Countering the Frame: Black Journalists and the Politics of Representation in Silent Film

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Silent films played a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of race, often reinforcing White supremacist ideologies through caricatured and dehumanizing depictions of Blackness.[1] Black characters—when visible at all—were frequently portrayed as comic relief, criminals or servants. These roles, often performed in Blackface by white actors, perpetuated harmful stereotypes that distorted public understanding of Black identity, intellect, and capacity.[2] This visual culture extended to representations of Black professionals, including journalists, whose appearances in early cinema were minimal and often grounded in racist assumptions. Such portrayals aligned with broader cultural narratives that framed African Americans as unfit for intellectual or authoritative roles, echoing the ideologies seen in films like D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which cemented many of these racial tropes in United States' film history.

Nonetheless, amidst this landscape of cinematic erasure and distortion, a modest yet significant body of work by Black filmmakers emerged in the early twentieth century that directly contested prevailing portrayals of Black life. This essay specifically focuses on the representation of Black journalists in silent-era cinema—a figure seldom depicted and nearly

[1] Joe Saltzman and Lauren Mitchell, "The Image of the Journalist in Silent Film, 1890 to 1929: Part One: 1890 to 1919," *The IJPC Journal* 7 (2018): 35–244.
[2] Maryann Erigha, "Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change," *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): 78–89.

entirely absent from mainstream narratives. Through meticulous analysis of films such as *Within Our Gates* (1920), *As the World Rolls On* (1921), *The Dungeon* (1922), *The Flaming Crisis* (1924) and *Eleven P.M.* (1928), I contend that Black filmmakers strategically employed the figure of the journalist to construct counter-narratives that affirmed Black intellect, resilience, and modernity.

Drawing from Critical Race Theory and the counter-storytelling framework,[3] I contend that these portrayals offered early cinematic resistance to dominant ideologies, providing visual evidence of Black professional agency and illustrating the critical role of the Black press in exposing racial injustice. While White-owned silent films relegated Black characters to comic relief, servants or criminal figures, Black-directed race films created journalists as protagonists—investigative, principled and community-centered. Examining these rare but powerful depictions expands our understanding of Black media history and highlights how Black filmmakers reclaimed narrative authority during a time of political, cultural and cinematic exclusion.

Framing Black Experiences: Race, Culture and Media in the Early 20th Century

The period between 1910 and the mid-1930s represented a significant cultural and political turning point in African American history. Widely recognized as the era of the "New Negro Movement" and the Harlem Renaissance, this epoch was characterized by prolific artistic, intellectual, and journalistic endeavors by African Americans, alongside the large-scale migration of Black families from rural Southern regions to industrial urban centers in the North. Despite persistent segregation, racial violence, and systemic barriers to advancement, Black communities articulated new dimensions of cultural and political visibility. Prominent figures such as W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes employed

[3] Solorzano, Daniel G., and Tara J. Yosso. "Critical race and LatCrit theory and method: Counter-storytelling." *International journal of qualitative studies in education* 14, no. 4 (2001): 471-495.

journalism, literature, and activism to fundamentally reshape the public discourse concerning Black identity, progress, and resilience.

Simultaneously, African American filmmakers commenced the development of their own cinematic traditions, frequently designated as race films—motion pictures produced by, for, and about African Americans.[4] These films operated as both cultural artifacts and political interventions, offering Black audiences stories that rejected the racist tropes of mainstream cinema. While White-owned silent films often depicted African Americans through the lens of caricature—lazy, hypersexual, angry or unintelligent—Black-directed productions sought to humanize and elevate Black life. Notably, these films offered alternative visions of Black professionals, including doctors, teachers, entrepreneurs and journalists, challenging the limited and harmful portrayals common in White Hollywood.

Among these figures, the Black journalist emerged as a significant symbol of intellect, advocacy, and truth-telling. Emerging concurrently with the rise of the Black press and institutions such as the NAACP—established in 1909 and publicly protesting *"The Birth of a Nation*" by 1915—Black journalists occupied a pivotal position at the convergence of media, resistance, and public influence. Their participation in early race films was deliberate; these portrayals reflected a comprehensive effort by Black cultural producers to present African Americans as civic actors and intellectual contributors, rather than merely victims or entertainers. Although distribution limitations and preservation deficiencies constrained the dissemination of race films, the narratives they conveyed remain an essential archive of Black agency and self-definition during a period marked by systemic exclusion.

[4] Horak, Jan-Christopher. "Preserving Race Films." In *Early Race Filmmaking in America*, pp. 199-230. Routledge, 2016.

This cultural and historical backdrop is essential for understanding the significance of Black journalists in silent-era cinema. In what follows, I turn to specific films—*As the World Rolls On* (1921), *The Dungeon* (1922), *The Flaming Crisis* (1924), and *Eleven P.M.* (1928)—to explore how Black filmmakers used journalism as a narrative tool to resist dominant ideologies, document Black life, and reimagine the role of Black professionals on screen.

This intervention also participates in broader scholarly efforts to reframe early cinematic history through a more inclusive and accurate lens. Scholars such as Jacqueline Stewart have emphasized the importance of race films as tools of cultural resistance and self-definition, challenging the presumed universality of Hollywood narratives. In *Migrating to the Movies*, Stewart demonstrates how African American audiences used race films not only as entertainment but also as vehicles for cultural affirmation and social critique.[5] Similarly, Jane Gaines[6] and Charlene Regester[7] have illuminated the political dimensions of early Black filmmaking, particularly in the work of Oscar Micheaux. By focusing on the figure of the journalist—a symbolic stand-in for public voice, authority and accountability—this essay extends these conversations, highlighting how race film directors articulated an alternate media logic grounded in Black intellect, advocacy and narrative control.

Black Journalists in Silent-Era Race Films: Counter-Storytelling in Practice

Silent-era films rarely featured Black journalists, and when they did—mainly in race films made by Black filmmakers—the portrayals were intentional and transformative. Between 1890 and 1909, only three depictions of Black journalists appeared in silent films, compared to

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[5] Stewart, Jacqueline Najuma. *Migrating to the movies: Cinema and Black urban modernity*. Univ of California Press, 2005.

[6] Gaines, Jane. "White privilege and looking relations: Race and gender in feminist film theory." *Cultural Critique*4 (1986): 59-79.

[7] Regester, Charlene. "The Misreading and Rereading of African American Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux: A Critical Review of Micheaux Scholarship." *Film History* 7, no. 4 (1995): 426-449.

over 2,000 White-presenting journalist characters during the same period.[8] This stark disparity underscores not only systematic exclusion of Black intellectual labor from early cinematic stories but also the radical significance of the few counter-images that existed. Black filmmakers deliberately used journalism to reshape prevailing narratives, portraying Black journalists not as caricatures but as cultural critics, protectors and professionals. While five films are known to depict Black journalists in the silent era—*Within Our Gates* (1920), *As the World Rolls On* (1921), *The Dungeon* (1922), *The Flaming Crisis* (1924) and *Eleven P.M.* (1928), only two—*Eleven P.M.* and *Within Our Gates*—survived and have been accessible for viewing.

This limited survival points to a broader issue: the precarious preservation of early Black cinema. Film preservation is not a neutral act—it reflects those whose histories are deemed worthy of saving.[9] The loss of so many race films complicates efforts to construct a full genealogy of Black media labor and storytelling. Yet, the fragments that do endure offer critical insight into a larger cultural and ideological project—one in which Black filmmakers asserted their right to document and dignify Black life, even within a cinematic landscape structured to marginalize and erase them. In what follows, I first provide a brief synopsis of three of the five films to contextualize how Black journalists were portrayed, followed by a deeper analysis of the two I was able to view directly.

As the World Rolls On (1921): Editorial Authority and Social Commentary

In this 1921 race film, a Black editor of a leading African American newspaper assumes a pivotal role in documenting community events and providing social commentary. Although the entire film is challenging to access, period synopses and secondary literature highlight the

[8] Saltzman and Mitchell, "The Image of the Journalist," 90.

[9] Field, Allyson Nadia. "Archival Rediscovery and the Production of History: Solving the Mystery of Something Good—Negro Kiss (1898)." *Film History* 33, no. 2 (2021): 1-33.; Francis, Terri. "Whose" black film" is this? The pragmatics and pathos of black film scholarship." *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 4 (2014): 146-150.

editor's visibility as a leader and decision-maker within the press.[10] His presence corresponds with the roles of real-world Black journalists of the era—individuals who employed the influence of the Black press to oppose racist policies, advocate for civil rights, and empower Black communities. By centering a Black editor as an authority and intellectual figure, the film subtly challenges the prevailing cinematic association of African Americans with subservience or criminality.

The Dungeon (1922): Investigative Risk and Black Female Agency

Oscar Micheaux's "The Dungeon" introduces a rare and compelling figure: a Black woman journalist who unearths residential segregation and publishes an exposé in a Black newspaper.[11] Her investigative efforts place her in danger; however, she persists, motivated by a dedication to justice. This depiction contrasts markedly with the invisibility of Black women in mainstream journalism films of that period. A significant scene shows her writing alone in a dimly lit room, her posture attentive, with the light highlighting her notebook as she composes an article that confronts institutionalized racism. This portrayal of contemplative solitude—a Black woman documenting truth to power—serves as a cinematic act of resistance and reclamation. Her character exemplifies counter-storytelling: she reinterprets Black experience through her perspective, risking her life to reveal injustice.

The Flaming Crisis (1924): Martyrdom and Moral Journalism

The Flaming Crisis narrates the story of a young African American reporter who uncovers corruption associated with a prominent labor leader and is unjustly accused of

[10] Maryann Erigha, "Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change," *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): 78–89.
[11] William R. Jacobs, "The Age of African American Cinema," *American Book Review* 29, no. 2 (2008): 16.

murder.[12] The film chronicles his transition from a respected journalist to a fugitive pursued for criminal activities, and ultimately to a vindicated truthful narrator. A noteworthy scene depicts the journalist displaying a freshly printed newspaper with his byline prominently visible—an emblem of journalistic authority. The press functions both as a weapon and as evidence in his pursuit of justice. By dramatizing the vulnerability of Black truth-tellers, the film reflects real-world histories in which Black journalists encountered threats, violence, and criminalization for voicing their perspectives. This depiction underscores the journalist's moral integrity, bravery, and dedication to the public good.

Collectively, the portrayals of Black journalists in race films exhibit a remarkable thematic coherence: journalism serves as a conduit for justice, truth, and survival. These individuals are neither mere background extras nor one-dimensional plot devices. Rather, they are purposefully constructed characters designed to reclaim Black visibility and agency within a medium that frequently rendered Blackness either invisible or monstrous.

The Press as Narrative Weapon: Journalism in Within Our Gates (1920)

Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920), the earliest known surviving feature film by an African American director, does not center a Black journalist in the traditional sense. However, the film prominently features newspapers and press discourse as storytelling devices, employing White media rhetoric to reveal and critique the racial violence embedded in early twentieth-century America. Through visual intertitles and narrative moments that mimic

[12] Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, "The Black Press: Soldiers without Swords," *The Oral History Review* 26, no. 1 (1999): 105–106.

headlines and editorials, Micheaux demonstrates how mainstream newspapers served not only to inform but also to mislead, criminalize, and dehumanize Black life.

In one striking scene, a White senator justifies voter suppression legislation through a newspaper column titled, “Law Proposed to Stop Negroes of the Vote.” His quote—"From the soles of their flat feet to the crown of their head, Negroes are undoubtedly inferior beings"—exposes the virulent White supremacy embedded in political discourse and legitimized by the press. Later, another headline describes a lynching as the "accidental death at unknown hands” of a Black man wrongly accused of killing a White man. By placing these false and racially coded statements within simulated newspaper text, Micheaux signals his awareness of the press’s role in shaping racist public sentiment and institutional violence.

Instead of employing the Black journalist as a character, *Within Our Gates* uses the White press itself as a narrative antagonist. The film serves as a cinematic counterargument to the distortions disseminated by the Mainstream media and functions as a visual counter-narrative that amends the historical record. In this context, Micheaux engages in the practice identified by Critical Race Theory as counter-storytelling: exposing dominant ideologies by emphasizing the truths and traumas of marginalized communities.

Although the film’s protagonist is an African American educator rather than a journalist, she nonetheless participates in the act of truth-telling through the medium of education, paralleling Micheaux’s own approach through filmmaking. The use of fictitious headlines, coded editorials, and visual contrasts between media representations and lived experiences renders *Within Our Gates* a compelling text, wherein press discourse functions both as a subject and a site of resistance. This exemplifies journalism not merely as a profession but as a form of propaganda—Micheaux responds not by imitating it but by reconfiguring it.

Eleven P.M. (1928): The Burden of Excellence

Richard Maurice's *Eleven P.M.* offers one of the most comprehensive portrayals of a Black journalist within silent cinema.[13] The protagonist, a newspaper writer and amateur boxer, is entrusted with completing an article on reincarnation by a strict deadline—while concurrently preparing for a boxing match and caring for his loved ones. The narrative, conveyed through a dream sequence, exemplifies his intense endeavor to succeed across multiple domains. Visually, he is depicted as well-dressed, amidst papers, and engaged at his desk late into the night. The ticking clock serves as a symbol of pressure and aspiration. Although the story ultimately remains incomplete, the film effectively articulates the burdens of expectations imposed upon Black professionals in a society that seldom recognizes their complexity or the labor to which they dedicate themselves.

Contrary to the stereotypical depictions of laziness or foolishness often portrayed in films produced in White contexts, the journalist in *Eleven P.M.* is portrayed as ambitious, overextended, and profoundly human. His fatigue should not be regarded as a sign of failure, but rather as evidence of his unwavering dedication to achieving success within a society that is predisposed to oppose him. Maurice provides not merely a character study, but also a critique of the expectations and erasures that characterize the Black experience — rendering this film one of the most sophisticated counter-narratives within the corpus of early African American cinema.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Frame—Journalists, Cinema and Black Modernity

[13] Saltzman and Mitchell, "The Image of the Journalist," 90.

Though infrequent, the portrayal of Black journalists in silent-era cinema offers a powerful counter-narrative to dominant White representations of African Americans in early film. While mainstream silent cinema often depicted Blackness as indolent, criminal, or intellectually inferior, Black filmmakers presented journalists as thoughtful, ambitious, and courageous advocates of truth. Through an analysis of films such as *Within Our Gates* (1920), *As the World Rolls On* (1921), *The Dungeon* (1922), *The Flaming Crisis* (1924) and *Eleven P.M.* (1928), this essay demonstrates how Black-directed race films employed journalism not only as a narrative device but also as a political and cultural assertion of modern Black identity.

Grounded in Critical Race Theory and particularly the tenet of counter-storytelling, these films disrupted dominant cinematic tropes by asserting Black agency through visual and narrative techniques. The portrayals of Black journalists were not simply symbolic gesture; they represented a deliberate reclamation of authorship over Black life and intellect in a period marked by racial violence, political disenfranchisement and systemic erasure. Though only a handful of these films survive, the ones that do—particularly *Eleven P.M.* and *Within Our Gates*—reveal how journalism functioned both as a storytelling tool and a cultural weapon. The Black journalist, rarely granted visibility in mainstream films, becomes a proxy for the filmmaker, reshaping dominant public discourse and asserting truths often suppressed by the White press. In this way, the essay not only contributes to our understanding of Black media history but also affirms the enduring influence of Black storytelling traditions in challenging systems of oppression and providing pathways to historical redress, cultural resilience and intellectual legacy.

Moreover, the themes explored in these early films remain profoundly relevant today. Contemporary Black journalists continue to navigate structural barriers to authority, credibility,

safety and voice, often working under the weight of racialized scrutiny and institutional resistance. The legacy of these silent-era portrayals, then, is not confined to history—they form part of a living tradition of media-based resistance and narrative reclamation. Recognizing this lineage underscores the continued significance of Black cinematic authorship and journalistic labor as vital sites of cultural resilience and truth-telling in the face of enduring inequities.