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## *The Birth of a Nation: The Case for a Tri-Level Analysis of Forms of Racial Vindication*

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*The Birth of a Nation*: The Case for A Tri-Level Analysis of Forms of Racial Vindication

by

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

Early American film scholars often critique the relative ineffectiveness of a single literary work, protest movement or silent film to achieve effective racial vindication following the release of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Thomas Cripps, for example, examines a relatively ineffective isolated attempt to counter the notions of White supremacy promoted in the film. This study makes the case for applying a non-traditional tri-level analysis when measuring the effectiveness of such attempts. The paper focuses on efforts to redeem the image and the potential of African Americans after 1915 in the Black public sphere in three concurrent vehicles: the written word, the activism of individuals and progressive organizations and the production of silent films. The study defines and distinguishes between racism, anti-racism and racial vindication. Racial vindication is the method used by the men and women that this study focuses on.

The paper begins by documenting how notions of White supremacy and Black inferiority were at the root of America's socio-cultural atmosphere during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This set the stage for D. W. Griffith's movie. The study then looks at how contemporary scholars in the 1910s and 1920s -- writers, visual artists, civic and community leaders and film makers -- attempted to counter Griffith's propaganda through various means. I argue that there is considerable merit in analyzing the combined efforts of these outspoken men and women to attempt to rescue the humanity of African Americans from Griffith's clutches in three broad arenas. My argument does agree with many film scholars that no one single act of racial vindication sufficiently challenged the effectiveness of *The Birth of a Nation*. We use as a case study the silent film *The Birth of a Race* (1918). When this film is considered in isolation, it does have a minimal affect on stemming the tide of racism in America. This is precisely the point of this thesis.

No prominent Griffith scholar has published a comprehensive study that considers how literature, sociopolitical activism and silent film all worked in concert to combat the impact *The Birth of a Nation* had

on America. This paper does so. It contributes to the historiography of early American silent film and the racial vindication movement by calling for a triangular analysis and validation of the cumulative impact varied forms of resistance had on representations of White supremacy in *The Birth of a Nation*. Chapter III and the study's conclusion comment on the benefits that such an analysis contributes to future studies of racial vindication in response to artistic expressions deemed to be racist.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the genesis and the cultural context of the racist theories, science and scholarship that painted the national landscape in 1915, leading the way for filmmaker D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*?
2. What influence did the traditions of racial vindication and of a Black public sphere play in motivating writers, activist organizations and film makers (with emphasis on *The Birth of a Race* a case study) to counter the notions of White superiority and Black inferiority?
3. What are the differences between racism, anti-racism and racial vindication, and were these movements in play following the release of *The Birth of a Nation*?
4. What lessons can we learn from conducting a cross-genre analysis of the racial vindication movement in America in response to *The Birth of a Nation*?

## **THE ARGUMENT**

I argue that by scholars applying a comprehensive tri-level (genre) analysis of the racial vindication movement in the Black public sphere in America, following the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), they provide a more effective assessment of the cumulative viability of varied responses to the film than does the more commonly applied single-genre analysis.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The argument uses qualitative research, supported by archival research that makes use of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources used in the study include the films *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the film *The Birth of a Race* (1918) and early twentieth century newspaper articles. The literature review relies heavily on secondary sources including essays, pamphlets, web sites, plays and books. Reference material comes from the University of South Florida (USF) Library, USF Special Collections, the Hillsborough County Public Library John F. Germany Main Library History Division - Special Collections, the Tampa Bay History Center Witt Research Library, the New York, N. Y. Public Library Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the USF Library Services Website, internet websites and from the personal library of the author.



## INTRODUCTION

U. S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan said in his dissenting opinion in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896, "In the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here ... Our Constitution is colorblind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humble is the peer of the most powerful." Unfortunately, the majority of the justices declared that just the opposite would be the law of the land. And in 1915, David W. Griffith said in his *A Plea for the Art of the Motion Picture*, "We do demand, as a right, the liberty to show the dark side of wrong, that we may illuminate the bright side of virtue." In Griffith's metaphor, Black people represented what was wrong with America and White people stood for what was right in the country.

These contrasting statements, made by two White Kentucky-born sons of the South, in many ways represent an important consideration of this study. Ephriam Katz refers to Griffith in the *Fourth Edition of the Film Encyclopedia* as, "the single most important figure in the history of American film, and one of the most influential in the world to the development of world cinema as an art." In the mind of film maker Griffith African Americans were born an inferior race. He believed that for the purpose of conventional identification, their darker complexion was divine evidence of their natural inferiority. In the quotation cited above Griffith uses the words "bright" and "virtue" to state his case for White supremacy. Post-Reconstruction White America was receptive to Griffith's racist beliefs and eager to celebrate the racial stereotypes found in *The Birth of a Nation*. This paper begins by documenting some of the nineteenth century's socio-political history that ushers in Griffith's rise to fame (Katz 2004).

The study also touches on how for hundreds of years before the *Plessy* decision, scholars, politicians, ministers, artists, slave owners (including Harlan's parents) and their sympathizers promoted the notion of White superiority in numerous venues. Courageous White abolitionists, Blacks who rebelled against race prejudice and others who supported their position fought a constant battle that intensified

after Reconstruction ended in the 1870s. Within the next forty years the number of Blacks who were lynched in America rose at an alarming rate. Coincidentally, this occurred at the same time the silent film industry made its entry onto the national scene.

Harlan's dissent is noted in this paper as an outstanding example of racial vindication. It is well meaning but has negligible value when considered in isolation. The justice deserves credit, however, for signaling from the highest court in the land that African American humanity deserved vindication. Harlan's statement indicates to scholars that his attitudes about race (like that of many others) evolved over time. In 1863 he opposed President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Harlan's dissent in the *Plessy* case may be considered one brick in a wall (slowly being constructed after the Civil War) that sought to bolster the worth of Black people in America. This paper places Harlan's dissent and numerous other expressions of the humanity of African Americans in a broad category -- racial vindication -- whether they be in the form of books, newspaper articles, social movements, silent film, etc. When taken in isolation each venue may have considerable limits in how effective it was. This paper argues for considering the collective effectiveness of these efforts. Together these efforts helped pave the road to resistance that slowly changed many attitudes about race in America approaching the 1930s.

This study addresses how to best measure the impact of others who -- like Justice Harlan -- used their positions of influence in the public sphere to attempt to rescue the humanity of African Americans from the degradation caused by centuries of abuse, neglect and murder. The people whose work this study illuminates used their skills to express their opinions and facts by conducting research and by writing, leading progressive organizations and by creating films that all had redemption as their goal. This paper argues that when scholars like Cripps consider only individual responses (one newspaper editorial, march or silent film) they fail to factor in complimentary movements that occurred simultaneously in early twentieth century America. Therefore, the study advocates the use of a more comprehensive analysis for this movement toward racial vindication.

Houston A. Baker, Jr. argues for the importance of acknowledging the significant role the Black public sphere plays in America. He pinpoints October 16, 1995, the date one million African American men ascended on the national mall in Washington, D. C., as one of the greatest public demonstrations of

what this study classifies as an expression of racial vindication. The public space these men occupied with their bodies during the Million Man March represented for them a platform on which they could affirm their determination to take the responsibility for their future into their own hands. One leader, Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, was credited with calling for the march. But the implications of the public appeal to manhood on the mall that day crossed over the lines of religion, class, disability, sexual orientation, age, marital status and political affiliation. Black men (and women) also rallied around a common cause in the early twentieth century through the written word, public protests and silent film. They responded to nineteenth century Jim Crow segregation, violence and disenfranchisement with the tools available to them during that period (Baker 2001, 52).

Baker gives us the hope that Black people can regenerate this kind of mass action that gives rise to the aspirations of people of color and, consequently, to all of America. He says, "We are now the last best hope and potential resource for twenty-first century renewal of possibilities of public-sphere empowerment and good life advantages for the Black American majority." This is the same kind of hope the defenders of the race stood upon when they wrote, spoke out, protested as groups and produced silent films prior to and after 1915, the year *The Birth of a Nation* entered the American scene (Baker 2001, 71).

## **CHAPTER I**

### **The Genesis of White and Black Stereotypes In American Culture**

This chapter illustrates how by 1915 America was well prepared to embrace a new way to celebrate the long-held notions of White superiority and Black inferiority. Steven Mailloux says in *Rhetorical Power* that such an analysis of the reception of a film, "must be placed within the cultural conversations, relevant social practices, and constraining material circumstances of its historical moment." Mailloux says this history is temporary and shifts as the culture shifts its values. We agree. The period in which Griffith did his early work ushered in Jim Crow segregation and violence against Black people. This made lynching and other forms of intimidation and violence common occurrences. This New Era racism played on the fears of small farmers who were told that huge industries would give "White men's jobs" to Blacks (Mailloux 1989, 134).

### **The Impact of Racist Literature and Oratory During the "Nadir Years"**

At the turn of the twentieth century White supremacists targeted for harassment successful African Americans who had for a brief time enjoyed the fruits of Reconstruction. From 1870 to 1898 twenty-two Black men were elected to the U. S. Congress. Hundreds more served as deputy sheriffs, tax collectors, state legislators and successful business owners. Black schools headed by African American principals and teachers opened throughout the deep South. Griffith vilified these Black leaders in *The Birth of a Nation*. Resentful White supremacists often burned down these people's homes, businesses and churches. Or worst, they killed many of them without cause. These vigilantes rode under names like the White Camellia in Texas, Knights of the Rising Sun in Mississippi, the White Line, the Pale Faces, White Brotherhood, Seymore Knights or the Invisible Empire. A favorite accusation against these Black men was that they had raped or insulted White women. This chapter examines the cultural markings that ushered in *The Birth of a Nation* (Katz 1986, 31).

Since the arrival of the first Africans on North American shores scholars, writers, politicians and entertainers have expressed popular racist beliefs in literature, oratory, songs, cartoons and other forms of communication. In the first years of the twentieth century a former actor named David W. Griffith tried his hand at the art of film directing. The stars aligned for Griffith and writer Rev. Thomas Dixon and the movie they created in 1915 marked an epoch in early American film history. It allowed them to walk through the doors of dozens of theaters, churches and social halls with a powerful tool for spreading propaganda about race. Adoring audiences all across America and abroad cheered their creation -- *The Birth of a Nation*. The recently improved vehicle for dramatizing age-old racist stereotypes, with some fascinating innovations thrown in, was silent film!

Joe Feagin uses the phrase "White racial frame" to describe the systemic racism that is deeply rooted in institutionalized structures of, "white created racial oppression of color." Feagin points out that when the Pilgrims arrived in America from England in 1620 (protesting in part against what they viewed as a corrupt Anglican church) they brought with them their belief in a social order that recognized class, "racial and gender inequities and stratification." Nell Painter details at great length how this theory was shared and expanded upon by men like Immanuel Kant (called the inventor of the concepts of "race" and "whiteness"), Johann Fredrich Blumenbach (who introduced the term "Caucasian"), Paul Brocca, Samuel George Morton (whose collection of human skulls was greatly admired), Charles White, Louis Agassiz and R. W. Gibbs in the 1800s and early 1900s (Gould 1981)(Feagin 2012) (Feagin 2012, pp. 2-3) (Painter 2010).

Agassiz focused much of his philosophy on how amalgamation undermined the goal of racists to maintain a pure, untainted White nation. He warned Caucasians that the, "sexual receptiveness of housemaids and the naivete" of "young Southern (White) gentlemen would lead to ultimate danger for America." Agassiz justifies the indiscretions of young White men by attributing these acts to the lusts of Black women for the bodies of White southern gentlemen. The theme of Black men lusting for White women runs throughout *The Birth of a Nation* (Gould 1981).

As it did in all other facets of early American life, racism found its place in the field of entertainment. prior to 1915. "Minstrelsy was the most popular form of public mass entertainment in nineteenth-century

America before vaudeville and musical comedies," Mailloux says. He points out how Americans underwent a socialization that dictated what acceptable behavior looked like. Mark Twain, in spite of his liberal treatment (for the day) of his subject matter in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, did not escape much of the same racist stereotyping of other books of the era. Ralph Ellison argued in 1958 that, "Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition." Alas, none of Twain's literary contemporaries linked *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to the larger topic of racism in America in the 1880s. A more important issue for them at that time was the threat of the "Bad-Boy Boom" to society. Mailloux traced this overriding concern about juvenile delinquency to 1883 and George W. Peck's story *Peck's Bad Boy*. Popular dime novels that told of the exploits of mischievous youth became a concern for adults. And in 1885, when *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published, the *New York World* ran a review of the book "Mark Twain's Bad Boy" (Mailloux 1989).

The Concord Free Public Library took Twain's book off its shelves, while the *Springfield, Mass. Republican* and the *New York World* supported the Concord ban. The point here is that a practical man's priorities are dictated by the contemporary issues that command his attention. *The Birth of a Nation* and its world of stereotypes was destined to fit in nicely with the atmosphere of bigotry that dominated the land in the early twentieth century (Mailloux 1989).

Between 1852 and 1861 (the nine years leading up to the Civil War) writers who sought to bolster the status quo and celebrate White supremacy wrote twenty-seven plantation novels. The writers of these books merely picked up where their predecessors left off in documenting their belief in polygenesis. Dixon grew in his determination to join those who preceded him in setting the record straight about the inequality of Whites and Blacks once and for all. Doing so would allow him to claim his place as a defender of his race and to pay tribute to the ideals his family handed down to him. This early work paved the way for the ideas that later manifested themselves in *The Birth of a Nation* (Williams 2001).

Rayford Logan called the period between 1877 and 1915, "the nadir years." He believed that this era represented a lost generation for African American advancement for one primary reason. As damning as they were, it was not so much because of the rise in incidents of lynching, grinding poverty through peonage and an abusive system of sharecropping. Nor did it deserve that designation primarily because

of the political disenfranchisement and segregation that Blacks endured. Logan said, "it was the sense of abandonment by the Republican Party," that most damaged the aspirations of African Americans during these years. This paper presents supporting evidence of how these ideas dominated the culture into which Griffith stepped with *The Birth of a Nation* (Bernardi 1996) (*The Tampa Tribune*, 5, June 12, 2013).

Brinton's *Races and Peoples: Lectures on the Science of Ethnography* (1890), for example, helped transform anthropology from a, "romantic past time to an academic discipline." He elevated the age-old stereotypes about the inferiority of Blacks into the realm of "scientific" facts. Like his predecessors he compared African Americans to apes. And with Radical Reconstruction on the wane. Briton's scholarship legitimized social movements of the late nineteenth century. Lee D. Baker traces many similarities between Briton's theories and much of the logic found in the majority opinions in the *Plessy* decision. Briton's work inspired new minstrel shows, trading cards and sheet music that helped popularize "coon songs." These forms of racist entertainment (and misguided education for many illiterate people) were popular at a time when still photography was being converted to moving pictures (Baker 1998).

In 1896, while the *Plessy* decision was being debated in the Supreme Court, Frederick L. Hoffman published his problematic volume *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*. Hoffman. The statistician for the Prudential Life Insurance Company was convinced that, "the alarmingly high rates among African Americans of tuberculosis, syphilis, gonorrhea, illegitimacy and criminal activity was caused by abject immorality". He called this immorality a, "heritable race trait ... the colored race is shown to be on the downward grade" This "evidence" gave men like Dixon and Griffith the social scientific authority from which to spread their ideas about the inferiority of Blacks with virtual impunity. It also influenced many local governments and health care agencies to neglect the many needs of Black people (Baker 1998, 79).

### **Dixon, Griffith and Racism in Early Silent Film**

Racism was the theme of dozens of silent film shorts long before 1913, when Dixon and Griffith conceived the idea of producing *The Birth of a Nation*. The Mutoscope and Biograph Company produced three film shorts in 1896 that celebrated racist stereotypes: *Hard Work*, *Watermelon* (sic) *Feast* and *Dancing Darkies*. These films were typical of others during this period that ridiculed African Americans by

portraying them as primitive, clumsy, ignorant, immoral and not to be trusted. Unlike some of his first works, many of the vignettes Thomas Edison produced between 1897 and 1900 were demeaning to African Americans. These films had titles like: *Buck Dancer* (1898), *Watermelon Contest* (1899), the *Edison Minstrels*, *Minstrels Battling in a Room* and *Sambo and Aunt Jemima: Comedians* (Schickel 1984).

Edison and other White men in the business at the turn of the twentieth century could have continued to produce films that represented Black people as they were -- as soldiers, as workers and as children who loved mischief like all others did. Instead, Edison joined the band of film executives who discovered that the public could not get enough of seeing moving images of Black people playing the fool. It amused them and reinforced in their psyches what they had been told for as long as they could remember about Negroes. The paying public made it worthwhile for the film industry to make more and more of these films, as the profits rolled in. How was Black America to compete against such odds? It competed in this war of images and ideas in the only way it could: it produced numerous responses to the racism in *The Birth of a Nation* by using various weapons at its disposal !

Dixon was born in Kings Mountain (Shelby) North Carolina on January 11, 1864 during the final stages of the Civil War. He was the son of loyal Confederates. Dixon's father and uncle told him stories of how in 1868-1869 they helped organize the Cleveland County Chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. At the age of eight Dixon and his uncle attended a session of the South Carolina Statehouse. That same year Dixon's father taught him that Harriett Beecher Stowe's 1852 book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a romanticized and distorted story that did not do justice to the true story of the fall of the mighty South. Stowe's volatile tale of a sympathetic Uncle Tom matched against the South's oppressive system of exploitation was followed by a mighty backlash of racist literature in America. Years later Dixon would join this tradition (Gossett 1965).

Once he completed high school Dixon enrolled in Wake Forrest College along with brothers Clarence and Frank. He wrote his first play, *From College to Prison*, for the Wake Forrest student newspaper. This early work told the story of a student who was arrested for being a member of the Ku Klux Klan, a familiar subject area for the lad and one he would return to again and again. He graduated in



1883 with numerous honors and enrolled in graduate school at Johns Hopkins University. There he made the acquaintance of Woodrow Wilson, a man destined to become president of the United States. Meanwhile, the public consciousness that dominated American culture during this era was created by theories that supported White supremacy. These beliefs were consistently supported by men like Winthrop, Mather, Edwards, Blumenbach, Broca, Morton, Agassiz and Galton (Slide 2004).

Upon seeing Aikens' Uncle Tom drama as an adult Dixon became determined to convert *The Clansman* into a stage play. He was convinced of the truth as spoken in a line taken from *The Clansman*: "But for the Black curse, the South would be today the garden of the world." Dixon eventually wrote three books (his Reconstruction Trilogy) that told what he considered to be the true story of the fall of the glorious South after the War Between the States (Slide 2004, 282).

When traveling on the lecture circuit Dixon saw George L. Aikens' stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was the story he first learned of as a boy while sitting at his father's feet. This experience rekindled in him the desire to tell this story to secular audiences from the South's point of view. In 1902 he began writing his first book, *The Leopard's Spot*. This was his opportunity to rebut Stowe's position that demonized the South and the institution of slavery. He quickly followed his first book with *The Clansman* and then with *The Traitor*. Dixon documented various acts of terror, murder and rape which he alleged had been committed by Blacks against Whites. He argued that these frequent vicious acts of violence that African Americans perpetrated against innocent Caucasians justified retaliatory behavior -- in the name of justice -- by the Ku Klux Klan. Dixon referred to the KKK as a, "Law and Order League." This Invisible Empire of white-robed Anglo-Saxon Knights was simply the old answer for organized crime.

Dixon claimed that contrary to criticism he received, he loved the Negro. He said he was sympathetic to his plight in life and that he believed that the Black man, "should have the opportunity for the highest, noblest and freest development of his full rounded manhood." Yet in his books, plays and speeches he made it clear that Negroes should not expect to reach their full potential (such as Whites do) in the United States, neither in the North or in the South. He also believed that if Blacks were given the vote it would lead to total integration throughout the country. This would result in social equality, he believed, and eventually to wide-spread miscegenation. Dixon followed the dictates of his elders and

peers while ignoring the accomplishments of intelligent, talented Black men like Frederick Douglas, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Alain Locke and Monroe Trotter (Slide 2004, p. 46-47).

Sandra Gunning notes that, "The Klansman makes a brief appearance in (Dixon's ) *The Leopard's Spot* ... but they ride in full force into the pages of *The Clansman*, the second book in the trilogy". Dixon dedicated *The Clansman*, "to the memory of a Scotch-Irish leader of the South, my Uncle, Colonel Leroy McAfee, Grand Titan of the Invisible Empire Ku Klux Klan." Daniel Bernardi sums up the film *The Birth of a Nation*, based on *The Clansman*, in a few words: "Eden established, lost and restored." Dixon used his interpretation of the bible and of the Constitution of the United States to paint an ideal world in *The Clansman* where kindly plantation masters are the world's heroes. It was, he reasoned, the master's place to unite the White South and the White North (Gossett 1965) (Williams 2001).

Dixon's play *The Clansman* opened in Norfolk, Virginia September 22, 1905. He spared little expense in giving the production as much realism as possible. Dixon paid to have trained riders straddle across live horses (both men and horses were draped in full Ku Klux Klan regalia) as the beasts galloped across the stage. His main actors, as usual, were Whites in blackface. Emotions ran high throughout the performance at the play's premiere just as they would less than ten years later when the film debuted. More than a hundred Blacks were lynched each year in the United States during the early 1900s. And we surmise that *The Birth of a Nation* contributed to the national frenzy that condoned lynching as a means of keeping African Americans in their place (Baker 1998, 248) (Dagbovie 2010).

Dixon partnered with George H. Brennan and his Southern Amusement Company to produce additional performances of his play *The Clansman* through 1910. Interest in the production began to wane after it reached Toledo, Buffalo and Boston. But by then Dixon had seen the growth in the number of people who embraced his book *The Clansman* and the play by the same name. "His next step," says Johnson, "was to move to the most popularly priced houses possible -- the movie theatre." And that is where the collaboration between Dixon and Griffith proved to be the most potent connection for promoting racism that the public had ever witnessed (Johnson 2007).

While Dixon was launching a successful career as a minister, author and playwright, Griffith was pursuing his dream of becoming an actor. Griffith heard many tales from his father Jake about the elder's gallant service to the Confederacy during the war. D. W. was born January 22, 1875 on a 264-acre farm near Crestwood, Kentucky in Oldham County. His father rose to the rank of colonel (and possibly breveted Brigadier General), C. S. A. He was a largely self-trained physician and surgeon and demonstrated his bravery under fire by remaining on the battle field at least twice after being wounded. His service was considered extraordinary, considering that Kentucky was a border state and had divided loyalties (Schickel 1984).

The elder Griffith's dedication to Southern ideals was not unique. Stetson Kennedy argues that the Civil War did not really end at Appomattox: Confederate soldiers merely traded in their uniforms for the masks of night riders and engaged in guerrilla actions against those who opposed White supremacy. The public sphere that Griffith was exposed to as a youth prepared him to glorify White supremacy and the Klan as an adult just as he did in *The Birth of a Nation* (Schickel 1984).

Anthony Slide notes that Dixon had the idea (while Griffith provided the creative genius) to make the film. "As a team ... they were unique in American history up to this time and, ultimately, far beyond," he says. Griffith got some of his inspiration from Thomas Nast's 1868 *Harper's Weekly* cartoon "This is a White Man's Government." By the time Griffith first screened the film January 1, 1915 for a small group of people in Riverside, California, success was all but assured (Slide 2004, p. 82-83) (Stokes 2007) (Painter 2010, p. 203-204, 250).

Griffith initially estimated that the film could be done on a budget of \$40,000. Dixon proposed selling Griffith the screen rights for \$25,000, paid in advance. In the end, Dixon settled for \$2,000 in advance and 25% of the film's profit. It turned out to be a prosperous investment for Dixon as *The Birth of a Nation* earned the highest gross of any film for the next twenty-four years. He walked away with more than \$1,000,000 profit (Johnson 2007) (Williams 2001) (Schickel 1984).

Griffith illustrated a different twist to Agassiz's analogy about interracial affairs when he turned his focus to one of the most controversial sequences in *The Birth of a Nation*. In the second half of the film Griffith's Black Gus character (in reality White actor Walter Long in blackface) pleaded for the hand in

marriage of White Flora (Little Sister). She rejected his plea and fled as Gus chased her through the woods. Rather than submit to his advances Flora threw herself off a cliff and fell to her death. When the audience next saw Gus's face many in the theater who saw the film cried for "the rope." This was the scene most objected to by critics. Griffith sent the audience two key messages here. First, he demonstrated that it was better for a White woman to commit suicide than to choose a Black man for her mate. And second, he confirmed his approval of White vigilantism. They could (indeed, were expected to) take justice into their own hands when Blacks crossed the line. Griffith was convinced that the Klan was necessary after the Civil War to, "reestablish the civilization" (Gould 1981) (Griffith 1915) (Slide 2004, 29).

Wilson's 1902 *History of the American People* became a guide post for Griffith to follow in his film work. Wilson had leaned heavily in his writings on the scholarship of his predecessors on the topics of White supremacy and Black inferiority. *The Birth of a Nation* frequently quoted Wilson, particularly in the opening lines of the second act that accompany the film (Jozajtis 2001) (Bernardi 1996).

Griffith was raised around Blacks, who as slaves had belonged to his father before emancipation. He recalled that as a boy at his father's death bed, "the four old niggers were standing at the back of the foot of the bed weeping freely. I am quite sure they really loved him." Griffith believed that the only proper place for Blacks living in America was under the subjection of Whites and in their service. This belief is rooted in the age-old racist notion that Black adults in American society should be considered as children in need of the guidance of benevolent Whites. This was never more evident than in the film that set the tone for the silent film industry -- *The Birth of a Nation* (Schickel 1984).

One important Black character had the distinction of being the first to be named. Donald Bogle says, "In the beginning there was an Uncle Tom." When Uncle Tom appeared in a 1903 silent film that ran twelve minutes he did become the first Black character identified by name. The film short was directed by former mechanic Edwin S. Porter, who could have taken his character from Stowe's book. And in the hands of future directors during the twentieth century, the name may have changed but the characteristics of the docile, faithful harmless servant remained the same. Bogle says that other Black caricatures that took their place next to Uncle Tom in film were the mammy, the coon, the tragic mulatto

and the one Griffith introduced in *The Birth of a Nation*, the Buck (played by the evil Gus character) (Bogle 1973).

The Biograph Company that Griffith helped shape from 1908 to 1913 was a major player in fashioning the racial conventions that would dominate the early silent film industry. It produced *Nigger in the Woodpile* and *The Chicken Thief* before hiring Griffith. Black servants were always represented in film as trusted souls who were loyal to a fault to their masters. Hollywood, thus, was defining appropriate behavior for all African Americans. Black entertainers, when used at all, were never identified by name. Aggressive Black male characters all met tragic fates and Black women were portrayed as unattractive or having loose morals. White actors in blackface played all significant Black roles. And when Black extras became a necessity in crowd scenes they remained anonymous (Schickel 1984) (Bernardi 1996) (Leab 1975).

After working at Biograph for five years Griffith became disenchanted. The company exercised considerable control over him and his work. Although he was the creative backbone of the business Biograph did not give him billing for directing his films. So on September 29, 1913 he declared his independence. Griffith ran a full-page advertisement in the *New York Democratic Mirror* proclaiming that he had been the, "Producer of all great Biograph successes." He was convinced that he could advance his career by leaving not only Biograph but also by leaving New York, where powerful film executives monopolized the industry. He relocated to Los Angeles, California and accepted a \$16,500.00 annual salary from brothers Harry and Roy Aiken of the Majestic Company. The Aikens were Mid-West film exchangers who were eager to partner with Griffith. In this way Griffith helped invent Hollywood (Schickel 1984).

Early in 1915, shortly before *The Birth of a Nation* came on the scene, Fox debuted the racist film *The Nigger*. Based on Edward Sheldon's play of the same name the movie was a sign of worst things to come that year for African Americans. To their credit Fox re-titled the film *The New Governor*. But the film's message was the same as in countless others before it: Whites are the chosen people of God and Blacks are to be their subjects. Robert and Frances Flaherty said, "Early in the Progressive Era Dixon and Griffith trumped Stowe's race card -- as well as that of numerous other artists. They inverted the

racial polarities in society by showing the dangers to White women threatened by emancipated black men in *The Clansman* and in *The Birth of a Nation*" (Williams 2001, 5) (Roby 1994, 180).

Griffith set about gathering financial support for the film from Harry Aiken and his brother. He also sought funds from the Majestic, Reliance and Mutual Film Companies. And he visited Wall Street investors. Reliance' Board of Directors turned him down. But the Aiken Brothers pledged to give him some of their shares in the film, plus stock in their other enterprises for a \$25,000 loan. Once Griffith collected money from them he began selling stock in the movie to all comers. He channeled all the funds he raised through the new Epoch Production Company for one sole purpose -- to finance *The Birth of a Nation*. He chose July 4, 1914 to begin filming because the date represented his "independence" from the grips of New York film executives. In his new Hollywood setting he was free of the East Coast film syndicate (Slide 2004) (Schickel 1984).

By the time *The Birth of a Nation* was completed Griffith had raised \$100,000. This was much more funding than most people ever imagined he could generate in less than one year. The film earned a profit in excess of \$50,000,000, a record that stood from 1915 until the Civil War and Reconstruction epic *Gone With The Wind* was released in 1939. *The Birth of a Nation* was so popular that some theater patrons paid as much as \$2.00 to see it at a time when many Americans then earned less than that for a full day's work. And as already stated, the film did an incredible job of spreading racist propaganda and disdain for African Americans. When Simmons used the film to rejuvenate the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan just outside of Atlanta, he ushered in a whole new level of racial hatred in America (Schickel 1984).

One of Dixon's shrewdest moves was to seek an endorsement for the film from his former college acquaintance, President Wilson. Dixon had been instrumental in helping Wilson secure an honorary degree from Wake Forest College and the recognition helped boost Wilson's rise in the political arena. Dixon was sure the president would return the favor. It became evident that Dixon and Wilson shared many of the same ideas about race. Many of Wilson's theories in his *History of the American People* were resurrected in *The Birth of a Nation*. And in 1913 Dixon dedicated his book *The Southerner* to Wilson.

As Feagin would point out, Griffith clearly benefitted from the privilege his White skin afforded him in his relationship with Wilson. This was an advantage Scott, Foster, the Johnson brothers, Micheaux and

other Black film executives could never enjoy. He had the financing and the public's approval to make his points via characters like the most controversial character in the film, Gus. This Black villain, was not alone to blame for the evils of the Black man. Griffith said: Gus' inherited wild nature compelled him to lust after the White maiden Flora. In expanding upon the repulsive Gus character who Dixon introduced in *The Clansman*. Griffith created the Buck, a first for the big screen -- the "big, baadddd (sic) niggers, over sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh" *The Birth of a Nation* concludes with Griffith's vision of a harmonious unity between Whites in the North and South -- thanks to the heroics of the Ku Klux Klan. The film makes no mention of even the possibility of future harmony between Blacks and Whites (Reid 1993).

Future revived Klan leader William J. Simmons also had a great sense of timing. He capitalized on the release of *The Birth of a Nation* in Atlanta in December 1915 and rejuvenate the KKK. He elevated himself into the leadership of the movement that promised to rescue White America from the "Black devils" and their sympathizers. Simmons got a copy of the 1867 *Reconstruction Klan Prescript* and began working out an expanded ritual for a hierarchy of Klan officials. He drew pictures of these white-robed, masked men riding on their horses. And by the time he had recovered from his injuries in an auto accident he was determined to revive the organization that became the new Ku Klux Klan. He led KKK inductees in a secret ritual in Stone Mountain, Georgia shortly after *The Birth of a Nation* made its debut in nearby Atlanta. It was there that Simmons added his personal touch to the ritual -- the burning cross (Simmons 1923) (Baker 1998, 19) (Dagbovie 2010).

President Wilson promptly segregated federal workers and eliminated many Black jobs upon taking office in 1913. He proved to be a loyal ally of segregationists and white supremacists. Wilson won reelection in 1916 in large part because of his campaign slogan, "He Kept Us Out Of War." But he did not keep Griffith's film out of movie theaters.

While good timing played a major role in the enthusiastic reception Griffith's film received, its competition (such as it was) had no such fortune. *The Birth of a Race* had the misfortune to be released at the end of the international hostilities, when America movie goers were weary of war films and visual images of suffering. When *The Birth of a Nation* debuted in early 1915 it would be two more years before

the United States would enter the Great War. Americans who saw the film had lots of time to take in these exciting new images of offensive Black people and heroic Whites in the comfort of plush movie houses or rented church halls.

## Summary

This chapter begins by emphasizing the importance of reading the past within what Mailloux calls the "historical moment." While the facts of the past will not change, effective interpretations of historical events must rely in large part upon an analysis of the environment within which they are created. *The Birth of a Nation* was produced in an environment which had been heavily influenced by racist thinkers like Winthrop, Blumenbach, Brocca, Morton, White Agassiz and Gibbs. These men challenged Darwin's theories on the equality of ethnic groups with their form of Social Darwinism. Their rebuttals became prominent during the "nadir years", 1877 to 1915. African Americans experienced a major setback during the post-Reconstruction era when the Republican Party abandoned them. The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in the Supreme Court officially institutionalized Jim Crow segregation. And Southern Democrats began to abuse the rights African Americans had gained only a few years earlier. The rest of the nation remained neutral on the issue of segregation and violence against African Americans. Blacks suffered numerous indignities on several levels. As powerful as were negative public images in early silent film, they were not the only hurdles in front of Blacks.

The election of Woodrow Wilson in 1912 as the first Democratic president since the Civil War coincided with the emergence of Dixon and Griffith as collaborators. These three men played major roles in the country's acceptance of *The Birth of a Nation*. The seed that was planted when Dixon first saw the play *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a young man grew into his obsession. He was determined to present an alternative interpretation of how the South had been wronged by the North in the War. It blossomed with his controversial 1905 play *The Clansman*, which served as the blueprint for *The Birth of a Nation*. Meanwhile, Griffith rose from his existence as a struggling actor to become an accomplished silent film director. Once he gained his independence from the East Coast film monopoly and moved to Hollywood the stage was set for the collaboration that changed the way movies were made. The nation suddenly found new ways to celebrate White supremacy, denigrate Blacks and simultaneously turn a profit. This vehicle was called the featured-length silent film.



A careful reading of the historical moment that Mailloux identifies makes the success *The Birth of a Nation* enjoyed predictable. Dixon leaned on Wilson's book *History of the American People* for background information for his book and play, *The Clansman*, while Griffith did the same for the film. Meanwhile, the new president fired numerous Black federal employees and segregated those who remained employed. As pointed out, lynching became a favorite tool of White vigilante groups. By the time Wilson agreed to screen *The Birth of a Nation* in the White House the stage had long been set for the film to become a national phenomenon.

The Atlanta debut of *The Birth of a Nation* occurred on December 6, 1915. Within a few weeks the former minister and business opportunist Simmons had revived the Klan. Technically the group had been dormant since passage of the Ku Klux Klan Act in 1871. But random acts of violence against African Americans continued into the new century, whether the Klan claimed responsibility for acts of violence against Blacks or not. And by reviving the organization, Simmons awakened the racist forces that were primed to renew vigilante terrorism in the name of protecting White people (especially women) from what it considered the evil beasts -- African Americans (Simmons 1923).

This study argues that just as Dixon considered himself a friend of the Negro, many men of privilege down through the years have refused to see themselves as those without power see them -- as gate keepers of the status quo. Some scholars say that Blacks view powerful White men as those who fail to recognize the source of their authority. If that authority is grounded primarily in the color of their White skin then this study concurs that this power is unmerited. To be fair, not all White men of power in America brandish their proclivity toward societal domination in this way.

## CHAPTER II

### The Roots of Racial Vindication in America

St. Claire Drake describes racial vindication as a special genre of intellectual activity. According to Lee Baker it originated in the eighteenth century. "It eventually became a scientific assault against racial oppression," Baker continued. "It sought to disprove slander, answer pejorative allegations and criticize so-called scientific generalizations about Africans and people of African descent." Joe Feagin calls the principle of racial vindication, "Anti-racist Counter Frames and Home-Culture Frames." Feagin also says that Blacks and other people who have been the target of oppression and slanderous rhetoric fight back as a natural reaction to this racism. Since the beginning of slavery in America these men and women have fought back, he says. "African Americans have created and sustained a critical home culture that incorporates cultural features from their African backgrounds, as well as aspects of European culture ... refined and shaped in the fiery crucible called North American racism" (Baker 1998, p. 107-108) (Feagin 2010, p. 158-159).

#### Definitions: Racism, Anti-Racism and Racial Vindication

Many scholars agree with Manning Marable's description of race as an artificial construct. He wrote that it first emerged in the fifteenth century, at the outset of the expansion of European capitalism into the Western Hemisphere. "The search for agricultural commodities and profits from the extreme exploitation of involuntary workers deemed less than human gave birth to the notion of racial equality," he says in *Black Leadership*. The desire to easily distinguish and vilify their human capital led the slave catchers and their financiers to separate men and women by their physical characteristics, phenotype, body structure and facial features. The scientific justification for the establishment and survival of the system of chattel slavery was left in the hands of the men this study discussed in Chapter I. (Marable 1998).

Scholars define racism in various ways. Robert Miles (1989) calls it an ideology that is both false (not scientific) and partial (supporting vested capitalistic interests): a combination of prejudice and power.

Bonilla-Silva (1997) describes it as a social system that involves ethnoracial categories based on a hierarchy. This construct then produces disparities in life chances between ethnoracial groups. Pettman (1986) refers to racism as an ideology of inferiority that devalues others and justifies inequality. Charles Quist-Adade's article "What is Race and What is Racism?" defines "race" as a grouping of human population characterized by socially selected physical traits. It is a social construct, arbitrarily created by human beings, he says. Gabrielle Berman and Yin Paradies find that these definitions all fall short in one way or another. In their essay "Racism, disadvantage and multiculturalism: towards effective anti-racist praxis" they define racism as, "that which maintains or exacerbates inequality or opportunity among ethnoracial groups." It does two things at once, they contend: it disadvantages minority ethnoracial groups while providing other (majority) groups with unfair advantages. They also identify three types of racism: internalized, interpersonal and systemic (Berman and Parides, 2008) (Quist-Adade 2005).

This paper argues that all racism that finds a vessel in which to travel become systematic. As the scholars cited above report, racism is indeed a social construct. It permeates the minds of those who succumb to its lure. Proponents cling to its dependence on false science and folk lore, with no basis in fact. The real danger of racism is that it needs no truth to take root. It can grow and blossom into prejudice, discrimination, violence and murder based on no more than a blind, misguided bias. In Dixon and Griffith's cases, they learned this bias as young men and spent their lives spreading their poisonous venom in literature, oratory and, ultimately, in silent film. As Berman and Parides have said, racism at its worst both gives an unmerited advantage to the dominant ethnic group and oppresses the dominated ethnic group. This is the double dose of evil the men and women who stood for racial vindication fought against in response to *The Birth of a Nation* (Berman and Parides 2008).

Anti-racism is not merely the opposite of racism. It is much more than that. Anthias and Lloyd (2002) define it as, "the construction of a positive project," in which people can live together in harmony and mutual respect. It is broader than a movement that focuses only on prejudice, power, ideology, stereotypes, domination or unequal treatment. It aggressively attacks these discrepancies across all of these foci. Berman and Parides believe that the goal of anti-racism should be to create equality of opportunity with a focus on equity of outcome. In order to do so we believe as do Berman and Parides that anti-racism policies and programs must be adapted by majority communities and not just by minority

ones. Otherwise, words like multiculturalism, brotherhood and diversity mean little to those inside the power structure (Berman and Parides 2008).

This study concurs with Alastair Bonnett that anti-racism refers to forms of thought and/or practice that seek to confront, eradicate and/or ameliorate racism. To be most effective anti-racism must be "disruptive." Bonnett says that this aggressive form of response to racism did not occur on a large scale in the United States until the 1960s (along with the causes of anti-sexism and gay rights). It certainly did not exist in the 1910s following the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. Physical confrontations with the authorities who supported exhibitions of the film, such as those led by Monroe Trotter in Boston, do not qualify as anti-racism initiatives. These defiant acts did little to refute the false racist science on which White supremacy was founded. Nor did they accomplish much in the area of celebrating the contributions African Americans made to civilized society. Yet Trotter's unorthodox activism and noisy agitation were important contributions to the overall movement toward racial vindication. The power brokers who otherwise might have ignored the pleas for mutual human respect could not forever ignore the voice of Trotter and other learned militants (Bonnett 2000).

Bonnett called anti-racism, "a spirit of defiance and the creation of sustainable states." He identifies it in its various forms: everyday anti-racism; multi-cultural anti-racism; psychological anti-racism; radical anti-racism (directly challenging power structures); and anti-racism that actively favors previously excluded races. A sixth theory, anti-Nazi and anti-fascist anti-racism represents issues that are not addressed in this study. By definition, none of the acts of racial vindication examined in this paper (covering the period 1915 through the 1920s) rise to these levels of intensity. Yet collectively they converge to help point the nation toward the more humane decade of the 1930s and the administration of the liberal Democratic President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Although the country was in the midst of the Great Depression then, the playing field for Blacks and Whites began to gradually level off like it had not done since Reconstruction (Bonnett 2000).

In 2001 Dei called for a serious intellectual engagement of anti-racist theory for political purposes. Such a pursuit requires that scholars consider, "differences that extend beyond race, gender, class and sexuality to issues of language, culture, religion and spirituality." Power relations are what matter, he

says. The first Director of the Center for Integrative Anti-Racism Studies (CIARS) at the University of Toronto, Canada, he focuses on what he called the "anti-racist challenge" for educators (Dei 2008). We can apply his theory to the racism in *The Birth of a Nation*. To do so, we first must recognize that those with power are generally socialized not to see and acknowledge that privilege.

Anti-racism also focuses on the pointed notion of difference, as opposed to diversity. Notions of sameness, Dei warns, too frequently follow this kind of diversity. On the other hand, anti-racism at its best cuts across the lines of power relations in society and exposes the inequities that lie within. This study concurs with Dei's assessment that anti-racism goes far beyond mere racial vindication. Yet, it also recognizes that racial vindication was virtually all Griffith's opponents realistically had at their disposal in the world of smothering prejudice and White supremacy that they lived in during the 1910s and 1920s.

Dei suggests going a step farther. He advocates for the implementation of anti-racist theory in today's classroom in order to reach future generations. Another modern proponent of teaching anti-racism to young people is Tim Wise, founder of the Association for White Anti-Racist Education (AWARE). Wise organizes both student and staff White affinity groups that are dedicated to developing positive anti-racist racial identities. Group members ask each other, "what is White privilege in America and what is the cost to racism to Whites in America?" Wise's purpose is to help White students challenge the social construction of privilege and become proactive anti-racist members of society. This study endorses Wise's methods as a means to addressing important questions head-on (Denevi and Pastan 2006).

Racial vindication is defined by many scholars as a challenge to an accusation or claim that is widely accepted. When the Civil War ended, free Black men and women began to seek en masse their own vehicles of expression in religion, business, education and social circles. A few entered politics, particularly during Reconstruction. Marable says, "the sense of shared suffering and collective cooperation was the basis for an appreciation of the community's racial identity and heritage" for the freedmen. The spirit of racial vindication ushered in the aspirations of Black men and women at the dawning of the twentieth century. Jim Crow restrictions aside, those who defended these aspirations followed their natural instincts and fought for the right of Black people to be treated with dignity and respect (Marable 1998).

Tamara Haywood says vindication is action taken on behalf of something or someone who has been defamed. *The Birth of a Nation* certainly falls within the category of a tremendous insult to Blacks and to all human beings who believed in the humanity of African Americans. Many people believed that racial vindication was most justified in 1915 to promote fairness, reverse the injustice and present evidence that refutes the defamation (Haywood 2012).

This study places both the efforts to refute the racism in *The Birth of a Nation* and to those that celebrate the humanity of African Americans within the school of racial vindication. Unlike anti-racist movements, the men, women and organizations that responded to Griffith's film did not incorporate direct challenges to the structure of power in the United States into their opposition. They, instead, primarily focused on attempting to prevent the film from being shown to the public. They presented literature and newspaper editorials to readers that pleaded for fairness in representations of Black people. They protested in public spheres with their voices and in the streets with their bodies in opposition to the vilification of Black people in Griffith's work. And they made their own films to show images of Black people who existed in various stations in life. These were considered progressive actions during the height of Jim Crow segregation in America. And for their times, these efforts represented progress for Black people. African American leaders and the intelligent and creative minds of the 1910s and 1920s challenged racism in ways that for many of them were groundbreaking.

The remainder of this chapter examines the tradition of racial vindication in the United States and places it within the context of responses to *The Birth of a Nation*. Previously this paper pointed to evidence that Stowe's 1852 tale of life in the antebellum South in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* greatly motivated Dixon to reinterpret this story. He did so notably in his trilogy of books, in his stage play *The Clansman* and ultimately in the film *The Birth of a Nation*. But Stowe was only one of several people living in the nineteenth century who played a key role in building upon the tradition of racial vindication in response to age-old racism in America. These writers and historians engaged in what this study calls a rhetoric of vindication. Stowe and others sought to, "exonerate the past by exposing the narrow ground of the opposition, by occupying an expanded version of scientific inquiry, and by turning conventional science to different and preferred ends" (Browne 2000, 269).

Mailloux points out that the most important sociopolitical controversy in the nation in the 1880s centered around race, whether most Americans acknowledged that it did or not. Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* challenges existing notions of White superiority and Black inferiority in the 1880s through the interplay of its characters and the dictates of the dominating racist beliefs of the day. Mailloux instructs us to interpret this book through the eyes of one who has a sense of the cultural history of the 1880s. We must do the same thing with *The Birth of a Nation*. This post-Reconstruction era was dominated by a neutral North and a South that was determined to strip away whatever Black progress it could in whatever ways it could (Mailloux 1989).

It is instructive, if we find it possible, to view *The Birth of a Nation* through the eyes of a White southerner living in America in 1915. Doing so allows us to better understand how Dixon, Griffith, Wilson and men bred in "Dixie" like them viewed their southern homeland as the victim of unjust northern oppressors. Poor Whites also shared this sense of loss and the need to avenge their misfortunes. The Civil War had destroyed their way of life and they had not yet recovered from it. The war and Reconstruction took away their human property, their land and their dignity. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution of the United States gave African Americans unprecedented rights. And over the years Dixon and others believed that the federal government had forgotten poor and working class Whites. White supremacy mentality dictated that Black people take their destiny into their own hands.

It did not matter to Dixon that the prosperity enjoyed during the antebellum period by plantation owners in the South, factory owners in the North, ship builders in the East and other White men of means was built on the backs of oppressed men, women and children of color. Nor did it matter to him that generations of enslaved people were denied all but the bare necessities of life. Night riders reasoned that they were merely protecting what God intended for them to possess. For many people whose ancestors supported the Confederacy it must have seemed patriotic to support those who covered their heads with white sheets, became hooded vigilantes and took the law into their own hands. Demonizing and oppressing Black people whenever possible seemed rational to millions of White men and women living in the states where slavery had been legal a little over fifty years earlier. And in 1915 racist science and

scholarship that supported the notions of White supremacy added fuel to the fires of prejudice that burned from Florida to Washington State and from New England to California.

Once we attempt to see *The Birth of a Nation* through the eyes of a White southerner who has been reared in the sociopolitical era of early silent film we may better understand why he felt compelled to celebrate White supremacy. He believed that he honored his ancestry by reclaiming what he believed was his birthright. He learned as a child that God intended for the White man to rule over the earth, keep inferior races in subjection and protect the honor of White women. All of this played out in dramatic fashion in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Still, a counter movement, racial vindication, stubbornly pushed against this racist aggression and ultimately prevailed. The racial vindication tradition required two things: challenges to (with verifiable and reliable evidence) existing racist science that is built on the false premise of the natural superiority of Whites and the inferiority of Blacks; and (while opposing this false notion of White superiority) celebrations of the humanity and the outstanding achievements of African Americans. This chapter points to how some key examples of racial vindication in the public sphere in American literature, oratory and in the actions of progressive organizations impacted reactions to *The Birth of a Nation*. It also emphasizes the value of conducting a tri-level analysis of racial vindication efforts: the written word, the action of progressive organizations and Black film. To do otherwise is to limit the analysis of the total impact of the push against *The Birth of a Nation* in the years following its release (Patton 1996, 25).

### **The Tradition of Racial Vindication in Literature**

Nell Painter provided us with an excellent summary of how anti-racist literature entered the public sphere in America in the eighteenth century in *The History of White People*. She recognized French-born scholar Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crevecoeur as an outstanding early contributor to the school of racial vindication. The Frenchman moved to New York, changed his name to J. Hector St. John and in 1782 published *Letters from an American Farmer*. In one of his letters he commented on a visit he made to Charleston, South Carolina. He was stunned there by the callousness with which White slave owners treated their servants. Speaking on behalf of these slaves and their descendants St. John condemned the, "frauds committed in Africa in order to entrap them." His letters criticized his rich slave-owning hosts



for, "justifying the holding of Africans in bondage." He predicted that a slave rebellion in America was inevitable. Less than fifty years later in Virginia enslaved Nat Turner made his prediction come true (Painter 2010).

Arthur A. Schomburg said, "vindicating evidences of individual achievement have as a matter of fact been gathered and treasured for over a century: Abbe' Gregoire's liberal-minded book on Negro notables in 1808 was the pioneer effort." Schomburg believed that the Black man in America, "must remake his past in order to make his future." He wrote that the antidote for prejudice was pride of race. His significant contribution to racial vindication in America will be discussed later in this chapter (Huggins 1976, p. 217).

Many scholars and activists joined the racial vindication tradition through their writings in newspapers, journals, books, art, drawings and poetry. In 1828, John Russworm, in an essay entitled, "Varieties of the Human Races" argued forcefully in the pages of *Freedom's Journal* that, "human variation was a result not of fixed type or species diversity, but of environment alone." Russworm believed that climate more than any other single course predetermined the varieties of characteristics among human beings. Stephen Howard Browne also noted that *The Liberator* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* frequently ran essays that appealed to the reader for racial proscription. Many advocates quoted Genesis, proclaiming that all human beings were descendants of Adam and Eve, "and Acts xvii. 25 ('God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth") (Browne 2000, pp. 271-271).

But perhaps the most striking blow in print for racial vindication during this era came in 1829 with the publication of *David Walker's Appeal: in four articles together with a preamble, to the coloured citizens of the world, but in particular, and very expressively to the people of the United States of America*. *Walker's Appeal* (as it's more commonly known) shocked the nation with its frank attack on what it called American hypocrisy. Walker frequently challenged the status quo and criticized White America for its mistreatment of Black people. He was most outspoken in his newspaper, *Freedom's Journal* -- the first Black-owned newspaper in America. He also frequently ranted in public about the injustices African Americans were forced to endure. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison gave *Walker's Appeal* positive

reviews in *The Liberator*, the nation's most influential abolitionist periodical. When Walker died of tuberculosis (some skeptics said his death came under curious circumstances) at the age of forty-five, America lost one of its most aggressive voices for the vindication of African Americans (Painter 2010).

One other strong early voice for racial vindication was that of Rev. Hosea Easton. Easton's father descended from the Wampanoag and Narragansett Indians and his mother was at least part African. He identified himself as "colored" and opened a school for Negro youth in Boston. Easton also became a minister in Hartford, Connecticut. But a mob of angry White supremacists burned down his church in 1836. In response to this senseless act of violence Easton published *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States and the Prejudice Exercised towards Them: with a Sermon on the Duty of the Church to Them*. (Painter 2010).

Easton repeated many of the affirmations Walker made in his *Appeal*. He compared ancient African kingdoms (beginning with Ham and Egypt) with Europe and its roots in ancient Greece. His major contention was that the ancient Egyptians taught the Greeks, "everything of value." This was an astonishingly bold position for a colored man to take at this time. Easton went on to outline in more than five pages numerous crimes against humanity that were perpetrated by Europeans against Blacks down through the ages. He also credited White supremacist' claims of their advanced state in the sciences to, "their innate thirst for blood and plunder" (Painter 2010, 123).

Garrison also contributed to the tradition of racial vindication by using art and pictures. In an 1831 masthead in *The Liberator* he portrayed a slave auction of a Black family taking place in front of the nation's capitol. Vice President John C. Calhoun became so outraged when he saw the drawing that he tried (unsuccessfully) to ban newspapers with, "pictorial representations of slavery" from the mails. Calhoun did not set about banning slavery itself -- just representations of it in drawings. Black abolitionists Frederick Douglas, William "Ethop" Wilson, James McCune Smith, Sojour Truth and Harriett Jacobs embraced images such as these and used them to further their own struggles in literature and in other forms of expression to achieve racial vindication.

Also noteworthy among those voices of racial vindication in literature were books that challenged traditional stereotypes and offered a redemptive interpretation of Black people and their contributions to

civilization. Outstanding examples include: William Wells Brown's *The Rising Son of The Antecedents* and *Advancement of the Colored Race* (1874); William Alexander's *History of the Colored Race in America* (1883); and H. F. Kletzing and W. H. Crogman's *Progress of a Race, or, The Remarkable Advancement of the Afro-American* (1897). All of these texts were designed to oppose the restrictive science that preceded them. These earlier instruments of propaganda were created by men who believed that White superiority and Black inferiority were irrefutable facts. This study points out that collectively the examples of racial vindication in literature listed above represent an effort to use the historical monograph, empirical data, scripture, the character portrait and the ideology of progressivism to produce revisionist history (Browne 2000, 282).

In late 1884 *Century Magazine* published George W. Cable's essay "The Freedman's Case in Equity." The piece immediately became controversial in part because Cable was a White man from the South (Louisiana). He criticized the nation for an, "absence of intellectual and moral debate" on the plight of African Americans. Cable criticized the South for working, "to maintain a purely arbitrary superiority of all whites over all blacks." He concluded that the only apparent reason for maintaining these distinctions of color were, "to preserve the old arbitrary supremacy of the master class over the menial." He and Samuel Clemens (Twain) went on a widely-publicized reading tour through several northern and border states from November 1884 to February 1885. In response to Cable's scathing essay the *Century* editors invited Henry W. Grady, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, to write a rebuttal. In an essay titled "In Plain Black and White" Grady said that not only was a distinction between Whites and Blacks a necessary one, it was the foundation of a stable society (Mailloux 1989, pp. 65-66).

Prussian-born anthropologist Franz Boas became the most prominent of the few international scholars in the late nineteenth century who challenged the long-held assumption that inequality at birth was the will of God. He struck a mighty blow for racial vindication with his revolutionary theories. Boas graduated from Germany's Heidenburg University and earned a Ph.D. in physics from Kiel University in 1881. His Jewish ancestry aside, he was generally well thought of until the German nationalist movement made overt hatred of Jews widespread. He migrated to the United States in the 1890s and settled into a teaching position at New York's Columbia University. Boas became a pioneer in conducting research into environment and culture, rather than into race, as the major determinants of people's body types and

physiques. His 600-page *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* challenged conventional scholarship on racism between White cultures (Painter 2010).

For example, Boas' discovery that head shape changes when environments change was revolutionary. One of his students at Columbia, anthropologist and writer Zora Neal Hurston, became a prominent writer during the Harlem Renaissance. Later in this study we again touch on how this group of brilliant young creative African American artists and writers took on racial vindication mission with tremendous creative passion (Painter 2010).

W. E. B. DuBois' 1896 ethnography *The Philadelphia Negro* was perhaps the most outstanding example of quantifiable research in the arena of racial vindication of its day. DuBois spent fifteen months conducting participant observation in the City of Brotherly Love. He concluded at the end of his 400-page study that, "the ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation." His work stood as an example for others who sought to defend African American humanity based on the facts and realities of their existence and the opportunities made available to them. Unfortunately his research was shelved by those in power and his recommendations for improving the lives of Blacks in Philadelphia were ignored (Baker 1998, p. 113-114) (Johnson 2012, 9).

By 1901 DuBois had come to believe that Monroe Trotter's *The Boston Guardian* was one of the more significant vanguards for racial vindication. Trotter graduated from Harvard in 1895 and was joined as co-editor of the newspaper by 1895 Amherst graduate George Forbes. DuBois said their weekly newspaper represented, "the beginning of organized opposition" to Jim Crow segregation in America. E. Franklin Frazier observed that Trotter's *Guardian* and the moderate *New York Age* (which Trotter called a mouthpiece for Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Machine) were the dominant Black newspapers in the country at that time. Robert Abbott's *Chicago Defender*, founded in 1905, also deserves mention here. Abbott was known for running bold, sensational headlines that called attention to the injustices against African Americans.

In 1903 DuBois published perhaps his best known book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Three years later he joined predecessors Trotter and Forbes and opened a printing shop in Memphis. For the next year DuBois published his own newspaper, *The Moon*. From 1907 to 1910 he and two friends published the

newspaper *Horizon* in Washington, D. C. By then DuBois had become an important member of the group that organized the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He soon became editor of *The Crisis* Magazine for the group. This organization and its' publication played key roles in efforts toward racial vindication that followed the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (DuBois 1983, p. 238, 251-252).

### **The Tradition of Racial Vindication in Oratory and in Public Protest**

A few White scholars and activists joined Black leaders in early America in rejecting the notion that African Americans were inherently inferior human beings. They documented evidence that Blacks, when given an education and the opportunity, could demonstrate their intelligence, creativity and worthiness as productive citizens. A few examples of the men and women who stood against the odds in the spirit of racial vindication follow.

Samuel Stanhope Smith, who would become president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton College), defended the proposition that African Americans were intelligent human beings. He specifically recognized the genius of Black poet Phyllis Wheatley. When Thomas Jefferson commented that Wheatley's work lacked good scholarship and real genius, Smith responded that genius requires freedom. Smith went on to say that few Southern White Americans (who mainly were planters) could have written poetry equal to that of Wheatley (Feagin 2012).

Like Wheatley, Black American Benjamin Banneker challenged notions of White supremacy and Black inferiority simply by his accomplishments. In 1791 this astronomer and surveyor created an almanac. He said the racist framing of Black Americans was, "lacking in virtue and humanity." Banneker is one of many men of color whose extraordinary achievements belies the racist philosophy that claims that Blacks lack intelligence (Feagin 2012).

No acts of defiance against slavery fit into the circle of racial vindication quite like the slave rebellions planned and carried out in Virginia and South Carolina in the early nineteenth century. Gabriel Prosser (1800) Denmark Vesey (1822) and Turner (1831) set out to liberate by force as many enslaved Blacks as possible. News of Turner's rebellion was covered by *The Richmond Enquirer* on August 30. It reported that Turner and some thirty-five others joined him in massacring, "50 to 75 women and children,

and some 8 or 10 men." The newspaper said that most of the rebels were slaves who were, "the property of kind and indulgent masters." Turner was betrayed but escaped apprehension for several days. He was captured, tried, convicted and hanged for his crimes. Several other Blacks in his party were executed or sent to plantations in the Caribbean Islands. As a result the South made life more difficult for its remaining slave population. Yet Blacks continued to resist slavery by running away, plotting occasional uprisings, sabotaging the flow of work on the plantations and by committing suicide. This study places these acts of defiance within our definition of racial vindication (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/parr3>, 1, 10-12-2014) (<http://www.biography.com/people/nat-turner>, 10-12-2014).

Other examples of men and women who took bold stances in the tradition of racial vindication take the form of oration. Henry Highland Garnet delivered his famous "Address to the Slaves" in 1843. In it the fiery Presbyterian preacher called for mass slave insurrections. His argument was that violent uprisings vindicated the enslaved Africans from charges that they had accepted their condition. Leaning heavily on an atypical interpretation of scripture he said, "Brethren, your oppressors aim to ... make you as much like brutes as possible. To such degradation it is sinful in the extreme for you to make voluntary submission. The divine commandments you are in duty bound to reverence and obey. If you do not obey them, you will surely meet the displeasure of the Almighty" (Franklin and Collier-Thomas 3, 1996).

The most noted Black female who played a prominent role in the tradition of racial vindication at the turn of the twentieth century was Ida B. Wells. She began her "Anti-Lynching Crusades" in 1892 following the murder of three friends by a White mob in Memphis, Tennessee. Forced to leave her print shop in Memphis and relocate to Chicago because of her defense of Black people, she continued to speak before thousands of people and wrote in support of racial vindication from her new base. Her bold anti-lynching crusade is her primary legacy. By tracking lynching incidents she documented the brutality that racists were guilty of as the new century emerged. Wells claimed a prominent place among those who stood for racial vindication in the years before *The Birth of a Nation* was released. And there were other women who took bold stands in the spirit of racial vindication (Franklin and Collier-Thomas 1996).

Margaret Murray Washington (Mrs. Booker T. Washington) served as president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) at its ninth biennial conference in 1914. Meeting at Wilberforce

University, the group exhibited a "Women on the March" pageant. It presented different eras in the lives of African American women, beginning in the era of slavery and ending with children dressed for the future. This dramatic presentation meets our definition of racial vindication (as discussed earlier in this chapter) with one caveat: the women failed to celebrate the greatness of the original people of Africa prior to their enslavement and transport to America. But considering the era in which the pageant was given, we can appreciate the NACW's effort to instill pride in Blacks in America (Rouse 1996).

According to June O. Patton, Richard Robert Wright, Sr. was one of the, " most prominent and influential African-American intellectuals who was committed to vindicating the race from charges of 'cultural backwardness' and 'mental inferiority'." Trained at the University of Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, Oxford and the University of Pennsylvania, he was a rare blend -- an effective scholar-activist. Wright worked tirelessly to promote the concept of racial equality and labeled most of the arguments advanced by racial prognosticators as, "intellectual claptrap and rhetorical nonsense, clouded in pure fantasy" (Patton 1996).

Wright challenged many of these racist theories in a speech before the American Missionary Association at Worcester, Massachusetts in 1881. He pointed out the tremendous contributions to America since the end of the Civil War. In the fifteen years that followed, he noted, Blacks had acquired over \$100 million worth of property in the South. And by 1878 over 675,150 Black children were enrolled in school. He predicted that Blacks would, "help shape the destiny of this republic." His work refuted the racist claims that African Americans had not made significant contributions to society (Patton 1996).

In 1895 Black South Carolina Republican leader Robert S. Smalls told a state constitutional convention, "my race needs no special defense, for the past history of them in this country proves them to be the equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life." Okon Edet Uya said that Smalls' comments drew praises from many of his peers (Franklin and Collier-Thomas, 6 1996).

In 1902, when Dixon published his book *The Leopard's Spot*, Kelly Miller, a Black dean at Howard University in Washington D. C., dove into the White supremacy - racial vindication pool when he wrote to Dixon, "Your teachings subvert the foundations of law and established order. You are the high priest of

lawlessness, the prophet of anarchy." According to Black Arkansas lawyer Sutton E. Griggs, Dixon, "said and did all things which he deemed necessary to leave behind him the greatest heritage of hate the world has ever known." Dixon replied to his public, "my books are hard reading for a Negro, and yet the Negroes, in denouncing them, are unwittingly denouncing one of their best friends" (Franklin 1979, 424).

DuBois attempted to collaborate with Washington and others in January 1904, when they met in a circle known as "The Committee of Twelve." Their goal was to consolidate efforts that encouraged Black and White citizens to work together toward uplifting Blacks in America. It was an ambitious and noble idea. But once Washington and his Tuskegee Machine began to dictate the direction the group should take, predictably, DuBois promptly resigned. The White power structure defended Washington's platform of accommodation that emerged from this group. Both DuBois and Washington would live to see *The Birth of a Nation* unleashed upon the country early in 1915. They reacted quite differently to the film, although both were outraged at Griffith's work. In response to the movie DuBois revived his pageant *The Star of Ethiopia* and chose not to respond directly to Griffith. Washington was privately working with Scott to produce a counter-narrative in silent film at the time of his passing.

It is curious that Dixon himself provided platforms from which speakers could appeal for racial vindication following some northern performances of his play *The Clansman*. He organized and participated in some of the public debates, discussing where the line between truth and fiction was in the play. Some critics saw it as a publicity stunt to boost ticket sales. Whatever his motivation for doing so Dixon threw himself into these open discussions with Black and White leaders. A *New York Times* headline in December 1905 read, "A Dixon Pamphlet Stirs Negro Clergy." Dixon spoke to these audiences about his theory on the Black man's proper place in society: in a separate space and in submission to Whites. He said in *The Times* on February 5, 1906 that, "this thing, half devil and half child, is supposed to be your equal and actually claims that equality. He does not get it now, but fifty years from now (in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation became the law) 60,000,000 negroes will claim those equal rights and will take them if they are refused" (*New York Post* January 29, 1906).

Public protests and activist organizations formed an important component of racial vindication around the same time *The Clansman* made its debut. Examples cited here are notable because they



demonstrate that this movement was not restricted to only one region in the United States. Protesters in Philadelphia and Atlanta caused those cities to ban the play. There also were major protests in New York. In October 1906 a large crowd of Blacks in Philadelphia blocked the performance, "because of its tendency to arouse racial prejudice and incite to riot." The Atlanta riot broke out at the beginning of the 1906-1907 theater season. The city council there banned the play more to avoid personal injury and property damage than out of a sense of moral outrage. But the Supreme Court ruled in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* that free speech protections in the First Amendment did not extend to movie theaters. This interpretation of the law stood until 1951 (Stokes 2007, p. 132-133) (Slide 2004) (Johnson 2007, pp. 19-23).

In 1906 DuBois and a number of progressive Blacks and Whites called another meeting to plot a strategy for advancing the progress of African Americans. His failed attempt to bring "The Committee of Twelve" to consensus two years earlier (when Washington was part of the group) prompted DuBois to try again. This new group met in Ft. Erie near Niagara Falls, just across the Canadian border from Buffalo, New York. Twenty-nine men, representing fourteen states, attended the session. They met there for several days and called themselves the "Niagara Movement." The organization became incorporated January 31, 1906. DuBois wrote the guiding principles for the group, saying the ten million Black people in the United States demanded, "full manhood rights." It claimed every right and opportunity for Black people that White people enjoyed in America. Four of the most noteworthy principles the group adopted were: manhood suffrage; the abolition of cast distinctions based simply on race and color; the recognition of human brotherhood as a practical present creed; and the recognition of the highest and best human training as the monopoly of no special class or race.

The Niagara Movement set the stage in 1909 for the founding of what would become the NAACP. More than any other group, the NAACP was at the forefront of directly and aggressively contesting exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation*. It led the charge for racial vindication for the coming decades and continues to do so one hundred years later.

## The Tradition of Racial Vindication in Silent Film

Racial vindication took one more important form prior to Griffith's release of *The Birth of a Nation*: other silent film that refuted the notion of White superiority, declared the equality of African Americans and celebrated the achievements of Black people. Thomas Edison was a major player in this arena on both sides of the question of whether it was better to promote White supremacy or racial vindication in film.

Edison's very early work in film included a number of brief non-racist ethnographic curiosities that featured children at play, women doing their chores in the home and men busy at work in the field. These films were usually only a few minutes long and were shot outdoors on location, using available natural light. They did not focus on controversial subject matter and were harmless diversions. Edison's "acturaries" included vaudeville performances, railway trains, parades, sporting events, military exercises and foreign people pursuing their customary activities. In 1895 Edison filmed an unedited documentary of Black West Indians dancing, bathing and coaling ships.

In April of 1898 he sent photographer William Paley to Tampa, Florida to film soldiers preparing to leave for Cuba and the Spanish-American War. Members of Lt. Col. Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and other White soldiers were joined in Florida by Black troops, including three thousand members of the Buffalo Soldiers. Paley filmed for Edison *The Ninth and Tenth Cavalry Watering Horses* and *The Colored Troops Disembarking* in Tampa Bay. The Black soldiers in these acturaries appeared as dignified on film as did the White soldiers in Paley's moving pictures. It was the first time Black men were shown on the big screen in positions of authority, holding weapons, riding horses and dressing in the uniform of the United States army. They all were simply men preparing to defend their country against Spain in Cuba. And once they arrived in Cuba, Black soldiers in the Twenty-Fifth Infantry were featured in the movies *The Battle of Mt. Ariot* and *Colored Invincibles*. Three years later, in 1901, Edison filmed natives of the Arctic in the "*Esquimaux (Eskimo) Village at the Pan American Exposition*" in Buffalo. Again there was no ridicule directed toward these people of color. This places them in the racial vindication pool (Musser 1995).

Intentionally or not many of Edison's Black films made between 1895 and 1901 demonstrated how silent movies could place African Americans and other people of color in the spotlight without ridiculing or demonizing them. But this soon changed, as men in the early silent film industry soon learned that this new communications vehicle could be used to entertain Whites, denigrate Black people and turn a profit at the same time. And Edison was first a businessman. While he was an early proponent of portraying in film people of color (such as the Buffalo Soldiers and Eskimos) as dignified human beings, he also realized that the American culture that embraced coon shows and Black buffoonery in the nineteenth century would embrace the same representations in silent film in the twentieth century.

John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. reported in the Eighth Edition of *From Slavery to Freedom* that, "it has been claimed by many that the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries saved the Rough Riders from complete annihilation at Las Guisamas." But these brief glimpses of African American bravery on film in the face of danger and in defense of their country at the dawn of the twentieth century would not become the dominant images the country would see. The emerging silent film industry had other plans for African American subjects. They would become the butts of jokes, the threats to be feared and the child-like servants in the hundreds of films that producers churned out in the coming years. Edison was among those who changed course and chose this route. He needed to look no farther than his own laboratory to find the brilliant Black scientist and inventor Lewis Latimer, a man worthy of featuring on film at work. Latimer conducted research and published his findings for others to follow. Yet Edison, like his competitors, continued to promote the superiority of White people at the expense of Blacks: Edison did not celebrate Latimer's accomplishments on camera (Musser 1995).

As Latimer and other Black achievers were crushing the myth that African Americans could not be brilliant and inventive, Washington was busy stroking the flames of second class citizenship. He had long since won the approval of segregationists and those who wanted to silence the voices of protest in his 1895 "Atlanta Compromise" speech. He later demonstrated that he understood the wisdom in using the same tool -- moving pictures -- that segregationists had used to defame his race. But Washington planned to use his film for a different purpose.

While he preached the wisdom of separatism and the value of industrial education for Blacks, he also used the power of silent film to celebrate his work at Tuskegee Institute. In 1909 he became a pioneer in the silent film industry and struck a blow for racial vindication. In that same year, in which the NAACP was organized (an organization he turned his back on), Washington promoted his college with the movie *A Trip to Tuskegee*. He hired the Black-owned Broome Exhibition Company from Boston to shoot the twenty-five minute silent film. It showcased the physical plant on the school's campus in Alabama and included several images of Washington supervising the students at study and at work. His objectives were to demonstrate how Blacks could be good citizens if they had an industrial education and if they were given the opportunity to become productive members of society. Washington exhibited the film to potential Tuskegee donors at Carnegie Hall in 1910. He also supervised the filming of *A Day at Tuskegee* in 1913 (Field 2009).

Even before he produced silent film at Tuskegee Washington played an important role in the development of African American visual art. Michael Bieze's *Booker T. Washington and the Representation of Self*, indicates that Washington posed for hundreds of photographs from 1890 to 1915, the final twenty-five years of his life. Bieze calls Washington America's first Black celebrity. Most of these photographs publicized and marketed Washington's Tuskegee Machine and his National Negro Business League. He quickly learned how to promote the Tuskegee brand and he seldom missed an opportunity to trumpet the accomplishments of the college. While doing so Washington quietly challenged the racist and stereotypical images of Blacks in popular American culture. In Bieze's view Washington was an important patron of Black artists and a supporter of Black arts. He certainly understood the power of the camera. Washington's transition from embracing still photographs to using silent film to promote his brand was a natural progression. We will never know where it might have led him following the introduction of *The Birth of a Nation* (Bieze 2008).

On February 23 1909, the same year Washington produced his first Tuskegee movie, Hampton Institute in Virginia filmed students during a live stage performance also in Carnegie Hall. Just as in the case of Tuskegee, the Hampton film was used to raise awareness of the school and to solicit donations. It showed students working as carpenters, blacksmiths, wheelwrights and as other tradesmen. The 1909 *Southern Workmen* described the Hampton exhibition before 2,000 spectators as, "students in overalls ...

seen busily engaged in the actual work ... of the industries which the school offers." Other college films featuring Tuskegee and Hampton students that followed included: *John Henry at Hampton: A Kind of Student Who Makes Good* (1913); *Making Negro Lives Count* (1914); *The New Era* (1915) and *Cephas Returns* (1915). All of these films fall under our definition of racial vindication (Field 2009, p. 108, 110-111).

While the Tuskegee and Hampton films were designed to reach specific audiences (most notably potential White donors), commercial film makers wanted their work to reach the general population. Their motive, like that of Tuskegee and Hampton, was profit. They also wanted to promote the development of their craft. But they built much of the appeal of their product around the humiliation and vilification of Black people.

Foster formed the Foster Photoplay Company in Chicago. It joined Boston's Broome Company as two of the country's first Black-owned film production companies. Foster's 1910 film *The Pullman Porter* was funny, entertaining and demonstrated that Blacks could play comedic roles on film without serving as the buffoon of White people's jokes. This was a bold step in the industry: Foster demonstrated that Blacks could create film that made people laugh with African Americans instead of merely laughing at African Americans. His work represented a rebuttal to the racist films that the industry had made popular at the turn of the century. The *New York Age* said of both *The Pullman Porter* and in *The Fall Guy* (1913) that Foster's films represented, "Negro life without putting the race in a ridiculous light." Reid noted how Foster's comic chase scenes were far less demeaning than were those in the Rastus series that demean Blacks: examples are *How Rastus Got His Turkey* (1910) and *Rastus in Zululand* (1910). Yet other film scholars disagree on how Foster's films should be interpreted. Leab and Cripps, for example, saw little deviation in Foster's films and some of those directed in the racist genre (Reid 1993).

While Griffith was shooting *The Birth of a Nation* in 1914, Foster was directing two films: *The Butler* and *The Garter and the Maid*. They were in contrast to the better financed shorts that White producers and directors made at that time. But they helped undo the poor image most of the industry had saddled African Americans with. Foster even added a new twist to his exhibitions. He enlisted the services of Lottie Grady, an outstanding singer, to entertain the audience while the projectionist changed the movie

reels. No other promoter had done this until Foster began the practice. These two Foster films paled in the giant shadow of *The Birth of a Nation* in the struggle against White supremacy. But Foster's work was an important component in the broader movement toward racial vindication. It helped move African Americans a little closer toward their goal of achieving equality in an unequal socio-political environment (Reid 1993).

Had Washington not been such a controversial figure among many Black leaders in the North he might have been able to forge an alliance with Foster and others to produce silent films that went beyond the grounds of Tuskegee Institute prior to 1915. But Washington's determination to shield the Tuskegee Machine from those who did not agree with his philosophy of accepting White America's terms of segregation worked against any such possible collaboration. And his death in late 1915 ended all speculation in that regard.

Following the exhibition of the Tuskegee film at Carnegie Hall in 1910 Washington aide Emmett Jay Scott convinced him that moving pictures should play a major role in future marketing strategies for Tuskegee. Scott saw how this emerging phenomenon could boost the already considerable power base the "Tuskegee Machine" enjoyed. Because of his lofty stature among political and industrial leaders Washington (assisted by Scott) had built both Tuskegee Institute and the National Negro Business League (NNBL) into major forces. In the past, Washington had leaned heavily on still photography to promote the Tuskegee brand. But after Scott got his first experience in film while working with the Broome Company on the Tuskegee project "film" became for him the word of the day. Scott clung to his ideas about the tremendous potential silent film offered years after Washington's death.

Scott was born in Houston, Texas in 1873, the oldest of nine children. As a lad he got his first exposure to business while cleaning the office of the *Houston Chronicle*. Scott attended Wiley College and, in the 1890s he helped establish the *Texas Freeman*. Under his leadership the *Freedmen* became one of the Southwest's leading Black newspapers. Scott wore many hats there -- journalist, promoter, investor manager and facilitator. He firmly believed that Black capitalism could overcome racial prejudice. *The Freedmen* became just the kind of newspaper Washington sought the support of as he built his Black empire in Alabama (Dailey 2003).

After Washington delivered his Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895 Scott had been one of the people who related positively to the message. He began corresponding with the Wizard of Tuskegee and at the age of twenty-four Scott became Washington's personal secretary. From 1897 until Washington's death in 1915 Scott was Washington's chief confidant in all matters involving Tuskegee and the NLRB. Scott helped shape and mold the dominating image Washington and the Tuskegee Machine held in racial politics in America for more than two decades.

Beginning in 1910 Scott seized the opportunity to use silent film to help Washington's image grow. Scott first met Sears & Roebuck's Julius Rosenwald in 1911 during the philanthropists' first visit to Tuskegee. Rosenwald returned the next year with several other wealthy businessmen from Chicago. Scott helped facilitate this visit and nurtured his relationship with Rosenwald over the years.

Something else notable and germane to this study happened in 1912. Washington, Scott and several other "Booker-ites" boarded a private coach and visited several cities in Florida by train. As was his custom Washington gave periodic speeches throughout the South to promote the Tuskegee Machine. That spring the men toured the Sunshine State. Traveling south from Ocala on March 4 they passed through a Hillsborough County tourist attraction just north of Tampa known as Sulphur Springs. The river was lined with palm and oak trees and featured lush tropical scenery. Six years later this same location represented the Garden of Eden in some of the surviving scenes in *The Birth of a Race*. In 1918, when many of the film's final shots were made there, it used as a backdrop a replica of an ancient temple surrounded by African American extras, dressed as Egyptian slaves. Scott or someone else familiar with this location suggested that the film crew for *The Birth of a Race* select this location. Florida's warm weather was perfect for filming during the winter months (Leab 1975) (Jackson 2008, 165).

## **Summary**

This chapter gives a brief history of the racial vindication movement in America in the century leading up to the 1915 release of *The Birth of a Nation*. Baker traced the origin of racial vindication to the eighteenth century, while others say it began a century earlier. Feagin called it a natural reaction to, "anti-racist counter frames and home-culture frames." This chapter gives examples of outstanding efforts to achieve this vindication in three areas: (1) literature, (2) oratory and public protest and (3) silent film.

All of these venues have two important things in common: they challenged the notions of White supremacy that claimed that Caucasians were inherently superior human beings to Blacks; and they celebrated the humanity and the accomplishments of African Americans. Both Black and White writers addressed the controversy in newspapers, books, journals, pamphlets, art, poetry and other forms of written expression. In addition anthropologist Boas and scholar/ethnographer DuBois conducted research and published their findings that supported theories that recognized the equality of Whites and Blacks as human beings.

The chapter also cites examples of public oratories and protests in the arena of racial vindication. These examples recognize Black and White men and women active in the academy, astronomy, the church, the state house and in anti-lynching campaigns. The chapter points out how legal challenges to exhibitions of *The Birth of a Race* in cities that included Philadelphia, Atlanta and Boston played a critical role in the racial vindication movement of the early twentieth century. It illustrates the early contribution that Edison made to racial vindication in film. And it acknowledges the celebration in silent film of Blacks in college settings at Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes. This section also looks at how independent Black film maker Foster presented to the public images that displayed the acting talent of his subjects without ridiculing them for being African Americans. A study of the impact upon racial vindication of these three categories -- literature, social movements and silent film -- gives us a more comprehensive analysis of their effectiveness than does the analysis of a single discipline.

This study calls for a tri-level analysis of racial vindication in America after the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. We also find value in using a similarly broad study of the reactions of those who supported racial vindication in response to White supremacy prior to 1915. Chapter II describes the sociopolitical atmosphere in American race relations in the nineteenth century. The chapter lists several key documents, events and silent films that permeated the public sphere during the era. This all preceded the release of Griffith's film and helped set the tone for the racial vindication efforts that followed 1915. The chapter cites several complimentary events that should not be considered in isolation simply because they may not occur within the same venue or in the same year. They all work together to accomplish the same goal -- racial vindication -- whether there are obvious connections or not.



For example, in 1829 *Walker's Appeal* was published to attack White hypocrisy in America and to call Black men to action in their own behalf. In 1831, after Turner led his bloody revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, "noted abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison even published an editorial in his newspaper *The Liberator* in support of Turner to some degree." Also in 1831 Garrison used art to depict the inhumane auction of an enslaved Black family in front of the nation's capital in the masthead of *The Liberator*. And later in the 1830s, Rev. Easton responded to White supremacists burning down his Connecticut church by publishing *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States and the Prejudice Exercised towards Them: with a Sermon on the Duty of the Church to Them*. Easton chose to both preach this sermon and to put it in writing for publication and distribution to a larger audience.

Thus Walker, Turner, Garrison and Easton used either the written word, art, oratory, an aggressive form of social activism or a combination of these within a few years of each other to strive toward achieving racial vindication. Although they may have sought to achieve it in very different ways their intent was the same ([www.biography.com/people/nat-turner](http://www.biography.com/people/nat-turner), 2, 10-12-2014).

It is immaterial whether these four men ever met each other. Nor is it important to know whether or not they all took any common oath of allegiance to work for racial vindication. This study calls for the actions of men such as those listed above to all take their place under the wide tent of racial vindication. *The Birth of a Nation* scholars tend to isolate the numerous attempts to censor Griffith and point to their failures to effectively do so. This study finds this approach to be short sighted and advocates that such analyses not fall prey to a segregation of the various venues of response. To consider the bold actions of Turner and his followers on August 21, 1831 in a vacuum, for example, might suggest that he failed to vindicate the humanity of any enslaved Africans. But when Turner's action is considered one step in a long journey, traveled by millions of people in America over two centuries, the expanded perspective of racial vindication becomes instructive.

Likewise, we must consider more than a single effort by a single entity to challenge the numerous examples of White supremacy in *The Birth of a Nation* when judging the effectiveness of counter arguments and actions. Such a comprehensive analysis should include all those who in theory opposed

notions of White supremacy in the film. Such a grouping of people of like minds helps us gain proper perspective. Yet other scholars who study reactions to *The Birth of a Nation* have yet to document and publish a broad analysis that considers the three-pronged approach this study calls for. This paper advocates for future research in this field using such an approach.

Chapter III looks closely at the country's reactions to the film in the written word, in social activism and in silent film. It first ties together a sequence of events that on the surface may appear to be unrelated but which actually complement each other. As the chapter points out, the stars appeared to align themselves and bring together the right men at the right time to produce *The Birth of a Nation*.

## CHAPTER III

### ***The Birth of a Nation: Benefits of a Tri-Level Analysis of Racial Vindication***

There is little doubt that strong, dramatic -- even spectacular -- affirmations of White supremacy carried the day in *The Birth of a Nation*. David M. Chalmers said of the film, "its greatest selling point was the protection of traditional American values," from Maine to California. And because African Americans were locked out of the mainstream of opportunities available there was virtually no way they could become part of this value system. They were marginalized, discriminated against and despised by the millions of Klan recruits who flocked to the reborn KKK. A formidable response to such a powerful instrument required the collective efforts of men (and women) dedicated to striving for racial vindication in numerous venues. What this study advocates for is an analysis of the various responses to the film that gives substantial weight to all of these actions if they fall within our definition of racial vindication.

President Wilson took office in 1913. Prior presidents William McKinley (1897-1901), Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) and William Howard Taft (1909-1913) did little to give Black people any hope that their lives in America would improve. Wilson did not change the pattern. Under these national leaders other Southern states followed the lead of Mississippi and systematically stripped away the meager gains Black people had struggled to hold onto since Reconstruction. Poverty among Blacks was extremely high and they seemed trapped in a system of peonage and sharecropping that barely kept the poorest of them fed. Poor Whites (many of whom soon would join the revived Ku Klux Klan) naturally felt threatened by Blacks who competed with them for scarce resources. Into this sociopolitical arena entered Dixon, Griffith and *The Birth of a Nation* (Bernardi 1996, pp. 40-41)

Wilson segregated federal workers by race and fired many Black government employees early in his administration. By doing so he failed to keep a commitment he had made during his campaign to treat African Americans fairly. He said that in his various federal bureaus he was implementing a plan that, "will not in one bureau mix the races." The president declared that the "English race" had risen in time through

various circumstances -- and that others also must do so by waiting their turn. A few months after his wife died, Wilson agreed to allow Dixon and Griffith to exhibit an early private screening of his film (then titled *The Clansman*) in the East Room of the White House. Contrary to some historic accounts this would not be the first time a film was shown there. Wilson and members of his cabinet saw the film *Cabria* in the White House on June 26, 1914, two months before Mrs. Wilson died. In any case, the fact that Griffith exhibited *The Birth of a Nation* (or *The Clansman* as it was known then) in the White House for the president legitimized the film and its message in the minds of millions of Americans (Franklin 1979) (Stokes 2007) (Jozajtis 2001) (Leab 1976, 34).

After viewing the three-hour movie Wilson reported that he was very pleased with the exhibition. Allegedly he said, "it was like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." Scholars have debated over whether or not Wilson actually said these words. What is certain is that once the film was released to the public, in spite of pressure placed on him to do so, Wilson never publicly expressed his disapproval of exhibitions of the film. And audiences all across America flocked to see the movie, helping it break attendance records for a silent picture. Many people rode trains for long distances to reach movie houses in the nearest big city where it was shown (Slide 2004) (Stokes 2007) (Reid 1993).

Once Dixon had exhibited the film for the president he wasted no time in setting up a second important private showing for Supreme Court Justice Edward D. White. When they met later that day White told Dixon that he never had seen a silent film and he had no intention of seeing this one. But as Dixon was about to leave he mentioned to White that *The Birth of a Nation* showed the true history of the Ku Klux Klan. Suddenly, White showed interest in the project. "I was a member of the Klan, sir," he said. White agreed to see the film that evening with Dixon, Griffith and several other important guests. Again, Dixon benefitted from what Feagin identifies as the privilege of having White skin. Getting his foot in the doors of two of the country's most influential leaders was an advantage that none of the African Americans who formed the racial vindication movement in response to *The Birth of a Nation* would enjoy (Slide 2004) (Franklin 1979) (Stokes 2007).

The National Press Club hosted White, thirty-eight United States senators, some fifty members of the U. S. House of Representatives and several of their wives for a screening of *The Birth of a Nation*. Others in attendance included members of the diplomatic corps, several other high-ranking government officials and numerous journalists. They viewed the film in the grand ballroom of Washington's Raleigh Hotel. When the screening ended the group showered Griffith with praises. It represented an important second step for Dixon and Griffith in building political clout to withstand the opposition to exhibitions of the film they were sure would come. Dixon screened the movie several more times for journalists and other men of influence before the official premier. Actor Douglas Fairbanks and his wife, for example, attended one of the screenings. This all gave Dixon and Griffith tremendous momentum as they primed the country for their epic production (Slide 2004) (Franklin 1979) (Stokes 2007).

The men and women who opposed racism sprung into action immediately after the official public premiere of the film took place February 8, 1915 at Clune's Auditorium in downtown Los Angeles. Later that day Director Griffith copyrighted the movie as *The Birth of a Nation or The Clansman*. The year was significant because it marked the Fiftieth Anniversary of the, "high tide of the Civil War ... celebrations" (Chalmers 1987, pp. 2-3).

As noted previously, the one sustained national effort to thwart exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation* centered came from the NAACP and its various branch offices. But even within this fledgling new organization disagreement existed among the leadership about how best to contest Griffith's work. DuBois, the group's most visible public face, refused to get involved in public protests, appeals to censorship panels and petitions to the courts over exhibitions of the film. There were many other marginalized efforts to stand up to Griffith's monster. After Washington's death Scott bumbled his way through one failed attempt after another to finance and produce a film that could rival the impact of *The Birth of a Nation*. Trotter succeeded in rallying thousands of protesters in Boston but failed to stop exhibitions of the film there. Abbott and his *Chicago Defender* published several scathing rebuttals of the film's messages that circulated all over the nation. But his success in blocking exhibitions of the film were limited to Chicago (and there only temporarily) and to other cities in Illinois.

Epilogues to *The Birth of a Nation* of students at Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes failed to effectively address the racist images that immediately preceded them during these three-hour film marathons in movie theaters. Meanwhile Foster, the Johnson brothers and Micheaux could only finance film shorts that did not get major distribution agreements with white-owned theaters. Their low-budget films primarily were seen only by Black audiences. Individually their best work was woefully inadequate to be considered very effective antidotes for *The Birth of a Nation*. Yet, the collective efforts of these "race men" and women were indeed admirable. The film scholars cited in this study examine these efforts to vindicate the race as individual efforts only. By doing so they miss the opportunity to examine the cumulative impact -- the tri-level analysis -- that this study endorses (Stokes 2007) (Slide 2004).

Not until 1939 -- twenty-four years after the release of *The Birth of a Nation* -- did another film (*Gone With the Wind*) gross more than the approximate \$50,000,000 Griffith's movie earned. David O. Selznick's epic movie, like *The Birth of a Nation*, was a story of the old South in Civil War and Reconstruction. And as much of the public did with Griffith's film it considered Selznick's tale factual also. Both films portrayed a noble South being overrun by a vicious and corrupt North. They both also depicted Whites as chivalrous and courageous and Blacks as lazy, simple-minded or loyal to a fault to their masters. Selznick's slaves were so loyal that they remained on the plantation, Tara, long after they were freed by the Union ("Yankee") Army. As was the case with *The Birth of a Nation*, the NAACP firmly opposed exhibitions of *Gone With the Wind*. And as was true in the prior case, NAACP protests and court challenges alone had important but marginable success in doing so.

### **The Making of *The Birth of a Nation* and America's Response**

This study's argument centers around Cripps' comments on the limited options facing the proponents of racial vindication. His assessment of possible options for racial vindication does not take into account the cumulative impact on racism of more than one of the viable options he listed.

In the years immediately following 1915 numerous people did pursue all the venues Cripps cited. These reactions to *The Birth of a Nation* occurred simultaneously, increasing their effectiveness, and not in isolation as Cripps' focus on *The Birth of a Race* would suggest. Written condemnations of Griffith's film were published and circulated as public criticism of the film took place in movie theater lobbies and in the

street. NAACP leaders appeared before numerous censorship boards and city councils while its lawyers argued for their cause before judges. Black film makers turned out movies in California. All these men of courage learned from each other how to best stand up for the race. The Klan, which rose to prominence after 1915, had registered nearly 100,000 members by 1921. It remained the most tangible example of the racial hatred represented in *The Birth of a Nation*. By 1925 it claimed more than three million subjects (Chalmers 1987, p.33).

Linda Williams said that Dixon, Griffith and the Aiken brothers helped convert the nation to the "southern mentality" when they released *The Birth of a Nation*. According to Williams the film replaced the Uncle Tom-inspired sympathy of the antebellum and Reconstruction South to the, "new sense of historical truth." But whose truth was Griffith's audience being fed? The "new" nation he helped create was one in which North and South formed racial solidarity at the expense of the Black man, who was painted as their common enemy. This so-called common enemy posed a constant sexual threat toward defenseless White women. Thus this philosophy dictated that the Gus character Dixon invented and who Griffith embellished had to die a violent death (he was lynched) at the hands of the White males who were merely protecting their White women. The mere proposal of marriage -- physical contact between the two or not -- by a Black man to a White woman mandated a death sentence in the society dominated by this "southern mentality (Williams 2001)."

One thing was sure: the White public went to see the film in record numbers, making Dixon, Griffith, the Aiken brothers and other major investors rich men.

According to Grace Elizabeth Hale, in Griffith's movies, "blacks at last stand virtually alone in being responsible for the 'hell' of Reconstruction." This repudiation creates not just national reconciliation," Hale says, "but the birth of the new Anglo-Saxon nation as well." In her book *Making Whiteness: the Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* she asserts that war and Reconstruction in the film also provide the narrative for allowing a new respect for White femininity to join White male masculinity. Both concepts compliment, of course, White supremacy. In addition Reconstruction limited the open access White males previously had to Black females in the slave quarters. This brought on White male frustration, complimented by their increased glorification of White women, which fueled their yearning to lynch the,

"black beasts rapists." Thus the country in the early twentieth century moved decidedly toward, "building segregation as culture upon segregation as policy" (Hale 1998, pp. 79, 233).

By 1928 more than two million members had left the KKK. Much of the organization's decline in the late 1920s was due to internal corruption and incompetent leadership. Some of its downfall was due to an America that fought back against attacks on Blacks, Catholics, Jews and foreigners who did not fit the White Anglo-Saxon profile. This paper also attributes some this decline in White supremacy's potency via the KKK to the influence of the Harlem Renaissance. This movement took place in America's largest city and was led by exceptional African Americans.

For many years racist propaganda claimed that Blacks lacked superior intelligence. And the Klan warned its followers that they posed a dangerous threat to their security. Yet by 1920 no Negro rebellion had taken place on the cotton farm or in the urban ghetto, David M. Chalmers pointed out. Instead, hundreds of talented Black writers, musicians, singers, dancers, painters, poets and philosophers settled in New York City. They put to bed the lie that Black people could only imitate Whites and were only good for performing manual labor. Thus the impact this creative energy coming from New York had on the nation -- the Harlem Renaissance -- must be considered in any analysis of the impact of racial vindication in the years that followed the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (Chalmers 1987, pp. 33, 291).

### **Racial Vindication Following *The Birth of a Nation* Through the Written Word**

DuBois issued the first edition of the *Crisis Magazine*, the official literary arm of the NAACP, on January 1, 1916. By then *The Birth of a Nation* had been shown all over the country and was stirring up controversy as no other film had ever done. Du Bois was aware that he put out the first *Crisis Magazine* on the one-year anniversary of *The Birth of a Nation's* opening showing in Riverside, California. The *Crisis* sounded the alarm against the divisive impact *The Birth of a Nation* had on race relations in America and continued to do so for years. DuBois, however, thought it folly to respond to *The Birth of a Nation* through organized protests or by producing films in the spirit of racial vindication. He believed such reactions would only result in giving the film more publicity and increasing public interest in it.

Instead DuBois revived his 1911 pageant "The Star of Ethiopia" in 1915 and organized performances in New York and Washington, D. C. In 1916 he took the pageant to Philadelphia. Due in



large part to excessive expenses associated with the lavish production it was only performed one more time, in the Hollywood Bowl in 1925.

Pero Dagbovie argues that the lynching of Blacks during Reconstruction could classify as genocide, based on various scholars' definition of the term. The Klan (and Griffith) saw lynching (or the threat of lynching) as a necessary tool to maintain the strict line of interaction between the races. In 1919 the NAACP published the eye-opening book *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1819-1918*. The organization also supported the federal Dyer Bill. But the Senate failed to pass it.

NAACP membership grew from 5,000 in 1914 to around 9,000 in 1917. Then it sprang up to about 90,000 in 1919. Thus, membership increased ten-fold in this two-year period! In 1913 the NAACP had only a few branch offices. By 1919 there were more than 300 branch offices in cities all over the United States. The organization's web site credits its fight against *The Birth of a Nation* for this unprecedented growth during such a short period of time. This explosion in civic activism via membership in the country's largest civil rights organization must be considered as playing a significant role in an assessment of the cumulative opposition to the film (<http://www.naacp.org>).

It meant much to these brave men and women to stand tall, affirm their humanity and to vindicate Black people in the wake of *The Birth of a Nation*. They did so in spite of the decisions the majority court of public opinion ruled by judges, mayors or censorship committees that maintained "business as usual" attitudes (Dei 2001).

In November 1921 DuBois published his monthly opinion column in *The Crisis* Magazine. In it he said, "The absolute equality of races -- physical, political and social -- is the founding stone of world peace and human advancement." He told his readers that, "science, religion and practical politics deny the God-appointed existence of super races or of races naturally and inevitably inferior" (DuBois 1921)

As a display of race pride, the *Crisis* prominently ran advertisements for Black colleges in each edition. They promoted such institutions of higher learning as Virginia Union University, Lincoln Hospital and Home, The National Training School in Durham, North Carolina, the State of New Jersey Manual Training & Industrial School For Colored Youth, Lincoln University in Chester County, Pennsylvania, Wiley College, Cheney Training School For Teachers in Cheney, Pennsylvania, Atlanta University,

Morehouse College, Knoxville College, Clark University, The Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College, Fisk University, Biddle University in Charlotte, North Carolina, Morris Brown University, Simmons University in Louisville, Kentucky, the Berean Manual Training and Industrial School, Talladega College, the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls, Roger Williams University in Nashville, Tennessee, Joseph K. Brick Agricultural Industrial and Normal School in Bricks, North Carolina, Coleman College in Gibsland, Louisiana, the St. Mary School in Philadelphia and the Colored Teachers' Bureau in Wilberforce, Ohio (DuBois 1921).

By running these advertisements on the inside front cover of *The Crisis* DuBois was making the point that higher education and knowledge were not the special possessions of White men. African American schools trained thousands of young people each year. The fact alone that so many Black colleges and secondary schools existed was a major blow for racial vindication. And DuBois wanted those who believed that Dixon and Griffith were right to ridicule Black intellect to stand corrected in the pages of the NAACP's periodical. As editor of *The Crisis* DuBois chose not to spar directly with Griffith in the pages of the magazine. But several Black newspapers did so on a regular basis in the years that followed the release of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 (DuBois 1921).

Thabiti Asukile credits self-trained historian Joel Augustus Rogers with writing an effective racial vindicationist novel in 1917 -- *From Superman to Man*. Wilson J. Moss calls Rogers, "the most beloved and influential of the vindicationists." In his book Rogers describes a dialogue between a Pullman porter named Dixon and a White southern legislator. The expected roles are reversed in the novel, however, because the Black man exhibits the superior intellect of the two and belies the stereotypical image that Griffith portrayed in *The Birth of a Nation*. Among those who complimented Rogers for his work were Rev. George Frazier Miller of St. Augustine Church, the journalist John Edward Bruce, author William H. Ferris, Harlem stepladder intellectual Hubert Harrison and New York's Black bibliophile Schomburg.

Rogers compelled his readers to view African Americans in the larger context of world history. He exposed the fallacy of, "sub-Saharan Africans and their descendants in the Americas as brutes who were incapable of functioning as intelligent human beings outside the normal order of human bondage." Asukile says that Rogers read many of the racist books that were published during the early twentieth century.

But, "none seem to have moved him more than Thomas F. Dixon Jr.'s *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905)." Rogers, like film maker Oscar Micheaux, worked as a railroad porter out of Chicago. His experience traveling from state to state while meeting numerous White passengers greatly expanded his world view. His exposure as a train porter to the psyche and attitudes of many White Americans gave him the first-hand background to write *From Superman to Man* (Asukile 2011).

Traveling from Chicago to other cities gave Rogers and other Pullman porters the opportunity to distribute copies of Abbott's *Chicago Defender* to Black people in other cities and towns who otherwise might not have had access to this source of information. By 1925 the *Defender* reported a circulation of more than 200,000 copies, making it the largest selling Black newspaper in the United States. Thus, the Pullman porters played an important role in the racial vindication movement following the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. They helped distribute the news that helped to redeem the humanity of African Americans. Rogers said in the *Courier*, "As a young man I wasn't interested in 'race.' Then in Thomas Dixon's '*Clansman*' I read that if you had a 'drop of Negro blood' you were damned intellectually and I began to take notice". The role these Black workers played, therefore, helped lift up the hopes and aspirations of African Americans. This important contribution must not be discounted by scholars who assess in isolation the value of the role Black newspapers played in the racial vindication movement (Asukile 2011).

Rogers' interaction with other members of the racial vindication movement further demonstrates the importance of examining the effectiveness of taking a broad view of these rebuttals to *The Birth of a Nation*. He sent copies of *From Man to Superman* to race leaders whom he respected. DuBois initially did not think much of the book. But eventually DuBois praised the work in *The Crisis*.

Griffith had a curious relationship with the Black press following the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. *The Baltimore African-American*, *California Eagle*, *Chicago Defender*, *New York Age*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, *Philadelphia Tribune* and the *Pittsburg Courier* all informed their readers of protests and other reactions to the film for years after its release. Still, he refused to

acknowledge that his film was detrimental to race relations. The Black press continued to hammer away at the movie (Glick 2011).

Robert L. Vann, like Rogers also of the *Pittsburg Courier*, was one of the leading voices in Black journalism in America from 1910 to 1940. Andrew Buni says that one of Vann's missions in the *Courier* was to, "combat the distortions in the white press's portrayal of black people, deliberate or not." As pointed out later in this study, White newspaper reports, editorials, cartoons and advertisements such as those that routinely ran in the *Tampa Morning Tribune* while *The Birth of a Race* was being filmed there in 1918 demeaned African Americans. Thus, the Black press attempted to vindicate the race by using the same venue that White communicators used. The cumulative contributions made by activist newspaper journalist like Vann, Abbott with the *Chicago Defender*, Trotter with the *Boston Guardian* and P. B. Young of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* all meet our definition of racial vindication. They refuted the false notions that Black people were naturally inferior and that they had not made (and were incapable of making) significant contributions to civilization (Franklin and Collier-Thomas 1996, 164).

Some Black newspapers interpreted *Intolerance*, a Griffith film that followed *The Birth of a Nation*, as sort of an anti-*The Clansman* film. Glick believes that Griffith underwent an ideological epiphany following *The Birth of a Nation*. But as Richard Schinkel observes, Griffith did not address "racial intolerance" in his new film. And the movie did not offer an apology for *The Birth of a Nation*. Still, the prominent Black newspaper the *Chicago Defender* complimented Griffith for employing renowned Black actor Noble Johnson in the production of *Intolerance*. Johnson portrayed a chariot driver in the film, a minor role but one for which Griffith won praise from many Blacks and Whites. Still critics continued to point to the lack of diversity in Hollywood when it came to hiring Black actors for major films. For many years to come the industry preferred to use Whites in blackface over talented Black actors. And when Blacks were hired, they were casts as servants, entertainers or as vile human beings (Glick 2011).

Bogle, again, identifies those "Black roles" as stereotypical Uncle Toms, coons, mammies, bucks or tragic mulattoes. At the same time (since these were virtually the only roles Hollywood hired Blacks for before World War II) most of the Black press applauded film executives whenever they hired African Americans regardless of the role. Hattie McDaniel, the first Black actor to win an Oscar (for her role as the

faithful servant Mammie in 1939's *Gone With the Wind*) once said, "I'd rather play a maid than to be one." And the debate over which is more valuable to African Americans -- employment for Black actors or the image their roles gave to the group -- continues into modern times.

African Americans created a Black public sphere in order to attack the problem. In his 1963 essay "The Reaction of the Negro to the Modern Motion Picture *The Birth of a Nation*" Cripps says that most Negroes in the urban North turned to censorship because they lacked funds to produce their own pictures. The NAACP mailed out copies of Francis Hackett's stinging review of *The Birth of a Nation* in the "New Republic" to 500 newspapers. African American and liberal Whites privately printed and distributed pamphlets denouncing the film. This organized protest by newspapers sympathetic to the cause of bringing exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation* to a halt was effective in alerting Black people across the country to the urgency of the crisis. But New York Mayor John P. Mitchell denied the NAACP a license to parade there in protest of the movie. Still, one of the most publicized rebukes of the film came from the pen of Jane Adams on March 13 in Oswald Garrison Villard's *Post*. In July 1915 radical *Chicago Defender* Editor and Publisher Abbott ran a cartoon that linked the film with the Ku Klux Klan and led the protest there against the movie (Cripps 1963).

On May 13, 1921 *New Age* columnist, NAACP Executive Secretary and Harlem Renaissance writer James Weldon Johnson viewed *The Birth of a Nation* at New York's Capitol Theater. He wrote that the film was being revived then in response to the recent murder of eleven Black farm workers in Jasper County, Georgia. There had been tension there when a White plantation owner was accused of violating peonage laws. Johnson argued that there should be great outrage coming from the Catholic and Jewish groups in America over the resurrection of *The Birth of a Nation* in the 1920s. He pointed out that the Ku Klux Klan was attacking members of these ethnic groups as well as African Americans. The *Chicago Defender's* Abbott, considered with Trotter the most aggressive of Black journalists in the country, led a boycott in his city that blocked the initial attempts to exhibit the film there.

Protests in the Black media over *The Birth of a Nation* film took on an international flavor in 1923 when Paris banned the film for a second time. *The Chicago Defender* ran a story on its editorial page under the headline "French Democracy Versus American Race Prejudice." Cubans in Havana blocked

exhibitions of the film on the island and European correspondent J. A. Rogers spoke against *The Birth of a Nation* being screened in Milan.

Two of the first men who responded to the need for racial vindication in America after *The Birth of a Nation* was released by joining DuBois in using scholarship, research and historical inquiry were Schomburg and Carter G. Woodson. They actually had responded in this way to the need for racial vindication in America long before (and long after) the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. Schomburg left his native Puerto Rico for the United States in 1891. He settled in New York on April 17 at a time when Blacks and other non-White Americans began forming organizations that could vindicate the race from the notions of White supremacy in the post-Reconstruction era. Soon after coming to America Schomburg became secretary of the Las Dos Antillas (The Two Islands) Club, which sought independence from Spain for Cuba and his native Puerto Rico. Woodson, who earned a Ph. D. from Harvard, founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNHL) on September 9, 1915 -- eight months after *The Birth of a Nation* burst on the American scene. Known as the "Father of Black History" Woodson founded ASNLH in the Chicago office of the executive secretary of the Wabash Avenue Department of the Young Mens Christian Association (YMCA) (Dagbovie 2004, 381).

Schomburg began collecting African artifacts, books, all kinds of documents and items of interest in Puerto Rico. He continued this practice when he arrived in New York. Just before he arrived in Harlem five men there formed the Negro Society for Historical Research. In 1897 the American Negro Historical Society was formed in Philadelphia. And the American Negro Academy (so named by poet Paul Laurence Dunbar) was formed in the Washington D. C. home of John Wesley Cromwell. By 1911 Schomburg had accumulated 300 books and valuable Afrocentric documents and artifacts. He said much of his vision was confirmed in a speech given in 1911 by Black Harvard graduate Locke titled "The Question of a Race Tradition." The first African American Rhodes scholar, Locke founded the African Union Society in Oxford, England and said, "there is no alternative to turning back toward an African past". And in 1914 -- the same year Griffith was filming *The Birth of a Nation* -- Cromwell published *The Negro in American History* and Schomburg joined the American Negro Academy.

In 1915 Schomburg used the pen name "Guarinex" and published his *Checklist of American Negro Poetry*. The document contained 236 items and consisted of fifty-seven pages. He and Bruce Grit collected other texts, artifacts and items of interest relevant to the African diaspora. In the tradition of racial vindication Schomburg declared their purpose to be, "to collect evidence and undertake research that would inform, inspire and uplift the black race." They vigorously pursued racial vindication.

Joining Woodson as founders of ASNLH were George Cleveland Hall (the group's first president), W. B. Hargrove, J. E. Stamps and A. L. Jackson. Woodson served as the founding director of research and editor of the monthly journal. J. E. Moreland was elected secretary-treasurer. J. A. Bingham, Miss S. P. Breckridge and G. N. Grisham all served on the executive council. Early editions of the journal focused on negro achievements and included such topics as: the history of free negroes prior to the civil war; negroes during Reconstruction; negro urban laborers; rural workers and negroes in the church and in professions. The group's *Journal of Negro (later African American) Life and History* made its debut on January 1, 1916, as the founders of ASNLH and their supporters all over America still was all abuzz over the controversial *The Birth of a Nation*. Like DuBois and *The Crisis*, they also chose to debut their racial vindication publication on the date that coincided with the first anniversary of *The Birth of a Nation*.

V. P. Franklin and Bettye Collier-Thomas say, "From the beginning (1915) Carter G. Woodson knew that the *Journal of Negro History* (JNH) would be important for 'race vindication'." Woodson published articles and collected materials that told the story of Black people as a means by which, "the Negro [could] escape the awful fate of becoming a negligible factor in the thought of the world." The journal called for Black preachers, professors, publishers and other highly educated professionals to put their intellect and training in service to "the race." DuBois promoted this ideal in his early work by identifying this group as the "talented tenth." Woodson was convinced that by focusing on Black achievement these leading thinkers could deconstruct the discursive structures erected in science, medicine, the law and historical discourse, "to uphold the mental and cultural inferiority of African people."(Franklin and Collier-Thomas 2003).

We note here two excellent examples of cooperation between complimentary and contemporary organizations: ASNLH and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Mrs. Washington, the

widow of Booker T. Washington, served for years as president of NACW. In 1916 (the year following her husband's death) she encouraged the group's members to financially support Woodson's new publication, the *Journal of Negro History*. She also urged them to use his materials in their schools. In response, a group of Black women in Washington, D. C., sold photographs taken by local photographer Robert Scurlock along with Woodson's materials door-to-door to support his "Negro History Movement." This kind of cooperation across gender lines between groups of progressive African Americans support this study's argument that the whole of the racial vindication movement cannot be appreciated without considering each contributing part. Again, many Griffith scholars fail to assess the mutual support of these complimentary efforts to achieve a measure of racial vindication (Rouse 1996).

As Dagbovie points out that, "This African American vindicationist tradition of the early 1900s included many new black scholars," They toiled to vindicate the race without direct support for their work from mainstream White academic institutions. Instead they organized seminars, conferences, lectures and meetings in Black churches, community centers, high school auditoriums as well as at colleges and universities. Woodson published a genre of historical scholarship that was accessible to a wide range of readers. And he also supported a form of racial vindication that challenged *The Birth of a Nation* to a space within the public sphere that he (and not rich White men) controlled -- the factual arena of historical research and knowledge. It was this constant search for truth that ultimately carried the day for those who stood for racial vindication in the face of *The Birth of a Nation* (Dagbovie 2004, 375).

The work Woodson, ASNLH and Schomburg did complimented the legal challenges the NAACP filed -- all on behalf of racial vindication -- against exhibitions of Griffith's film. The argument in this paper is in support of weighing the viability of all efforts toward racial vindication as defined here. To consider the effectiveness of one effort toward this end without doing so for the others gives an incomplete picture of the totality of the movement (Dagbovie 2004).

As the country entered the 1920s an equally potent movement was forming in New York City. The "New Negro" that Nathan Huggins discussed symbolized for many the shift in power from Tuskegee to New York after the Great War. "Their very movement was a defiance of a system of white supremacy, Jim Crow, terror, and the Ku Klux Klan," he said. Claude McKay captured the spirit of this transition when



he wrote in his poem *The White House*, "I possess the courage and the grace to bear my anger proudly and unbent."

Lionel Bascom called Locke the, "father of the Harlem renaissance." Locke challenged the three major tenets of nineteenth century racist ideology: the belief in superior and inferior races; the belief that race mixing was degenerative and would lead to the downfall of civilization; and the belief that intellectual ability and the capacity for flourishing in a civilized society were linked to a phenotypic race. His writings and oratorical skills place him squarely in the middle of literary scholars who pushed for racial vindication following the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. Many other exceptional men and women followed Locke in challenging the old stereotypes that had fed the proponents of White supremacy for centuries. The poet Sterling A. Brown called on America to remember the nineteenth century revolutionary Turner and wrote about his troubled spirit. And Schomburg said, "vindicating evidences of individual achievement ... have been gathered and treasured for over a century ... The blatant Caucasian racist with his theories and assumptions of race superiority and dominance has in turn bred his Ethiopian counterpart" (Haywood 2011) (Bascom 1999, 5) (Huggins 1976, 220).

### **Racial Vindication Through Oratory and Public Protests after *The Birth of a Nation***

Government officials and Black people responded in quite different ways in light of the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. In general government agencies and censorship boards protected Griffith's First Amendment rights to exhibit *The Birth of a Nation*. If they ordered changes in the film at all they usually were minor ones. Film executives envied the record-setting success the movie experienced nation-wide. They marveled at Griffith's technical innovations as a director and anointed him the prince of Hollywood. Many Whites in both the North and in the South went to see the film, confirming Griffith's place in film lore.

Weeks before *The Birth of a Nation* opened in New York the Supreme Court ruled in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission* in Ohio that First Amendment freedom of speech did not extend to motion pictures. But Griffith put up a formidable defense for freedom of expression, "for the art of the motion picture." A divided NAACP body fretted over how to use its sparse resources. And board members had differing opinions about the most effective strategy to stop Griffith's momentum. Was it better to counter Griffith's grossly stereotypical and dangerous film with public protests and court challenges? Or,

as DuBois felt and as NAACP founder Mary White Ovington said, should they ignore the film because, "publicity will only aid a show." In the end, Griffith's opponents used a combination of approaches (Stokes 2007, 133).

When Griffith appeared before the members of the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures (NBCMP) on March 12, 1915 they reportedly cheered as he entered the room. The group listened to Griffith's request to exhibit the film and then voted twelve to nine to allow the movie to be shown. An editorial writer for the *New York Globe* said on April 6, 1915, "to make a few dirty dollars men are willing to pander to depraved tastes and to torment a race apathy that is the most sinister and dangerous feature of American life." The legal challenge to viewing *The Birth of a Nation* in New York and elsewhere in the country was dismissed by the court in late May (Stokes 2007, 133).

The NAACP's fight to stop the film in New York was primarily led by White ministers. *New York Age* film critic Lester Walton criticized African Americans for not working together more effectively to protest against the movie being shown there. After the New York episode the national NAACP office adopted a strategy of leaning on the individual local branches to challenge future exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation* in cities where it was scheduled to be shown. Still, by the summer of 1915 the film had been seen all over America. A few notable exceptions, where local efforts prevented it from being exhibited, were Philadelphia, Wilmington, Delaware and (temporarily) Chicago. The Wilmington City Council assessed a fine of \$50 for showing either *The Birth of a Nation* or the inflammatory film *The Nigger*. Chicago Mayor William Thompson derailed the showing of the film and helped ban it in the entire state of Illinois. Eventually the film did show in Chicago.. Few other cities, however, took such strong action against either movie (Stokes 2007) (Stokes 2007, 133) (Cripps 1963) (Glick 2011).

Griffith defended the film in late 1915 when he said, "the only opposition to it (the film) so far is a Negro society (referring to the NAACP) which advises its members to arm themselves and to fight the whites and to make mongrel marriages." But he must have known that the NAACP had considerable influence, as it persuaded a number of newspapers, organizations and leaders to also express their displeasure with the film. Griffith said, "the attack of the organized opponents to this picture is centered upon the feature of it which they deem might become an influence against the intermarriage of blacks and

whites." Thus, Griffith's obsession with miscegenation remains at the forefront of his defense of his argument. It remained the major tenet of his philosophy on race relations for the rest of his career. Yet the opposition to the film covered numerous areas and was not solely focused on amalgamation (Stokes 2007) (Cripps 1993, 58).

The NAACP website says, "the founding members of the Association immediately understood the power and influence of the then new media of film ... (and the association) has also been at the forefront of the struggle for the inclusion of all Americans, regardless of race, in the entertainment industry." It is unmistakable that the national NAACP and its branches owe much of their early growth to the lengthy battles they lodged against exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation* all across the country. There were scattered victories of varying proportions in different regions. But collectively, with the initiatives of other courageous individuals, organizations and Black film producers, these efforts helped turn attitudes away from the racist propaganda Dixon and Griffith sold for a handsome profit ([www.naacp.org](http://www.naacp.org)).

The NAACP was only six years old when *The Birth of a Nation* made its debut. Banning the film became the organization's first major project. There were 5,000 NAACP members nation-wide when the movie opened in 1915. Thousands more began to join the group as publicity over the fight to ban the film grew in city after city. The NAACP worked to offset the effects of the film in three stages: political organization; censorship and creation of a clearer aesthetic ideal. Ironically the NBCMP and the NAACP were located in the same building in New York. And when Griffith won his argument to exhibit the film in New York on March 12, 1915 you could say it was the day the NAACP began its largest membership drive of its early existence -- on the same city block of its opposition (Cripps 1993, 58).

A month earlier, when the Los Angeles newspaper began advertising the coming of *The Birth of a Nation* to Clune's Auditorium, the NAACP branch office there immediately began raising objections. On January 29 many branch members saw the film and posed five specific objections: the movie belittled the North in its revisionist history of the Civil War; it portrayed Blacks as hideous, repulsive and depraved savages at their worst or as simple-minded fools at their best; it spread notions of immorality because of the sexual innuendos in scenes involving the Stoneman character from the North and his affections for his mulatto housekeeper; it promoted violence (especially in scenes like the ones including the "Little

Colonel" character and the rampaging Black soldiers who behave like dangerous and irresponsible children with loaded guns); and it promoted animosity between the races on several levels. For example, it celebrated tension between the "Little Colonel" (portrayed as an honorable Southern gentleman) and Silas Lynch (painted as a corrupt, lusty "tragic" mulatto politician) (Stokes 2007).

When the NBCMP initially heard from the Los Angeles Branch of the NAACP it told the group that it would consider banning the film. But the local censorship board approved the film's exhibition and Griffith's colleagues moved forward. The branch then protested to the mayor and the chief of police. But both officials refused to block the film from being shown. They said that because the local censors had approved the showing they could not prevent the movie from being exhibited. The NAACP then appealed to the Los Angeles City Council. And on February 3, 1915 the city council approved a resolution that it sent to the local censorship board, saying that the film should be banned. But this too failed to have the desired effect (Stokes 2007).

Undaunted, the Los Angeles NAACP filed a law suit against exhibitions of the film there. The court granted the request but only required that the film not be shown the afternoon of February 8, 1915 (as had been advertised). The narrowly-drawn law suit had only requested a ban for that (opening) afternoon. It was silent on later showings that evening or on subsequent days. As a result the film was shown to a packed house of spectators that evening, February 8. And it continued to run in Los Angeles in the coming days, weeks and months (Stokes 2007).

It was the Los Angeles Branch of the NAACP that set the rules of engagement for the lengthy nation-wide battle against *The Birth of a Nation*. The national office and numerous branches used the "public safety" argument when filing legal arguments in cities to stop the film from being shown in cities all across America. Rarely was the film banned completely. Some local censorship boards did require that the most objectionable scenes be deleted (such as those showing the castration and lynching of Gus). But even with twenty minutes deleted from the original movie there still remained over two and a half hours. This left plenty of time to celebrate White supremacy at the expense of Blacks (actually Whites in blackface). Most critics agreed that the second half of the film was most damning. It depicted Griffith's imaginative interpretation of events during the Civil War and Reconstruction (Stokes 2007).

African American attorney Charles W. Chestnut, an outspoken advocate for Black rights, played several roles in the struggle for racial vindication. He perhaps had more varied talents as a major player in this arena than did any other single progressive thinker. As a young man he was the principal of a school in Fayetteville, North Carolina. He then worked as a journalist in New York City. Chestnut also wrote outstanding prose, covering such topics as miscegenation in America. He published several books, including a biography of Frederick Douglass and *The House Behind the Cedars*. A talented orator, he traveled on the lecture circuit in the South. Chestnut worked with Washington to convince Macmillan to withdraw from publishing the racist volume *The American Negro*. Most significant for purposes of this study, Chestnut passed the bar in Ohio and helped persuade the courts to prohibit exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation* in that state. Thus he made contributions to racial vindication in all the areas Cripps identifies -- literature, oratory and silent film (with his legal role in blocking showings of *The Birth of a Nation*). Chestnut served as president of the NAACP, and for his humanitarian efforts the organization honored him in 1928 with its Springarn Medal (Bloom 1995).

The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) best rivaled the KKK in membership numbers after *The Birth of a Nation* was released. The organization was founded by Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born organizer whom Martin Luther King, Jr. would call, "the first man of color in the history of the United States to lead and develop a mass movement." He arrived in New York City in early 1916 and settled in Harlem. In just a few years he formed the organization that drew far more disciples than did the NAACP. He began attracting crowds by speaking on street corners, in small rooms and anywhere he could secure a podium (Blaisdell 2004).

By 1919, after Garvey gained world-wide notoriety for surviving an attempted assassination, he claimed that the UNIA had more than two million members. One southern woman explained his ability to grow the organization so rapidly: "Garvey is giving my people backbone where they had wishbones." He extended a call for revolution to Black people in America and all over the world. The only concrete prerequisite was that they had to be descended from Africa. A trained journalist, Garvey was above all a captivating orator. Many said that his public speaking skills were unmatched in his day (Blaisdell 2004).

Tony Martin said of Garvey, "the fluency of his speeches lay in the fact that he had something to say, something that touched him so deeply that it constituted an outpouring from the heart and found response in his hearers." Garvey had little patience with the NAACP, the artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance or with any movement that preached integration or assimilation with White people. His brand of racial vindication blended the lines of journalism (he founded the newspaper *The Negro World*), oratory (such as he displayed to thousands in 1920 at the First Annual Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World) and Black entrepreneurship (with his Black Star Line shipping venture). He promoted Black pride through his "Back to Africa" movement. He organized lavish celebrations in the name of nationhood. They included exalted titles for UNIA leaders, massive and impressive parades and a unique style of Black pageantry that the country had not seen before. It took his arrest for mail fraud (1922), his imprisonment (1925) and his deportation from the United States back to Jamaica (1927) by President Calvin Coolidge to bring the movement he founded to an end (Martin 1986).

How curious it is that Garvey found allies in 1922 in leaders of the KKK. The vigilante group that was born again in 1915, when Griffith released *The Birth of a Nation*, discovered that Garvey shared with it some common ground. Garvey and the Klan agreed on several points. Garvey said, "The attitude of the UNIA is in a way similar to the Ku Klux Klan. Whilst the Ku Klux Klan wants to make America absolutely a white man's country, the UNIA wants to make Africa absolutely a black man's country." Blaisdel credits Garvey's alliance with White supremacists over matters of statehood, miscegenation and "race purity" with causing the UNIA's eventual downfall. Still, this study categorizes "Garveyism" with other forms of racial vindication identified in this study. It meets our definition of the term as used in this paper. "Garveyism" refutes the notion of the innate superiority of Whites and it celebrates (perhaps more than did any other contemporary movement) the humanity and the accomplishments of Black people. Garveyism gave African Americans the mantra "Up you mighty race." It also contributed the red, black and green African unity flag that remains popular among African Americans to this day (Blaisdel 2004).

Black and White women formed coalitions that stood for racial vindication in the midst of exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation*. Jacqueline Anne Rouse credits Washington's widow, Margaret, with continuing the legacy her late husband fashioned as a leader of his race. Margaret hosted a private meeting around Mr. Washington's table, where she met with Carrie Parks Johnson and Sara Estelle Haskins of the

Southern Methodist Women's Committee, Lugenia Burns Hope, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Lucy Lane, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Janie Porter Barrett and Mary McLeod Bethune. They endorsed a six-point statement, "denouncing lynching and supporting the enfranchisement of black women." In 1920 Mrs. Washington was one of four African American women who were invited to address the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC). This group included White women representing various Protestant religious denominations, the Young Women's Christian Association and the General Federation of Women's Clubs (Rouse 1996).

Also in 1920 Mrs. Washington was a leader in the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), the Tuskegee Women's Club and the Alabama Federation of Colored Women Clubs. They all reconstructed the tradition of racial protest among southern Black women. "The commitment to race vindication and the creation of economic power were mutually supportive," according to Rouse. These groups supported Black land ownership. And they were pioneers in promoting "Negro History." Rouse notes that the Sojourner Truth Club of Montgomery sponsored youth essay contests all over Alabama which, "predated by several decades Carter G. Woodson's "Negro History Week" celebrations that began in 1926. (Rouse 1996).

In many ways Mrs. Washington carved out her own identity as a proponent of racial vindication that distinguished her philosophy from that of her late husband. For example, she became active in the Pan-African movement, something her late husband never showed much interest in. Mrs. Washington joined the International Council of Women of the Darker Races and strived to unite women from many parts of the world around several global issues: female oppression, the colonization of Africa, the deplorable treatment of people in the Congo, the United States' occupation of Haiti and the plight of women and children of color around the world.

For his part, the fiery Trotter was determined to keep the film out of Boston. He led non-sanctioned protests in the city when *The Birth of a Nation* reared its head there. Like DuBois and Woodson, Trotter had earned a Ph. D. from Harvard and had the reputation of being a courageous, independent thinker. Years earlier he had helped convince former Boston Mayor John F. Fitzgerald to ban Dixon's play *The Clansman* in the city. Now that the play had been converted into a film Trotter was as determined as ever

to block its exhibition. In 1909 he had been invited to the organizational meeting of what became the NAACP. An independent thinker, both he and Wells objected to the numerous White leaders in the new group. In spite of DuBois' endorsement of the group they refused to join. DuBois, himself no timid soul, called Trotter the era's, "most radical Negro leader." Stokes describes Trotter as, "a pioneer of direct action and confrontation." And it can be argued that no single person sacrificed more or was as determined to prevent exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation* than Trotter (Cripps 1963).

Unfortunately Trotter had alienated President Wilson at a meeting in the White House in 1914. This occurred at the same time Griffith was filming *The Birth of a Nation*. The president found Trotter's manner abrasive and ignored his plea for discouraging future exhibitions of the film. On April 7, 1915 Trotter attended a meeting in Boston to discuss banning the film with Fitzgerald's successor as mayor, James Curley. Also in attendance were members of the NAACP and of the radical Boston Literary and Historical Association. After the NAACP members made their plea to the mayor to ban the film Trotter reminded him that African Americans had voted heavily for him to win his office. And if he did not ban exhibitions of the film in Boston, Trotter warned the mayor, he would lose the Black vote when he ran for reelection. Still, the film opened in Boston's Tremont Theater on April 10 (Stokes 2007, 141).

Some of the scenes Trotter's group most objected to were deleted. But the debut in Boston went on as scheduled. Trotter complained that the theater refused to sell Blacks tickets to the opening showing. The mayor called the film, "an outrage on the negro race" but said he was powerless to stop its exhibition. One week later Trotter led a group during a demonstration in the theater's lobby. They protested when the theater refused to sell them tickets. The police responded and an officer struck Trotter in the head during a scuffle. Trotter and ten other protestors were taken to jail. An African American who managed to gain entry into the theater threw an egg that landed in the middle of the movie screen. Someone also set off a stink bomb inside the theater. When the film ended there were fist fights and arrests outside the building. Trotter's biographer called it, "the most ominous racial incident in Boston in anyone's memory" (Stokes 2007, 146).

Trotter got out of jail the next day and spoke at a mass rally in Boston's Faneull Hall. Both Black and White speakers took the stage, But Trotter received the warmest reception. He blamed Mayor Curley



for allowing the film to be shown in Boston. The city did ban exhibitions of the film on Sundays. But Trotter insisted that the governor and state officials ban it on all days. On April 19 Trotter led a crowd of 2,000 protesters along Beacon Street to the state house. Governor David L. Walsh agreed to have the state attorney general prosecute management of the Tremont Theater for breaking a 1910 law that forbade any performance that was deemed, "lewd, obscene, indecent, immoral or impure." Trotter announced the governor's plan to the waiting crowd and it eventually disbursed. A future demonstration that had been planned was cancelled and the crowd felt it had achieved victory. But when Municipal Court Judge Thomas H. Dowd ruled only that he would delete the Gus chase scene and allow the rest of the movie to run intact, Trotter and his supporters began working to get a new state censorship law passed (Stokes 2007, 147).

On May 3 the Massachusetts State Legislature held a special showing of *The Birth of a Nation*. Afterwards a majority of legislators voted to support a new censorship bill that would ban exhibitions of the film in the state. Trotter again pressured Mayor Curley (now a member of the new censorship board) to ban the film. The following day the NAACP petitioned the board for a hearing. Meanwhile, by the end of May over 100,000 White Boston residents had seen the film. Meetings and protests continued. And on June 2 the local censorship board held a final public hearing on the matter. Trotter was not allowed to attend. Instead, Black citizens William L. Lewis and Butler R. Wilson and White liberal J. Mott Hallowell spoke for those opposing future exhibitions of the film. The board listened to the opposition but voted not to revoke the Tremont Theater's license. The theater continued showing *The Birth of a Nation* in Boston.

Boston's final major protest over *The Birth of a Nation* took place outside the Tremont Theater on June 7. Eight people were arrested during this protest. As late as 1918 Trotter still was challenging the right of theaters in New England to show the film (which then was being revived). In May of that year he joined the Equal Rights League (founded as the National Independent Political League). This group managed that month to suppress the film in Lynn, Massachusetts. But by then Trotter had become part of a dwindling group of people who still had the tools with which to challenge Griffith's right to show the film. In September 1915 the movie changed venues in Boston while continuing through October on a record-setting attendance pace. In spite of all that Trotter and his supporters did *The Birth of a Nation* was exhibited 360 times in Massachusetts (Stokes 2007) (Stokes 2007, 150).

Scott must be credited with persistently striving to create a film that could directly challenge the racist messages in *The Birth of a Nation*. He did so in spite of the death of his mentor and benefactor, Washington, and the long odds against him. Film scholars attribute his zeal to his interest in procuring personal consulting fees. Regardless of his motives it was Scott who stubbornly rang the bell that led to the creation of *The Birth of a Race*. This same drive for racial vindication is what led Micheaux to make forty films between 1919 and 1940 about realistic Black life. It is this same determination that drove Trotter to face assault, arrest and jail. Once freed, he immediately led thousands of protesters in a march to the state house in Boston. Because of his determination to achieve a measure of racial vindication he directly challenged President Wilson as few men had the courage to do. And it was in the name of racial vindication that the NAACP spent its precious resources in city after city, attempting to ban the early exhibitions of the film. The young organization did so in spite of repeatedly suffering disappointments and defeats in the halls of power and justice.

Yet more bad news was ahead. On October 30 Francis J. Grimke referred to the Ku Klux Klan as portrayed in *The Birth of a Nation* as, "a band of lawbreakers and murderers." It was unfortunately for African Americans that Klan violence was not limited to the film. It grew to include more than three million members by 1925 in large part due to Griffith's movie. The KKK sponsored numerous exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation* in conjunction with membership rallies in churches, social halls and public spaces in many small towns across the land. Men, women and children attended these mass gatherings. And in spite of the mounting opposition to the movie Griffith remained in a state of denial about the damage it did to Black people and to race relations in America. (Simmons 1923).

### **Responses to *The Birth of a Nation* in Silent Film**

There were a few Blacks who accepted the challenge and who gathered the resources to respond to *The Birth of a Nation* by creating their own silent films. Their work supports the argument of this study -- that several silent movies (not just *The Birth of a Race*) played an important role in racial vindication after 1915. African American film maker Bill Foster, one of these African American silent film pioneers, said that Black film showed, "the Negro side of it ... nothing can beat a moving picture." Both Foster, Washington and his aide Scott were convinced that, "the moving picture is the Negro ... man's only ...

chance to make money and put his race right with the world." Scott would go on to play an important (but ill fated) role in keeping alive the dream that produced *The Birth of a Race* in 1918 (Leab 1975, 221).

Ironically, some of the first films shown to the public that featured Black people in respectable roles after the debut of *The Birth of a Nation* were promoted and shown by Griffith himself. Cripps recounts that when Griffith received the initial backlash from critics who said *The Birth of a Nation* showed Blacks only in demeaning roles he decided to address the issue head on. While the struggle over exhibiting the film in Boston was raging, Griffith approached Washington and requested permission to attach some of his film shot at Tuskegee as an epilogue to *The Birth of a Nation*. But Washington said *The Birth of a Nation* was a "hurtful, vicious play" and refused to give Griffith the film. Washington said he was offended by the whole proposition and would not allow Tuskegee to be a pawn in Griffith's race game (Cripps 1963, 356).

So Griffith devised a second plan to appease his critics and to silence others. He approached Hampton Principal Hollis Frissell and made the same request he had approached Washington with. Hampton, which had made *John Henry at Hampton: A kind of Student Who Makes Good* and *The New Era* on campus as promotional films to promote the college, was more receptive to Griffith's request than Washington had been. Frissell allowed the Hampton film to be shown at the end of *The Birth of a Nation* (Cripps 1963, 356).

Allyson Nadie Field comments, "Hampton administration allowed *The New Era*, a film compiled from reedited footage of one of the institute's publicity films, to be appended as an epilogue to *The Birth of a Nation* to placate the censors and critics of the epic's misrepresentation of American history and African American humanity." This compromise with Griffith that Hampton Institute made sparked a nationwide debate in the Black press and among educators. At stake was whether or not Hampton undermined all other efforts to effectively counter the damage *The Birth of a Nation* was causing Black America. This decision by Hampton was especially troubling because the Hampton footage used as an epilogue to *The Birth of a Nation* does nothing to address White supremacy and its affect on the lives of Black Americans -- whether they are college graduates or not! (Field 2009, pp. 107-108).

Griffith was not done. Before Washington died he secured a copy of one of the films shot at Tuskegee also. The *Toronto Daily Star* reported that, "In some situations, the film (*The Birth of a Nation*)

was followed by a documentary about Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute and the successful education of the black population, as a kind of counter-view to the film -- or a new ending." Griffith's shrewd move of tacking on promotional films from Hampton and Tuskegee at the end of some theater exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation* only gave the controversy a new dimension and added to his profit margin (*Toronto Daily Star*, Sept. 21, 1915).

The message in the college movies that the proper place for Black people was in the service of others was not universally accepted by Black America. The implication in the Hampton and Tuskegee films was that education at Negro colleges was designed to prepare the Black student to be, "useful when he goes back among his people." But in Field's words, "John Henry is not going to compete for jobs with southern whites nor does he aspire to move north." Field believes these messages are acceptable to the White power structure because they encourage Black students to learn trades and focus on learning agricultural techniques that are most useful in the south. Neither of these disciplines prepare John Henry to move north and compete for employment there. This "underlying conservatism" made these early Black films palatable to White audiences and Black college benefactors. Yet given the era of early silent film the mere presence of intelligent young Black college students on the screen was still a blow for racial vindication. Considering all, it represented significant progress for African Americans (Field 2009, 112).

In Griffith's case, this study argues that his decision to acquire films from Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes to show as epilogues to *The Birth of a Nation* was nefarious. It was neither primarily intended to acknowledge the discrepancy in power among Blacks and Whites, nor to imply that Black achievement was on an equal footing with White achievement. As DuBois said of such tactics in response to *The Birth of a Nation*, the Black college epilogues only "added to a show."

In 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* prompted the few existing Black-owned film companies to begin the difficult task of challenging Griffith's tremendously successful endeavors. They wanted to tell stories in the tradition of racial vindication but they needed to raise substantial capital to do so. They also faced the problem of having little experience in producing feature films. Griffith's movie emerged in the midst of racial attitudes that had been shaped hundreds of years ago. These early film pioneers realized that it would take a tremendous effort to effectively challenge the celebration of White supremacy that Griffith

had saturated the country with. Presidents Washington at Tuskegee and Frissell at Hampton had produced positive (many thought) Black films that demonstrated the possibilities of portraying Black people in a positive light. Black film makers Foster, the Johnson Brothers and Oscar Micheaux soon made pictures that held up the banner of racial vindication. These efforts were important steps. But in isolation no single endeavor could greatly diminish the impact *The Birth of a Nation* had on America.

### **Washington, Scott and *The Birth of a Race***

Perhaps the man best situated early in 1915 to respond effectively to *The Birth of a Nation* in film never had the opportunity to do so. Shortly after the movie was released Washington and Scott began discussing plans to produce a film they would call *Up From Slavery*, the title of the autobiography based on Washington's life story. Cripps notes that Washington wanted to make a film that was a "counter-irritant" to *The Birth of a Nation*. Washington intended to set the historical record straight by giving his interpretation of the Black man's struggles and triumphs in America. His trusted aide, Scott, leaned heavily on his valuable experience with the films they had done a few years earlier to promote Tuskegee Institute to advise the Tuskegee president. Washington and Scott proposed using as a working title *Lincoln's Dream*. Soon, however, they learned the harsh realities of competing against White business interests to accomplish such a task. Then matters got considerably worse when Washington's health began to fade. He and Scott had just begun then to lay out how they would secure financing for their movie (Cripps 1988).

Cripps says that, "independently of each other the two black groups (the NAACP and the Tuskegee Machine under Washington and Scott) opened negotiations with Carl Laemmle's adventuresome Universal Pictures. Meanwhile the NAACP's Motion Picture Committee attempted to partner with Elaine Stern of Universal. Initially the NAACP proposed a budget of \$200,000 (perhaps symbolic because it was twice the budget Griffith spent to produce *The Birth of a Nation*). Early in 1915 the NAACP proposed providing 25% of this amount (\$50,000). But by June the NAACP would only commit to raising \$10,000. Subsequently Universal dropped its offer down to \$60,000. Internal conflict over the project and procrastination within NAACP leadership led Stern to become disenchanted. She turned to Tuskegee instead for support. But by July, Washington's health was getting worse and Scott was reluctant to deal with her. Stern lost interest in the project altogether (Cripps 1988, 55).

Project proposals went from a Viograph idea of producing a modern version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Stern's five-reel script titled *Lincoln's Dream*. Scott met with an agent from the Thomas Ince Studio in New York to discuss the proposal. But he backed away because the proposition didn't appear to him, "a square deal all around" (Cripps 1988).

More and more Scott was convinced that total Black control over the project would be preferable. So he turned to African American film executive Edwin L. Barker of the Advance Motion Picture Company for assistance. Scott returned (for the moment) to the idea of calling the picture *Up From Slavery*. Washington's personal success story would be the focal point, with implications of uplift for all Black people the ultimate message. Scott's business plan had he and Washington at the center of the film's distribution. They planned to connect with Washington's publisher, link with the NNLB (and its 600 affiliates) and win the support of the nation's more than one hundred Black-owned newspapers. Scott was sure they all would support the photoplay. For his consulting services Scott proposed that he receive a liberal 15% royalty of the film's profits, a monthly stipend and an expense account (Cripps 1988, 55).

Washington and Scott had devised what they thought was a viable plan. And had it succeeded perhaps it would have made Scott a wealthy man. More importantly the nation may have had a formidable alternative in film to *The Birth of a Nation*. Perhaps Washington's critics might have celebrated his legacy in different ways than they have. But it was not to be. Washington died November 14, 1915, leaving Scott to his own devices to produce the film they had planned to make together. It would be three years before this movie -- ultimately titled *The Birth of a Race* -- was released. And by then national focus on tensions around American race relations that made the movie necessary in the first place had been shifted to a focus on tensions around America's threat from abroad. And Scott had moved on.

After Washington's death Scott moved ahead alone on the project. He met with prominent movie executive H. C. Oppenheimer of the Universal Film Company in New York. After Washington's death Scott fashioned the new title for the film he would produce -- *The Birth of a Race*. It was an obvious and direct challenge to Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. On July 12, 1916 Scott formed the *Birth of a Race* Photoplay Company in Delaware and began seeking investors and a production staff. The company began with \$1,000,000 in capital to, "conduct film exchanges and deal in moving pictures of all kinds."

Original incorporators were Herbert E. Latter and N. P. Coffin of Wilmington, Delaware and Clement M. Egner of Elkton, Maryland ([www.stocklobster.com](http://www.stocklobster.com) Nov. 3, 2012).

A company brochure for *The Birth of a Race* said the enterprise would create a film that would depict, "the true story of the Negro, his life in Africa. His transportation to America, his enslavement, his freedom, his achievements, together with his past, present and future relations with his white neighbor." Using the contacts he developed under the tutelage of Washington, Scott called upon Rosenwald to help finance the project. Next, Scott hired the Chicago stock brokerage firm of Giles B. Corey. He offered a contract to the famous African American baritone Harry T. Burleigh to compose and arrange music for the film. Scott also solicited finances from former United States President Taft, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church Bishop Isiah B. Scott and from Washington's widow Margaret. The corporation issued 100,000 shares of stock, worth \$10 each ([www.stocklobster.com](http://www.stocklobster.com) Nov. 3, 2012) (Leab 1975).

Scott's team began mailing out material and circulating a newsletter that detailed their progress. The promotional material indicated that President Moten of Tuskegee (Washington's replacement), Fred Moore of *The New Age*, liberal Southern White men of means and Black professionals all were behind Scott's project. Burleigh remained committed to producing the musical score for the film and the Selig Polyscope Company of Chicago, the best film producers in the city, agreed to shoot the movie (Cripps 1988).

Scott's temporary business partner and film distributor Barker served as president of *The Birth of a Race* Photoplay Corporation. He turned over 80,000 shares of stock to investors but soon proved to be in over his head. *Variety Magazine* began investigating the venture and reported that by March 1918 some 7,000 investors had purchased 50,000 of these shares. Stock sales brought in only \$350,000 because much of it was sold at a discount. After deductions for sales commissions, advertising and other overhead expenses only \$264,000 remained to finance production of the film. This still was an impressive amount. One elaborate promotional item, a prospectus, indicated -- prematurely -- that Rosenwald, Taft and Illinois Governor Frank Lowden all were "interested and assisting" the project. But Rosenwald was not pleased because he had not yet agreed to support the company financially. Then he refused to help. Following the

death of Washington this was the second major blow to Scott's plans. Stocks sold aside, the venture was not off to a promising start (Leab 1975) (Leab 1975, pp. 322-323) (*stocklobster.com* Nov. 2, 2012).

The company made false promises to potential investors and to the public that proved fatal. Advertising claimed that for every \$100 invested in the film speculators would receive \$1,800 in return. There was no basis upon which to confirm this projection. It was a mistake to base the projection on the incredible returns investors in *The Birth of a Nation* realized. This false comparison helped doom Scott and his collaborators' plans (Leab 1975).

Cripps called Scott, "the little engine that could" for all his drive and ambition to complete the project. But the group Scott put together criticized him for his growing willingness to, "compromise with the devil" to secure funds. He signed no less than three contracts and their codicils. In each contract, Cripps says, Scott sought, "greater precision in defining his royalties and perquisites that in sketching the nature of the project." And he notes that Scott played into the hands of the White angels, whose goal was only to make money. This took the film farther and farther away from its intended theme of racial vindication. Cripps said the universalism of *The Birth of a Race* replaced the celebration of the humanity of African Americans and placed the "Black Other" into the role of the "tamed exotic" (Bernardi 1996, 45).

Corey ran afoul of the law while collecting funds for the film. He was arrested in Chicago for fraud and Daniel Frohman picked up the project. Cripps says that Frohman, "took over and completed another portion of the film in Tampa, a vast biblical sequence which bore no relation to Selig's footage. By then the Blacks film executives felt control slip from their grip." He continued, "Tampa (was) where they shot the last sequence, an Old Testament struggle between Pharaoh's Nubian army and the fleeing Children of Israel" (Cripps 1993) (Jackson 2008) (Mormino and Pizzo 1983, 158).

The three Frohman brothers, Daniel, Gustava and Charles, created their company in Chicago in 1915, about the time *The Birth of a Nation* was breaking records at the box office. They were seasoned theatrical businessmen who enjoyed tremendous success promoting blackface minstrel shows. Many years earlier (1878) they had cast acclaimed Black actor Sam Lucas in their lucrative stage production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Their background, therefore, prepared them to make a film designed to promote racial vindication. Ironically, Charles died May 7, 1915 aboard the British cruise liner RMS Lusitania. The



Germans sank the ship off the coast of Ireland in the Atlantic Ocean while it was en route to England. This tragic incident killed almost 1,200 people, many of them Americans, and eventually thrust the United States into the Great War. And this tragedy also shifted the nation's focus overseas, dooming any hopes *The Birth of a Race* would have to rival *The Birth of a Nation* in its impact upon America (Toll 1974) (Bernardi 1996) (*Associated Press*, May 7, 2013).

By the time the Frohman brothers got involved with the venture the focus of *The Birth of a Race* had shifted significantly from that of showing Black progress into focusing on a neutrally shaded universal progress. Scott, therefore, unintentionally helped create the very thing he once warned against -- White control over the film that could (and did) minimize its focus on racial vindication. In the end, the primary message in *The Birth of a Race* cloaked universal "progress" in American patriotism and greatly minimized any racial vindication it might have addressed. The powerful scenes representing racial vindication that it did contain were lost in the midst of a war story that left the Black-White story behind (Bernardi 1996, 45).

While it was being filmed in 1917 and 1918 *The Birth of a Race* was intended to counter the notions of White supremacy Griffith had popularized. While Daniel Frohman was shooting the film in Florida *The Tampa Morning Tribune* was running advertisements for coffee that mocked Negro dialect: "It sure am some good coffee," it read. And *The Tampa Sunday Tribune* appealed to Black women to, "Bleach your Dark Skin" and get "soft, fair, clear, Bright skin." And the *Tampa Sunday Tribune* called out "Girls! Lots of Beautiful (long wavy) hair." These ads were typical of those that ran in newspapers and magazines all across the country as both *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Birth of a Race* were being produced. This was the America that existed when these two films were released. This was the America that Dixon and Griffith benefitted from. And it was the America that Booker T. Washington, Emmett Jay Scott and others who stood for racial vindication in the wake of *The Birth of a Nation* found themselves at odds with (*The Tampa Morning Tribune*, Ten, January 22, 1918) (*The Tampa Sunday Tribune*, B Eleven, January 20, 1918) (*The Tampa Sunday Tribune*, 8, Eleven, January 20, 1918).

The Great War was consuming Europe and had ground the foreign film industry to a virtual halt. By the spring of 1918 the war -- and not paying to see a film that addressed race relations in America -- was

most people's priority. Newspapers were full of stories about the conflict and speculation about whether the United States would enter it. The December 21, 1917 edition of the *Tampa Morning Tribune* reported that Barker, the African American president of *The Birth of a Race* Company, was in town preparing to shoot several scenes for the movie. Barker reported to the newspaper that the film's lighting equipment had just arrived in Tampa, which would allow the crew to do some filming at night. But he soon found himself deep in debt behind the project. He sold his interest to Corey, the Chicago broker who would be convicted for stock fraud, and to Daniel Frohman. By the time Corey was arrested under the so-called blue sky laws for fraudulently promoting stocks, Selig had already spent \$140,000 on the movie.

Cripps points out that in 1918, when much of the filming was done, America was involved in heavy fighting on the Western front. Shortly after the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918 the name of the film was temporarily changed to *The Story of a Great Peace*. This was a marketing tool designed to capitalize on American patriotism and victory in the Great War. *Variety Magazine* reported on December 6, 1918, however, that the name would remain *The Birth of a Race*. By then it mattered little what name the film took. The public had little interest in it. Fortunately for persons interested in racial vindication other films would emerge.

*Variety* writer Barker reported that by the time the Frohmans began filming in Tampa the project was in shambles. It was well over budget and had drifted far away from its original intent of vindicating African Americans from the terrible stain left on their humanity by *The Birth of a Nation*. Cripps says that Barker believed, "the movie would not be about the Negro at all ... Scott was no longer a scenarist." And Cripps suggests that each time the film changed hands the goal of racial vindication got watered down more and more. "The Black angle is replaced," he says, "by the film's biblical story. And the sole image of Blacks is one that was to become a convention in later Hollywood biblical epics -- Nubians, black, Negroid, passive, standing on the edge of the frame"(Cripps 1993, pp. 74-75).

To its credit promoter Barker and the Frohman Company advertised in the *Tampa Tribune* that they would hire 250 African Americans as extras in the scenes shot in Sulphur Springs for *The Birth of a Race*. They portrayed soldiers in Pharaoh's Egyptian army. This is slightly less than the number of extras Griffith used. *The Birth of a Race* opened December 1, 1918 in Chicago's prestigious Blackstone Theater as a

twelve-reel film. The promoters rented the theater for \$6,000 for the first month. *The Chicago Tribune* and the local Black paper, *The Broad Ax*, gave the film favorable reviews as a work of art. But the *Tribune* also said the movie "tires you out" and the majority of other reviews did not compliment the film (Cripps 1988).

*The Birth of a Race* opened with a lengthy prologue that featured historic scenes of Adam, Eve, Jesus and Abraham Lincoln. The action then shifted to 1914, one week prior to the beginning of the Great War. Two German-American Schmidt Family brothers chose to fight on opposite sides. Oscar (George LeGuerre) decided to join the Kaiser, while the younger brother (George) casts his lot with the United States Army. Predictably the two brothers met again (in a field hospital in France). When German soldiers attacked the hospital, George killed his brother Oscar while protecting the French nurses at the hospital. Later George returned home and rescued his wife from a diabolical German spy. *The Los Angeles Times* (among many other newspapers) called the film a bitter disappointment, both artistically and financially (*Los Angeles Times* October 20, 2012).

The film moved quickly, often without warning, from title frame to title frame. It shifted from "equality instead of slavery" to "peace and humility" as it took the audience on a voyage with Christopher Columbus. At a constitutional convention in Philadelphia it showed a sign that read "equality." And while Lincoln emancipated the slaves (without actually mentioning slavery) the film quickly moved to Lincoln's wish for "peace" as he lay on his death bed, surrounded by friends. Before filming was completed the Frohman Company dropped out of the production. The Rothacker Manufacturing Company in Chicago completed editing of the film, making it the fourth company in less than four years to be in charge of *The Birth of a Race*. Some of the final scenes filmed were shot in Chicago and in New York. The movie was hopelessly over budget. Little wonder the finished product became so disjointed (Bernardi 1996, pp. 49, 53) (Cripps 1988) (Leab 1975).

Cripps said *The Birth of a Race* failed to effectively vindicate African Americans from the racist dogma from the past. "Owing to the war conditions ... the advancement of the Negro was dropped out (while) the second part was converted into a modern war drama." Many who saw the film agreed with this assessment and voted with their purses (Cripps 1988).

Bernardi observes that *The Birth of a Race* could not have been released at a less opportune time. "In cadence with the end of the Great War in November 1918, when surely war movies would have been box office poison, they released their tangle of biblical universalism." The overlap of the production of *The Birth of a Race* and the Great War was never more evident than in a headline in the *Tampa Morning Tribune* on January 17, 1918. It read, "Tampa Picture Players Have Registered Intent to Purchase W. S. S. War Savings Stamps." Thus, even the attention of the actors in *The Birth of a Race* was temporarily diverted to encourage the public to support the war effort. Once the film was released it failed to draw sufficient interest to make any money for its investors (Bernardi 1933, 47) (*The Tampa Morning Tribune* January 17, 1918).

*Moving Picture World* said of the film, "it attempts to follow the development of mankind down to the present day and throws in a disconnected war story for good measure. About everything has been applied to the production but common sense. The structure is without form and is a striking example of what a photoplay should not be. The producers have attempted to impress by bulk and have been overwhelmed by their lack of skill (<http://www.stocklobster.com> Nov. 3, 2012)."

Had *The Birth of a Race* been true to its initial central story line (the promotion of harmony between the different ethnic groups) it might have helped convince Americans that Blacks were just as intelligent, patriotic and honest as were Whites. And even had the scenes that emphasized racial harmony been more central to the plot the same might have happened had more people seen the film. Even so, the three scenes from the film that this study highlighted earlier (Simon the Cyrenian carrying Jesus' cross, Africans sitting among men from all over the world and the Black farmer/soldier who marches off to war side-by-side next to a White farmer/soldier) were exceptional. Had the film reached more people it may have opened the eyes and touched the souls of many Americans who valued racial fairness.

*The Birth of a Race* did not reach Tampa, where many of the final scenes were shot, until October 27, 1919. There it played in a segregated theater, the Strand, as was the case throughout the South. The film received mixed reviews, just as it did throughout the country. The African American extras from Tampa who appeared in the movie were not allowed to see the film in the White-only theater due to the Jim Crow laws that were strictly enforced. Again, the film's value in the arena of racial vindication lies in

considering it as one of several movies with elements of Black-White unity that refuted the White supremacy championed in *The Birth of a Nation* (Cripps 1988) (Leab 1975) (Mormino and Pizzo 1983, pp. 74-75).

*Variety Magazine* thoroughly investigated the fiasco that plagued *The Birth of a Race's* production and found several problems. The magazine called the film an artistic flop and a business fraud. It said many people were led to believe that much of Washington's legacy was tied to the movie (through Scott) but this was far from the case. Barker had dropped Scott from the venture long before the film made its debut. *Variety* concluded that the final product was really a poor synthesis of two movies: the remaining vestiges of Scott's ideas (fueled by racial vindication) clumsily fused with the ideas promoted by men who were focused on American patriotism and the Great War. *Variety* criticized the inconsistent quality of the message and of the production. It noted that as control of the pictures passed from Selig to Noble to Frohman and, finally, to Rothacher. Scott's dream was called a, "terrible waste ... a cheap and uninteresting story (Cripps 1988) (Cripps 1988, pp. 60-61) (*The New York Times*, Oct. 20, 2012).

In addition, *Variety* reported that some of the investors in the film -- many of them African Americans who lived on State Street on the south side of Chicago -- were the victims of bait-and-switch tactics: the movie's advertised theme of racial vindication was changed to one of national patriotism. And the magazine said that many investors were bullied into buying blocks of seats with little advance notice after dates and movie house locations were juggled around. The film opened in Chicago in late 1918. It was released nationally in April 1919. But with the scathing review it received from *Variety Magazine* -- the industry's bible -- it soon vanished from sight. "It was steadfastly ignored by the war-weary public" noted film critic Hal Erickson of *Rovi* said (Cripps 1988, pp. 60-61) (*The New York Times*, Oct. 20, 2012).

*Variety* was correct in much of its criticism of *The Birth of a Race*. The film lacked a clear focus and was released at a time when America was indeed weary of the thought of war. But Barker's review failed to note two observations made earlier in this study. In at least two powerful scenes (that both survive today) Director Noble illuminated the possibilities of universal brotherhood. And in a third scene Noble celebrated the possibilities of American patriotism and brotherhood between Blacks and Whites. This too was played down in reviews of the film. Noble made no distinction of class between Blacks and Whites in

the these three key scenes. They were strong statements for racial vindication. Perhaps one reason critics wrote the film off was because these and similar sequences in *The Birth of a Race* might have changed the minds and hearts of many Whites had they gone to see the movie.

Cripps said that although the film's scene with the two farmers who transformed into soldiers represented less than 2% of the movie's screen time, it remained a, "hidden slice of black life in the 'progressive era'." The three important scenes from *The Birth of a Race* previously cited extended the racial vindication traditions by celebrating the humanity of Black people. They portrayed Blacks as the equals of Whites, negating the notions of White supremacy. When forces within the film industry sabotaged the production, they helped clear the way for Hollywood to continue to exploit the racist stereotypes projected by the old familiar (and profitable) images: Uncle Tom, the coon, the mammy, the tragic mulatto and the Black buck (*The Birth of a Race* 1918) (Cripps 1988, pp. 58-59).

On this account *The Birth of a Race* makes a significant statement for racial vindication. Unfortunately, the statement was suppressed when the film was released and it remained so in the years that followed.

This study has no evidence to prove that *Variety Magazine* had a hidden agenda for its harsh criticism of *The Birth of a Race*. To be sure, *Variety* was not alone in its negative critique of the movie. But it is interesting to note that the magazine took a special interest in the business aspects of the movie even early in its planning stages. *Variety* consistently criticized the project while it still was in production, long before anyone saw the film. It was no secret that the movie's initial backers took a great risk when they went against the racially conservative grain for Hollywood spectacles of the era.

As has been previously stated, the argument advanced by this study did not focus on the lengths *Variety Magazine* went to investigate how Griffith managed to raise \$100,000 for *The Birth of a Nation* in less than a year. The magazine was founded in New York in 1905 (at a time when the play *The Clansman* was enjoying success on the stage). *Variety* editors were aware of Griffith's project long before it debuted. None of the research that contributed to this study reveals any reports by *Variety* of how Griffith somehow raised more than double the capital needed for what began as a \$40,000 movie. In any

event, *Variety's* scathing review and damaging extensive investigative reporting virtually insured that *The Birth of a Race* was destined to fail in all aspects long before it raised the curtain on opening night.

Cripps comments that the intransigence of American racial culture had more to do with the failure of *The Birth of a Race* than did the failures of Scott and other African Americans at, "the still youthful art of moviemaking." Blacks were threatened in the early days of film by the divide in White American culture between the Dixon/Griffith conservatives and the Rosenwald Progressives. In addition African Americans continued to be plagued by the consistent economic challenges that were exacerbated by White-on-Black violence, Jim Crow-inspired racism and competition for jobs from European immigrants. Yet while these forces converged to oppress Blacks they also drove determined, innovative young African American film makers to push for what Scott called, "that indefatigable something which I shall call the colored man's point of view" (Cripps 1996).

Scott remained committed to the idea of promoting racial vindication via film and looked for a way to make a profit while doing so. He continued on this track even after he was no longer part of the making of *The Birth of a Race*. He persuaded Black Producer George Frederick Wheeler to move to California so they could produce a racial vindication film together. Then Scott convinced Chicago movie producer E. L. Snyder to assist Wheeler with putting together a film project about Washington's life. Scott again considered using *Up From Slavery* as the name for the project. Other ideas involved using as subjects DuBois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* or Ohio novelist Chestnut's *The House Behind the Cedars*. Maceo Crenshaw Dailey called them all, "narratives of African American achievement." This may have been true. But there was no guarantee that DuBois would agree to work with Scott, whom he did not trust. And Scott had no best practices business models with which he could predict financial success for any of his ideas.

And as in the case of his 1915 discussions with Washington, again little went right with Scott's plans to produce a racial vindication film. In the film industry he was a prince seeking a kingdom in vain. He soon returned to his other business ventures and accepted a prestigious job with the Department of the Navy in Washington, D. C. Interest in *The Birth of a Race* faded then in the country and did not resurface until the 1970s.

## **Black Film Makers and the Quest for Racial Vindication**

Notably, Foster was one of a few exceptional Black film makers who successfully sought to vindicate African Americans through his art. He used all-colored casts and enjoyed modest financial success in his early years. He was praised for portraying what one newspaper called, "real Negro life" (Leab 1975)

Yet, scholars say that both the Johnson brothers and Micheaux compromised attempts to vindicate the race by showing a preference for using light-skinned actors over darker ones. And even though these fairer skinned actors portrayed positive role models, the Johnsons and Micheaux sent their audiences a message about the value society places on skin color. George Johnson, for example, was the most popular Black actor of his time and also had very light skin. He and his brother, Lincoln Motion Picture Company President Noble, followed the industry's normal trend at that time. They used what Gunnar Myrdal called the then-accepted cast system of hiring fair complexioned cast members -- "color valuation." The heroic leads, lovers and even the "bad women" parts were played by mulatto actors (Leab 1975).

Film scholars speculate that some of the Johnsons and Micheaux's choices in the complexion of their actors may have been due more to their individual taste than because of societal pressure. The Black press often criticized Micheaux for favoring fairer complexioned Blacks in his films. Nevertheless, he continued to chose them for dozens of roles. This study concludes that in spite of these criticisms the work the Johnson brothers and Micheaux did meets an acceptable definition of racial vindication and contributes significantly to that movement (Leab 1975) (Leab 1975, pp. 321-337).

The Johnson brothers got their start when they incorporated the Lincoln Motion Picture Company in Los Angeles in 1917. They issued \$75,000 worth of stock to begin the venture and hired virtually an all-Black staff: cameraman Harry Grant was the lone White employee. The Johnsons went into business to make a profit while demonstrating that Blacks could successfully operate a film company and make movies that portrayed African Americans in a positive light. The company produced five films and a few news reels before it failed. Lincoln's first film was *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*. Initially it was shown only in Los Angeles (Reid 1983).



Lincoln's second film, *The Trooper of Company K*, focused on the Negro Tenth Cavalry. This was the same group that Paley filmed for Edison in real life in Tampa in 1898. And like Lincoln's first film it stood tall in the struggle to establish racial vindication (Leab 1975, pp. 342-326).

George Johnson's challenges in the film industry were indicative of the issues his competitors faced. This made their quest to stand for racial vindication much more difficult than it was for Griffith and others who promoted White supremacy. Johnson established a system of film distribution out of necessity. "Lincoln and other black film ventures suffered from the unwillingness of a white industry to handle movies made by Negroes that did not conform to the usual stereotypes," he said. He acted under contract with Universal while also serving as president of Lincoln until Universal gave him an ultimatum -- choose an acting career with them or choose to run his company. Johnson chose his acting career. Leab notes, "distribution and financial difficulties plagued black filmmakers throughout the silent period and later." Still, the persevered (Leab 1975, 328).

While *The Birth of a Race* was being produced, Micheaux accepted the challenge of lifting high the banner of race pride. He became Black American film's best option for racial vindication. Micheaux directed over twenty silent films and several sound features between 1916 and 1928. And from 1919 to 1940 he completed an average of one film a year, outlasting all other Black film executives of his era. Notably, Micheaux's *Within These Gates* took important steps to redeem the dignity and humanity of African Americans on the silver screen.

Born on a farm in Metropolis, Illinois in 1884, Micheaux was the fifth child of parents who had been slaves. He got much of his life experience from working as a Pullman porter on trains between Chicago and Portland, Oregon. When he saw an advertisement for land in South Dakota he took advantage of the opportunity and became a homesteader. This would be the name of his first film. *The Homesteader* was at times autobiographical. It told the story of Jean Baptiste, an honest hard-working Black man. Baptiste married a troubled maiden who went into a trance. She stabbed her father to death and then committed suicide. Through it all Baptiste carried himself with dignity and compassion. Mark A. Reid says in *Redefining Black Film* that Baptiste's character, "gave Black audiences a favorable image to combat D. W. Griffith's image of 'pure black bucks' " (Reid 1995).

*The Homesteader* premiered in Chicago in 1919, just as *The Birth of a Race* was struggling for survival in the same city. Micheaux's eight-reel film was rated poor in technique but high in emotional value. Noble Johnson offered to convert the book into a film. But the two could not agree on financial terms (Micheaux allegedly wanted Johnson to pay his expenses to travel to Los Angeles to supervise filming). And without any film experience Micheaux decided to make the movie himself. He sold stock for \$75 a share, primarily to White farmers in Iowa, South Dakota and Nebraska. He assembled a cast of unknown actors and a few experienced performers (like Evelyn Preer), completed filming for \$15,000 and earned a modest profit. And just like that Micheaux had created a measure of racial vindication in film for Black America. Not only did he raise the finance for the film, he successfully produced and marketed it (Leab 1975, pp. 334-335).

We believe that Micheaux came closer than anyone else who sought to produce a film rich in racial vindication in the years immediately following the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. The previously mentioned *Within Our Gates* held its own against *The Birth of a Nation* as far as offering a counter image of Black people was concerned. The difference was in the film's meager exposure. W. Fitzhugh Brundage praised Micheaux's 1920 film, "as a brilliant and timely rebuttal of D. W. Griffith's racist 1915 epic *The Birth of a Nation*". The film told several interconnected stories of families in both the North and in the South, just as did *The Birth of a Nation*. But Micheaux's film celebrated Black education, Black humanity and White philanthropy. It engaged viewers in various "social questions" concerning Black manhood, Black citizenship, Black patriotism and compromising Black preachers. He boldly tackled the subjects of lynching and interracial rape (Brundage 2001).

Brundage makes another comparison between *The Birth of a Nation* and *Within Our Gates*. He said, "*The Birth of a Nation* argument, finally, is that Blacks do not think consciously so much as act blindly according to an inner, bestial drive. *Within Our Gates*, after deriving a plausible alternative version of action and history, demonstrates otherwise" (Brundage 2001, 227).

But Micheaux also was criticized for emphasizing the negative side of life in Black communities. Critics said he included too many scenes in his films that glorified 'ghetto life' and crap games, all-Negro dives, wife-beating and women congregating to gamble. In 1920 Lester Walton praised Micheaux's film

*The Brute* but accused him of including too many scenes that were, "not any too pleasing to those of us who desire to see the better side of Negro life portrayed." Micheaux's response to this criticism seemed to fall in line with a comment that Griffith might have made concerning the slave quarters scenes in *The Birth of a Nation*. Micheaux said that audiences paid to see portrayals of life in Black communities where struggles against vices and trouble rule the day. We believe that Micheaux was justified in seeking a balance in portraying the virtues of the characters in his films. He lifted the race up while exposing the imperfections that are common to all human beings.

Other production companies tried their hand at promoting racial vindication in film in the 1920s. These included New Jersey's Frederick Douglas Film Company, Chicago's Royal Gardens Film Company, Kansas City's Andlauer Productions Company, Ben Strasser Productions (which helped make Tim Moore of the *Amos 'n Andy* television series a star) and the Reol Motion Picture Corporation. All these companies went into business in the decade after *The Birth of a Nation* was released. They got their motivation from Foster, the Johnson brothers and Micheaux and they had varying levels of success and longevity. Not all companies that strived to achieve racial vindication in film were said to be owned by African Americans, however. A Black newspaper reported that the Colored Players Film Corporation was owned by a Jewish syndicate. Regardless of the ethnic background of the producers, these movies also meet this study's definition of a body of work that attempted to vindicate the Blacks in America (Leab 1975).

Roel Harlem Theater veteran Richard J. Levy took a notable stand for racial vindication when he produced the film *The Man Who Would be White*. The protagonist in the film became a successful businessman who had a secret: he confessed to the head of his company that he was a Negro passing for White. The movie ended with an important (and idealistic) message for the audience: "It is the man and not the color that counts" (Leab 1975, 333).

The primary obstacle facing progressive-minded Black film makers was securing adequate financing to make quality films. Ed Guerrero says the average cost of making a Hollywood movie rose from \$20,000 in 1914 to \$300,000 by 1924. Thus many talented Blacks were priced out of the industry before they could enter it. So movie moguls and producers consciously projected White middle class

values in their films at their best and racist sentiments at their worst. Small independent film makers were on their own if they wanted to defy the attitudes about race in the system that controlled the industry.

Film scholars agree that there is no precise way to measure the psychological damage racism in film did to African Americans when *The Birth of a Nation* was released. Black actors frequently accepted the roles made available to them regardless of the stigma attached to the characters they portrayed. *Variety Magazine* estimated that over fifty percent of the roles accepted by Blacks in films made between 1915 and 1920 cast them as maids, stable boys and the like. Cripps reported that during this same five-year period, "roughly half the Negro roles reviewed in *Variety* were maids and butlers, and seventy-four percent of these roles were identified in the films' credits by some demeaning name." This figure rose to eighty percent in the 1920s, said Cripps. The legacy of such a tendency to portray Blacks (when they were portrayed at all) as expendable entities in major silent films gave the forces that stood for racial vindication an extremely difficult task (Cripps 1996).

### **What a Tri-Level Analysis of Racial Vindication Teaches Us**

The argument in this paper is that silent film scholars should apply a tri-level analysis of the effectiveness of efforts to achieve racial vindication in reaction to D. W. Griffith's silent film *The Birth of a Nation*. Cripps, Bogle, Field, Glick and others who study the impact Griffith had on America tend to measure racial vindication in one venue or another. To do so is to fail to consider their cumulative positive impact on racism. Several concurrent efforts via various vehicles of racial vindication addressed the problem more effectively than did any single effort to do so. Cripps and other scholars lean toward analyzing the failures of the silent film *The Birth of a Race*, for example, to significantly alter the massive appeal of *The Birth of a Nation*. This paper concludes that such an approach does a disservice to the cumulative affect the entire racial vindication movement had on America in response to Griffith's film.

Again, this study agrees with silent film critics who conclude that a single-venue critique of the effectiveness of one attempt to achieve a measure of racial vindication in response to *The Birth of a Nation* often points to disappointing results. Such a narrow analysis, however, can be misleading when we ignore or minimize the many other shifting parts that comprise the entire racial vindication movement. For example, DuBois' drama *The Star of Ethiopia* complimented Micheaux' film *Within These Gates*. The

political agitation of the NAACP gave balance to the active resistance and the public demonstrations that Trotter led. And the mass Black nationalist movement that Garvey created gave persons interested in racial vindication an alternative to boycotting *The Birth of a Nation* or by simply viewing *The Birth of a Race*. The strength of one of these forms of resistance gave purpose (and the potential for cross-over appeal and power) to the other!

A tri-level analysis of racial vindication in response to *The Birth of a Nation*, on the other hand, yields three things: first, it reveals to the researcher the many ways in which opponents to racism can make use of the opportunities they have access to (a comprehensive assessment); second, it demonstrates how disciplines like literature, oratory, organizational activism and silent film can complement each other in the name of racial vindication, even when the actors don't always coordinate their moves (the strength of diversity); and third, it points the way to a new methodology that people working in concert in opposition to racist art forms can use to maximize their cumulative power (collective action). As we pointed out earlier, racial vindication is by definition not as aggressive in confronting racism as is anti-racism. In the sociopolitical environment of 1915 -- when the NAACP reported that an average of nearly one Black man was lynched each day -- the individual forces that came against *The Birth of a Nation* were about as persuasive as could be expected.

A consideration of such efforts in the combined areas of literature, oratory and activism and in silent film, however, can be most instructive. The sum of these varied efforts is much greater than is the weight of each separate part. This study demonstrates the value of using a broad measurement of racial vindication as opposed to using a narrow one. By considering in concert efforts made in these three venues we widen and enrich the scope of such an inquiry. This more inclusive approach of evaluating the racial vindication movement in response to *The Birth of a Nation* reveals that people fought back on many levels. The dark shadow that Griffith's film casts over the country was not a total victory for racist propaganda as Cripps and others report.

For example, forces in Chicago and Philadelphia successfully countered Griffith's film by pushing for its censorship. These efforts were successful in large part because of the efforts of brave and influential men like Abbott. He strategically and successfully rallied opposition to exhibitions of *The Birth of a Nation*

in Illinois in his columns in *Chicago Defender*, by making overtures to government officials and by working with activist organizations. No doubt the Frohman brothers chose to debut *The Birth of a Race* in Chicago in part because their company was located there, but also because of the effective resistance there to *The Birth of a Nation*.

As this study notes, Black Pullman porters assisted in this effort by distributing copies of the *Chicago Defender* as they traveled by train across the country. This greatly contributed to the *Defender's* circulation reaching 200,000 at a time when racist propaganda would have you believe that Blacks were largely illiterate and not interested in reading about current events. This collaboration between Abbott and the Pullman porters is typical of the support system African Americans had in place during the 1910s. These informal bonds strengthened the varied efforts to fight against the kind of racist bigotry that *The Birth of a Nation* created. Silent film scholars err when they overlook this dynamic.

Cripps and other film critics who examined the difference *The Birth of a Race* had on race relations in 1918 isolated the impact of the film from other contemporary efforts at racial vindication. This paper argues that it is a mistake to minimize the combined power of the players in a movement that inspired numerous attacks on racism in many varied forms. *The Birth of a Race* is but one example of an effort to counter notions of White supremacy with ideals that celebrate the humanity of Black people. This paper advocates that future scholars explore a more complete picture of these efforts toward racial vindication by weighing the combined complimentary contributions of writers, activists groups and silent films. All of these participants fought in their own ways to achieve racial vindication. They drew strength from each other once *The Birth of a Nation* entered the public's consciousness. This argument is discussed further in the study's conclusion.

## **Summary**

This chapter looks at the sociopolitical environment in which *The Birth of a Nation* was produced and at the efforts made to achieve racial vindication. Although the Ku Klux Klan was not officially revived until shortly after the film made its Atlanta debut in late 1915, the conditions for such a rebirth had been favorable for many years. The partnership of Dixon and Griffith created a powerful film that was the most expensive, lengthy, intriguing and controversial movie made in the United States to that point. They

sought and received the blessings of President Wilson, members of the U. S. Supreme Court and the National Press Club before the film was exhibited to the public. Justice White even announced that he had once been a member of the Ku Klux Klan once he learned of the film's story line. This unofficial approval of the film in the highest corners of the federal government and from the press made local censorship boards all around the country reluctant to prohibit the film from being shown in their cities.

This section also notes how Simmons took advantage of *The Birth of a Nation's* premiere in Atlanta in late 1915 to revive the Ku Klux Klan. The organization, officially dormant since 1871, quickly spread throughout the country. This resulted in an increase in racial violence and a deepening of the festering wounds that already existed in American race relations.

Only persistent agitation like that of men like Rogers, with his Black vindicationist race novel *From Man to Superman* stood against the impact on racism *The Birth of a Nation* had. *Crisis* editor DuBois and members of the press, the determination of the activist group the NAACP, scholars and researchers like Schomburg, Woodson and Locke helped to slowly turn the tide against the additional damage done to already poor race relations in America by the film. In addition, Black silent movies *The Birth of a Race*, Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*, those produced by the Lincoln brothers and others contributed to this movement. They all were designed to refute the tenets of White supremacy and to confirm the worth of African Americans. All of these efforts must be considered in concert when measuring the effectiveness of efforts to push back against the impact of Griffith's film.

The first nod toward racial vindication in film after the release of *The Birth of a Nation* came, ironically, from Griffith himself. He showed as epilogues to his movie (against the wishes of Washington) film shorts made years earlier of Black college students at Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes. Regardless of his motive his decision to add these films at the end of *The Birth of a Nation* and to engage in debates over the value to society of his film only increased his profit. In 1915, just months before Washington died, he and Scott planned to produce the film that ultimately became *The Birth of a Race*. Through a series of mishaps and misfortune the project passed through their hands to those of Barker, the Frohman brothers, Selig and Rothaker before it was released in December 1918 in Chicago. No single reason for the film's failure to reach huge audiences was larger than the fact that America was coming out of the

Great War. Audiences were not in a mood to see a war movie as the bloody conflict came to an end. And the nation had turned its attention away from the plight of the Negro's plea for justice in America.

*Variety* gave *The Birth of a Race* poor reviews and much of the press that cared about the film at all did the same. Most of this criticism was because the story line moved from theme to theme without a clear connection. The movie also was criticized because early advertisements indicated that it would be about the Negro. But, in fact, it became during prolonged production more of a war movie. *Variety* and many other critics failed to celebrate sections of the film that did strike what could have been significant blows for racial vindication. And these critics all failed to champion three important scenes: Black men sat among Whites as brothers while Jesus taught them to love their enemies; Black Simon the Cyrenian carried Jesus' cross as he struggled toward Calvary to be crucified; and Black and White farmers stood side-by-side, transformed into soldiers in uniform and marched off together to defend America in the Great War. These scenes are among those that survive today. But these powerful images became a casualty of the movie's poor reception, minimizing the impact on racial vindication.

This chapter indicates that *The Birth of a Nation* was responsible for an unspecified amount of psychological damage that was inflicted upon Black people. As they struggled for recognition of their worth in America following the Great War they faced tremendous obstacles. Black actors who were fortunate to get small roles in major films were limited to playing menial parts, usually performing as servants, vamps, criminals or buffoons. Chapter III also points out that the cost of film production rose from an average of \$20,000 in 1914 to \$300,000 in 1924. These financial considerations severely limited talented men like Micheaux, for example, from creating major motion pictures that could rival *The Birth of a Nation*. But he and other Black film makers took their place next to DuBois, the NAACP, Trotter, Schomburg, Woodson, Locke and the leaders of the emerging Harlem Renaissance. Together they attacked White supremacy in their own various ways. In the end their mission of promoting racial vindication prevailed over the mirage of White supremacy that was championed by Dixon, Griffith and *The Birth of a Nation*.



Most importantly, this chapter repeats the argument that conducting a tri-level analysis of the effectiveness of racial vindication in response to *The Birth of a Nation* is desirable to considering only an isolated literary work, act of protest or silent film, such as Cripps does.

## CONCLUSION

Cripps says that the Black masses had three choices in approaching racial vindication after *The Birth of a Nation* was released in 1915. First, he said, they could follow DuBois' lead and choose not to respond directly to Griffith's film. Rather, they could put their creative pen to paper. DuBois and others endeavored to elevate Blacks without directly challenging the racism in *The Birth of a Nation*. Second, Cripps said others could oppose exhibitions of the film by urging censorship (as did the NAACP) or by taking direct confrontational action (as Rev. Monroe Trotter did). Or third, Cripps said they could seek financing and produce their own films. While Washington and Scott intended to follow the later path, Foster, the Johnson Brothers and Oscar Micheaux actually did so (Cripps 1963).

My argument is that a much broader and less narrow approach than the one Cripps offers is more beneficial to the study of this topic. I agree with Cripps and *The Birth of a Nation* scholars that *The Birth of a Race*, when considered in a vacuum, failed in its intended mission of providing a substantial amount of racial vindication. But the analysis of racial vindication as a political, social and creative movement should not end there.

We conclude in this study that just as Griffith was responsible for *The Birth of a Nation*, he and his film also were in some ways responsible for many resulting challenging movements: the rapid growth of the NAACP; the production of the racial vindication films *The Birth of a Race*, *The Homesteader* and *Within Our Gates*; the explosive growth of Garvey's UNIA to over two million members; the inspirational voices of the Harlem Renaissance; and the forward movements of thousands of local progressives to form political, religious, civic and social groups all across America. This too is part of the legacy of *The Birth of a Nation*.

As we discussed, African Americans had little political or economic power during the Jim Crow era when Griffith's film was created. Perhaps had there been a more coordinated effort to challenge the impact of *The Birth of a Nation* -- across the lines of race, class, politics, culture, religion and sex -- the

film would have been banned in more than just a few cities. Who can say whether or not the Ku Klux Klan was destined to grow into an organization with more than three million members regardless to what opposition came against it? Maybe Congress would have continued to refuse to pass anti-lynching legislation even if the release of *The Birth of a Nation* and the resurgence of the Klan had not occurred. We will never know the answers to these questions. But this study does illustrate that the collective efforts made toward racial vindication in the wake of the release of Griffith's film impacted more people than did that of the one film upon which some scholars place this unfair burden.

This paper calls for an outlook on the challenge to consider a synthesis of the numerous efforts to vindicate the humanity of African Americans during this era. They used the Black public sphere to peck away in various ways at the tremendous damage Griffith's film did to race relations in an already volatile cultural climate. Scholars who have written about efforts toward racial vindication following the release of *The Birth of a Nation* have not yet published comprehensive analyses that consider the cumulative impact of the written word, activism and silent film on the film. This paper points to the benefits of adopting such an approach.

Even the combined efforts of all of the various efforts to achieve significant racial vindication, as discussed in this study, must have seemed inadequate to Scott, DuBois, Trotter and to their contemporaries when they considered them in isolation. America's long tradition of promoting racist theories that embrace polygenesis and claim that White people are superior to people of color was a powerful force. But all three men found ways to remain engaged in progressive movements, even after the impact of *The Birth of a Nation* had begun to fade into the background.

George J. Sefa Dei in "Rescuing Theory: Anti-Racism and Inclusive Education" Dei asks a legitimate question: "How do we measure success or failure in the anti-racist practice of resistance to dominant structures and knowledge?" He notes that Johal (200a) talks about the "pigmentary passport of privilege" that Whites in America and elsewhere carry with them. Resistance to their consistent dominance is not just based on the challenge of domination. It also should be based on, "a need to affirm oneself, one's sense of worth and purpose, and to become whole within a disconnected, fragmented and dispiritual context" (Dei 2001).

As I argue, this is the reason a tri-level analysis of racial vindication in response to *The Birth of a Nation* has value. It allows us to consider as a whole the combined persuasive power of these movements in literature, oratory and protest and in silent film to do two things: arrest the false notions that Black people are inherently inferior beings, and celebrate their accomplishments in numerous fields of endeavor.

This study points out how restrictive it is to ignore the stand for racial vindication of all of the work represented by the numerous writers, orators, activist groups and other film directors noted in this study. As *Variety* said in its damning reviews of Noble's film, *The Birth of a Race* never had a chance to stand tall against Griffith's work. This study notes that *Variety's* prominent position in 1918 within the White racial frame, which Feagin describes in this study, makes it complicit in the failure of *The Birth of a Race* to attract a larger audience.

Given the poor state of race relations, the financial restrictions Black film makers faced and the national priority the Great War posed, no single person or entity could have effectively achieved racial vindication in the face of *The Birth of a Nation*. Limited resources, little experience making feature length films and hostile enemies (both seen and hooded) prevented any single effort to turn back the momentum racism had built up from having much success.

The NAACP played a critical role in producing both literature, (*Crisis Magazine* and *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1919*) and sociopolitical activism following the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. The NAACP reported that its memberships grew ten-fold from 1917 to 1919 (from 9,000 to 90,000). In the later years of the Harlem Renaissance, Ku Klux Klan membership fell from over 3,000,000 (1925) to less than one million (1928). These membership trends give us some insight during this era into the nature of activism in organizations that place heavy emphasis on matters of race.

For this reason there is great value in conducting an analysis of the racial vindication movement that considers how the numerous efforts mentioned here complement each other. Such an analysis must include, for example: the thoughtful legal challenges of the NAACP; the scholarship and the literature of DuBois and Locke; the research done and artifacts collected by Schomburg and Woodson; the aggressive activities of progressive individuals like Trotter and Abbott; the work of film makers Foster, the

Johnson brothers and Micheaux; the aggressive nationalist leadership of Garvey and the creativity of the other Black men and women of the Harlem Renaissance. They all are important to our analysis.

Perhaps *Chicago Defender* Editor Abbott, *Boston Guardian* Editor Trotter and film maker Micheaux had the most success of any individuals in vindicating the race after Griffith's film was introduced to the country. Abbott wrote scathing editorials condemning Griffith's work and rallied other newspaper editors to do the same. Abbott also worked effectively with local politicians and censors and helped keep the film out of Chicago when it was released and out of other cities in Illinois. Abbott used the written word, editorial cartoons and his position as a well respected journalist and orator to successfully oppose exhibitions of the film in his city and in others. Trotter may have even exceeded Abbott in his zeal and determination in his attempts to keep the film out of Boston. Although he failed to do so, his bravery and determination inspired many others to stand up against racism.

And Micheaux's creative work and his longevity as a proponent of racial vindication following the release of *The Birth of a Nation* is monumental. Again, we make the argument that scholars should analyze all efforts within the three venues identified to minimize the impact of Griffith's film. Such a tri-level analysis (comparing and contrasting, for example, the work of DuBois, Abbott, Woodson, Trotter, Garvey and Micheaux during this era) provides a much broader perspective than does a critique of the racial vindication work done by Scott.

We shall never know how the nation's most powerful African American in early 1915, Washington, might have fit into the racial vindication movement that followed *The Birth of a Nation*. With his contacts in White America, his Tuskegee Machine and through his NNBL he was undoubtedly the best situated Black leader in 1915 to harness the resources and the support for producing and exhibiting an impressive film. Washington's considerable contacts and Scott's tireless energy may have, indeed, resulted in an *Up From Slavery* film that just might have rivaled Griffith's production. Even after Washington's death Scott was able to help raise several hundred thousands of dollars toward financing *The Birth of a Race*. But we can only speculate about what might have been had his partnership with Washington survived one more year.

Even if Washington and Scott had produced the film they first envisioned, a tri-level of analysis would still have been in order to better support racial vindication. Griffith's film had the distinct advantage of reaching hundreds of thousands of Americans before the nation's attention was averted away by the Great War. And after the spring of 1917 no single vehicle, no matter how well intended, could have overcome the damage *The Birth of a Nation* had done to Black people and to their place in American society.

Again, we cite Micheaux's film *Within Our Gates* above all others as coming the closest to providing a representative measure of racial vindication in film. Its primary drawback was poor exposure. Yet it spoke well of the humanity of Black men and women and earned positive recognition for Micheaux. Again, the racial vindication value of this film must be considered along with that of other movies, literature and activism that had the same goal during this era. Doing so teaches us the value of considering all available relevant comparatives within the range of possibilities. To do otherwise prevents us from focusing on a more complete picture of the varied ways that Black America fought back on the heels of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* impacting the country as it did..

1920s Harlem Renaissance Poet Countee Cullen's poem *Simon The Cyrenian Speaks* makes a powerful statement. It is a testament to how many African Americans must have felt then when they pondered what their appropriate response to *The Birth of a Nation* and to the lingering legacy of White supremacy should be. Cullen considered the emotions of Simon, portrayed in *The Birth of a Race*, as he witnessed Jesus struggling to bear his cross. And while Cullen's poem cannot (nor should it) speak for all efforts toward racial vindication, it is representative of that spirit. Simon, like many other Black men, rose above the persecution he faced on earth to vindicate people of color with his compassion, love and righteousness toward all men.

The effectiveness of this poem and many other efforts to help calm the storm of racism in America by achieving a measure of racial vindication in the early twentieth century should not be judged in isolation. This study asserts that film scholars who write about how Griffith's opponents reacted to *The Birth of a Nation* must consider a tri-level analysis of racial vindication if they seek to tell the whole story.

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## APPENDIX

### TIMELINE

- 1775 -- Immanuel Kant created the concept of "race": White, Negro, Hunnish and Hindu
- 1787 -- United States Constitution defined each Black as 3/5 of a White person
- 1795 -- Friedrich Blumenbach introduced the term "Caucasian" to describe White people
- 1799 -- Charles White defended polygenesis in his *Account of the Regular Graduation of Man*
- 1850 -- Louis Agassiz published his thoughts on separate racial species in the *Christian Examiner*
- 1851 -- Samuel George Morton died after collecting and measuring over 1,000 human skulls
- 1852 -- Harriet Beecher Stowe published Uncle Tom's Cabin, creating a national controversy
- 1857 -- U. S. Supreme Court Dred Scott decision rules Blacks have no legal standing in court
- 1859 -- Charles Darwin challenged existing racist theories in his *On the Origin of Species*
- 1861 -- Philadelphia's Coleman Sellers invented & patented the Kinematoscope to view photos
- 1866 -- The Ku Klux Klan was formed in Pulaski, Tennessee one year after the Civil War ended
- 1875 -- Congress passed a broad Civil Rights Act near the end of Reconstruction
- 1883 -- Congress repealed 1875 Civil Rights Act, allowing Jim Crow racism to target Blacks
- 1894 -- Thomas Edison and William Dickson's Kinetoscope exhibited photos in New York
- 1895 -- Booker T. Washington delivered his Atlanta Compromise Speech supporting segregation
- 1896 -- U. S. ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that "separate but equal" was then the law of the land
- 1898 -- Thomas Edison produced two films of Negro soldiers prior to the Spanish-American War
- 1905 -- Thomas Dixon's Civil War-era book debuted as the play *The Clansman* in Norfolk, Va.

1909 -- The NAACP was founded in New York with *Crisis* Editor W. E. B. DuBois a member

1910 -- Booker T. Washington exhibited film of Tuskegee students in New York's Carnegie Hall

1912-- Franz Boas published vindication's *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants*

1913 -- Black film director William Foster released *The Railroad Porter* in Chicago

1915-- D. W. Griffith released *The Birth of a Nation* to large audiences amidst much controversy

1915 -- Hampton Institute approved its film *The New Era* as an epilogue to *The Birth of a Nation*

1915 -- Carter G. Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History

1915 -- William T. Simmons revived the Ku Klux Klan in Stone Mountain, Georgia near Atlanta

1916 -- Frederick Douglas Film Company released *The Colored American Winning His Suit*

1917 -- The United States entered the Great War (World War I)

1918--Rothacker Film Manufacturing Company's *The Birth of a Race* debuted (racial vindication)

1919 -- Black film director Oscar Micheaux released *The Homesteader*, his first film, in Chicago

1925 -- The New York Public Library established Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

1927 -- Al Jolson performed in blackface in the first talking motion picture, *The Jazz Singer*

1927 -- The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Oscars) was founded in Los Angeles

1929 -- Black film legend Lincoln "Stepin Fetchit" Perry made his film debut in *Hearts of Dixie*

1930 -- Producer Harry Aiken released a synchronized version of *The Birth of a Nation*

1935-- Black Bill "Bojangles" Robinson appeared in films with White child star Shirley Temple

1939 -- David O. Selznick released film *Gone With The Wind* with familiar racist stereotypes

1940 -- Black actress Hattie McDaniel became first Black to win an Oscar (*Gone With the Wind*)

1942 -- Black actor Paul Robeson and the NAACP picketed the racist play *Tales of Manhattan*

1944 -- Lawrence Reddick estimated that three of every four film roles mocked Blacks



1946 -- Walt Disney's film *Song of the South* exploited Blacks with "Uncle Tom" and "Mammie"

1951 -- Remake of 1929 *Showboat* film altered some racially offensive language and scenes

1964 -- Sidney Poitier became the first Black to win Best Actor award (*Lilies of the Field*)

1971 -- Black film maker Melvin Van Peebles released *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*

1993 -- Director Halle Gerima marketed and distributed his independent film *Sankofa*

2008 -- Tyler Perry became first Black in film to open his own major motion picture studio

2013 -- *The Help*, a film about Black maids in the South, won forty-one major awards

2014 -- Black English Director Steve McQueen's film *12 Years a Slave* nominated for nine Oscars