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Desegregating the screen: Oscar Micheaux and the rise of activist cinema

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Just after the release of *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Spike Lee was asked why he would make a film that left white viewers feeling 'uncomfortable'. His response turned the interviewer's question on its head:

> [H]ow do you think Black people have felt for 80 years watching stuff like *The Birth of a Nation* ... and we go on and on. Black people have had to live under this thing for 400 years ... We made [*Do the Right Thing*] so we could put the spotlight on racism and say that everything is not okay, that this [USA] is not the land of milk and honey and truth and justice.[1]

Clyde Taylor has observed that cinema histories have tended to chart the trajectory of US film by using Griffith's film as a starting point: 'almost a myth of origin – [and] there is an inclination to unburden this grand origi-nating moment from any discourse on race relations in the United States'.[2] Valerie Smith, in *Representing Blackness*, further argues that the problem is not just that *The Birth of a Nation* is 'considered by many to be the sym-bolic, although not literal, origin of US cinema', but that it 'is frequently offered up by film critics and historians as the inaugural moment of African American cinema as well'.[3] Bolstering the film's fabricated status as US cin-ema's (and African American cinema's) origin is its seemingly monolithic presence: a grandiose spectacle and 'media event of a type that complements the definition of mass culture'.[4]

As Lee's comments suggest, *The Birth of a Nation* is not a singular event around which subsequent US filmmaking developed, but rather a text prob-lematically enmeshed within mobile discourses and public debates about US history, national identity, race and representation. Indeed, Lee elsewhere stated that he had 'no problem' with *The Birth of a Nation* being screened, but that its 'social impact' and contexts need to be made clear, and its legacies recognised as painful, personal and heterogeneous.[5] Lee encapsu-lates these dynamics in his work by incorporating the film in the disrup-tive, self-reflexive montage of *Bamboozled* (2000) and *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), the latter showing Griffith's film screened as part of a ritualistic

Ku Klux Klan meeting, a scene that both resembles and upends *The Birth of a Nation*'s divisive re-enactments, authoritatively labelled as 'historical facsimiles'. In foregrounding the buffoonish racism of those attending the Klan screening, Lee counters Griffith's notorious scene set in the state legislature of North Carolina, where newly elected African American representatives, shown as extreme stereotypes, pass a law permitting mixed marriage. *BlacKkKlansman* both reframes and lampoons Griffith's images and messages: a strategic act of unsettling *Birth*'s tenuous authority as a historical and social document.

This chapter foregrounds such multilayered modes of politically activist popular film, where formal and critical interventions map on to what Edward Said called 'contrapuntal reading': a process where canonical texts are addressed 'with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works'.[6] Contrapuntal reading takes into account both hegemonic imperialism and processes of resistance, which involves 'extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded'.[7] In the case of films such as *BlacKkKlansman*, this process might be characterised as contrapuntal creative practice, a glossing and self-reflexive engagement with hegemonic texts that exposes social and experiential realities they seek to hide.

Public condemnation of *The Birth of a Nation* at the time of its release is well documented, and resistance started there, but the film should further be seen as enmeshed in an *ongoing* contrapuntal dynamic which continues to erode efforts to afford it an elite status in film history.[8] The early films of Oscar Micheaux, pioneer of US 'race movies', have been key to this process, denying *The Birth of a Nation* the appearance of ideological unity and narrative coherence while laying bare a text 'riddled with cracks'.[9] Micheaux's early films, though sometimes characterised as protests voiced in the wake of *Birth*'s mammoth spectacle, and further viewed as inferior to the 'standards of classical cinema', deliver more than a glancing blow to *Birth*'s authority: they unseat the integrity of Griffith's 'Lost Cause' (of the Confederacy) vision and overturn the hierarchies of centre and margins in American race politics and in established versions of US film history itself.[10]

Whose nation? Reframing margins and mainstream

The Birth of a Nation was hardly the inaugural moment of American, or African American, cinema. James Snead draws on an earlier moment, citing the confluence of 'two portentous events' that occurred in 1896.[11] The first event was Thomas Edison's decision – in part due to pressure from the

international success of the Lumières' versatile Cinématograph – to phase out the lucrative Kinetoscope peep show parlours and introduce projection in the form of the Vitascope. This development was instrumental to shifting filmgoing in the US from an individuated activity towards a mass audience phenomenon. The second event occurred less than a month later, when the Supreme Court decision *Plessy vs Ferguson* refused to intervene in the enforcement of 'separate but equal' facilities, initiating sixty years of federal compliance with legislated segregation. The origins of cinema-going as a communal experience in the US thus coincided with the division of the filmgoing community into Black and white factions, leading to segregated spatial relations in cinemas. This concurrence of events, Snead argues, precipitated the rise of Black independent cinema.[12] Indeed, Charles Musser stresses the need to recognise cinema's imbrications in ideology 'pre-Griffith': 'since early cinema was at least in part a continuation – as well as a transformation – of screen practice, the notion that cinema was ever "innocent" or ideologically unformed holds little weight'.[13]

By 1910, while Griffith was working at Biograph, William Foster had established The Foster Photoplay Company in Chicago, widely considered the first all-African American film production company.[14] Writing in 1913, Foster expressed his 'resentment' against demeaning portrayals of African Americans that were 'presented everywhere'.[15] As Allyson Nadia Field observes in her discussion of 'uplift cinema', an African American cinema of self-representation and self-reliance, 'the goal was not to rely on white filmmakers to change their characterisation of Black people but to provide a model for Black filmmakers – an emerging Black filmmaking practice – that would avoid the representational problems evident in mainstream films'.[16] By 1918, novelist and entrepreneur Oscar Micheaux had started his own production company, The Micheaux Film and Book Company, and was adapting his third novel into the eight-reel feature *The Homesteader* (1919), a landmark film considered lost. As evidenced in his earliest extant films *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) – forming part of what has been called a 'separate cinema' amidst the burgeoning US cinema industry – Micheaux had a talent for making allusive and challenging films that took on and ruptured Griffith's carefully honed Manichean world-view.[17]

The work came out of an urgent need for self-representation, and for features that spoke to African American audiences and social concerns while appealing to popular tastes. Micheaux stressed themes of truth and uplift in his early work:

> I have always tried to make my photoplays present the truth, to lay before the race a cross-section of its own life, to view the colored heart from close range. It is only by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my pictures, in

the light and background of their true state, that we can raise our people to greater heights.[18]

Micheaux, as bell hooks argues, developed 'independent filmmaking as counter-hegemonic cultural production', yet his projects were at the same time part of a business model aimed towards a filmgoing public – Micheaux did not strive for an obscure or underground status.[19]

Working as an independent director-producer, Micheaux's formal and narrative strategies arguably enact what would later in feminist contexts be called counter-cinema: a politically activist cinema that strives to demystify dominant and embedded social structures while also appealing to popular tastes. Indeed, with respect to the latter, Micheaux envisioned his first film as having a crossover appeal that could be marketed to both white and Black audiences, though this was never realised.[20] Micheaux conjoined entertainment and ideological demystification in his early films, as evidenced in *Within Our Gates* and *The Symbol of the Unconquered*. Yet despite his tenacious approach, all-round skills (producing, writing, casting, directing, camerawork, postproduction, promotion and distribution), and ability to deliver complex and multilayered features on the tightest of budgets, he was long criticised as inferior in craft to 'masters' such as Griffith, lacking mainstream appeal and remaining sidelined in the film 'canon'.[21] Significant research by scholars such as Charlene Regester, bell hooks, Jane Gaines, J. Ronald Green, Pearl Bowser, Louise Spence and Charles Musser has provided correctives to this critical treatment and a new vocabulary for approaching Micheaux and race movies more generally.[22] Green finds in Micheaux's work a 'rough style' that displays a carefully honed political aesthetic that reconfigures, undermines and ironically comments on popular cinema's slick entertainments.[23]

Moreover, Micheaux can be seen to maintain an ethical stance, with production values reflecting the uneven distribution of resources between the haves and have-nots in US society. Drawing on W. E. B. Du Bois's paradigmatic notion of 'twoness', where African Americans are impelled to see themselves simultaneously not just from interior consciousness but as 'othered' by a dominant white gaze, Green argues: 'Micheaux's critique of Griffith can be understood as a debate between exclusive vs. inclusive social policy ... Micheaux was more moderate, more open-ended politically and formally, and more dialectical in his approach to art, which are characteristics of twoness'.[24] While delivering engrossing elements of action, melodrama and spectacle, Micheaux's work reveals mainstream cinema's complicity in propagating falsehoods about US history and society, promoting racialised divisions and stereotypes – what James Baldwin saw as American 'amnesia about historical violence, conquest, and imperialism' – practices entrenched and normalised in *Birth*.[25]

Segregated screens

Cinematic segregation describes the ways US cinema has historically not only elided blackness but confined it to certain spaces – to the margins of the screen, to the side or balcony of the movie theatre, or to the outer limits of Hollywood's distribution practices. Central to Micheaux's contrapuntal practice is an acute attention to – and critical intervention in – the spatial dynamics and politics of the relatively new medium of popular narrative cinema. Micheaux's films show that the virtual world of the screen can map on to and critique troubled relations in the segregated spaces of the American experience.

As work by critics such as Myrto Konstantarakos, Alison Butler, Paula J. Massood, Wendy Everett, Axel Goodbody and Tom Conley has variously shown, spatial signs and relations are densely imbricated in the narrative and mimetic effects that create meaning in cinema.[26] The very act of watching films, Conley suggests, corresponds to modes of spatial perception.[27] Micheaux's work not only draws attention to the politically charged topographies of African American life in the midst of the first Great Migration and Jim Crow, but provides guiding evidence of how screen space can be racialised, perpetuating the dynamics of a segregated United States. Micheaux might be characterised as 'answering' Griffith and Hollywood, but his legacy has ultimately proved more disruptive than simply acting as Griffith's nemesis.[28] If 'answering' implies response, it is important to think about Micheaux's work not just as responding, but as enacting a textualisation that entangles Griffith's *Birth* in facts and experiences of racism and prejudice that the latter strives to suppress. Further, Micheaux's work is grounded in formal and narrative innovations that challenge cinema's storytelling conventions. Griffith's technique helped to wed the concept of popular cinema to that of 'high art', as Pearl Bowser notes: 'if a film were to be considered as art, there must be an artist, and, according to the nineteenth-century romantic tradition, an artist who is a creative genius. The title of artist in this sense was awarded to D. W. Griffith by [contemporary reviewer] Louis Reeves Harrison', as well as by 'public relations men' who 'claimed for D. W. Griffith the invention of practically everything in use at the time'.[29] 'High' art Micheaux's work probably is not, at least not in the terms that define classical cinema, but Micheaux did develop an artistic practice and ethics under the constraints of budgets, limited equipment and film stock, short timetables, hampered distribution, and aggressive censorship. This practice drew on cinema's growing popularity as social communication, collective activity, and entertainment, while incorporating critical attention to filmic techniques of making meaning that restrict broader understandings of US history and experience.

Snead's illuminating link between Edison's shifting to collective screening and *Plessy vs Ferguson* stresses that segregationist tendencies inhere in the very fabric of US cinemagoing nearly from its inception. As Snead argues, 'it is one of the bitter ironies of American history, then, that motion picture technology, with its singular potential for good or evil, grew to perfection during the same time period (1890–1915) that saw the systematic, determined, and almost hysterical persecution and defamation of blacks and other minority groups'.[30] As the nickelodeon era (roughly 1905–1914) moved towards the era of the 'picture palace', Jim Crow laws enforced segregation in movie theatres (Fig. 4.1). And not only in southern states; in northern cities such as New York, separate entrances and seating areas for whites and Blacks (Black patrons were normally confined to the 'unseen' spaces of the balcony) could be found well into the 1930s.[31] Cases of segregating or overcharging Black customers were registered and protests lodged in Chicago, Brooklyn, Harlem, Troy and other northern sites.[32] One woman who would not sit in the balcony of the Victoria Theater in Rochester, New York, sued in 1913 to defend her civil rights, though the record shows that she lost her case.[33] This racialising of exhibition space was underpinned

Figure 4.1 Segregated cinema entrance, Belzoni, Mississippi (1939). Photographed by Marion Post Wolcott. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives.

by the structure of the film business and, especially in southern states, by the establishment of Black and white movie houses. At the same time, on screen Hollywood was codifying and segregating virtual space, perpetuating an ongoing history of racial division and unequal power relations. This process was consolidated in the anti-miscegenation clause of the Production Code, published in the leading trade journal *Variety* in February 1930.

Analysis of human geography has shown us that cultural and personal autonomy is closely linked to physical and social mobility, and access to – or denial of – free movement through private and public spaces powerfully shapes individual and social identities. As Edward Soja has argued, 'space in itself may be primordially given, but the organisation and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience'.[34] For Ed Guerrero, 'the negotiation of racial images, boundaries, and hierarchies has been part of our national life from its beginnings'.[35] Stop and search, 'driving while Black', the systemic violence and racialised policing of public space as highlighted by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement: these reflect ways African American life has long been subjected to geographical and spatial displacement, division and hierarchy. These relations are marked historically by the forced displacements of slavery, the migrations of the early decades of the twentieth century, and in the Second Great Migration (1940–70) from the rural South to the industrialised North and western US. As Bowser and Spence note, 'new migration patterns contributed to the economic and social restructuring of urban America and had effects on many facets of everyday life'.[36]

At the same time, as reinforced with the restrictions of the Production Code Administration, even where Black characters might appear, US cinema was dominated by images of white mobility, Black containment and typecasting. As Thomas Cripps reports: 'go as far we like in shooting black maid and white mistress embracing in *Nothing Sacred* (1937), wrote Val Lewton to his boss, [David O.] Selznick, providing we give no implication of equality'.[37] Manthia Diawara suggests that the work of Black filmmakers has hence often revealed an acute awareness of the power of spatial representation, and he stresses the need for the screen to provide a critically transformative space.[38] Massood's work further provides a detailed social and historical map to the ways in which spatial tropes of mobility and entrapment have been central to Black films 'from their very inception'.[39]

A consideration of how cinema articulates spatial relations might break down the concept of space into three interconnected areas: first, the notion of socially produced space, as formulated in the work of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja; second, the idea of audience space and the architectural space of the theatre; and finally, theories of virtual space or the space of the screen.[40] Segregation is an act of coding – defining, constructing and

policing – personal and community relations to 'primordially given' public space. Extending this to the movie theatre and screen multiplies and reinforces such acts of social and psychic control.

For Anne Friedberg, the movie theatre can be seen as a safe space for fantasy, imaginary transport, and multiform identification; she outlines the new mobilities provided by the emergence of cinema's 'mobilized virtual gaze'.[41] Recalling the modern figure of the strolling flâneuse, Friedberg proposes that in cinema, 'the spectator-shopper – trying on identities – engages in the pleasures of a temporally and spatially fluid subjectivity'.[42] Yet the movie theatre is also a socially produced architectural space that has hardly been immune to the contingencies and social restrictions lying outside its walls. Robert F. Arnold cites the necessity of investigating the conditions of spectatorship in order to avoid theories that might posit notions of a unified or ideal spectator position. 'The complex ideological give and take in the conditions of spectatorship', Arnold argues, 'cannot be reduced to a formal definition of a single apparatus and/or assumed across a variety of historically and functionally distinct practices'.[43]

Such an approach helps break down continuities in histories of spectatorship, and opens the door to considering the heterogeneity of filmgoing positions within particular historical and physical contexts. Some questions might be raised at this point: how have actual spatial restrictions imposed through filmgoing conditions affected the navigation of virtual space? More specifically, what filmgoing experiences are produced, or contained, from the cinema's segregated balcony as opposed to the main floor?[44] The implications of filmgoing positions and the ways these might determine not only audience responses, but the very meanings and experiences produced in filmgoing, are implied by the critic G. William Jones, who recalls the segregated movie theatre of his childhood. He writes,

> although I cannot remember ever hearing them laughing or cheering at the screen like we [white] boys did down below, I knew they were there, because I could occasionally hear them, before the show started, moving around the backless benches they had to sit on while we sat in the comparative comfort of wooden, bolted-to-the-floor rows of folding seats which curved to fit the body.[45]

As Hollywood studios expanded their reach, exclusionary production and distribution practices were met by the rise of the 'race picture' business. There were also steps that could be taken to avoid segregated venues: an advertising poster for *Within Our Gates* refers to using the African American community centre Union Hall in Chicago to screen the film: 'Owing to the peculiar nature of this picture no theatre could be secured that would exhibit it, therefore we were forced to do the next best things and use our own building' (Fig. 4.2). Before the wider establishment of Black theatres, Micheaux's

Figure 4.2 Advertisement for *Within Our Gates* (Micheaux Book and Film Company, 1920). Public domain.

movies were distributed in ad hoc and innovative ways, often in various recut versions due to local censorship: shown in churches, rented halls, even private homes, and they were met with animated audience interaction.

Moving from built to virtual space, when analysing the spatial dynamics of the screen Stephen Heath argued that traditional popular cinema has worked to order, control and unify both on-screen and off-screen space through the construction of looks, exchanges and objects in the frame.[46] Narrative cinema thus has played on the assumptions of point of view to create a stable subject position, endowing spectators with an imaginary position of authority. Developing the concept of the 'suture', Heath suggested that film can elide or suture over potential ruptures that might endanger a sense of spatial unity, while it posits the spectator at the imaginary centre as the producer of meaning. From this position, the popular screen might appear to afford a democratic space, available to the wandering gaze of the filmgoer-flâneuse, as Friedberg suggests. But the screen might also be seen as a kind of bounded space or territory – and the territory, as Michel Foucault put it, is 'no doubt a geographical notion, but it is first of all a juridico-political one: the area controlled by a certain kind of power'.[47]

Critical work on the politicisation of screen space has often been concerned with the relations of centre and periphery, on-screen and off, the visible and hidden. With respect to African American filmgoing, Guerrero expresses this process succinctly, arguing that mainstream US film long engaged in a spatial project of 'framing blackness': a historical tendency to relegate African Americans to a space of otherness, even when they are visible within the frame. Hollywood has conventionally worked to 'construct black people as other and subordinate' while naturalising white privilege 'as the invisible but sovereign "norm"'.[48] Cinema not only re-presents the lived experience of spatiality but restructures it within the realms of virtual space, transforming actual spatial relations though not always providing a means of liberation. For Diawara, the gaze of the Black filmgoer has often

been constituted as much by prohibition and the denial of freedom and pleasure as by the promise of mobile identification.[49] Similarly, opening her essay on the 'oppositional gaze', hooks lingers on images of suppression and containment: 'Thinking about Black female spectators, I remembered being punished as a child for staring', she writes, and the moment is associated with the denial of subjectivity enforced by master/slave looking relations.[50]
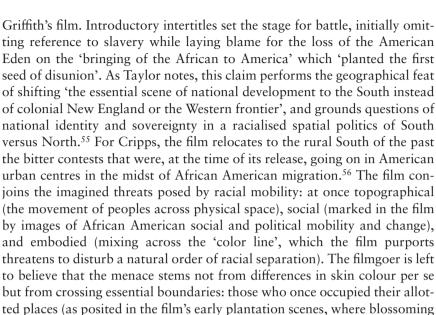
In his study of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), a film set on Saint Helena Island off the Carolinas which reflects on Black spectatorship, migration and urbanisation, Diawara notes a resistance to a traditional 'hierarchical disposition of objects on the screen'. He points to a connection between screen space, *mise-en-scène*, and power: 'space is related to power and powerlessness, in so far as those who occupy the center of the screen are usually more powerful that those situated in the background or completely absent from the screen'.[51] But, as Diawara further indicates, efforts at containment of an oppositional gaze – sustained by the 'suture' and traditional balance of power in dominant film practices – do not automatically reduce marginalised filmgoers to passivity. On the contrary, as hooks states, by taking up an active, critical gaze, by 'looking and looking back', filmgoers can combat the process of 'cinematic negation' enforced by hegemonic looking relations.[52] Though this may not correspond to the pleasures produced by the 'sutured in' filmgoer, this is a kind of contrapuntal practice that twins the filmgoing experience with recognition of a film's textuality – its interrelation to other potential narratives, representations and positionalities. Micheaux's work offers some of the earliest cinematic examples of this challenging practice of 'looking back', while his stories, themes and characters also resonate 'beyond the sounds and images of a specific film to other texts', as Bowser and Spence contend, 'such as news stories, magazine articles, oral tales, songs, sermons, and other films'.[53]

Deterritorialising the screen

The Birth of a Nation dramatises fundamental tensions presumed provoked by the mobilisation of divided and hierarchical racial and spatial relations. Literally and metaphorically conflating 'race' with 'culture' and 'nation', it depicts segregation as the means to preserve the sacred dream of the American Adam as the domain of whiteness.[54] In so doing, Griffith's film naturalises a racialised map of human geography, twinning racial determinism with an essentialised concept of space.

Struggles over spatial freedoms and constraints – which encompass the control of land, property and, crucially, the symbolic space of the white female body within patriarchy – are the primary narrative catalysts in

Griffith's film. Introductory intertitles set the stage for battle, initially omitting reference to slavery while laying blame for the loss of the American Eden on the 'bringing of the African to America' which 'planted the first seed of disunion'. As Taylor notes, this claim performs the geographical feat of shifting 'the essential scene of national development to the South instead of colonial New England or the Western frontier', and grounds questions of national identity and sovereignty in a racialised spatial politics of South versus North.[55] For Cripps, the film relocates to the rural South of the past the bitter contests that were, at the time of its release, going on in American urban centres in the midst of African American migration.[56] The film conjoins the imagined threats posed by racial mobility: at once topographical (the movement of peoples across physical space), social (marked in the film by images of African American social and political mobility and change), and embodied (mixing across the 'color line', which the film purports threatens to disturb a natural order of racial separation). The filmgoer is left to believe that the menace stems not from differences in skin colour per se but from crossing essential boundaries: those who once occupied their allotted places (as posited in the film's early plantation scenes, where blossoming relations between the Camerons and visiting Stonemans are plotted against a backdrop of enslaved people placidly labouring in cotton fields) are now roaming freely across the nation.

The film's epic dramatisations of Civil War battle epitomise spatial conflict over race and US destiny, but after the defeat of the South, Griffith heightens the equation of new Black freedoms with spatial invasions, intertitles quoting Woodrow Wilson's claim that US legislators were determined to '*put the white South under the heel of the black South*' (emphasis in original). The territorial battles of the Civil War are replayed in scenes depicting Black men jostling white people off the sidewalks of Piedmont, occupying and desecrating the halls of government (authenticated as 'historical facsimile'), and preying on white women. Spatial politics are rendered visible through Griffith's blocking and framing, as demonstrated in the famous sequence where Gus 'the renegade' (Walter Long, in blackface) pursues (or follows) 'little pet' Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh) as she hysterically runs through the forest after being approached and touched on the arm (as Linda Williams notes, 'nothing ... insinuates his sexual intentions toward Flora').[57] Gus's darkened face and glimmering eyes are shot in tight close-up and partial shadow, dominating the frame and appearing to extend into off-screen space, while long shots of Flora emphasise her smallness (the 'little pet' sister is associatively intercut with an innocent squirrel). Through the juxtaposition of shots, her figure appears bounded by Gus's controlling physical presence and gaze. In one shot, as Flora runs towards the audience, Gus emerges from beyond the frame's edge, forcing her to flee into the distance

and ultimately out of frame (a racially codified action thematised in the film and reversed in the closing scenes). Griffith's cross-cutting enhances tensions by showing that any 'safe' distance between Flora and Gus increasingly gives way to the dangers of physical proximity, while the rescuing 'Little Colonel' Ben lags behind. When the gap between Flora and Gus is finally breached at the top of a precipice (vertical pressure in the frame adding to the suspense), the collapse of spatial autonomy threatens physical contact. Flora jumps to her death, violently putting to an end any threat of intermingling.
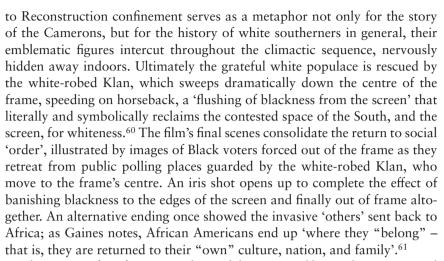
Micheaux's *The Symbol of the Unconquered* turns any logic in Griffith's binary vision on its head, critically engaging filmgoers with processes of constructing social truths in cinema while dramatising the dangers of drawing false conclusions based on outward appearances. The film raises complex questions about common knowledge in representation: here how silent cinema might aim to steer interpretation and assume common meaning through the encoding of visual signs. In a scene that elliptically recalls visual and structural components of the 'Gus Chase' sequence, the heroine Eve Mason (Iris Hall) is terrified in the middle of the night by the looming figure of Abraham (E. G. Tatum), whom she misreads as menacing her. Micheaux lights and frames Abraham from Eve's point of view in a manner much like Griffith's representation of the looming face of Gus, filling the space of the screen and threatening to overwhelm it. Micheaux maps on to Griffith's sequence but condenses the action and blurs the racially opposed logic that animates Flora's histrionics. Rather than showing a Black man appearing to menace a white woman, in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* both characters have been banished to the margins (forced to sleep in a barn) due to their presumed racial origins. Even if Eve is able to 'pass' unintentionally, in this case she has been targeted by the self-hating hotel owner Jefferson Driscoll (Lawrence Chenault), himself a mixed-race figure who depends on concealing his ancestry and rejecting blackness.[58] Like Flora in *Birth*, Eve recoils from the figure that appears to threaten her, leading to a physical fall, though in Eve's case her fall through the barn's hatchway is not self-inflicted and she survives.[59] Intertitles in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* exonerate the 'good Abraham' of any wrongdoing and, by extension, the scenario might further hint that Gus could have been the victim of a similar misreading of the threat – a message which extends to audiences and their reading of screen images.

The climactic scenes of *The Birth of a Nation* intensify the territorial oppositions marked by racialised spaces and bodies, suggesting that Black mobility has sidelined whiteness, placed it 'under its heel' and now, quite literally, the 'white race' is trapped. Members of the Cameron clan are confined to a cabin while the advancing Black mob threatens to vanquish the symbolic remnants of whiteness. The trajectory from antebellum freedoms

to Reconstruction confinement serves as a metaphor not only for the story of the Camerons, but for the history of white southerners in general, their emblematic figures intercut throughout the climactic sequence, nervously hidden away indoors. Ultimately the grateful white populace is rescued by the white-robed Klan, which sweeps dramatically down the centre of the frame, speeding on horseback, a 'flushing of blackness from the screen' that literally and symbolically reclaims the contested space of the South, and the screen, for whiteness.[60] The film's final scenes consolidate the return to social 'order', illustrated by images of Black voters forced out of the frame as they retreat from public polling places guarded by the white-robed Klan, who move to the frame's centre. An iris shot opens up to complete the effect of banishing blackness to the edges of the screen and finally out of frame altogether. An alternative ending once showed the invasive 'others' sent back to Africa; as Gaines notes, African Americans end up 'where they "belong" – that is, they are returned to their "own" culture, nation, and family'.[61]

The project of confronting such racial divisions and hierarchies, attempted but with limited success in a film such as *The Birth of a Race* (1918), is not just about presenting correctives to racism and stereotyping but involves deconstructing and reconfiguring the racialised spaces, images and typologies naturalised by mainstream screen practices.[62] *Within Our Gates* (rediscovered in Spain's national archive by Thomas Cripps in the 1970s after being thought lost) creates a film world that poses alternatives to the ideology and aesthetics of *Birth* while staking its own claims to authentic national history and character. Though no direct evidence has been found that Micheaux was specifically targeting *Birth*, critics have argued that *Within Our Gates* is the earliest response to Griffith's politics and vision by a Black director.[63] Certainly, as Bowser and Spence have shown, audiences coming to Micheaux's film were making links between the films. As one Chicago schoolteacher, Willis N. Huggins, wrote after seeing *Within Our Gates* premiere at the Vendome Theater: ' "The Birth of a Nation" was written by oppressors to show that the oppressed were a burden and a drawback to the nation, that they had no real grievance ... "Within Our Gates" is written by the oppressed and shows in a mild way the degree and kind of his oppression'.[64] The comment 'in a mild way' would indicate not only the difficulties of capturing on film the magnitude of racist practices and structures, but reflects the 1,200 feet of cuts that were required by the Chicago Board of Censors of scenes of vigilantism, lynching and rape, which the Board claimed could rekindle violence seen in the 'Red Summer' of 1919.[65] In later screenings, Micheaux restored some of the cut scenes, though no definitive print exists to fully illustrate Micheaux's intentions.

Within Our Gates shows up the mediation behind what Griffith labels 'historical facsimiles', and behind the white-dominated media, through
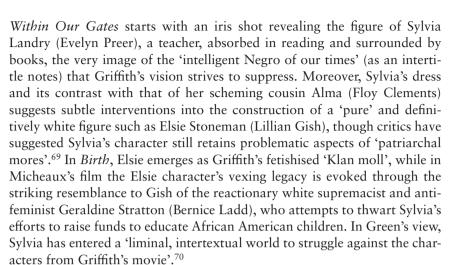
constructing a collage of overlapping, sometimes competing, visual and narrative elements. Stories are told over fractured spaces via letters, dream sequences that blur imagination and reality, flashbacks, and dramatic crime scenes that are acted out and then re-enacted from the perspective of a false account. Micheaux's aims at both telling the truth and providing ironic commentary on the revisions and exclusionary practices of dominant media, ranging from journalism to film, recall the razor-sharp observations on racism and white supremacy of Charles W. Chesnutt, whose stories Micheaux would later adapt into film. Micheaux, Green argues, 'was just as committed to his racial message as Griffith was to his', but a difference lay in the way Micheaux 'challenged his own audience, his own "race"', in ways that could be 'intentionally perverse'.[66] While aligned to 'race men' such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Micheaux refused to support uplift purely through the construction of 'positive images' or by taking a high moral ground. For example, he debuted Paul Robeson – then riding Broadway success acting in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* – in his first film role as the 'vicious jackleg preacher' in *Body and Soul* (1925), based on Nan Bagby Stephens's play *Roseanne*.[67] Micheaux even courted controversy as a means to drum up business. The opening titles of *Within Our Gates* set the stage, and a darkly ironic tone: 'At the opening of our drama, we find our characters in the North, where the prejudices and hatreds of the South do not exist – though this does not prevent the occasional lynching of a Negro'. While it slyly undermines *Birth*'s staid sentiments, *Within Our Gates* should not be viewed as parody or reactive commentary, hence resituating Griffith at the centre with critical and creative alternatives in the margins. Micheaux laid bare the elisions and stereotypes embedded in Hollywood realism and formal unity, but beyond this was an innovator, developing ad hoc low-budget production, cutting and distribution practices that responded to rapidly changing conditions and censorship demands. The results work to defamiliarise dominant technique while engaging filmgoers in stories and experiences obscured by industrial US film production.

Micheaux fractures the integrity of Griffith's film while exposing its mediated and bounded world-view. The violence justified and then accelerated by Griffith's film is uncompromisingly articulated by Bowser and Spence:
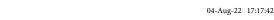
> Stories of lynchings and sadistic torture were regularly reported in the Black weeklies, telling of burnings, mutilations, and body parts (including male genitals) being fought over or sold as souvenirs. On September 8, 1917, the *Chicago Defender* published a front-page photograph of a severed head, with ears, nose, and upper lip mutilated, under the headline 'Not Belgium – America'. This photo of Eli Person, who had been burned alive, had been reproduced and sold as a souvenir in Memphis, to whites only, for a quarter a copy.[68]

Within Our Gates starts with an iris shot revealing the figure of Sylvia Landry (Evelyn Preer), a teacher, absorbed in reading and surrounded by books, the very image of the 'intelligent Negro of our times' (as an intertitle notes) that Griffith's vision strives to suppress. Moreover, Sylvia's dress and its contrast with that of her scheming cousin Alma (Floy Clements) suggests subtle interventions into the construction of a 'pure' and definitively white figure such as Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish), though critics have suggested Sylvia's character still retains problematic aspects of 'patriarchal mores'.[69] In *Birth*, Elsie emerges as Griffith's fetishised 'Klan moll', while in Micheaux's film the Elsie character's vexing legacy is evoked through the striking resemblance to Gish of the reactionary white supremacist and anti-feminist Geraldine Stratton (Bernice Ladd), who attempts to thwart Sylvia's efforts to raise funds to educate African American children. In Green's view, Sylvia has entered a 'liminal, intertextual world to struggle against the characters from Griffith's movie'.[70]

Echoing and returning to haunt Griffith's text is Micheaux's portrayal of the lynching of the Landrys – Sylvia's adoptive parents – and the attempted rape of Sylvia. Where the scene of Gus's lynching in *Birth* is relatively brief, with an emphasis on 'justice' and de-emphasis of the extreme violence of the act, Micheaux shows the savage attack on the Landrys and their struggle for survival in extended detail. Cross-cutting dramatically between scenes of white-on-Black violence, Micheaux takes on and inverts the logic and dynamics of Griffith's famous parallel technique, which strategically juxtaposes for dramatic effect actions taking place in distinct spaces, arranges them as temporal and narrative forward movement, and emphasises peril, pursuit and the promise of rescue. Micheaux's sequence uncannily recalls moments seen in *Birth*, but this is resemblance with a difference. For example, Sylvia's encounter with the puppy when in hiding arguably evokes the association between Flora's innocence and the squirrel, but whereas Flora then flees from a perceived threat, Sylvia is literally being hunted like an animal by a rifle-wielding mob.

Echoes of *Birth*'s climactic scenes resonate in the later scenes of *Within Our Gates*, and the latter are just as tense, yet less antithetically structured than Griffith's. Where in *Birth* cross-cutting highlights besieged whiteness and the heroic efforts of the Klan sweeping towards rescue and victory, the cross-cutting of *Within Our Gates* underlines the plight of the Landrys alongside Sylvia's vulnerable and imperilled state; there is no third party riding to the rescue. Sylvia's and her adoptive parents' attacks are juxtaposed, with no means of communicating across spatial divides and no forward movement towards release, reinforcing the sense of isolation, desperation and – problematically, as critics have pointed out – victimhood.[71]

Moreover, Micheaux adds an additional narrative level and fatalist framing by setting the scenes in flashback. Green points out that Micheaux interrogates Griffith's legacy but never resorts to parody. If *Within Our Gates* had been made in the style of *The Birth of a Nation*, the idea and act of rescue would have been paramount: 'the action would have emphasized freedom, omnipotence, perfect timing, resolution, and spectacular monumentality of the hero's, the filmmaker's, and the intended spectator's manhood. That is basically the way *The Birth of a Nation* works.'[72]

The Landrys are not saved; they are casualties of systemic racism and a white-dominated circulation of lies. The latter is shown through false press reports ('Efrem ... himself victim of accidental death at unknown hands') and enacted on the screen itself, as Micheaux reconstructs the invented version of Landry murdering Philip Gridlestone. Films can tell lies, this suggests; even 'facsimiles' can lie. Though the Landrys are overwhelmed by the mob, their son Emil's clever faking of his own death and escape on horseback provides a brief respite (and perhaps another sly assault on Griffith's envisioning of Klan heroics – many of the white mob are seen not on horses but awkwardly perched on bicycles). Still, Emil's fate is unknown and left off-screen.

Sylvia's attack by Armand Gridlestone can be seen to map onto Elsie's violent encounter with Silas Lynch in *Birth*, while reversing racial typing (Figs 4.3 and 4.4). Both incidents take place in confined spaces and employ comparable blocking of two actors, though in Micheaux's film the attack is more sustained and the framing unsettlingly claustrophobic. The attack on Sylvia is finally stopped not by a dramatic rescue, but by Armand's discovery of Sylvia's scar, and hence her identity as his (according to an intertitle) 'legitimate' daughter by a former marriage to an African American. Micheaux marks the end of the attack as a realisation of cultural and biological entanglement rather than the victory of an antithetical force. Unlike Griffith, there is no banishing of the racial 'other', just the revelation of a history of guilt. Sylvia's scar knits together presumed divisions, denying the dominant codification and segregation of the screen, collapsing racialised spaces and categories *within* a single visual signifier.[73]

Where Griffith's vision ultimately stresses the restoration of the screen to white space and the 'white race', Micheaux's screen provides a more entangled and ambivalent perspective. Sylvia's recognition of her mixed-race background and Dr Vivian's acceptance of her past, and of her work – urging her to be proud of her 'people', her country, and her place in it – upends Griffith's vision of a 'pure' and, by necessity, white national character. The vilified figure of the mulatto in *The Birth of a Nation* is envisioned at the heart of national potential and rebirth in *Within Our Gates*. Micheaux ends the film with a Griffith-like portrait of the happy couple, a lap dissolve
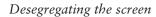
Figure 4.3 Still from *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith Corp., 1915). Public domain.

Figure 4.4 Still from *Within Our Gates* (Micheaux Book and Film Company, 1920). Public domain.

revealing a two-shot of their figures, hands entwined. As in *Birth*'s ending, the middle-class heterosexual couple promises the future hope of the nation – and Micheaux has been critiqued for an apparent identification with and valorisation of the middle class, associated with uplift.[74] But as Green points out, these couples could not be less alike. If for Griffith marriage is invoked as a conservative act, asserting the greatness of past values and reinforcing 'necessary' social divisions, marriage in Micheaux's ending might be viewed as a progressive act, 'an affirmation of the social self, of mutuality rather than radical individuality, of the right of women to free agency, and of racial hybridity and equality'.[75] This move towards plurality and hybridity is a recurring motif in Micheaux's work.

Conclusion

In 1925, Micheaux attempted to get his adaptation of Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* past the Virginia Board of Censors who, like so many boards before this one, balked at the treatment of racial injustice and miscegenation, and demanded cuts. The censors' report argued that the film was 'liable to cause friction between the races and might therefore incite crime', since it 'contravenes the spirit of the recently enacted anti-miscegenation law which put Virginia in the forefront as a pioneer in legislation aimed to preserve the integrity of the white race'. The report prompted a sharp response from Micheaux: 'There has been but one picture that incited the colored people to riot, and that still does ... that picture is *The Birth of a Nation*'.[76] Much like Spike Lee's comments at the start of this chapter, Micheaux turns the censors' claim on its head, holding up a mirror to the hypocrisy of white privilege while locating violence not in portrayals of racial injustice or ethnic hybridity but in the inflamed rhetoric and ongoing impact of Griffith's film.

Within Our Gates and *The Symbol of the Unconquered* move beyond *Birth*'s self-enclosing spectacle to open up spaces that interrogate presumptions that cinema might offer an unmediated window on the world. These films raise questions about acceptance of the social hierarchies that movies produce and reinforce. In doing so they work to reconfigure ways that a rapidly expanding US film industry was, with few exceptions, promoting a carefully codified, segregated screen to deliver dominant visions, and versions, of national history and character.

As Green notes, Micheaux strongly believed that 'added expense and high production values do not necessarily produce, and may be detrimental to, valuable cinema'.[77] This leaves us with a question, when viewed from the standpoint of post-Civil Rights and the BLM movement, as to what

constitutes 'valuable cinema'? Is *The Birth of a Nation* primarily useful as a historical example of propaganda for white supremacy, or as a document of a landmark moment in the growth of the US movie business? Is it still to be viewed as 'art'? The Internet and digital streaming have lessened obstacles to accessing Micheaux's films, as well as providing platforms for encountering a broader spectrum of race movies, leaving Griffith's mammoth spectacle no longer occupying a privileged status in terms of distribution and visibility. Micheaux's films, while animating conversations about cinema and racial representation in the early twentieth century, further evidence critical, stylistic and narrative tensions, harnessed to political urgency, that engage with an ongoing scrutiny of screen mediation and hegemonic power relations. This exposing of cinema artifice might be said effectively to put Griffith's film in its place: just as when a good magic trick is unmasked, audiences are left with less incentive to return to the illusion.

Micheaux was well aware that his work was socially and economically marginalised, and was savvy, if beholden, to the politics of the segregated American movie industry. A character in one of his later novels describes the situation: 'The major picture business has long ago been taken over by Wall Street.' He continues:

> It is a huge and gigantic industry and trust, operated through about a half dozen or more what you call 'major' film companies, who own or control all the best theatres not only in this country, but in Europe ... If I spent a million dollars to make a colored picture and if it was as good as the best picture ever made, it couldn't play anywhere except in what they call Negro theatres.[78]
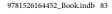
Yet Micheaux's narrative complexity and rough style have reasserted their place in cinema history, creating an irreducible textuality that enmeshes Griffith's Manichean vision in the very web of discourses about race, hybridity and national character that it attempted to moralise away, suppress, and ultimately push off screen altogether.

Notes

1 Quoted in J. Jones, 'Spike Lee's Look at the Realities of Racism', *Black Film Review*, 5:2 (1989), 13.
2 C. Taylor, 'The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema', in D. Bernardi (ed.), *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 16.
3 V. Smith, *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 1.
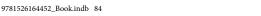4 Taylor, 'The Re-Birth', p. 15.

5   S. Lee, with J. Lashay, 'Spike Lee on *The Birth of a Nation*'s Horrific Social Effects' (Blacktree TV, 2018), www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAIL8ZbTJVI.

6   E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 78.

7   Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 79.

8   Koszarski notes 'storms of protests' against Griffith's film, particularly by the NAACP and W. E. B. Du Bois, see R. Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 320. See also M. Stokes, *D .W. Griffith's* The Birth of a Nation*: A History of 'the Most Controversial Picture of All Time'* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 6–11; and C. L. Gray, 'In Plain Sight: Changing Representations of "Biracial" People in Film 1903–2015', PhD dissertation (Marquette University, 2016), http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/682, pp. 67–70.

9   J. Comolli and J. Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', in B. Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 27. On 'race movies' see P. Bowser and L. Spence, *Writing Himself Into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp. 52–67.

10 C. Regester, 'The Misreading and Rereading of African American Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux: A Critical Review of Micheaux Scholarship', *Film History*, 7:4 (1995), 426.

11 J. Snead, 'Images of Blacks in Black Independent Films', in M. T. Martin (ed.), *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 366.

12 Ibid.

13 C. Musser, 'Historiographic Method and the Study of Early Cinema', *Cinema Journal*, 44:1 (2004), 106.

14 For an overview of early African American film production see M. Cifor, H. Girma, S. Norman and M. Posner, 'Early African American Film Database, 1909–1930', *Journal of Open Humanities Data* (2018), DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/johd.7.

15 A. N. Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 1.

16 Ibid.

17 *Within Our Gates* (1920), dir. Oscar Micheaux, feat. Evelyn Preer, Floy (listed as 'Flo') Clements, Charles D. Lucas, produced by Micheaux Film and Book Company; *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), dir. Oscar Micheaux, feat. Iris Hall, Lawrence Chenault, produced by Micheaux Film and Book Company. Intertitles translated by Charles Musser. See also J. Kisch and E. Mapp, *A Separate Cinema: Fifty Years of Black Cast Posters* (New York: Noonday, 1992).

18 Quoted in b. hooks, 'Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness', *Black American Literature Forum*, 25:2 (1991), 351.

19 Ibid.

20 J. R. Green, *With a Crooked Stick – The Films of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 23.

21 B. Allmendinger, 'The Plow and the Pen: The Pioneering Adventures of Oscar Micheaux', *American Literature*, 75:3 (2003), 545.

22 See Regester, 'The Misreading and Rereading of African American Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux'; hooks, 'Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness'; J. Gaines, '*The Birth of a Nation* and *Within Our Gates*: Two Tales of the American South', in R. H. King and H. Taylor (eds), *Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 177–92; J. R. Green, *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000); Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself Into History*; P. Bowser, J. Gaines and C. Musser (eds), *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

23 Green, *Straight Lick*, p. 53.

24 Green, *Straight Lick*, p. 87.

25 L. Mirakhor, 'Resisting the Temptation to Give Up: James Baldwin, Robert Adams, and the Disavowal of the American Way of Life', *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), 655.

26 See M. Konstantarakos (ed.), *Spaces in European Cinema* (Exeter: Intellect Press, 2000); A. Butler, *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen* (New York: Wallflower, 2002); P. J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); W. Everett and A. Goodbody (eds), *Revisiting Space: Space and Place in European Cinema* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005); T. Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

27 Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*, p. 3.

28 N. Fleener, 'Answering Film with Film: The Hampton Epilogue, a Positive Alternative to the Negative Black Stereotypes Presented in *The Birth of a Nation*', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 7:4 (1980), 400.

29 P. Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 59, 269.

30 Snead, 'Images of Blacks in Black Independent Films', p. 365.

31 D. Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), p. 159.

32 Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself Into History*, pp. 61–2.

33 Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, p. 9.

34 E. W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 79–80.

35 E. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 41.

36 Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself Into History*, p. 52.

37 T. Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 10.

38 M. Diawara (ed.), *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8–19.

39 Massood, *Black City Cinema*, p. 201.

40 See H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (London: Blackwell, 1991 [1974]); Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*.

41 A. Friedberg, 'Cinema and the Postmodern Condition', in L. Williams (ed.), *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 60.

42 Friedberg, 'Cinema and the Postmodern Condition', p. 65.

43 R. F. Arnold, 'Film Space/Audience Space: Notes Toward a Theory of Spectatorship', *Velvet Light Trap*, 25 (1990), 51.

44 On segregated filmgoing in the US, see J. N. Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); J. Geiger, '"The Game Behind the Game": Spatial Politics and Spike Lee's *He Got Game*', in R. Hutchison and J. Krase (eds), *Race and Ethnicity in New York City* (New York: Elsevier, 2004), pp. 83–105; E. Abel, 'Double Take: Photography, Cinema, and the Segregated Theater', *Critical Inquiry*, 34 (2008), S2–S20.

45 G. W. Jones, *Black Cinema Treasures, Lost and Found* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1991), p. 185.

46 S. Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 45–6.

47 M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, trans. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 68.

48 Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 5.

49 Diawara, *Black American Cinema*, pp. 215–17.

50 b. hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators', in M. Diawara (ed.), *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 288.

51 Diawara, *Black American Cinema*, p. 11.

52 hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze', pp. 300–2.

53 Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself Into History*, p. 126.

54 Gaines, '*The Birth of a Nation* and *Within Our Gates*', p. 177.

55 Taylor, 'The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema', pp. 20–1.

56 T. Cripps, 'The Making of *The Birth of a Race*: The Emerging Politics of Identity in Silent Movies', in D. Bernardi (ed.), *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 38.

57 L. Williams, 'Race, Melodrama, and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)', in L. Grieveson and P. Krämer (eds), *The Silent Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 253.

58 On Micheaux, class, and skin tone, see Green, *Straight Lick*, pp. 177–9. Gray considers that Micheaux's apparent reverence for Booker T. Washington, 'presages a non-sentimental view of the mulatto figure' (Gray, 'In Plain Sight', pp. 77–9).

59 Even so, critics have noted Eve appears to embody the patriarchal trope of 'women as helpless victims', a persistent figuration in Micheaux's films; A. Frymus, 'Evelyn Preer and Black Female Stardom in the Silent Film Era', *Feminist Media Studies* (2021), DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2021.1879198.

60 Williams, 'Race, Melodrama, and *The Birth of a Nation*', p. 249. For a cogent analysis of segregated *mise-en-scène* in Griffith's Biograph films, see D. Bernardi (ed.), *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 115–16.

61 Gaines, '*The Birth of a Nation* and *Within Our Gates*', p. 179.

62 The film began as an NAACP project but changed direction to focus on wartime contributions of African American soldiers. Cripps outlines the film's

problematic production history and 'considerable failings' (Cripps, 'The Making of *The Birth of a Race*', p. 53).

63 See, for example, Green, *Straight Lick*, pp. 1–30; J. Gaines, '*Within Our Gates*: From Race Melodrama to Opportunity Narrative', in C. Musser, J. Gaines and P. Bowser (eds), *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 67–80.

64 Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself Into History*, p. 126.

65 Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself Into History*, p. 125. The 'Red Summer' was a term coined by James Weldon Johnson, then working for the NAACP, to describe white supremacist violence and riots across dozens of US cities, linked to post-World War I economic and social tensions.

66 Green, *With a Crooked Stick*, p. 24.

67 Ibid. See also H. V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 69–70.

68 Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself Into History*, p. 127.

69 Frymus, 'Evelyn Preer and Black Female Stardom', p. 5.

70 Green, *Straight Lick*, p. 199, p. 9.

71 C. Regester, 'Evelyn Preer as a Vehicle of Victimization in Micheaux's Films', in B. T. Lupack (ed.), *Early Race Filmmaking in America* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 88–104. Frymus notes that 'African Americans did not exist in complete isolation from dominant, patriarchal schemata, and helpless female victims of Micheaux films support this fact' (Frymus, 'Evelyn Preer and Black Female Stardom', p. 9).

72 Green, *Straight Lick*, p. 26.

73 Green makes a further intervention here, contending that though the Spanish intertitles from the rediscovered print, on which the English translation was based, state that Sylvia is the mixed-race legitimate daughter of Gridlestone, 'it is probable that in Micheaux's original version of the film, Sylvia was the *illegitimate* offspring of white-on-black rape' (Green, *Straight Lick*, p. 26, emphasis in original).

74 Green, *With a Crooked Stick*, p. 10.

75 Green, *Straight Lick*, p. 29.

76 J. D. Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 102.

77 Green, *With a Crooked Stick*, p. 34.

78 O. Micheaux, *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* (New York: Book Supply Company, 1945), pp. 90–1.

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