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IDENTITY AND BETRAYAL

The Symbol of the Unconquered and Oscar Micheaux's "Biographical Legend"

"The Symbol of the Unconquered, *the latest and the best of the Micheaux productions, will open a six day showing at the Vendome Theater on Monday January 10th [1921]. This feature has been creating a wonderful amount of comment all over the East and is one which should be seen by everybody. The story is a clean-cut one and the action is full of speed, interesting and exciting. It tells of the struggles of a young man to retain possession of a piece of valuable oil land against tremendous odds, which includes [sic] everything from intimidation at the hand of his neighbors to a narrow escape from death for him at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan. A love story of beautiful texture lends added interest and some red-blooded scrapping and hard, hard riding furnishes the picture with the amount of exciting action required to make the blood tingle through your veins at high speed."*

—The Chicago Defender, *1/8/21*

"It is claimed the touch of the romance woven in The Homesteader *is coincident with the author's own life but this is still a matter of conjecture."*

—The Half-Century Magazine, *April 1919*

"My color shrouds me in. . . ."

—*Countee Cullen*

Seventy-two years after its 1920 premiere at the Vaudette Theater in Detroit, a print of *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, Oscar Micheaux's tale of mistaken identity, romance, and adventure in the West, was repatriated to the United States from the Belgium national film archives (Cinémathèque Royale/ Koninklijk Filmarchief) with French and Flemish intertitles. *The Symbol of the Unconquered* is one of only three of Micheaux's silent films that have "survived" thus far.[1] Though his career spanned thirty years, approximately twenty-five features—more than half of his total output—were produced in the first decade (1918–1929). These films were tools to express his personal view of the African

American experience. In his desire to have his life be an example for others, Micheaux fostered certain aspects of his personal vision, made artistic use of his personal history, and dramatized particular motifs. He created a biographical persona composed of selected actual and imaginary events that continues to exist and exert influence today, even though many of his films are lost and forgotten.

In his silent films, Micheaux chose themes that were contentious or explosive in their time. By responding to such contemporary social issues as concubinage, rape, miscegenation, peonage, and lynching, he created a textured and layered expressive response to the social crises that circumscribed African American life. *Within Our Gates*, for example, unveils the lynch mob, exposing its members as ordinary townfolk: men, women, and even children who participate in hunting down and hanging a Black family. *The Symbol of the Unconquered* unmasks the Ku Klux Klan. In *The Gunsaulus Mystery* (1921), a reworking of the Leo M. Frank case, a man is wrongfully accused of the murder of a white woman.[2] Promotion for *The Dungeon* (1922) touted the film as dealing with the then-pending Dyer anti-lynching bill. *The Brute* (1920) condemned racketeering and the abuse of women. Passing is the central theme of *The House Behind the Cedars* (1925); *Body and Soul* confronts hypocrisy and corruption in the ministry; and racially restrictive real estate covenants are challenged in *Birthright* (1924).

These films generated heated debate and were subject to censorship by official censor boards, community groups, and individuals such as local sheriffs and theater owners. For instance, a police captain in New Orleans ordered a Race theater to discontinue showing *Within Our Gates* because in his opinion the lynching scenes would incite a riot.[3] The Virginia State Board of Motion Picture Censors rejected the full version of *The House Behind the Cedars* for "presenting the grievances of the negro in very unpleasant terms and even touching on dangerous ground, intermarriage between the races."[4]

Micheaux sometimes defied the censor board by showing a film without submitting it for a license or without eliminating offensive passages[5] and, on occasion, would use the controversy over a film in one town to promote it in other locations, advertising, for example, the "complete version" of *Within Our Gates*. For its run in Omaha, an article in a local newspaper announced the forthcoming showing as "the Race film production that created a sensation in Chicago" and "required two solid months to get by the censor board."[6] Censorship became the plot of his 1921 film *Deceit*.

Fig. 1: Portrait of Oscar Micheaux from his first novel, *The Conquest* (1913).

The silent features now extant (*Within Our Gates* [1920], *The Symbol of the Unconquered* [1920], and *Body and Soul* [1925]), along with his novels, promotional materials, and personal papers, illuminate the degree to which Micheaux used his self-constructed social identity, political point of view, and status as African American entrepreneur to create, promote, and shape the reception of his works. This "biographical legend," to borrow from Boris Tomashevsky,[7] was not only the way that Micheaux made expressive use of his biography, it also validated the racial experiences of his audiences and gave credibility to his role as a successful filmmaker and novelist. During the first decade of his career, Micheaux developed a public persona as an aggressive and successful businessman and a controversial and confident maverick producer—an image that was to sustain him for the next twenty years, although little

of the work after his first sound picture, *The Exile* in 1931, would seem to justify it.[8]

Micheaux, son of former slaves, was the product of a generation of African American migrants who left the land in search of "the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire."[9] In his semi-autobiographical novels *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer by the Pioneer* (1913) and *The Homesteader* (1917), he tells of venturing forth from his home in southern Illinois in 1901, in search of a career at the age of seventeen. Heading north to Chicago, he supported himself at odd jobs, shining shoes, bailing water in a coal mine, laboring in a factory, the stockyards, and as a Pullman porter. While working as a porter, Micheaux was able to save enough money to set up an agrarian enterprise, a homestead on the Rosebud Reservation in Winner, South Dakota.[10] His novels suggest that, like many of his white immigrant neighbors who made land purchases based on the prospects of the railroad extending westward, he hoped to turn a profit on the value of his holdings. However, in order to acquire title to the land, it was necessary to build a house on it and till the soil. He wrote of preferring selling the family crop to working in the fields as a boy and knowing little about farming. Undeterred by lack of experience, he taught himself the rudiments of Great Plains farming, a process he described in painful detail, including purchasing mules, getting the right equipment to break the prairie, and turning the sod over day after day.[11] He also reflected on the need, as the only "colored man" engaged in agriculture on the Reservation,[12] to demonstrate to his neighbors that he was an honest, hardworking Negro determined to succeed. Bent on disproving the widely held belief that "the negro," when faced with the hardships of homesteading, would opt for the "ease and comfort" of the city, Micheaux broke-out three times as many acres as his neighbors.[13]

Working hard for five years, Micheaux amassed more than five hundred acres by the time he was twenty-five. He approached homesteading with the same philosophy he was later to apply to his book and movie businesses: independence, persistence, and a willingness to take risks. One chapter of *The Conquest*, in a writing style that differs from the rest of the novel,[14] digresses to report the history of two towns, detailing the townsfolk's speculation on the routes of the railroad's expansion. Although the "objective reporting" of the details and key players obviously attempts to distance Micheaux from those speculators, it is given such

prominence in an otherwise personal story that one cannot help but wonder what role he had in the scheme. Indeed, the image of Micheaux as land speculator seems more in tune with Micheaux-the-entrepreneur than with Micheaux-the-homesteader. In his own words, he "was possessed with a business turn of mind."[15] In *The Homesteader*, for example, he boasts about how, after writing "his life story" and having a publisher reject it, he financed *The Conquest* himself. With borrowed money for a suit and a trip to Nebraska, he struck a deal with a printer there and then raised money for the first payment by preselling copies of the book to his neighbors in South Dakota.

Although Micheaux acquired a large holding and claimed to have been successful at farming wheat and flax,[16] his career as a farmer ended sometime between 1912 and 1913. He tells of liens on his homestead and struggling to pay interest and taxes so he would not lose his land. Many homesteaders who had settled with great optimism were forced to abandon their claims because of a prolonged drought. Foreclosures were so common, they "occasioned no comment."[17] In his next novel, *The Forged Note* (1915), he refers nostalgically to the Rosebud Reservation and returning to the land.[18] By 1916 Micheaux had moved to Sioux City, Iowa, where he published a third novel, *The Homesteader*, and sold his earlier works through his firm, The Western Book Supply Company.

In 1918 George P. Johnson, general booking manager of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company of Los Angeles, initiated a correspondence with Oscar Micheaux, now an author, publishing his own books and selling them door-to-door. Johnson wrote to The Western Book Supply Company about his discovery of *The Homesteader* in a *Chicago Defender* advertisement and inquired into the film rights to the book.[19] His brother and founder of the company, the actor Noble Johnson, reviewed Micheaux's novel and suggested that parts of it—the interracial romance, most likely—were too controversial for them to deal with, adding, "It is a little too advanced on certain subjects for us yet and unless we would change [it] so decidedly that it would hardly be recognizable, we could not expect much support from white houses."[20]

There followed a rapid exchange of correspondence over three months between Micheaux and George P. Johnson, with Johnson initially trying to convince Micheaux that he had more expertise in "the movie game" and promising that he could mold it "into a first-class feature." Micheaux, just as he had approached learning to farm by inquiring from others, was probing for information from the Johnsons. At the same time, he was already constructing a grandiose persona by main-

taining that his 500-page novel should be a big picture, at least six reels, not the Lincoln Company's usual two- or three-reel product.[21] He was also apparently convinced that, far from being a detriment to profitability, the controversial nature of such themes as interracial marriage was a very good selling device and should be exploited: "Nothing would make more people as anxious to see a picture than a litho reading: SHALL RACES INTERMARRY?"[22]

With no movie experience at all, Micheaux ultimately decided to produce *The Homesteader* himself, incorporating under the name of Micheaux Book and Film Company. Bragging to Lincoln that he was able to raise $5,000 through a stock subscription in less than two weeks,[23] he went on to produce an eight-reeler, the longest African American film at that time, and advertised it as "Oscar Micheaux's Mammoth Photoplay." The theatrical debut of the film was promoted as "Passed by the Censor Board despite the protests of three Chicago ministers who claimed that it was based upon the supposed hypocritical actions of a prominent colored preacher of the city!"[24]

With the release of *The Homesteader* in February of 1919, Micheaux joined the growing number of small companies producing films exclusively for African American audiences. By the end of 1920, Micheaux had released his fourth feature, *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, "A Stirring Tale of Love and Adventure in the Great Northwest," like *The Homesteader*, a wilderness story. The frontier, for Micheaux, is the mythic space of moral drama and the site of opportunities seemingly free of the restrictive and discriminatory laws and social arrangements of the rural South and the urban metropolis, where the characteristic model of economic expansion is entrepreneurship. His first novel, *The Conquest*, set in Gregory County, South Dakota, celebrates the enterprising individuals: homesteaders, merchants, bankers, and real estate dealers involved in commercial clubs, land booms, and speculating on the route of the railroad. The hero of *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, a man of the frontier, self-willed and self-motivated, is another articulation of Oscar Micheaux's biographical legend. Accumulating wealth through hard work and self-denial, he is almost a metaphor for the spirit of individualism. In a 1910 article in *The Chicago Defender*, Micheaux quoted Horace Greeley, "Go west young man and grow up with the country," and although he wrote about openings for doctors, lawyers, laborers, and mechanics, he posited the future of the West with agricultural possibilities, calling farmlands "the bosses of wealth." For Micheaux, the land openings along the Frontier provided the opportune moment for the

Negro to "do something for himself." Detailing the participation of the Race in agriculture, he wrote of fewer than "300 Negro farmers in the ten states of the Northwest [and] more opportunities than young men to grasp them."[25] Although such an image made him seem unique, enlarging his legend as a "Negro pioneer," Micheaux was one of many thousands of African Americans, since emancipation, who saw the frontier as the land of hope where one could realize one's own destiny.[26]

The appeal of the West spoke strongly to many Americans as both a symbolic and actual place offering an unspoiled environment in "the hollow of God's hand"[27] for individuals to fill with their own virtue, where social conventions and distinctions prove less important than natural ability, inner goodness, and individual achievement. Real estate promoters, railroad advertisements, news stories, dime novels, traveling shows, and movies mythologized the frontier as the site of freedom, wealth, and independence, capturing the imagination of a multitude of African Americans determined to put the residues of slavery and racial barriers behind them. Micheaux's hero in *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, Van Allen, a gentlemanly frontiersman in a buckboard riding the prairies of South Dakota, embodied the Western hero, self-sufficient and calmly rugged. Race theaters, not unlike white houses, featured Westerns as an important part of the programming in the late teens and twenties. Edward Henry, a projectionist throughout the 1920s in a Black theater in Jackson, Mississippi, recalled, "When you go back, William S. Hart was one of the big men. . . . All you had to do was just put his name out there; [you] didn't have to put any pictures or anything, just William S. Hart, Wednesday, and they'd be coming. . . . William S. Hart, Tom Mix . . . as I say, just open the door and stand back. The crowds'll come in."[28]

The great antagonist in *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, however, was not hostile elements, menacing outlaws, or "savage" Indians, as in most white Westerns, but the Ku Klux Klan. And Micheaux capitalized on that. Despite a climate of racial violence and intimidation, he advertised the film's premiere in Detroit as, "SEE THE KU KLUX KLAN IN ACTION AND THEIR ANNIHILATION!"[29] When it played in Baltimore, the *Afro-American* ad exhorted, "SEE THE MURDEROUS RIDE OF THE INSIDIOUS KU KLUX KLAN in their effort to drive a BLACK BOY off of valuable Oil Lands—and the wonderful heroism of a traveler to save him!"[30] Another reference to the KKK (apparently quoting from Micheaux's press release) appears in *The Chicago Whip*: "night riders rode down upon [the hero] like ghosts with firey torches intent upon revenge."[31] And a

New York Age review headlined, "KKK Put to Rout in PhotoPlay to be Shown at the Lafayette [Theatre]," called attention to "[t]he viciousness and un-Americanism of the Ku-Klux-Klan which . . . is beginning to manifest itself again in certain parts of the United States. . . . [The film] is regarded as quite timely in view of the present attempt to organize night riders in this country for the express purpose of holding back the advancement of the Negro."[32]

Promotion for *The Symbol of the Unconquered* addressed the Black spectator and underscored the protest nature of the film. However, to think of the Klan as the singular antagonist is to reduce the complexity of Micheaux's representation. The hero, the homesteader Hugh Van Allen (played by Walter Thompson), is echoed by Driscoll (played by Lawrence Chenault), the villain who is also out to improve his lot. Both characters are speculators who have migrated to the Northwest in pursuit of bigger and better opportunities. Although Driscoll is motivated by the same drives as the hero (indeed, as Micheaux himself), he acts in unscrupulous ways. He advances his standing, not by hard work and self-denial, but through coercion and deception. Through Driscoll and his cohorts, Micheaux exposes the economic origins of whitecapping; Driscoll, a light-skinned man passing for White, is the leader of a gang of greedy misfits plotting to intimidate Van Allen and drive him off his valuable oil lands. It is Driscoll's participation in the Klan, his use of the same forces of intimidation that he would experience if his true racial identity were known, that disturbs the equilibrium of any clear-cut binary opposition.

Why does Micheaux superimpose the image of the KKK over an interracial band of thieves, swindlers, and connivers (including a former clergyman)? Is Driscoll the resurrected Eph from *Within Our Gates*, a betrayer, albeit in a more complex form? Driscoll's racial ambiguity allows him to pass, but the darker complected Eph must rely on a charade of obsequious behavior to gain white acceptance. Micheaux appropriated the stereotype to comment on the aspirations and social behavior of those who kowtow to Whites. Eph's wearing of the servile mask and his loyalty to his master represents his way of negotiating racism; however, as the mob turns on him, it is clear that his shield is precarious; in the end, he is just another "nigger."[33] Driscoll, on the other hand, not only wants to be White, but in order to achieve whiteness, he assumes the posture of the oppressor; in order to ward off the terror of the other, Driscoll himself becomes a terrorist. He counters racism with hatred, turns that hatred on the Race and, by extension, on himself. Both Eph

and Driscoll deny their solidarity with the group. Eph in trying to secure his own "privileged" position among the Whites in the big house, separates himself and betrays a fellow Negro.[34] Driscoll, by internalizing negative perceptions of blackness, isolates himself and betrays the Race.[35] Micheaux criticized the social behavior of both characters and both get their just desserts.

Van Allen's triumph over hatred is even sweeter because he has overcome Driscoll's "self-hate," as well as the nightriders, the symbol of racial oppression and intimidation. The unmasking of hatred is as much a part of the film as the violence perpetrated in the name of hatred.

We think of Van Allen as Micheaux's surrogate, and in the character of Van Allen, Micheaux was dreaming and redreaming his own ambitions and desires. In the epilogue, Van Allen's good deeds are rewarded: He becomes prosperous from the oil on his land and discovers that Eve Mason (played by Iris Hall), a neighboring homesteader, is, despite her looks, really a Black woman, and thus a suitable wife. In *The Conquest*, Micheaux writes of his experiences homesteading and falling in love with his neighbor's daughter, an unnamed young Scottish woman of strong character and "anxious to improve her mind," attributes he clearly admired.[36] One of the least verifiable facts of the author's life, this interracial romance is a recurring theme and rhetorical trope in his films and novels. Micheaux replays this love, or the possibility of it, in much of his work. In *The Conquest*, although he never acts on his feelings, he conveys a sense of anxiety about even considering it: To pursue an interracial relationship would be to call into question his loyalty to the Race.

This type of titillation—and concession to popular mores—is more developed in his novel *The Homesteader*. The main character, the Negro pioneer Jean Baptiste, deciding not to marry the woman he loves (whom he believes to be Caucasian), cites, "*The Custom Of The Country, and its law*," and goes on to note that such a marriage "would be the most unpopular thing he could do . . . he would be condemned, he would be despised by the race that was his."[37] However, in this book (and in his later films and novels) Micheaux provided a happier ending: The hero discovers that his love is not White after all and marriage becomes possible.

Clues to the true racial identity of the woman, who seems to be an inappropriate love interest for the hero, emerge in different ways in these works. In *The Exile* (1931), for example, the heroine is described as a White woman by another character early in the film. The audience gets essential narrative information as she does: We share her curiosity when

she examines her physical appearance before a mirror, but do not know for certain that she is Black until the heroine does, in a final scene.

On the other hand, the audience knows more than the characters do in *The Betrayal* (1948), the film version of Micheaux's 1943 novel, *The Wind from Nowhere* (another reworking of his biographical legend). The film opens with a scene of an elderly Black man explaining his grandaughter's lineage; however, the heroine is not present in that scene and does not know that the gentleman is her grandfather.[38] By carefully tracing the character's origins, Micheaux informs the audience that the heroine herself is unaware of her true racial identity and therefore is neither deceitful nor disloyal. Consistently in all these works, it is the Micheaux-like male hero who struggles for much of the story with the political and moral dilemmas of such a marriage.[39] His is the noble fight. In *Thirty Years Later* (1928), it is the man who is unaware of his ancestry; however, he *also* fights the noble fight, and when he finds out his origins, the hero becomes proud of the Race and marries his love.[40]

Micheaux's treatment of miscegenation in such films as *The Homesteader, Within Our Gates, The Symbol of the Unconquered, A Son of Satan, The House Behind the Cedars, Thirty Years Later, Birthright, The Exile, Veiled Aristocrats, God's Stepchildren, The Betrayal*, and all seven of his novels, are ambitious reworkings of the conventions of melodrama from a point of view within the Black community—a resourceful reconfiguration of the genre. By centering the African American experience, he offered a bold critique of American society. To understand the scope and complexity of this critique, we must see it as a political enterprise that both codified the values of the time and attempted to mold them.[41]

Although mistaken identity was a common convention of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century melodrama—the ill-suited lover who turns out not to be ill-suited after all (not a sibling, a pauper, a moral indigent, etc.)—the reversals in Micheaux's stories more often involve the potential transgression of the social taboos and legal prohibitions against miscegenation.

Miscegenation threatens definitions of race, challenging the idea that racial identity might be "knowable." By blurring the dichotomy on which whiteness depends, miscegenation throws into disarray the basis of white supremacy, Black "inferiority." As Toni Morrison has pointed out, it is by imagining blackness that whiteness "knows itself as not enslaved, but free, not repulsive, but desirable, not helpless, but licensed and powerful."[42]

Rather than suggesting a radical new way of seeing or attempting to

create a new narrative space for representation, in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (as in much of his other early work), Micheaux worked within the hardened conventions and presuppositions of "the Negro problem" text, melding the plots and conventions of the sentimental melodrama with Western settings and characters. He was "crafting a voice out of tight places," as Houston Baker wrote of Booker T. Washington's use of minstrelsy.[43] Often invoking the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in his promotional material (print ads, trailers, etc.), Micheaux seems to have admired not only the enormous social impact (and commercial success) of Harriet Beecher Stowe's work, but also its evangelical piety and moral commitment.[44]

Many of his characters represent sociological and moral forces rather than psychologically individuated people, and function as models to prove what can be accomplished through hard work and industry. At the beginning of his career, striking out on his own and settling on the land, Micheaux was influenced by Booker T. Washington's philosophy, "not of destruction, but of construction; not of defense, but of aggression; . . . not of hostility or surrender, but of friendship and advance"; where self-help, one's "own efforts," and "usefulness in the community" were the "surest and most potent protection."[45] *The Conquest*, a success and adventure story about a Black pioneer in the West, was dedicated to "The Honorable Booker T. Washington," and many of his other books and movies aimed to galvanize the spirit of success through examples of individual achievement. In *Body and Soul*, Micheaux used Washington's image as a visual tag to identify characterological traits. Sylvester, the industrious inventor, is introduced in a shot that frames him with a portrait of Booker T. Washington.[46] In the 1910 *Defender* article referred to earlier, Micheaux wrote that he was "not trying to offer a solution to the Negro problem, for I don't feel that there is any problem further than the future of anything, whether it be a town, state or race. . . . It depends first on individual achievement, and I am at a loss to see a brilliant future for the young colored man unless he first does something for himself." The hero of his film *The Millionaire* (1927), a soldier of fortune, who as a youth possessed "great initiative and definite purpose," returns to the community as a rich man. Explaining why Jean Baptiste foreswears marriage with his White neighbor in *The Homesteader*, Micheaux wrote, "He had set himself in this new land to succeed; he had worked and slaved to that end. He liked his people; he wanted to help them. Examples they needed and such he was glad to have become; but if he married now the one he loved, the example was lost."[47] Micheaux stated in *The Conquest*

that one of his greatest tasks in life was "to convince a certain class of my racial acquaintances that a colored man can be anything."[48] Mildred Latham, the love interest of the homesteader, author, and itinerant book peddler in *The Forged Note*, admires the hero as "a Negro pioneer . . . [who] blaze[d] the way for others."[49]

However, Micheaux's racial uplift, which was so important to counter accusations of "inferiority," challenged White definitions of race without changing the terms. Others in this period—Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston, for example—questioned those very terms, demanding new definitions of Race from within Black America. Hurston's work recodifies both language and story by bringing out the richness of oral culture, the African American vernacular, and folk tales. Hughes wrote of his own use of Black culture, "Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile."[50] Hurston and Hughes, and other New Negroes, saw themselves as reclaiming images of blackness, an attempt, as Alain Locke put it, to build Americanism on Race values.[51]

Like Hurston, Hughes, and Brown, Micheaux spoke as a Negro; the "blackness" of the author is a strong presence. However, because of his sense of personal responsibility and uplift, he saw himself as an instructive voice and an empowering interpreter of Black life *for* the community. Van Allen in *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, as the title implies, is an expression of Oscar Micheaux's optimism for the Race. Like Micheaux's biographical legend, Van Allen is the adventurous entrepreneur, an achiever, loyal to the Race, persistent and brave in the face of adversities.

Ironically, however, today Van Allen is one of the least provocative characters! Driscoll, on the other hand, is so overdrawn that he borders on the horrific—almost uncanny. "Uncanny" because he is at once so evil and so familiar. The act of passing is not uncommon or automatically condemned by the Black community. Rather, it is Driscoll's attitude of superiority, seeing Blacks as subhuman and taking pleasure in their misfortune, that is so wicked and well known—both a betrayal and a surrender. In his hotel, he refuses a room to Abraham, a Black traveling salesman (played by E. G. Tatum), and leads him to the barn. When Eve arrives from a long journey exhausted and hungry, Driscoll at first thinks the light-skinned woman is White; but, as she is about to register, he

looks into her eyes and "sees" her true identity. His initially genial behavior turns to hatred; he denies her a bed in his hotel, sending her to the hayloft. During the night, Eve, awakened by a storm and frightened when discovering that there is someone else in the barn, falls from the loft and runs out into a driving rain. Driscoll, watching from his bedroom window as she struggles in the storm, takes sinister joy in her suffering. Surrounded by an aura of shimmering whiteness (in white nightshirt and sheets, lit as if he were aglow), he thrashes his arms in triumph.

What is so disturbing about Driscoll is his assumption of the posture of the oppressor *and* his terror of discovery. He sees both his true identity in Eve's pale face and the possibility of being unmasked. In *The Conquest*, invoking a story from his experiences as a homesteader in South Dakota, Micheaux wrote about the children of a wealthy mixed-race family who were passing and lived in fear of other members of the Race, dreading "that moment of racial recognition."[52] Driscoll's own racial identity is exposed early in the film by his mother, a darker skinned lady, as he is proposing to a White woman. In this scene, the terror of racial recognition and the odiousness of racial terror come together as Driscoll attacks his own mother because she is Black.

Later, in a barroom scene, there is a fist fight between Van Allen and Driscoll, supposedly over a horse deal turned sour. The fight scene is introduced by a close shot of both Driscoll and Van Allen framed in a mirror. Driscoll looks up and recognizes Van Allen. Perhaps he sees Van Allen as the horse-trade victim he has been mocking. Or is this that moment of racial recognition? Perhaps Driscoll sees his despised self in Van Allen, his own blackness. Driscoll pulls a gun threatening Van Allen; but Van Allen wrestles the gun away from him and they fight. After being beaten by Van Allen and declaring, "I'll get my revenge!," Driscoll is thrown out of the bar with a swift kick in the butt by the same traveling salesman whom he had refused to serve in his hotel. Is this a matter of a Black man getting the better of a "White" man[53] or is it intra-racial censure?

Lawrence Chenault's performance style throughout the film—his chalky makeup; outlined eyes; arched eyebrows; tense, often flailing, arms and hunched shoulders; the rigidity of his body and the vehemence of his gestures—expresses a man driven by fear. Driscoll's self-loathing and terror of discovery provoke his attack on Van Allen; having failed, he uses the Klan as a personal instrument of revenge. It is because his life is so tenuous that he is so vicious. Reflecting on the South Dakota mixed-race family, Micheaux wrote, "What worried me most, however,

even frightened me, was, that after marriage and when their children had grown to manhood and womanhood, they . . . had a terror of their race."[54] They looked upon other Blacks with a dread of discovery. Such a discovery would expose not only their racial identity, but also a life of deception, threatening social and psychological upheaval. For Driscoll, race is the unspeakable, the stranger entering the gate, menacing his whiteness. Identity, to borrow from James Baldwin, "would seem to be the garment with which [he] covers the nakedness of the self."[55]

The Competitor magazine praised *The Symbol of the Unconquered* as making a significant thrust at the "more than 500,000 people" in America who are "passing for white."[56] *The Daily Ohio State Journal* in 1909 wrote of thousands of people passing in Washington, D.C. alone: "Those who just occasionally pass for white, simply to secure just recognition, and the privileges the laws vouchsafe an American citizen, should not be censured harshly. An unjust discrimination, a forced and ungodly segregation drives them to practice deception. . . . But it is an awful experience to pass for white. At all times fear—the fear of detection—haunts one. . . . Those who turn their backs upon their own color, own race and own relatives to live a life of fear, of dread, and almost isolation just to pass for white seven days in the week, while regarded with utter contempt by their colored race, really ought to be pitied, when it is known how heavy is the burden they carry, and how much they suffer in silence."[57]

Micheaux exploited these concerns in the script for the 1938 film, *God's Stepchildren*. Andrew, the white husband of the young woman who is passing, upon discovering his wife's "streak" says, "You aren't the first to try this, Naomi. No, it has been tried since the days of slavery and even before that; but they can't get away with it, so you see you can't get away with it, for sooner or later, somewhere, some time after a life of fear and exemption you will be found out, and when you are they'll turn on you, loath you, despise you, even spit in your face and call you by your right name—Naomi, Negress."[58]

The Black press often covered both well-known interracial marriages and court cases of people attempting to prove that they were Negro in order to counter charges of miscegenation.[59] Stories of Whites not being able to discern what is obvious to a Black person were part of the popular discourses of the time. It was thought quite funny that for Whites, race was not so much a matter of color and appearance as mannerisms and deportment. Helen M. Chesnutt, in her biography of her father, tells of the family entering a restaurant while traveling and after being seated,

seeing the manager "bearing down" upon their table; they immediately began speaking French . . . and the man retreated.[60]

Lester Walton, in an article entitled "When is a Negro a Negro to a Caucasian?," asked, "[B]y what standard do they differentiate as to when is a Negro a Negro?" and laughed about vaudevillian John Hodges ("Any colored person can tell what John Hodges is") trying to eat at a restaurant and telling the waiter that he is not a Negro, but an English Jew, and getting served.[61] In another article, Walton tells the story of the White manager and cashier at the Fifty-ninth Street Theatre in New York who were discharged because "they mistook a young lady of color to be of the white race and proceeded to speak disrespectfully of their ebony-hued employer [William Mack Felton]." Walton mused, "One of the amusing features of the so-called Negro problem is the inability of the white people to recognize hundreds and hundreds of colored people who have gone on the other side of the color line. To us there is nothing so ludicrous as to observe one known as a violent Negro hater walking arm-in-arm or sitting at a table eating with a person of color, the radical Caucasian indulging in an erratic outburst of abuse on the Negro to the unconcealed delight of the colored person."[62]

In 1925, the wealthy White New York socialite, Leonard "Kip" Rhinelander, took his new wife, Alice Jones Rhinelander, to court to dissolve their marriage when he found out that she had "Negro ancestry and concealed the fact from him during their courtship."[63] Mrs. Rhinelander denied any deception, insisting that anyone could tell she was a Negro. The trial made the front pages of the Black weeklies. Micheaux used the notoriety of the Rhinelander case to promote *The House Behind the Cedars*, his 1925 adaptation of Chesnutt's story of passing.[64] But even without mentioning it in his ads, such popular discourses on crossing the "color line" certainly would have influenced the way audiences understood Micheaux's films. Press coverage, folk sayings, blues songs, verbal exchanges are all part of the spectatorial experience. As Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott put it, "a text . . . is never 'there' except in forms in which it is also and always other than 'just itself,' always-already humming with reading possibilities which derive from outside its covers."[65]

Because Driscoll's true racial identity is established early in the film, audiences watch his vileness, knowing he is Black. In his mask, he so rejects blackness that, turning his anger on the Race, he becomes an assault on the audience. The defeat of the vengeful character at the end

of the film must have given the audience a moment of relief and joy—an assault on the oppressor. Likewise, the scene in the bar where he is kicked in the butt by the traveling salesman, one of the gestures that clustered around the "Tom" character in minstrelsy, offers vicarious pleasure in his humiliation. Driscoll's downfall and the apocalyptic renewal of the ending is a victory not only for Van Allen, but for the audience as well, putting to rest notions of Black "inferiority." What visions of their own radical anger and omnipotence might the audience have experienced through the hero!

Driscoll is both a vehicle to explore interracial relations and, as a person of mixed blood (the product of historical miscegenation), an expression of those relations. The question of color is a recurring interest for Micheaux. However, it's not a simple infatuation with color, nor is it simply a narrative contrivance—that is, the melodramatic trope of someone being not what he or she seems. It's far more complex than that. Although he was often accused of casting by color,[66] he criticized the color-caste system within the community as destructive social behavior. And although he created a star system of fair-skinned performers (Iris Hall, Shingzie Howard, Evelyn Preer, Lawrence Chenault, Carman Newsome, Lorenzo Tucker, etc.) chosen for their "look" and potential appeal to audiences, he didn't necessarily associate these "looks" with certain qualities, such as "goodness." In *Body and Soul*, Paul Robeson plays both the hero and the villain with no change of make-up, and the scoundrel, Yellow Curley, is played by Lawrence Chenault (who also plays villains in other films where the shade of one's skin is not part of the story).[67] In *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, Walter Thompson playing the hero, a rugged outdoorsman, acquires his swarthy complexion with dark make-up. Carl Mahon, who did not think of himself as an actor, felt that Micheaux cast him in romantic leads because of his "exotic looks," the combination of dark skin and straight hair.[68] In several of Micheaux's films—*The Symbol of the Unconquered, The House Behind the Cedars*, and *God's Stepchildren*, for examples—we would argue that he is not reproducing "color prejudice," but criticizing it.

For Micheaux the problem of miscegenation is not the mixing of the races but the disloyalty that comes from trying to hide one's racial identity. Sylvia, in *Within Our Gates*, who is the offspring of the plantation owner's brother, is adopted by Black sharecroppers and is raised as one of their own. She sees herself as a Black woman. As a person of mixed blood, Sylvia is not automatically an outsider, someone different, a point

of division. In a medium long shot of her family around a table, there are a variety of skin colors. The storyline is not "about" skin color per se; it is "about" the rape of Black women by White men.

Although much of Eve's backstory in the only surviving print of *The Symbol of the Unconquered* seems to be missing,[69] Eve, like Sylvia, is comfortable with who she is and is not trying to pass. In an interview around the time of the film's release, Micheaux said, "There is one thing aside from [making] the story interesting that I strive to demonstrate in all my pictures and that is, it makes no difference what may be a person's color, or from where a person comes, if the heart is right, that's what counts, and success is sure."[70] Eve is not only a Black woman but a Race woman. It is through a letter commending her for her service to the Race that Van Allen discovers her true identity.

In *The Betrayal*, Micheaux's final film, Martin Eden (the character's name, like Eve's, associates him with a pastoral innocence)[71] tells the story of a mixed-race family in South Dakota with many children who would pass their father off as an "old colored servant who helped to raise them" when visitors came to call. One of the brothers was dark. Drafted into the army and assigned to a colored unit, unhappy with being unable to serve in a White regiment, "he stood before a mirror in his tent one night, took a German Luger that he had acquired—and blew his brains out."[72]

Although some contemporary critics have accused Micheaux of "Race hatred,"[73] it might be more fruitful to look at his work as adamantly depicting the diversity of Black life as he saw it. His works criticized certain attitudes, behavior, and conduct as detrimental to the future of the Race. Among the great diversity of characters criticized are gamblers, womanizers, people without ambition, and blind followers of the faith. As bell hooks put it, "[H]e was not concerned with the simple reduction of black representation to a 'positive' image."[74] In his 1946 novel *The Story of Dorothy Stanfield*, Micheaux described his surrogate, the book publisher and motion picture producer Sidney Wyeth with the following: "Wyeth is an intense race man; and while he can and does criticize the Negro in his books . . . , he is for his people at all times, regardless the circumstances."[75]

There are characters who hate the Race—Driscoll in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* is a clear example; Naomi in *God's Stepchildren* is another. Like Driscoll, Naomi abandoned her family in order to pass for White. The scene of discovery is once again a scene of maternal devotion; however, contrary to Driscoll's, Naomi's is a scene of love not hate.

It is her pained reaction upon seeing her small son on the street that gives her away.[76] Driscoll has no loving ties to anyone; Naomi is defeated by both her love and her self-loathing. Condemned by her betrayal, she quietly sinks into the murky river to end her suffering. In the film's final shot, the words "As ye sow, so shall ye reap" are superimposed over her hat floating on the surface of the water.

The most Micheaux-like character in *God's Stepchildren* is Jimmy, Naomi's morally upright foster brother. Like Micheaux, Jimmy worked as a railroad porter and saved money to buy a farm. In a scene where he tells his fiancée Eva his plans, she asks, "Why is it that so many, most all of our men, when they go into business it's got to be a crap game, a numbers bank or a policy shop? Why can't they go into some legitimate business, like white people?" Jimmy replies, "They could, but they made no study of economics. Their idea of success is to seek the line of least resistance. The Negro hates to think. He's a stranger to planning. . . . For that is the failure of our group. For we *are* a failure, you know. . . . [I]t seems that we should go right back to the beginning and start all over again. That's what I've decided to do. . . . I'm going to buy a farm and start at the beginning." A similar pastoral image appears in Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* where he wrote about wishing he could "remove the great bulk of . . . people into the country districts and plant them upon the soil, upon the solid and never deceptive foundation of Mother Nature, where all nations and races that have ever succeeded have gotten their start—a start that at first may be slow and toilsome, but one that nevertheless is real."[77] If one accepts Jimmy as a voice of Micheaux, Micheaux is once again adapting Booker T. Washington's attachment to the land, philosophy of meritorious work, and proving one's self to the outside world. Twenty-five years before Jimmy's speech, Micheaux declared his own decision to seek a homestead, going West to "the land of real beginning."[78]

However, unlike Washington, Jimmy's criticism of the work attitudes of urban Blacks suggests an acceptance of the mythical figure of the shiftless "coon," incapable of learning or achieving, holding the Race down. In the 1910 *Defender* article quoted earlier, Micheaux himself confessed, "I return from Chicago each trip I make, more discouraged year after year with the hopelessness of [the young Negro's lack of] foresight. His inability to use common sense in looking into his future is truly discouraging. . . . The trouble with the men of our race is that they want something for nothing."

In his biographical legend, Micheaux was working to disprove these

kinds of stereotypes. The portrait he paints of himself is one of ambitious well-laid plans, initiative, and persistent hard work. In *The Conquest* he comments on planting more acres than than his neighbors: "At first I was regarded as an object of curiosity, which changed to admiration. I was not called a free-go-easy coon, but a genuine booster for Calais and the Little Crow."[79] It is almost as though Micheaux felt that in order for him to rise, he had to uplift the Race, and a criticism of negative behavior would help to advance his cause. Although not an essentialist position (Micheaux clearly felt that, with education and guidance, people could change), the rub is, of course, that the character on whose back he builds his own legend of success must be held in contempt for the comparison to work.[80]

Jean Baptiste, in *The Homesteader*, a more clearly autobiographical character than Jimmy, "had confidence in education uplifting people; it made them more observing. It helped them morally":

> He had studied his race . . . , unfortunately as a whole their standard of morals were not so high as it should be. Of course he understood that the same began back in the time of slavery. They had not been brought up to a regard of morality in a higher sense and they were possessed with certain weaknesses. He was aware that in the days of slavery the Negro to begin with had had, as a rule only what he could steal, therefore stealing became a virtue. When accused as he naturally was sure to be, he had resorted to the subtle art of lying. . . . So with freedom his race had not gotten away from these loose practices. They were given still to lustful, undependable habits, which he at times became very impatient with. His version was that a race could not rise higher than their morals.[81]

With the arrogance of the self-taught and self-made, Micheaux projects himself as upright and highly moral; he also sets himself apart from others as a superior and righteous person. Part of the means by which he built the appearance of success included singling out those of the Race whom he characterized as immoral or without ambition and perseverance and censuring them for impeding the progress of the Race, and therefore holding *him* back. When he says there's no Negro problem, just the problem of individuals, he was acting on the premise that individual acts affect the entire group, a dynamic imposed by a racist system. That was his "burden of Race." By setting himself up as a model of one who had risen above the prevalent notion of the Negro as "inferior," he was inadvertedly reinforcing the very attitude he imagined he was overcoming—the notion that the morality, ambition, and abilities of the

Negro was "the problem." Col. Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, associate producer of two of Micheaux's films, was still using these same discourses in 1940. Describing *Lying Lips* in *Time* magazine, he said, "It's about a beautiful girl who is lead astray because she wants beautiful things. . . . You see, I am trying to build up the morals of my race."[82]

The Symbol of the Unconquered sets up a moral opposition between individual attitudes and behavior (such as the denial of racial identity in order to assert personal power and privilege) and the well-being of the group. Driscoll is the moral instrument through which Micheaux offers direction on social aspirations. Van Allen is both a stand-in for Oscar Micheaux and a means through which Micheaux builds his biographical legend, his legend of success. The working title of *The Symbol of the Unconquered* was *The Wilderness Trail*.[83] The name change is both affirming and challenging, a call to collective consciousness—very much like the title and long patriotic speech at the end of *Within Our Gates*. These films are a part of a continuous recoding and reshaping of Racial identity, African American solidarity, and the individual.

Notes

The material in this essay is part of the authors' forthcoming book, *In Search of Oscar Micheaux*, Rutgers University Press, 1997.

1. This was the second of Micheaux silent films to be returned in the past several years. *La Negra/Within Our Gates*, was repatriated from La Filmoteca Nacional de España, the National Film Archive of Spain, in 1990. The politics of what is "lost, stolen, or strayed," to quote Bill Cosby, is an important area of research and speculation. What motivates the "discovery" of a film in an archive? Why only three of at least twenty-five? Although we do not know how many prints of *The Symbol of the Unconquered* were struck, Micheaux claimed to have had nine prints of *The Brute* (also 1920) circulating; yet none have surfaced, so far. Letter, Swan Micheaux to George P. Johnson, 10/27/20, George P. Johnson Collection, Powell Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

2. Frank, a Jewish man convicted of the rape and murder of a young White woman, was lynched by a mob in Marietta, Georgia, in 1915. The Black press covered the case extensively, partially because a Black witness was allowed to testify against a White. See Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black–White Relations in the American South since Emancipation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 168–172.

3. Letter to Frank T. Monney, Superintendent of Police, from Theodore A. Ray, Captain, Special to the Superintendent, March 19, 1920, George P. Johnson Collection, UCLA.

4. 2/4/30, Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Law, Division of Motion Picture Censorship, list of films rejected in toto since 8/1/22, Virginia State Library and Archives. In his 1925 review of *The House Behind the Cedars*, the board's chair, Evan Chesterman, wrote that the film "contravenes the spirit of the recently enacted anti-

miscegination law which has put Virginia in the forefront as a pioneer in legislation aimed to preserve the integrity of the white race."

5. Letter, Micheaux to Virginia State Board of Censors, 10/14/24, Virginia Division of Motion Picture Censorship, Virginia State Library and Archives.

6. "Race Problem Play Comes to Omaha," clipping file, George P. Johnson Collection, UCLA, no date. The film was to play at the Loyal Theater beginning 8/9/20. This article seems to be based on Micheaux's promotional material; the same wording appeared in an article in *The Chicago Defender* for the January run of the film at the Vendome Theater.

7. "Thus the biography that is useful for the literary historian is not the author's curriculum vitae or the investigator's account of his life. What the literary historian really needs is the biographical legend created by the author himself." See Boris Tomasevskij's [Tomashevsky] "Literature and Biography" in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978), p. 55.

8. A previous film, *Daughter of the Congo*, 1930, was billed by Micheaux as a "talking, singing and dancing" picture; however, the sound sequence, according to one reviewer, John Mack Brown, was confined to "one short and unnecessary scene." [Norfolk] *Journal and Guide*, 4/12/30.

9. *The Souls of Black Folk* in *W. E. B. Du Bois Writings*, Nathan Huggins, ed. (New York: The Library of America, 1986), p. 370.

10. *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer, by the Pioneer* (Lincoln, Nebraska: The Woodruff Press, 1913) p. 47. Richard Slotkin (in *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* [New York: Atheneum, 1985] pp. 284–285) suggests that the Homestead legislation that divided Indian lands into homestead-type allotments was planned as both a safety valve for urban discontent and a way to integrate native Americans into "civilized society" by making them into yeoman farmers. However, "unlike homesteading in the well-watered and forested Middle West, plains farming required considerable investment of capital and a larger scale of operations to make it profitable. . . . Indeed, the greatest beneficiaries of the Homestead legislation were railroad, banking, and landholding corporations; and thirty years after the first Homestead Act, land ownership in the Great Plains states was being steadily consolidated in fewer and fewer hands."

11. Ibid., pp. 74–85.

12. Ibid., p. 145.

13. Ibid., pp. 98–99.

14. Pp. 104–107. In a biographical note from the "Publishers" that prefaces *The Homesteader*, Micheaux is described as having written articles for newspapers and magazines.

15. *The Homesteader* (McGrath Publishing Company Reprint, 1969 [1917]), p. 407.

16. *The Chicago Defender*, 10/28/11.

17. Ibid., pp. 400–401. In his novels, he also writes of having lost some land due to marital difficulties.

18. (Lincoln, Nebraska: Western Book Supply Company, 1915), p. 541.

19. 5/7/18, George P. Johnson Collection, UCLA.

20. Noble Johnson to George Johnson, no date (this letter seems to be from the end of May 1918, immediately before George Johnson's 5/31/18 letter to Micheaux), George P.

Johnson Collection, UCLA. The handwritten letter goes on to say, "and as I said before I for myself will not make [indistinguishable] my/any living/thing catering to our people." (Noble did not take any salary from the Lincoln Company.)

21. See, for example, letters 5/13/18, 5/15/18, 5/31/18, and 6/25/18, George P. Johnson Collection, UCLA.

22. In a letter from Micheaux to the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, 6/25/18, George P. Johnson Collection, UCLA; capitalization and punctuation thus in original. Micheaux certainly was cognizant of the public attention brought to the interracial marriage of the champion boxer Jack Johnson and the government's attempt to legally entrap him.

23. Letters to Clarence A. Brooks, 8/11/18 and 8/13/18, George P. Johnson Collection, UCLA. The stock offering budgeted $15,000 for the total cost of the film, including four prints, overhead, and advertising lithos.

24. Vendome Theater, *The Chicago Defender*, 3/1/19.

25. "Where the Negro Fails," *The Chicago Defender*, 3/19/10.

26. Nell Irvin Painter's *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* is a study of one such group of homesteaders (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992). Micheaux's own family had migrated West from Southern Illinois to Kansas, and later, Colorado and California (interview with Verna Crowe, Micheaux's niece, Los Angeles, California, 1/29/91).

27. Micheaux used this phrase in *The Homesteader*, p. 25, and, again, in *The Wind from Nowhere* (New York: Book Supply Company, 1943), p. 133.

28. Interview, Jackson, Mississippi, 6/18/93; Mr. Henry worked at Race theaters in Jackson from 1919 to 1977 and trained several other African American operators.

29. *The Chicago Defender*, 11/20/20.

30. *Afro-American*, 12/31/20.

31. *Whip*, 1/15/21.

32. Unsigned, *The New York Age*, 12/25/20.

33. See the authors' presentations, "'I may be crazy, but I ain't no fool': The Strategic Use of Stereotypes in Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gate*," at the Modern Language Association, San Diego, December 1994, and the revised and expanded version at the Society of Cinema Studies Conference, New York, March 1995.

34. Eph is a peripheral character, living on the edges of both Black and White society. He is never shown in the same space or frame with other Blacks.

35. This is interesting in contrast to the mulattos in C. W. Chesnutt's works, characters who continue to have ties to the community (in, for example, the short story, "The Wife of His Youth" in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* [Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899]) or who have affection for and the support of their family, even though they are bitterly missed (*The House Behind the Cedars* [Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1900]).

36. Pp. 153–154.

37. P. 147. Italics and capitalization thus in original.

38. Script, The Motion Picture Commission of the State of New York, New York State Archives, Albany, New York.

39. South Dakota did not have an anti-miscegination law until 1909.

40. Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalogue of Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts* (Westport,

Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 139. According to Peterson, the story is based on *The Racial Triangle* by Henry Francis Downing.

41. See Jane Tompkins's "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, Elaine Showalter, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 85.

42. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 52.

43. Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 33.

44. *Within Our Gates*, for example, was advertised as "the most sensational story of the race question since Uncle Tom's Cabin." He described *Birthright* as "a grim, gripping story of Negro life in the South today, more crowded with action, thrills, romance, comedy and suspense than any story on this subject since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." His 1947 novelization of *Veiled Aristocrats* and *The House Behind the Cedars*, *The Masquerade* (New York: Book Supply Company) opens with a reference to Stowe's book.

45. *World's Work*, November 1910, reprinted in Herbert Aptheker's *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, 1910–1932*. (New York: Citadel Press, 1973), pp. 3–15.

46. A portrait of Washington also appears on the wall of Eve's grandfather's frontier cabin in *The Symbol of the Unconquered*.

47. P. 147.

48. P. 145.

49. P. 48.

50. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, 6/23/26.

51. *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925), p. 12.

52. Pp. 160–162. However, in what appears to be a contradiction, the Black romantic lead, in order to meet the demands of melodrama, must be blind to the race of his beloved until the moment of utopian revelation. A review of the film in *The New York Age* (1/1/21) noted, "As in nine cases out of ten Negroes instinctively recognize one of their own, some are apt to wonder why he did not learn the truth sooner. However, the raising of such a point does not in anyway detract form the general excellence of the picture."

53. Boxer Jack Johnson's defeat of his White opponent broke a social taboo of the period, and films of his bouts were banned from interstate commerce. See Dan Streible's "A History of the Boxing Film, 1894–1915: Social Control and Social Reform in the Progressive Era," *Film History* 3, no. 3 (1989).

54. *The Conquest*, p. 162.

55. *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Dell, 1990), p. 93.

56. January–February 1921.

57. Quoted in *The New York Age*, 10/16/09.

58. New York State Archives; script copyrighted 1937. There exists no record of the determination of the Motion Picture Commission of the State of New York; however, this scene does not exist in the print currently in circulation. The author's preface to the script declares that "all the characters appearing herein, regardless how bright in color they may seem, are members of the Negro Race." In a film that deals with the sensitive subject of an interracial marriage, Micheaux seems to be assuring the censors, and perhaps even his distributors, that the cast is all Black.

59. See, for one example, the front page of the *The New York Age*, 8/21/13. In one article, "Can't Tell Who's Who: Denver Authorities Think Woman Married to Coal Black Negro is White," Mrs. Nora Harrington Frazier offers samples of her blood to prove that she is Black. The article also discusses several tests that the woman submitted to in order to convince the marriage licence bureau clerk to give her a licence, including looking for dark blotches at the root of her hair and pressing her finger nails. Just below that notice is a piece "Gives up all for Negro: Pretty Daughter of Wealthy White Farmer Marries Samuel De Frees Against the Wishes of Her Parents" about a Ringwood, New Jersey, couple.

60. *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), p. 274.

61. 4/22/09.

62. *The New York Age*, 5/1/13. The theatre, near a neighborhood known as San Juan Hill, catered to the residents of the vicinity, both Black and White.

63. [Norfolk] *Journal and Guide*, 11/28/15. During the proceedings, Mrs. Rhinelander was asked to bare her back to the jury, so that they could tell how dark her skin was.

64. See, for example, "The Parallel of the Rhinelander Case" (*Amsterdam News*, 3/4/25).

65. *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 90–91.

66. See Theophilus Lewis, *The New York Age*, 4/16/30, for example. Speaking of *Daughter of the Congo*, Lewis accused Micheaux of associating "nobility with lightness and villainy with blackness."

67. Richard Grupenhoff in *The Black Valentino: The Stage and Screen Career of Lorenzo Tucker* (Metutchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1988, pp. 61–81) discusses Tucker playing both romantic leads and gangsters in Micheaux's films.

68. Interview, 10/18/71, Julius Lester's *Free Time* (PBS). Mahon was a New York City school teacher with good diction, but no dramatic training.

69. Since the only extant print is 3,852 feet (the Museum of Modern Art print), a little more than half of the 7 reels advertised in 1920, it is difficult to determine exactly how Micheaux developed much of the story, characters, and themes.

70. Quoted in *The Competitor*, Jan.–Feb. 1921, p. 61. Micheaux's thoughts here seem similar to Washington's: "Every persecuted individual and race should get much consolation out of the great human law, which is universal and eternal, that merit, no matter under what skin found, is in the long run, recognized and rewarded." *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963 [1901]), p. 29.

71. The name seems to have been borrowed from or an homage to Jack London's 1909 semi-autobiography, *Martin Eden*; Micheaux also used the title of Gertrude Sanborn's 1923 novel, *Veiled Aristocrats*, for his sound remake of C. W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*.

72. Script, New York State Archive.

73. See, for example, Joseph A. Young's *Black Novelist as White Racist: The Myth of Black Inferiority in the Novels of Oscar Micheaux*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1989). J. Ronald Green and Horace Neal, Jr.'s "Oscar Micheaux and Racial Slur: A Response to 'The Rediscovery of Oscar Micheaux" (*Journal of Film and Video* 40, no. 4 [Fall 1988]) raises questions on how Micheaux used racial stereotypes and "slurs" and their effects. Jane Gaines discusses the debate over Micheaux's class position and

Race hatred in "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux," in *Black Cinema: History, Theory, Criticism*, Manthia Diawara, ed. (New York: Routledge and Chapman, Hall/American Film Institute, 1993).

74. "Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation.* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 133.

75. *The Story of Dorothy Stanfield* (New York: Book Supply Company, 1946), p. 85.

76. The script submitted to The Motion Picture Commission of the State of New York indicates that her husband sees her reaction and begins to suspect that she has been passing. He grabs her and says, "Let me look straight into your eyes. That's where I've been seeing something that I could never understand; but I'm going to now, so stand still woman and let me look into those eyes. So that's it. That's what I have been seeing all the time, and could never understand. You have got a streak. . . ." Although this scene is not in the print currently in distribution, it is in one of the trailers. It is interesting that Micheaux used the controversal out-takes for the trailer. Was this a question of economy? His taste for promotion by the use of controversy? Or perhaps a way to give his audience important information that is not going to make it to the film?

77. P. 77. This idea is developed further in the utopian ending of Micheaux's novel *The Wind From Nowhere*, pp. 422–423. However, whereas Washington found hope in the South, Micheaux saw fresher prospects in the Northern Great Plains (which he refers to as the Great Northwest).

78. *The Conquest*, p. 47.

79. Pp. 98–99; Micheaux's fictional Little Crow is the Rosebud Reservation and Calais, Dallas, S. D.

80. His somewhat outdated ideas offended some of his audience. The film was protested in New York and Boston, as Beatrice Goodloe of the Young Communist League explained, "because it slandered Negroes, holding them up to ridicule" and set "light-skinned Negroes against their darker brothers." See Clyde Taylor's "Crossed Over and Can't Get Black," *Black Film Review* 7, no. 4 (1993): p. 25.

81. Pp. 160–161.

82. 1/28/40.

83. A Tom Mix film with the same name opened in July 1919.