. The mother exposes him, he escapes (hiding in the mother's house and murdering a man in the process). The film closes on the mother waking up, declaring it was all a dream as Isabelle enters the house with her new husband- the good brother who has just been paid a fortune for some invention.

1926 - *The Conjure Woman* IMBd has no record of this movie)

Not viewed. This date has been attributed by *The International Film Index, 1895-1990*. Henry Sampson's filmography lists it as 1926, but does not indicate what Micheaux's part in the film's realisation was, listing it simply under 'Micheaux Film Corporation.'

1927 - *The Phantom of Kenwood* (IMDb has no record of this)

Not viewed. The only reference I have found to this is in Henry Sampson's source book. I suspect it is an alternative title for *Darktown Revue/Review*. It is mentioned at the back of the book under 'Micheaux Film Corporation.' Sampson does not indicate in what capacity Micheaux was involved.

1927 - *The Spider's Web* (d,p,w)

Not viewed. Henry Sampson argues that this is a silent version of *The Girl from Chicago* and the screenplay was based on an original story enacted by the Policy Players, but he does not record the author. Judging by the AFI catalogue's synopsis of the film, Sampson is correct in his description of its relation to *the Girl from Chicago*: the plot is identical as are the characters' names (see *Girl from Chicago* synopsis below).

1927 - *The Millionaire* (d,p,w)

Not viewed. An African American soldier of fortune moves to Argentina where, after fifteen years of hard work, he makes his fortune. He returns to New York, meets a woman who is in the grip of the underworld who tries to trap him into marriage. Her reforms her, defeats the criminals and teaches the girl to take pleasure in beauty and her own talents (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1927 - *The Broken Violin* (IMDb has no record of this film)

Not viewed. According to Henry Sampson, Micheaux's screenplay for this film was an adaptation of a novel entitled *House of Mystery*. Sampson does not note the author's name. The AFI catalogue claims that the source is a short story written by Micheaux entitled 'House of Mystery' but list no publication details. The narrative centres around a beautiful black, female violin prodigy, Lelia Cooper, daughter of a washerwoman and a drunkard. The father comes home one day to demand money. When his wife refuses to give him any he breaks Lelia's violin over her mother's head. Lelia's brother intervenes, then runs out, his father in pursuit. The father gets run over by a speeding truck in the chase, Lelia eventually achieves musical success and finds true love (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1928 - *The Wages of Sin* (d,p,w but IMDb list it as a 1929 release)

Not viewed. Henry Sampson argues that the screenplay for this movie was an adaptation of a novel entitled, *Alias Jefferson Lee*. He does not record the novel's author. Jane Gaines (2001) has written that this film is a dramatisation of Micheaux's bankruptcy, filed that year. A successful African American filmmaker employs his brother who steals money from the company leading to the filmmaker's financial difficulties. The filmmaker, Winston, fires his brother and sets about raising money for his next movie. He meets a woman, they plan to marry then she suddenly disappears. Winston re-employs his brother who intentionally sets out to destroy the business and betrays his brother. An 'unusual' character enters the situation, the denouement involves thrills and heroism (no details are available to fill out this section), there is a happy ending (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1928 - *Dark Princess* (IMDb has no record of this film)

Not viewed. The only reference I have found to this film is in Henry Sampson's source book.

1928 - *Thirty Years Later* (d,w)

Not viewed. Henry Sampson has claimed that the screenplay for this film was adapted by Micheaux from a stage drama *The Tangle*. Once again, Sampson has not noted the author's name. A mulatto, George Eldridge Van Paul, unaware of his black heritage falls in love with a black girl, Hester, who refuses his offer of marriage. Subsequently his mother reveals that he is half-black, he embraces his race and gets happily married to Hester.

1929 - *When Men Betray* (d,p,w but IMDb list it as a 1928 film)

Not viewed. A plot synopsis from the *New York Age* describes the movie thus: 'Briefly, it is the story of a beautiful girl, who was cold to the love of a good and ambitious young lad. Believing the rosy promises of a smooth-tongued stranger, she runs away and follows him to the city. The unhappiness and disaster which followed can easily be imagined. Deserted on her wedding night- alone, penniless, in a foreign city, left to the none too tender mercies of strangers. Her sad plight and the events which follow her desertion make a gripping, brutally frank, yet wonderfully, absorbing picture' (reprinted in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1930 - *Easy Street* (d,p,w but IMDb list it as a 1928 release)

Not viewed. An ad for the film describes this film as 'A sensational story of Love, Finance, Gang Life, City Slickers and their attempt to swindle an old man of honestly earned money. A plot sensational with Surprise, Action, Love, Suspence [sic.] and Intrigue' (quoted in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1930 - *A Daughter of the Congo* (d,p)

Not viewed. A mulatto, Lupelta, is stolen as a baby and reared by an Africna tribe. Years later, on a journey with her maid to visit her betrothed, the powerful chief Lodango, Lupelta is captured by Arab slave traders and transported to Liberia where she is eventually liberated by an American soldier. She is brought to a mission school where she thrives academically, although some of her 'native' ways still persist. Through diligence and beauty and intelligence she becomes one of the most popular girls in Monrovia (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1930 - *Darktown Scandals Revue* (not in IMDb's list)

Not viewed. The only reference I have found to this is in Henry Sampson's source book. I suspect it is an alternative title for *Darktown Revue/Review*. IT is mentioned at the back of the book under 'Micheaux Film Corporation.' Sampson does not indicate in what capacity Micheaux was involved.

1931 - *Darktown Revue/Review* (d,p,w)

Not viewed. I have seen both spellings of review in various articles.

1931 - *The Exile*(d,w, IMDb claims it is based on Micheaux's novel *The Conquest*)

Not viewed. Henry Sampson claims that this premiered at Ogden Theatre, New York City on March 14, 1931. A former maid, Edith Duval, plans to convert a disused mansion into a gambling den, to the horror of her respectable suitor, Jane Baptiste, who wants to take her to his farm in South Dakota. She refuses his offer. Five years later, having grown successful in his farming, Jean Baptiste seeks a helping hand from his white neighbours. The girl of that family, Agnes, is attracted to Jean Baptiste and he to her but as she is white he foresees difficulty if they marry and so breaks up with her. Miserable, Jean Baptiste returns to Chicago, proposes to Edith again in a misguided attempt to forget Agnes. Edith accepts his offer but is killed by an old lover, with Jean Baptiste accused of her murder. Agnes, hearing of this, decides to go to the city to Jean's help. Her father, hearing of her decision, tells her that she is of Ethiopian descent thus clearing the way for her to marry Jean, who by now has been cleared of the charge. Jean and Agnes set off to live happily ever after in South Dakota (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1932 - *Black Magic* (d,p,w)

Not viewed.

1932 - *Ten Minutes to Live* a.k.a. *Ten Minutes to Kill* (d,p,w)

Viewed. Garbled plot with many, many scenes of song and dance numbers in a nightclub.

1932 - *Veiled Aristocrats* (d,p)

Viewed. This film's screenplay was an adaptation of the Charles W. Chesnutt novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*. John Warwick, who has been passing since a teenager, returns home to convince his sister to join him. She is reluctant but her 'coal black' fiancé and mother convince her that she must try, even though she is doomed to be unhappy. She goes with her brother, months pass and receives a proposal of marriage from a prominent white man, George Tryon. She turns him down and returns home while her brother is out of the house. The maids in the house all know that she is passing and pity her in her misery. Contains scenes of song and dance numbers.

1932 - *The Girl from Chicago* (d,p)

Viewed. See notes on *The Spider's Web*. Federal agent, Alonzo White, comes to Batesburg to investigate a case of peonage perpetrated by a white man, Ballinger, against black workers. He meets Norma, recently graduated from high school. They fall in love. Ballinger is seen shooting his lover, Liza, when she threatens to inform on him. She survives. Alonzo convicts Ballinger of peonage and he, Norma and her landlady, Mary, move to Harlem. Mary loses money on the rackets until one day her numbers come up. As she goes to collect her winnings we see Liza shoot dead the underworld boss who runs the numbers racket. Mary arrives just afterward, is framed with the murder and put on trial. Alonzo goes under cover, exposes Liza as the murderer and saves Mary from the

electric chair. He marries Norma, they go the Bermuda and Mary goes back to Batesburg.(Contains many nightclub scenes of singing and dancing.

1934 - *Harlem After Midnight* (d,p,w)

Not viewed. Possibly another title for *Murder in Harlem*. I think this because Henry Sampson has noted this film marks Oscar Micheaux's only appearance as an actor, but he appears in *Murder in Harlem*.

Vivian Poret dates her employer's son, Nelson, while her gangster husband, Jerry 'the Snitch', is in jail. Nelson urges her to get an annulment so that they can get married. Jerry escapes from prison, meets Vivian who offers him her savings of \$500 in return for a divorce. He refuses, demanding ten times that amount. Meanwhile, Nelson's 'kept woman', Kate, has been dumped by Nelson and when she meets Jerry the two plot revenge against Vivian and her beau. Their revenge comes in the form of attempting to 'lead astray' Vivian's sister, Sacha, who is new to town. They involve their friend Harold in the plot. He poses as a decent person, befriends Vivian and her sister, all the while plotting the sale of Sacha to an old man 'for his pleasure.' Sacha discovers the truth before it is too late. By now, Kate has realised that Jerry is a 'reefer addict' and is keen to avoid him. However, the police are tipped off to raid Kate's house where they find a wealthy Jewish man that Jerry had imprisoned. Jerry escapes capture, tries once again to get money from Vivian but she refuses (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1935 - *Murder in Harlem* a.k.a. *Lem Hawkin's Confession* (d,w)

Viewed. According to Henry Sampson, the pre-production title for this movie was *The Brand of Cain*. Also, see notes from *The Gunsaulus Mystery*. A young black woman meets a struggling lawyer as he attempts to sell his novel door to door. Due to misunderstandings, they are parted despite their evident interest in each other. Years later, he is still struggling as a lawyer when she comes for his help in proving that her brother did not commit a murder. Through his investigation and the testimony of the janitor, Lem Hawkins, the lawyer discovers that a white factory owner is the culprit. They win the case and live happily ever after.

1936 - *Temptation* (d,p,w but listed on IMDb as a 1935 film)

Not viewed. No contemporary information has been found on this film but according to the AFI catalogue the plot concerns a light skinned model who attempts to change her life and live morally, despite her previous connection to the underworld. Apparently the film had a budget of \$15,000, with \$2,000 paid to the actors.

1937 - *Underworld* (d,p,w)

Viewed. In the film's opening credits it states that the screenplay is based on a story by Edna Mae Baker entitled *Chicago After Midnight*. A promising student, Paul, is lured to Chicago's underworld by a friend. He becomes involved with a prostitute, Dinah, but eventually leaves her for a 'good' girl, Evelyn, who runs her own beauty parlour that he knew at college. The prostitute frames him for a murder that she has committed, kills her maid when the latter reproaches her, then gets killed in a crash with a train. The student is

cleared and lives happily ever after with the 'good' girl. Includes several singing and dancing scenes, discrete from the plot.

1937 - *Miracle in Harlem* (not listed in IMDb)

Not viewed. The only reference I have found to this film is its inclusion in a Micheaux filmography in *The International Film Index, 1895-1990*.

1938 - *Swing!* (d,p,w, but listed as a 1939 release by IMDb)

Viewed. According to *The International Film Index, 1895-1990*, this should be dated 1936. Mandy, betrayed by her lover with another woman, leaves her home town and goes to the city where she works in a nightclub as a seamstress, living with the club's secretary. The star of the show gets drunk, breaks her leg and cannot perform. Mandy is drafted to sing in the star's place, she's a huge success and the show moves to Broadway. Her ex-lover returns to her and is threatened with a bullet in the head by the secretary if he doesn't treat Mandy well in the future. Contains many scenes of song and dance numbers.

1938 - *God's Stepchildren* (d,p but listed by IMDb as a 1937 release)

Viewed. Naomi, a light skinned foundling, is fostered by a dark skinned woman and her son Jimmy. Naomi hates her colour and attempts to pass as white while still a child. She also starts a whispering campaign against her school teacher when the latter chastises her for being spiteful and cruel. To punish Naomi and in the hope that she will improve with time, Naomi's foster mother sends her off to a convent school. Many years pass. Finished school, Naomi returns to her foster mother's house, falls in love with Jimmy, is forced by him and his mother to marry a (dark skinned) half-wit. She has a child with him but, unable to stand the marriage she leaves the child with her mother and goes to pass in the white world. Years pass, Naomi returns to her family home, peers through the window at her unknowing mother, Jimmy, his wife, their children and her own son happily sitting in the parlour. She walks to a tall bridge and jumps off to her death. Contains a few nightclub scenes.

1939 - *Birthright* (d,p,w)

Not viewed. According to the AFI catalogue of ethnicity in feature films, this film's subtitle was 'A story of the Negro and the South.' Based on same narrative as the earlier version.

1939 - *Lying Lips* (d,p,w)

Viewed. A singer as a nightclub, Elsie, refuses to 'escort' some of the club owner's seedy male friends. She is defended in her decision by a bouncer, Hednott, at the club who is fired for his efforts. She and he get friendly, go on a few dates. She is prepared to 'keep him' if he can't find another job. He wants to join the police force. One night, Elsie's aunt, who lives with the girl, is murdered. Elsie is charged with the crime. Hednott and a black policeman investigate. Discover that in fact it is an ex-lover who shot the aunt, a fact that has been covered up by the ex-lover's wife, Mrs Green. Hednott and the policeman take one of Mrs Green's hench-men to a 'haunted' house and threaten to leave

him there overnight at the mercy of ghosts unless he confesses the truth. The henchman tells all: Mr Green asked Mrs Green for a divorce. She refused. He said that he would go ask Elsie's aunt to run away with him and if she refused he would shoot her dead and then kill himself. Later, Mrs Green found a note written by her husband saying that he did it and was off to kill himself. She hid it and framed Elsie (there's no reason give but perhaps it is because it was her party that Elsie refused to join at the opening of the film).. Elsie is freed, she marries Hednott and they invest \$15,000 that she has saved in a trust fund to educate their children.

1940 - *Notorious Elinor Lee* (d,p,w)

Not viewed. A gangster's moll, Elinor Lee, has a prizefighter on a ten year contract. She conspires with other criminals to build him up and then force him to take a dive against the champion Wagner, winning them half a million dollars. Elinor also sets up a sweetheart, Fredi, for the fighter, Benny Blue. Benny fights well, then after celebrating with Fredi loses his next fight, against Wagner. This leads to his downfall, reduced to fighting anyone who will give him the opportunity. Eventually he begins to gain success and is offered a second chance but Fredi has been coerced by Elinor to make Benny throw the fight. Responding to Benny's claim that his love for her can overcome her troubles, Fredi admits that she is an ex-convict and afraid of Elinor. The big rematch against Wagner comes and reporters bet on 'Blue Dynamite vs. Aryan mentality.' Benny wins and Elinor and her cohorts are ruined (synopsis based on that given in the AFI catalogue of Ethnicity in feature films).

1948 - *The Betrayal* (d,p,w)

Not viewed. IMDb claim it is based on the novel *The Wind from Nowhere* by Micheaux. The narrative is loosely the same as the *The Homesteader*.

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Filmography

Directed and Produced by Oscar Micheaux

The Betrayal (1948)

Birthright (1924)

Birthright (1939)

Black Magic (1932)

Body and Soul (1925)

The Broken Violin (1927)

The Brute (1920)

The Conjure Woman (1926)

Dark Princess (1928)

Darktown Scandals Revue (1930)

Darktown Revue/Review (1931)

A Daughter of the Congo (1930)

Deceit (1923)

The Devil's Disciple (1925)

The Dungeon (1922)

Easy Street (1930)

The Exile (1931)

Fool's Errand (1922)

The Girl from Chicago (1932)

The Ghost of Tolston's Manor (1923)

God's Stepchildren (1938)

The Gunsaulus Mystery (1921)

Harlem After Midnight (1934) Possibly another title for *Murder in Harlem*.

The Homesteader (1919)

The House Behind the Cedars (1924)

The Hypocrite (1921)

Jasper Landry's Will (1923)
Lying Lips (1939)
Marcus Garland (1925)
The Millionaire (1927)
Miracle in Harlem (1937)
Murder in Harlem a.k.a. *Lem Hawkin's Confession* (1935)
Notorious Elinor Lee (1940)
The Phantom of Kenwood (1927)
The Shadow (1921)
A Son of Satan (1924)
The Spider's Web (1927)
Swing! (1938)
Symbol of the Unconquered (1920)
Temptation (1936)
Ten Minutes to Live a.k.a. *Ten Minutes to Kill* (1932)
Thirty Years Later (1928)
Underworld (1937)
Veiled Aristocrats (1932)
The Virgin of the Seminole (1922)
The Wages of Sin (1928)
When Men Betray (1928/9)
Within Our Gates (1920). According to Peterson this was also known as
Circumstantial Evidence)

Secondary Sources

Birth of a Nation (1915) Director D.W. Griffith, D.W. Griffith Corporation.
Blue Dahlia (1946) Director George Marshall, Paramount.
Borderline (1935) Director Kenneth McPherson, Pool Films.
Broken Blossoms (1919) Director D.W. Griffith, United Artists/D.W. Griffith.

Check And Double Check (1930) Director Melville Brown, RKO.

The Debt (1916) Director unknown, Rex Company.

Ganja and Hess (1973) Director Bill Gunn, Kelly-Jordan Studio.

Gone With the Wind (1939) Director Victor Fleming, Selznick/MGM.

Green Pastures (1936) Director Marc Connelly, Warner Brothers.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? (1967) Stanley Kramer, Columbia Studio.

Hearts in Dixie (1929) Director Paul Sloane, Fox-Movietone.

Hallelujah! (1929) Director King Vidor, MGM.

Imitation of Life (1934) Director John M Stahl, Universal.

In the Heat of the Night (1967) Director Norman Jewison, MGM/United Artists.

It's a Wonderful Life (1946) Director Frank Capra, Liberty Films.

Maltese Falcon (1941) Director John Huston, Warner Brothers

A Man's Duty (1920), Director unknown, Lincoln Films.

Mr Deed Goes to Town (1936) Director Frank Capra, Columbia.

Mr Smith Goes to Washington (1939) Director Frank Capra, Columbia.

St. Louis Blues (1927) Director Dudley Murphy, Sack Studios.

Shaft (1971) Director Gordon Parks, MGM.

Showboat (1936) Director James Whale, Universal.

Stella Dallas (1937) Director King Vidor, United Artists.

Stop! (1970) Director Bill Gunn, Warner Brothers.

Superfly (1972) Gordon Parks, Jr., Warner Brothers.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971) Director Melvin Van Peebles, Distributor Cinemation.

Tales of Manhattan (1942) Director Julien Duvivier, Twentieth Century Fox.

These Three (1936) William Wyler, United Artists.

They Won't Forget (1937) Director Mervyn LeRoy, Warner Brothers.

Trooper of Troop K (1916), Johnson Brothers, Lincoln Motion Pictures.

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1907) Vitagraph.

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1927) Director Harry Pollard, Universal.

Way Down East (1920) Director D.W. Griffith, United Artists.