Dana White: I’m going to throw away all of the things I’ve prepared for today and continue in the mode that we’re in and start talking. I’m not going to tell you my life story. I’m an urban historian. That’s basically my craft. I really come to film rather late in my career. I came to Atlanta in 1970 and I was on joint appointment between Emory University and Atlanta University, which was then the graduate division of the Atlanta University Center. I was in the history department at Atlanta University and I had the great good fortune of my chair was the foremost authority on black Atlanta. He had joined the history department when W. E. B. Dubois was there. He knew everybody. He has no papers because he was on the phone all the time talking to people. He got me off jury duty one week because he knew the district attorney. But anyway, my first effort in studying black Atlanta was when the railroad line was put in, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority. There had to be a, since federal money was involved, there had to be an environmental impact study done. So I was deputized to handle that. We were given rather substantial checks so we kept graduate students in food for a couple of years doing it. They said do you know how to do this and I said of course, doesn’t everybody. I really didn’t know because no one had ever done it before.

So what we did was to go out and walk the streets. When you hear of Auburn Avenue, sweet Auburn, I walked up and down Auburn Avenue for a large portion of the summer and, again, the visual aspect that Cara [Caddoo] was talking about. I can recreate, as I’m sitting here talking to you I can recreate that in my mind.

Jumping ahead, I’m not going to give you a year by year analysis but jumping ahead I worked on a television series, an eight part series called “The Making of Modern Atlanta,” which really looked at Atlanta from the end of World War II to the then present which would have been ’93. The person who directed our film was a, it was done for public television, but the person who directed our film was a film man rather than a television man and he made that very clear. We did a lot of work in the field. We would go out and we would stand on the street corner and mic’d up and talking about things. We spent a lot of down time and he talked about film all the time. I had no interest in film up to that point in my career except to go to a movie every now and then. I got interested in the idea of film and what could film tell me about the city. So the city rather than film is my interest.

So this is how Matthew [Bernstein] and I got connected up. I thought maybe I could learn something new about film, about the city using film. So that brought us to what Matthew [Bernstein] was describing here. I don’t know if it was my first effort but my first concerted effort of doing research on my own was on Oscar Micheaux but not his films but what happened to Oscar Micheaux, what he was doing before he became a filmmaker. He did not become a filmmaker until he was 35. This is rather a late start, I would say. But he had been a writer before that. He had been many things before that and I’m not going to rehearse that because many of you know much about this.

His second book, his first book was actually “The Conquest,” was classified by the Library of Congress as local history. It was not classified as a novel. He changed the
names to protect against the litigious. He was going to be sued so he changed it but he didn’t change it very much.

His second book was his first really his travel account. In this book he starts, he gets on a train and comes down to Atlanta and spends probably five months living in Atlanta and describes Atlanta. He changes the names again, sometimes, so Peachtree Street becomes Plum Street. Sometimes he would change one letter. So what I did was to follow Micheaux through Atlanta and see what his Atlanta was and what it wasn’t, which was interesting. It’s an interesting class. I think there’s a mistake. Matthew [Bernstein] mentioned the Top Hat Theater versus the Mass Theater. There were class elements in the African American community and it’s very important to recognize them and to see what they are.

All of the race films of this time period played in Top Hat Theaters. None of them played initially in the Mass Theaters. So it was a sense of duty to support, for people who had the money, to support these films.

Anyway, Micheaux, what I came away with from Micheaux was the connections he made during the five or six months that he lived in Atlanta. Then he moved on. Atlanta, by the way, was called Italia. Then he moved on to Effingham, which was Birmingham. Then he moved on to Creole City, guess, and then he had one, a named city, which had its main drag was called Beal Street but it was B-E-A-L rather than B-E-A-L-E. He describes theaters in Atlanta and he gives the background of theater in Atlanta. He describes three theaters in Birmingham, this would be 1915, 1914-1915, and he describes an actual performance in Memphis where his heroine goes down Beal Street to this theater and what she experiences sitting in the theater. It’s really quite powerful.

So anyway, the main interest for me is what I thought was the most interesting aspect of this, is that he seemingly made contacts with the so called movie men, as they were called in the first black, major black newspaper, not the one Matthew [Bernstein] mentioned but The Independent, which was an earlier publication. He made these contacts in 1914-1915 and kept them through the 1930’s. So as he was traveling he was making these connections. He would stay with these people and he didn’t have much choice. There were no hotels for African Americans during the time period when he first came here and didn’t come until much later.

So Micheaux was really very interesting for me in that sense. Greg [Waller], do I have a couple more minutes?

Gregory Waller: Yes. One and a half.

Dana White: I wanted just this question of digitalization. Emory is doing some interesting things in terms of digitalization but so far they’re not Atlanta. They’re Rome, not Rome, Georgia, you all know there is a Rome, Georgia. I was mentioning to someone that I was spending two weeks in Rome and they said two weeks in Rome? They thought it was Georgia. It was actually Italy. But Emory has just put together a major exhibition on Rome, Italy during three periods, the 16th, 17th and 18th century. I’m not going to, it’s
antichita teatro magnificenza. You can see my Italian is a little rusty. It actually deals with the city as perceived through a series of maps of the 16th, 17th and 18th century. They take the 17th century map, which covers a wall. It's in panels and it's an aerial view. They've digitalized it and you can walk through it. There's a machine there and you can walk through that city and you can get contemporary views of where you are. They've developed an app for this as well, which is a fascinating thing. They have another project, which is not directly connected with this, which is called Rome Walks. Art history students and faculty are going to Rome and walking the sites today of the Colosseum, the Pantheon, all of these, and recording what it feels like today to walk through those sites. Walking is very, very important not only to visualize but to feel. I've had students who have studied Atlanta and they would talk about this is only half a mile away but it's a half a mile away uphill. To get that sense of the feel of the city is very, very important and this is what they're doing.

Now, quickly and 30 seconds; I have 30 seconds left. We, that is the Marboro where I have manuscript archives, rare book library, has an Atlanta project, which is just getting started. An urban geographer and a former student of both Matthew [Bernstein] and mine who has MA's in history, film studies, and something else. I can't think what the third one is. But these are two people who really know Atlanta. They have taken the 1928 atlas of Atlanta, which is this enormous document, and digitalized it page by page. This shows every street, every property, most facilities within, transportation, sewer lines, early electric lines, whatever. All of this is being digitalized and now information is being fed into this. So our list of theaters they will be put in there, stage one. Stage two, if we have any photographs of the audience or of the time that will be put in there as well and then what movies were playing. So you hit that one site. You will be able in a way to walk through, well, back up for a minute. 1928, this atlas is just when they're changing the street numbering. The Depression is following right after that and all of our city directories are coded according to race. So every person, every institution that is African American has a C after it. So we can code this according to race, the entire city, and you can basically begin to walk through it. I think that's where our work will really fit in and it's very exciting.

Final statement, a sociologist, I was putting together a research design for undergraduates. One of the questions, and it was a series of questions, what is the question, what are the sources, we've all done this. I said what is true and this fellow said what else is true. That's always haunted me. This is where I think digitalization could come in. When we begin to look at these theaters in this context is there a soda fountain nearby? Is there a newsstand? All of this will be there for about a 22 or 23-year period. Thank you.