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THE RACE MOVIE AND THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE NEW NEGRO WOMAN: OSCAR MICHEAUX'S *WITHIN OUR GATES* (1920)

In my discussion, I seek to explore one of the sensational discoveries in recent years, the earliest surviving feature-length film by an African American: Oscar Micheaux. As of today, Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*, released in 1920 in segregated theaters in the United States, is known as the first remaining *race movie*, which was also the most powerful black response to D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a landmark film in celluloid history.[1] *Within Our Gates* had been lost for 70 years when its last surviving print was discovered in Spain, by Madrid's Filmoteca Espanola in the early 1990s. It had Spanish intertitles and a Spanish title: *La Negra. Within Our Gates* was restored and translated into English by the Library of Congress in 1993 and since then Micheaux's film has become one of the most exciting topics for scholars keen on exploring the wealth of African American culture in the early Modern Era. Micheaux's growing popularity is also noticeable among academics who are ambitious to challenge entrenched beliefs in the incontestable hegemony of the white film industry in the early period of the silent film and the dominance of white male culture in general, as well as among those who are eager to stand up for the necessity of ongoing canon revisions based on recently unearthed historical and cultural evidence.[2]

[1] Griffith's influence on one of the pioneers of film theory and practice, Sergei Eisenstein, is far from being sufficiently acknowledged by Hungarian film critics. For a critical elaboration of Griffith's influence on his notion of film-making and the montage in particular, see Eisenstein's "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today" in *Film Form* (1949, 1977).

[2] Oscar Micheaux's defining presence in the history of film was famously acknowledged in 1986 by the Directors' Guild of America, honoring Oscar Micheaux, Frederico Fellini and Akira Kurosawa with the Golden Jubilee Special Award. Among a considerable number of critical reassessments of Oscar Micheaux's cultural significance, the landmark book to this date is *African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era: Oscar Micheaux and His Circle* (2001), which was written to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Micheaux's death.

My discussion of Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* is based on the hypothesis that the American race movie is the filmic discourse of the New Negro / New Negro Woman.[3] Put another way, I claim that the race film in general and Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* in particular is essentially a counter narrative articulated with the aim of revising the racist iconography of black representation in the America of the 1910s and 1920s. In the present analysis, I want to elaborate on the race, class, and gender dynamics of *Within Our Gates*, focusing on Micheaux's alternative national discourse that he pitted against the racist national discourse in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. In doing so, I want to focus on his characters, especially on Sylvia Landry, the New Negro Woman, who is the pivotal agent of this newly evolving black revisionary narrative.

GRIFFITH'S DISCOURSE OF WHITE AMERICA AND ITS ICONOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

Griffith's exceedingly successful film epic, the first million-dollar movie, is about the birth, or rather, the rebirth of the American nation largely based on Thomas Dixon's popular 1905 novel, *The Clansman*, which recounts the story of the Ku Klux Klan. The film narrative hinges on the argument that racial segregation (the necessity of upholding the purity of blood, penalizing miscegenation, and prohibiting intermarriage) is inscribed into *nature*, and that the purity of the Aryan blood in America is a structural law, even a humanitarian necessity to keep the world from deteriorating into general chaos, that is, from institutional, moral, and biological confusion.

The iconic characters of this film are embedded in iconic settings representing Old Order (Pastoral South) and New Chaos (Urban North, Reconstruction South), along with an evolving Future as Past Restored. In this tapestry of Southern Order and Dignity, there is a strict hierarchy of race, class, and gender, which 'naturally' arranges itself into three groups.

White characters epitomize strength, pride, and self-control as well as physical beauty. White beauty is emblematized by young white women (Elsie Stoneman, Margaret, and Flora Cameron), the repositories of the race's aesthetic superiority.[4] All characters are members of the privileged class of the South, all of them descending from the plantation aristocracy. As is typical of orderly characters, there is a strict gender hierarchy presiding among white men and women, resulting in masculine men and feminine women. Men are either revered patriarchs (Colonel Cameron) and patriarchs-to-be (Ben Cameron), i.e. supreme guardians of women, children and slaves, or formerly revered patriarchs (Austin Stoneman). Women of the North and the South lack any individual traits except for their unconditional devotion to their men and the ideas they represent: the cause of racial purity and benevolent slavocracy, a system that they serve by feminine self-sacrifice, clandestine support of the KKK, and last but not least, by killing themselves, like little Flora, when pursued by a lecherous black Union veteran.

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[3] I use the terms the New Negro and New Negro Woman to signify a new class of black people with education, middle class aspirations and racial pride as they first appeared in the Cleveland *Gazette* in 1895. The New Negro resurfaced in literary criticism in the 1980s to designate a specific, though contested, discourse of modern blackness. Instrumental in constructing the discourse of the New Negro Woman were Julia Anne Cooper, Frances Harper, Jessie Fauset, Elisa Johnson McDougald, Nella Larsen, and Marita O. Bonner.

[4] For an intriguing exploration of white feminine beauty by a particular technology of lighting in early mainstream American narrative cinema and its racial and sexual implications, see Chapter 3 of Richard Dyer's *White* (1997).

Mulattos/mulattas are described as standing halfway between blacks and whites in physical beauty, though the racial balance is tilted toward black barbarism: both Silas Lynch and Lydia Brown are represented only as distorted whites. Significantly, they are intellectually gifted but deeply corrupt and greedy. The mulatto Sylas Lynch (mentored by Reconstruction politician Stoneman) and the mulatta Lydia Brown (the mistress of Stoneman) are crooked people capable of deceiving even powerful white politicians, such as Senator Stoneman of Philadelphia, who brings about moral and political chaos in pastoral South Carolina. In terms of their social position, the mulattos and mulattas are defined as not 'naturally' belonging to the privileged class (the high middle class of the North), because they are only parasites, thriving on the benevolence and weakness of white men in power. As far as their gender is concerned, they are not 'natural' women and men. This gender chaos is the inevitable consequence of their 'mixed blood'. Irrespective of their sex, they are similar in being out of control: lusting for sex with white men (or women), and for white man's power.

Phenotypically black characters form a distinctly separate group of ugly people.[5] They are also represented as 'normally' poor and part of a faceless mass in the rural South. One of the obvious reasons for their lacking individuality is that they are, in fact, not gendered, as they are still at the stage of barbarism, or put differently, at a pre-gendered stage. If occasionally gendered, they are abnormally oversexed and so motivated by uncontrollable sexual instincts, like Gus, the black rapist.

Based on these characters, Griffith's discourse heralds the birth of a new white nation which is, in fact, no more than the restoration of the old rural South by the biological reproduction of the white race through the union, that is, marriage of the South and the North, under the surveillance of the KKK. The pivotal figure of this new national discourse is Ben Cameron, the biologically and culturally superior Aryan, who is also the caretaker of the best traditions of the Old by establishing the KKK. Also in his hands is the historical destiny of America and white civilization at large, which is threatened by the tide of barbarism that Negroes, Asians, and second-class European immigrants (from the southern and eastern parts of the continent) meant to Griffith in the 1910s.

MICHEAUX'S COUNTER NARRATIVE AND THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE NEW NEGRO WOMAN

Contrary to Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, representing blacks as a faceless, brutal mob, or perversely ambitious, corrupt, and lecherous mulattos, Oscar Micheaux offers the rich tapestry of a diversified black society with characters from all walks of life. From the beginning, he is intent on persuading his audience that no character has popped into this story as a figment of his imagination since they are to be regarded as representatives of specific black classes and genders. This message is conveyed by calling two of his weighty characters 'typical'. They are Sylvia Landry, the educated, middle-class woman and her step-father, the uneducated, working-class Jasper Landry.

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[5] In a recently published Hungarian study of myths and stereotypes, which is groundbreaking in its ambition to discuss the racist heritage of American culture in the light of the minsrel tradition (Virágos Zsolt-Varró Gabriella, *Jim Crow örökösei: Mítosz és sztereotípia az amerikai társadalmi tudatban és kultúrában*, 2002 /*The Heirs of Jim Crow: Myth and Stereotype in American Social Consciousness and Culture*/), there is a section dealing with D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and Griffith's racist attitude, contending that he used white actors even for playing black characters, including black mobs (265). Indeed, Griffith's Southern race prejudice greatly affected his artistic practices, nevertheless he did use black actors, especially for black mob scenes. Typically, these black actors were, however, kept in segregated areas during the shootings.

What the young urban woman and the older farmer have in common, that is, what they typify despite all the differences in their character is a feature completely missing from Griffith: a strong black striving for bettering themselves and their community.

Micheaux's narrative turns on the interaction of a complicated social network of blacks and whites, female and male characters. Blacks are mainly diversified by class and within a social group; they are described as having predominantly positive or negative traits. Though Micheaux is partial toward the black professional middle class, he still makes a clear distinction between scheming Alma Pritchard and her idealized cousin, Sylvia Landry. Similarly, he applies a respectable, uplifting minister (Reverend Wilson) and his corrupt counterpart (Old Ned) in the plot. There are average, working-class people, such as city blacks and farmers (Sylvia's foster family, the Landrys), and their repulsive counterpart, the traditional plantation Negro (Efrem).

In addition, as a counterpoint to respectable professionals and striving poor blacks, Micheaux gives the portrait of a busy network of the black urban underground complete with thieves and gamblers (Red, Larry).

Though making use of a few stereotypes from the racist iconography of Griffith (and the minstrel show and plantation fiction tradition that Griffith tapped for his film), Oscar Micheaux's aim is strategically different even with the coon, the tom and the plantation negro. By these characters, *Within Our Gates* conveyed the message to the contemporary black audiences at 'midnight rambles' that personal weakness is partly the consequence of racist American history and partly the very cause of social troubles in black communities.

Less diversified than black society, the representation of white society also suggests sophistication and above all, a clearly discernable political message. These white characters are fewer in number and a group of them is meant to be types from the black man's perspective (benevolent northern woman, biased Southern woman, despotic Southern landowner). However, another group indicates Oscar Micheaux's more sophisticated portrayal of the dynamics of class, race, and gender than Griffith's *Birth*: the cheated poor white sharecropper killing the land owner who has formerly claimed that the law in the South is made by white men to benefit white men; the lynching party made up of poor whites, including even women and children; the white rapist from a family of slavocrats, who also turns out to be Sylvia's father. These white characters are also integral to the narrative that Micheaux recounts in his race movie with a keen eye on his people in the context of American history, calling on his audiences to consider the vital necessity of a racially integrated society to fulfill the hopes and accomplish the grand design of the founding fathers of America, the land of hopes.

Connecting the white side of American society with the black, the South with the North, the rural with the urban, the affluent class with the impoverished and the criminal, is the pivotal character, Sylvia Landry (played by Evelyn Preer). She is also described as an attractive and respectable black woman whose gender boundaries are more fluid than any of the white, black, or mulatto characters in Griffith, but at the same time, she also shares idealized aspects of femininity with Griffith's white women. Her strategic place in the film narrative is further enhanced by the fact that her character links the past to a promising future. Furthermore, she also stands at the center of two interwoven narratives, one representing an earlier popular genre, the other, a newly evolving one. I contend, that Sylvia Landry, the iconic character of a new racial discourse (also prefiguring female characters in Harlem Renaissance women's fiction, such as Jessie Redmon Fauset's heroines in *There Is Confusion, Plum Bun, Comedy: American Style),* is molded by these

two plots, the race melodrama and the opportunity narrative.[6] This double coding also accounts for apparent inconsistencies in her character.

Typical of race melodramas, Sylvia Landry is a light-skinned woman who is enveloped in mystery – as tragic mulattas would be. Well defined as she is at the beginning of the movie by her profession, her identity remains ambiguous practically until the last, flashback section of the narrative. The viewer who is interpellated as a subject by Micheaux's evoking the paraphernalia of race melodramas, is kept in suspense for more than 40 minutes of the total 78 of the film because she cannot decide whether Sylvia is a virtuous woman with a legitimate origin and respectable goals or the very opposite is true of her: she is the daughter of a sinful liaison, and her doings motivated by deception and scheming.

Similar to typical melodramatic victims beset by insurmountable difficulty and ineradicable stain, she has no clearly defined family, that is, a supportive network of kin to defend her from irreversible decline. Besides her cousin, Alma Pritchard, whom she visits on the east, no information is provided until the very end as to who her mother or father were, where her other relatives are, or, for that matter, who made possible her education. In short, until the last time jump in the movie, we have no reliable handle on the character of this charming, white-skinned woman represented *without* a family, home, and past, but *with* an impeccable wardrobe, excellent education, and conspicuously active life, all these features typical of the kept woman, the beautiful mulatta, as in William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853). Even the scene of her being savagely abused by a middle-aged white man derives from this melodramatic repertoire of narrative tradition, but as I will discuss later, the rape scene is reinscribed by Micheaux for a clearly different political agenda.

In spite of the narrative strategy slanted toward making Sylvia Landry reminiscent of victimized tragic mulattas in race melodramas, Oscar Micheaux eventually makes sure that his is a new kind of black narrative with which to address a specifically black audience. In other words, his heroine's story eventually unfolds as an opportunity narrative revolving around a successful black woman. Educated and independent, Sylvia is rendered as the most flexible and innovative of all the characters, black or white. When learning about her school's dire budgetary conditions, she is the only one to keep the disaster from unfolding: she goes to Boston to gain white support for black education and raises funds for her school. Back home, as the flashback section of the film demonstrates, her accounting skills and New Negro self-confidence save her step-father from the crooked white landowner. As an educated young woman, she also goes out of her way to make sure that her little brother, Emil, gets his education to advance in life. At the end of the film, after a series of vicissitudes, she not only prevents her school from closing down, but makes it prosper and expand to the benefit of a growing black community.

Having the skills and intelligence as well as dedication to her community, Sylvia is adamant and also successful in her goal to uplift her race. Oscar Micheaux's sharp focus on the New Negro Woman in this regard shares the perspective of those women writers of the late nineteenth and the turn of the century who saw the New Negro Woman "at the gateway of this new era of American civilization." As Anna Julia Cooper put it in *A Voice from the South,* it is this black woman in whose "hands must be moulded the strength, the wit, the statesmanship, the morality, all the psychic force, the social and economic intercourse of that era" (Lerner, 1972: 574).

In traditional white gender terms, say, those of Griffith, Sylvia Landry's celebrated features (her courage, self-confidence, ambition, perseverance, mobility, emotional control, ntellectual

[6] The notion of race melodrama and opportunity narrative informing *Within Our Gates* was applied by Jane Gaines in "Within Our Gates: From Race Melodrama to Opportunity Narrative." Though indebted to her insight, my focus is different as I elaborate on the discontinuities in Sylvia Landry's character that Gaines treats only in passing.

power, and incentive) might be regarded as masculine.[7] Yet, Sylvia Landry is emphatically described as a woman in the film. She has a refined taste, elegant clothes complete with furs, fashionable hats and purses. She is equipped with social skills for effective communication in the urban parlor, which enables her to cope with the class and color line. She has a 'motherly' nature: playing mother and big sister to Emil and self-sacrificially throwing herself before a car in Boston to rescue a little boy's life (as mothers should metaphorically sacrifice their life for their children).

Sylvia Landry is also the center of heterosexual interest in *Within Our Gates*. In less than fifteen minutes, she is desired by three men in succession and altogether there are five men of various social, educational, and racial backgrounds who are keenly interested in her as a woman (Conrad, Larry, Rev. Wilson Jacobs, Dr Vivian, Armand Gridlestone). The first conflict of the film issues from her exceptional sexual desirability because her cousin, Alma, who is in love with Conrad, Sylvia's well-established and handsome fiancé, finds no other way to get him from Sylvia but by scheming against her. She arranges for a compromising situation involving Sylvia with a white man, having Conrad witness the ambiguous couple. Her sexual identity comes most brutally to the fore when she is nearly raped by white Armand Gridlestone. Despite this gloomy beginning, however, the film concludes with the idealized aspect of her life as a happy black woman: she is united with Dr Vivian, the most handsome and attractive black man out of the five, in marriage.

Sylvia's femininity, which clearly measures up to white women's, is emphasized in Micheaux's film in that she shows a great amount of sensitivity, even timidity toward males. For example, when Conrad mistakenly believes she has been unfaithful to him, with no willingness to listen to her part of the story, he begins physically abusing her by wrenching her arm, stifling her throat and throwing her to the floor. Though we need to remind ourselves of very different acting conventions in the silent film era when in the absence of the sound track, speech was literally spread all over the body of the actor. The extent of brutality that Sylvia has to suffer at the hands of her fiancé seems to go beyond the limit of expressive body language. Surprisingly, Sylvia does not defend herself: neither is she trying to get help nor is she retaliating.

What I assume is suggested here is her distinct womanly trait, her marked vulnerability. This comes by surprise since her highlighted feminine fragility seems to be incompatible with her intellectual, psychological, and even physical strength that she needs throughout the film narrative to travel great distances, fight for money, recover quickly from the psychological shock of having her money stolen in the street, and then having a car running over her body. Regardless, she always looks elegant and smiling after recovering from her ordeals.

Yet, Sylvia, the New Negro Woman's vulnerability is repeatedly emphasized in the film – not only to make her femininity measure up to any white womanly standard (even the whitest of all, Flora Cameron in Griffith), but also to put this black female vulnerability into black political discourse. In what is to follow is a brief analysis of a long sequence of sexual and racial violence in Micheaux's race movie, centering around a rape scene. I want to argue that Micheaux instrumentalizes the New Negro Woman's vulnerability in order to convey an effective message to his black audience about past, present, and future conditions of the American Negro in America.

This shocking sequence of multiple violence takes place in a flashback illustrating Alma's revelatory explanation of Sylvia's past and spotless character to Dr Vivian. Accordingly, Armand Gridlestone savagely attacks Sylvia Landry in an abandoned cottage. Sylvia has just returned

[7] Comparing Micheaux to other black filmmakers, bell hooks credits Micheaux with a most radical perspective, claiming that "there are infinitely more transgressive visionary images of black femaleness in the work of a filmmaker like Oscar Micheaux than there are in that of most black film directors, precisely because Micheaux was not seeing through the lens of white longings and expectations" (*Reel to Real* 100).

from the marshland where her family, the Landrys, is hiding because they know their lives are in danger. Without having any evidence of the real identity of the killer, bloodthirsty whites accuse Jasper Landry of Philip Gridleston's death, so they seek to trace him down and destroy his whole family. While Sylvia is trying to collect some food and clothes for the Landrys in the cottage, the white mob find them in the marshland and as was the custom under Jim Crow, they hang and burn the innocent husband and wife. (Luckily, their young son, Emil, manages to escape on horseback).

As argued by Jane Gaines and other film scholars, this scene is exceptionally dramatic in its thematic and technical sophistication, powerfully rejecting Griffith's opinion on black violence. Whereas *Birth of a Nation* argues that the very cause of the American social chaos is the breach of 'natural law', that is, the transgression of biological and social categories between white and black, superior and inferior (dramatized in scenes of interracial sexual violence), *Within Our Gates* provides the black man's perspective, that is, a black counter narrative on this most weighty issue. Yet, Micheaux not only reverses the relations here by making a barbaric white aristocrat ravage an educated, middle class mulatta; he dramatically changes the very terms of the discourse of violence. To wit, Oscar Mischeaux is no longer satisfied with the political potentials of a narrative turning on the savvy of the black man who craftily accepts the master's terms only to appropriate his discursive space to black ends as Grandison did in Chesnutt's short story, "The Passing of Grandison", or as the representative black American did in Booker T. Washington's autobiographical narrative, *Up from Slavery*. In establishing the long sequence that represents the fight between a white male rapist and his black female victim, cross-cut to scenes of lynching the Landrys, Oscar Micheaux provides a new interpretation of interracial violence, with the following possible implication:

1. Black women are not willing Jezebels, neither are they helpless victims (like idealized little Flora in Griffith), but they fight (and have always fought) for their virtue.
2. Inherent in this is the intimation that black people, however victimized, have never been willing, or worse, contented slaves, but rebels, even capable of forming maroon communities.
3. The meticulously cross-cut scenes showing the developing drama of rape on the one hand and of lynching on the other suggest that burning black men and ravaging black women are crimes internally and historically connected. As the sequence is structured around a blazing bonfire, the two interweaving episodes of violence are emphasized, giving the intimation that the flame of the bonfire consuming black bodies and the flame of perverse sexuality ravaging the black female body are ignited by the very same racial hatred.
4. Furthermore, what is implied in this representation of racial violence is an indirect message to the black public watching this film in segregated theaters: if you do not fight back in self-defense, as Sylvia does in the abandoned cottage when attacked by a lustful white man, you might end up as inanimate objects, or even worse, pieces of coal, like her parents.

In conclusion: Oscar Micheaux's race movie, *Within Our Gates* is a powerful black response to Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, refusing Griffith's hideous black stereotypes and white supremacist message. Moreover, Micheaux's film provides an alternative discourse of national identity in a most critical period of American history, when the United States has accumulated unparalleled tensions inside and outside of its borders marked by imperialist expansion (Mexico, Cuba, Haiti), World War in Europe, white terrorism in the South, race riots in northern cities (the bloodiest

in Chicago, in 1919), an unparalleled size of immigration and black migration, all this triggering rapid structural changes in the economy and the culture of the nation.

Micheaux's answer to these shocking changes is dramatically different from Griffith's. While Griffith demands a segregated society to save civilization, Micheaux embraces the idea of a racially integrated society. While Griffith seeks nostalgically to restore a rural past, Micheaux advocates a vision of urban America. While Griffith singles out purity of (white) blood as the sole basis for human value, Micheaux considers education, individual and communal achievement as solid grounds for human distinction. Last but not least, while Griffith's supremacist narrative turns on Ben Cameron, the Aryan founder of the KKK obsessed with stamping out the sin of miscegenation, Micheaux's discourse hinges on Sylvia Landry, a respectable woman of white and black ancestry, emblematizing the American dream, newly unfolding.

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