

**REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK MASCULINITY IN OSCAR MICHEAUX'S
SILENT FILM *WITHIN OUR GATES***

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Abstract: My paper focuses on studying the representations of black masculinity in the Harlem Renaissance's discourse, and investigates how these representations challenged the limited, reductive and one-dimensional stereotypes which were adopted and further disseminated by the popular culture of the time. To do so, I will analyze a number of black male characters depicted in the silent film, *Within Our Gates* (1920), of the African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux.

Keywords: black masculinity, Oscar Micheaux, race films, the Harlem Renaissance

1. Introduction

Oscar Micheaux was one of the major figures in the so called "race film industry," one of the few prolific filmmakers, who was able to continue producing race films for an extended period of time, that is between 1918 and 1948. In their book *Oscar Micheaux and his Circle*, Pearl Browser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser describe Micheaux as "a major figure of the New Negro Renaissance," whose work "is dense, rich and complex" (20016: xvii).

Micheaux's films reached the height of their popularity at the time of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s, which aimed to present a new image of black people as capable of controlling their destiny and making high achievements in the arts and in the intellectual life in general, which was in stark contrast to the popular racial stereotypes associated with black people at the time. According to Saunders Redding, "[...] The Negro began that revelation and vindication of himself, that impassioned study of his accomplishments, the declaration of his future that creates the masculine literature of the 'New Negro'" (qtd. in Pochmara 2011: 9).

Anna Pochmara argues that the Harlem Renaissance was a masculine movement due to the fact that the majority of representatives were males, who adopted markedly masculine and militant ideologies, and so offered less space for the black female agency (9). This is manifest in the texts of writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the leading intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, of whom Pochmara remarks:

Apart from the masculinization of the elite destined to uplift the black race, Du Bois's rhetoric also simply excludes women from the community of black citizens. Du Bois uses the collective subject "we" with reference to black people; however, it is in some cases followed by "our" or "your" women. This phrasing denies black women the subject position indicated by "we." Such use of possessive pronouns can be found in the most important texts, including "The Niagara Movement Statement". (1906:40)

Furthermore, most of the Harlem Renaissance writers used tropes were "loaded with engendered and sexual connotations" (Pochmara, 2011:9) to celebrate black masculinity and to assert the role of the black man as central to the movement's discourse. The reason why these writers found it so important to emphasize the correlations between race and gender dates back to the time of slavery, when the black male body was owned by the white owner, and to the racial segregation of the Jim Crow laws, which inferred an economic and political exclusion on the black man and kept him away from the public spheres which were "defined against feminine domesticity" (ibid.:19). Robin Wiegman argues that "the de-commodification of the African-

American body that accompanies the transformation from chattel to citizenry is mediated through a complicated process of sexualization and gendering” (qtd. in Pochmara 2011:20). The emasculation of the black man is also fortified with the phenomenon of lynching, which was associated with rape charges. The lynch logic defined the black man as the brute rapist, whose uncontrollable sexuality threatens the purity of the white womanhood, to practice violence against the body of the black man, and to disempower his masculinity. The discourse of the Harlem Renaissance, therefore, was used to empower the position of the black man in the American society, from which he was excluded for centuries. Hence, in this paper I shall focus on the representations of black masculinity in Oscar Micheaux’s silent film *Within Our Gates*, which aimed to present a “new” image of the black man as part of the Harlem Renaissance discourse.

2. The Harlem Renaissance Discourse

The Harlem Renaissance’s counter-hegemonic discourse challenges the negative stereotypes about the black man as the savage, the violent criminal, and the rapist. These limited, reductive and one-dimensional stereotypes were readily adopted and further disseminated by the popular culture of the time, which “precipitated images of blacks in the visual arts that conformed to the worst stereotypes imaginable” (Powell 2013:35). Films like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) by D. W. Griffith perpetuated the hegemonic racial images which represent “the black masculine body as: (1) exotic and strange, (2) violent, (3) incompetent and uneducated, (4) sexual, (5) exploitable, and (6) innately incapacitated” (Jackson qtd. in Johnson and Taylor 2013: 114) which, in turn, used to fuel the white society’s fear of the black man. Cornel West attributes the problem of “invisibility and namelessness” of black men in American films to the “relative lack of power to represent themselves to themselves and to others as complex human beings, and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by White supremacist ideologies” (qtd. in Bell-Jordan 2013: 130). As a result, the messages revealed through the hegemonic representation of the black man and of the black people in general, in films produced by white filmmakers such as D. W. Griffith, significantly shaped the ways in which white people perceived the black man, and how the black man perceived himself as well (Bell – Jordan 2013:130).

In response to the racist characterizations of black people, and the black man in particular in films produced by white filmmakers, African American writers and directors started to produce films with an all-black cast, mainly for black audiences, which came to be known as “race films.” These films offered a counter representation of black people, and aimed to challenge the demeaning, one-dimensional stereotypes through transforming white society’s perception of black people, and more importantly, the black’s self-perception. Moreover, race films presented “libratory rescripting that offers holistic constructions of black identities” (Johnson and Taylor 2013:114) and black male identities in particular. Oscar Micheaux’s silent films can be regarded as paradigmatic examples of this cultural shift in the representation of black males.

The race film industry started with the African American producer William Foster, whose Foster Photography Company (1910) is considered as the first film production company which produced films catered to black audience. As most of race filmmakers, Foster used his films to challenge and refute the racial stereotypes of blacks in popular culture such as theaters and films. Foster believed that:

In a moving picture, the Negro can offset so many insults to the race—can tell their side of the birth of this great nation—can show what a great man Frederick Douglass was, the works of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Don Pedro, and battle of San Juan Hill, the things that will never be told except by the

Negroes themselves . . . It is the Negro businessman's only international chance to make money and put his race right with the world. (qtd in. Register 2016: 36)

During the years following the production of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the film which “as it is often said, stirred black Americans to produce their own stories in motion picture form” (Browser et al. 2016: xix), several film companies emerged such as The Lincoln Motion Picture (1916-1921) by Noble and George P. Johnson, Fredrick Douglass Company (1916-1919), Micheaux Film Corporation by Oscar Micheaux. These companies produced race films which were different and against the kind of films produced by Hollywood, especially in the silent period when “Hollywood was ill-equipped to make and uninterested in making films for African-American audiences” (xviii). The emergence of sound films by the late of 1920s posed considerable extra costs, which made it difficult for these companies to compete with Hollywood. Some of these companies went bankrupt due to the costly technology of sound films as well as the limitations of market to which these companies distributed their low-budget films. Pearl Browser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser, in *Oscar Micheaux and his Circle*, argue that Clyde Taylor expounded this problem of “technical proficiency” as:

A question of economics, [...], and race cinema is best understood as “underdeveloped” in relation to Hollywood, which might then be seen as an “overdeveloped” cinema. Underdevelopment is the “invisible hand” that “determines everything,” says Taylor, from the budget constraints that dictate a single “take” on the set to the number of black theaters that, as he says, “limits the take” in another sense. The consequences of underdevelopment are dramatized in Richard Norman's assertion [...] that whereas white films could play 15,000 theaters, race films could only count on the 105 theaters that catered to the black trade, all facilities that would have been more or less segregated in these years. (2016: xxv)

Micheaux's was one of the few African American filmmakers who continued to make race films in the silent as well as the sound period.

Oscar Micheaux's earliest films were controversial in the eyes of the larger public due to their “frank presentation of racial prejudice, discrimination, lynching, and miscegenation,” topics which urged the state censors to ban many of his films (Wallace 2016: 61). However, another controversial element of Micheaux's films can be observed with a retrospective critical insight, namely that in his version of attempting the “uplift” of the black community, he portrayed his positive male characters as men of respectability and integrity, whereby he can be seen as exaggerating the benign features of these characters. On the other hand, he also portrays black men as villains, crooks, pimps, and corrupt officials, who betray their own people to cater to the white society. Micheaux's work is important not only because it provided a counterpoint to pejorative stereotypes, but also that he created dichotomous roles for black male characters, which has resulted in a more nuanced cinematic portrayal of the black man.

Charlene Register, however, argues that Micheaux's portrayal of the unpleasant side of the black society was “[. . .] simply not tolerated within the African-American community. Such representations were bound to result in the bruising criticism that he received from the press” (48). In his effort to defend his films, Micheaux explained his “disturbing presentations” of some of his characters, he said:

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. My results might have been narrow at times, due perhaps to certain limited situations, which I endeavored to portray, but in those limited situations, the truth was the predominant characteristic. 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. 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. (qtd. in Register 2016: 45)

Micheaux's films do not depict a "simple reduction of black representation to a positive image," as bell hooks argues, but rather representations "that would convey complexity of experience and feeling" (1992:133). His films aimed to reveal "the original stories of Negro life," as Micheaux himself explains (qtd. in Hooks 1992:134), through presenting characters to which black people, and the black man in particular, can relate.

Oscar Micheaux's oldest surviving film is *Within Our Gates* (1920), the film which many scholars deemed it a direct response to Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). In this film, Micheaux addressed the rape charges frequently brought against black men, who were often punished by lynching. He attempted to counteract the rapist stereotypes through portraying his black male characters as capable of self-restraint and honorable behavior towards women. Micheaux also addressed the obstacles which prevent the race solidarity through portraying some of his black male characters as pimps and crooks, whose main aim is to hinder "the character on whom the hopes of others depend" (Gaines 2016: 79). The story of the film takes place in the early twentieth century, it is about Sylvia Landry, a fair-skinned lady, who is a teacher at a school in the American South run by a black male headmaster and his sister. The school teaches the children of black families, who are depicted as willing and eager to learn. One of the scenes shows a black sharecropper, who is a father of two children, in the school asking the headmaster to accept his children, and the intertitles have him say "that he has no money but will do whatever work is necessary in order to provide his children with an education" (Wallace 2016: 62). Such shots are inversions of the representations of black men either as criminal or as ignorant servants whose mental faculties are incompetent to learn. Due to financial problems, Sylvia travels to the North to raise money to save the school. During her trip, Sylvia encounters a street thief who steals her purse and runs away. Sylvia is rescued by Dr. Vivian, a black gentleman who is presented as a doctor, with whom Sylvia later shares a love story which ends up with the two getting engaged. Micheaux shows Dr. Vivian as a man of principles, who is ready to offer his help to women whenever it is needed. Micheaux, thus, uses Dr. Vivian's character to alter the image of the black man from being aggressive, criminal, and rapist and replace with a new image of the noble black man, the one who protects rather than rapes women.

Micheaux's emphasis on education, hard work, and self-restraint, in presenting his black male characters, foregrounds his belief in the ability of the black man to control his own destiny as a step toward achieving the uplift of the black community. Furthermore, Micheaux's model of the black man is analogous to Booker T. Washington's example of masculinity which is manifest in his reference to President William McKinley, of whom Washington writes:

I have observed that those who have accomplished the greatest results are those who "keep under the body"; are those who never grow excited or lose self-control, but are always calm, self-possessed, patient, and polite. I think that President William McKinley is the best example of a man of this class I have ever seen. In order to be successful in any kind of undertaking, I think the main thing is for one to grow to the point where one completely forgets him- self. (qtd in. Pochmara 2011: 26)

Micheaux shows us more of Sylvia's life in the penultimate sequence of the film, using a flashback to her past. The flashback explains that Sylvia is the adopted daughter of a loving black sharecropper, Jasper Landry, and his wife, who had raised and educated her. Her foster father is shown as a "young, vigorous, attractive, clean-cut, honest" man, in stark contrast to the figure of Uncle Tom (Wallace 2016:63). Sylvia helps her foster father to discover that the white landowner, Philip Gridlestone, has swindled him and that he owes him money. Gridlestone is shot in his office, while Sylvia's foster father is in there claiming his money, by another angry white sharecropper. Sylvia's foster father is found guilty after "Ephrem" — Gridlestone's black servant who was spying on them from the window—snitches on him. Consequently, the foster father and his wife are brutally lynched by a group of white people.

According to Anna Pochmara, “between 1882 and 1901, 1,914 black people were lynched, which indicates that most Southern black communities witnessed a lynching and no black individual could feel safe from it” (2011:19). The reason that made Ephrem betray Sylvia’s foster father is his eagerness to cater to the white folk so that they accept him as one of them. This, however, does not happen, as he ends up being lynched just like Sylvia’s foster father. Micheaux uses the character of Ephrem to prove that black men who choose to betray their race are not inherently evil, but it is the white society’s influence on them that made them act like evils.

In his attempt to reconceptualize the lynch logic according to which lynching is associated with rape charges, as part of the collective imagination at the time (Pochmara 2011: 19), Micheaux crosscuts the lynching scene of Sylvia’s foster parents being lynched with another scene, in which she is nearly raped. The scene shows Sylvia in a fight with Gridlestone’s angry brother who wants to rape her. Sylvia is saved at the last moment when her assailant rips her dress to discover a birth mark on her breast, which proves that “he is assaulting his own daughter” (Gaines 2016:74), as the intertitle explains : “A scar that she had on her chest saved her dishonor because on discovering it Girdlestone [the landowner’s brother] knew that Sylvia was his daughter which he had in legitimate marriage with a woman of her race and later adopted by the Landrys” (ibid.:74). This scene is reminiscent in many ways of the history of sexual attacks of the plantation masters on the slave women, and it confronts the myth of black men’s uncontrollable sexuality towards white women (ibid.:74). This obsession with the black male sexuality has been used as a justification for violence against black men as part of a racist ideology to disempower the black community (Pochmara 2011:20). Micheaux’s emphasis on Sylvia’s purity is important because, according to Jane Gaines, “African-American women were historically characterized as sexually willing, it was difficult to argue that they had ever been raped or sexually assaulted. Conveniently, it was impossible to rape a black woman” (2016: 75). Moreover, this scene demonstrates Micheaux’s attempt to rewrite the lynch scenario to place the white man as the sexual aggressor, who seeks to rape the pure black woman, whereas he places the black man as the real victim of the white society’s sadism.

3. Conclusion

The idea of rewriting the lynch logic is voiced in several texts of the Harlem Renaissance’s discourse, mainly in the work of W.E. Du Bois. In his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois tells the story of an educated young black man called John, who comes back home after he finished his education in the North. John is presented as “the target of lynch mob,” because he killed the white man who raped his sister (Pochmara 2011: 45), and who happens to be the son of the judge with whom John met when he returned from the North. John visited the judge in his house to ask for permission to open up a school for black people, and the judge answer was:

In this country the Negro must remain subordinate, and can never expect to be the equal of white men. In their place, your people can be honest and respectful; and God knows, I’ll do what I can to help them. But when they want to reverse nature, and rule white men, and marry white women, and sit in my parlor, then, by God! We’ll hold them under if we have to lynch every Nigger in the land. (Du Bois 2007:163)

Here, Du Bois explains that lynching is not the result of sexual crimes against white women, but even the honorable, well-educated black men can face lynching if they pursue justice and racial equality. Likewise, Oscar Micheaux’s attempt to rewrite the Lynch logic, Du Bois posits the black woman as a target for the white man’s sexuality, and the black man as the protector who is often punished by lynching for protecting the purity of black women.

Thus, we may say that as part of the Harlem Renaissance's discourse, Oscar Micheaux's film *Within Our Gates* aims to challenge the degrading stereotypes of the black man, which depict him either as the ignorant, the criminal, or the rapist. Micheaux presents a model of the black man whose identity is centered on hard work, self-control, and willingness for education. For the sake of achieving the uplift of the black community, Micheaux espoused integrity in presenting his characters. For this reason, many of his black male characters are neither noble nor educated, but villains and crooks who betray their own people to be accepted by the white society. Furthermore, *Within Our Gates* foregrounds Micheaux's endeavor to deconstruct the lynch logic, which depicts the black man's sexuality as a menace to the purity of the white woman, to posit the black man as the real victim of the racism of white people.



Gridleston's brother attempts to rape Sylvia (his real daughter)

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