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Oscar Micheaux's Cinematic Legacy: Through the Eyes of Contemporary Black Newspapers

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Rachel Elizabeth Rosenfeld

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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## Chapter I: Introduction

“One of the greatest tasks of my life has been to convince a certain class of my racial acquaintances that a colored man can be anything” – Oscar Micheaux<sup>1</sup>

Equality is a long-enshrined ideal of American democracy, but was never truly a reality for millions of African Americans during the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Several generations out of slavery, memories of past inequalities and injustices remained fresh in the minds of survivors and their descendants. Through building communities, they not only created havens from racial prejudices enforced by the Jim Crow laws, but also enabled the celebration of their culture, often disregarded by much of the white populace. Black newspapers and race films were cornerstones of these emerging black communities. These forms of mass media united the disparate black public scattered across the United States in ways no previous media could.

One of the most successful African American filmmakers of the twentieth century, Oscar Micheaux, stood testament to this vibrant community as well as the intersections of mass media and black America. For over three decades, his motion pictures and novels fought “against [the] white racist caricature and stereotype” of black culture that permeated American society.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, of the forty-three films he produced, less than fifteen survive.<sup>4</sup> This limitation led

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Micheaux, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (Lincoln: The Woodruff Press, 1913), 145.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of this paper I use the following terms “African American” and “black” interchangeably to refer to Americans of black African descent. I also refer to newspapers published by and written for twentieth-century African American audiences as the “black press” and “African American press” as well as the “Negro press” because this was the terminology used by the papers themselves.

<sup>3</sup> J. Ronald Green, *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 118.

<sup>4</sup> A primary cause of this dilemma was the fact old film’s nitrate film base were highly flammable and naturally deteriorated when improperly stored. Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2002), 96.

past film historians to focus their scholarship on Micheaux's surviving films and, but these historians neglected contemporary black newspapers as additional key sources of contextual information. As time progresses, the ever-increasing digitization of black newspapers grants historians easier access to these important resources and in turn more opportunities to incorporate newspaper analysis into their research. The newspapers were integral to Micheaux's professional successes and failures. As a director and pioneer of black cinema he was vital to sustaining and promoting black popular culture, and contextualizing the experiences of his audiences is key to understanding this period. Since no extensive research details his connection to the black press throughout his entire career, this thesis serves as a case study on the evolution of Micheaux's popularity and press coverage during his silent film *and* sound film career. Ultimately, a detailed analysis of the relationship between Micheaux and contemporary black newspapers sheds light on the trends of his career and serves as a reflection of African American audiences' reception and opinions of early twentieth-century cinema.

## Chapter II: Contextualizing Micheaux's World

It is impossible to fully understand Micheaux's impact on American culture without first “recognizing the period of history which served as background to his colorful and turbulent life.”<sup>5</sup> Micheaux was born less than twenty years after Reconstruction yet just before the rise of twentieth-century modernism. Thus, the African American experience of his era was greatly impacted by post-Reconstruction retrenchment and the great urban migrations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James Earl Young, *The Life and Work of Oscar Micheaux: Pioneer Black Author and Filmmaker* (San Francisco: KMT Publications, 2003), 15.

<sup>6</sup> For works that focus on these major themes in American history, consult *The Promise Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* by Nicholas Lemann from 1991 and *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* by Jacqueline Stewart from 2005. Nicholas Lemann, *The Promise Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).; Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

The end of Reconstruction brought a restoration of segregationist policies and white supremacy across the South. The sharecropping system restricted black autonomy by financially hobbling farmers while the Ku Klux Klan intimidated and violently lynched hundreds of African Americans. Prejudice still existed in the north, but the racial landscape of the Jim Crow South led millions of southern blacks to migrate northward in search of new economic opportunities, and improved racial conditions primarily in urban areas.

Historians classify this period as the “First Great Migration,” and, over time, major cities such as Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York City became centers of migration for freed slaves. These industrial capitals consistently required new sources of labor, and African Americans satisfied the shortages, particularly those caused by five million workers leaving to serve in the armed forces during World War I.<sup>7</sup> Peak movement occurred between 1910 and 1920 “when [the] northern population of African Americans jumped from 79,000 to 227,000.”<sup>8</sup> By 1930, New York's black population nearly tripled since 1900.<sup>9</sup> In addition to new jobs, the city environment provided an ever-growing black public with spaces for urban culture to thrive.<sup>10</sup> Micheaux flourished in these emerging black cultural centers, and the black press proved key to the foundation of these urban communities as they documented and promoted these changes.

Micheaux's contemporaries relied heavily on the black press to “create, maintain, and mold the black communities it has served.”<sup>11</sup> These newspapers flourished because they offered African Americans the forum to create a collective consciousness founded on racial solidarity.

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<sup>7</sup> Young, *The Life and Work of Oscar Micheaux*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> The Harlem Renaissance occurred later, but was an equally important product of these urban centers because it was the socio-cultural culmination of the First Great Migration.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Finkelman and Cary D. Wintz, *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance: A-J* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 649.

They successfully connected individuals with news about millions of blacks outside their community. Beyond crime or sports, the white press rarely covered news of the black community, creating a highly biased and limited perception of black America in the popular media.<sup>12</sup> In retrospect, African American journalist Vernon Jarrett recalled:

We didn't exist in other papers... we were neither born, we didn't get married, we didn't die... we were truly invisible unless we committed a crime. But in the black press... we did get married, they showed our babies being born, they showed us graduating, they showed our Ph.D.s.<sup>13</sup>

In his lifetime, Jarrett worked for both the *Chicago Defender* and the *Chicago Tribune*, and his account vocalized widely-held desires for coverage of black organizations, events, and achievements the white press purposefully neglected. The white press' selectivity unintentionally drove up circulation of the Negro press, making it the most influential and powerful informational outlet for the black community.

Beginning with the establishment of New York City's *Freedom's Journal* in 1827, dozens of independently-owned black papers cropped up across the states. These newspapers not only recorded black history as it happened, but also made it happen because it created “a tremendous power of suggestion.”<sup>14</sup> Several of the most influential newspapers of Micheaux's time were the *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Afro-American*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This bias perception related to W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of “twoness” in *The Souls of Black Folk*. African Americans like Micheaux struggled with their “double consciousness” because they were “always looking at one's self through the eyes” of racist white America and “measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 123.

<sup>14</sup> Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American 1892-1950* (Westport: Praeger, 1998), xii.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to focusing on these national newspapers, this thesis also focuses on other widely circulated papers such as the *New York Age*, *New York Amsterdam News*, and *Norfolk Journal and Guide*.

In Micheaux's case, the newspapers not only provided his film advertisements with the greatest public exposure to his strongest audience, but the critics' reviews also kept him relevant in the minds of his movie-going public. The press provided audiences and filmmakers with a space for conversing in ways no other media of the time could. Tracking the paper trail of Micheaux provides historians with tangible evidence of his reception that can then be used to formulate trends of Micheaux's successes and failures throughout his film career.<sup>16</sup>

Film serves as a reflection of society, and during the twentieth century, America's divisions within the world of cinema mirrored the racial divide of the country. Cinema's predecessors – vaudeville, tent shows, and minstrel shows – created a destructive pattern of stereotyping, belittling, and ridiculing of black Americans that Hollywood perpetuated. Classical Hollywood was an oligopoly dominated by white men, and their “racial attitudes and ... movies reflected much of the racial temper” of many white Americans.<sup>17</sup> Thus, racism permeated the industry and black actors were rarely hired to portray their own race on screen.<sup>18</sup> White actors frequently donned blackface and created racist caricatures such as Uncle Tom, the Coon, Mammy, and the Tragic Mulatto. Each of these stereotypes “failed to provide fully human roles for black characters” and further marginalized African Americans across the country.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It is also important to note the literacy rates of Micheaux's audience. The National Center for Education Statistics states 23% of blacks were illiterate in 1920, and this number decreased to 16.4% in 1930 and 11.5% by 1940. Thus, literacy rates increased overtime, leading to a larger audience for Micheaux in the black press. “120 Years of Illiteracy,” *The National Center for Education Statistics*, Accessed March 1, 2017, [https://nces.ed.gov/naal/lit\\_history.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/naal/lit_history.asp).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 90.

<sup>18</sup> Film historian Donald Bogle calculated that in 1930, only 128 actors in Hollywood were black compared to 4,451 white actors. Furthermore, of the 1,106 managers, directors, and officials in Hollywood, “only 3 were black, and none were writers, directors, or producers.” Dwight Bogle, *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood* (New York: Ballantine, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Dan Flory, “Race, Rationality, and Melodrama: Aesthetic Response and the Case of Oscar Micheaux,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2005): 327.



A black underground emerged outside the major studios of Hollywood; this growing genre of race pictures provided African Americans with opportunities for racial and entrepreneurial expression. Unlike Hollywood, race pictures offered black audiences a chance to “work out their identity as American citizens and thereby to provide a realistic and autonomous model of African American citizenship.... [that was not] constantly blocked by the pervasiveness of ethnic, rube-like images.”<sup>20</sup>

Between 1915-1950, filmmakers produced approximately five hundred race films primarily in northern cities, including New York and Chicago.<sup>21</sup> Throughout this period, African American motion picture producers faced a plethora of obstacles, including paltry financing, unfair censorship, segregated theatres, limited bookings, poor distribution channels, amateurish acting, technical inadequacies, and inexperienced crews. Any one of these impediments could have ended race cinema -- but the genre survived. It succeeded because its black audiences yearned for screen images that reflected themselves, that were more representative of their lives. Contrary to segregated white theatres which rarely showed race pictures, race theatres were “spaces of agency and a site of community.”<sup>22</sup> These theatres provided black audiences with safe spaces where they celebrated cultural identity on screen.<sup>23</sup> As a prominent visionary of the race film, Oscar Micheaux brought the black experience to life in the burgeoning media of cinema.

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<sup>20</sup> Green, *Straight Lick*, 131.

<sup>21</sup> Alison McMahan, *Alice Guy Blaché: Lost Visionary of the Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 148.

<sup>22</sup> Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Press University, 2000), 63.

<sup>23</sup> In accordance with segregation laws, most race films were screened in designated black theatres in predominantly black neighborhoods. On rare occasion, segregated white theatres screened race films, but only during less popular time-slots such as matinees or at midnight. Cara Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 70-72.

Oscar Micheaux was born on January 2, 1884 in Metropolis, Illinois. He was the fifth child of a former slave, Calvin Micheaux and his wife Belle.<sup>24</sup> According to Micheaux's writings, he received good grades in school, but “was continually critiqued for talking too much and being too inquisitive.”<sup>25</sup> After his family ran into financial troubles and relocated to a farm, the seventeen-year-old Micheaux moved to Chicago. He supported himself through odd jobs like shoe shining before eventually securing work as a Pullman Porter for the major railroads. This was a prestigious employment opportunity for African Americans because it paid well, required travel, and for Micheaux, connected him with wealthy passengers and a greater knowledge of business.

In 1904, Micheaux left the railroads and invested in a business venture he learned about during his Pullman Porter years: homesteading. He moved to the newly opened Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota and became the only colored farmer in Gregory County. Over time, he earned the respect and trust of his white counterparts by disproving the misconception “the Negro when faced with hardships of homesteading, would opt for the 'ease and comfort' of the city.”<sup>26</sup> These homesteading years were incredibly formative for Micheaux and inspired his autobiographical novels and films.<sup>27</sup> An agriculturist turned author, Micheaux began selling his books door-to-door in 1913, and eventually grabbed the attention of the Johnson Brothers'

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux: The Great and Only: The Life of America's First Black Filmmaker* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 2007), 5.

<sup>25</sup> McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux: The Great and Only: The Life of America's First Black Filmmaker*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Booker T. Washington was also a self-made man who continually fought oppression by promoting racial uplift through education and entrepreneurship. Micheaux came of age during the height of Washington's career and his ideology clearly influenced the filmmaker. In 1924, Micheaux told the *Pittsburgh Courier*, “It is only by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my pictures in the light and background of their true state, that I can raise our people to greater heights. I am too much imbued with the spirit of Booker T. Washington to engraft false virtues upon ourselves.” “Oscar Micheaux Writes on Growth of Race in Movie Field,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 13, 1924, 10.

Lincoln Motion Picture Company with his 1917 novel, *The Homesteader*.<sup>28</sup> The Johnsons hoped to adapt the novel to film, but the partnership deteriorated because Micheaux wanted too much power over the production process. This failure marked a crucial turning point in Micheaux's career. He realized his untapped potential in the race film industry:

The colored producer has dared to step into a world which has hitherto remained closed to him. His entrance into this unexplored field is for him trebly difficult... If the race has any pride in presenting its own achievements in this field it behooves it to interest itself and morally encourage such efforts.<sup>29</sup>

In 1918, Micheaux founded the Micheaux Film and Book Company to further pursue his newfound passion for cinema.

By the mid-1920s, this self-taught grassroots filmmaker established himself as a leading race picture producer. Micheaux's thirty-year career in the industry earned him the title of most prolific African American director of the early twentieth century. He produced over forty-three films and wrote seven novels that each resonated beyond their images and texts. Micheaux's works contributed to the grand narrative of African American history and he granted viewers “a sense of personal and historical agency.”<sup>30</sup> In the end, this agency inspired Micheaux's never-ending devotion to racial uplift, middle-class values, and a blunt candor rarely found in early race cinema.

A primary goal of this paper is to track the evolution of Micheaux's cinematic legacy through black newspapers, identifying trends in his coverage over several decades. Newspapers

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<sup>28</sup> Noble and George Johnson incorporated the Lincoln Motion Picture Company in 1917. These brothers were Micheaux's predecessors in the race picture world, and they produced five films between 1916-1921. Cara Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom*, 181.

<sup>29</sup> “Oscar Micheaux Writes on Growth of Race in Movie Field,” *Pittsburgh Courier*.

<sup>30</sup> Bowser and Spence, 105.

initially praised Micheaux's early race films as revolutionary and vital contributions to the genre. However, in the mid-1920s his popularity began to decline. By the end of the decade the press became “intolerant of most productions while demanding higher, and perhaps unattainable standards given the obstacles faced by black filmmakers.”<sup>31</sup> Micheaux was the only black director to survive the transition from silent to sound cinema; the synchronization of sound in motion pictures marked a definitive turning point in Micheaux’s career. He received a brief spike in the popularity of his early 1930s motion pictures, but soon fell into complete disfavor with the press. This was due in part to both rising criticism of his realistic, albeit less-than-rosy representations of African American life and his inability to financially compete with Hollywood’s growing number of black musicals. The information supporting these overarching trends is extrapolated from a case study of newspaper articles published on Micheaux's films *Within Our Gates*, *Symbol of the Unconquered*, *Body and Soul*, *The Exile*, *Ten Minutes to Live*, *Murder in Harlem*, *God's Stepchildren*, and *The Betrayal*. A majority of this research centers around accessible films with the exception of *The Exile* and *The Betrayal*. These films are exceptions because publications on these works proved essential to the analysis. *The Exile* was Micheaux's first talking picture and *The Betrayal* was his final film.

It is also important to acknowledge the following limitations of research centered around Oscar Micheaux. First, thirty-one of Micheaux's films are lost and this analysis is thoroughly grounded in his surviving works and assumes these films are representative of the entire body. Second, of his extant prints, it is “unclear how near they are to Micheaux's authorial and directorial intentions... forcing analyses and interpretations of Micheaux's films to be

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<sup>31</sup> Charlene Regester, “The African-American Press and Race Movies, 1909-1929,” in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, ed. Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 43.

extraordinarily open ended.”<sup>32</sup> Micheaux’s unending battle with censorship boards was the primary cause of this disconnect. Third, it is vital to recognize the biases inherent in the newspapers. The press published enticing articles and advertisements to ensure their survival. Each journalist also brought their own biases to their articles, and in cases of the *Chicago Defender* and *New York Age*, conflicts of interest arose when several columnists doubled as booking agents for theatres and companies.<sup>33</sup> Overall, these biases and agendas certainly color any analysis of Micheaux's works and of the newspapers, but they do not preclude or diminish scholarship on either subject.

### Chapter III: Silent Films

#### I: *Within Our Gates* (1920)

Presumed lost for decades, Micheaux's second silent picture, *Within Our Gates*, was rediscovered in the 1970s under its Spanish release title, *La Negra*.<sup>34</sup> In its original English form, the title directly referred to an epigraph in D.W. Griffith's 1919 film, *A Romance of Happy Valley*: “harm not the stranger within your gates, lest you yourself be hurt.”<sup>35</sup> This juxtaposition of Micheaux and Griffith was just one of dozens embedded in Micheaux's film. In fact, *Within Our Gates* in many ways was a direct response to Griffith's more infamous film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915) as well as the Chicago Riots of 1919.

Called the 'Red Summer,' this post-war period was marked by tensions over the great northern migrations and growing resentment amongst black veterans who “risked their lives

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<sup>32</sup> Knight, *Disintegrating the Black Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film*, 96.

<sup>33</sup> Bowser, Gaines, and Musser, *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, xxv.

<sup>34</sup> *A Romance of Happy Valley*, directed by D.W. Griffith (1919; D.W. Griffith Productions).

<sup>35</sup> *Within Our Gates*, directed by Oscar Micheaux (1920; Micheaux Book & Film Company).

fighting for the causes of freedom and democracy [and] found themselves denied basic rights.”<sup>36</sup> Tensions culminated on July 27, 1919 when an African American teenager named Eugene Williams was stoned to death in Lake Michigan after he unknowingly violated unofficial segregation lines.<sup>37</sup> The police refused to arrest the boy's murderers, causing a week of riots and the subsequent burning of residential districts which left thousands of black families homeless. Upon witnessing this bloody conflict firsthand, Micheaux deliberately titled his next film, *Within Our Gates*. Here, Micheaux's title throws Griffith's sentimentality back in his face: whites supposedly yearned for peace 'within our gates,' but their peace was hypocritically defined by the violent subjugation of blacks.

While Micheaux's title directly combatted *A Romance of Happy Valley*, *Within Our Gates* thematically served more as a critique of *Birth of a Nation*. What has come to be regarded as Griffith's defaming portrayal of African Americans served as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it reinforced derogatory stereotypes and conferred legitimacy on the Ku Klux Klan; on the other hand, it urged the black community to exert greater agency in response to the motion picture industry. If black Americans were to “gain control of how they were presented on the screen, they would have to create their own images.”<sup>38</sup> Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* embodied this call to arms through its discussions of education, miscegenation, and lynching from the African American perspective.

In the film *Within Our Gates*, the story centers around Sylvia Landry, an African American teacher who journeys North in efforts to raise \$5,000 for the underprivileged students

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<sup>36</sup> “The Chicago Race Riot of 1919,” *History*, Accessed July 2, 2016, <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/chicago-race-riot-of-1919>.

<sup>37</sup> “The Chicago Race Riot of 1919,” *History*.

<sup>38</sup> Regester, “The African-American Press and Race Movies, 1909-1929,” 36.

of Piney Woods School. Teaching at this time was a well-respected profession for black women like Sylvia because education was key to the betterment of the race, and from the opening scenes onward, Sylvia symbolizes racial uplift. Once in the North, Sylvia's purse is stolen by a black street urchin, but fortunately recovered by her future love interest, Dr. V. Vivian. Several scenes later, she rescues a young white child from being run over by the automobile of Elena Warwick. The stars align here, because Mrs. Warwick is a wealthy philanthropist. After hearing Sylvia's plan Mrs. Warwick agrees to fund her mission, but ponders how much to donate. She decides to consult a rich southerner named Mrs. Stratton. Unfortunately, this woman is the epitome of southern prejudice. She claims blacks, "don't want an education. Can't you see that thinking would only give them a headache?"<sup>39</sup> Her blatant discrimination appalls Mrs. Warwick and she decides to donate \$50,000 to Sylvia so that in time racists such as Mrs. Stratton will be disproved.

While Mrs. Warwick secures the funding, Dr. Vivian searches for Sylvia so that he may profess his love. In the process, he meets Sylvia's cousin Alma who sheds light on Sylvia's traumatic past. The Landrys, a poor yet caring black family, adopted Sylvia and lovingly raise her as their own. One day, Mr. Landry is wrongfully accused of murdering a corrupt white landowner named Mr. Philip Gridlestone. Before any lawful investigation was organized, a white mob angrily lynches the innocent Landrys in cold blood. Sylvia and her younger brother escape the rope, but she is nearly raped by Philip Gridlestone's brother, Armand. Their violent struggle climaxes when a scar on Sylvia's chest reveals to Armand Gridlestone that he almost molested his own daughter. Despite this horrific realization, he keeps her paternity hidden and decides to pay for Sylvia's education in repentance.

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<sup>39</sup> *Within Our Gates*, directed by Oscar Micheaux.

By portraying a white man as the rapist, *Within Our Gates* challenges the Hollywood caricature of black men as savage brutes, rapists, and defilers of white womanhood. Micheaux clearly flips this stereotype by depicting black women as the victims and white men as the predators. In doing so, Micheaux condemns decades of social and sexual subjugation. At the end of the film, after hearing all of Sylvia's hardships, Dr. Vivian's admiration and love for her only strengthens. He accepts Sylvia's past and proceeds to praise their race, specifically their wartime contributions: "Be proud of our country. We should never forget what our people did in... France, from Bruges to Chateau-Thierry, from Saint-Mihiel to the Alps!"<sup>40</sup> Dr. Vivian successfully instills racial pride in Sylvia, and in a melodramatic fashion, the film closes with their wedding and the solidification of the black family unit.

### *Newspaper Reception*

*Within Our Gates* received wide press coverage due in part to the fact the movie was released in 1920, a year at the height of race picture production. Micheaux's brazen presentation of lynching, discrimination, and miscegenation resonated deeply with African American audiences. For many, the film reflected their dark reality, as evidenced by the Johnson Brothers' commentary on Omaha's reception: "'Within Our Gates'... is too realistic of what happened here in the city last year."<sup>41</sup> The Chicago Board of Movie Censors were the first to deny this reality by rejecting Micheaux's picture for fear of it inciting another series of riots. Only after a series of heavy edits and the support of Chicago's Mayor William Thompson and prominent members of the black community did the film eventually pass censorship guidelines.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> George Johnson, letter to Oscar Micheaux, August 10, 1920, as quoted in Bowser and Spence, 146.



The *Chicago Defender* provided the most extensive coverage of *Within Our Gates*, possibly due to the fact its headquarters was in the same city in which the motion picture was filmed and premiered. The film appeared in four separate articles in the January 17, 1920 edition -- its highest-recorded coverage in a single issue. In addition to a brief advertisement by Vendome Theatre, the location of its premiere that day, every other article heaped praise on Micheaux's newest motion picture. The *Defender* earnestly believed "people interested in the welfare of the Race cannot afford to miss seeing this great production, and, remember, it TELLS IT ALL."<sup>42</sup>

The article, "Great Lesson" stated, "125,000 race people in Chicago here have a chance to see the greatest protest against injustice and the fine preachment against prejudice that was ever screened."<sup>43</sup> Here, the press praised Micheaux's utilization of film as a tool of education that taught "great lessons... properly driven home."<sup>44</sup> The *Defender*'s Willis N. Huggins wrote "The Editor's Mail Box" which also commended the film: "the spirit of 'Within Our Gates' is the spirit of Douglas, Nat Turner, Scarborough and Du Bois, rolled into one."<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, a large portion of the black public believed Micheaux was "an asset to the nation in all phases of national life, aspiration and development," a man who rightfully earned his spot alongside these revolutionary social justice warriors.<sup>46</sup> Huggins also proved the press recognized Micheaux's deliberate efforts to counter Griffith: "Birth of a Nation was written by oppressors... 'Within Our Gates' is written by the oppressed."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>43</sup> "The Great Lesson," *Chicago Defender*, January 27, 1920, 7.

<sup>44</sup> "The Great Lesson," *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>45</sup> Willis Huggins, "The Editor's Mail Box: Says Defender Was Right," *Chicago Defender*, January 17, 1920, 16.

<sup>46</sup> Huggins, "The Editor's Mail Box: Says Defender Was Right," *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Such a direct rebuke to racism in Hollywood struck a chord with black audiences and led to the film's high demand across the country. Its popularity can easily be traced through the *Defender's* coverage of the film a month after its premiere. Records show the paper published a January 17, 1920 and two January 24, 1920 advertisements for Hammond's Pickford Theater, two advertisements on January 31, 1920 for Dooley's Atlas Theater, and a February 21, 1920 article that stated the "final opportunity for Chicagoans to see Micheaux's 'Within Our Gates' ... [was] at the States Theater."<sup>48</sup>

A variety of prominent black newspapers mirrored the *Defender's* overwhelmingly positive response. For example, the Lincoln Theatre advertised its screenings in the *New York Age*, and later praised the movie as "the greatest race drama ever shown."<sup>49</sup> Film, like newspaper, reflected the harsh realities of black America, as evidenced by the *Age's* claim, "the story deals with Negro life as we find it at the present in the South amongst our people."<sup>50</sup> Bold statements such as this enticed the *Age's* readership and black New Yorkers flocked to theatres. Once inside, northern blacks bore witness to Micheaux's artful capturing of the systematic dehumanization of their southern brethren. After screenings, the press recorded audience reactions and found many people left theatres with greater empathy towards southern blacks. This empathy encouraged a racial solidarity that crossed geographical boundaries.

The *Associated Negro Press* announced, "people were standing in the streets for hours waiting for an opportunity to get inside [the Vendome Theatre]," but a fair number of people also protested in the streets.<sup>51</sup> An interracial group from the Methodist Episcopal Ministers' Alliance

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<sup>48</sup> "Within Our Gates," *Chicago Defender*, February 21, 1920, 6.

<sup>49</sup> "Lincoln Theatre," *New York Age*, May 15, 1920.

<sup>50</sup> "'Within Our Gates' at Putnam, B'klyn," *New York Age*, July 17, 1920.

<sup>51</sup> *Associated Negro Press*, January 20, 1920, as quoted in Bowser and Spence, 125.

were the primary advocates of protest because they viewed Micheaux's film as a subliminal attack on church leaders.<sup>52</sup>

The January 17, 1920 issue of the *Chicago Defender* tracked these protests: "On Monday a committee of the protestors attended the Vendome. Only a few of them had seen any part of 'Within Our Gates,' and none of them had seen it all."<sup>53</sup> Can one justly protest a film they have not seen themselves and personally judged? The paper encouraged such questioning and further undermined the legitimacy of the protesters through onsite interviews. After viewing *Within Our Gates*, several protesters concurred, "the picture was perfect" and one man even stated, "the whole affair had been misrepresented to him, and that he felt better for having reviewed the picture."<sup>54</sup>

By stripping away the anonymity of the protesters through interviews, the *Defender* revealed some members' flawed logic and in turn further legitimized Micheaux's critique of the dangers of unquestioning mob mentalities. In *Within Our Gates*, the Landrys were wrongfully lynched by a prejudiced mob ignorant of Mr. Philip Gridlestone's true killer. In a similar vein, some protesters blindly opposed Micheaux without proper knowledge of the true nature of his film. They only felt comfortable doing so because of their anonymity and strength through numbers. In both instances, the dangers of deindividuation in groups was exposed, and together, the paper and film urged everyone to critically analyze the reasoning behind their actions.

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<sup>52</sup> A preacher named Ned was the contentious character the Alliance protested. This man feigned ignorance and ineptitude in the face of white men, but secretly chided himself for such behavior. Micheaux's inclusion of this character was meant to critique Ned's actions as an obstruction to racial progress.

<sup>53</sup> "The Great Lesson," *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

While these protests aimed to discourage crowds, it only fueled the public interest; articles published on the protests kept Micheaux relevant and newsworthy. This filmmaker proved himself a master of manipulating potential setbacks, and in a similar fashion to the protests, he used the papers to turn censorship roadblocks into beneficial publicity. Micheaux's films were filled with racially charged themes, and any representations of whites, especially ineffective authority figures, invited censure. Contemporary black audiences knew the rarity of seeing candid presentations of white brutality, and were instantly drawn towards films deemed too racially radical.

Micheaux fully recognized this allure and played it up in various newspaper articles. The filmmaker declared, “this is the picture that required two solid months to get by the Censor Board... there are more thrills than was ever seen in any individual production.”<sup>55</sup> The following ideas were subtly planted in the minds of the readership: What are these thrills? What could possibly be so radical that it required two months of censorship? Am I missing out if I do not see *Within Our Gates*? Micheaux hoped his articles would ingrain these questions in readers, and his repetition of this exact quote in the next two weeks of the *Defender* proved his determination.

Cuts made before the film's January debut were restored by February, and Micheaux took full advantage of this throughout his advertising campaigns. The header of the January 31, 1920 *Defender* advertisement was the clearest example of Micheaux attracting audiences with promises of never-before-seen footage restored from prior censorship:

Race people of Chicago – Please Note! The Photoplay, WITHIN OUR GATES, was passed by the Censor, but owing to a wave of agitation on the part of certain Race people (who have not even seen it) 1,200 feet was eliminated during its first engagement. This

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<sup>55</sup> “Within Our Gates,” *Chicago Defender*, January 31, 1920, 8.

1,200 feet has been restored and the picture will positively be shown from now on as originally produced and released – no cuts-outs. – Oscar Micheaux.<sup>56</sup>

The up-and-coming filmmaker kept this buzz alive and used controversy in the newspapers over *Within Our Gates* in one town to promote the film in other locations. For example, the local Omaha press eagerly announced the arrival of “the race film production that created a sensation in Chicago, [and] required two solid months to get by the censor board.”<sup>57</sup> Whether it be Chicago or Omaha, Micheaux battled censors everywhere he went, but decided early on these impediments would not define his career. He spun these issues to his favor and galvanized support through various newspaper articles and advertisements. Overall, Micheaux effectively treated white oppression both indirectly and directly in each version of *Within Our Gates*. He successfully maneuvered around the constraints of the censorship boards.

Censorship battles and street protests over *Within Our Gates* created buzz across America, but the filmmaker yearned for international publicity too. Micheaux aimed to increase his revenue overseas, “where the climate for race pictures was said to be more receptive than in some parts of America.”<sup>58</sup> The *Defender* article, “Going Abroad,” detailed Micheaux's foreign pursuits. This January 31, 1920 article stated Micheaux, “will be going abroad to arrange world distribution of his 'Within Our Gates' and series of new racial features, which he will produce upon his return.”<sup>59</sup> The fact Micheaux attempted to establish an international presence was groundbreaking and extremely rare amongst black filmmakers of the period. Audiences reading this article were undoubtedly impressed by Micheaux's ambition and determination for international acclaim.

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<sup>56</sup> “Display Ad 25,” *Chicago Defender*, January 31, 1920, 8.

<sup>57</sup> “Race Problem Play Comes to Omaha,” as quoted in Bowser and Spence, 15.

<sup>58</sup> McGilligan, 146.

<sup>59</sup> “Going Abroad: Noted Motion Picture Producer Soon Sails for Europe,” *Chicago Defender*, January 31, 1920, 8.

From a theoretical standpoint, successful global distribution could provide legitimacy to Micheaux as an *American* filmmaker. He was an African American filmmaker, but on a deeper level he strived to represent the American film industry abroad just as much as Hollywood motion pictures. Such success could, in turn, also earn him the respect of Hollywood studios who dominated the international film market. While no existing port authority records confirm Micheaux travelled abroad, circumstantial evidence suggest he successfully reached to international audiences. The only extant print of *Within Our Gates* was found in Spain with Spanish subtitles. Who would have had the ambition and the funds to distribute Micheaux's pictures in Europe? Two years ago, historian Cara Caddoo postulated Micheaux left the international distribution to a white Jewish immigrant named Joseph Pierre Lamy. She believes Lamy met Micheaux in New York, and between 1920-1921, he might have travelled to France and England to distribute Micheaux's films. Her primary evidence for this partnership was the fact that Micheaux's letterhead once stated "Foreign Distributions by Joseph P. Lamy New York London Paris."<sup>60</sup> Regardless of who distributed the films, the mere fact Micheaux advertised stories of his travels in the papers naturally bolstered his reputation. He wanted to be a force to be reckoned with both domestically and internationally, and he continued to channel this competitive mentality with his film, *The Symbol of the Unconquered*.

## **II: *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920)**

Cinematheque Royale in Belgium rescued the sole remaining print of this stirring melodrama which contained Flemish and French intertitles that described the missing footage.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Caddoo, 193.

<sup>61</sup> J. Ronald Green, *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 53.

Micheaux's fourth silent film, it was his first produced entirely in the east in studios located at Fort Lee, New Jersey. The film's original working title was *The Wilderness Trail*, but Micheaux's name change was both “affirming and challenging, a call to collective consciousness.”<sup>62</sup> For Micheaux, blacks were America's true symbol of the unconquered. Despite centuries of slavery, whites never truly conquered African Americans; Micheaux's people preserved their heritage and continually fought discrimination in all areas of life.

In a traditional auteur fashion, *The Symbol of the Unconquered* repeats themes of westward migration central to his novels, *The Homesteader* and *The Conquest*. For Micheaux, the frontier provides “the opportune moment for the Negro to 'do something for himself,'” because survival and success depends more on an individual’s natural ability and perseverance rather than social conventions.<sup>63</sup>

These themes come into play in *The Symbol of the Unconquered*. The story begins with a light-skinned black woman named Eve Mason at her grandfather's deathbed. She inherits a large tract of land in the northwest town of Oristown, and promptly leaves Selma to settle it. Exhausted from her travels, Eve spends the night in the Driscoll Hotel, owned by Jefferson Driscoll, a light-skinned African American passing for white. Once he realizes Eve is black, Driscoll immediately refuses her proper lodging and sends her to a musty barn for the night. This man treats blacks as subhuman and takes sinister pleasure in their misfortune throughout the film. Micheaux's condemnation of Driscoll is a direct attack on blacks who pass for white; he sees them as betrayers of their race.

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<sup>62</sup> Bowser and Spence, 175.

<sup>63</sup> Oscar Micheaux, “Where the Negro Fails,” *Chicago Defender*, March 19, 1910, as quoted in Bowser and Spence, 157.

The next morning on her way into town Eve meets her neighbor, a black frontiersman by the name of Hugh Van Allen. This rugged, self-sufficient man earns his success through hard work and is a black embodiment of the Western hero. In many ways, Van Allen is also a surrogate for “Micheaux's dreaming and redreaming of his own ambitions and desires” during his years of Dakota homesteading.<sup>64</sup> Over the course of the film, Van Allen falls in love with Eve, but believing she is white, he suppresses his true feelings in order to remain loyal to his race and evade acts of reprisal by the white townspeople.

The plot thickens when Driscoll intercepts a letter meant for Van Allen that reveals his land contains valuable oil fields. In attempts to drive Van Allen off his land, Driscoll leaves threatening notes at his doorstep and eventually enlists the help of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan attacks Van Allen's property, but is defeated because the black community rallies in his defense. Intertitles then flash forward two years and show Van Allen discovered the oil and became an entrepreneurial oil king. Eve then visits this frontiersman with documentation that confirms her black heritage. Upon this revelation Van Allen lovingly embraces Eve and the film ends with an iris of the new couple kissing. It is important to note the closing scene's melodramatic tropes satisfy Micheaux's audiences by reworking classical Hollywood happy endings. This further proves American audiences across the racial spectrum held similar cinematic expectations and were equally drawn towards hopeful conclusions.

### *Newspaper Reception*

Newspaper archives indicated *The Symbol of the Unconquered* was the second-most covered of Micheaux's motion pictures, proof of Micheaux's blossoming silent film career. Of

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 160-161.



these articles, the *Chicago Defender* published twice as many articles as its leading competitors. The national editions of the *Defender* published local and national stories, meaning even though the paper was published in Chicago, it included advertisements and news for readers across the United States. Micheaux hoped word of his new motion picture would spread from city to city and encourage future audiences to attend his films when it reached their area.

The *Defender* served as a prime example of this strategy through its publication of Michigan film advertisements. Its November 20, 1920 issue proudly announced Detroit's Vaudette Theatre had the honor of presenting, “the latest and greatest of all Micheaux productions... [in its] absolutely first run... first time on any screen.”<sup>65</sup> A week later, Micheaux bought space for two more articles in the *Defender* to advertise his latest production. His first advertisement featured a shot of Driscoll and Van Allen's fight with all the quintessential elements of western bar brawl. Located above the photograph were the details of the Detroit premiere as well as six catchy taglines to further entice audiences. Micheaux's most compelling tagline claimed the film was, “a story of action, built around the lives of real, red-blooded men and women, in a country where a man is a man because he is.”<sup>66</sup> This single sentence bluntly challenged America's racial ordering of society. In Micheaux's films, the frontier set an example the entire country should follow. It was an uncharted land where race was irrelevant for survival, every man was recognized simply as a man and treated as equals regardless of their skin color. While this claim was certainly idealistic for the period, every one of Micheaux's pictures worked towards making this ideal a reality. He prioritized showing blacks as valuable American citizens on the silver screen.

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<sup>65</sup> “Display Ad 24,” *Chicago Defender*, November 20, 1920, 6.

<sup>66</sup> “Display Ad 24,” *Chicago Defender*.

After its Detroit premiere, Micheaux booked *The Symbol of the Unconquered* in over seventeen cities, including the usual Chicago, New York, and Baltimore theatres but also Southern venues in Knoxville, Birmingham, Louisville, and Jacksonville.<sup>67</sup> These cities received the film with open arms, as evidenced by the *Defender's* statement, "in every section of the country the condition is the same. Even from the extreme southland comes reports of extended runs and rebookings."<sup>68</sup> Micheaux's latest motion picture production successfully created "a wonderful amount of comment all over the East."<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, thirty-one articles published by leading black newspapers were each filled with glowing reviews and captivating advertisements. Not a single one of these articles criticized *The Symbol of the Unconquered*.

To further illustrate the significance of this film to audiences, the *Defender* published several notices. For example, on November 27, 1920 the paper stated, "the Manager E.B. Dudley has gone to an enormous expense to bring this great seven-reel attraction to Detroit... patrons of the Vaudeville are bound to show their appreciation by giving a record attendance."<sup>70</sup> By pointing out the 'great lengths' Dudley went to, the newspaper attempted to stir appreciation in Detroit audiences and encouraged them to show it by attending a screening. Overall, the *Defender* and Micheaux benefited from this subliminal message -- the former through increased circulation and the latter through ticket sales.

A similar tactic appeared in the January 1, 1921 issue for a Philadelphia showing:

"Special Note: Owing to the great cost and length of this production, it will never be shown less

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<sup>67</sup> "Display Ad 13," *Chicago Defender*, February 5, 1921.; Charles Musser, Corey Creekmur, Pearl Bowser, J. Ronald Green, Charlene Register, and Louise Spence, "Appendix B," in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, 240.

<sup>68</sup> "Final Showing," *Chicago Defender*, January 29, 1920, 4.

<sup>69</sup> "Micheaux Film," *Chicago Defender*, January 8, 1921, 4.

<sup>70</sup> "The Vaudeville," *Chicago Defender*, November 27, 1920, 5.

than first-class theater prices – the producers.”<sup>71</sup> While the previous article emphasized the theatre manager, this one defended the producer's decision on ticket prices. Here, readers were informed of the funding challenges race picture producers faced and were consequently asked to support Micheaux's cinematic efforts regardless of the cost.

This discussion of finances emerged again in a January 15, 1921 article for *The Symbol of the Unconquered's* screenings in Memphis. New Palace Theater's Mr. Barrasso “has gone to enormous expense to land this attraction and the people of Memphis are to be congratulated in having a progressive theater manager who doesn't back up at 'price' in his bookings.”<sup>72</sup> Advertisements instructed readers to appreciate the behind-the-scenes efforts necessary for procuring race pictures. The *Defender's* specification of Mr. Barrasso also personalized the argument, a strategy that encouraged support. Overall, this article, along with the January 1, 1921 and November 27, 1920 pieces, hoped that by shedding light on these difficulties they would encourage racial solidarity in the form of attending race pictures. In terms of ticket sales, it succeeded; this film was one of Micheaux's most popular silent pictures.

*The Symbol of the Unconquered's* theme of mistaken identity was woven into the narrative through Driscoll's passing for white and Van Allen's misjudgment of Eve's race. Black newspapers highlighted the importance of these themes through their frequent inclusion of this key plot detail. For example, the *Defender's* November 27, 1920 article stated, “[Van Allen] meets Eve Mason, a young lady of his own Race... is very light complected and is naturally mistaken for a white person.”<sup>73</sup> The *Afro-American* repeated this plot point in two articles. Its

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<sup>71</sup> “Display Ad 21,” *Chicago Defender*, January 1, 1921, 5.

<sup>72</sup> “At Memphis,” *Chicago Defender*, January 15, 1921, 4.

<sup>73</sup> “The Vaudette,” *Chicago Defender*.

October 28, 1921 issue stated, “Eve Mason, beautiful Quadroon... Van Allen... mistakes her for white.”<sup>74</sup> Neither of these papers nor Micheaux faulted Van Allen for this mistake because he did not romantically pursue Eve until her race was confirmed. During the early twentieth century, miscegenation was illegal and Micheaux's heroes rejected its temptations in favor of racial loyalty. He hoped his audiences would follow Van Allen's lead by having enough racial pride and practicality to marry within their community and avoid the harsh legal ramifications of miscegenation.<sup>75</sup>

While Eve and Van Allen's relationship was praised, Driscoll's relationship with his heritage was reviled in the papers and film itself. Every article that detailed the plot clearly described Driscoll as the villain, as evidenced by a *Defender* article that stated, “Driscoll... vowed to make it hard for all Race people.”<sup>76</sup> Eve's unintentional passing was harmless because she identified as black, but in Driscoll's case he became a criminal racist when he joined forces with the Klan. Sadly, Driscoll “counters racism with hatred, [and] turns that hatred on the Race, and by extension, on himself.”<sup>77</sup>

Eve and Driscoll's themes were crucial to *The Symbol of the Unconquered* because racial ambiguity represented a direct threat to white supremacy. Miscegenation and mistaken identity both occurred on film and opened the question of whether racial identity was truly 'knowable' and as clear-cut as one might think. Micheaux's works blurred “the dichotomy on which

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<sup>74</sup> “Display Ad 4,” *Afro-American*, October 28, 1921, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Micheaux's recurring theme of racial loyalty is an autobiographical reference. During his homesteading years, he fell in love with a white woman whom he referred to as ‘the Scotch girl.’ However, due to racial prejudices and fear of betraying his race, Micheaux ended the relationship. Oscar Micheaux, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*.

<sup>76</sup> “The Vaudette,” *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>77</sup> Bowser and Spence, 160.

whiteness depend[ed],” thereby calling attention to the problematic foundations of white supremacy and the structural discrimination it created.<sup>78</sup>

In Micheaux's day, the Ku Klux Klan created a climate of intimidation and racial violence across the South. While *Birth of a Nation* glorified these terrorists, Micheaux's film exposed the Klan's true nature and “reflected the concerns and attitudes of the nation's black weeklies, which devoted extensive news coverage to the Klan's activities.”<sup>79</sup> Micheaux's western film capitalized on the Klan's infamy and made them the central antagonists instead of the stereotypical Indian or savage outlaw. *The Symbol of the Unconquered* provided audiences with an African American perspective on these hooded racists, and the filmmaker flooded newspapers with advertisements featuring the Klan. A November 20, 1920 article by the *Defender* claimed, “see the Klu Klux Klan in action, and their annihilation!”<sup>80</sup> Two months later, the newspaper published an article in greater detail, describing the Klan's “present attempt to organize night riders in this country for the express purpose of holding back the advancement of the Negro.”<sup>81</sup> For some filmmakers, film created a fictional space in which they could act out their fantasies. As seen by these *Defender* articles, *The Symbol of the Unconquered* created satisfying images of African Americans finally triumphing over the Ku Klux Klan. In reality institutional racism prevented the Ku Klux Klan's complete destruction, but Micheaux toyed with such visions of justice being truly served to the Klansmen in both his film and advertisements.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>79</sup> Charles Musser, “To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights,” in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, 123.

<sup>80</sup> “Display Ad 24,” *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>81</sup> “Ku Klux Klan Put to Rout in PhotoPlay to be Shown at Lafayette,” *New York Age*, December 25, 1920.

Micheaux's criticism of the Klan in the *Defender* was just the beginning. He used a plethora of other national black newspapers as channels for his message. The *New York Age's* December 25, 1920 issue featured an article that detailed how the “viciousness and the un-Americanism of the Ku-Klux Klan... will be vividly exposed... [in] Oscar Micheaux's latest and greatest photo play.”<sup>82</sup> A bold critique of the Klan was also found in the *Philadelphia Tribune's* “Ku Klux Klan Reach Philadelphia: see the inner workings of the 'invisible empire,' the midnight dash of the 'white riders' and their annihilation in the greatest negro photoplay ever produced.”<sup>83</sup> This newspaper's mentioning of the Klan's 'invisible empire' was key because these 'night riders' fed off white America's fears. The Klan was not the only villain; Micheaux's film was a social commentary on how racist ideology embraced by millions of whites indirectly supported the Klan's terrorism.

Micheaux's rare appearance in white newspapers like *Billboard* is noteworthy because they provide compelling points of comparison with the Negro press. In 1920, *Billboard* hired a prominent black journalist named James Albert Jackson to write a column on African American entertainment.<sup>84</sup> By hiring Jackson, *Billboard* became the first white trade paper to hire a black critic and publish a weekly feature on the black entertainment industry for a predominantly white readership. Records suggest *Billboard* was the only white paper to feature *The Symbol of the Unconquered*. Such press coverage surely validated Micheaux's career and assisted the director in reaching white audiences normally unaware of or indifferent towards his films.

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<sup>82</sup> “Ku Klux Klan Put to Rout in PhotoPlay to be Shown at Lafayette,” *The New York Age*.

<sup>83</sup> “Dunbar Theatre,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 1, 1921.

<sup>84</sup> For more information on J.A. Jackson's career, consult *J.A. Jackson's Page in Billboard: A Voice for Black Performance During the Harlem Renaissance Between 1920-1925* by Anthony Hill from 1988.

January 1, 1921 marked the film's first appearance in a simple *Billboard* advertisement on page twenty-nine, "This Week: The Lafayette, N.Y... the big Micheaux picture will be the attraction for the week."<sup>85</sup> Two weeks later in "Good Picture," the paper concluded *The Symbol of the Unconquered* was "a picture that ought to find a ready market in the 800 houses catering to colored audiences, and it is of a sufficient interest to prove a good draw in many houses that cater to a general patronage."<sup>86</sup> This article's distinction between audiences was key: the first half of the sentence stated the picture was worthy of black audiences because it was geared towards them. However, because Jackson wrote for primarily white audiences in *Billboard*, he later implored the 'general patronage,' code for white patrons, to keep an open mind towards race pictures. Jackson's persuasion was subtle, but his writings in the white press aimed at normalizing and celebrating black entertainment outside of its target audiences.

To Micheaux's delight, *Billboard* featured three more articles on *The Symbol of the Unconquered*. The January 29, 1921 section of J.A. Jackson's Page included two advertisements. One praised a black booking agent named Billy Schooler for "contracting for the Micheaux Film Corporation... [and placing] the 'Symbol of the Unconquered' in Kentucky and Southern Illinois."<sup>87</sup> A May 28, 1921 feature also detailed how the film reached a wide audience, but this time in Vicksburg.<sup>88</sup> These three articles further prove Micheaux successfully distributed his motion pictures across the country. This was no small or easy task for black filmmakers working

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<sup>85</sup> J.A. Jackson, "This Week: The Lafayette, N.Y.," *Billboard*, January 1, 1921, 29.

<sup>86</sup> J.A. Jackson, "J.A. Jackson's Page," *Billboard*, January 29, 1921, 27.

<sup>87</sup> J.A. Jackson, "Here and There Among the Folks," *Billboard*, January 29, 1921, 27.

<sup>88</sup> J.A. Jackson, "Tatum in Vicksburg," *Billboard*, May 28, 1921, 45.

outside Hollywood's channels. In fact, hundreds of black film companies failed due to poorly connected distribution networks during the first part of the twentieth century.<sup>89</sup>

*Billboard's* second January 29, 1921 article supported this distribution observation as it described how the movie played at the Temple Theater in Cleveland, but it was also striking for other reasons. Jackson wrote, “mixed audiences saw the picture, and both races seemed equally interested in the story unfolded.”<sup>90</sup> This was the only article published on *The Symbol of the Unconquered* that mentioned a mixed audience. Given this period of segregation, Jackson's mere mentioning of a mixed audience enjoying race cinema was revolutionary and taboo in many social circles. Nonetheless, *Billboard* allowed the journalist to emphasize this point. It marked a small, yet progressive step towards building a collective American audience less defined by racial restrictions.

A final note on *Billboard's* *The Symbol of the Unconquered* articles: they dealt not only with what Jackson wrote in the paper, but also on what he deliberately left out. Every black newspaper capitalized on the infamy of the Ku Klux Klan and included detailed fantasies of its eradication in their advertisements. *Billboard*, as it did not cater to primarily black readership, purposefully avoided any discussion of the Klan. Even though the hooded night riders were so vital to this motion picture's plot, Jackson recognized the dangers of discussing white on black violence in his column. Reading about the Klansmen brought uncomfortable discussions of race to the forefront of Micheaux's public. At their core, many white readers probably felt their general apathy towards black civil rights and overall subtle racial prejudices implicated them and

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<sup>89</sup> *Chicago Defender* columnist D. Ireland Thomas noted that by 1923 only three race filmmaking companies still produced race films: Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Micheaux Film and Book Company, and the Norman Film Manufacturing Company. Register, “The African-American Press and Race Movies, 1909-1929,” 41.

<sup>90</sup> J.A. Jackson, “J.A. Jackson’s Page,” *Billboard*, January 29, 1921, 27.



gave cover to extremist groups like the Klan. Given the uncontroversial nature of Jackson's reviews of *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, it is clear Jackson aimed not to offend his white audiences but instead highlighted the positives of race pictures that white viewers could appreciate.

### **III: *Body and Soul* (1925)**

One of Micheaux's best-known silent motion pictures, *Body and Soul*, is his thirteenth production.<sup>91</sup> Released in 1925, it is the last of his twenty-six silent productions to survive into the twenty-first century. Starring the famous stage actor Paul Robeson, this film offers a harsh critique on the hypocrisy of American churches through Robeson's dual roles as honest inventor and jackleg preacher. Micheaux's criticism of Christianity is rooted in his poor relationship with his first wife's preacher father, which he later incorporates into *The Conquest* and *Within Our Gates* before the theme resurfaces in *Body and Soul*. Micheaux believed "preachers and motion picture producers, masters of illusion, were under pressure to tell empowering stories."<sup>92</sup> While some preachers use this power to promote positive ideologies, Robeson's performance makes it clear Micheaux thought preachers could also use the guise of piety and virtue to misuse power conferred on them by their faithful congregation. The church is an instrument of empowerment for African Americans, and the film's questioning of this institution's authority and purity was radical for audiences of the period.

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<sup>91</sup> Between 1920-1925, Micheaux continued to make films across the United States and met his second wife, Alice B. Russell. During their twenty-five-year marriage, Russell produced three of Micheaux's films, starred in eleven, and assisted as miscellaneous crew on countless other productions.

<sup>92</sup> Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, "Oscar Micheaux's 'Body and Soul' and the Burden of Representation," *Cinema Journal* (2000): 5.

*Body and Soul's* opening intertitles dramatically state a prisoner has escaped near Tatesville, Georgia and subsequently assumed the identity of Reverend Isaiah T. Jenkins. With the help of his fellow inmate, Yello-Curley Hinds, Jenkins deviously swindles the congregation of their offerings. The parishioners unquestioningly follow his sermons and generously donate their earnings to this crook. Micheaux purposefully includes these scenes to warn his audiences “against investing too much blind faith” in men like the faux reverend.<sup>93</sup> After his first oration, Jenkins meets the beautiful Isabelle Perkins and her hard-working mother Martha Jane. From then on, Martha Jane continually pressures her daughter into marrying him even though she is truly in love with Jenkins' estranged twin brother, a humble yet poor inventor named Sylvester. This duality of Robeson's characters is a classic example of Micheaux's representation of the cross sections of black life. His juxtaposition of both seedy and honest African Americans leaves audiences with an important dichotomy: in this world one has the power to be a corrupt Reverend Jenkins or a virtuous Sylvester.

Over the course of the film Isabelle questions Jenkins's intentions, and her suspicions are confirmed when Jenkins steals Martha Jane's money. This manipulative man convinces Isabelle no one would trust her word against a 'pious' man like him, and she accepts blame for the theft before fleeing to Atlanta. The film then cuts to Martha Jane discovering her daughter destitute of proper food, clothing, and housing. This innocent woman's spiral into total ruin proves too much for her, and Isabelle dies in her mother's arms minutes after they are reunited. Just before her death Isabelle reveals the dark truth behind Jenkins. In a flashback sequence, Rev. Jenkins traps Isabelle in a deserted farmhouse during an intense storm. As she changes into dry clothes, a leering Jenkins sneaks into her quarters, and backs the “frightened, defenseless, and shamed

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<sup>93</sup> Dan Flory, “Race, Rationality, and Melodrama: Aesthetic Response and the Case of Oscar Micheaux,” 331.

woman... into a corner.”<sup>94</sup> The following intertitle, “a half hour later,” implies Jenkins raped Isabelle for a prolonged period of time.<sup>95</sup>

After learning the truth about Jenkins, Martha Jane races back to Tatesville to confront Jenkins. She proceeds to bravely accuse Jenkins of his crimes in front of the entire congregation. With the evidence mounting against him, Jenkins flees into the night to escape his congregation which is now determined to bring him to justice. This climatic sequence appears to be the conclusion of the film, but Micheaux subverts these expectations by having Martha Jane suddenly jolt awake to realize everything was a dream. Isabelle is indeed alive, Reverend Jenkins is not a corrupt priest, and Martha Jane was not robbed. Evidently, *Body and Soul* rejects standard narrative logic, and Martha Jane grants Isabelle her blessing to marry her Sylvester, who, in reality, is a successful inventor. Just like *Within Our Gates* and *Symbol of the Unconquered*, this film ends with a melodramatic, jubilant union of middle-class folk.

### ***Newspaper Reception***

*Body and Soul* was originally a nine-reel production, but the extant print is only eight reels long. This missing reel confirms the director's version was not the final cut of the film. Given its fiery condemnation of church corruption, it comes as no surprise to film historians that *Body and Soul* was “marred by censorship... [and] prints were recut and reworked as they circulated from venue to venue.”<sup>96</sup>

At the Motion Picture Commission of the State of New York when Micheaux first applied for an exhibition license, *Body and Soul* was rejected in toto on the grounds its lewd

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<sup>94</sup> Bowser and Spence, 198

<sup>95</sup> *Symbol of the Unconquered*, directed by Oscar Micheaux (1920; Micheaux Book & Film Company).

<sup>96</sup> Musser, “To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights,” 121.

portrayal of Jenkins was “sacrilegious, immoral, and would tend to incite crime.”<sup>97</sup> The director submitted an appeal with new footage that explained how censors could have misinterpreted the Reverend, but the censors affirmed their original rejection. Without censor approval, no newspapers or theatres would feature his production. Micheaux could not financially run the risk of no advertisements or circulation and he drastically altered the story of Robeson's villain. In its original form, there was no dream sequence in *Body and Soul* and the Reverend was the real antagonist. However, when Micheaux reduced the film from nine reels to five, he transferred the villainy associated with the Reverend to the ex-convict disguised as a pious man of the cloth. New title cards and “an abrupt new ending that posited the entire story as a dream,” were also added.<sup>98</sup> These changes finally satisfied New York censors and the film premiered in New York City.

Micheaux skillfully pacified censors across the country, as evidenced by the fact the film screened across New York, Virginia, Washington D.C., Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Illinois.<sup>99</sup> However, every state eliminated different sections of the film and none of them approved of *Body and Soul* in its original form. Why then did the *Pittsburgh Courier* on December 12, 1925 advertise the film as, “9 reels of romance, action and pathos” and the *New York Amsterdam News* publish an advance announcement that praised the film's “nine great reels”?<sup>100</sup> Micheaux's promise of an uncensored screening of *Body and Soul* was the exact same sensational tactic used in *Within Our Gates* to lure audiences into theatres. These newspaper pieces represented a direct

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>98</sup> McGilligan, 216.

<sup>99</sup> Musser, Creekmur, Bowser, Green, Register, and Spence, “Appendix B,” 258-259.

<sup>100</sup> “New Dunbar Theatre,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 12, 1925, 10.

affront to censorship decisions, and historians have confirmed Micheaux “premiered the original vision of *Body and Soul* at the New Douglas and Roosevelt theatres.”<sup>101</sup>

The black newspapers provided crucial evidence of these draws of audiences as well as proof that Micheaux openly challenged censorship boards' authority. While other race picture producers silently complied, Micheaux refused to accede fully to the power of white censor boards. The director rebelled because he believed his audiences deserved more than a sanitized version of *Body and Soul*. Edited versions lacked the full truth behind Micheaux's racially charged commentary on American society. A year earlier in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Afro-American*, and *Billboard*, Micheaux elaborated on his vision of truth in cinema: “I have always tried to make my photoplays present the truth, to lay before the race a cross section of its own life, to view the colored heart from close range.”<sup>102</sup> *Body and Soul* typified this statement because Robeson's portrayal of both Reverend Jenkins and Sylvester showed African Americans were truly human. Everyone, regardless of their race, contained elements of 'good' and 'bad' just like Robeson's dual characters, and it was up to each person to choose which path to follow. To Micheaux, his films encouraged African Americans to emulate characters like Sylvester and raise their race in the eyes of racists bent on suppressing their rights.

White Hollywood filmmakers monopolized the global film market and in turn excluded black independent filmmakers. Micheaux's desire for international success was first established in *Within Our Gates* articles, and the director continued to promote his global appeal through

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<sup>101</sup> J. Ronald Green, “Appendix A,” in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, 216.

<sup>102</sup> “Oscar Micheaux Writes on Growth of Race in Movie Field,” *Pittsburgh Courier*.; J. Ronald Green, *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux*, 77.; J.A. Jackson, “Royal Becomes Distribution Center,” *Billboard*, December 7, 1924, 49.

several *Body and Soul* press releases. The *Afro-American's* February 14, 1925 issue stated, “Micheaux in D.C. says he plans long trip abroad later” and “plans to visit London and all of the larger cities on the Continent, probably Cairo, and several Russian cities.”<sup>103</sup> Overall, Micheaux hoped to obtain world distribution and the article effectively captured the director's ambitious vision.

The *Pittsburgh Courier* also featured an article on Micheaux's international goals on February 14, 1925. It is important to note here the *Afro-American's* description of Micheaux's plans for London, Cairo, and Russia were copied word for word in the *Courier's* article, “Paul Robeson, Miss Russel Star in Micheaux's Latest Movie, 'Body and Soul'.” This repetition was no coincidence; Micheaux frequently sent press packets to every large black newspaper with the hopes that his own pitches would be the final word released in the papers. Since time was always of the essence, the papers often published directly from Micheaux's press releases. This trend benefitted both parties because it granted Micheaux greater agency in the press and it saved journalists the time of writing original advertisements on films they themselves often had not seen.

A plethora of *Body and Soul's* advertisements applauded and focused on Robeson's previous stage success in London, but later articles also discussed Micheaux's international endeavors.<sup>104</sup> In “Micheaux to Sail,” the *Afro-American* detailed that the filmmaker's “planned trip that will include a tour of the West Indies and South America.”<sup>105</sup> These locations were vastly different than those previously listed, and given Micheaux was constantly pinched for

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<sup>103</sup> “New Micheaux Film Stars Robeson: Miss Julia Russell of Mount Clair,” *Afro-American*, February 14, 1925, 5.

<sup>104</sup> Prior to acting, this versatile man was an accomplished athlete, singer, and scholar. Robeson's professional engagements both domestically and internationally were celebrated in the black press.

<sup>105</sup> “Micheaux to Sail,” *Afro-American*, December 12, 1925, 4.

funds, it is highly unlikely he ever made it to all of his desired destinations. Regardless, the papers admired his hunger for international acclaim. The *Afro-American* was impressed with Micheaux's plans for a publicity campaign “to acquaint the citizens with colored productions... and [cause a] foreign invasion.”<sup>106</sup>

In addition to emphasizing *Body and Soul's* international appeal, Micheaux's advertising campaign capitalized on Paul Robeson's presence in the cast. For example, *New York Amsterdam News* stated, “Robeson's recent success in Europe has added to his popularity as a screen artist.”<sup>107</sup> Micheaux knew Robeson was a hero in the black community and the director used his growing reputation as a surefire selling point. For instance, “the world's greatest Negro actor” was a Robeson tagline featured first in *New York Amsterdam News*, but which also appeared numerous times in the *New York Age*, the *Afro-American*, and *Norfolk Journal and Guide* [to emphasize this concept].<sup>108</sup>

A variety of the newspapers' superlatives touted Robeson's star status and compelled readers to witness his dual nature on screen. The *New York Age's* November 14, 1925 issue symbolized this persuasion and encouraged audiences to witness “a gripping dramatic version of Negro life in the south.”<sup>109</sup> A month later, the *Afro-American* published a similar advertisement that proclaimed, “[*Body and Soul* was] a magnificent combination of Negro brains and art.”<sup>110</sup> Overall these commercial advertisements were highly complimentary; but the major black papers

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<sup>106</sup> “Micheaux to Sail,” *Afro-American*.

<sup>107</sup> “Robeson and Chenault in ‘Body and Soul,’” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 2, 1925, 5.

<sup>108</sup> “Franklin Theatre Ad,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 11, 1925, 7.; “New Douglas Theatre... Roosevelt Theatre,” *New York Age*, November 14, 1925, 6.; “Paul Robeson Tops Big Bill at Attucks,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, June 19, 1926, 5.; “The Royal Theatre,” *Afro-American*, August 28, 1926, 4.

<sup>109</sup> “Roosevelt Theatre Ad,” *New York Age*, November 14, 1925, 6.

<sup>110</sup> “Pictures You Want to See at Local Movie Houses: A Merry Christmas at the M,” *Afro-American*, December 26, 1925, 4.

barely featured any positive reviews on *Body and Soul*.<sup>111</sup> Neither *Within Our Gates* or *The Symbol of the Unconquered* suffered from this lack of favorable reviews, but instead thrived from the positive press coverage conferred upon them.

Much to Micheaux's dismay, *Body and Soul's* absence of positive reviews were filled with a plethora of negative press responses. The film's assault on religious corruption as well as critique on the congregation's blind faith did not resonate well with certain audiences and critics. The *Pittsburgh Courier* detailed Chicago's kickback in "Sylvester Russell's Review," as "patronage slumped in the middle of the week owing to the fact that the story was void of interest."<sup>112</sup> Despite consistent misrepresentation of African Americans by Hollywood, New York papers like the *New York Age* also believed *Body and Soul* was not "any too pleasing to those of us who desire the better side of Negro life to be portrayed."<sup>113</sup> Publisher Lester Walton wrote of the "numerous complaints [that] have been sent to the *Age* office recently, as to the character of race pictures" like *Body and Soul* which allegedly "magnif[ied] our vices and minimize[d] our virtues."<sup>114</sup> A majority of Micheaux's New York critics were successful professionals such as Walton, and this class of blacks yearned for greater respect from society. They believed in distancing themselves from the criminal, gambling, drunken, and sinful members of their race that Robeson's character Reverend Jenkins symbolized.

While various papers believed Micheaux's seamy depiction of crooks like Jenkins highlighted pitfalls in the African American community which needed to be addressed, other

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<sup>111</sup> Between 1925-1926, *Amsterdam News* "edited out nearly all references to Micheaux and his films." Musser, "To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights," 129.

<sup>112</sup> "Sylvester Russell's Review," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 5, 1927, 2B.

<sup>113</sup> Lester Walton, "Sam Langford's Wallop Makes 'The Brute' a Screen Success," *New York Age*, September 18, 1920, as quoted in Bowser and Spence, "Oscar Micheaux's 'Body and Soul' and the Burden of Representation," 2-3.

<sup>114</sup> Lester Walton, "Complain of Picture Shows Front of Franklin Theatre," *New York Age*, December 20, 1925, as quoted in Musser, "To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights," 124.; Bowser and Spence, 253.



newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* railed against *Body and Soul* in its columns. Editor William Henry's "Correcting Micheaux" wondered, "as to which screen production does our people the most harm. The Klansman. 'Birth of a Nation' or Micheaux's 'Body and Soul' of course."<sup>115</sup> This conflation of Micheaux to Griffith marked a dramatic shift in the *Defender's* opinion of Micheaux. Henry insinuated *Body and Soul* was as dangerous as *Birth of a Nation* because of its degrading images of their race. This was clearly evidenced by his inquiries, "what excuse can a man of our Race make when he paints us as rapists of our own women?... [and why] must we sit and look at a production that refers to us as niggers?"<sup>116</sup> A subset of Micheaux's total audience certainly viewed the director as a betrayer of his race, and Henry thanked "real Race-respecting artists, preachers and producers who will continue to work for the benefit of their Race regardless of such filth as 'Body and Soul.'"<sup>117</sup> Even though these supposed divisions between 'good' and 'bad' were not as clear as Henry believed, his acknowledgement of it still sheds light on real divisions within the black community.

This article then claimed, "now as to the merits of the picture, none exist" and even challenged its competitors in the black press: "of a course a paper comes out that says he has been wonderful – but the audience hardly believes it."<sup>118</sup> Here, Henry tried to differentiate from his contemporaries by claiming the *Defender* did not take audiences for fools, but instead listened and respected their opinions. Such persuasion aimed at securing readers' loyalty, and the *Defender* was not the only black newspaper that utilized such tactics.

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<sup>115</sup> William Henry, "Correcting Micheaux," *Chicago Defender*, January 22, 1927, A2.

<sup>116</sup> William Henry, "Correcting Micheaux," *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

The *Defender* further castigated Micheaux when it stated men like him, “in their great haste to gather in a few dollars they forget their Race. And even the merits of their own work.”<sup>119</sup> Henry charged Micheaux with compromising his morals in favor of quick money, but this claim was shortsighted. Survival in the film industry was cutthroat, especially for race picture producers with their limited theatre market. To succeed, Micheaux needed to be an entrepreneurial showman. Critics like Henry dismissed Micheaux's films as easy money, but the fact is his films were financially successful because they effectively reeled in audiences with controversial themes that offended “popular taste to address issues that he felt were important.”<sup>120</sup> Micheaux did not conform to traditional race pictures, and because of this, his uniqueness contributed to the box office success of *Within Our Gates* and *The Symbol of the Unconquered*. By sharp contrast, *Body and Soul* was one of Micheaux's first widely criticized films by numerous black newspapers, and it exemplified the decline of race pictures during the mid-1920s. By the end of the 1920s, the fate of the race picture industry was truly put into question due to the emergence of talking pictures.

## **Chapter IV: Sound Films**

### **I: *The Transition to Talkies***

*Body and Soul's* contentious reception marked the beginning of Micheaux's decline in the silent picture industry. Filmmakers like Micheaux were no longer trailblazers of the movement, and according to the *Afro-American*, “the day is gone... when people will pay to see a colored picture simply because it is a colored picture.”<sup>121</sup> Race pictures were increasingly compared to Hollywood films whose lavish production standards overshadowed black independent films.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Musser, “To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights,” 126.

<sup>121</sup> *Chicago Defender*, January 10, 1925, as quoted in Bowser and Spence, 210.

*New York Amsterdam News* journalist, Romeo Dougherty's believed Micheaux was "passe" and "so far beneath what [Hollywood] has to offer from studios fully equipped and with high paid writers furnishing scenarios."<sup>122</sup> Such critical opinions were growing amongst the black press outlets.

Newspapers that once boasted long block bookings of Micheaux "were replaced by smaller announcements of [only] one or two-day bookings in single theatres."<sup>123</sup> He no longer received the bountiful press coverage *Within Our Gates*, *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, and *Body and Soul* relied upon for success. On rare occasion, white newspapers featured Micheaux, but they were often negative articles. For example, in 1927 *Variety* published an article about a Micheaux film that "failed to click with the Negro patrons of the Indians Theatre here and was withdrawn after one day's presentation."<sup>124</sup>

In addition to increasingly negative press reports, Micheaux also faced challenges in securing bookings. By the mid-1920s over 15,000 theatres operated across the United States, but only about 100, less than 1%, screened race movies.<sup>125</sup> In 1926, George Perry of the *Pittsburgh Courier* confirmed this limitation by stating, "the greatest drawback heretofore is... the lack of first run theatres of sufficient size and accommodations to warrant the return that is necessary to maintain a steady release of film offerings."<sup>126</sup> With this severely limited market, losing any theatre was a major blow to Micheaux's success, unlike in Hollywood, where the abundant

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<sup>122</sup> Romeo Dougherty, *New York Age*, December 23, 1935, as quoted in Bowser and Spence, 210.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>124</sup> *Variety* was a weekly entertainment trade magazine of the period. "Negro Film Taken Off," *Variety*, July 6, 1927, 5.

<sup>125</sup> Phyllis Klotman, "Planes, Trains, and Automobiles," in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, ed. Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 174.

<sup>126</sup> George Perry, "Theatre Building Gaining Activity," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 2, 1926.

distribution channels guaranteed widespread box office success. Thus, independent filmmakers like Micheaux needed to charge larger booking fees to turn any sort of profit at the select theatres their films were featured.

When given the choice between screening race pictures that catered to niche minority audiences and screening less expensive generic Hollywood films that assured profit outside minorities, most theatre managers chose the latter. The *Defender* detailed this trend:

The theatre owners were not willing to pay the increased costs to book a Race film... they want cheap as a regular production of a white corporation ... the producer of Race pictures is forced to get his profit out of a few Race theaters, while the white productions encircle the globe.<sup>127</sup>

Furthermore, a growing number of journalists like Dougherty pessimistically believed managers who screened race films did so “more from a mistaken idea of a sentiment which they feel they should exhibit in a colored community, than because of the worth of the pictures.”<sup>128</sup> Articles such as this further undercut the legitimacy and popularity of race cinema, and by the late 1920s the genre was nearly non-existent.

Enormous change came on October 27, 1927 when Warner Bros. revolutionized cinema with its release of *The Jazz Singer*.<sup>129</sup> This was the world's first feature-length film with synchronized sound. Journalists like Robert Sherwood of *Life* believed this cinematic landmark was “fraught with tremendous significance,” and for filmmakers like Micheaux, this development meant “the end of the silent pictures [was] in sight.”<sup>130</sup> Micheaux derived a key stream of profit from recycling his silent pictures through black theatres years after their original

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<sup>127</sup> D. Ireland Thomas, *Chicago Defender*, January 10, 1925, as quoted in Bowser and Spence, 209.

<sup>128</sup> Romeo Dougherty, *New York Age*, as quoted in Musser, “To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights,” 124.

<sup>129</sup> McGilligan, 227.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

release. However, the advent of the talkie meant Micheaux's films quickly lost their future value and the director frantically sought “to get his silent pictures into theatres before they switched over entirely to sound.”<sup>131</sup>

Talking pictures were extremely expensive, and by 1928 most small theatres were incorporated into larger chains that provided the necessary finances for sound equipment.<sup>132</sup> With its seemingly endless stream of capital, Hollywood studios smoothly converted their films to talkies, but independent filmmakers did not. The “expensive technological innovation ... [and] required investment in both production and exhibition of film” were more than the average race picture producer could afford.<sup>133</sup> Even the most successful directors suffered, putting the future of race cinema in jeopardy.<sup>134</sup> Micheaux declared voluntary bankruptcy in 1928 and the major black press outlets plastered his decision across their newspapers.<sup>135</sup> The *Afro-American's* March 2, 1928 issue captured Micheaux's resilience despite his bankruptcy: “the producer is still seeking bookings for his pictures and is going ahead with plans for recovering... evidently he believes in the slogan, 'a man may be down but he's never out.’”<sup>136</sup> Micheaux's optimism in the face of adversity was rare, and the newspapers curiously tracked his movements to see if he could deliver on the grand comeback he promised.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>132</sup> Bowser and Spence, 211.

<sup>133</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 195

<sup>134</sup> Race picture companies such as the Lincoln Motion Picture Company and the Royal Gardens Motion Picture Company did not survive long enough for the transition to synchronized sound cinema. Other companies like the Colored Feature Photoplay and the Eureka Film Corporation never raised enough funds to fully produce a film. Paula Massood, *Making a Promised Land: Harlem in Twentieth-Century Photography and Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 64.

<sup>135</sup> The desertion of Micheaux's younger brother, Swan also contributed to Micheaux's bankruptcy. A feud between the brothers ensued once Micheaux realized Swan grossly mismanaged the corporation's finances. In retaliation, Swan founded his own race picture company, *Dunbar Film Corporation*, and managed to persuade several of Micheaux's employees to join his ranks. Swan only produced one motion picture, *The Midnight Ace*. McGilligan, 232.

<sup>136</sup> Obie McCollum, “Things Theatrical: Micheaux Down But Not Out,” *Afro-American*, March 3, 1928, 8.

Unfortunately, the onset of the Great Depression further complicated matters for Micheaux. Hollywood slowly opened its doors to black performers to secure African American patronage during these trying times. This caused race pictures' best stars to flock to California to secure these coveted roles that also provided paychecks vital to survival during the Depression. For Micheaux, the loss of *Body and Soul's* Paul Robeson and *Within Our Gate's* Evelyn Preer to Hollywood was detrimental; he knew he could not compete without outside help.

During his silent film career, as a fully independent producer Micheaux relied on dozens of small-time investors who seemed to have exerted minimal influence on his films, but costly sound films required more permanent sources of outside finance. In 1929, Micheaux formed an interracial alliance with New Yorkers Frank Schiffman and Leo Brecher to secure his future in the film industry.<sup>137</sup> This reorganization of Micheaux's company under white financing flooded black newspapers across the country because Micheaux became the only race picture producer to survive the transition to sound cinema. In his early years, Micheaux railed against such white support, but now he saw firsthand the benefits of it. Under Brecher's primary control, Schiffman ran the four largest theatres in Harlem: the New Douglas, the Lafayette, the Roosevelt, and the Odeon.<sup>138</sup> Harlem was the new capital of Black America, and Micheaux also gained easier access to crucial theatres south of New York such as Washington D.C.'s Howard, Baltimore's Colonial, Norfolk's Attucks, and Philadelphia's Dunbar.<sup>139</sup> The Schiffman-Brecher theatre monopoly

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<sup>137</sup> Micheaux's transition from independently financed films to white-financed films has sparked widespread scholarly debates over how much power Micheaux retained over the filmmaking process. There is no definitive answer, but Micheaux's extant sound films suggest no extremely radical shift in Micheaux's control over the films occurred because they retained Micheaux's iconic racially-centered themes.

<sup>138</sup> McGilligan, 219.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

promised a revitalization of Micheaux's film career, and with “black creative talent backed up by white financing,” the trio collaborated on their first talking production, *The Exile*.<sup>140</sup>

## II: *The Exile* (1931)

No complete version of this all-black talkie survives, but fragments of footage combined with newspaper advertisements and reviews suggest Micheaux successfully incorporated his signature themes into this talkie.<sup>141</sup> The advent of sound “offered many filmmakers an excuse to revisit their hits or favorite stories from the silent era,” and in the case of *The Exile*, Micheaux utilized themes of homesteading and mistaken racial identities central to his films *The Conquest*, *The Homesteader*, *Within Our Gates*, and *The Symbol of the Unconquered*.<sup>142</sup>

*The Exile* opens with the story of Jean Baptiste and his fiancé Edith Duval. Once a servant, Duval becomes owner of a lavish Chicago mansion her previous employers abandoned when blacks moved into their neighborhood.<sup>143</sup> Against Baptiste's wishes, Duval later transforms the mansion into a nightclub and speakeasy which then causes the couple to break their engagement. Ultimately, Duval's sinful ambition is completely at odds with Baptiste's middle-class values and he decides to start fresh as a farmer in South Dakota.

This decision is a direct homage to Micheaux's own homesteading days, as Baptiste represents the embodiment of Micheaux in this narrative. The connection is further solidified when Baptiste meets his beautiful white neighbor named Agnes Stewart because Micheaux fell

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<sup>140</sup> Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>141</sup> Scholarship suggests Micheaux utilized his newly established the Schiffman-Brecher finances to “boast a textbook array of shots and angles... [and] superior studio lighting.” McGilligan, 255.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>143</sup> This small plot point purposefully condemns the growing trend of white-flight from integrated neighborhoods.

in love with a Scotch girl. Unbeknownst to Baptiste, Agnes believes “race does not matter and that Baptiste might even be the same color as her mother, who died giving birth to her.”<sup>144</sup> Here Agnes and Baptiste's romance introduces the theme of miscegenation in *The Exile*, a clearly egregious violation of contemporary segregation laws. Once again Micheaux's films challenge the racial status quo, but for the sake of plot development Baptiste deserts Agnes for fear of societal condemnation.

An intertitle reveals Baptiste is drawn “like a moth to flame” back to Duval who has become queen of the Chicago underworld.<sup>145</sup> Duval's social club is a cesspool of illegal activity and it serves as a direct critique of behavior Micheaux found “all too common in the black community... [which threatens] the dignity of all people of African descent.”<sup>146</sup> Baptiste and his femme fatale haphazardly agree to marriage, but in a tragic turn of events she is murdered by a former lover.<sup>147</sup> Initially Baptiste is arrested for her murder, but he is later exonerated. During this entire engagement, the African American identity of Agnes is solidified by the one-drop rule and she journeys to Chicago to profess her love to Baptiste.<sup>148</sup> Similar to *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, this revelation legitimizes Anges and Baptiste's love and the couple marry on their way back to South Dakota. Once again, Micheaux's quintessential middle-class couple lives happily-ever-after in the comforts of their humble homestead.

### *Newspaper Reception*

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<sup>144</sup> J. Ronald Green, *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux*, 113.

<sup>145</sup> *The Exile*, directed by Oscar Micheaux (1931, Micheaux Film Corporation).

<sup>146</sup> Green, 127.

<sup>147</sup> Duval's lover is an Ethiopian named Jango. He kills her because he does not want her to “ruin” other men like she ruined him.

<sup>148</sup> The “one-drop rule” is an American principle of racial classification which stated if anyone had a single ancestor of African descent then they themselves were considered black too. This discriminatory concept was also applied to Native Americans.



*The Exile* symbolized Micheaux's personal comeback as well as his race's perseverance [in the industry]. A key component of this landmark film's success was the black press, and from the film's early days onward Micheaux utilized its power to raise anticipation to promote his picture.

*The Exile* formally premiered in May 1931, but newspapers featured articles and advertisements months earlier. The *Pittsburgh Courier* believed, "Micheaux studied hard and waited a long time for the breaks," and the major African American newspapers recognized the immense effort required for the making of *The Exile*.<sup>149</sup> On January 10, 1931, the *Chicago Defender*, the *New York Age*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Afro-American* all featured teaser articles that rallied support for Micheaux before they or audiences ever viewed the film. This was a strategic move on Micheaux's part to plant the seeds of *The Exile* in the minds of black readers across the nation all at the same time. There was little variation between these four articles which also implied each paper more-or-less printed directly from Micheaux's personal platform. Each paper detailed the reorganization of the Micheaux Film Corporation through the following lines: "It will continue the production and distribution of photoplays of Race life... [but] will be officered as follows: Oscar Micheaux, president; Frank Schiffman, vice president and secretary, and Leo Brecher, treasurer."<sup>150</sup> Schiffman and Brecher's financial backing meant they maintained final say. However, the fact Micheaux was listed as the head of the organization and managed to maintain his company name was extremely noteworthy. Micheaux's preserved African American

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<sup>149</sup> McGilligan, 256.

<sup>150</sup> "Lafayette Theatre Heads Buy Majority Stock in Oscar Micheaux Film Co.," *New York Age*, January 10, 1931, 6.; "Micheaux Film Corporation: All-Talking Pictures..." *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 10, 1931, 8.; "Micheaux to Produce New Film," *Chicago Defender*, January 10, 1931, 8.; "Oscar Micheaux Producing 'The Exile' for Broadway," *Afro-American*, January 10, 1931, 9.

agency in the film industry, a rare occurrence in white partnerships, and for that his audiences admired his ambition and tenacity.

Each article also mentioned *The Exile* would be filmed in, “the Metropolitan studios at Fort Lee N.J., the largest most fully equipped studios in the East for independent production.”<sup>151</sup> Access to this resource was no small thing for black filmmakers who were often inhibited by their shoe-string budgets and limited studio access. Analysis of these four newspaper articles also sheds light on a key advantage white directors took for granted but was afforded by the Schiffman-Brecher capital: rehearsal time. For once Micheaux gained flexibility in his schedule and allotted time to perfect his motion pictures. Each newspaper detailed this rarity as “the cast, which has been in rehearsal for some time,” but the *New York Age* elaborated on it by naming “Charles Moore [and] Eunice Brooks” as the stars while the *Afro-American* specified the singers and dancers came “from 'Blackbirds’ [and] 'Brown Buddies.’”<sup>152</sup> References to these actors and well-known black theatrics familiarized audiences with *The Exile* and simultaneously developed a star-system in the black show business circuit that encouraged audiences to attend films to see their favorites on screen.

An equally important anticipation device these four articles employed was the promise of a Broadway opening for *The Exile*. Three of the papers prominently featured the line, “the production, when completed, will make a try-out on Broadway,” but African American readers of the period knew these aspirations were lofty for black filmmakers.<sup>153</sup> In Micheaux's day, it

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<sup>151</sup> “Lafayette Theatre Heads Buy Majority Stock in Oscar Micheaux Film Co.,” *New York Age*.

<sup>152</sup> “Micheaux to Produce New Film,” *Chicago Defender*.; “Oscar Micheaux Producing ‘The Exile’ for Broadway,” *Afro-American*.

<sup>153</sup> “Oscar Micheaux Producing ‘The Exile’ for Broadway,” *Afro-American*.; “Micheaux to Produce New Film,” *Chicago Defender*.; “Micheaux Film Corporation,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 10, 1931, 8.

was a well-known fact the 'Great White Way' of Broadway referred to the bright marquees as well as the predominate white majority of the musical theatre industry. Just like Hollywood, Broadway systematically denied African Americans opportunities. Thus, Micheaux's mere mentioning of a potential Broadway opening piqued readers' interest and encouraged them to ponder whether the whiteness of the Great White Way would finally be broached by black talent.

The January papers did not provide readers with the answer, but later issues encouraged readers to track *The Exile's* progress throughout the months preceding its premiere, including a February 18, 1931 piece entitled, "Micheaux's 'The Exile' Being Prepared: All-Talking Picture of Modern Negro Life in the Cutting Room."<sup>154</sup> The *Chicago Defender* followed suit later that week on page eight of its national edition: "the photography of 'The Exile,' Oscar Micheaux's first all-talking photoplay of modern life, has been completed and is now being assembled... it is expected to have its premiere somewhere along the Great White Way soon."<sup>155</sup> Both of these articles were brief but adequately galvanized a following for *The Exile*.

In March, the *New York Age* published a lengthy article that effectively summarized the main points of the January and February newspaper articles. The author admired the "up-to-date modern studio crews" at Micheaux's disposal and later detailed how "five weeks of intensive rehearsal were put in by the cast. No such period of preparation had ever been allowed before."<sup>156</sup> According to this article, Micheaux's new capital clearly had its tangible benefits because the actors left rehearsal "supremely confident that they would give a splendid and faultless performance" and "the advance 'rushes' have more than exceeded the fondest hopes of

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<sup>154</sup> "Micheaux's 'Exile' Being Prepared," *New York Amsterdam News*, February, 18, 1931.

<sup>155</sup> Charlene Regester, *Black Entertainers in African American Newspaper Articles* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2002), 63.

<sup>156</sup> "Sidelights on New Picture, 'The Exile,'" *New York Age*, May 7, 1931, 6.

those interested in the picture.”<sup>157</sup> If readers were not already entranced by these promises, the *New York Age* secured their attention in its closing line: “‘The Exile,’ means that a new avenue of employment will be opened wider for hundreds of capable, deserving, colored performers.”<sup>158</sup> Here *The Exile* symbolized more than entertainment. Micheaux used film as opportunity for African Americans to raise their race to greater heights while also combating racism in the industry.

The *Afro-American's* March 7, 1931 and March 14, 1931 editions provide scholars with one final example of Micheaux's efforts to stir anticipation in his audiences. Micheaux held pre-release screenings of *The Exile* in select theatres and purposefully invited members of the national black press to these events. Exclusivity was inherent in such occasions, and Micheaux received coverage even when reporters could not attend, since an invitation complimented the journalist for making the cut. For example, on March 7, 1931 an *Afro-American* writer stated, “I was indeed sorry not to have been present, as I was away from home when the invitation to attend came,” because he felt the occasion as well as his invitation was still noteworthy and newsworthy.<sup>159</sup> Journalist George Tyler's “‘The Exile’ Best of Micheaux's Productions” covered the film's special midnight preview at the Ogden Theatre in New York City. As the title implies, Tyler positively reviewed the picture, he declared “Micheaux has made a wonderful effort” with the potential to cater “to both white and colored patrons. It would be an international seller.”<sup>160</sup> Such high praise further promoted Micheaux's comeback, and these previews also allowed the director to test the waters with audiences. The two-month gap between previews and the

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<sup>157</sup> “Sidelights on New Picture, ‘The Exile,’” *New York Age*.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> “Manhattan Madness: ‘Brown Buddies’ at Lafayette This Week,” *Afro-American*, March 7, 1931, 9.

<sup>160</sup> George Tyler, “‘The Exile’ Best of Micheaux’s Productions,” *Afro-American*, March 14, 1931, 8.

premiere suggested Micheaux used his extra time to fine-tune *The Exile*, another first for the filmmaker.

Anticipation climaxed at *The Exile*'s Lafayette Theatre premiere in May 1931. As the first African American talkie, *The Exile* received ample coverage across the black press as a historic occasion. The May 23, 1931 editions of the *New York Age*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Chicago Defender* each featured segments on Micheaux. Clifford W. Mackay of the *Defender* briefly acknowledged that the premiere occurred, but the other papers provided vivid detail in their columns. The *New York Age*'s W.E. Clark reported immense enthusiasm: "'The Exile' was presented to a capacity audience... [and was] by far the best picture Mr. Micheaux ever turned out."<sup>161</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier*'s front page headline on *The Exile* mirrored the *Defender* and the *Courier*'s support. Micheaux's months of strategic advertising paid off because the *Courier* reported, "Saturday afternoon ... was greeted by more than an overflow audience that had waited more than six months to see just what appeal the picture had for a Metropolitan audiences."<sup>162</sup> The *Courier* further commended the film's "nice plot, a love story as gripping as it possibly can be" as well as Micheaux's truthful "portrayal of Negro life in a city that no one but a Negro who has travelled and lived in cities could tell."<sup>163</sup> Micheaux represented on movie screens the lives of the black community otherwise ignored by Hollywood cinema and white newspapers, and audiences loved it.

After *The Exile*'s New York premiere, the press followed Micheaux as he arranged key bookings in the major markets of Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Chicago, and Baltimore. In

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<sup>161</sup> W.E. Clark, "'The Exile at Lafayette Theatre,'" *New York Age*, May 23, 1931, 6.

<sup>162</sup> "'The Exile,' First Negro Talkie..." *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 23, 1931, 8.

<sup>163</sup> "'The Exile,' First Negro Talkie..." *Pittsburgh Courier*.

July, the *Chicago Defender* reported *The Exile* as “by far the best production of its kind that has ever been enacted, directed and supervised by a hundred per cent nonwhite staff.”<sup>164</sup> Once Micheaux hit Baltimore, the *Afro-American* praised the film as “more than merely a 'talking picture with a colored cast.’” This review went so far to describe *The Exile* as “true to life... [and] the first talking picture taken from the lives, loves, the intrigues, the hates, the adventures of colored people... far removed from the cotton field of the South.”<sup>165</sup> Micheaux’s film countered Hollywood’s typecasting by offering dynamic black characters, and the black newspapers astutely recognized the importance of Micheaux’s divergence from Hollywood.

In summation, the black press supported Micheaux's first venture into the world of talking pictures. Previous scholarship on the subject has concluded the white press ignored *The Exile*. However, *Variety* featured two short yet enlightening articles on the film's white press reception. On May 13, 1931, *Variety* printed a short statement, “Oscar Micheaux and Frank Schiffman... have made the first all-Negro talker in the east, it's entitled 'The Exile.’”<sup>166</sup> This neutral piece was factual and offered no journalists' personal opinions on *The Exile*, but on May 27, 1931 *Variety* shared its viewpoint. The reporter harshly stated, “the Negro will not take his racemade talker seriously... [and] Micheaux in his direction shows a tendency to drag out scenes as well as pad speeches.”<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, the reporter’s pointed criticism condemned Schiffman for being tricked into supporting the film, as evidenced by his following statement: “Schiffman may get his money back for this one in the Negro houses but it is doubtful.”<sup>168</sup> Overall, *Variety* found very few redeeming qualities in *The Exile* and concluded, “the only solution seems to be

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<sup>164</sup> “Chicago Film, ‘The Exile,’ Brings Race Cast to Regal for Week,” *Chicago Defender*, July 18, 1931, 5.

<sup>165</sup> “‘The Exile’ to be Broadway Feature,” *Afro-American*, November 14, 1931, 2.

<sup>166</sup> “All Negro Talker,” *Variety*, May 13, 1931.

<sup>167</sup> “Film Reviews: The Exile,” *Variety*, May 27, 1931, 57.

<sup>168</sup> “Film Reviews: The Exile,” *Variety*.

for producers of Negro films to forget the drama and go for out and out farce or light comedy.”<sup>169</sup> Yes, black newspapers criticized Micheaux's film, but they never suggested race pictures should not be taken seriously. *Variety*'s suggestion for Micheaux to stick to mindless comedies instead of heartfelt dramas that humanized black struggles ultimately supported Hollywood's agenda of caricaturing African Americans as a naïve, secondary race.

*Variety*'s rejection of *The Exile* was the harshest in print, but some black newspapers also critiqued the film. Following the premier, the *New York Age* published one of the few documented negative comments in an overall positive review. W.E. Clark admitted the film, “has many obvious faults” including but not limited to “Miss Brooks [who] overacts many of her scenes, while Miss Nora Newsome, the heroine is much too amateurish.”<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, the reviewer found “the musical score by Donald Heywood [was] nothing to rave about and it is doubtful if the cabaret scenes by Leonard Harper will get pass [sic] the censors of other states.”<sup>171</sup> For the most part, *The Exile* “rang the usual censorship bells...the returns were slow from outside New York,” and Clark's observations represented the black newspapers' general opinion on the faults of *The Exile*.<sup>172</sup> Another critique of Micheaux's latest film was that he failed to secure the Broadway screenings his advertisements continually boasted about. Micheaux's dream of a Broadway exhibition never came to fruition, meaning the filmmaker's many stories centered around the Great White Way became false advertisements wholly symbolic of his failure. While these false promises diminished his credibility with the African American

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> W.E. Clark, “‘The Exile’ at Lafayette Theatre,” *New York Age*, May 23, 1931, 6.

<sup>171</sup> W.E. Clark, “‘The Exile’ at Lafayette Theatre,” *New York Age*.

<sup>172</sup> McGilligan, 259.

newspapers, Micheaux's reputation was truly tarnished through a series of lawsuits in the years following *The Exile*.

In 1931, the *Afro-American* detailed Micheaux's first lawsuit. The vaudeville team of Hooten and Hooten sued Micheaux for emulating their 'Alphabet Sermon' in Micheaux's prologue for *The Exile*, a short entitled *Darktown Revue*, without their permission.<sup>173</sup> Unfortunately, surviving press records do not provide the Hooten and Hooten verdict. A similar ambiguity enshrouded the actress Lucille Lewis's 1932 case against Micheaux because she seemingly vanished from the paper records. Lewis claimed Micheaux never fully paid her, and even though the story did not receive much coverage, the *Chicago Defender* reported other creditors like Schiffman followed her lead.<sup>174</sup> The Schiffman-Brecher partnership rejuvenated Micheaux's career through its capital and venue access; however, shortly after *The Exile*, the partnership deteriorated into a series of harsh battles in the courtroom. Why would Micheaux sever ties with such a lucrative union? No singular answer exists, but the black newspapers provide scholars with key coverage of Micheaux's "downward spiral of legal entanglements" that shed light on these turbulent years in a way no other records could.<sup>175</sup>

Apparently in 1932, the seeds of discontent were sown when Micheaux surreptitiously headed south for promotion without Schiffman's permission. The financier was livid. Schiffman swiftly prepared legal action, as evidenced by *New York Amsterdam's* May 18, 1932 article, "Micheaux Defeated in Ruling: Movie Producer Sued for Accounting on 'The Exile.'" Justice Peter Schmuck presided over this case in which Schiffman charged Micheaux with

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<sup>173</sup> McGilligan, 270.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.



“misappropriation of funds, infringements of copyrights, and attempted removal of officers... and signing and cashing \$3,500 worth of checks belonging to the corporation.”<sup>176</sup> Records indicated Micheaux denied these allegations and stated the real problem was that Schiffman unfairly demanded repayment for marketing and production costs of *The Exile*. According to the director, Schiffman provided him with insufficient funds because the actual production and “expenses incurred in marketing... was almost three times the sum advanced.”<sup>177</sup> Thus, Micheaux contended, “he was not only unable to pay the theatre manager... but was practically bankrupted himself by the venture.”<sup>178</sup> In the end, Schiffman emerged victorious when Micheaux was ordered to “give an accounting of the financial state of the Fayette Pictures Inc,... and return all money unlawfully withheld.”<sup>179</sup> In retrospect, this case marked the end of the Schiffman-Brecher-Micheaux partnership and the beginning of their fierce courtroom conflicts.

Less than half a year later Schiffman had Micheaux formally arrested. The *New York Amsterdam News* plastered the feud across the front page of its November 23, 1932 issue. For thirteen years Micheaux coveted front-page coverage for his motion pictures, not his lawsuits. Micheaux was held “on a charge of petty larceny growing out of the production of his ill-fated film, 'The Exile.’”<sup>180</sup> This paper's use of the phrase 'ill-fated' signified readers' new perception of *The Exile*, a view that tarnished the film's glowing success in 1931. Furthermore, the article also confirmed the amount in question was \$86.91.<sup>181</sup> For a theatre tycoon like Schiffman this amount

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<sup>176</sup> “Micheaux Defeated in Ruling,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1932, 1.

<sup>177</sup> “Micheaux Defeated in Ruling,” *New York Amsterdam News*.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> “Micheaux Faces Trial for Larceny,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 23, 1932, 1.

<sup>181</sup> “Micheaux Faces Trial for Larceny,” *New York Amsterdam News*.

of money was probably negligible, which suggests his dispute with Micheaux was based on management styles rather than dollar amounts.

Three days later the *Chicago Defender* and the *Afro-American* also featured pieces on the second Schiffman-Micheaux courtroom dispute. Both summarized the main points of the *New York Amsterdam* article for their respective readerships. The *Defender* emphasized the charges were “but one of a series of larcenies” while the *Afro-American* found it necessary to specify Schiffman's race.<sup>182</sup> With slight variations, all three accounts of the November court cases announced, “Micheaux denied the charges made by Schiffman and was held in \$500 bail for another hearing.”<sup>183</sup> Against the advice of his lawyer, Micheaux promptly jumped the bond and skipped a series of following court dates.

The filmmaker was nimble at evading attorneys, and it took Schiffman another five months to bring Micheaux to court. Once again, the *New York Amsterdam News* provided the most comprehensive coverage of the trial. On April 5, 1933, it confirmed Micheaux would, “go on trial tomorrow in Part VI of Special Sessions.”<sup>184</sup> At this point readers were well-acquainted with Micheaux's reckless bail-skipping habits and were eager for any updates on this drawn-out case. The case was not closed since the April 26, 1933 issue of the *New York Amsterdam News* reported another Micheaux trial was set for April 29, 1933.<sup>185</sup> Instead of settling the case once and for all, Micheaux was let out on bail but once again intentionally skipped his trial. This complete disregard for the law baffled African Americans across the country. How did he

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<sup>182</sup> “Arrest Oscar Micheaux... Producer is Ordered Held for Larceny,” *Chicago Defender*, November 26, 1932, 5.; “Oscar Micheaux Held for Larceny,” *Afro-American*, November 26, 1932, 19.

<sup>183</sup> “Arrest Oscar Micheaux... Producer is Ordered Held for Larceny,” *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>184</sup> “Oscar Micheaux Trial Will Begin Tomorrow,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 5, 1933, 2.

<sup>185</sup> “Oscar Micheaux Trial This Friday,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 26, 1933.

continually evade judgement? Was it out of recklessness or sheer arrogance? There is no definitive answer, but what is known is that the newspaper indicated Micheaux's reputation plummeted fast.

Previous articles of the trials were relatively neutral, but the March 17, 1933 edition of the *New York Amsterdam News* marked a turning point in the press' coverage of the case. A full-scale manhunt for Micheaux, “the unwilling principal in a game of hide and seek with police officers,” commenced.<sup>186</sup> This was not a plot of a Micheaux drama; this was reality and readers were captivated by the thrill of the chase. After missing his third scheduled hearing, “a general police alarm ha[d] been sent out.”<sup>187</sup> Micheaux was a wanted man now and the press sensationalized his transformation from filmmaker to felon.

Micheaux's game of cat and mouse ended in October “when he was picked up in Baltimore.”<sup>188</sup> The *New York Amsterdam News* catalogued the filmmaker's capture and the court's decision to raise his bail from \$500 to \$2,500.<sup>189</sup> This spike signified the seriousness of the case in New York courts, and the *Afro-American* highlighted the case on page one of its October 7, 1933 issue. Given the paper trail of Micheaux's disrespectful, tumultuous relationship with the law, many readers naturally assumed Micheaux would be incarcerated. Black newspapers across the country capitalized on covering this case, and the court's final decision shocked thousands of readers. The *New York Amsterdam News* confirmed Micheaux “was acquitted on a charge of petit larceny... [because] the case against him was so inadequate.”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> “Court Still Hunting for Micheaux,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 17, 1933.

<sup>187</sup> “Court Still Hunting for Micheaux,” *New York Amsterdam News*.

<sup>188</sup> “Sets Big Bail for Micheaux,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 4, 1933, 1.

<sup>189</sup> “Sets Big Bail for Micheaux,” *New York Amsterdam News*.

<sup>190</sup> “Micheaux Set Free in Trial,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 6, 1933, 1.

The judge disregarded his evasions of the court and “the producer, beaming proudly, left the courtroom without taking the stand.”<sup>191</sup>

The record showed Micheaux beat his creditors, but “later in the day it was revealed another issue was still to be settled... [with] his one-time friend Frank Schiffman... [who planned] to continue in the civil courts.”<sup>192</sup> One moment Micheaux was in the clear and the next he was thrown right back in the fray. Micheaux eventually “paid his court fees and fines, as well as the money owed to Frank Schiffman.”<sup>193</sup> Years of courtroom battles may have concluded, but the director was in no way left unscathed. Any of Micheaux's future films were completely banned from the Schiffman-Brecher Harlem empire, the “nation's single most concentrated market for race pictures.”<sup>194</sup> This blacklisting was detrimental to Micheaux, and his lack of white capital coupled with restricted theatre access was apparent through the black newspaper's coverage of one of his next films, *Ten Minutes to Live*.

### **III: *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932)**

Amidst the years of courtroom battles Micheaux still managed to produce a staggering six motion picture productions. *Ten Minutes to Live* is the one of the six talkies to survive from this period of Micheaux's career. In this period of Great Depression, his audiences craved “all singing, all dancing” films, and Micheaux produced this early talkie to compete with Hollywood's flurry of big budget musicals featuring several race picture stars.<sup>195</sup> However, the

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<sup>191</sup> “Micheaux Set Free in Trial,” *New York Amsterdam News*.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> McGilligan, 272.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>195</sup> *Darktown Revue* (1931), *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932), and *Lying Lips* (1939) were three of Micheaux's talking pictures that utilized singing and dancing to combat Hollywood musicals. The most popular black-cast Hollywood musicals of the period were MGM's *Hallelujah!* (1929) and Fox's *Hearts in Dixie* (1929).

film was not up to his previous works and its tepid reception in the black press reflected audiences' unpopular opinions. *Ten Minutes to Live's* amateur production values, scattered plot, and numerous editing errors reflected Micheaux's tight budget constrictions and paranoia “about ceding any power to outsiders” during the Schiffman lawsuits.<sup>196</sup> These difficulties defined Micheaux's early sound career and greatly impacted the overall quality of his productions.

Unlike its predecessors, *Ten Minutes to Live* is divided into two separate stories. Audiences found it difficult to differentiate between the two because Micheaux's mise-en-scene, storylines, and actors overlapped with little clarification. Entitled “the Faker,” the first story follows two narrative threads, one centers around a filmmaker named Marshall in search of a showgirl for an upcoming film while the second focuses on a nameless man courting a woman. Just like Robeson in *Body and Soul*, Marshall and the courter are physically identical and encourage audiences to compare the two men. Some interpretations of the film believe Marshall and the courter are not twins, but the same person. Micheaux leaves this open to interpretation, making the film extremely confusing.

Regardless of whether they are the same person, Marshall is clearly Micheaux's surrogate in the picture, and audiences join the filmmaker in watching two song-and-dance numbers at the Lybia cabaret. These musical numbers are strategically included to satisfy audiences' desire for sound entertainment. After the performances, Marshall humbly offers a small part that, “don't pay much, only \$3.50 a day” to the scantily-dressed performer instead of to the elegant one.<sup>197</sup> He is frank about his limitations as an African American filmmaker, and his transparency encourages audiences to respect Micheaux's own constraints in the real world.

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<sup>196</sup> McGilligan, 266.

<sup>197</sup> *Ten Minutes to Live*, directed by Oscar Micheaux (1932; Micheaux Film Corporation).

However, honesty such as this is not characteristic of the courter, the true faker of the narrative. On the surface, he symbolizes Micheaux's iconic middle-class protagonist: the courter is well-spoken, employed, conservatively dressed, and promises his lover “I am a man of means... I am a man of money... I can give you everything your heart desires.”<sup>198</sup> She is a naive yet admirable girl whose “poor mother worked herself to death to send me through college, and died saying I would struggle hard and be somebody.”<sup>199</sup> Instead of following this path of uplift, she is seduced by the faker's promise of class advancement through marriage. Audiences cringe as the philander defends his infidelity and states their marriage license is invalid because it is actually a dog license. After this revelation, a brawl ensues and dramatically concludes with the death of the young girl. Thankfully, in the end, justice is restored because the girl's foster mother shoots the faker to death for his misdeeds. Overall, both narrative threads serve as extensive critiques on class division, infidelity, and the dangers of false class advancement.

Once “the Faker” concludes, only a brief intertitle signals the beginning of “the Killer” narrative. To complicate matters further, the second narrative also takes place in the Lybia cabaret with little exposition. Anthony and Letha are two middle-class lovebirds and the main protagonists. Soon after their arrival at the Lybia cabaret, their pleasurable night out is promptly ruined when Letha receives a note: “when you receive this note with you will have just ten minutes to live.”<sup>200</sup> It is written by a killer bent on avenging a past betrayal who also “lost his voice and hearing about five years ago and developed strange hallucinations.”<sup>201</sup> Just before this strange criminal kills Letha, by the oddest turn of events he receives a telegram stating Letha is

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<sup>198</sup> *Ten Minutes to Live*, directed by Oscar Micheaux.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

the wrong woman. The real betrayer is in fact his female accomplice. After this revelation, the criminal is arrested and Letha's name is cleared. Both actions effectively restore societal order. Just as expected, the picture ends with Letha and Anthony rejoining their proper middle class environment far from the riff-raff in the Lybia cabaret. Micheaux utilizes his traditional uplift narrative because his middle-class protagonists maintain their “class dignity and personal integrity” in spite of interference by the seedier, lower-classes of African Americans.<sup>202</sup>

Micheaux hopes his audiences will emulate Marshall, Anthony, and Letha instead of the courter and the killer.

### *Newspaper Reception*

The Schiffman lawsuits sullied Micheaux's reputation in the press long before *Ten Minutes to Live* ever hit the screen. This damage greatly contributed to Micheaux's struggle to retain his once loyal fan base during the early 1930s. Furthermore, even if fans wanted to see *Ten Minutes to Live*, many could not because he was banned from the Schiffman-Brecher Harlem theatre empire.

The New York papers' coverage, or frankly lack thereof, was prime evidence of the effects of Micheaux's blacklisting. Harlem was home to the largest concentration of race picture theatres in America, and Micheaux was banned from nearly every single one. Records indicate *New York Amsterdam News*, *New York Age* or any local papers never printed advertisements or reviews of *Ten Minutes to Live*. The film was deemed not pertinent to their readerships and therefore not a profitable subject to print. Micheaux lost access to thousands of paying customers.

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<sup>202</sup> Green, 152.

The *Chicago Defender* only covered *Ten Minutes to Live* in two issues. On June 11, 1932, page six featured a single line: “‘Ten Minutes to Live,’ an all-black cast film produced by Oscar Micheaux.”<sup>203</sup> Such a nondescript advertisement lacked the filmmaker's quintessential pizzazz. This bland advertisement may be phrased like this in part to save money and publicize with minimal expense. The following week the *Defender's* June 18, 1932 issue included two longer stories. In “Sans the Footlights or Even the Stage With the Drops,” the reporter “came back from Detroit in the same vehicle with Oscar Mischeaux.”<sup>204</sup> At this point in his career Micheaux was a regular headliner in the *Defender*, thereby suggesting this misspelling of his last name was purposeful. Analysis of previous newspapers suggest a theory. During *Body and Soul's* controversial days, agencies that condemned the film, such as *New York Amsterdam News*, used misspelling to publicly distance themselves from “the mischievous Micheaux [or] Mischeaux.”<sup>205</sup> In other words, when Micheaux was out of favor with the black press, various newspapers used this ‘misspelling’ as subtle jab at the filmmaker to cue readers into the papers' true sentiments.

When applied to this *Defender* article, the theory supported the journalist's subliminal critique of Micheaux. The reporter described Micheaux as “unmindful that he was being observed... [because] his time was taken up, while ours was our own.”<sup>206</sup> Bear in mind Micheaux was defeated in one of his first trials less than a month before this article, meaning readers may have logically concluded the director was preoccupied with legal matters. Furthermore, this article's second dig at the director was evidenced by the line: “Oscar didn't recognize 'The Drops'

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<sup>203</sup> Charlene Regester, *Black Entertainers in African American Newspaper Articles*, 100.

<sup>204</sup> “Sans the Footlights or Even the Stage With the Drops,” *Chicago Defender*, June 18, 1932, 5.

<sup>205</sup> Musser, “To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights,” 130.

<sup>206</sup> “Sans the Footlights or Even the Stage With the Drops,” *Chicago Defender*



[a black musical group of the period] and we wouldn't recognize Oscar.”<sup>207</sup> Micheaux was a pioneer of the race picture industry, a seasoned veteran of thirteen years, and for the Drops to not recognize the man signified Micheaux's waning popularity in comparison to his silent film days. Yet, the article's closing lines suggested Micheaux attempted to mask his decline. The director bragged about “just what a splendid hit his 'Ten Minutes to Live' had proven with pictures' fandom.”<sup>208</sup> Here, even in casual conversation Micheaux was a businessman advertising to anyone willing to listen. Yet, his poor box office returns on *Ten Minutes to Live* contradicted his statement above. Micheaux projected a facade of confidence and success despite his current misfortune. Perhaps he believed that maintaining this persona encouraged readers of the article to attend *Ten Minutes to Live*. Since the newspapers did not publish regularly on the film, Micheaux sought publicity anywhere he could, and this article attested to his determination.

Unfortunately for Micheaux, the June 18, 1932 issue of the *Defender* informed readers across the country of his film's poor reception. “Going Backstage with the Scribe” stated the film “created no particular stir in the movie circles during its recent run at the Metropolitan Theater.”<sup>209</sup> In one sentence this article summarized the reason *Ten Minutes to Live* was not well liked. The newspaper pointedly acknowledged how Micheaux's “lack of funds with which to carry out his plans is working against Oscar in all his attempts to crash the talkie field.”<sup>210</sup> In *The Exile*, Micheaux's white capital provided him studio access, weeks of rehearsal, and additional editing time; *Ten Minutes to Live* epitomized what a lack of these funds produced. From its opening scene till its conclusion, *Ten Minutes to Live's* narrative coherence was nonexistent and

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> “Sans the Footlights or Even the Stage With the Drops,” *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>209</sup> “Going Backstage with the Scribe,” *Chicago Defender*, June 18, 1932, as quoted in Regester, 8.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 8.

Micheaux's cost-saving measures were glaringly obvious. Actor Carlton Moss recalled, “Micheaux allotted a certain amount of film footage for each scene. There was no extra – there were no 'retakes.’”<sup>211</sup> This explained the picture's lack of continuity editing which in turn forced Micheaux to haphazardly splice together footage in illogical ways.<sup>212</sup> The *Defender* disapproved of Micheaux's cheap moves here and promoted films by other directors in their columns instead.

The *Afro-American* was equally unreceptive to *Ten Minutes to Live*; its June 4, 1932 was the only edition that featured any discussion of the film. According to “Around the Theatres,” “Oscar Michaux screened his latest talkie” the week before in Philadelphia.<sup>213</sup> Once again the black press deliberately misspelled Micheaux's name to further communicate their disapproval of his recent actions as well as his film. Moreover, the paper's modest compliment, “there is some snappy dancing by a fast moving chorus” was overshadowed by its criticism of the “bad sound effects.”<sup>214</sup> On multiple occasions Micheaux sacrificed his sound quality due to limited time and money. Moss recollected, “the actors pleaded with him to let them rerecord words they felt they had mispronounced, or lines they thought were hurried” to no avail.<sup>215</sup> At one point Micheaux even recorded his own voice over actor Carl Mahon's voice and completely disrupted the diegetic world. Lapses in sound continuity such as these were duly noted by audiences and further undermined Micheaux's reputation. One final example of Micheaux's money-saving measures in *Ten Minutes to Live* was his decision to make the criminal deaf and mute. This allowed Micheaux to use intertitles, a remnant of his silent film days, and save money by limiting his

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<sup>211</sup> McGilligan, 267.

<sup>212</sup> For example, the faker's reference to “the man you see with her,” was irrational because there was no man in the earlier shot.

<sup>213</sup> “Around the Theatres,” *Afro-American*, June 4, 1932, 18.

<sup>214</sup> “Around the Theatres,” *Afro-American*.

<sup>215</sup> McGilligan, 266.

expenses on synchronous sound. The *Afro-American's* astute staff noted production mistakes such as those listed above and knew Micheaux would not meet their readers' standards. Thus, the paper concluded its review with this hypothesis: “Micheaux started out to make three shorts and wound up with a feature – which I fear won't go far.”<sup>216</sup>

The *Afro-American's* prediction was not far off because one of the last newspaper records of *Ten Minutes to Live* screenings took place in Norfolk. To counter his blacklisting up north Micheaux concentrated on booking south and southwest markets, as evidenced by the *Norfolk Journal and Guide's* coverage. On September 10, 1932, the *Guide* announced *Ten Minutes to Live* was “a dramatic tragedy featuring Tressie Mitchell, who would appear in person, during the showing... [and] George Williams and Gallie DeGaston will also appear in person.”<sup>217</sup> In Micheaux 's heyday he used famous leads like Paul Robeson for *Body and Soul* screenings to coax audiences into attendance. By sharp contrast, *Ten Minutes to Live* promised appearances of obscure supporting actors. This stark difference indicated Micheaux was both unable to afford touring with his higher billed actors and desperately searching for any way to draw audiences into the limited theatres he booked.

Furthermore, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* published only two more advertisements for *Ten Minutes to Live*, both on September 24, 1932. The Manhattan Theatre publicized, “Wednesday and Thursday, Tressio Mitchell and Gregory Williams, stars of 'Ten Minutes to Live,'... will appear on stage in person.”<sup>218</sup> Its second reference advertised screenings at the Manhattan Theatre and Capital Theatre, both picture houses owned by a man named Lichtman.

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<sup>216</sup> “Around the Theatres,” *Afro-American*.

<sup>217</sup> “Theatre Ad,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, September 10, 1932, 14.

<sup>218</sup> “At the Manhattan,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, September 24, 1932, 13.

What is telling about this newspaper advertisement is not the fact Lichtman screened the film, but the fact the Attucks declined an opportunity to showcase *Ten Minutes to Live*. Schiffman owned this popular Norfolk theatre and prior to their lawsuits gladly screened Micheaux's moving pictures there. However, Schiffman's deteriorating relationship with Micheaux prohibited such an arrangement and Micheaux certainly felt this loss in his pockets. Often times Micheaux's absence in the black newspapers was just as important as his coverage. *Ten Minutes to Live* represented a turning point in Micheaux's career, one characterized by increasingly diminished and negative press coverage that reflected his difficulties during the transition from silent to sound cinema.

#### **IV: *Murder in Harlem* (1935)**

At the tail end of the Schiffman feud, Micheaux released his thirty-fifth film entitled *Murder in Harlem*.<sup>219</sup> In traditional Micheaux fashion, this talkie was a remake of one of his silent pictures, his 1921 film entitled *The Gunsaulus Mystery*.<sup>220</sup> Both films centered around a murder mystery plot based on a real event. The 1913 Leo Frank trial was one of the most infamous trials of the early twentieth century.

This court case appealed to Micheaux for several reasons. First, it was public domain, meaning there were no potential copyright issues that could lead to lengthy lawsuits he could not afford. Second, his audiences would respond to a sensational case from which the recent past

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<sup>219</sup> The East's lukewarm reception of *Lem Hawkins' Confession* caused Micheaux to retitle the picture *Murder in Harlem*. He hoped a reference to the cultural center of African Americans would draw in crowds. With the assistance of Clarence Brooks and Sack Brothers associates, Micheaux barnstormed the West Coast and Southwest. To their dismay, the name change was not extremely helpful. The picture was only mildly successful.

<sup>220</sup> During the sound era, Micheaux remade several of his successful silent motion pictures into sound films. He remade *Birthright* (1924) in 1939 under the same title, *House Behind the Cedars* (1927) became *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), and *Spider's Web* (1927) became *The Girl From Chicago* (1932).

added a new layer of depth; viewers analyzed Micheaux's pointed parable of the trial with their personal memories in mind. Lastly, the case adhered to one of Micheaux's most iconic themes; the story of a falsely accused and ultimately exonerated African American suspect. Prior to *Murder in Harlem*, films such as *Within Our Gates*, *The Gunsaulus Mystery*, *Ten Minutes to Live*, and *The Exile* each capitalized on the exoneration of innocent blacks.<sup>221</sup> In accordance with this pivotal theme, *Murder in Harlem* was Micheaux's interpretation of his people's history and the reverberating effects of the Leo Frank trial within African American community over two decades later.

To properly interpret *Murder in Harlem*'s reception by the black newspapers and audiences, a firm understanding of the legal history of the actual Leo Frank trial is crucial. Frank was the Jewish superintendent of the National Pencil Factory in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>222</sup> During his routine night rounds of the basement, watchman Newt Lee discovered the body of thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan. Bruising around her neck and cuts across her face indicated she died of strangulation. The police were surprised to find two cryptic notes next to the corpse. The first stated, “he said he would love me, lay down play like the night witch... [that] tall black negro.”<sup>223</sup> The second note detailed, “I went to make water and he push me down a hole a long tall negro black did it I write while play with me.”<sup>224</sup>

These mysterious papers clearly implicated Lee; shortly after news of his arrest and Phagan's death reached the public and the case was thrown into the national spotlight. The

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<sup>221</sup> Micheaux continually incorporated this theme into his future motion pictures such as *Lying Lips* (1939) and *The Betrayal* (1948).

<sup>222</sup> Michael Bronski, “The Return of the Repressed: Leo Frank Through the Eyes of Oscar Micheaux,” *Shofar* (2005): 33.

<sup>223</sup> Michael Bronski, “The Return of the Repressed: Leo Frank Through the Eyes of Oscar Micheaux,” 41.

<sup>224</sup> Bronski, 41.

primary murder suspects were Lee, Frank, and a black factory worker named Jim Conley. During the trials, Conley signed an affidavit that stated Frank forced him to write the letters and carry her corpse to the basement after Frank had sex with her.<sup>225</sup> Frank's defense denied these allegations and the main tension of the trial was the word of an uneducated African American against the word of a northern, college-educated Jewish businessman. On numerous occasions Conley was imprisoned for minor crimes, and this record, coupled with his four conflicting affidavits, questioned his credibility as a witness. Such questions of legitimacy were but a single facet of the case's "enormous labyrinth of unresolved details."<sup>226</sup> Racial prejudices against Conley and anti-Semitism against Frank heavily influenced the courtroom proceedings and ultimately biased the judiciary. In death, Phagan was memorialized as a symbol of southern femininity unjustly violated by the unbridled lust of a Jew. Anti-Semitic ideology was rampant across the South and Frank's Jewish identity biased peoples' views of the case. In response, Frank's team attempted to shift the guilt to Conley by utilizing racist rhetoric which is apparent in the counsel's statement below:

Why go further than this black wretch there by the elevator shaft... Why negroes rob and ravish everyday in the most peculiar and shocking way. But Frank's race don't kill. They are not a violent race. Some of them may be immoral, but they don't go further then that.<sup>227</sup>

Frank hoped his drawing this distinction between African Americans and Jews would arouse support. This strategy ultimately failed. On August 25, 1913, the court found Frank guilty of Phagan's murder. Years of appeals ensued, and the court eventually released the order to commute his murder conviction to life imprisonment. However, within a month of his

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 36.

incarceration his throat was slashed; violence climaxed when a vigilante group seized him in the middle of the night and lynched him in Phagan's hometown.<sup>228</sup>

The Leo Frank case was filled with discussion of miscegenation, lynching, and racism – all controversial subjects Micheaux regularly employed in his narratives. The filmmaker's decision to use this case as a baseline for *Murder in Harlem* came as no surprise to his audiences. However, Micheaux surprised his viewers in other ways. His inclusion of certain cinematic conventions, key plot twists, and additional characters strayed from the true history and provided black perspective on an infamous case wrought with historic significance. Even though the film was heavily edited by censors, the surviving copy retains enough of the film's central plot points to allow viewers a strong grasp of its key differences from the real court case.

The film opens on black night watchman, Arthur Vance, who discovers the body of a white woman named Myrtle Stanfield (the Mary Phagan stand-in) and a mysterious note condemning “the tall negro.”<sup>229</sup> Upon their arrival, the police immediately arrest Vance and then, without pause, the film jumps back three years. The sudden flashback is designed to introduce two protagonists not original to the Leo Frank Trial. An aspiring lawyer, but currently traveling salesman, Henry Glory sells an anonymous book door-to-door.<sup>230</sup> One day he meets Claudia Vance, the female protagonist who quickly deduces Glory is the true author of the books. The pair are instantly attracted to each other, but through a case of mistaken identity, Glory believes

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<sup>228</sup> Recent scholarship concluded the social and legal drama surrounding this case ultimately led to a miscarriage of justice because the true identity of Mary Phagan's killer is unknown to this day. *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>229</sup> *Murder in Harlem*, directed by Oscar Micheaux (1935; Micheaux Film Corporation).

<sup>230</sup> This plot point was a direct reference to Micheaux's early door-to-door book selling days. He thoroughly enjoyed inserting small autobiographical references throughout his films.

Vance is her immoral neighbor. Regardless, Glory returns to her apartment to declare his love, but is mugged by her criminal neighbor, known as Catbird.

Title cards reveal Glory never made it to Vance's door, and returns viewers to 1935, the time of the murder. Since that early encounter, Glory became an attorney and Vance now seeks his counsel because her brother is the convicted watchman. It is important to note here that Micheaux's decision to focus on Glory and Vance's romance diverges from the real case, creating a conventional melodramatic, romantic plot that his audiences craved in their cinema. Glory and Vance's romance sharply contrasts with the film's main murder plot line and deviates from the historical record. Courtroom sequences dominate the screen and each account of the murder is structured as a flashback sequence. When Brisbane (the Leo Frank stand-in) recounts the events, the astute Vance notices that Brisbane exchanges several nervous glances with Lem Hawkins (the Jim Conley stand-in) and later threatens Hawkins in the back of the courtroom. She suspects Hawkins is involved in Brisbane's cover-up, and vamps the fool, filling him with liquor and flattery until he spills the truth. By this point, Vance is an equal part of Glory's defense team, and her craftiness, bravery, and determination to clear her brother's name makes Vance a clear feminist heroine.

Glory and Vance convince Hawkins to take the stand, and Micheaux adapts Conley's testimony nearly verbatim for the scene.<sup>231</sup> Once again, flashbacks recount Hawkins's perspective of the murder. Brisbane expresses romantic interest in Myrtle and later attempts to seduce her too, but upon her rejection he injures the girl. Brisbane then orders Hawkins to check on Myrtle, and the pair quickly realize she died moments beforehand. Under immense pressure

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<sup>231</sup> Micheaux claimed to have attended the trials, but this is impossible to verify. Regardless, his level of detail proved the filmmaker possessed a deep knowledge of the trial. McGilligan, 28.



from Brisbane, Hawkins forges the notes to place blame away from the pair and Brisbane bribes Hawkins for his silence and cooperation. Hawkins' testimony is true, but through Vance and Glory's further investigations, Micheaux makes an ingenious twist that presents a new perspective on the Leo Frank case.

A minor character in the real trial, Phagan's boyfriend George Epps, becomes the true murderer of Phagan in Micheaux's adaptation. In the film, Epps is an overly jealous boy who threatens to kill Myrtle if he catches her with Brisbane. He proceeds to witness Brisbane attacking Myrtle, but interprets their struggle as a sign of passion. Shortly after Brisbane leaves Myrtle unconscious on the floor, Epps secretly strangles his girlfriend in a manner that suggests Brisbane killed her. This realization clears Hawkins and Brisbane, and a newspaper intertitle later reports Epps dies in a mysterious manner. With the truth finally revealed, Vance is exonerated. Glory then visits Vance's apartment and meets the Catbird next door; in that moment, the lawyer realizes all this time he mistook Vance for her prostitute neighbor. Glory profusely apologizes to Vance and vows his wedding present will be a home "far from the Catbird's nest."<sup>232</sup> In their final moments, the new couple happily kisses and once again exemplify Micheaux's "goal of uplift toward middle-class life."<sup>233</sup> Their intelligence and perseverance is rewarded, just like the couples of *Within Our Gates*, *Symbol of the Unconquered*, *Body and Soul*, *The Exile*, and *Ten Minutes to Live*.

*Murder in Harlem* highlights prejudices embedded within America by reinterpreting an infamous trial shrouded in mystery. After watching the film, an obvious question for viewers is "Why does Micheaux choose Epps as the primary killer instead of Brisbane or Hawkins?" The

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<sup>232</sup> *Murder in Harlem*, directed by Oscar Micheaux (1935; Micheaux Film Corporation).

<sup>233</sup> Reid, *Redefining Black Film*, 85.

filmmaker purposefully dramatizes “the consensus of many black newspapers... that Conley's claims were true and that Leo Frank was a duplicitous, lecherous murderer.”<sup>234</sup> But Micheaux knew supporting the lynching of a white male like Frank was nearly impossible for an African American filmmaker of the period. Censors across America would reject any hints of this. Furthermore, the anti-Semitic undertones of the real case were another subject the filmmaker could not comment on because he did not want to offend his new production investor, Alfred Sack. Owner of Sack Amusement Enterprises, this Jewish entrepreneur provided Micheaux financial support and access to race picture houses the director desperately needed.<sup>235</sup> Thus, condemning Frank as a perverse Jew would alienate a crucial supporter and irrevocably damage his career.

Ultimately, Micheaux successfully created an African-American-centered counter-narrative through his manipulation of Epps as a Frank doppelganger.<sup>236</sup> Epps embodied all the perverted, anti-Semitic rhetoric of the real trial in a manner Micheaux's audiences knew was truly meant for Brisbane. Technically Epps was the final nail in Myrtle's coffin, but Brisbane was also a criminal; he was a sexual aggressor whose misdeeds greatly contributed to Myrtle's death. This narrative sleight of hand placed full blame on Epps, partial blame on Brisbane, and cleared Hawkins in a way that passed censors' standards. Through Conley, *Murder in Harlem* calls attention to the detrimental impact of white power structures that wrongly frame African Americans. By proving Conley did not contribute to Myrtle's death, Glory and Vance “put

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<sup>234</sup> Matthew Bernstein, *Screening a Lynching: The Leo Frank Case on Film and Television* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), 43.

<sup>235</sup> Sack pre-booked Micheaux's films in his company's black theatres across the Southwest and South. He also assisted Micheaux in the Harlem sphere of theatres by making local exhibition arrangements with RKO. McGilligan, 286.

<sup>236</sup> Epps is Frank's doppelganger in the sense that he is the true murderer of the Mary Phagan character.

forward a message of African American empowerment and uplift, [that refuted] the racist lies put forward by the Leo Frank defense team.”<sup>237</sup> Micheaux's pointed revision of history in *Murder in Harlem* was revolutionary and ought to have resurrected Micheaux's career. However, as the newspaper trail shows, this comeback picture was largely ignored, a clear signal Micheaux's time had passed.

### *Newspaper Reception*

Micheaux hoped *Murder in Harlem* would be well received if its plot reflected contemporary black newspapers' consensus on the Frank case. Almost overnight the case became a cause célèbre, and this greatly angered the African American press because this white man's story received national coverage while thousands of black lynching victims never received press attention, let alone a trial.<sup>238</sup> In this specific case, white newspapers' reports of the trial stood in stark contrast to the black newspapers. The *New York Times* frequently referred to Conley as a “black monster,” illustrating the white press' tendency to demonize Conley in favor of Frank.<sup>239</sup> By contrast, the black press felt Frank was the guilty party. For instance, the *Chicago Defender* stated, “there seems to be absolutely no question of his [Frank's] guilt” while the *Chicago Whip* asserted, “the evidence shows that Leo Frank committed the crime... and then tried to blame the crime on the COLORED MAN.”<sup>240</sup> In their eyes, Conley was another attempt to scapegoat African Americans for crimes committed by white Americans. Without lionizing Conley, the black press believed “if one bit of evidence had emerged to cast suspicion on Conley, he would

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<sup>237</sup> Bronski, 49.

<sup>238</sup> Between 1882-1930 an estimated 288 white Americans were lynched while 2,500 African American lynchings occurred between 1880-1930. Matthew Bernstein, *Screening a Lynching: The Leo Frank Case on Film and Television*, 1.

<sup>239</sup> Matthew Bernstein, “Oscar Micheaux and Leo Frank: Cinematic Justice Across the Color Line,” *Film Quarterly* (2004): 14.

<sup>240</sup> *Chicago Defender*, April 25, 1914, *Chicago Whip*, May 7, 1921, as quoted in Matthew Bernstein, “Oscar Micheaux and Leo Frank: Cinematic Justice Across the Color Line,” 14.

have been indicted, if not lynched immediately.”<sup>241</sup> Micheaux's film reflected this belief in Conley's innocence, and he hoped his mirroring of the black press' solidarity on the case would cultivate support of the film.

Records indicated *The Gunsaulus Mystery* was a raging box office success, and Micheaux hoped to recreate this success in its latest adaptation, *Murder in Harlem*. In 1921, black newspapers praised Micheaux's adaptation of the Leo Frank case. For example, the *Chicago Defender* hailed *The Gunsaulus Mystery* as “highly dramatic” with “bits of comedy.”<sup>242</sup> This positive feedback complemented the film's blunt advertising campaign. Micheaux capitalized on advertisements such as this *Afro-American* post: “this story is based on the Leo Frank case... one of the most mysterious murder cases on record.”<sup>243</sup> Fourteen years later, Micheaux believed *Murder in Harlem* could revamp his career if its advertisements copied *The Gunsaulus Mystery*'s strategy of directly associating his film with the case. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide*'s May issues provided the clearest examples of this emulation. On May 4, 1935, the *Guide* stated the film, “is based on the sensational 'Stanfield Murder Case’” which made “up as interesting a story as you could wish to see.”<sup>244</sup> This exact phrase was referenced again in the *Guide* on May 11, 1935; the Regal Theatre advertisement declared, “[*Murder in Harlem*] is based on the sensational 'Stanfield Murder Case.’”<sup>245</sup>

Unfortunately, instead of following *The Gunsaulus Mystery*'s success, *Murder in Harlem* followed the trends of his latest sound pictures. It received few positive reviews from the black

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>242</sup> Bernstein, 12.

<sup>243</sup> “Carey ‘The Mystery,’” *Afro-American*, April 6, 1923, 4.

<sup>244</sup> “Lem Hawkins’ Confession, Starring Clarence Brooks at Booker T for One Week,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 4, 1923, 13.

<sup>245</sup> “Cabaret Scene From ‘Lem Hawkins’ Confession,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 11, 1935, 15.

press. The *Chicago Defender* and *Norfolk Journal and Guide* published the most favorable descriptions of the film in their advertisement sections. The fact is advertisements, not critics' reviews, were the only positive coverage *Murder in Harlem* received.

Throughout Micheaux's advertising campaign he relied primarily on three photographs to entice people into the theatre: a Dorothy Van Engle portrait, a cabaret sequence, and a corpse picture.<sup>246</sup> Both the *Defender* and *Norfolk Journal and Guide* featured actress Van Engle seductively in profile. The *Defender's* caption emphasized her star status while the *Guide* accentuated her beauty as “the creole constellation.”<sup>247</sup> Micheaux hoped highlighting Van Engle's exquisiteness would bolster her celebrity status and create loyal fan followings that would attend *Murder in Harlem* if for no other reason than seeing their favorite actress on screen.

The cabaret photograph was also key to Micheaux's *Defender* and *Guide* advertisements because it shined light on what attracted his audiences.<sup>248</sup> On the one hand, this image confirmed Micheaux's film showcased upbeat music and exciting dance numbers that drew audiences to Hollywood pictures. On the other hand, it symbolized something deeper than a simple repetition of Hollywood theatrics. It portrayed a class of well-dressed, civilized African Americans enjoying a classy night out on the town. Images of a burgeoning black middle class were key to Micheaux's films because they encouraged his audiences to strive for this status. Micheaux deliberately filled his films and related advertisements with middle-class uplift images he hoped would inspire his peers.

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<sup>246</sup> Dorothy Van Engle played the role of Claudia.

<sup>247</sup> “Film Star,” *Chicago Defender*, May 25, 1935, 7.; “Screen Star,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 4, 1934, 3.

<sup>248</sup> “Cabaret Scene From ‘Lem Hawkins’ Confession,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 11, 1935, 15.; “In New Micheaux Picture,” *Chicago Defender*, April 27, 1935, 11.

The last photographs featured in both newspapers' advertisements underscored *Murder in Harlem's* thriller appeal. On May 4, 1935, an advertisement in the *Guide* featured a “tense scene” of Glory and Vance leaning over a black corpse.<sup>249</sup> A month later the June 15, 1935 issue of the *Defender* prominently displayed another still of the body. Such a graphic photograph of the gruesome cadaver certainly caught readers' eyes and encouraged them to discover why the man died. A large part of the film's appeal was also its promise of drama, suspense, mystery, and murder. Grabbing advertisements such as these encapsulated the various appeals Micheaux made to his viewers' cinematic interests.

By contrast, advertisements which did not incorporate the photographs were generally brief and lacked the draw of the photographs. Two of the *Defender's* editions provided some of the most concise yet positive statements about *Murder in Harlem*. On August 24, 1935, the paper advertised, “a delightful treat awaits patrons of Warner Brothers Metropolitan Theater... the sensational mystery screen hit.”<sup>250</sup> Two weeks later the *Defender* stated, “a new film by Oscar Micheaux now running at the Metropolitan Theatre is packing 'em in.”<sup>251</sup>

A singular *Afro-American* article complemented the *Defender's* positive words. The engrossing title, “What's Wrong with the All-Colored Movie Industry?: Oscar Micheaux Still Trying to Break the Ice After 15-Year Struggle” grabbed readers' attention. Yet, its seemingly negative title prefaced an overwhelmingly hopeful reception of *Murder in Harlem*. The author praised the film's, “striking departure from the 'backwoods to Harlem nightlife' theme, once considered characteristic of Micheaux productions.”<sup>252</sup> This acknowledgement of the evolution

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<sup>249</sup>“In New Micheaux Picture,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 4, 1935, 15.

<sup>250</sup> Register, 7.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>252</sup> “What's Wrong with the All-Colored Movie Industry?” *Afro-American*, May 18, 1935, 8.

of Micheaux's career was a rare find amongst articles published during the latter half of his career. More often, the black press tore apart Micheaux's latest pictures for not living up to Hollywood's high standards of production. Instead of embracing such cynicism and criticism, the article ended on a reassuring note: "Micheaux's promises regarding the new trend in all-colored movies carry a note of encouragement for actors and audiences alike."<sup>253</sup>

While the articles above certainly supported *Murder in Harlem*, complimentary pieces were few and far between. Micheaux knew race pictures were an endangered species in the world of film. With Schiffman's ban of Harlem theatres still in effect, Micheaux concentrated his New York bookings to small theaters. The fact Micheaux did not advertise these screenings accounted for *Murder in Harlem's* virtual blackout in the New York press. Records indicate only two articles were published and each lambasted the film. *New York Amsterdam News* produced a seemingly promising article entitled "Micheaux's Latest Seems to Be His Best." It complimented the sound recording, but ultimately condemned the picture because, "the continuity has again been ignored as one of the most vital elements of a good motion picture."<sup>254</sup> This article's use of the word 'again' implied this fault was a common occurrence in Micheaux's work. Its second critique of *Murder in Harlem* echoed another frequent complaint: *Amsterdam News* believed "the acting is decidedly overdone by a cast of actors whom we have seen do better."<sup>255</sup> The repetition of these newspaper critiques signified black audiences' opinions and is one of the few tangible recordings of their reception of this Micheaux film.

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<sup>253</sup> "What's Wrong with the All-Colored Movie Industry?" *Afro-American*.

<sup>254</sup> "Micheaux's Latest Seems to Be His Best," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 27, 1935, 10.

<sup>255</sup> "Micheaux's Latest Seems to Be His Best," *New York Amsterdam News*.

In a similar vein, the *New York Age's* Lou Layne castigated *Murder in Harlem* in his May 25, 1935 column. He believed the film, “brought only feelings of extreme disgust [and] revulsion” to its viewers through Hawkins's use of the word 'nigger' in the forged notes.<sup>256</sup> Layne vehemently disagreed with Micheaux's usage of the term. He believed Micheaux used “poor judgement in his attempt at humor... [and tried] to ape Hollywood by capitalizing on 'antiquated' tradition.”<sup>257</sup> The article's conflation of Micheaux with Hollywood stereotypes was extremely harsh, and Layne continued to berate the filmmaker. This was clearly evidenced by Layne's statement: “Micheaux may be pioneering in Negro theaters, but when he does so by holding himself and the rest of us up to nationwide ridicule, we can well do without him – and gladly.”<sup>258</sup> The severity of Layne's denunciation of Micheaux was unlike any critique he received during his silent film career. A filmmaker the press once lauded as a prime example of African American agency and pride now struggled desperately for remotely positive support.

A final instance of Micheaux's waning popularity was the subtle, yet repeated misspelling of the filmmaker's name by two of America's top African American newspaper agencies. The *Afro-American* April 27, 1935 issue featured an advertisement entitled, “In New Michaux Film.”<sup>259</sup> Three weeks later the *Defender* echoed the *Afro-American's* disapproval by misspelling the filmmaker's name like 'Mischeaux.’<sup>260</sup> Once again, this repetition of this subtle jab by multiple black newspapers further confirmed the filmmaker's spiraling popularity, and his later film *God's Stepchildren* signified another attempt to mitigate this decline.

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<sup>256</sup> Lou Layne, “Moon Over Harlem,” *New York Age*, May 25 1935, 4.

<sup>257</sup> Lou Layne, “Moon Over Harlem.”

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> “In New Michaux Film,” *Afro-American*, April 27, 1935, 8.

<sup>260</sup> “Race Players Star in Murder Picture,” *Chicago Defender*, June 15, 1935, 6.



### V: *God's Stepchildren* (1938)

Micheaux's thirty-eighth film is of particular importance because the film's customary repetition of racially controversial themes is a direct rebuttal to a cherished Hollywood film entitled *Imitation of Life* (1934). Just as *Within Our Gates* and *Symbol of the Unconquered* countered *Birth of a Nation*, *God's Stepchildren* challenged this Oscar-nominated motion picture. *Imitation of Life* incensed African American audiences due to its stereotypical portrayal of a tragic mulatto who passes for white but is ultimately punished for desiring opportunities and treatment equal to those of white Americans.<sup>261</sup> This condemnation of African Americans was dehumanizing and predicated on the assumption their race was naturally inferior to whites. Micheaux responded to this blatant racism in Hollywood the best way he knew – by producing an independent film that offered a bold critique from a black perspective.

The bulk of *God's Stepchildren* was shot in New Jersey and New York, but the outdoor footage suggests portions were filmed “near Dallas, Texas, where the Sack Brothers had invested in a low-budget production facility.”<sup>262</sup> Even though Sack was stringent with budgets, he was ultimately a reliable investor who allowed Micheaux immense creative liberty throughout their eight-year partnership.

To rebut films like *Imitation of Life*, Micheaux relied heavily on Alice B. Russell's unpublished short story, *Naomi, Negress* for narrative inspiration. *God's Stepchildren* channels several themes central to this short work. The film opens with a light-skinned African American woman anonymously abandoning her child Naomi at the doorstep of a black woman named Mrs. Saunders. Seconds later, an intertitle flashes forward to reveal Mrs. Saunders raised the child in her quaint, middle-class suburban town with her biological son Jimmy. Despite her African

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<sup>261</sup> *Imitation of Life*, directed by John Stahl (1934; Universal Pictures).

<sup>262</sup> McGilligan, 297.

American upbringing, Naomi yearns to be white. The child's light complexion allows her to ditch her colored school and pass as white at a white school until she is caught by Mrs. Saunders and a black teacher named Mrs. Cushinberry. Naomi then bitterly attends the local colored school where she torments her black peers as an outlet of her racial frustration. Mrs. Cushinberry attempts to curb Naomi's animosity, but the child retaliates and spreads vicious rumor that nearly ruins the teacher's life.

Ten years later, an intertitle reads: "Naomi was forgiven, but sent away to a convent, while Jimmy and little Eva, the teacher's daughter, grow to young man and womanhood."<sup>263</sup> Jimmy matures into an honest, middle-class gentleman who earned his fortune as a Pullman Porter.<sup>264</sup> He dreams of becoming a farmer and sharing this experience with his sweet fiancé, Eva, by his side. The couple embodies all the qualities of Micheaux's perfect African American; the director uses the pair as vehicles to teach audiences about the middle-class values of hard work, honesty, and racial pride. A clear example of Micheaux's utilization of the couple for preachment purposes occurs shortly after Jimmy refuses to invest his hard-earned money in numbers rackets on the basis that such games "drag the Negro down."<sup>265</sup> Jimmy ponders why his brethren gravitate towards toxic pastimes and "the lines of least resistance" instead of investing "in legitimate businesses."<sup>266</sup> Through the voice of Jimmy, Micheaux encourages audiences to uplift their race through productive actions like farming; he believes this path fosters African American prosperity and independence.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> *God's Stepchildren*, directed by Oscar Micheaux (1938; Micheaux Film Corporation).

<sup>264</sup> Once again, Micheaux's repetition of the Pullman Porter and farming narratives directly tie Jimmy to himself. Audiences recognized this connection and therefore read the character as a Micheaux stand-in figure.

<sup>265</sup> *God's Stepchildren*, directed by Oscar Micheaux.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> Jimmy's emphasis on the power of farming and land ownership is an adaption of Booker T. Washington's attachment to land as well as his belief that admirable work proved oneself to society.

Jimmy and Eva's exemplification of black middle-class sophistication starkly contrasts with Naomi's twisted nature. She yearns for Jimmy's middle-class status but seeks it out in an extremely perverse manner. Naomi romantically pursues Jimmy and attempts to subtly vamp him numerous times since they are not technically blood related siblings. Fortunately, Jimmy continually spurns her incestuous advances. Eventually Naomi marries a family friend named Clyde, even though she is secretly appalled by his dark skin and "funny looking" features.<sup>268</sup> A year later Naomi gives birth to a healthy baby boy and her family hopes she will finally embrace the role of a proud, nurturing African American mother just like Mrs. Saunders. Unfortunately, Naomi rejects her heritage and abandons her family in favor of passing for white in the city.<sup>269</sup> She gravely declares to Mrs. Saunders, "I'm leaving the Negro race ... I'm going away from all I ever knew, to the other side... If you see me, you don't know me. Even if you pass me on the street, I am a stranger."<sup>270</sup> This desertion directly parallels the film's opening sequence where Naomi's mother abandons her baby as well as her black heritage, thereby warning African Americans of the cyclical nature of passing and the ultimate demise of those who spurn their race.

A brief fade indicates several years have passed since Naomi's departure, during which time Jimmy and Eva raised Naomi's child as a part of their own family. One night Naomi secretly spies on the happy family as they peacefully read to each other in the living room. Judging by her physical state, Naomi failed to successfully pass in white society and she is homeless and ashamed of her desertion of her race and family. Naomi's destitution is juxtaposed by footage of her family ensconced in their middle-class home; once again the scene is

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<sup>268</sup> *God's Stepchildren*, directed by Oscar Micheaux.

<sup>269</sup> Passing for white is a key theme of *God's Stepchildren* that directly echoes Driscoll in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* and Rena and John Walden in *Veiled Aristocrats*.

<sup>270</sup> *God's Stepchildren*, directed by Oscar Micheaux.

emblematic of Micheaux's goal of racial uplift. At one point Naomi's child catches sight of his mother in the window and exclaims, "I did see a woman, Grandma."<sup>271</sup> However, by the time Mrs. Saunders and Jimmy rush to the porch Naomi is gone.

The following sequence is one of the most poignant endings in any of Micheaux's talking pictures. Naomi cannot shoulder the weight of her betrayal, and Micheaux darkly intercuts images of Naomi gazing over a bridge with the children gaily singing "Ring Around the Rosy." Seconds later, the sound of a splash follows the final image of Naomi's hat swirling downstream. Here, Micheaux's montage employs the immense power of suggestion, implying Naomi committed suicide. The film's ending shot is superimposed by the text, "as ye sow, so shall ye reap. Galatians 6:7" which suggests a moral that evokes the cyclical nature of Naomi's birth, maternity, and death.<sup>272</sup>

### *Newspaper Reception*

*God's Stepchildren's* bleak ending, controversial representation of passing, and blunt critiques of lower class blacks each contributed to the film's overwhelmingly negative reception, as evidenced by its newspaper coverage. Press reports provide scholars one of the few tangible sources of information on audiences' responses. Like *Within Our Gates*, *God's Stepchildren* sparked wide-scale protests across the United States. Micheaux hoped to quietly and successfully premiere at the Regent Theatre, an RKO picture house in Harlem. Instead, the *New York Age* described the "first indication of unfavorable reaction against the picture was a picket line in front of the theatre" shortly after its debut.<sup>273</sup> Eight different organizations rallied against *God's*

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> John Harding, "Motion Picture is Withdrawn After Protest in New York," *New York Age*, May 5, 1938.

*Stepchildren*.<sup>274</sup> The May 5, 1938 edition of the *Age* chronicled protest leader Beatrice Goodlove's motivation: "We asked that the picture be withdrawn immediately because... it slandered Negroes... [we] also protested against speeches made by characters in the picture implying that Negroes fell for any kind of gambling game."<sup>275</sup> Goodlove's adamant condemnation of *God's Stepchildren* did not end at the theatre. The newspaper documented African Americans like Goodlove taking to the streets and actively protesting Micheaux in attempts to exert greater agency over their race's portrayal in film. Micheaux's racial identification granted him no mercy; protesters were by far more critical of black directors because they were "expected" to know better than to dishonor their race with unfavorable screen representations.

These protests threatened the Regent's reputation and projected earnings, causing it to withdraw *God's Stepchildren* just two days after its opening. Shortly afterwards, RKO banned the film entirely from its domestic theatre circuit. This blacklisting coupled with Schiffman's ban jeopardized Micheaux's career, and he desperately searched for any outlet to salvage *God's Stepchildren's* future success. He consented to meet with the protestors during three separate delegations, and, according to the *Age*, after much deliberation Micheaux agreed to three main concessions. He "agreed to delete the offensive portions," to "announce [the] protests before each showing of the picture, as reason for the deletions," and lastly to allow "representatives of all the protests... to preview his next two pictures."<sup>276</sup> These compromises further illustrated black audiences' genuine concern for their portrayal race on screen as well as Micheaux's

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<sup>274</sup> The eight organizations are listed as follows: the National Negro Congress, the Frederick Douglass Club, the Harlem Teachers Union, the International Workers Order, the American Youth Congress, the Young Communist League, the Workers Alliance, and the Harlem Committee for Better Pictures for Children. John Harding, "Motion Picture is Withdrawn After Protest in New York," *New York Age*.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

attempts to cater to his viewing public. The *Age* favored the protestors' stance and applauded their concerted efforts "to cooperate with [Micheaux] in bringing progressive and enlightened type of Negro motion picture to movie audiences."<sup>277</sup>

Three weeks later, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* published a nearly identical article to the *Age* article. Its title, "Protests Causes Withdrawal of Micheaux's Films: Group Objects to Showing of Photoplay: Critics Say 'God's Stepchildren' is Slander to Race," immediately grabbed audiences' attention. Furthermore, this repeated coverage of Micheaux's protest fiasco signified the event's significance for black readers across the country. White newspapers deliberately ignored *God's Stepchildren*, but the black press recognized its relevance to their readers and tracked its development.

By the late 1930s Micheaux was rarely headline material, but he sincerely hoped the *God's Stepchildren* protests would create enough buzz to merit front page coverage, just like protests of *Within Our Gates*. As per the New York protest agreements, Micheaux removed offensive portions for Brooklyn's Tompkins, Apollo, and Subway theatre screenings. However, in the traditional Micheaux fashion, the director slyly evaded censorship restrictions in Massachusetts, and capitalized on advertisements for his original, uncensored version at the Ritz Plaza Hall in Boston.<sup>278</sup> Micheaux's brash actions and use of the black press to promote the taboo, uncut film intentionally provoked an outward response from Bostonians.

*Amsterdam News's* article, "Show 'God's Stepchildren' in Boston Despite Protests: Micheaux Film Fought on grounds It Shows the Negro in an Uncomplimentary Manner" stands testament to the success of Micheaux's manipulation of the press and protests.<sup>279</sup> The writer

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> McGilligan, 300.

<sup>279</sup> "Show 'God's Stepchildren' in Boston Despite Protests," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 9, 1938, 21.

stated, “as soon as news of the production was spread... the protests began,” and four groups organized a concerted protest.<sup>280</sup> Like the New York protesters, Bostonians “sought to have the picture barred on the grounds that it treated the Negro in an uncomplimentary manner.”<sup>281</sup> Both protests vehemently condemned Micheaux’s unfavorable characterizations of their race, thereby signifying a rising dissenting opinion of the film. Moreover, the article’s articulation of these sentiments effectively signified the importance of such demonstrations to the greater African American community; protesting apparent injustices at any level merited ample coverage across the black press. A final note on the significance of *Amsterdam News*’s report subtly lay in the article’s closing sentences. Just as Micheaux hoped, “rumors that the motion picture met with opposition in New York added zest” to the Boston scene.<sup>282</sup> This statement further affirmed the dual-nature of protests. Micheaux benefitted from controversy, and “contrary to all speculation... the picture found many colored patrons anxious to judge it for themselves.”<sup>283</sup>

As with every Micheaux film, censorship restrictions dictated variations in *God’s Stepchildren* screenings across the country. Inclusion of contentious scenes fueled protests, and surviving newspaper records confirmed which sequences aggravated audiences the most. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide*’s September publications referenced a lost scene that caused many patrons to leave the theatre in disgust. The *Guide* detailed *God’s Stepchildren*’s Roanoke, Virginia exhibition. It emphasized the importance of a scene where Naomi, “marries a white man, [and] the trouble comes down on her head.”<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> The protesters were the New England Congress for Equal Opportunities, New England Congress of Colored Youth, the South End Progressive Club, and the South End Educational Committee. “Show ‘God’s Stepchildren’ in Boston Despite Protests,” *New York Amsterdam News*.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> “‘God’s Stepchildren’ Tops Virginia Theatre Program,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, September 17, 1938, 10.

On September 24, 1938, the *Guide*'s advertisement for screenings in Rocky Mount, N.C. repeated this sentence verbatim.<sup>285</sup> These references verified a missing scene vital to Naomi's demise. As the film stands now, Naomi's failure to pass in the white world is unexplained, but the advertisements indicated the woman indeed married a white man named Andrew. However, once he discovers she is colored, Andrew brutally beats and deserts his wife. This graphic scene cements Micheaux's opinion on passing: denying one's heritage is a debilitating transgression, both physically and mentally. Shock value of this caliber was rare in Micheaux's talking pictures and reminiscent of his early silent films.<sup>286</sup> The race picture industry was fading, and Micheaux desperately sought to recreate his success of earlier decades through gripping sequences such as Naomi's assault and subsequent suicide. However, as the papers proved, audiences' interests evolved and censors tightened their restrictions, meaning only select theatres screened this infamous sequence.

*Amsterdam News* claimed *God's Stepchildren* found no favorable publicity in the black newspaper circuit, and records indicated only one outlet positively reviewed the film. Nahum Bascher of the *Chicago Defender* previewed the feature at Warner Bros. Pictures. He concluded, "it's the best yet in sound, acting and screening that this pioneer has done."<sup>287</sup> However, Bascher also acknowledged Micheaux's limitations as a black director and further commended his progress in the face of adversity: "he has kept at it with modest financing and much enthusiasm."<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> "God's Stepchildren at the Booker-T," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, September 24, 1938, 15.

<sup>286</sup> For example, the near-rape and lynching scenes in *Within Our Gates*, the Klan attack in *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, and the rape in *Body and Soul*.

<sup>287</sup> Nahum Bascher, "Fanfare," *Chicago Defender*, September 3, 1938, 18.

<sup>288</sup> Nahum Bascher, "Fanfare," *Chicago Defender*.



One of the only other supportive commentaries appeared in the *Defender's* September 24, 1938 issue. Page eight stated *God's Stepchildren*, "is said by critics to be one of the best dramas... to be seen in Chicago in years."<sup>289</sup> Such a supportive claim was uncommon in the press at the time, but further reading recognizes the underlying reasons of the above statement. This was not a positive review, but in fact an advertisement for the Metropolitan Theatre. The theatre hoped vague references to critics' reception of *God's Stepchildren* would legitimize their choice in screening the picture. This praise of Micheaux's latest work was fueled by the theatre's hunger for profit, and did not stand independently as a positive reception of the film like Bascher's review.

For *God's Stepchildren's* advertising campaign, Micheaux concentrated his efforts on the New York area. This may appear as an odd choice for Micheaux given his continual blacklisting in most Harlem theatres. However, the largest concentration of Micheaux's target audience still resided in New York, and the newspaper records substantiated his focus. The *Afro-American*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Norfolk Journal and Guide* published at least two relatively brief advertisements each.<sup>290</sup> By contrast, the *New York Amsterdam News* issued six separate theatre advertisements including the Tompkins, Apollo, Regent, and Banco Theatres.<sup>291</sup>

In terms of recurring advertising themes, *God's Stepchildren* emphasized the taboo nature of Naomi's passing narrative the most. The *Afro-American's* September 11, 1937 advertisement

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<sup>289</sup> *Chicago Defender*, September 24, 1938, 8, as quoted in Regester, 318.

<sup>290</sup> New Micheaux Picture to be Made in Harlem," *Afro-American*, September 11, 1937, 12.; "Stepchild(?)," *Afro-American*, April 23, 1938, 11.; "God's Stepchildren' Given a Screening," *Chicago Defender*, August 20, 1938, 18.; Regester, 318.; "In New Movie," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, September 25, 1937, A18.; "God's Stepchildren at the Booker-T," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*.; "Richmond Theatres: At the Booker-T," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, August 13, 1938, 13.; "God's Stepchildren' Tops Virginia Theatre Program," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*.

<sup>291</sup>"At the Regent," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 10, 1938, B2.; "Display Ad 22," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 4, 1938, 6.; "Display Ad 23," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 4, 1938, 6.; "Display Ad 83," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 21, 1938, 16.; "Display Ad 88," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 4, 1949, 19.; "Theatre Fare," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 21, 1938, 17.

briefly described *God's Stepchildren* as, “the story of a very light skin colored girl who doesn't want to be colored.”<sup>292</sup> This early advertisement for the film clued audiences into its passing theme, an issue that Micheaux purposefully used to critique “the Hollywood clichés from his own unique perspective.”<sup>293</sup> A *Norfolk Journal and Guide* advertisement stated, “Naomi develops peculiarities... [because] she resents and dislikes Negro children.”<sup>294</sup> This implied Naomi's prejudice against her own race was abnormal and discouraged throughout black society. Lastly, an *Afro-American* advertisement featuring a photograph of young Naomi was also of significance. The caption stated, “an almost white baby... decides later in life to cross the color line, bringing tragedy to herself.”<sup>295</sup> Why does she decide to pass for white? What is her tragedy? Questions such as these were primarily the thoughts Micheaux wanted to plant in readers' minds to encourage them to flock to the theatres for answers.

Similar to its predecessors, *God's Stepchildren's* advertisement campaign concentrated its efforts on the film's most controversial aspects to draw audiences in. The film's moderate success was partially attributed to its protests and the subsequent media coverage of the events made the film relevant beyond its mere exhibition. Micheaux's controversial portrayal of an African American woman passing for white stands out amongst the rest of his talking pictures, and, in fact, *God's Stepchildren* became one of Micheaux's few sound films that appeared in theatres across the country years after its initial release. This is clearly evidenced by a 1949 *New York Amsterdam News* advertisement for Banco Theatre.<sup>296</sup> However, despite *God's Stepchildren's* continual relevance and pointed reflection of America's racial climate, the film

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<sup>292</sup> “New Micheaux Picture to be Made in Harlem,” *Afro-American*.

<sup>293</sup> McGilligan, 293.

<sup>294</sup> “Richmond Theatres: At the Booker-T,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*.

<sup>295</sup> “Stepchild(?),” *Afro-American*.

<sup>296</sup> “Display Ad 88,” *New York Amsterdam News*.

was not successful enough to revitalize Micheaux's career. By the end of the decade this once unstoppable race picture pioneer faded into relative obscurity.

### **VI: *The Seven-Year Hiatus***

After *God's Stepchildren*, Micheaux produced four more motion pictures before embarking on a seven-year hiatus from filmmaking in 1940, the largest interim of his career. A primary cause of Micheaux's hiatus was the termination of his contract with Sack Amusement Enterprises. In 1947, the Sack brothers left the race film distribution industry by quietly selling most of their theatre chain and ending a plethora of partnerships.<sup>297</sup> History attested to the immense difficulties Micheaux faced when he lost financial backers during this sound era of filmmaking. He bitterly declared, "I don't feel like going out begging a lot of Jews to put up money to make pictures with, any more. Just don't feel like it."<sup>298</sup>

This financial frustration was the final straw and from 1941-1948 Micheaux did not release a single motion picture. However, the man by no means remained idle during these years. Micheaux was first and foremost an entrepreneur, and he continually searched for any outlets to exhibit his work. For example, a *God's Stepchildren* 1949 advertisement demonstrated Micheaux's habit of recycling his old pictures in theatres across the country, making meager returns when he could. This venture was unsustainable in the long term, and the filmmaker ultimately returned to self-publishing. Reminiscent of his early days, Micheaux travelled the country and sold his novels out of his suitcase. Writing was familiar territory for Micheaux because it required less risk and investment than filmmaking, and he efficiently converted earlier projects and unfilmed scripts into four novels. His last two novels, *The Story of Dorothy*

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<sup>297</sup> Sack cut all domestic ties except for a select number of Dallas theatres which exclusively screened foreign-language films. McGilligan, 311.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

*Stanfield* and *Masquerade*, were significant because of the former's sensationalistic focus on the infamous Leo Frank court case while the latter addressed passing for white.

Both books enjoyed modest sales, but Micheaux's first two novels published in the early 1940s, *The Wind from Nowhere* and *The Case of Mrs. Wingate*, were by far more pertinent to his final feature film and reflected his current hardships. In *The Case of Mrs. Wingate*, Micheaux offered a blunt analysis of the race picture industry's decline in the face of Hollywood's domination:

These big film companies reciprocate their pictures with each other. 'I'll play ours in those you control' they say, in effect, to each other, 'If you'll play ours in those you control' And so it goes. If I spend a million dollars to make a colored picture and if it was as good as the best picture ever made, I couldn't play it anywhere except in what they call Negro theatres, unless I could persuade one of the major companies to release it, and they're not that interested much in Negroes...<sup>299</sup>

These meticulously written lines described a racist double standard in the American film industry that Hollywood companies would not openly acknowledge. Whether in film or through novels, Micheaux used any medium accessible to combat prejudices that repressed African American liberty.

While *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* effectively critiqued the Hollywood film industry, his earlier book, *The Wind from Nowhere*, proved essential in his later career. This novel was yet another remake of Micheaux's previous novels, *The Conquest* and *The Homesteader*.<sup>300</sup> During this final phase of his career, Micheaux heavily referenced his own life story, and *The Wind from Nowhere* became the basis for his final return to filmmaking – *The Betrayal*.

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<sup>299</sup> Oscar Micheaux, *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* (New York: Book Supply Company, 1945), 91.

<sup>300</sup> Its title is a direct play on *Gone With the Wind*'s sentimentalized characterization of the Old South.

## VII: *The Betrayal* (1948)

By the spring of 1947, the book business bottomed out, and Micheaux declared, “[I want] to get back into pictures as soon as possible.”<sup>301</sup> He partnered with Astor Pictures, but the venture was extremely risky for Micheaux because he used his life savings for the film’s operating budget. Unfortunately, the film is lost, but its major plot points can be pieced together through a dialogue script and contemporary newspapers.<sup>302</sup>

A prosperous, black farmer named Martin Eden is the protagonist. He lives in South Dakota and hires the Stewart family to manage his property while he travels to Chicago. One day he meets Deborah Stewart, but believing that she is white, decides not to pursue her. Like Sylvia Landry of *Within Our Gates* and Eve Mason of *Symbol of the Unconquered*, Deborah does not know she is half black, and this ignorance is central to the plot’s development. Desperate to forget his forbidden love, Eden somberly travels to Chicago and meets a prosperous woman named Linda Lee. Shortly after their introduction, Eden haphazardly proposes to Linda and the young couple elope. While Linda loves Eden, her deceitful father wrongly believes the man is only interested in his daughter for her money.

Over time he convinces Linda that Eden plans to kill her, causing her to run home to her family. A year later, Eden finally relocates his estranged wife Linda, but, after an intense struggle, is accidentally shot by her. The wounded farmer returns alone to his ranch and coincidentally passes Deborah as she journeys to Indiana to visit her long-lost grandfather. Once Deborah meets her dark-skinned grandfather, she discovers her true ancestry. Overjoyed by this

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<sup>301</sup> McGilligan, 327.

<sup>302</sup> Alan Gevison, *Within Our Gates: Ethnicity in American Feature Films, 1911-1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 86.

revelation, Deborah reunites with Martin and the couple happily embrace as they ponder their future together.

Quintessential elements of *The Exile*, *The Wind from Nowhere*, *The Homesteader*, and *The Conquest*, like racial ambiguity and homesteading, are embedded in *The Betrayal*. In its full form, *The Betrayal* was 3 hour and 24 minutes, making it the second longest feature-length film ever produced at the time.<sup>303</sup> Micheaux's forty-third film incorporated "potentially contentious themes of the more inflammatory early films" he hoped would revitalize his career once more.<sup>304</sup>

### *Newspaper Reception*

*The Betrayal* was Micheaux's final chance at redemption, a final comeback on which he spared no expense in newspaper advertisements. On one level, this expenditure paid off; Micheaux finally achieved the life-long goal of a Broadway premiere. *The Betrayal*'s opening at the Mansfield Theatre was groundbreaking not just for Micheaux, but his entire race, since it was the first all-black movie to ever play on Broadway.

Micheaux recognized this revolutionary nature of this Broadway premiere, and he capitalized on its significance through a variety of newspaper advertisements. Surviving records suggest the *Afro-American* only published one piece on *The Betrayal*, but this advertisement distinguished itself from the rest of Micheaux's notices. Released over half a year before its premiere, the "Announcement Extraordinary" proclaimed, "it's on the way! What? The Greatest Negro Photoplay of all time! Look for it at a leading Broadway legitimate theatre soon!"<sup>305</sup> In terms of its timing, Micheaux deliberately dropped this headline months before the premiere. He used the newspapers to plant seeds of curiosity and excitement in the minds of readers. If

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<sup>303</sup> *Gone with the Wind* was the longest feature-length film of the period. McGilligan, 342.

<sup>304</sup> Bowser and Spence, 217.

<sup>305</sup> "Announcement Extraordinary," *Afro-American*, December 13, 1947.

executed correctly, Micheaux could satisfy audiences' desires through future screenings of *The Betrayal* while simultaneously reaping financial benefits from the venture.

Additionally, this *Afro-American* advertisement is germane to an analysis of Micheaux's relationship with the press because of its call for "20 or 30 capable and intelligent young men and women to manage our Road Shows."<sup>306</sup> In contrast to prototypical announcements, this offered readers a unique opportunity to take part in the race picture industry. Micheaux's films sought to elevate classes of African Americans, as did this advertisement: "managers and assistants thus far have been white people... we're going to use COLORED managers for this is a 100 per cent owned Negro company."<sup>307</sup> These words instilled racial pride in audiences by encouraging blacks to exert greater agency over the motion picture industry by participating in road shows.<sup>308</sup> Micheaux wanted to offer "these jobs to any Negro capable of being made into a good manager," but there was a caveat.<sup>309</sup> To become a travelling manager for Micheaux, prospective managers had to "lend [Micheaux] \$300 to help... purchase advertising accessories & etc. to help exploit the picture when ready."<sup>310</sup> This need for financial investment, no matter how small was less common among white production companies and accurately reflected financial limitations in black film industry. Unlike Hollywood producers, Micheaux parlayed the offering of a modest position in the movie industry in exchange for income needed to sustain his filmmaking capabilities.

Of all the papers, *New York Amsterdam News* published the most advertisements on *The Betrayal*. Beginning on June 6, 1948, a brief advertisement plugged for "Micheaux's thrilling

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<sup>306</sup> "Announcement Extraordinary," *Afro-American*.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>308</sup> The announcement also referenced potential screenings "from Maine to California: from and including Canada to the Gulf of Mexico – and in all English speaking countries the world over." Like *Within Our Gates* and *Body and Soul*, Micheaux attempted to expose international audiences to *The Betrayal*. *Ibid.*

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

motion picture epic [about]... the strangest love story ever told” playing “by popular demand” at the Mansfield.<sup>311</sup> Two weeks later, *Amsterdam News* published an advertisement reminding audiences of the premiere. It emphasized the film’s defining statistics, such as the facts “[it] was produced at a cost of more than \$100,000” and was “the second longest movie ever produced. ‘Gone with the Wind’ is the only one longer.”<sup>312</sup> This juxtaposition of *The Betrayal* and *Gone with the Wind* demonstrated race pictures competed with Hollywood pictures for the patronage of black audiences. By producing a film of nearly equal length and of a Broadway caliber, Micheaux aimed to prove race pictures were just as official and deserving of recognition as Hollywood films.

*The Betrayal*’s launch was paramount to the black press, as further evidenced by the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*’s coverage the day before the premiere. Even though the event took place hundreds of miles from the Norfolk readers, its occurrence was still of interest, and merited coverage. The June 19, 1948 advertisement reiterated the film’s exceptional length compared to *Gone with the Wind*. An equally significant aspect of this advertisement was its accentuation of Deborah’s belief she was “white even though she does not know that she too is a Negro according to American standards.”<sup>313</sup> The key words in this advertisement were “American standards.” Such a distinction implied American race standards were not universally accepted standards because, as previously discussed, racial ambiguity discredited the foundations of racist ideology. Thus, Micheaux’s inclusion of racial uncertainty in both the film and this subtle advertisement phrasing aimed at undermining racist ideology that pervaded twentieth-century America.

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<sup>311</sup> “Advertisement,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 6, 1948.

<sup>312</sup> “The Betrayal Has Premier at Mansfield,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 19, 1948, 25.

<sup>313</sup> “‘The Betrayal’ Set for NYC Debut Showing,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, June 19, 1948, E22.



Like the *Guide*, the *Chicago Defender* also released a single advertisement that stated, “‘The Betrayal,’ opened at the Mansfield Theatre on Broadway.”<sup>314</sup> A final advertisement for *The Betrayal*’s premiere appeared in the September 11, 1948 edition of *Amsterdam News*. It praised the film as “the first all Negro financed and produced movie to appear at a downtown theatre, [and make] big for national box office attraction.”<sup>315</sup> Positive press such as these advertisements were exactly the type of headlines Micheaux hoped would counter his overwhelmingly negative coverage near the tail-end of the 1930s. In the end, a Broadway premiere was a surefire method of securing press coverage. Even though *The Betrayal* only played on Broadway for a week, Micheaux capitalized on the tagline, “direct from Broadway” in black newspapers across the country.<sup>316</sup> This three-word tagline effectively conferred a newfound level of legitimacy on *The Betrayal* that enticed audiences.

In addition to the Broadway premiere, Micheaux’s advertising campaign also highlighted the controversial nature of *The Betrayal*’s interracial romance angle. Anti-miscegenation laws were deeply entrenched in 1940s America, making Micheaux’s “strangest love story ever told” extremely taboo.<sup>317</sup> An *Amsterdam News* article encapsulated Micheaux’s sensationalist exploitation of miscegenation through a vivid description of Deborah’s grand revelation:

There before her at last stood grandpa Bourdreux... she was shocked! For he was a – colored man! She realized in that moment then, that she was not a white girl – and never had been; that she was colored too, colored – just like him!<sup>318</sup>

Once again, Micheaux referenced how Deborah’s racial ambiguity boldly threatened the racial standards of white supremacists.

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<sup>314</sup> “Stars Over Broadway,” *Chicago Defender*, July 3, 1948, 9.

<sup>315</sup> “Photo Standalone 23,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 11, 1948, 22.

<sup>316</sup> Patrick McGilligan, “Me and Oscar Micheaux: An Interview with LeRoy Collins,” *Film Quarterly* (2004):7.

<sup>317</sup> Patrick McGilligan, “Me and Oscar Micheaux: An Interview with LeRoy Collins,” *Film Quarterly*, 3.

<sup>318</sup> “Display Ad 82,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 30, 1950, 21.

Micheaux intentionally filled the black newspapers with enticing advertisements. He hoped these announcements would galvanize support for *The Betrayal* that would in turn be validated by critics' reviews. Only then could Micheaux successfully launch his final cinematic comeback. Much to Micheaux's dismay, not a single black newspaper released a positive review; hostile reviews filled not just the African American press, but several of the most popular white newspapers too.

On June 26, 1948, the prestigious *New York Times* published its first ever article on a Micheaux picture. Prior to that, Micheaux's film career was wholly ignored by the *Times*. Journalist Thomas M. Pryor broke the paper's silence, but it was by no means in Micheaux's favor. In a condescending tone, Pryor stated the *Times* covered *The Betrayal*'s premiere "for the record, and that alone."<sup>319</sup> If not for its Broadway premiere, this agency would have ignored *The Betrayal*, just like it ignored the last twenty-nine years of Micheaux's career. After viewing, Pryor believed "the story develops in painful detail" and later critiqued the director for "not represent[ing] his ideas clearly."<sup>320</sup> For Micheaux, *The Betrayal*'s dramatic plot was a vehicle for his brazen attack on racism in America. Yet, the *Times* belittled this objective: "some of the most dramatic lines and sequences are so gauche as to provoke embarrassed laughter."<sup>321</sup> This blatant attempt to discredit Micheaux's message was a prime example of the dominant white society's efforts to maintain their racial superiority; Pryor's article encouraged white readers to completely disregard Micheaux as a serious filmmaker before they ever walked in the theatre. The white press did everything in their power to denigrate black filmmakers, attempting to remind men like Micheaux of 'their place' below them in society. If Pryor's critique of Micheaux did not fully

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<sup>319</sup> T.M.P., "First All-Negro Film at Mansfield," *New York Times*, June 26, 1948, 10.

<sup>320</sup> T.M.P., "First All-Negro Film at Mansfield," *New York Times*.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

delegitimize *The Betrayal*, his final derision of its technical imperfections did. According to the author, the film “is further handicapped by sporadically poor photography and consistently amateurish performances and direction” in ways Hollywood pictures are not.<sup>322</sup> Once again, the *Times* rebuked *The Betrayal*’s technical ineptitude without acknowledging the plethora of roadblocks colored filmmakers faced that Hollywood did not.

Four days after the *Times* article, another prominent white newspaper, *Variety*, slammed Micheaux. The writer, named Bron, recognized the film, “has some general interest because it’s an all-Negro acted-and-produced pic... [that] touches honestly on some provocative racial themes,” but nonetheless condemned its “amateurish limits [and] appeal to Negro centers.”<sup>323</sup> Similar to Pyror, Bron believed race pictures were an inferior genre. He used his column to drill this opinion into his readership through his vivid descriptions of *The Betrayal* as an “overlong, dull domestic drama” whose “dialog is stilted and artificial.”<sup>324</sup> Furthermore, the article chided Micheaux’s actors for not using “natural, loose-swinging acting and speech which invariably make Negro personalities shine on stage or screen.”<sup>325</sup> Such descriptors were traditionally relegated to Hollywood’s racist caricatures of African Americans. Thus, *Variety*’s article advocated for a return to the earlier days of cinema where stereotypes reinforced an ideal of black inferiority in the face of white America, the exact opposite of everything Micheaux represented.

*BoxOffice* was the final major white newspaper that bashed *The Betrayal* through its publication. On August 28, 1948, the paper harshly concluded, “sincerity of purpose is

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Bron, “Pictures: Film Review – The Betrayal,” *Variety*, June 30, 1948, 18.

<sup>324</sup> Bron, “Pictures: Film Review – The Betrayal,” *Variety*.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

practically the only redeeming feature of this all-Negro feature.”<sup>326</sup> It critiqued the stilted dialogue which supposedly caused “patrons [to] burst into laughter at the most dramatic moments” as well as the acting which it considered “either amateurish or downright bad.”<sup>327</sup> These opinions mirrored the *New York Times* and *Variety*’s analyses. Additionally, *BoxOffice* stated, “the picture might do good business in Negro theaters. It has no value elsewhere.”<sup>328</sup> This quotation further illustrated the schism between race pictures and Hollywood pictures.<sup>329</sup>

Scholars may simplify the white press’ unyielding rejection of *The Betrayal* to racial prejudice, but the black press equally denounced of the film. On July 3, 1948, both *New York Amsterdam News* and *Norfolk Journal and Guide* criticized the film. Concise in its judgement, *Amsterdam News* stated, “the film from beginning to end was bad; the acting is worse than amateurish; the dialogue is ridiculous, the story downright stupid.”<sup>330</sup> The *Guide*’s article, “‘The Betrayal’ Unfortunately is Just That” reached the same conclusion as *Amsterdam News*. They credited its short Broadway run to the “confusing plot, amateurish acting, poor direction, and faulty photography.” Interestingly, the black press also stated Micheaux’s dramatic scenes “provoked embarrassed amusement.”<sup>331</sup> Overall, these critiques mirrored the white press’ rejection, demonstrating the black press’ growing antipathy towards race pictures and subtle alignment with the white press’ standards for motion pictures.

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<sup>326</sup> “Feature Review Exploits: The Betrayal,” *BoxOffice*, August 28, 1948, A15-A16.

<sup>327</sup> “Feature Review Exploits: The Betrayal,” *BoxOffice*.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>329</sup> A September 17, 1949 article by *BoxOffice* suggested a schism between Micheaux and Astor Picture Corporation developed too. It stated Micheaux was “not authorized to book the picture” because Astor controlled “exclusive distribution rights.” This information implied Micheaux attempted to book *The Betrayal* without Astor’s approval. Micheaux’s suggested insubordination was reminiscent of his feud with Schiffman a decade earlier.

“Advertisement,” *BoxOffice*, September 17, 1949, 34.

<sup>330</sup> Bowser and Spence, 218.

<sup>331</sup> “‘The Betrayal’ Unfortunately is Just That,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, July 3, 1948, D21.

The *Chicago Defender*, an establishment once Micheaux's biggest ally, now echoed its fellow newspapers' condemnation. Entitled, "'The Betrayal' Severely Criticized, a Bore," the piece concluded the film was "not highly regarded by the critics."<sup>332</sup> Just one week later, the *Defender* released a follow-up article whose title symbolized the culmination of Micheaux's greatest fears: "Thousands of Dollars Wasted Annually on Production of [Race] Films." Unlike the halcyon days of silent film where race cinema thrived across the states, contemporary black talkies "showed plainly that thousands of dollars were spent on producing the pictures... better left unscreened."<sup>333</sup> Unfortunately, Micheaux was the clearest sign of this decline. He was the only race picture producer who survived the transition from silent to sound cinema, but just like his predecessors, he reached the breaking point. *The Betrayal's* hostile reception and overall failure to galvanize support marked this end of Micheaux's film career.<sup>334</sup>

## Chapter V: Conclusion

The newspapers' harsh castigation of *The Betrayal* signified race cinema's relegation to "a worse than ever marginal existence."<sup>335</sup> It was the end of race cinema as Micheaux knew it, and the disheartened director struggled to reconcile with this reality. Alice B. Russell's correspondences at the time sheds light on another aspect of Micheaux's overall deterioration – his health. A 1948 letter to Micheaux's sister stated "arthritis [spread] all over his body" to the point where "he can't grip or hold anything tightly."<sup>336</sup> This condition, coupled with Micheaux's hypertension and arteriosclerosis, permanently confined him to a wheelchair. As Micheaux's

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<sup>332</sup> "'The Betrayal Severely Criticized, a Bore," *Chicago Defender*, as quoted in Regester, 580.

<sup>333</sup> Regester, 26.

<sup>334</sup> *The Betrayal* was most popular in the deep South and out West because of its Broadway premiere status, but overall the film's exhibition was highly unsuccessful. Shortly after its failure, Astor Pictures, like Sack Amusement Enterprises, abandoned the race picture industry in favor of foreign-language films from French New Wave and Italian directors.

<sup>335</sup> McGilligan, 328.

<sup>336</sup> Richard Grupenhoff, "The Rediscovery of Oscar Micheaux, Black Pioneer," *Journal of Film and Video* (1988): 47.

health deteriorated, so did his film career. Once *The Betrayal* tanked in 1948, Micheaux embarked on a promotional book tour of the South in attempts to rejuvenate his legacy. During its Charlotte N.C. stop Micheaux suffered from heart failure, and after six weeks of hospitalization, he passed away on March 25, 1951 at the age of sixty-seven.<sup>337</sup>

Unlike the white newspaper agencies, the major black press outlets reported Micheaux's death. The *Pittsburgh Courier* spearheaded coverage with its obituary, "Movie Pioneer Dies Suddenly: Oscar Micheaux, Producer-Author." It credited the "well-known Negro movie producer pioneer" with the production of forty-four motion pictures and several notable books.<sup>338</sup> While these acknowledgements of Micheaux's success were complimentary, the article generally focused on the mater-of-fact details of his career. The article did not embellish or overly praise Micheaux as a filmmaker.

On April 7, 1951, the *Chicago Defender* published a terse obituary on Page One. The paper touched on Micheaux's filmic and literary accomplishments in a banal manner which lacked the vigor of Micheaux's public persona. Additionally, the *Defender's* story failed to mention Micheaux "ever lived in Chicago or produced some of his best-known films there."<sup>339</sup> This lack of attention to detail demonstrated the black press' growing apathy towards Micheaux. His relevance waned with the passing of each year, and the newspapers' lack of comprehensive coverage on his death verified it.

The *Afro-American* featured an obituary for Micheaux on April 21, 1951. It briefly detailed his life as a "pioneer of all-colored movies, author, playwright and publisher" who

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<sup>337</sup> Rumors also circulated that Micheaux was hospitalized due to a car accident. However, no one ever confirmed this theory. McGilligan, 344.

<sup>338</sup> "Movie Pioneer Dies Suddenly: Oscar Micheaux, Producer-Author," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 1951.

<sup>339</sup> McGilligan, 345.

gained “his greatest fame as the financier of 44 motion pictures.”<sup>340</sup> However, the piece emphasized the recent failure of *The Betrayal* “which some critics unmercifully called a ‘betrayal’ of his race.”<sup>341</sup> For the *Afro-American*, “this film, intended to be his masterpiece, turned out to be a flop, both artistically and financially.”<sup>342</sup> This incredibly negative statement further evidenced the black press’ dislike of Micheaux’s work during his final years .

*Amsterdam News* was the only black newspaper that dedicated an extensive segment of its front page to Micheaux’s death. From start to finish, Journalist S.W. Garlington eulogized the director in his April 7, 1951 article, “Oscar Micheaux, Producer, Dies.” The writer hailed Micheaux as, “one of Harlem’s most distinguished citizens,” who “came to this city... and immediately started up the ladder of an interesting and varied career.”<sup>343</sup> As evidenced by his rise to fame, Micheaux embodied the racial uplift ideology embedded in every single one of his works. Unfortunately, with this rise also came the director’s fall, Garlington wrote morosely, “[Micheaux] lost all, or most of [his money] with his ill-fated adventure” that “was one of his most ambitious cinema attempts and had a Broadway premiere at the Mansfield Theatre, but failed to win public acclaim.”<sup>344</sup> This singular sentence confirmed *The Betrayal*’s final legacy, that of failure. Following this somber statement, the article incorporated a candid quote by Micheaux that fully encapsulated the man’s motivation in the film industry:

I’m tired of reading about the Negro in an inferior position in society. I want to see them in dignified roles. Also I want to see the white man and the white woman as the villains... I want to see the Negro picture in books just like he lives.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> “Oscar Micheaux Buried in Kansas,” *Afro-American*, April 21, 1951.

<sup>341</sup> “Oscar Micheaux Buried in Kansas,” *Afro-American*.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>343</sup> S.W. Garlington, “Oscar Micheaux Filmmaker Dies,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 7, 1951.

<sup>344</sup> “Oscar Micheaux Filmmaker Dies,” *New York Amsterdam News*.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

Micheaux's seven novels and forty-four films embodied these goals, and the newspapers tracked the director's colorful life as he achieved them. Unlike most African American filmmakers, Micheaux doubled as an author, and in his concluding sentence, Garlington lionized Micheaux once more as "a successful author: and, also a successful businessman."<sup>346</sup>

Oscar Micheaux was a trailblazing pioneer of race pictures, and to better understand his colossal impact on the black independent film industry, one must analyze his intricate relationship with the black press. The white press largely ignored African Americans while black newspapers flourished as they created a collective consciousness for blacks across the country. Race pictures were another keystone of black America that countered the racism of Hollywood, and Micheaux symbolized the intersection of these cultural spheres. Unfortunately, only a third of Micheaux's motion pictures survive today. This makes black newspapers' records of the filmmaker one of the most indispensable and only tangible accounts of his career. Thus, a detailed analysis of these documents sheds light on the evolution of Micheaux's career as well as his ever-changing African American audience.

The early years of Micheaux's silent film career were characterized by positive reinforcement by the black press. As evidenced by *Within Our Gates* and *The Symbol of the Unconquered*'s receptions, the African American press heaped praise upon the promising filmmaker. The press found both his discussion of miscegenation and lynching in *Within Our Gates* and his attack on the Ku Klux Klan in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* refreshing because they boldly reflected the social mores and political tenor of America from an African American perspective. As time progressed, the black press became more critical of race pictures and actively denounced negative screen portrayals of blacks. Micheaux's most well-known silent

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid.



work, *Body and Soul*, exemplified this transitional period because the press vehemently criticized the film's treacherous black preacher. To combat the negative response, Micheaux effectively manipulated the controversy and censorship issues through various press releases, a strategy he carried throughout his career.

Following *Body and Soul*'s contentious reception, the African American press further "positioned itself in a sometimes unwelcome[d] advisory capacity" that demanded higher quality race pictures without fully understanding the plethora of impediments in black filmmakers' paths.<sup>347</sup> The advent of sound cinema marked the biggest evolution of the twentieth-century film industry, and independent black directors fought hard to survive this transition. Micheaux was the only African American director to endure this costly development. With the help of white financial backers, Micheaux produced *The Exile* in 1931. Unlike *Body and Soul*, this motion picture was widely celebrated by the black press because it marked the arrival of African Americans in the talking picture world. *The Exile* greatly benefited from the black press' extensive coverage, but this support was short-lived. Once Micheaux's partnership with Schiffman deteriorated, the press capitalized on the sensationalism of their courtroom battles. No longer covered for his films, Micheaux became a scandalous celebrity in the press, and the papers became an outlet that exploited his misfortune for profit. Surprisingly, Micheaux found time to produce *Ten Minutes to Live* during these turbulent years. However, time constraints coupled with Micheaux's limited finances directly resulted in *Ten Minutes to Live*'s poor production values and disjointed plotline. By this time, the African American press' intolerance for low-budget productions resulted in the film's harsh denunciation.

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<sup>347</sup> Regester, "The African-American Press and Race Movies, 1909-1929," 37.

Micheaux struggled to survive in this cutthroat industry, and his thirty-fifth film, *Murder in Harlem* demonstrated his attempts to recreate success of earlier decades. As a remake of his successful silent film, *The Gunsaulus Mystery*, the film called attention to injustices of the American courts from the African American point-of-view. Despite this counter-narrative's refreshing perspective, it received hardly any favorable reviews which in turn influenced audiences' poor reaction to the film. During the latter half of the 1930s, Micheaux released *God's Stepchildren*, an extremely controversial film centered around passing for white in the black community. Ultimately, the black press outright condemned the film in favor of promoting motion pictures that only espoused positive representations of African American life. Even coverage of widespread protests and enticing advertising campaigns could not reinvigorate Micheaux's waning career. The press exerted great influence, and black journalists' dissatisfaction with Micheaux outweighed support enough to inhibit Micheaux's overall success.

By 1941, Micheaux reached a breaking point and embarked on a seven-year hiatus to recuperate. *The Betrayal* launched Micheaux's final comeback in 1948, but it was too late. Race pictures were completely out of fashion, and the white and black press' hostile condemnation of Micheaux's last film confirmed it. The fact that newspaper professionals once loyal to Micheaux were now either retired or deceased also contributed to his steady decline.<sup>348</sup> The director's support system in the press was vital to his rise to fame during the early 1920s, and consequently crucial to his steady decline in the late 1940s.

In an age when white racist caricatures of African Americans dominated the American film industry, Micheaux defiantly opposed degrading stereotypes. This trailblazing director endeavored to create a body of race pictures that countered Hollywood racism with authentic

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<sup>348</sup> Robert Abbott of the *Chicago Defender* and Nahum Bascher of the *Associated Negro Press* were two prime examples of Micheaux's previous supporters in the press. They both died in the late 1930s/1940s.

portrayals of African American life. For Micheaux, such authenticity could only be achieved if he thoroughly analyzed the intricate layers of America's social class system. By juxtaposing the criminal sides of black America with a burgeoning black middle class, Micheaux's films critiqued unlawful members of the lower-classes in ways that promoted racial uplift for future generations.

Not all audience members agreed with this class commentary, and a case study of early twentieth-century black newspapers provides historians with a treasure trove of information on audiences' reception of Micheaux's race pictures. His films expressed a candor about controversial themes like miscegenation, black oppression, and class conflict rare in early race cinema; these themes resonated deeply with African Americans in ways that warranted Micheaux's extensive press coverage over three decades. Thus, an extensive analysis of Micheaux's relationship with the black press is not only an exploration of his vibrant career, but also a study of Micheaux's crucial dialogue with his black viewing public. This public, one widely ignored by white media, unequivocally deserved films that genuinely articulated their own racial pride and heritage from the eyes of a filmmaker who himself demonstrated black agency in the film industry. Against all odds, Micheaux answered this call to action. Journalist Willis N. Huggins once described Oscar Micheaux's pictures as "a quivering tongue of fire, the burn of which will be felt in the far distant years,"<sup>349</sup> and nearly a century later, ongoing scholarship stands testament to Micheaux's attainment of such a legacy.

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<sup>349</sup> Willis Huggins, "The Editor's Mail Box: Says Defender Was Right."

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