

# OSCAR MICHEAUX SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER

Volume 9, Spring 2001



William Foster

## William Foster: The Dean of the Negro Photoplay

by Jacqueline Stewart  
University of Chicago

In her film *Compensation* (1999), Zeinabu Irene Davis stages a scene in which her main characters, a Black couple at the turn of the twentieth century, go to the movies. The film they see is William Foster's *The Railroad Porter* (1913), widely regarded as the first film produced by an African American. Since there is no extant print of *The Railroad Porter*, Davis opted to remake the film herself, based on descriptions from the Black press. What results is a fitting, imaginative tribute to the man George P. Johnson described as "The Dean of the Negro Photoplay," a pioneer who paved the way for those like Johnson (Lincoln Motion Picture Company) and Oscar Micheaux, who would continue his effort to redefine Black film images and to uplift and entertain Black audiences.

Before founding his film company in 1913, Foster enjoyed a long career in show business, having worked as a vaudeville publicity and booking agent, and as Business Representative for Robert Motts' legendary Pekin

Theater. Located on "The Stroll," a section of south State Street that was Black Chicago's business and entertainment center, the nationally known Pekin was celebrated as the first Black-owned and operated venue of "legitimate" theatrical entertainment, including a stock company of Black dramatic actors, appearances by the country's leading vaudeville and musical performers. Foster not only cultivated Black talent at the Pekin, he also wrote extensively about the Black theatrical scene (under the pen name Juli Jones) for African American newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and the *Indianapolis Freeman*.

Foster founded the Foster Photoplay Company in order to specialize in non-degrading Black-cast comedies. Foster was keenly interested in seeing African Americans use moving pictures as an instrument of uplift. As he wrote in the December 20, 1913 issue of the *Freeman* (cited by Henry T. Sampson): "Nothing has done so much to awaken race consciousness of the colored man in the United States as the motion picture. It has made him hungry to see himself as he

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has come to be.” In comedies like his debut, *The Railroad Porter*, and newsreels such as *The Colored Championship Baseball Game* (1914), Foster tried to represent elements of Black life that African-Americans had cultivated in Northern cities, but were largely ignored in white-produced films—particularly the lifestyles of the Black middle class. For example, *The Railroad Porter* (starring former members of the Pekin Stock Company, Lottie Gradie and Howard Kelly), portrays a wife of a Pullman porter who has an affair with a waiter from the Elite Café, one of the leading gathering places along “The Stroll.” Records indicate that Foster’s films were shown primarily in theaters in Chicago (where they were shot) and Eastern cities, where they spoke to and about an urbane African-American constituency. This audience raises interesting questions about the representational politics of Foster’s films—on the one hand they celebrate Black upward mobility; on the other, as comedies, they seem to risk supporting long-standing Black stereotypes.

Reviews in the *Defender* suggest that Foster’s films enjoyed great popularity in Chicago, tapping into an audience that appreciated Foster’s brand of Black-oriented humor. The “Musical and Dramatic” column reported in August 1913 that *The Railroad Porter* “has surprised all of State street” by playing at the large States Theater to “crowded houses, with matinees Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays.” As a result of *Porter*’s success, the State offered Foster an exclusive contract to premiere his subsequent films, including the forthcoming, *The Butler*. In October 1913, Foster’s short comedy, *The Fall Guy*, also drew large audiences at the States. Fos-

ter’s success reached another peak the following month, when *The Railroad Porter* was screened to white audiences at the Majestic theater, “the leading vaudeville house in Chicago.” *The Defender* reported on November 22 that the Majestic audience so enjoyed Foster’s film that they exhibited the kind of “inappropriate” spectatorial behavior frequently attributed to Black Belt audiences: “When it was screened patrons jumped up and shouted, some laughed so loud that ushers had to silence them.” Despite these achievements, Foster faced the familiar set of difficulties (financing, distribution) that plagued early Black filmmaking efforts.



A scene from *Compensation*  
by Zeinabu Irene Davis

After producing at least eleven films his company folded in 1916.

Foster worked as circulation manager for the *Defender* during the late 1910s. He continued to play an important role in Chicago’s African-American film culture when he was hired in 1917 to manage another

State Street theater, the Star, a movie house operated by black businessman and gambling lord Henry “Teenan” Jones. In many ways, this position allowed Foster to reprise the role he had played at the Pekin. Under Jones’s and Foster’s leadership, the Star was celebrated as “the only house in Chicago owned and operated entirely by members of the Race,” a position formerly held by the Pekin. Moreover, both employers—Motts and Jones—had strong “underworld” affiliations. For many years, Foster seems to have successfully navigated the thin line between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” in the business of Black entertainment. However, during the late 1920s Foster moved to Los Angeles where he unsuccessfully attempted to found another film production company.

Though Foster has become something of a footnote in Black film history, his multivarious activities played a pivotal role in the development of the notion of a thriving Black film industry during the silent era. Foster tried to convince African Americans to buy stock in Black-owned film companies, and worked to organize a distribution and exhibition network of Black-owned theaters, while at the same time he attempted to rehabilitate negative Black film images. In the current wave of scholarly attention to the race film era, Foster’s work in motion picture production, live theater and film exhibition deserve much closer attention. Zeinabu Davis’s recent cinematic tribute to Foster—illustrating his lively and appreciative African-American audience—suggests fresh ways to revisit and recontextualize his extraordinary career.

# Micheaux and the Millennium: A Report on Current Activities

by Corey K. Creekmur  
University of Iowa

The year of the new millennium was an unusually exciting year for Micheaux events: in early July, I was fortunate to be in Bologna, Italy with *The Living Nickelodeon*, a performance troupe developed by my University of Iowa colleague Rick Altman that recreates the experience of early film exhibition through a combination of films, illustrated song slides, musical accompaniment, and sound effects. (I provide the sound effects, using such things as drums, horns, whistles, and a terribly mistreated violin.) While we've performed before audiences in Chicago, Washington DC, Montreal, and New York, among other North American locations, this was our first European appearance. We were brought to Bologna, one of Europe's selected "millennial" cities, as part of *Il Cinema Ritrovato*, a film festival organized by the Cineteca del Comune di Bologna and the Nederlands Film Museum to showcase restored silent and early sound films. Among the films shown in the Cinema Fulgor was Oscar Micheaux's *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), in a beautifully tinted 35mm print from the Royal Belgian Cinematheque, along with live piano accompaniment. With rather wordy French and Dutch intertitles, the film proved challenging for the simultaneous translators working hard to render

the information into Italian and English. In any case, the mid-sized theatre was almost full for Micheaux's film at 9 a.m. on July 3rd. It was clear that the audience—from Italy, France, Eng-



*Symbol of the Unconquered*  
was screened at the Il Cinema  
Ritrovato Festival

land, and elsewhere—found the film fascinating, and I think those Americans sitting in the theatre on the day before their Independence Day found it a curious but somehow appropriate experience to see an international version of this long-lost American film in an Italian cinema.

Finally, to mark the end of the summer, I attended the 5th Annual Micheaux Festival in Gregory, South Dakota for the first time, and experienced what my fellow Micheaux scholars—including Ron Green, Charlene Register, and Pearl Bows-

er—have insisted: the dramatic landscape of Micheaux's former home thoroughly revises one's understanding of this singular man's life and work. The hospitality of the conference's hosts is by now legendary, and not exaggerated. A visit to Gregory doesn't exactly "explain" the enigma that is Oscar Micheaux, but certainly helps to deepen one's sense of his uniqueness. The festival offers film screenings, food, presentations, and opportunity for conversation, but I think anyone interested in Micheaux owes it to themselves to attend the Festival in order to get a sense of the landscape that once surrounded and inspired the young Oscar Micheaux.

Finally, two "millennial" Micheaux events that I was fortunate enough to experience during 2000 include the long-anticipated appearance of J. Ron Green's *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (Indiana University Press) and Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence's *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (Rutgers University Press), both of which have allowed this year to be an especially exciting year for Micheaux fans and scholars. I should also mention Betti Carol VanEpps-Taylor's biography *Oscar Micheaux: South Dakota Homesteader, Author, Pioneer Film Maker* (Dakota West Books) which led the charge of Micheaux books, appearing in 1999.

## Micheaux Mania

Visit <http://www.micheaux.org>, an informative website about the upcoming Micheaux Festival in Great Bend, Kansas commemorating the 50th anniversary of Micheaux's death. The festival will be held in March 24-25, 2001.

A multimedia exploration of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* entitled *Griffith in Context*, aims to historically contextualize the film and juxtapose Griffith's work with Micheaux's. For more info check out <http://griffith-in-context.gatech.edu/>

# Excerpts from "Telling White Lies: Oscar Micheaux and Charles Chesnutt"

by Corey K. Creekmur  
University of Iowa

To promote the forthcoming *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle* edited by Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser, I have reconstructed my essay "Telling White Lies: Oscar Micheaux and Charles W. Chesnutt," for the current issue of the newsletter. This essay argues that the renewed scholarly attention to Micheaux has yet to account for the apparent fact that most of his films were adaptations, sometimes of his own novels, but most often, it seems, of the works of others. However, many of the sources for Micheaux's films—explicitly named on title cards or on posters—remain obscure and incompletely identified: a good deal of detective work remains to be done before we can adequately assess the ways in which Micheaux translated written works into films. However, at least one of Micheaux's favorite sources for adaptation is very clear: the work of the prominent African-American novelist Charles W. Chesnutt.

In a pioneering essay (published in the *Journal of Film and Video* 49:1-2, 1997), Charlene Regester has already examined the strained relationship between Chesnutt and the Micheaux Film Corporation regarding the silent and now lost 1924 film adaptation of Chesnutt's "passing" novel *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). In fact, we now know that Micheaux adapted this novel twice, for the second time as the recently rediscovered talkie *Veiled Aristocrats*

(1932). I confirm that the relationship between the two men was at best ambivalent, perhaps most curiously in the case of Micheaux's last published novel, *The Masquerade* (1947), which one could only generously call an homage to Chesnutt. In fact, *The Masquerade* is a blatant re-



scene from Micheaux's *Veiled Aristocrats*, a film based on Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars*

writing of Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, with a preface that has the nerve to identify the "new" work as an improvement on the original. However, I think Micheaux's audacious rewriting of Chesnutt's book, along with his cinematic adaptations, suggests a much more complex understanding of "adaptation" than the rather narrow, one-way translation from page to screen that film critics tend to assume and employ. In brief, I argue that Micheaux approaches the work of adaptation in a form both distinctive to an African-American tradition and comprehensible given Micheaux's perpetually strapped financial situa-

tion; for Micheaux, adaptation becomes an act of transformation more akin to "signifying" or even postmodern techniques of appropriation (such as digital sampling) than straightforward transformation from one medium to another.

The set of texts I've mentioned remain fascinating and deserve further investigation, but in my essay I argue that Chesnutt may have actually provided Micheaux with an even more important narrative model, and a literary source for some of the intricate plotting that has puzzled or attracted Micheaux's recent critics. Most directly, the film that now looks like Micheaux's masterpiece, *Within Our Gates* (1920), appears to be a curious and highly creative adaptation of Chesnutt's masterpiece, the political novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Micheaux's film is not an adaptation of Chesnutt's novel in its particulars, but

relies upon some of its narrative structures, including the presentation of key scenes more than once and from different perspectives, anticipating the modernist techniques of writers like William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf or filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman. This technique is used by Chesnutt and Micheaux, however, for distinctly racialized purposes: to demonstrate the truth of African-American experience in contrast to the lies perpetuated by white power, in the form of newspapers and "official" versions, which are eventually taken to be "history." While there are a few moments in *Within Our Gates* that

resemble specific scenes in *The Marrow of Tradition*, I believe that Micheaux more creatively borrows Chesnutt's means of depicting two versions of history within one text, the reality experienced by disenfranchised blacks and the fictions constructed by powerful whites. To dramatize the gulf between black truth and white lies, both Chesnutt and Micheaux take advantage of the storyteller's ability to narrate events more than once, from distinct points of view. In adapting this technique from Chesnutt, Micheaux especially exploits the cinematic devices of the dissolve and the flashback to mark the differences between fantasy and reality, or actual events and distorted retellings. Much like Sergei Eisenstein's famous claim that D. W. Griffith derived his form—but not necessarily his content—from the novels of Charles Dickens, I believe that Micheaux found a model of race-conscious form in Chesnutt's work that he could adapt for his own purposes and to tell his own stories in film.

Since completing my essay and having the opportunity to present my work to various encouraging audiences, I've been pleased to see that Chesnutt, while always recognized as a pioneering African-American author, has recently received renewed interest in a way that's not unlike the revival of interest in Micheaux in recent years. Almost all of Chesnutt's books—including

the key works *The House Behind the Cedars*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, and the short story collection *The Conjure Woman* (1899)—are currently in print, and in multiple editions, including an "expanded" edition of *The Conjure Woman* from Duke University Press. More recently, three of Chesnutt's previously unpublished novels—*Mandy Oxendine* (circa 1896), *Paul Marchand F.M.C.* (1921), *The Quarry* (1928)—have appeared for the first time, the first from the University of Illinois Press, and the last two from Princeton University Press. These are not only exciting acts of recovery, but they shatter a common myth about Chesnutt's later years.

It was long assumed that Chesnutt's limited financial success as a writer eventually led him to abandon writing during the final decade of his life, but the existence of these works clarifies that Chesnutt did not stop writing, despite numerous publisher's dispiriting rejections. I think that anyone interested in Micheaux would benefit from reading Chesnutt's work, and I hope that my efforts to reconnect them, along with the groundbreaking work of Regester and a more recent essay, "Micheaux's Chesnutt" by Susan Gillman (in *PMLA* 114:5, October 1999), will lead to additional explorations of their significant if difficult "collaborations."

## Oscar Micheaux and His Circle Film Tour

Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African American Film-making and Race Cinema of the Silent Era, a seven-part touring program, will have its world premiere at the Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone-Sacile, Italy in mid-October, 2001. Some portion of the Italian program

will visit various schools, museums and cultural centers around the country, giving new audiences a taste of the Micheaux experience. The tour is still in the planning stages, but hopes to include the following films:

*Two Knights in Vaudeville* (1917)  
*A Black Sherlock Holmes* (1918)  
*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1914)  
*Happy Though Married* (1920)  
*Within Our Gates* (1920)  
*A Pictorial View Of Idlewild* (1927)  
*The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920)  
*Flying Ace* (1926)  
*The Pilgrim* (1923)  
*Body and Soul* (1925)  
*Ten Nights in a Bar Room* (1921)  
*Zora Neale Hurston* (1927-9)  
*Verdict Not Guilty*  
*Hell-Bound Train* (1930)

*Showboat* (1929)  
*Black and Tan* (1929)  
*Scar of Shame* (1929)  
*Eleven P.M.* (1928)  
*Hallelulah* (1929)  
*Hearts in Dixie* (1929)  
*Darktown Revue* (1931)  
*The Exile* (1931)  
*Veiled Aristocrats* (1932)  
*Murder in Harlem* (1935)  
*Birthright* (1938)

*Midnight Ramble*, a documentary  
on Race film (1994)

# Modern Day Pioneers on the Prairie:

## A Review of the South Dakota Micheaux Film Festival

Elisa Richard

Planning Committee of the Oscar Micheaux Festival  
Gregory, South Dakota

When you hear the words pioneer or homesteader, visions of land plowing, residing in a one-room sod house, and existing on meager resources are what comes to mind. However, for the last six years, the word "pioneer" has had a whole new meaning in Gregory, South Dakota. The pioneers of the Micheaux film festival that started out as a three-day event have seen it evolve into a five-day history conference and festival promoting cultural exchange. Initially, two scholars were recruited for the first festival yet this number has increased to seventeen scholars and ten guest speakers. And in August 2000 at the Fifth Micheaux Film Festival, some 400 participants attended these events. Thus, every year the pioneering spirit of the Oscar Micheaux Film Festival is renewed by those who come to celebrate the Gregory County pioneer and African-American filmmaker and novelist, Oscar Micheaux.

Although the Oscar Micheaux Film Festival was first held in 1996, Lee Arbie Barry, a local historian as well as many South Dakotans had already known about Micheaux for years. Reports circulated in Gregory among those familiar with Micheaux or with Micheaux's legend. Attesting to their interest in Micheaux, many residents owned original copies of his autographed novels; novels distributed to farmers in the mid-West.

However, the festival ignited when Mrs. Barry received a copy of the *Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter* and shared it with Richard Papousek, local historian. Papousek proceeded to contact Duke University and was advised that Jane Gaines, a Duke professor, would be in the area and would be interested in visiting Micheaux's homestead. Following her arrival, Gaines was immediately impressed with Gregory County where Micheaux's

homestead was located and with the knowledge possessed by local residents of Micheaux and his homesteading years.

With encouragement from Gaines, local residents Richard Papousek, Francie Johnson, and Jack Broome, all history buffs, proceeded to make plans for the First Annual Oscar Micheaux Festival held August 16-18, 1996. The South Dakota Humanities Council got involved in the project by funding scholars Pearl Bowser and Charlene Regester to attend the festival and share their research. Initially, the three-day festival included tours of the Micheaux homestead which is located on the exact plot of land described in Micheaux's novel, *The Conquest*, as well tours of routes traveled by Micheaux, Native American dancing, screenings of Micheaux's silent films, roundtable discussions, prairie dinners, church services, and an exhibition of original land documents held by Micheaux.



South Dakota under many inches of snow

Because the first Micheaux Film Festival was so well received, plans were then made to make the Festival an annual event. Since that time, the festival has become a popular conference, cultural affairs event, and venue for local historians to exchange their views on how Micheaux transfigured into the western milieu some 97 years ago. The film festival prompted Charlene Regester, co-editor of the *Micheaux Newsletter*, to remark, "I will have to rethink Micheaux again after coming to South Dakota."

In view of the festival's success, it was awarded the prestigious Schwartz Humanities Award in 1997. Numerous articles and publications have been published nationally and internationally as a result of this conference. Professor Learthen Dorsey of the University of Nebraska, who is researching early homesteaders, found the conference resourceful in terms of facilitating his research. Scholars Pearl Bowser, Ron Green, Betti Van Epps-Taylor, who all attended the festival, have had their books published on Micheaux. The fes-

tival has even attracted motion picture producer Preston Holmes and actor James McDaniel of *NYPD Blue*. Michael Unthank of the New York Arts Council also attended one of the festivals with an interest in producing a motion picture on Micheaux. As the festival has grown it continues to attract a vast array of history buffs, scholars, entertainers, or Micheaux fans.

Although Micheaux left South Dakota in 1912, the homesteading experience had such an influence on his life that Micheaux continually revisits this western experience in his novels as well as films. And Gregory, South Dakota can lay claim to the land that so impacted Micheaux throughout his life. Oscar Micheaux stated, "I was carried away by the first sight of it," describing his South Dakota homestead for the first time. It is of interest to note that many festival goers have a similar revelation after attending the film festival.

In an effort to improve the festival, organizers intend to attract more independent filmmakers who can exhibit their works, coordinate with colleges and universities to send students interested in film history and film studies, and involve local school systems by having them serve as participants. It is also the intent of the planning committee to have Micheaux inducted into the South Dakota Hall of Fame and possibly pursue having a commemorative postage stamp printed in

his honor.

The film festival was donated a building in the "Theater District" of Gregory, South Dakota and plans are being made to name the building The Oscar Micheaux Cultural Study Center. The cultural center will house oral histories, photographs, memorabilia, in addition to providing an informational directory on Gregory County history and Micheaux. Plans are also being made to establish an endowment fund to be used for scholarships for students pursuing acting or writing careers. It is the hope of the festival's planning committee to make the Micheaux Homestead and Cultural Center both a tourist and historical site for attracting visitors year round.

The 2001 Micheaux Film Festival will be held August 8-12 in Gregory in an effort to revive the homesteader energy and spirit that Micheaux imparted through his works. As pioneer Laura Ingles Wilder once said, one who has not homesteaded could never understand the fascination and terror the homestead provided. However, attending the festival can allow one to experience Micheaux's homesteading years, engage in debate surrounding Micheaux, better understand Micheaux's work, and develop an appreciation for the African American homesteader who became a novelist and later filmmaker.

## News of Interest

The Sioux City Museum and Historical Association held an exhibition titled, **Oscar Micheaux and Sioux City's West 7th Street**, an exhibition about Micheaux's experiences and contributions to the Sioux City community, and the nature of the African-American community in Sioux City. For additional information contact Daniel Truckey, Curator of history, at (712) 279-6174.

A **Magic Johnson Theater** was opened in Harlem on June 30, 2000, featuring a "Wall of Fame" of famous figures of the Harlem community. A still of Oscar Micheaux is displayed on the wall

with other famous individuals including Duke Ellington, Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Percy Sutton.

An interview with Ron Green about his book *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*, was featured as part of an **NPR feature on the screening of Micheaux's 1925 film *Body and Soul***. The film was screened at Lincoln Center for the New York Film Festival, accompanied by a new jazz score composed by a member of the Lincoln Center jazz Orchestra.

Howard Hobson is working on **compiling a list of all existing race films** and their archive locations. He hopes to catalogue as many features, shorts, and documentaries produced between 1915-1960 as possible. The preliminary list of this project is scheduled to be completed by the end of January 2000.

February 14, 2000; An article discussing **Grant Harper Reid's research** of his grandfather, showman Leonard Harper, mentions that Harper was involved in the making of Oscar Micheaux's first talkie film, *The Exile* (1931).



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## WRITING HIMSELF INTO HISTORY

*Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films,  
and His Audiences*

PEARL BOWSER AND LOUISE SPENCE

Foreword by Thulani Davis



*Writing Himself into History* is an eagerly anticipated analysis of the career and artistry surrounding the legendary black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. With the exception of Spike Lee, Micheaux is the most famous—and prolific—African American director in film history. Between 1918 and 1948 he made more than forty "Race pictures," movies made for and about African Americans. A man of immense creativity, he also wrote seven novels.

Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence concentrate here on the first decade of Micheaux's career, when he produced and directed more than twenty silent features and built a reputation as a controversial artist and maverick entrepreneur. Placing his work firmly within his social and cultural milieu, the authors also examine Micheaux's family background and life experience. They provide a close textual analysis of his surviving silent films (*The Symbol of the Unconquered*, *Within Our Gates*, and *Body and Soul*), and highlight the rivalry between production companies, dilemmas of assimilation versus a separate cultural identity, and gender and class issues. *Writing Himself into History* also analyzes Micheaux's career as a novelist in relation to his work as a filmmaker.

**PEARL BOWSER**, founder of the African Diaspora Images collection, specializes in African and African American film. She co-directed the award-winning documentary *Midnight Ramble: Oscar Micheaux and the Story of Race Movies*. **LOUISE SPENCE** is an associate professor and coordinator of media studies at Sacred Heart University in Connecticut and has published extensively in scholarly journals and anthologies. **THULANI DAVIS** is a writer, author of the novels *Maker of Saints* and *1959* and contributor to *Malcolm X: The Great Photographs* and the biographical film *W.E.B. Du Bois*.

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# Within our Grasp. . .

by Jill Jordan Sieder  
Edited by Nicole Walker

When the American Film Institute named D.W. Griffith's Civil War saga, *The Birth of a Nation*, as one of its 100 best films of all time in 1998, a collective groan went out among African Americans and film buffs of all stripes who consider this early film, however captivating it may be, the apotheosis of racist, historically haywire Southern mythology. They wondered how a film that romanticizes plantation life, ridicules blacks and glorifies the work of Klan-led lynch mobs ever made the cut. One could imagine Booker T. Washington, who had enjoined blacks across the country to engage in protests against the film back in 1915, spinning, even convulsing in his grave. After so much struggle this is the cultural document that stands for our time, for all time? Oh, Lord, put the truth to this lie.

Or perhaps Washington is perfectly content in the heavenly ether, rubbing elbows with his old friend Oscar Micheaux. Maybe he knows that Micheaux, the first black film auteur of the 20th century, has already set the celluloid record straight and is on the verge, finally, of getting his due.

Two of Micheaux's early silent films, the ones that historians now consider his most powerful and important, were considered lost for more than 60 years, until old prints were discovered in musty European film archives a decade ago. Prior to that, only 10 of his films were known

to have survived, the bulk of those from the sound era. When scholars viewed the restored versions of *Within Our Gates* (1919) and *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), they were bowled over, realizing they now had precious material on hand that compelled them to rewrite film history and, ultimately, to reinterpret the new light and shadow cast on a diffi-

her purse is snatched. By film's end, they fall in love. It's an uplifting, but not terribly compelling story were it not for the final scenes, in which Sylvia, in a nightmarish flashback, recalls her near-rape at the hands of a white plantation owner and the unjust, brutal lynching of her sharecropper parents by a fanatical white mob.



lynching scene from Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*

cult, violent era of American's social history.

The extant version of *Within Our Gates*, a 35mm print which was returned to the U.S. from a film archive in Madrid in the late 1980s, tells the story of Sylvia Landry, a poised young mulatta woman struggling against odds to raise money for the Negro school where she teaches in Vicksburg, Miss. At the turn of the century, Landry travels north to Boston, where she is hit by a car and then helped and befriended by a wealthy white society matron. The matron debates the merits of boosting black education, but eventually gives her \$50,000 for the school. Landry also meets a handsome black doctor, who comes to her aid when

*Within Our Gates*, which elicited fierce protests even before its nationwide release in 1919, is considered by many to be Micheaux's direct response to *The Birth of a Nation*, which also prompted emotional protests and near-riots across the country, from Boston to Atlanta, and spurred the young NAACP to mobilize against it in 1915. Both films were released during a violent decade when an average of 60 blacks were lynched each year. Because of the tense

racial climate, others see *Within Our Gates* more broadly as Micheaux's response to the outrages and challenges of the Jim Crow era, the first in a one-two cinematic punch that also included Micheaux's somewhat autobiographical *Symbol of the Unconquered*, which chronicles the efforts of a noble black man to stake out a living as a homesteader in the Midwest.

In *Symbol of the Unconquered*, the black hero holds his ground and chivalrously protects a lovely light-skinned mulatta neighbor (who is passing for white) as a local gang of thieves and hooded, torch-carrying Klansmen plot to frighten him, steal his land and finally, to kill him. Though how they do it remains

# The Legend of Micheaux

unknown, due to a key missing reel, the amorous “black” couple emerges from the ordeal unscathed, thrilled to discover their shared racial identity. Laced within these (and many other) Micheaux melodramas are themes of inter- and intra-racial tensions and hatred, many of which are expressed sexually.

Scholars, historians and cinephiles vigorously debate the intentions, merits, and deficits of these two daring “protest” films and others in the complicated Micheaux oeuvre, which, most critics agree, lost its artistic and political edge toward the end of his career. But no one can see Micheaux’s early silent films and walk away wondering if black Americans endured the injustices of those times in seething silence, under the cover of vaudeville subversions and Step ‘N Fetchit-style clowning, or if they rebelled more openly. His films, and the emerging record of the flap they caused in many of the cities they traveled to, from Chicago to Richmond to New Orleans, prove that there was a sustained, articulate protest and that Micheaux helped lead the charge.

Further, they show that several decades before Hollywood-backed films like *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* and *Jungle Fever* took on some of America’s touchiest racial issues, including fear of miscegenation and black self-hatred, a wily black independent director, the grandson of a slave, making films on shoestring budgets, was deliberately provoking those debates among his black and white

contemporaries, making everyone squirm.

Among those convinced that Micheaux went toe-to-toe, frame-to-frame with Griffith’s Civil War epic in *Within Our Gates*, consciously attacking and inverting certain powerful images and their meanings, is Jane Gaines, director of Duke University’s film studies program and co-editor of the *Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter*, based in Durham, N.C. In an essay about the two films in *Dixie Debates*, a 1996 book on Southern culture, Gaines dissects and compares the jarring rape and lynch sequences in each film.

*The Birth of a Nation* centers around the lives of two families; the Camerons of South Carolina, a wealthy, genteel Southern family, and the Stonemans of Pennsylvania, who become intertwined in a carefree, idyllic, antebellum South. They inter-

subtle, “Quaintly a way of life that is to be no more, we hear an audible sigh.” Its climax includes two scenes in which white women are molested by black men. In one scene, Lucy Stoneman, played by a doe-eyed Lillian Gish, is chased around a drawing room by Silas Lynch, a black man who says he wants to marry her. In another scene, a younger Cameron girl, called “Little Sister,” is chased to her death when she jumps off a cliff to avoid being violated by Gus, a lecherous, renegade mulatto.

Gaines notes that the ensuing rage of the white men, who don Ku Klux Klan robes and race on horseback to rescue Lucy from the clutches of Silas and who also hunt down and lynch Gus, is sanctioned by Griffith, a proud Kentuckian. Remaining faithful to Thomas Dixon, Jr.’s racist 1905 novel, *The Clansman*, on which *The Birth of a Nation* was based, while ratcheting up the novel’s emotional impact, the film delivers the same message: the white-ruled social order of the glorious Old South, torn asunder by war and still threatened in the post-Reconstruction period by boundless black appetites for white men’s livelihoods, land, and even their women, must be restored, swiftly and violently.

In *Within Our Gates*, Gaines argues, similarly staged scenes are compressed and interwoven for a dramatically different effect. Micheaux cuts

back and forth between the attempted rape of the young Sylvia Landry and the hanging and burning of her parents. The rape of Sylvia, who circles around the room, “her desper-



Micheaux’s answer to *Birth of a Nation*’s rape scene

marry, and their lives are ravaged by the Civil War and the woes of the Reconstruction era, in which blacks gain some prominence politically. The film begins with the nostalgic

tion echoing the trapped animal panic of Lillian Gish," is suddenly arrested when her attacker, an angry, scapegoat-seeking white farmer (whose plantation has gone to seed, and whose brother has been murdered), poised to rip her dress from her bosom, notices a scar above her breast and realizes that she is his daughter, born of slave days. Instantly revealing the white man as a two-time rapist, while averting the actual rape, Micheaux "has it both ways," says Gaines. He "castigates the white patriarch" even as he "proclaims the total innocence of Sylvia," whom Gaines views as standing in for all the black women, slaves, and offspring alike, raped by whites throughout American history.

"Whereas Griffith uses the family to justify Gus's lynching," Gaines observes, "Micheaux uses the family to argue the inhumanity of the practice, essentially showing the ideal family suffering the consequences of vigilante justice."

It is not clear if the mostly black audiences who packed into the 500 or so theaters on the predominantly Southern "Chitlin Circuit" that thrived before the Depression were able to view versions of Micheaux films close to the ones we have now, or if the versions they saw were dramatically altered. For instance, the introductory subtitles for *Within Our Gates*, as translated from *La Nègre*, the print found in Madrid, read: "This is the American South, where ignorance and lynch law reign supreme." Micheaux probably couldn't have gotten away with that in the U.S. In fact, the potency of his cinematic images and messages caused so much anxiety in America that many of his films were virtually shredded by

censors before their release.

In 1920, in Chicago, where race riots had plagued the city a year earlier, black and white ministers alike exhorted the mayor and the police chief to ban *Within Our Gates*. Later that year, Chicago's film censor board, which included Reverend A.J. Bowling, a black Harvard-educated minister, demanded several potentially inflammatory scenes be cut from *Symbol of the Unconquered*, including "all scenes of colored man holding white girl's hand after subtitle 'strongly desirous' and dialogue such as, 'She is nothing but a Negress,' 'Old Darkeys,' and, 'He is one of those arrogant educated Negroes.'" Bowling's documented reaction to the film seems to indicate that the black bourgeoisie was just as skittish about the films as were many whites, says Charlene Regester, a professor of African & Afro-American Studies at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (and co-editor of the *Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter*).

Among those inspired by Micheaux's legendary audacity and prolific output is actor-director

*Dorothy Dandridge Story*, starring and produced by Halle Berry).

Other prominent black actors and directors who are reportedly interested in Micheaux film projects include Robert Townsend, a long-time admirer who attended the rededication of Micheaux's previously unmarked tombstone in Great Bend, Kansas in 1988 and Spike Lee, perhaps the most visible heir to Micheaux's legacy.

For now, those who would like to see some of the rare Micheaux films (out of the 15 known to exist) and to learn more about him will get the chance when an ambitious educational project led by several prominent film scholars gets rolling in the next year or so. A project that grew out of a conference on race films at Yale University in 1995, the book and film tour, called *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle*, will include a 200-plus-page book full of essays about Micheaux and seven early black films (including three silent films by Micheaux, *The Scar of Shame* (1927) by the Colored Players Film Corp., and a documentary by anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston). Yale film studies professor Charles Musser, who co-edited the book, says the tour, which will travel to various schools, museums and cultural centers around the country, will launch when funding is secured for the reproduction of several more

Micheaux, the first black film  
auteur of the 20th century,  
has set the celluloid record  
straight and is on the verge,  
finally, of getting his due.

James McDaniel (Lt. Fancy on *NYPD Blue*), who is developing a fictional account of Micheaux's life for HBO Films, along with Pearl Bowser (who produced the acclaimed 1994 documentary on race film, *Midnight Ramble*). McDaniel shopped the story treatment around Hollywood for two years, until it found a home at HBO (which also recently produced *The*

35 mm film prints, which will be distributed by the Museum of Modern Art.

Seeing the fiery midnight ride of the Klan among such a storied and "authentic" Harlem audience, Musser says, "I felt like I'd seen it for the first time. It was so powerful. I hope more Americans get to bear witness to what Micheaux did."

# Body and Soul screened at New York Film Festival

By Kate Torgovnick

The New York Film Festival usually showcases new, independent films, highlighting *Dancer in the Dark*, *Pollock*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (September 22-October 9, 2000). While remaining a venue for the new, the 38th Annual New York Film Festival delved into the past with a screening of Oscar Micheaux's silent film *Body and Soul* (1925).

*Body and Soul* is the story of a small-town girl, Isabelle, who is terrorized by Isaiah, a criminal posing as a pastor. Paul Robeson plays Isaiah, his first starring role in a feature-film. Because of Isaiah's position in the community, Isabelle's mother forces her towards Isaiah, leading to a tragic chain of events. Though *Body and Soul* deals with dark and depressing themes of rape and corruption in the church, the film ends on a celebratory note.

The screening of *Body and Soul* was a collaboration between the New York Film Festival and Jazz at Lincoln

Center. A new score by trombonist Wycliffe Gordon accompanied Micheaux's classic film. Gordon's score complemented *Body and Soul*, managing to capture both the severity and joy of the film. Led by trumpeter Wynton Marsallis, the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra played vibrantly, incorporating swing, gospel, and chanting into a beautiful and original score. With the orchestra perched on a stage below the film screen, it was difficult at times to decide whether to focus on the film or on the band. The orchestra continued to jam after the film ended, improvising on themes present in Gordon's score.

Many celebrities attended the screening of *Body and Soul*. Legendary singer and actor Harry Belafonte made a special appearance at the event, giving the audience a brief biographical introduction to Oscar Micheaux. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, also attended the screening, sitting in the balcony next to singer Tony Bennett. Actor Danny Glover was also spotted in the lobby.



Paul Robeson stars in Micheaux's *Body and Soul*



## Is it Oscar Micheaux?

In the liner notes to the Library of Congress Video Collection: African American Cinema for *Within Our Gates*, it states that Micheaux himself plays a cameo role as Larry the Leech's partner in a fake jewelry scheme (Larry played by Jack Chenault). But some Micheaux scholars are unsure. Above are some frames of Micheaux's alleged cameo taken from the video. What do you think? Does anyone have any documentation on this role? Let us know...

# Renew your Subscription to the Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter. . .



Send your check with this form to the *Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter*, Duke University Film & Video Program, 104 Crowell Hall, Box 90671, Durham, NC 27708. Cost is \$10 per year domestic, \$15 international.

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# Micheaux Film Festivals and Screenings

**Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era**, a seven-part touring program, will have its world premiere at the Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone-Sacile, Italy in **mid-October, 2001**. We'll try to send our readers more information about the eight-day festival of silent cinema when we receive full information. All are keen on having an excellent African American audience in Italy for this exciting event. The accompanying catalogue, edited by Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser, is to be published by Indiana University Press and Giornate de Cinema Muto.

**Black Film Festival, February 2001.** Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, Iowa. For additional information contact Teree Caldwell-Johnson, Phone (515) 287-3123, Tcaldwe@co.polk.ia.us.

**Oscar Micheaux Festival, March 24- 25, 2001**, Great Bend, KS. To mark the 50th anniversary of the death of Oscar Micheaux, who is buried in Great Bend, Kansas, the finest Micheaux scholars are invited to Great Bend for a Micheaux Festival to share their knowledge and to help celebrate and honor the life of this pioneer. For questions or comments about Micheaux or the Festival, contact Marty Keenan the organizer of the Festival at [marty.keenan@greatbend.com](mailto:marty.keenan@greatbend.com) or visit the web-page at [www.micheaux.org](http://www.micheaux.org).

**Oscar Micheaux Film Festival—6th Annual, August 2001**, Gregory South Dakota. Sponsored by the South Dakota Humanities Council. Contact Richard Papousek, Oscar Micheaux Film Festival, P.O. Box 149, Gregory, South Dakota, Phone (605) 835-8391.

**Black Film of the 20th Century: Framing History—Linking Culture. January 30-February 27, 2000.** "The Era of Oscar Micheaux," February 6th, 2000. Des Moines Art Center. Screening of *Within Our Gates* and Lecture by Jane Gaines "The Birth of a Nation and *Within Our Gates*: Two Tales of the American South."

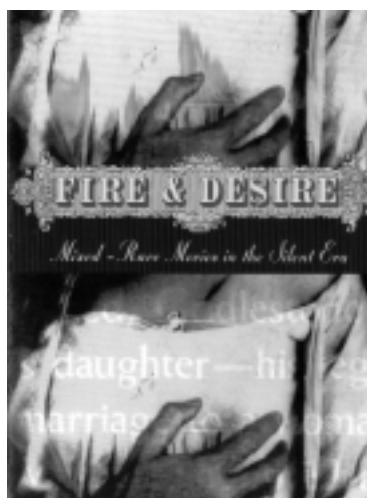
*Within Our Gates* was screened **September 9, 2000** at the "Out of the Storm; Black American Independent Film Festival" in Amsterdam.



*Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*

By Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence

## Look for these new books on Oscar Micheaux



*Fire & Desire:  
Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era*  
By Jane M. Gaines



*Straight Lick: The Cinema  
of Oscar Micheaux*  
By J. Ronald Green



# Conferences

## 2002 Conferences

**Domitor Conference. Montreal, Canada, June 2002.** The Conference will provide the opportunity to reflect on technology and its impact on the devices that determine the production, exhibition, and reception of moving images. Paper topics include: The relations between the technology of cinema and the art of narration, the impact of the new technology on other media, and specific material and technical properties that characterize cinema. The call for papers deadline was September 8, 2000. For more information contact Karine Martinez, coordinator, Fax (514) 343-2393, [karinem@cam.org](mailto:karinem@cam.org).

## 2001 Conferences

**26th Annual Conference on Literature and Film. Florida State University, February 1-3, 2001.** "The Emotions in Literature and Film." Possible topics include: The theory and/or practice of such emotions as love, joy, delight, trust, admiration, hate, despair, jealousy, fear and abjection in philosophical, psychological, social, and/or political contexts. Deadline for submission was October 2, 2000. Contact: Sherly Kormondy, Center for Professional Development, Florida State University, 555 West Pensacola Street, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1640, Phone (850) 644-2118, Fax (850) 644-2589, [skormondy@cpd.fsu.edu](mailto:skormondy@cpd.fsu.edu).

**Orphans of the Storm II: Documenting the 20th Century. University of South Carolina, March 29-31, 2001.** Building upon the enthusiastic response to its inaugural film symposium ("Orphans of the Storm," September 23-25, 1999), the University of South Carolina is hosting a second symposium on the preservation, study, and use of "orphan films." How does the preservation of orphan films enhance our understanding of the 20th century? What does the world's moving-image archive tell us about these years? How might the varieties of orphan films document this movie-made century? What histories—official or unofficial, secret or forgotten, traditional or revisionist—are to be made from the likes of home movies, outtakes, newsreels, silent cinema, experimental works, stock footage, educational films, government productions, amateur footage, kinescopes, industrials, travelogues, and all manner of independent documentaries? Deadline is March 1, 2001. Abstracts of proposed presentations are invited. For further information, contact: Prof. Dan Streible, Film Studies Program, Department of Art, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208, Phone (803) 777-9158, Fax (803) 777-0535, [streible@sc.edu](mailto:streible@sc.edu). Check out the website at <http://www.sc.edu/filmsymposium>.

**Real to Reel: Black Life in Cinema. The Department of African and Afro-American Studies at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, April 5-7, 2001.** Topics include: Historical figures transformed on the screen, the rural ideal and the location of culture, diaspora and homelands: reconstructing Africa in international cinema, ménage-a trois: black sexuality, the camera, and the spectators's gaze, notions of race in sci-fi and fantasy films, and blaxploitation films and hip-hop culture. Deadline for proposals was November 10, 2000. For more information contact Robin Vander, [realtoreel@unc.edu](mailto:realtoreel@unc.edu) or Dept. of African and Afro-American Studies, CB# 3395, 109 Battle Hall, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599-3395, Attn: Real to Reel.

**The Society for Cinema Studies 2001 Conference. Washington, D.C., May 24-27, 2001. "Media/ History/ Policy Plenary."** The focus of the conference is the role of film and video as an agent of cultural memory, as a catalyst for reevaluating the past, and as a resource for engaging public debate with a view toward affecting institutional and government policy. Deadline for proposals was October 2, 2000. Contact Jane Dye, Society for Cinema Studies, 302 Old Science Hall, 640 Parrington Oval, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019-3060.



## Conferences

**Screen Studies Conference. University of Glasgow, Scotland, June-July 2001.** The 11th Screen Studies Conference will offer a mix of keynote addresses, panels and workshop sessions on a variety of topics related to cinema studies. For more information contact: Caroline Beven, *Screen*, Gilmorehille Centre, University of Glasgow, G12 8QQ Scotland, telephone 0141-330-5035, Fax 0141-330-3515, [screen@arts.gla.ac.uk](mailto:screen@arts.gla.ac.uk).

**Console-ing Passions. July 5-8, 2001.** This will be the first European appearance of this US-based annual television studies conference. Hosted by the University of Bristol Drama Department, it will take place in the centrally located and beautifully maintained Georgian mansion Clifton Hill House, built around 1747 for a Bristol merchant and ship-owner. "Console-ing Passions" welcomes proposals for papers, panels, and workshops on television, video and feminism. The changing nature of television since the advent of digital media technologies and the emerging global economy have profound ramifications for contemporary studies of the televisual text. The deadline for submission of abstracts was January 31, 2001. For more information go to <http://www.bris.ac.uk/cpuk/console-ing.html>.

**University of Film and Video Association Conference. Rochester, New York, August 1-4, 2001.** Sponsored by the Eastman Kodak Company. For more information contact Melinda Levin, UFVA Conference Vice President, University of North Texas, Phone (940) 565-3194, [Melinda@unt.edu](mailto:Melinda@unt.edu). Check the following website for additional information at <http://www.ufva.org/digest/>.

### 2000 Conferences

**University Film and Video Association 54th Annual Conference, August 16-19, 2000.** Colorado College, Colorado Springs. Panels, screenings, and talks were conducted throughout the weekend on a variety of topics including: films by Oliver Stone, the Sundance film festival, computer tools for classroom learning.

**Imitating Life: Women, Race and Film 1932-2000: An Interdisciplinary conference at Princeton University Program in African American Studies, September 22-23, 2000.** The conference included a keynote address from, guest star, Halle Berry, and featured three panels, each involving commenters and recognized scholar-experts who delivered 25-minute presentations. Panel discussions and question-and-answer sessions with scholars as well as the general public followed. Guests included: Ann Douglas, Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Jill Nelson, Richard Dyer, Valerie Smith, Thomas W. Cripps, Thadious M. Davis, and Cheryl Wall. Additional information is available from the conference website at <http://www.princeton.edu/~aasprog/ilooverview.html>.

**The Melodrama and Melancholy of Race: Berkeley Conference on Race and Mass Culture, October 6-7, 2000,** University of California, Berkeley. Speakers included: Elizabeth Abel, Stephen Michael Best, Anne Cheung, Jane Gaines, Susan Gillman, Michael Rogin, and Linda Williams.

### Congratulation to Charles Musser

"To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights: Resistance and Reappropriation in *Body and Soul*" by Charles Musser is the winner of the Katherine Kovacs Prize for Outstanding Scholarship (essay) published in 1999-2000. It was originally published in *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 12"2 (1999), 321-356, and will also be included in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle* (forthcoming, 2001) edited by Pearl Bowser, Jane M. Gaines, and Charles Musser.

# Minutes of the Oscar Micheaux Society Annual Meeting

The meeting was held at the Congress Plaza Hotel in Chicago, site of the Society for Cinema Studies conference, on March 11, 2000. Jane Gaines, Charlene Regester, Ron Green, Corey Creekmur, Gloria Gibson, Charles Musser, Gregory Waller, Diane Brooks, Matthew Bernstein, Kevin Sandler, and Jan Loveland were present.

**Report on Oscar Micheaux and His Circle Touring Package:** There were several reports on ongoing projects that the Society has been planning. At the time of this meeting, it looks likely that the 20th Pordenone Silent Film Festival (Giornate del cinema Muto) will feature a touring package of Micheaux films, to be accompanied by an anthology covering his entire cinematic oeuvre. The entire tour package will be co-curated by Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser. Jane Gaines thanked both Charles Musser and Charlene Regester for their efforts toward mounting the tour. This exciting combination of Micheaux films will be packaged to tour American institutions, perhaps involving special events with individual speakers.

**Forthcoming Micheaux Book Publications:** Other Society members will be publishing books this year as well: Ron Green's two volume study of several filmmakers, including Micheaux, *Visions of Uplift*, and Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence's *Writing Himself Into History* (Rutgers University Press) will both be solid additions to available Micheaux scholarship. Also, Princeton English professor Claudia Tate is reportedly publishing a work which discusses Micheaux's depiction of color consciousness in his films.

**Videotape/Film Availability Update:** In a related effort, society member Corey Creekmur has been encouraging publishers to consider re-issuing Micheaux's novels. With a view to future Society Newsletters, Creekmur will also update his ongoing, very exhaustive list of available materials in all media. One new addition is a Paramount newsreel with a short segment that was aimed at black moviegoers, showing Micheaux at work, which is now held in the collection of the British Film Institute in London.

**Micheaux Celebrations and Festivals:** Announcements were made regarding the upcoming Micheaux film festivals and celebrations to be held at Great Bend, Kansas in March 2001 and Gregory, South Dakota in August 2001.

**Other Early Black Filmmakers in Need of Attention, i.e. William Foster:** At the same time, members discussed other neglected filmmakers of the same period, with a special concern raised about William Foster, whose career has not yet been adequately documented.

**Micheaux Communications/Mailing List—Electronic Publications, Library Deposits, and Back Issues:** Gaines reported on the importance of distributing the newsletter and touring package materials to libraries and archives interested in preserving black cinema materials.

**Marketing the Touring Package/ Black Community Support of Early Black Cinema/ Programs/ Education:** Those in attendance agreed that financial support from the Black community for doing research and restoration work should be encouraged and that the Society should continue outreach efforts in that direction.

**Newsletter—Future Issues:** Some discussion was focused on topics for future newsletters and potential contributors as the Micheaux Newsletter is always eager to report on any research or ventures involved in the restoration and preservation of early black cinema.

—Compiled by Jan Loveland

## Bibliography Update

**“To Redream the Dreams of White Playrights: Reappropriation and Resistance in Oscar Micheaux’s *Body and Soul*,”** Charles Musser, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 12:2 (1999), pp 321-356. An analysis of the structure and technique of Micheaux’s *Body and Soul* as it compares to Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*. Musser contends that *Body and Soul* is a reworking of three plays (*Roseanne*, *The Emperor Jones*, and *All God’s Chillun’ Got Wings*) that explored black life and culture.

**“Oscar Micheaux’s *Body and Soul* and the Burden of Representation.”** Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Cinema Journal* 39:3 (Spring, 2000), pp 3-29. Explores Micheaux’s silent drama *Body and Soul* and some of the critical discourses of the period. It also addresses the politics of racial identity and the quest for racial unity in a period when the class structure within the African American community was becoming more stratified.

**“Jazz Club was the Heart of the Black Community’s Nightlife—Historians: Ebony Club Endangered”** Michael Crittenden, *The Roanoke Times*, Friday, May 19, 2000. Discusses the Ebony Club, a former Roanoke nightspot, which was once the location of the Oscar Micheaux Film Corp., being named to the Preservation Alliance of Virginia’s list of “Most Endangered Historic Places.”

***Writing Himself Into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, And His Audiences.*** by Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence. (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2000). Concentrates on the first decade of Micheaux’s career, placing his work firmly within his social and cultural milieu. Provides a close textual analysis of his surviving films (including *Symbol of the Unconquered*, *Within Our Gates*, and *Body and Soul*), and highlights the rivalry between studios, dilemmas of assimilation versus separatism, gender issues, and class.

***Fire & Desire: Mixed -Race Movies in the Silent Era.*** Jane Gaines (University of Chicago Press, 2000). Critically examines the intersection of race and desire in early cinematic representations and literary texts such as the works of Oscar Micheaux and James Baldwin’s writings. Includes Gaines’s well known essay on *Within Our Gates* as a political response to *Birth of a Nation* and addresses the politics of class and color in *Symbol of the Unconquered*.

***Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux.*** J. Ronald Green. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). Green examines Oscar Micheaux’s impressive legacy in commercial cinema. Between 1913 and 1951 he wrote, directed, and distributed 43 feature films, more than any other Black filmmaker in the world, a record of production that is likely to stand for a very long time. His efforts produced a nuanced body of films, boldly and repeatedly treating controversial topics that faced white censorship time after time: white mob and Klan violence, light-skin-color fetish, white financing of Black cultural productions.

***Oscar Micheaux and His Circle.*** Edited by Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser (Indiana University Press, forthcoming 2001). A collection of essays on Oscar Micheaux and other African American filmmakers of the silent era, compiled by scholars who attended the Micheaux and His Circle conference at Yale University in 1995. Essays include work by: Clyde Taylor, Jane Gaines, Phyllis Klotman, Gloria Gibson, Corey Creekmur, Louise Spence, Pearl Bowser, Charles Musser, J. Ron Green, Charlene Regester, Sister Francesca Thompson, Jayna Brown, and Michelle Wallace.

***Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson.*** Linda Williams (Princeton University Press, April, 2001). Images of black men suffering at the hands of whites and of white women sexually threatened by black men have long been burned into the American conscience through popular entertainment, and continue to influence Americans’ understanding of race. Williams explores how these images took root, beginning with melodramatic theater, where suffering characters acquire virtue through victimization.

***Who’s That Lady?*** Claudia Tate (forthcoming). Addresses idealized depictions of black femininity in selected modern film and literary text, and includes a chapter on Micheaux and his passing women in *The Veiled Aristocrats* and *All God’s Stepchildren*.



*The Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter* is dedicated to providing a medium through which we can promote discourse, debate, and discovery about filmmaker and novelist Oscar Micheaux and others who were active in early African American cinema. Unfortunately, much of their work remains inaccessible. It is through this medium that we hope to provide an avenue for inquiry into Micheaux and others who contributed to early African American cinema. *The Oscar Micheaux Newsletter* is a publication of the Film & Video Program at Duke University. We welcome your contributions, questions, and comments. Information and articles for editorial review should be sent to:

**The Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter**  
**Duke University Film & Video Program**  
**104 Crowell Hall Box 90671**  
**Durham, NC 27708-0671**

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**Editorial Assistants:** Nicole Walker and Lisa Poteet

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**Visit us on the web at <http://www.duke.edu/web/film/Micheaux>**

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**Oscar Micheaux Society meeting at Society for Cinema Studies:**  
**Washington, DC    Saturday, May 26, 2001    7:30-8:30 am**

