

# African-Americans and Silent Films

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Paula J. Massood provides an overview of African-American filmmakers, producers, actors, and characters as represented in movies of the silent era – many responding, in part, to **D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*** and to images of African-Americans in earlier print, vaudeville, and screen sources. Notably, however, the first black-directed, black-cast motion picture, ***The Railroad Porter*** (1912), predated Griffith's film and was produced by the black-owned **Foster Photoplay Company**, formed to create comedies that would entertain without degrading their African-American characters. Through the work of such key figures as **Oscar Micheaux**, **Noble Johnson**, and **Lawrence Chenault**, Massood explores **entertainment** and **uplift** as the two

key focal points of early African-American cinema. Massood also examines exhibition practices targeting black audiences and the impact of the coming of sound on black filmmakers and audiences. Her essay shares ground with Charlie Keil on D. W. Griffith in this volume and with Alex Lykidis and Janet K. Cutler on black independent film in Volume II of this series, and with Ed Guerrero on Blaxploitation and Keith Harris on black crossover cinema in the hardcover/online version.

**Additional terms, names, and concepts:** National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), blackface, minstrelsy, the New Negro

Histories of African-American participation in American silent film often cite D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) as the defining moment in black cinematic representation. The film's myths of black inferiority and the sanctity of white nationhood seemed almost nostalgic at a moment of national growth and change, of which the new film technology was a part.

At the same time, its images of black brutes lasciviously chasing innocent white women and a congressional hall filled with barefoot, chicken-eating black coons solidified a number of myths that appealed to a young nation furiously attempting to define itself in the face of increasing immigration from abroad, the massive growth of urban industrial areas (and the

attendant loss of an agrarian culture), and the threat of world war.

While Griffith's film is responsible for sparking African-American protest movements on the local level through churches and civic groups and on the national level through the efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), it is inaccurate to suggest that its depictions of African-American characters were novel. In fact, besides the relatively new depiction of Gus's lust-filled, violent black brute, many of the black character types included in the film were drawn, like the narrative itself, from older representations of black people from the page, stage, and screen.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in order to fully understand the relationship between American silent cinema and African-American representation, we must first briefly consider earlier moments in the history of silent cinema, for the preceding decades of filmmaking set the stage for the representational and political issues raised in *The Birth of a Nation* and that were further examined, especially by black independent filmmakers, throughout the remainder of the silent period.

## Early Background: Vaudeville, Blackface Minstrelsy, and Film

African-American participation in American silent cinema, whether in front of or behind the camera, roughly follows two trajectories: entertainment and uplift. The former path draws on early cinema's roots in carnivals, vaudeville acts, and the minstrel stage, often borrowing from popular and familiar forms of stereotype and caricature, particularly blackface minstrelsy, for comic relief and overall entertainment. In a number of ways this transition was to be expected because many of the actors and skits from vaudeville appeared in early American film, the new medium providing a novel presentation of what was essentially carnival and sideshow material. The latter path, uplift, grew out of more explicit political goals that sought to counter demeaning white stereotypes of African-Americans with images of black strivers and professionals. Both entertainment and uplift films have complex histories that deserve further exploration.

As early as 1894, Thomas Edison's company was incorporating minstrel subject matter and performers,

many of them African-American, into its first films. For example, *The Pickaninny Dance – From the "Passing Show"* (1894), *James Grundy, no. 1/Buck and Wing Dance* (1895), and *James Grundy, no. 2/Cake Walk* (1895) feature popular acts from the vaudeville circuit. Other Edison titles, such as *A Watermelon Contest* (1895), *Sambo and Jemima* (1900), *Bally-Hoo Cake Walk* (1901), and *The Gator and the Pickaninny* (1903), drew upon familiar character types and comic scenarios from the stage. In these early examples, we can see cinema's inherent contradictions taking shape: The shorts capture actual, but often identified, black minstrel performers engaged in acts of fiction that were frequently taken to represent or mimic real life. The only roles open to black performers, these character types became the norm and were read as such by early film audiences.

The early films were most often single-shot, one-reel depictions of characters or short events. Over the next decade, however, the development of story films extended the complexity of cinematic narrative, and white actors in blackface increasingly supplanted African-American performers, shifting theatrical performance practices to the screen. Some films, like *What Happened in the Tunnel* (Edison, 1903) and *A Bucket of Cream Ale* (American Mutoscope, 1904), are set in unspecified locations, but the majority of films from this time are located in the rural South in a series of celluloid plantation dramas inspired by Plantation School novels, most notably *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Edison, 1902), which was repeatedly remade during the silent era.<sup>2</sup> Other examples include *The Chicken Thief* (American Mutoscope, 1904), *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (Edison, 1904), and *The Watermelon Patch* (Edison, 1905). Like their literary and visual precursors, many of the story films (especially those detailing black subservience and/or criminality) were, according to Jacqueline Stewart, a means of "disavow[ing], via mass culture, Black agency and progress" by presenting black subjects as backward, uncivilized, or as comic buffoons to both white and black audiences, since they were available to all viewers (Stewart 2005, 34).

There's no doubt that Griffith, a Southerner by birth and a stage actor by training, was familiar with these character types and narratives. From roughly 1897 until his film career began in 1908, Griffith supported himself on the stage as a member of various touring companies that performed legitimate theater, including Thomas Dixon, Jr's antisocialist *The One*

*Woman* (based on his novel of the same name), in which he had a role in New York between 1906 and 1907. During his early time at Biograph, Griffith directed a number of Civil War narratives, including *In Old Kentucky* (1909), *His Trust* (1911), *His Trust Fulfilled* (1911), and *The Informer* (1912) (Lang 1994, 29). Many of the themes of these early films would be developed in *The Birth of a Nation*, including a sympathetic rendering of the Southern slave system and the use of white performers in blackface.

While major film companies were expanding and moving to the West Coast, African-American showmen saw the new medium's potential as a viable profit-making opportunity as well as a means of presenting alternative versions of black life to audiences. The companies they began could be found throughout the country, though many were located in areas with large African-American populations. In 1912, for example, vaudeville showman William Foster established the Foster Photoplay Company in Chicago with the intention of making, as he announced in the *Indianapolis Freeman*, "non-degrading Black-cast comedies" for black audiences. The company's first film, *The Railroad Porter* (1912), starring "former members of the Pekin Stock Company," is considered to be the first black-directed motion picture (Sampson 1995, 174).<sup>3</sup> The film's narrative of a Pullman porter who learns that his wife is carrying on an affair with another man is filled with comic antics and suggests the appeal of the comedic form for black as well as white filmmakers. Yet Foster viewed film as a means of displaying African-American talents to the world along with being a tool to "offset so many insults to the race" (quoted in Everett 2001, 54). For Foster, then, film could be entertaining, profitable, and political.

Soon other race film companies were established in Foster's wake; for example, in 1913, the Afro-American Film Company was founded in New York by white investors and with African-American businessman Hunter C. Haynes as head of production. The Afro-American Film Company, like Foster's Photoplay Company, initially produced short comedies featuring popular black vaudevillians, again demonstrating the strong links between the stage and the screen. Unlike Foster's company, however, the Afro-American Film Company was white-owned, having been incorporated by A. W. Burg and G. K. and F. A. Wade for \$10,000. Given the cost of

capitalization, many companies producing films for black audiences – and it should be noted that audiences were often segregated in both the North and the South at this time – had white financing. In the case of the Afro-American Film Company, Haynes's role in the company's decision-making remains unclear (Walton 1914, 6). In fact, he may have been nothing more than the company's black face, a common organizational strategy for white owners looking to gain legitimacy with black audiences.

The Afro-American Film Company released two films in 1914, *Lovie Joe's Romance* and *One Large Evening*. While reviews were initially neutral, the company's films soon became the target of criticism in the black press over their inclusion of demeaning stereotypes. For example, Henry T. Sampson suggests that despite the use of black stars, *Lovie Joe's Romance* and *One Large Evening* were received poorly by "black theatre owners and managers [who] refused to book the films because they contained many of the same derogatory racial-stereotype characterizations of blacks in films released by the major companies" (1995, 178).<sup>4</sup> The theater managers' reluctance to show the films prompted Haynes to publish an appeal in black newspapers for increased community support for black films. In it he focused on the ways in which Afro-American films differed from those being released by mainstream companies:

There has been so much trash put out by film companies representing the colored man ... that it has almost disgusted him, and he is very suspicious when he sees a colored film advertised. But he can rest assured that any film advertised by the Afro-American Film Co. cannot but meet his approval. (Quoted in Sampson 1995, 178)<sup>5</sup>

For its part, the black press was willing to forgive Haynes for what it viewed as the sins of the company's white backers. Lester Walton, for example, observed in the *New York Age* that when

*One Large Evening* was shown at the Lafayette Theatre [in Harlem] there were some who were disposed to criticize Hunter C. Haynes ... for putting the picture on the market. But it is said that "his voice did not have any sound to it" when the advisability of producing *One Large Evening* was discussed.... Perhaps it is the same old story – the colored man furnishing the idea, but shut out from partnership when the proposition materializes. (Walton 1914, 6)

Shortly afterward, and perhaps due to such criticism coupled with a desire to make different films, Haynes left Afro-American to form his own Harlem-based company, the Haynes Photoplay Company. The company produced one short comedy, *Uncle Remus' First Visit to New York* (1914), a play on the familiar narrative of a pair of country bumpkins in the big city. According to Stewart, even though the film's humor comes at the expense of the unsophisticated rubes from the South, the critical response to *Uncle Remus* acknowledged the increasing modernity and urbanization of black audiences; for example, a reviewer for the *Indianapolis Freeman* suggested that the film is a "faithful portrait that contrasts the new Negro with the old and forges a chain of circumstances that vividly point out the progress the race has made in his fifty years of freedom" (quoted in Stewart 2005, 194). Haynes also produced a newsreel focusing on elite blacks in New York and Boston, which featured the popular boxers Sam Langford and Joe Walcott. This film was also reviewed favorably by the black press, which described it in 1914 as "by far the most meritorious picture of its kind ever thrown upon the screen" (quoted in Sampson 1995, 179).

Meanwhile, major film companies continued borrowing from popular vaudeville themes, most often for comic effect. Del Henderson, Griffith's colleague at Biograph, produced a number of single-reel comedies during the early teens. Many of these films, including *Black and White* (1913) and *Rag-Time Romance* (1913), feature white actors in blackface. Another company, New York's Crystal Films, also produced single-reel comedies with similar race themes. One title in particular, *A Change of Complexion* (Phillips Smalley, 1914), plays on the idea of mistaken identity through the comic construct of a white middle-class couple being "darkened" by a maid who had been chastened previously for associating with a vaudeville performer.<sup>6</sup> Like *What Happened in a Tunnel*, an Edison film in which the comedy is centered on an identity switch between a white woman and her black maid (to the horror of the white woman's suitor), these longer narratives played on the comic and sometimes threatening possibilities of white people suddenly turning black.

After the release of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1916, Biograph released *A Natural Born Gambler*, starring popular *Ziegfeld Follies* and vaudeville star Bert

Williams, who is also credited as writer and director. The film, set in a bar with an illegal gambling space in the back, depicts Williams's character, "Jonah Man," and his cronies (none of whom are in blackface) as drinkers and gamblers engaged in many of the behaviors that had become rote for African-American characters in American film. And yet *A Natural Born Gambler* is interesting in that it features Williams, a West Indian blackface performer, in the lead role, implying that the entertainer had a strong enough popular following to carry a film intended for white audiences. In fact, Williams received the equivalent of top billing at the time, with his name appearing before the title of the film: This placement is perhaps a reflection of his fame and also the autonomy he enjoyed with his Biograph contract.

While the depiction of the group of men, the "Independent Order of Calcimine Artists of America," is played for comic effect, *A Natural Born Gambler* manages, however slightly, to offer alternatives to the more familiar black buffoons and fools normally showcased in Biograph products. First, almost the entire black cast (excluding Williams) performs without blackface makeup. They are relatively well dressed and educated, the latter suggested by various scenes in which the characters read newspapers, write reports, and calculate bar tabs and club dues. Additionally, Williams plays his character with a subtlety and complexity lacking in most cinematic blackface renditions of the time. Originally part of the Williams and Walker comedy duo, Williams rose to fame as a blackface performer who often, especially with George Walker, pushed the limits of blackface performance on stage, using what had become a demeaning stage convention as a conscious performative strategy. In this film, Williams is the center of attention both within and outside of the narrative: The characters look to him to carry the narrative forward just as the audience follows and even identifies with his character through story and framing (for example, his expressions are readable through close-up shots of his face). That Williams also plays his role, despite the blackface and the use of stereotypical dialect in title cards, with dignity and humanity, moves his minstrel character beyond sheer stereotype. In the end, Williams succeeds in manufacturing audience identification and empathy, perhaps a first for a black film performer in American film.

## Story Films, Melodrama, and Uplift

As the responses to the Afro-American Company films suggest, black critics and audiences approached film with a critical eye even before *The Birth of a Nation* was released. However, even though it incorporated familiar racial tropes, Griffith's film was different in that it presented, through the use of sophisticated formal techniques and multiple reels, American history on an epic scale. Moreover, and perhaps more important, *The Birth of a Nation* depicted fictional events as though they were real, often presenting tableaux as if directly from historical documents. For Griffith, the "motion picture approaches more closely real life" than theater, and the camera "doesn't lie" (quoted in Rogin 1994, 259). In a sense, then, the power of *The Birth of a Nation* wasn't that it extended black caricatures, but that it argued – repeatedly through plot details and form – that these caricatures were true.

In addition to state and national protests and censorship battles, the African-American response to Griffith's film was cinematic. Most immediately, the Birth of a Race Photoplay Corporation was established in 1917, with the stated purpose of presenting "the true story of the Negro, his life in Africa, his transportation to America, his enslavement, his freedom, his achievements, together with his past, present and future relations with his white neighbor" (quoted in Sampson 1995, 208). Initially produced by Emmett J. Scott and Booker T. Washington (the narrative was based on Washington's *Up From Slavery*), the film eventually had the involvement of the NAACP and Universal Studios. Funding problems and the demands of attempting to fulfill various producers' visions unfortunately changed the scope of the film, and what was originally meant to highlight black American accomplishment became a presentation of Judeo-Christian history from the pages of the Bible. *The Birth of a Race* opened nearly two years after production began, was a critical and financial failure, and served as a cautionary tale for black filmmakers about white interference.

While *The Birth of a Race* was intended to be a direct response to Griffith's film, other race film companies were established in the late teens that resulted from the convergence of a number of social, political, and economic factors. As the earlier discussion

points out, at the beginning of the twentieth century there already was an interest in the production of films featuring black characters and stories for African-American audiences. The release of *Birth* helped fuel the desire to create positive representations of blacks, a desire that was also closely aligned with the black elite's project to define a "New Negro" in the twentieth century. At the same time, the nation's African-American population was becoming more urban as Northern industrial cities opened their factories to an influx of Southern, formerly agrarian, workers. This Great Migration resulted in an African-American population that was increasingly urban and one for whom antebellum melodramas, such as Griffith's, were outmoded. Film, in this environment, was seen as an important tool for educating the newly arrived migrants, especially by the black middle class who took a progressive and pedagogical approach to the new technology.

While a number of race film companies were established in the late teens and the early 1920s, arguably the most influential African-American outfits were the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, established by George and Noble Johnson in 1916, and the Micheaux Book and Film Company, founded by Oscar Micheaux in 1918. Noble Johnson was a versatile character actor who played a variety of roles in Hollywood films from 1915 onward. Not long after beginning his career in film, Johnson founded, with his brother George, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, aiming to provide black audiences with dramatic stories of African-American accomplishment. Firmly ensconced in the uplift ideology embraced by W. E. B. Du Bois's "Talented Tenth," the company was celebrated in the black press for its "dedication to technical merits and thematic integrity in depicting black life and culture" (Everett 2001, 117). In his capacity as top talent for the company, Noble Johnson appeared in three releases, *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916), *A Trooper of Troop K* (1917), and *The Law of Nature* (1917), before he left in 1918. He often used the money he earned from his work in studio films, along with other sources, to bankroll Lincoln's operations. His resignation from the company was rumored to be the result of an ultimatum set by Universal Studios, which had a contract with the actor (Bogle 2006, 23).

While there remain no extant prints of the Lincoln films, descriptions of their narratives provide insight

into their uplift strategies: “to make positive family films, each structured around a black hero’s struggle to accomplish some admirable ambition” (Berry 2001, 50). *The Realization of a Negro’s Ambition*, for example, narrates the story of a recent Tuskegee graduate with an engineering degree who returns to the family farm after failing to find employment in a discriminatory oil industry. Through a series of plot twists, which lead him to Los Angeles and an oil job (after he’s saved the life of a white executive’s daughter), the young man manages to find oil on the family farm, marry his long-time sweetheart, and live happily ever after. The film’s hero is presented as an upright citizen who is college educated, hard working, and ambitious. His success at the film’s end provided an alternative embodiment of black masculinity to the image of black masculinity projected by most films of the time, which presented black men as lazy, dumb, and uneducated.

Through narratives that dramatized the concerns and ambitions of the black middle class, the Lincoln films offered a further alternative to the films typically being produced by both black and white film companies. This was not lost on the black press, whose readership was made up of the black bourgeoisie. The Los Angeles-based *California Eagle* was especially supportive of the company’s endeavors, covering the premiere of *The Realization of a Negro’s Ambition* and praising the final product. According to Everett, Lincoln’s

commitment to serious dramas as opposed to the cheaply made ribald comedies of its competitors prompted the *Eagle* to conclude that Lincoln not only represented a significant advance for black incursions into the influential medium of film but, more importantly, symbolized a giant step in the black community’s quest for building black institutions. (2001, 110)

But the company also struggled to stay afloat while facing competition from more established studios, including Universal, which held Noble’s contract. George Johnson continued Lincoln’s mission for a few more years following the departure of his brother Noble in 1918, but the company went out of business in 1923, after releasing one more film, *By Right of Birth* (1921).

Lincoln’s most serious competitor was the Micheaux Book and Film Company. A former railroad porter, homesteader, and novelist, Oscar

Micheaux was also an entrepreneur, a provocateur, and a race man who symbolizes the two, often competing, facets of African-American silent filmmaking – entertainment and uplift. Micheaux moved into filmmaking after George and Noble Johnson refused his request to direct the Lincoln adaptation of his novel, *The Homesteader* (the Johnsons had attempted to purchase the rights to the novel after its publication in 1917).<sup>7</sup> Micheaux had no prior filmmaking experience before establishing the Micheaux Book and Film Company in Chicago in 1918, but he went on to direct the adaptation and release *The Homesteader* in February 1919. The director’s first film, a semi-autobiographical story about a homesteader in South Dakota, was a critical success upon release, with the *Half-Century Magazine*, for example, suggesting that *The Homesteader* ranked “in power and workmanship with the greatest of white western productions” (quoted in McGilligan 2007, 131).

*The Homesteader* also introduced many of the stylistic patterns that would continue to appear throughout Micheaux’s filmmaking career, one that extended from the silent to the sound era and included over 40 films. Characteristic of Micheaux, also, was his skill at marketing. Prior to *The Homesteader*’s release, Micheaux was a relative unknown in Chicago, and – even though the interiors were shot in the city and the director cast members of the popular Lafayette Players (who had opened up a satellite troupe in Chicago in 1918) in a number of roles in the film – there was little press coverage of the production. Micheaux booked an 8,000-seat theater in the city for the film’s premiere and took out half-page advertisements in local black newspapers announcing his “Mammoth Photoplay ... destined to mark a new epoch in the achievements of the darker races.” The ads called upon the community’s race pride by exclaiming:

Every Race man and woman should cast aside their skepticism regarding the Negro’s ability as a motion picture star and go and see [the film], not only for the absorbing interest obtaining herein, but as an appreciation of those finer arts which no race can ignore and hope to obtain a higher plane of thought and action. (Quoted in McGilligan 2007, 129)

Micheaux, like Foster, saw that uplift didn’t have to come at the expense of profit. More important, he never questioned his or other black filmmakers’ ability and right to make a film.

While he may have been extolling race pride and accomplishment, the black middle class never fully accepted Micheaux or his films. Part of this resulted from his personality, which had George and Noble Johnson referring to him as “a rough Negro who got his hands on some cash” (quoted in Cripps 1993, 184). Part may also have been due to his commitment to the self-help ideals of Booker T. Washington at a time when W. E. B. Du Bois was at the forefront of modern African-American political life. And part also resulted from the subject matter of his films, which included such controversial content as racially motivated violence (including lynching scenes), miscegenation, black urban criminality, and the hypocrisy of the black church. *The Homesteader*, for example, may have opened to enthusiastic reviews, but its premiere run was short-lived. After receiving complaints from members of the black clergy claiming that the film vilified black preachers, the Chicago Censorship Board banned future screenings of the film in the city because of its “tendency to disturb the public peace” (quoted in McGilligan 2007, 130). The ban was overturned a few days later, but it was just one of many similar incidents in Micheaux’s career. The upside of such controversy, however, was that the director drew upon such press for subsequent advertising campaigns.

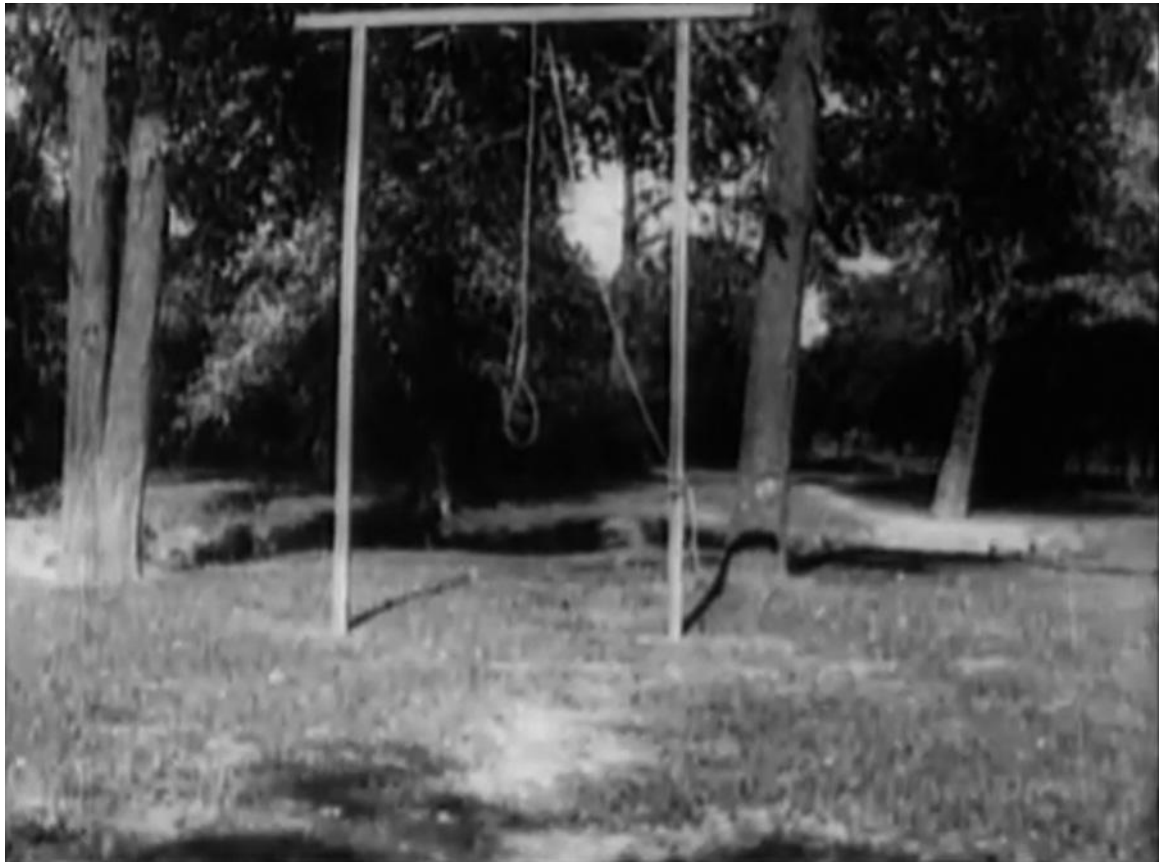
After *The Homesteader*, Micheaux quickly began work on his next film, *Within Our Gates* (1919), which presents a much more powerful and controversial rejoinder to *The Birth of a Nation* than the earlier *The Birth of a Race*. The film, one of the few surviving examples of Micheaux’s silent work, is basically an uplift melodrama focusing on a young, educated woman named Sylvia Landry. After a failed romance, Sylvia moves from the North to take a teaching position in an all-black school in the South. When the school experiences financial troubles, she heads back north in search of a possible patron. Through a variety of plot twists, Sylvia finds a patron for the school and meets and falls in love with a young, handsome Doctor Vivian. But Sylvia has a past: Near the end of the film a flashback reveals that she is the product of a mixed-race marriage and that her adoptive parents (the reasons for her adoption remain unclear) were victims of a violent lynching. Despite this history, Sylvia and Doctor Vivian marry and live happily ever after.

In its story of African-American accomplishment and success, *Within Our Gates* offered an uplifting

narrative of the New Negro. Yet the film also contains a number of controversial elements that troubled the black establishment in places like Chicago and New York. As noted, Micheaux’s film offers an answer to a number of the more demeaning moments in *The Birth of a Nation*. Most important, it suggests that violence, such as lynching, which was on the rise in the late teens, was not the result of black depravity as represented when a lust-filled black brute chases an innocent white woman in *The Birth of a Nation*. Rather, it stemmed from white greed, lust, and desire for power. In *Within Our Gates*, for example, Sylvia is nearly raped by a white man who, it turns out, is actually her father. Also, her adopted family is lynched because the educated Sylvia determines that the white plantation owner has been cheating her sharecropper father. Moreover, rather than simply imply the lynching, Micheaux showed most of the action, including shots of the parents being captured and hanged by a white mob.

Like *The Homesteader*, *Within Our Gates* proved to be highly controversial, especially in Chicago, which had experienced a wave of race riots in its predominantly black South Side neighborhoods the previous summer. The violence was initiated when a young black man was stoned to death for swimming on the wrong side of a segregated city beach. Race relations were already strained in the city, the result of a burgeoning black population that was moving beyond the borders of the overcrowded South Side into other neighborhoods. Black Chicago erupted at news of the murder and the authorities’ lack of response to the community’s cries for justice. The violence was responsible for 38 deaths and hundreds of injuries. In such an environment, it was feared that Micheaux’s film would incite a new wave of riots, a fear that was shared equally by the city’s black and white communities.<sup>8</sup> Both black and white social and religious leaders protested the film and called for its more offensive scenes of lynching and attempted rape to be cut, with which the director had no choice but to comply. Micheaux’s experiences in Chicago were replicated in other cities with large black communities and suggested the expectations and the limits black leaders often placed on the content of films meant for their constituencies.

Micheaux had a prolific film career, directing over 20 films during the silent era. Of these, in addition to *Within Our Gates*, only two prints exist: *The Symbol*



**Figure 4.1** The moment before the lynching in *Within Our Gates* (1919, director and producer Oscar Micheaux).

of the *Unconquered* (1920) and *Body and Soul* (1925). The former, the first film made after Micheaux relocated to Harlem in the early 1920s (where he had no better luck connecting with the black elite), continued his revisionist interpretation of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* by returning to the themes of miscegenation and racial violence. The film is another version of a homesteading tale, focusing on a young woman who inherits a farm claim in the West. She becomes an object of the wrath of a local white property owner who tries to scare her off with the help of the Ku Klux Klan, who are presented as largely motivated by greed. The latter film, *Body and Soul*, marked Paul Robeson's screen debut in dual roles as a dishonest preacher (and rapist) and a young, upstanding inventor, both of whom vie for the hand of a young woman. Both films were controversial, but the latter especially, which again sparked the wrath of the black church.

These films, in combination with Micheaux's other, now-missing, silents, suggest the filmmaker's interest in creating controversy. More important, however, they signify his sophisticated grasp of race politics of the time. Controversial, and often lacking in production values, the Micheaux Book and Film Company's silent films were also exclusively black-financed, a rarity for black film at this time and, as we have seen with Hunter Haynes's experiences with the Afro-American Film Company, a guarantee that what was being filmed was not the result of compromise. As far as we can tell from the documentary evidence that survives, many of the films, for example his adaptations of Thomas Stribling's *Birthright* (1924) and Charles Chestnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1924/1925) and *The Conjure Woman* (1926), focus on black identity and ambition. Others, like *The Brute* (1920) and *The Devil's Disciple* (1926), offer moral lessons regarding the temptations of urban life, a

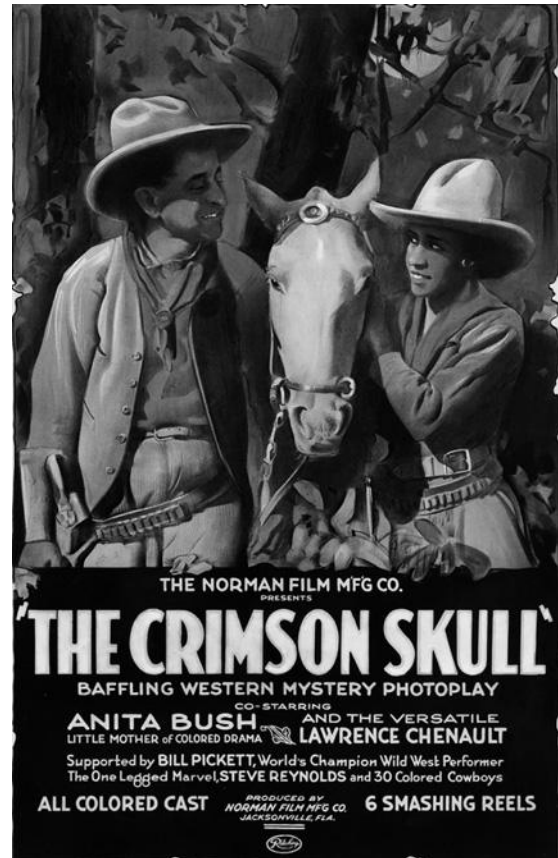


popular theme among the black bourgeoisie and both black and white progressives. Whether focusing on the black middle class or the underworld, preachers or teachers, Micheaux's silent films examine the complexities of increasingly modernized and urbanized African-American life.

## White-Owned Race Film Companies: Competition and Collaboration

In addition to black-owned and operated production companies, there were a number of white-owned companies making films during the 1920s, and three that were well respected at the time stand out for their uplift films: The Norman Film Manufacturing Company of Florida, Reol Productions of New York, and the Colored Players Film Company of Philadelphia. Richard Norman from Jacksonville established the Norman Company in 1912. The company briefly made films with white casts before shifting into the production of black-cast melodramas, Westerns, mysteries, and flying films. The Westerns, *The Bull Dogger* (1921) and *The Crimson Skull* (1922), headlined well-known African-American cowboy Bill Pickett and were shot in the all-black town of Boley, Oklahoma. Both films also starred Anita Bush, who founded the Lafayette Players (originally the Anita Bush Stock Company) and was known as the "Little Mother of Colored Drama." *The Crimson Skull* was described as "a typical picture of the old swash-buckling west, with the added attraction of a cast composed of our actors and actresses who could ride and shoot in true Western style" (quoted in Klotman 2001, 168–169). Besides the Westerns, Norman also produced a shipwreck story, *Regeneration* (1923), and *The Flying Ace* (1926), the latter a well-received aviation film described in its posters as "The Greatest Airplane Thriller Ever Produced."

The Norman Company, like the Lincoln Company, did not survive the transition to sound. Richard Norman continued his involvement in the film business, distributing other companies' films into the 1930s. Among the films he distributed were a few of Micheaux's sound titles. According to Phyllis Klotman, the pair established a relationship in the 1920s, perhaps a result of their combined interests and the



**Figure 4.2** Poster for Richard E. Norman's *The Crimson Skull* (1922, producer Norman Film Manufacturing Company).

fact that the race film circuit was relatively small (Norman also shared correspondence with George Noble of the Lincoln Company). This early communication and Norman's continuing connections with the race film distribution circuit may have prompted Micheaux to work with him later in his career (Klotman 2001, 172).

Another of Lincoln's and Micheaux's competitors was Reol Productions, a New York-based production company that made race films from 1920 until approximately 1924. Reol was founded by Robert Levy, an experienced theater and film man, who had previously worked in the Los Angeles offices of the Éclair Film Company and also was the former owner of the Quality Amusement Corporation, operators of race theaters (including Harlem's Lafayette Theatre). Through this latter connection, Levy enjoyed a

direct line to some of Harlem's, and the Lafayette's, most popular talents, including Lawrence Chenault, who also appeared in a number of Oscar Micheaux's productions, and Edna Morton, considered by the black press to be the "Colored Mary Pickford." Reol produced a number of feature-length uplift dramas during its short life span, along with two newsreels (focusing on Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee) and three comedies (two shorts and one feature): *The Jazz Hounds* (1921), *The Simp* (1921), and *Easy Money* (1922). *The Jazz Hounds* drew its subject matter from a series of popular black Sherlock Holmes films produced by another white-owned race film company, Ebony Film Corporation, during the teens (Petersen 2008, 310),<sup>9</sup> while the next two comedies starred popular stage comedian and theater owner Sherman H. Dudley, who later worked with the Colored Players Film Corporation.

Reol's uplift films followed a similar pattern as their main black and white competitors in their focus on black heroes and heroines of accomplishment or those striving for success; for example, *Secret Sorrow* (1921) includes a successful district attorney, while *The Burden of Race* (1921) focuses on a young university student. Additionally, Reol adapted a number of narratives from popular literature of the time, including Paul Laurence Dunbar's 1902 migration novel, *The Sport of Gods* (1921), its debut film, and Aubrey Bowser's serialized passing story, "The Man Who Would Be White," as its second feature, titled *The Call of His People* (1921). The films explored popular themes from the time – migration, passing, and achievement – and did so by depicting "exemplary African Americans rising to middle-class status" (Petersen 2008, 311). Despite their subject matter, their popularity with the black press, and Levy's connections to the black theater circuit, Reol Productions went out of business in 1924. According to Levy, "Negro amusement buyers are fickle and possessed of a peculiar psychic complex, and they prefer to patronize the galleries of white theatres [rather] than theirs" (quoted in Sampson 1995, 215), a common lament among race film producers.

The Colored Players Film Corporation of Philadelphia had similar roots as Reol; David Starkman established it in 1926 with Louis Groner and Roy Calnek (the latter of whom also directed three of the company's four releases). Starkman came from the film world, having owned a film exchange and a

theater catering to black patrons. Calnek was an experienced director who had made at least three race films (for Superior Art Motion Pictures, Inc., another Philadelphia-based company) by the time he joined Starkman (Musser 2001, 180). The company drew its acting talent and technical personnel from the Philadelphia area and often combined professionals like Calnek and Lawrence Chenault (who appeared in all of the company's films) with unknowns.

According to a number of scholars, including Henry T. Sampson and Charles Musser, Starkman was the Jewish equivalent of Oscar Micheaux in that he was the primary power behind the Colored Players, creating the majority of its promotion and advertising himself (Sampson 1995, 218; Musser 2001, 181).<sup>10</sup> Starkman, like Micheaux, also believed in making uplifting films that were free of demeaning stereotypes. Rather than form an alliance, however, such as the one Micheaux worked out with Richard Norman, the Colored Players Film Corporation and the Micheaux Book and Film Company were competitors for the comparatively small box office enjoyed by race film productions in contrast to the more mainstream product coming from what was increasingly a standardized industry based in Hollywood. The rival companies' films often opened in the same cities at the same time, and just as often the companies poached each other's stars. Lawrence Chenault, for example, first worked in Micheaux films before appearing in Colored Players features, and Shingzie Howard, a Micheaux discovery, appeared in at least two of the company's productions. One of the primary differences between the two companies, however, was in their reception by the black press. Whereas Micheaux's films often were controversial and the subject of censorship battles, the Colored Players' productions received high marks from assorted newspapers; the company's debut, *A Prince of His Race* (1926), for instance, was described as "a decided step forward in the field of cinema art as it pertains to the Negro" by the *Philadelphia Tribune* (quoted in Musser 2001, 185).

Despite differences in reception and production values (the Colored Players productions had more generous budgets and the films often looked better), Starkman and the Colored Players personnel engaged with similar subject matter as most of the black-owned companies: Their films focused on educated and ambitious black heroes and heroines trying to

better themselves in the twentieth century. *Ten Nights in a Barroom* (1926), the company's second feature, provides a good example of these concerns. Starring the respected black stage actor Charles S. Gilpin in his first and only screen role (prior to this he had most famously starred on the stage in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*) and Lawrence Chenault in a supporting role, the film is an adaptation of Timothy Shay Arthur's nineteenth-century temperance tale of the same title, in which a man loses everything because of his drinking. Gilpin's performance was well received and the film as a whole was described in the *Chicago Defender* as "of a very high standard" and "presented in a manner which holds intense interest, being actually exciting and melodramatic in spots. It is a Racial novelty and one which carries a deep moral" (quoted in Sampson 1995, 341).

*The Scar of Shame* (1927), the company's last film and the only one that has survived almost intact, was equally well received. The film narrates the story of an ill-fated marriage between two individuals who meet in a Philadelphia boarding house. Alvin Hilliard, an aspiring composer, meets Louise Howard while rescuing her from a beating by her stepfather, an alcoholic underworld figure named Strike. After delivering her from two more attacks, Alvin marries Louise and the resulting union pairs his bourgeois blood and ambitions with her less admirable family tree. Through a variety of plot twists and misunderstandings that result in the pair's separation – Alvin mistakenly wounds Louise with a gun, is sent to prison, and eventually escapes – Alvin resumes his middle-class life as a music teacher while Louise, the child of the underworld, ends up a prostitute and eventually commits suicide.

*The Scar of Shame's* class dynamics, which include Alvin's eventual engagement to a woman of similar class background and Louise's convenient demise, have been discussed in detail by a number of film scholars.<sup>11</sup> The film's narrative, casting, and mise-en-scène work toward what Thomas Cripps describes as "the finer things, the higher hopes, and higher aims" (1997, 55). The film presents a world in which these "higher ideals" are embodied by Alvin and a few of the boarding house residents. The world outside the boarding house is presented as dangerous for those striving for a better life: It is where Louise's father spends his time, along with another boarding house resident, who is Alvin's chief competitor for Louise's

attentions. And yet, while *The Scar of Shame* embodies the ideology of the bourgeoisie, its narrative of uplift fails to extend to Louise. A child of the lower class (she was employed by the boarding house), she cannot escape her class status through marriage to Alvin. Her demise clears the way for his rightful coupling with a woman more of his social caste.

Despite, or perhaps because of this class bias, *The Scar of Shame* fared well with reviewers who focused on its production values and narrative. A reviewer for the *New York Amsterdam News*, for example, asserted that the film "sets a new standard of excellence," and Cripps suggests that *The Scar of Shame* "exemplified the highest hope of the black generation of the 1920s who placed faith in individual aspiration as the path to group emancipation" (1997, 57). The film was the result of the partnership between Starkman and Sherman H. Dudley, with Starkman as the general manager of the reorganized company and Dudley serving as the president. Dudley, who had become interested in race films with his involvement in Reol's *The Simp*, was a vocal supporter of the industry, even arguing in the *Chicago Defender*: "We need them [race films]. I don't believe any manager lost a dime on a Race picture regardless of how rotten the picture was. If that be the case, why can't they make money with good pictures with good Race scenarios written carefully around Race atmosphere. I think we should write about ourselves and stop trying to ape the white man" (quoted in Musser 2001, 182). Unfortunately, the Colored Players, like many race film companies invested in rewriting African-American representations, failed financially, and *The Scar of Shame* was the last film produced by the company.

## The Minors: Lesser-Known Race Film Companies

The Lincoln, Micheaux, Norman, Reol, and Colored Players companies were the most visible and successful race film producers of the silent era, but a number of lesser-known companies, incorporated during the 1920s, also were scattered across the country. Some managed to make a film or two before ceasing operations while others failed to produce anything before disappearing. The more noteworthy examples include the Detroit-based Maurice Film Company,

founded in 1920 by Richard Maurice. Maurice made two films almost 10 years apart, *Nobody's Children* (1920) and *Eleven P.M.* (1928). The latter film, which is extant, is considered to be one of the earliest (if not the first) experimental films made by an African-American filmmaker. The film contains an innovative visual style – employing superimpositions and split screens along with a complicated narrative structure, including dream sequences and flashbacks – to tell an uplift tale about a young writer who must finish a magazine story by the appointed hour of the title. He falls asleep and dreams of a musician whose life is ruined by living on the street. The musician is reincarnated as a dog that then returns to exact vengeance on the people who ruined his family. The young writer eventually wakes up and uses his dream as inspiration to successfully complete his own narrative.

At least eight black-owned and operated film production companies incorporated between 1914 and 1928 in New York, and one in New Jersey, the Frederick Douglass Film Company. Of these, half were involved exclusively in newsreel production (Haynes Photoplay Company, Toussaint Motion Picture Exchange/Whipper Reel Negro News, the Downing Film Company, BEJAC Film Company, Douglass). Of the remaining companies, three made fiction films (Seminole Film Producing, Colored Feature Photoplay, Inc., and Paragon Pictures Corporation), and one never produced a film (the Eureka Film Co., Inc.). Little is known about most of the films released by the companies; however, Paragon's *The Crimson Fog* (1928) starred well-known actors Inez Clough and Lawrence Chenault, suggesting that the company enjoyed access to many of the same performers as the larger firms.<sup>12</sup>

In Chicago, Peter Jones established the Peter P. Jones Photoplay Company in 1914 before moving to Harlem in 1922 (where he founded Seminole); the Unique Film Company was established in 1916 and made one film, *Shadowed by the Devil* (1916), before going out of business; and the Royal Gardens Motion Picture Company was founded in 1919 by a former Ebony Film Company actor, Sam T. Jacks, and made one film, *In the Depths of Our Hearts* (1919) (Sampson 1995, 188). Elsewhere, companies appeared in Los Angeles (Booker T. Film Company, est. 1921, and the Rosebud Film Corporation, est. 1927), Massachusetts (Peacock Photoplay, est. 1921), St Louis (the Eagle Film Company, est. 1922), Kansas City (the

Western Picture Producing Company, est. 1922), and Washington, DC (Monumental Pictures Corporation, est. 1921). The dates of the various companies suggest that 1920–1922 was the high point in race film production, with only some of the larger companies, like Micheaux, producing throughout the decade, especially once the industry transitioned to sound after 1927.

Judging from what little evidence exists, there were fewer white-controlled race film companies established during the early part of the 1920s, suggesting that the rapidly professionalizing mainstream industry held greater appeal and profit potential for white entrepreneurs looking to make films (though a number of small companies continued making films in the New York area, using the facilities left behind by larger filmmaking concerns). It also highlights the persistence of the industry's discriminatory practices, which disallowed black technical personnel or performers from achieving any positions of power in Hollywood.

In addition to the firms already discussed, most of the white independent production companies, like the black-owned companies, were located around the country. Some white companies, such as the Al Bartlett Film Manufacturing Company of Atlanta (est. 1913), the Ebony Film Corporation of Chicago (est. 1917), and the Harris Dickson Film Company of Mississippi (est. 1921), made comedies with subject matter drawn from popular vaudeville scenarios or, as in the last example, from a series of popular *Saturday Evening Post* plantation stories (Sampson 1995, 212). Others, like the Democracy Film Corporation of Los Angeles (est. 1917) and the Dunbar Film Corporation of New York (est. 1928), produced dramas, many of which were uplift narratives and featured accomplished and intelligent protagonists. The Democracy Film Corporation, for example, released *Injustice* in 1919, a controversial film that was advertised as an answer to Dixon's *The Clansman*. Also, the Dunbar Film Corporation, who employed Oscar Micheaux's brother Swan Micheaux as its vice president, successfully released the detective film *Midnight Ace* (1928) before going out of business.<sup>13</sup>

While the race film industry experienced a number of changes during the late teens through the mid-1920s, the mainstream American film industry was taking the shape that it still retains. From the early teens onward many Eastern companies

began moving west – following the lead of the Selig Polyscope Film Company, the Christie Film Company, Carl Laemmle's Independent Moving Picture Company (IMP), and others – lured by the promise of fine weather, cheap land, and a continent's distance away from the East Coast's restrictive business practices (for example, those practiced by the Motion Picture Patents Company). By the mid-1920s most of the major film studios were established on the West Coast, with Warner Bros., Paramount (formerly Famous Players-Lasky), RKO (formerly Mutual Film Corporation), Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (formerly Louis B. Mayer Picture and Metro Pictures), and Fox Film Corporation making up the “big five” studios. Minor studios included Columbia Pictures, United Artists, and Universal Studios, the largest among numerous smaller producers.

Even though the West Coast studios developed into a modern, vertically integrated, profit-making industry, they continued to rely on a number of conventions from film's earliest Eastern iterations, including a narrative focus on melodrama and comedy and a practice of typecasting by race, ethnicity, and gender. During the 1920s, as noted, there was little or no hope for African-American technical personnel seeking jobs in Hollywood; the industry remained as segregated as it was on the East Coast. Roles in front of the camera promised little more and often took the form of uncredited bit parts as domestic help or other background players (such as slaves in plantation dramas as *In Old Kentucky* or *Topsy and Eva*, both from 1927). The use of blackface decreased on-screen during the later silent era, as did the more demeaning types (the sexualized brutes, for instance) of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, but no new images filled the gap, and there remained few opportunities for African-American dramatic performers to sustain a career in Hollywood. Actors such as Evelyn Preer and Charles Gilpin, stars of the black stage and screen, were virtually invisible in Hollywood productions; Preer appeared in very small roles in early sound films and Gilpin was fired from Universal's version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1927 for being uncooperative.<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Chenault, perhaps the most ubiquitous male star of race films, never appeared in a major studio release.

The performers who managed to work regularly during the 1920s did so either by playing a number of different ethnicities rather than African-

American characters or by accepting variations of the same stereotypes drawn from vaudeville and the early screen. In the former category is Noble Johnson, founder and president of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, who enjoyed a Hollywood career that spanned from 1915 to 1950 (and who used his Hollywood earnings to support Lincoln, as noted). Johnson was a versatile character actor who played a variety of roles in Hollywood film, though few of them were identifiably “black.” Instead, the light-skinned Johnson was cast in brown-skinned or exotic roles, playing Native Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders in a number of prestige pictures, including Rex Ingram's *The Four Men of the Apocalypse* (1921), Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923) and *The King of Kings* (1927), and Raoul Walsh's *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924). Throughout this time, the black press functioned as boosters, overlooking the racial mismarking and reading Johnson's work experiences as a sign of black achievement.

More often than not, however, black performers were expected to play roles of the pickaninny or the comic buffoon. Donald Bogle argues, for example, that the most visible black performers in Hollywood during the early 1920s were children associated with the “Our Gang” series, including Ernest Morrison (Sunshine Sammy), Eugene Jackson (Pineapple), Billie Thomas (Buckwheat), Allen Clayton Hoskins (Farina), and Matthew Beard (Stymie) (2006, 41). Of these performers, Ernest Morrison has the distinction of being one of the first black actors to sign with a studio (Hal Roach in 1919). In his early work with the studio, Morrison acted as sidekick to comedians Harold Lloyd and Sam Pollard, most famously in *Haunted Spooks* (1920) as a flour-covered pickaninny opposite Lloyd. In 1921 Morrison was cast as the lead in *The Pickaninny*, the first in a planned series of short films featuring his Sunshine Sammy character. The series never materialized because exhibitors informed Roach “that mainstream theatres would not show shorts featuring a colored star” (Bogle 2006, 33). Morrison's role in the “Our Gang” series followed the next year, in which he played the only black child amidst an ensemble cast of children (though Allen “Farina” Hoskins was soon added to the mix). Morrison left the series in 1924 and was replaced by a succession of black child actors playing similar roles. He later returned to the screen in the “East Side Kids” series.

These examples suggest that the more satisfying, though less lucrative, roles for African-American actors and comedians tended to be in the race film industry. Most of the major producers, including Lincoln, Micheaux, and the Colored Players, drew from established theatrical troupes for their players, and many launched the relatively long careers of actors in race films; for example, Lawrence Chenault, a Lafayette Player, appeared in race film productions for virtually all the major companies, including Norman, Micheaux, and the Colored Players, and continued working with Micheaux after the transition to sound. And Evelyn Preer, as noted, had a much more successful career with Micheaux than she ever experienced during her short stay in Hollywood. However, the practice of casting dramatic performers, along with the types of roles available to them, would change, like much of the race film industry, with the transition to sound in 1927.

## The End: The Coming of Sound

The release of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 marked an important and strange moment in American film history, one that underscores the *Fort/Da* relationship that Hollywood has had with African-Americans throughout its history. On the one hand, when popular vaudevillian Al Jolson performed, in blackface, the first few spoken words in a feature-length film, he transferred the nation's almost naturalized minstrel aesthetic from silent to sound film. On the other hand, the film launched a new moment in African-American participation in the industry as blackface Jolsons, Eddie Cantors, and other white stage performers translated a variety of new African-American performative modes, especially jazz, to audiences. It wasn't long before Hollywood started casting black singers and dancers; the new sound technology, it was believed, was especially well suited for black voices.<sup>15</sup> Popular cabaret performers like Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters were cast in musical intervals within longer narratives or in the all-black musicals, such as *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and *Hallelujah!* (1929), released by studios at the end of the decade. The Hollywood vogue for African-American performers was relatively short-lived, however, and soon the demeaning roles – domestics (the mammy of Louise Beavers), comic

buffoons (Stepin Fetchit), or “atmospheric furniture” (Cripps 1993, 127) – again became the norm.

What may have been an opportunity for performers such as Waters, Nina Mae McKinney, Noble Sissle, and Eubie Blake, among others, was initially devastating for the race film industry. Many companies were undercapitalized and lacked the financial resources to adapt to sound filmmaking. Likewise, theaters that catered to black patrons, sometimes the only venue for race films, could not afford to equip their facilities with sound equipment. African-American audiences, as mentioned, were historically drawn to Hollywood's production values, and sound film made the difference in quality all the more obvious. That they could see big-name African-American performers in featured roles – at least in black-cast musicals – was an added bonus. All of these factors, coupled with the fact that many race film stars, such as Evelyn Preer, Spencer Williams, and Clarence Brooks, were drawn to Hollywood's higher pay and superior sound and image, put all production companies, but especially those that were black-owned (which were often in an even more financially precarious position), at an even greater disadvantage. By the late 1920s, most black-owned companies, with the exception of Oscar Micheaux's, had gone out of business, and Micheaux only survived by declaring bankruptcy in early 1928 and reorganizing in 1929 as the Micheaux Film Corporation, with money from (white) theater owners and managers Leo Brecher and Frank Schiffman.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to Micheaux's newly organized company, a few other production companies appeared on the periphery of the larger industry, mostly in New York and Los Angeles, and all of them showed the demands that sound had placed on the industry. First, they were all composed of mixed-race personnel, with whites serving in financial and technical roles behind the cameras while the black talent largely remained in front, with some, nevertheless, in powerful positions. In the 1930s and 1940s, for example, Ralph Cooper, Herb Jeffries, and Spencer Williams would remain influential in their respective companies.<sup>17</sup> Second, most companies switched from explicit uplift content and started producing popular genre films – gangster films, musicals, sports films, and Westerns – in order to more effectively and directly compete with Hollywood. At the end of the decade, and with the advent of sound, race cinema's more reformist phase passed, and a new industry emerged.

## Notes

1. *The Birth of a Nation* was based on two novels written by Thomas Dixon, Jr, *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905), the latter of which was adapted into a stage play before being made into the film.
2. The number of silent film versions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* resulted from the novel's massive readership (in serial or novel form) and the popularity of traveling stage adaptations ("Tom shows"). In almost all the silent adaptations, a white actor in black-face was cast as Uncle Tom. It wasn't until 1914 that the story was adapted to the screen with a black stage actor, Sam Lucas, in the role of Uncle Tom. And no version, including the 1927 *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ever featured an African-American performer in the part of Topsy.
3. The Pekin Players were formed in Chicago in 1906. They staged serious plays along with "refined white comedies," which included actors in whiteface (Haskins, quoted in Curtis 1998, 41).
4. The company's marketing practices, which geared different advertising toward different audiences, may not have helped *One Large Evening*. According to Thomas Cripps, the film was called *One Large Evening* "in the ghetto and *A Night in Coontown* in white exhibition houses," a change that was noted by Lester Walton in the *New York Age* in his discussion of the Chicago Censorship Board's decision not to show the film (Cripps 1993, 42; see also Walton 1914).
5. Haynes's appeal appeared in the *Indianapolis Freeman* on March 14, 1914.
6. Phillips Smalley was married to Lois Weber, an early American filmmaker, who often produced shorts with reformist themes.
7. Micheaux's novels include *The Conquest* (1913), *The Homesteader* (1917), and *The Forged Note* (1918), among others.
8. For more on this subject, see also Gaines 2001; Stewart 2005, 226–244; and Massood 2003, 47–57.
9. The Ebony Film Corporation was based in Chicago and operated 1916–1919. It produced two-reel comedy films featuring a black detective character. According to Sampson, the films were "well-received in white theaters," perhaps because of their use of demeaning stereotypes of foolish blacks, and "were heavily criticized by the black press in Chicago" for the same reasons (1995, 204).
10. However, Micheaux's correspondence with Norman suggests that he wasn't fond of Starkman. For more on their rivalry, see Klotman 2001.
11. See also Gaines 1997.
12. Clough was a popular stage and screen performer, who had appeared in Reol's *Ties of Blood* (1921), *The Simp* (1921), *The Secret Sorrow* (1921), and *Easy Money* (1922), as well as Micheaux's *The Gunsaulus Mystery* (1921). She also appeared in numerous Broadway productions, including *Three Plays for a Negro Theater* (1917), *The Chocolate Dandies* (1924), and *Harlem* (1928), among other productions.
13. Swan Micheaux was employed as the secretary-treasurer of the Micheaux Book and Film Company until 1927, when he left after one too many disagreements with his older brother (McGilligan 2007, 230).
14. The reasons behind Gilpin's dismissal remain unclear. Universal cited Gilpin's demanding stage schedule, while rumors also circulated suggesting that the studio felt he was too "aggressive" for the role (Cripps 1993, 159).
15. This view was popular among both white and black cultural critics. One of the strongest voices of African-American aesthetics in the 1920s, Alain Locke, for example, commented on the almost natural synergy between sound film and black voices in which sound technology had the potential to reveal the "realism" of African-American culture rather than the "hackneyed caricatures" of motion picture representation (Locke & Brown 1975, 26).
16. According to Patrick McGilligan, the pair "controlled Harlem's five largest theaters [Odeon, the Roosevelt, the Douglas, the Lafayette, and the Renaissance theaters], offering movies and live entertainment to a combined capacity of 6,700 people (2007, 256). While the partnership with Micheaux didn't last long, it guaranteed, in the short term, exhibition spaces for his films.
17. Cooper, former emcee of the Apollo Theater, along with George Randol, founded Cooper-Randol Pictures in 1937. The company faced financial difficulties while making their first film, *Dark Manhattan* (1937), and joined with producers Jack and Bert Goldberg's Million Dollar Productions. Popular singer Herb Jeffries worked with Sack Amusement Enterprises to produce a series of Westerns in the late 1930s. Spencer Williams directed a number of popular race films in the 1940s.

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