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The Plow and the Pen: The Pioneering Adventures of Oscar Micheaux

Between 1919 and 1948, Oscar Micheaux produced, directed, and distributed more than forty feature-length films. Although his status as a pioneer in early African American cinema has been justly acknowledged, the films themselves, more often than not, have been damned with faint praise. Joseph Young, Micheaux's toughest critic, has written: "Micheaux was not an excellent filmmaker, nor even a good one. He turned out to be the best in a class of black filmmakers."[1] Donald Bogle, an authority on African American cinema, argues that Micheaux's films were "technically inferior" to Hollywood products because they were made in less time, with less money, and often with amateur casts and improvised crews. In addition, he addresses Micheaux's self-imposed limitations, claiming that Micheaux's body of work, for better or worse, "reflected the interests and outlooks of the black bourgeoisie." According to Bogle, Micheaux's films depicted "a fantasy world where blacks were just as affluent, just as educated, just as 'cultured,' just as well-mannered—in short, just as white" as their Hollywood counterparts.[2]

Recently critics have begun to reassess Micheaux's few surviving films. Works once considered merely sensational and melodramatic now receive credit for dealing with such volatile and topical issues as rape, domestic abuse, lynching, and miscegenation. His focus on the black bourgeoisie and his defense of Booker T. Washington have been reunderstood as pleas for black independence, self-education, and laissez-faire competition. Micheaux has been called a "maverick stylist" and a "model for the independent black cinema" whose once "technically inferior" films have been heralded in some quarters

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as examples of guerilla, avant-garde filmmaking.[3] *Midnight Ramble*, a 1994 PBS documentary, has acknowledged Micheaux's contribution to race movies.[4] Since the mid-1990s, the Film and Video Program at Duke University has offered a Web site and newsletter dedicated to educating readers about the once forgotten African American filmmaker. Heading into the twenty-first century, the critical momentum propelling Micheaux to the front ranks among American artists has continued to build. In the fall of 2000, the Film Society of Lincoln Center, in conjunction with the New York Film Festival, screened a restored version of Micheaux's 1925 classic, *Body and Soul*, with a new jazz score composed by Wycliffe Gordon and conducted by Wynton Marsalis.

Despite this renewed interest in Micheaux's films, it is sometimes forgotten that before he became a pioneer in black cinema, Micheaux was literally a black pioneer. Born in Illinois in 1884, the grandson of a slave, Micheaux moved to South Dakota in 1904, when parcels of land on the Rosebud Reservation were made available to settlers through an organized government lottery. In purchasing a quarter section and farming it, Micheaux became one of the earliest African American homesteaders on the United States frontier. After a drought in 1911, subsequent crop failures, foreclosure, and the collapse of his marriage, Micheaux turned to writing. In 1913, he self-published *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*, an autobiographical novel. Throughout the rest of his career, in fiction and film, Micheaux reworked this same material. In 1917, he self-published *The Homesteader*, a longer, more complex, and less autobiographical work that also deals with the hardships of a black pioneer. In 1919, his adaptation of the novel became the first feature-length African American film. After filming *The Homesteader*, Micheaux stopped writing novels and became a full-time film maker. During his most fertile period, between the early 1920s and the late 1930s, and during his resumed career as a writer in the following decade, Micheaux produced urban crime dramas, mysteries, melodramas, romances, and musicals. But he returned to the West periodically. In 1931, he directed *The Exile*, a remake of *The Homesteader*, believed to be the first African American talking film,[5] and in 1944, he self-published *The Wind from Nowhere*, his third literary account of his frontier experience, which served as the basis for his last film, *The Betrayal* (1948).

Although Micheaux's films have been resurrected and subjected

to careful critical scrutiny, most of his writings remain out of print. Like his films, which were dismissed for decades, his books are still regarded as poorly crafted and ideologically conservative. Young, who produced the first study devoted to Micheaux's seven novels, claims that the fiction is marred by a crude grasp of language, a lack of artistic complexity, and an absence of "figurative imagery." More seriously, he alleges that as a member of the "assimilationist school" and an apologist for Booker T. Washington, Micheaux accepted "a myth of black inferiority." Believing that he could succeed by imitating prosperous white pioneers, Micheaux, according to Young, embraced "Anglo-Saxon myths, Anglo-Saxon values, and Anglo-Saxon philosophy."[6] As Robert Bone claims, more succinctly and caustically, Micheaux, in his writing, "plays white as children play house."[7]

It is time to reopen the case against Oscar Micheaux and to reexamine this verdict. Like critics who have called for a reassessment of Micheaux's cinematic canon, I would argue that his writings have been simplistically treated. In this essay, I have chosen to focus on three of Micheaux's seven novels—*The Conquest, The Homesteader*, and *The Wind from Nowhere*—which I describe as a trilogy. His four other novels, like most of his films, are not set in the West. It is these three loosely autobiographical works, and the film adaptations of Micheaux's Western experience, that reveal the most about Micheaux's personal beliefs and how they intensified, changed, or evolved over time. Here the West becomes a testing ground for determining whether African Americans have a stake in the American dream, envisioned by Micheaux as a quest for personal freedom, respect by his peers, and economic success.

It has become commonplace to assume that Micheaux identified with the imperial enterprise of westward expansion; that he promoted farming and manual vocational skills; and that he tried to succeed as a black pioneer by conservatively keeping his place in a segregated Western farming community. Micheaux tends to be viewed, at best, as a dupe who was tricked by the promise of free enterprise and racial equality and, at worst, as an ideologue out of step with his time. However, *The Conquest*, the first work in the trilogy, actually refutes the notion that African Americans can translate the American dream into reality, although *The Homesteader* and *The Wind from Nowhere* later seem to contradict this conclusion. In these later novels, the heroes assimilate, prosper, and lift up the race. Yet because the sequels stray

from Micheaux's own experience, they make black success in the West seem like an entertaining mirage. As Micheaux's alter egos grow more heroic in stature, they become less representative of historic black pioneers.[8]

Micheaux was plagued by a profound double consciousness. Although he believed that African Americans could achieve economic success, he realized that white Americans underestimated his race's potential; he therefore created fictional heroes who, by conquering the frontier in the tradition of immigrant Anglo-Americans, might inspire black readers while succeeding in terms that white readers would respect. But the myth of the frontier as a land of (equal) opportunity and a place of renewal proved nonviable. The triumphs of Micheaux's Western protagonists disguised his own failures as a homesteader, husband, and father. The contrast between negative personal experience and representations of an ideal reality created a tension that complemented and complicated Micheaux's double consciousness. With each artistic revision of his autobiography, the gap between experience and fantasy became increasingly harder to bridge.

Micheaux's interest in Western settlement and vocational enterprise put him at odds with contemporaneous African American writers who migrated to cities in search of culturally and intellectually stimulating environments. In his subject matter and its treatment, Micheaux has more in common with regional and Euro-American writers. Hamlin Garland's short-story collection, *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), like *The Conquest*, examines the conflict between romantic individualism and the forces of economic and social oppression that thwart the success of rural midwesterners.[9] Like *Giants in the Earth* (1927), the first novel in O. E. Rölvaag's trilogy about Norwegian-American immigrants, Micheaux's three-volume chronicle examines the physical hardships and psychological disorientation experienced by characters who relate to the prairie as outsiders or foreigners.

At the same time, however, Micheaux signifies within an African American artistic tradition. His frontier trilogy and his three Western films illustrate a pattern of repetition and difference. By racializing the Anglo-national narrative of conquest and settlement, and by retelling the story of an African American pioneer in more than one medium, Micheaux created a pattern that was "familiar and new" (*WHH*, 38). His return to the same material throughout his career is not a sign of Micheaux's creative exhaustion but, rather, repre-

sents his effort to resolve his early traumatic experience—farm failure, bankruptcy, and the loss of his wife—in works where the hero finds cathartic redemption and therapeutic success. This fragmented self was reconstructed in fiction and film as Micheaux tried to reconcile regional tensions, racism, and economic constraints that prevented African American men from making their frontier dreams a reality. In addition, Micheaux fashioned a new racial as well as a fictional personal history. He embraced the frontier myth by celebrating westward migration, agrarian struggle, and the inevitable triumph of civilization. Yet he expanded the myth to include racial minorities as representative figures in the process of Manifest Destiny.

The Conquest marks an important departure from the traditional pathways of African American literature. Micheaux's thinly disguised alter ego, Oscar Devereaux, heads West, unlike most African Americans who believed that urban industrial centers offered more advantages than the rural South or Midwest. Devereaux chooses wilderness over civilization, rejects most of his race, leaves behind his community, relocates his family, and attempts to reshape his destiny. Just as important, *The Conquest* challenges turn-of-the-century white frontier historiography. Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) defines the frontier as a "crucible"—a land of equal opportunity that democratically forges Americans into a "mixed race" of citizens.[10] *The Conquest* asks whether African Americans can participate in this forging of a multiethnic society.

Houston Baker has argued that African Americans who read Turner's essay feel "no regret over the end of the western frontier." According to Baker, the West (as a place, as a myth) holds no promise for African Americans and, hence, no significance.[11] At first, *The Conquest* seems determined to disprove this hypothesis, as Devereaux pursues his dream of becoming a homesteader. The only black farmer in Gregory County,[12] the lonely Devereaux falls in love with a white woman who lives on a homestead nearby.[13] Determined to succeed on the prairie but without offending the predominantly white local community that frowns on mixed marriages, he renounces his sweetheart. Returning to Illinois in search of a wife, he meets Orlean McCraline, the daughter of a well-known African American minister. Having already sacrificed his true love in order to advance his career,

the practical Devereaux now views McCraline as a means to an end. He takes his fiancée to the West, where she joins his sister and grandmother, also recent arrivals. The three women file claims on separate parcels of land that Devereaux then cultivates, thereby increasing his empire and adding "to the wealth of the colored race in the state."[14]

Devereaux internalizes white racism in the process of pursuing success. Accepting the unspoken premise that African Americans on the prairie can be separate yet equal, he practices self-segregation, marries within his race, and creates a black farming franchise. At the same time, he participates in the victimization of another racial minority, joining white settlers in displacing Native Americans by purchasing land on the Rosebud Reservation that once belonged to the Sioux.[15] Devereaux identifies with the purpose of national expansion and considers the Sioux lazy squatters. He contrasts their resistance to assimilation (to the peaceful relinquishment of their nomadic existence, to repatriation, and to agricultural reeducation) with his own ambition to farm as many acres as possible (*C*, 178–81). As a "progressive" who believes in self-enterprise, he admonishes African Americans for not "monopolizing more of the many million acres" that white farmers have seized for themselves (*C*, 251–52). Maintaining that African Americans can overcome racism by earning the good opinion of their white neighbors, he preaches the virtues of segregated schooling, manual industry, and bourgeois morality (*C*, 248–50, 139, 193).

Devereaux's plans, however, fail to yield the predicted results. Although he studies experimental seeding and plowing techniques, Devereaux cannot forecast the weather, which ultimately determines the fate of his crops. Nor can he persuade his wife to accept the hardships of farming. After their child is stillborn, she leaves him, abandons her claim, and returns to her parents, precipitating an emotional and financial crisis that pushes Devereaux deeper into despair. As M. K. Johnson has observed, the death of Devereaux's son represents the demise of his dream, for it disproves Turner's thesis that the West is a land of new beginnings and fresh opportunities, or the site of symbolic rebirth. The title of *The Conquest* is therefore ironic.[16] Instead of ruling his personal and professional destiny, the hero is conquered by the land, social conventions, and events beyond his control.

Unlike the American Adam, who finds in the wilderness an ability to order the New World, Micheaux's black pioneer loses his land, banishes hope, and retreats into exile at the end of the novel. In keep-

ing with African American literary tradition, *The Conquest* critiques the Anglo-Saxon edenic myth. If white antebellum writers deployed the trope of the New World as paradise, ignoring the evils of slavery while stressing the "idyllic" qualities of Southern plantation life,[17] so proponents of Manifest Destiny tended to discount the costs of Western conquest and settlement, focusing instead on the divine right of Anglo-Saxon possession. Considering the genocide and enslavement of Native Americans, and the persecution of Mormons and other religious minorities, both results of the process of frontier expansion, one might reasonably speculate whether African American pioneers, such as Micheaux, could expect to receive unbiased treatment. Just as African American writers challenged representations of the plantation as pastoral, so Micheaux, in *The Conquest*, rejects the myth of the frontier as Eden.

Micheaux's African American characters regain paradise, however, in the final two works in the trilogy. *The Homesteader* and *The Wind from Nowhere* follow *The Conquest* in tracing the troubles of their respective protagonists, but they continue beyond the point where the first novel ends. Unlike *The Conquest*, *The Homesteader* features a hero whose fortunes improve. Jean Baptiste, Micheaux's alter ego, leaves Cairo, Illinois (referred to as "Egypt" because of its sizable black population) and begins his own exodus.[18] Escaping from a rural ghetto that offers few opportunities, Baptiste exchanges bondage for freedom, migrating westward and staking a claim on the prairie. In South Dakota, the promised land, he loses his wife and son and almost forfeits the farm. But through a complicated series of plot twists, the protagonist avoids becoming a sacrificial victim, unlike his biblical namesake. He harvests a wheat crop and pays off his mortgage (*H*, 515); gets revenge on the Reverend, who has sown dissent in his marriage (517–22); and then marries Agnes Stewart, a white woman and his first love, when he discovers that she has a trace of black blood (526). Just as Micheaux restores the farm to fertility, so he reunites Jean Baptiste and Agnes Stewart (his "dream girl") in the "enchanted garden" where the lovers first met (139). Unlike contemporary African American writers who represent the vexed nature of interracial relationships by invoking Adam and Eve, their fall, and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Micheaux finds a solution that enables his hero to marry a white woman and simultaneously recapture paradise.[19]

In *The Wind from Nowhere*, Micheaux succeeds in even more gran-

diose terms, transforming the prelapsarian prairie into an agricultural utopia. At the end of the novel, Martin Eden, Micheaux's third alter ego, stands on top of Mt. Eden. This mountain has rich deposits of manganese that the hero will one day extract, sell in order to acquire more land and equipment, and use to plant crops that will be successfully harvested "year after year." Micheaux envisions Martin Eden and his wife Deborah using the profits from farming to lift up the race. They will pluck "worthy and industrious" African Americans from the cities, settle them on ten-acre tracts, teach women to grow their own food, and hire men to work in "food product factories and manganese alloy plants" that Martin Eden builds on the prairie.[20] *The Conquest* is ironic because the hero suffers defeat, but the success of Micheaux's later heroes is ironic as well, despite their triumph over adversity. Martin's fortunes, for example, improve with the discovery of precious ore on his property, such that accident plays the determining role in shaping his future, rather than planning, perseverance, and seasonal sacrifice. By transforming Eden's privately owned farm into a commune with factories, Micheaux suggests that an idealized urban industrial complex, superimposed upon an agrarian grid, offers African Americans a combination of the best opportunities. Success is based on contradiction as well as compromise. Martin Eden is named after the hero of Jack London's novel of that name, whose protagonist triumphs professionally after years of hard work and struggle, then commits suicide after deciding that his achievements are hollow. Micheaux's Martin Eden finds fulfillment in enterprise, unlike Micheaux himself or London's titular character. *The Wind from Nowhere* thus has to contradict its own literary and autobiographical sources in order to construct a myth of black success in the West. *The Homesteader* and *The Wind from Nowhere* seemingly affirm the place of African Americans in the national narrative of continental conquest and settlement. Micheaux not only saves his heroes from failure but he also rescues his heroines from the fate of the tragic mulatta. Agnes Stewart Baptiste and Deborah Eden have been able to marry the black men they love and join their husbands in founding a new world on the prairie, once they discover their black ancestry.[21] This discovery enables marriage to take place, leads to the foundation of an agricultural dynasty, and results in future black pioneers. Micheaux links a subplot involving the celebration of the heroines' black genealogy with the main plot in which black heroes reclaim the wilderness. He

associates the recovery of racial roots with the placing of roots in the soil, narrating the story of African American settlement on the South Dakota frontier.

Erasing his own failure as an African American pioneer, Micheaux reproduces the West as a blank page and inscribes on it a fiction that makes success possible. In the process, however, Micheaux's heroes become progressively passive and dependent on others. *The Conquest* ends with Oscar watching helplessly as his wife reenters her father's house, closing "the door" on his dreams (*C*, 311). In *The Homesteader*, Baptiste suffers further indignities. His first wife, Orlean McCarthy, not only rejects him by choosing to stay with her father but assaults him as well: "[W]ith a strength, born of excitement, she struck [Jean] in his face, in his eyes. . . . He reached out and caught her around the waist as he lost his footing and fell to his knees. As he lingered in this position his face was upturned. She struck him then with all the force in her body. He groaned, as he gradually loosened his hold upon her, and slowly sank to the floor" (*H*, 383). In *The Wind from Nowhere*, Linda, Eden's first wife, behaves even more violently. Seizing a gun from the symbolically impotent hero, she wounds him and he "sink[s] to the floor with a groan" (*WN*, 294).

In all three novels, the pioneer's ability to master the prairie partially depends on his success in managing women. Because his worth is based on the amount of land he owns (in *The Homesteader*, his wife, sister, and grandmother hold title to property that he farms and controls) the hero objectifies women, viewing them as a necessary means to an end. "I have always regarded matrimony," Devereaux states in *The Homesteader*, "as a business proposition" (*H*, 183). Over the course of the trilogy, the hero becomes more reliant on women. As he becomes less effectual in shaping his fate, they become more instrumental, though not necessarily more sympathetic. In *The Homesteader*, for example, Orlean rebels against her father by stabbing him, then plunges the knife into her breast (*H*, 521–22). In *The Wind from Nowhere*, Linda kills the Reverend, then rushes out of the house and into oncoming traffic (*WN*, 349–51). When Jean Baptiste becomes the prime suspect in the deaths of his wife and her father, Agnes comes to Chicago to rescue him (*H*, 506). She hires a Pinkerton detective to solve the homicide-suicide case and saves the hero from prison (508). In *The Wind from Nowhere*, Deborah Eden also intervenes melodramatically. Traveling to Chicago, she lectures Linda on wifely dis-

loyalty, and when Linda tells her to mind her own business, she proclaims: "'I'm *making* it my business, see!' and finishing, she smacked Linda hard on the cheek" (*WN*, 330). Then, taking a train, swimming across a river, and riding on horseback, she arrives home in time to prevent land-grabbers from seizing Linda's unoccupied farm (*WN*, 366–75).

The success of African Americans in the West is an improbable fiction whose perpetuation relies on the positive outcome of such far-fetched scenarios. The melodramatic elements in *The Homesteader* and *The Wind from Nowhere* derive from Western pulp fiction and African American literature. Like dime novels, the last two works in the trilogy feature villainous land speculators, evil railroad barons, and innocent farmers threatened with losing their mortgages.[22] The light and dark heroines play opposing roles in determining the fate of the hero. In the African American melodramatic tradition, they not only have different racial features but also respectively symbolize positive and negative traits.[23] Marriage to the white heroine (Agnes or Deborah) guarantees assimilation, economic advancement, and progress for black heroes. Marriage to the black antiheroine (Orlean or Linda) necessitates a return to the city, dooms the hero to failure, and prevents upward racial mobility. Micheaux displaces onto the antiheroine the hero's "dark" tendencies—his recurring habit of fantasizing about killing his wife and her father (*H*, 484; *WN*, 276). By killing her father and taking her own life, the dark angel grants the hero's subconscious wish, removing the obstacles blocking his path to success. The light angel provides nonviolent solutions to the hero's problems by seeking divine inspiration. In *The Wind from Nowhere*, for instance, Deborah Eden devises a plan for rescuing her husband while praying for guidance in church (*WN*, 357).

Tensions increase noticeably over the course of the Western trilogy. Irony suggests the presence of a double perspective, forcing the reader to question what conquest means and what price the African American pioneer pays for success. Paradoxically, as the hero becomes more triumphant, he is diminished. In addition, he develops psychological fantasies in which he imagines "acting out" in socially unacceptable ways. He is a latent misogynist who blames his wife for his troubles, a potential adulterer who desires an unattainable woman, and a would-be murderer who fantasizes about using violence to resolve his dilemma. In spite of his belief in the possibility of black

self-advancement, he reveals a secret racial self-loathing. He prefers a light-skinned wife who would facilitate his social assimilation and upward economic mobility. Although he begins his career as a homesteader, he ends it as an industrial-agrarian entrepreneur. The rural life that Micheaux depicts in his trilogy becomes more anachronistic and irrelevant with the passage of time. Whereas *The Conquest* and *The Homesteader* take place at the turn of the century, *The Wind from Nowhere*, published many years later, seems stuck in a time warp. It refers vaguely to an "economic depression" that must have begun in the late 1920s (*WN*, 14). It mentions the existence of automobiles (*WN*, 20) but makes no further reference to modernization and industrialization, no allusion to either World War, and no acknowledgment of the progress African Americans had made since *The Homesteader*. Booker T. Washington, who died in 1915, no longer represented the views of a significant portion of the African American population, serving instead as a reminder of an earlier, more politically conservative period. So Micheaux's prescription for ending unemployment and poverty—his allotment of "ten acres and a cow" to each Western immigrant—seems like an "outdated" solution in the mid-twentieth century (*WHH*, 24). While African Americans in the 1940s migrated to large urban areas, or went to fight overseas, Micheaux's characters remain on the prairie, staging the same battles that their predecessors fought in *The Conquest* in 1913.

There is a double consciousness and a tendency to encode contradictory messages in Micheaux's Western trilogy. The novels can be read as affirmations of faith in the ability of African Americans to participate in the development of the U.S. frontier or as fictions that subvert their ostensible purpose by inscribing African American success as a myth. Although Micheaux never systematically questions the process that results in the installation of white people in the region, and in the removal or absence of racial minorities, he acknowledges that white farmers resent sharing land with a "squaw man" (*H*, 86) or "nigger" (*C*, 87). Micheaux's alter egos show contempt for African Americans who do not want to work hard, overcome their society's low expectations for them, and lift up the race. But his heroes also resent white Americans who treat African Americans as second-class citizens and attempt to prevent them from achieving their fullest poten-

tial. As "exceptional" black men who exhibit none of the negative qualities associated with stereotypes of their race, Micheaux's heroes identify with white pioneers and entrepreneurs. However, as "representative" black men who articulate the concerns of their people, the author's fictional surrogates also critique black-white relations, addressing racial prejudice, double standards, and economic injustices, sometimes so subtly that critics fail to recognize the existence of a covert counternarrative. As a writer who solicited the patronage of his white rural neighbors, as well as the following of a black urban audience, Micheaux produced novels that members of his divided constituency were capable of interpreting differently.

For instance, although Micheaux has been criticized for embracing Booker T. Washington, who praised manual labor as a means of achieving prosperity, it has seldom been noted that Micheaux's alter egos often take shortcuts on the road to success. While working as a Pullman porter, Devereaux overhears passengers discussing the existence of cheap Western land. After pumping a farmer for more information and learning that land costs more than eighty dollars per acre, the hero, who lacks investment capital, devises a scheme to raise funds (*C*, 51–53). By "knocking down" passengers—skimming money from travelers who pay for their accommodations in cash—Devereaux acquires the money necessary to purchase land on the prairie.[24] Defending the hero's actions, the narrator claims that the Pullman Company exploits its "colored employees," paying them "starvation wages" and forcing them to steal in order to offset their "near-slave conditions" (*C*, 50–51).

Elsewhere in *The Conquest*, when Devereaux describes himself as a "radical" who supports Washington's "progressive" platform, he seems to be appealing to conservative readers, suggesting that African Americans should accommodate "obvious prejudice," accept the fact that they have few opportunities, and farm land as an alternative to working for "more equal rights" (*C*, 251). Yet here the narrator exploits his lowly position, takes revenge on a system that has forced African Americans into servitude, and defends his actions without "regrets" or "apologies" (*C*, 51). His lack of repentance indicates his awareness of a more radical audience, a second set of readers to whom he also appeals. Political liberals, and African Americans in particular, would have been sympathetic to the narrator's argument. Since the profession of Pullman porter was one of the few occupations open

to black men at the turn of the century, many would have recognized, as the narrator claims, that they were treated as menial servants, paid inadequate wages, and subjected to harsh working conditions—that they were exploited by a company that repeatedly thwarted their efforts to unionize.[25] In the opinion of some readers, the narrator might have been justified in comparing his employment to slavery.

The Pullman episode suggests one reason for rereading Micheaux. Although he recommended patience with racial injustice, slow progress, and physical toil as a means of achieving success, Micheaux also practiced a more secular gospel than the one he preached. Speculators, as well as aspiring homesteaders, participated in the South Dakota lottery in 1904. Those who drew winning numbers, and who qualified to purchase quarter-section tracts at affordable prices, often sold their acreage to farmers for sizable profits. Others held onto their land, hoping that railroads would come West, bringing people and industry, which would drive up the cost of real estate and make their investments more valuable.[26] Micheaux's acknowledged distaste for farming and other forms of physical labor (*C*, 31–32) and his expressed admiration for white investors and businessmen (*C*, 71–72) have led critics to wonder whether the author fancied himself a "virtual slave" to the land (*WN*, 165) or an entrepreneur. In later years, Micheaux's neighbors insisted that his "game was trying to outfox the railroad, and his farming efforts merely a front" that collapsed when the railroad decided to bypass his property.[27] Recently critics have surmised that because negotiations involving the railroads and land speculators are "given such prominence in an otherwise 'personal' chronicle . . . one cannot help but wonder what role [Micheaux] had in the scheme" (*WHH*, 8). To the extent that he admired (and may have conspired with) gamblers who bought and sold land for profit rather than farming it, Micheaux flirted with riskier and more radical methods of achieving success than those practiced by white homesteaders or by members of a black bourgeoise.[28]

Micheaux viewed writing as one of those radical methods—as a means to an end, whereby the author could recoup his earlier financial losses. Micheaux's alter ego, the debt-ridden Jean Baptiste, claims in *The Homesteader* that he decided to "write his own story" when foreclosure on his mortgage seemed imminent (*H*, 401). Likewise, Micheaux wrote *The Conquest* not just to chronicle his failure as a black pioneer; he self-published it to launch a new career as a writer.

Writing, for Micheaux, was an entrepreneurial enterprise, the success of which depended initially on the support of a local white audience. He found a printer in Lincoln, Nebraska, who agreed to publish one thousand copies of *The Conquest* for seventy-five cents apiece but demanded two hundred and fifty dollars before going to press. The aspiring writer went door to door, seeking subscriptions from farmers, describing *The Conquest* as a book "about their lives as well as his own." Within two weeks, he sold fifteen hundred copies for one dollar and fifty cents each, cleared a respectable profit, and decided that writing, not farming, "offered the best hope for his continued financial health" (*OM*, 76–77).

The Conquest targeted two groups of readers. It appealed, on one hand, to white subscribers who invested in the novel as promotional literature. Because the novel extols the availability of cheap land and the virtues of farming and celebrates the arrival of railroads and the growth of racially tolerant frontier communities, it may have been expected to promote westward migration, which would have increased the value of prairie land, thus benefiting those who were already residents. But the novel also appealed to African American readers, whom Micheaux might have had a harder time pleasing, since they could have interpreted the defeats the hero suffers as discouraging. *The Conquest* thus divides into two separate narratives. The first half provides a social history of South Dakota at the turn of the century, focusing on Micheaux's alter ego and other thinly disguised historical figures who played pivotal roles in the frontier's development; the second half documents Devereaux's return to the city, his critique of black urban ghettoes, his failure there to locate a suitable wife, his inability to find support for his pioneer enterprise within the community, and his final defeat. One critic complains that Micheaux didn't "integrate" these two sections skillfully. Another believes that the "symbolic juxtaposition" of the two narratives—one situated on the prairie, featuring a predominantly white cast of characters, the other taking place among a metropolitan black population—organizes a productive debate in Micheaux's work between region and race.[29]

Commenting on the doubleness reflected in Micheaux's sensibility, Jane Gaines believes that the artist saw "Black culture through the eyes of the White culture," creating portraits of "an irredeemable Black underclass" that whites found believable.[30] If Micheaux courted white readers, however, he also curried favor with African Americans.

In 1915, he moved to Sioux City, Iowa, where he founded the Western Book Supply Company. In order to finance publication of *The Homesteader*, he sold stock in the company, mainly to white farmers in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa.[31] He also attempted to expand his black audience, launching "aggressive promotional tours" in black belts in the North and the South and visiting schools, churches, and homes in efforts to publicize his endeavor.[32] In an advertising pamphlet, he pitched the book to African American readers: "Consider it in the light of a gift to relatives or dear friends and let your order be for more than one copy."[33]

Similarly, in at least one scene in the novel, the narrator speaks to black readers, shifting linguistic registers in order to address black concerns. Visiting the south side of Chicago ("Darktown proper"), he discusses his search for a wife with a friend:

> "Well, how's Chicago"? he inquired irrelevantly.
> "Same old burg," she replied, drawing a chair up close.
> "And how's hubby?"
> "Fine!"
> "And the rest of the family?"
> "The same. Pearl, too."
> "Oh, Pearl. . . . How is Pearl?"
> "Still single. . . ."
> "Thought she was engaged to be married when I was here last year?"
> "Oh, that fellow was no good!"
> "What was the matter?"
> "What's the matter with lots of these nigga' men 'round Chicago? They can't keep a wife a posing on State Street."
> "Humph!"
> "It's the truth!"
> "And how about the women? They seem to be fond of passing along to be posed at. . . ."
> "Oh, you're mean," she pouted. Then: "Are you married yet?"
> "Oh, lordy! How could I get married? Not thirty minutes ago I saw the first colored girl I have seen in a year!" (*H*, 149)

This passage stands in contrast to the rest of *The Homesteader*, revealing a textual tension between western European literary practice and African American oral tradition. Building on Henry Louis Gates's

assumption that "the production of literature was taken to be the central arena in which persons of African descent could, or could not, establish and redefine their status within the human community," I would argue that Micheaux viewed the production of literature as such a means to an end.[34] The author wrote in order to demonstrate what he failed to prove as a farmer or land investor: that a black man was capable, by means of hard work and self-education, of forging a successful career and, in the process, earning the admiration of whites. Likewise, the author's fictional surrogate speaks standard English in order to indicate his erudition, enhanced social status, and will to assimilate.[35]

When Devereaux enters the African American community, however, he changes personas. Although he remains chaste on the prairie, respecting the color line, in "Darktown" he trades innuendos and flirts with a married black woman. He becomes angry when white men pelt him with terms like "d—n nigger!" (*H*, 125), but he takes no offense when a member of his own race refers to "'nigga' men" playfully. Modulating from standard English into salty vernacular, he participates in a companionable interchange characterized by unrestricted loose language and vocal inflections ("'Oh, lordy!'" / "'Humph!'"). More to the point, Oscar promises his black friend that he won't marry outside his race (*H*, 151). The protagonist signifies his intention through the use of vernacular, reassuring his black readers that he hasn't lost touch with his ethnic identity even though he has moved to a rural, nonblack community.[36]

Addresses to a specific African American audience occur seldom in Micheaux's frontier trilogy. The issue of split reception becomes more apparent when one compares the markets for film and literature. Only a few stills remain of Micheaux's first film, *The Homesteader*. Archival records, however, indicate that the writer-director exploited the theme of miscegenation in order to attract more white viewers. In a letter to executives of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, a black-owned corporation that considered producing a film version of Micheaux's novel in 1918, Micheaux insists that the subplot, concerning "the white girl who in the end turns out to be colored," would pique curiosity. (According to rumor, a "white friend had told him that including the white girl . . . was one reason that many whites bought the book.")[37] Like the novel, the film adaptation was pitched primarily to a white demographic. Micheaux wanted distri-

bution rights to the picture west of Mississippi and north of Missouri, "among white people only." The producers, he wrote, could distribute *The Homesteader* in the remaining national markets, where "colored people" formed a greater share of the audience.[38] After negotiations fell through, Micheaux decided to produce the film independently, forming the Micheaux Book and Film Company (which later became the Micheaux Film Corporation) in 1918. Once again, Micheaux waged a divided campaign, financing his film by selling stock in his new corporation to the same white investors who had purchased stakes in his novel but promoting it in urban markets where there were more movie theaters. Realizing that race movies would appeal more to black than to white viewers, he advertised the film in the *Chicago Defender* and other African American newspapers. By emphasizing the film's all-black cast, he created an ethnic market for *The Homesteader*, which eventually grossed five thousand dollars (*OM*, 97–100).

Having quit farming as well as abandoned his literary career in favor of filmmaking, Micheaux began spending more time in the East and Midwest, using such settings as New York and Chicago to film stories that featured black, middle-class, professional, or cosmopolitan characters. Although he continued to rely partially on white financial backing and never gave up hope that his films would cross over (*OM*, 125–26), he gradually shifted his racial and geographical focus, targeting a black urban audience. Because the first adaptation of *The Homesteader* no longer survives, it is impossible to compare the film with the remake, *The Exile*, which appeared twelve years later. But the latter film differs significantly from the novel on which it was based, emphasizing city life rather than homesteading. The difference between the source novel and the film adaptation once again suggests Micheaux's awareness of audience, his alternating ability to satisfy white readers and viewers of race movies. As jazz music plays, the opening credits appear against a background of skyscrapers. A producer's note follows: "This is a story of Chicago—and the Negro," it claims.[39] The subsequent story adheres to the same basic outline as Micheaux's Western novel but includes more scenes set in the city. Orlean McCarthy, the hero's original romantic nemesis, is replaced by Edith Duval, the owner of a South Side speakeasy, who attempts to seduce Jean Baptiste away from his wholesome life on the prairie. Although the film praises, in passing, the virtues of the outdoors and

includes some brief footage of farming, it showcases scenes in the nightclub, including performances by an instrumental jazz orchestra, tap dancers, and chorus girls. Narratively gratuitous but professionally choreographed sequences, these scenes prove more entertaining than the ostensible story involving Baptiste's attempt to escape from his hostess's clutches.

Here Micheaux seems less interested in favoring the West as a setting and less willing to portray white characters as black role models. The Micheaux Film Corporation had gone bankrupt in the late 1920s, and Micheaux had been forced to seek financial assistance from white investors who, in exchange, had demanded partial control of his company. This situation did not prevent the independently minded Micheaux from addressing white racism and from subtly satirizing white businessmen. In *The Exile*, the audience learns that Edith Duval's nightclub was once a mansion owned by a well-to-do meatpacker who abandoned his dwelling when migrating African Americans came to Chicago and moved into his neighborhood. Without seeking authorization, Micheaux filmed steel magnate Charles Schwab's home in New York, using the shots, tongue-in-cheek, to represent the juke joint's exterior.[40]

Micheaux's success—first as a farmer, then as a novelist, and last as a filmmaker—depended on the consumer loyalty and financial support of both races. Consequently, Micheaux's work is characterized by shifting self-interests and conflicting ideological messages. But his career as an artist was energized rather than paralyzed by such a profound double consciousness. Micheaux exploited his doubleness—his persona as an assimilated African American and his reputation as a maverick African American filmmaker—to attract both white and black followers. He emulated white entrepreneurs, aspired to membership in the black bourgeoisie, and catered indiscriminately to any race, region, or industry that might advance his career. Young believes that Micheaux wrote novels and produced films in order to obtain "white support" and make money.[41] Elton Fax, an illustrator who knew Micheaux personally, offers a different perspective in *Midnight Ramble*. Micheaux liked to say that he made race movies in order to lift up "our people." "I'm sure he sincerely tried to do that because he felt it profitable to do so," Fax speculates. "After all, our people weren't going to theaters to see black people bring us down further." Although they disagree on his motives, Young and Fax agree that Micheaux made success a priority.

Hoping to strike gold again, Micheaux returned to the subject of the West periodically. *The Wind from Nowhere*, the final work in his trilogy, became a bestseller, appearing in at least nine editions.[42] The film version, however, flopped at the box office. Comparing it unfavorably to an amateur home movie, critics complained that *The Betrayal* suffered from poor production values, unprofessional acting, and ludicrous dialogue.[43] Micheaux's final film, which no longer survives, apparently left the impression that Micheaux was a second-rate artist whose earlier efforts had broken new ground in African American cinema but whose technically inferior later productions remained fixated on the same subjects and themes. Micheaux's return to familiar material, with disappointing results, may suggest that the writer and filmmaker ended his career in a state of creative exhaustion. However, rather than ranking his works in order of relative merit, it may be more useful to consider the reasons that Micheaux produced various versions of his autobiography. These retellings revise the frontier myth, as well as Micheaux's own experience, in a manner consistent with the African American practice of repetition with difference. In psychological terms, his novels and films also enabled him to come to terms with his past by confronting and resolving that traumatic experience.

Psychoanalytic critics define accounts of trauma as mediated literary experiments. A subject's inability to forget a traumatic occurrence, combined with a psychological need to recollect the episode in a manner that feels bearable, results in a literature of "double telling" that mixes dramatic distortion, and thus self-protection, with fact.[44] In Micheaux's case, a series of traumatic events—including the failure of his farm, bankruptcy, the death of his son, and divorce—forced him to seek other forms of employment. Writing autobiographical novels and screenplays not only provided necessary sources of income but also probably helped him come to grips with his failure as an African American Western homesteader. In dramatic recreations of his personal history, Micheaux blamed his defeats on forces beyond his control and imagined alternate outcomes that were more satisfactory. Cathy Caruth, claiming that trauma is not just a pathology, insists that it is also "the story of a wound that cries out."[45] Micheaux reopened his own wounds and sought to heal them through the artistic process, in repeated attempts to make sense of catastrophe.

Micheaux's novels and films illustrate how narratives about race and trauma sometimes converge. His works may be considered double tellings as well as retellings, cathartic artistic experiments in which

the subject's personal failures come to stand for the traumatic historical experiences of African Americans in the United States—in particular, the obstacles they faced on the Western frontier. Repeatedly, Micheaux transforms the specifics of his life into representative art. In addition, his male protagonists, often the sole members of their race in the region, serve as test cases for determining whether equal opportunities exist for other racial minorities. In Micheaux's own case, the reality of life on the prairie for a black man at the turn of the century did not conform to the Anglo-American myth of the frontier. For Micheaux, the disintegration of this myth engendered a prolonged trauma that he assuaged somewhat through artistic endeavors in which he imagined a vibrant black West as an actual possibility. Micheaux's interpretations and revisions of history may be understood as attempts to bear witness to this mythic possibility in fiction and film, for both black and white Americans in rural and urban locations, over several decades of complex and productive creation.

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Notes

I am grateful to Lars Larson for help with my research for this essay.

1 Joseph A. Young, *Black Novelist as White Racist: The Myth of Inferiority in the Novels of Oscar Micheaux* (New York: Greenwood, 1989), 65.

2 Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Viking, 1973; reprint, New York: Continuum, 1991), 114–16. For similar critiques of Micheaux's films, see John Kisch and Edward Mapp, *A Separate Cinema: Fifty Years of Black-Cast Posters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), xvii; and Stephen F. Soitos, "Micheaux, Oscar," in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, ed. William Andrews (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 495. Unlike Bogle, J. Ronald Green argues that Micheaux represented the black middle class, not the bourgeoisie. Green discusses the pejorative ideological associations that cling to the latter term, reminding readers that most of Micheaux's contemporary audience would have fallen into the first class of viewers (see *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2000], 31–40).

3 Critics who have contributed to the rehabilitation of Micheaux's reputation include bell hooks, "Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness," *Black American Literature and Film* 25 (summer 1991): 351–60; Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California

Press, 1993), 11–14; Jane Gaines and Charlene Regester, "Micheaux, Oscar," in *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, ed. Jack Salzman, 5 vols. (New York: MacMillan, 1996), 4:1772–74; Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, "Identity and Betrayal: *The Symbol of the Unconquered* and Oscar Micheaux's 'Biographical Legend,'" *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1996), 57, 71–72; Green, *Straight Lick*, xv, 34–35; Susan Gillman, "Micheaux's Chestnutt," *PMLA* 114 (October 1999): 1080–88; and Soitos, "Micheaux, Oscar," 495.

4 See *Midnight Ramble: The Story of the Black Film Industry*, directed by Bestor Cram and Pearl Bowser (Boston: WGBH Television, 1994).

5 See Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audience* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000), 212; further references to this source will be cited parenthetically as *WHH*.

6 Young, *Black Novelist*, 10, ix.

7 Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), 49.

8 I am in basic agreement with M. K. Johnson, who offers the best criticism of *The Conquest* to date. However, while arguing that Micheaux's novel critiques "the myth of the West and the myth of racial uplift," Johnson fails to consider subsequent works, such as *The Homesteader* and *The Wind from Nowhere*, in which Micheaux seems, at least on the surface, to revise his critique. I would like to acknowledge Johnson's insights while at the same time extending his project to consider Micheaux's three novels together, and to complicate the thesis that Johnson sets forth (see "'Stranger in a Strange Land': An African American Response to the Frontier Tradition in Oscar Micheaux's *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*," *Western American Literature* [fall 1998]: 249).

9 For a fuller account of this conflict as it appears in Garland's work, see Donald Pizer, *Hamlin Garland's Early Work and Career* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1960), 2, 38–44.

10 Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, ed. Harold P. Simonson (1893; reprint, New York: Continuum, 1991), 44.

11 Houston A. Baker Jr., "Completely Well: One View of Black American Culture," *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1972), 2.

12 The trilogy gives the impression that Micheaux (or his fictional counterpart) was the only African American farmer in the region, but anecdotal and historical evidence suggests otherwise. In the late nineteenth century, the Reverend John C. Coleman, an official in the African American Methodist Episcopal Church and the president of the Northwestern Homestead Movement, "championed agriculture because this was the

best strategy to help [black] homesteaders obtain a 'permanent footing' and an 'independent existence.'" Whereas in 1870 there were only ninety-four African Americans out of thirteen thousand people in South Dakota Territory, ten years later there were almost four hundred more (Henry Lewis Suggs, "The Black Press, Black Migration, and the Transplantation of Culture on the Great Plains of South Dakota, 1865–1985," in *The Black Press in the Middle West, 1865–1985*, ed. Henry Lewis Suggs [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1996], 297–99). Betti Carol VanEpps-Taylor writes that Micheaux "could hardly have resided in South Dakota during the homestead period without being aware of the large Sully County Colored Colony thriving not far to the northeast. Begun in Fairbanks Township on the banks of the Missouri River northeast of Pierre in 1884 by Norval Blair, an ex-slave from northern Illinois, and his adult children, it had prospered. During the homestead boom of 1905–1910, a number of African American families tried their luck in western Sully County, and by the 1910 census, the immediate area was home to at least 13 black homesteading families." In addition, the "sizeable African American Yankton colony, begun in the 1880s," was still thriving in the southeast corner of the state, and there were smaller black homesteading communities in nearby northwestern Nebraska (*Oscar Micheaux: A Biography* [Rapid City, S. Dak.: Dakota West Books, 1999], 53–54); further references to this source will be cited parenthetically as *OM*. Ted Blakely, an African American historian from Yankton whose ancestors homesteaded there in the early twentieth century, has continued to challenge "Micheaux's notion of being the only African American in the area" (Bowser and Spence, *WHH*, 222). For a history of black homesteading in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on individual farmers as well as on black rural communities, see Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York: Norton, 1998), 143–56; and William Loren Katz, *The Black West*, rev. ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 167–98.

13 No one knows the extent to which Micheaux, in his first work, mixed fiction with fact. While some of the author's descendants believe that there was such a woman "who caught his eye and perhaps broke his heart," investigators caution that Micheaux may have invented this ill-fated love affair (VanEpps-Taylor, *OM*, 57). Bowser and Spence refer to the semi-autobiographical heroes who appear in most of Micheaux's novels and films as "biographical legends" (*WHH*, 5). Green, however, contends that *The Conquest*, in particular, is "fundamentally trustworthy as autobiography and as history" (*Straight Lick*, xi).

14 Oscar Micheaux, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (1913; reprint, Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1994), 199; further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *C*.

15 For histories of the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota and for ac-

counts of the Sioux in particular, see Doane Robinson, *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians* (1904; reprint, Minneapolis, Minn.: Ross and Haines, 1956), 459–69; Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), 200–230; and Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1968), 133–34, 253–55, 320–32.

16 See Johnson, "'Stranger,'" 245, 248.

17 See J. Lee Greene, *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel's First Century* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1996), 6.

18 Oscar Micheaux, *The Homesteader: A Novel* (Sioux City, Iowa: Western Book Supply, 1917; reprint, Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1994), 163; further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *H*.

19 See Greene, *Blacks in Eden*, 168.

20 Oscar Micheaux, *The Wind from Nowhere* (New York: Book Supply, 1944), 384–85; further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *WN*.

21 In African American melodramas in general, and in one of Micheaux's films in particular, Jane Gaines detects the presence of "racial themes which reorganize the world in such a way that black heritage is rewarded over white paternity; [these works] are schematic renunciations of the prevailing order of things in white American society where, historically, the discovery of black blood meant sudden reversal of fortune, social exclusion, or banishment" ("*The Scar of Shame*: Skin Color and Caste in Black Silent Melodrama," in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy [Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1991], 331). The same theme appears in the last two novels in Micheaux's Western trilogy.

22 See David Grimsted, "Vigilante Chronicle: The Politics of Melodrama Brought to Life," in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. Jacky Brattton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 200.

23 See Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 33–36; see also Bone, *The Negro Novel*, 21–25.

24 Recently commentators have begun to address the passage in *The Conquest* in which Micheaux's narrator defends the practice of "knocking down" passengers (VanEpps-Taylor, *OM*, 25; Bower and Spence, *WHH*, 6–7).

25 For an excellent history of the profession, an analysis of the work culture, and interviews with individual porters, see Jack Santino, *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: Stories of Black Pullman Porters* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1989).

26 See Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 176.

27 Janis Hebert, "Oscar Micheaux: Black Pioneer," *South Dakota Review* 11 (winter 1973): 63. See also John Milton, *South Dakota: A Bicentennial History* (New York: Norton, 1977), 100.

28 In discussing the films of Micheaux, Thomas Cripps writes that in "only a few cases" do "blacks succeed after working hard." Because they lack equal job opportunities, they tend not to believe in "the puritanical work ethic," relying on luck, "the quick score," and "bonanzas" to compensate for economic injustices ("'Race Movies' as Voices of the Black Bourgeoisie: *The Scar of Shame*," in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. Valerie Smith [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1997], 50). In his pioneer trilogy, although Micheaux advocates farming, or working hard, his heroes triumph by other means (the melodramatic death of a rival, rescue by a woman on horseback, the discovery of valuable ore). In *The Conquest*, the amount of attention devoted to speculative real estate ventures and plans for getting rich quickly foreshadows the reliance on plot and the importance of scheming in Micheaux's later novels.

29 Young claims that the "structural divisions" in *The Conquest* are signs of Micheaux's flaws as a novelist (*Black Novelist*, 75). Arlene Elder, however, believes that they signify "Micheaux's self-conscious emotional division between personal ambition, marked by intense frontier individualism, and his hope of being not only a racial representative but a leader of his people and a model for them" (*The "Hindered Hand": Cultural Implications of Early African American Fiction* [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1978], 299). Johnson agrees, describing the first half of the novel as "an account of a determined individual conquering his environment," in the tradition of Western American literature, and comparing the second half to earlier works in African American fiction dealing with manhood and race ("'Stranger,'" 232).

30 Jane Gaines, "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux," in *Black American Cinema: Aesthetics and Spectatorship*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 66; see also Greene, who devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of "twoness" in Micheaux's (primarily non-Western) films (*Blacks in Eden*, 41–56).

31 See Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 1995), 149; and Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 75.

32 Bogle, *Toms, Coons*, 110.

33 Micheaux, advertising pamphlet; cited in Bowser and Spence, *WHH*, 12.

34 Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 129.

35 See Bowser and Spence, who discuss the use of dialects and folk idioms in Micheaux's novels and films (*WHH*, 206).

36 Eventually Devereaux marries Agnes Stewart when he discovers that she has a black mother. Micheaux allows the reader to speculate whether Agnes's black blood indeed enhances her worth as a heroine, noting early in the novel that her half brothers are pure white but also "half-witted" (*H*, 14).

37 See Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 158.

38 Oscar Micheaux to the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, 25 June 1918, George P. Johnson Collection, University of California, Los Angeles.

39 *The Exile*, directed by Oscar Micheaux, with Eunice Brooks, Nora Newsome, and Stanley Morrell (Micheaux Pictures, 1931). Micheaux changed the name of his film company each time it went bankrupt. In 1929, two years before he filmed *The Exile*, Micheaux renamed his company Micheaux Pictures. Later, he renamed the company Micheaux Picture Corporation, but it is uncertain if the change preceded filming of *The Exile*.

40 See Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 190.

41 Young, *Black Novelist*, 70.

42 See VanEpps-Taylor, *OM*, 7; and Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 166.

43 For contemporary reviews of the film, see Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 36, 104.

44 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996), 7. Kalí Tal also distinguishes between event and remembrance, noting that the "process of translation of traumatic experience into text is best understood in terms of . . . the dual semiotic and semantic function of language." In narratives dealing with trauma, as in all linguistic accounts, there is a gap between the sign and its referent (*Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* [Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996], 15).

45 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 2–7.