

Mistah Beauty, the Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Woman, Select Scenes from a Film Never Cast by Oscar Micheaux, Harlem, 1920s

If Gladys Bentley's life were an Oscar Micheaux film, it might open with a shot of the three-story tenement house in Philadelphia in which the entertainer grew up. Four boys play in the alley behind the house. The camera settles on the eldest, distinguishing him from the others as the film's protagonist, but not exaggerating any difference between him and the other boys. Nothing about the way he jumps from the top of the stairs to the bottom of the landing or shoves his young brother aside, which causes him to fall and to cry Mama, establishes or fixes the categories "boy" or "girl," "brother" or "sister." Or the story might start earlier, with a pair of empty hands filling the frame, but cut off from the body and suspended in the air, expectant. Then a shot of the young mother staring indifferently at an infant she cannot love and refuses to embrace, the rejection would be punctuated or underscored with dramatic music that would announce that this failed embrace is an event, a significant moment, a nodal point in the story to unfold. A melodramatic gesture like the mother's downcast eyes, averted gaze, or forehead cradled in her palms as she sobs would telegraph her anguish. Or a long take of the mother as she retreats from the baby nestled in her husband's extended arms. The self-loathing would be apparent on her face as she turns her back to the infant, her firstborn, but the child she would never be able to love. The one who would remind her always that she

was not a good-enough mother. It would hurt too much to say the words *bad mother*, even when the fact couldn't be avoided. The next scene might be shot in deep shadow, and we would struggle to make out the dark figure in the even darker room, until the door was thrown open and the harsh light from the hallway flooded the windowless room, and the fourteen-year-old androgyne resting on the narrow cot wearing his brother's Sunday suit and lost in a daydream about the third-grade teacher whom he still loves madly. Before he could open his eyes and pull himself from the fantasy of her arms, her kisses, and return to the dark stuffy room, he would be exposed and berated. Next scene, extreme close-up of the letter written by the distraught sixteen-year-old in the early hours of the morning, addressed to his mother and father, explaining that he was heading to New York, that he could not live at home anymore; he could not pretend to be the daughter his mother could never love, she could love only a son and he became one. Yet she failed to love him. The long objective stare of the camera as he walks down the hallway and creeps out of the house with everything he owns, which isn't much, packed in a satchel, and pulls the door closed very quietly behind him. Or the story might open in a cabaret, with a close-up of Bentley as the Bad Nigger, as the flashy gentleman (the physiognomy or a gesture would signal to the audience his tragic flaw, his moral defect).

In the film, the telltale gestures, tics, and queer traits would give Bentley away: his tendency to swagger; the too-big body, the too-loud voice, the mountain of flesh, the vocal intonation, the distribution of hair, the masculine distribution of weight, his brazen flouting of law and custom and civilization, the preening defiance and naked display of pleasure. Seated at the best table in the club, he would be surrounded by a bevy of beauties. The camera lingers on the five bottles of champagne accumulated at the table, so the audience doesn't miss the clue and the condemnation: he has been plying the young chorines with alcohol and all of them are intoxicated, and the many bottles make plain that the rogue has money to burn. The eyes brim with lust. The sideways smile and the inviting mouth are certain to be the cause of a young chorine's downfall.



Cut to the dance number on the club floor, which is pivotal, obligatory, and never inessential in a Micheaux film. Everything terrible about the club—the alcohol, the debauchery, the infidelity encouraged by the environment, the loose, jaded women—would be balanced by this scene, which would condemn the cabaret and at the same time exalt it. In the cabaret scene, black virtuosity is on display. Then comes the chorus, and the dancing bodies are arranged in beautiful lines that shift and change as the flourish and excess of the dancers unfold into riotous possibility and translate the tumult and upheaval of the Black Belt into art. The extended musical numbers might first seem like digressions, except that they establish the horizon in which everything else transpires and foreground the lovely actuality of blackness. The dance scene is crucial, the movement of bodies, the chorus as well as the ordinary folks crowding the floor, reveal the other lineages of black cinema, understood broadly as a rendering of black life in motion in contrast to the arrested and fixed images that produce and document black life as a problem. The cabaret scene illuminates the indebtedness of the moving picture to the limbo dance (which, practiced on the slave ship, was “the gateway to or threshold of a new world and the dislocation of a chain of miles”) and to the ring shout danced in the clearing. The long legs of the high-brown chorus girls propel through the

air, and their collective movement creates a series of beautiful lines that they arrange and break. The café-au-lait beauty shimmies as she sings a popular ditty with her hips swiveling and arms cutting the air, and the flow of this segment cuts and deranges the regimented units of the melodrama's plot, and before all this beauty we forget for a few minutes that things will end badly for the sheik at the table. The chorus conjures the promise that this night might never end, that there is no world but this one, that everything is possible, that the reservoir of life is limitless. The hyperextended bottom, the contracted figure, the rotating pelvis, the arms akimbo and then raised to the sky and bringing down the house, the motion of bodies—they collapse the distance between the plantation and the city, the quarters and the tenements, producing the “annihilation of time and space” characteristic of modernity and definitive of the cinema. The Shimmy, the Turkey Trot, the Funky Butt, the Black Bottom, the synchronized rhythm of the chorus all attest to the flow and frequency of black locomotion, to the propulsion and arrest of history. Bentley's life refracted through Micheaux's cinema is the wild, deregulated movement that refuses the color line and flees the enclosure of the ghetto. The bodies in motion, bodies intimate and proximate, recklessly assert what might be, how black folks *might could* live. The slave ship is as central as the railroad in the collapse of time and space that produce modernity and black cinema. The scene pivots around the breach and the wound and endeavors the impossible—to redress it. The beauty resides as much in the attempt as in its failure. What it envisions: life reconstructed along radically different lines. The chorus elaborates and reconstructs the passage, conjures the death in the fields and the death on city pavements, and reanimates life; it enables the felled bodies to rise, plays out in multiple times, and invites all to enter the circle, to join the line, to rejoice, and to *celebrate with great solemnity*.

Such scenes could be witnessed each night in the dozens of nightclubs and cabarets where Bentley performed. La Bentley was a star in Harlem's Jungle Alley, one of its high priests. Bentley was abundant flesh, art in motion.

Huge, voluptuous, and chocolate-colored, Bentley always worked in a tuxedo and top hat or flashy men's attire. The hair was cut short, tamed and waved by a handful of pomade that plastered it to the scalp. Any day of the week, Bentley could be seen marching down Seventh Avenue attired in the

threads of a Harlem sheik and usually with a pretty chorus girl hanging on his arms. He thrived on the fact that his “odd habits” were “the subject of much tongue wagging” because he lived and loved as a man. He wasn’t a radical, but a brilliant performer, one smart enough to make the corporeal malediction of black and mannish into a kind of costume that delighted, aroused, and solicited others. Risk or reward attended the offer of the thick dark body as an object of veneration and ridicule, condemnation and pleasure. The appreciation and the laughter of the onlookers crowded in the cabaret domesticated the danger of La Bentley, but he conceded no ground. There was nothing feminine about him; it was more than glamour drag, more than a woman outfitted as a man, as several of his wives, both white and colored, could attest. Black and white audiences loved the risqué lyrics, the sonorous deep voice, the open flirtation with the most attractive women in the audience, the jokes about sissies and bull daggers. They cried, laughing so hard; they were doubled over from the ache of it, they blushed, and they fed on the anomalous beauty of Bentley. “The large dark masculine figure,” according to Langston Hughes, was “a piece of African sculpture animated by rhythm.” A modern surface. An exemplary architecture of black possibility.





In a Micheaux film, all this virtuosity would seem to be an aside, a break in the narrative, a digression in the plot of seduction or betrayal, but in fact everything else that happened in the film was merely a supplement to this. When the camera eventually returned to Bentley or to the shady antagonist and his struggle with the good man, the hardworking one devoted to the improvement of the race, laboring ceaselessly to raise funds for a Negro school, willing to marry a girl to save her from the gutter or an abusive father, or too honorable to abandon a woman of questionable morals and remaining true even when a better woman waited in the wings—it didn't really matter; it was hard to recall the story line or keep track of which was the good woman and which was the bad, separate the actualities from the dream sequence. The viewer watches and waits with bated breath for the next interruption of the cabaret scene and betrayal of the plot. The duel or competition between the two men that would decide the fate of our heroine and the future of the race would be dull, uninteresting, and anticlimactic. In a Micheaux film, the lustful, prodigal Bentley, sharp and rough as any Harlem sweet man and able *to lay down their jive just like a natural man*, could only be cast as villain. The player flitted from woman to woman; never capable of being sated, at best, he could love them and leave them. There were not enough women in the world to make him feel loved. So he ran through the chorus girls, ruined women, spoiled them, used and abused them. *They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man.*

A heartbreaker like Bentley, a womanizer, a carouser, and a libertine, would meet a bad end. The story punished those deviating from the marriage plot, from the script of racial uplift, from the ought and should of what a woman was expected to be. As if repenting for the lavish club scenes, the half-dressed bodies, the promiscuous life and intimate trespass afforded by the nighttime, the denouement of the film would restore the trampled ideals and imperiled norms of temperance, monogamy, and heterosexuality. Bentley's queer masculinity ran roughshod over the righteous propagation that resided at the heart of every racial melodrama. Bentley trashed the gendered norms and family ideals central to the project of racial uplift—self-regulation, monogamy, fidelity, wedlock, and reproduction—and scoffed at the moralism of the latter-day Victorians, the aristocrats of uplift. Alas, the villain cannot escape the end that awaits him. By the time *The End* rolls onto the screen, virtue's antagonist is long gone.

A car crash, a bullet to the head or the heart, or the penitentiary has resolved the drama. (For our protagonist, the political climate would propel the story toward a tragic end. In the 1930s, state law would require female performers to apply for a license to wear men's clothing in their acts. Cross-dressing was now labeled as subversive. Queers were placed in the sightlines of Senator McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee [HUAC]. Bentley's much discussed marriage to a white woman in a civil ceremony made the entertainer vulnerable.)

A car crash or bullet would not kill this celebrated sharper and lady lover, this husband to many beautiful women, black and white. A brutal twist in the plot of the film Micheaux never directed leads to the demise of our protagonist. An act of self-immolation motivated by state repression and declared in a coerced confession forces the beautiful husband to assume the role of wife, signaling his defeat. It is a crushing last act of self-renunciation. The lines from the deathbed: *I inhabited that half-shadow no man's land which exists between the boundaries of the two sexes. Throughout the world there are thousands of us furtive humans who have created for ourselves a fantasy as old as civilization itself; a fantasy which enables us, if only temporarily, to turn our back on the hard realm of life. Our number is legion and our heartbreak inconceivable.*





The hard-hearted no-count man, sharper, sheik, sweet man, queer fellow, seducer must be handled or dispatched so that the right couple can emerge—the true husband and wife. So that the girl ruined by the promise of a part in the show, the girl willing to meet the gambler, pimp, or shady producer later at the after-hours spot, the girl willing to do anything to get the part can be rescued, so that no one else will savor the words or hum the tune: *Women ain't gonna need no men. They got a head like a sweet angel and walk just like a natural man.*