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A Light in Darkness, Oscar Micheaux: Entrepreneur Intellectual Agitator

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

By

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University of Arkansas
Bachelor of Arts in History and African and African American Studies, 2011

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract:

Oscar Micheaux was a luminary who served as an agent of racial uplift, with a unique message to share with the world on behalf of the culturally marginalized African Americans. He produced projects that conveyed the complexity of the true black experience with passion and creative courage. His films empowered black audiences and challenged conventional stereotypes of black culture and potential. The legacy of Oscar Micheaux is historically unparalleled among his contemporaries. He transcended traditionally held perspectives about what black people could accomplish. The consciousness within his work still heavily influences black entertainment today. This study seeks to add to the existing collection of works chronicling Micheaux's career, however it adds unique perspective unanalyzed in existing scholarship. Additionally, it serves to educate contemporary audiences on the most prolific and unheralded novelist and film producer of the Race films era.

Acknowledgements:

Foremost, I wish to thank the Almighty for orchestrating my capacity and curiosity to understand Oscar Micheaux's importance to black culture. I wish to also thank Dr. Calvin White and the African & African American Studies office for the outstanding support from every member of the program. Your words and deeds sharpened my research and I certainly owe a tremendous debt of gratitude. I also wish to thank my darling wife for everything you do to help me be who I am. Lastly, I wish to thank Oscar Micheaux and the fore bearers who laid the groundwork for this study and the opportunities that more freely exist for our people today.

Dedication:

This work is dedicated to the memory and legacy of Oscar Micheaux, without whom this project would not be possible.

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Introduction

Born January 2, 1884, Oscar Micheaux became one of the most prolific and consistent independent black filmmakers in the United States history. Micheaux, a flamboyant and gregarious public figure remained guarded and reticent about his personal life until he passed in 1951. For the past 67 years Micheaux's accomplishments as well as the achievements of the black independent film production in its entirety have gone largely unrecognized. Very few extensive biographical projects of Micheaux are published and until the late 1980s, very little was known about his family background, the nature of his records and estate, or his filmmaking methods and techniques. What few literary works that do remain have been pieced together from self-revelations in his autobiographical novels and films and interviews with his last known living relatives and friends.

Micheaux undoubtedly made significant contributions in the history of African Americans in the United States; however, his story is one which very few people are familiar. Micheaux was also very aware of the criticism he faced and on more than one occasion, he responded with an appeal for understanding of his objectives for the methods and techniques he employed. In the January 24, 1925 edition of the *Philadelphia Afro-American* he summarized his 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 a close range. My results might have been narrow at times, but in those limited situations, the truth was the predominant characteristic. It is only by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my picture, in the light and background of their true state, that we can rise our people to greater height.¹

¹ Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992. 133

One can argue that Micheaux's unwillingness to compromise his vision of racial uplift contributed to the forgotten legacy of the tremendous accomplishments he made in American history during the first half of the 20th century. Micheaux, a quintessential self-made author and filmmaker, infused life experiences into his films with unapologetic individualism and refreshing outspokenness. Micheaux presented positive images of blacks in films during a time when Hollywood insisted on stereotyping and portraying blacks in a negative light. His films dealt honestly and openly with the social and economic issues blacks faced every day. Yet, his story has often been omitted from the accounts of Reconstruction and the Post Emancipation struggles; therefore, the purpose of this study is to illuminate the contributions that Micheaux made in the early 20th century. As an entrepreneur, author and filmmaker, this project examines the correlations between his contributions and those more prominently celebrated historic figures in African American history, such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and W.E.B. DuBois. Their lives and careers will be explored in comparison with Oscar Micheaux's to reveal commonalities in the contributions and motivations of these luminaries. Analysis will also show that despite the incredible endeavors of Micheaux, his legacy is not nearly as culturally celebrated as his co-laborers in consciousness. At some time in his career, Micheaux corresponded collaborated with, or repudiated all of these individuals. To live and struggle for the uplift of the race during this era was a tall challenge for any black person; Micheaux stood as tall, and his little told legacy loomed as large as any of his race compatriots.

The expression "African American film industry of the 1920s" seems an oxymoron, yet early black filmmakers fought to overcome obstacles such as a lack of financial resources,

inadequate training, segregated theatres, and limited bookings.² African Americans deeply resented the portrayals of their race in traditional Hollywood imagery. Micheaux rose to the challenge to produce films that presented African Americans overcoming the obstacles imposed by dominant society. Micheaux worked to advance his race and was initially awarded high praise for his endeavors and his enterprise however his contributions lay largely unrecognized outside of the American film industry. Few people are aware that the Directors Guild of America honored Micheaux with a lifetime achievement award in 1987, and even fewer have seen any of his films. A luminary, Micheaux worked as an agent for racial uplift with a unique message he shared with the world on behalf of the masses of silenced African Americans. He produced projects that conveyed the complexity of the “real black” experience with passion and creative courage. His films empowered black audiences and challenged conventional stereotypes of black culture and potential.

The legacy of Oscar Micheaux is historically unparalleled among his contemporary co-laborers for black social uplift. He transcended traditionally held perspectives about what black people could accomplish. The consciousness his work conveyed still permeates and influences black entertainment today, most prominently displayed through the works of contemporary directors like Melvin Van Peebles, Spike Lee and John Singleton. The significance of this study is that it adds to the limited literary collection on the work of Oscar Micheaux. Additionally, it serves to educate modern audiences on the most prolific under celebrated director of African American films during the era of Race Movies.

² Charlene Regester, “*The African American Press and Race Movies 1909-1929*, 34-49

In 1807, a British abolitionist group *The African Institution*, proposed “The portrait of the Negro has seldom been drawn but by the pencil of his oppressor and the Negro has sat for it in the distorted attitude of slavery.” Dr. Carter G. Woodson extolled the European interest in African culture illustrating a global desire to view depictions of black life from within their own world.³ A fundamental conduit of early American culture was experienced through attending the movies; however, for blacks this experience was not equally shared. Social customs of the early 1900s prohibited many black Americans from attending certain movie theatres. To enjoy the movie experience, black Americans many times attended midnight releases or special screenings in theaters that permitted their attendance in “colored only” sessions.⁴ During this same era, blacks in record numbers left the South seeking new lives in the cities of the north and the plains of the west.

In these new locations, African Americans established communities of their own, which functioned parallel to the white society, separated by law and customs of segregation. Cities such as Nicodemus, Kansas were established among the western plains by and for black migrants. Members of these communities operated independently of whites and aggressively petitioned the other blacks to depart the South for better lives and a more secure posterity.⁵ As close as these two worlds were, African Americans knew more about white culture than white Americans ever cared to learn about black culture. This was equally true in popular culture. In film, blackness was either ignored or portrayed in such a way that dehumanized black audiences so severely,

³ Woodson, Carter Godwin. *The Mis-education of the Negro*. Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1933. 87.

⁴ *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

⁵ "Nicodemus Kansas." Nicodemus Kansas. Accessed May 19, 2015. <http://www.nicodemuskansas.org/>.

they did not even recognize themselves. African Americans quickly began to recognize the dire need to see on screen productions from within their own community, movies that would come to be popularly known as ‘race films’. Hollywood would witness the rise of an entire industry of black film production starring black actors for black audiences. ‘Midnight rambles,’ the popularly attended late night premieres of films and other cinematic productions for black patrons, show-cased these new black films which were greatly celebrated in the theaters of the southern theatre circuit.⁶

In a segregated world, black patrons flocked to see movies made especially for them. Audiences were enthralled with the films because they had never previously seen any such depictions of black life and culture on the silver screen. Between 1910 and 1950 more than 500 race films were produced, many which directly addressed socially controversial topics. Pearl Bowser, legendary film archivist and author, asserted that these films were inspirational to black audiences because they presented images of themselves that were not shown in traditional cinema.⁷ To see black characters playing heroic roles or an all-black cast was a wonderful and new experience for black audiences.

Chicago, is where race films developed a significant following. The city, at the turn-of-the-century, became the cultural center for southern blacks. Determined to put the shadows of slavery behind them, southern blacks poured into the city by the thousands. Longing to establish a sense of familiarity and belonging in new locations, author Toni Bambara proclaimed race films, along with other racially centered endeavors and organizations provided a sense of

⁶ Midnight Ramble. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

⁷ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. Xvi.

affirmation for these settlers. These films reflected the essence of the burden Blacks felt to uplift their community. As post-migration blacks began to prosper, a sophisticated urbane middle-class also began to develop. These individuals displayed a tremendous desire to reconstruct their social image from those that were portrayed in the various forms of mass media. African Americans were constantly assaulted by demeaning images from popular white culture such as cartoons, the press and now in motion pictures. Black culture and imagery displayed on screen at this time remained solely for the purpose of comedic entertainment for white audiences. Elton Fax, celebrated black illustrator, concurred with this notion offering his belief that the black image was designed specifically to be devoid of conscious thought and purely display for entertainment value.⁸ Many traditional Hollywood representations of black culture still envisioned them as illiterate plantation dwellers that made no significant contributions to greater culture. In addition, most Hollywood portrayals effectively dehumanized African Americans in the eyes of white culture. In response, black filmmakers produced race films to portray African-American culture honestly, with dignity and affection. Therefore, movies became lucrative potential tools of racial uplift, with the power to demand an equal playing field in society.

Peter Jones, a black producer from Chicago, made films to showcase the everyday life of the black community. Movies such as these were essential to black social confidence because they displayed the lives and endeavors of individuals and institutions that sought to positively help the race. Black institutions of learning such as Tuskegee and the Hampton Institute also produced and promoted films to showcase their efforts at black social uplift. These films instilled a sense of pride and connectedness into their audience. The films became profitable

⁸ Elton Fax - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

entertainment, drawing on the traditions of Vaudeville Theater, an early showcase circuit for black performers. The author highly suggests *Redefining Black Film* by Mark A. Reid, *Black Film, White Money* by Jessie A. Rhines and *Black Films & Filmmakers: A Comprehensive Anthology from Stereotype to Superhero* by Lindsay Patterson as additional research on black activity and representation in the early film industry.

The District:

‘The Stroll,’ the black Vaudeville district of Chicago, gave birth to individuals such as press agent William Foster, who founded one of the earliest black owned film production companies.⁹ Black Vaudevillians started in early slapstick comedies, which were enjoyed by both black and white audiences. Outside the darkened theaters however the social political and economic outlook for most African-Americans during this time was much darker. Overt racial violence against African Americans was commonplace during the era following the conclusion of Reconstruction and the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance, many times even sanctioned and justified by popular media. Lynching had become a popular method of retaliation against black social advancement; the highest numbers occurring during the 1890s but, as early as 1900, up to 100 lynchings were reported annually and reports did not decline until the 1920s.¹⁰ In this racially charged climate, in 1915 blacks were assaulted by one of the most pernicious attacks of racist propaganda ever produced, D. W. Griffith’s three hour epic *The Birth of a Nation*. Derived from Thomas Dixon’s novel *The Clansmen*, the film, was seen by more Americans than any movie previously released. The film also sanctioned the violent practices of the Ku Klux Klan

⁹ Gaines, Jane M. *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, 94-95.

¹⁰ Robert Hall - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

while displaying African Americans as ape-like, hypersexual, corrupt and lazy. Mainstream America from President Woodrow Wilson on hailed *Birth of a Nation* as an artistic triumph, while blacks remained outraged by the films distortions. Black protest of the film occurred from the earliest adaptations of Dixon's *The Clansman*. Across the country, black opponents and their white supporters organized legislative committees, petitioned mayors and set up protests to have the film banned.

In 1916, Lincoln Pictures, a black owned film company became the first to produce serious dramatic films. Their sole surviving work was released in 1921 titled *By Right of Birth*. The film departed from the general portrayal of black characters on national screens. They showed blacks as professional, educated, and morally upstanding defying the stereotypical images portrayed by white media. Lincoln Pictures was the creation of Noble Johnson a black versatile character actor, who played seemingly every type of ethnicity beside his own race. Johnson brought his acting experience into his productions to provide an element of high quality film expertise never before seen in a race picture. In 1918 after discovering his work in the *Chicago Defender*, Lincoln Pictures reached out to an unknown novelist from South Dakota, named Oscar Micheaux.¹¹

Oscar Micheaux:

On January 2, 1884 nearly 40 miles above the city Cairo along the Ohio River, Oscar Micheaux was born into a working class rural Ohio family. The fourth born son of Calvin Swan Micheaux and Belle Goff, Micheaux was not formally educated beyond public school but

¹¹ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 10.

experienced race and class prejudice most of his life. As a boy, Micheaux's family relocated outside the city of Metropolis in southern Illinois, where he displayed a talent for selling his family's produce. Bright, independent, and strong willed, Micheaux spent most of his time avoiding childhood games and working on his own projects. From his earliest novel *The Conquest*, we learned that his father, disappointed with his farming skills, sent him to do the marketing and networking with the people in nearby towns, turning into his first real experience with business and selling a product.¹²

By his teenage years, Micheaux was regarded as a rebel, freethinker, and had grown very disgusted with conventional thinking. Evidence of this can be seen at an early age. In a novel penned at the age of sixteen, Micheaux displayed consciousness of race and class, when he combined dialogue about racial injustices African Americans faced with the encouragement for self-improvement and success:

Another thing that added to my unpopularity, perhaps, was my persistent declarations that there were not enough competent colored people to grasp the many opportunities that presented themselves, and that if white people could possess such nice homes, wealth and luxuries, so in time, could the colored people. "You're a fool", I would be told, and then would follow the timeworn long and cruel slavery, and after the emancipation, the prejudice and hatred of the white race, whose chief object was to prevent the progress and betterment of the Negro. This excuse for the negro's lack of ambition was constantly dinned into my ears from the Kagle corner loafer to the minister in the pulpit, and I became so tired of it all that I declared that I could ever leave Mpls [Metropolis] I would never return. More, I would disprove such a theory and in the following chapters I hope to show that what I believed fourteen years ago was true.¹³

This early desire to prove African Americans could successfully transcend racial obstacles established the standards by which Micheaux lived and produced his films and literature.

¹² Green, J. Ronald. *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 13

¹³ Micheaux, Oscar. *The Conquest the Story of a Negro Pioneer*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1913.17.

At the age of 17, Micheaux ventured away from home in 1901, going to live in the city of Chicago with his brother. In the city, he worked in the stockyards before securing a job as a Pullman Porter, which enabled him to travel the United States by rail for nearly three years. By 1904, he had saved enough money to purchase a relinquished homestead located on the edge of the Indian Territory in South Dakota. Determined to build a 1,000-acre ranch as an example he hoped others would follow, Micheaux encouraged African Americans of the South to escape the oppressive lands of their forefathers through media outlets such as the *Chicago Defender*, a major voice of black culture.¹⁴ As Micheaux wrote in his first novel *The Conquest*, “I turn my face westward with the spirit of Horace Greeley, the words go west young man and grow up with the country ringing in my ears.”¹⁵

Feeling successful with the acquisition of his homestead, Micheaux fell in love with a white woman, which according to the social standards of the times was unacceptable. Due to the anticipated public fallout and disapproval of the relationship, he decided instead to marry Orlean McCracken, a middle class black woman from Chicago whose father Reverend N.J. McCracken, was a well-known preacher. His happiness would be short lived as a major drought abruptly ended his career as a rancher. To make matters worse, his marriage failed due to the meddling behavior of his father-in-law, which sent the homestead into financial bankruptcy leading Micheaux to consider writing professionally. Shortly after, Micheaux began his writing career authoring short observational pieces and reviews for local newspapers. He used his ranching

¹⁴ Micheaux, Oscar. "Where the Negro Fails." *Chicago Defender*, March 19, 1910. Accessed November 2, 2014.

¹⁵ Micheaux, Oscar. *The Conquest the Story of a Negro Pioneer*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1913.47.

experiences as the basis for his burgeoning writing career. The self-taught author wrote, published and distributed his works personally, door to door among his fellow white ranching community, an amazing feat for an African-American of this time. Micheaux sold his novels such as *The Homesteader* another pseudo biopic published 1917, mostly to his neighbors on the plains of Iowa and South Dakota. Becoming quite successful at promoting himself as a writer, his books found both black and white audiences.

Lincoln Picture Company of Los Angeles, California became aware of Micheaux's success and offered to adapt his novel *The Homesteader* to film. With no previous film production experience, Micheaux decided to produce the film himself. The deal between Micheaux and Lincoln Pictures eventually deteriorated due to the owner's reluctance to allow Micheaux the rights to produce his films. However, within a few months Micheaux hired a cast, a crew and a chauffeur who drove them from Chicago to rural South Dakota to begin filming. Witnesses Olive & Dorothy Delfs recall encountering Micheaux's production team, as young girls, descending upon their South Dakota family farm, "[Micheaux] and his team spent a day shooting on our family farm...people who were total strangers to you out here [Micheaux] came in with intelligence and an idea that at that time was way out there someplace, that was not a part of everyday life."¹⁶

Micheaux went on to produce, direct, edit, and distribute 43 feature length black cast films and 7 fiction novels for his audience. Through his works, Micheaux tried to position himself as an example of success for his race. He aimed to show that the prejudices and hatred blacks experienced was a winnable obstacle asserting that only lack of ambition could deter the

¹⁶ Delf Sisters Interview - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

betterment of black people. In *The Homesteader* and *The Conquest*, Micheaux's protagonists are respected by their white neighbors as intelligent and admirable men because of their enterprising attitude and work ethic. One can argue these literary examples showcase the adulation Micheaux held for Booker Washington's economic ideology of self-sufficiency and his life is an embodiment of the example Washington encouraged for black success.

Micheaux would direct more 'race movies' than any other black film director. Black filmmaker Carlton Moss offered, "Perhaps Micheaux's greatest achievement was that he proved he could make films. He grew up in a time where it was believed you could not spell if you are black and he challenged that myth."¹⁷ Micheaux's first major film *The Homesteader* produced in 1918 was the first feature-length race movie. Not only was Micheaux the first black to make feature-length films, he was also the first to explore racial taboo subjects. With *The Homesteader*, he addressed interracial romance and sexual assault, extremely controversial content for the period. This theme was revisited many times throughout Micheaux's book and film career. Micheaux insisted in directly dealing with these complex and nuanced ideals. Focusing on questions of color, the need for education, and issues blacks faced in urban environments, his work reflected high concern for the message he wanted to share in his films, including his philosophical perspectives on black life.

Micheaux served as an exemplary businessman, employing his trade in a capitalistic enterprise with minimal financial resources but an enormity of skill. His entrepreneurial astuteness helped him see successes over his first year totaling \$40,000 in total film attendance

¹⁷ Carlton Moss - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

sales.¹⁸ His impressive personality, salesmanship and marketing strategies allowed him to be an early model of entrepreneurial success for the independent black film industry that grew out of his shadow. Micheaux once wrote, “One of the greatest task of my life has been to show that the colored man can be anything.”¹⁹ The *Symbol of the Unconquered* a recently discovered 1921 production, once again expressed his belief that the greatest opportunity for a black man existed through hard work and clean living. Micheaux genuinely saw his work as laboring for the betterment of African Americans, certainly out of empathy but also because it was profitable for him. He did not believe blacks would support anything other than uplifting images because they were bombarded daily with social degradation. This era was enormously dangerous and frustrating, but contained vast potential for progressive minded African Americans nationwide.

The early years of Micheaux’s career era also saw the outbreak of World War I, which presented blacks with another chance to demonstrate their patriotism and seek social mobility. Micheaux quickly organized his production agency the Micheaux Book and Film Company in 1918, due to black films being in high demand. Micheaux capitalized on showcasing his films along the infamous southern ‘chitlin circuit’ of Vaudevillian theatres, a route of nightclub venues, diners, juke joints, and theaters throughout the southeastern United States that featured African-American performers and specifically accommodated black audiences. The race film industry produced many projects that were criticized as flawed and under financed, but the industry found a strong ally with the black press. Shingzie Howard McClane, an actress in four

¹⁸ Green, Ronald. *With A Crooked Stick: the Films of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004. 22-23.

¹⁹ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 165.

of Micheaux's films *Underworld* 1937, *Swing/Gods Step Children* 1938, *The Betrayal* 1948 fondly recalled the modern designing of the black theatres and the widespread support their films received from the black community.²⁰ Even critics claimed the efforts of black directors like Micheaux as leading the struggle to help the black community help itself. Black journalist such as St. Claire Bourne, Sr. compelled the black public to support Micheaux's films despite aesthetic inadequacies associated with independent production.²¹ Micheaux found resonance with his audience because of the idyllic messages endowed into his films, despite his technical inadequacies as a producer. The race film industry never completely coalesced with the cultural explosion-taking place in Harlem of the 1920's, but filmmakers did repurpose the literature of famous black authors and employed the talents of classically trained black actors.

New and progressive race film companies emerged during the onset of the roaring twenties and sought to raise the professional standards of the industry. Groups such as Harlem's LaFayette Players established black posh film companies such as Reol Productions, creating publicity and popularity for many black theatre actors.²² Micheaux, keenly capitalized on the transitioning industry by helping actors make their big screen premieres in his films. Social dramas were growing in popularity and Micheaux found competition within the film industry from black cinema groups in the 1920's such as the Colored Players of Philadelphia.²³ As audio was introduced to film in the late 1920's production costs continued to increase. Black producers found it increasingly difficult generating revenue for their films, resulting in subpar production

²⁰ Shingzie McClane - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

²¹ St. Claire Bourne, Sr. - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

²² Diawara, Manthia. *Black American Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 1993. 7.

²³ Green, J. Ronald. *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 86-87.

processes. Micheaux himself became legendary for his propensity to stretch his available production resources, reusing generic scene selections for multiple films and maximizing any opportunity to capture the imagery for his stories on camera. Scarce revenue streams began to cripple the race film industry which Micheaux's projects helped popularize.

The crash of the New York Stock Exchange in 1929 dealt a fatal blow to the vulnerable black film production industry. Micheaux himself did not escape these financially depressing circumstances and his production company faced bankruptcy. Facing these financial challenges, Micheaux, approached businessman Frank Schifford, owner of the legendary Apollo Theater in Harlem. Micheaux received cash advances from Schifford for production capital on the basis that his films would successfully showcase in Schifford's three Harlem theatres. With help from his new white business partners, Micheaux continued to produce films such as 1931's *The Exile*, the first black produced talking film and 1932's *The Veiled Aristocrats*. With these films, Micheaux continued to critique the evils of city life and address the delicate balance of superficial color barriers in the black community with his 'one drop of black blood' romances. Despite the social and financial pressures, Oscar Micheaux remained the only early black producer to successfully transition from the pre-sound productions to full audio films. Hollywood soon began to appreciate the lucrative potential of producing films with all black casts, however, African American actors were typically showcased in less than complimentary roles. The content Hollywood produced films such as 1929's *Hallelujah* and 1948's *Miracle in Harlem*, served to reinforce negative stereotypes of black character. Black performers like *Miracle in Harlem*'s Stepin Fetchit with proven ability were type casted and many times pigeon holed into roles that displayed black people as untrustworthy, inarticulate and overly servile characters on the periphery of the film action. Two key ingredients in these films were singing and dancing, due to

Hollywood's attempted duplication of the less expensive entertainment value of well-mounted musicals.²⁴

Race movies began to deviate from their intended purpose of uplift and positive depictions of black culture as white producers began to dominate the production market. Any major differences between the race movies and the Hollywood produced films began to dissipate. Future stars such as Lena Horne and Herbert Jefferies made their debuts in these early Hollywood black casted films. Hollywood created stiff competition for the black produced film industry and siphoned off large segments of black film industry's audience by controlling the theatre distribution circuit.²⁵ Herb Jefferies and other conscious minded actors emphasized the importance of continuing the race films original purpose of uplift and positive black representations of all sorts from black cowboys to black professional persons.²⁶ Racial uplift films grew unpopular and out of touch. Shola Lynch, curator for the Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division of the Schomburg Center for Research Black Culture in New York, surmised the lack of Micheaux's remaining films helped push the collective memory to the cultural back burner. The largeness of the silent film industry was lost with the growth of talking promotions.²⁷ The impact of the race picture industry became largely diluted with the development of black casted Hollywood productions, and the stock market crash of 1929 diminished resources for the race film industry. The onset of integration provided a final

²⁴ St Clair Bourne - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

²⁵ Green, J. Ronald. *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 105

²⁶ Herb Jefferies - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

²⁷ Lynch, Shola. "Discussion of Micheaux's Career with Shola Lynch, NYPL." Telephone interview by author. February 17, 2015.

deathblow for the black film industry and the legacies of early black producers like Oscar Micheaux.

Micheaux's films found increasing difficulty securing locations to premiere his projects as the 1930s continued. Micheaux never lost his original propensity for using film as a tool for critique and even his newer films contained harsh messages condemning the ills he saw with society. His later films while still socially critical, failed to establish the resonance they once maintained with the black film going community. Micheaux now faced heavy criticism for his treatment of dark skinned black characters in his newer projects like 1938's *God's Step Children* and in some cities, he was even forced to withdraw his films by black protest.²⁸ By the 1940's, it became increasingly clear that the era of race movies Micheaux originally inspired had a very limited future. Micheaux's later productions embraced this reality by branching beyond his typical racial uplift format. Forced to adapt to a shrinking market, Micheaux adjusted his content to a wider range of material including gangster films and mystery thrillers such as *Underworld* and *Murder in Harlem*.

²⁸ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 113.

CHAPTER 2: THE INTELLECTUAL

After the Civil War, the United States Congress amended the U.S. constitution in an effort to accommodate black freedom, equality and progress. Congress passed and ratified the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 prohibiting slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 granting citizenship and due process and equal protection by law to all people born or naturalized in the U.S., and the Fifteenth Amendment in 1869 giving the right to vote to all citizens, regardless of race. Congress also established the Freedmen's Bureau to work with officials in each of the Southern states to aid freed slaves and white refugees by furnishing supplies and medical services, founding schools, supervising contracts between freedmen and their employers, and managing seized or uninhabited lands. As Reconstruction continued, white society sought to retract the gains African Americans made since emancipation. Locally imposed written and unwritten laws were enforced to maintain white control over black progress. There was no suffrage for blacks and no indication that they could look forward to a future with full citizenship and participation in American democracy.²⁹ Limited economic opportunity formation of oppressive organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan led to increasing black migration to northern cities.

Critical evaluation of continuing racial inequality that led to a new attitude of self-determination in African Americans for acceptance on their own terms.³⁰ World War I opened new doors of opportunity for black people seeking progress such as factory employment and potential for military service abroad. Leading black community figures and intellectuals such as W.E.B.

²⁹ Franklin, John Hope. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*. 3rd Ed. New York: Knopf, 1967. 206

³⁰ Ibid., 27

DuBois encouraged blacks to enlist in the war effort to gain racial respect through service, which blacks demonstrated in every war of American history. Yet when the war concluded and soldiers returned to the home front, blacks increasingly found themselves caught in the crosshairs between their own rising social expectations and continued oppression and systemic exclusion from opportunity. Returning black soldiers felt they fought to make the world safe for democracy and earned equal rights and employment, but what they most often encountered was hostile resistance based on economic competition. White Americans, especially in the South, were concerned that returning black soldiers would utilize combat training to physically demand the rights of citizenship. Post war racial tensions erupted into open rioting between whites and blacks in dozens of cities around the country. Black soldiers were openly attacked by white mobs as they disembarked from their returning trains and other public transports many times while still in uniform. Hopelessness and despair were prevalent and there was little positivity many African Americans could see from remaining in their current situations. The harsh reality of black life during this era motivated individuals like Micheaux to advocate for mass departure.³¹ Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land*, Malaika Adero's *Up South* and Daniel Johnson's *Black Migration in America* all provide valuable additional information on the mass exodus of blacks during the early 20th century.

³¹ Davis, David. "Not Only Is War Hell." *African American Review* 42, no. 3/4 (2008): 477-91. Accessed October 30, 2015.

Black Migration

At the onset of World War I, African Americans largely still resided in the southeast section of the country. They soon began migrating to seek opportunities in the North and the West. There were several earlier significant migrations of African Americans such as the migration to Kansas in 1879 led by Henry Adams of Louisiana and Moses Singleton of Tennessee, the migrations into Arkansas and Texas in 1888 to 1889, and the departure of 1916 to 1918 were caused by economic conditions and also the poor treatment of African Americans in the South.³² Black migration occurred simultaneously with the boom in industrial demand for unskilled labor in the 1920s. Dissatisfaction with conditions in the South prompted many African Americans to relocate North to better their status. Other factors that played a role in the mass migration were the decline of agricultural industries of the South from the boll weevil and disastrous flooding during the summer of 1915, and the growth of the northern industry. Demands of the European war also overtaxed the labor market and ended the traditional supply of European immigrant labor. The heavy traffic of African Americans moving North influenced many other black southerners living along the often-traveled routes North to follow suit.³³ In the early 1900's, many African Americans moved to northern cities such as Chicago and New York. Black masses became increasingly interested in securing black independence instead of assimilation into the white society. This was the spirit of activism that Micheaux shared and helped develop into a tremendous career. He used popular media outlets like the militant

³² Cronon, Edmund David. *Black Moses the Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. 22

³³ Ibid., 25

Chicago Defender newspaper to encourage African Americans to strike their own path and gain respect through thrift and entrepreneurship.

The Defender used its extensive reach to the South to condemn white southerner's behavior and advocate for blacks to depart seeking better lives. Circulation of the *Defender* rose from 50,000 to 125,000 during the peak years of the migration. The newspaper often spoke of aggressive protests against the injustices of life in the South. Stories of brutalities in the region were featured in nearly every edition of the *Defender*. African American outlets such as the *Defender* represented unapologetic black pride, dignity, and assertiveness. From its inception in 1905 it served as a crusader against the southern mobocracy.³⁴ In the March 19, 1910 publication of *The Defender*, Oscar Micheaux openly solicited blacks of the South to join the migration in an article titled "Where the Negro Fails: Go West Young Man and Grow With the Country." He asserted that there were less than 300 black farmers in the ten states of the American Northwest to take advantage of the plentiful and prosperous farmlands.³⁵ By the conclusion of WWI, record numbers of African Americans had left their homes in the South in search of the opportunity, yet found that even in the North they were still treated as second-class citizens. It was at that this critical time that individuals like Booker Washington, W.E.B. Dubois and Marcus Garvey urgently appealed to African American consciousness and sought to instill racial uplift through every possible avenue. Micheaux consciously positioned his mission alongside these noteworthy black figures, evidenced through compilation of his efforts through

³⁴ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 54

³⁵ Micheaux, Oscar. "Where the Negro Fails." *Chicago Defender*, March 19, 1910. Accessed November 2, 2014.

film production, media solicitation and the lived experiences shared in his literature. Black people were determined to create their own opportunities, leading to the socioeconomic restructuring of America where the black businesses endeavored to support their livelihood from within the black community. This model of self-sufficiency was what Micheaux sought to provide to his audience by encouraging their migration and entrepreneurial activity. The author suggests *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* by Nell I. Painter and *Black Exodus* by Alferdteen Harrison as additional research on the Black Migration during the early 20th century.

Wariness of Religion and Religiosity

Micheaux was considered a rebel from his earliest recollections. In his works we find unmasked criticism for the black clergymen. Typical Micheaux renditions of minsters either suggested moral corruption or stubborn ignorance, and each character was diametrically opposed to honest diligent labor. In *The Conquest* and *The Homesteader*, Micheaux shared the story of his failed marriage to Orlean, the daughter of Reverend N.J. McCracken of Chicago. Micheaux's protagonists are logical and ethical and can never seem to agree with obstinate clergymen antagonists. *The Homesteader's* Jean Baptiste is distrusting of his father-in-law Reverend N.J. McCarthy (derived from the real life McCracken), stemming from a childhood incident and revelation of Reverend McCarthy's infidelities. The legendary Paul Robeson even made his on-screen debut as Reverend Jenkins in Micheaux's 1925 piece *Body and Soul*. Robeson was casted in a familiar role for Micheaux's films, a philandering, and alcoholic minister's son. Robeson's character displayed Micheaux's general disdain and distrust for clergymen and angered a

segment of his audience so much so that this film also never garnered widespread support from the black community because of its treatment of ministers.³⁶ Micheaux presented dishonesty and greed as the ministers main motivation, arguing that he was only trying to present the truth and lay out for the black race a cross examination of its own life, a viewing of the colored heart from close range.³⁷ Some of the black public resented this representation of ministers because it openly exposed the ills within their communities. A black patron named William Henry questioned the editor of the *Chicago Defender* whether Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* or Micheaux's *Body and Soul* caused more harm for the black race, "One would expect a white screenwriter to fan the flames of hatred. But what can we say when a black man portrays our people in the same manner?"³⁸ Micheaux's critiques of fanatical religiosity drew parallels to the works of W.E.B. Dubois which described the 'frenzy of shouting' most notably associated with the black church.³⁹ Dubois was keenly aware of the centrality of the church to the black experience, and posited that religion stifled Southern black's ability to assert their civil liberties because it required the denial of their true thoughts and desires in favor of silent submission to the racial status quo.⁴⁰ Micheaux also critiqued the imagery of the church as detrimental to black intellectual progression because it maintained a corruptive stronghold over its constituents.⁴¹

³⁶ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 207

³⁷ *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

³⁸ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 207

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 195

⁴⁰ DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Champaign, Ill.: Dover Publications 124

⁴¹ Micheaux, Oscar. *The Homesteader: A Novel*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1917. xx

Oscar Micheaux and W.E.B. DuBois openly criticized black religiosity and were especially critical of black ministers. In his film *Within Our Gates*, Micheaux criticized the black religious community as dangerous to African American freedom and advancement. *Within Our Gates* provided religious critique through the character of Uncle Ned, a shuffling inarticulate clergyman who served as a pawn of the local white elites. Black religion was displayed in Micheaux's works as a time tested means of control to keep blacks in oppression. Micheaux and other black intellectuals openly decried the dangers of the compulsive nature of religiosity and its use by white society to constrain black progress.

Co-laborers of Consciousness

The Post Reconstruction era was a critical time for individuals like Oscar Micheaux. The sadistic treatment of African Americans coupled with vast economic insufficiency largely constructed this dark era for the black inhabitants of America. It is frankly difficult to label any black resident of America as a citizen without full and equal access to economic opportunity, education, and suffrage, all of which were systematically denied to African Americans despite any service they may have provided the country. Yet, the individuals who lived contemporaneously with Micheaux are celebrated as some of the brightest luminaries and most radical revolutionaries in black culture. Men and women began to actively sow the seeds of consciousness and racial pride through every available outlet. Micheaux was not living and working in a vacuum during the days that saw the birth of the anti-lynching movement, the philosophical debates over the future of black education and the rise of black entrepreneurship and racial uplift. Micheaux drew influence and inspiration from leading black intellectuals and

he considered himself a man of reason and learning even though he was never classically trained as a writer or producer.⁴²

IDA B. WELLS

The efforts of Ida Bell Wells-Barnett towards the civic protection and overall empowerment of African Americans is well documented. Her coverage, skillset and consciousness were developed early in life when she lost of her parents and a sibling. Wells-Barnett, however would play an interesting role in the career of Oscar Micheaux. Born in 1862 and educated in Holly Springs, Mississippi Wells-Barnett later moved to Memphis, Tennessee in 1884 to pursue teaching opportunities. She was no stranger to stirring controversy by remaining true to her convictions when she began penning social critiques under the penname “Lola” in the *Memphis Free Speech*. Wells-Barnett in similar entrepreneurial fashion to Micheaux purchased interest in a platform that allowed her to publically expose ills of racism and hardships blacks endured living in the South. When three of her friends were murdered by a lynch mob, Wells-Barnett began an international crusade to expose and end lynching.

In March of 1892 Wells’ friends Mr. Thomas Moss, Mr. Calvin McDowell and Mr. Henry Steward, black managers of a successful segregated grocery business were viciously lynched because they dared to defend their store from their resentful white competitors. The three men were esteemed, law-abiding citizens with peaceful enthusiasm for their business, ‘People’s Grocery’ store, located in a dense Memphis suburb. On March 9, 1892 a white grocer competitor named Barrett visited People’s Grocery intending to intimidate his way through a

⁴² Micheaux, Oscar. *The Conquest the Story of a Negro Pioneer*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1913.xi

discrepancy. After his plans were vanquished by Calvin McDowell, Barrett organized a posse of twelve plain clothed officers to execute his retaliation. Forcibly entering through the back door, three of the officers were struck by the men defending the store. Memphis was aroused with excitement for 48 hours following the incident, until the wounded officers were announced to survive. As many as 31 men were suspected and arrested as conspirators in the assault, although the initial actions of Barrett and the officers were never questioned. Mr. Moss, Mr. McDowell and Mr. Steward were all secretly taken from their cells and brutally murdered, in efforts to discourage perceived growing black independence. Wells-Barnett wrote a stinging resolution against lynching through her newspaper company the *Memphis Free Speech*.⁴³ For her own safety, Wells-Barnett relocated from Memphis to New York and eventually to Chicago. Along her journey she served in several positions which allowed her to help the swelling numbers of black migrants looking Northward in search of better lives. The pain of losing loved ones hardened Wells-Barnett, and she became a well-established civil servant for the city of Chicago, during the time Micheaux was developing and promoting his fledgling book and his company. She also organized legal aid for the victims of the Chicago riots of 1919.

Wells-Barnett used her platform to prick the consciousness of America by recalling the facts concerning the hellish daily black existence in the South. Wells-Barnett also dared to reveal the consensual venture of the sexual liaisons between white women and black men, indicting the white male populous as the main culprits of sexual offense against African American women. Micheaux conveyed many of the same ideas as Wells-Barnett through his

⁴³ Barnett, Ida B. *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors; A Red Record; Mob Rule in New Orleans*. New York: Arno Press, 1969. 14

literature and film projects. Wells-Barnett disclosed the intent of her burden in her monumental contribution *Southern Horrors*, by “Somebody must show that the Afro American race is more sinned against than sinning, and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so.” These sentiments are also demonstrated in the works and message of Oscar Micheaux. In his film *Within Our Gates*, Micheaux incorporated the imagery of white lynch mob violence against a black family and sexual violence by white men against black women. *Within Our Gates* juxtaposed lynching and rape scenes of violence being committed against a black family by white members of the community. His early books and films such as *The Conquest*, *The Homesteader*, and *The Symbol of the Unconquered* also revealed the consensual nature of relationships between white women and black men. ‘The Scotch Girl’ of *The Conquest*, Agnes Stewart of *The Homesteader* and Eve Mason of *The Symbol of the Unconquered* all illustrate the organic romantic attraction between white women and black men, an occurrence deemed unfathomable by dominant society.⁴⁴ All of these characters were loosely created from his real romantic involvement with one of his white female neighbors.⁴⁵

Wells-Barnett and Oscar Micheaux undoubtedly shared conversation over these and additional controversial issues facing the black community. She was consulted among the list of prominent African American citizens of Chicago to review Micheaux’s film *The Homesteader* before it was allowed to premiere in the city’s black theatres. The scenes from Micheaux’s film were deemed so disturbing that members of the black and white communities feared the onset of

⁴⁴ Bernstein, Matthew, Oscar Micheaux and Leo Frank: Cinematic Justice Across the Color Line, *Film Quarterly* Vol. 57, No. 4 (Summer 2004), pp. 8-21

⁴⁵ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 161

racial violence. In reality, the messages of Wells-Barnett and Micheaux were correctly deemed controversial and may have been provocative of violent white reaction. After Wells-Barnett purchased interest in the *Memphis Free Speech* and launched her literary assault on Lynch Law, her newspaper business was ransacked and her life was threatened should she remain outspoken in Memphis. Relocation North allowed her to continue the anti-lynching campaign with less overt threats than those she incurred during her time in the South. Though their renditions may have been different the messages and motivations of Micheaux and Wells-Barnett were very much the same. Wells-Barnett was and remains deservedly celebrated for her courage and conscious; even the honorable Frederick Douglas lauded Wells-Barnett for testifying real knowledge about the ills of racism.⁴⁶ Few are familiar and fewer are cognizant enough to celebrate Micheaux in the same vein of conscious agitation. Micheaux's contributions were relevant during his era for the same reason as heroines such as Wells-Barnett. Micheaux shared his testimony, his truth, and his perspective about the issues deemed taboo and unmentionable by mainstream America, but nonetheless essential to the protection of the black community. The author suggests *Crusade for Justice: the Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells & the Campaign Against Lynching* by Paula Giddings and *To Tell Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* by Mia Bay as bolstering scholarship on the life and works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

⁴⁶ Barnett, Ida B. *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors; A Red Record; Mob Rule in New Orleans*. New York: Arno Press, 1969. 28

During the era when Oscar Micheaux lived and worked, African Americans undertook the immense task of reclaiming their humanity and civic identity from a country set on denying their justice. In the decades following the conclusion of the Reconstruction Era of 1877, the Federal Supreme Courts deemed much of the civil rights legislation passed between 1866 and 1877 unconstitutional.⁴⁷ These decisions allowed southern state legislatures to reconstruct their constitutions to systematically deny black people equal access to the ballot. The Supreme Court's 1896 Plessey vs. Ferguson ruling legitimizing the southern practice of "Separate but equal" placed a federal stamp of approval on racist discrimination and oppression. Micheaux, as did many others of his time, championed the efforts of Booker T. Washington, the principal of a small black institution in Alabama who aspired to uplift his people through self-reliance and racial solidarity.

Micheaux was greatly influenced by the socioeconomic philosophies of Washington, who encouraged blacks to be politically patient, work with diligence and defer integrations until whites accepted and respected their economic progress.⁴⁸ Learthen Dorsey, Micheaux's biographer, suggested that Micheaux was a proponent of Washington's accommodationist philosophy, offering "Writers influenced by Washington never wrote about black militancy nor attacked Jim Crow directly, but concentrated on assimilations and the middle class ideal, or criticized racial dissention or tensions within the black community."⁴⁹ The repetitive thematic narratives of Micheaux's works support those comments. Washington's philosophies helped to

⁴⁷ Washington, Booker T. *Up from Slavery, an Autobiography*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963. vii

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 49

⁴⁹ Micheaux, Oscar. *The Conquest the Story of a Negro Pioneer*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1913. Ixi

establish his legacy as an icon of black culture; however, subsequent re-examinations of his career reveal the complexity of his business and political acumen. Similarities between the two are found through cross analysis of their autobiographical literature. Washington's *Up from Slavery* is celebrated by many for its wise insights, it also helped create the pragmatic reputation of Booker T. Washington as a man of action who knew how to get things done. Critics even likened *Up from Slavery* to the prototypical American success story, the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin.⁵⁰ An astute businesslike mentality is what Washington believed would demand respect from white society and ultimately lead to equal social standing for black people. In his thinly veiled autobiography, *The Conquest*, Oscar Micheaux demonstrated the same philosophy regarding generating respect for the race. The protagonist in *The Conquest*, Oscar Devereaux, believed that blacks were responsible for their own destiny in life despite any racial hardships endured. The story's white South Dakota townspeople grew to respect Devereaux's diligent work and tenacity for success, culturally accepting him as an esteemed member of the community. Micheaux's black characters in *The Conquest* did wrestle with the duality of their existence; however, race did not define the totality of his narrative. Devereaux's accomplishments demanded the respect of his community regardless of his skin color, which was the epitome of Washington's exhortations for the race, and Micheaux's central artistic theme.

Similar motivations can also be concluded from analysis of the two autobiographies. Born into slavery in 1856 on a small farm in Franklin County West Virginia, Washington used his energy and example to illustrate that blackness should not be seen as a debilitating handicap,

⁵⁰ Washington, Booker T. *Up from Slavery, an Autobiography*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963. Xiv

and that his model was proof of what black people can accomplish for themselves.⁵¹

Contemporary black social critic Bell Hooks affirmed Micheaux's efforts to, "Create screen images that would disrupt and challenge conventional racist representatives of blackness...with complexity of experience and feeling."⁵² Micheaux's protagonist sought to convince his people that a colored man could be anything he worked to be with initiative and courage regardless of education.

Both individuals utilized their life and work to embody the sentiment of black progress. Micheaux dedicated his first work *The Conquest* to Booker T. Washington, but these inspirational cohorts would share entrepreneurial philosophies as well. Washington and Micheaux solicited assistance and resources for their racial uplift programs from the white community. Tuskegee Institute and many of Washington's other ventures were underwritten with funding from white philanthropy. Micheaux, too sought help from white society both as an author promoting his books and through his on screen productions. His books were sold among his white homesteading neighbors; he also worked with white business owners to finance and produce later projects. Additionally, Sylvia, the female protagonist of *Within Our Gates* travelled North to solicit help from white philanthropists to secure funds for schools in rural black communities. Washington and Micheaux also shared notions of economic self-sufficiency as the primary method by which black advancement would occur.

⁵¹ Washington, Booker T. *Up from Slavery, an Autobiography*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963. Xxi

⁵² Micheaux, Oscar. *The Conquest the Story of a Negro Pioneer*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1913. xiii

As an author and film producer, Micheaux not only taught himself writing and filmmaking, but also how to sell his vision and abilities to black and white audiences. Micheaux spent many hours generating support for his projects among his white neighbors in the Great Plains and within the black communities of the urban North and rural South. Washington, similarly established himself by taking advantage of his unique positioning between the crossroads of black and white America. His nonthreatening appeal helped him make a living through writing and public fundraising engagements to support his school and its potential for blacks and whites of the post emancipation South.⁵³ Tuskegee Institute would even venture into Micheaux's world of cinema to showcase the impact the Institute was having for its students in the changing world.⁵⁴ The relationship between these men is significant because it lends further substance context and complexity to Micheaux and Washington and the era they lived and worked. These men articulated the Victorian virtues of an aspirant black middle class seeking to hold America true to her proclaimed values. Both Micheaux and Washington were keenly aware of the awesome power of public perception and displayed themselves through a lens of progressive self-reliance. Regardless of one's philosophical subscription, Booker T. Washington is identified as a black cultural hero because of the intent of his message. Oscar Micheaux may not be as known among popular culture; however, his message and the legacy of his accomplishment deserves equal prominence as Washington or any other noteworthy black figure.

⁵³ Washington, Booker T. *Up from Slavery, an Autobiography*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963. Xiv

⁵⁴ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 103

The author suggests *Booker T. Washington: Black Leadership in the Age of Jim Crow* by Raymond W. Smock, *Booker T. Washington: A Biography* by Jasmine Evans and *Negro Thought in America 1880-1915* by August Meier as supporting scholarship on the life and works of Booker T. Washington.

W.E.B. DuBois

Oscar Micheaux was unapologetically a proponent of Booker T. Washington's philosophical outlook and contributed to the growing distance between Washington and his most notable critic, Atlanta University professor William Edmond Burghardt DuBois. A contemporary of Micheaux and Washington, DuBois hailed from Great Barrington, Massachusetts, a much different world from the land of the slaves where he would eventually relocate for school and work. DuBois identified and daringly criticized the social regulations dictating the interactions of black and white America at the conclusion of the Reconstruction Era. W.E.B. DuBois was publically critical of Booker T. Washington and sole reliance on the Tuskegee model of industrial education as the best method of black advancement, to which Micheaux subscribed.

There are many similarities that can be analyzed between the desired outcomes the two contemporaries shared for the race. In 1903, DuBois published his landmark project *The Souls of Black Folk*, which saw immediate success and positioned him as a nationally recognized laborer for the uplift of black people. In this work DuBois directly challenged the popular sentiment of industrial education as the best course of action for the race. DuBois posited that though the industrial education model was noble in purpose, it did not provide adequate training for the holistic educational development of its black students. He explained his belief that the ideas of industrial education stemmed from the slavery shaped mentality that black people were merely

material resources needing manual labor skills to maximize future dividends.⁵⁵ DuBois also asserted that classical education was necessary to develop the teachers who would serve in the institutions of industrial education, stating “Thus it was no accident that gave birth to universities centuries before common schools, that made fair Harvard the first flower of our wilderness...They must first have common schools to train teachers for the common schools.”⁵⁶ DuBois’s triple paradox presented fundamental challenges for the uplift philosophies posited by Washington’s industrial education aims. DuBois felt any artistic or entrepreneurial gains made by blacks would ultimately be squandered without securing equal suffrage. He also encouraged Washington’s notions of self-respect and thrift but DuBois criticized methodology as conducive of civic inferiority. DuBois asserted without suffrage and access to classical higher education and training, black primary and vocational institutions would not receive the necessary skills to provide quality teachers for the industrial programs.⁵⁷ At the time Oscar Micheaux published his first narrative, *The Conquest*, DuBois and his philosophies were well-known and gathering support among various global black communities. Micheaux himself was openly critical of those who challenged the contentions of his inspirational sage, labeling Washington as progressive and all critics as reactionaries.⁵⁸ Micheaux believed that the supporters of DuBois critique had minimal understanding that industrial education was the first means of lifting the black unlearned into a suitable state of citizenship.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Champaign, Ill.: Dover Publications, 1903. 58

⁵⁶ Ibid., 59

⁵⁷ Ibid., 31

⁵⁸ Micheaux, Oscar. *The Conquest the Story of a Negro Pioneer*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1913. 251

⁵⁹ Ibid., 253

Despite their philosophical differences of opinion, many parallels can be drawn from these two individuals. Both utilized their professional platform to expose the veiled reality of hardship facing black Americans. DuBois used his literature *the Souls of Black Folk* and the periodical auxiliary of his National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *The Crisis*, as an expose' and protest against the discrimination and injustices incurred by black communities. Likewise, Micheaux used his literature and films to reveal the inhumanity and oppression blacks faced in everyday life both in the North and the South and provide help for African Americans seeking encouragement. Micheaux's publications in the *Chicago Defender*, his novels and films testified the real and often horrific experiences of black life and encouraged blacks to seek better for themselves. For example, in *The Homesteader*, Micheaux's protagonist Jean Baptiste discussed the systemic challenges blacks faced but did not allow those challenges to serve as an excuse for inactivity.⁶⁰ The works of both men articulated the aspirations of the wishful black middle class. Micheaux's characters adopted the Victorian work ethic, responsibility, and certain distrust for people who he felt were unwilling to provide real and tangible solutions for the black community as Washington's philosophy had.⁶¹ DuBois was a product and proponent of the same middle class ethos, but he placed far more responsibility on the shoulders of white America to help the black condition than Washington or Micheaux ever would. Yet, in the works of both Micheaux and DuBois we find notions of respectability promoted as well as the encouragement of black ambition for higher social achievement. Both men also displayed unabashed criticism for black religiosity and were especially critical of black

⁶⁰ Micheaux, Oscar. *The Homesteader: A Novel*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1917. 6

⁶¹ Micheaux, Oscar. *The Conquest the Story of a Negro Pioneer*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1913. 253

ministers. The Church remained the epicenter of black social life and its ministers held an esteemed role within the black communities. Additional information on the centrality of the church to the black community can be found in the works of Anthea Butler's *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, Evelyn Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent*, and John Giggie's *After Redemption*.

DuBois theorized, because African Americans seen as religious animals (a being of deep emotional nature which instinctively embraces the supernatural), white slave owners used Christianity as a tool for social control.⁶² Micheaux, too offered heavy criticism for black clergymen through his character Reverend N.J. McCarthy, a fictive take on his real father-in-law Reverend N.J. McCraline of Chicago.⁶³ McCarthy is characterized as morally corrupt, vain and unlearned, who created a lifetime of strife for the entrepreneurial protagonist. Devereaux (Micheaux's autobiographical protagonist) married one of the reverend's daughters after a previously failed love interest due to their racial differences. Devereaux's marriage to Orlean McCarthy was an avenue for conflict between her and her father who signified the larger discussion between DuBois and Washington. Additionally, Micheaux used his protagonist to highlight that McCarthy and countless other black clergymen were ignorant of DuBois basic respect for Washington's ideas. Essentially, Micheaux supported both Washington and DuBois philosophies, but he was leery of those who used DuBois critique as an excuse to not participate in Washington's economic program.⁶⁴ The greater significance of the parallel between

⁶² DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Champaign, Ill.: Dover Publications, 1903. 120

⁶³ Green, J. Ronald. *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 18

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 19

Micheaux and DuBois lies within the motivation behind both of their endeavors. Micheaux and DuBois were both driven to provide hope and uplift their race during a difficult time of true despair. Both showcased the strides and shortcomings of the aspirant middle class, a glimpse of their race from its own point of view. Finally, Micheaux's films and literature and DuBois' early publications provide contemporary audiences a prevue of urban and rural black life during the turn of the 20th century, allowing reflection toward the socioeconomic progress, if any, made by black people post Emancipation. The author suggests *W.E.B. Dubois 1868-1919: Biography of a Race* by David L. Lewis, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois & the Struggle for Racial Uplift* by Jacqueline M. Moore and *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Dubois* as additional scholarship on the life and works of W.E.B. Dubois.

MARCUS GARVEY

Marcus Garvey, the vociferous leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association was another noteworthy contemporary of Oscar Micheaux. Garvey's legacy is well known and celebrated by scholars of race and people of the African diaspora worldwide. He was an entrepreneur and organizer who was dedicated to improving the lot of blacks wherever they reside in the world. Garvey and Micheaux were the products of a time when black communities were growing increasingly embittered with their socioeconomic position and emboldened to hold America true to the values set in the constitution. This era would lay witness to the ascendance of both Micheaux and Garvey both whom despite little if any correspondence between the two, implemented the philosophies of Booker T. Washington in their professional careers.

Washington's *Up from Slavery*, captivated both men. Garvey first discovered *Up from Slavery* in

London during one of his earlier international excursions.⁶⁵ Garvey credited Washington with unlocking his destiny to become a leader and example for his downtrodden people. The methods and goals of Washington's socioeconomic philosophy were evident in the entrepreneurial endeavors of Garvey and Micheaux. Both men learned through Washington's example that racial uplift could be very profitable both culturally and financially.

Born on August 17, 1887 in St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica, Garvey displayed immense pride in his African heritage, which earmarked his persona, and was instilled very early through his parents Marcus and Sarah Garvey. Garvey's parents were rumored to claim lineage to the lionized Jamaican Maroons, escaped slaves who rejected enslavement.⁶⁶ Growing up as a black man, Garvey understood the sense of despair and hopelessness within his own Jamaican community and among those black communities he encountered through international travel. Economic difficulties required Garvey to leave school and learn the printing trade when he was fourteen. Wanting to educate himself to the best of his abilities, Garvey took up the printing trade with his godfather. The skills he acquired during his training allowed him the opportunity to be the master printer and foreman at the successful Kingston firm P.A. Benjamin & Company before losing his position for leading a labor strike.⁶⁷ Blacklisted for his participation in the labor strike, Garvey sought to implement a Tuskegee model education system in Jamaica through his newly formed organization the United Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities League (U.N.I.A). He corresponded with Washington and planned to visit

⁶⁵ Cronon, Edmund David. *Black Moses the Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. 16

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5

⁶⁷ Grant, Colin. *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.32

Tuskegee to strengthen ties between the two organizations; however, prior to this occurring Washington passed away in 1915.

Garvey came to the United States in 1916 and built upon public support for separatism through founding and leading the UNIA. Garvey found a voice to reach the masses of black Americans, many fresh from relocation to the urban centers of the North, through the newspaper of the UNIA. The UNIA organized and unified people in the first African American mass movement. The consciousness of the UNIA focused on pride in, and celebration of African American descent; on their developing economic self-sufficiency; on freedom of Africa; and on African Americans' returning to Africa. Garvey called for black patronage of black owned businesses in the US. He also emphasized that white racism was so entrenched in white American society that it was futile to appeal to their sense of justice and their high-sounding democratic principles. With parades and uniforms to celebrate its work, the UNIA appealed highly to the masses of African Americans and gained widespread support. His newspaper would grow in popularity and so outspokenly critical of Western Anglo cultural dominance that the UNIA was cited and investigated by the Department of Justice for "Negro Radicalism" in 1919 and 1920.⁶⁸

Micheaux was also greatly impressed by the words and deeds of the Sage of Tuskegee, to whom his first literary venture is dedicated. Micheaux was all too familiar with the masses of black migrants, which the UNIA worked to galvanize and empower. Micheaux himself utilized avenues such as the popular periodical *The Chicago Defender* to solicit blacks from the South to

⁶⁸ Cronon, Edmund David. *Black Moses the Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. 47

seek better opportunities in the north.⁶⁹ If Booker T. Washington did hold such an influential position for both Garvey and Micheaux, it is undoubtedly his motivation that encouraged both men to the lucrative potential of racial uplift. Micheaux and Garvey both attempted to follow the entrepreneurial example of Washington in their own fashion, with various degrees of success achieved by both. Garvey notably organized the Black Star Line fleet to build upon the growing success of the UNIA, following Washington's blueprint for entrepreneurial success through racial uplift. Micheaux likewise opened the Micheaux Book & Film Company to capitalize on the money of generated from his racial uplift efforts. Both men also took on the arduous task of reclaiming and rebuilding black identity to be reconstructed in a positive manner by black people. Garvey envisioned a, "New world of black men, not peons, serfs, dogs and slaves, but a nation of sturdy men making their impress upon civilization and causing a new light to dawn on the human race."⁷⁰ Garvey and the UNIA aimed to rebuild racial self-respect through pride in black heritage, even embedding this ambition into the language and purpose of the association.⁷¹ Oscar Micheaux also found pleasure and purpose in recrafting public perception of blackness by infusing racial pride and consciousness in his projects and encouraging enterprise and entrepreneurship among blacks.

Travel furthermore played an integral role in the life education of Oscar Micheaux as it had for Garvey. During his earlier years Micheaux served as a Pullman car porter in Chicago, where he was introduced to the idea of securing a relinquished homestead in the plains of South

⁶⁹ Micheaux, Oscar. "Where the Negro Fails." *Chicago Defender*, March 19, 1910. Accessed November 2, 2014.

⁷⁰ Cronon, Edmund David. *Black Moses the Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. 16

⁷¹ Ibid., 17

Dakota. This influence was critical because it exposed Micheaux to new opportunities at advancement for people with ambition regardless of race. Garvey too experienced the impact of travel in his early endeavors, as evidenced through his tours of Central and South America, where he became cognizant of the universality of the black experience among the diaspora.⁷² Micheaux desired to be an example of black success for his race to draw inspiration and aspiration. Their methodology and personalities were on completely opposite ends of the spectrum; however, these two visionaries shared the noble desire to empower the race to see itself as a strong and capable people deserving and now demanding of equality and respect. The significance in the comparison of these two individuals is found in the singularity of their purpose. Black people of the diaspora and the American south were yearning for strength and positive representation during this most challenging of eras. Garvey and Micheaux were co-laborers in the effort for black progress and drew their internal inspiration from the likes of Booker T. Washington in order to develop as entrepreneurs and agents of racial uplift. The author suggests *Race First: The Ideological & Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* and *Marcus Garvey, Hero: a First Biography* by Tony Martin, and *Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa* by John Henrick Clarke as supplementary scholarship on the life and works of Marcus Garvey.

⁷² Ibid., 18

CHAPTER 3: THE AGITATOR

The Chicago Riots

The year 1919 was a pivotal point in the story of American civil relations. During the infamous summer of 1919, long-standing neighborhoods around the country and especially in the city of Chicago were completely consumed in racial violence. 6,000 troops were called in to stop the bloodshed during what became known as the Red Summer. The violence of the Red Summer was devastating and threatened the very existence of many black communities. Red Summer, so labeled due to the numerous instances of corporate violence, provided a glimpse of how far individuals from both sides of the color line were willing to go to ensure the protection of their socioeconomic aspirations. The violence of the summer of 1919 marked a significant transition especially in places such as Chicago, because of the extent of retaliation expressed by the black communities which felt they were under assault from all fronts.⁷³ The legacy of the 1919 Chicago riots looms large in American history. To date these riots remain the country's deadliest recorded outbreak of racial violence.⁷⁴

On a steamy July Sunday in 1919 the *Chicago Defender* reminded its readers that the waters of Lake Michigan provided a well times way to beat the soaring temperatures. The 25th/26th Street beach was especially recommended to the black communities of Chicago because

⁷³ Robert Hall - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

⁷⁴ Sandburg, Carl. *The Chicago Race Riots, July, 1919*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969. 3

of its welcoming accommodations for black beachgoers like free towels and black lifeguards.⁷⁵ Five energetic black teenage boys from around the south side of the city near 53rd street hurriedly maneuvering through the blocks close to the 26th street because Irish gangs would harass black travelers in their area. The five boys, John Harris and four Williams's boys, brothers Charles and Lawrence and two others Paul and Eugene were not heading to the 25th street beach, but to a private little island affectionately known as the hot and cold because of competing and potent effluence from the Keely Brewery and Consumers Ice Co. The waters were notorious for bleaching the skin of black swimmers so it remained a rather exclusive location for the boys. At about two o'clock the boys set out in the lake with the help of a giant makeshift raft constructed over several weeks by a dozen or more teenagers. Simultaneously at the 29th street beach, which was exclusively segregated for whites, a group of black men and women determined to enter the beach. Moments later they were barraged with an ambush of rocks, threats, and curses. Temporarily escaping, the black group reappeared throwing stones of their own retaliation. The ensuing conflict on the beachfront would merely serve as a precursor for the violence that lay in the days ahead.

Tragically as the five boys swam unaware of the erupting scene on the 29th street beach, a white man began hurling bricks at the boys from the beachfront. Initially believing they were participating in some sort of game with the man, the boys' glee turned to panic and awe when one of them, Eugene Williams was struck in the forehead by one of the stones and sank into Lake Michigan. Thirty minutes later divers recovered Eugene's lifeless body from the waters, as

⁷⁵ Tuttle, William M. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. 3

the boys corralled a black police officer to help them identify the perpetrator.⁷⁶ The black officer and the boys alerted Officer Daniel Callahan a white patrolman on duty, but Callahan refused to arrest the alleged accuser, instead arresting a black man after complaints by white participants in the earlier skirmish. Hundreds of angry white and black Chicagoans swarmed to the beach prompted by exaggerated distortions of the day's events. The growing crowd waxed tumultuous and violent as a patrol wagon approached to apprehend Officer Callahan's black arrested man. Then James Crawford, a black member of the crowd fired his revolver into a group of policemen injuring one officer.

The return fire gave onlookers their cue and signaled the onset of an all of race war.⁷⁷ The next forty-eight hours saw the complete dilapidation of social order and the most violent bloodletting of the entire saga. Gang and mob violence from neighborhood clubs along with the passive assistance of the white Chicago police officers accounted for the death of twenty-three black people. Blacks responded in kind with 15 murders of whites for an unfortunate total of 38 fatalities. This occurrence of racial conflict was distinctly different because the communities of the black belt were not the major location of the violence. White Chicagoans did descend upon the black belt community to cause destruction, but did so hurriedly to avoid the retaliation of sniper fire. In previous rioting such as in nearby St. Louis, the bulk of the confrontations occurred in black communities; however, in Chicago 41% of the violence was located in the Irish

⁷⁶ Tuttle, William M. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. 8

⁷⁷ Sandburg, Carl. *The Chicago Race Riots, July, 1919*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969. 3

controlled stockyards compared to 34% in the black belt.⁷⁸ Oscar Micheaux had already begun his “Great Southern Tour” by the time the violence broke at the end of July. The following analysis will attempt to theorize how despite his physical absence his work and mission may have been a motivator for the emboldened reactions of black Chicagoans seen during the 1919 riots.

Traditional journalist and historical narratives boiled down their estimations for the underlying causes for the violence of those few bloody days in Chicago. Journalist Carl Sandburg was a young reporter for the *Chicago Daily* newspaper assigned to cover the riots in a series of newspaper articles, following the progression of the rioting. Sandburg used his investigations, which initiated weeks prior to the events on July 27 to conclude three major catalysts for the violence that ensued. Sandburg deduced, “In any American city where the racial situation is critical at this moment, the radical and active factors probably are (1) housing, (2) politics and war psychology, and (3) organization of labor.”⁷⁹ As discussed earlier, the northward and westward migration of blacks from the South certainly enflamed hostile competitions among black and white workers vying for better labor opportunity and better living accommodations. Politics and war psychology are also credible factors because returning black WWI soldiers were growing increasingly impatient with the oppressive treatment they received once back in the U.S. political corruption also contributed to the disproportions of black individuals affected by the rioting. Of the 537 overall injured citizen, 342 were black. Moreover,

⁷⁸ Tuttle, William M. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. 65

⁷⁹ Tuttle, William M. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. 6

although blacks had suffered the majority of the bloodshed, they were also arrested by police at twice the rate of white rioters.⁸⁰ To the rampant political corruption Sandburg reflected, “The black belt of Chicago is probably the strongest effective unit of political power, good or bad, in America.”⁸¹ During the war years blacks in Chicago mobilized and successfully influenced political campaigns of major Chicago politicians like county commissioner Edward H. Wright and Oscar DePriest, first black Chicago city alderman and congressman. Black voting behavior aroused hostility and reinforced the racial bigotry of numerous white groups who retaliated violently.⁸²

Allen Grimshaw theorized in his 1969 investigation, racial violence in the United States’ that the social strains of labor, housing, and political conflicts held responsibility for the rioting of 1919, yet recent scholarship places greater emphasis on the potential role “soft causes” played in differentiating this specific violent episode.⁸³ Chicago riots historian William Tuttle offered further elaboration on the traditionally recognized “hard causes” for the riots like housing and labor negotiations, but his analysis also indirectly suggested how the works of men like Oscar Micheaux lead to a new attitude among blacks in the city. Tuttle suggested that in addition to the influential return of black soldiers, a larger movement was reshaping the mentality of the black community. The ‘New Negro’ attitude was encouraged by unashamed themes that distinguished black intellectual art. Tuttle recognized individuals such as Dr. Carter Woodson and John Hope

⁸⁰ Ibid., 64

⁸¹ Sandburg, Carl. *The Chicago Race Riots, July, 1919*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969. 2

⁸² Tuttle, William M. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. 184

⁸³ Grimshaw, Allen Day. *Racial Violence in the United States*. Chicago: Aldine Pub., 1969. 273

Franklin and poets like Roscoe Jameson and Claude McKay with reeducating the black populous in its own history and culture.⁸⁴ However, to this list of race awakeners should be added the works of Oscar Micheaux, who in February 1919 premiered his first feature length film *The Homesteader*, which sported a cast of all black actors to the city of Chicago, honoring the return on the 8th Illinois division and providing the first true on screen reflection of black life from a black source. The film showcased the life and trials of Jean Baptiste, Micheaux's protagonist, as a capable black homesteader and the central heroic figure who pushed the narrative of the story. This accomplishment along with Micheaux's overall aim of racial uplift is significant to the development of hostilities between black and white Chicagoans in 1919. Most historical narratives attribute white fear and frustration to tangible challenges black created for the interracial status quo including, but not limited to black community policing and socioeconomic advancement; white resentment led to violent reestablishment of the social order. Richard M. Brown suggested that white violence was triggered by the perception of black aggressiveness, not merely the act of black aggressiveness."⁸⁵ From this perspective it is easily understandable that Micheaux's films and novels contributed to the influx of race pride and consciousness for the black citizens of Chicago and abroad. Micheaux's goal of showing the black man that he can be whatever he could be whatever he wanted directly challenged the social domination of white culture. As seen in the previous outbreaks of racial conflict the perception of black progress whether on screen or in the ballot box certainly contributed to the violent reactions of those few

⁸⁴ Tuttle, William M. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. 224

⁸⁵ Roche, Roberta. *The Sociogenesis of a Race Riot: Springfield, Illinois, in 1908*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990. 14

steamy, but deadly days. Micheaux was heavily influenced by the racial violence of 1919. He would set out to produce a stinging response to the racial conflict that surrounded him. His next film would be the most controversial motion picture Micheaux would ever produce.

Birth of a Nation & Within Our Gates:

Micheaux selected the title for his second feature length film to be a well-designated response to the social atrocities committed in D.W. Griffith's 1915 epic *The Birth of a Nation*. An epigraph to Griffith's 1919 *The Romance of Happy Valley* read, "Harm nor the stranger, within your gates, lest you yourself be hurt."⁸⁶ Micheaux and black communities deemed the project so intolerable that he threatened unless harm against African Americans ceased, white Americans would soon be hurt themselves. Contextually Micheaux responded to Griffith's narrative in a multitude of ways. The story line of *Within Our Gates* addressed controversial issues such as rape, miscegenation and lynching in a very similar fashion to the op-ed exposes provided by Ida Wells-Barnett. *Within Our Gates* provided an inside view regarding many of the social ills that plagued African American existence. Micheaux employed melodramatic replication in *Within Our Gates* to challenge and aesthetic of Griffith's blockbuster. The film exposed the figurative identities of the towns people who were in the mob and community the lynching atrocities including men and women and children who kidnap and murder a black family.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Green, J. Ronald. *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 1

⁸⁷ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 14

In 1920 Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* was the first film to tell the story of racial intimidation, lynching and rape from the black point of view. The conflict unfolds when a black tenant farmer named Jasper Landry goes to a plantation owner to demand a fair share of the plantation's profits. During their argument the plantation owner is suddenly shot by another disgruntled white sharecropper but Landry is falsely accused of the murder. In the film, as a lynch mob assembled Micheaux added a graphic twist to the plot. Searching for Landry, the brother of the murdered plantation owner comes upon a young woman and attempts to rape her. Here, Micheaux reversed the traditional rape narrative. In this film, the attacker was a lecherous white man not a sex crazed black man, an image that was popularized in white films. Several points of interest arose from this scene, including the obvious reflection of the rape scene. To many scholars the scene was a racial inversion of the rape scene from Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. By utilizing similar gesticulations and lighting patterns Micheaux was directly confronting the misleading rape narratives espoused in white films and actual reality.⁸⁸ The rapist was stunned when he discovered that the woman he attempted to sexually assault is his own illegitimate daughter, revealed by scar on her chest. At the film's climax, a white mob captured the black Landry family and Jasper Landry along with his wife were beaten then lynched for a crime they had not committed. Film historians critiqued Micheaux's decision to premiere this film with so many outbreaks of racial tension around the country and within their own region. Critics were concerned that Micheaux's film would arouse further instances of racial violence and rioting. The provocative scenes within the film stirred up so much controversy that Micheaux at one point succumbed to community pressure to remove certain portions of the film

⁸⁸ Toni Bambara - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

to allow its premiere. He flexed his entrepreneurial prowess to circumvent these obstacles by re-releasing the films with the additional removed footage, marketing them as the uncut version.⁸⁹ The scenes from the film were so disturbing that they ultimately limited the mainstream appeal of *Within Our Gates* to only a couple years of exposure. At the time *Within Our Gates* was released there were more than 300 theatres catering to black audiences. Storefront theatres and movie palaces were built and owned by black entrepreneurs, supporting a burgeoning black film industry and solidifying the popularity of race films through the 1920's.⁹⁰

Micheaux understood the severity of his film's insinuations but remained steadfast that his art truly reflected reality. Because this film was so controversial it was subject to review by official censorship panels, community organizations, local sheriffs, and theatre owners. *Within Our Gates* was completed merely a few months after the red summer of 1919 and the Chicago Riots which he and fellow race agitator Ida B. Wells witnessed first-hand. The atmosphere was still very rife with racial confrontation when the Chicago censor board first banned the entire movie amid fear it would incite another race riot. After consultation with the leading black citizens, *Within Our Gates* was officially licensed to premier in Chicago's Vendome Theatre. Critics from an interracial delegation of the Methodist Episcopal Ministers alliance attempted unsuccessfully to have the premier cancelled; however, the film was substantially shortened prior to release.⁹¹ The film still conveyed the stirring intended effect despite the modified debut. A

⁸⁹ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 15

⁹⁰ Ibid., 61

⁹¹ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 125

Chicago schoolteacher named Willis Huggins was fortunate enough to see the film the day it premiered and offered the following to the editor of the *Chicago Defender*,

I saw *Within Our Gates* Monday afternoon. Deleted as it is, it still constitutes a favorable argument against southern mobocracy, peonage, and concubinage...The spirit of *Within Our Gates* is the spirit of Douglas, Nat Turner, Scarborough, and DuBois rolled in to one...*Birth of a Nation* was written by oppressions to show that the oppressed were a burden ad a drawback to the nation.⁹²

Micheaux's stories, ideas, and characters resonated with the shared experiences of black Americans. Weeklies like the *Defender* included articles by social commentators like Walter White and Ida B. Wells-Barnett condemning the lynching record for states such as Arkansas and the plantation system that indebted sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Stories of sadistic torture were regularly reported including burnings, mutilations, and selling of souvenir body parts. Black Americans no matter where they resided were connected enough to understand the reality of life in the nadir. They simply longed for individuals among them like Micheaux to have the courage and capability to show the world the reality of their corporate plight. In *Within Our Gates* we see honest intelligent and respectable black characters who have noble ambitions of racial uplift and who have achieved success in life because of hard work and earnest effort.⁹³

Micheaux also espoused support for feminine protection in *Within Our Gates* by including the scene of a white man raping a young black woman, who is later revealed to be his illegitimate daughter from a previous sexual assault. In reality some white men still considered the emancipated black woman as feely accessible to their sexual whims. Exposing this scenario

⁹² Ibid., 126

⁹³ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 129

on film, Micheaux challenged Griffith's traditional rape narrative, by revealing what was a common fact of black life.⁹⁴ He paired his uplift drama with the lynching and rape stories to clearly showcase their white supremacy would not be conquered by black sexuality as popularity feared. Micheaux demonstrated the liberating power of black autonomy and how self-determination would advance the race. He concluded *Within Our Gates* with a reflective resolution between the romantic leads of the film to provide his audience with group catharsis. In *Within Our Gates*, Micheaux also offered social critiques of the Uncle Tom type figures among the black community in the character of Uncle Ned. These figures were overtly criticized by the black community for their untrustworthy nature and Micheaux reflected this sentiment in this film, as Uncle Ned's actions directly result in the murder of the Jasper family. As a creative expression, *Within Our Gates* is a powerful example of resistance culture to a systematic opposition that relied on the fear and silence of its victims. It also served as a significant address to the new African American that symbolized the complexities and dialogues of the black race in relation to religion, education, service, voting, lynching, miscegenation, and peonage.⁹⁵ The 'New Negro' attitude which Garvey so ardently endorsed clearly permeated the attitudes of *Within Our Gates*' script and characters. The author suggests *D.W. Griffith & the Origins of American Narrative Film: the Early Years of Biograph* by Tom Gunning, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media & Race in America* by Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, and *Film Out of Theatre: D.W. Griffith, Birth of a Nation and the Melodrama the Clansman* by Jeffery B. Martin as supplementary research on the career of D.W. Griffith and the film *Birth of a Nation*.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 136

⁹⁵ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 155

The Homesteader

Following the collapse of his homesteading venture and the return of his first wife to her family in Chicago, Micheaux was convinced that the uniqueness of his story was an interesting and potentially valuable commodity. His first two novels, *The Conquest* (1913), and the *Forged Note* (1915) were written near the Rosebud country of Sioux City, Iowa. After an extensive book sales tour through the American Midwest and South, Micheaux began organizing his resources and reflections to contrive his third novel *The Homesteader* in 1917.⁹⁶ By the time *The Homesteader* was in circulation, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, the 1915 adaptation of Thomas Dixon's white supremacist propaganda *The Clansmen* was well on its way to box office success. *The Homesteader's* leading character Jean Baptiste, a black man fell in love with Agnes Stewart who appeared white and their romance is doomed until it is eventually discovered that Agnes has one drop of black blood in their love affair is now acceptable.⁹⁷ This film went on to become Hollywood's first blockbuster film in American history and reinforced existing negative stereotypical presumptions about black people. The African American community vehemently opposed Griffith's work and called for creation of a black controlled film industry to challenge the slanderous film. Numerous newly established black film companies and uplift agencies such as Washington's Tuskegee University attempted inadequately to produce a response to Griffith and results were compromised at best.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Green, J. Ronald. *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 21

⁹⁷ Micheaux, Oscar. *The Homesteader: A Novel*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1917.

⁹⁸ Green, J. Ronald. *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 22

Lincoln Motion Picture Company, a fellow black owned production company owned by Noble and George P. Johnson, approached Micheaux offering to purchase the rights to produce *The Homesteader* after discovering the novel in a *Chicago Defender* advertisement.⁹⁹ Micheaux was initially interested in their offer, but declined because he did not believe the Johnsons could allocate the necessary time or resources to develop the project to the scale of Micheaux's vision. He also wanted to base his production closer to the midwest as opposed to the Johnson's Los Angeles headquarters because it was more economic and close to sources of black talent.¹⁰⁰ The Johnson brothers eventually felt the narrative to be too controversial a risk to incur, especially with Micheaux's insistence on lead directing the productions.¹⁰¹ From there in the summer of 1918 Micheaux formed his own production company, The Micheaux Book and Film Company. To generate production capital, for *The Homesteader* film, he sold stock in his company to white farmers throughout Illinois, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota. Micheaux managed to raise nearly \$15,000 toward production cost for the film which grossed \$5,000 during its 1919 New York opening.¹⁰² The film is unfortunately extant, but the novel has survived as a nearly 520 page example of the grandios aspirations Micheaux held for this mammoth screenplay.

The Homesteader protagonist Jean Baptiste was an allusion to the black frenchman Jean Baptiste Point du Sable who established a trading post in 1779 which developed into the city of Chicago. Jean Baptiste is also useful to convey Micheaux's philosophical perspectives. Jean

⁹⁹ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 10

¹⁰⁰ Green, J. Ronald. *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 22

¹⁰¹ Micheaux, Oscar. *The Homesteader: A Novel*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1917. 3

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 6

Baptiste is a clean living man with a strong work ethic, symbolizing Micheaux's suggested behavior for improvement of the black community. Micheaux also used his protagonist to illustrate the characteristics that composed the successful "New Negro," (enterprise, education, respectability) and Baptiste was ever conscious that his actions reflect heavily upon his race.¹⁰³ Race and class were prominent thematic elements to *The Homesteader*, but arousing race consciousness seemed to remain the most fundamental objective. Micheaux reflected through Baptiste, "The individual here did not matter so much, it was the cause. His race needed examples; they needed instances of successes to overcome the effects of ignorance and an animal unconsciousness that was prevalent among them."¹⁰⁴ Micheaux demonstrated his propensity to market and commodify racial uplift. His company's general prospectus, which he used to acquire production funding for *The Homesteader* stated,

Aside from the general public, who themselves having never seen a picture in which the negro race and a negro is so portrayed....twelve million negro people will have their first opportunity to see their race in a stellar role. Their patronage which can be expected in immense numbers will mean in itself alone a fortune.¹⁰⁵

Micheaux produced a eight reel epic, advertising it as "Oscar Micheaux's mammoth photoplay." *The Homesteader* premiered on February 20, 1919 at Chicago's Eighth Regiment Armory, with declarations that the film would set a new high mark among the accomplishments of the darker races. The program also included a patriotic short on the homecoming of the black 8th Illinois infantry divisions who served valiantly during World War I. Micheaux marketed *The Homesteader* extensively through black media outlets like the *Chicago Defender*, appealing for

¹⁰³ Micheaux, Oscar. *The Homesteader: A Novel*. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Press, 1917. 6

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 109

¹⁰⁵ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 11

the support of the black community. After the film's premier at the Right Regiment Armory *The Homesteader* was scheduled for theatrical release a week later at the popular Vendome Theatre on State Street, Chicago's main black business and entertainment thoroughfare. However, Micheaux soon faced scrutiny from within the names of the black clergy because of the on-screen treatment of his father-in-law antagonist Reverend McCracken. Responding to this appeal the Chicago censor board invited some of the city's most prominent African American citizens to review the film for release permission. The review board was comprised of notable citizens such as Mr. and Mrs. Robert S. Abbott, Mrs. Ida Be. Wells-Barnett, City Councilman Oscar DePriest, Colonel John R. Marshall and Defender columnist Tony Langston. The composition of *The Homesteader's* film review board is notable on multiple surfaces. The board enthusiastically endorsed *The Homesteader* premiere and Micheaux cunningly promoted the controversial attention the film garnered. The review board composition was also noteworthy because of the prestigious personnel from which it was comprised. Individuals such as Ida Wells and Oscar Depriest were key advocates for ensuring his films premiered in spite of any potentially controversial content. In addition, the review board members were proponents of consciousness so their exposure to Micheaux's projects can be evaluated as an expansion of his circle of conscious influence. The film controversy aroused the attention of critics and supporters, boosting Micheaux's notoriety so that he was recognized by the half century magazine as 1919's "most popular author" in the city of Chicago, and *The Homesteader* was heralded as the best motion picture yet written, acted and staged by a colored man.¹⁰⁶ The success of *The*

¹⁰⁶ Bowser, Pearl, and Louise Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 13

Homesteader was in part due to Micheaux's ability to use his blackness to create a strong and identifiable narrative for his audience. Micheaux now envisioned himself as a voice of guidance and empowering interpreter of black life for the community's uplift.¹⁰⁷ He deduced that the appreciation he received during his early career confirmed the public mandate to see real racial photoplays depicting actual black life.

The Homesteader also produced a successful initial run in Southern theatres during Micheaux's 'Great Southern Tour' of May-July 1919. During these early summer months of 1919, Micheaux traveled the East and the South to premiere the *Homesteader* and gather inspiration for future productions.¹⁰⁸ With this very first project Micheaux presented himself as a confident professional film producer and distributor capable of developing screen plays on a scale never before accomplished by a black producer. Micheaux's first film was an immediate success, but it did not fill the social desire for a black produced response to Griffith's epic. As his first film was in successful circulation, Micheaux set out to challenge Griffith's racist blockbuster with a stinging response that would correct the narrative of *Birth of a Nation*.

Conclusion

Micheaux lived, worked and dreamed during the most challenging era to do so as a black man. His early life experiences such as working his family produce company or working the rails as a Pullman Porter, prepared him to take advantage of his later business ventures. He was introduced to his homesteading opportunity through travel, the work ethic he developed as a

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 26

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 12

child helped him successfully establish his own book and film company at a time when blacks still were illiterate and their educations were restricted and unequal to say the least. Although his later projects did not receive positive reviews due to their use of recycled themes, Micheaux continued to garner overall support from the black community. In 1951, while promoting projects on the road, Oscar Micheaux passed away. In a career that spanned 30 years, he produced over 40 motion pictures. By the 1950's the race film industry had all but perished with the onset of integration and only a few fragments of these films survived. These films are the only reminders of the times when black Americans desperately desired to see themselves reflected on screen with dignity, affection and pride.

The research question addressed in this study aligns with the overall purpose of the examination. Does black culture celebrate Oscar Micheaux as a self-made entrepreneur, who brought race relations to the forefront of confrontation in the 1900s through his novels and films? In large Oscar Micheaux and his admirable legacy has gone relatively unheralded in the conscious of black America. The average citizen may not be familiar with Micheaux's specific contributions to the movie industry, but the influence of his work resonates today. Black producers, directors, and actors all have opportunity today because of the effect of people like Oscar Micheaux to break down perceived barriers to show black America a glimpse of its artistic future. Micheaux worked tirelessly until his death in 1951 to challenge traditional stereotypes about black character, and to correct the narrative of ignorance and bestiality that was depicted in early African American on screen representatives. Micheaux was not monolithically praised by the black community because many times he was openly critical of the backwards mindset of his race. However, his critiques were generated from a desired outcome of racial uplift and respectability, much like the contemporary racial protagonist of his time, Well-Barnett, Garvey,

Washington and DuBois, ultimately which is why comparison of Micheaux's efforts confirms his place among the greats in the pantheon of black culture. The intent of his work was noble and the execution of his message should be esteemed among the higher contributions in black history.

Examination of Micheaux's career revealed that he was a noteworthy provider of racial uplift although largely unrecognized. Wells-Barnett was correlated because of her courageous outspokenness to expose the truth about Lynch Law, the rape narrative and the consensual nature of many interracial relationships. The cross-examination of Micheaux and Wells-Barnett revealed similar propensity to discuss taboo racial subjects candidly and creatively from the black perspective. They also shared the burden of racial protection and progress.

Marcus Garvey was analyzed because of his unique ability to help black people of the diaspora reimagine blackness on its own terms. For Garvey, blackness was not a scar of shame, but a badge of honor. His UNIA efforts and the entrepreneurial efforts of his Black Star Line helped reshape popular notions of what black people could accomplish. Similarly Micheaux's entrepreneurial endeavors illustrated that black people had the ability to accomplish any goal they set their mind to. His activities may have slightly differed, but the inspiration and motivation behind these two men were singular. Both men were proponents of Washington's economic philosophy and their lives and work reflected this. Their burden was to provide a backbone for the black community to stand and demand respect for their culture.

Booker T. Washington was included to showcase the philosophical underpinnings of Micheaux's entrepreneurial endeavors. Washington was a key influence for Micheaux and his socioeconomic perspectives were woven directly into Micheaux's books and films. Micheaux even dedicated his first novel *The Conquest* to Washington. The two shared common principles

of hard work and gaining social respect through economic accomplishment. Washington also influenced many Micheaux contemporaries including Marcus Garvey. The criticisms and challenges Washington faced were advocated by Micheaux and through his literature and films. Their shared burden was to provide a successful economic example of self-reliance for the black community, and to provide hope to black people during this challenging era.

William E.B. DuBois was also studied because of his notable intellectual contributions and challenges to black and white America. DuBois was a prominent agitator and although he did not subscribe to socioeconomic and education philosophies of Washington, similarities are drawn to intent with which he labored- racial uplift. Micheaux was also an outspoken intellectual and even challenged the views of DuBois and other “reactionaries” in his own films and literature. DuBois and Micheaux were critical of black religiosity, particularly uneducated clergymen. In the works of both men we find stinging critiques of black ministers and the potential misguidance they use to indulge their selfish desires. Both men utilized their platform to openly advocate for racial uplift. Although expressed through divergent methodology, the work of the two highlight a singular desire to hold America accountable for their mistreatment of its black citizens.

The final chapter of this study provided a contextual analysis of the rioting that Micheaux and his contemporaries lived through. The Chicago Riots of 1919 are especially examined to more thoroughly understand their causes and correlations to the career of Oscar Micheaux. I contend that the correlations between the outbreak of violence and Micheaux’s consciousness efforts are more tangible than current scholarship has acknowledged. Black Americans in Chicago and around the country were growing impatient and embittered at their quality of life and future opportunity. Lynching and physically overt racism still plagued black communities

with little effort to eradicate these violent atrocities. In Chicago, the men and women of their black community reached their proverbial last straw with the beachfront murder of the black teenager, Eugene Williams on July 27, 1919. The corporate violence that ensued left 38 people dead and over 500 injured was the worst racial conflict in American history. Traditional narratives point to the headline causes for the rioting such as housing and job competition onset by the strains of the immigration. However, riot historian William Tuttle also asserted that one cannot fundamentally dismiss the role growing race pride and consciousness played in motivation the black citizens and returning WWI soldiers to no longer tolerate the mistreatment of their people. The vigor which black Chicagoans resisted this violence was demonstrated by the reversal of the typical riot narrative where the black community is assaulted by outside forces. In 1919 blacks took the fight to white held neighborhoods such as Chicago's Irish stockyard district. I argued that Micheaux consciously produced works such as 1919's *The Homesteader* and 1920s *Within Our Gates*, which exposed controversial issues of rape, lynching, and discrimination, to impart the race pride and consciousness Tuttle explained contributed to the emboldened reaction of black Chicagoans in 1919. He connected his films to larger black points of pride like the Illinois 8th Infantry division to strengthen the ties of consciousness and pride between his mission and other noteworthy black accomplishments.

Black communities were willing to stand, fight, and die for their civil rights and pride well before the movements of the 1960s. Micheaux was in a powerful position of social influence during a most critical juncture in the growth of black culture. His contributions consciously helped establish the aggressive perception of black advancement and progress, which was bolstered resentment from white society and desires for the old status quo, which was changing before their very eyes. The example of the Chicago Riots demonstrated exactly how

powerful imagery and notions of race pride are as motivation for oppressed people. Oscar Micheaux was a leading agent for the insertion of race pride and courage through his personal and professional example. It is easily understandable why his message may have resonated so profoundly with black Chicagoans during the summer of 1919.

The existence of Micheaux's works and other race films from the early film era was proof that black people were creatively seeking to leave their mark on their own time and that media assaults such as *Birth of a Nation* did not go unanswered. Micheaux and other black directors of his time created a movement of memories and legacies that reinforced black pride and emboldened their audience to require justice for on screen depictions of black character.¹⁰⁹ Black film producers borrowed themes from the temperance movement to address the social ills plaguing black communities. Issues such as drunkenness, violence and domestic battery were brazenly displayed to critique negative public behavior and instill a new sense of morality during the prohibition era. Films such as *The Scar of Shame* and *Ten Nights in a Barroom* were produced to critique greater issues like class and gender prejudices within the black community. Micheaux and other early black directors revalued the black woman on film as an entity to be protected from vice and abuse by both black and white men.¹¹⁰ Micheaux dealt with important issues in the black community such as race, intermarriage, lynching, and voting rights. He was heavily criticized throughout his career

¹⁰⁹ Toni Bambara - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

¹¹⁰ Toni Bambara - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD.

The life and career of Oscar Micheaux provides an excellent example of an American success story. His shortcomings as an entrepreneur and filmmaker in no way detract from the spectacular contributions he made in such a relatively brief span of time. Micheaux was compelled with self-determination to show the world that the black man could be anything. He certainly was a visionary ahead of his time representing strength and courage and acted as a huge agent of change for the black community during the 1900s.

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