

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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## **1. Topic and Thesis Statement:**

Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) was one of the most significant figures in the history of early African American cinema. Micheaux was a self-made man, who transitioned from being a homesteader to a novelist and ultimately a filmmaker, before eventually returning to writing novels. Over the course of his career, he authored seven novels and directed approximately forty films—both silent and sound ones—making him one of the most prolific filmmakers of his time. Despite his impressive output, Micheaux was forgotten for decades after his death in 1951, and the vast majority of his films got lost. It was only in the 1970s that he was discovered again, when some of his lost films were found and restored, which sparked a new interest in his work not only in filmmaking circles, but also in academia.

This dissertation aims to explore the work of Oscar Micheaux, focusing specifically on his representation of black male characters in his silent and sound films between 1920 and 1939. Micheaux's portrayals of black men placed in various cinematic roles and social statuses served as a response to the stereotypical depictions of African American males commonly presented by white filmmakers of the period. These representations mostly relied on racist distortions and caricatured images rooted in stereotyping cultural practices such as 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 shaped the black community at the time and, hence, his films feature 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 as that of an agent of "racial uplift," akin to Booker T. Washington (a role model of his) and W. E. B. Du Bois. The dissertation further claims 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.

## **2. Chapter Description**

The dissertation is divided into four chapters: the first one serves to provide a conceptual framework for the subsequent discussions, while each of the remaining three chapters focuses on the analysis of 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 the 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 nineteenth and twentieth centuries, concluding with a brief investigation of the portrayals of black characters in race films produced by Foster Photoplay Company, Lincoln Motion Picture Company, and Micheaux's own Book and Film Company.

The second chapter, "Systemic Racial Violence and the Black Laborer in *Within Our Gates* (1920)," focuses on the character of the black 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, which can be better understood through studying the relationship between white and black laborers and white landowners on the cotton plantations of postbellum South. The chapter also examines Micheaux's representation of racial tension between Jasper, the white landowner, and the white farmers, and analyzes scenes portraying the lynching of Jasper by a mob of white people of various social statuses.

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). The chapter first demonstrates how Micheaux-scholars have 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 main argument of the chapter is that through the representation of Old Ned, Hawkins, and the hard-shell preacher, Micheaux, rather than reaffirming racial stereotypes, reappropriates the modes of comic representation in such a way as to challenge those stereotypes, but at the same time articulate his criticism of certain elements of the black community who might hinder the ideal goal of racial uplift.

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 Micheaux's so called "Achievement films." It provides an overview of 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 and W. E. B. Du Bois. The chapter goes on to analyze the relationship between the

leading men and the working-class characters, exploring the root causes of the formers' controversial attempt to distance themselves from black people of more modest backgrounds (sometimes even by using racial slurs). Finally, the chapter addresses Micheaux's take on the phenomenon 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*.

### **3. Results**

Each chapter of the dissertation examines a distinct type of male character in Oscar Micheaux's silent and sound films. The chapters are unified by their shared purpose of interpreting these characters as representing 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. While this dissertation does not cover every male character type that appears in Micheaux's films, it concentrates on those that recur throughout his work and whose representation distinctly contributes to and aligns with his broader goal of racial uplift.

The dissertation has aimed to demonstrate that Micheaux tendentiously shaped male characters in such a way as to challenge the prevalent racist views at the time and promote resilience and empowerment in the face of systemic oppression. My inquiry has also explored Micheaux's nuanced approach to character portrayal, which goes beyond victimization and caricature, so as to represent black male identity in its complexity. Placed within the interpretive framework of my study, the character types of the laborer, the comic figure, and the leading man could be shown to be so many constituents of Micheaux's multifaceted vision of black manhood.

As the individual chapters reveal, Micheaux's depictions are far from idealistic: they often exhibit flaws such as illiteracy, servility, and lack of solidarity within the black

community, which can hinder the desired goal of uplift. Thus, his honest portrayals of these shortcomings can be interpreted as opportunities for critical reflection and social commentary. It is precisely through this multifaceted portrayal that Micheaux was able to engage with broader issues affecting both the internal dynamics of the black community and its external struggles against racial discrimination.

None of the characters examined serves as a wholly positive or negative example of black manhood. Their portrayals encompass qualities that contribute to both personal and communal advancement, alongside traits that could impede their own progress and that of those around them, if no effort is made to overcome them. The hardworking laborer, Jasper, had to overcome his illiteracy to resist the exploitation of the white landowner. Similarly, the comic figures of Old Ned and Hawkins had to turn their apparent servility and clownish behavior into strategic tools to combat the racism of the white characters. The male leads, such as Jimmy and Henry Glory, must also come to understand that systemic racism impacts different members of the black community in varied and complex ways. To effectively confront racism, they must cultivate a deep sense of empathy, understanding, and solidarity with one another.

The depiction of these characters transcends a simplistic narrative of racial victimization. Each, in their own way, manages to challenge the racist beliefs and actions of the white characters around them. They all exhibit agency and resistance in various forms, which becomes fully understood and appreciated when viewed within the context of Micheaux's broader efforts to counter the demeaning portrayals of black people and his commitment to racial uplift.

### **Conference Papers:**

- **6-7 February 2021:** “Representation of Black Masculinity in Oscar Micheaux’s Silent Film *Body and Soul* (1925),” **International Conference on Film Studies “(De)constructing Cinematic Identities,”** London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research
- **29 November 2019:** “Representations of Black Masculinity in Oscar Micheaux’s Silent Film *The Symbol of the Unconquered*,” **Networks Conference**, Partium Christian University, Oradea, Romania.
- **17-18 October 2019:** **Workshop by the PathoGraphics research project**, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany
- **31 May 2019:** “The Quest for Identity: Representations of African-American Male Characters in Early Twentieth Century Films,” **13<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association for American Studies (HAAS 13)**, University of Debrecen, Hungary.
- **17 May 2019:** “Racial Stereotypes in Films in the Early 20th Century,” **BAS Conference**, University of Timisoara, Romania.
- **7 February 2019:** “Mimicry and Hybridity: The Quest for Identity in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*,” **Young Researchers Workshop**, the Institute of English and American Studies (IEAS), University of Debrecen, Hungary
- **31 January-2 February 2019:** **4th Biannual Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English (HUSSE 4)**, Veszprém, Hungary.
- **7 November 2018:** “Mimicry and Hybridity: The Quest for Identity in African American Literature,” **The Students Conference on "Language, Literary and**

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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Foreign language Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Chenini, F.:** Representations of Black Masculinity in Oscar Micheaux's Silent Film The Symbol of the Unconquered.  
In: Intercultural Occurrences: Diversity and Alterity. Szerk.: Péter Gaál-Szabó; Andrea Csillag; Otilia Veres; Szilárd Kmeczkó, Debreceni Református Hittudományi Egyetem ; Nagyvárad : Partium Kiadó, Debrecen, 133-150, 2020, (Cultures, Contexts, Identities, ISSN 2631-1674 ; 2.) ISBN: 9786155853319

#### Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

2. **Chenini, F.:** Lynn, Thomas Jay. Chinua Achebe and The Politics of Narration: Envisioning Language. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.  
*Eger J. Am. Stud.* 16, 145-148, 2020. ISSN: 1786-2337.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.33036/EJAS.2020.145>

#### Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (2)

3. **Chenini, F.:** Representations of Black Masculinity in Oscar Micheaux's Silent Film Within Our Gates.  
*Roman. J. Eng. Stu.* 17 (1), 31-37, 2020. ISSN: 1584-3734.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/rjes-2020-0005>
4. **Chenini, F.:** Mimicry and Hybridity: The Quest for Black Identity in Richard Wright's Native Son.  
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