

IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

Fort Lee Studios: Where the Movie Magic Began

Target Age: High School
Time Period: 20th Century
Featured County: Bergen
NJ 350th Theme: Innovation

NJ Common Core Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.A.6.c, 6.1.12.D.8.b
Social Studies Skills: Chronological Thinking,
Critical Thinking
Language Arts Literacy: 3.1 Reading, 3.2 Writing

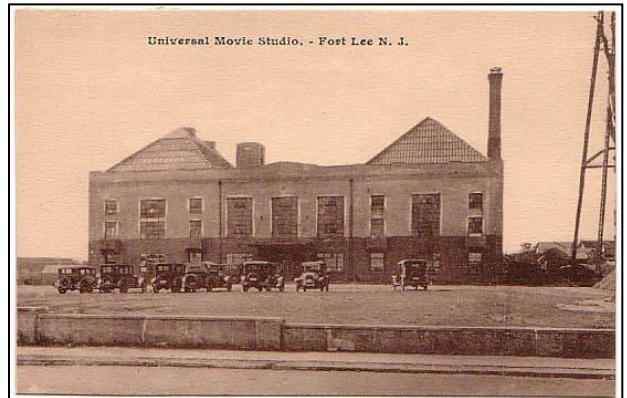


Image courtesy of the Fort Lee Film Commission.

Essential Question: How did New Jersey help shape the origins of the U.S. motion picture industry?

BACKGROUND:

Although most people think Hollywood is the motion picture capital of the world, New Jersey was the real birthplace of the modern film industry. Motion pictures were invented and first produced at Thomas Edison's laboratory and studio in West Orange. Fort Lee—just across from New York City—became a key site for early film production.

During the 1910s, motion pictures infused every aspect of life in this suburban New Jersey community. Filmmakers like D.W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, and Mack Sennett imported entire acting companies across the Hudson River to pose against the Palisades during what became known as the “nickelodeon era.” The likes of Theda Bara, “Fatty” Arbuckle, and Douglas Fairbanks worked in the rows of great greenhouse studios that sprang up in this film boomtown and neighboring communities, and tax revenues from studios and laboratories filled municipal bank accounts.

But just as Fort Lee production facilities were gaining strength, Nestor Studios of Bayonne, New Jersey, built the first studio in Hollywood, CA in 1911. Nestor Studios later merged with Universal Studios. California's more hospitable and cost-effective climate led to the eventual shift of virtually all filmmaking to the West Coast by the 1930s. Fort Lee, the film town once hailed as the center of the U.S. motion picture industry, languished. Stages once filled by Paramount and Universal were leased by independent producers or used as paint shops by scenic artists from Broadway. Most of Fort Lee's film history eventually disappeared, one studio at a time.

ACTIVITY:

One of the most provocative films produced in Fort Lee was “*Within our Gates*” by African-American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. Micheaux intended the film as a response to D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film “*The Birth of a Nation*.” “*The Birth of a Nation*” was a silent film based on the novel and play *The Clansman*, which chronicles the relationship of two families in Civil War and Reconstruction-era America- the pro-Union Northern Stonemans and the pro-Confederacy Southern Camerons -over the course of several years. The film was a commercial success, but was highly controversial because of its portrayal of African-American men (played by white actors in blackface) as unintelligent and sexually aggressive towards white women, and the portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan as a heroic force. There were widespread protests against “*The Birth of a Nation*,” which was banned in several cities. The newly formed NAACP, along with other groups, fought against the film's distribution and published a 47-page pamphlet titled “Fighting a Vicious Film: Protest Against 'The Birth of a Nation.'”

“*Within our Gates*,” produced in 1919, was part of that response. It is the earliest known and complete black film made by an African-American director, and chronicles the fictional story of Sylvia Landry, a black schoolteacher who goes north to raise funds for better schools in the segregated South in the Jim Crow era following the Civil War. It not only explores the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North in hopes of a better life, but it is also a searing indictment against racism, including a emotionally charged climactic lynching sequence (for which students should be prepared).

This activity asks students to compare the ideas of both films. Assign students to watch “*The Birth of Nation*” the weekend before the activity (available for free online at: http://archive.org/details/dw_griffith_birth_of_a_nation). It is long, running 3 hours; if time is a concern, students can watch the first 15 minutes and assign several contemporary reviews of the film instead. These will allow students to explore reactions about the film when it was first released and assess why it was popular with some and problematic for others (these reviews are included at the end of this activity).

Ask students to read W. Fitzhugh Brundage’s “Why I’ll Watch Oscar Micheaux’s ‘Within our Gates’ until I Wear it Out,” *Perspectives, a Journal of the American Historical Association* (August 17, 2010) also included below, then watch “*Within our Gates*” either in class or as homework. Students should take notes (available for free online at: <http://archive.org/details/WithinOurGates> and running 1 hour and 17 minutes). Have students consider:

1. How does the film portray African American capabilities? What can they accomplish?
2. How does it treat relationships between blacks and whites and how does this compare with what appeared in “*The Birth of a Nation*?”
3. How do both films incorporate or react to stereotypes about race?

FOLLOW-UP:

New Jersey continues to be featured in both documentaries and blockbuster films. Have students research the variety of movies that have used the state to set their stage. Are there particular themes, locations, events, or people that have received more attention than others? Is New Jersey always New Jersey, or has it stood in for another location in the country? What potential benefits do film-making offer to the state and its residents? To find answers, encourage them to explore the New Jersey Motion Picture and Television Commission’s website which includes lists of past and current films set in the state, press releases, information about financial incentives...and for those really interested in the field details about student internships (<http://njfilm.org/>).

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Places You Can Visit

Fort Lee Historical Commission: <http://www.thefortleehistoricalsociety.org/>

Fort Lee Film Commission: <http://fortleefilm.org>

Additional Classroom Activities

“Our Story Project,” Bergen County, NJ, Teaching American History Grant, U.S. Department of Education (section on early film industry): <http://sites.bergen.org/ourstory/projects/motionpicture/overview.html>

“The Birth of a Nation and Black Protest,” George Washington University, Center for History and New Media: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/episodes/the-birth-of-a-nation-and-black-protest/>

“Birth of a Nation, the NAACP, and the Balancing Act of Rights,” Edsitement, sponsored by the NEH: <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/birth-nation-naacp-and-balancing-rights>

“Movies for a Nickel: The Nickelodeon,” The First Ladies Library: <http://www.firstladies.org/curriculum/curriculum.aspx?Curriculum=1556>

For More Information

Fort Lee Film Commission, *Fort Lee: Birthplace of the Motion Picture Industry* (Arcadia Publishing, 2006).

Richard Korzarski, *Fort Lee: The Film Town* (Indiana University Press, 2005).

Mary Pickford, “Before Hollywood, There was Fort Lee, N.J.: Early Movie Making in New Jersey” (DVD, Image Entertainment, 2003; run time 146 minutes).

Paul C. Spehr, *The Movies Begin: Making Movies in New Jersey, 1897-1920* (Newark Museum Association, 1977).

VARIETY

March 11, 1915

In the picturization of "The Clansman" Mr. Griffith has set such a pace it will take a long time before one will come along that can top it in point of production, acting, photography and direction. Every bit of the film was laid, played and made in America. One may find some flaws in the general running of the picture, but they are so small and insignificant that the bigness and greatness of the entire film production itself completely crowds out any little defects that might be singled out.

The story of the Dixon novel, "The Clansman," is pretty well known. The Camerons of the south and the Stonemans of the north and Silas Lynch, the mulatto Lieutenant-Governor, the Civil War, the opening and finish of the Civil War, the scenes attendant upon the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the period of carpet-bagging days and union reconstruction following Lee's surrender, the terrorizing of the southern whites by the newly freed blacks and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan that later overpowers the negroes and gives the white men the authority rightfully theirs, all these including some wonderfully well staged battle scenes taken at night are realistically, graphically and most superbly depicted by the camera.

Griffith knows the value of striking, gripping and melodramatic anti-climaxes and also is fully cognizant of the importance of having several big "punches" instead of one for camera visualization. Building up photoplay action and "posing" a picture which would look well re-produced in colors is a natural instinct with Griffith and he's one director who knows how to get action typified intensely.

In "The Birth of a Nation" Griffith took his time and thereby builded well. Thousands of feet of celluloid were used and for some six months or so he and his co-directors worked day and night to shape the story into a thrilling, dramatic wordless play that would not pass out overnight in the minds of the millions who are bound to see this picture before it has been laid away to rest. The battle scenes are wonderfully conceived and show two armies in such natural fighting array it is almost unbelievable that one is looking at a picture, staged by one whose only purpose was to make it get away from the usual stagey phoniness so apparent in numerous picture battle plays. And the departure of the soldiers splendidly arranged. Then the death of the famous martyred president was so deftly and ably handled no one can find any fault.

Of course there are many who will aver that Griffith should have shown the subsequent death of the assassin, John Wilkes Booth, but as he had an arch-villain in the shape of the renegade, Gus, later to deal with severely it was best he stick closer to the story at hand. This same Gus, fiendish and with the lust of the beast in his eye, gives mad chase to the pet sister of "Little Colonel" Ben Cameron and she jumps to her death from a high cliff rather than permit herself to be torched alive by that brute in human form. This was also nicely cameraed.

Then comes the reconstruction period following a camera scene of Grant and Lee ending the war at Appomatox. Harassing scenes showing the persecution of the whites with the Camerons more than getting their share and with Ben Cameron organizing the white-robed Ku Klux Klan which late gives the picture one of the biggest moments of its entire version when it rides down the blacks and later saves a small band of whites about to be massacred alive. Here the renegade Gus is killed.

Griffith picturized an allegorical conception at the end showing what universal peace meant to the nation. Some may not care for it, but in the church neighborhoods and where the staunchest of the peace advocates live it will go with a hurrah. There are something like 12,000 feet of film, but the program says it's all there in two acts. There is an intermission just preceding the stirring days of the carpet-baggery action. Griffith struck it right when he adapted the Dixon story for the film. He knew the south and he

knew just what kind of picture would please all white classes. Some places the censors are going to find fault. That's a persistent way some censors have. That scene of the lashing on the back of the old negro will undoubtedly come in for a full share of criticism. The scene of the "black congress" and the negro removing his shoe may be censured but it's drawn from reported facts. But no matter what the censors censor there will be plenty of film action and interest left to make it the biggest demanded film production of the present century. It's worth seeing anywhere. Many will see it twice, yea thrice and still obtain much satisfaction and entertainment. It's there with a multiple of thrills.

Of the acting company, Henry Walthal made a manly straightforward character of the "Little Colonel" and handled his big scenes most effectively. Mae Marsh as the pet sister does some remarkable work as the little girl who loves the south and loves her brother. Ralph Lewis is splendid as the leader of the House who helps Silas Lynch rise to power. George Siegmann gets all there can be gotten out of the despicable character of Lynch. Walter Long makes Gus, the renegade negro, a hated, much despised type, his acting and makeup being complete. Mary Alden, Lillian Gish, Robert Harron, Jennie and Miriam Cooper deserve mention for their excellent work. The other minor characters were satisfactorily portrayed. Donald Crisp had a good makeup as Grant while Joseph Henabery "posed" most acceptably as Lincoln.

It may not be amiss to pass away from critical comment for the moment to say that as D. W. Griffith, the world's best film director, is and has been responsible for so many of the innovations in picture making, doing more to make filming an art than any one person, so D. W. Griffith has been the first to bring a "\$2 picture" to the box office of a "\$2 theatre." When it was first reported about this "Griffith feature" would retail to the public at a \$2 scale, the picture people shrugged their shoulders, said "50 cents at the most" and let it go at that. But as so many options of pictures and their possibilities have gone wrong, so, it appears, is the belief that there can not be a \$2 picture as erroneous as many of the others. But it is fitting that Mr. Griffith should have so far progressed and advanced in the art he did so much to foster and improve until he became the first director of a successful film that can compete in \$2 theatres with \$2 stage productions. That is the concise picture record of a few years, within ten at the most, and for feature pictures, even less.

"Cabiria" was an admittedly big film production, a spectacle or series of spectacles that held no general interest through the fault of the make or director. It drew in certain territory and even then in a desultory manner. But "A Birth of a Nation" has universal appeal to America at least, and the superbness of this production will gain recognition anywhere, with the story carrying, through perhaps to lesser human interest extent in foreign lands than at home, where the subject is more thoroughly understood.

"A Birth of a Nation" is said to have cost \$300,000. This is rather a high estimate, but other than the money the film represents, its returns are going to be certain. Not alone is this film playing at a \$2 scale in a theatre where the orchestra and operator besides the house staff are the principal necessary force, as against a stage production that might have a salary list of from \$4,000 to \$8,500 weekly, according to the piece, but "A Birth of a Nation" can give as many performances a week as the house wishes it to, and in this particular instance will not give less than 14, two shows daily. The stage production in a \$2 theatre would give eight performances as a rule, perhaps nine and with a holiday intervening, ten. While the Liberty is advertising the Griffith film up to one dollar "with loge seats \$2," the scale is practically a two-dollar one, made so by the demand for seats. "A Birth of a Nation" is a great epoch in picture making; it's great for pictures and it's great for the name and fame of David Wark Griffith. When a man like Griffith in a new field can do what he has done, he may as well be hailed while he is living.

OPPOSE "BIRTH OF NATION."

Washington, D. C.—Officials of the N. A. A. C. P. say they will resist to the utmost any effort on the part of the managers here to show "The Birth of a Nation," which it is said is headed this way. With a failure to suppress the film in Boston, New York, Chicago, Atlantic City and Philadelphia, the lawyers in this city are dubious about the course that should be taken to keep the vile production out of Washington. No objection was raised to "The Nigger," which was played here to such large audiences that it had to make a return engagement. It was shown also at the Howard to overflowing audiences. "The Nigger" had redeeming traits, but the second part of "The Birth of a Nation" is a libel upon a struggling race that was in no wise responsible for the sad conditions growing out of reconstruction days. It may be that the managers will listen to the appeal of the Colored people that they refuse to allow the film (or filth) to be shown in any of the local houses.

AN NAACP OFFICIAL CALLS FOR CENSORSHIP OF *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*

April 17, 1915.
Mr. George Packard
1522 First National Bank Bldg.,
Chicago, Ill.

My dear Mr. Packard:

I am utterly disgusted with the situation in regard to "The Birth of a Nation". As you will read in the next number of the Crisis, we have fought it at every possible point. In spite of the promise of the Mayor to cut out the two objectionable scenes in the second part, which show a white girl committing suicide to escape from a Negro pursuer, and a mulatto politician trying to force marriage upon the daughter of his white benefactor, these two scenes still form the motif of the really unimportant incidents, of which I enclose a list. I have seen the thing four times and am positive that nothing more will be done about it. Jane Addams saw it when it was in its worst form in New York. I know of no one else from Chicago who saw it. I enclose Miss Addam's opinion.

When we took the thing before the Police Magistrate he told us that he could do nothing about it unless it lead to a breach of the peace. Some kind of demonstration began in the Liberty Theatre Wednesday night but the colored people took absolutely no part in it, and the only man arrested was a white man. This, of course, is exactly what Littleton, counsel for the producer, Griffith, held in the Magistrates' Court when we have our hearing and claimed that it might lead to a breach of the peace.

Frankly, I do not think you can do one single thing. It has been to me a most liberal education and I purposely am through. The harm it is doing the colored people cannot be estimated. I hear echoes of it wherever I go and have no doubt that this was in the mind of the people who are producing it. Their profits here are something like \$14,000 a day and their expenses about \$400. I have ceased to worry about it, and if I seem disinterested, kindly remember that we have put six weeks of constant effort of this thing and have gotten nowhere.

Sincerely yours,
Mary Childs Nerney, Secretary.

NAACP Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

MAR 25 1915 5

HENRY STREET SETTLEMENT
NEW YORK

MAIN HOUSE
265 HENRY STREET

March 24, 1915

Dear Miss Nerney:

As I understand it, the committee appointed yesterday was to inquire into the wisdom of the demonstration, and to take steps for its accomplishment, if they decided that it should be made. In thinking further about it, it seems to me that it is not at all necessary to have a big procession. The quality of the people who march, their dignity and the reasonableness of their presentation of the protest will be, I think, what will make the demonstration dramatic and effective. It ought to be, because of these qualities, in striking contrast to the incendiary and unreasonable exhibition at the Liberty Theatre. I think that the head-workers of settlements would march with the colored people, and I think a hundred is as good as a thousand. I also think that it would be a great mistake to give any general invitations to people to march. The impressiveness will depend entirely upon the evidence of careful thought, and the prestige of the people, colored and white, who go to the Mayor.

Will you be good enough to show this to Dr. Du Bois? I infer from what he said that he and I are thinking alike on this matter.

Very sincerely yours

Lillian D. Wald

Miss May Childs Nerney
70 Fifth Avenue, New York

Letter by Lillian Wald to the May Childs Nerney, Secretary of the NAACP, March 24, 1915.

Perspectives on History

The Newsmagazine of the *American Historical Association*

Why I'll Watch Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* until I Wear It Out

By W. Fitzhugh Brundage

I have a weakness for silent movies. I'll watch with pleasure even the most cliché-ridden among them, partly for the mesmerizing visual vocabulary of the films, partly to see early moviemakers working out the narrative grammar of cinema, and partly for the glimpses of random landscapes and material culture—fashions, furnishings, technology—captured in silent movies.

Alas, few of my students share my enthusiasm. Too often the films' stylized acting and overwrought plots elicit laughter or induce napping. Like scratchy 78 recordings, silent films require more concentration and patience than many students possess.

Yet one silent movie that consistently stirs my students' imaginations is Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920). Crammed into 80 minutes is a complex plot of love, betrayal, murder, rape, lynching, gambling, miscegenation, racial uplift, white bigotry, and black migration from the rural South to the urban North. Translated onto film are the hardships of blacks in the Jim Crow era United States, the promises and disappointments of black freedom, and the emergence of the "New Negro." The film is one of the earliest examples, and certainly the most ambitious extant example, of black appropriation of the emerging technology to contest representations of African Americans in mass culture.

Like an overstuffed used bookstore, *Within Our Gates* invites close and repeated inspection. Although I have watched the film countless times, with each viewing I discover something previously overlooked. Micheaux was a neophyte, self-taught filmmaker when he directed the film, and the intricacies of the movie's plot are sometimes difficult to follow. Yet, if the plot is understood as a triptych of related but distinct acts, the film's scope and ambitions become clear, indeed remarkable.

The film opens with the protagonist, Sylvia Landry, a young black woman, visiting her cousin Alma in the North while she awaits her fiancé's return from military service. Harboring designs on her cousin's betrothed, Alma contrives to fix Sylvia up with her brother-in-law, a dissipated card shark. Alma succeeds in catching Sylvia in a compromising situation just as her fiancé returns, prompting him to break off the engagement. Despondent, Sylvia returns south and dedicates herself to teaching at a school for the children of black sharecroppers. Despite the tireless efforts Sylvia and her mentor, Rev. Wilson Jacobs, the school is overcrowded and severely underfunded by local white authorities. Faced with the school's collapse, Sylvia returns to the North to raise funds.

To this point, the film appears to be a romantic melodrama yoked to a story of thwarted racial uplift in the rural South. Micheaux was a self-made man who embraced and proselytized the era's "up by the boot straps" dogma. The son of former slaves, he held odd jobs before homesteading in South Dakota. There, although largely self-educated, he began to write and publish stories and novels, which he sold door to door. Convinced that his semi-autobiographical novel *The Homesteader* was worthy of a film, he secured sufficient funds to form a movie production company and, in 1919, released his first film. A year later, when he made *Within Our Gates*, he continued to promote black uplift while displaying anxiety about corrupting urban influences on rural blacks. Like the jeremiads delivered by contemporary black ministers, Micheaux's film dwelled on the obligation to strive for respectability. As a pioneer black filmmaker working in a medium abounding with invidious racial stereotypes, Micheaux acutely sensed the importance of depicting blacks comporting themselves with decorum and modesty. Even so, he did not shy away from acknowledging those blacks whose behavior, he believed, contributed to stereotypes. In contrast to Sylvia and Rev. Jacobs, who are paragons of respectability, Alma and her brother-in-law personify forms of selfishness and dissolution that impede the race's potential.

The tone and focus of *Within Our Gates* shift markedly when Sylvia journeys north to fundraise. Micheaux resorts to improbable plot contrivances to shift our attention to the poisonous effects of white racism. Already frustrated by her failure to raise money, Sylvia is waylaid by a black thug who snatches her purse. Fortunately, Dr. V. Vivian, a dashing young black man "passionately engaged in social questions," runs down her assailant. A budding romance between Dr. Vivian and Sylvia is abruptly halted when she is struck by an automobile belonging, coincidentally, to a wealthy white philanthropist. After learning of Sylvia's mission, the philanthropist considers donating money to Sylvia's school. A southern friend to whom she turns for advice is appalled that misguided altruism may lead the philanthropist to waste her wealth on blacks, who, the friend insists, cannot and should not be educated. The philanthropist eventually rejects this advice and makes a huge donation to Sylvia's school. Sylvia quickly recovers from her injuries and hastens south with the donation.

Despite the rickety plot turns in this portion of the film, Micheaux offers a searing portrait of the ideology of white supremacy. Overturning prevailing wisdom, portrayed notably in D. W. Griffith's film epic *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Within Our Gates* underscores that racism is fueled by ignorance and hinders national unity. Whereas Griffith's film suggests that the revelation of blacks' true capacities and natures would restore racial unity and fraternity among northern and southern whites, Micheaux counters that if northern whites could see through the fog of white southern bigotry they would recognize that blacks were citizens worthy of both rights and respect.

Micheaux is not naïve about the likelihood of whites achieving such clarity. One of the movie's most poignant vignettes depicts the predicament of "Old Ned," a black preacher who must humiliate himself and attest that "Yes'm. White folks is mighty fine," in order to collect small donations for his church from bigoted whites. After doing so, the preacher stares into the camera and confesses, "Again, I've sold my birthright. All for a miserable mess of pottage. Negroes and Whites—all are equal. As for me, miserable sinner, hell is my destiny." Unlike the black characters in *Birth of a Nation*, who are either bestial or loyal and subservient, Old Ned wears a

mask of deference while harboring resentment and self-loathing, illustrating the psychic pain endured by blacks who comported themselves in accordance with the dictates of white supremacy.

In the final act of the film Micheaux displays his maturing talents as both a storyteller and social critic, exploring his larger concerns—violence and the sexual politics of white supremacy—with exceptional insight. After Sylvia’s return to the South, Dr. Vivian continues to pine for her. He tracks down Alma, who recounts her cousin’s tragic history. In an extended flashback, Dr. Vivian learns that Sylvia was raised by the Landrys, a black family who, in spite of poverty and white opposition, managed to provide Sylvia with a modicum of education. Subsequently, Mr. Landry became embroiled in a dispute with his cruel landlord, Mr. Gridlestone, and was wrongfully accused of his murder. Gridlestone had actually been murdered by an embittered white farmer, but Efram, a fawning black servant of Gridlestone’s, accused Landry to gain the favor of the white mob intent on avenging the planter’s murder. In the film’s climax, Micheaux dramatically juxtaposes the lynching of Mr. Landry and his wife with the simultaneous attempted rape of Sylvia by Gridlestone’s brother. Between scenes of the hanging and burning of the Landrys, Sylvia engages in a frantic struggle with her would-be rapist. During the fight, Gridlestone’s brother notices a distinctive scar on Sylvia’s breast and realizes that he is attempting to violate his own daughter, whom he had fathered with a local black woman. Shocked by his discovery, he allows Sylvia to escape.

In this remarkable scene Micheaux translated the black critique of lynching to film. At a time of mounting black mobilization against lynching, Micheaux pressed his viewers to empathize with the victims of white violence. In Micheaux’s hands lynching and rape were evidence of white, not black, barbarism. In contrast to Gus, the stereotypical black rapist in *Birth of a Nation*, Micheaux’s rapist is a privileged and apparently “respectable” white. And rather than a lamentable but justified act of self-defense, lynching, in Micheaux’s film, is irrational, capricious, and indefensible savagery against innocent and estimable citizens like the Landrys. Although Ida Wells-Barnett and others had leveled similar attacks against lynching, no one had previously shown Micheaux’s talent at translating the denunciation of crime into art. Even present day viewers jaded by the violence commonplace in contemporary films find Micheaux’s rendering of lynching haunting and galvanizing.

The reception of the film and its subsequent history add to its fascination. Given its explosive subject matters and the timing of its release—only months after the deadly race riots of 1919—it was inevitable that Micheaux’s film would run afoul of censors. In Chicago, for example, the Board of Censors stalled for two months before finally approving the film. Elsewhere officials demanded that controversial scenes be cut, prompting Micheaux to screen different versions of the film as local circumstances demanded. Perhaps because of the controversy the film aroused, after its release *Within Our Gates* was lost for decades. Then in the 1970s a single print, entitled *La Negra*, was discovered in Spain. Using that print, the Library of Congress restored the film during the early 1990s. Yet the restoration is at best an approximation of Micheaux’s original production. A brief sequence in the middle of the film is lost and only four of the original English intertitles have survived. (In the restored movie Spanish intertitles were re-translated back into English and an intertitle frame takes the place of a missing sequence.) The virtual erasure of *Within Our Gates* for almost half a century and the elevation of D. W. Griffith’s *Birth*

of a Nation to the status of cinematic masterpiece are telling illustrations of the politics of race and power in twentieth century American popular culture.

After each viewing of *Within Our Gates*, I am struck by Micheaux's audacity and ambition. He sought to appropriate a still primitive medium to depict the complexities of the black experience in America while making a film that would enthrall viewers as interested in spectacle and entertainment as in a message of racial uplift. Like his contemporaries Scott Joplin, Bert Williams, and others, Micheaux was exploring how black social justice could be insinuated into the cultural marketplace. Only now is it possible to appreciate fully how successfully Micheaux achieved these goals in *Within Our Gates*.

—W. Fitzhugh Brundage is the William B. Umstead Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His most recent publication is *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Belknap Press/Harvard Univ. Press, 2005).

CREDIT INFORMATION:

In Classroom Activity:

Pg. 1: Image of Universal Studies, Fort Lee Film Commission.

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