

Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Uplift vs. Stereotyping:
The Representation of Male Social Roles in Oscar Micheaux's Films
Between 1920 and 1939

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Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies
University of Debrecen
2024

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral (Ph.D.) degree in

Literature and Cultural Studies

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Prepared in the framework of the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies of the

University of Debrecen

(British and North American Literature and Culture Study Program)

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'F' followed by a loop and a horizontal line.

Acknowledgment

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Péter Csató. Without his indispensable guidance, patience, and unwavering support, this dissertation would not have been possible. His dedication to my growth as a scholar, both personally and academically, has been instrumental. I am sincerely grateful for the time he devoted to reading and correcting my drafts, as well as the many thoughtful discussions that helped clarify my questions and concerns.

I extend my thanks to Professor István D. Rácz, Dr. Péter Gaál-Szabó, Dr. Harry E. Bailey, Dr. András Lénárt, Dr. Kata Anna Váró, and Dr. András Tarnóc for their invaluable comments and suggestions during my preliminary defense and chapter defenses. Their insights have significantly refined and enhanced my work.

A special thanks goes to Dr. Péter Gaál-Szabó, who has been more than an instructor and committee member to me. His encouragement, kind words, and belief in me have been immensely supportive throughout this process.

I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Tibor Nagy, Dr. Gabriella Espák, and Dr. Judit Szathmári for their guidance and support. Their kindness was instrumental in my journey.

To my dear friends and colleagues in the doctoral program, your friendship has made the challenges of pursuing a Ph.D. much more bearable. I deeply value the camaraderie we shared.

Finally, I am eternally grateful to my parents, sisters, and brothers for their love, support, and patience. Their boundless encouragement and belief in me have been my constant source of strength and inspiration. I owe so much to their presence and the sacrifices they have made to help me complete this dissertation.

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Introduction

This dissertation aims to explore the work of African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951), focusing specifically on his representation of black male characters in his silent and sound films between 1920 and 1939. Micheaux's films have provided portrayals of black men placed in various cinematic roles and social statuses as a response to the stereotypical depictions commonly presented by white filmmakers of the period, whose films often relied on racist distortions and caricatured images rooted in nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy. Micheaux's counter-representations, however, move beyond the simplistic creation of idealistic images of black male characters, and show an awareness of the complex sociopolitical factors that shape the black community and, hence, produce a diverse array of character-types. Accordingly, while some of his male characters are indeed depicted as noble, educated, and affluent, some others are portrayed as impoverished, illiterate, comic or outright villainous. The latter types of representation have often exposed Micheaux to the criticism that he himself engaged in stereotyping his own people, as these characters bear too much of a resemblance to the stereotypical portrayals of black men in white-produced films. One of the main objectives of this dissertation, however, is to counter these criticisms by arguing that Micheaux's representations provide a nuanced portrayal of his male characters, which testifies to his accurate understanding of the social, economic, and existential challenges faced by the black community of his time. Being aware of these challenges, he conceived of his own role that of an agent of "racial uplift," akin to Booker T. Washington (a role model for Micheaux) and W. E. B. Du Bois. The dissertation will further claim that Micheaux's resorting to seemingly stereotypical representations functions as a way of reappropriating the clichés of the negative portrayals and turning them into a means of constructive criticism, which thereby significantly contributes to his endeavor of uplift.

In order to properly understand the motivations of Micheaux's modes of representation, it is important to provide an overview of the cinematic depictions of black male characters by both white and black filmmakers prior to Micheaux's entry into the film industry in 1919. It is also essential to examine the broader historical context and socioeconomic changes in the period that preceded and coincided with the advent of cinema in the 1890s, as they significantly influenced the construction of these cinematic depictions. Historical changes such as emancipation, the implementation of new legal, economic, political, and social practices in the American South during the periods of the Reconstruction and Jim Crow, as well as the rise of racial violence and lynching incidents all contributed to shaping the racial and gender identity of both white and black men in the period, which was reflected in their representation even in early silent white-produced films (1903-1915). These salient points will be addressed throughout the chapters of this dissertation.

1. Literature Review

Since the discovery of some of Micheaux's lost films in the 1970s, there has been growing scholarly attention trained on his films and those of contemporary black filmmakers. Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (1973) and Henry Sampson's *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films* (1977) are among the first books which provided an insightful overview of the film companies of early independent black filmmakers, synopses of the films they produced, and the representation of black characters in American films in general. In the chapter titled "The Interlude: Black-Market Cinema," Bogle dedicates a subchapter to studying Micheaux, where he describes him as a "fiendishly aggressive young entrepreneur . . . [who] [i]n 1931, when most black independents were closing up shop . . . released *The Exile*, one of the first all-talking motion pictures made by a black company" (97). Describing Micheaux's work philosophy,

Bogle states that he “well understood the mass imagination, and by catering to its wants and needs he was able to survive and become successful. His philosophy on literature later extended to his films: Learn from the masses; then teach them. And teach he did” (98).

Similarly, Sampson, in the chapter “Micheaux Film Corporation: Oscar Micheaux,” provides a general account of Micheaux’s early personal life, his career progression from author to filmmaker, and the challenges he faced in distributing his films. The chapter includes contemporary newspaper film reviews, which offer insight into how some of Micheaux’s films were received by audiences and the censorship issues he faced. Sampson’s book along with Bogle’s, and other early books on American cinema such as James P. Murray’s *To Find an Image: Black Films From Uncle Tom to Super Fly* (1973), Jim Pines’ *Blacks in Films: A Survey of Racial Themes and Images in the American Film* (1974), Thomas Cripps’s *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (1977), and James Nesteby’s *Black Images in American Films, 1896-1954: The Interplay Between Civil Rights and Film Culture* (1982), significantly contributed to introducing Oscar Micheaux and other black filmmakers to the academic field readers. These works established foundational knowledge about black cinema and Hollywood films, tracing their early stages, their development over the years, and the sociohistorical circumstances surrounding them. However, these works often lack the depth needed for a thorough analysis of Micheaux’s themes and characters, often leading to inaccurate interpretations such as Cripps’s contention that Micheaux’s characters do not represent the experiences of black people, but rather mirror those of the bourgeois *white* middle class (189), and that Micheaux and other black filmmakers were lured by “the temptation to make mirror images of white movies” (171). Bogle similarly suggests that Micheaux frequently relied on mainstream Hollywood productions when writing his scripts (102), noting that “[j]ust as Negro newspapers and magazines took major stories and reported on them from a black perspective, Micheaux often—especially in the talkies—took the typical Hollywood script and gave it a

racial slant” (102). Bogle also observes that Micheaux’s leading characters were black versions of white protagonists in Hollywood films (99). These interpretations will be further discussed and responded to in the fourth chapter.

Micheaux received constant criticism from scholars such as Joseph Young (1989), Daniel Leab (1976), and Horace Neal and Ronald Green (1988). Young claims that Micheaux was “a black Negrophobe” (140), whose works reflect “a desire to be white, or a self-hatred of one’s blackness and a revulsion from the majority of Blacks” (141). Leab goes as far as contending that Micheaux’s depiction of black characters is similar to those presented in white cinema and that his films are not “designed to uplift or to enlighten” (81). Neal and Green, in turn, argue that Micheaux employed racial stereotypes and racial ridicule in shaping certain characters, stating that “[a]ny attempt to assess Micheaux’s use of negative stereotypes and racial ridicule would have to deal with the strong current of negative responses [from the black press, black film critics, the Young Communist League, the National Negro Congress]” (66).

Contrary to these predominantly critical views, the dissertation will aim to demonstrate that Micheaux’s characters were shaped in a complex way that defies definitive categorizations. My reading of Micheaux’s characters is corroborated by bell hooks’s¹ article, “Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness,” where she points out that Micheaux presented a “counter-hegemonic cultural production,” which depicts characters that “convey complexity of experience and feeling” (134). Ronald Green shares a similar sentiment in his book, *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (2000), where he revises his earlier assessment of Micheaux’s use of racial stereotypes, arguing that “[Micheaux’s] frank use of caricature served his purposes of analyzing, revising, interrogating, and eradicating caricature” (67). Additionally, Green’s *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux* (2004) is also a valuable book to understand

¹ The lowercase initials follow the author’s own use of her name.

the complexity of Micheaux's characters, the book mainly provides a plot analysis of all Micheaux's surviving films.

hooks's and Green's revised interpretations were reinforced by other critics such as Reid, Gerald Butters, Cedric Robinson, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart. Reid, in his book *Redefining Black Film* (1993), contends that Micheaux's films portrayed the nineteen-twenties from a distinctly black perspective (12), presenting "imaginative reflections of a proud, aggressive New Negro" (11-12). Butters's book *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen* (2007) is a pioneering work, ranking high among the few which focuses on studying the representation of black male characters in films produced by white and black filmmakers in the silent period. Butters argues that "[a]lthough genre and characterization may have been borrowed from white movies [in Micheaux's films], they were often set in a milieu with a black sensibility that changed the dynamics of the film's receptive structure" (124). He points out that Micheaux's portrayal of the black experience was not only from the perspective of the black bourgeoisie but also the working men and women (125). Butters further explains that although Micheaux depicted his black male characters as "evil or corrupt or vindictive, but there was often (but not always) a motivation to such emotional qualities . . . unlike in white productions, such negative characteristics were not portrayed as 'natural' to the black man" (124). Butters's book provides an insightful analysis of Micheaux's film *Within Our Gates* (1920), on which my analysis of the film in the second chapter is based. Butters's book, however, does not include Micheaux's surviving sound films, which he justifies by stating that "Micheaux's political and racial ideology on the screen digressed in the sound era" (148). As I emphasize in the first chapter, this argument by Butters, shared by other scholars, lacks accuracy. Micheaux's sound films carried forward the depth and complexity of black representation that he had established in his silent films, engaging black audiences and addressing important issues relevant to the

community. In my analysis, I address this issue by focusing not only on Micheaux's silent films but also on his sound films.

Robinson, in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (2007), offers significant insights into the period that coincided with the rise of the race films, which “was quite a troubled one for Black Americans, filled with excitement and (almost) unprecedented violence” (237). He provides a sociohistorical analysis of the period, discussing the escalation in racial violence and lynching in connection with the economic changes America experienced during the years of World War I. This book has been helpful in establishing the historical context for the second chapter of the dissertation, where I discuss the rise of racial tension between white and black laborers, often culminating in lynching, during the period coinciding with the production of *Within Our Gates* (1920). Robinson's book has provided valuable insights into Micheaux's minstrel-like characters and his use of blackface, on which I rely in the third chapter in explaining their employment as a means of resistance. As Robinson argues, Micheaux was “the heir of a form of Black resistance to the new racial regime which could be traced to late minstrelsy, more particularly Black minstrelsy,” when a group of black artists “perfected a host of Black resistance gestures for display before largely white audiences” (128).

Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, in *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (2005), provides an insightful study about Micheaux's construction of setting to illustrate the life of black people and the problems they faced in regions like the North, South, and the West. Stewart argues that the representation of black life in these spaces and the migration of the characters between them shows “how various geographically based ‘types’ of Black characters function to help or hinder the projects of individual and race uplift” (220). In agreement with Stewart's observation, my analysis of Micheaux's black male characters—many of whom are depicted in the urban North, the rural South, or the West—demonstrates that

black men suffered racial prejudice and hatred irrespective of their geographical location, though not in the same way or to the same degree. Another significant contribution to the understanding of race cinema in general and Micheaux's silent films in particular is *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (2016) by Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser. This book provides valuable contemporary context for race cinema, offering insights into its black actors and its relationship with the black press. Moreover, it presents various analyses of Micheaux's silent films. However, like many other books, this one focuses primarily on Micheaux's three extant silent films, expressing a hope that "future work will be done on Micheaux the novelist and on the director's sound-era films" (Bowser, Gaines, and Musser xix).

2. Contribution

This dissertation aims to contribute to Micheaux-scholarship by addressing a specific aspect of his cinematic output, which is the representation of male characters in both Micheaux's silent and sound films. The decision to focus on black male characters is motivated by the fact that the early portrayals of black people in white-produced films often focused on depicting black men, rather than women, typically performed by white actors in blackface. As previously indicated, these portrayals stemmed from the theatrical practice of blackface minstrelsy, which predominantly featured caricatured stereotypes of black males. As Daniel Leab points out, these shows "succeeded in fixing the *black man* in the American consciousness as a ludicrous figure" (8; emphasis added). In response to these demeaning representations, the subsequent rise of race films, including those by Micheaux, aimed to counteract such portrayals by giving more prominence to black male characters. By focusing on black male characters, Micheaux and other race filmmakers sought to reclaim and redefine black masculinity on screen, challenging the pervasive and dehumanizing caricatures that had dominated mainstream cinema. This does

not imply that cinematic portrayals of black women were absent; on the contrary, black women were always present in mainstream cinema, and their portrayals were also confined to distorted images based on minstrel stereotypes, such as the mulatto or mammy. These stereotypes were notably evident in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Such stereotypes were challenged by black filmmakers, as is apparent in Micheaux's revolutionary and uplifting representation of black female characters. He often presented them as educated, intellectually independent, while capable of supporting black male leaders in overcoming their struggles. However, this representation is still limited: while the black male leads in Micheaux's films are portrayed as striving for social and economic advancement, typically achieving their goals by the end, the primary achievements of black female leads often revolve around finding romance, which highlights a disparity in how male and female characters' successes are framed. As Butters notes, "[i]f cinema can be considered a tool of patriarchal control, then Micheaux is guilty. He accepted the contemporary attitude that women were economically and socially dependent on men. But he also believed in female education and condemned emotional and physical brutality toward women" (148). Butters also explains that he differentiates "Micheaux's concept of 'success' in regard to gender because of the differing attributes he placed on men and women. As in *Within Our Gates*, the typical prescription for female success was simply to marry a good man" (146). This reading of Micheaux's representation of female characters, by both Butters and myself, might be reductive, as it lacks the deep and thorough examination that is beyond the scope of our projects. However, it is clear that Micheaux's films include a variety of black male types, from the illiterate laborer and minstrel-like villains through the prosperous homesteader and secret agent to the educated doctors and lawyers. This diversity of male character types provides my dissertation with rich material for analysis. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that the representation of these characters is imbued with an intent of resistance, insofar as—with both his positive and negative depictions of black

males—Micheaux provokes his African American audiences to reclaim agency by repudiating the negative stereotypes and/or by following the positive cinematic exemplars. Either way, they come to serve his larger-scale goal of racial uplift.

3. Structure of the Dissertation

To establish a comprehensive study of the representation of black male characters in Micheaux's films, this dissertation will be divided into four chapters. The first chapter will serve to provide a conceptual framework for the subsequent discussions, while each of the remaining three chapters will focus on a specific type of male character. The first chapter, "The Black Male Character in Early White-Produced Films and Early Race Films," offers an overview of how black male characters were portrayed in early white-produced films and race films. It examines the racial stereotypes and sociohistorical circumstances that shaped these portrayals, including the theatrical practice of blackface minstrelsy and its connections to the social and economic changes in American society during the second half of the nineteenth century. The chapter also examines stereotypical black characters as well as the correlation between manhood and racial status at the turn of the twentieth century, concluding with a brief investigation of the portrayals of black characters in race films produced by Foster Photoplay Company, Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Micheaux Book and Film Company.

The second chapter, "Systemic Racial Violence and the Black Laborer in *Within Our Gates* (1920)," focuses on the character type of the black hard-working laborer, exemplified by the character of the poor southern farmer, Jasper Landry, in Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920). It offers an overview of the strained relationship between white and black laborers during the period of World War I, as well as the relationship between white and black laborers and white landowners within the economic system of cotton plantation in the postbellum South. The chapter also examines Micheaux's representation of racial tension between Jasper Laundry,

the white landowner, and the white farmers, and analyzes scenes portraying the lynching of Jasper by a mob of white people from various social positions.

The third chapter, “The Reappropriation of Comic Character Portrayals in *Within Our Gates*, *Murder in Harlem*, and *The Darktown Revue*,” focuses on Micheaux’s representation of black men as comic characters, exemplified by the character of the preacher Old Ned in *Within Our Gates*, the watchman Lem Hawkins in the sound film *Murder in Harlem* (1935), and the “hard-shell” preacher in *The Darktown Revue* (1931). It addresses how Micheaux-scholars viewed the resemblance between Micheaux’s comic characters and traditional stereotypes and caricatures, and discusses the relationship of these characters to black American humor. The chapter also examines how the comic characters of Old Ned, Hawkins, and the hard-shell preacher are shaped to resemble racial stereotypes and how Micheaux reappropriates the representation of these characters to challenge those stereotypes.

The fourth chapter, “The Talented Tenth on the Big Screen: The Representation of Black Leading Men in Micheaux’s Achievement Films,” examines the portrayal of black leading men in what Gerald Butters terms Micheaux’s “Achievement” films. It provides insights into the critical reflections that these films and characters have provoked among scholars, and examines Micheaux’s representation of these characters in light of the ideology of uplift, as advanced by Booker T. Washington’s and W. E. B. Du Bois’s. The chapter also analyses the relationship between these leading men and the working-class characters, exploring the root causes of the formers’ attempt to distance themselves from black people of more modest backgrounds (even by using racial slurs). Finally, the chapter addresses Micheaux’s take on the phenomena of “passing” and racial prejudice, particularly through his representation of the troubled relationship between the lead character, Jimmy, and his foster sister, Naomi, in *God’s Stepchildren*.

Chapter One:

Race and Manhood:

The Black Male Character in Early White-Produced Films and Early Race Films

Before exploring the representation of black male characters in the films of Oscar Micheaux, this chapter aims to provide a preliminary overview of the cinematic depictions of black male characters in American films since 1890s, which marks the beginning of the cinema industry in America. This examination spans both white and black filmmakers' productions in the period preceding Micheaux's entry into the film industry in 1919. In agreement with the notion that "[t]he portrayal of African-American men on the screen was not created in a vacuum" (*Black Manhood*, Butters 1), but it has been woven into broader societal contexts, this chapter also examines the entrenched stereotypes deeply rooted in nineteenth-century stage performances, which significantly shaped racial representation in white-produced films, and served as the backdrop against which black filmmakers sought to create their own cinematic narrative. Barbara Lupack emphasizes the significant role of films in reflecting the profound societal changes during the early twentieth century, stating that "[m]ore than any other medium, movies reflected the tremendous changes occurring in American society" (x). Therefore, the chapter aims to illuminate the historical circumstances and societal challenges of the period in question era, when, according to Martin Summers, "manhood seemed to be a national preoccupation" (1).

The cinematic (mis)representation of black men on the screen by white filmmakers reflected the mistreatment and racism they faced in real life. Robert Jackson observes that filmmakers of the early era were not impervious to the pervasive racism that permeated American society, as they were deeply entrenched in a cultural milieu where racial biases were rampant. Thus, their films, reflective of the broader cultural landscape, absorbed and perpetuated the racist stereotypes within a wider spectrum—which included casual or overt,

unconscious or intellectualized forms of racism—that was characteristic of the era (29). Instead of challenging or questioning these attitudes, white filmmakers often served as conduits through which such biases found expression on the cinematic screen. Gerald R. Butters echoes a similar sentiment when responding to Thomas Cripps’s assertion that “[d]uring the first ten years of commercial cinema, starting in 1895, Afro-Americans through luck and accident appeared on the screen in a more favorable light than they heretofore had done in theater or fiction” adding that “they portrayed a range of roles far more varied than American society would grant them in everyday life” (8). Butters argues that “[t]his was seldom the case. Instead, these ‘ruptures’ in cinematic depictions of African Americans illustrated that reality was catching up with the fictional racist narratives woven by white American filmmakers that often espoused the worst of southern fears”² (xiv), which permeated the national consciousness, with “[t]he dominant southern ideology of black inferiority becam[ing] the popular national perception” (3). As Thomas Gossett contends, “as the question of race was concerned, the South appeared to be more successful than the North in getting the whole country to adopt its ideas” (254).

Butters’s perspective appears more accurate than Cripps’s, especially given that white filmmakers in the period tended to rely on stereotypical depictions rooted in blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville to construct their black characters. This tendency was not merely a creative choice but an ingrained practice, perpetuating the derogatory portrayals of black people. As Barbara Lupack notes, “the images of blacks as ludicrous figures ‘prone to frenzied dancing, shiftless, garish dress, gin tippling, dice shooting, torturing the language, and, inevitably, addicted to watermelon and chicken, usually stolen,’ became indelibly etched in the white imagination” (2). The recurrence of these images on screen “created a narrative web with which the spectator is familiar and to which the viewer returns, with every new film he or she

². Southern fears, which fueled the enactment of Jim Crow laws, lynching incidents, and riots, will be addressed later in this chapter and in more detail in the second chapter.

sees” (Butters 41). “Cater[ing] to the public tastes,” white filmmakers not only adapted these stereotypical images, but also exacerbated them, distorting them even further (Bogle 4). Film historian Donald Bogle points out that “[i]n the early days when all the black characters were still portrayed by white actors in blackface, there was nothing but the old character types [which] sat like square boxes on a shelf. A white actor walked by, selected a box, and used it as a base for a very square, rigidly defined performance” (4). These “square boxes” defined the cinematic portrayal of black people, and particularly of black men, in the early silent period of motion pictures and continued “to dominate black characters for the next half century” (4). Therefore, besides being a source of amusement, early American silent films were also a vehicle for disseminating the hegemonic mythology of black male inferiority (Butters 41).

1. Blackface Minstrelsy and Black Male Stereotypes

The mythology of black male inferiority was intricately woven into the practice of blackface minstrel shows. As Daniel Leab observes, “[minstrel shows] succeeded in fixing the black man in the American consciousness as a ludicrous figure supposedly born . . . ‘hoofing on the levee to the strumming of banjos’” (8). Blackface minstrelsy was a nineteenth-century theatrical practice in which white actors donning blackface makeup or masks caricatured black people for sport and profit (Lott 3). Frederick Douglass, writing in *The North Star*, referred to these actors as “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white citizens” (qtd. in Lott 15). As Eric Lott puts it, this denunciation by Douglass “nicely captures minstrelsy’s further commodification of an already enslaved, noncitizen people” (15). The minstrel presentation of black people encompassed a range of fixed, racist images in which white people could find confirmation of their own superiority (Toll 179). These racist images, Kevin Gates notes, “laid the intellectual and emotional foundation for the assumption by social

scientists, clergy, and jurists that African Americans were biologically inferior, disorderly, appetitive at the expense of reason, and, finally, unassimilable” (70).

Blackface minstrelsy, often labeled as “racial counterfeit” (Lott 38), manifests a cross-racial desire “that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure” (6). It created depictions of black people that projected the internal emotional, psychological states, and economic needs of white people. Ralph Ellison corroborates this point, as he argues that:

Despite their billings as images of reality, these Negroes of fiction are counterfeits. They are projected aspects of an internal symbolic process through which, like a primitive tribesman dancing himself into the group frenzy necessary for battle, the white American prepares himself emotionally to perform a social role . . . Color prejudice springs not from the stereotype alone, but from an internal psychological state; not from misinformation alone, but from an inner need to believe . . . The prejudiced individual creates his own stereotypes, very often unconsciously, by reading into situations involving Negroes those stock meanings which justify his emotional and economic needs. (116-17)

The surge in the popularity of minstrelsy during a time of significant public concern about slavery and the socio-political and socio-economic status of black people was not accidental. The reason is that, Robert Toll explains, minstrelsy offered a safe outlet for its audiences to “work out their feelings about even the most sensitive and volatile issue” in a lighthearted manner, allowing them to simply laugh off the performances without taking them seriously (65). Furthermore, minstrelsy molded the “vague notions and amorphous beliefs” held by white Americans about black people into vivid and striking caricatures (65). To defend slavery and express the audiences’ concern about “millions of blacks challeng[ing] white for land, job, and

status,” minstrelsy provided caricatures of satisfied and happy slaves and freed black men as discontented and unhappy (66). Black people were also portrayed as lazy and irresponsible, unable to survive life outside the system of slavery, which is manifest in minstrel songs like “The Bonja song,” which reads:

Me sing all day, me sleep all night

Me have no care, me sleep is light

Me tink, no matter what tomorrow bring

Me happy, so me sing. (Pieterse 133)

Therefore, “minstrelsy’s portrayals of slavery and blacks reveal the evolution and functioning of American racial stereotypes better than any other source” (Toll 65-66). The racial content of minstrelsy was intricately tied to the dynamic interaction between the performers and their audiences: When public opinion changed, so did the content of minstrelsy (65).

Blackface minstrelsy was “less the incarnation of an age-old racism than an emergent social semantic figure highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled fantasies of its audiences” (Lott 6). It surfaced to public a deeply entrenched racialized elements, including thoughts, feelings, tones, and impulses, “residing at the edge of the very edge of semantic availability,” that many Americans only vaguely acknowledged, let alone comprehended (6). During the 1840s, for example, when working-class white people faced economic disaster, the appeal of minstrel shows grew even stronger (141). The economic slump coincided with significant changes in the northeastern capitalist landscape, particularly in the apprentice system of labor, leading to a deep sense of unease among the popular classes. In response, there was “a much muted sense of class resistance, an attempt to shore up ‘white’ class identities by targeting new enemies such as immigrants, blacks, and tipplers” (141). During this period, minstrel shows eased the tension among various segments of the working class as well as between workers and their superiors by uniting them, as it were, in a homogeneous front in the

face of minstrel characters such as Thomas D. Rice's Jim Crow, who were posited as a common foe (141). As Lott writes, "[t]he alliance at which Rice's burlesque playlets had hinted in their effigies of the black dandy soon became commonplace in policing the capitalist crisis of the post-panic years" (141). Lott further explains that as the minstrel show evolved into a night-long entertainment, it responded to the crisis of the early 1840s "with an intensified white egalitarianism that, for all its real instability, buried class tensions and permitted class alliances along rigidifying racial lines, a vital need in this period of seeming disintegration" (141).

Among the stereotypes that were prevalent in blackface entertainment are Sambo, representing the rural southern plantation character, and Zip Coon, embodying the urban dandy (Butters 12). Sambo was depicted as "a lazy, dim-witted, slow-moving, and slow-talking yet good-natured man who meant right but always seemed to do wrong" (12). Constantly portrayed as hungry and seeking to cop out of a difficult situation, Sambo had prominent lips, bright white teeth, short nappy hair, and a demeanor reminiscent of a primate (12). On the other hand, Zip Coon symbolized the post-Civil War black man who moved to the city, striving to assimilate into white culture but often failing comically (12). He was recognized by his flashy and exaggerated clothes, which typically included swallow-tail coat with wide lapels, flamboyant shirts, striped trousers, pats, and a top hat (Stanley 102). Despite his confident and elegant demeanor, his speech frequently riddled with a mismatched vocabulary and pretentiousness, undermining his efforts to appear sophisticated (102). As Butters indicates, "the use of multisyllabic words became a staple of the vaudevillian routine" (12). Zip Coon often sought to get money without exerting any effort, and was "all too willing to take advantage of Sambo, his slower cousin" (12).

According to Butters, Zip Coon was the more menacing of the two black male stereotypes due to his dangerous vices that were perceived as threatening to white people (12). Zip Coon's desire to assimilate was the "one characteristic that whites feared the most"

(Dennison 357). As Dennison sates, “the black male’s longing to be white was expressed as a sort of covetousness of white values or standards, as though adopting the trappings of white society would cause albescence” (357). The fear of a black man “want[ing] to be white” (357) is vividly expressed in coon songs such as “Got Your Habits On,” where the first chorus sings:

And when dey learn how to read and write
why most of dem niggers just think they’re white . . . (qtd. in Dennison 357)

Another coon song that expresses a similar fear is “I’ve Got A White Man Running My Automobile.” The coon character in this song is portrayed as determined to ridicule the white man, “reinforc[ing] the fear that placing whites in positions inferior to that of blacks would undermine the whole structure of white society” (357). The song reads:

I’ve got a white man running my automo, automo,
Running my automobile,
You never can know, till you get the dough,
How happy it makes you feel, I eats the best of chicken stew,
If my money gives out I’ll steal,
Just to keep that white man running my automo,
Running my automobile. (qtd. in Dennison 357)

Therefore, to reinforce the perceived “natural” and “safe” inferiority of the black man, white people had to mock the dreams and aspirations of the Zip Coon figure (Butters 12). Zip Coon and Sambo were among the characters that transitioned into motion picture characters as representations of black male “normality” (13).

2. The Black Male Character in Early White-Produced Films

According to Donald Bogle, the representation of black characters (male and female) on screen was confined to five primary types: Uncle Tom, the coon, the brutal black buck, the tragic

mulatto, and the mammy. These character types were all employed for a singular purpose: “to entertain by stressing Negro inferiority” (3). Among them, Uncle Tom, the coon, and the brutal buck are male characters. Uncle Tom was the first black character to appear in American films, making its debut in Edwin S. Porter’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Slavery Days*, produced by the Edison Manufacturing Company in 1903. Numerous cinematic renditions of Tom’s character emerged in subsequent years, consistently portraying him as a faithful, enduring figure. As described by Bogle, the Tom characters are often “chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted,” yet they steadfastly maintain loyalty to their white masters, embodying traits of submission, stoicism, generosity, and selflessness. Such portrayals endeared them to white audiences and elevated them to a heroic status of sort (Bogle 3).

In Porter’s film, the character of Uncle Tom was played by a “a nameless, lightly overweight white actor made up in blackface” (Bogle 3). This portrayal depicted Uncle Tom as tall, aged, with a thinning fringe of white hair on his balding head (Williams 87). According to Linda Williams, the “doddering elderly figure” depicted in these early film versions resembled the nineteenth-century stage version of the Uncle Tom character (87). These portrayals diverged significantly from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel or Hammatt Billings’ book illustrations, which depicted Uncle Tom as a “vigorous, broad-shouldered middle-aged man” (87). Williams attributes this difference to Uncle Tom’s close relationship with the young white girl Eva, which required spatial proximity between the two characters. She suggests, “[i]t would seem that it was one thing for verbal pictures and insubstantial drawings to depict the work’s cross-gender interracial amity and quite another to actually see real human bodies interact (even with the artifice of blackface)” (87). Real black actors in Porter’s film were relegated to secondary roles such as cakewalk dancers and crapshooters. As Butters observes, unlike Stowe’s sympathetic depiction of black people, Porter’s film relied more on prevalent stereotypes so that white Americans could easily “identify” with the narrative (54).

Despite “the intensity of the condensed pathos and action” throughout the film, many scenes begin with slaves engaging in joyful dancing (Williams 88). For instance, in the “Tom and Eva in the Garden” scene, a well-dressed group of black people on the St. Clare plantation performs an intricate cakewalk dance before Eva and Tom appear to envision their paradise in the garden (88). Similarly, another scene, the “Auction Sale of St. Clare’s Slaves,” opens with dancing slaves clad in rags, while others gamble, “incongruously setting a happy context for the auction of Emmeline and Tom that follows” (88). The auction scene stands out as one of the film’s most distorted portrayals, presenting the institution of slavery in a manner that makes it appear palatable rather than depicting its true horrors (Butters 54). As Williams indicates, Porter’s film suggests that white Americans held contradictory feelings about “Slavery Days.” These days were nostalgically remembered as a period of innocent childhood with joyful, well-dressed black people, yet they also depicted the cruel reality of family separation and brutal violence, as evident in “the flogging death of Tom carried out directly by [Simon] Legree” (89). Therefore, similar to the stage versions of *Uncle Tom*, Porter’s film not only misrepresented Stowe’s condemnation of slavery and “disinclined Americans from taking seriously the pathos of Tom’s plight and encouraged their perception of his acquiescence and obedience as a model of good racial behavior,” but it also “reduced [the character of] Tom from a touchstone for the national conscience to an object of national amusement” (Lupack 2).

The character type of Tom also emerged in the silent film *The Confederate Spy*, produced by the Kalem Film Manufacturing Company in 1910. The storyline revolves around old Uncle Daniel, “to whom all the administration of [of the young master John Ward’s] estate is entrusted” (Sampson 49). In a daring effort to save his wounded master, Uncle Daniel traverses perilous swamps and deserted plantations to seek assistance (50). Ultimately, he sacrifices himself before a Northern firing squad “for massa sake and little missi” (Bogle 6). Similar to Porter’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Confederate Spy* refrains from portraying the

horrors of slavery. Instead, it presents black slaves as “[h]appy, contented, and well cared for, they are as joyous and happy as a bunch of school just dismissed” (Sampson 50).

Likewise, the film titled *For Massa’s Sake* (1911) revolves around old Uncle Joe, his wife, and their six sons, liberated by Colonel St. Clair prior to his death (Sampson 62). The Colonel’s son Harry, facing imminent loss of his inheritance due to gambling debts, prompts Uncle Joe to sell himself and his family into slavery. The proceeds are handed over to his young “massa,” meeting the financial obligation (62). As Butters observes, “the pure unbelievability of such films” was a prevalent feature in early silent film narratives (61). This narrative approach reflects a wish fulfillment on the part of white filmmakers who consistently portrayed black male slaves/servants as “faithful to their trusts” or “met their obligations” (61), often situating these loyal figures within a nostalgic past rather than the contemporary era (62).

The character of Tom appeared again in William Robert Delay’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, released by World Corporation in 1914. This film, one of the few attempting to adhere to Stowe’s novel rather than the stage version, departed from the conventional Tom-tradition by casting Sam Lucas, a distinguished black actor, in the title role—an historic moment as Lucas became the first black man to take on a leading role in a film (Bogle 6). However, despite this progress, Uncle Tom was still depicted in a subordinate role, portrayed as “a mere plaything for young white children. Eva dresses Tom, an elderly man, in rings of flowers” (Butters 56). Even when sold to the cruel slave dealer, Haley, a little white boy consoles Tom with a promise to buy him back when he grows up. As Butters puts it, “[t]hat Tom’s fate can be determined by a young white child demonstrates the helplessness of black men in slavery”. (56).

Another prevalent black character type in early silent films, the coon, was often depicted as “docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing” (Leab 1). According to Daniel Leab, the coon character “exhibited qualities of foolish exaggeration and an apparently hereditary clumsiness and ignorance as well as an addictive

craving for fried chicken and watermelon” (Leab 1). Variants of this character included the pickaninny, Rastus, and Uncle Remus. The pickaninny figure was portrayed as a harmless and playful black child whose eyes widen and hair stands on end at the slightest excitement (Bogle 7). His antics were both pleasant and diverting (7). Rastus was one of “the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes,” depicted as unreliable, crazy, lazy, often seen eating watermelon and chicken, and speaking broken English (8). Uncle Remus was a character “closely related to the tom, yet distinguished by his quaint, naïve, and comic philosophizing” (8).

Shortly after the turn of the century, with the rise of narrative storytelling in motion pictures (Sampson 26), coon characters began appearing in various roles. They were depicted as naïve wood-thieves in films like *Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904) and as a stumbling, stuttering, and silly newlywed couple in productions such as *Wooing the Wedding of a Coon* (1905) (Bogle 8). In 1910, the coon character was portrayed as a poultry thief in *How Rastus Got His Turkey*, where Rastus opts to steal rather than purchase a turkey for Thanksgiving dinner. In *Rastus in Zululand* (1910), titular character is depicted as “an odd-jobs man; that is, he does odd jobs when he has to, but when there are a few small coins in his pocket he prefers to sleep” (Sampson 100). Rastus decides to nap in the sunlight because “a darky needs warmth,” as explained in the film’s synopsis (100). In his dream, Rastus finds himself on a disastrous cruise that ends with the ship wrecked in Zululand and his capture by cannibals. Rastus is about to be cooked in a pot before the chief’s daughter intervenes. Facing the prospect of marriage to an unappealing woman or death, Rastus chooses the cooking pot, but he “awakens just as the water has begun to boil and ‘is much relieved to find himself within walking distance of a place where nerve tonic is sold’” (Leab 1). Leab argues that *Rastus in Zululand* vividly reflects the racial prejudices and beliefs prevalent in America before World War I (1).

The Buck character type was notably underrepresented among black male cinematic stereotypes in the early silent films (Butters 22). He was depicted as “a bestial, brutal, sex-crazed, violent criminal, forever willing to insult white womanhood and step out of his social place” (22). D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) marked the introduction of the Buck character, appearing in two categories: the black brute and the black bucks (Bogle 13). The black brute was portrayed as a barbaric figure intent on causing chaos, with his physical aggression often interpreted as an expression of sexual repression (13). Griffith’s black brutes are the subhuman, feral, and nameless characters embarking on rampages fueled by rage. They subject the faithful servant of the southern white family, the Camerons, to violence, assault white men in the town, and advocate for “equal marriage” on placards (13). As for the black brutes, “Griffith’s really great archetypal figures” (13), they were depicted as “always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (13-14). In Griffith’s film, they were represented by the mulatto Silas Lynch and the renegade Gus, whose characterizations reflect “the tie between sex and racism in America” (14). Through the characters of Lynch and Gus, Griffith invoked the myth of hyper black sexuality, amplifying the white fear that every black man has a desire for a white woman. This fear was rooted in the assumption that the white woman represented the epitome of female desirability, embodying “a symbol of white pride, power, and beauty” (14).

As Butter indicates, the representation of the buck character was unusual in American films, yet it constituted a prevalent threatening image that resonated deeply with the white American public, particularly in the South (52). As the first two decades of American cinema coincided with a surge in lynching events in the United States, “the filmic prescription of asexuality to black men was an attempt to neuter them. The black male body was feminized (equated with the castrated body) to be put in a position of being mastered” (Butters 52). The enduring presence and prevalence of characters like Uncle Tom and the coon, both portraying

neutered black males, is not accidental (52). These characters are rooted in the ideology of Euro-American sexual dominance and black male asexuality (52). As Butters suggests: “One can argue that this was a wish fulfillment on the part of the moviemaking establishment and the American public or simply a gross simplification of the American racial hierarchy” (52).

The mulatto, which can be both a male and female character, was another archetype that reinforced “the black-as-threat” perception (Leab 10), often depicted as a scheming, deceitful figure driven solely by the ambition to elevate their social status at any cost (Lupack 3). The portrayal of mulatto characters perpetuated prevailing beliefs about white superiority: “The merest drop of Negro blood was a taint from which there was no redemption: by the same token, a character’s white blood was responsible for any positive features he or she might have” (Leab 10). Mulatto characters were frequently depicted as striving to assimilate and integrate into a culture that was not entirely their own, thereby posing a threat to the established social order and challenging “the racist exclusions of white society, and played into white fears of ‘mongrelization’ of the races” (Lupack 3). The very presence of mulattoes was perceived as a reminder of the uncomfortable reality of interracial relationships, especially interracial sexuality (3). Ironically, as Jane Gaines indicates, the very mulatto class that white filmmakers, like Griffith, aimed “to discredit . . . [was] the product of the indiscretion of the men of the planter class” (*Fire and Desire* 188). In *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith portrays the mulatto characters as corrupt tempters who seek to transgress the racial order. Lydia Brown, mulatto housekeeper, is driven by ambition for power, leading her to seduce her employer, Austen Stoneman, a parliamentary leader. One intertitle describes her as “the great leader’s weakness that is to blight a nation.” Another mulatto character is Stoneman’s protégé, Silas Lynch, depicted as “a traitor to his white patron and a greater traitor to his own people, whom he plans to lead by an evil way to build himself a throne of vaulting power,” with the intention of marrying his patron’s daughter, Elsie. Griffith’s representation of mulattos as willing to cross

both sexual and racial lines utterly ignores the systematic sexual violence inflicted upon black women, during and after slavery, due to which multiracial children were born in the first place.

It is important to clarify that the three stereotypical character types—Uncle Tom, the Zip Coon, and the brutal buck—do not represent the male characters found in Micheaux’s films and will not be the focus of analysis in the thematic chapters. These stereotypes are primarily examined to illustrate how Micheaux challenged, debunked, and recontextualized them. They are also referenced to establish a point of reference, highlighting the contrast between black male characters as portrayed in films by white filmmakers and those depicted in films by black filmmakers. While some of Micheaux’s male characters may bear superficial similarities to these stereotypes, it is important to emphasize that these resemblances should often be understood within the context of Micheaux’s counter-narrative, which seeks to subvert and redefine such representations.

3. Race and Manhood at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

The stereotypical representation of the black male character in early silent films reflects the struggles with racial and gender identity that characterized the decades around the turn of the century when “Americans were obsessed with the connection between manhood and racial dominance” (Bederman 4). As Martin Summers argues, the concept of manhood held significant societal importance at the turn of the century in America, becoming a focal point of the national attention. The preoccupation with manhood extended from “individual concerns about one’s own masculine character to larger collective anxieties over the nation’s manliness” (1). Definitions of manhood that were shaped in terms of race and class permeated everyday conversations. Various aspects of society, including definitions of success, notions of citizenship, and national debates over expansion and empire, were all influenced by gendered ideas (1). Ultimately, the question of what constituted manhood overshadowed the perceptions

of most men and women, shaping their views on economic prosperity, national belonging, and their place within social hierarchies, based on race, ethnicity, and class (1), in a way that supported white supremacy.

The correlation between white identity and male power at that point had been a longstanding practice that was deeply ingrained in the American society (Bederman 20). As Bederman argues, “White Americans had long associated powerful manhood with white supremacy” (20). This correlation is particularly evident in the early to mid-nineteenth century, where American citizenship rights were predominantly viewed as rights reserved exclusively for white males (20), defining citizenship essentially as “‘manhood’ rights,” excluding black men whose manhood was undermined by the institution of slavery and, subsequently, by legal and extralegal constraints. Gail Bederman contends that “[f]ramers of state constitutions in sixteen northern and western states explicitly placed African American men in the same category as women, as ‘dependents.’ Negro males, whether free or slave, were forbidden to exercise ‘manhood’ rights— forbidden to vote, hold electoral office, serve on juries, or join the military” (20). In the same vein, white working-class men also viewed themselves as entitled to manly independence that women³ and black men were denied. As Bederman puts it: “The conclusion was implicit but widely understood: Negro males, unlike white males, were less than men” (20).

Success, particularly in economic terms, and citizenship played crucial roles in shaping the gender identity of white men, and they both underwent significant changes in the aftermath

³ According to Summers, in the latter half of the 19th century, especially in the mid-decades, women challenged the gender-based definition of citizenship by advocating for suffrage and participating in reform movements. By the early 20th century, their activism in areas like prohibition, education, consumer rights, and social welfare blurred the lines between “the public sphere of electoral and party politics and the private sphere of middle-class reform.” This division was further eroded by the successful suffrage campaign leading to the Nineteenth Amendment and women’s advancements in education and previously male-dominated fields. Despite these strides, however, the notion of public citizen remained largely within a masculine framework in the minds of turn-of-the-century Americans (2).

of slavery. The redefinition of freedom and citizenship as rights solely reserved for white people, particularly for white men, and the economic difficulties that characterized the period resulted in a convoluted situation where white men found themselves “[losing] power in a new and frightening way” (Williamson 301). During the agricultural depression of the late 1880s and through the 1890s, white men, especially the poor farmers, were powerless in the face of rapidly changing economics, which put many of them in direct and severe competition with freed black men (301). As southern white men “had been very much taken by sex and family roles prescribed in the Victorian era” (Williamson 115), they found themselves unable to practice their masculine role of “protector-as-breadwinner” (301). They were “less and less able to provide for their women in the accustomed style” (115). This challenge was particularly acute for those with poor economic status, while even affluent men experienced a relative decline in their ability to meet this expectation, leading to feelings of inadequacy. In order to affirm their male power and sense of identity, white men believed that they could make up for the material provisions by prioritizing the purity and piety of their women (115). They began to emphasize their role as “protector-as-defender” of the purity of white women against the perceived threat posed by “the black beast rapist” (301). As Joel Williamson contends: “Lynching and rioting, total disfranchisement, and blatant segregation formed satisfying displays of power in one area of their lives when they could no longer display power in another” (301).

The new understanding of southern white men’s masculine role as defenders, coupled with the racism and violence they wielded in defense of white women’s purity, found support in scientific, scholarly, and popular tracts that aimed to demonstrate the innate inferiority of the black man compared to the white man (Butters 3). These tracts often drew upon ideas of social Darwinism that positioned black people at the lower and primitive end of the evolutionary scale (3). As regards “scientific” justifications, Kevin Gates cites the example of the Harvard

biologist Nathaniel S. Shaler, who claimed in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1900) that “coons will get wild when there was . . . a racket going on, but all they will need is the firm hand of the master race” (70). Magazines and newspapers also played a role in justifying vigilante violence against black people in the South (Butters 3). Marion L. Dawson, a former judge advocate general of Virginia, wrote in *The North American Review* (1901) that “[i]t is unnecessary to shock the sensibilities of the public by calling attention to the repulsive details of those crimes for which lynching, in some form, has been the almost invariable penalty. They have always been, however, of a nature so brutal and so savage that no pen can describe and no imagination picture them” (280).

According to Summers, “[f]or black men in the United States, manhood was equally a matter of some consequence” (3). The period of the turn of the twentieth century was particularly crucial as the entrenched Jim Crow system gained maturity in the South, proving a range of legal, economic, political, and social practices, “whose logic and mechanisms of oppression were primarily based on race but which also shaped the gender identity formation of blacks and gender relations within black communities” (3). This period also witnessed serious efforts to disfranchise black people, which “attenuated the links between manhood and citizenship for blacks” (Summers 3). Sean Dennis Cashman explains that “Mississippi was the first state effectively to disfranchise African-American citizens by a constitutional convention in 1890” (7). This action was followed by many other states in subsequent years, with proponents of disfranchisement arguing that it aimed to “end corruption at elections . . . prevent African-Americans from holding the balance of power in contests between rival factions of whites . . . [and] oblige African-Americans to abandon their false hopes of betterment and, instead, make them accept their true social place,” ultimately leading to an improvement in race relations (7-8). Furthermore, economic discrimination and the increasing difficulty of sustaining black families solely on the income of a male breadwinner undermined the

patriarchal structure of black households, making it difficult for black men to fulfill social expectations and uphold their manhood according to the dominant cultural norms (Summers 3).

Moreover, racial violence and lynching incidents escalated during this period, which “purportedly sought to police an aggressive black male sexuality and often incorporated the horrific act of castration, made any assertion of independence or brazen behavior a potentially perilous action” (Summers 3). Many cities, like Wilmington, North Carolina (1898), Statesboro, Georgia (1904), Atlanta (1906), Brownsville, Texas (1906), and Springfield, Illinois (1908), endured vicious race riots (Butters 2). Moreover, over 1,100 black men were lynched between 1900 and 1914 (2). This ferocious punishment was mostly reserved for black men and typically carried out by white men, serving as a communal reminder of the dominance of the white man in the South (2). Furthermore, according to Summers, the legal and customary practice of segregation contributed to a fragile sense of manhood among black people in many ways. On the one hand, black men frequently criticized the inadequate quality of segregated facilities, highlighting their poor physical conditions and lack of resources as an affront to their collective manhood (3). The black correspondent for the *Chattanooga Times*, Weldon Victor Jenkins, exemplifies this sentiment by addressing the deplorable conditions of the black residential areas and their role in prompting black people to leave the South, using masculinist terms (3). He wrote that “[o]ne of our grievances is that in colored localities we have very bad streets, no lights, no sewerage system, and sanitary conditions are necessarily bad. Give the negro the right kind of a show, living wages, consider him as a man, and he will be contented to remain here” (qtd. in Scott 169). On the other hand, segregated spaces, which mirrored and enforced racial distinctions, often tended to erode intra-racial distinctions (Summers 3). An example could be found in the case of middle- and upper-class white women, who had their own separate train car, intended to protect them from the rough and potentially vulgar environment of white male passengers, while black men and women from all social classes were forced to

share the Jim Crow car (4). Moreover, black men and women typically had access to one unisex lavatory (4). Therefore, segregation not only blurred class differences among black people but also blurred the gender conventions that were otherwise well defined within the dominant culture (4).

As Bederman observes, black men were aware that their perceived lack of manhood was used to legitimize their social and political disenfranchisement (20). In response, they loudly asserted that they were men, insisting on their “manhood rights” as did male slaves by demanding their freedom (20). Frederick Douglass, recalling his first overt act of resistance to being whipped by the slaveholder Edward Covey, remarked: “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own *manhood*. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free” (60; emphasis added). Similarly, in 1828, David Walker expressed deep sorrow over the dehumanization of black men, demonstrating the stark contrast in how people of African descent were perceived. He wrote, “all the inhabitants of the earth, (except, however, the sons of Africa) are called *men*, and of course are, and ought to be free. But we (colored people) and our children are brutes!! and of course are, and *ought to be SLAVES* . . . Oh! my colored brethren . . . when shall we arise from this death-like apathy! –and be men!!” (56; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, black men were well aware that securing civic power was contingent upon proving themselves as men. They also understood that military service “was their most potent tool to claim that they were men and should have the same rights and privileges as all American men” (Bederman 20). For this reason, despite facing unequal and bad treatment, 180,000 black men joined the Union Army during the Civil War (20).

4. The Black Male Character in Early Race Films

Black filmmakers began creating more positive cinematic depictions of black men as a direct response to their dehumanization both on-screen in white-produced films and in real life. These filmmakers “represented an attempt by African-American men to create a defense against constant racial attack, develop racial self-help, and reclaim manhood” (Butters 5). In 1910/1912, the first black filmmaker William Bill Foster founded his Foster Photoplay Company in Chicago. Foster had a long and prosperous career in show business (Stewart 194): “he had been a press agent for the [Bert] Williams and [George] Walker revues and the [Bob] Cole and [Billy] Johnson’s [comedy-musical] *A Trip to Coontown* [1898], a sportswriter for the [Chicago] *Defender*, an occasional actor under the name of Juli Jones, and finally a purveyor of sheet music and Haitian coffee” (Cripps 79). Setting up his film company on the South State Street “Stroll,” he went on to produce a minimum of twelve films (Stewart 194), including the black comedy shorts *The Railroad Porter* in (1912/1913) and *The Fall Guy* (1913). The two films were described by the weekly black newspaper *The New York Age* as “comedy films representing Negro life without putting the race in a ridiculous light” (qtd. in Reid 7).

Foster’s films represented aspects of black urban life, strategically shifting the narrative focus onto the various professions occupied by black people in the period (Field 55). For instance, in *The Butler* (1913), which depicted a “high-class detective or kidnapping scene,” centered around an employee in a white family, thus elevating a role typically marginalized in white media (55). Similarly, *The Railroad Porter* showcased occupations available for black people, featuring elements of middle-class and upwardly mobile black social lifestyle which were appealing “to audiences frustrated with the dehumanizing racial caricatures in motion pictures” (55). As Jacqueline Stewart points out, “Foster’s familiarity with the African American entertainment scene suggests that his films not only reflected modern Black ‘realities’ but also catered to prevalent Black popular cultural tastes” (195). His distinctive

combination of black middle-class characters and conventions of comedy allowed him to proudly promote the progressive, realistic, and culturally specific nature of his work, aligning with the ideals of uplift ideology, “despite the potential for (and long history of) unflattering caricature in comic Black representations” (195).

The synopsis of *The Railroad Porter* is described in *The New York Age* of September 25, 1913, as follows:

[The film] dealt with a young wife who, thinking her husband had gone out on “his run,” invited a fashionably dressed chap, who was a waiter at one of the colored cafés on State Street, to dine. However, the husband did not go out, and, upon returning home found wifey sitting at the table serving the waiter all the delicacies of the season. Mr. Husband proceeds to get his revolver, which he uses carelessly, running the unwelcome visitor back to his home. Then the waiter gets his revolver and returns the compliment . . . no one is hurt . . . and all ends happily.

Daniel Leab sates that the film “was a comedy that does not seem to have been very different in style and content from the films depicting blacks that were turned out by the industry” (59). Similarly, Thomas Cripps describes the film as “an imitation of Keystone comic chases completed perhaps three years before *The Birth of a Nation*” (80). However, Mark Reid argues that Leab’s and Cripps’s assessments overlook a significant element which was often disregarded by contemporaries such as Keystone and Chaplin—namely, the portrayal of black characters not only as porters serving for white people but also as waiters in respectable cafés within middle-class black communities (8). The film depicted well-dressed male characters holding respectable occupations such as railroad porter and café waiter, in contrast to the common portrayal of black men as unemployed, lazy, and poorly dressed in films produced by white filmmakers. Reid indicates that “neither ‘Mr. Husband’ nor the ‘fashionably dressed chap’ uses his revolver to harm the other. It is true that . . . [the film] has a comic chase scene

as Cripps has said, but Foster's use of the comic chase is far different from the stereotypical chase of the petty black thief in the Rastus Series" (8). Reed further explains that "Leab is correct in implying that *The Railroad Porter* is similar to the comedies turned out by the industry. Nevertheless, Foster's photoplays altered the popular Rastus stereotype by using African-American socio-cultural realities as the content of his films" (8). These realities included the presence of a thriving black middle-class, employed black men in the North, and members of the black community supporting businesses owned by fellow black people (8).

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company distinguished itself as one of the most successful black film companies, prioritizing "high" dramas over "low" comedies to resonate with black audiences (Stewart 202). In their 1917 prospectus, the company's founders outlined their mission to produce films that would "reflect merit and credit upon the Race" and provide employment opportunities and financial investments for black people (qtd. in Stewart 203). Noble Johnson, serving as president, leading actor, and director-scenarist, led the company alongside Clarence Brooks, the second leading actor and secretary, and Dr. James Thomas Smith, the vice president and treasurer. Other important figures included Dudley A. Brooks as assistant secretary, William O. Tyler as attorney, and George Perry Johnson as general booking manager and screenwriter. Notably, Harry Grant, the cameraman, was the sole white member of the company (Butters 110, Reid 9, Sampson 130). The company's decision to enter the motion picture industry was driven by both economic interests and political motivations (Butters 93). As Butters contends, "[t]he potentially lucrative African-American film audience, the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of African-American masculinity on the screen, and the developing multifaceted movement of black self-help and racial organization were all key factors leading to the distribution of films starring African Americans by African Americans" (93). The company produced four dramas: *The Realization of a Negroes Ambition* (1916), *The Trooper of Troop K* (1916), *The Law of Nature* (1917), *A Man's Duty* (1919), and *By Right of*

Birth (1921). These films, as described by Jane Gaines, “were moral tales of self-reliance, resourcefulness, and exceptionality in which the hero’s ambitions are achieved in the same way that race prejudice is thought to be overcome by demonstrations of the way in which he is just as accomplished as or *just like* a white hero” (*Fire and Desire* 107; emphasis in the original). Most of these narratives culminated in the protagonist finding love and marrying their partner. While such romantic relationships were commonplace in melodramatic narratives produced by white-controlled studios, featuring white protagonists, they were rarely depicted between black characters in these productions (Butters 116). The Lincoln Motion Picture Company addressed this narrative gap by portraying the “wholeness of African-American family life, complete with romantic love and tenderness toward children” (116).

The Realization of a Negro’s Ambition (1916) was the company’s first production, featuring James Burton (played by Noble Johnson), a Tuskegee graduate who leaves his father’s farm and girlfriend to pursue his career as a civil engineer. Butters points out that “[t]his was the first time in screen history that a college-educated African American had ever been depicted” (111). The film highlights Burton’s ambition and resourcefulness as he sets out West in search of employment opportunities. It addresses the issue of employment discrimination against black people, a topic previously unexplored in cinema (111), as Burton is unjustly denied an oil-drilling position in California due to his being black. Despite this setback, Burton secures the job after saving the life of a white oilman’s daughter. Recognizing Burton’s qualifications as a civil engineer, the grateful father appoints him as the leader of an oil expedition. As the narrative progresses, Burton realizes that the terrain of California’s oil fields resembles that of his father’s farm. This revelation leads him back home, where he discovers oil on his family’s land. With his newfound wealth, Burton purchases a home and marries his girlfriend. The final scene depicts “James in later years, with ambition realized, home and

family, a nice country to live in and nice people to live and enjoy it with.”⁴ Therefore, in *The Realization of a Negro’s Ambition* the black man is ambitious, robust, devoted to his family, supported and respected by friends for his exemplary character, and proudly black American (112). As most of Lincoln’s films, *The Realization* was highly acclaimed by both black audiences and critics for its high-quality acting, writing, and cinematography, as well as its uplifting portrayal of the finer qualities of the black community (Stewart 203-210). A newspaper report from the screening of the film at the opening of the National Negro Business League convention on August 14, 1916 stated that:

This educational and interesting picture marks the beginning of a new era in the production of Race pictures. Feeling that the trend of public sentiment among the Race lover of the silent drama is growing so antagonistic to the insulting, humiliating and undignified portrayal of the cheap burlesque, slap-stick comedies so universally shown as characteristic of the Afro-American ideals, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company of Los Angeles, California, a Race firm, has in their first release successfully eliminated these undesirable features and produced a really interesting, inspiring and commendable educational love drama featuring the business and social life of the Negro as it really is and not as our jealous contemporaries would have it appear. (“Photo-Play”)

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company released its second film, *The Trooper of Troop K* (1916), which depicted the June 1916 “Carrizal Incident” during the Mexican-American War’s Carrizal battle, “when Troops K and C of the African-American Tenth Calvary almost perished” (Reid 10). The newspaper titled *The California Eagle* praised the film for its historical

⁴ The quote is found in Lincoln Motion Picture Company file, GPJC, as Butters indicates (234).

significance, writing that the film “will rank as an exceptional picture if only for its historical value, commemorating as it does the battle at Carrizal, where our boys made such a good fight against overwhelming odds, sacrificing their blood and life for their country.” The story follows “Shiftless Joe” (portrayed by Noble Johnson), hailing from a lower-class background, in contrast to his sweetheart Clara Holens and James Warner, who also vies for Clara’s affection. Joe is depicted as “a rural, unkempt, and lazy character” (10), whose love and sympathy for animals costs him his job. Clara advises him to join the army “where ‘regularity, discipline, and training’ will make him into a man” (Butters 115). After joining the army, Joe rescues his injured captain and becomes a hero. He, therefore, “finds himself all man with a big heart and good enough for a little girl who is waiting home for him,” as the *California Eagle* account described him. The film depicts Joe’s transformation from a shiftless character to a determined man, who faces challenges, achieves success with integrity, and ultimately returns home to marry his beloved sweetheart (Reid 10). As Reid argues, Joe “is a redeemed black hero; he presents an alternative image both to the ‘coon,’ a shiftless black stereotype, and to the ‘Tom,’ a black who, when faced with racism, resigns himself to an inferior place” (10).

4.1. Oscar Micheaux in the Film Industry

Micheaux founded the Micheaux Book and Film Company in 1918, and created approximately forty films spanning from 1919 to 1948. Among these, at least twenty-eight were produced during the silent film era, with around sixteen released during the sound film period. While most of Micheaux’s films have been lost to time, a few notable surviving silent films include *Within Our Gates* (1920), *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), and *Body and Soul* (1925). Most of these films portrayed “the tragedy of the Negro being enacted on American soil and voiced the heart cry of millions in a world where the common heritage of trials and obstacles and disappointments are intensified by the evil shadow of prejudice” (qtd. in Bowser and

Spence 81). In addition to these silent films, several of Micheaux's sound films have also survived, including *The Exile* (1931), *The Darktown Revue* (1931), *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932), *The Girl from Chicago* (1932), *Murder in Harlem* (1935), *Underworld* (1937), *God's Stepchildren* (1938), *Birthright* (1938-1939), *Swing!* (1938) *Lying Lips*, *The Notorious Elinor Lee* (1940). However, many of these surviving films are incomplete or in poor condition, posing challenges for analysis. As a result, this dissertation does not encompass analyses of the aspect focused on in the individual chapters in every surviving film.

Similar to Lincoln's company, the Micheaux Book and Film Company "appealed to Black audiences by focusing their efforts on producing 'high' dramas rather than 'low' comedies" (Stewart 202). However, as Stewart argues, "Micheaux's narrative voice assumes a much more didactic tone than seems to have been the case in Lincoln films" (219). Furthermore, Micheaux's films boldly addressed (inter)racial issues that were not commonly tackled by either white or black film companies. Micheaux's films depicted "black-oriented themes like interracial intimacy, lynching, passing, and other controversial subjects such as urban graft, wife beating, gambling, rape, and prostitution to their audience" (Reid 12). His film *The Homesteader* (1919), an adaptation of his novel of the same title (1917), the longest film produced by a black filmmaker at the time with almost three-hour length, depicted a love story between a black farmer and his white neighbor, which did not culminate in marriage "due to the homesteader's own sense of racial solidarity" (Bowser and Spence 81). In the novel version of *The Homesteader* (1917), Micheaux attributes the protagonist Jean Baptiste's refusal to marry his white neighbor to the fact that Baptiste "had set himself in this new land to succeed; he had worked and slaved to that end. He liked his people; he wanted to help them. Examples they needed and such he was glad to have become; but if he married now the one he loved, the example was lost" (147). According to Reid, Micheaux's film *The Homesteader* is the first American film where sexual relationship between a black man and white woman is not

presented as an act of rape, providing the black audience with a positive image to counteract Griffith's portrayal of black men as "pure black bucks" (Reid 12). The theme of interracial intimacy recurs in films like *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) and *The Exile* (1931), where the male leads fall in love with women whose light skin makes them look white. Micheaux's male leads often refrain from acting upon their feelings until these women reveal their black identity at the end of the films. As Clyde Taylor points out, Micheaux "played throughout his career with the scenario in which an apparently White woman discovers in the eleventh hour that she possesses one drop of Black blood (enough in those apartheid days to finalize a Black identity) and can therefore marry her Black lover" (5). Micheaux often used this "one drop of Black blood" theme to attract audiences' attention to his films because he understood that "nothing would attract so racialized a society as an advertisement saying 'SHALL RACES INTERMARRY?'" (Taylor 5). Additionally, he relied on this theme to navigate censorship restrictions when addressing interracial intimacy, a topic considered provocative by the censors.

Among the other topics that caused Micheaux censorship issues were lynching and mob violence, as depicted in films like *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *The Gunsaulus Mystery* (1921). According to Reid, the portrayal of lynching in *Within Our Gates*, "a topic that Hollywood refused to dramatize until after World War II . . . should be the starting point of any discussion of the cinematic treatment of lynching" (12). The film meticulously portrays the lynching of Jasper Landry, a black farmer falsely accused of murdering a white plantation owner. The portrayal of Jasper is "contrasted sharply with the image of envious white men who considered Jasper Landry an uppity black" (Reid 12). Reid indicates that "the film so graphically presented the lynching that a racially-mixed censorship board fought against its Chicago screening!" (12). The topic of lynching in *Within Our Gates* will be studied in the next chapter, where I analyze Micheaux's representation of the poor southern farmer Jasper Landry and examine his complex

relationships with his white landowner and another white farmer, marked by racial tension that escalates into violence and ultimately leads to lynching. The chapter will also discuss the composition of the lynch mob depicted in Micheaux's film, comprising of white people from various social positions, including both men and women.

Micheaux's continuous treatment of controversial and provocative topics demonstrates his determination to challenge and overcome the obstacles imposed by white censorship on the black filmmakers. Thomas Cripps notes that "[even] [i]f blacks could make movies in isolation, they still could not release them until white eyes approved them" (192). Throughout his career, Micheaux's films were frequently scrutinized by various state and city censorship boards, including the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, the New York State Motion Picture Commission, the Chicago Board of Censors, the Virginia State Board of Censors, and the Kansas State Board of Review of Motion Pictures. These boards were originally established to control the content that Americans could watch due to "[t]he tremendous impact film had on the public" (Young Jr 37). This impact prompted officials to enact social legislations and self-regulations (38). Butters indicates that "[a]lmost from the inception of film, the issue of control over the exhibition and content of this new entertainment medium became important politically and socially. As an increasingly large number of Americans flocked to see these new 'photoplays,' a powerful and forceful contingent of Americans attempted to control what the public saw" (*Banned in Kansas* xi).

These efforts to control public viewing through censorship illustrate "the confusion caused by attempting to reconcile an unflagging allegiance to abstract liberty with a traditional desire to censor personal morality" ("Censorship of Motion Pictures" 88). For these censorship boards, preserving personal as well as public morality required their usually white members to disapprove films they considered "obscene, indecent, immoral, inhuman, sacrilegious . . . [or portraying] a character that its exhibition would tend to corrupt morals or incite crime . . ."

("Oscar Micheaux on the Cutting Edge," Register 62). However, these white-imposed standards did not account for the humiliation of black people on screen or the false and racist stereotypes that confined black characters in white-made films. Black filmmakers' attempts to depict their characters outside racial stereotypes, showing them as equal or superior to white characters, were often rejected. Micheaux's film *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), for instance, was rejected by the Virginia State Board of Censors because, according to Jennifer Fronc, the censors "detected subversive content in *Veiled Aristocrats*: African Americans successfully passing as white, holding professional jobs, and enjoying the privileges usually only available to well-off white families, such as household servants" (740). Similarly, Micheaux's silent film *The Brute* (1920) faced issues with the Chicago censorship board, partly due to a scene depicting a black fighter, Sam Langford, defeating a white opponent in a boxing match. Micheaux's portrayal of Langford as strong, defiant, and capable of defeating a white man was a bold statement, which was disturbing to the censors who demanded that the "close view of [the] knock out" be entirely deleted from the film (*Black Film*, Register 169). As Butters notes, "Micheaux was displaying a heroic, powerful black man. Because of this, the white censorship board of Chicago ordered aggressive cuts that Micheaux had to implement to exhibit the film" (*Black Manhood* 138).

Another example is Micheaux's *A Son of Satan* (1924), which portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as a wild bunch of villains (also showing the killing of the Klan's leader), which was in stark contrast to their depiction as noble men in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Charlene Register argues that this portrayal might be the real reason behind the film's rejection by the New York State Motion Picture Commission, while the official reason was based on the claims that the film's images of black people drinking, carousing, playing craps, and engaging in violent acts were "inhuman and would tend to incite to crime" ("Oscar Micheaux on the Cutting Edge," Register 66-67). Given the pervasive negative portrayals of black characters in white-produced

films at the time, these claims seem unfounded and reflect a lack of understanding of the complexity of black characters in the films of black filmmakers like Micheaux. John R. Alley supports this view, explaining that censorship boards, such as the Virginia Board of Censors, were never concerned with advocating for a more “human” representation of black people. Alley writes:

In the legislation defining the Board one of the central tenets was a concern with blocking material which would tend to incite violence. The Board interpreted this, it seems, solely in terms of the presumed threats posed by the racial themes depicted in motion pictures from black film makers. Ironically, a Board that would almost immediately seem unsympathetic to the expression of ideas by black film makers, met its first and most vigorous opposition from D. W. Griffith and Thomas Dixon. Both men were involved in a nationwide campaign against state censor boards and in support of free filmic expression. Griffith and Dixon appeared before the Virginia General Assembly as a part of that effort which began after the furor over their film *Birth of a Nation*. The Board appeared unconcerned over the racial tension generated by *Birth of a Nation*. It did use the supposed threat of racial violence as a weapon to exercise prior restraint and to cast immediate suspicion on all movies made by black film makers. The immediate target of the Board became Oscar Micheaux. (qtd. Green 209)

Alley’s observations highlight the biased nature of these censorship boards: under the guise of maintaining morality and preventing incitement to racial violence, these boards systemically suppressed black voices. They often denied Micheaux’s films a license of exhibition on the ground of concerns over immorality and potential incitement to crime, yet these reasons were thinly veiled attempts to stifle any positive or realistic representation of black people that contradicted the prevailing racist stereotypes. Their double standards reveal an intent to

maintain the racial hierarchy and prevent any challenge to white supremacy. This does not mean that white filmmakers were not subject to censorship, but, as the case of *The Birth of a Nation* shows, the restrictions were not as severe as those imposed on black filmmakers. As Taylor asserts, “[t]o be sure, in the era of silent movies, censorship applied to everyone. But the unequal burden of censorship for non-Whites is made evident by the number of times Micheaux was faced with censorship for a variety of possible offenses, usually connected to race in one way or another” (5).

To continue making and exhibiting his films, Micheaux often had to cooperate with the boards’ orders. He demonstrated a pragmatic willingness to comply with certain demands, adjusting his work to fit the stringent demands made by the censorship boards. This included making specific changes to characters and removing scenes deemed inappropriate or too provocative by the censors. However, Micheaux’s compliance was not passive acquiescence. He frequently challenged and resisted these directives, pushing back against the limitations imposed on his creative expression. His resistance was evident in his persistent engagement with controversial topics and his portrayal of white characters as villains, a recurring theme in his films that directly confronted the dominant filmic narratives of the time. He found innovative ways to navigate the constraints imposed by the censorship boards. For example, Micheaux turned the challenges he faced with the Chicago Board of Censors regarding his film *The Homesteader* (1919) to his advantage in its publicity. One advertisement boldly proclaimed: “Passed by the Censor Board Despite the Protests of Three Chicago Ministers who claimed it was based upon the supposed hypocritical actions of a prominent colored preacher of this city [Chicago]” (qtd. in Butters, *Black Manhood* 135). By leveraging the controversy, Micheaux effectively used censorship as a tool to generate interest and discussion around the film. Furthermore, his silent film *Birthright* (1924) also faced problems with the New York State Motion Picture Commission, who ordered him to do the following changes:

Reel 1: Eliminate underlined words from subtitle: “How the Hell can he arrest him when he just hit down.”

Reel 3: Eliminate subtitle: “Legal - hell - anything a white man wants to put over on a nigger is legal.”

Reel 4 & 5: Eliminate all but one scene in each reel of shooting craps.

Reel 6: Eliminate underlined words in subtitle: “You ain't no black Jesus - ...” (qtd. in Register 65)

Micheaux maneuvered around the orders by changing the word “Hell” to “H _ _ L” instead of deleting it⁵. Register explains that this tactic enabled Micheaux to retain the word in the film and maintain the critical remark about the exploitation of blacks by whites. By drawing attention to the modified word, he managed to keep a strong accusation and public denunciation of whites on screen (66). Moreover, on some occasions, Micheaux attempted to bypass censorship restrictions by exhibiting his films in theaters without submitting them to the censorship board for approval. A notable instance of this is his film *The Millionaire* (1927), which he showed in Chicago without seeking prior approval from the censorship board. Register explains that “[w]hen the New York Motion Picture Commission became aware that theatres were showing a film that had not been submitted for their approval, they threatened immediate legal action. [But] Micheaux responded to their fury in his usual apologetic manner, defusing them, gaining time, but in the final analysis, bowing to their wishes” (69). Despite his defiance, Micheaux often had to navigate the delicate balance of challenging censorship while avoiding severe legal repercussions that could hinder his ability to continue making films. As Green asserts, “[t]he choice for Micheaux, in his decision to compromise his work by

⁵According to Register, Micheaux agreed to delete the subtitle “You ain’t no black Jesus” and to limit the depiction of the crap game scenes in reels 4 and 5 to a single occurrence (66).

cooperating with censor boards, was a choice between survival or failure as an independent filmmaker. He chose survival” (*Straight* 210).

Censorship was not the only challenge Micheaux faced during his filmmaking career. He also faced hurdles in financing and distributing his films. To fund his film *The Homesteader*, Micheaux used his business acumen and salesmanship to sell stocks in his publishing company, Western Book and Supply Co., to white farmers and businessmen that he knew in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa. The shares were priced between \$75 and \$100 each, a strategy he had previously employed to finance the publication of his book *The Conquest* (1913) (Sampson 150, Reid 12). Micheaux had a remarkable ability to turn situations to his advantage, earning him a reputation as a superb promoter (Leab 78). He often persuaded movie theaters to book his upcoming films by showing them new scripts, photographs of his actors, and sometimes even bringing the actors themselves (Murray 9).

Since film distribution was monopolized by white-controlled companies (Green, *Straight* 229), black filmmakers like Micheaux faced significant obstacles in reaching larger markets. To overcome these challenges, Micheaux devised his own distribution strategy. Drawing on the methods he used to sell his books, Micheaux embarked on regular tours, traveling from theater to theater with his films. His routine involved touring in the spring, returning to New York City in the summer to shoot and edit his films, and then launching a new round of distribution in the fall (Murray 9). This production and distribution routine proved successful for Micheaux, allowing him to produce a feature film every year for two decades, despite working with limited resources and generally low-income audiences. Remarkably, he achieved this without grants, subsidies, or the advantages of a monopoly—an accomplishment that later filmmakers would envy (Murray 9). Micheaux, along with his brother Swan, managed the distribution of their films in the Northeastern states and Chicago. Additionally, Micheaux established a network of agents across various regions of the country, including George

Anderson in Little Rock, Arkansas; Tiffany Tolliver in Roanoke, Virginia; John Harris in Oklahoma and Louisiana; Ira McGowan in Texas; and the Southern Distribution Co., located at 182 Auburn Ave., Atlanta, Georgia, which covered South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Alabama (Sampson 194).

Micheaux's films were primarily shown in black-owned theaters, which were few in number, and in white-owned theaters that catered to black audiences. He aspired to break into the white market, understanding that "the market of black theaters would always be limited and would therefore put a constraint of the amount of money he could spend on production which would limit the technical quality of his films" (Sampson 150). To pursue this ambition, Micheaux was advised by a friend to include white-looking female leads whose black racial identity was ambiguous⁶. This strategy was based on the success of his novel *The Homesteader*, where the inclusion of a white girl character was noted as a key reason why many white readers purchased the book (Sampson 158). Sampson argues that this is why many of Micheaux's films revolve around themes of mistaken identity. In addition, Micheaux tried to attract white audiences by basing some of his films on stories that were widely publicized in the white press. However, these efforts proved unsuccessful, as he failed to break into the market of white theaters in the United States (Sampson 158), and his primary audience remained black. This might explain why most of his films continued to focus on themes mostly relevant to the black community.

Some scholars contend that Micheaux's silent films were more controversial due to their bold exposure of the racism and socioeconomic inequality experienced by black people compared to his sound films. For instance, Gaines argues that "[a]udiences viewing any one of African-American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux's three surviving silent films are often surprised

⁶As previously mentioned in this chapter, some scholars suggest that Micheaux used female characters with ambiguous racial identities as a way to explore the theme of interracial intimacy while circumventing censorship restrictions.

at how distinctly different they seem from his more well-known sound work, dating from 1931, many more examples of which have been available for exhibition in the decades since his death in 1951” (“Within Our Gates,” 67). Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence concur with Gaines’s point as they write that “[d]uring that first decade of his career, [Micheaux] developed the public persona of an aggressive and successful businessman and a controversial and confident maverick producer—an image that was to sustain him for the next twenty years, although little of the work after his first sound picture, *The Exile* (1931), would seem to justify it” (85). Butters shares a similar sentiment, contending that “[i]t is true that Micheaux’s political and racial ideology on the screen digressed in the sound era. His silent films simply ‘said more’ than his sound films. His pictures became less confrontational and more exploitive in his portrayals of black criminality and sexuality” (148). Butters further indicates that Micheaux’s sound films included black stereotypes that reflected the presentation of black people in mainstream white films (148). Therefore, as Butters observes, Micheaux’s films became increasingly generic and haphazardly assembled, often inserting musical numbers into scenes without any purpose other than serving as filler (148-149). While these scholars’ arguments may hold merit in certain instances, they also appear to be inaccurate on others. Throughout my analysis of Micheaux’s sound films, it becomes apparent that they were not necessarily less conventional or confrontational compared to his silent films. This assessment takes into account the unique characteristics of the new sound technology and its high expenses that made it increasingly difficult for black filmmakers to compete with the dominant productions of Hollywood studios, which also extended their influence to the black market.

The advent of sound technology heightened the visibility of black stereotypes in Micheaux’s sound films compared to his silent works. Unlike silent films, where character dialogue is conveyed mainly through brief intertitles, sound films present characters who are both seen and heard. As I will show in the third chapter, where I study Micheaux’s use of racial

stereotypes in shaping his comic characters, these characters are present in both silent and sound films. Examples include Old Ned in the silent film *Within Our Gates*, and characters like Hawkins and the “hard-shell” preacher played by Amon Davis in the sound films *Murder in Harlem* and *The Darktown Revue* respectively. Furthermore, these comic characters appear far more intricate and complex than the simplistic, one-dimensional black characters commonly found in mainstream Hollywood movies. Additionally, the comic characters in his sound films exhibit a greater degree of sophistication compared to those in his silent films, which provide viewers with opportunities to discern the nuances of their representation. These nuances are often most apparent in musical scenes featuring singing, dancing, and minstrel-like performances, which enhance viewers’ engagement. According to Henry Sampson, “Micheaux reasoned that the nightclub scenes would not only be appealing to whites but would also be a very entertaining feature to blacks in the South who had never seen a Harlem nightclub show. (162). However, as Sampson further explains, Micheaux failed to break into the white market, but “he continued to use the ‘nightclub’ scene as an integral part of his films as it proved to be very popular with black audiences” (164). Therefore, by incorporating these popular musical performances⁷, Micheaux not only ensured financial profitability but also captured the attention of predominantly black viewers, to whom he conveyed his racial messages.

In his sound films, Micheaux continued to address (inter)racial topics, which often led to censorship challenges. Topics like interracial intimacy recurred in the films *The Exile* and *God’s Stepchildren*, both of which caused vigorous protests from both white and black groups. According to Sampson, *The Exile*’s debut in Pittsburgh was halted mid-showing by two white women from the Pennsylvania Board of Censors, whose excuse was the absence of the State

⁷ According to Sampson, Micheaux was often able to hire entertainers who were famous among the audiences of black theater and nightclubs, including Tim Moore, Andrew Tribble, Gallie DeGaston, Cora Green, Eunice Wilson, and beautiful chorus girls from the Cotton Club, Small’s Paradise, Connie’s Inn, and the Yeah Man Club in Harlem (163).

Censor Board's seal, which signifies the approval of the film. However, "there was some speculation at the time that both women objected to a scene in the film showing a black man making love to a white woman," whose black identity was revealed in a later scene not witnessed by the Board members (162). Moreover, the film was halted due to another scene depicting a white man "trying to take advantage of a woman and being soundly thrashed by the black man who comes to her rescue" (162). In response to the halting of *The Exile*, The *Pittsburgh Courier* stated in an article:

The refusal to allow the running of THE EXILE brings clearly to mind the furor created by the running of THE BIRTH OF A NATION, a race-hating and mob-inciting film if ever there was one, and the apathetic attitude of a Board of Censors in connection with this film. It's all right for a picture to arouse race hatred, apparently, if the victims of the mob's spirit are Negroes, and now they're making a "talkie." Negroes all over the country will watch with a great deal of interest just what action the Board of Censors of the Keystone State will take in this film. (qtd. in Sampson 162)

Furthermore, as I demonstrate in chapter four, significant topics such as black education, "passing," and racial uplift, which were addressed in silent films like *Within Our Gates* and the *Symbol of the Unconquered* reappeared in sound films such as *Murder in Harlem*, *Lying Lips*, and *God's Stepchildren*. *God's Stepchildren*, described as "one of the most notable of Micheaux's films of the 1930s" (164), faced nationwide bans from all RKO theaters due to audience protests and objections from groups like the Young Communist League and the National Negro Congress. These protests were sparked by a (missing) scene showing a white man physically assaulting and spitting on Naomi, a "passing" for white girl, upon learning that she has "colored blood" (165). Therefore, while Micheaux's aesthetics and production techniques in his sound films may not match the sophistication of Hollywood productions or

even his earlier silent works, the portrayal of black people, especially black men, in his sound films exhibits a depth and complexity beyond that of Hollywood. This representation is not a departure but rather a continuation of the representations he established in his silent films, as demonstrated in this dissertation.

4.2. "Race" Films and "Black" Films

By the time Micheaux began producing films, "race film" was already an established cinematic genre with its own market and audience. Race films emerged around in the early 1910s, with the founding of the Foster Photoplay Company in Chicago by the pioneering black filmmaker William Bill Foster. Race films, broadly defined, are movies made by black filmmakers specifically for black audiences, with casts consisting entirely of black actors. Cedric Robinson characterizes these films as "targeted for a Black movie-going market, frequently arranged in separate or segregated theaters" (225). It is important to note that "race" in this context was not meant to be a discriminatory epithet, which black audiences readily understood, as they were "already familiar with the terms 'race men' and 'race women.' For at least one generation before the decade 1910–20, race men and women were familiar figures, usually educated or affluent Blacks who publicly, or at least noticeably, championed causes for the 'uplift' of the race" (Robinson 225-26). These "race men and women" were frequently featured as leading characters in race films and served as exemplars for the audience.

Nevertheless, there have been disagreements over the decades among scholars about the proper usage of the label of race film, especially the ways in which it pertains to cultural representations of African Americans. Michele Wallace contends that "the so-called race films made mostly by independent producers, sometimes black, usually for the specific purpose of rescuing the image of blacks from the deleterious impression made by the caricature films, and, after 1915, by *The Birth of a Nation*" (139). According to Wallace, these race films

encompassed melodramas as well as documentaries, which were made to be screened in churches with the overt purpose of facilitating the “uplift” of black audiences. She further explains that race films also featured “quite a few comedies that freely borrowed from or parodied many of the elements of the caricature films so much so that black audiences and theatre owners sometimes complained” (140). However, race films, including those by Oscar Micheaux, faced economic challenges during the sound era, contributing to their lack of financial success (Wallace 152).

In a similar vein, Jane Gaines contends that race films were significant in the sense that they offered images that were counterhegemonic without directly countering every aspect of white culture (13). Gaines states that “their oppositionality, if it could be called that, was in the circumvention, in the way they produced images that didn’t go through white culture” (13). Viewed primarily by black audiences, while being largely unknown to white ones, race films depicted “an all-black world, a utopian vision of ‘all-black everything’” (Gaines 13). She further observes that these films played an important role in defining black entertainment made for black audiences during the first two decades of the twentieth century, but at the same time these films also became constitutive of the overall image of the black community: “Ironically, although the race film pioneers started from the assumption that they knew who they were and who the race audience would be, they were, as they produced, directed, and exhibited their product, actually *constituting* that race community” (emphasis in the original), argues Gaines, while also wondering if the term “race” in race films was intended to refer to the producers, or to the subject matter addressed in these films, or to the audiences, or to all of these aspects (16). She asserts that it would be overly simplistic to claim that race films were named as such because they were largely made by, for, and about black people, explaining that such a claim overlooks the complex historical circumstances that surrounded the emergence of these films (16-17). Gaines notes that “[t]he chain of historical events that produced this short-lived cinema

were not self-evident or inevitable but contingent and unexpected. The race pioneers carved something significant out of nothing—race movies were an audacious invention that helped to make an audience that most white entrepreneurs did not see, that helped to imagine a separate community into existence” (17).

Robinson, however, takes issue both with Wallace and Gaines, pointing out that after the release of *The Birth of a Nation* there was a balance in the production of race films, where both “uplift” romances and melodramas as well as parodies and slapstick comedies were produced. He argues that this balance “challenges Wallace’s presumption that race films generally countered race caricatures” (Robinson 226). Robinson’s criticism of Wallace, however, seems to be unfounded, as the latter does acknowledge the existence of parodies about which “black audiences and theatre owners sometimes complained.” (140). She further supports this by asserting that within the category of race films, “there are variations and anomalies” (139). Wallace’s actually does not seem far removed from Robinson’s, who contends that “within the genre of race films there were important differences between the many which appropriated ‘Hollywood’s’ caricatures of Black representation and the few which directly attacked them” (126). It seems, however, that Robinson rightfully criticizes “Gaines’s notion that race community was ‘invented’ by race films . . . as an ahistorical inflation” (126). Furthermore, Gaines’s assumption that race films portrayed “an all-black world, a utopian vision of ‘all-black everything’” (13) does not seem to apply to most of Micheaux’s films, which feature white characters in various roles, positive and negative, such as the virtuous philanthropist Mrs. Warwick and the racist landlord Philip Gridlestone in *Within Our Gates* (1920). Moreover, the world Micheaux portrayed in his films is far from utopian, as it candidly depicts the socioeconomic injustices and systemic racial violence inflicted on black people.

Robinson, however, does not see the purport of race films as entirely beneficial to the black community. He suggests that not all race films should be labeled as black films, as many

of these films operated within the construction of knowledge that sustained racism (231), hence they should be distinguished from “black films,” which were supposed to provide resistance against the racial regime and a profound critique of racial capitalism (231). In making his differentiation, Robinson relies on Tommy Lott’s insight that “the white cultural nationalism of Hollywood’s Eurocentric empire requires something like a third Cinema movement to help non-white people survive the oppressive and self-destructive consciousness that empire seeks to perpetuate” (139). Black films, for Lott, are “black film practices . . . fundamentally concerned with the issues that currently define the political struggle of black people” (151).

According to the criteria formulated by Lott and Robinson, Micheaux’s films qualify as “black films,” for nearly all of them, including his sound films, addressed racial issues such as lynching, rape, economic inequality, racial prejudice, and black education. Moreover, Robinson notes that many race films that “exploited Black caricatures for the amusement of their largely Black audiences” cannot be qualified as black cinema based on Lott’s criteria (227), which may not hold true for all race films that utilized black caricatures, particularly in the case of Micheaux’s films. As will be detailed in this dissertation, especially in the second chapter, Micheaux’s employment of racial caricatures never solely serves the purpose of entertainment. He skillfully revised and reappropriated these caricatures to create characters capable of resisting and challenging the simplistic, one-dimensional cinematic depiction of black people, particularly black men.

Mark Reid contributes to the discussion by arguing that any examination of black films must differentiate between black independent films and black commercial films “in order to examine what types of films blacks create when they retain control over the distribution of their films” (2). He defines black independent films as “any feature-length fiction film whose central focus is the Afro-American community. Such films are written, directed, and produced by Afro-Americans and people of African ancestry who reside in the United States. These films are not

distributed by major American film companies” (4). On the other hand, black commercial films are “any feature-length fiction film whose central focus is the Afro-American community . . . [but it] is written, directed, or produced by at least one black person in collaboration with non-black people. Films included in this category are distributed by major American film companies” (4).

Reid identifies three significant film types within the category of black independent films: comedy, urban action, and black family films (2). According to him, “African-American comedy” films are “black-oriented fiction films whose casts include popular black comedians and whose primary purpose is to amuse its interracial audiences through the use of hybrid minstrelsy and social satire” (5). Reid indicates that while “African-American comedy” films may incorporate elements of sex and violence, these elements are not intended to create or alleviate the audience’s anxieties (5), an example of which are films produced by the Foster Photoplay Company. The black family film genre, typically made by the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, on the other hand, is “a black-oriented fiction film whose action takes place within a typical black family whose narrative function and ideological aim is the restoration of the family. Thus, if the narrative of a family film uses humor, it is only to develop themes and issues of secondary importance to the reestablishment of the family circle” (5). Furthermore, Reid delineates the black action film genre as comprising “black-oriented feature-length fiction films whose narratives may use a combination of the following elements: sexually explicit scenes, physically or psychologically aggressive acts that result in violence, and fearful or horrifying characters or events. These elements usually limit protagonists to mythic or superhuman roles.” This film genre encompasses different subtypes, such as the horror film, the Western, and the gangster-detective film (5), which is exemplified, according to Reid, by Micheaux’s silent films made before 1929.

Reid considers Micheaux's films produced after 1929 to be commercial rather than black independent films. This is because after the Micheaux Book and Film Company went bankrupt in 1928, Micheaux founded the Micheaux Film Corporation in 1929 with financing from the white owners of Harlem's theaters. The New York Age reported in 1931: "While Mr. Micheaux remains the titular head of the motion picture company, the control has passed into the hands of the lessees of the Lafayette and other theaters in Harlem" (qtd. in Reid 16). Therefore, according to Reid, Micheaux's sound films cannot be qualified as black independent films since they were not entirely produced by Micheaux. Reid's definitions of black independent films and black commercial films seem limited when it comes to Micheaux's sound films. While Micheaux's sound films might have been financed by white entrepreneurs, they cannot be considered commercial according to Reid's premise. Reid states that "when commercial films are made by black writers and directors, a black perspective that acknowledges differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality rarely surfaces" (2). However, as evidenced by my analysis throughout this dissertation, both Micheaux's silent and sound films reflect a clear understanding of these differences.

Chapter Two:

Racial Violence and the Black Laborer in *Within Our Gates*

This chapter focuses on studying the representation of the black hard-working laborer, which is exemplified most characteristically by the character of the poor southern farmer, Jasper Landry, in Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920). Gerald Butters contends that the depiction of Jasper's character is atypical in "the vocabulary of African-American filmmaking in the period," explaining that "[i]n numerous black-directed films of the silent era, the poor rural African-American sharecropper was usually seen as an uneducated country rube, a man who simply tried to live day to day with little concern for the future" (*Black Manhood* 162). In *Within Our Gates*, however, the portrayal of Jasper challenges prevailing negative depictions of impoverished black farmers, as he emerges as a virtuous family man, displaying love for his children and wife, and a diligent farmer who achieves success in securing funds to send his children to school. Described in the film as "typical of the thousands of poor Negro laborers in the Great Delta," Jasper embodies individuals lacking formal education and voting rights, yet harboring a perpetual aspiration for a home, a few acres of land, a church to attend, and an education for their offspring. Butters explains that among all the black male characters in the film, Jasper stands out as particularly relatable to the male audience members, many of whom were recent migrants sharing similar dreams. This cinematic portrayal presents a distinct perspective on black masculinity, which challenges all racial biases that aim to dehumanize the black man. As Butters puts it, "[i]t is indeed radical. If African-American men have the same hopes, dreams, and feelings as white men then it is very difficult to justify racism, lynching, and segregation" (155). This chapter aims to explore the nuanced representation of Jasper as an underprivileged lower-class laborer, who is nonetheless portrayed as a dignified black man,

hence an exemplary character in Micheaux's cinematic universe. At the same time, Micheaux uses this character to address complex social issues such as racial and class tensions, racial violence (lynching), rape, and education. The chapter approaches the topic of racial violence primarily from the perspective of labor relations in the post-WWI period, when the film was made, the roots of which, however, will be traced back to South of the 1890s. The reason for this focus is that the lynching incident in *Within Our Gates* is depicted within a context that emphasizes labor and racial relations, particularly among the characters of Jasper, the white farmers, and the white landowner Gridlestone. These relations closely resemble those prevalent in the South in the 1890s, a period marked by escalating racial tensions between white and black southerners. Therefore, examining the socio-economic circumstances under which both white and black farmers lived in the plantation economy of cotton agriculture during this period is crucial for understanding the racial violence that Micheaux presents in the film. The initial part of this chapter will offer a socio-historical examination of actual instances of racial violence which occurred before the production of *Within Our Gates* (1920) in the United States, and may have inspired Micheaux in the making of the film. Furthermore, the chapter will provide insights into the plantation economy of the postbellum South, at a time when "public power was overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of the white aristocracy" (Wilson 13), which led the racial tensions between black farmers, white landlords and, particularly white farmers, often escalating into racial violence, and culminating in lynching. The subsequent part will demonstrate Micheaux's representation of racial tension involving Jasper Laundry, the white landlord, and the white farmers. Finally, the concluding part of this chapter will examine the scenes depicting the lynching of Jasper by a frenzied mob composed of white people with different social positions, providing an analysis of the film's portrayal of racial relationships and violence. I argue that the lynching of Jasper Landry symbolizes his role as a scapegoat for the racial frustrations and socioeconomic tensions experienced by white laborers.

1. Racial Tensions Between Black and White Laborers in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century America

Racial tensions between black and white people surged during the period that coincided with the rise of the race films, and incidentally with the production of Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920). As indicated by Cedric Robinson, this period marked a tumultuous time for black people, characterized by almost unprecedented violence (237). *Within Our Gates* was made during the summer of 1919, a period retrospectively labeled as the "Red Summer" due to the bloodshed that resulted from race riots and lynchings of African Americans in Chicago,⁸ the very city where the film was shot a couple of weeks later. Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck explains that what was unusual about the Chicago riot was that black people made a fierce effort to defend themselves, actively fighting back against white violence (27). This defiant attitude inspired fear among white people, which instigated surges of retaliation, encouraging further violence and repression against the black people in other parts of the country. For instance, a black man, whose name is unknown, was on a train traveling through Georgia when he proudly shared with his fellow travelers that he was from Chicago, and asserted the black community ought to emulate the resistance shown by the black people in Chicago. His bold remarks made him a target for an enraged white mob, who dragged him from the train and lynched him, hanging him from a tree near Cochran (Tolnay and Beck 27). Another incident occurred a few weeks later when Eli Cooper, a black man living near Dadwell in Laurens County, was forcibly taken from his home by a group of fifteen to twenty white Georgians. They took him to Petway's Church in neighboring Dodge County, where they shot Cooper, set the church on fire,

⁸ The Chicago riot of 1919 was started by a fight between white and black bathers at a segregated beach after a black boy swam to the other side and was stoned by a group of white boys, which led to his death by drowning. "Rumor swept the beach, 'White people have killed a Negro.' The resulting fight, which involved the beach police and the white and colored crowd, set off six days of rioting" (Drake and Cayton 200).

and threw his body into the flames (27). According to Tolnay and Beck, “Cooper’s ‘crime’ was talking with his friends and neighbors about rebelling against white racial supremacy” (27). The tragic fates of the unnamed black man and Eli Cooper demonstrate the deadly consequences of challenging the entrenched racial hierarchies of the time and highlight the pervasive and brutal enforcement of white supremacy in the early 20th-century United States.

This period of intense racial violence was further exacerbated by the changing economic environment in America that eventually led up to the “Red Summer” of 1919. Prior to this period, there had been a significant increase in racial violence and lynching in both northern and southern cities. Robinson attributes this escalation to the conflicting agendas between various factions of capital and the state, which were further intensified by the onset of World War I (237). According to Robinson, American involvement in the war was primarily motivated by the imperative of the American institutions of finance capital to protect loans extended to the Allies and substantial investments in war production. The heightened demand for American-made war materials consequently led to an increased need for labor force, prompting new waves of migration from the South to industrial cities dedicated to producing and shipping supplies for war zones (237). The ensuing competition between black and white laborers, both subjected to deplorable work conditions, created an environment conducive to racial violence.⁹ As Robinson contends:

The inevitable partial relaxation of segregated labor incited race conflict. For one, striking and unionized white workers habituated to the protection of Jim Crow were

⁹ Lynchings and race riots became more frequent with the return of the black soldiers from the war in 1918 and 1919, who were constantly subjected to investigation by military intelligence on the ground of their potential involvement in “secret organizations,” aiming to generate “Black activism for civil rights or fair treatment” (Robinson 239). According to Robinson, “[i]n 1918, fifty-eight of the sixty-two lynching victims were Black; in 1919, seventy-seven of the eighty-three were Black (at least ten of whom were in uniform). And in the riots in Washington, D.C., and Chicago in June and July of 1919, when Blacks organized defensive positions against white marauders, *The New York Times* disinterred rumors of the ‘secret organization’” (240)

suddenly exposed to a lowered racial barrier. Employers, responding to the lure of windfall profits, had introduced work speed-ups. Consequently, white workers were frequently faced with Black strikebreakers. Not surprisingly, in 1917 and 1918, race riots and lynchings occurred with some regularity. (237)¹⁰

Claire Drake and Horace Cayton also provide further commentary on the repercussions of the war on racial tensions within the labor sector. They note that:

Here and there throughout America, the tensions of postwar readjustment flared into open violence. On the labor front and along the color-line, deep-laid frustrations, uneasy fears, and latent suspicions bobbed to the surface. Group antagonisms suppressed and sublimated by the war effort now returned with a doubled fury. For labor, there were the “Palmer raids”; for the Negro, lynchings and riots. The South, particularly, was nervous. Returning Negro soldiers, their horizons widened through travel, constituted a threat to the caste system. They must be kept in their place. A wave of interracial conflicts swept the country involving communities in the North as well as in the South. (199)

This volatile situation was further fueled by the existing racial prejudices and the institutional support for white supremacy. Consequently, the intersection of economic pressures, migration, and entrenched racial prejudices created a perilous environment for black people, who faced brutal repression for any act of defiance against the established order.

Furthermore, the period following the Civil War and the Reconstruction era also witnessed an escalation of racial tension between white and black southerners, which culminated in a surge in racial violence, notably lynching, which occurred with alarming

¹⁰ Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henry contend that “in summer of 1917, a rash of racial clashes spread through major cities, North and South; Chicago, New York, Newark, Danville (Va.), Lexington (Ky.), Waco (Tex.), and Chester (Pa.). But the worst of all took place in Illinois, in the tough industrial town of East St. Louis” (23).

frequency. This upswing in hostilities coincided with “[t]he conclusion of the federal military occupation of former Confederate states . . . and the restoration of control over southern state governments to the hands of white southerners” (Smangs 1). However, the restoration of the political authority of white southerners during the post-Reconstruction period also served to heighten a sense of ambiguity regarding the symbolic and social boundaries that were once precisely defined and clearly articulated during the era of slavery and would solidify during the subsequent period of Jim Crow segregation (44). The defeat of the Confederacy, the abolition of slavery, and the economic, political, and social initiatives undertaken during the Reconstruction period to consolidate race relations collectively “destroyed the institutionalized antebellum system of symbolic and social race boundaries, categories, and identities” (Smangs 9). Without these clear boundaries, “stably institutionalizing white superiority and black inferiority, as (white) freedom and (black) bondage had done during slavery, conservative white supremacy could not meaningfully or consequentially elevate the lot of whites over blacks” (44). With the privileges of freedom and citizenship no longer being exclusively reserved for white people, a complex scenery emerged, in which the meaning and benefit of whiteness as a social identity were not clearly defined (Smangs 44). Consequently, the economic, political, and social privileges associated with whiteness remained elusive, causing “racial stress” among many white people, especially the poor white farmers (44).

This stress was intensified by the fact that many black men succeeded in taking advantage of these significant and unprecedented changes. Black men like Sterling Thompson, born in 1849 in Georgia, managed to thrive in this changing environment (Bailey 119). According to Amy Bailey, Thompson “learned to read and write, set up farming, married, and had at least one child, a son named Clifford, who was born when Sterling was in his late twenties” (120). In addition to his economic prosperity, he became a prominent politician, a status that would have brought him significant attention from the local white community (120).

According to Bailey, Thompson “had a relationship with power brokers in the white community starkly different from that enjoyed by most blacks, and even by many disadvantaged whites” (120). This relationship, however, did not shield him from racial animosity. In December of 1900, Thompson began receiving threatening letters from a group of whitecaps¹¹, who insisted that he leave the county (120). Despite the clear danger, Thompson refused to comply with their demands. Later, a group of masked white men went to Thompson’s house one night, and after calling him out, they opened fire, killing Thompson and wounding his son (120). This brutal act of violence was not an isolated incident but rather a symptom of the broader racial tensions and the extreme measures some white men were willing to take so as to maintain their perceived racial superiority and economic control.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a substantial agricultural reorganization happened in the Cotton South, resulting in “the downward slide of many whites into tenancy and sharecropping” (Tolnay and Beck 153). This transformation compelled many white farmers to enter into a direct competition with black farmers for the first time (122). Tolnay and Beck note that “[t]his was an undesirable situation for marginal whites [even] during the best of times; it was virtually intolerable when the cotton economy was slack” (122). Charles Flynn contends that friction between white and black farmers “increased during the late nineteenth century as some blacks achieved a measure of independence and as the number of landless whites increased rapidly” (182). Poor whites grappling with shrinking incomes viewed neighboring blacks not only as competitors for “a shrunken economic pie,” but also as “challengers to the superior social station ‘guaranteed’ by the caste system” (Tolnay and Beck 122). In his famous book on lynching, *Rope and Faggot* (1929), Walter White also confirms this observation, noting with a tinge of irony that “[i]t is not difficult to imagine the inner

¹¹ Whitecapping is a tactic used to coerce black laborers and tenants into abandoning their homes or property. This method was used to drive black people off the land they owned or rented (Holmes 166).

thoughts of the poor white as he sees members of a race he has been taught by tradition, and by practically every force of public opinion with which he comes into contact, to believe inferior making greater progress than his own” (11-12). “Given the historical ideology of white racial superiority,” as Tolnay and Beck indicate, the diminishing social standing of these white farmers contributed to an unstable atmosphere, setting the stage for the emergence of conditions that could lead to potential racial violence (153). White asserts, still with scathing irony, that exerting “[p]hysical violence upon the person of the member of the ‘inferior’ race who has dared prove himself not so inferior is the sole balm for the poor white’s wounded self-esteem” (12). In addition to serving as a means of “healing” self-esteem and releasing racial stress among poor whites, racial violence played a crucial role in instilling fear and terror into the black farmers so that they concede labor opportunities and quit the competition. An illustrative example of this took place in the 1890s in southern Mississippi, where poor white farmers frequently engaged in whitecapping (Tolnay and Beck 24). Among the victims of whitecapping was Eli Hilson, a prosperous black farm owner, who was assassinated by a group of whitecaps a few days before Christmas in 1903 (24). The Memphis Commercial Appeal described the incident as follows:

Eli Hilson a negro living eight miles from Brookhaven, was assassinated yesterday while on the way home from town alone in his buggy. Last winter Hilson who lived on a farm of his own and was prosperous, was warned by the whitecaps to leave, which warning he disregarded. About three or four weeks ago his home was visited in the night by whitecaps and several volleys fired into it. He still disregarded the warning, and remained on his place. Hilson is the second negro murdered by whitecaps in that portion of Lincoln County within the last month, and the other negroes are greatly alarmed over the situation. (2)

As Tolnay and Beck observe, it is ironic that Hilson's determination and prosperity—the very traits celebrated in American, particularly Southern, culture—were the same ones that led to his death (24). In a society that extolled the virtues of hard work, self-reliance, and economic success, Hilson's financial independence should have been admired, but instead, it marked him out as a threat to the established racial order. His success as a black man challenged the prevailing system of white supremacy, setting a dangerous example for other black farmers who might have “see[n] him as a role model and follow[ed] in his footsteps, acquiring land, banking assets, and trying to break away from white domination” (Tolnay and Beck 25). The idea of large numbers of black farmers gaining independence was intolerable to most white Mississippians (25), a sentiment starkly reflected in the words of former Mississippi governor James K. Vardaman: “If it is necessary every Negro in the state will be lynched; it will be done to maintain white supremacy” (qtd. in McMillen 224).

Moreover, racial tensions between white and black farmers were instigated by exploitative strategies employed by white landowners as part of their schemes to amass wealth. According to Amy Baily, during this period large landowners actively sought to expand their holdings and consolidate their wealth, compelling numerous whites into tenant status and, consequently, downward mobility (155). The economic dominance of landowners was contingent on the availability of an abundant, cost-effective, and compliant black rural labor force, thereby pushing smallholding and landless whites to compete with rural blacks for opportunities in farm tenancy and labor roles (Smangs 2-3). The ensuing racial antagonism and violence proved advantageous for white landowners, as their perpetual fear revolved around the potential formation of a coalition between black and white labor—a formidable threat to the social, economic, and political hegemony enjoyed by these landowners and the white elite (Tolnay and Beck 123). Tolnay and Beck further illuminate that “the threat of a coalition between black laborers likely increased when the poor of both races suffered from reduced

cotton prices” (123). It is in this vein that Philip Randolph, a black activist and co-editor of *The Messenger*, urged his readers to prioritize the interests of their social class over their caste, asserting: “[i]f the employers can keep the white and black dogs, on account of race prejudice, fighting over a bone; the yellow capitalist dog will get away with the bone—the bone, to which we refer, is profits” (qtd. in Tolnay and Beck 27). Herbert Shapiro supports this notion, stating that “[w]hen those committed to racial subordination sensed the possibility of blacks and whites coming together for common purposes, their response most often was to reach for the gun and the rope” (219). Additionally, landowners resorted to racial violence to secure control and discipline over the black farmers. This use of violence aimed to suppress any tendency toward resistance or uprising among the black farming community, ensuring compliance with the oppressive and exploitative working conditions imposed upon them.

Therefore, racial violence proved advantageous for both white farmers and landowners, and albeit their motives and objectives were different, they converged on their interest to reap the benefits derived from such practices for their economic advancement (Tolnay and Beck 123). This orchestration of racial violence played a pivotal role in alleviating interclass tensions resulting from the disparate economic interests between white landowners and farmers. As articulated by Smangs:

Economic conditions in the southern cotton economy strongly influenced lynching violence against blacks . . . because they promoted a common interest among different classes of whites in controlling and subduing African Americans . . . economic conditions aligned the interests of different classes of whites in ways bringing them together in an interclass coalition against blacks. (2-3)

Thus, the perceived threat of a common enemy became imperative for maintaining the stability of the white class structure. In navigating this complex dynamic, poor white farmers found themselves “caught in the tug between caste and class interests,” where the former became

increasingly more dominant for poor white and black laborers alike (Tolnay and Beck 27), thus exacerbating the antagonisms between the two groups. Therefore, racism functioned as “the glue that bound society together, and lynching was the public affirmation of that fraternal bond” (Tolnay and Beck 27), illustrating the interplay between race, class, and power relations in this historical context.

Tolnay, Beck, and William Julius Wilson seem to agree that an insightful comprehension of racial relations and class conflicts in the rural South can be achieved through the perspectives offered by orthodox Marxist and split labor market theories. Within the framework of orthodox Marxist theory, which, according to Wilson, “is the most popular variant of the Marxists’ explanations of race” (Wilson 4), the repression of the black minority is delineated as serving primarily the interest of the white elite, comprising of merchants and planters, who benefit from a sizable, subservient, and low-cost force (Tolnay and Beck 58). To curb the mobility of the black minority and stifle their ability to address grievances against white employers, the white elite resorts to a complex network of legal and social arrangements (58-59). This intricate web supports discrimination in employment, housing, and education, actively fostering racial prejudices and ideologies of racial subjugation, such as racism (Wilson 5), and “when necessary to supplement these arrangements, the white elite used violent tactics such as lynching” (Tolnay and Beck 59). According to Wilson, orthodox Marxists argue that, given the capitalist class’s ultimate goal of profit maximization, concerted efforts are made to suppress workers’ demands for increased wages and weaken their bargaining power by fostering divisions, particularly along racial lines. This intentional division results in the isolation of lower-priced black labor (4-5). Consequently, the capitalist class “can counteract ambitious claims of the white labor for higher wages either by threatening to increase the average wage rate of black workers or by replacing segments of the white labor with segments of the black labor force in special situations such as strikes” (4). This strategic approach

weakens labor solidarity between white and black laborers, ultimately ensuring the preservation of the capitalist class's hegemony (Tolnay and Beck 59, Wilson 5). As Wilson puts it: "orthodox Marxists argue that racial antagonism is designed to be a 'mask for privilege' that effectively conceals the efforts of the ruling class to exploit subordinate minority groups and divide the working class" (5).

Edna Bonacich's split labor market theory of racial antagonism presents "a somewhat different picture while maintaining a conflict orientation" (Tolnay and Beck 59). The main distinction between this theory and orthodox Marxism lies in their respective understanding of racial stratification. While orthodox Marxism attributes the development of racial stratification to the motivations and actions of the capitalist class, the split labor market theory directly links racial stratification to the powerful, higher-paid working class (Wilson 7). As Wilson explains, "[t]he central hypothesis of the split labor-market theory is that racial antagonism first develops in a labor market split along racial lines. The term 'antagonism' includes all aspects of inter-group conflict, from beliefs and ideologies (e.g., racism), to overt behavior (e.g., discrimination), to institutions (e.g., segregationist laws)" (6). In Bonacich's view, a split labor market arises when the price of labor for workers from two groups differs for the same work (Bonacich 549). According to Bonacich's theory, as Tolnay and Beck read it, the postwar rural South included three distinct classes: white planters and employers, higher-priced white laborers, and cheaper black laborers (Tolnay and Beck 59). The class of white employers often aimed to maintain a cheap and compliant labor force to effectively compete with other businesses (Bonacich 553). On the other hand, the higher-priced white laborers always worked "to extract the highest wage possible" (Tolnay and Beck 59). They perceived the presence of cheaper black laborers as a threat, "fearing that it will either force them to leave the territory or reduce them to its level" (Bonacich 553). As Bonacich indicates, when the labor market is ethnically split, class antagonism transforms into ethnic antagonism (554). Therefore, "while

much rhetoric of ethnic antagonism concentrates on ethnicity and race, it really in large measure (though probably not entirely) expresses this class conflict” (554).

2. Racial Tension Between the Black Farmer, the White Landlord, and the White Farmers in *Within Our Gates*

In *Within Our Gates*, Micheaux constructs a setting that demonstrates the various racial atrocities suffered by black people both in the North and the South. The film opens with an intertitle that states in an ironic tone: “At the opening of our drama, we find characters in the North, where the prejudices and hatreds of the South do not exist—though this does not prevent the occasional lynching of a Negro.” However, as the film’s narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that prejudice and hatred are a hindrance to racial progress and prosperity for black characters, irrespective of their geographical location. Although the intertitle indicates the possibility of lynching in the North, it is the South where the lynching of Jasper Landry occurs. Preceding Jasper’s story, which is portrayed in a lengthy flashback towards the film’s conclusion, Micheaux sets the stage by depicting the southern environment earlier in the film, in a scene which introduces the plight of poor black farmers. Opening with an intertitle that reads: “Far from all civilization and the in depths of the forests of the South, where ignorance and the lynch law reign supreme, we find the hamlet of Piney Woods and the school for Negroes.” The intertitle’s reference to “ignorance” leaves ambiguity as to whether it pertains to white or black people of the South, especially that the suffering of black farmers appears to stem from the ignorance prevalent among both groups. On the one hand, the racist attitudes of many white individuals are fostered by their ignorance and lack of understanding of how the two races can coexist harmoniously. On the other hand, as portrayed in the film and elaborated upon later in the chapter, the ignorance among black farmers frequently plays a role in perpetuating the cycle of their exploitation and oppression by white planters. As the scene

illustrates, ignorance is systematically imposed on these farmers and their families by depriving their children a proper education. The scene also portrays the efforts of Reverend Jacobs, described as “an apostle of education for the black race,” in his “unequal struggle against the Negroes’ ignorance,” as another intertitle states. He establishes the Piney Woods school to provide education for the black children. However, the school faces imminent closure due to the overwhelming number of eager students and the scant public funding allocated for their education. Additionally, the scene depicts the repercussions of ignorance on the parents of these children, exemplified by a nameless poor black farmer trapped in servitude under white planters within an oppressive plantation economy. This system, revolving around cotton production, enables the planter(s) to seize his mule when he fails to meet rent payments. “The weevils ate up the cotton crop—and bein’ as I couldn’t pay rent, they took ma mule,” the farmer tells Reverend Jacobs. This intertitle not only references a genuine issue affecting cotton crops in the South during the 1910s, but also demonstrates the power dynamics inherent in the relationship between black tenant farmers and white planters and landowners in the southern economic system, as envisioned by Micheaux. In pursuit of a better future for his children, the farmer brings his children to Jacobs’s school to learn despite his lack of money to afford the tuition fees, recognizing the pivotal role of education in breaking the shackles of poverty and oppression. He deeply understands that without education, his children can “never ‘mount to nothin!”

Similarly, Jasper Landry, another black farmer, toils diligently under dire conditions to provide for his children’s education. He is introduced as a “workman,” a representative of “the thousands of poor Negro laborers in the Great Delta.” Alongside another white farmer, Jasper works for the white landowner Philip Gridlestone. The ignorance of both Jasper and the white farmer make them vulnerable to exploitation by Gridlestone, who embezzles their earnings. When confronted, Gridlestone responds with disdain and cruelty. Jasper falls victim not only

to Gridlestone's exploitation but also to the white farmer who murders Gridlestone and lets Jasper take the blame for his crime, ultimately resulting in Jasper's lynching by a frenzied mob. The relationship between Jasper, Gridlestone, and the white farmer, is intricately woven around the framework of tenant farming. Gridlestone is portrayed as a "landowner, aristocrat, and master of the neighboring lands." His position places him in the class that controls the labor market, wielding social, economic, and political dominance. This hierarchical power dynamic becomes apparent when Gridlestone menacingly asserts: "the white man makes the law in this country." Gridlestone is further characterized as an exploitative landowner, who manipulates financial accounts to enhance his profit margins. His methods involve coercion and cruelty to ensure compliance with oppressive working conditions. For this reason, he is described as "a modern Nero, feared by the Negroes, envied and hated by the whites."

The film shows Gridlestone's reaction when Jasper, empowered by his educated foster daughter's accounting skills, decides to confront him. He resorts to violence in an attempt to instill fear and maintain control, showcasing a cruel and racist attitude against Jasper. Gridlestone verbally abuses Jasper, physically assaults him, and brandishes a gun. Despite Jasper's status as a free laborer, Gridlestone treats him as if he were a slave, assuming a masterly role instead of that of an employer. This analogy is explicitly drawn by Gridlestone as he tells Jasper: "I have always treated the coloreds well—but I remember that my father, who owned a thousand slaves, had callouses on his hands, and he showed me that was the only way to keep 'em in line." Gridlestone's invocation of his father's ownership of slaves and his rash treatment of them reflects a commitment to the socioeconomic and symbolic boundaries that once firmly institutionalized white superiority and black inferiority during slavery (Smangs 44). Gridlestone's actions seem resistant to the transformative impact of such historical events as the defeat of the Confederacy, abolition, and subsequent measures aimed at improving the position of black people and fostering equitable race relations (Smangs 9). His treatment of

Jasper mirrors the mindset of many white southerners who struggled “to grasp the implications of emancipation of slaves for white-black relations” (Smangs 38). Colonel Samuel Thomas, in a report to Congress in late 1865, provides insight into this mindset by describing the prevailing sentiment towards black people in the post-war South:

Wherever I go—the street, the shop, the house, or the steamboat—I hear the people talk in such a way as to indicate that they are yet unable to conceive of the Negro as possessing any rights at all . . . They may admit that the individual relations of master and slaves have been destroyed by the war and the President’s emancipation proclamation, [but] they still have an ingrained feeling that the blacks at large belong to the whites at large, and whenever opportunity serves they treat the colored people just as their profit, caprice or passion may dictate. (qtd. in Feimster 42)

These southerners were persistent in their belief that black people were inherently inferior and destined to be subservient to them. Their mindset epitomized a stubborn adherence to the old racial hierarchy, demonstrating a reluctance to recognize the newly acquired status of black people as free and equal, and exemplifying the enduring challenges in reshaping societal attitudes following emancipation. Similarly, in *Within Our Gates*, Micheaux’s portrayal of the laborer/employer relationship between Jasper and Gridlestone reveals a palpable sense of confusion on Gridlestone’s part concerning the changing status of black individuals, like Jasper, and his outright refusal to accept this new reality. Moreover, the laborer/employer dynamic, as presented by Micheaux, demonstrates that this relationship transcends mere socioeconomic statuses as “upper-class” and “working-class.” It is deeply entangled with the racial identities

of Gridlestone and Jasper, marked by a historical backdrop of racial prejudice, violence, and animosity, all of which significantly influence their economic interactions.¹²

While the film offers limited insights into the background of the white farmer, contextual clues, such as his humble clothes resembling Jasper's, and the antagonistic relationship he shares with Gridlestone, suggest that they belong to the same class. Similar to Jasper, this white farmer is also portrayed as subject to oppression by Gridlestone, of which the viewer is made aware in a pivotal scene where Gridlestone assaults Jasper. While their fight is underway, the camera cuts to an external angle to show the altercation through a window, which turns out to be the white farmer's perspective as he is pointing his rifle at Gridlestone in order to shoot him. At that point, an intertitle explicates the white farmer's plight: "Yes, Gridlestone had cheated him, also, and when he had called him to terms, had laughed in his face, calling him 'poor white trash—and no better than a Negro,' whereupon he had sworn [to kill him]." This scene aptly demonstrates the absence of a potential class coalition between the white farmer and Jasper against their common oppressor to ameliorate their labor conditions. The reason is that, as can be understood from the intertitle, the white farmer deems Jasper's racial identity as "a Negro" to be inferior, perceiving any comparison with him as an insult, likely

¹² In contrast with Micheaux's depiction of Jasper, it is worth examining the portrayal of Uncle Tom (often criticized since as a simplistic white stereotype of a black man) in Harry Pollard's 1927 cinematic adaptation of Harrier Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Both characters are depicted as kind and devoted to their families, embodying a stoic resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity. However, the way their heroism is expressed differs significantly. In Pollard's film (following Stowe's narrative), Uncle Tom's heroism is deeply rooted in Christian virtue and moral fortitude. He is portrayed as a Christ-like figure who, despite enduring unimaginable suffering, remains steadfast in his faith and commitment to the greater good of his people. By contrast, Micheaux's portrayal of Jasper in *Within Our Gates* offers a more grounded and pragmatic vision of black heroism. Jasper is not a martyr but a man of action, willing to directly confront the injustices he faces. Unlike Tom, who accepts his suffering as part of a divine plan, Jasper believes in fighting for tangible rewards in this life. His defiance of racism is not passive but active, rooted in a desire to secure a better future for his family and community. Jasper's goals—educating his children, owning land, and providing a stable home—are aspirations that reflect the practical concerns of many black laborers at the time. Both figures embody different forms of resistance to racism, but Jasper's more active and pragmatic approach speaks to Micheaux's vision of black empowerment and social change. This vision challenges the sentimental and often one-dimensional portrayals of black characters prevalent in earlier narratives like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and offers a more nuanced and realistic representation of black resilience and agency.

inciting agitation and potentially contributing to his decision to kill Gridlestone. Additionally, it is also plausible that the farmer's act is further motivated by his sense of betrayal upon discovering that he was cheated and his money was stolen. The fact that the white farmer is in a position where he could be compared to a black man, based on his poor economic situation, suggests that the white farmer is experiencing anxieties surrounding his racial superiority and masculine power, evident in his retaliatory violence against Gridlestone. This situation harkens back to the post-Reconstruction era, when impoverished, landless white farmers viewed their black counterparts as economic competitors as well as threats to their presumed superior status within the racial caste system. Since manhood and white supremacy were intertwined (as discussed in the first chapter), these farmers felt they were losing their masculine power, particularly as citizenship was no longer exclusive to white men. Their economic problems only intensify this sense of powerlessness, further undermining their ability to fulfill the traditional masculine role of the breadwinner. Furthermore, in the case of the white farmer, these anxieties over his racial and gender identities can also be heightened by the implausibility of establishing a caste solidarity with Gridlestone, as the latter privileges his economic interests over solidarity. Consequently, the white farmer finds himself unable to forge coalitions at either caste or class level. The antagonism defining the relationship between the white farmer and Gridlestone extends beyond social and class distinctions; it is fueled by the racial and gender insecurities evidently troubling the white farmer. Gridlestone astutely leverages these vulnerabilities, strategically employing them to deflect the farmer's potential revolt against exploitation. Nevertheless, this manipulation becomes a double-edged sword, as it ultimately paves the way for his own demise at the hands of the agitated farmer.

The white farmer's palpable anxieties reveal a failure on his part to comprehend Jasper's new role as a free black man and his *equal* as a laborer. His apparent fear of being compared to or deemed inferior to a black man, constituting the ultimate insult, underscores that, akin to

Gridlestone, the white farmer is still viewing Jasper, and black people in general, within the boundaries demarcated during the slavery. This could be understood in light of Walter White's elucidation of the antipathy of southern poor whites towards any progress made by black people. He also provides an explanation of these poor southerners' constant perception of black people as inferiors. White contends that "[t]here are . . . many whites who bitterly resent [the black man's] emergence as an individual or as a group from the lowest economic, educational, and cultural position" (11). He further observes, quoting H. L. Mencken, that "Ku Kluxry is the Southern poor white's answer to the progress of the emerging Negro, once his equal and now threatening to become his superior" (qtd. in White 11). White ascribes the poor southerner's deep fear of the black man's progress and his status as an equal to the systematically ingrained beliefs, shaped by tradition and reinforced by nearly every facet of prevailing public opinion, which emphasize the presumed inferiority of the black man (12). Therefore, upon witnessing his advancements, whether constitutional, such as freedom and citizenship, or economic, like possessing "a comfortable home, an automobile, a bank account, a radio of the latest model, and a well-dressed wife and children" (White 12), the poor southerner grapples with emotional turmoil and a complex array of feelings. The burgeoning resentment within such individuals, witnessing a perceived challenge to social hierarchy, historically drove many white people to lynching mobs (12). This intricate interplay of societal teachings, deeply rooted prejudices, and the unsettling experience of perceived displacement contributed to a psychological landscape fraught with tension and hostility which often led to the rejection, ridicule, and abuse of the black man.

Furthermore, the white farmer's fear of being compared to a black man could also be interpreted as a reflection of the southern whites' "unwillingness to form new ideas [about the blacks], no matter how much evidence is offered regarding the soundness of the new ideas or the falsity of the old" (White 10). White explains that the general lack of progress in the rural

South makes it more prone to this attitude compared to other parts of the country. He indicates that the typical southerner often boasts about his unique understanding of the black man, claiming that nobody else possesses the same level of knowledge on the subject (10). However, when the word “Negro” is uttered, a complex tapestry of ingrained stereotypes unfolds in the minds of many whites in the South. These stereotypes include, among others, the image of “the happy-go-lucky,” the habitual criminal with unrestrained appetite and governed only by extreme brutality, and the humble, pre-Civil War archetype who instinctively “knows his place” (10). White southerners’ attitude towards these entrenched stereotypes span a spectrum, “ranging all the way from affection or amused superiority to loathing and extreme fear” (10). Such rigid categorizations not only oversimplify the diverse experiences and identities within the black community but also contribute to a pervasive societal dismissal of those who do not neatly align with these preconceived notions. In the eyes of the average southern white, black people who resist fitting snugly into these predetermined categories often evoke resentment or are hastily dismissed as “unusual,” rendering them deemed unworthy of nuanced understanding and classification (10).

Despite the nuanced personality of Jasper that opposes the aforementioned stereotypes, both Gridlestone and the white farmer seem entrenched in retaining the negative historical connotations associated with Jasper’s racial identity. The white farmer’s anxiety about being equated with a black man is not merely a fear of racial comparison; rather, it embodies a deep-seated apprehension of association with historically ingrained connotations used to justify the systematic oppression of black people. Paradoxically, these entrenched connotations, once wielded to degrade and ridicule the black man, are now cynically harnessed by Gridlestone to deride and diminish the white farmer. This subtle but significant shift in power dynamics is made possible by the transformed circumstances where both Jasper and the white farmer find themselves as laborers toiling on Gridlestone’s land. The agency within Jaspers character plays

a pivotal role here, as the power relationship undergoes a significant reversal. This reversal becomes a catalyst not only for the racial tension and frustration experienced by the white farmer but also for the palpable friction between him and Gridlestone, ultimately contributing to the demise of the latter. Hence, the character of the black farmer, as intricately presented by Micheaux, transcends the limitations of the entrenched racist categorizations, leaving the white farmer grappling with the repercussions of a shifted power dynamic that disrupts the established norms which once ensured his superiority. However, Jasper remains portrayed as a victim of discriminations, deeply rooted in racial and class distinctions that disproportionately target him in comparison to the white farmer. This inequity is notably apparent in Gridlestone's differing responses to the endeavors of both Jasper and the white farmer to put an end to exploitation. Gridlestone, in response to the white farmer's confrontation, resorts to mockery and ridicule; however, his reaction takes a markedly more severe turn when dealing with Jasper—employing tactics of terror, physical violence, and even brandishing a firearm. Therefore, while both Jasper and the white farmer share a victimized status, rooted in their socioeconomic class, the nuanced portrayal of the two characters serves to underscore the glaring disparities and the more severe mistreatment faced by Jasper in the face of deeply ingrained racial and class-based prejudices.

In this sense, the fact that both Jasper and the white farmer are hired for tilling Gridlestone's land seem to belie their differentiation in terms of their racial identities. Nonetheless, the working class to which the white farmer belongs is fundamentally distinct from that which Jasper is relegated to, an incongruity underscored by the pervasive influence of white supremacy ideologies embraced by both the white farmer and Gridlestone. This divisive perspective not only withholds recognition from Jasper as an eligible free laborer but also deepens the profundity of racial and class-based prejudices, shaping their respective experiences within this social structure. This sentiment is echoed by DuBois in his exploration of the formation black labor, where he argues that “[i]t became easy to say and easier to prove

that these black men were not men in the sense that white men were, and could never be, in the same sense, free. Their slavery was a matter of both race and social condition, but the condition was limited and determined by race” (*Black Reconstruction* 5). Kevin Gaines further supports this perspective by asserting that the plight of black people persisted even after slavery, as “class identities and relationships throughout the era of segregation were defined and determined by racial caste subordination.” As Gaines notes, this is evident in the fact that racial violence targeted all black people regardless of their socioeconomic status, including black landowners and political leaders (*Rethinking Race* 385).

Similarly, Jasper’s socioeconomic status in Micheaux’s film appears to be circumscribed and influenced by his racial identity, placing him within a paradoxical predicament characterized by the dichotomy between his identity as a black man and his role as a laborer in a society dominated by white-supremacist norms. This dichotomy reflects what DuBois describes as the dilemma of “twoness,” encapsulating the struggle of having “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (*The Souls* 2).¹³ Jasper’s socioeconomic standing is marked by the unreconciled and opposing extremes of “African-American realities and values, on one hand, and white American values, on the other hand” (Green, *Straight* 183). Therefore, as Green puts it, the trajectory of one’s class position inevitably follows the contours of racial identity, with the dominant group perpetuating its position at the top of the class ladder. (183). This incongruity between class position and racial identity aligns with Bonacich’s conceptualization of the split labor market, a phenomenon manifest when the remuneration for labor varies between workers from different groups engaged in the same tasks (Bonacich 549). Applying Bonacich’s framework to the relationship between Jasper and the white farmer elucidates a distinct class divide. The white farmer, by

¹³ Although Du Bois originally applied the concept of “twoness” to the conflict between being black and being American, it is equally relevant in Jasper’s experience in Micheaux’s film.

virtue of his race, is positioned within the class of higher-paid labor, while Jasper finds himself consigned to the class of lower-paid labor. This stark differentiation, as Bonacich indicates, materializes when the labor market is divided along racial lines (553), which prompts the transformation of class antagonisms into ethnic or racial antagonisms (Bonacich 553).

However, Micheaux seems to be challenging the “African-American realities and values” (Green, *Straight* 183) and the limitations of Jasper’s racial identity in a society that is structured around white dominance, by portraying Jasper as morally superior to the white farmer. Jasper’s moral ascendancy stems from virtues such as kindness, diligent pursuit of economic progress, and above all, a profound belief in the significance role of education for a better future. In contrast, the white farmer is portrayed as an illiterate character with limited intellectual and moral sensibilities, while Jasper emerges as an embodiment of moral rectitude, displaying a determination to overcome his educational limitations. This determination is particularly apparent in his commitment to securing an education for his foster daughter and his efforts to gather funds for his son’s schooling. Jasper’s educational pursuits serve to challenge racial stereotypes of black people as “lazy” or intellectually lacking the motivation to aspire to education. Furthermore, Jasper’s illiteracy is presented as a consequence of external social and economic conditions imposed on the black community, rather than an inherent flaw. This is exemplified in the scene which features the poor black farmer whose mule was confiscated by his landowner(s) after a crop failure. Accompanied by his children, the farmer pleads with the headmaster, Reverend Jacobs, expressing his children’s fervent desire for education despite financial constraints. The intertitle reads: “I hears ‘bout your school—‘n’ so we walked from my place, a ways off, ‘cause my children here don’t do nothin’ but say, ‘Papa, without schoolin’, we c’n never ‘mount to nothin! So here I is, suh, ready ta work day ‘n’ night so’s my

children c'n get schoolin' 'n' be useful to society."¹⁴ Like Jasper, this black farmer, despite his illiteracy, demonstrates a deep awareness of the importance of education for his children and the future of the black community. Both men, along with their children, dismantle racial stereotypes, emphasizing that "being black" and "being uneducated" are not synonymous. Through these characters, Micheaux elevates black farmers morally, positioning them as mouthpieces for his message that education is essential for the uplifting of black people.

Micheaux further accentuates the importance of education for the black community by depicting the resentment of the landowner, Gridlestone, upon learning that Jasper's foster daughter, Sylvia, has learned to read and write. This significant scene not only illuminates the positive impact of Sylvia's education on the Landry family but also exposes Gridlestone's exploitation of literacy to financially harm Jasper. The visual narrative proceeds with Jasper and his wife proudly gathered around a dining table, observing Sylvia as she manages her father's financial accounts. Then Sylvia triumphantly announces: "It's wonderful! Together, you and Emil have earned \$625. It will pay off all our debts, with enough left over for me to return to school. But this time I'm taking Emil with me." By contrast, the film switches to Gridlestone at his desk, engaged in the malicious act of tampering with Jasper's financial records. These paralleled scenes starkly contrast the Landry family's joy with the insidious exploitation orchestrated by Gridlestone. The narrative tension intensifies as Ephrem, Gridlestone's black servant, delivers the news of Sylvia's education, warning Gridlestone that his manipulative practices will no longer find success. Ephrem says: "Dat Landry gal been ta school 'n' keeps her pappy's books now—so ya won't git ta cheat him no mo'." Ephrem's revelation is a turning point in the narrative, generating frustration and anxiety in Gridlestone, which becomes palpable as he envisions Jasper's wife saying: "She is as educated as white girls

¹⁴ Butters notes that "[t]he use of dialect is not meant to be derogatory. It is realistic in the context of its portrayal of a poor uneducated sharecropper and his willingness to go to extreme measures to give his children a future. . . This type of scene never appeared in mainstream white productions of the period" (*Black Manhood* 152).

now—so when you go pay the boss you tell him that.” However, the intertitle reveals the actual conversation between Sylvia and her father, emphasizing the practical advice to maintain financial records so that Gridlestone could be compelled to deal with Jasper more fairly.

The visualization of Sylvia being compared to a white girl unveils Gridlestone’s unquestioning identification of education with “whiteness.” Gridlestone’s concerns seem to extend beyond economic interests, manifesting a deeper unease rooted in racial tension. This racial tension goes beyond the fear of being equated with black people, and stems from a fear of the prospect of emancipated and educated black individuals gaining power and challenging white dominance. This anxiety is reflected in Gridlestone’s warning to Jasper when he visits him in his office to pay his debts, holding a paper containing his financial records written by Sylvia: “You’re gettin’ mighty smart, eh? But I’m in to you. And remember that the white man makes the law in this country.” Gridlestone’s aggressive response to the possibility of Jasper’s “education” (even though via the mediation of Sylvia) parallels the anxieties expressed by white southerners in their personal reminiscences, many of which were published in newspapers. According to Bruce Baker,

White accounts generally began by describing a profound loss of control: Federal occupation or the elections following the 1867 passage of the Reconstruction Acts. “After the war the bottom rail was put on top; the negroes were given the right of suffrage, which had been taken from the whites,” recalled Gasper Loren Toole of Aiken County, “and this put the control of the government in the hands of the negroes.” The father of novelist Julia Peterkin combined both Federal occupation and black voting in his description of the beginning of Reconstruction: “In each town a company of Federal troops was quartered to remind the citizens of Yankee power- how ignorant Negroes were lifted to places of honor, to offices of state, judges, legislators.” In both cases, the chronology of events suggests that whites thought of Reconstruction

primarily as a period when they lost control of the society in which they lived. (73-74).

In a similar vein, as previously mentioned, Walter White asserts that the rise of the Ku Klux Klan was a reactionary response by poor southerners to any potential progress achieved by black people (11).

Similar anxieties are echoed by D. W. Griffith's cinematic portrayal in *The Birth of a Nation* with its "white supremacist and pro-lynching imagery" (Wood 3), offering white audiences the visual means to assuage their fears. Griffith's portrayal includes scenes of black laborers, induced by carpetbaggers, abandoning their work and dancing in the street instead, implying a lack of responsibility on their part (Butters 73). As Butters indicates, "Griffith implies that the Freedmen's Bureau caused a complete breakdown in the labor system. Black men are not responsible; they must be induced to work" (73). In addition, black men are shown physically insulting white people, manipulating votes, and engaging in perceived immoral activities. These visuals aim not only to incite outrage among white spectators but also to reinforce the dire consequences associated with the empowerment of black people, echoing a self-justifying narrative that is deeply ingrained in racial dominance and control. Moreover, these scenes in Griffith's portrayal also serve to rationalize the violent actions taken by the Klan members, who use force to reclaim power and defend the putative social ideals of the South.

Similarly, in Micheaux's film, *Gridlestone*, driven by his profound fears and concerns, resorts to violence to threaten and punish Jasper for daring to transgress social boundaries and challenge his established dominance. For Gridlestone, murdering Jasper becomes a necessity to quell his anxieties and maintain the status quo. Due to a dramatic turn of events, Gridlestone, on the brink of murdering Jasper, meets his own demise at the hands of the white farmer, similarly driven by fears and concerns triggered by Gridlestone's degrading comparison of him to a black man. This twist of fate could be seen as a commentary on the cyclical nature of

violence rooted in racial tension, showcasing the paradoxical outcome where the very fears that propel white people to extreme measures ultimately lead to their own downfall. This irony is carried further when the white farmer is mistakenly murdered by two other white farmers while on search for Jasper and his family with the intent of carrying out a lynching. This incident powerfully illustrates the interconnectedness of nature, fear, violence, and the unintended consequences that unfold within the narrative.

3. A Black Scapegoat for the White Racial and Socioeconomic Anxieties

Gridlestone's violent treatment of Jasper and his willingness to kill him when Jasper went to pay his debts, the white farmer's choice to allow Jasper to be lynched for the murder of Gridlestone, and the eagerness of white villagers to pursue and lynch Jasper upon hearing the false news of him murdering Gridlestone, despite many of them being oppressed by Gridlestone, collectively demonstrate that the death of Jasper is a shared objective for all these white characters. In the case of the white farmer and villagers, their motivation seems to surpass a mere attempt to conceal or seek retribution for Gridlestone's murder. Jasper appears as a scapegoat for the ingrained racial frustrations and socioeconomic tensions harbored by the poor white farmer, and the villagers. Joel Williamson aptly explains the dynamic of scapegoating when he states that "[f]rustration of this sort bred aggression, and aggression needed a scapegoat. Black people in the South were the traditional, the ready-made, ready-to-wear scapegoat" (492).

Furthermore, Jasper serves as a scapegoat for the cycle of violence among the white characters, a cycle that begins with Gridlestone's exploitation and mistreatment of the white farmer. Gridlestone's cruelty and disdain lead the farmer to seek revenge by murdering Gridlestone, thus perpetuating the destructive cycle of violence. This escalating conflict ultimately contributes to the farmer's own demise. Rene Girard elucidates the mechanism of

reciprocal violence as a vicious circle, stating that “once a community enters the circle, it is unable to extricate itself . . . As long as a working capital of accumulated hatred and suspicion exists at the center of the community, it will continue to increase no matter what men do” (81). This eruption of violence among the white characters poses a grave threat to the unity and harmony of the white community, necessitating the sacrificial scapegoating of Jasper. The death of Jasper serves as a purgative act, capable of “purging the community of its ills” and contributing to the “restoration of public tranquility” (94). The scapegoating of Jasper appears as a significant moment in the film narrative, representing “the change from reciprocal violence and destruction to unanimous accord and construction” (86). It is the juncture where the fractured white community transforms, emerging as a unified entity bound together by a shared hatred for Jasper. Girard describes this convergence when he explains that “[a]ll the rancors scattered at random among the divergent individuals, all the differing antagonisms, now converge on an isolated and unique figure” (79). The death of Jasper, therefore, seems to embody a dual redemptive effect: pacifying the individual anxieties of Gridlestone and the white farmer and villagers while simultaneously it functions as a catalyst for absorbing social tensions and preserving the broader social cohesion. Girard explains this process by stating that “each member’s hostility, caused by clashing against others, becomes converted from an individual feeling to a communal force unanimously directed against a single individual” (79). This conversion could not have occurred if Jasper had been murdered privately by Gridlestone or the white farmer; it required the public, ritualistic spectacle of a lynching. Micheaux reinforces this ritualistic element with a vivid portrayal of the lynch mob, which displays the collective eagerness of white people from diverse classes to participate in the lynching and witness Jasper and his family’s hanging.

Micheaux’s representation of lynching as a paradigmatic manifestation of the scapegoating mechanism explores several aspects of this practice, among which is the

demographic composition of the lynch mob. As Williamson explains: “[t]he tendency was for the white community to ascribe the actual lynching to boys and men of the lower class” (188). However, Micheaux portrays the mob as an audacious and well-organized group, suggesting the complicity of all segments of the local white society. Comprised of white men from diverse occupations, including poor farmers, waiters, shop owners, alongside women and children, the lynch mob depicted by Micheaux highlights an interclass coalition emerging among the white villagers. Their collective objective is to mete out punishment to Jasper and his family for a crime they did not commit. This depiction exposes the irrationality and brutality of the lynch mob’s version of “justice,” which is driven less by the specifics of any crime and more by deeply ingrained racial fears and hatred. This twisted logic is vividly illustrated by Williamson’s account of an interview between Harvard historian Albert Bushnell Hart and a young Mississippian in 1908. The young man openly admitted: “You don’t understand how we feel down here, when there is a row, we feel like killing a nigger whether he has done anything or not” (qtd.in Williamson 187). This statement reflects the brutal reality that Micheaux portrays in his film: the mob is concerned not with the guilt or innocence of the accused but with the act of lynching itself. Through this portrayal, Micheaux strips away any pretense of justice or righteousness associated with lynching, revealing it for what it truly was: a socially sanctioned form of racial terror aimed at maintaining control over black bodies and lives. Williamson reinforces this point, noting that the black person targeted by the mob was often seen as an irredeemable sinner who deserved to be lynched, regardless of the severity of the alleged crime, even when it was not as grave as rape. He writes that:

When the crime of the lynched person was acknowledged to be anything other than rape, the argument was offered that this lynching could not be condemned for fear of rendering this ultimate tool of justice unavailable when the awful crime did occur. Not only was the person executed guilty in the opinion of the white public, he was often

also somehow seen as an alien in that society. He was a drifter or an incorrigible criminal; he was feeble-minded, or he was insane. And, always, he got what he deserved; he reaped as he had sown.

This process aligns with Girard's argument that when a community convinces itself that a single individual is responsible for its turmoil and unanimously views this person as the "polluted" enemy—the source of its collective ills—that belief becomes reality (81-82).

Micheaux makes his critique of the vigilantism of the mob even more poignant when the villagers, in a chilling twist, decide to lynch Ephrem, Gridlestone's black servant, as a substitute for the Landrys before they are captured. Ephrem's lynching takes place as a cruelly ironic counterpoint to his own reflection while standing among the mob: "T'ain' no doubt 'bout it—da whi' fo'ks loves me. Here I is 'mong da whi' fo'k, while dem other niggahs hide in da woods." Despite Ephrem being known as "the white man's friend," being the one who incited the mob to search for Jasper, and having committed no act warranting mob violence, he is nonetheless seized and lynched by the frenzied mob. Explaining the "justice" of the lynching mob, Jane Gaines writes that "this 'justice' was . . . indiscriminate since, given the 'brushfire' effect of mob justice, it often didn't matter if the black person accused of the crime could not be found. If the crowd had worked up an appetite for black flesh, any convenient Negro might be executed" (168). In this scene, Micheaux also displays the absurd naivety of Ephrem's faith in the purported friendship of the white villagers, revealing the glaring irrationality inherent in the mob's pursuit of their distorted version of justice.

Being a member of the mob proves to be a means of establishing and securing social position for the white villagers, while the lynching of Jasper also serves as an opportunity to align their racial and economic interests. Amy Louise Wood contends that these interests become particularly evident when labor exploitation by white landowners coexists with economic competition between white and black farmers. A further factor is the fragile social

status of poor white farmers, which results from the intersection of their distressed economic standing and their asserted racial superiority over equally distressed black landless farmers (155). The lynching of Jasper becomes a quintessential manifestation of interclass solidarity in action, where whites, spanning from the poorest farmers to landowners, find common ground against a shared and detested enemy. The lynching of Jasper also functions as “a symbolic manifestation of the unity of white supremacy” (Tolnay and Beck 50), wherein the caste line unites the white villagers, offering the poor farmers a foundation for their alleged superiority over the black farmers. Furthermore, Tolnay and Beck assert that racial solidarity among white people is further solidified by newspaper accounts and editorials about lynching events. They state that “[w]hen newspapers reported that a lynch mob included many prominent and respected members of the white community, they not only legitimated mob violence, but also left the clear message of racial solidarity of all whites united against the common foe” (25). Smangs shares a similar view when he discusses the significance of “media of mass communication” in the events of “collective intergroup violence.” He writes that:

The development of solidary collectivities wherein most members are anonymous to one another is crucially linked to media of mass communication. In Sumiala’s . . . words, “The important thing about these communities is that their cohesion revolves around events, images, symbols, myths and stories constructed and mediated by the media.” In such collectivities, episodic solidarity displays within smaller localized groups . . . are stripped of their local contexts in mass-mediated communication which enables the dissemination and assimilation of the events into a general public discourse of common knowledge generating collective identities and solidarities throughout the wider community. (26).

Therefore, according to Smangs, the mass media not only shares information but also functions a vehicle for shaping and embodying symbolic and social boundaries, connecting “ingroup members” to each other and their communities while separating them from “outgroup members” (27). Micheaux intricately portrays this dynamic when he depicts the complicity of newspapers in the lynching of Jasper. Through a sequence of intertitles beginning with “What the newspapers said,” the viewer learns about a news report titled “The Murderer Landry Eludes Capture.” The report, however, misrepresents the truth, as it conceals the cruelty of Gridlestone and legitimates the brutality of the white villagers. The report recounts:

Efrem, Gridlestone’s faithful servant—and himself the recent victim of accidental death at *unknown hands*—had described the event as follows: Landry, completely drunk, entered the office of Gridlestone, who, with his accustomed kindly manner, turned to greet him. The murderer chased his victim around the room, while the latter, wounded, begged him for mercy, and then fell to the floor dying, while the savage Negro continued his attack without [mercy]. (emphasis added)

The report is an obvious misrepresentation of the actual events, demonstrating the complicity of the press in perpetuating systemic oppression and racism. As Butters succinctly puts it: “Micheaux intricately demonstrates how the press, the system of law and order, and those in economic power all worked together to trap black men” (143).

Moreover, Smangs indicates that solidarity is only displayed among whites of differing social and economic statuses in certain specific constellations, which emerges most tangibly in the act of lynching. He argues that solidarity is “neither automatic nor obvious but only observable in collective action, and unless such action is forthcoming, there will always be uncertainty about its collective unity and resolve” (25). This sense of white solidarity is manifested in the systematic and coherent procedures of lynching, from hunting down,

dragging, and torturing the victim to hanging and burning his/her remains, wherein a high level of commitment and collective unity is shown by the members of the mob. Micheaux adeptly captures this spirit of white solidarity in his meticulous portrayal of the lynching of Jasper and his wife. The depiction unfolds in a sequence of harrowing shots, each unveiling a different facet of the barbaric event. The brutality is further emphasized by the rough, fragmented editing style, characterized by rapid cuts, varied shot types, and shifting camera positions, all of which convey the raw savagery of real-world lynching. Before the execution, a designated committee falsely announces Jasper's capture and confession to a murder that viewers know he did not commit. The mob is depicted in a tableau shot¹⁵, framed in a documentary style, as they gather around a proclamation hung on a tree trunk. This shot, taken from the rear, captures the mob's enthusiastic reaction in the woods—some casually holding sticks, others riding bikes, with a few, mostly children, glancing back at the camera. The realistic performances, combined with the camera's back angle and neutral distance, enhance the authenticity of the scene, placing the viewer in the position of an onlooker within the congregation, evoking the visual language of documentary footage and photographs of actual lynching events that were prevalent during that period. Micheaux portrays the bloodlust of the lynch mob when he shows that even women and children are not spared of their murderous rage. He underscores this point through an earlier medium shot that focuses on a white woman armed with a rifle, searching for Jasper and his family. This shot is crosscut with another that depicts Sylvia, clutching a bag of provisions she risked her life to collect from the house for her family hiding in the woods. The juxtaposition of these two shots is striking—on one side, the image of a white woman driven by hatred and bloodlust, and on the other, Sylvia, motivated by love and the urge to survive. To further

¹⁵ The writer and filmmaker Dina Ciraulo explains that tableau shots are typically “filmed with a static camera at a ‘neutral’ distance from the action (no extreme close-ups and few long shots). Usually, subjects are centered in the frame, and there is a single plane of action, often with a neutral background” (76-77). Ciraulo notes that many shots in *Within Our Gates* adhere to this tableau style (76), particularly those featuring black characters. She argues that “[b]y placing his [black] actors in the center of a static frame, Micheaux asserts the primacy of his characters. From the first shot, he demonstrates that African Americans will be given full, uncompromised depiction” (77).

emphasize the contrast between the two women, Micheaux includes a close-up shot of Sylvia gently petting a puppy she found while leaving the house. This tender moment accentuates Sylvia's innocence and humanity, providing a counterpoint to the white woman's cruelty. The editing style used in these shots provides a sense of continuity, giving the impression that the white woman and Sylvia are engaged in a shot/reverse shot sequence. This technique, Micheaux typically employed in conversations between characters, suggests an unspoken dialogue between the two women, one that reveals the profound moral chasm between them.

The lynching scene begins with an iris shot, opening to a long shot of the mob holding sticks and dragging Jasper, his wife, and their son to the site of the lynching. A medium-wide shot then offers a closer view of the mob as they brutally beat the couple. In the frenzy, a man tears off the wife's clothes. A medium close-up follows, showing Jasper attempting to rescue his wife, only to be knocked to the ground by the mob. The third shot depicts the wife clinging tightly to her young son in a desperate attempt to protect him from the beating. The boy is soon torn away, and nooses are forcibly placed around both his and his mother's neck. Subsequent medium-wide and medium close-up shots show the mob tightening a noose around Jasper's neck, while his son manages to escape on horseback, though his fate remains unknown. In a pan¹⁶ shot, the camera smoothly pivots from right to left, revealing the mob as they joyfully and casually drag Jasper and his wife toward a wooden bar for the lynching. This technique further enhances the realism of the scene, placing the viewer (once again) in the position of a spectator within the congregation, reminiscent of the white crowds that once gathered at real lynching events. However, this lynching is portrayed from a black perspective, intended for black spectators, subverting the traditional gaze of such scenes and reclaiming the narrative. In a poignant moment, Jasper and his wife are shown with nooses around their necks, and in a

¹⁶ Film theorist and historian David Bordwell explains that “[t]he pan (short for ‘panorama’) movement rotates the camera on a vertical axis. The camera as a whole does not displace itself. On screen, the pan gives the impression of a frame horizontally scanning space. It is as if the camera ‘turns its head’ right or left” (181).

close-up, two ropes dangle starkly against the sky. The final shots capture the full savagery of the lynch mob: in a shot/reverse shot sequence, both sides of the wooden bar are revealed, showing the entire crowd—poor and wealthy, men and women—working together to pull the ropes. The coherent and disciplined movements of the mob suggest a chilling familiarity with this barbaric practice, emphasizing their shared complicity and experience in such violence. As Gaines asserts, “[i]t is all the better that these scenes are also shot in such crisp focus, for what they portray is nothing more nor less than white people as primitives. The accusation of ‘savagery’ is turned back onto white southern culture” (168-69).

Micheaux skillfully reveals the brutality and savagery inherent in the lynching mob, a stark departure from Griffith’s deliberate omission of such horrors in his pro-lynching narrative in *The Birth of a Nation*. Griffith’s film implies the killing of the former slave, Gus through a series of shots depicting the Klan chasing, capturing, and holding a “trial” in the woods where Gus is deemed “guilty.” The narrative then moves to Gus’s lifeless body being carried on horseback, accompanied by a note adorned with a skull and crossbones emblem and bearing the letters “KKK,” left on the doorstep of Silas Lynch, the mulatto leader of the southern blacks. Griffith’s strategic omission of the torture and violence inflicted on Gus shields the spectators from the monstrosity and immorality of the Klan, perpetuating an image of the Klansmen as noble heroes. Wood emphasizes this point, stating that “[w]ithout seeing the brutality or bloodshed, the viewer could imagine the Klansmen as righteous avengers of the honor of Flora [the youngest daughter of the Cameron, a white southern family], that virginal ‘flower’ of southern womanhood, and, by extension, the honor of the white South. Indeed, the lynching is presented as an act of efficient and honorable justice, ‘a fair trial in the dim halls of the Invisible Empire,’ as the intertitle reads” (152). Micheaux creates a harsh counterpoint to this idealized image made by Griffith as he exposes the vengeful crowd’s bloodlust, paralleled by the lecherous desire of Gridlestone’s brother, Armand, for Sylvia, Jasper’s adopted daughter. In

alternating scenes, Micheaux intercuts the lynching of Jasper and his wife with another scene in which his adopted daughter is being chased by Armand in an attempt to rape her. Robinson observes that in this scene, Micheaux counteracts

two of Griffith's most powerful depictions of Black rapists (the "Gus chase" of Mae Marsh as Flora Cameron, and Silas Lynch's assault on Elsie Stoneman, the abolitionist senator's daughter, played by Lillian Gish), Micheaux begins the preying on Sylvia by Armand as an exterior, and then moving to an interior has Evelyn Preer [Sylvia] reenact the trapped Elsie's horror by almost exactly duplicating the histrionic gestures of Lillian Gish in *Birth*. (256).

In doing so, Micheaux effectively presents the white mob as not only savage lynchers but also perpetrators of sexual violence.

Griffith extolled the lynch mob as valiant defenders of the South, rescuing it from perceived lawlessness and chaos following the empowerment of black people. *The Birth* projected Griffith's "worst racial fantasies" involving black corruption, political misuse, male dominance, and sexual conquest over white women, promoting racial antagonism and violence against black people (Butters 81). The Klan, depicted as sturdy, hardworking white men, retaliates against the alleged rape and murder of Flora Cameron, "a symbol of white womanhood and white civilization" (79), by Gus. The lynching of Gus is framed as a necessary defense against black sexual savagery, fostering a sense of pride and unity among spectators, while simultaneously fueling racial antagonism and violence against black people, as Wood explains:

Nowhere was audience reaction as strong as in the South. The images that the film projected of black sexual assault against white women and the Klan's vengeance for those assaults imparted immediate and familiar meanings for viewers already well acquainted with and deeply invested in pro-lynching rhetoric and images. Moreover,

spectators' strong emotional and visceral responses to these scenes evinced the same mob spirit, united in a sense of white superiority, that *Birth* itself depicted and celebrated. Watching the film, in turn, legitimated that crowd sensibility. In other words, as with early lynching films, *Birth* transformed audiences into lynching spectators and made their spectatorship of violence respectable, even righteous. (150)

Unlike Griffith's sentimentalization of solidarity and aestheticization of white superiority, Micheaux's film refrains from romanticizing the actions of the lynch mob. He effectively exposes the total barbarism of the lynch mob, debunking the notion that its members are exclusively white men by including white women and children, whom Griffith insisted on presenting as helpless and innocent. The motivations of Micheaux's lynch mob differ significantly; it is not engaged in a racial fight to protect the honor of white womanhood. Instead, it finds its origins in racial chaos sparked by a murder committed by a white farmer against a rapacious white landowner. Micheaux's mob acts not merely in defense of an abstract notion of white civilization from the black man's supposed desire for power but, more pragmatically, in defense of its members' personal economic and racial interests that are primarily threatened by the avarice of white landowners. Micheaux's lynching scene dismantles the idealized image of the mob's unity, questioning the sincerity of its members with one another. This is vividly portrayed in the scene where a white farmer, who killed Gridlestone, is mistakenly murdered by two other white farmers without facing prosecution from the white community. Micheaux exposes the fractures within the mob, highlighting their lack of genuine cohesion and unity.

It is no surprise, then, that *Within Our Gates* faced intense protests and resistance from white officials and censorship boards, who primarily objected to Micheaux's portrayal of racial violence and the white mob from his own perspective—a perspective that aligned with those of many in the black community, including journalists and activists. As Gaines points out,

“Micheaux’s narrative of white brutality . . . parallels the reports of journalist [Ida B.] Wells as well as the facts circulated in the more radical newspapers like the *Defender*. Thus one way of looking at the lynching sequence is as a newsreel—the newsreel that no other film company dared to produce and exhibit” (242). The outrage and controversy surrounding Micheaux’s film recall the protests that followed the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, sparking widespread campaigns by the NAACP and other black organizations. Yet while the NAACP’s protests against *The Birth* were driven by its falsehoods and misrepresentation of race relations, the protests against *Within Our Gates* stemmed from its depiction of “too much truth”—a truth that diverged from the prevailing discourse, which ignored the political realities of southern lynch mob justice (162). The protests against *Within Our Gates* and the efforts by censorship boards to ban the film can be interpreted as more than just a reaction to its content; they were part of a broader attempt to maintain control over the narrative surrounding race relations in America. In response, the black press¹⁷ rallied behind Micheaux’s film. It endorsed its narrative and applauded its boldness in addressing controversial racial issues¹⁸. A review published in the *Chicago Defender* in 1920 praised the film, stating:

Preliminary reading of outrages perpetrated in the south opened the scene of “Within Our Gates” at the Pickford last week, Friday when I dropped in to see the picture released and shown in its entirety. You see chickens out of doors and the good mother of a progressive family all enacted most naturally. Discussions which show that the

¹⁷ The black press has been active since the 1800s. It was established to respond to white racism and advocate for self-determination, principles it has consistently upheld throughout its history (Regester 34). According to Regester, “[t]he [black] press played a dual role in its response, both denouncing the negative screen representations and encouraging African Americans to assert themselves in the industry by becoming actors, actresses, filmmakers, producers, directors, and technicians” (34).

¹⁸ The black press did not maintain its early support for Micheaux’s films throughout his filmmaking career. In his early years, it “heaped praise on Oscar Micheaux’s pictures whenever and wherever they were shown” (Regester 44). However, over time, the black press grew more critical of both Micheaux’s films and race films in general. As I discuss in the third chapter, many black journalists preferred to see black characters portrayed solely in a positive light, a preference that conflicted with Micheaux’s more complex approach to filmmaking. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, Micheaux’s characters transcend simplistic classifications of being merely positive or negative representations of black people.

colored race had never practiced anarchy and there never was a slacker and Theodore Roosevelt's picture seen on the outside of the Literary Digest which opened to readings of great value are seen in the movies by reflection . . . The lynching attempt leads to the boy [Ephrem] who dreams he is lynched. You see him hung up in the vanishing illusion. It is quick, natural and effective. Attempted burning at the stake in another scene only shows fire. There is nothing in the picture but what is *true and truly legitimate*. (qtd. In Sampson 279; emphasis added)

Similarly, a review published in the Omaha, *Nebraska Daily* praised the film for pushing boundaries that other filmmakers would not dare to cross:

This is the picture that required two solid months to get by the censor board and it is the claim of the author and producer that while it is a bit radical it is also the biggest protest against race prejudice, lynching and "concubinage" that was ever written or filmed and that there are more thrills and gripping, holding moments than ever seen in any individual productions. The scenes are laid in the South, where the outrages are most predominant and the author has not minced words in presenting the facts as they really exist. (qtd. In Sampson 279)

Both reviews reflect the black community's appreciation for Micheaux's willingness to address the harsh realities faced by black people—realities that mainstream media had long ignored or misrepresented. The enthusiastic support from the black press further demonstrates how the film resonated as a powerful tool for social change, offering a much-needed counternarrative to the deeply ingrained racial prejudices of the time.

Despite facing systemic racism that shapes his economic, social, and racial interactions with the white characters, the portrayal of Jasper transcends a simplistic narrative of racial victimization. The white characters' response to his non-militant resistance against the status quo manifested in his dedication to hard work, love and support for his family, and commitment

to providing education for his children, unveils the mindset of white southerners. This mindset, exemplified by the actions and beliefs of characters like Gridlestone and the white farmer and villagers, contributes to perpetuating the unsettling race relations in the South. While Jasper is portrayed as physically threatened, insulted, and ultimately lynched at the hands of white characters, yet he is also depicted as morally superior, with his vision for a better future for his children is realized through his foster daughter, Sylvia. She grows up to become “a school a teacher . . . [and] typical of the intelligent Negro of our times,” as Micheaux introduces her in the beginning of the film. In contrast, these white characters are depicted as weak and defeated by their own malicious acts against one another, driven by personal, economic, and racial interests.

Chapter Three:

The Reappropriation of Comic Character Portrayals

in *Within Our Gates*, *Murder in Harlem*, and *The Darktown Revue*

One of the stereotypes often used in the works of white filmmakers is the black man as a comic character. Gerald Butters highlights the fact that black men were frequently portrayed as “humorous objects” in white-produced films, characterized by “dim-wittedness, slow moving, shiftless caricatures which were non-threatening to the mainstream audience” (*Black Manhood* 150). This mode of representation aligns with the stereotypical portrayal of black men as lacking intelligence and being perpetually childlike, “simple, docile, and manageable” (Williamson 15). The degrading impact of these stereotypes intensified with the advent of motion pictures, where white-produced films confined the black man to comic imagery involving stereotypes such as “watermelon eating, chicken stealing, crap shooting, laziness, and subservience to whites” (Sampson 24)¹⁹. These representations were rooted in the hegemonic belief in the “mental inferiority,” moreover, “animalistic, and primitive nature” of the black man, reinforcing the notion that criminal activities, such as food theft, were inherent to their personality. Butters argues that this stereotype was based on the assumption that black men were incapable of satisfying their gastronomic desires or providing for their families without resorting to theft: “built within this broad-based stereotype was the assumption that African American men had no other way of obtaining a pullet other than stealing it” (24). Additionally, these films depicted violence and physical pain inflicted upon black characters (predominantly males) for comic purposes, but also as a means to curb their alleged criminal inclinations. Butters contends that “black male pain meant white audience laughter in the minds of many

¹⁹ Butters elucidates that the watermelon serves as a potent visual symbol of the perceived “appetites” of black men, laden with sexual connotations. This portrayal insinuates that black men are characterized by uncontrollable desires, depicting them as savage and gluttonous, so consumed by their cravings for the pink flesh of the fruit that they regress to a primitive state, forsaking all sense of decorum (21-22).

[white] filmmakers,” which contributed to the normalization of racial violence in a period when “lynching had been ritualized into a form of mass entertainment in the American South” (32).

While Micheaux sought to counteract these damaging images, his films transcend the simplistic urge to create an idealistic image of black male characters. Instead, they endeavor to convey the nuanced complexity of the black experience. bell hooks contends that Micheaux adamantly rejected the notion of black cultural production being a mere reaction to white depictions. She explains that he offered a broader and more authentic exploration of blackness, rather than only portraying it in a positive light (136). Micheaux’s representation of the black man unfolds through a diverse array of black male characters, including the educated, noble entrepreneur (as we will see in chapter four), the stoic laborer victimized by systemic white violence (as discussed in chapter two), and the morally ambiguous “black villain,” who is willing to exploit his community for personal gain (as discussed in this chapter). What this chapter sets out to explore is Micheaux’s portrayal of these villains as comic characters. While these characters may bear a resemblance to traditional stereotypes and caricatures, particularly that of Zip Coon, they deviate significantly from the crude depictions used by white filmmakers for comedic effect. Micheaux’s comic characters often exhibit unfashionable attire, speak in broken, stuttering English, and display cowardly and clownish behavior in the presence of white characters, yet their ambiguous shaping lends a higher degree of complexity to Micheaux’s representations. On the one hand, they might be perceived as conforming to white racial stereotypes, but on the other hand, the depiction of these characters could be interpreted as a deliberate reappropriation and revision of the comic characters’ racist representation in white-produced films. The dual nature of these representations complicates any simplistic categorization, rendering them resistant to facile classification as either overtly positive or negative depictions of black manhood. Therefore, a thorough examination is warranted, one that transcends binary interpretations and fully grasps multifaceted significance of these

representations. Butters argues that in Micheaux's films, "it was not difficult to figure out who symbolized the 'good' or 'bad' examples of black manhood. He attempted to demonstrate the qualities that were needed to be a successful man, but he also explored the motivation behind the negative characteristics of some African-American men" (150). However, the main contention of this chapter is that the argument for the binary nature of Micheaux's representations does not hold when applied to his comic characters. In accordance with this premise, the chapter will first examine the extent to which Micheaux's comic characters resemble traditional racial caricatures, and then goes on to investigate how Micheaux strategically utilized these comic characters as a means to resist the stereotypical portrayal of black manhood by white filmmakers. Through the reappropriation of the black comic character, Micheaux creates a space to address controversial issues related to the black man, both within and outside the black community. I argue that the ambiguity of Micheaux's comic characters stems from the specific ways in which they interact with their peers within the diegetic world of the films and at the non-diegetic level with the audience, while strategically navigating the confines of the white gaze.

1. The Ambiguity of Racial Stereotypes in Micheaux's Films and Its Relation to Black American Humor

The resemblance of Micheaux's comic characters to traditional stereotypes and caricatures has sparked dynamic debates among Micheaux-scholars. Joseph Young contends that the way in which Micheaux represents these characters indicates his desire to assimilate, while resenting the majority of black people to garner white support in order for his films to be financially successful (70). In his book of the telling title *Black Novelist as White Racist*, Young accuses Micheaux of being "a black Negrophobe" (140), whose works reflect "a desire to be white, or a self-hatred of one's blackness and a revulsion from the majority of Blacks" (141). Young

asserts that “Micheaux borrowed and embellished Negrophobia . . . from the phenomenological world of the Plantation School, in which Blacks are ‘docile children’ at best and ‘brute Negroes’ at worst, worthy of extermination by the mob and unquestionably responsible for their status at the bottom of society” (139). Furthermore, Young claims that Micheaux in his works contradicts “the assertion that because of slavery before the Civil War and because of racial bigotry since that war, Blacks fail” (141). According to Young, the perceived failure of black people for Micheaux is attributed to their lack of initiative, laziness, inclination to commit crimes, and the disgrace associated with their race (141). Young goes on to argue that Micheaux “consistently accepts the white world as more civilized, more intelligent, and more progressive; he establishes his categories of Blacks in relation to white norms of progress” (148). While Young acknowledges that Micheaux’s films “encouraged racial unity and celebrated Blacks,” he attributes his occasional “better-than-average” portrayals to the effect of “the black press, the public, and the censorship boards” (70-71). However, Young’s analysis overlooks the fact that Micheaux was consistently targeted by white censorship due to his candid presentation of racial prejudice, lynching, rape, passing, racial violence, miscegenation, and the economic challenges that disenfranchised black children from proper education. The reception of his films in the black press was not unanimously positive, either: he received harsh criticism as well as high praise in newspapers run by African Americans. As Charlene Register explains, much of the criticism directed at Micheaux by black journalists could be ascribed to what bell hooks describes as Micheaux’s refusal to reduce black representation to a simple positive image (44).

In alignment with Young’s critique, Daniel Leab contends that Micheaux’s portrayal of black characters does not differ significantly from those depicted in white cinema; Micheaux’s films, he indicates, are not “designed to uplift or to enlighten,” but rather “to entertain, to appeal to his concept of black popular taste, and to make money” (81). He heavily relies on the negative responses from the black press at the time when evaluating Micheaux’s characters. Leab cites

a columnist from *The New York Age*, who remarked that while Micheaux “might be a pioneer in making films but . . . ‘when he does so by holding . . . the rest of us to . . . ridicule, we can well do without him – and gladly’” (191). Leab appears to align with the columnist’s critique, as he neither questions their motives nor offers an alternative perspective.

Horace Neal and Ronald Green, in their article “Oscar Micheaux and Racial Slur,” argue that Micheaux does employ racial stereotypes and racial ridicule in shaping certain characters (66). Similar to Leab, Neal and Green rely on the negative criticism published by contemporary black columnists and critics in assessing these characters. They state that “[i]t is true that Micheaux always worked to advance his race, but he was criticized throughout his career by the black press, black film critics, the Young Communist League, the National Negro Congress . . . Any attempt to assess Micheaux’s use of negative stereotypes and racial ridicule would have to deal with the strong current of negative responses” (66).

While it is true that some of Micheaux’s films were severely criticized by the black press, this criticism reflects the reviewers’ aspirations, ideals, and concerns regarding how black people should be portrayed in films and how the black filmmaking industry should contribute to the development of the black community, rather than providing an objective and comprehensive evaluation of Micheaux’s characters. Viewing these characters solely from the perspective of such reviewers risks diminishing Micheaux’s vision and results in a reductive analysis. As Charlene Register notes, the negative criticism in black newspapers was largely driven by the reviewers’ desire to see only positive representations on screen (46). This desire can be understood as a reaction to the stereotypical and derogatory portrayals of black people in white-produced films. For instance, Lester Walton, writing for the *New York Age*, voiced this opinion regarding Micheaux’s *The Brute* as follows: “As at no time in the history of motion pictures have white producers sought to represent the Negro in [a] complimentary light; it therefore is the duty of race producers to gladden our hearts and inspire us by presenting

characters typifying the better element of Negroes” (qtd. in Regester 44). However, it is worth noting that these same portrayals, which some reviewers found objectionable, were praised by others, albeit with caution. In his review of Micheaux’s *Birthright* (1924), J. A. Jackson remarked:

Whatever may have been the motive that prompted the writing [of] the book, and however distasteful it may be to proud members of the race, there is no denying the faithfulness with which it brings out the condition in pictures. It is not a nice story in many of its aspects, but if the truth it reveals can be carried to the country at large, it will have served a most useful purpose . . . Its brutal frankness hurts, and some of the titles put a sting into the evening’s entertainment and just because it has been so well done; everyone of us should see it. (qtd. in Regester 45)

Unlike Walton, Jackson did not view Micheaux’s portrayals as negative but instead as a necessary truth, painful though it might be. This perspective aligns closely with Micheaux’s broader approach, which, as Regester points out, sought to uplift the black community by exposing the social ills that kept African Americans politically and economically marginalized (45). While Walton, Jackson, and Micheaux all shared a commitment to the advancement of black people, their approaches differed significantly. Therefore, evaluating Micheaux’s portrayals through a lens that differs from his own—as critics like Leab and Neal and Green seem to do—risks imposing interpretations on these portrayals that diverge from what Micheaux intended at the time. These approaches might compromise the complexity of Micheaux’s work and confine his portrayals to a simplistic binary of positive versus negative, which undermines their deeper meaning and impact.

The article by Neal and Green is a response to Richard Grupenhoff’s article, “The Rediscovery of Oscar Micheaux,” wherein Grupenhoff asserts that Micheaux countered Hollywood’s portrayal of black people as Uncle Toms, Mammies, and Stepin Fetchit with

positive images and honest discussions about the socio-economic challenges they faced (46).

In his article, Grupenhoff states:

Rarely, if ever, did Micheaux depict members of his race in a negative light. That is not to say that his films lacked negative behavior. Micheaux's films were often melodramatic, and as such presented a world of good versus evil, with its obvious heroes and villains. *The Girl From Chicago* (1932), for instance, is a tale of exploitation, greed, and murder. *Swing!* (1936) is a proto-feminist critique of middle-class black male behavior. Still, while there are negative characters in Micheaux's films, there are no negative stereotypes held up to ridicule (46).

Contrary to Grupenhoff, Neal and Green dispute the assertion that Micheaux uses melodrama as a genre for his films. They confirm that Micheaux's films defy easy categorization into a single genre because his "use of genre, including melodrama, is always radically impure" (67). According to them, Micheaux's style of filmmaking is characterized by eclecticism, contradiction, and a disregard for the "accepted system of coherency (such as continuity editing and illusionistic mise-en-scene)" (67). According to Neal and Green, Grupenhoff's attribution of Micheaux's negative depiction of black characters to melodramatic representation glosses over his tacit acceptance of racial stereotypes that are meant to ridicule these characters.

Much like Grupenhoff, bell hooks, in her article "Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness," points out that Oscar Micheaux, through his "counter-hegemonic cultural production," worked to construct a screen image that would disrupt and challenge conventional racist depictions of blackness (133). hooks perceives Micheaux's characters as visual expressions intended to "convey complexity of experience and feeling" (134). She also contends that his characters can be analyzed within the framework of melodrama, arguing that Micheaux's "use of melodrama has been misunderstood by contemporary viewers who see this style as undermining cinematic capacity to convey complexity" (134). Instead, as hooks argues by quoting Laura Mulvey, "the

melodrama's aesthetic strength lies precisely in its displacement of the power of the word . . . While the aesthetics of melodrama evolved for a non-literate audience, the style throws doubt on the adequacy of speech to express the complexities of passion . . . A whole terrain of the "unspeakable" can thus be depicted (qtd. in hooks 134). Hooks further explains that this nuanced comprehension of melodrama enables us to perceive clearly how Micheaux's films "work to transgress boundaries to offer perspectives, different 'takes,' on black experience that can be found/seen in no other cinematic practice during his day" (134).

In his book *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*, Green revises his earlier evaluation of Micheaux's use of racial stereotypes. In the book, Green argues that Micheaux employed images of caricature with the purpose of criticizing them (151). As he contends: "[Micheaux's] frank use of caricature served his purposes of analyzing, revising, interrogating, and eradicating caricature; his use of caricature was balanced by the equally frank indignation, directed at white racist causes of caricature, that Micheaux demonstrated throughout his literary and cinematic career" (67). Green goes on to explain that Micheaux used stereotypes and caricature "not to exploit and thus strengthen them but rather to mount a complex, nuanced, extended critique of racist stereotyping" (67). Furthermore, Green challenges Young's criticism of Micheaux, deeming it ill-considered and one-sided (193-94). He contends that "Micheaux's attitude and art are more complex than Young's assessment has suggested, and a more dialectical position is called for" (193). Green rebuts Young's critique, arguing that his "diagnosis of terminal racial self-hatred does not fit a man who was himself quite black culturally and physically, who saw himself as black, and who did not see himself as inferior to anyone, black or white" (194). Green also states that the behaviors caricatured by Micheaux were indeed prevalent in "a sector of the [black] community he [Micheaux] finds unsavory," (58). Therefore, according to Green, Micheaux's ridicule of such behaviors serves the purpose of forthright criticism intended for the betterment of black people (67). Green quotes

Micheaux's contention that "[i]t is only by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my pictures, in the light and background of their true state, that we can raise our people to greater heights" (qtd. in Green 67). The ridicule of these characters, Green explains, serves as an invitation by Micheaux for his audience "to stand above these caricatures in spite of their enjoyment of them" (152). The audience is invited to identify with the more sophisticated characters who deal with these caricatures "in a way that implies reprobation" (154).

In her dissertation, "No Longer 'On the Outside Looking In': Oscar Micheaux's Role in the Construction of a Black American Film Form," Niamh Doheny disagrees with Green's reading of Micheaux's use of caricatures "as something in need of reprobation" (8). Moreover, Doheny's understanding of Micheaux's "insults" towards the black community differ from that of Neal and Green (128). She holds that "Micheaux was in the business of attracting as many people as possible to his films; he would hardly take the occasion to berate his audience and risk diminished box-office takings for his own personal amusement" (128). Doheny interprets Micheaux's racial caricatures vis-à-vis the cultural practice of "Black minstrelsy" —which denotes the practice of minstrel performances executed by black performers—arguing that he relied on the staging and narrative system of minstrelsy to "address his black audience within a structure that they recognized and enjoyed so that, as with stage minstrelsy, he could edify while still entertaining" (152). She points out that "black urban audiences' reception of minstrel acts, especially when performed by fellow African Americans, was more complex than simply hostile, for a variety of reasons" (152). Doheny goes on to contend that black minstrelsy was popular among black audiences, offering them "a chance to address each other on the issues of the day; it presented a means of reappropriating their past and succeeded in fostering a sense of belonging in the black community" (152). In Doheny's view, Micheaux challenges conventional racial stereotypes and white modes of representation, such as minstrelsy and melodrama, overturning their distortions of African American history and characters (18).

These varying, and often conflicting, scholarly interpretations of Micheaux's use of racial stereotypes and caricatures reflect the complexity inherent in the portrayal of these characters. They also demonstrate a tendency among certain scholars to readily condemn any use of racial stereotypes and caricatures in Micheaux's films. These interpretations appear to overlook the complexity of Micheaux's comic characters, which resist the binary classification, as argued in this chapter. On the other hand, scholars like hooks, Green, and Doheny appear open to looking beyond the negative historical connotations associated with racial stereotypes. They appreciate the complexity and ambiguity with which these comic characters are shaped. Their views generally align with this chapter's argument, though there are points of divergence. For instance, I disagree with Green's claim that the behavior of caricatured characters in Micheaux's films is ridiculed as a form of criticism (*Straight Lick* 67). In the case of the comic characters examined in this chapter, their behavior is not intended as something to be mocked but rather as a strategic response, adopted in certain situations—especially around white characters—to achieve specific goals that would otherwise be unattainable. Rather than ridiculing these characters or their actions, their behavior can be interpreted as a tool to elevate them above the racist white characters surrounding them, granting them a form of agency rarely seen in the portrayal of comic characters in white-produced films. Furthermore, while Doheny's argument that Micheaux used minstrelsy in shaping his comic characters so he “could edify while still entertaining” (152) is plausible, entertainment for Micheaux was much less of an objective than using the minstrelsy tradition in a strategic manner to challenge dominant cinematic conventions. Micheaux was operating within a film industry that had long relied on blackface minstrelsy as the standard for depicting black characters, a practice deeply entrenched in American culture, as explained in the first chapter. Given this context, Micheaux's invocation of minstrel-like characters can be seen as both a necessity and a form of subversion. Additionally, the resistance embedded in Micheaux's characterization of these comic figures

draws on a rich history of black performers in minstrel shows who, while forced to adopt demeaning stereotypes, often injected subtle forms of resistance into their performances. These black entertainers sought to undermine and reclaim the very tropes that had been designed to ridicule and dehumanize them. As will be further explored in this chapter, Micheaux inherited this legacy of subversion. His comic characters, though seemingly shaped by familiar minstrel conventions, do more than simply entertain; they disrupt and challenge the racialized norms of the time by infusing these tropes with layers of complexity and resistance. Thus, his use of minstrel-like characters was less a matter of choice and more that of necessity within the constraints of constructing comic characters in the existing cinematic framework.

This duality in Micheaux's portrayals—characters who simultaneously embody and subvert stereotypes—mirrors a larger cultural dynamic experienced by black individuals in America. It resonates with W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of “double consciousness” and “twoness” that black individuals must navigate: the “ability (or, for Du Bois, an enforced burden) to see oneself and others from multiple perspectives” (Watkins 27)²⁰. This also corresponds with Ralph Ellison's reflection that being a black person in America “imposes the uneasy burden and occasional joy of a complex double vision, a fluid, ambivalent response to men and events which represents, at its finest, a profoundly civilized adjustment to the cost of being human in this world” (520). The adaptation of black people to the institution of slavery, the imposition of Jim Crow laws, and the stringent segregation in public spaces necessitated “the regular construction of alternative *public narratives*, demanding at least two versions of every story (undoubtedly enforcing Du Bois's psychological divisions)” (Creekmur 156; emphasis in the original). As Craig Hansen Werner indicates:

²⁰In a similar context, Corey Creekmur indicate that “this compelling characterization of the African-American's internal division has served as a model for understanding Micheaux, among many ... Since Du Bois's notion [of double-consciousness or ‘two-ness,’] is intended as an explanation of the African-American psyche, the model is certainly appropriate to a consideration of Micheaux” (156).

Experiencing what W. E. B. Du Bois called double consciousness, Afro-Americans, individually and communally, learned quickly to exploit the gap between signifier and signified. Constructing elaborate verbal “masks” in everyday discourse as well as in the spirituals and animal tales, “slaves” ... continually ... subverted the oppositional racist association of white with such privileged terms as “good,” “God,” “mature,” and “civilized,” and black with such excluded terms as “evil,” “devil,” “child-like,” and “savage.” (9)

The dual construction of their selves, consequently, served as a means for black individuals to navigate the gap between, what Mel Watkins refers to as, “appearances and reality” (568) or “the shadow image and blacks’ assigned social position” (569).

The perception of reality from dual perspectives— “the conventional as well as the unexpected or unconventional” (Watkins 26)—constitutes a fundamental aspect in the creation of humor (26). This notion is illustrated by Luigi Pirandello in his exploration of the distinction between the “artist” and the “humorist,” observing that while the former typically concentrates solely on the body, the latter “concerns himself with body and shadow at the same time and sometimes more with the shadow than the body. He notes all the fine turns of that shadow, how it stretches this much or grows that much fatter, as if to make fun of the body, which all this time does not concern itself with the shadow or its size” (qtd. in Holland 25). Watkins explains that that the humorist, in acknowledging his own “shadow,” may be adopting the “‘double-consciousness’ and self-appraisal of ‘amused contempt and pity’ that Du Bois attributes to blacks” (27). In this context, Watkins argues that Du Bois’s depiction of this psychological dilemma faced by black people offers a valuable insight into “the source and special tenor of black American humor” (94).

According to Glenda R. Carpio, black American humor “frequently marks the multifaceted nature of . . . [black and white] relations, both how much they have changed and

how much they have stayed the same over time” (Carpio 5)²¹. By embracing “African-Americans’ role as a shadow presence in America, along with . . . the comic interaction between shadow and body” —black American humor emerges as a nuanced and shadowy comic vision “that satirizes and humanizes America’s main body”²² (Watkins 569)²³. Drawing on Pirandello’s metaphor of body and shadow, this humor “variously stretches and turns, creating grotesque apparitions or comic shades that reflect the perfidy and concealed desires of the mainstream” (569). Black American humor derides and ridicules the mainstream’s attempts to legitimize rigid and absurd claims of decorum and propriety (569). Watkins notes that “[t]he black humorist’s oblique light is not aimed at mainstream America alone; it is also directed at African-Americans and focuses on their follies as well” (569).

According to Mason Brewer, black American humor is “perhaps, the most original, prolific, diverse and entertaining humor produced by any ethnic group” in the United States (xi). Dexter Gordon argues that even though the origins of black American humor are difficult to determine, an unbroken tradition can be traced from the first African slaves brought to America. They preserved elements of their African heritage and culture through their folklore,

²¹Humor was employed by white Americans against ethnic minorities for purposes distinct from those of black American humor. As Joseph Boskin explains, white people used humor to “reassure themselves and blunt the threats implicit in differences” (“Ethnic Humor” 81). This form of humor, referred to as “ethnic humor,” has a long history characterized by resilience and adaptability (81). It was typically directed at supposedly “inferior social groups and functioned as a tool for the well-established members of society—predominantly white, Protestant “haves”—to assert dominance over newly arrived immigrants, black slaves, freedmen, and other marginalized groups (81). Ethnic humor in the United States particularly thrived during periods when the nation faced an influx of impoverished immigrants who were not easily assimilated. According to Boskin, “[o]lder-stock Americans aimed jokes at these newcomers and their unusual customs as a method of promoting cultural conformity” (84).

²² The marginalized status of black Americans, which deeply influences black American humor, is a shared experience that also shapes the humor of other minority groups in America, such as Jews. As Watkins notes, “black humor (like Jewish humor, perhaps the most prominent influence on the American humor tradition) is in many ways shaped by the minority status of its creators. The outsider or ‘shadow’ position of Jews and blacks in mainstream American society has given them a unique perspective on themselves as well as on the dominant or majority culture” (27).

²³ According to Watkins, “no one yet has definitely described humor in general,” and it is tricky to categorically define black American humor. Being doubly masked, often pretending naivety and veiling its satire beneath a mask of innocence, black American humor “presents an especially knotty problem” (568).

while they assimilated elements of white American culture, with which they mutually influenced one another (259). Humor served various functions for the slaves, acting as an outlet for the expression of anger and rage (259). As Gordon observes, “[h]umor continues to be a relatively safe way to do violence to the oppressor in return for injustice” (259). Within the oppressive conditions of slavery, humor allowed slaves to challenge their masters subtly, masking their defiance with wit. This form of intellectual subversion often took the guise of the seemingly innocent, childlike, or foolish slave—a persona that enabled slaves to critique their masters while avoiding direct punishment. This strategy is exemplified in the tale of Pompey and his master, which cleverly disguises satire beneath the surface of a seemingly innocent conversation. The interaction begins with the master’s question, seeking validation from Pompey:

“Pompey, how do I look?” the master asked.

“O, massa, mighty. You looks mighty.”

“What do you mean ‘Mighty,’ Pompey?”

“Why, massa, you looks noble.”

“What do you mean by noble?”

“Why, suh, you looks just like a lion.”

“Why, Pompey, where have you ever seen a lion?”

“I saw one down in yonder field the other day, massa.”

“Pompey, you foolish fellow, that was a jackass.”

“Was it, massa? Well, suh, you looks just like him.” (qtd. in Watkin 66)

The brilliance of this exchange lies in its layered meaning: on the surface, it appears as a simple mistake made by a “naïve” slave, but beneath this veneer is a sharp and incisive critique of the master’s self-importance. As Watkins notes, this tale is a masterful example of cutting satire, yet many slaveholders, blinded by their own prejudices, would interpret such stories as evidence

of black naiveté rather than recognizing the sophisticated wit at play (66). Moreover, slaves often used humor to “transform a negative situation or stereotype into a positive one by exposing its essentially ludicrous nature” (39). The tale “Swapping Dreams” is an example of this subversive use of humor, illustrating how the house servant Ike employs wit to subtly assert a sense of superiority over his master, Jim Turner (39):

One morning, when Ike entered the master’s room to clean it, he found the master just preparing to get out of bed. “Ike,” he said, “I certainly did have a strange dream last night.”

“Sez yuh did, Massa, sez yuh did?” answered Ike. “Lemme hyeah it.”

“All right,” replied the master. “It was like this: I dreamed I went to Nigger Heaven last night, and saw there a lot of garbage, some old torn-down houses, a few old broken-down, rotten fences, the muddiest, sloppiest streets I ever saw, and a big bunch of ragged, dirty Negroes walking around.”

“Umph, umph, Massa,” said Ike. “Yuh sho’ musta et de same l’ing Ah did las night, ’cause Ah dreamed Ah went up ter de white man’s paradise, an de streets wuz all ob gol’ an’ silvah, and dey wuz lots o’ milk an’ honey dere an’ putty pearly gates, but dey wuzn’t uh soul in de whole place.”

By turning the master’s dream against him, Ike gains a momentary sense of superiority over his master. His response, while carefully wrapped in the language of deference, is a bold assertion of his own perspective, one that challenges the master’s authority and the legitimacy of the racial hierarchies that sustain it. This approach allowed Ike to maintain a degree of safety in a perilous environment while still finding ways to preserve his dignity and humanity. Here, humor serves as a quiet rebellion—a way to resist the dehumanizing forces of slavery and assert one’s presence and worth in a society

Furthermore, as black people migrated to the Northern cities in the 1920s, they “used humor to celebrate their folk culture [and] by the 1930s, this celebration became a protest against racism” (258). Black writers such as Wallace Thurman, Nella Larsen, Langston Hughes “exploited the multiple facets of humor in an effort to recover a distinctly Black folk past with its acknowledgment of basic human instincts” (258). The deployment of satire, irony, and the comic imagination in their work often exhibited acidity, burlesque, and a venomous quality, reaching levels of being fiendish and scurrilous (258). Humor, for black people, serves as a means of adjusting to and surviving “the absurdity of America’s racial arrangements” (Watkins 567). As Ellison put it:

So that double knowledge of knowing the reality of a society that had the power to treat you as though you were actually inferior, but knowing within yourself that you were not, you were thrown into a position in which you were either going to develop a sense of humor or you were going to die of frustration, of a sense of the irrational. (“American Humor”).

Humor played a pivotal role in enabling black people to keenly observe and scrutinize their white counterparts, revealing the contradictions that undermine the presumption of white superiority (Watkins 568). As a result, black American humor emanates from these insightful observations and examinations, embodying a shared ironic vision among a group that, in its pursuit of establishing a place as Americans, has skeptically regarded the gap between appearances and reality, consistently uncovering elements of contradiction and absurdity (568).

2. Micheaux’s Comic Characters in the Context of Black American Humor

In Micheaux’s films, humor unfolds through two types of comic male characters: those seamlessly integrated into the daily life of the portrayed black society, and those featured in

comic situations that resemble minstrel-like shows held in cabarets and clubs²⁴. In both cases, humor seems to be grounded in incongruity, which is identified as the central element in nearly all kinds of humor (Watkins 128). Tyrus Miller elucidates the connection between humor and incongruity, noting that “laughter only breaks out at points where the force of incongruity exceeds the containing energies of the image, at sites where figures rupture and forms fail” (57). The incongruity in Micheaux’s films materializes in the disparity or contrast between the expected behavior of these characters and their actual actions. An illustration of this can be found in Micheaux’s depiction of black ministers, notably in *Within Our Gates* (1920). The character Old Ned, despite introduced as a man of God, takes on a demeanor more reminiscent of a coon caricature. His clownish and entertaining persona is vividly portrayed in a spirited sermon that bears a striking resemblance to a vaudeville skit featuring a caricature of a “hard-shell” preacher, performed by Amon Davis in blackface in Micheaux’s film *The Darktown Revue* (1932). Old Ned passionately shouts, waves his hands, and energetically jumps from one side of the podium to the other, stirring the frenetic response of his audience—the black congregation at the church, whose reaction are consistently captured by the camera. In his sermon, he preaches: “Behold, I foresee that black people will be the first and the last! While the white folk, with all their schooling, all their wealth, all their sins, will most all fall into the everlasting inferno! While our race, lacking these vices and whose souls are more pure, most all will ascend to Heaven! Hallelujah!”

In contrast to the role of the charismatic preacher, Old Ned’s buffoonery and submissiveness are accentuated when he “pays a call on his white friends” on a Monday to

²⁴ Green makes a similar remark when he argues that Micheaux’s inclusion of caricatures in his films is for the purpose of criticizing them. He observes: “There are more- and less-pure examples of Micheaux’s use of this tactic. At the pure end of the spectrum are explicit caricatures, minstrel figures directly from the world of performance and entertainment [...] At the less-pure end of the spectrum are characters who are fully embedded in the plot—not in production numbers or skits—who nevertheless have characteristics comparable to minstrel caricatures” (*Straight Lick* 151).

report on the preceding Sunday's sermon. The scene opens with an iris shot transitioning to a medium-wide shot, revealing two white men seated casually at opposite ends of the frame, their positioning resembling that of an audience awaiting an anticipated show. The symmetry of their placement suggests their unified gaze and authority over the impending performance. As the camera captures this expectant mood, Old Ned enters the frame, moving towards the center, where he becomes the focal point of the scene. The visual composition reinforces his role as an entertainer, existing mainly for their enjoyment. Old Ned appears as an object of amusement and entertainment for the white men, who derive pleasure from watching his sycophantic behavior, including bowing, grinning broadly, and demeaning himself. This culminates in a medium close-up shot that captures one of the white men kicking him in the backside, eliciting laughter as Old Ned exits the room—a gesture that evokes the dehumanizing caricatures found in minstrel shows (Bowser and Spencer 95).

The white men find Old Ned to be amusing even when he states that “the vices and sins of the white folk will end them up in Hell” and that “more negroes than whites will rise up to Heaven” in the mock-sermon he performs in front of the them, to which they respond with clapping and laughing. The white men's reaction can be partially ascribed to the fact that Old Ned's religious views align with their interests. As Butters suggests, “they understand that this black religious doctrine (of which Old Ned is a preacher) justifies the current racial and social system” (154). Thus, they do not challenge Old Ned because they are aware that these religious views contribute to a narrative in which black people accept their disadvantaged circumstances while validating the privileged status of white people. Simultaneously, it might also be interpreted as stemming from the white men's ingrained perception of Old Ned as a source of amusement. The black novelist Jessie Redmon Fauset voices a similar sentiment in her article, “Some Notes on Color” (1922):

[T]he sort of attitude instanced by a [white] journalist the other day who thought colored people ought to be willing to permit the term nigger because it carries with it so much picturesqueness defines pretty well, I think, our position in the eyes of the white world. Either we are inartistic or we are picturesque and always the inference is implied that we live objectively with one eye on the attitude of the white world as though it were the audience and we the players whose hope and design is to please.

(76)

Likewise, it appears that the white men in the scene in question perceive Old Ned as a simplistic caricature brought to life, whose antics and demeanor are intended solely for the amusement and gratification of the white gaze. Beyond the entertaining facet, Old Ned's clownish persona also takes on a villainous quality, evident in his collaboration with the white men in manipulating his black congregation for personal gain. Through his sermons, he convinces his audience that "being poor and uneducated are attributes that will lead African Americans into heaven" and that the "present racial system [is] God's ordained plan" (Butter 275).

The representation of Old Ned showcases a stark disparity between his subservient, buffoonish, and villainous demeanor and the viewer's expectations of a dignified and righteous black preacher advocating for the education, socioeconomic uplift, and the resistance against racism and white oppression within the black community. Franklin Frazier emphasizes the significant role that the righteous black preachers played in supporting black education as he writes: "the work of the Negro preacher in establishing schools was especially important since the southern States provided only a pittance of public funds for the education of Negro children" (34). Furthermore, there is a noticeable dissonance between the substance of Old Ned's sermons and the audience's presumed recognition and familiarity with genuine Christian teachings. In this regard, Watkins explains that

unlike most whites, black audiences *knew* that black life was much richer and more diverse than the one-dimensional portrayal of happy-go-lucky simpletons that minstrelsy presented. This is not surprising, since incongruity is the central element in nearly all humor: we laugh because of our awareness of the disparity between a perceived action and what we know is possible for us. A joke focused on a black comic's ravenous consumption of a watermelon or on his assertive misuse of multi-syllabic words loses most of its humorous overtones if the listener is incapable of recognizing that one may eat in a less demonstrative manner or speak properly. (128; emphasis in the original)

The incongruity in Old Ned's representation is further highlighted when juxtaposed with the character of Reverend Wilson Jacobs, described as "the Booker T. Washington-like founder of the rural school for black children" (Green, *With a Crooked Stick* 44) and, in Micheaux's words, "an apostle of education for the black race." Reverend Jacobs could be perceived as epitomizing the preconceived notions of the expected behavior of a black preacher, which form an understanding that certain individuals (among the film viewers), particularly those who are white or harbor racist beliefs, may either lack or consciously ignore. In addition, this understanding might prove challenging for certain black people, particularly those with better education and higher socioeconomic status, who may find it difficult to appreciate Old Ned's minstrel-like character. This sentiment is echoed by Watkins's observation that as

one might reasonably argue that educated blacks' *inability* to laugh at minstrel exaggeration reflected some paranoia and self-doubt among themselves. Normally, the ability to laugh even when the joke is at one's own expense is a sign of assurance and confidence . . . Educated blacks responded to minstrelsy by reacting as much to what they knew whites saw in it as to what was presented on stage. They denounced it

because they understood that mainstream America saw the stage Negro as *the* essential black person. (128; emphasis in the original)

In an era when the clownish and entertaining portrayal of figures like Old Ned epitomized the conventional depiction of black men in the mainstream media and the prevailing perception among many white individuals, the criticism directed at Micheaux's films by certain segments of the black community becomes understandable²⁵. However, Micheaux's utilization of such characters does not necessarily imply the internalization of negative stereotyping²⁶. Rather, Old Ned's character emerges as a comedic exaggeration of traits and mannerisms that Micheaux perceives as characteristic of certain black preachers, rather than a representation intended for the black audience to identify *all* black preachers with it. Old Ned serves as a vehicle for satire, aimed at critiquing and mocking corrupt and collusive preachers. This distinction becomes apparent when contrasted with characters like Reverend Jacobs, whose depiction accentuates the dignity and moral rectitude of the black preacher, which effectively counterpoints Old Ned's treacherous conduct. Cedric Robinson also notes how Micheaux balanced his critical depiction of Old Ned by the character of Reverend Jacobs, who embodies one of the noble pillars of Piney Woods along with his sister (254). Reverend Jacobs epitomizes "the image of good black manhood" (Green, *With a Crooked* 44), portrayed as noble, dignified, honest, diligent, and devoted to the cause of black people. Both Reverend Jacobs and Old Ned serve as instruments to address the racial issue of hindering black education due to systemic racism. While Reverend Jacobs challenges the system by seeking philanthropic funding to sustain his school, Old Ned

²⁵ Anna Siomopoulos argues that Micheaux's films faced criticism not only from white censors but also from "prominent African Americans, who accused Micheaux of airing the black community's dirty laundry" (114). Additionally, she indicates that the portrayal of Old Ned in *Within Our Gates* prompted many black ministers to criticize the film, resulting in some black theater owners refusing to book and screen it (114).

²⁶ Charlene Register observes that among the black newspapers that praised *Within Our Gates* was *the Chicago Defender*, which stated in its initial review of the film: "The author has not minced words in presenting the facts as they really exist ... People interested in the welfare of the Race cannot afford to miss seeing this great production" (44).

seemingly aids the system in maintaining the status quo, as emphasized by Mrs. Stratton, a racist southerner: “Wasting \$5000 on a school is plainly silly [she tells a northern philanthropist], when you could give \$100 to old Ned, the best preacher in the world who will do more to keep Negroes in their place than all your schools put together.” Furthermore, Old Ned’s teachings are also ridiculed and his arguments are debunked through the character of Dr. Vivian, an educated and diligent black man, whose noble qualities position him as another positive exemplar of black manhood. Dr. Vivian is shown as reading *The Literary Digest* magazine, which explicitly states: “The Negro is a human being. His nature is not different from other human nature. Thus, we must recognize his rights as a human being. Such is *the teaching of Christianity*” (Emphasis added). In contrast with Old Ned’s sermon and his treacherous ways, Reverend Jacobs’s overall conduct is represented as congruous with the teachings of Christianity, thereby the clownish performance of Old Ned more overtly assumes the function of a profound criticism rather than self-serving mockery. Such a comparison would also unveil the inherent contradiction and absurdity between the caricatured, minstrel-like portrayal of black men and more nuanced (or even realistic) representations.

An illustration of humor stemming from incongruity can also be found in the portrayal of the black watchman, Lem Hawkins, in *Murder in Harlem* (1935)²⁷, whose physical appearance and demeanor are reminiscent of a coon caricature. Hawkins’s initial introduction as a clownish and buffoonish figure occurs in a courtroom scene where he receives instructions to refrain from drinking and maintain silence from Anthony Brisbane, a white superintendent

²⁷ This film is also known by the titles, *Lem Hawkins’ Confession* and *Brand of Cain*. The film draws inspiration from the sensational murder and trial in Atlanta known as the Dorothy Stanfield murder case (Green 176). Mathew Bernstein also indicates that *Murder in Harlem* is based on “one of the most sensational American trials in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This was the Atlanta, Georgia, Mary Phagan/ Leo Frank case of 1913 to 1915, in which a Southern black factory sweeper provided the crucial evidence which found his Jewish superintendent guilty of—and eventually lynched for—the murder of a Southern, white, teenage, female employee” (8).

at the National Chemical Laboratories, who has sexually abused a white female worker²⁸, Dorothy Stanfield, and falsely accuses another watchman, Arthur Vance, of having murdered her. Hawkins complies with Brisbane's directives in a clownish manner, holding his cap with both hands, nodding, and staring with bulging eyes, creating a comedic persona that displays an exaggerated loyalty to Brisbane. Hawkins's buffoonery and comedic persona evolves throughout the film, underscoring his role as an almost minstrel-like entertainer. In a setting reminiscent of the church scene in *Within Our Gates*, Hawkins finds himself on the witness stand, responding to a rigorous interrogation by black attorney Henry Glory with clownish gestures that elicit laughter from the courtroom audience, resembling more of an entertainment spectacle than a legal proceeding. The scene unfolds as a captivating show, with both black and white audiences repeatedly shown enjoying Hawkins's antics: he rolls his eyes, pats his head, and gazes in bewilderment at Glory when he is rendered speechless. Hawkins's comic caricature is further amplified in another scene at a so called "buffet flat"²⁹ owned by a corrupt black woman known as "The Catbird," who invites him to her Saturday night party intending to cheat him out of the money he has received from Brisbane for aiding him in his schemes. In this scene, Hawkins comically struggles and ultimately fails to mimic the behavior, dressing, drinking, and dancing habits of the elegant black patrons attending The Catbird's party. His attempts to blend in make him appear foolish as he walks ostentatiously with a smirk, seemingly trying to belong. Commenting on the scene, Green states that:

²⁸ Brisbane's attempt to sexually assault Dorothy Stanfield fails, as the two engage in a scuffle that ends with Brisbane striking her and causing her to fall unconscious. When he compels Hawkins to check on her, they discover that she is dead. Initially, both Brisbane, Hawkins, and the viewers assume Brisbane is responsible. However, later in the film, it is revealed that Stanfield was strangled by her white boyfriend while she was unconscious, as he mistakenly believed she was willingly involved with Brisbane.

²⁹ Chris Albertson, the biographer of the black singer Bessie Smith, defines the buffet flats as "small, privately owned establishments featuring all sorts of illegal activities: gambling and erotic shows, as well as sex acts of every conceivable kind. These buffet flats were usually owned by women, who ran them with admirable efficiency, catering to the occasional thrill-seeker as well as to regular clients whose personal tastes they knew intimately . . . Buffet flats were always located in private homes or apartments. Bootleg liquor was plentiful, and a different 'show' was usually presented in each room" (122)

Hawkins looks out of place, even though he is dressed up. He is wearing a brown, ill-fitting suit with a lighter colored vest; he is unfashionably overweight and, though he is smoking with a fancy cigarette holder, he is handling it as if it were a cheap cigar. The other clientele are dressed in perfectly fitting evening clothes, many in black tie or evening gowns; their physiques are fashionably trim, and they urbanely smoke cigarettes. (158)

While dancing with Claudia, the female lead and Arthur Vance's sister, Hawkins's extravagant dance moves visibly deviate from the refined atmosphere of the party, adopting a more spirited style reminiscent of a "juke-joint dancer" (Green, *Straight Lick* 165). His dancing stands out from the surrounding patrons, who adhere to a more formal way of dancing, which reflects their affluent background.

Similar to Old Ned, Hawkins is depicted as a nefarious character, collaborating with Brisbane in his sinister plot to assault Dorothy Stanfield and falsely implicate Vance (Hawkins's fellow-watchman) in her murder. Throughout the narrative, Hawkins's clownish demeanor is juxtaposed with the heinousness of his actions. For instance, he engages in a shuffle dance upon receiving a coin from Brisbane for performing the task of surveilling the stairs leading to the office where Dorothy is targeted for assault. Green suggests that this scene reflects Micheaux's use of the "'insert coin, get shuffle' trope, [which] practically turns Hawkins into a white man's living 'juke' box" (169). However, it is noteworthy that Brisbane is conspicuously absent from the two scenes in which Hawkins displays his clownish persona, namely during his shuffle dance and in a later scene where he stealthily tiptoes around Brisbane's office, which implies that Brisbane is not the intended audience for these performances. Since all these scenes are part of Hawkins's narrated testimony in the courtroom (in a flashback), Hawkins's primary audience in this case are the attendees of the court, who are depicted as being entertained and amused while listening to his testimony. Furthermore, the

film's viewers are another intended audience, who are witnessing the visual representation of the testimony and being guided by the reactions of the court's attendees, who function as a diegetic audience for Hawkins. After Hawkins abandons his assigned post and spies on Brisbane during the attempted assault on Dorothy, the scene transitions to Hawkins tiptoeing around Brisbane's office accompanied by whimsical background music, which adds a comedic undertone to the otherwise serious subject matter. The humor in this scene is counterpointed by the tragic predicament faced by the white woman, the fellow watchman, and Hawkins, who is coerced by Brisbane's threats of lynching into compliance with his schemes.

Likewise, in *Within Our Gates*, humor is offset by Old Ned's cruel exploitation of the black congregation and the humiliating treatment he receives from the two white men. This interplay encapsulates what Pirandello refer to as "the feeling of the opposite," a fundamental element of tragicomedy (Carpio 36). Glenda Carpio explains that comedy typically generates laughter from "the perception of the opposite," achieved through techniques like inversion, incongruity, and juxtaposition. However, in tragicomedy, the laughter produced is "troubled and obstructed" by the looming inevitability of doom. Carpio emphasizes that in tragicomedy, the audience finds itself delicately positioned, caught between the desire to laugh and the suspicion that such laughter might cruelly coincide with an impending tragedy. In navigating this delicate balance, conflicting desires arise—one grapples with the simultaneous yearning and reluctance to embrace laughter (36). The dual effect and contradictory impulses stemming from the laughter in tragicomedy are evident in the discordant nature of laughter evoked by Hawkins and Old Ned. This laughter stands in contrast with their (forced) complicity in the scheming of the white characters in the films, which results in harm to them and the innocent black and white people around them.

Similar to the contrasting depictions of Old Ned and Reverend Jacobs in *Within Our Gates*, the incongruity of Hawkins's representation in *Murder in Harlem* is further

demonstrated through the contrasting character of the other black watchman, Arthur Vance. The stark disparity between Hawkins's comical physical appearance, style, and demeanor juxtaposed to Vance's more refined presentation enhances the comedic effect. Hawkins, with his clownish jumpsuit that accentuates his overweight physique, stands in sharp contrast to Vance, who is impeccably dressed in a suit that complements his tall and stylishly slender frame. Vance is portrayed as a respectable, decent, and articulate man, maintaining a polite and reserved manner, even upon the unsettling discovery of Dorothy's lifeless body during his midnight rounds. Both Hawkins and Vance, upon facing the grim sight of the murdered woman, direct their gaze straight at the camera, expressing horror and fear. Their direct gazes into the camera serve as a means to actively involve and engage with the film's black viewers, which is a recurring motif in Micheaux's films. These instances often involve monologues delivered by the characters, which unravel their emotions, realizations, confessions, or future intentions. Green makes an analogous point about the function of the direct glance in Micheaux's films as follows:

These direct glances may be seen as a representation of direct speech, of integrity and good faith, through a simple, pseudo-theatrical address to the audience. They can also be seen as part of a style that is less illusionistic and glossy than that of Hollywood, that does not stitch the implied viewer into the narrative through "furtive" continuity editing. Even if these glances toward the camera or "audience" are unconscious or unwilled by the filmmaker, even if they are "mistakes," they have a consistency of pattern that constitutes a breach of illusionism, an improvisation that tends to advance Micheaux's themes and to represent his enunciative directness. They represent an attitude toward making film and an address to film audiences that is fundamentally different from the classical, an attitude that is not so much anti-illusionistic as a-illusionistic (54)

In the specific context of Hawkins and Vance, their direct gazes at the camera convey a palpable sense of fear and recognition. They understand that being in close proximity to the body of a deceased white woman exposes them to the imminent threat of lynching, despite their innocence in the murder. These moments of eye contact establish a shared experience with the black viewers, prompting a contemplation of the absurdity and irrationality inherent in the logic of lynching, a theme subtly referenced in various instances throughout the film.³⁰ The film captures the grim reality as the black officer decides to escort Vance “out of town for safekeeping” to prevent potential harm. Brisbane further reinforces this unjust logic as he attempts to coerce Hawkins into collaboration, stating: “Somebody is going to be hung for that. Why should it be me? I have influential connections in Boston . . . I will contact the police station and inform them of a murdered white girl in the factory, holding a colored man until their arrival.”

In the aftermath of the discovery of Dorothy’s body, Hawkins rushes back to Brisbane, tearfully pleading to be allowed to go home, saying that “white folk gonna lynch me sure.” In contrast, Vance takes a more composed approach, he promptly reports the murder to the police and displays a willingness to cooperate in their investigation. This juxtaposition of Hawkins and Vance adds a layer of complexity to the film’s comic representation of the former, which derives from the contrast between their contrasting responses in the face of adversity. Carpio makes a parallel point in her analysis of the novelist and playwright William Well Brown’s strategic utilization of humor and appropriation of racist stereotypes (33). She observes that

³⁰ During my preliminary defense, Dr. Harry Edward Bailey made an insightful remark regarding how different audiences might interpret a character’s direct gaze, based on their racial background: “When a character looks directly into the camera, such as Vance and Hawkins do in *Murder in Harlem*, or Old Ned does in *Within Gates*, they are establishing a bond with the audience and communicating a message to the audience that obviates the need for dialog or explanation. A white audience would not get the exact same message, but a black audience would understand what the character is saying: ‘I’m being set up, and you understand because you may have been here too yourself.’” It seems likely that this was Micheaux’s intention in including these direct glances at the camera, especially given that his audience was predominantly black. These moments of direct engagement carry an implicit understanding that speaks specifically to the experiences of black viewers.

during Brown's dramatic readings, audiences could discern the constructive impact arising from the exaggeration of the already disturbing facets of racial stereotypes, yielding a cathartic comic effect. Furthermore, they could appreciate the humor he created by contrasting his sophisticated persona with those of the buffoons he lampooned (34). A comparable instance is apparent in the lectures of Frederick Douglass, as elucidated by Granville Ganter (540). He indicates that Douglass, a remarkably intelligent and powerful orator, employed conventions of minstrelsy in his lectures. In doing so, he harnessed his strong personal charisma as a dynamic refutation of racist prejudices against blacks. Douglass, when adopting the mask of a buffoon in satires targeting bigoted preachers, presented a persona so unlike his usual self that it enhanced the comedic impact of the performance (Carpio 238, Ganter 540)³¹.

As Carpio and Ganter assert, the deliberate contrast between the refined personas of Brown and Douglass and their caricatured renditions serves a dual purpose: not only does this contrast elicit humor, but it also concurrently challenges any intrinsic association between the performers' identities and the racial stereotypes they portray. The audience discerns these stereotypes as dual theatrical masks, easily donned or discarded at the performer's will, as illustrated by Ganter's account of Douglass's ability to transition seamlessly from his mock sermon persona (540). Ganter writes: "At the conclusion of his mock sermon, Douglass would clearly step away from his gospel burlesque, quipping his regret that such 'miserable twaddle should be palmed off on the poor slave.' Douglass's verbal expertise thus allowed him to move in and out of the roles cast for black speakers" (540). Green makes a related point in his discussion of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' strategic use of racial caricatures in opposition to their "sophisticated middle-class musicality and social demeanor" in the 1870s (137). The Fisk Jubilee Singers' strategy, however, differed somewhat from that of Brown and Douglass, as the

³¹ For more insights about Frederick Douglass's use of humor in his criticism of slavery and racial prejudice, see Granville Ganter's article, "'He Made Us Laugh Some': Frederick Douglass's Humor."

choir members were not the ones who performed the caricatures. Their shows often included a skit featuring a hard-shell preacher, whose appearance and performance contrasted with theirs and that of the preacher who escorted them. Green explains that:

the Fisk project may have been using caricature to confront the problems of racism, if somewhat diffidently. They were not just putting themselves forward as well-dressed, well-behaved models of non-caricatured, upright Americanness; they may also have been “signifying” on white caricatures of black Americans. For example, the inclusion of the skit of the hard-shell sermon invites a comparison with the more sober “sermons” of the Fisk tour and with the sermons of the non-hard-shell clergy who supported the tour throughout the country. The Fisk entourage and the sermons of their middle-class hosts were favored in such a comparison. Rhetorically, the Fisk Singers would be saying, “here is a caricature of ethnic religious behavior that you will recognize; notice that *we are not like that, but that we are black. We African Americans from Fisk are more like you and your ministers than we are like this hard-shell caricature. We are more like you than you thought we were.*” (143-144; emphasis added)

Drawing a parallel, Green suggests that Micheaux employed a similar strategy by contrasting clean-cut, well-dressed characters—or those embodying “bourgeois values” (139) —with caricatured ones. According to Green, both Micheaux and the Fisk Singers aimed to confront and challenge negative images and caricatures as part of a broader effort to uplift the race (137). He indicates that Micheaux, like the Fisk Singers, engaged in oppositional artistic practices, navigating the complex dialectics of twoness and high-low status (147). In this sense, the concept of “twoness” in Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates* and *Murder in Harlem* is manifested in the twofold function of the juxtaposition of the caricatured portrayal of Old Ned and Hawkins with their more sophisticated counterparts: generating humor and simultaneously confronting

the detrimental effects of racial caricatures. This twofold strategy is accomplished by accentuating the prevalence and variety of refined characters embodying diverse facets of black manhood within the community. Figures like Reverend Jacobs, Doctor Vivian, and Vance, the watchman, exemplify a more nuanced and positive representation, challenging stereotypical depictions through their multifaceted portrayals.

Micheaux's deliberate effort to challenge and appropriate stereotypical images is intricately woven into the multifaceted characterization of the figures of Old Ned and Hawkins. These characters, with their exaggerated buffoonery, stand in stark contrast not only to the dignified personas of Reverend Jacobs and Vance, but also to their "true," suppressed selves, which often emerge in moments free from the scrutiny of the white gaze. In certain scenes, both Old Ned and Hawkins manifest their awareness of their own roleplaying that is meant to satisfy societal expectations and conform to the racial prejudices. Old Ned's caricatured persona disappears as soon as he leaves the office of the white men and "shuts the door on the space of his humiliation and degradation" (Creekmur 157), and in a close-up shot that accentuates his somber expression, he solemnly declares: "Again I've sold my birthright. All for a miserable 'mess of pottage.' Negroes and whites all are equal. As for me, miserable sinner, Hell is my destiny." Louise Spence and Pearl Bowser observe that in this pivotal scene, Micheaux "forces Ned out of his 'acceptable role' . . . The character performs the stereotype *and* comments on it" (152; emphasis in the original). Old Ned's earnest comment is delivered with a solemnity that conveys the anguish, fear, and sense helplessness. It also shows Old Ned's readiness to provide "a scathing critique of the conceits of white Southern paternalism" (Robinson 255) in front of the film's viewers. To emphasize the importance of Ned's momentary "aside", Micheaux "chooses to address his audience directly, momentarily forsaking the filmic illusion of the closed text" (255). By doing so, he "cancels the wall of the screen which separates the spectator from filmed reality . . . [because] these truths are too important to Micheaux to be arrested by

obligatory adherence to formal filmic protocols” (255)³². By eschewing formal filmic conventions and canceling the wall of the screen, Micheaux invites the spectator not only into the filmic reality but also into the suppressed depths of his comic characters’ selves. These moments of introspection often occur when the character feels compelled to speak directly to the film’s audience alone, away from the gaze of the white characters.

This recurring moment is also apparent in *Murder in Harlem*, where Hawkins momentarily sheds his buffoonish guise to confide to the film’s viewers his plan to confront Brisbane’s request to burn Dorothy’s body. As soon as Brisbane exits the room, Hawkins adopts an earnest and articulate demeanor, speaking directly to the camera: “That white man got something up his sleeve. He ain’t give me all this money for nothing. Anyway, I’m gonna try to get away with it. But if I can just make it to them [door] steps, I am gonna run. I am gonna run so fast till Ralph Metcalf can’t catch me. Oh, here he comes back.” Both Old Ned and Hawkins demonstrate a remarkable ability to transition fluidly between their pretended and genuine personas, and this flexibility contributes to the overall effect, on Micheaux’s part, of the exposing of the detrimental simplification of the stereotypes depicted by white filmmakers. Additionally, their ability to transition fluidly, much like in the case of Brown and Douglass, refute the intrinsic association between Old Ned and Hawkins’s black identities and the caricatured personas they perform. Therefore, such depictions by Micheaux, to borrow Caprio’s words about Brown during his dramatic readings, “appropriated racial stereotypes and transformed them from vehicles of humor *against* African Americans to sources of humor *by* African Americans about racism” (34; emphasis in the original).

³² The interpretation of this scene as Old Ned speaking directly to the camera and engaging with the film’s viewer is also supported by Michele Wallace (64) and Corey Creekmur (154).

According to Butters, Micheaux was a profit-driven businessman, yet he also emerged as a significant social commentator, utilizing the commercial medium of motion pictures to convey his perspective (126) and to “provide the black audience with morals and issues conducive to their success” (125). His films boldly tackled controversial topics, which he deemed essential for the advancement of the black community. As Micheaux himself asserted: “I have always tried to make my photoplays present the truth, to lay before the race a cross section of its own life . . . It is only by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my pictures, in the light and background of their true state, that we can raise our people to greater heights” (qtd. in Register 45). In this pursuit, Micheaux employed comic characters not merely for amusement, but also as vehicles for social critique aimed at both black and white people. The dual function of these characters reflects the essence of black American humor, as articulated by Carpio: “African American humor has been and continues to be both a bountiful source of creativity and pleasure and an energetic mode of social and political critique” (7).

Among the recurrent topics that Micheaux targeted with explicit and biting satire is the prevalence of certain religious practices within the black community, epitomized by the seemingly manipulative and charismatic character, Old Ned. As previously noted, this critique resurfaces in Micheaux’s second sound film, *Darktown Revue*, where he revisits the topic through a comic sermon of a “hard-shell” preacher, performed by Amon Davis in blackface. Using a black entertainer wearing blackface might initially seem contradictory to Micheaux’s goal of promoting racial uplift. However, this gesture by Micheaux should be understood within the broader context of minstrelsy as a form of black resistance, a tradition honed by a group of notable black performers, choreographers, and writers³³ in the late nineteenth century (Robinson 128). Cedric Robinson argues that Micheaux is the heir of these artists, who adeptly

³³ Among this group are Bob Cole, Bert Williams, George Walker, Aida Overton Walker, James Weldon Johnson and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, Will Marion Cook, and Paul Laurence Dunbar (Robinson 128).

created various gestures of black resistance for presentation before predominantly white audiences. They “recovered and devised much of the moral and conceptual lexicon, as well as the subtle oppositional tactics that would channel Black resistance into public entertainment, paving the way for Micheaux” (128). Among these acts of black resistance is the black minstrels’ ironic use of blackface as a means to confront racism. This perspective is eloquently captured by the black painter Robert Colescott, who remarked in an interview: “when you’re dealing with supercharged issues, you get down to dealing with them in terms of irony . . . That’s what the minstrels were about. Some of them were in black-face because they weren’t black enough, and they were saying ‘This is the way white people think we are supposed to act.’ When the situation is ridiculous, you deal with it through silliness and irony” (qtd. in Colman 118). Therefore, Micheaux’s inclusion of blackface in the scene of the sermon could be interpreted as means to underscore Davis’s role as a performer, prompting viewers to attribute the ludicrous and comic elements they witness to the exaggerated portrayal of the preacher Davis embodies rather than to his actual racial identity.

In contrast to Old Ned’s manipulative religious teachings, the “hard-shell sermon,” in *Darktown Revue*, diverges from religious doctrine entirely. Instead, it is a nonsensical sermon filled with gibberish, which showcases “a brilliant ironic transformation of the letters of alphabets into a seemingly passionate spiritual jeremiad” (Green, *Straight* 152). Similar to Old Ned, the preacher performed by Davis energetically delivers his sermon, moving fervently from one side of the portable podium to the other, seemingly aiming to rouse his congregation/audience. However, the film does not show the audience, as the camera angle focuses solely on the stage where Davis performs, with Donald Heywood’s choir standing behind him. The choir members are depicted as elegant and sophisticated, reminiscent of the dancing patrons in *Murder in Harlem*. Green contends that the choir “serves as a surrogate audience; they stand behind and above the preacher so that their pseudo-serious and mildly

amused and bemused expressions can be read as a commentary” (152). He further argues that the choir members behave similarly to the dancing patrons in *Murder in Harlem*, who, according to Green, act as a diegetic audience for Hawking’s awkward dance, expressing disdain and disbelief at the absurd spectacle before them (165). However, these assertions by Green lack accuracy, as it is challenging to ascertain from the actual scenes whether the choir and patrons’ occasional smiles and nods are intended to be interpreted as reactions to the comic demeanor of the “hard-shell” preacher and Hawkins. In fact, they are more likely to be casual gestures, which the director allowed them—as “extras”—to improvise on the spot. Furthermore, the attitude of the choir members and the patrons is not necessarily analogous to the way audiences typically react in entertaining (minstrel) performances, as seen in the church scene in *Within Our Gates*, and the court scene in *Murder in Harlem*. In both instances, Old Ned and Hawkins successfully engage their audiences in a manner reminiscent of minstrel shows. Dale Cockrell describes the atmosphere in these shows as follows: “Minstrelsy was obviously startling in its immediacy. Reports of audience behavior confirm that the house felt fully in its right to respond spontaneously, forcefully, and vocally to events on the stage. More than perhaps any other form of American theatre in the period, minstrelsy involved the audience” (58).

Nonetheless, I concur with Green’s assertion that the composition of the scenes featuring Hawkins dancing and Davis performing invites an unavoidable comparison with their more refined counterparts (165). In addition, Green astutely observes that the choir’s song “Is That a Religion?” could be interpreted as a critique of “this sort of religion and these sorts of deacons and ministers” (152). The juxtaposition of Davis’s clownish persona with the dignified choir members illuminates an incongruity that invites the film’s viewers to mock and laugh at his exaggerated portrayal. By presenting Davis in a manner that elicits laughter, the film encourages critical engagement with this stereotype, recognizing its inherent absurdity.

Furthermore, by humorously challenging this stereotype, the film creates a space for dialogue and understanding, which ultimately contributes to the ongoing process of dismantling harmful racial narratives. This lays the groundwork for potential social transformation within the black community and fosters positive change.

Notably, black artists and writers such as William Brown adopted a similar strategy, employing humor as a tool to reshape social perceptions of slavery. Carpio observes that “Brown knew that to critique slavery by using minstrel humor was to run the risk of affirming racist stereotypes, but he believed that the laughter it produced could be turned to social change” (35). Brown, like Douglass at the beginning of his career, took advantage of his audience’s ingrained tendency to find amusement and laugh at plantation stereotypes (35). By embodying easily recognizable black characters and drawing on audience prejudices, he effectively utilized humor as a means of social commentary (35). Brown also employed “the infectious good feeling of sharing and release that laughter can produce to make his audiences laugh at the bigoted whites that he also impersonated” (35).

Another religious practice that Micheaux critiques is the blind obedience to religious figures, as evident in the interaction between Old Ned and his congregation in the church scene. This practice is reflected in Mrs. Stratton’s racist claim that black people’s ambition “is to belong to a dozen lodges, consume religion without restraint, and, when they die, go straight up to heaven.” This statement seems to properly describe the congregation members, whose behavior is exaggerated in a manner that emphasizes its comic effect. However, the film also presents a different portrayal of other congregation members, whose behavior is in contrast with that of the excited members. The disparity in reactions among the congregation is highlighted through parallel editing, effectively utilizing rapid intercutting between Old Ned’s spirited sermon and the varied responses of the congregation. Old Ned’s fervent shouts and energetic movements are captured in two successive shots—a medium close-up followed by a

medium shot—offering different angles while consistently centering him in the frame. These shots are interwoven with a close-up of a young woman cradling a crying baby, juxtaposed against a man on the left side of the frame whose static expression conveys his lack of interest in the sermon. By contrast, the woman’s reaction is animated; she shakes her head, rolls her eyes, and dabs away tears with a handkerchief. The scene alternates between Old Ned’s impassioned performance, the congregation’s fervent reactions, and the woman’s incredulous gaze at the preacher. These sequences are shown in three successive close-up shots, focusing individually on their distinct behaviors. At one point, the woman briefly glances into the camera, evoking a similar moment of direct eye contact seen in *Murder in Harlem* by Hawkins and Vance. This gaze suggests a desire to communicate directly with the film’s viewer, as if questioning the nature of the ceremony with her confused and bewildered expression. Her glance almost seems to ask, “Is this truly a religious ceremony, or is it something else altogether?” This moment invites the audience to question the spectacle unfolding before them, blurring the boundary between performance and reality.

The woman’s contrasting reaction to those around her is further emphasized by the framing, which often captures the individuals seated beside her. This time, on the right side of the frame, a man is shown to her left, asleep with his mouth open and head tilted back. The subsequent medium and medium close-up shots intercut between the congregation’s laughter and the sleeping man on the left, while another sleeping man appears on the right with his head slumped forward. A close-up then transitions from a woman in the congregation, shouting and clapping, to the two sleeping men being abruptly woken by the noise. As the scene progresses, the editing becomes more rapid, alternating between shots of an increasingly excited congregation and Old Ned’s performance reaching its climax. This accelerated intercutting heightens the tempo of the event, transforming it into something more complex than a mere spectacle of entertainment. By juxtaposing the various responses, the editing underscores the

diversity of reactions among the congregation members, encouraging viewers to discern and reflect on their differing attitudes. While some are deeply moved and engaged by Old Ned's sermon, others—like the slumbering men—remain disconnected from the fervor around them. Amidst this range of reactions, the young woman's focused, attentive demeanor stands out.

The frequent shots focusing on the black woman suggest that her reactions are not casually inserted but carry narrative significance that the viewer is meant to consider. While it is challenging to pin down a singular interpretation of her response, her distinct attitude as well as the editing of the scene indicate that she is not easily swayed by Old Ned's sermon or his performance. Her subdued reactions and refusal to engage with the spectacle imply a critical distance from the fervor surrounding her. By contrasting her demeanor with the man's static expression and the other men's slumber, the film suggests that she is not among those who attend the Sunday service without purpose or conviction. Her prolonged gaze at Old Ned may hint at her recognition of a shift in his character as a preacher, or her disappointment with the unexpected nature of his performance. Her demeanor reflects a growing realization of the disparity between Old Ned's spiritual role and his exaggerated, clownish behavior. Ultimately, her reaction ties into the broader narrative of the scene, which concludes with Old Ned abandoning his caricatured persona in favor of a more serious and authentic demeanor. This shift underscores the woman's perceptiveness and suggests that her reactions are pivotal in revealing the underlying tensions and contradictions in Old Ned's character.

The powerful content, combined with the cinematic editing of the church scene, draws attention to external forces that compel black individuals like Old Ned to adopt caricatured personas in the first place. Figures such as Mr. Stratton and the white men Old Ned visits on Mondays exemplify this exploitation. Their agenda, rooted in maintaining socioeconomic dominance, discourages black people from pursuing equal rights, instead promoting asceticism and spiritual transcendence as pathways to salvation in the afterlife. This manipulation of

religious doctrine serves to reinforce control and subjugation within the black community. Hence, Micheaux's narrative transcends a mere criticism of blind obedience to black preachers. He employs stereotypical portrayals of characters like Old Ned and the excited congregation members as a form of satire, offering commentary on broader social interactions. These stereotypes serve a dual purpose: they not only illuminate internal community issues but also reveal the insidious influence of racist white people on figures like Old Ned, which erodes their allegiance to their own community. As indicated by Jane Gaines, Micheaux's approach critiques white society through the depiction of "scoundrels and crooks it has produced" (78), offering a nuanced commentary on the pervasive influence of racism and its impact on both individual characters and the wider black community.

The buffoonery and apparent deference of Micheaux's comic characters are not always a manifestation of their vulnerability when engaging with their white counterparts. Rather, it often functions as a strategic guise, which allows them to deceive and manipulate these individuals. This tactic is prominently showcased in *Murder in Harlem*, where Hawkins assumes the role of a subservient fool in Brisbane's presence. Brisbane, unsuspecting, confides in Hawkins, revealing his plot to sexually assault Dorothy and then details about how he failed to execute the assault. Due to Hawkins's convincing performance as a simpleton, Brisbane confesses to injuring the girl while attempting the assault, leaving her unconscious in the storeroom. These revelations become pivotal in Hawkins's courtroom testimony, leading to Brisbane's indictment and the exoneration of Claudia's brother, Vance. Furthermore, Hawkins adeptly employs his clownish persona to sidestep the criminal tasks assigned to him by Brisbane. In the scene where Brisbane threatens to call the police because Hawkins refuses to incinerate Dorothy's body, Hawkins resorts to feigned childlike demeanor, tearfully beseeching Brisbane to reconsider. However, Hawkins swiftly transitions into a position of agency as he initiates negotiations with Brisbane, adamantly refusing to venture alone to the basement, lest

Brisbane exploit the opportunity to involve the police in his absence. Hawkins assertively states: "I go there only when you come and go with me because . . . what keeps you from calling the police [while] I go do it. You have got to come with me because I ain't going there by myself," whereby he effectively manipulates Brisbane to alter his plans. As a result, Brisbane decides to send Hawkins to a nearby pub to eat and compose himself, with the proviso that he returns in forty minutes to proceed with the disposal. Hawkins successfully evades the task, and does not return to the factory until the following day, by which time the police have already begun their investigation. Through his buffoonery, Hawkins not only shields himself from Brisbane's machinations but also challenges the perception of him as a mere subservient fool, which Brisbane readily accepts. Nathan Huggins notes that "[t]he [white] audience (one should say the popular culture) had ingrained in its imagination a view of the Negro that was comic and pathetic. The theatrical darky was childlike; he could be duped into the most idiotic and foolish schemes; but like a child, too, innocence would protect him and turn the tables on the schemers" (251). However, Hawkins subverts this stereotype by employing wit and intelligence to outmaneuver Brisbane, thereby altering the narrative. Furthermore, the guise of the buffoon empowers Hawkins to respond to Brisbane's demeaning remarks with sarcasm and irony. Feigning ignorance, he deliberately misunderstands Brisbane's orders to write a second incriminatory note, which irritates Brisbane. He says: "Write another note, dumbbell." Hawkins, with a touch of irony and sarcasm, echoes, "Oh. Write another note, dumbbell." This tone persists as Hawkins engages with Brisbane's attempt to correct the misspellings in the note, which Hawkins has probably made intentionally. "Here, rub that 'a' out in 'Negro' and make it 'e,'" says Brisbane. Hawkins responds with thinly veiled mockery: "Oh, it seems to me that, that you ain't spellin' it like they calls it nohow. There should be an 'i' instead of an 'e,' and there should be two 'g's instead of one," while his facial expressions suggest sarcasm. Hawkins proceeds to rework the note to his liking and hands it over to Brisbane, who accepts

it without objection. Huggins explains that black performers “tried to push beyond the limits of the minstrel character ... [and] use the [minstrel] stereotype as an instrumental satire” (258). Hawkins appears to adopt a similar strategy, leveraging the protective veil of his persona to openly criticize and mock Brisbane’s condescending perception of him as a black man devoid of independent thought or agency. Hawkins skillfully exposes Brisbane’s failure to grasp his intelligence and multifaceted character, as demonstrated in several instances. Firstly, he anticipates Brisbane’s request to burn the body and successfully refuses it. Secondly, he defies Brisbane’s directive to remain by the stairwell and instead opts to spy on him and gather information that would indict him later. Moreover, Hawkins discerns Brisbane’s scheme to plant incriminating notes that would lead the police to arrest the other watchman. These actions underscore Hawkins’s astute understanding of Brisbane as a white man, which enables him to navigate situations in alignment with or against Brisbane’s wishes based on his own interests. In a similar context, George Edmund Haynes writes:

much of the white man’s notion of what the Negro aspires to be is either an imaginative white man’s construction of what he conjectures he would strive for, were he a Negro, or it is what some Negro has let the white gather in response to leading questions . . . The Negro is a master in responding to the white man according to the latter’s wishes (363-64).

Hawkins exemplifies this adaptability, asserting authority and power over Brisbane, which best appears in the fact that all the details about Brisbane’s behavior, thoughts, and actions are shown as part of Hawkins’s narrated testimony in a flashback. Hawkins has the absolute authority to shape the image of Brisbane in a way that would serve his interest. By portraying Brisbane as a criminal, sexual predator, and virulent racist, Hawkins not only secures his and Vance’s freedom but also rectifies the one-dimensional presentation of the black man.

Therefore, the representation of the comic characters Hawkins, Old Ned, and the “hard-shell, preacher marks the reappropriation and revision of this type of black male character, making it far more complex, intelligent, and different from the comic black character depicted in films produced by white filmmakers. Contrary to some scholarly interpretations, this reappropriation aligns these characters with Micheaux’s uplift agenda, despite their comical appearance, style, and demeanor, which are reminiscent of racial caricatures. Micheaux presents their clownish, caricatured personas in a way that makes them appear absurd compared to the variety of male characters in the three films, who are portrayed to resemble the black men in the film’s audience. In the case of Old Ned and Hawkins, their caricatured personas also appear absurd when juxtaposed to their suppressed selves, which often challenge the racist beliefs and actions of the white characters. The sinister plots hatched by these white characters are often thwarted by the wit and intelligence of Old Ned and Hawkins, which go unnoticed by the white characters. Both Old Ned and Hawkins skillfully exploit the white characters’ ignorance, while using the protective veil of their clownish personas to outmaneuver them, thereby mocking their supposed superiority in front of the films’ viewers. Hence, the caricatured personas of these comic male characters are not intended to mock or ridicule them, as is common in white-produced films, but rather to empower them to counteract the racism of the of the white characters. These caricatured personas also emphasize that they are merely a performed guise that bears no relation to the real black identity of these comic male characters and black men in general.

Chapter Four:

The Talented Tenth on the Big Screen:

The Representation of Black Leading Men in Micheaux's Achievement Films

The films that constitute the focus of this chapter belong in the category to which Gerard Butters refers to as Micheaux's "Achievement" films (145). In these films, "Micheaux attempts to outline a plan by which African-American men can become successful" and "lay out a system of values that would inspire accomplishment and self-confidence in African-American men" (Butters 145-146). This endeavor of Micheaux's is facilitated by featuring his version of the classical "leading-man" type of characters, who are typically depicted as larger-than-life protagonists with predominantly positive personality traits. Accordingly, Micheaux's black leading men are depicted as educated, diligent, refined, confident, hardworking, disciplined, and courageous individuals, who are committed to the advancement of their race, and they have worked their way to, or aspire to attain middle-class status. Through their portrayal, Micheaux "worked out questions of his own manhood on the screen while trying to create examples of African-American masculinity that he considered desirable" (Butters 148). According to Louise Spence and Pearl Bowser, most of Micheaux's films, mainly the silent ones, are adaptations of his early novels, characterized as "fictional biography" (132), which "were acts of recollection and imagination, creations and re-creations shaped by his personal experience and the desire to construct an image of himself for his audience" (81). They argue that "[i]n his desire to have his life be an example for others, Micheaux fostered certain aspects of his personal vision, made artistic use of his personal history, and dramatized particular motifs" (85). Through this approach, he created "a legendary biography," blending selected real and fictional events, which persist and continue to have influence to this day, despite the loss of many of his films (85). Therefore, many of Micheaux's leading male characters serve as an embodiment of his "biographical legend" (86), which reflects "his self-constructed social identity, political point

of view, and status as African-American entrepreneur” (85): Moreover, these characters were instrumental in his pursuit of racial uplift.

Micheaux’s leading characters, much like his comic ones, have become subjects of ongoing criticism by scholars. What the detractors find objectionable are the seemingly derogatory views (occasionally including racial slurs) expressed by these characters when they criticize their own people. These instances of negative criticism reflect the leading characters’ disdain for what they perceive as objectionable traits in certain black groups, from which they wish to distance themselves. As Ronald Green contends, “[a]ny irony or playfulness intended in this type of deprecation is weakened by Micheaux’s consistent application of such terms (‘dirty Negro,’ ‘Cornbread,’ ‘monkey’s grandpa’) to characters he does not like. The terms are meant to hurt. He seems to be saying to his ethnic group that some of them deserve these terms” (*Straight Lick* 58). The racial slurs also include ridiculing comments made by the leading characters, as is the case in *The Girl from Chicago* (1932) and *God’s Stepchildren* (1938), which express their “low esteem for other members of their race” (Green 58) and their perception of their people as lacking business sense and intelligence (59).

The leading characters’ posing with an air of assumed superiority, let alone the racial slurs, make Micheaux’s “achievement films,” at the very least, ambiguous in terms of interpretation. On one hand, the criticism could be construed as an incentive, aimed at inspiring positive change in the black community. On the other hand, the leading characters’ disdain for their black peers can easily be understood (or misunderstood) as Micheaux’s adoption of the racial stereotypes propagated in Hollywood films and mainstream cinema in general. In what follows, my aim is to examine this very ambiguity in Micheaux’s representation of his male lead characters, and to demonstrate that their depictions were significantly influenced by ideologies of “uplift” put forward at the time by two African American visionaries, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Their edifying endeavors, in turn, had a direct bearing on

the emergence of the idealized image that Micheaux adopted for his leading male characters, even though it may not always have aligned entirely with his own socio-political stance.

The term of “racial uplift” is as ambiguous and controversial as the portrayal of Micheaux’s leading characters, which reveals the profound tensions embedded within the struggles of black people for progress and identity. Since the late nineteenth century and throughout the segregation era, “uplift” has carried various meanings within the black community (Gaines 1). According to Kevin Gaines, one prominent interpretation of “uplift” emerged from the religious and cultural traditions of African Americans during slavery. This understanding was deeply tied to the antislavery folk religion of the slaves, which centered on both spiritual and collective social transcendence. It reflected a faith-driven commitment to overcoming the hardships of worldly oppression and misery, suggesting that African Americans could transcend these conditions not only spiritually but also socially. This sense of uplift became in many ways synonymous with the pursuit of education, viewed as the essential pathway to both personal and collective liberation. After emancipation, this form of uplift, imbued with the fervor of liberation theology, flourished among African Americans as a symbol of hope and resilience (Gaines 1). However, there is a different understanding of uplift, which reflects both the “desire for social mobility and the economic and racial barriers to it” (Gaines 2). As Gaines further explains, uplift in this sense emphasizes class differentiation as a form of racial progress. Black elites striving for status and moral authority often sought to distance themselves from the so-called “undeveloped” black majority (2). These black elites “claimed class distinctions, indeed, the very existence of a ‘better class’ of blacks, as evidence of what they called race progress” (Gaines xiv).

While this stratification introduced tensions within the black community by downplaying unity and fostering class antagonism, it is crucial to contextualize the actions of black elites within the broader societal structures they navigated. Understanding this context

prevents overly simplistic accusations of internalized racism or a mere desire to assimilate into whiteness, as “E. Franklin Frazier’s polemic attacking a materialistic, status-addicted black bourgeoisie suggested” (Gaines 3). The complexities of their position reveal a more nuanced struggle for recognition and progress within a racially oppressive society. According to Gaines,

Through racial uplift ideology, elite blacks sought the cooperation of white political and business elites in the pursuit of race progress. Their social vision of blacks within American society was largely determined by those powerful whites who reasserted control over black and white labor by disfranchising blacks and poor whites after the democratic experiment of Reconstruction. In other words, racial uplift ideology cannot be regarded as an independent black perspective. Black middle-class ideology cannot be isolated from dominant modes of knowledge and power relations structured by race and racism. While black elites’ oppositional claims of self-help may have symbolized their desire for independence and self-determination, this self-image obscured the extent to which self-help also functioned as an accommodation to blacks’ noncitizenship status. (xvi)

Thus, while black elites advocated self-help and racial progress, their efforts were often constrained by the very power structures they sought to challenge. This duality highlights how their pursuit of progress functioned as both a form of resistance and accommodation to the limitations imposed by systemic racism. Additionally, racial progress was further complicated by the differing visions within the black elite on how best to achieve it. These visions were shaped by various factors, including geographical location, class, and social standing. As Gaines notes, “[r]eflecting their precarious social position, as well as internal divisions across lines of class, color, culture, region, and gender, African American elites disagreed amongst themselves on a number of issues,” including education, participation in imperialist and foreign wars, citizenship rights, gender relations, and the definition of Black culture (xiv). These

internal divisions underscore the complexities of racial uplift, revealing that it was far from being a monolithic project. This tension is particularly evident in the conflicting ideologies of prominent figures like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Their divergent perspectives on racial progress—especially their contrasting views on black manhood—highlight the nuanced challenges within the movement, which will be further explored below.

1. The Ambiguity of Male Leads in Micheaux's Films

To gain insight into the controversial understanding of Micheaux's achievement films, it is worth considering some of the critical reflections that they have provoked in the past few decades. Eileen Landay was one of the first critics to point out disapprovingly that Micheaux's films often lacked "ethnic truth," and instead featured Hollywood-adventures, melodramas, mysteries, with black equivalents of stars like Valentino and Mae West (45). She also claims that Micheaux has perpetuated many white stereotypes, portraying leading characters with lighter skin and fine features, while villains were depicted as darker and more "Negroid" (45). While some of his films addressed problems faced by black people, they primarily focused on the black bourgeoisie rather than the struggles of the ghetto dweller or sharecropper (45). Through the portrayal of the affluent black bourgeois characters, Landay explains, Micheaux aimed to instill a sense of racial pride in his audiences (45). She writes that Micheaux's attitude "was not unlike the Belafonte-Poitier integrationists who followed him, though his energy in seeking out 'his audience' and his total control over the financing of his films was much like that of Melvin Van Peebles" (45-49).

In a similar vein, Thomas Cripps's contends that Micheaux's characters do not represent the experiences of black people, but rather mirror those of the bourgeois *white* middle class. He observes that "[b]lack simply did not see *themselves* on the screen—even the screen of Oscar Micheaux. Mere black presence on the screen, reflecting bourgeois white aspiration, no longer was enough" (189; emphasis in the original). According to Cripps, Micheaux and other black

filmmakers were lured by “the temptation to make mirror images of white movies” because “[th]e agonies of turning to Mother Africa for inspiration had already been demonstrated by [Marcus] Garvey, the South still encouraged flight rather than inspiration, and the ghetto was too bitter to contemplate” (171-172). He further explains that creating heroes who would be relatable to the black audiences, many of whom suffered segregation and discrimination, was a conundrum for black filmmakers, mainly because “whites to one degree or another had assimilated the core values of American life and had developed mythic heroes to symbolize the values” (171). Therefore, Cripps suggests, the traditional heroic narratives often failed to resonate with black audiences: cheering for the cavalry against the Indians, Tarzan against the tribes, or Douglas Fairbanks against a vizier felt disconnected and out of place (171).

Similarly, Donald Bogle suggests that Micheaux frequently drew inspiration from mainstream Hollywood productions when writing his scripts, though there were exceptions, notably in his silent films where he prioritized themes of race (102). He notes that “[j]ust as Negro newspapers and magazines took major stories and reported on them from a black perspective, Micheaux often—especially in the talkies—took the typical Hollywood script and gave it a racial slant” (102). Bogle also observes that Micheaux’s leading characters often mirrored those found in white Hollywood films, acting merely as their black versions:

Handsome and smooth Lorenzo Tucker was first referred to as the “black Valentino.” Later, when talkies came in, he was the “colored William Powell.” Sexy and insolent Bee Freeman, a vamp figure, was the “sepia Mae West.” Slick Chester, a character actor who played gangster roles, was the “colored Cagney.” Lovely Ethel Moses was sometimes touted as the “Negro Harlow.” The leads in Micheaux pictures were usually played by light-colored Negro actors, and in later years Micheaux was to be severely criticized by more militant black audiences for selecting “light-brights.” Once Micheaux had completed a film, he carried stills from it to theater managers. “Here’s

my black Valentino. The girls love him,” he would boast. “If I can get the right backing, I’ll star him in my next film, too.” (99)

He further argues that although Micheaux’s films acknowledged racial problems, he never went as far as realistically depicting the ghetto or images of racial misery and decay. Rather, his films most often focused on upright middle-class protagonists, creating a world that blends pure fantasy with reflections of the extant, but still less populous black bourgeoisie (103). According to Bogle, Micheaux “seems determined to depict blacks as just as affluent, just as educated, just as ‘cultured’ as white America” (103). Bogle finds Micheaux’s representation of the leading characters to align with W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of the “talented tenth,” explaining that these characters are “the educated go-getters who believe they must do something to ‘further the race, not hinder it’” (103). While Bogle believes that Micheaux’s films, with their portrayal of light bright leads and darker “lower” classes, may provoke discomfort and embarrass later audience, they still remain a significant part of black film and social history (103).

Gerald Butters, on the other hand, responding to the criticism that Micheaux promoted “bourgeois” values, states that while his films advocated for concepts like self-reliance, education, and economic advancement, they were “often placed against the realities of African-American life, in contrast to films by other black filmmakers” (124). He disagrees with the claim that the films of Micheaux only focused on representing the experience of the black bourgeoisie, asserting that a “closer examination of Micheaux’s films proves that this was not true. His films also praised the working man and woman” (125). Butters goes on to contend that if Micheaux placed a notable emphasis on the portrayal of the black bourgeoisie, it was because, sharing Du Bois’s vision, he believed such depictions would serve as an incentive that would “lead the African-American population to economic and social success” (125). In his understanding, the fact that Micheaux did not shy away from representing not only the success, but also the challenges faced by the black bourgeoisie, helped “lower-class African Americans

. . . identify and unite with their racial brothers and sisters rather than be antagonistic toward them because of their socioeconomic status” (125). Moreover, such representations, Butters notes, must be viewed within the broader context of a counterhegemonic discourse with which black directors aligned themselves. Additionally, Butters disputes Cripps’s statement that Micheaux and other black filmmakers made “mirror images of white movies” (Cripps 172), explaining that while “genre and characterization may have been borrowed from white movies, they were often set in a milieu with a black sensibility that changed the dynamics of the film’s receptive structure” (124). He asserts that the presentation of black people in the leading roles in Micheaux’s films significantly changed the black moviegoers’ reception: seeing black actors and actresses going through danger, love, or professional success, the black spectator probably experienced a different emotional response compared to films with an all-white cast (124). Through his films, Butters observes, Micheaux “challenged conventional norms of filmmaking by incorporating a black sensibility that showed the complex problems and issues facing African-American men in the postwar years” (125-126).

Sharing a similar sentiment, Mark Reid indicates that Micheaux’s films depicted the nineteen-twenties from a distinctly black perspective (12), addressing controversial themes that were avoided not only by Hollywood studios, but also by black film companies such as Lincoln Motion Picture (18). Reid writes that “[w]hereas Lincoln Motion Picture productions were serious melodramas that espoused conventional *middle-class* puritanical ethics, Micheaux productions . . . introduced black-oriented themes like interracial intimacy, lynching, passing, and other controversial subjects such as urban graft, wife beating, gambling, rape, and prostitution to their audience” (12; emphasis added). Reid contends that Micheaux’s films often depicted the leading characters in an urban environment along with characters who “were either in the process of migrating from the South to the North or were inhabitants of an urban *ghetto*” (11; emphasis added). In his comparison between the protagonists in Noble Johnson’s *The*

Realization of a Negro's Ambition (1916, produced by the Lincoln Motion Picture Company), and Micheaux's *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), Reid states that

[u]nlike Lincoln Motion Picture's *Realization*, a family film that portrayed a black man who patiently endured racism and obtained the right to prospect oil by saving a white oilman's daughter, Micheaux's action film shows that the black protagonist must physically battle against the violence of racism to retain his oil-rich land. The difference between the two suggests that *Symbol* reflects a turning point in African-American thought. Instead of emphasizing the long-suffering virtues of black Americans, Micheaux felt his black audiences would accept violence, urban lowlifes, interracial intimacy, and steamy love scenes. (14)

In Reid's view, Micheaux's films were shaped by profound sociopsychical shifts within the black community, so it is a misleading oversimplification to deem them mere imitations of mainstream Hollywood productions. These shifts included the ascendancy of Marcus Garvey's ideology of black nationalist capitalism and the impact of Alain Locke's aesthetic philosophy, which provided guidance to black artists like Micheaux during the Harlem Renaissance (14).

Ronald Green points out that Micheaux frequently drew on established white genres such as musicals and gangster movies and occasionally depicted his actors as black versions of white stars (*Straight* 174). However, Green cautions against a hasty interpretation of these affinities as proof of Micheaux's intention to produce bourgeoisie-related films, patterned on white productions (175). He explains that it was a common practice in the world of race films to feature black actors who mimicked white film stars and to rely on generic clichés of mainstream white-produced movies, so it was not Micheaux's unique invention (175). Furthermore, Green notes that Micheaux was adept at using irony to "signify on" the white genres and identities he referenced in his films (175). He further emphasizes that Micheaux consistently publicized his films and actors as "all colored," underscoring their "African-

Americanness” (175). In addition, Micheaux diligently worked to “keep his films within the class confines of his African-American audience and to keep his actors from indulging in pretensions to an African-American star system inspired by Hollywood or to an African-American color-caste system based on values borrowed from white racism” (Green 175). Therefore, these varying perspectives by Green and other critics reflect the complexity of Micheaux’s representation of male leading characters. This complexity should be viewed in light of Micheaux’s pursuit of racial uplift to be properly understood—a point some of these scholars have neglected, which resulted in interpretations that are overly simplistic and definitive. As I demonstrate in the rest of the chapter, Micheaux’s representation is further complicated by the influence of the ideologies of Washington and Du Bois, each of which has found both advocates and detractors among critics

2. The Influence of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois on Micheaux’s Achievement Films

In his discussion of Micheaux’s male leading characters, Green detects a strong affinity between the representation of these leading men and Booker T. Washington’s ideals of black manhood, which also faced radical criticism in certain segments of the black press (60). He suggests that those who recognize a strong “tom” element in Booker T. Washington are likely to detect similar traits in Micheaux’s films as well, embodied by characters who exhibit “a more or less palpable tom-ness simply because of their attitudes toward white skin, white culture, and some white people” (60). Although Micheaux’s ideal characters are not exclusively modeled after Washington, “Micheaux never abandoned his original admiration of Washington’s qualities and accomplishments—never considered Washington an Uncle Tom—and thus, Micheaux attracted criticism from both the black-nationalist and the integrationist quarters of the black press” (Green 60).

Besides Washington, numerous scholars have identified W. E. B. Du Bois as another notable influence on the portrayal of Micheaux's leading men. Both Washington and Du Bois presented "competing visions" of black manhood (Pochmara 18), which contribute to the overall complexity of these characters. In her analysis of Washington's autobiography, *Up From Slavery* (1901), Anna Pochmara observes that Washington depicted the black man as self-restrained, non-aggressive, patient, and hard-working, exhibiting the Protestant work ethic (25-32). These values run parallel to the nineteenth-century middle-class Victorian tradition of white Genteel masculinity (25), which, according to Gail Bederman, is based on sexual self-restraint, powerful will, and strong characters (18). Pochmara indicates that Washington opposed black migration and urbanization, as he envisioned a rural and pastoral environment for the successful black man, exemplifying what Michael Kimmel calls the "preindustrial Genteel Patriarch, whose identity was stably based on land ownership" (Pochmara 10). According to Kimmel, "[t]he term 'Genteel Patriarch' describes the manhood of the landed gentry: refined, elegant, and given to casual sensuousness, he was a devoted father who spent his time on his estate with his family" (Kimmel 13). Pochmara explains that "Washington's rural manliness can also be read as an attempt to appropriate the potent image of the yeoman farmer and, connected with it, the pastoral ideal central to the American myth of origin" (28).

The values that shape Washington's vision of black manhood seem to align with the representation of many of Micheaux's lead male characters, which also champions self-restraint and the Protestant work ethic, and encourages landownership. As Green indicates, Micheaux himself was raised on a family farm in southern Illinois, on the cusp of the South, and he ventured into entrepreneurial farming in South Dakota later in his life (*Straight* 73). These farming experiences were reflected later in his novels—*The Conquest* (1913), *The Homesteader* (1917), and *The Wind from Nowhere* (1941)—and films, providing a valuable knowledge that Micheaux skillfully utilized, addressing tenant farmers and former tenant farmers among his

readers and viewers, many of whom escaped the tenant and peonage system of the South by migrating to the North (Green 73). Among Micheaux's films that painted a favorable portrayal of farming life are:

Within Our Gates (Sylvia's father is a tenant farmer who, as he is about to become independent, is lynched; the lynching story is set in the context of a tenant-farming system that punishes economic transgression); *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (the hero is a farm-owning prospector out West; he relives the horse-trading scam that Micheaux's hero suffered on the homestead in the novel *The Conquest*, and he helps his homesteading neighbor work her subsistence garden); *The Exile* (the hero becomes a successful western homesteader whose visits to Chicago temporarily corrupt him); *The Girl from Chicago . . .* and *God's Stepchildren* (the hero buys a large farm and wants his stepsister to marry the farmer next door to curb her extravagant urban-white desires). (Green 23)

Micheaux appears to have been influenced by Washington's emphasis on farming and landownership as central elements of his vision of black manhood and narrative of race uplift, which is further underlined by Micheaux's dedication of his first novel, *The Conquest*, "To the Honorable Booker T. Washington," and his inclusion of a portrait of Washington in the films *Body and Soul* and *The Symbol of the Unconquered*. However, Micheaux did not blindly adhere to Washington's vision; he acknowledged its limitations and endeavored to avoid them in his work. As Pochmara indicates, Washington's pastoral model of black manhood clashes starkly with the harsh reality of the sharecropping system that was prevalent in the South. This system starkly denied black people access to land ownership, which belies the idealized archetypes of the Genteel Patriarch and yeoman farmer (Pochmara 28). Micheaux, intimately acquainted with this social environment, reflects this reality in his work, consistently portraying the socioeconomic hurdles faced by his characters within and beyond the black community. This

struggle for land ownership is exemplified in the antagonistic relationship between the farmer Jasper Landry and his oppressive landowner in *Within Our Gates*, ultimately culminating in Jasper's tragic lynching.

Unlike Washington's ideals, Micheaux's portrayal of male leads does not inherently oppose migration or urbanization, as long as these changes facilitate their prosperity and the uplifting of their community. In *God's Stepchildren*, for example, the male lead, Jimmy, is depicted as an urban middle-class man who intends to use the \$6,700 he saved from his (urban) job as a Pullman porter to purchase a homestead. In terms of migration, *The Girl from Chicago* depicts the South as a stagnant environment devoid of opportunities, particularly for ambitious people like the talented younger sister of Mary Austin, who is a pianist and singer. Mary, who owns a boarding house where the leading characters, Alonzo White and Norma Shepard, stay, aspires to send her sister North for a brighter future. The film dedicates its second half to showcasing the migration of the main characters to the North, a transition celebrated by the male lead, White, with the exclamation, "Home to Harlem!" (Green 51). This scene, as Green argues, authentically captures the hopes and anxieties surrounding migration, a realism seldom depicted in Hollywood (51). Moreover, Micheaux appears to diverge from Washington's "praising of menial work [and] industrial education" (Pochmara 29) over the value of intellectual endeavors and liberal education. Pochmara explains that "[a]ccording to Washington, it is not courage or intellect but hard work, patience, and restraint that lead to success. He praises the blessed influence of menial labor as a necessary element of education" (27). She further expounds that "Washington draws on American respect for hard menial work in order to advocate a strenuous path to respectable working manhood" (32). By contrast, Micheaux's male leads are doctors, lawyers, secret agents, and even Harvard graduates, which demonstrates the importance of intellect and higher education in Micheaux's vision of black manhood.

Micheaux's treatment of lynching also differs from Washington's: while Washington briefly alludes to lynching twice in his autobiography, he avoids naming it directly for the first time, referring to it instead as "the practice to which the people in certain sections of the South have felt themselves compelled to resort, in order to get rid of the force of the Negroes' ballot" (qtd. in Pochmara 24). Towards the conclusion of his autobiographical narrative, Washington characterizes the incidents of turn-of-the-century lynchings as "superficial and temporary signs" (214), a perspective that contrasts with historians' accounts indicating that "these incidents greatly outnumbered Ku Klux Klan raids during Reconstruction" (Pochmara 24). Consequently, Pochmara observes that Washington chooses to downplay the influence of lynching and "represent black men as reconciled with the status quo and devoid of any kind of bitterness or aggression" (24). She further elucidates that by portraying black men "as non-aggressive, patient, and stoical in their attitude towards whites, Washington challenges the myth of the black rapist" (25) and reframes the lynch logic. Throughout Washington's autobiography, black men are depicted as devoid of aggression and sexuality, assuming the role of protectors rather than aggressors toward white womanhood (31). Therefore, "instead of the black brute, the white female victim, and the white protector, Washington represents black men as protectors of white femininity, whereas the sexual threat is projected onto the Northern soldier" (31). In addition, Washington held the apparently conservative view that the purity of black womanhood is endangered by liberal education, which is closely intertwined with immigration, urbanization, and the industrial North (31).

Micheaux, on the other hand, chose to confront the topic of lynching head-on, without Washington's euphemisms and relativizations. He not only explicitly names it but also meticulously illustrates the act and its perpetrators, as detailed in the second chapter. In his overt representation, Micheaux portrays white women as complicit in the lynching incidents that target the black man for alleged crimes that are not even related to rape. Micheaux explicitly

reverses the blame from the black man to the white man as a (sexual) threat to both black and white womanhood, which is evident in scenes such as the attempted rape of Sylvia by the landowner's brother in *Within Our Gates*, and the sexual assault on the white Dorothy Stanfield by the superintendent Anthony Brisbane in *Murder in Harlem*.

While Micheaux's male leads demonstrate self-restraint and lack of aggression, they exhibit fierceness and tenacity when confronting the racism of white men, which is more closely aligned with Du Bois's vision of black manhood as distinguished by its militancy, presenting a stark contrast to Washington's approach (Pochmara 33). Du Bois's ideal of the successful black man is "linked to the emergent ideology of a more assertive masculinity rather than to stoical manliness" (Pochmara 54). Aware of the pervasive myth of the "black brute," Du Bois carefully harmonizes his militant masculinity with intellectual pursuits and spiritual engagement (54). Through the notion of the "talented tenth," he portrayed exceptional men whose knowledge is instrumental in transcending racial barriers and guiding the black community towards progress (Du Bois 33). Du Bois asserts that throughout history, it has been the educated and intelligent among the black populace who have led and uplifted the masses, while slavery and racial prejudice have hindered their progress (34). Du Bois's ideal of the privileged black individuals and their endeavor to uplift their community are paralleled by Micheaux's portrayal of some of his leading men in his achievement films. Two such examples are the characters of Dr. V. Vivian and Conrad Drebert in *Within Our Gates*, to whom Green refers as "[t]he principal examples of good black manhood in the North" (*With a Crooked Stick* 44). They are Sylvia's two fiancés at different times, who are "[b]oth . . . scientists, seekers of knowledge, men of the world . . . created in the image of DuBois . . . both honorable and racially loyal" (44). Both in their professional capacity and in terms of their moral standing, these characters are depicted as exemplars whose achievements, despite systemic racism and socioeconomic barriers, serve as a beacon of hope and inspiration. They embody resilience,

determination, and intelligence, navigating through adversity with grace and dignity. Theirs is not merely individual success, but one that holds a broader significance, symbolizing the potential for progress and empowerment within their black community. Just as Du Bois's "talented tenth" aims to guide the masses towards uplift and enlightenment, the lead characters in Micheaux's films serve as inspirational figures, and through their stories, audiences are invited to contemplate the uplifting power of perseverance, education, and solidarity in the face of oppression.

Furthermore, there is a notable preference for the term "men" in Du Bois's rhetoric, which carries dual implications, suggesting both the masculine gender and a detachment of the black subject from the lower classes (Pochmara 35). This lexical choice underscores a class identification rooted in notions of "men of rank" rather than "low-down folk," echoing the elitism inherent in the concept of the talented tenth (35). In Du Bois's seminal text *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903),

term "men" occurs in the vicinity of "able-bodied," "toiling, sweating," "cursing," "angry silence," "thoughtful," "marvelous hindsight," "striv[ing] to know," "angry and revengeful," "eager striving," "successful," "exceptional," "thinking," "of the sturdier make," "armed," "honorable," "reputable," or "swarthy" ... [as opposed to] "people" [that is] accompanied by connotations such as "poverty and ignorance," "ruder souls," "lowly," "voluntarily surrender," "weaker," "untaught," "backward," "defenseless," "patent weaknesses and shortcomings," "undeveloped," "stolen and oppressed," "slavery and servitude." (Pochmara 36)

In Du Bois's essay "The Talented Tenth," the distinct usage of "people" and "men" marks a differentiation between "the ignorant masses and the 'exceptional' and 'distinguished' men" (Pochmara 36), whose responsibility is "to civilize and elevate their less fortunate fellows" (Du Bois 48). Hence, there exists a palpable tension characterizing the relationship between black

leading figures and the broader black masses, as depicted by Du Bois. This tension demonstrates “a problem encountered by all the leaders and writers who intend to forge a collective black identity” (Pochmara 11). Pochmara explains that “[t]he perennial dilemma faced by representatives of the underprivileged stems from the fact that the privilege entailed in the leading position distances them from the community they represent” (11). Consequently, they find themselves navigating a complex balancing act: on the one hand, asserting their agency requires a degree of dissociation from the masses, while on the other, legitimizing their racial identity necessitates an “identification with the folk or with the working class” (11).

This interplay demonstrates the complex dynamics inherent in the construction of black identity and leadership within the black community. These dynamics are also echoed in the tense relationship between Micheaux’s male leading characters and their people, exemplified by the frequent use of racial slurs and expression of harsh sentiments towards those they are meant to represent. In fact, the racial slurs and the harshly expressed opinions are a manifestation of the inherent tension in Du Bois’s vision of black manhood. However, like in the case of Washington, Micheaux did not unquestioningly adhere to Du Bois’s vision. The representation of the strained rapport between his male leads and the black people does not necessarily reflect Micheaux’s personal stance, given his provision of positive depictions of black characters from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including the working-class. Therefore, as I aim to demonstrate in the remaining part of the chapter, these racial slurs and harsh attitudes could be interpreted as Micheaux’s criticism of his characters who represent the talented tenth, exposing an unpalatable aspect of their identity construction, which adds a complexity to the representation of these characters.

3. The Talented Tenth and the Working Class

Despite claims of Micheaux's favoritism towards middle-class characters over working-class ones, his depiction of exemplars of the talented tenth (represented by the educated, intellectual male leads) illustrates a deeply intertwined and interconnected relationship between the two socioeconomic groups. Micheaux's reconstruction of the image of black manhood through the journeys of his successful male leads depicts working-class life as a foundational element of their journeys. Coming from modest backgrounds, these characters pursue education, undertake hard work, and show perseverance in order to climb the social ladder, with the ultimate purpose of establishing a black male identity firmly rooted in middle-class existence. Niamh Doheny expresses a similar view, arguing that Micheaux's films celebrate the ability of black people to achieve their goals, irrespective of their social standing. Micheaux often presents his black viewers with his professional characters before they have acquired wealth, portraying them as still part of the working class (114)³⁴. As Butters notes, "Micheaux frequently commented on the requirements he believed were necessary for black male success" (146). Through his didactic narrative voice, Micheaux outlined a clear path toward the uplift of the black community, engaging all segments with their different class backgrounds (Stewart 219). Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence indicate that "because of his sense of personal responsibility and uplift . . . [Micheaux] saw himself as an instructive voice and an empowering interpreter of Black life for the community" ("Identity and Betrayal" 67).

In *Within Our Gates*, key figures of uplift include Reverend Wilson Jacobs, "a surrogate of Booker T. Washington" (Green, *With a Crooked* 44), and Dr. Vivian, a "Du Bois-like figure" (44), who are educated professionals dedicated to advancing their people's cause. Despite

³⁴Doheny asserts that Micheaux's professionals "dedicate themselves to helping their fellow African Americans without any attending condescension" (114). However, as I discuss later in this chapter, some of Micheaux's professionals, who often serve as lead characters in Micheaux's films, do exhibit attitudes that imply a sense of superiority over their people, frequently viewing their community members as an obstacle to their own success.

financial challenges, Reverend Jacobs establishes a school for underprivileged black children in the South, while Dr. Vivian offers medical services in the North and actively works to alleviate social disadvantages caused by racial discrimination. These middle-class figures aspire to achieve social and economic advancement, a vision shared by the working-class character Jasper Landry for his children. His foster daughter, Sylvia, achieves this vision through the hard work, love, and ambition of her foster father, as she obtains an education and becomes a teacher. Sylvia also comes to play a significant role in saving Reverend Jacobs's school and attracts the attention of both Reverend Jacobs and Dr. Vivian as a potential romantic partner, symbolizing the bridge between social classes and the realization of collective aspirations for progress. Both Reverend Jacobs and Dr. Vivian see Sylvia as a fitting marriage partner³⁵, they recognize her as an embodiment of the uplift they advocate for their community. In this way, the path of uplift initiated by Jasper finds its culmination in Sylvia, Reverend Jacobs, and Dr. Vivian, demonstrating a collective journey towards social and economic advancement.

Similarly, in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), the male lead Hugh Van Allen, a young black prospector, begins humbly as a homesteader on a small piece of land before rising to become "one of the oil kings." In this film, Van Allen's journey of socioeconomic advancement takes on a militant and defiant tone. Van Allen engages in physical combat with Jefferson Driscoll, a passing-for-white mulatto, after Driscoll sells him stolen horses. Van Allen displays remarkable determination, defiance, and bravery in facing Driscoll and his cohorts, members of a racist terrorist group called The Knights of the Black Cross, who aim to intimidate

³⁵ Green interprets Sylvia's rejection of Reverend Jacobs's marriage proposal and her acceptance of Dr. Vivian's as a direct response to "the continuing insistence by some of Micheaux's critics that he had disdain for DuBois and reverence for Washington." He argues that "[s]ince Sylvia is the tireless agent of racial unity (she is the go-between for North and South, for upper and lower classes, and for urban and rural cultures), and since Sylvia is the most perfect and desirable marriage partner and 'racial' progenitor . . . Micheaux, by linking Sylvia to Dr. Vivian in marriage at the end of the film, effectively preferred the future offered by DuBois over that offered by Booker T. Washington" (*With a Crooked* 44).

Van Allen into relinquishing his land. Van Allen ultimately achieves triumph, as he defeats the group, retains his land, discovers oil fields, and achieves wealth. Bowser and Spence argue that “Van Allen, like many of Micheaux’s characters, represents sociological and moral forces rather than a psychologically individuated person, functioning as a model to illustrate what could be accomplished through hard work and industry” (91). Following his success, Van Allen remains connected to the working class through his philanthropic endeavors. He is depicted as generously donating money to “The Committee for the defense of the colored race,” as an intertitle indicates, and providing employment to Abraham, a black man who, like Van Allen, faced oppression at the hands of Driscoll, offering him a position in his oil company.

In *Murder in Harlem* (1935) and *Lying Lips* (1932), the male lead characters are depicted on a journey of professional and socioeconomic transformation. In *Murder in Harlem*, Henry Glory, “an explicit surrogate for Micheaux himself” (Green, *Straight* 168), starts out as a struggling law student, selling his novel door to door to fund his law school fees. This scene mirrors Micheaux’s own experience, as the way Glory is selling his novel “is precisely how Micheaux had made a living before and even during his film career and is also closely analogous to the way Micheaux distributed his films” (Green 168). Glory embodies the aspirations and struggles of many black people striving for advancement and upward mobility within the black community. Through education, perseverance, and hard work, Glory transcends his humble beginnings to become an esteemed attorney. Glory’s evolution from a struggling law student to a respected legal professional is not merely a personal achievement; his legal acumen is instrumental in unraveling the mystery surrounding Dorothy Stanfield’s murder. His tireless pursuit of the truth leads to the exoneration of Arthur Vance, a falsely accused black watchman. Additionally, Glory’s intervention prevents Lem Hawkins from further entanglement in the cover-up of Brisbane’s sexual crime, averting the looming threat of lynching and bringing the guilty to account. Green indicates that although “Micheaux has been criticized for being not

just middle-class but also bourgeois and ‘white’ . . . Glory, not only interrogates and wins freedom for the African-American lower-class figure, he also interrogates and indicts characters who are significantly bourgeois and white” (174). Through the character of Glory, Micheaux demonstrates the importance of education, determination, and resilience in overcoming societal barriers and achieving personal and collective progress.

In *Lying Lips*, the male lead is Benjamin Hadnott, who embarks on a journey of upward mobility, with aspirations to become a police detective. He is initially employed as a nightclub manager owned by two white owners, where he faces a moral dilemma when asked to coerce a black female singer, Elsie Bellwood, into performing at private parties for gang members after work-hours—a request he rejects, and ultimately resigns in protest. Before he leaves, Hadnott rebukes the white owners for exploiting the vulnerable members of his race: “As to you two, if you had any respect for the unfortunate members of my race, especially the girls who are forced to work here, you would not try to make them do ugly things. But since you have not, I do not like your attitude. I am quitting!” Driven by a desire for professional advancement, Hadnott diligently studies for two years to become a detective. After a period of unemployment, he successfully passes the detective exam, making “a major advance in his middle-class career” (Green, *With a Crooked* 262). Green describes Hadnott’s journey as a manifestation of Micheaux’s vision of uplift, which underscores the moral and aspirational dimensions inherent in his pursuit of success (260). Similar to Glory, Hadnott’s career progression extends beyond personal achievement; it holds the promise of benefiting the black community at large, particularly its disadvantaged members. Hadnott himself acknowledges this broader significance, as he expresses his belief that with a better job, he can contribute more effectively to the welfare of others. “With a better job I can do more good. Naturally, I am glad that I can be more independent and stand up when occasion rises for decent girls like you,” he tells Elsie. Therefore, Micheaux’s consistent portrayal of these leading characters’ working-class

backgrounds and their willingness to actively help others from similar backgrounds debunks any claims of Micheaux favoring one social class over another.

4. Racial Slurs and Detachment

While the male lead characters in Micheaux's films maintain a deep connection to their working-class origins and harbor genuine intentions to uplift their community, there are instances where they exhibit attitudes that suggest a perception of themselves as distinct from their people. Despite their commitment to the advancement of the community, they occasionally view their fellow community members as impediments to their success. In *Murder in Harlem*, for example, Henry Glory discusses with Claudia his decision to publish his novel anonymously, which he justifies by his perception that the black community is not sufficiently appreciative of each other's achievements. He remarks: "We belong to a not very appreciative group when it comes to any achievements by each other, especially if they are privileged to meet that person ordinarily. If many of the so-called dicty people, to whom I must sell, thought I wrote the book, they would not read it with an open mind." However, he quickly adds: "Of course they are not all that way," implicitly exempting Claudia from having to make this corrective remark. They ultimately agree that if their community members do not discover that Glory is the author, he can "sell [the novel] and go about [his] business without being cross-examined." Such instances might be viewed as a manifestation of Micheaux's didactic and instructive voice coming to the foreground, criticizing the black community for the lack of unity and support for each other, thereby encouraging greater solidarity among his audience. Glory's description of his novel to his customers echoes this sentiment: "It is a new novel by a negro author, of course everyone is ordering a copy. And why should not they! A wake like this by one of our group is something to order." Glory's statement that black people are interested to buy and read his novel mainly because it is written by a community member is further

emphasized by Claudia, who promises to order a copy “if for no other reason, then because it is [written] by a colored author.” However, Glory’s remark also suggests an attempt to distance himself and those like Claudia from the perceived unpleasant practices and traits that he presents as common within the black community.

Glory’s attitude reoccurs in *The Girl from Chicago* (1932) through the male lead, who bears the telling name, Alonzo *White* and the female lead Norma Shepard, who express their admiration for each other in a manner that distances them from the rest of the black community. Norma begins by stating: “I know you are far different from anybody I have ever met. In fact, I had begun to think there were no such men as you,” to which Alonzo responds: “[B]ut you also interest me a great deal. Indeed, I hardly expected to meet anybody down here [in Batesburg, Mississippi] or anywhere else like you . . . I know I speak the truth. You seem to inspire a new confidence in me to regard to our girls.” Such statements by Alonzo and Norma do not seem to bear any didactic tone, but rather, as Green observes, they reveal “their mutual low esteem for other members of their race” (*Straight* 58). Such statements reflect a perceived sense of superiority or exceptionalism within these characters, which demonstrates an attempt of dissociation from the broader black community. A similar attempt can be observed in the utterances of Jimmy, the male leading character, in *God’s Stepchildren* (1938), in which he appears to distance himself from the rest of the black people. During a conversation between Eva, the female lead, and Jimmy, they discuss the latter’s potential economic opportunities using the money he has collected through years of hard work. Eva asks: “Why is it that most of our men, when they go to business, it has got to be a crap game, numbers bank, or policy shops, why cannot they go to some legitimate business, like white people?” To this, Jimmy answers: “They could, but then they have to study economics. Their idea of success is to seek the line of least resistance. The Negro hates to think, he is a stranger to planning.” Then he adds: “I guess I think too much, and plan too much also.” Such attitudes displayed by these leading characters

are incongruous with their evident connections to various segments of the black community, rooted in their working-class origins. Furthermore, these attitudes are in contrast with their position of leadership and their apparent efforts toward the uplift and advancement of the black community across its diverse segments. Therefore, as mentioned in the previous section, these characters embody what Pochmara refers to as “[t]he perennial dilemma faced by representatives of the underprivileged,” whose leading position necessitates them to simultaneously identify and disidentify with the black community (11).

Similar to his comic characters, as discussed in the third chapter, Micheaux’s male leading characters, have a dual nature, defying simplistic, one-dimensional categorizations as solely positive or negative figures. They are depicted in a complex and multifaceted manner that reflects both their admirable and flawed aspects, supporting hooks’s assertion that Micheaux’s characters are not a “simple reduction of black representation to a ‘positive’ image,” but rather “images that would convey complexity of experience and feeling” (133). The multifaceted characterization of these characters challenges claims that Micheaux was primarily interested in praising his “middle-class, bourgeois” leading characters, often depicting them in a positive light and sparing criticism and negative images to the working-class characters. It seems that Micheaux’s criticism is extended to all his characters, regardless of their socioeconomic status, whose traits and attitudes he deems detrimental to the cause of uplifting the black community. This sentiment aligns with Butters’s argument that “Oscar Micheaux went beyond the idealization of black manhood that was so prevalent among other African-American filmmakers. He called upon African-American men to examine their own activities and manhood, warts and all” (148). Such a stance is further affirmed in Micheaux’s letter published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1924, in which he writes:

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 . . . It is only

by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my pictures, in the light and back ground of their true state, that we 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, to make ourselves that which we are not. Nothing could be a greater blow to our own progress. The recognition of our true situation will react in itself as a stimulus for self-advancement. (qtd. in Sampson 169)

While these lines are often cited by scholars when discussing Micheaux's portrayal of his characters as caricatured villains and crooks, they also offer insight into the broader approach to character depiction in Micheaux's films. Henry Sampson refers to this letter as "the best summary of Micheaux's approach to film production" (168), suggesting its relevance to understanding the complexity of characterization in all Micheaux's characters. Therefore, Micheaux's presentation of the "true situation" of the black community to stimulate "self-advancement," as he argues, includes explicit portrayals of the unpalatable attitudes of his male leading characters. This approach allowed Micheaux to demonstrate the impact of these attitudes on the characters surrounding the male leads and to address broader racial issues such as "passing" and color prejudice, as evident in *God's Stepchildren*.

5. Passing and Color Prejudice in *God's Stepchildren*

Micheaux's criticism of his male leading characters is apparent in *God's Stepchildren* through the portrayal of Jimmy's harsh treatment of his foster sister, Naomi. The strained relationship between them sheds light on many racial issues, including "passing," which refers to "individuals with black African ancestry, even in a minimal amount, who attempted to 'pass' as full-blooded white Americans" (Butters 148). Micheaux, in turn, seems particularly interested in exploring the complexities of color prejudice. Both Jimmy and Naomi are initially depicted as light-skinned children, yet Naomi stands out as a troublemaker due to her aspiration

to attend the white children's school rather than the "colored school," to which she feels entitled by her fair complexion. Jimmy fiercely rebukes Naomi for her bold endeavor, not shying away even from threatening her with violence:

She needs a good licking, that's what's the matter. And if you [addressing the foster mother] don't want to give it to her, turn her over to me, and I will. That's what she needs, a good spanking. Well, I'll go, but if Ma's not so dumped, she ought to know what's the matter with you. Everybody else does. You just don't want to be colored, that's all . . . if you'd break her head, she may get these notions out of it. Why do you let her fool you? She deliberately slipped off and went to a white school; that's what she did.

Jimmy's excessive harshness toward Naomi reflects his lack of empathy and failure to comprehend her plight. His interpretation of Naomi's desire to attend the "white school" as a rejection of her own racial identity, deserving of severe punishment, is inconsistent with his role as an advocate of uplift in the film. By contrast, the film's narrative suggests that Naomi's attempt to attend the "white school" stems not from a disdain for her black community, but from the restricted opportunities available to them, offering a more sympathetic perspective on the act of "passing," and a more nuanced insight into the psychology of the "passer." Naomi is unsatisfied with the deplorable conditions of the school offered for the black kids; she, therefore, chooses to go to a better one. Naomi explains this later in the film, when she clarifies why she escaped from the school. Naomi tells her teacher: "I don't want to come to this *old* school, and I never did. I don't like you, and I don't like any of the children. I am here only because mama made me come" (emphasis added). Her resentment towards her teacher and her peers is unlikely to be directed at their "blackness," given that many of them, including the teacher, share her light complexion, but it rather stems from her utter frustration about being prevented from attending the "white school." This antagonism begins with her black classmates

reporting her actions to her mother and the teacher, resulting in Naomi's spanking, which further fuels her animosity towards them. Naomi's perceived misbehavior is eventually met with a decision by her family to incarcerate her in a convent for years. Jimmy's response to Naomi's desire to attend the "white school" could be seen as an effort to uphold racial unity and solidarity. However, his and his mother's excessively harsh treatment of Naomi, including frequent spankings and her extended confinement in a convent, undermine their approach. Moreover, Jimmy's insistence on forcing Naomi into a doomed marriage upon her release from the convent manifests the flawed nature of their attempts to maintain racial unity.

A comparison of Jimmy's treatment of Naomi with the attitudes of Micheaux's other male leads towards "passing" suggests that Jimmy's approach is both unreasonable and unwise. For example, in *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, Hugh Van Allen is depicted as engaging in a physical altercation with Jefferson Driscoll not because Driscoll is "passing" for white, but rather due to his malicious actions towards black people, such as selling stolen horses to them. From the beginning of the film, Driscoll is introduced as "one of the many mulattos who conceal their origins," and "had developed a ferocious hatred for the black race, from which he was born." Unlike in the case of Naomi, the film does not provide the reasons for Driscoll's "passing," but his seeking financial advancement, as a hotelier and later a land speculator, must be the primary motivating factor. However, it appears that his racial identity does not significantly impact his profitability, as even though he is presumed to be white, Driscoll works under similar conditions as Van Allen and he is less prosperous. Driscoll, unlike Van Allen, "reads everything in racial terms" (Gaines 217): he resorts to physical violence against his dark-skinned mother when she appears in front of the white woman he is courting; he denies Abraham and Eve Mason accommodation in his hotel solely because of their being black, and later, he collaborates with white individuals in selling stolen horses and even hatching a plot to murder Van Allen in order to seize his valuable land. Driscoll is both a white bigot and "a

black man guise of a white, acting out both white bigotry and race betrayal simultaneously” (Gaines 217). The film’s focus on displaying Driscoll’s numerous wicked deeds suggests that for Micheaux the problem lies not in the act of “passing” itself, but rather in the “passer’s” conduct towards their own community thereafter. Bowser and Spence further emphasize this point, explaining that “[a]lthough passing is neither uncommon nor automatically condemned by the Black community, it is Driscoll’s attitude of superiority, seeing Blacks as subhuman and taking pleasure in their misfortune, that is wicked—both a betrayal and a surrender” (92).

In *Veiled Aristocrat* (1932), which is based on Charles Chesnutt’s novel *The House Behind the Cedar* (1900), the male lead, Frank Fowler, is portrayed as “a darker-skinned black man who is a member of the local *black* aristocracy and who is both too dark and too ethnically loyal to pass for white” (Green, *Straight* 176; emphasis in the original). Frank demonstrates remarkable consideration and understanding when he discovers that his lover, Rena, is being coerced by her brother—a “passing” -for-white lawyer—to abandon the black community—including Frank and her own mother—and relocate to another city with him, where they could live as whites. Frank, unlike Jimmy, shows patience and sagacity in dealing with the brother’s plan, which impresses Rena and makes her all the more determined to stay with him. After Rena tells Frank about her brother’s plan, he replies: “I am so sorry that they [referring to Rena’s mother and brother] take such a view. It seems you will be so much happier if they would be just willing to meet us halfway. But life is like that; if people could all see alike and feel alike, there will be no politics, nor race prejudice.” Rena praises Frank, saying: “How even-tempered you are, Frank! You have every reason to be violently angry and swelling, and yet you are as calm and considerate as a trained diplomat”. To which Frank responds:

what you have told me calls for calm deliberation and consideration, Rena. I love you, you love me. You have been kind and obedient to your mother all your life. You will never contrary her or contrary me. You have just been good and kind and wonderful

to everybody. I am sending you to your brother because I know what he plans to do is vain and impossible and will not make you even successful or happy. But you have got to go with him to prove it that way.

Frank's deep affection and empathetic understanding of Rena create a sanctuary to which she ultimately returns, thereby foiling her brother's plan, just as Frank had anticipated.

Unlike the harmonious relationship that connects of Frank and Rena, most scenes depicting Jimmy and Naomi together often show Jimmy either chastising or threatening his foster sister. Apparently both Jimmy and Naomi are aware that they are not real siblings as is evident in their conversation, where Naomi candidly states: "Let us, as I started, be frank with each other. We are only foster brother and sister, you know that. And you know, too, Jimmy, that I love you. I love you dearly." This revelation does not seem to be new to Jimmy, who does not respond to Naomi's advance until she says: "You know that you would marry me if you were not pledged to Eva. Now, I am willing to give up all that is dear and sweet to me to please you and our mother." When Jimmy reunites with Naomi for the first time after her return from the convent, there is a palpable mutual admiration between them. Their mother also notices that as she says: "Well, I have never seen such a meeting between brother and sister. You are acting more like two long-lost lovers. Go ahead, boy, take her in your arms and kiss her. Can't you see what she needs!" When Jimmy and Naomi kiss, the mother interrupts them, saying: "Well, have you forgotten your mother? If you two were not brother and sister, I would be... oh, well, I will not say it." This scene leads Green to refer to Naomi as exhibiting incestuous behavior (*With a Crooked* 225), which case the characterization could also apply to Jimmy, since he does not seem to mind romantically kissing Naomi. Therefore, Naomi's hints of love likely go unnoticed by Jimmy not due to an inability to perceive them, but because he chooses to overlook them, much like his deliberate avoidance of her repeated pleas not to marry his friend, Clyde. Naomi describes her marriage to Clyde as a "sublime sacrifice" that will cost her "almost

everything,” including her life, a fate that ultimately comes to pass as she tragically takes her own life at the film’s conclusion. She tells Jimmy:

Your friend Clyde has asked me to marry him, and I know you and mother want me to accept. I don’t love the man, and never will and am willing to tell him so, but I was a bad girl once and caused a lot of trouble, and I realize now that things can’t always be as I would like to have them ... I have decided to marry this man. But before I make this sublime sacrifice—for to marry a man that I do not love is to me like *committing suicide* . . . I caused you enough trouble years ago. I am going to sacrifice almost everything now to make amends, and I will. (emphasis added)

Naomi appears as a victim of Jimmy’s callousness and disregard for her thoughts and feelings, which suggests that she is unwelcome among her family members. Given Jimmy’s prominence as a leading character, one could argue that Naomi’s exclusion happens at a societal, not merely at a familial level. This sentiment is strongly reinforced in the final scene which shows Naomi’s foster mother, Jimmy, his wife and children, and Naomi’s own son happily gathered in a living room while Naomi surreptitiously observes them through the window, reinforcing her position as a social outcast. When her son notices her, she flees to the river with the intention of ending her life. When her son mentions that he has seen a woman looking at them through the window, the foster mother, who knows the child has told the truth, replies: “Yes dear, I know you did. But nobody else saw her but you, so let’s forget all about her and just pretend she was not there.” This final gesture performs one of the cruelest forms of exclusion, namely obliteration: rendering Naomi invisible, moreover, non-existent to the rest of the family.

Jimmy’s coercion of Naomi into marrying Clyde brings doom to the latter as well, who loses his wife to death and his child to the foster mother, which is evidenced by Clyde’s absence from the seemingly happy family in the living room scene. Jimmy’s decision to arrange Naomi’s marriage to Clyde stems from his unfounded belief in Naomi’s supposed attraction to

“worthless and good-looking” urban men. He rationalizes his actions to his mother, stating that “[i]t is better this way [to force Naomi to marry Clyde] than to let her pick. She’d be sure to pick some worthless, good-looker in the city, and they would part in due time. She is too pretty to leave her to her own fate.” Despite the mistakenness of his assumption, which disregards Naomi’s true feelings for him—a fact she has attempted to convey numerous times—Jimmy proceeds to impose his belief by coercing Naomi into marrying Clyde.

Green’s judgment of Naomi is rather austere, asserting that Naomi rejects Clyde due to his dark skin, driven by her “light-skin fetish” (*Straight Lick* 64), and also argues that she “refuses to seek class position by staying married to a darker-skinned striver. Class is explicitly defined by race and color for Naomi. But it is not so defined for Micheaux, who condemns Naomi to suicide in his morality tale specifically because of her-race-phobic interpretation of class and of uplift” (*With a Crooked* 214). However, Naomi refuses to marry Clyde even before she knows anything about him, whether he is dark-skinned or light-skinned, wealthy or poor. In the cabaret scene, while dancing together, Jimmy tells Naomi: “I guess I will have to find you one now, I have a friend near where we live. He is very industrious, I will have him over to meet you. He will make some girl a fine husband.” Naomi replies: “Oh really! Well, never mind. I am not going to like any man. I have never thought of marrying one.” A similar conversation takes place again between the two of them on their way back from the city to the farm, where Naomi tells Jimmy: “Oh, how nice it might be to be a farmer’s wife like you. A nice, young, and successful farmer.” To this, Jimmy replies with by saying: “There’s a farmer near me, young and successful too. I want you to meet him. You might . . .” but Naomi irritably interrupts him: “I am not interested. You needn’t bother.” Jimmy continues nevertheless: “I’ll have him come over to meet you. *I have a feeling that he will like you*” (Emphasis added). “I said no, emphatically no,” replies Naomi.

Naomi's dislike of Clyde is evident from the moment they first meet. Upon seeing him, she exclaims to her foster mother: "Oh, mama look! Who is that with Jimmy? Oh, what make him so funny looking . . . I don't want anybody who looks like that. Please hide me somewhere." On another occasion, she pleads Jimmy to send Clyde away, stating: "He is so awfully ugly, I am afraid of him." However, it is still difficult to attribute Naomi's dislike of Clyde solely to his dark skin. Unlike Jimmy, Clyde lacks charm, elegance, and eloquence, he appears plain and naïve, unable to discern Naomi's disinterest in him despite her cold demeanor during their first meeting. In another scene, he is shown rehearsing how to propose, while Naomi is hiding nearby and only her voice can be heard as she rejects his (mock-)proposal. "I love you truly. I fell in love with you the moment I laid my eyes on you. Will you be mine darling? . . . Naomi do you love me dear?" says Clyde. Naomi's voice responds, interrupting: "No, you ugly rascal. I don't. And I would not marry you if you were the last man on earth. Be gone quickly and never let me see that homely face of yours again." Nonetheless, he chooses to disregard the voice, convinced he is merely imagining it. Therefore, it is unclear if Clyde was as wise, considerate, and willing to engage in heartfelt conversation with his wife-to-be, where they could freely exchange their hopes and fears, as Frank is with Rena, in *Veiled Aristocrats*, would Naomi still reject him and ultimately chooses to "pass" for white. Furthermore, given that Naomi and Clyde are never shown having meetings alone together or engaging in conversations similar to those of Jimmy and Eva or Frank and Rena, it is likely that Clyde's affection for Naomi is primarily rooted in his physical attraction to her. This notion is implied by his statement, "I fell in love with you the moment I laid my eyes on you," and echoed by the foster mother, who remarks: "Clyde is so blinded by her beauty and that pretty color, until he will be her slave." Thus, if Naomi's rejection of Clyde is indicative of her light-skin fetishism (*Straight Lick* 64) and "her-race-phobic interpretation of class and of uplift," for which she deserves to be condemned to suicide, as Green suggests (*With a Crooked* 214), then

Clyde's attraction to Naomi could also be seen as a sign of his light-skin fetishism and a desire to elevate his class position by marrying a light-skinned and beautiful woman. If that is the case, then why is Clyde not also condemned to suicide by Micheaux?

Furthermore, Green contends that while Clyde possesses only few characteristics typically attributed by Micheaux to his middle-class characters, he still cannot be identified as a lower-class character, mainly due to his relationship with Jimmy. Green asserts:

Jimmy states several times that the (few) middle-class traits that Clyde does have make him a candidate for uplift and thus worthy of respect . . . The superficial trappings of uplift—the fine clothes, fine speech, nice house and car, lovely living room furniture, and light skin . . . are not the central values of uplift . . . Clyde has some of the most important of those less superficial traits, and he knows that Naomi does not value them as much as she disdains his ethnic African-American traits and country manners. (*With a Crooked* 215)

Notably, however, the few middle-class traits that Jimmy allegedly ascribes to Clyde are not demonstrated directly throughout the film, but are merely referenced by Jimmy and his mother. They invoke these traits only when urging Naomi to consider Clyde as a husband, but they neglect to mention them in their surreptitious discussions of how to dupe Clyde into marrying Naomi. Throughout their discussion, Jimmy and his mother describe Clyde not as “a nice fellow and industrious,” as they tell Naomi, but as someone blinded by her beauty and skin color, and “crazy” for desiring to be in a relationship with Naomi that may not endure due to her evident disdain, which Clyde appears to disregard. Their concern seems less about the success of Naomi's marriage, whether to Clyde or another, and more about avoiding any blame for the marriage's potential failure. Therefore, Clyde's purported values and work ethic could be Jimmy's invention, aimed at deceiving Naomi into marrying the man he has selected for her. Even if Clyde does possess “solid work habits” (Green 215), it is not evident that Jimmy has

chosen him solely for that reason alone. The driving factor appears to be Clyde's obsession with Naomi's light color, which enables Jimmy and his mother to manipulate him into a marriage that they know may not last. Jimmy tells his mother: "I hate to do it [getting Naomi to marry Clyde]. Doesn't seem altogether fair to her, but as I see it, Naomi [after returning from the convent] is still a dangerous problem to us. She has not changed, she is simply restrained. She has been taught restraint. If *we get her off on Clyde*, who worships her already, and then get a family started . . ." (Emphasis added). The mother interrupts, saying: "It is the only way, Jimmy. Of course, Clyde is so blinded by her beauty and that pretty color, until he will be her slave. Otherwise, he is crazy, and I am not so sure she will stay with him even if we succeed in getting her married to him." Jimmy agrees with his mother, stating: "She is too pretty to leave her to her own fate. It is a risk marrying her off to Clyde. But since he is doubly anxious to have her, he could not blame us if it does not turn out right." In this sense, it is not just Naomi who fails to appreciate Clyde's purported middle-class attributes, as Green implies, but also her foster brother and mother, who exploit his obsession with Naomi's light features for their own schemes.

Green agrees that "[t]his plot seems unworthy of these characters, inappropriate for strivers after the American dream who work hard, guard their honor, and righteously reject all illegitimate exploitation of other members of their race through scams and rackets" (210). Therefore, in order to mitigate the blame for the plotting of Jimmy and his mother, he suggests that Naomi should be seen as "an allegorical figure for whiteness itself" (210). He argues as follows:

Whiteness within the black community is profoundly destructive and must finally be treated as the fundamentally and unalterably hateful intrusion that it has historically proved itself to be in the African-American advance toward the American dream. In that context, almost anything the good characters do to control Naomi is justifiable;

certainly, to the extent that Naomi represents whiteness itself as a relentless disrupting force, we need to feel no concern for her unhappiness in these plotted arrangements. (210)

Green further suggests that Naomi might even be of white origin since her real identity remains ambiguous throughout the film: “[t]he romantic and vulgarly racial idea that Naomi may be drawn toward her ‘true’ and original race by some mysterious force is part of the meaning of the narrative; it is the strange magnetism of her obsession that causes all the film’s problem” (225). Green’s suggestions may provide a plausible rationale for Naomi’s choice to “pass” for white and for Jimmy and his mother’s attitude toward her. However, these suggestions seem to be incompatible with Jimmy’s and his mother’s efforts to assimilate Naomi into the black community and their determination to force her into a marriage with a supposedly “good,” middle-class black character to keep her within the black community. If Naomi is indeed “white” or an allegorical personification of “whiteness,” her desire to join the white world is, then, natural and as rightful as Rena’s desire to abandon the white life that her brother forces on her and return to her black lover and black mother. In this case, Jimmy and his mother’s harshness, which is meant to express refusal of Naomi’s desire to “pass” for white, would seem to be unreasonable because they are preventing Naomi from going *back* to where she originally belongs. Moreover, Green’s suggestions seem to be problematic regarding Clyde’s infatuation with Naomi and his aspiration to wed her. In this scenario, Clyde’s obsession with Naomi’s beauty could be interpreted as an obsession with “whiteness” itself, and his desire to marry Naomi as a longing to marry a white woman. Moreover, Green indicates that “Jimmy’s tactics for micro-management of Naomi’s desire constitute the meanest chain of actions by a leading character in all of Micheaux’s surviving films and thus may have special meaning. Jimmy’s harshness appears less mean, for example, in the light of Naomi’s desire for whiteness” (216). If we allow, however, that “desire for whiteness” is condemnable, why could we not interpret

Naomi's harsh treatment of Clyde and her decision to leave him as similarly deserved and justifiable act, as Clyde's desire for Naomi is basically a desire for "whiteness."

The representation of the character of Naomi creates an ambiguous emotional impression on the viewer: it does not encourage the act of "passing," but it does reflect an understanding of the challenges faced by "passers." Rather than outrightly denouncing the act of "passing," this portrayal highlights the oppressive living conditions imposed on the black community, which, particularly affecting ambitious individuals like Naomi, push them to aspire for more than what the prevailing racist system permits, ultimately leading them to consider "passing" as a means of pursuing their ambitions.³⁶ However, Naomi's story suggests that the white world does not offer the "passers" the opportunities they seek, as seen in her attempt to reunite with her family in the final scene. Thus, rather than endorsing "passing," this representation implies that the success of ambitious individuals must occur within the black community. To achieve this, community members must embrace and support these individuals and foster an environment of understanding and empathy to overcome the barriers imposed by white prejudice. This idea is reinforced by the depiction of the tragic consequences of Naomi's mistreatment by those around her, particularly the male lead Jimmy, whose actions deepen her suffering and sense of isolation and ultimately push her to "pass."

³⁶ It is worth noting that Naomi is not the only character who leaves her baby with Mrs. Saunders in order to "pass" for white. The film opens with a similar action when Naomi's mother leaves her with Mrs. Saunders and heads to the city to work. Although it is not explicitly stated whether Naomi's mother was attempting to pass, there is a strong possibility that this was the case, given the film's themes, her light skin, and her inability to find work locally. Her departure is driven by poverty and desperation, as she tells Mrs. Saunders that she and her baby are both starving. Both Naomi and her mother are portrayed as being compelled to leave their children and their communities behind. For the mother, poverty and the lack of job opportunities drive her decision—an indication of the harsh conditions faced by the black community. Naomi, however, is motivated to pass mainly by the mistreatment she suffers at the hands of those within her own community. This parallel highlights the dual nature of oppression: while white racism imposes severe limitations on black people, the film also explores the ways in which black individuals sometimes inflict harm upon one another, thereby compounding the obstacles to racial uplift. This juxtaposition emphasizes that both external oppression and internal conflict present significant barriers to the progress of the black community, reinforcing the idea that solidarity and empathy are crucial to overcoming these challenges.

In conclusion, much like his portrayal of the characters of the black laborer and comic villains in previous chapters, Micheaux's representation of the male leads is complex and multifaceted. This depiction includes traits that aid in their personal and communal advancement, as well as aspects that hinder their progress and that of those around them. Just as Japer had to overcome his illiteracy in order to thwart the white landowner's exploitation, Old Ned and Hawkins had to weaponize their putative servility and clownish personas to counteract the racism of the of the white characters, the male leads also must recognize that systemic racism affects different members of black community in varied and complex ways. They, therefore, have to develop a deep sense of empathy, understanding, and solidarity towards one another to be able to confront racism together. The portrayal of the lead characters' weaknesses demonstrates that they are far from being idealized and they are not utopian figures. They are realistically represented characters, with flaws that necessitate change and growth, just like in any other segment of the black community. Therefore, the influence of the ideologies of "uplift" of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois in shaping his leading male characters did not prevent Micheaux from presenting his vision of manhood in such a way as it aligns with his own perspective on uplift.

Conclusion

This dissertation has analyzed the representation of black male characters in Oscar Micheaux's silent and sound films, focusing on three character-types: the hard laborer, the comical "villain," and the leading man. It has argued that Micheaux's representation of these characters is imbued with a deliberate intent of resistance, which aligns them with his broader goal of racial uplift. Micheaux's representation of these male characters has been interpreted as a cinematic counter-response to the stereotypical portrayals of black men in white-produced films at the time, which perpetuated distorted and caricatured images, mostly inherited from nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy.

My analysis has attempted to demonstrate that Micheaux has tendentiously shaped male characters in such a way that they should embody a certain vision of black manhood, thereby challenging the prevalent racist beliefs about and images of black men, which promoted resilience and empowerment in the face of systemic oppression. It has also been my intention to explore the ways in which Micheaux employed a nuanced approach to black characterization, which goes beyond victimization and caricature, to portray a strategic, complex, and multifaceted black male identity. Although the black laborer, Jasper, in *Within Our Gates* is depicted as being economically exploited, physically assaulted and eventually lynched, this depiction transcends a simplistic narrative of racial victimization. His non-militant resistance through hard work, family support, and commitment to education, juxtaposed with the rapacity, ignorance, and moral decay of the white characters, demonstrates a narrative of strength and endurance. Jasper's ideals and values of resistance, which remain alive after his death, are immortalized through his foster daughter Sylvia, who symbolizes the continuity of black resilience and racial uplift. Sylvia embodies the hope and determination that define the black community's ongoing struggles for justice and equality.

In addition, the re-appropriation of black comic characters, such as Hawkins, Old Ned, and the hard-shell preacher, provides portrayals that resist simplistic interpretations as mere racial caricatures or subservient accomplices to racist white characters. These comic characters prove to be complex and intelligent, capable of challenging the supremacy of the white characters and subverting prevalent racial stereotypes. The presence of these comic characters among the diverse array of male characters in the films, along with the frequent emergence of their refined, suppressed selves, undermines any association of their caricatured personas with black men in general. This approach emphasizes the multifaceted nature of black male identity and rejects simplistic, demeaning portrayals. Moreover, Micheaux's portrayal of his male leads reflects his endeavor to reinforce solidarity and unity between the members of the black community, regardless of their different socioeconomic backgrounds. By showcasing the humble beginnings of his characters of the "talented tenth," which are deeply rooted in the working-class life, Micheaux presents leading men with significant similarities with other socioeconomic groups. This suggests that all members of the black community share the same ordeal of racial prejudice and socioeconomic inequality, which can be more effectively confronted and overcome through collective efforts and solidarity. To protect and maintain this solidarity, Micheaux did not hesitate to address the weaknesses and flaws of his male lead characters, showing how they affect those around them. By emphasizing that these characters are neither idealized nor above criticism, Micheaux presents them as realistic individuals, who require change and growth, just like any other member of the black community. Collectively, Micheaux's characters, whether they are resilient laborers, re-appropriated comic figures, or male leads, allowed him to explore and comment on (intra)racial relations and the complexities of uplift within the black community.

By examining Micheaux's black male characters as embodiments of his intent to resist prevailing stereotypes and pursue racial uplift, this dissertation has not aimed to idealize their

role in countering distorted cinematic portrayals of black men, nor has it sought to overemphasize the significance of Micheaux's project of racial uplift. Understanding Micheaux and his characters in this light may be challenging for some, as evidenced by the frequent and severe criticism he received from contemporary black newspapers and recent scholars. Many of these critics interpreted Micheaux's portrayals as negative representations and suggested that he should have provided more "complimentary" images. For example, journalist Lester Walton of the *New York Age* criticized Micheaux's lost film *The Brute* (1920) by stating:

As I looked at the picture I was reminded of the attitude of the daily press, which magnifies our vices and minimizes our virtues . . . As at no time in the history of motion pictures have white producers sought to represent the Negro in [a] complimentary light; it therefore is the duty of race producers to gladden our hearts and inspire us by presenting characters typifying the better element of Negroes. (qtd. in Register 44)

The portrayals of black men in *The Brute* are consistent with those found in Micheaux's other films, many of which have been addressed in this dissertation. Walton's criticism, representative of the broader critical reception Micheaux faced, demonstrates a recurring challenge in Micheaux's career: the difficulty some critics had in understanding and appreciating his nuanced and complex approach to the representation of the black community in general, and black men in particular. Comprehending Micheaux's cinematic representations within the context of his efforts to challenge the derogatory depiction of black people and his quest for racial uplift is essential. Doing so not only illuminates the complexity and nuance of Micheaux's approach to character development, but also aids in fully grasping his significance as agent of uplift in the black community.

Micheaux's controversial representation of the black community not only defined his films but also laid the groundwork for future generations of black independent filmmakers. This

characteristic approach found its echo in the films of the Blaxploitation era, particularly in the 1970s, when black filmmakers sought to create bold, unapologetic narratives that spoke directly to black audiences. Among these filmmakers, Melvin Van Peebles stood out with his film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), a work often regarded as a seminal piece in the Blaxploitation genre. Scholars such as Mark Reid have drawn connections between Van Peebles's characters and those of Micheaux's films, viewing them as spiritual and thematic descendants. According to Reid,

Micheaux's reading of the African-American moviegoer anticipated by fifty years the commercial black-oriented films of the early 1970s . . . the "colored man with bricks" who defeats the Klan [in *The Symbol of the Unconquered*] is a superhero, an ancestor of such heroes of the 1970s as Sweetback . . . The protagonist's retaliatory violence toward the Klan in *Symbol of the Unconquered* becomes an essential requirement of the seventies black action-film protagonists. The formula also dictated that the protagonist be sexually appealing to the opposite sex. Together, these requirements generated narratives that tend to exploit violence and explore black sensuality while the film depicts racist acts perpetrated by white villains. Micheaux's action films were forerunners of these 1970s film types . . . (14)

Indeed, Van Peebles explores the intersection of sex, power, and race, confronting the viewer with the complexity of black masculinity in a society structured by systemic racism. The film tackles a host of provocative issues, from police brutality and the criminalization of black men to the exploitation of black bodies in both the political and sexual arenas. It explores themes of prostitution and interracial relationships, while also emphasizing the crucial importance of solidarity within the black community as a means of collective resistance to white oppression. The audacity of Van Peebles's approach to these subjects was, in many ways, a continuation of the groundwork laid by Micheaux. In both directors' films, there is a shared commitment to

addressing the harsh realities of racism, while simultaneously creating narratives that celebrate black empowerment and resistance.

Like Micheaux's films, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* sparked a wide range of responses, generating both praise and criticism for its portrayal of black people. As Reid observes, "[p]robably no other black director has provoked such critical controversy since Micheaux angered parts of the black community with *The Brute* (1920) and *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920)" (81). One notable supporter of Van Peebles's film was Huey P. Newton, the founder of the Black Panther Party, who dedicated an entire issue of the party's newspaper to celebrate the film (Guerrero 87). Newton praised *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* as a film with profound messages for the black community, stating, "[o]n many levels Van Peebles is attempting to communicate some crucial ideas, and motivate us to a deeper understanding and then action based upon that understanding . . . It is the first truly revolutionary Black film made and it is presented to us by a Black man." Newton noted that some viewers missed the film's deeper points, but emphasized its central message: "It demonstrates that one of the key routes to our survival and the success of our resistance is unity." According to Newton, Van Peebles used symbolic elements from the community to convey deeper meanings. "[He] is showing one thing on the screen but saying something completely different to the audience," Newton remarked, highlighting the film's use of signifying to communicate powerful, underlying messages ("He Won't Bleed Me"). This technique mirrors Micheaux's strategy, discussed in chapter three, where his comic characters adopt dual, contradictory personas to subtly challenge and dismantle stereotypical depictions of black people while addressing sensitive topics safely. Additionally, Van Peebles's approach recalls Micheaux's use of characters' direct gazes into the camera, covertly communicating messages to the audience beyond the white gaze.

In contrast to Newton, Lerone Bennett argues that *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* “carries us to antiquated white stereotypes, subtly and invidiously identifying with black reality” (“Emancipation Orgasm”). He criticizes the film for glamorizing the struggles of the ghetto, suggesting that some people mistakenly associate black culture with poverty and sexualized images of women (Guerrero 89). According to Bennett, Van Peebles’ film fails to be truly revolutionary or representative of black identity (“Emancipation Orgasm”). As Guerrero elaborates, Bennett believes the film offers empty fantasies and a hero who lacks historical depth, driven by self-interest, and acts without a revolutionary purpose, motivated only by fear and desperation (89). Similarly, a representative of Kuumba, “a black cultural nationalist drama group” (Reid 80), argues that *Sweetback* falls short of a fundamental principle of black art: functionality. According to him, black art must go beyond mere stimulation; it should educate, deepen the understanding of black people and the forces that shape their lives and others, critically engage with society, and “ultimately enlist blacks in the struggle for their liberation” (qtd. in Reid 81). This critique emphasizes the role of black art as a form of activism and education, aiming not only to reflect black experience but also to empower the community to challenge oppressive structures.

While Van Peebles’s film may lack this educational component, it is a consistent feature of Oscar Micheaux’s work, as demonstrated throughout this dissertation. Micheaux’s films consistently engage with social, racial, and economic issues, using film as a vehicle for cultural consciousness and community empowerment. His films offer not just representations of black life, but narratives that critically examine the conditions faced by black Americans, encouraging African American audiences to reflect on their socio-political realities. This educational and socially engaged approach also characterizes the work of black filmmakers emerging from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), particularly those who became part of the black independent film movement in the early 1970s. Among these filmmakers were prominent

figures like Haile Gerima, Charles Burnett, and others who were deeply influenced by the revolutionary political and cultural climate of the 1960s. According to Ntongela Masilela, the political consciousness of this group was informed by the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the anti-war movement, and the activities in America that supported national liberation struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (107-108). The broader political climate of the time spurred these filmmakers to explore black identity and resistance through cinema, viewing film as a medium for both cultural expression and political activism. According to Masilela, these filmmakers sought to develop a cinematic form that was uniquely rooted in their historical and cultural experiences, one that could not be co-opted by Hollywood. Their search led them to the family dramas of Oscar Micheaux from the 1920s and '30s (108). "The revolutionary breakthrough of the UCLA school was to draw on Micheaux's work, yet shift its social subject matter from a middle-class to a working-class milieu in which Black labor struggled against White capital" (Masilela 108). However, as discussed in chapters two and four, Micheaux's films never excluded the working class from their narratives. The economic struggles of working-class characters were a central theme in many of Micheaux's films, which depicted the complexities of black life across both middle and working-class contexts. Thus, while Masilela emphasizes the distinctiveness of the UCLA filmmakers' focus on working-class black lives, it is important to recognize that this focus is, in fact, a continuation of a theme that had already been prevalent in Micheaux's work. Therefore, the UCLA filmmakers' emphasis on class struggle is not a departure from Micheaux, but rather an extension of his approach. This demonstrates the enduring relevance of Micheaux's work to subsequent generations of black filmmakers, who shared his themes and filmic approach to confront the socio-economic and political realities of their own time.

The in-depth analysis of the works of black independent filmmakers from the 1970s is beyond the scope of this dissertation, which limits this research's ability to fully explore the

influence of Micheaux's films on these later filmmakers. Consequently, future studies should address this gap to gain a deeper understanding and greater appreciation of the complexities within Micheaux's body of work and its impact on subsequent generations of black filmmakers.

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