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CALL AND RESPONSE:

The Narrative Politics of Precedent and Structure in Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*

By Liam Magee

As the oldest surviving film by an African American director, Oscar Micheaux's Within Our Gates (1920) has been the object of considerable curiosity as both a historical artifact and a formative work of Black art. Of particular interest is the densely intertextual nature of the film's narrative, which takes substantial cues from many tropes common to race fiction of the early twentieth century. This is perhaps most clearly evidenced by the film's opening hour, which plays out as a nearly exact specimen of the racial uplift stories that dominated the era's Black literary scene, and by its final five minutes, which clearly replicate the marriage plots that defined contemporary women's literature. Crucially, these allusions—and, more importantly, the optimistic racial and socioeconomic philosophies they entail—are complicated by the presence of a late flashback sequence whose traumatic contents, rife with brutal racial and sexual violence, seem diametrically at odds with the idealism that defines the rest of the film. This paper investigates this seemingly problematic tonal disjunction by seeking to examine the flashback in its proper narratological context, exploring its aesthetic roots in mediums as diverse as newsprint, novels, and lynch photography, in order to better understand the ways in which the flashback's inclusion modifies—or even challenges—the film's dramatic thesis. The argument is finally made that the flashback's disruptive nature is in fact its greatest strength, generating a complex interrogation of the platitudinous narrative archetypes that define both the remainder of the film and the race literature of Micheaux's time.

I. A Brief Introduction to *La Negra*

"We want to see our lives dramatized on the screen as we are living it, the same as other people, the world over." So said Oscar Micheaux, perhaps the early Black film director most eager to wage an artistic war over just what African American life "as we are living it" really meant. In a series of films whose frank depictions of racialized violence shocked audiences and incurred the wrath of censors nationwide,[1] Micheaux charged headfirst into a cinematic battle for the country's understanding of the African American condition. 1920's *Within Our Gates*, controversial at the time of its release, has since risen in historical stature, and is today appreciated both for its translation of pre-existing cinematic innovations into the realm of Black film as well as for its status as the first direct challenge by a Black filmmaker to the monstrous pathos of D.W. Griffith's infamous magnum opus *The Birth of a Nation*, released five years prior. But while *Within Our Gates* has been evaluated as a historically significant cultural artifact, its proper place in African American literary and artistic thought remains underdeveloped. An examination of Micheaux's film—and particularly of its remarkable conclusion—in the context of established literary, cinematic, and cultural conventions reveals an intricate tapestry of archetypal precedents which Micheaux recapitulated and critiqued in equal measure, but which do not single-handedly account for many of the film's most striking narrative tensions.

First, a qualification: early film production, hampered by the need to placate various levels of censors as well as by the fact that entire reels of film could be heavily modified as they traveled across state lines to different venues, was an inherently unstable artistic medium. This is doubly true for *Within Our Gates*, the only extant edition of which comes from a Spanish-language print titled *La Negra* that returned to the United States from Europe in 1990, and whose intertitles were subsequently translated back into English. Combined with the inherent instability of race film production in an America with separate censor boards for every city in which Micheaux aimed to exhibit his film, what we are left with is a text that may or may not hew closely to the director's "original" version—if such a version ever existed to begin with. *La Negra* is as much a historical artifact as it is a singular work of art, and any potential editorial idiosyncrasies relative to other, hypothetical versions of the film ought to be understood as a function of those historical circumstances rather than as a perversion of the artwork itself. The extant version of *Within Our Gates* may rightly be considered as valid an edition of the film as any other, and it does little good to spend an analysis of it lamenting possible alternative iterations that might smooth over moments of apparent structural discrepancy. Indeed, as this analysis will demonstrate, it is often those very discrepancies that yield the most fruitful avenues of inquiry. Nonetheless, the film's structural instability does leave it open to the possibility of equally legitimate alternate versions, theoretical discussion of which can prove enlightening as part of an effort to understand *Within Our Gates* in its only extant form.

II. Uplift and Archetype

Within Our Gates chronicles the journey of Sylvia Landry, an educated, middle class southern mulatta who goes north in search of the funding necessary to save a school for Black children. Along the way, Sylvia's story grows in scope to encompass many archetypal characters and narrative devices, from the kindly white benefactress Sylvia encounters to the strong, professional Black man she eventually falls in love with and marries at the film's conclusion.[2] On a temporal level, the film's narrative contains two distinct stories: a "present-day" chronicle of Sylvia's journey to the North and back, and an extended flashback sequence detailing Sylvia's past for which the present-day plot line serves as a lengthy frame story. Considering Micheaux's controversial stature among his contemporaries, the former of these is perhaps most remarkable for seeming totally *un*remarkable in the context of established precedents. Indeed, when viewed apart from the second

1 Charlene Register, "Black Films, White Censors: Oscar Micheaux Confronts Censorship in New York, Virginia, and Chicago," in Movie Censorship and American Culture, edited by Francis G. Couvares (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), pp. 159–86.

2 See the character of Emily Shelby in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin for a classic example of a "benevolent" white benefactress. For a professional Black man whom the story's female protagonist eventually marries, see Dr. William Miller in Charles Chesnutt's The Marrow of Tradition.

storyline, Sylvia's present-day journey takes the form of a classical racial uplift narrative—classical in the sense that it employs a variety of established plot devices to paint Sylvia and her mission as that of any good Christian Black woman dedicated to the elevation of her race.

There is, for one, a heavy emphasis on formal education as an avenue to professional success, furthered by the need for educated Blacks to improve the station of their fellows. The emphasis becomes noticeably pronounced in the presence of Black professionals like Dr. Vivian and the Reverend Jacobs, and cements itself as one of the film's dominant themes through Sylvia's ongoing quest to secure funding for a Black schoolhouse. Such a figuration of formal education as key to moving beyond the ignorance engendered by the generational traumas of slavery and Jim Crow can be found in a wide variety of precedents, from the debates between Booker T. Washington and his contemporaries about the proper form and role of education in modern Black life to the pages of melodramas that had been dominating the race literature scene for nearly a century by the time Micheaux rose to prominence. [3]

It goes without saying (though, for the sake of clarity, I will here say it) that no racial uplift narrative can be uplifting without a baseline of racially defined hardship from which the characters must—well, be uplifted. In the frame narrative of *Within Our Gates*, such obstacles rise up against Sylvia regularly. In just one of many notable instances, a wealthy northern woman bearing a striking (and intentional) [4] resemblance to an aged Lillian Gish—who famously played Elsie Stoneman, the southern belle who needs to be rescued from a Black mob by the Ku Klux Klan in *The Birth of a Nation*—argues against charity towards Sylvia's school. Instead, she suggests donating to a Black minister who uses his rhetorical gifts and biblical knowledge to preach the continuation, rather than elimination, of Black subservience—a cruel twist on the religious motifs of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, perhaps suggested by the many unfaithful proslavery stage adaptations her novel inspired.[5] Taken together, a pattern begins to emerge out of Micheaux's instantiations of racialized obstacles along Sylvia's path: in many instances, Micheaux can clearly be seen drawing upon thoroughly well-established archetypes from the race fictions of page, stage, and screen. Indeed, at every turn of Sylvia's "present-day" narrative arc, Micheaux's adherence to the conventions of uplift storytelling is unfailing almost to the point of parody. In sum, his heroine faces a financial problem threatening the educational (and therefore economic) prospects of Black youths, draws upon her own considerable industry to journey north and find the necessary funds, and finally settles into a life of security via marriage to a successful Black professional.

III. Disruption

But what is more intriguing than Micheaux's ability to follow the established uplift template is the remarkable way in which *Within Our Gates* goes about undermining it. Sylvia's journey to the North and back works as an archetypal uplift narrative, but only when considered in isolation. Micheaux, rather than ending his film with Sylvia's acquisition of the needed funds, instead breaks the momentum of its uplift narrative with an extended flashback sequence in the third act. The flashback, far from recapitulating the progressive themes espoused by the film's preceding hour, consists of a deeply troubling sequence of events in which a younger Sylvia is torn from the successful, "uplifted" life she had known by the most traumatic means imaginable. These include the framing of her father for a murder he did not commit, the lynching of both of her parents, and, perhaps most disturbingly, the attempted rape of Sylvia herself by a white man revealed to be no less than Sylvia's biological father. The apparent roteness of the present-day uplift narrative is thus circumvented by a sequence that horrifically shatters the uplift mold in the film's eleventh hour. In light of the flashback sequence, Sylvia's present-day journey becomes vital not as a rotely archetypal celebration of uplift themes, but as a deeply troubling interrogation of them aided by a flashback which impairs the narratological principles associated with uplift literature. It is through a more exacting exploration of the flashback itself—and its intricate relationship with the narrative events that bookend it on either side—that the extraordinary sophistication of Micheaux's

3 Kevin Kelly Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, And Culture In the Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 139.

4 Ronald J. Green, Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 9.

5 Adena Spingarn, "Uncle Tom on the American Stage," in Uncle Tom: From Martyr to Traitor (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 51.

discourse becomes apparent.[6] Sylvia's story at last comes into focus not merely as a violent interruption of the classical uplift narrative or as a wrinkle in the efficacy of the traditional marriage plot, but as a compelling investigation of those archetypal modes of storytelling and as an exposé of their failure to contend with the realities of lived African American experience in the early twentieth century.

Far from simply recycling well-worn archetypes, an analysis of the flashback uncovers Micheaux's simultaneous effort to undermine the classical intentions of said devices by subtly (and, sometimes, not so subtly) altering the terms of their presentation. To this effect, Micheaux employs novel editorial choices with which to both embrace the rhetorical power of inherited archetypes and critique the superficiality of the solutions they offered to the ever-pressing issue of American racism. The first sign that Micheaux does not intend merely to translate the devices of race literature into film is apparent not within the flashback itself, but in the flawed architecture of the frame narrative that precedes it. The notion of a frame is perhaps as old as storytelling itself, but Micheaux's method of transitioning from the frame and into "Sylvia's Story" (as it is dubbed by a transitional intertitle)[7] lacks any intuitive narrative logic. For while this is very much "Sylvia's Story," it is curiously being told not by Sylvia herself, but by Alma Prichard, Sylvia's initially envious cousin, to no less than Dr. V. Vivian, a suitor for Sylvia who must know more about her troubled past if he is to ask for her hand in marriage. As the flashback proceeds, and as Sylvia's deeply personal responses to the traumatizing events therein become visibly mapped onto the very narratological fabric of the embedded story, the fact that it is supposedly Alma narrating it beggars belief. Nothing in the frame narrative up until this point has suggested that Alma might possess the capacity for such invention, if invention it is, and there is no logical way for Alma to possess such a nuanced understanding of a history that does not belong to her, if an accurate history it is taken to be. The flashback's centrality, explicit labeling as "Sylvia's Story," and sheer narrative import all attest to its veracity within the world of the film. And yet because of that veracity—and because of the lingering hold the events of the flashback thus maintain on Sylvia's psyche—it seems to resist the simple logic of the surrounding frame, which initially assumes that personal industry can overcome systemic oppression and eventually suggests that Sylvia's buried trauma can be fully explained in the space of an afternoon's conversation and then dispelled forever by a marriage proposal. For this reason, it is deceptively easy to regard the framing of the flashback as a mistake—or, perhaps, as a casualty of the extant version's potentially butchered editing. As with just about every problem posed by the structure of *Within Our Gates*, it is always the case that some hypothetical lost version of the film might rectify this apparent misstep. One such "solution" might lie in translocating the flashback to the very beginning of the film, thus allowing the present-day uplift narrative to serve a more explicitly recuperative role in Sylvia's story. In such a film, the uplift narrative would function not as a dream of Black industry messily disrupted by the gritty reality of the flashback, but as a redemptive arc for a Black woman reclaiming the agency that was torn from her many years ago.

Such hypotheticals are undeniably intriguing, but they appeal to a longing for an impossible clarity rather than a willingness to accept *La Negra* on its own terms. A more fruitful approach to the flashback's questionable framing is to consider the curious way in which its prominence as a logical nonstarter—it is inconceivable, again, that Alma Prichard would be the one to tell this story—prompts the sequence to draw attention to itself. The flashback seems flawed not because we doubt the veracity of its contents, but because we doubt the veracity of its insertion into the surrounding narrative. We doubt that "Sylvia's Story" can possibly come from the mouth of Alma, we doubt that the present-day Sylvia would appear half so economically idealistic with the weight of such horrific and unresolved trauma on her shoulders, and above all, we doubt that the flashback belongs at the tail end of a narrative that has thus far espoused a very different attitude towards oppression—one of overcoming it through personal industry rather than succumbing to it due to a lack of any individual agency whatsoever. That the manner of the flashback's insertion defies plausibility does not mean that the embedded narrative therein is similarly unbelievable—far from it, in fact. Rather, as the flashback

6 Tom Gunning, "Theory and History: Narrative Discourse and the Narrator System," in D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 15. Gunning defines narrative discourse as "the actual arrangement of signifiers that communicate the story—words in literature, moving images and written titles in silent films." Gunning expands this definition to include temporal and narratological aspects of cinematic storytelling, and it is primarily these aspects of Micheaux's discourse in which this paper is interested.

7 Within Our Gates, directed by Oscar Micheaux (1920; Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1992), web video, intertitle.

progresses and Sylvia's trauma is excavated, the sequence comes into view as an expression of truth buried within a fallacious frame, and not the other way around. In other words, the idea that the Black daughter of a sharecropper would have experienced such horrors is perfectly conceivable, but the fact that this information is prefaced by an hour-long, remarkably typical uplift story is much more difficult to parse. The flashback's contradictory mode of presentation—the way in which it seems impossibly embedded in the surrounding narrative of racial uplift—comes to emphasize the flashback's seeming veracity by begging the question of just why such a frame is incompatible with the buried truth of Sylvia's trauma in the first place.

Thus Micheaux conspicuously fractures the machinery of classical frame narratives, crafting a film that grapples intensely with their narratological form and function to replace their seductive dream of racial uplift with the harsh reality of racial trauma that defines the flashback. The visibility of this fracturing is amplified by the fact that Micheaux spends so much of the film constructing an archetypal veneer. This includes parts of the flashback itself, which contains an impressive array of scenarios that—though adding a texture all their own to the fabric of *Within Our Gates*—are indicative of a director who wore his influences on his sleeve when he wasn't busy subverting them. These moments of direct archetypal repurposing can be observed in a variety of instances throughout the flashback which serve to place *Within Our Gates* in an extended literary history even as Micheaux sought to supersede the limits imposed by that history. One such instance occurs shortly after the murder of Philip Gridlestone by an embittered white sharecropper. As though prescient of the fact that her husband will soon be framed for the crime, Mrs. Landry, with Sylvia beside her at home, exclaims that "'I know you're gwine ta laugh a' me, but I'se the feelin' somethin' ter'ble has happened.'"[8] The moment recalls a scene earlier in the film when the adult Sylvia, seemingly armed with the power of propheticism, wakes troubled from a dream in which she "'...saw [Larry] kill a man!'"[9] just as Larry (Alma's criminal brother) was, in fact, in the process of shooting a fellow gambler. The parallel between the evidently prophetic capacities of Sylvia and her mother serves as a binding narrative thread between the two plotlines, much like how the cutaway editing of the Old Ned sequence structurally anticipates the isolated nature of the flashback. Importantly, though put to a novel structural use while being translated into an emerging medium, the instantiation of propheticism itself is far from an original narrative device. The archetypal device of dreams and everyday moments of foreboding serving as prescient visions was nothing new by Micheaux's day, and had in fact already been incorporated into the African American literary canon: Pauline Hopkins' serial novel *Of One Blood* (published from 1902–1903), for instance, had explored the matter in some depth eighteen years prior. Micheaux is content to recall a narrative device owed to his literary forebears, wielding it with uncommon grace to unite two narratologically isolated plot threads while still toeing the boundaries of established convention. Importantly, Micheaux's technique of recapitulation—of pulling threads from his literary forebears and weaving them into the burgeoning language of cinema—is not limited to the presence of prophetic dreams, but carries over into other significant aspects of "Sylvia's Story," including its prolonged meditation on the relationship between racial violence and the press.

IV. A Tale of Two Lynchings

Some time later in the flashback, having taken his family and fled into the woods from the terrifying ramifications of a crime for which he is blameless, Jasper Landry is condemned by the local newspaper as "THE MURDERER LANDRY."[10] What follows is a remarkable feat of silent film craftsmanship. In a *Rashomon*-esque sequence—that is to say, a sequence that reveals past narrative events from a perspective other than the one from which they were originally shown—Micheaux uses his lens to visually depict the murder of Philip Gridlestone as told by the duplicitous Efrem. Having already witnessed the truth of Gridlestone's murder and of the framing of Jasper Landry, the audience is made to watch the newspaper's version of events: Landry, now a cackling fiend with a handgun, gleefully shoots a defenseless Gridlestone. The scene is intercut with clippings from the newspaper article describing this false version of the attack, each of which details only the fragment

8 Within Our Gates, intertitle.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

of action it precedes (Figure 1). Micheaux's audience is thus made to view the textual rendition of the violently racialized lie in lockstep with the visual rendition, a technique—impossible in any other medium—which suggests a symbiotic connection between hate-mongering white journalism, the violence it sensationalizes, and, implicitly, the lynching that ensues. It is, of course, through the newspaper article that the lynching of the Landrys achieves (in the eyes of its white readership) a near-mythic association with justice—an association that had been famously espoused five years earlier in *The Birth of a Nation*. Though novel in his cinematic approach to this cyclical relationship between white journalism and racialized violence, Micheaux was making an underlying point that was far from original. In Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), just such a connection is made between the white supremacist newspaper run by Major Carteret and the massacre of Black civilians he uses it to incite. Micheaux, who himself directed three separate adaptations of Chesnutt's work,[11] was undoubtedly aware of the literary precedent for the relationship between press and violence he hoped to draw.

The sequence, of course, also presages the lynching of the Landrys. Following a brief cutaway to a scene wherein Sylvia's mother asks for salvation from God, the newspaper clippings end with a "PROCLAMATION" for the "HANGING OF THE NEGRO MURDERERS OF PHILIP GRIDLESTONE," who are "under guard by the citizens of Lawrence..."[12] Given the newspaper's villainous depiction of Jasper Landry, the romanticized association of lynching with criminal justice holds true here. What is much more curious, then, is how the newspaper describes a different lynching—a lynching that has already occurred, rather than the one still to come. This is the lynching of Efrem, Gridlestone's devoted Black manservant, who witnesses the death of his employer and rushes to both white citizens and the press to implicate Landry. In contrast to Jasper Landry's supposed cruelty and soon-to-be-deserved fate, Efrem is described by the clippings as "Gridlestone's faithful servant" who was "himself the recent victim of accidental death at unknown hands."[13] With Efrem in mind, the story of the flashback can be read in part as a tale of two lynchings: one of a Black couple whose industry and self-reliance threatens to undermine southern racial codes, the other of a Black man who fanatically toes the color line and is killed nonetheless. To better understand this dynamic, and through it the seemingly contradictory manner in which the two lynchings are mediated by the press, it is best to begin with the murders themselves.

Perhaps the most curious similarity between how the two lynchings are presented is, paradoxically, the fact that neither lynching is actually presented. This is to say that although what might be called the "periphery" of each murder—that is, the icons and moments surrounding the act of lynching—is depicted more than clearly enough for Micheaux's audience to understand the fact of the lynchings, the lynchings themselves are more implied than they are shown. Interestingly, this similarity between the two lynchings gives way to a difference, insofar as the two sequences do not visually depict the *same* peripheral moments and images. In a sense, the two scenes actually complement each other: one is centered on the moments before and after the lynching (and is notably couched in the visual language of contemporary lynch photography), while the other focuses solely on the act of lynching itself, crucially—and confusingly—by showing an imagined version of the lynching rather than the actual lynching itself.

The murder of the Landrys, for one, is largely suggested in its buildup and in its aftermath. We witness the victims being corralled into an open field. We see the nooses slipped over their necks. We watch as the crowd pulls on the ropes, which go taut in a closeup as they are dragged over the crossbar. Later, we gaze on as the bodies are burned in the night (perhaps—though not necessarily—due to the limitations of contemporary special effects, we only see the fires and not the corpses). The one thing the audience is not privy to is the lynching itself—there is no shot of the Landrys being hanged; rather, the hanging is made explicit through the iconography of the rope and the sight of the crowds before and after it takes place. By contrast, Efrem's lynching sequence is focused entirely on the act itself rather than the before-and-after. There is no rope-pulling or bonfire to speak of, and no forceful corralling. Efrem's depicted lynching, unlike that of the Landrys, is

11 Chesnutt's short story collection The Conjure Woman (1899) was adapted by Micheaux into a film of the same name, now lost, in 1926. Chesnutt's novel The House Behind the Cedars (1900) was initially adapted by Micheaux as a film of the same name, now lost, in 1927, and was revisited for a second adaptation—this time with sound—as Veiled Aristocrats in 1932.

12 Within Our Gates, intertitle.

13 Ibid.

portrayed seemingly with no buildup at all. In the establishing shot, Efrem is shown "in his glory,"[14] enraptured with the thought of being accepted by the lynchers as one of their own. Moments later the impatient mob turns on him, and a fleeting shot of Efrem's horrified expression dissolves into the image of his hanged body (Figure 2).

In strictly temporal terms, there is therefore an odd sense in which the two lynchings complement each other. If the image of the actual hanged victims is conspicuously absent from the lynching of the Landrys, it is perhaps because Micheaux did not feel the need to repeat the imagery already present in Efrem's lynching. With this temporal framework in mind, Efrem's lynching becomes visually integral to the murder of the Landrys, with the sum of the two sequences' parts being a complete lynching from start to finish. What this approach ignores is a further discrepancy between the two scenes, which is the fact that the two sequences represent discursively distinct elements. Whereas the lynching of the Landrys is an event that happens, within the narrative, concurrent with its visual presentation, the depicted lynching of Efrem is akin to a vision that anticipates his "actual" lynching. Said actual lynching, in one of Micheaux's most unorthodox editing choices in an already unorthodox film, is never directly depicted. Indeed, the shot of Efrem's corpse dissolves back into a shot of the living Efrem being hurried off to his actual lynching, which occurs offscreen and receives its sole mention in the pages of the newspaper. The moment is preceded not by preparations for the lynching, as in the case of the Landrys, but by Efrem's delusion of white acceptance following his accusation of Jasper Landry: "'T'ain' no doubt 'bout it—da whi' fo'ks loves me.'"[15] Micheaux shatters Efrem's futile pretension by confronting audiences with the brutal reality of lynching sans the events that bookend it, only to finish by showing that the lynching itself was actually a grotesque portent of a thing to come rather than the thing itself. In the case of the Landrys, Micheaux gives audiences a lynching that occurs in narrative real time, bookends and all, but leaves the central moment to the imagination. The dread specter of lynching thus seeps into the marrow of each instance without a single narratively genuine lynching being shown. But there is a greater purpose to Micheaux's tactics than the generation of an emotive undercurrent. Considering, now, the newspaper's description of Efrem's lynching in light of both the lynching of the Landrys and the temporal distortion that defines the surrounding editing of both sequences, it becomes clear that Micheaux's true interest in these scenes might just lie in the mediation of racial violence rather than in the fact of the violence itself.

For it is upon the crucial issue of mediation that much of both the flashback's narrative and its discourse turn. The murder of Philip Gridlestone, for one, as told by Efrem to the white men of Lawrence through a secondary arbitrator in the form of the newspaper, becomes just cause for the lynching of Jasper Landry and his wife. Efrem, believing himself ingratiated with the white community to the point where the idea of his own lynching is unthinkable, is quick to condemn a Black man whose industry dared to challenge the racial economy Efrem willingly subordinates himself to. With this singular piece of kindling, the newspaper ignites a righteous call to action for the town's white citizenry—one based, as previously noted, on an association of lynching with justice, couched in a fallacious narrative of Philip Gridlestone's demise. Through its mediation of violence, the newspaper inspires its white readership to take agency of their racial destiny via lynching even as the paper itself assumes a position of agency by being the source of that inspiration. With the proper target and the proper claims of Black criminality, the white newspaper becomes a targeted instrument of racial violence rather than journalistic truth, a dynamic seen, as previously mentioned, in the likes of Chesnutt's novels.[16]

By contrast, turning to the curious way in which the paper mediates Efrem's own demise—an "accidental death [by] unknown hands"—what one finds is not an assumption of agency, but an evacuation of it. There are no claims of criminality against Efrem with which to demonize him, no clear route towards justifying his lynching in the same terms as the Landrys'. The murder of Efrem, a Black man who, per the newspaper's own words, did just about everything possible to maintain the racial code of the South, falls outside the realm of lynching as an honorable tradition of justice. With this in mind, the evacuation of agency makes all the sense in the world: in lieu of any reasonable justification for the murder, those behind the newspaper choose simply to

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 In addition to the mediation of racial violence via the white press that occurs in each work, the character of Jerry from The Marrow of Tradition also bears a remarkable resemblance to Efrem. Both characters are fanatically loyal servants to white employers, and both characters are ultimately murdered by white mobs.

wash their hands of it while tacitly acknowledging its reality—the implied circumstances behind an "accidental death at unknown hands" would have been clear to any white southerner. Such a figuration of the white news media was well-founded in Micheaux's day, a fact exemplified by the way in which the vague language of the clippings in *Within Our Gates* directly approximate the vernacular employed by the white media when discussing lynchings at the turn of the twentieth century. On the one hand, to call Efrem's murder an "accidental death at unknown hands" seems a remarkably improbable claim, given that it is difficult to accidentally lynch a human being and even more difficult for a sizeable mob to do it with any anonymity in the closely knit communities of the American South. In practice, however, such a description was far from remarkable. "[A] negro who lived near Braehead was lynched last night by unknown parties," reads one article from a 1910 edition of the *Montgomery Advertiser* describing the "summary vengeance" inflicted by a white mob upon Grant Richardson, a Black man of "fair reputation" accused of assaulting a white woman.[17] Indeed, were a person in Micheaux's day to pick up a given southern newspaper, they would likely walk away with the correct impression that the average lynch mob, no matter how large or how small or how prominent in its community, was generally able to murder a Black man of previously good reputation while maintaining total anonymity in the press.

The newspaper article of *Within Our Gates* essentially works to encourage the lynching of one Black man for his imagined criminality while simultaneously brushing aside the murder of another Black man purely because he does not fit a desired relationship between lynching and justice. The central hypocrisy of lynching—the juxtaposition between its supposed goal of mythic justice and its tendency to be the tool of choice for murdering innocent Black people—is boldly represented. It is particularly apparent when the situation is considered apart from the skewed depiction of Jasper Landry: Landry was, in fact, innocent of murder, and Efrem's only crime towards a white person was being the closest Black body for the mob to lynch, meaning that multiple "innocents" were lynched. But even within the confines of the newspaper's story, the explicit understanding of Efrem's innocence denies any pretension that lynch law is a vehicle of justice. Lynch law is thus reduced to an instrument of racial violence whose distinction between Black sinners and saints is, like the logic of racism itself, skin deep. But the lengths to which Micheaux goes in order to approximate the language and structure of contemporary newspaper lynching articles resist such a purely moral judgement, which has the effect of honing in on the act of lynching while subordinating the ex post facto mediation of the act—a mediation which, as Micheaux knew, was in itself a retroactively violent act that furthered the dehumanization of lynching victims and protected their murderers. Micheaux certainly critiques the amorality of the physical action of lynching, but by carefully interdigitating physical acts of violence with retroactive written ones, he makes the additional argument that these seemingly distinct acts of racial violence are one and the same.

Still, even on the bluntly moral plane of analysis, further wrinkles appear. It is not the case, after all, that Efrem is a blameless character. Though Efrem reports to the newspaper what he believes to be true, insofar as he does believe that Jasper Landry is the murderer of Philip Gridlestone, he only does so in the service of ingratiating himself to the white people of Lawrence. Crucially, it is also the case that Efrem may not have given a wholly accurate account to the newspaper, which describes Landry as "completely drunk" and Gridlestone as "beg[ging] for mercy,"[18] neither of which are details that align with what Efrem could reasonably have witnessed. Whether these embellishments were added by Efrem or whether they were inventions of his white amanuensis is left ambiguous, adding a troubling layer of uncertainty to the visible mediation of racial violence in both the murder of Gridlestone and the lynchings that follow it.

If one considers Efrem in the context of the film at large, an argument does present itself for the former interpretation—that is to say, the fictitious additions to Jasper Landry's villainy likely at least stem from Efrem himself and not the newspaper's writers. This is due to the fact that within the film, Efrem's cowardly need to ingratiate himself with white society is not unprecedented. Indeed, Efrem's motivations are remarkably similar to those of Old Ned, a Black preacher from the present-day storyline who preaches submission and white supremacy to his congregation, and who is rewarded for his communal betrayal with white patronage. And like

17 Ralph Ginzburg, "'ANGRY MINERS LYNCH NEGRO' from the Montgomery Advertiser," in 100 Years of Lynchings (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1988), 72. This is just one example; Ginzburg's book is full of them, and is an invaluable resource for period newspaper articles about lynchings.

18 Within Our Gates, intertitle.

Old Ned, whose sermons are revealed to exact a terrible emotional cost from their deliverer,[19] Efrem eventually suffers horribly for his willful subservience—a fate all too common for the race traitors of contemporaneous race fiction.[20] Old Ned offers a parallel with Efrem too direct to ignore, and which generates some indirect evidence as to the origins of the newspaper article's embellishments, mediated though they are by the pen of a white writer. With this in mind, there is a particularly awful irony to the fact that Efrem, who initiated the hunt to lynch Jasper Landry, is himself hanged before the Landrys are even located. It is an irony that Efrem's self-delusion, highlighted by Micheaux's choice to depict "Efrem in his glory" immediately before his imagined (but anticipatory) lynching, accentuates. Efrem's lynching does not occur in spite of his submission to white authority, but rather is directly caused by it. The logic behind Micheaux's choice to depict Efrem's demise as something resembling a vision becomes somewhat clearer. Efrem has spent his life running from the threat of lynching by maintaining a fanatical devotion to the color line, but in his betrayal of an innocent Black family, ultimately visits lynching upon himself by way of inciting the white mob. Efrem's subservience turns him, in a sense, into an accessory to his own murder—a dynamic made all the more clear by the fact that the imagined lynching is literally a projection of his own subconscious. By contrast, the Landrys, whose deaths are shot from afar and whose actual lynchings are not shown, serve as a haunting depiction of lynching being visited upon a Black family by forces completely external to themselves.

V. Precedence, Spectacle, and the Lynch Mod

The externality of the violence forced upon the Landrys—the manner in which, unlike with Efrem's murder, the film seems preoccupied not with the victims' personal reactions to their lynchings but rather with how the lynchings proceed as almost coldly impersonal acts of violence inflicted upon them—is only part of the picture. The mechanisms by which the Landrys' lynching absorbs, challenges, and reinterprets contemporaneous perceptions of racial violence only become clear through an extended viewing of the sequence itself. Though only making up a few minutes of the film, the lynching was key to much of the controversy surrounding *Within Our Gates*'s release.[21] In the creative landscape of 1920, it had been five years since D.W. Griffith mythologized the lynch mob and nearly seventy since Harriet Beecher Stowe championed the use of sentimental identification and religious imagery in making Black death tragic, and Oscar Micheaux knew the only way to confront moviegoing Americans with something new—something terrifying—was to give them what they had never seen before: the truth.

The nature of "truth" is, of course, far from absolute. Indeed, Woodrow Wilson himself famously (and almost certainly apocryphally)[22] described *The Birth of a Nation*—a film no reasonable student of American history would consider more than racist propaganda—as "all so terribly true." In a world of competing storytellers, then, the production of any film inspired by actual events becomes an act of displacing truths authored by others in favor of a new vision. In staging the lynching of the Landrys not as a moment for heightened storytelling or religious monologuing, but as a moment of believable violence grounded in contemporaneous visual representations of genuine lynchings, Micheaux uprooted glorified portrayals of Black death that had captured the nation's collective conscience and replaced them with one that laid bare the casual cruelty at the heart of American racism.

The lynching of the Landrys begins with Jasper Landry, his unnamed wife, and their young son, Emil, being corralled into an open field on what is specified as a Sunday—a day possibly chosen to emphasize the sacrilegious nature of the lynching. Mrs. Landry is dragged forth and thrown to the ground, where she is beaten;

19 A short sequence finds Old Ned leaving a room occupied with white patrons to whom he has just debased himself, wearing a smile characteristic of the "happy darky" stock character. As soon as he is alone, Old Ned's smile disappears, and he exclaims (via an intertitle) "'Again I've sold my birthright. All for a miserable 'mess of pottage.' Negros and whites—all are equal. As for me, miserable sinner, Hell is my destiny.'"

20 See note 8 for just one example.

21 Michele Wallace, "Oscar Micheaux's Within Our Gates: The Possibilities for Alternative Visions," in Oscar Micheaux & His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), 61.

22 Mark E. Benbow, "Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and 'Like Writing History with Lightning'," in The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era 9, no.4 (2010), 529.

Jasper grapples with one of the mob members in response (Figure 3) and is soon restrained as Emil makes an unlikely escape. Then the crowd positions the elder Landrys beneath makeshift gallows, throws the ropes over the crossbar, and pulls—all with the visible excitement of a summer picnic. As was the case with Efrem, it is in the remarkable presentation of the lynching that Micheaux's most compelling techniques present themselves. Micheaux did not undertake his work in a vacuum, and by the time he brought lynching to the silver screen, the practice was already well-represented as a visual exhibition. Early twentieth century lynchings were community events,[23] inherently suited to the spectacular cinematic mode of representation because they were already experienced as spectacles by much of the South. They were both tourist traps and commonplace happenings, a phenomenon popularized nationwide by the likes of photographs (often in the form of postcards) depicting actual lynchings that were advertised in newspapers and sold in drugstores.[24] Micheaux's task became creating a cinematic interpretation of lynching that felt both familiar and unprecedented, and that engaged with the reality of how spectacle lynching was commonly represented while simultaneously staking a trenchant claim for how it ought to be represented.

As the lynching ("pre-lynching" may be a more accurate descriptor) progresses, arguably the most distinct departure from the lynching of Efrem lies in the cinematography. Next to the close-up intimacy of Efrem's imagined lynching, the lynching of the Landrys is shot at a much greater distance from its subjects. As has been noted, the focus here seems to be not so much on the internal anguish of the victims, as was the case with Efrem, but on the very external forces that initiate the lynching. Accordingly, the camera is set far enough away to place the mob squarely in the midground of the image and maintains a flat angle throughout. Though Micheaux centers his shot on the Landrys, the distance of the lens from the gallows renders any emotion on the victim's faces imperceptible. The framing is, in a word, stagelike, an effect emphasized by the boxy field of view afforded by a 1:33:1 aspect ratio. The staginess of the lynching is accentuated by a curious lack of dynamism, both in the lens and in the subjects. The Landrys, for one, are shown from a distance standing still beneath the crossbar of the gallows; when the camera cuts away, they are not seen again—as has also been noted, the lynching itself is left implied rather than shown, so there is no visible shot of the bodies in motion. The crowd, for another, might as well be posing for a photograph before eventually pulling on the ropes, an action whose movement Micheaux seems to undermine by cutting away to a shot of the rope itself rather than the people in the act of pulling it. Compared to the closeup shots and the dissolve that characterize Efrem's lynching—dynamic, intimate, and uniquely cinematic devices—the lynching of the Landrys is filmed in such a manner as to render it a disarmingly static affair.

If "disarming" seems like an odd descriptor for the Landrys' lynching, it is only because the modern viewer has relatively little to compare it with. But in 1920, five years removed from the most technically accomplished and infamous silent film ever made about race relations, to stage a lynching as Micheaux did represented a radical departure from the cinematic norm. In the latter half of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, following the death of his sister, Klan leader Ben Cameron kidnaps the guilty Gus (portrayed in glaringly obvious blackface by white actor Walter Long), then tries and swiftly executes him.[25] A single shot brilliantly demonstrates the scene's pathos: held fast to the ground by two hooded Klansmen, Gus frantically surveys the masked faces around him (Figure 4). Shirt shredded and eyes wide, Gus appears as cowardly villainy personified. The Klansmen tower over the guilty party as shining pillars of righteousness, an effect magnified by both the presence of Klansmen on horseback in the background as well as the slight downward tilt of the camera. As the standing Ben Cameron takes off his mask to look the kneeling Gus in the eye, the height dynamic combines with the fervor of the surrounding Klansmen to give the distinct impression of righteous, if

23 Amy Kate Bailey and Karen A. Snedker, "Practicing What They Preach? Lynching and Religion in the American South, 1890–1929," in American Journal of Sociology 117, no.3 (2011): 846. The authors are particularly interested in the "moral solidarity" felt by religious communities that participated in lynchings. The importance of communal religion to lynching is present in Micheaux's film, though not substantially explored. In one intriguing moment, for instance, the intertitles describe the accidental death of Philip Gridlestone's true murderer as "divine justice," suggesting the presence of a seemingly righteous God who is mysteriously absent when the innocent Landrys are hanged for a crime they did not commit.

24 Ralph Ginzburg, "'GRIM REMINDER' from the Chicago Defender," in 100 Years of Lynchings (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1988), pp. 112–113.

25 The Birth of a Nation, directed by D.W. Griffith (1915; New York, NY: Kino Lorber, 2011), DVD.

somber, moral fury.

By contrast, the hanging of the Landrys exhibits no such superficially symbolic imagery. There are no fantastical costumes for the audience to gawk at, no towering men on horseback to emphasize a righteous power dynamic, and no smoldering cross to charge the scene with religious import. In their places are seemingly ordinary white men, women, and even excited children, some of whom literally leap for joy at the prospect of a hanging. In lieu of the heightened, pseudo-religious fervor displayed by the equivalent scene in *The Birth of a Nation*, Micheaux gives his audience a moment that feels strikingly mundane. Crucially, that mundanity is emphasized by the relatively static nature of the Landrys' lynching. The no-frills, flatly stagelike framing and everyday affect of the mob suggest not a world where lynchings could be reasonably interpreted as mythic contests of evil and moral virtue, but a world where lynchings needed to be taken at face value as disturbingly ordinary acts of everyday hatred staged as community events. Naturally, cinema was not the first visual medium to capture this element of lynchings: spectacle lynch photography, by technological necessity a static medium, makes clear sense as a visual precedent for *Within Our Gates*. Compare the hanging of the Landrys to any given photograph of an actual early twentieth century lynching and the similitude of Micheaux's stripped-down depiction becomes clear. From the teeming mass of onlookers present at the 1916 murder of Jesse Washington to the multitudes of quieter but generally well-attended lynchings set amongst wooded southern landscapes, candid photographs of lynchings as lighthearted community spectacle presented a wealth of material for the industrious filmmaker to draw upon. Indeed, the pastoral setting and midground positioning of the Landrys, with the latter's erasure of the Landry's individuality in favor of the mob's communal identity, do much to evoke the photographs of anonymous Black lynching victims that littered the newspapers and gift shops of the early twentieth century South. As just one example, consider a photograph of the 1911 lynching of Laura Nelson and her son, L.D.,[26] who were seized by a mob of forty from their Oklahoma jail cell and hanged from a bridge for their alleged involvement in the killing of a deputy sheriff, next to the lynching of the Landrys. Though by no means a direct source of inspiration for Micheaux,[27] this particular photograph demonstrates many of the conventions common to lynch photography that he would come to draw on for *Within Our Gates* (Figure 5). The photograph's wooded setting and its flat, uninventive, midground-heavy framing that obscures details of the mob and its victims in service of a broader communal identity, are present and accounted for in the film. There is a distinct element of narratological understatement to this particular brand of photography, content as it was to depict the spectacle of lynching without the additional humanity provided by closeups and idiosyncratic movements. It is very much the case that in translating spectacle lynching into the cinematic medium, Micheaux, to some extent, subverted the pre-existing Griffith-esque conventions already associated with cinematic lynching by exploiting another set of visual conventions altogether in the form of lynch photography. By bringing the mundane savagery of real-world lynch photography to the silver screen, he thus posed a direct, if understated, moral challenge to a burgeoning art form that had failed to make audiences see lynching as anything less than righteous crusades. Intriguingly, however, it is not the case that this moral challenge prevented Micheaux from utilizing Griffith-esque cinematography to depict lynching. Instead, Micheaux simply imposed those cinematic conventions—the closeups, the horrified expressions—upon the lynching of Efrem, the only Black character in the film whose cowardice places him on a level with Gus of *The Birth of a Nation*.

But while the success of Griffith's style of cinematic racism suggested that the murders of African Americans in film formed a genre that had yet to critically evaluate itself, Black death in literature was another matter entirely. The cinematic lynching that had previously caught the public eye was a tableau of hate, while decades of literature had already decried the horrors of lynch law. Accordingly, while Micheaux aimed for a

26 James Allen, "The Lynching of Laura Nelson and Her Son, Several Dozen Onlookers. May 25, 1911, Okemah, Oklahoma. Gelatin Silver Print. Real Photo Postcard. 5 1/2 x 3 1/2,'" in Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (n.p., 2000).

27 Notably, the possibility that photographs of this particular lynching were Micheaux's direct inspiration cannot be wholly dismissed. Besides the similar framing (a similitude which can be observed in hundreds of photographs of other lynchings), there is also the fact that Laura Nelson is possibly the only Black female lynching victim (and certainly the most well-known) for whom photographs of the lynching itself are still extant. Beyond depicting a lynching of Black people, Micheaux was depicting a lynching of a Black woman, making a photograph as unique as that of Laura and L.D. Nelson's lynching a potentially valuable source of inspiration. Combine this with the photograph's evident popularity—the image above is actually of a postcard made out of the original photograph, complete with copyright information etched into its surface—and it is not altogether unlikely that Micheaux may have been aware of it.

total reinvention of the manner in which cinematic lynching had previously been portrayed, his method with regards to early race literature was more one of recapitulation and critique: though ideologically aligned with the work of fellow writers and artists vehemently opposed to American racism, Micheaux's level eye and realist, photographic leanings frequently put him at odds with the sentimentalized, melodramatic arc of the fictional Black murder victim. To be sure, Micheaux was far from averse to implementing well-established melodramatic conventions of race literature: the late insertion of a marriage plot, for instance, speaks to any of a number of sentimental and domestic novels, and the uplift motif that runs throughout the first hour of *Within Our Gates* can also be found in many seminal works of race fiction. But despite Micheaux's compromise with and incorporation of certain melodramatic plot devices into his film, when it came to the actual representation of lynching, his chosen path veered as far away from Stowe's sentimentality as it did Griffith's moral depravity.

The 1852 publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* served as both the genesis and commercial zenith of popular race fiction. The novel became a rallying cry for a generation of race literature writers, mostly Black, who would spend the next several decades either embracing or refuting aspects of Stowe's sentimentality—a line of call and response that, as the juxtaposition of melodramatic plot devices with realist and photographic ambitions make clear, continues into *Within Our Gates*. Compare the murder of Uncle Tom to that of the Landrys and a few superficial similarities are immediately apparent: both are lynchings that function as the one of the climactic focal points of their respective stories, and both contribute to tragic dramatic conclusions that preempt surprisingly (and perhaps falsely) optimistic narrative endings. The similarities end there. Stowe's lynching is founded on the principle of sentimental identification: the death of Uncle Tom is preceded by the death of the young, white, and saintly Evangeline St. Clare, suggesting that any tears shed for little Eva should just as reasonably be shed for Tom. By contrast, *Within Our Gates* features no such white proxy for the Landrys, but rather leaves the Black victims to find lasting significance through the immediate impact of their own deaths and their own deaths alone, which are shot in such a manner as to recall the visual conventions of widely circulated lynch photography. The deeply religious aspect of Tom's death is similarly done away with. For Tom, the ability to become a spiritual martyr through dying transforms death into "an access of power, not a loss of it,"[28] and prompts a lengthy death soliloquy as Tom "[goes] into glory."[29] The Landrys receive no equivalent martyrdom, instead being dealt a death that is swift, violent, and silent—a silence amplified both by constraints of the early cinematic medium as well as by the lack of written dialogue via intertitles. Much like how the photographic stagecraft of Micheaux's scene confronts the mythologized moral defense of lynching apparent in Griffith's more explicitly cinematic interpretation, the realism on display suggests a significance for the murders of African Americans beyond Stowe's religiosity. Rather than transform lynching into an icon for the elevation of Black virtue, Micheaux recapitulates Stowe's anti-lynching stance for the silver screen while simultaneously lowering lynching to its true realm as a momentary, senseless act of violence. Micheaux's victims need not speak for themselves, in a sense, because the condition of their murder does the speaking for them. The photographic representation of their deaths, inspired by popularly commercialized lynch photography and devoid of melodrama or spiritual pretense, says more about the everyday cruelty of lynching than a spontaneous monologue delivered through intertitles ever could.

Looking beyond the interior world of the lynching sequence itself—that is to say, by considering Tom Gunning's paradigm in which a film's narrative discourse and its modes of production and exhibition are inseparable from one another—reveals yet deeper layers to Micheaux's metacommentary.[30] Particularly curious is his choice to market the film almost exclusively on the merits of the lynching scene rather than the broader uplift narrative in which it is embedded.[31] Odd though the choice may seem, by taking into account both the historical commercial efficacy of violence against Black bodies and established modes of early

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28 Jane Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History," in Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), 128.

29 Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin (Boston, MA: John P. Jewett and Company, 1852; reprint, New York, NY: Penguin, 1981), 590.

30 Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded, edited by Strauven Wanda (Amsterdam, NL: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 383.

31 Jane Gaines, "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux" in Black American Cinema (London, UK: Routledge, 1993), 52.

cinematic exhibition, one observes a marketing tactic that recapitulated the legacy of earlier Black activists through the established paradigm of early film marketing. For it is the case that graphic violence already had a storied history as a marketable commodity in Black narratives: from Olaudah Equiano's description of the Middle Passage to Frederick Douglass's famous recollection of Aunt Hester's whipping, a public interest—whether solely righteous or at least somewhat prurient is difficult to say—in the violence done to African Americans was an established tool for the savvy activist to employ. Marketing a feature film by employing this previously literary instrument allowed Micheaux to capitalize on the relatively more recent tools of cinema itself in the early 1900s, which began as a hugely exhibitionist endeavor—to use Gunning's words, a "cinema of attraction."[32] Early cinema was entirely reliant not on the voyeuristic narratives that would come to define the movies as a story-driven medium, but on capturing singularly exciting moments and exhibiting them to the public as one would exhibit a circus freak. In choosing to advertise *Within Our Gates* on the strength of its most striking action sequence (if action it can be called), Micheaux melded the marketing stratagems of race literature and early cinema to ensure that the lynching of the Landrys would be his film's most lingering sequence even before audience members had actually seen it. It is lastly worth noting here that the particular spectacle of lynchings, already treated as community attractions by much of the nation at the time, were particularly well-suited to such a tactic.

VI. Trauma, Chronology, and Editing

Remarkably, the lynching of the Landrys is not altogether the climax of the flashback. Immediately after the ropes go taught, it is revealed that Sylvia, who has been "hidden….with relatives who had promised to help her parents,"[33] is being pursued by Armand Gridlestone, brother of the late Philip Gridlestone. He enters the cabin in which Sylvia is hiding and, in a nightmarish sequence intercut with shots of the elder Landrys' corpses being burned, assaults her. In its construction, the sequence is among the most intricate of the entire film, and the curious temporal distortion that undercuts the entire scene is key to understanding why.

The lynching ends, and the assault sequence begins, with a simple intertitle informing us that the succeeding events occur "[t]hat same afternoon."[34] This chronology, at least initially, seems to hold up: a shot of Armand creeping up to the cabin's door is intercut with shots of the elder Landrys' bodies being cut down (again, only the rope is shown) and kindling being laid for their burning, all of which seem to take place in broad daylight (Figure 6). The suggestion, via both the parallel editing exhibited by the sequence and the preceding intertitle, that Armand approaches concurrently with the kindling being laid but before the actual bonfire, establishes a fairly straightforward temporal framework with which to consider the remainder of the scene. What happens next calls this simple chronology into question. Armand enters the cabin and throws himself at the visibly horrified Sylvia when the film cuts to another intertitle, which suggests that Armand is "[n]ot satisfied with the poor victims incinerated in the bonfire."[35] This muddles the chronology, given that it would be impossible for the assault to take place both before and after the bodies are burned. Perhaps even more confusingly, as the assault of Sylvia continues, it is interrupted multiple times by shots of the bonfire itself (Figure 7). In summary, the intertitles suggest that the assault may be occurring either before or after the bonfire, while the parallel editing of the sequence seems to suggest that they are coincident. Jane Gaines convincingly argues that this narratological discrepancy works to generate a visual contrast between the flames of the burning bodies and the proverbial flames of Armand Gridlestone's desire, "symbolically charg[ing]" the scene as a "reenactment of the white patriarch's ravishment of Black womanhood," historiographically tied to the rapes that produced the South's mulatto population to begin with.[36] Gaines goes a step further by arguing that the politics of the parallel editing on display serve to render the audience helpless in the face of witnessing that awful history reenacted, while simultaneously raising the potential for "pleasure" at the sight of Sylvia's remarkable resistance. The temporal discrepancy between the two scenes, then, underscores that traumatic

32 See note 17 above.
33 Within Our Gates, intertitle.
34 Ibid.
35 Within Our Gates, intertitle.
36 J. Gaines, "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux," 57.

sense of helplessness, which is strong enough to overcome the limits of rational chronology when the events are detailed to Dr. Vivian many years later. The sequence's unstable chronology, much like the instantiation of the flashback itself as an interruption to Sylvia's uplift arc, wordlessly implies the traumatic power of the memories it relates.

The impact of Micheaux's unorthodox editing, beyond underscoring a visual contrast, comes to greater significance in the way that the "parallel" descriptor becomes less applicable as the scene progresses. Though it would be accurate to observe that the intersplicing of the bonfire and the assault imply a simultaneity that subverts the chronology established by the intertitles, it would not be totally holistic. Crucially, though the chronological locations of events contrasted via parallel editing may differ—such is clearly the case with the assault of Sylvia—a further wrinkle is added by the fact that the two events portrayed do not appear to be happening at the same rate. Put another way, both the temporal location and directionality of the events depicted appear to be at odds with one another. This chronological asymmetry is best observed through the change in time of day that takes place over the course of the bonfire segments (that is to say, the moments depicting the preparations for, and carrying out of, the burning of the Landrys' bodies, which occur as brief interruptions of the assault itself). For while the bonfire sequence may begin in the "same afternoon" that Armand approaches Sylvia's door, as made clear by the visibly sunlit shots of the nooses being severed and the kindling being laid, it does not stay there. Rather, by the time Armand reaches for Sylvia and the bodies are actually being burned, it is suddenly nighttime for the mob. Thus the burning of the bodies proceeds in darkness while Gridlestone's molestation of Sylvia, assuming we are not meant to believe it lasted several hours, proceeds in broad daylight. Visually, the encroaching blackness allows the flames of the bonfire to appear much more distinct, strengthening the contrast noted by Gaines between fire and desire. But crucially, on the temporal register, the shift from day to night actually works to signal that time has been *dilated* for Sylvia in addition to having been displaced. Seemingly filmed in—and edited to appear in—real time, Armand's assault of Sylvia most probably occupies the space of a few minutes at most. But contrasted against the bonfire sequence, in which time seems to be advancing at a much more rapid pace, Sylvia's assault gives the distinct impression of a relatively brief event being unspooled to run in lockstep with a much longer one. Simply put, when the attempted rape is revisited through a lens laden with unresolved trauma, it seems to be moving in slow motion. This element of temporal dilation further textures Micheaux's portrayal of Sylvia's lingering trauma, more broadly characterized by the dissonance of two chronologically distinct events being forced into an impossible simultaneity.

Importantly, the assault alone was evidently not, to Micheaux's eyes, sufficient cause for this instance of slow motion retrospective narration. Compounding the impact of the violence itself is the sudden revelation Sylvia is, as revealed by a scar on her chest, Armand's "legitimate daughter from marriage to a woman of her race"[37] adopted by the Landrys (Figure 8). Central as it is to the assault that preempts it, the importance of this moment of familial revelation is similarly drawn forth by the temporal dilation of the scene's remarkable editing. The potency of the discovery is such that Gridlestone immediately retreats, horrified, hand raised to his forehead. The camera lingers on him, then fades out; when the scene fades in again, the flashback has ended and Alma Prichard compounds the perverse horror of the moment by revealing to Dr. Vivian that it was Armand himself who had bankrolled Sylvia's education. This turn of events, though seemingly miraculous, is far from unprecedented. A similar happenstance can be found in the likes of William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), which drew upon the reality of the gendered violence that created the South's mulatto population to make the invisibility of blood central to the narrative trajectory of the tragic mulatta.[38] Even Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, which Micheaux drew from (and some would argue adapted as *Within Our Gates*)[39] and which has been called a transitional work moving away from the sentimentality of authors like Stowe,[40] exhibits this melodramatic mainstay despite eschewing much of the overt melodrama characteristic of earlier race literature.

The additional suggestion that Armand was at one point married to Sylvia's biological mother implies some level of presumed affection and familial responsibility, rather than outright violence, at the point of Sylvia's beginnings—another plot point accounted for in the pages of race literature. In Francis E.W. Harper's

37 Within Our Gates, intertitle.

38 Wallace, "Oscar Micheaux's Within Our Gates: The Possibilities for Alternative Visions," 67.

39 Gillman, Susan. "Micheaux's Chesnutt," PMLA 114, no. 5 (1999): 1080.

40 Wallace, "Oscar Micheaux's Within Our Gates: The Possibilities for Alternative Visions," 72.

Iola Leroy (1892), whose retrospective narration makes it perhaps the most structurally similar work to *Within Our Gates*, there is even weight afforded to the fact that the titular mulatta's white father, much like Armand Gridlestone, has paid for his biracial daughter's education. Complicating such comparisons is Armand's dual role as both Sylvia's benefactor and her attempted rapist—it is not the case that Armand is an ultimately benevolent white father in the mold of Eugene Leroy, but it is also not the case that Armand is solely negligent, as is the father of *Clotel*.

This focalization of occasionally competing melodramatic precedents into a single role seems like a wildly unstable template for a character in any film, let alone one that often seems eager to dispel the very traditions it recapitulates. Armand Gridlestone represents a key example of Micheaux's tendency to draw upon the same melodramatic threads that *Within Our Gates* as a whole seems to interrogate—a tendency whose seemingly self-contradictory nature is made explicit in Armand's actions. For although Armand certainly draws upon the legacies of both paternal and outright abusive white characters in earlier race fictions, he does the unthinkable by both attempting to provide for the resulting child of a legitimate marriage to a Black woman *and* trying to rape that same child. A brief summary of Armand's history with Sylvia throws this inconsistent behavior into sharp relief. He apparently begins as a relatively enlightened member of the southern gentry, going so far as to marry a Black woman and father a legitimate child with her. Though he seemingly disowns Sylvia at birth and places her in the hands of a Black family—possibly an act done out of fear of the social taboo of miscegenation—Armand nonetheless appears to feel enough of a familial obligation towards her to fund her education (and, crucially, her eventual philanthropy). Then, in spite of this relative goodwill coming from a well-to-do southern white man, his final act in the flashback is the attempted rape of Sylvia. Even in the context of the seminal race fiction Micheaux surely would have been familiar with, Armand Gridlestone is a rare creation: a character who embodies not only the types of the white benefactor and white assailant, but a character who embodies them at once. By the conventions of the race melodramas Micheaux draws upon, Armand ought to be two distinct characters, for his actions bring two very different ideals of what a southern white man of the times could be into a shared orbit.

Like the marriage that ends the film, however, it is important to observe that the validity of Armand's marriage to Sylvia's mother is deeply unstable. Though briefly described as "legitimate," the fact of Armand assaulting Sylvia calls any presumption of romantic love or familial duty pertaining to the marriage into question. Combining said instability with the structural fact that this hint of Gridlestone's past life occurs within a flashback detailing his Black daughter's buried trauma, the suggestion becomes available (though not definitively so) that the assault of Sylvia is an instance of history repeating itself in the ugly form of the gendered violence against Black women endemic to the South. Continuing the through line of temporal distortion into an analysis of the incestuous revelation, it is reasonable to wonder whether Armand's attempt to rape Sylvia is in fact a generational reinstantiation of the sexual violence he may once inflicted upon Sylvia's mother. Perhaps the clearest evidence for such a history lies in Armand's response to each event: following the hypothetical rape of Sylvia's mother, he marries her; following the attempted rape of Sylvia herself, it is revealed that he funded her education and in turn the philanthropic endeavors that define the frame narrative's uplift arc. Both rapes, in other words, are followed by Armand's efforts to ameliorate his crimes. Though the bifurcated nature of Gridlestone's motivations places him at odds with certain earlier embodiments of race fiction archetypes, it is still possible to find precedence for these apparently retrospective attempts at righting his racialized wrongs. Consider, for instance, the character of Sandy in *The Marrow of Tradition*, a Black man saved from a lynch mob by his employer, a white patriarch quietly implied to be Sandy's unacknowledged father. With literary context in mind, what might be crudely dubbed a cycle of white guilt begins to emerge—a cycle that both arises out of, and offers some explanation for, Gridlestone's seemingly confused alternation between benefactor and villain, and whose recognition levels a damning finger at the multigenerational, incestuous gendered violence at the core of the southern social hierarchy.

There is a hideous irony to the fact that the simultaneously incestuous and miscegenous violence Armand commits is key to upholding southern social codes even as it violates them. Incest was deeply taboo as a system of procreation among people who were entirely too close to one another in class and lineage, while miscegenation bore the opposite taboo of procreation among those who were entirely too far apart in class,

lineage, and ideology. In the assault of Sylvia, Micheaux renders that which is doubly taboo amongst southern white society shockingly explicit, and does so in the middle of a sequence whose curious temporal editing is already engineered to draw out such moments to their greatest potency. The ostensibly contradictory twins of incest and miscegenation are revealed by the actions of Armand Gridlestone to be deeply intertwined through the perverse eroticism of rape. The effect is to demand a stern reconsideration not just of the assault, but of the entire uplift narrative that frames it and, crucially, of the philanthropy that defines said uplift. In the flashback's final and perhaps most startling blow to the racial uplift narrative, Micheaux at last implicates the defiled reality of a philanthropic structure bankrolled by the same cycle of violently incestuous miscegenation and shame that manufactures the conditions upon which charity becomes necessary in the first place. Micheaux is known to have been a scrappy and spontaneous set decorator,[41] but it is perhaps no coincidence that a portrait of Abraham Lincoln oversees the assault (Figure 7). As arguably the white patron of Black America most commonly held beyond reproach, the mere presence of Lincoln's visage in the midst of such horror is enough to amplify the broader interrogation of white philanthropy and uplift narratives suggested by the internally inconsistent characterization of Armand Gridlestone and his actions towards Sylvia.

VII. Failed Resolution and the Marriage Plot

It is this final horror that concludes the flashback sequence, ending Sylvia's backstory on a deeply troubling note that raises far more questions than it answers. As though the film itself is awakening from a nightmare, the scene returns to the same shot of Alma and Dr. V. Vivian that preempted the flashback. As has been previously discussed, the narratological conditions of the flashback's insertion into the film require us to trust both in its psychological veracity as a representation of Sylvia's trauma and in Alma Prichard's seemingly superhuman ability to convey such pathos in a narrative she herself did not live through. Accepting this requirement is a task made all the more difficult by the fact that mere spoken words, such as Vivian must have received from Alma, are surely at a great disadvantage to cinematic editing when it comes to capturing the emotive force of a story fractured by the uncertainty of traumatic memory. But accept it we must, and with it the additional assumption that Dr. Vivian, Alma's audience, has been a perfect witness to the story of Sylvia as told by Alma. Like the viewer of *Within Our Gates*, Vivian now knows both the shape and texture of Sylvia's lingering trauma, and so armed must act to somehow rescue the uplift narrative said trauma has structurally upended. The solution he offers is at once entirely expected and entirely wrong. More than twenty minutes of the film's run time after sitting down beside Alma, Dr. Vivian stands. He seems to expound vigorously to an audience of one, thrusting his right fist into his left palm for emphasis as the camera fades (Figure 9). "[T]hus Dr. Vivian found Sylvia,"[42] an intertitle tells us, and when the scene fades in, Vivian is indeed seated beside Sylvia. "'Be proud of our country,'" he tells her. "'We were never immigrants… Be proud of our country, always!'"[43] It is with this oddly clumsy patriotic appeal that Vivian asks for Sylvia's hand in marriage, an appeal we are told Sylvia comes to understand as "perhaps….right after all."[44] For a movie that caused great controversy for its blunt willingness to depict explicit racial violence, the final images are surprisingly peaceful: Sylvia, having found the funds with which to rescue the school and having had her troubled history laid bare for both audience and suitor through the flashback sequence, finally seems to find peace in Dr. Vivian's arms as the film comes to a close (Figure 9).

Marriage, then, is depicted as the conclusive treatment for Sylvia's trauma. Faced with the need to recuperate the optimistic thrust of the earlier uplift narrative in the face of the cruelty exhibited in the flashback, the film seems content to marry Sylvia's woes away. Rather than offering a solution of more substance, Micheaux provides Sylvia with an ending that neither directly confronts the revealed horrors of her upbringing nor offers any substantive connection between those horrors and the economic uplift narrative that precedes

41 Richard Corliss, "An Oscar for Micheaux," in TIME (2002). Corliss interviews a man by the name of Haskell Wexler who worked as a camera loader on a Micheaux production. Wexler describes one memorable instance in which Micheaux, rather than erecting a new set for a scene that took place in a different room than the previously shot scene, decided to hastily throw up new curtains on the same set.

42 Within Our Gates, intertitle.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

them. Micheaux ties up his narrative without accounting in any meaningful way for the reality of the violence Sylvia has experienced, the audience has witnessed, and Dr. V. Vivian now supposedly understands. In light of the implication that Vivian fully comprehends not just the events of Sylvia's history but the lasting trauma associated with them, his newfound patriotic zeal and belief in the necessity of matrimony seem even more thematically unfounded. Dr. Vivian's response to the events portrayed in the flashback thus serves only to heighten, rather than ameliorate, the sense of unreality that pervades the flashback's improbable insertion into the uplift structure of the frame narrative. As an attempt to resolve the deeply disturbing tensions between the awful flashback and its optimistic frame, the marriage comes across as an awkward choice that aggravates the very problem it attempts to remedy, and one is led to wonder what could have prompted its inclusion at all.

But in the context of a story wherein moments of conflict seem to rise out of established narrative conventions, it is perhaps no real surprise that the ultimate solution to Sylvia's crisis should rely on yet another precedented device in the form of a marriage plot. Viewing *Within Our Gates*, one immediately senses a parallel between the story of Sylvia Landry and the stories of hundreds of fictional women over centuries of literary prehistory that envisioned marriage as an ultimate solution to female hardship—a solution that was not only celebrated but expected. One might look to the ending of any given Jane Austen novel and wonder whether, by Micheaux's time, much had really changed in fictional representations of female destiny. Narrowing the field of precedence to the works of African American writers, a similar pattern appears.[45] Indeed, when Harriet Jacobs penned her seminal *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), the presumption of a marriage plot had been so thoroughly ingrained in the female narratives of every race that she found it necessary to signpost her story as "[ending] with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage..."[46]

For a literary marriage plot that seems, at first glance, to approximate Sylvia Landry's almost exactly, one need look no further than Frances E.W. Harper. In *Iola Leroy*, the titular mixed-race woman embarks on a journey of uplift intermingled with self-discovery, has her buried trauma unearthed in the form of a prolonged flashback, and finally sees her troubles resolved by way of marriage to a successful medical doctor. These superficial similarities are so striking, in fact, that one might go so far as to take *Iola Leroy* as a perfect thematic and structural template for *Within Our Gates*, and therefore think to characterize the marriage plot of the latter as fulfilling a similarly sentimental, recuperative, and—more crucially—successful role in resolving Sylvia's story.

The error, as the ending of *Within Our Gates* makes abundantly clear, partially lies in assuming—as almost every narrative centered on a woman at the time was likely to assume, and as Dr. Vivian's actions also assume—that marriage to a successful man must in and of itself be a sufficient solution to the thematic problems posed by the remainder of a text. Certainly, this was often engineered to be the case in the literary melodramas that preceded Micheaux's work. In *Iola Leroy*, the union of the titular heroine with the biracial Dr. Latimer signals a neat resolution to Iola's—and through her, the novel's—struggles with identity and archetype: in marrying Latimer, Iola affirms a hard-won acceptance of her own blackness and simultaneously finds a measure of purpose and peace in marriage that allows her to transcend the traumatic trappings of a conventional tragic mulatta. Positioned at some distance from the conclusion of the novel's own traumatic flashback, Iola's marriage becomes a shining symbol of the Black woman's capacity to move beyond the horrors of her past and into a future glittering with industrious and uplifting possibility. *Iola Leroy's* romantic conclusion is thus part and parcel of its overarching uplift narrative, providing a prism through which the novel's thematic tensions are filtered and resolved. By contrast, even a cursory examination of *Within Our Gates*'s ending in the broader context of the film at large reveals a gaping discrepancy with the optimism of such a clear-cut resolution.

The discrepancy is largely temporal: whereas Iola's blissful union occurs well after the conclusion of her novel's retrospective sequence, Sylvia's marriage occurs directly after her backstory is related in shockingly visceral terms that are already at odds with the preceding uplift narrative. With no time left for Sylvia, Dr. Vivian, or the audience to contend with the memories of Sylvia's past in any meaningful way, the film swiftly ushers her off to live happily ever after. The thematic dissonance is almost comically palpable when Dr.

45 Wells Brown's Clotel, the very first novel published by an African American, concludes with the marriage of the titular Clotel's daughter following a lengthy string of traumatic events, setting a precedent that would be followed by decades of Black stories.

46 Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (Boston, MA: Thayer & Eldridge, 1861, reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2001), 164.

Vivian closes the film with patriotic platitudes—as though the audience hasn't just witnessed Sylvia's parents being lynched by their white countrymen and Sylvia herself being assaulted by her own father. If the horrors depicted in the flashback serve to disrupt the implicit promise of the prior hour's relatively rote uplift narrative, then the marriage plot represents a necessary but wholly unsatisfactory attempt to reconcile the thematically contradictory plot threads. The resolution offered by the marriage plot of *Within Our Gates*, plainly put, seems unearned and hurried—a sort of deus ex machina whose artificiality suggests the instability, rather than the glory, at the heart of racial uplift. All the marital felicity in the world, the film seems to suggest, is nothing next to the weight of remembered racial violence. In this sense, the marriage plots of *Within Our Gates* and *Iola Leroy* run antiparallel—two superficially aligned narrative pathways whose directionalities actually directly oppose one another.

A story like *Iola Leroy*, which enters its flashback early on and devotes appropriate time to the processes of acceptance and recovery, can afford to use marriage as a neat resolution. In such an instance, the marriage itself is less a source of resolution and more an appropriate coda to a resolution that has been gradually unfolding over the course of many chapters. The failure of the marriage plot in *Within Our Gates* to act as a serviceable resolution is also attributable—in addition to its somewhat vain presumption that marriage must be a sufficient solution to a woman's outstanding problems—to the fact that it is *not* merely used as the vessel for a more cohesive resolution that has been occurring over the course of the film's runtime. Such a resolution, given the late-stage positioning of the flashback, is impossible. What we are left with is a marriage plot, initiated by Dr. Vivian in the immediate aftermath of the flashback, that attempts to function as the entirety of the film's dramatic resolution and breaks under the weight. The marriage plot becomes a superficially serviceable but deeply flawed attempt to overcome Sylvia's past, offering platitudes in favor of actual resolution.

Thus, if the flashback represents the excavation of Sylvia's—and, by extension, the African American community's—buried multigenerational trauma, then the marriage plot functions as a disjointed attempt to bury that trauma all over again rather than truly transcend it. As is the case with many sequences in *Within Our Gates*, it is all too easy to dismiss such a thematic shortcoming as a deficiency of the film itself. In actuality, it is part and parcel of Micheaux's true, hidden theme, which is the collapse of such superficial archetypes in the face of remembered racial violence. With this in mind, the failure of the marriage plot to provide an adequate degree of resolution becomes its very point. The failure of the marriage plot is the failure of all narratives that offer moralizing sentiment over genuine resolution, that attempt merely to repress, rather than transcend, the deeply entrenched roots of racial trauma.

VIII. Resolving Sylvia's Story

Looking back to the uplift narrative that occupies the first two acts of the film, much the same can be said. If the frame narrative's transition into Sylvia's story feels impossible, it is because it very much is impossible—or, at the very least, represents an impossibility similar in kind to that of the failed marriage plot. The flashback's hurried insertion into a previously archetypal narrative of racial uplift becomes an intrusion of delayed truth into a seductively optimistic lie, a lie that is a lie specifically because it is incapable of being reconciled with the harsh reality of the flashback. The intensely unstable connection between the flashback and its frame ultimately calls into question the very possibility of racial uplift in light of the buried history of traumatic racial violence that it simply cannot be reconciled with. It is ultimately this same instability that the marriage plot fails to rectify, creating a finished narrative arc defined by its instability both in content and structure. The trauma of Sylvia's past finally becomes visible as a pearl of awful truth nestled uncomfortably within a hollow shell of easy solutions and naive industry, an outcry of pain and rage against the rote platitudes of uplift and patriotism that threatened to conceal a history of remembered violence integral to Micheaux's sense of the Black community. In producing such a work at the junction between classical verbal means of storytelling and the burgeoning visual language of cinema, Micheaux set out to create a film that would force African American stories to move beyond the confines of tired race fictions and to directly respond to the persistently inadequate mediations of racial violence found in all forms of the media of his time. The result is a layered tableau of fractured allusions to cinema, novel, photography, newspaper writing, and American lynching culture at large,

one that expresses their accompanying methods of framing through the broken themes of melodrama and uplift only in an effort to demonstrate the inability of those methods to properly address the lingering impact of racial violence both remembered and contemporary. Sylvia's past, like the course of African American history itself, is very much shaped by a trauma that must be acknowledged as inescapable—that is to say, as wholly invulnerable to superficial modes of narrative representation and combined racial optimism—if it is ever to be confronted head on and, perhaps, truly overcome.

IX. Emil's Escape and Conclusion

But in a final twist within the flashback that is, in light of Sylvia's seeming inability to logically escape the memory of her past, perhaps *Within Our Gates*' single most unexpected narrative turn, it is not the case that Micheaux portrays the trauma of the Landrys' lynchings as beyond escape entirely. For as the elder Landrys are held fast by the mob and the stage is set for the ritual to follow, something remarkable happens: the young Emil Landry escapes, and demonstrates impressive cunning in doing so. He slips out of the noose and runs away, falling to the ground and pretending to be shot when the mob fires upon him, only to leap to his feet and make off with a nearby horse (Figure 10). Emil's flight complicates the sequence's overall grim thesis by showing that lynching, in this single instance, is fallible.

More crucial is the fact that for Emil and Emil alone, both the fate of being lynched and the trauma associated with remembered racial violence become, at least to some extent, escapable. Unique among the Landrys, he frees himself not just from the gallows but from the whole of the remaining narrative. Sylvia, though not herself lynched, is shown grappling with the psychological weight of the events of that Sunday years into the future. It is this trauma that initiates the flashback altogether, and that accordingly marks the interruption of Sylvia's uplift story and the failure of her eventual love story. Emil, by contrast, never once appears in the course of the frame narrative. Micheaux is content to settle Emil's story by leaving it unsettled, allowing escape in and of itself to serve as a form of resolution. By escaping at the moment of trauma rather than living through it, Emil's future is evolved into something like a counterfactual history of Sylvia's own: freed from the traumatic whirlpool into which Sylvia—and, as the film perceives, the entirety of African American communal consciousness—is invariably drawn, Emil is left to chart an ambiguous destiny that likely bears little resemblance to Sylvia's. This marks perhaps one of the subtlest ways in which Micheaux moves his narrative beyond the rigid specifications of its literary forebears, where a seemingly loose plot thread such as Emil's would have been considered shoddy form. But while an unclear destiny may not be the most stable of resolutions, by contrast to the manner in which Sylvia's own attempt at escaping her past through living out an uplift narrative literally collapses into a reprisal of her most traumatic memories, Emil's counterfactual future emerges as a surprisingly complete resolution on its own terms. The lack of a formal resolution to Emil's story, in a sense, becomes more fulfilling than the dysfunctional resolution to Sylvia's.

Remembered racial violence, the film finally argues, can be neither escaped nor appropriately dealt with by relying on tired archetypes and uplifting platitudes. As the disjointed nature of Sylvia's arc suggests, such trauma can only be properly addressed by finding new narrative structures through which to convey it. Revisiting the moment of violence through memory only seems to disruptively recall the trauma to the forefront of Sylvia's existence, just as attempting to ignore or retrospectively ameliorate it through unfit narrative devices offers only a failed attempt at resolution. As Emil's defiance of the noose and his subsequently unresolved future demonstrates, to escape that trauma altogether—to find a way by which the lasting stain of racial violence seen to completion can finally be erased—is only possible by directly evacuating the moment of trauma itself. To those who have already experienced such violence to its fullest extent, such as Sylvia, this route of escape remains an impossibility buried deep in the past and accessible only by reacquiring an innocence that was irretrievably lost at the point of trauma. In the scheme of the film's overarching narrative, Emil's escape becomes something almost fanciful: a dream of untold possibilities violently stolen from Black America, not to be made right with wonderings of what once was and not to be properly addressed by falling back on the narrative rhythms of Micheaux's critical forebears. It is this last point, an impassioned outcry against the perceived narrative obsolescence of Black storytelling in the early twentieth century, that remains the film's

most potent and anguished legacy.

I. Bibliography

Figures

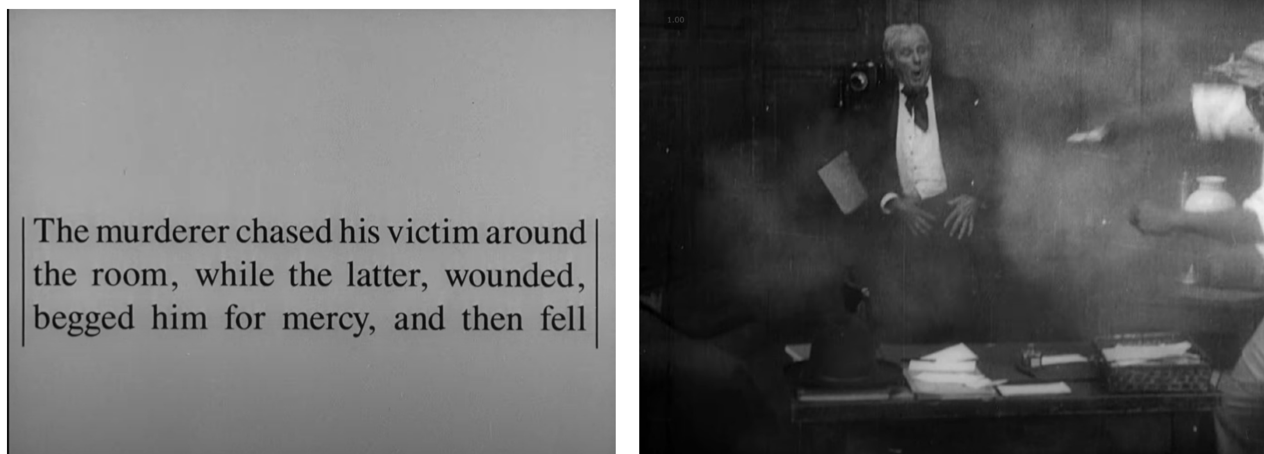

Figure 1. Left, an intertitle displays a quote from a newspaper article purportedly describing Efrem's story of Gridlestone's death. Right, the article's description is immediately translated into visual imagery as a comically evil Jasper Landry (William Starks) shoots a defenseless Philip Gridlestone (Ralph Johnson). Frame from *Within Our Gates* (1920, Oscar Micheaux). Digitized and made available by the Library of Congress.

Figure 2. Left, Efrem (E.G. Tatum) is briefly horrified as the mob he has incited turns on him. Right, the next shot, following a dissolve, shows Efrem's lynched body. Frames from *Within Our Gates* (1920, Oscar Micheaux). Digitized and made available by the Library of Congress.

Figure 3. Left, the lynch mob throws Mrs. Landry (Mattie Edwards) to the ground. Right, Jasper (William Starks) retaliates by attempting to strangle a member of the mob. Frames from *Within Our Gates* (1920, Oscar Micheaux). Digitized and made available by the Library of Congress.

Figure 4. The Ku Klux Klan of *The Birth of a Nation* towers over Gus (Walter Long, in blackface), accused of pursuing protagonist and Klan leader Ben Cameron's (Henry Walthall) sister to her death, before rapidly trying and executing him. Frame from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915, D.W. Griffith), remastered on DVD by Kino Lorber.

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Figure 5. Left, one of several extant photographs of the 1911 lynching of Laura Nelson and her son, L.D. This particular photograph was turned into a postcard; note the copyright etched into the bottom left corner of the image. Photograph by unknown, “The Lynching of Laura Neson and Her Son, Several Dozen Onlookers. May 25, 1911, Okemah, Oklahoma. Gelatin Silver Print. Real Photo Postcard. 5 1/2 x 3 ½.” Courtesy of James Allen, *Without Sanctuary* (website). Right, Micheaux’s filmed version of a similar scene with the lynching of the Landrys (William Starks and Mattie Edwards). Frame from *Within Our Gates* (1920, Oscar Micheaux). Digitized and made available by the Library of Congress.

Figure 6. Left, Armand Gridlestone (Grant Gorman) sneaks up to the cabin that Sylvia has taken refuge in. Right, members of the lynch mob lay kindling to dispose of the elder Landrys’ bodies. These scenes are intercut. Frames from *Within Our Gates* (1920, Oscar Micheaux). Digitized and made available by the Library of Congress.

Figure 7. Left, the mob burns the bodies of Sylia’s (Evelyn Preer) parents. Right, Armand (Grant Gorman) assaults Sylvia; note the portrait of Abraham Lincoln. The two sequences are intercut. Frames from *Within Our Gates* (1920, Oscar Micheaux). Digitized and made available by the Library of Congress.

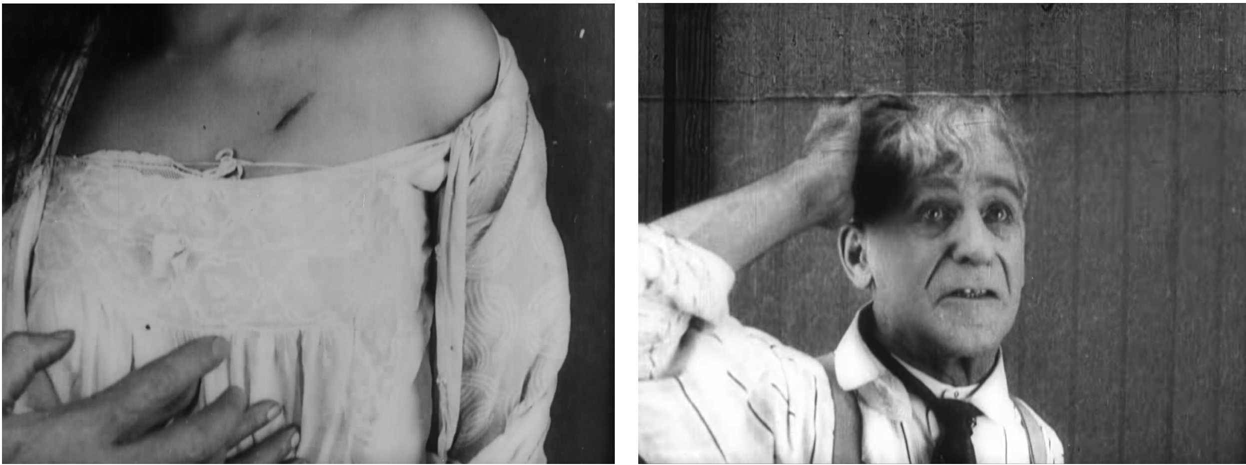

Figure 8. Left, a scar on Sylvia’s (Evelyn Preer) chest reveals that she is Armand’s (Grant Gorman) daughter. Right, Armand recoils in evident horror. Frames from *Within Our Gates* (1920, Oscar Micheaux). Digitized and made available by the Library of Congress.

Figure 9. Left, Dr. Vivian (Charles D. Lucas) expounds to Alma Prichard (Floy Clements). Right, moments later, Vivian secures Sylvia's (Evelyn Preer) hand in marriage as the film draws to a seemingly happy close. Frames from *Within Our Gates* (1920, Oscar Micheaux). Digitized and made available by the Library of Congress.

Figure 10. Left, Emil Landry (Grant Edwards) breaks free from the mob. Right, he makes his escape on horseback. Frames from *Within Our Gates* (1920, Oscar Micheaux). Digitized and made available by the Library of Congress.

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