

Black Frontiers: Race, Region, and Myth in African American Westerns, 1854-1954

by

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A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfilment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2021

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

Up until the 1960s the African American West remained largely unexamined in scholarship and, when examined, was marked for its historical absence or, as Eric Gardner notes, “limited to brief biographical asides focusing on the most romantic figures” (Gardner, *Jennie Carter*, xii). The challenge faced by recent scholarship in Western studies has not only been to recover the works of authors who have remained understudied or unpublished, but also to develop interpretive frameworks that consciously push beyond Anglo-centric visions of the West. One such method is New Regionalism. Espoused by Gardner, New Regionalism emphasizes the role of place and location in the production of a creative text. This approach interrogates the Western genre outside of previous canonical constructions that limit Black presence in literary and cultural history to certain geographic locations (i.e. the South and the Mid-Atlantic) and genres (i.e. the slave narrative). Examining Black textual communities in the West allows scholarship to move beyond acknowledging historical presence, to analyzing how African Americans represent themselves through the Western genre and, perhaps more pointedly, in relation to how they “cite/site under acknowledged Black geographies” (Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 111).

Each of the texts that I analyze involves migration to a frontier space on the edge of white society, a place where African American authors and cultural producers adapt to race-based restrictions and limitations, sometimes by challenging these restrictions and other times by assimilating into the white society. By revising a narrative structure that is associated with white American culture, they also claim a place in a society that refuses to acknowledge African American participation in and contribution to frontier history and mythology. The body of works examined in this dissertation analyzes a diverse set of stories to show the ways African American authors and producers of Western texts have participated in the revision of the Western genre in a full range of imaginative forms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a dissertation so often feels like a solitary endeavour, yet such a project is never fully undertaken alone. Many people have helped me with the production of *Black Frontiers: Race, Region, and Myth in African American Westerns, 1854-1954*, from reading drafts, to tracking down sources, to providing intellectual support when my own seemed lagging. I would like to thank Dr. Victoria Lamont and Dr. Jennifer Harris for their work guiding me through the process of writing and editing a dissertation. I would also like to thank those who gave me valuable feedback along the way: Dr. Chad Wriglesworth, Dr. Carter Neal, as well as the anonymous readers at the *Great Plains Quarterly* where a version of Chapter 6 appeared. I probably would never have gone down this road if it were not for the initial prodding of Dr. Sara Humphreys, whose work and teaching helped guide my decision to attend graduate school. During my years as a PhD Candidate at the University of Waterloo, the friendship, intellectual guidance, and camaraderie of people like Dr. Ashley Irwin, Valerie Uher, and Melissa Johnson helped me get to the finishing line.

Much of this study involved pouring over books, films, photographs, and newspapers from online archives. None of this work would have been possible without the support team at the Dana Porter Library at the University of Waterloo, who guided me to helpful resources during the drafting of each chapter. I would also like to thank the project directors at the *Digital Colored American Magazine*, Dr. Eurie Dahn and Dr. Brian Sweeney, for their insightful advice and work which benefited Chapter 2. Likewise, I owe a thanks to Annie Bennett of *North Dakota Horizons* for helping me locate material for Chapter 6.

Thanks to Tina Davidson, Margaret Ulbrick, Jenny Conroy, and the rest of the administrative staff in the English Language and Literature Department at the University of Waterloo for the work they do that helps to hold everything together.

To my students over the past seven years: I appreciate the opportunities you have given me to grow as both a teacher and a student.

With sincerest gratitude I want to acknowledge my family, Mike, Susan, and Mike Jr., Ashlinn, and Fiona, who believed in my ideas and allowed me the space to pursue an academic career. Thanks also to the friends who feel like family, Alana Rigby, Rasha Ghanim, and Devin Grosz for their consistent support, understanding, and kindness. Lastly, to my procrastination coach, Murphy, thanks for keeping me on my toes.

DEDICATION

To the authors and filmmakers whose lives and stories inspired this dissertation. Thank you.

To my family, with love as always.

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Introduction:

The African American West and Frontier Identity, 1854-1954

Let America be America again

Let it be the dream it used to be

Let it be the pioneer on the plain

Seeking a home where he himself is free

(America never was America to me)

– Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again”

In November 1905 Nat Love’s name graced the pages of the *Salt Lake Tribune* in an article announcing his forthcoming autobiography entitled “Colored Porter as Author – Nat Love, or ‘Deadwood Dick’ will Tell His Experiences.” The description reads:

Nat Love, or Deadwood Dick: is the title of the book that an old railroader is preparing for the press. Nat Love is the author’s name, and he is a colored porter who has been in the employ of the Pullman company for nearly twenty years. But Nat is more than a porter, for he claims to be the original “Deadwood Dick,” for he won the sobriquet, as he says, because he was the ‘best roper, and rider and long-distance shot.’ This was down in the Panhandle country some thirty years ago, and now Nat is going to feast the public with his experiences, both on the range and on the railroad. (*Salt Lake Tribune*, November 29, 1905)

Then living with his wife in Salt Lake City, Love went on to self-publish his autobiography *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle Country as “Deadwood Dick”* in 1907. The autobiography takes Love from the plantation and places him in the mythology of the Wild West, where he participates in gunfights, rodeos,

and Indian captures. He narrates his encounters with legendary cowboys such as Bat Masterson, Billy the Kid, and Jessie and Frank James, claiming a place amongst them as the outlaw “Deadwood Dick,” a moniker later made famous in Ed Wheeler’s Dime Novels. After his Western adventure ends, Love became a Pullman Porter for the Rio Grande railroad, travelling across the West again.

In *The Life and Adventures* Love paints a familiar portrait for many Americans brought up with the tales of the Old West, and yet his story still remains relatively unknown in popular culture. The reason for this is that stories of the American West are largely told from white perspectives, a notion that Houston Baker, Jr. attributes to the fact that the idea of the frontier, as it has been imagined for over two centuries, is inherently colonial and therefore exclusionary of African Americans. According to Baker, such “tales of pioneers enduring the hardships of the West for the promise of immense wealth are not the tales of Black America” (*Long Black Song* 2). Because African Americans have “been denied [their] part in the frontier and [their] share of the nation’s wealth,” he continues, “*frontier* is an alien word; for, in essence, all frontiers established by the white psyche have been closed” to African Americans (2). If African Americans have been denied the frontier, they have also been denied one of the nation’s dominant narratives, a narrative based on the opportunity to exploit the availability of land in the West. Therefore, if the myths, legends, and narratives of pioneers conquering the West are exclusive to the white psyche, what, we might ask, happens when African Americans engage with this mythic narrative?

To answer this question, we should first acknowledge that the stories of African Americans in the West have been obscured because dominant mythologies surrounding

frontier migration and settlement have previously limited investigations of these stories. Up until the mid-twentieth century, American politicians, historians, and cultural producers turned to the West to generate the exceptional qualities of the nation and to construct from this region a history appropriate for the twentieth-century. One such historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, announced in his famous address, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," (1893) that the centuries-long conquering and settlement of the "wilderness" by white pioneers and the gradual expansion of the Anglo-American colony had bore "a new product that is American" (34). The West became the locus for this new Americanness: cowboys became righteous heroes, railroads became symbols of American unity and industrial might, and the grand vistas of mountains, deserts, and plains signified the epic scope of the United State's history of conquest and rise to global power. The "Old Western History," as it is called, is celebrated in Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) and Frederic Remington's paintings, who amongst others portrayed a colourful West filled with cowboys, pioneers, Indian fighters, and frontier towns.

It was not until the 1960s and 70s that scholars began to research Black cowboys, soldiers, and other African Americans who were part of, but largely obscured by, this history. During the Civil Rights movement three notable histories of the Black West were published: Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones' *The Negro Cowboys* (1965), William Loren Katz's *The Black West* (1971), and William Sherman Savage's *Blacks in the West* (1976). Each of these texts revises and expands the study of the American West by introducing pioneers, fur traders, cowboys, and other African Americans whose vibrant stories challenge white American ideas of Western life. Another text, *Exodusters: Black*

Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction (1976) by Nell Irvin Painter, examines a specific historical moment in African American Western history, the Kansas Exodus movement (known as the “Exodusters”), and offers an in-depth and intimate account of the lives of people who were a part of this movement.

By the 1980s the study of marginalized peoples in the West – including women, Indigenous peoples, Hispanics, and African Americans – had become so prevalent that some scholars began to refer to this new fascination as New Western History.¹ The New Western History movement recast the study of the American frontier by focussing on race, class, gender, and environment in the trans-Mississippi West. These historians – including Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, William Cronon, and Donald Worster – viewed Turner’s Thesis as ethnocentric in its failure to acknowledge that the landscape in which the settlers came had been inhabited by people other than white pioneers. The significance of this are manifold: they challenge Turner’s conception of the development of the American West as something done primarily by white men; they confront the traces of Manifest Destiny in contemporary popular culture; they dispute Eurocentric ideals of a virgin wilderness, free land, and Indigenous peoples as a “vanishing” race; and, most importantly to this dissertation, they add to the standard definitions of history and literature the experiences and voices of those traditionally erased from the grand narratives of the American West, including African Americans. New Western History’s revisionary lens gave rise to and influenced the study of African American Western history in texts such as Quintard Taylor’s *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African*

¹ General texts, including collections, that elaborate on the scholarly positions of New Western History include Patricia Nelson Limerick’s *Legacy of Conquest* (1987), as well as her collection, *Something in the Soil* (2000); Gerald D. Nash’s *Creating the West* (1991), and Clyde A. Milner’s, ed., *A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West* (1996).

Americans in the American West, 1528-1990 (1998) and his collection of essays, *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000* (co-edited with Shirley Ann Wilson Moore), Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (2010), and more recently, Shirley Wilson Moore's *Sweet Freedom's Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trails, 1841-1869* (2016).²

The African American West in Literature and Film:

Despite the proliferation of historical surveys about the African American West, fewer studies have been devoted to the literary history of the subject. Literary histories that have been written, as Eric Gardner notes, tend to be "limited to brief biographical asides focusing on the most romantic figures" (*Jennie Carter* xii). However, some noteworthy articles have been produced on African American Westerners, including bell hooks' "Oscar Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness" (1991), Jaqueline Najuma Stewart's, "We Were Never Immigrants: Oscar Micheaux and the Reconstruction of Black American Identity" (2005), and Ayesha K. Hardison's "The Audacity of Hope: An American Daughter and Her Dream of Cultural Hybridity" (2014). These articles examine select Black Western authors from a variety of lenses, including Black Feminism (hooks and Hardison) and Regionalism (Stewart), to expand our understanding of works by Black Westerners.

In terms of books, Lois Brown's *Pauline Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution* (2008) is a critical biography on Hopkins that focuses on distinct periods of

² Other scholarship that revises and expands the canon of Western American literature to incorporate Black Western lives include Blake Allmendinger's *Ten Most Wanted* (1999), Noreen Grover Lape's *West of the Border: The Multicultural Literature of Western American Literature* (2000), Nathaniel Lewis' *Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship* (2003), Tricia Martineau Wagner's *African American Women of the Old West* (2007), and Douglas Flamming's *African Americans in the West* (2009).

her creative and political development, including the production and reception of her Western, *Winona* (1903). Another work, Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence's *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (2001) analyzes the career and artistry of Oscar Micheaux, including his print and cinematic Westerns. Four book-length studies examining the African American literary West more broadly have been published, including Michael K. Johnson's *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature* (2002) and *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the African American West* (2014), Blake Allmendinger's *Imagining the African American West* (2005), and Eric Gardner's *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2009).

Michael K. Johnson observes that the paucity of critical literary studies on the African American West "requires us to reconsider the restricted notion of the literary text and be more open to the discovery of the full richness of the ways the African American West has been experienced" (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 5). The variety of experiences, combined with the variety of primary materials, which do not necessarily fit neatly within traditional paradigms of genre nor form, necessitates that scholars be open-minded when considering their approach to Black Western lives and stories. Thus, the challenge faced by literary scholars studying African American Westerns has not only been to recover the works of authors who have remained understudied or unpublished, but also to develop interpretive frameworks that consciously push beyond Euro-American visions of the West.

One such method is New Regionalism. Espoused by Eric Gardner, New Regionalism emphasizes the role of place and location in the production of a creative text

(Gardner, “Nineteenth-Century”). This approach interrogates Western literature outside of previous canonical constructions that limit Black presence in literary and cultural history to certain geographic locations (i.e. the South and the Mid-Atlantic) and genres (i.e. the slave narrative). New Regionalism also intersects with the works of other scholars who study regional literature as a product of “place rather than process” by examining the social, political, economic, and racial factors that influenced a text, including Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds* (2006).³

In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick examines Black women’s geographies and how these geographies represented in their literature and art. Specifically, McKittrick argues that within and against the grain of dominant (or, in this instance, Euro-American) modes of power, knowledge, and space, these black geographic narratives need to be taken seriously because they reconfigure classificatory spatial practices and, thereby, insert black geographies into our worldview. When examining Western texts produced by Black Americans, this approach helps us to understand how individuals interact with concepts of region and place and, as McKittrick states, recognize that Black Western lives are “necessarily geographic, but also struggle with the discourses that erase and despatialized their sense of place” (27). It is through this lens that we are able to see how Black Westerns revise and, in some ways, oppose conventional representations of the West that have all-too-often obscured the histories and lives of African Americans who

³ In Limerick’s *The Legacy of Conquest* she writes, “a deemphasis of the frontier opens the door to a different kind of intellectual stability. Turner’s frontier was a process, not a place. When “civilization” had conquered “savagery” at any one location, the process – and the historian’s attention – moved on. In rethinking Western history, we gain the freedom to think of the West as a place – as many complicated environments occupied by natives who considered their homelands to be the center, not the edge (26). A focus on place rather than process invariably expands definitions of the West to include contemporary renditions, as well as representations of this place from a variety of perspectives outside the Anglo-American tradition.

lived there. Ultimately, both Gardner's and McKittrick's respective approaches allow scholarship to move beyond acknowledging historical presence to analyzing how African Americans represent themselves in texts and, perhaps more pointedly, through the genres that dominated Western locations in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.

The theoretical considerations of this dissertation are consistent with the strategies employed by literary critics who examine African American Western fiction and nonfiction and across diverse media. These approaches are in concert with literary analyses that have focused on examining African American Westerns as a series of representational strategies. For instance, in *Hoo-Doo Cowboys*, Johnson argues that Black authors and filmmakers use two representational modes in the Western: one, by challenging erasure to write themselves into a narrative and, two, by "using their experience of continued racial prejudice...to critique and contest the myth of an egalitarian and exceptional West" (11). These approaches help literary scholars examine Black textuality in the Western as always representational and also makes room for further analysis of marginalized voices and their respective textual communities. Allmendinger's *Imagining the African American West* emphasizes some of the considerations in Johnson's work and provides a diverse history of the Black Western, but likewise leaves room for further interpretations about how Black Westerns were shaped by the communities they were produced in.

Two other texts that take similar approaches as Johnson and Allmendinger are Dan Moo's *Outside America: Race, Ethnicity, and the Role of the American West in National Belonging* (2005) and Christine Bold's *The Frontier Club: Popular Westerns and Cultural Power, 1880-1924* (2013). In *Outside America* Dan Moos examines African

American Western texts in relation to the material conditions that produced them. Moos' central argument maintains that African American writers and producers who published locally did so at the cost of replaying many of the myths that were associated with the West (84). Hence, self-made success stories, the pioneering adventure, and struggles with the land became prominent literary examples of African American Western experiences. However, Moos' study, although significant in incorporating the print history of Black Westerns, leaves room for discussions about Black Westerns produced in different mediums. Bold's *The Frontier Club* brings to light buried archival materials to show the centrality of African Americans in the making of the Western, yet likewise makes space for more focussed discussions of Westerns produced by or about African Americans.

It is also worth mentioning that recent anthologies on the African American West pay attention to the relationship between Black authors and specific regions. One such anthology is *African Americans on the Great Plains: An Anthology* (2009), edited by Bruce A. Glasrud and Charles A. Braithewaite. This anthology takes an interdisciplinary approach to the subject of the African American Midwest, incorporating literary, historical, and materialist approaches in its essays to explore the experiences of African Americans in this region. Another work, *Black in the Middle: An Anthology of the Black Midwest* (2020), edited by Terrion L. Williamson, is the first anthology on the subject to include contributions exclusively by Black Midwestern authors, poets, and scholars. While both of these works provide comprehensive surveys of the experiences of African Americans in the Midwest, they leave room for studies on other historical regions in the West.

My dissertation builds on this previous scholarly literature by examining the relationship between African Americans and the West in periodicals, novels, and cinema produced in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. I use select case studies, including Jennie Carter's and Philip A. Bell's contributions to the San Francisco *Elevator*, Pauline Hopkins' *Winona* (1903), Nat Love's *Life and Adventures* (1907), Oscar Micheaux's homesteading novels and films, Herb Jeffries' *Harlem* trilogy, Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1946), and Era Bell Thompson's memoirs *American Daughter* (1947) and *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (1954), to show how African Americans represented their experiences in the West. The backbone of my exploration of these case studies involves analyzing regional double-consciousness. The exploration of what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "double-consciousness" has long been considered a central element in African American literature, and thus it is not surprising to discover it in Black Westerns. In Black Westerns, double-consciousness is a representational strategy that authors use to show the tensions between race and place.

In each chapter of my dissertation, I perform a close reading of the primary texts and their material histories because this approach allows me to investigate lesser-known or underrepresented authors. The focus on close reading and material history also allows me to include genres previously excluded from the study of African American Westerns, such as Noir, and to investigate authors such as Pauline Hopkins, who wrote about the American West from an Eastern perspective. Finally, this approach allows me to give priority to works produced by and for African American creators. Doing so adds to our appreciation of African American Westerns and also contributes to our understanding of the field.

The central questions of my dissertation are as follows: (1) How has the concept of race – or more specifically Blackness – undergone reinterpretation and redefinition because of textual recovery of African American Westerns? (2) In turn, how do texts by and about African Americans in the West imitate, develop, or redefine the Western? (3) How do African American Western authors and filmmakers employ their respective media (print and film) to revise dominant representations of race? (4) How this revisionism appropriated or challenged popular representations of race in the West and its associated genres (e.g. the Western, Noir)?

Case Studies of the African American West from Print to Screen

In Chapter 1, “*The Elevator* and African American Periodical Culture in the Nineteenth-Century West,” I examine the role that the San Francisco-based African American newspaper, the *Elevator*, played in shaping Black California in the late nineteenth-century. To do this I analyze the works of two of its contributors, founder and editor Philip A. Bell and journalist Jennie Carter. In the first section of the chapter, I examine select editorials written by Bell to demonstrate how he was using *The Elevator* as a platform to promote racial uplift in California. I also assess his editorials against the backdrop of the Black male suffrage debate that was taking place in the 1860s to further show how he was crafting a space for African American political voices in California.

The analysis of Bell leads into a discussion of Jennie Carter’s letters to *The Elevator*. This section frames Carter’s letters as functioning in two distinct modes: one, as part of the antebellum Cult of the Domestic, reflecting the style and content of ladies’ magazines and newspaper writings from the East; two, as part of the nineteenth-century California’s culture of racial uplift wherein literacy and education were seen as integral to

African American social elevation. I argue that in both of these modes Carter weaves in her own story, including anecdotes from her childhood to poetry about domestic life on the frontier, to shape a public persona as a frontierswoman and activist in the American West.

In Chapter 2, “Pauline Hopkins’ *Winona* and the African American West in Early Twentieth-Century Fiction,” I examine how Hopkins revised narrative conventions of the popular Dime Western to articulate the turn-of-the-twentieth century African American struggle for Black male suffrage. Hopkins, a Mid-Atlantic author and journalist affiliated with the *Colored American Magazine*, serialized her novel in the paper to bring attention to the ongoing struggle for enfranchisement. The Kansas frontier, I contend, is a speculative landscape in *Winona*, one that dramatizes the conflict between “civilization” and “savagery” to represent the forces of freedom and the institution of slavery, respectively. While the novel celebrates the American West as a place for remaking Black identity, it also calls into question the limitations that this space offers African Americans.

In my close reading of the novel, I examine Hopkins’ construction of her two main characters, Judah and Winona, and their relationship with frontier ideology. In her characterization of Judah, I contend, she relies on many of the conventions from the Dime Western. Judah embodies frontier masculinity, but unlike white frontier heroes, he is never rewarded for his bravery and strength. Hopkins shows how Judah’s fate is greatly shaped by his past as an enslaved man. Specifically, unlike white men in the novel, Judah is never able to participate in what Richard Slotkin terms “regenerative

violence” without fear of punishment, and this speaks to the limitations African American men faced on the American frontier.⁴

Unlike Judah, Winona is afforded more agency in the novel because of her ability to transgress racial and sexual boundaries. Early in the narrative she is ascribed characteristics of ideal womanhood but is eventually transformed from passive object to active heroine on the frontier. In spite of this, however, Hopkins makes it clear that she is not safe on the frontier for long. *Winona* concludes with a reversion of the frontier journey back to England – a reversal, Lois Brown writes, “of the Middle Passage” – that signifies the limitations the protagonists face in the West (382).

In Chapter 3, “Writing Himself into Myth: Nat Love and the Making of a Black Western Icon,” I argue that the photography and illustrations included in Love’s autobiography defamiliarizes the Western narrative for the reader. To investigate this claim I examine the interplay between the written and visual texts – more specifically, between the textual silences and visual presences of Love’s race as they are presented in his autobiography – to determine how the visual medium allows Love to avoid racial stereotypes inherent in the textual language of Blackness and, in turn, occupy the traditional role of a cowboy in the nineteenth-century frontier.

The first section of my chapter examines the written portion of Love’s autobiography to assess how he integrates himself into a traditional Western space and, in turn, claim the title of the legendary cowboy, “Deadwood Dick” by strategically

⁴ In his famous “Regeneration Through Violence” thesis, from the first volume of his trilogy on the mythology of the American West published in 1973, Richard Slotkin states that violence has a fundamental significance for the creation of American mythogenesis. He argues that “the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (5). What makes the myth “distinctively ‘American’ is [...] the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we have actually experienced” (13).

employing a series of “silences” around his racialized identity. These omissions, or “self-protective silences,” function as a “kind of authorial control” over certain aspects of life, namely aspects that are incongruent with the expected role of a cowboy in the nineteenth-century, such as the racism and discrimination Love may have faced on the range (Speirs 318).

In the second section of the chapter, I explore the function of the visual mediums in *The Life and Adventures*. Love’s portraits, while staged, work to counteract the strategic silences in his text. Furthermore, while the sketches mimic the style of pulp novels and magazines, they show Love as an enslaved child, marking this period of his life as an essential part of his Black Western experience. Taken together, the portraits and sketches defamiliarize the Western for the reader and allow Love to incorporate himself into the genre.

In Chapter 4, “Mediating Race: Oscar Micheaux and the African American Frontier in Print and Cinema,” I analyze Oscar Micheaux’s Western films, along with his homesteading novels, promotional material, and letters to show the degree to which he used his personal history, self-constructed social identity, and status as an entrepreneur to represent the frontier experience from an African American perspective. The first section of this chapter examines Micheaux’s debut novel, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (1913). *The Conquest* tells the story of Oscar Devereaux, whose success depends on his willingness to leave the Black East and become part of a community of white homesteaders in South Dakota. One of the innovative ways that Micheaux adapts Western conventions to better reflect his racialized experience is by revising the genre’s traditional West/East opposition to illustrate his double-consciousness. Torn between the

opportunities available in the white society of the West and the sense of belonging to the African American community back East, Devereaux externalizes his double-consciousness to emphasize the challenges faced by Black pioneers.

Racialized struggle on the frontier is made more complex in Micheaux's cinematic Westerns, including *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) and *The Exile* (1931). Both films offer a complicated mix of stereotypes while also showing frank and disturbing portrayals of racial prejudice in the West. Depictions of mob violence, lynchings, and discrimination led to both films being censored (Wallace 61). However, Black audiences saw Micheaux's cinematic Westerns as raw portrayals of Jim Crow Era atrocities, an access to "the real" which was often blindsided by white filmmakers. Micheaux's cinematic Westerns provided the mediating force of Black cinematic gaze which, according to Gladstone Yearwood, is always an act of resistance that uses cinema to filter "film's expressive traditions, formal structure, and meanings" through an African American perspective (Yearwood 107).

In Chapter 5, "East Meets West: Herb Jeffries and the Popular African-American Western," I examine popular Black Westerns of the 1930s, particularly the work of film actor and musical performer, Herbert Jeffries. Jeffries was one of the first African American performers, alongside vaudeville singer Taylor Gordon, to incorporate Black cultural and musical forms, including spirituals and jazz, into the Western genre. By the 1930s, African American characters in mainstream Westerns followed traditional tropes rooted in minstrel performance of the late nineteenth century. All Black cast Westerns began a process of revision and re-appropriation of these tropes by casting Black actors as the main protagonists. Jeffries's *Harlem* trilogy resemble white musical Westerns in

their plot and structure, but transports cultural forms, from musical and dancing styles to vernacular, from urban Black life onto the frontier. This signifies a longer tradition of Black ideological migration – the transportation of elements native to African American culture and, in this instance, Harlem, into spaces that have formerly excluded or expressed hostility towards them. Harlem’s placement on the frontier is a cinematic sleight-of-hand which intentionally moves Black geographical and ideological signification out West to effectively, as some scholars argue, “reterritorialize” a Black presence in the American West through the creation of a “predominately black milieu” within the setting of the Western, what Julia Leyda refers to as “strange anachronisms” in the *Harlem* Westerns that intentionally present African American life in a largely white-dominated cinematic space (Leyda 50).

I analyze Jeffries’ films as transitory, representing a shift in the way that Black performers characterize themselves in the Western genre. Using Micheaux’s works as a backdrop to the emergence of the Black cinematic Western, I examine how Jeffries, along with Chester Himes, revise the Western. The second section of my chapter discusses the parallels between the Black Western and Black Noir fiction using Himes’s semi-autobiographical novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). Himes’ novel explores the urban frontier and speaks about Black disillusionment during the mid-twentieth century. The Noir genre is significant not only because of its connections to the Western, but also because it imagines life in the West through a darker, psychoanalytical lens to reflect the racial tensions of the era.

In Chapter 6, “Race, Region, and Midwestern Identity in Era Bell Thompson’s *American Daughter* and *Africa, Land of My Fathers*,” I examine Thompson’s

autobiography *American Daughter* (1946) and her travel memoir, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (1954) to consider how she articulates the relationship between race and region. *American Daughter* is first and foremost a family history, the story of the Thompson family and their Midwestern experiences rather than the story of a lone male homesteader or cowboy (such as Oscar Micheaux or Nat Love), who leave their families behind to journey to the frontier. The Dakota frontier offers opportunities to Thompson's father unavailable to him in the East. Thompson, however, is peripheral to her father's enterprising plans and must find her own place within the frontier story. My approach to *American Daughter* examines how African American Western women contribute to a "re-presentation" of region apart from dominant (white, male) representations. In doing so, they "cite/site under acknowledged black geographies" (McKittrick 111). Using Katherine McKittrick's ideas as a framework, I argue that *American Daughter* revises traditional perceptions of region to reflect the African American woman's experiences in the early twentieth-century Midwest.

The analysis of *American Daughter* leads into a discussion about how Thompson represents the relationship between race and place in *Africa, Land of My Fathers*. In *Africa*, as in *American Daughter*, Thompson experiences a palpable double estrangement while travelling the continent that reflects the tensions between her ethnic and national identities. Thompson's journey through the continent represents a reversal of the traditional frontier journey. Thompson's African memoir also sheds light on the significance of regional identity in global interactions during the mid-twentieth century.

In the conclusion to this dissertation, "*Straight Outta Compton* to the Old Town Road," I examine late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century examples of the

Black West in American culture, including The Compton Cowboys, a group of Black cowboys who reside in Los Angeles. The conclusion highlights the significance of the continued efforts to recover lesser-known and underrepresented Black Western stories that have been told through a variety of mediums, including print, film, television, and music. The purpose of this conclusion is to show that the study of the Black Western stories is ongoing. I close with a brief discussion of the future of research in this area and recommend further studies for scholars.

To conclude, each of the texts that I analyze involves migration to a frontier space on the edge of white society, a place where Westerns produced by African Americans adapt to race-based restrictions and limitations, sometimes by challenging these restrictions and other times by assimilating into the white society. By revising a narrative structure that is associated with the dominant white culture, these individuals also claim a place in a society that refuses to acknowledge African American participation in and contribution to frontier history and mythology. The body of works examined provides a diverse set of stories, written from different perspectives, to show the many ways that the American West has been conceived by Black storytellers over the past two centuries. In essence, my approach to the Black West expands our understanding of the way African American authors and producers of western texts have participated in the creation of the Western genre in a full range of imaginative forms.

Chapter 1:

***The Elevator* and African American Periodical Culture in the Nineteenth-Century California**

Although the 1,176 African Americans counted in the 1860 census represented less than two percent of San Francisco's population, they formed one of the largest, most politically active, and progressive communities in the nineteenth-century Pacific West (De Graaf 286-287). It was in San Francisco that African Americans in the West first gained a public voice in their struggle for Black male suffrage. Their efforts to reform were displayed in a variety of initiatives, from petitions to public demonstrations, that gained national attention. At the heart of this campaign was one newspaper, *The Elevator*, produced weekly from 1865 until 1880, which created and reinforced an extended imagined community for Black Californians. Using the periodical as a platform to promote racial uplift, *The Elevator* helped to conceive of the legal, political, and social conditions for African Americans in the Pacific West in the latter half of the nineteenth-century.⁵

The Elevator's founder and editor-in-chief, Philip A. Bell, played a critical role in transforming the periodical into a powerful political platform. In his editorials, he frequently demanded state legislators approve the proposed Reconstruction-

⁵ While Benedict Anderson wrote about European print culture and its role in nationhood, the concept of an "imagined community" can be applied to African American newspapers, especially in the nineteenth-century. In a way, the cohesive networks fostered by African American print culture in the West resembled the contributions of print culture to the rise of European nationalism. Unlike European print networks, however, the English language was not the defining quality of communal identity for Black Californians; rather, this community formed around reform discourse and the common goals of racial uplift and Black male suffrage. For reference, see Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, 67-81 and Eric Gardner's *Jennie Carter: Black Journalist of the West*, xxvi-xxvii.

era constitutional amendments acknowledging Black citizenship and suffrage rights. Bell also regularly editorialized on behalf of expanding Black children's educational opportunities and was a prolific supporter of the cause of uplift, especially in poorer Black communities throughout the state.

One of Bell's most frequent contributors was a Black woman named Jennie Carter, who hailed from Nevada County, near Sacramento. Carter used *The Elevator* as a platform to construct an authoritative public persona, one that engaged with early conceptions of Black Republican Motherhood. Her letters covered a range of subjects, from domestic matters to national politics, race and racism, women's rights, suffrage, temperance, and education. In these letters, Carter advocated for African American social and economic uplift in California. Several of her letters also promoted racial uplift for readers by recounting her sojourns to places across California that modelled her sense of Black Western domesticity.

Bell's editorials and Carter's letters offer insight into the ways in which *The Elevator* was shaping African American communities in post-Civil War California. The periodical contributions of these authors helped to coordinate the periodical's readership and foster a Black sense of place in California that was essential to the organized pursuit of equal rights in the nineteenth-century West.

“We are levelers, not to level down, but to level up”: Philip A. Bell and the Role of the San Francisco *Elevator* in Racial Uplift



Figure 3: Philip A. Bell. Courtesy: blackpast.org

In 1862 Philip A. Bell, a journalist and the former editor of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, left New York City for San Francisco, where he briefly ran a real estate agency before turning back to journalism. In San Francisco he met Peter Anderson, a long-time leading political voice in the city's African American community, who recruited Bell to edit a newspaper that was intended to fill the void of the long-defunct *Mirror of the Times*. Given his past involvement in reform circles in the East, Bell saw the opportunity of working for a periodical as a means of crafting a space for reform in San Francisco as he had done in New York City.⁶ In his first editorial for the *Pacific Appeal* Bell noted that

⁶ Bell spent years working in Black press houses in the urban Northwest before moving to California. According to records, he was working as an agent for *The Liberator* in 1839 before becoming a journalist for *Frederick Douglass's Paper* in 1850. Through his networks in both

the title of the paper meant that it would “enter the field boldly, fearlessly, but with dignity and calmness to appeal for the rights of the Colored Citizens of this State” (5 April 1862). A brief look at the contents of the first issue – from a series of petitions protesting various issues in California, to an op-ed on justice for Black criminals sentenced in local courts, to a celebratory piece on the opening of the San Francisco Literary Institute – alerts readers to the many ways that Bell and Anderson were working to create a newspaper centred around justice and reform for Black Californians.

Shortly after the publication of the first issue of the *Appeal* Bell resigned from his post as editor due to philosophical differences with Anderson.⁷ Despite his resignation, Bell continued to occasionally write for the *Appeal* and began a series entitled “The Colored Men of California.” The series is comprised of biographical sketches of figures such as William H. Newby, a journalist for the *Mirror of the Times*, Thomas M. D. Ward, California’s first Black minister, and Dennis Drummond Carter, a musician, miner, and activist, along with other notable figures in Black California’s history. In his introduction to the series, Bell remarked that while none of the men were cowboys or homesteaders, they were nonetheless “pioneers . . . destined to perform an important part in the future

papers, Bell became an active participant in abolitionist circles in New York City and was a founding member of the city’s “Committee of the Thirteenth,” a group that called for statewide anticolonization efforts and aided fugitive slaves. For more information on Bell’s early career see Eric Gardner, *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature*, 105-112 and Gardner’s “Early African American Print Culture and the American West,” in *Early African American Print Culture*, ed. Lara Langer Cohen et. al., 75-89.

⁷ The reason for the feud between Bell and Anderson is unknown. Some scholars, including Frank Goodyear and Eric Gardner, speculate that Anderson was threatened by Bell, who was ten years older than him and an accomplished and well-known journalist. Others speculate it might have been the result of their peculiar personalities. In his 1852 profile, Martin Delany wrote that Bell was “highly sensitive, and very eccentric.” Anderson was said to be very temperamental himself. Delany, *Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People*, 102.

history of California.” He lists their occupations as orators, mechanics, merchants, scientists, and businessmen. These men, he writes, are:

men whose abilities will establish our claim to a higher position than that what is generally awarded us; men of force of character, of indomitable energy and sterling worth. Such are the men whose mental traits, and whose achievements we will place before our readers, and we will be able to show that ostracised and persecuted as we are, we have among us men, who in any community, would be recognized as representative men. (23 May 1863)

For Bell these “representative men” embodied the pioneering spirit of Black California and exemplified the promises, economic and otherwise, that the state offered African Americans. Speaking of the sketches themselves, Eric Gardner observes that they feature figures who “were not geographically-fixed, but rather had come to California in search of opportunities they could not find elsewhere.” “California was thus not just a destination for these men,” he continues, “it was also a springboard, a stopping point on all sorts of journeys, an important location . . . for Black movement in the West and the nation” (“Early African American Print Culture” 87-88). In addition, by positioning California as a place of promise in his biographies, Bell anticipates Frederick Jackson Turner’s Thesis, which argued that American democracy and American character were formed on the frontier.⁸ While the subjects of Turner’s Thesis were exclusively white, the

⁸ In “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Turner argues that individualism by the frontier’s wilderness created a national spirit of democracy. Turner sets up the opposition between the East and the West; as pioneers in the West strive for freedom, the East tries to restrain them. Of course, Turner’s essay boasts the triumph of Anglo-Germanic Americans over the frontier, with little consideration of racialized peoples. In spite of this, African Americans still participated in the settling of the frontier and were influenced by the mythology surrounding the West in the nineteenth-century.

men in Bell's biographies are, as he states, "pioneers" like their forbearers. Thus, by paralleling the pioneering spirit to that of the spirit of uplift embodied by his "representative men," Bell emphasizes the role that westward mobility played in the transformation and elevation of African American settlers in California. Mobility for Bell, writes Gardner, was more than just geographical movement, it was defined "by a confluence of factors that said much about blackness in America," as well as the character of the people who came out West. "Bell's sketches," writes Gardner, "asserted that Black Californians largely owed their presence in the West to their own exercise of mobility within and sometimes beyond the limits placed on African Americans throughout the nation" Thus, that challenged and challenging exercise became the base for the Black California that Bell and others fashioned in print ("Early African American Print Culture" 85).

Bell repeatedly returned to the theme of mobility in later issues of the *Appeal*, and it became central to almost every issue of *The Elevator*, a newspaper he founded in 1865. An examination of some of the paper's prospectus documents from the first issue show how Bell was employing the metaphors of uplift. In a paragraph under an article titled "Our Name" he writes,

Our Name is indicative of our object, we wish to elevate the oppressed of all nations of every clime to the position of manhood and freedom. We wish to place all mankind on a level; not by lowering them to one standard, but by elevating them in virtue, intelligence, and self-reliance on a level with the most favoured of the human race. We are levelers, not to level down, but to level up. (Quoted in Gardner, *Unexpected Places* 112)

Alluding to the latest technological advances to define the role of the textual as an aid to rising, Bell implicitly argues that the West – and the nation – needed a textual leveler and that *The Elevator* was positioned to provide as such. But if his metaphors for uplift offered readers the next step in the process of mobility that had brought African Americans to California, the paper's motto described where this community should stand. In the same issue from 5 May, under a section titled "Our Motto," Bell wrote, "We claim full 'equality before the law,' we desire nothing more, and we will be satisfied with nothing less." This motto, which was printed on the masthead of every issue, suggested both that "blacks needed to receive equal treatment when standing *in front* of the law, but also that blacks might need to take their equality temporarily *before* the law caught up to their higher ideal," writes Gardner. "In this," Gardner continues, "Bell's sense of equality was deeply tied to the ability to move within the public sphere" (*Unexpected Places* 112). For Bell, the concept of mobility was inextricable from equality. The ability to uplift oneself from one's station in life was crucial, he believed, to progress. This idea is celebrated in "Our Paper and its Purpose," a poem in the newspaper's same issue by James Madison Bell (not related to the editor). In the poem's final stanza, Madison Bell writes,

Then let us raise the sign of progress,
And bid the vaunting scoffer see
With all our lip-friends of profession
That manhood's right is liberty.
That manhood has, when left untrammelled,
Aspired to all that's good and great,

And many a slave by chains empaneled

Would fill, if free, a chair of State.

Having dedicated itself to “manhood's right to liberty,” *The Elevator* pursued a whole platform of specific reforms, including equal education, desegregating transportation, and uplift. During its first years, however, none was more important than Black male suffrage.

In 1865 Black male suffrage had long been a topic of debate in Californian newspapers. While most of these newspapers were against the idea of giving African American men the vote, reformers had been making a case for it since the early days of the *Mirror of the Times*.⁹ However, because California's African American population was too small during these early years for suffrage associations to make much headway, little progress had been made. In turn, Bell adopted a rhetorical strategy that emphasized the patriotism of the African American community in California. He displayed such a strategy in an editorial entitled “Citizenship and Suffrage,” where he contends that Black men deserve the vote because there are no more loyal citizens to Republican tenets and values than them:

What has the Negro population done, either as a class or individually, that the entire race should be disenfranchised? We answer confidently, nothing. We were law loving and law abiding, honest, industrious, and possessing higher moral character and greater forbearance than ever shown by any oppressed people. We

⁹ The *Mirror of the Times* founders, Mifflin W. Gibbs and Jonas H. Townsend, were activists who pressed for Black suffrage as well as changes to the Witness and Testimony Law. Their efforts ceded once the *Times* was forced to fold due to financial reasons and resistance they met from white Californians. For more information, see J. William Snorgrass, "The Black Press in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1856-1900," 306-307.

have fewer criminals, as the statistics of the country prove, than any class, except the Quakers; fewer paupers than any race except the Jews; and never was there found a traitor to the Government wearing a black skin, or claiming an affinity with the African race. (22 December 1865)

In this editorial Bell links the cause of Black male suffrage to the advancement of American democracy, showing readers that African American men are faithful to the Republican party and dedicated to the progress of their own community. He concludes by stating that it was up to California to awaken “from her unquiet dreams of delusion and fulfill her higher destiny by granting us full enfranchisement.” “Only then,” he writes, “will she not only perform an act of justice but redeem her name from the obloquy which now attends it and take her true stand as the noblest State in the union, as she is now the richest and most fertile” (22 December 1865). Bell closes his editorial by once again positioning California as a place of promise, arguing that if the state gives Black men the right to vote, then it will become the “noblest” (or, most loyal to the constitution and its promises for equal rights). Thus, Bell implies that the fight for Black male suffrage in California does not only concern African Americans, but all citizens of the state.

Bell not only advocated for Black male suffrage in the pages of *The Elevator*, but also at select times in the year in public demonstrations, including the 1865 Fourth of July parade. He believed that the Fourth of July parade represented an important moment for African Americans to demonstrate their solidarity and patriotic allegiance to America. For the first time in the country’s history whites were to witness the presence of this long-segregated community gathered together to march in the city streets as one. Before the parade, Bell wrote an editorial calling for African Americans in San Francisco to come

out and show their support for Black male suffrage, reminding readers that the occasion would be an opportunity to further their campaign. He writes,

We have long desired to celebrate our National Anniversary as American citizens. While others were rejoicing at the return of the day on which our Nation sprang into existence full of life and vigor, when she flung aside the swaddling bands of Colonial dependence and took her stand among the nations of the earth, we felt saddened that we could not rejoice with them; but we mourned over the degradation of our country and that thralldom [sic] of our race. Now, our country is truly FREE, and we, her sable sons, rejoice ... that our Government is relieved from the incubus of slavery, and can join in the ever-onward march of progress which free institutions hasten and accelerate. Let every colored man join in the procession on Tuesday next. Let us show, by our own deportment and behavior, that we appreciate the great boon which has been offered us and are fully capable of enjoying EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW. (27 June 1865)

In this excerpt Bell provides the heuristics for practicing reform by using constitutive rhetoric to articulate a sameness of purpose amongst readers. Phrases like “sable sons” and “every colored man” represent readers as part of a community. Bell also invites readers to participate in a public demonstration to show their mutual support for Black male suffrage. The phrase “ever-onward march of progress” imagines readers as part of a collective exercise for democracy, thus linking the act of mobility to the goal of uplift.

Bell understood that advocating for racial uplift also meant that *The Elevator* needed to establish a “literary character” in California. According to Elizabeth McHenry, “literary character” is

an attribute that, when acquired and properly maintained, would serve not only to divert African Americans from the many “evils” that threatened to corrupt society but also endow them with the personality needed to participate in the civic debates that would sustain a healthy democracy. Literary activities and the character cultivated through them provided a means of equipping oneself with lasting benefits that would ensure the success of the individual and, in turn, the community. (100)

The connection between literary character and suffrage was not incidental. In the nineteenth century, literary activity was seen as a component of citizenship. Being able to read, write, and orate were all considered respectable qualities of a race and necessary attributes for their participation in civic life. In *The Elevator* Bell provided readers with the tools for developing communities that could take on the tasks of educating and fostering a Black literary character in the West. Displays of literary character in *The Elevator* took many forms: from the promotion of literary societies in San Francisco and Sacramento, to the inclusion of poetry and other literary arts in the newspaper’s pages, to the establishment of public reading rooms. Reading rooms constituted an essential and lasting addition to the African American community in California by providing ready access to literary material. Readers were encouraged to stop by the printing house’s library to “peruse the current literature of the day and obtain knowledge of events,” an *Elevator* correspondent wrote. The correspondent continues: “by exercise we greatly increase activity as well as power; hence the benefit and necessity of education. I shall not attempt to discuss the moral effect of such enterprises. Their results are seen in the characters of men whose progress makes the nation great and powerful!” (17 January

1868). Two years later, in December 1870, Bell also proposed to establish another reading room, if he could “find fifty supporters willing to pay two dollars per quarter to maintain it.” Should the library be organized he wrote, “readers would be offered all the City papers” as well as a “large number of papers of California and adjoining states, along with the principal periodicals from Eastern and Southern states” (2 December 1870). By creating a network of African American periodicals from across the country, Bell was trying to foster a strong political consciousness for *The Elevator’s* readers, a consciousness that would connect Black Americans locally and nationally through the network of print.

The mission to foster a strong political consciousness amongst readers of *The Elevator* was most realized after the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment in April 1870. Although California had failed to pass the amendment in 1869, it was adopted by the necessary two-thirds majority of states and was ratified in February 1870. In his editorial marking the passing of the amendment, Bell once again employs constitutive rhetoric, this time joining the celebrations in San Francisco with those in Black communities throughout the nation. “*Gloria Triumphe!* We are free!” exclaimed Bell in the opening line of his editorial marking the amendment’s passing, “[l]et us be prepared to commemorate the event with due observance of joy, praise, and thanksgiving” (11 February 1870). Bell predicted celebrations in California would occur simultaneously with those across the country. “The Eastern States will be alive with enthusiasm,” he foretells. “In New York,” Bell continues, news had come that “Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips and Senator Revels, are to be the leading speakers” (10 March 1870). Over the next few weeks, the preparations for celebration occupied almost every issue of

The Elevator. On April 22nd Bell and other journalists wrote columns covering celebrations in cities and towns throughout California and the rest of the United States. There had been marches, speeches, and festivities in Sacramento, El Dorado, San Jose, Los Angeles, and Nevada City, they proclaimed. Across the country celebrations were held in Virginia, Nevada, Portland, New York City, Albany, and Philadelphia. A reprint of an article from the white-owned publication, the *Los Angeles Republican*, was also included to show solidarity between Californians (22 April 1870). In these editorials Bell conceives of African Americans as part of an imagined community of Californians, both Black and white, who united in their mission for Black male suffrage.

After the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment Bell continued as the editor-in-chief of *The Elevator* for fifteen years. Near the end of the nineteenth-century *The Elevator* had expanded its networks beyond the boundaries of state and to locations in Asia and Australia. The unitary fight for civil rights grew to reflect the diversity of the paper's readership. The periodical also broadened its conceptions of authorship to include a wide range of subjects and genres – from travelogues to book reviews, from local to national news, from opinion pieces to poetry. This was especially important for Black female journalists because print activism had previously been gendered masculine (“Early African American Print Culture” 82). Bell not only published female journalists but encouraged them to develop their own voices within and beyond established genres and forms, such as poetry and domestic writing. He thus had a group of regular contributors – amongst them Jennie Carter, who was best known for her multigeneric letters – to write about topical issues in the paper. Carter became one of most prominent voices in *The Elevator*. Her letters reveal that African American women in nineteenth-

century California were as invested in shaping the discourse around political issues, including suffrage, as Black men.

“I Will Write for You”: Jennie Carter’s Letters to a Rising Population



Figure 4: Nevada City, California, Circa 1866. Courtesy of commons.wikimedia.org

In June 1867 a woman calling herself “Ann J. Trask” and claiming to live on “Mud Hill” in Nevada County, California, wrote to Phillip A. Bell telling him that she had “been a reader of your excellent paper for some time” and was “grateful for your efforts on behalf of our people.” She noted, though, now that “our children and grandchildren are readers” Bell should “have in each issue a short story for them.” She concluded her letter with a simple promise, “If you like the idea, and think my scribbling any account, I will write for you” (5 July 1867). These were the words of Jennie Carter, a Black woman who had recently settled in California with her husband, Denis Drummond Carter. In the following issue, Bell published a sentimental story by Carter about the death of her beloved dog, Nino, during her childhood. Over the next seven years, she published over seventy pieces in *The Elevator*, expanding beyond her essays for children

to commentaries on California and national politics, racism, temperance, education, and suffrage.

While little is known about Carter's background or her life in California, her letters to *The Elevator* provide insight into her views, platforms, and experiences as a Black female activist effecting racial uplift in nineteenth-century California.¹⁰ As Carter's letters demonstrate, the most effective way for Black women to engage in activism and achieve a public voice was through the discourse of respectability, whose origins can be found in nineteenth-century reform traditions of the Mid-Atlantic. While conditions in California allowed her to break away from some of the more restrictive Mid-Atlantic traditions of womanhood, Carter used the discourse of respectability to construct a socially-sanctioned voice in *The Elevator* and to mobilize community activism in California.

During the nineteenth-century the standards of respectable Black activism and the conditions upon which Black women's voices were allowed into the public sphere were greatly determined by the Cult of True Womanhood. First described by Barbara Welter in 1966, the Cult of True Womanhood was a social system in which gender ideologies assigned women the role of the moral protector of the home and family life. In this system a woman's value was intrinsically tied to her success in domestic pursuits such as keeping a clean house, raising pious children, and being obedient to her husband. "A

¹⁰ Most of what is known about Carter's life before she came to California comes from her work in *The Elevator*. Carter talks about her childhood in New Orleans and that she spent some time in New York. She also talks about living on the Illinois/Wisconsin border in the late 1840s (*Jennie Carter* ix). Census records show that Carter married her second husband, Denis Drummond Carter, in 1866, approximately six years after she came to the state with her first husband, Reverend Mr. Correll, in 1860. Prior to this, Carter was recorded as Mary Jane Correll in several records, including a *Nevada Daily* marriage announcement (*Jennie Carter* x).

True Woman,” writes Welter, “was defined by four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (152). In the nineteenth-century all of these traits were explicitly attributed to white women, when the conditions of a fully entrenched economy of slavery positioned the white mistresses on the plantation at one end of the spectrum of respectability and relegated enslaved Black women to the other (thereby defining whiteness as that which was not Black, and vice versa). In response, Black female reformers sought to overturn the stereotypical images of Black women that cast them as sexually-licentious Jezebels, ignorant mammies, and frail enslaved women. The goal of these works was to define Black women’s place in the realm of respectability, domesticity, and femininity that popular opinion only attributed to white women.

One such reformer was Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who spun depictions of Black womanhood in her speeches and novels that sought to close the divide between popular imaginary perceptions of white and Black womanhood. In her most popular novel, *Iola Leroy* (1892), Harper deliberately fashioned her protagonist, Iola, after the attributes ascribed to white womanhood in an attempt to counter the degradation and denial of Black women’s virtue. The contemporary way to do this was to hearken to the virtuous features and qualities of the white woman as they are outlined in the Cult of True Womanhood. Harper affirmed Iola’s True Womanhood through several points in her characterization: she is able to pass as a respectable white woman, she is worthy of defense and protection by white and Black men alike, and she is worthy of marriage at the end of the novel.

Modern critics might be quick to point out the problematic nature of whiteness-as-womanhood in *Iola*, but given the definition of womanhood in the nineteenth-century

Harper's characterization of Iola was not an uncommon or ineffective approach to challenging negative stereotypes associated with Black women at the time. And yet Jennie Carter never portrayed Black women's value in association with their skin colour. These limitations of the Cult of True Womanhood affected Harper because she was writing in the East, and, as a light-skinned Black woman herself, she needed to uphold certain tropes to preserve her respectability and elite standing in Maryland's Black middle-class society.

Conversely, in mid-nineteenth century California the Cult of True Womanhood had less of an impact on women, Black and white. The reasons for this are identified by Victoria Lamont, who writes in *Westerns: A Woman's History* (2016) that "while [the discourse of True Womanhood] was a powerful rhetorical means of combating the position that women's suffrage was an aberration of women's nature, the discourse of women's moral influence was incompatible with the material conditions of frontier living" (24). Thus, for women like Carter, whose espousal of the importance of family and domestic duties for married women indicate she aligned with the values of True Womanhood, the realities of frontier life allowed her to break away from some of the more restrictive traditions of respectability.

Carter was also less likely constrained by transcontinental respectability discourse because of the demographics of Western Black communities to whom she was speaking to in *The Elevator*. Although Black women comprised less than one percent of all females living in the Pacific states until 1920, in California in particular their demographics lent themselves to the creation of a distinct geographical locus of elite Black middle-class womanhood. Historian Willi Coleman writes that Black women in

California were more likely to be literate and to have received some formal education compared to Black women in Mid-Atlantic states. This high degree of literacy, she states, “produced cultural tastes, social life, and a concern for education that collectively gave a majority of African Americans in cities like San Francisco a middle-class upbringing” (102). The presence of a literate Black middle-class would have a profound effect on the region’s history of intellectual and civil rights activism, a history that would be supported by the platform of the Black press in California. The earliest protests by Black women in the state took the form of individual lawsuits against the denial of civil rights, such as access to streetcars and education (Coleman 108-109). Activist writing in Black newspapers came to parallel female journalists’ advocacy for the recognition of the legal and social rights of African Americans in California. Speaking to an already literate Black middle-class, Carter appropriated tropes of respectability, namely, the ideals of domesticity as they were articulated by Black Republican Motherhood.

Black Republican Motherhood held that Black women were responsible for creating and establishing communities that both furthered republican ideas of nationhood and promoted the advancement of the race. The ideology behind this system stemmed from the belief that a woman’s natural sphere was in the home, but her influence was not confined to this space. Rather, supporters of Black Republican Motherhood advocated for the Black mother’s role in teaching and shaping the civic character of her children. As Lora Romero writes: “they [Black mothers] became responsible not just for producing and nurturing the populace but also for educating impressionable children against corrupting influences which could make them, later in life, unable to perform either masculine political duties or feminine social reproduction” (64). While the patriarchal

precepts of Republican Motherhood relegated women's teaching work to the domestic sphere, Black women found women's pedagogical dominion of the home to be a powerful conceptual framework for advocating on behalf of Black communities. Romero continues, Black Republican Mothers invested in "social housekeeping . . . a kind of activism" she writes, "that 'emphasized the role of Black women as saviors of the race, justifying their political authority because they were mothers'" (Romero, quoting Eileen Boris, 63). The movement expanded the customary view of a woman's domain as the home, to portray the community as an extension of this sphere of influence. Those involved in the movement sought both legislative and social reform for issues including education, temperance, and civil rights.

In her letters on temperance and education, Carter details her own form of social housekeeping. Her position on temperance was that drunkenness not only reflected poorly on the respectability of a person, but also was linked to the social elevation, or the lack thereof, of Black settlers.¹¹ In *The Elevator* she wrote anecdotal stories to instruct readers about the dangers of drunkenness. In one of these letters, dated 9 April 1869, Carter recounts her encounter with an old miner, who had lost his fortune and his family

¹¹ Carter's position on temperance was likely influenced by nineteenth-century women's politics around the dangers of drunkenness to the family. Temperance historian Ruth Bordin argues that women found such a compelling field in temperance activism because the general state of women's political-economic disenfranchisement was illustrated so dramatically by the "curse of intemperance." "The drunken husband," she argues, "epitomized the evils of a society in which women were second-class citizens" (6-9). Black temperance activists transformed this argument by connecting it to abolitionism. Alcohol was the "enslaver of the Black man," writes Denise Herd, that threatened the cause of suffrage. Temperance, in turn, became connected to the cause of suffrage and the more abstract "program of social betterment . . . 'temperance activity was thus deemed important for gaining social respectability and improving the overall economic and social position of blacks'" (Herd, 4). See Ruth Bordin. *Women and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900* and Denise Herd, "The Paradox of Temperance: Blacks and the Alcohol Question in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Drinking: Behavior and Belief in Modern History*, ed. Susanna Barrows and Robin Room, 354-358.

because of alcoholism. On a walk in the countryside near Mud Hill, Carter finds a solitary “miner’s cabin, situated in one of the most romantic places imaginable – sheltered between two large hills, and nearly surrounded, with one hill by its south side open, and a creek whose running waters made ceaseless music” (*Jennie Carter* 65-66). There she meets an old miner who tells her that he came to California to find gold and turned to gambling and alcohol for entertainment in the winter. Addicted to both “gambling and whiskey,” the man lamented that he “shall never hear from or see [his family] again” and that he could only “hope” to “die here” (67). In her description of the old man's situation, she shows how drunkenness not only resulted in the destruction of the Black family unit, but also destroyed the man’s hopes of striking gold in California.

In a following letter, dated 30 April 1869, Carter advances these arguments with another anecdote. Coming upon two girls who were speaking about the dangers of intemperance, she learns that one of the girl’s parents succumbed to alcoholism. The girl’s parents came “to California from Connecticut seven years ago, both endowed with superior mental and physical constitutions, with high hopes and considerable money,” but fell victims to “champagne suppers.” Their deaths left the girl and her two siblings orphaned and in a state of “unutterable sadness” (*Jennie Carter* 68). While Carter does not identify herself as a mother in these letters, she shows how intemperance threatens the comfort and safety of the family unit and, in turn, the larger African American community in California.

However, Carter was unwilling to ascribe the failure of racial uplift in California to intemperance alone. As she continued to write for *The Elevator*, she spoke more about the social limitations imposed by white culture on the African American community.

Carter especially targeted the lack of educational funding and support for Black children. In a column entitled, “Letter to Mr. Trask,” she writes on the “agitation of the school question”:

what we can accomplish for ourselves alone in this world is no matter, let us throw aside self entirely, labor for great principles which will bless all – for you know, D. [her husband], there are many of whom more might be made; many a one with high hopes and aspirations suddenly crushed by a selfish act, and gone down to the grave degraded and their memory only a shame. (*Jennie Carter* 41)

Carter’s address centres education around the question of character. She speaks on the role of “public opinion” in challenging racism in San Francisco and remarks on being “hopeful” that public opinion will be “enough” to challenge the underfunding of Black schools. However, she also believed that educated African Americans could convince the white public to give Black men the vote. In a second letter, dated 7 May 1869, she wrote about education and its role in advocating for Black male suffrage:

[w]e must be aware that the 15th Amendment is the last thing that will be done for us by the so called ‘ruling powers’ . . . I know not how it is in San Francisco, but here [Nevada County] there is an indifference on the subject of education that is deplorable. Many who cannot read will not learn, even in view of the fact that the right of suffrage is to be theirs and that an intelligent voter is a proper one. (*Jennie Carter* 69)

In the same letter Carter calls on Bell and *The Elevator* readers to “write, cease not, get the people in San Francisco to act as a unit. Will not the people there make an example for the Pacific coast? Organize! Organize!! Present a unified front to the enemy. Let all

mankind know we are in earnest and are not too lazy to progress” (70). Carter, like Bell, believed that the periodical could be used as a platform to effect change. Unlike Bell, however, her position of authority on all political matters had to be carefully coordinated because she was a Black woman.

While Carter was, in her own words, “not in favour of the vote for women,” she was invested in the power of gendered activism to incite political action, most notably in her calls for public demonstrations in which she participated (*Jennie Carter* 33).¹² This is best displayed in her call for a “grand procession” in Sacramento to commemorate the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment in Georgia. On 5 February 1870 she writes,

[w]ould it not be a good idea to have a celebration in Sacramento City, and all turn out and show the Democracy of California? . . . Would it not be a glorious thing, every town, village, city, and mining camp in the State, send her new-made citizens with banners, transparencies, and torches in a [p]rocession . . . the grandest and best California has ever seen? (*Jennie Carter* 84-85)

In her call for a grand procession Carter articulates “a kind of postgerminal, postsettlement mobility,” writes Gardner. He states, “she was talking about the kinds of ever-vigilant, ever-rising movement (and the character of this movement) that would be necessary once African Americans were in the West in order to ensure the continuance of

¹² In several letters, Carter writes about being against women’s suffrage. Her anti-suffrage stance was likely a response to Susan B. Anthony’s and Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s alliance with George Francis Train, a notorious racist and anti-abolitionist. This alliance, writes Gardner, “caused not only a rift in the movement for women’s rights but significant complications for efforts to get black men the vote.” (*Jennie Carter* xxv). Hence, Carter saw her allegiance first to her race, then to women as a whole. Nevertheless, Carter did not see men and women as unequal, rather she saw the value of both sexes and viewed them as interdependent on one another. She wrote in one letter, for example, that there should be “one purse in the family; not my purse, but ours; not my house, but ours, all joint stock” (5 June 1868 *Elevator*).

the kind of domestic settling that she had begun to find with Dennis Carter” (*Unexpected Places* 121).

For Carter mobility denoted more than just geographical movement. It also denoted racial uplift, as her later letters to *The Elevator* show. In these letters she writes about her sojourns to cities and towns throughout California, where she praises the locations that modelled her sense of Black Western domesticity, such as the small town of Oroville “whose citizens,” she writes, “are imbued with taste” (13 June 1869). Oroville drew some of her most glowing reviews because of “the improvements made, the regularity of the Streets – the comfortable yards full of fruit trees and flowers” (74). In contrast, she argues, most towns in California suffer compared to Oroville because

the neatness and thrift of New England farming is entirely overlooked. The money making, an ever-restless feeling that actuates people of every pursuit in California is a great drawback to the prosperity of the country. When farmers come to California to remain permanently, purchase small farms, build good houses and barns, substantial fences, set out plenty of fruit and ornamental trees, adding year by year improvements, having schoolhouses easy of access, churches within reasonable distances; then this state will surpass every other in the Union.

(74)

She argues that Oroville’s rural planning and refined infrastructure lent itself to the “majority Republican votes” in town and were essential to the town’s “continued efforts to improve the livelihoods of the people who lived there, black and white” (75).

Carter has similar praise for Carson City, Nevada, which she visited in 1873. She describes the town as settled, with markers of this settlement standing tall alongside the

mountains and hills: “[Carson City] is surrounded by mountains whose sides channeled, broken and abrupt brown and grey, make a formidable defence [*sic*] to the beautiful valley in which this city is located” (*Jennie Carter* 113). She writes that she could “imagine no more pleasing picture in early spring when nature puts on her dress of green than this valley and city” (113). These regional descriptions make note of the balance between human-made structures and their natural surroundings. Rather than completely transforming the land, human-made structures in Carson City serve to materialize the goals behind uplift. The mountains in the city have been levelled to erect the granite court houses, the mint, and schools. Carter catalogues these descriptions (116-118) and boasts of the town’s connection to the railroads. She states, “[s]ome have not doubted the future of Carson, or the great machine shops of the railroad would not have been built. I never saw finer buildings of my life built of cut granite.¹³ They will be enduring as mountains” (*Jennie Carter* 114). Two particular structures, the State Capitol and Supreme Court, characterize Carter’s hopes for the future. She writes that she toured the town and entered the Supreme Court, where she imagines striking down an anti-miscegenation bill recently passed and demanding that all white men who fathered children with non-white women “support and educate their own flesh and blood” (*Jennie Carter* 116). Her description of

¹³ The subject of railroads was a recurrent topic in Carter’s letters. In her descriptions of Colfax, she remarks on the town being a “depot for our county, our nearest approach to the Pacific Railroad, that great guide of our civilization” (*Jennie Carter* 55-56). Railroads were a hallmark of civilization for her because they connected otherwise disparate towns to the rest of the state and country. The railroad was not only essential to the geographical movement of peoples, but also to the metaphorical rising of California as a space where all peoples could integrate. In an article dated 30 August 1873, Carter comments on the “anti-railroad” platform of the Democrats. Speaking on these matters, she denounces the party’s (and the Republican’s) anti-immigrant policies, viewing the railroad as a key factor in the elevation of the state and its people. See Gardner, *Jennie Carter*, 55-58.

the Supreme Court shows that these structures are necessary because they function as places where African Americans can enact social and legal changes in the community.

Along with her descriptions of Oroville and Carson City, Carter's description of Sacramento as a city triumphantly emerging from the floods stands out for its depiction of the California's potential:

In Sacramento, some of the company (thinking of our Granite mountains left behind) said, "What a sea of mud." Not so, thought I, but what a city of "ants;" how they labored through the floods and flames, and made their hills on the low plains, and oh the dirt they have carried, load after load, until they can say to the waters, 'Thus far shalt thou go and no farther.' I can compare them to a coral insect who commenced his work under water and toiled on year after year, century after century, until at last a beautiful island rose from the depths of the sea. And so they labored on through all discouragements, being weak, yet fainting not by the way; they have their reward, a beautiful city above the floods. And how it would gladden the hearts of their ancestors in Eastern homes to see the beautiful gardens as I saw them on the 1st day of January 1869, filled with rose bushes in full bloom. (*Jennie Carter* 56)

In this letter Carter illustrates the rhythmic movement of progress; a laborious rising of a people that "would gladden the hearts of their ancestors in the East." Despite being weary, the labourers are persistent and steadfast, persevering through difficulty to see the city built. Using the imagery of labourers elevating the city from the ground, Carter shows that Black progress is fostered through mobilizing community effort for a common cause.



Figure 5: City of Sacramento, Circa 1860s. Courtesy of www.cityofsacramento.org

Carter further demonstrates the importance of mobility to African Americans in a pair of texts she sent to *The Elevator* after the release of William Still's *Underground Railroad* (1872), in which she recounts her own encounters with fugitives from slavery.¹⁴ In the first letter, she writes that when she lived in Wisconsin she was approached by “a woman with scarcely clothing to cover herself and a baby three months old, and both nearly famished. She told me to hide her quick for her master was in town, for she had seen him pass when laying in an old shed where she had been from midnight.” Carter concludes the letter by stating that “I believe the Lord had led her to me, for she had stopped only across the alley from my house, and when I opened the door and sat down, she saw me and knew me” (*Jennie Carter* 104-105). By recollecting her encounter with an enslaved woman, Carter celebrates the ways in which Still's work – and the memories it articulated – were travelling West. In the first anecdote, Gardner writes, she “specifically places herself as an agent of change and a mobile free woman” to show the

¹⁴ Philip A. Bell was the Pacific Coast's main agent for Still's book, and he marketed it, published excerpts from it, and encouraged correspondents to write about it.

ways in which those in the early West aided enslaved people by providing them with mobility (*Unexpected Places* 123).¹⁵ In the second letter, dated 13 March 1868, Carter advertises for the whereabouts of Henry Drummond, her husband's cousin, who had been abducted and sold into slavery when both men were boys. In this letter, she places upfront a kind of rootless mobility that had been made rootless by slavery. Both letters became part of a greater initiative of racial uplift, which considered mobility as an essential to the mission for suffrage.

Another text that functioned for a similar purpose as these letters is *Tru Montague*, an unfinished novel written by Carter that explores her familial connections to slavery. Two letters feature excerpts from the novel, dated 4 June 1869 and 17 August 1869. The first letter describes Truey, the child of an enslaved woman, being sold at an auction to a slave owner. The second letter follows Truey's return to her father in the North. In both letters Carter emphasizes the roles of mothers, including Truey's grandmother, in the emancipation of slaves. *Tru Montague* shows how *The Elevator* not only preserved histories in account of readers' interests, but practiced recovery of the African American experience with slavery within their reading circles.¹⁶

¹⁵ African American reformists often connected the struggle for emancipation to that of enfranchisement for Black men. In these letters specifically, the connection between emancipation and suffrage is implied by Carter's anecdote. Showing that Black settlers like herself participated in emancipating others serves a pedagogical purpose in this letter and speaks to how Carter was using her letters to instruct as well as inform her readers to commit to the common goal of legal and political freedom.

¹⁶ *Tru Montague* remained unfinished. The two letters discussed here are the only two letters detailing excerpts from the novel. From Carter's own descriptions of the novel, it was intended to be a slave narrative focusing on Truey's life after slavery. The novel seemed to imitate the sentimental works of Harper and other Black female writers of the time. While Carter claimed that the story told of family member's experiences with slavery, the details of this remain uncertain. See *Jennie Carter*, 118-120.

In conclusion, while conditions in nineteenth-century California enabled her to deviate from some of the more restrictive discourses of respectability, she ultimately relied on respectability discourse to construct a platform for her activism and to mobilize the Black Californians around local issues, such as temperance, education, and suffrage. Carter's letters on temperance and education connect these issues to the larger cause of racial uplift by showing the detrimental impacts of intemperance and a lack of education on the Black community. Her letter on the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment connected her to the broader socio-political activism of *The Elevator* by showing the importance of mobility to the cause of uplift in the Black community. Finally, in Carter's letters about slavery, she uses her own experiences as exemplary of the kinds of changes she (and Bell) wanted to see manifest in the everyday.

Coda: The Tales of Black America and the Work of the Black Periodical Press in the West

The works of Philip A. Bell and Jennie Carter contributed to *The Elevator's* influence on Black California in the late nineteenth-century. Both authors invested in the paper's platforms for racial uplift and Black male suffrage. Bell employed mobility metaphors to shape the periodical's standpoint on these issues and created a space for Black readers to advocate for themselves. Carter's letters advocate on behalf of Black women and their roles in shaping their communities. Mobility also features in her letters as a theme central to her travels across California. Furthermore, Carter's endeavours to write and reconstruct past stories on the slave experience within her own family incorporates the national struggle for enfranchisement and recognition of personhood.

The Elevator ran until 1885, the year of Bell's retirement. A decade later, many African Americans began leaving California for cities in the Northeast. However, the deep ties between African Americans and the American West continued into the twentieth-century. Journalist and editor Pauline Hopkins would bring a renewed sense of Black Western lives into fiction with her novel, *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest* (1903). Hopkins' role as an Eastern journalist working for one of the largest African American periodicals at the time, the *Colored American Magazine*, gave her a unique vantage point of the frontier narrative. Hopkins adapted the frontier narrative to explore the roots of post-Reconstruction racism in slavery and to encourage a renewed spirit of abolitionism among the *CAM*'s readership.

Chapter 2:

Pauline Hopkins' *Winona* and the Frontier Promise in Periodical Fiction

From 1900 to 1909, during a time of intensifying racial violence and disenfranchisement in the United States, the *Colored American Magazine (CAM)* served a vital role in promoting the development of a literary voice for African Americans, protesting injustices, and contesting dominant representations of African American culture and history. Similar to *The Elevator*, the *Colored American Magazine* published a wide-variety of content from African American journalists and contributors across the country, including political news, poetry, and cultural criticism. However, the magazine format of *CAM* also allowed for serial fiction to be published regularly. Pauline Hopkins, a founder of the magazine and its only female editor, was also an author who published a number of serialized novels in *CAM*.

One of these novels was *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest* (1903). Set in the years preceding the Civil War, the novel follows the capture, enslavement, and eventual rescue of its protagonists, Winona and Judah, who travel to Kansas with their rescuer, Warren Maxwell, to participate in John Brown's antislavery uprising during what came to be known as the battle of "Bleeding Kansas." According to Hazel Carby, "*Winona* was transparently a call for organized acts of resistance against twentieth-century persecution" that juxtaposes "the historical landscape of slavery" with "the contemporary social order" (xlili).

In this chapter I assess Carby's claim alongside a close reading of *Winona* to argue that, while Hopkins revises conventions of the Western to represent African American resistance against oppression, she also relies on others. In the first section of

the chapter I examine her construction of Judah, as well as how her representation of Indigeneity replicates the colonial trope of the “Vanishing Indian” to deliberate the future of African Americans in the United States. She uses Indigeneity, or more accurately what Phillip Round calls the ‘sign of the Native,’ to communicate her own cultural vision and desires of African American resistance (22).

In the section that follows, I analyze Hopkins’ construction of her frontier heroine, Winona. While Winona, unlike Judah, is afforded more agency in the novel, Hopkins relies on the trope of the “tragic mulatta” to represent Winona as a redeemable character. Overall, I argue that while Hopkins offers an intimate critique of racist violence at the turn-of-the-century in *Winona*, she simultaneously reveals the limitations of the Western genre to frame such a critique through her representations of womanhood and Indigeneity.

***Winona*: Revisionist Western or Cautionary Tale?**

In 1900 Pauline Hopkins began her tenure for the *Colored American Magazine* and soon became celebrated for her contributions to the magazine, which included biographical sketches, numerous political commentaries, editorials, short stories, and three serialized novels. Before she started working for *CAM*, Hopkins was already a published author. In 1899, she published *Contending Forces*, a sentimental romance set in the antebellum era that tells the tale of an enslaved woman’s survival of sexual abuse on a plantation and her eventual escape to freedom. In the novel Hopkins explores controversial racial themes, including miscegenation, and refutes stereotypes of the “tragic mulatta” figure to instead celebrate the emancipation and upward mobility of her

heroine. Upon its release, the novel was lauded as a success and launched her career as an author of fiction (Brown 190).

Hopkins followed *Contending Forces* with three serialized novels that she published in *CAM: Hagar's Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice* (1901-1902), *Winona* (1902), and *Of One Blood; Or the Hidden Self* (1902-1903). In her serialized fiction, as in *Contending Forces*, Hopkins combined the strategies and narrative conventions of popular genres with social and political critique to reflect timely issues of her day, including “amalgamation” (miscegenation), passing, and the legacies of slavery.¹⁷ Hopkins, who firmly believed that fiction had a political purpose, asserted that writing fiction was an especially effective means of intervening politically because of the mass appeal of fiction to “the many classes of citizens who never read history or biography” (“Pauline Hopkins”). Using popular genres to attract readers, she could present absorbing stories centring around African American protagonists on historical landscapes. Because of their historical locations, Hazel Carby considers Hopkins’ serialized novels “fictional histories” and argues that the purpose of including such histories was to show readers how the “actions and destinies of [her] characters are related to the ways in which their ancestors acted upon their own social conditions” (xxxv-xxxvi). Writing during what came to be known as the “nadir” of race relations, a period marked by an aggressive increase in lynch mob violence, mass disenfranchisement of African Americans and other minorities, and the threat of restored power to the former

¹⁷ Hopkins used the term, “amalgamation” to describe mixed-race marriages and miscegenation. See her essay, “Black or White – Which Should Be the Young Afro-American’s Choice in Marriage?” in *Daughter of the Revolution: The Major Nonfiction Works of Pauline Hopkins*, 108-114.

Confederacy, Hopkins sought to explore the roots of post-Reconstruction racism and to encourage a renewed spirit of abolitionism amongst *CAM*'s readership.¹⁸

Of all of her novels, *Winona* succeeds as Hopkins' most forceful condemnation of Jim Crow culture in its use of the hero and heroine's struggle for emancipation and their participation in John Brown's abolitionist campaign to promote a similar radical reform amongst readers in response to twentieth-century forms of racial oppression. Although *Winona* was Hopkins' first and only Western, it was not the first novel that she had written that considered the symbolism of the frontier. In *Hagar's Daughter*, the frontier is figured, albeit marginally, as a space of renewal and hope for the novel's African American characters, who struggled with racism and the politics of passing in the Northeast. In *Winona*, the Kansas frontier is a more convoluted symbol for the novel's Black characters. On one hand, Winona and Judah's participation in frontier struggle is transformative because it leads to their eventual freedom from bondage. On the other hand, the West is ultimately an inaccessible space for the hero and heroine because slavery continues to exist in America. The tensions that exist between Winona and Judah's desire for freedom and the impossibility of being free on the pre-Civil War landscape reflects the uncertain and ambiguous conditions that African Americans faced in the early twentieth-century.

Unlike her other serialized novels, *Winona* contemplates the genre in which it was written. While the novel adapts conventions of the Western, it also revises others, such as the representations of civilization and savagery. In most Westerns, civilization and savagery are ideological concepts that define the relationship that the settler has with the

¹⁸ The phrase, "nadir of race relations" was originally coined by Raymond Logan in his work, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901*.

frontier. As Michael K. Johnson writes the “savage/civilized dichotomy provides a structure through which cultural or political tensions can be played out, especially as those tensions occur across racial lines” (*Black Masculinity* 8). This formula usually follows a frontier hero, often coded as a white male, as he travels into the uncultivated wilderness. The hero is initially mastered by the wilderness, forcing them to adapt to the demands of frontier life and to “regress,” Richard Slotkin writes, “into a more primitive and natural condition of life so the false values of the “metropolis” [civilization] can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted” between the individual and the frontier they inhabit (*Gunfighter Nation* 14). Intimate knowledge of the usually-coded as Other Indigenous characters allows the frontier hero to survive the ordeals he must endure. The process of conquering and overcoming the wilderness (and the people who inhabit this wilderness) eventually results in the transformation of the hero and symbolizes the triumph of Anglo-American civilization.

In *Winona* Hopkins inverts this formula by representing Colonel Titus and the institution of slavery as symbolic of the wilderness that must be conquered by Winona and Judah and their abolitionist allies. The process of conquering Titus and his proslavery forces follows the protagonists on the conventional path of “regression” into a more basic state of being (as enslaved captives). With the aid of their allies, as well as the combat skills they learned from Indigenous tribal members as children, Winona and Judah escape slavery and conquer Titus and the proslavery forces in Kansas. By inverting the traditional dichotomy between civilization and savagery, Hopkins interrogates the so-called “civilized” attitudes that underpin the Turnerian narrative.

Winona's opening passage dramatizes the conflict between civilization and savagery by portraying the arrival of Titus and Thomson to the island where Winona and Judah live with their father, White Eagle. The narrator opens the novel by describing a picturesque landscape to highlight the region's natural beauty, amidst which Buffalo is situated. The city boasts an interracial population, who live together in harmony with their natural surroundings. The narrator states that, "[m]any strange tales of romantic happenings in this mixed community of Anglo-Saxons, Indians, and Negroes might be told similar to the one I am about to relate. The world would stand aghast and in vain to find the dividing line supposed to be the natural barrier between the whites and the dark-skinned races here" (287). However, the seemingly idealized image of the city does not hide the history of displacement that by the 1850s was playing out in wars that forced Senecas further West. The narrator states that a local tribe of Senecas had recently been forced to give up "their last great reservations to the on-sweeping Anglo-Saxon" and move to North Dakota (287). Those of the tribe that remained assimilated into the settler population and converted to Christianity while "their children were sent to pale-face schools" (287). These markers of colonization anticipate the slavery forces that have moved into the region. Despite being an "anti-slavery stronghold," the narrator tells us that Buffalo has recently been made vulnerable by the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act (288). Alongside the settler population slavecatchers haunt the region and prey on any African American they can find.

Because of its proximity to Buffalo the island that Winona and Judah inhabit with their father and Senecan caregiver, Nokomis, is susceptible to such forces of violent change and transformation. The children have been brought up as Senecas by their father,

an Englishman who was adopted by the tribe after he provided medical aid to a Senecan Chief during a cholera epidemic. After White Eagle “linked his fortunes” with the Senecas, he married Winona’s mother, who has died before the beginning of the novel, and adopted Judah, the son of an enslaved woman who died on route to Canada (290). Due to their upbringing, Winona and Judah have little knowledge of their familial ties to Colonel Titus, the cousin of White Eagle. The island that has “no name” or national affiliation becomes the site of conflict between the supposed “civilized” world of Titus and the “savage” world of White Eagle and his family (294). Titus and Thomson’s arrival on the island is signalled by gunfire and the downing of an eagle which flies over the coast, a foreboding symbol of the liberties that Winona and Judah will lose once they are enslaved. Unaware that the men are slavecatchers, the children lead them to White Eagle’s cabin where the men murder him, covet his inheritance, and capture Winona and Judah.

In this scene Hopkins’ parallels the capturing of Winona and Judah to the displacement of the Seneca tribe in order to highlight a shared history of colonial violence suffered by African Americans and Indigenous peoples. Colleen O’Brien observes that “[Titus’] dishonest manipulation of the right to inherit property on a familial level mirrors the national practices of encroaching on Indian territory and promoting the Westward expansion of slavery that also took place in the 1850s (34). Hopkins parallels the enslavement of her African American protagonists with the displacement of Senecas. Both groups are represented as colonized peoples who had

witnessed their land stolen from them, were displaced, and threatened with the possibility of cultural and ethnic genocide.¹⁹

Some critics have rightly challenged this problematic premise. One such critic, Lois Brown, argues that Hopkins “does not delve as deeply as she might into issues of Native American genocide, treaty conflicts, or wars” in spite of this comparison. Brown cites the 1887 Dawes Act as an example of legislation that Hopkins likely refers to in her portrayal of Senecan land dispossession, but she does not explicitly indicate this reference directly. Instead, writes Brown, “Hopkins seems to acknowledge these contemporary histories of white incursion and Native suffering in passing, but she treats slavery most fully” (368-369). In fact, slavery is presented as a threat to Indigenous sovereignty, as the dispossession of Senecas at the beginning of the novel suggests. Hopkins ties together the struggles of African Americans and Indigenous peoples by representing them as both victims of the same colonial project. Critic Elizabeth Ammons argues that Hopkins’ parallel “between Native Americans and African American histories” links the legacies of racist and imperialist violence suffered by both groups,” however, “her text’s relation to actual people who were [Indigenous] is as problematic as, for example, that of many white authors who included representations of African Americans” (216).

¹⁹ In his autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, Love constructs a similar analogy between Black and Indigenous Westerners. When captured by the Yellow Dog’s tribe, Love announces that “there was a large percentage of colored blood in the tribe, and as I was a colored man too, they wanted to keep me” (99). However, as evidenced by the way he describes the tribe, Love saw Indigenous peoples in imperialist terms – they were categorically represented as different from African Americans. Hopkins, on the other hand, represents both Indigenous peoples and African Americans collectively as colonized peoples.

While Hopkins' comparison of the oppression of Indigenous peoples and enslaved African Americans reflects the discourses of colonialism in the early twentieth-century that positioned subjects under colonial rule in a binary relationship with colonizers, it also contends for the necessity of both races – and by extension all of the “darker races” affected by U.S. imperialism – to recognize their shared position.²⁰ Hopkins previously made comparisons between the races in her essay series, “The Darker Races of the Twentieth-Century,” in which Hopkins calls for an “alliance” between non-white peoples throughout the globe to challenge the theory that the “darker races” were inherently less civilized than white society (Dworkin 327-332). In her alliance between Indigenous and African Americans, Hopkins employs what Philip Round calls “the sign of the Native” to privilege the perspectives of the colonized and, in turn, shows the colonizers, Titus and the Southern Confederacy, as destructive forces that not only threaten to destroy the inhabitants of the land they invade, but also the landscape itself, the latter of which is shown by Hopkins' representation of Titus' plantation, Magnolia Farm.

Situated on the Kansas-Missouri Border, Magnolia Farm is a dystopia ruled by the Confederate South's ideology of racial subjugation and the exploitation of land resources for profit.²¹ Despite having markers of civilization, including a functional legal system, a booming cotton industry, and a system of property ownership, the Southern way of life, fuelled by the abuse and exploitation of African bodies, is corrupt and

²⁰ The series also features Hopkins' perspective of Indigenous Americans. See “The North American Indian – Conclusion,” in Dworkin's *Daughter of the Revolution*, 327-332.

²¹ Yet another comparison that can be made between Nat Love's *Life and Adventures* and *Winona* is how both novels link the West to the plantation. Historically, Western expansion was seen as a way to expand slavery into newly settled territories, however, this history was erased by mainstream Westerns because it was incompatible with the frontier's association with liberty. In Love's and Hopkins' texts, the insertion of the plantation space into each novel's setting is innovative because it exposes the historical linkages that white narratives tend to erase.

unnatural.²² Magnolia Farm represents the evils of the Southern Confederacy that, like Titus himself, rely on the fraudulent posture of gentility to hide its true character.²³ This is shown in the first description of the plantation, which emphasizes the interchangeability between this landscape and its natural surroundings:

A few miles out from Kansas City, Missouri State, on a pleasant plain sloping off toward a murmuring stream, a branch of the mighty river, early in the spring of 1856, stood a rambling frame house two stories high, surrounded with piazzas, over which trailed grape vines, clematis, and Virginia creepers. The air was redolent with the scent of flowers, nor needed the eye to seek far for them for the whole front of the dwelling, and even the adjoining range of wooden stables, were rendered picturesque by rich masses of roses and honeysuckle covered them and the high, strong fence that enclosed four acres of cleared ground, at the end of which the buildings stood. (316)

This passage intentionally juxtaposes the supposed romanticism of the Southern antebellum landscape to the horrors of slavery that take place on it. The “mighty” Missouri River that flows adjacent to the plantation is a symbol of the slave trade as well as the divide between the North and South. The big house, where Titus lounges on the

²² See Adam W. Sweeting, *Reading Houses and Building Books: Andrew Jackson Downing and the Architecture of Popular Antebellum Literature, 1835-1855*, 1-15 and 93-122 for more on the subject of the symbolism of the plantation landscape.

²³ Hopkins seems to purposely contest the Southern Revisionist “Lost Cause” theory using irony in this passage. She highlights the natural beauty surrounding the plantation to emphasize its unnaturalness; the nobility of the slaveowner to show the very opposite: that slavery and its supporters require a veil of gentility to guise their brutality of the institution. The “Lost Cause” theory was made popular by writers such as Thomas Dixon, author of *The Clansman* (1905), who portrayed the Confederate South as noble and just to downplay the cruelty of slavery by portraying it as a necessary institution in teaching Christianity and civilization.

piazza in the shade of the pines, “casts no shadow” on its surroundings, symbolizing the institution of slavery’s unrelenting authority over its labourers (319). O’Brien argues that these scenes depict Titus as “a casual (and notably lazy) observer of the labor and production that extracts wealth from his plantation.” This image of Titus contradicts, she continues, the “[n]ationalist rhetoric [that] evidenced the ‘natural’ superiority of the Anglo-American male through his relationship to the landscape – his ability to tame the wilderness and cultivate the “empty” space of the frontier” (O’Brien). Contrary to the Anglo-American frontier hero, Titus removes himself from directly participating in the transformation of the wilderness and draws neither vigor from the land nor cultivates it for profit, making him an unfit representation of civilization, according to Western convention.

Titus’ performance of frontier masculinity starkly contrasts to that of Judah, who displays characteristics more strongly associated with the frontier hero. On Titus’ plantation Judah is described as “a lion of a man” and his physical strength is matched by his spiritual and mental resilience: “He was a stern, silent man, who apparently, had never known boyhood” (320). Because of these traits and his ability to proficiently train and ride horses, Judah is quickly promoted to assistant overseer on the plantation and given to Thomson, who had a “reputation for pure, unadulterated ‘cussedness’ [that was] notorious in this semi-barbarous section of the country” (317). He provides Judah with his biggest trial after he discovers Judah is a skilled horse rider. Thomson, a horse tamer and trader, buys an expensive stallion from a man in Kansas City. After several attempts at breaking the horse, Thomson gives up and decides to shoot the horse. Before he can do this, Judah begs Thomson to give him a chance to break the buck on his own. Unlike

Thomson, Judah can draw from his upbringing amongst Senecas to tame the horse. Judah wrangles the horse and uses the “power of the hypnotic eye,” a technique he learned from the Senecan tribe, to calm the horse before mounting him. In front of a crowd in the stadium Judah displays:

the most daring horsemanship ever witnessed in Kansas City. Rising in his stirrups, Judah, while keeping perfect control of the animal, converted the four acres of enclosure into a circus-arena, round which the horse was forced to gallop under the sting of the whip, and in the true style of reckless Indian riding on the Western plains. (326)

After Judah wins the horse wrangling competition, Thomson becomes jealous and proceeds to have Judah “broken in” at a Kansas City prison (326). Hopkins uses this passage to elicit the double entendre of breaking a horse and the slavery era practice of “buck breaking,” which usually involved stripping, beating, and sometimes raping an enslaved African American man as punishment. Johnson writes that in this scene Judah is denied the “merit” given to Western heroes for their horse-riding skills because of the novel’s slavery plot: “if the horse-riding scene belongs to the Western, Thomson’s actions punish Judah’s generic transgressions by placing him in a scene familiar to the African American tradition – the beating of a slave at the hands of a cruel overseer” (*Black Masculinity* 124). Judah is not only denied merit by Thomson but is also subjected to torture. He is essentially made to “learn his place” in the institution of slavery. Even still, Judah never fully relents to Thomson. He endures a particularly brutal whipping without a “groan” or “murmur.” Rather than break him, the beating stirs a desire for revenge against his overseer: “every stroke of the merciless lash was engraved in his heart in

bleeding stripes that called for vengeance” (328). While Judah’s desire for revenge is justified, Hopkins makes an explicit commentary about the limitations that Black male characters face on the Western landscape that anticipates the works of Oscar Micheaux and Chester Himes.

In *Winona*, as in Oscar Micheaux’s *The Conquest* (1913) and Chester Himes’ *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), the Black male hero’s contact with the white world leads to a regression into savagery. The frequent abuses he suffers at the hands of whites are intended to emasculate, leading the Black hero to desire revenge against his oppressor and want to prove his manliness by meeting violence with violence. However, the Black male hero must prove his manliness through the opposite reaction. He must “demonstrate,” as Johnson writes, “his ability to refrain from the savage act of violence, no matter how tempting or justifiable that act might be” (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 66). Unlike white male heroes, whose acts of violence, including murder, are read as signs of his superior manliness, Black men face the possibility of being stereotyped as savage, validating the all-too-common belief in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries that Black men were naturally prone to base emotions.

Given that Hopkins wrote *Winona* at a time when African American men in popular culture were frequently depicted as “brutes” in need of taming and punishment, Hopkins prevents her hero from fully becoming this stereotype by having Winona redeem him before he can kill Thomson.²⁴ When Judah meets Thomson during battle, he corners

²⁴ White supremacist literature portraying “brute” caricatures proliferated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Charles Carroll’s *The Negro A Beast* (1901) and Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spot* (1902) were both popular at the time Hopkins was writing. Theories surrounding Black men’s natural disposition towards violence were central to the studies

him on the edge of a cliff and “smiled. It was a terrible smile and carried in it all of the pent-up suffering of two years of bodily torture and a century of lacerated manhood” (415). After Thomson begs for mercy, Judah forces him to jump off the cliff. *Winona* justifies Judah’s transgression of his civil nature by defending his actions as an “outgrowth of the ‘system’ practised upon the black race” (418). Before Judah can fully participate in acts of violence, however, he is interrupted by Winona, who discovers Thomson injured and unconscious at the base of a cliff. When Judah attempts to shoot Thomson, Winona pleads with him to practice self-restraint: “You shall not! You make yourself as vile as the *vilest* of them—our enemies” (422). Maxwell is also present at the scene and further discourages Judah from murdering Thomson. The presence of Winona and Maxwell prevents Judah from enacting revenge and redeems him from falling into a state of savagery. Thus, in redeeming Judah, Hopkins posits an alternative and more ethical resolution based on forgiveness, rather than privileging the patriarchal demand for revenge.

Hopkins’ representation of Judah is complicated by her representation of the novel’s white hero, Warren Maxwell. Instead of Judah, Maxwell, a young British lawyer-turned-abolitionist, comes to embody the novel’s strongest argument against slavery. After joining John Brown in his fight against proslavery forces in Kansas, Maxwell assists Brown in helping fugitives from slavery reach the North. It is on one of these journeys that he is captured by Thomson and the Missouri Rangers, who attempt to burn him at the stake:

of physicians, William Lee Howard and Phillip Bruce. See George M. Frederickson’s *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*.

it was determined to burn the prisoner would be a fearful example of the death that awaited the men who dared to interfere with the ‘institution.’ . . . Thomson himself carried the brand to light the pile. His eyes met Warren’s as he knelt with the blazing pine. Not a word passed between them. Presently the barrier of flame began to rise. A thousand voiced cries of brutal triumph arose – not to the skies, so vile a thing could never find the heavenly blue; it must have fallen to the regions of the lost (368).

In this passage Hopkins reinforces the brutality of the institution of slavery to show that it does not stop its reign of terror because of Maxwell’s skin colour. Rather, white supremacist terror extends to all peoples who oppose it. Like Judah, Maxwell must endure suffering at the hands of the proslavery forces. However, Maxwell is able to seek revenge against his torturers without losing his “civil nature,” writes Johnson:

Whereas Hopkins feels she must remind the reader of Judah’s link to the greater cause, she describes Maxwell’s actions only in terms of personal vengeance.

“Whiteness,” Patterson observes, allows Maxwell “the privilege of less self-restraint” . . . Maxwell can act violently without seriously threatening his essentially civil nature. (Johnson, quoting Patterson, 141)

Unlike Judah, Maxwell can fully transform into a frontier hero and is rewarded as such with the love of Winona. Although both men share a love for Winona, Maxwell ultimately wins her affections. Brown writes “Maxwell’s whiteness, ancestry, and professional credentials enable him to enjoy an easy usurpation of an untutored man of African descent” (379). Maxwell possesses a privileged heritage that Judah does not and because of this is rewarded for his heroism. Judah’s awareness of Maxwell’s privilege

leads him to conclude that the “white man has the advantage in all things. Is it worth while struggling against such forces?” (357). Judah’s resentment, the novel explains, is his own freedom: “if [he and Winona] had remained together in slavery, she would have been not one whit above him, but freedom which he had sighed had already brought its cares, its duties, its self-abnegation.” Judah resolves to stay loyal to “White Eagle’s trust.” Judah’s resolve to stay loyal to White Eagle’s trust reveals the limitations his character faces. While a free man now, he is inevitably tied to the inheritance of his adoptive father, a white man from an aristocratic class. Judah’s fate in the novel parallels Winona’s, who is likewise restricted from developing full agency in the novel.

Winona: Frontier Hero or Sentimental Stereotype?

The volatility of the pre-Civil War frontier makes the landscape unsafe for both African American protagonists. Like Judah, Winona is a skilled survivalist who can ride horses, shoot, and fight like any frontiersman. In John Brown’s camp, she is promoted by Brown to the role of leader of the home guard during the battle of “Bleeding Kansas.” Yet, she must navigate this volatile landscape as an African American woman. As Blake Allmendinger writes, “for the African American heroine, the West is not a safe haven, but a place where kidnappings, rescues, hidings, abductions, border crossings, ambushes, and raids occur constantly. Although Winona is mobile, she is never technically free – from pursuit by her enemies, assaults on her virtue, or fears for her future” (37). Like Hopkins’ sentimental heroine in *Contending Forces*, Sappho Clark, Winona is portrayed through much of the novel as “a tragic mulatta,” who is rendered complicit to the racial and sexual caste systems that control the landscape. After her mother dies, Winona is left with little to no knowledge of her African American ancestry. Following enslavement,

Winona is groomed by Titus, who rapes her before she is rescued by Maxwell and transferred to John Brown's camp, where she is placed under the guardianship of Brown. Winona's experiences with sexual violence are shown to blame the "moral degeneracy" of the South on slaveowner's sexual depravity, rather than on Black enslaved women, who were labelled Jezebels.²⁵ In turn, the novel positions Winona as "redeemable" because she is the victim of a licentious slave owner. Her redeemability enables her eventual marriage to Maxwell as well as a successful resolution to the novel's marriage plot.

The marriage plot in the novel has led some critics to question whether Winona is only redeemed by her marriage to a "good" white man. Although Winona is presented as a strong and independent character, her freedom ultimately rests on the kindness of white characters and this "decenters the heroine's prominence," writes Claudia Tate. Tate argues that this was a common strategy used in all of Hopkins' novels to present the female protagonist as sympathetic: "Both Jewel [from *Hagar's Daughter*] and Winona display inordinate courage, but in each case their fortitude is directed only toward the men they love. Hence these two heroines, in addition to *Of One Blood's* Dianthe Lusk, abandon the woman-centered discourse of female development" (208). Hopkins relies on this convention in her construction of Winona. The "incredibly virtuous but almost invisible heroine" is "a staple in the novel" (216). Yet, unlike white Western heroines,

²⁵ As Carby writes, Hopkins' "use of mulatto figures engaged with the discourse of social Darwinism, undermining the tenets of "pure" blood and "pure" race as mythological, and implicitly exposed the absurdity of theories regarding the total separation of the races" See *Reconstructing Womanhood* for full analysis and Hopkins' article, "The Growth of the Social Evil amongst All Classes and Races in America" in Dworkin's *Daughter of the Revolution*, 201-207, where she discusses the social implications of being mixed-race for African American men and women.

Winona is never able to escape the bonds of slavery and exploitation. By agreeing to marry Maxwell, she must accept her position as an object of exchange between (mostly white) men in the novel, who limit her capacity to transform into a heroine that can claim an identity outside of the constructs of True Womanhood.²⁶ Even in John Brown's camp, she is prevented from taking an active role. Instead, she is placed under the "patriarchal care" of the abolitionist leader, who along with other men in the camp, regard her with patronizing affection: "Winona was quartered in John Brown's domicile. With her story and her beauty, she was an object of uncommon interest to all the camp. She became Captain Brown's special care and the rugged Puritan unbent to spoil and pet the 'pretty squaw,' as he delighted to call her" (375). In both settings – the plantation and John Brown's camp – Winona is domesticated as an "object of uncommon interest" to white men, who strive to either exploit (Titus) or preserve (Brown, Maxwell) her womanhood for their own purposes.

On the one occasion she attempts to escape all restriction by briefly returning to the wilderness, Winona is still constrained by expectations of white patriarchal society. When the news of Maxwell's capture by the proslavery forces reaches the camp, Brown seeks counsel with the men, "while the women listened but did not intrude with their opinions" (380). After the council, Winona flees to the woods that border the camp: "some impulse came over her to visit the wild place and drove her to a hole under the bluff. It was necessary to descend to find it. Presently she was in tunnel which led into a

²⁶ The conditions that Winona is subject to in the novel reflect the conventions of sentimental novels by African American women, in which the "tragic mulatta" is 'saved' by a white man from being enslaved again. A similar plot can be found in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), in which Iola initially falls in love with a white suitor, who helps her recover from her past.

cavern. She made herself a divan of dried moss and flung herself down at full length to think” (372). In this interior space where “no thought of racial or social barriers” cross her mind, Winona can dwell in her own thoughts. She ponders Maxwell’s fate and prays for his return. Jill Bergman argues that in this space Winona experiences a metaphorical rebirth. When Winona enters the “womb-like” cavern she is allowed to temporarily return to a “pre-oedipal” world of her “primal life”: “the imagery in this scene indicates her success in finding a return to the Mother whose absence she has felt since leaving her pre-oedipal home in Buffalo” (105). Winona returns to a time when she was free of the constraints of the identities that she must occupy in the new world as a racially- and sexually marked woman. Soon after emerging from the cavern, she convinces Brown to let her aid him in rescuing Maxwell, which leads to another transgression, this time through the physical, rather than psychological, transformation, of her gender. Winona disguises herself as Allen Pinks, a young man, to help Brown rescue Maxwell from prison, where he has been sent by proslavery forces after they caught him transporting fugitives from slavery to Canada.

The sexual disguise of female characters is a common convention in Westerns.²⁷ Western women who disguised themselves as men could participate in heroic activity that was almost exclusively reserved for men – gunfighting, horse riding, and hunting – as well as exhibit behaviour that would have been seen as unnatural and unrefined. Winona’s masculine disguise serves a different function in this instance, as a cover for her to rescue her beloved. Furthermore, although Winona’s disguise allows her to blend in with the other prisoners, she still faces the risk of physical and sexual assault in the

²⁷ See Henry Nash Smith's discussion of female disguise in the chapter, "The Dime Novel Heroine," in *Virgin Land*, 112-122.

prison. The narrator describes that in the prison “infamous outrages were enacted on free men of color,” including rape (384). Aware of this, Winona makes herself useful by nursing the sick and doing chores to gain the favour of the guards. “Very soon,” the narrator describes, “Allen Pinks was a great favourite and allowed many privileges; hearing of Maxwell’s illness, he asked the jailer if he could nurse him, and the jailer was more than glad to have him do it” (387). In disguise, Winona disrupts categories of race and gender that up until this point in the novel had been strictly defined for her by other people. By doing so, she can subvert these categories and become the rescuer of the helpless Maxwell. Yet, this disruption is temporary and, even in disguise, Winona still occupies a traditionally feminine role (nurse) and is also threatened with the possibility of rape, as well as the risk of being enslaved again. Although her bravery is rewarded by Brown, who appoints her as the leader of the camp’s home guard, Winona remains a passive character compared to Maxwell and Judah, who both experience character arcs that are transformative.

Winona is essentially returned to her state of ideal womanhood at the end by rendering her passive and having her trials rewarded with marriage to Maxwell. However, the novel does not end with marriage. Rather, Tate writes, “Hopkins's last discursive displacement at the very end of the work exchanges the conventional happy ending of marriage with explicit confidence in the approach of freedom” (204). Both characters never actually experience this freedom on the American landscape. After the battle for Kansas, they leave with Maxwell for Canada and eventually move overseas to England:

[Winona and Maxwell] made no plans for the future. What necessity was there of making plans for the future? They knew what the future would be. They loved each other; they would marry sooner or later, after they reached England, with the sanction of her grandfather, old Lord George, that was certain. American caste prejudice could not touch them in their home beyond the sea. (435)

Winona's and Judah's migration to England at the end of the novel is a common convention in African American literature.²⁸ In the Western, however, the journey back East usually symbolizes a return to racially-coded urban spaces (i.e. Chicago and Harlem). In *Winona* the protagonists' emigration to their father's homeland, England, is a departure from this convention. Brown has interpreted this ending as a "reversal of the Middle Passage," where the once-oppressed protagonists become powerful noble figures in a nation that had once colonized them (Brown 382). In England, Judah is rewarded for his bravery and courage: "he was knighted; had honors and wealth heaped upon him, and finally married into one of the best families of the realm" (435). Likewise, Winona is given a similar reward for her service: "all worshipped the last beautiful representative of an ancient family. The premature, crushing experiences of her young girlhood, its shocks and shameful surprises were not without good fruit. She was a noble woman" (435). Hopkins' 'fairy tale' ending for her protagonists offers them redemption for their trials by rewarding them with acceptance into white society; however, some scholars have criticized the novel's conclusion as a reversion back to the "sentimental ethic" that

²⁸ This convention can be found in the works of William Wells Brown as well as other African American writers who emigrated to England because they believed they were out of the reach of slavery. See *William Wells Brown: Clotel and Other Works*.

departs from Hopkins' previous novels, especially *Contending Forces*, a novel that endorses a revitalization of Black women's political action (Brown, Carby).

Similar to *Winona*, *Contending Forces* romanticizes the British empire. The lingering tensions between *Winona*'s endorsement of radical abolitionism and its conclusion ultimately questions whether the novel's ending legitimizes the struggles that Hopkins conveys as so necessary in the fight for emancipation throughout the novel. Martha Patterson states "the fact that [Winona] returns to England with Maxwell seems to signify the novel's renunciation of the John Brown ethic in favor of the dominant sentimental ethic of disengagement shows that the rewards of active engagement seem to be the promise of blissful disengagement" (455).

However, within the frameworks of the Western genre, it is arguable that the trajectories of the protagonists' respective journeys at the end of the novel makes an important statement about the limitations that the West offers Winona and Judah. Even though Kansas is a free state by the end of the novel, Winona and Judah are still vulnerable to being enslaved again and this reflects Kansas' troubled history with civil rights. In spite of its history as a racial "promised land," Kansas' legacy was one of false hope and failed prospects for African Americans when Hopkins was writing *Winona*.²⁹ After Reconstruction, the state witnessed a rise in anti-Black violence. As a report published in the *CAM* months before *Winona* was serialized attests, African Americans were often unjustly punished after being falsely accused of crimes they did not commit.

²⁹ During the Exodus (1878-1879) Kansas was touted as a "promised land" for African Americans leaving the South. Although African Americans initially found prosperity in Kansas, they eventually faced economic hardship and political inequity. More on the history on the Exoduster Movement can be found in Neil Irvin Painter's *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*.

The article details the lynching of a Black man versus the imprisonment of white men, both of whom were accused of the same crime. As the article reads: “the verdicts go to show that there are two kinds of law in this land of the ‘free,’ one for the white man and another for the black” (2.4. 314-315). Hopkins’ knowledge of such events likely influenced her portrayal of the Kansas frontier in *Winona*.

Although her protagonists leave the country, Hopkins concludes her novel by evoking the importance of African Americans on the landscape through the prophetic voice of Aunt Vinnie, a Black cook in the hotel of Edward Maybee, one of the novel’s abolitionists. Aunt Vinnie’s sermon predicts the end of slavery, but its message also resonates with Hopkins’ readers. The Black maternal figure, here represented as an ethereal symbol of Black folklore wisdom and prophecy, ends the novel with hope for a brighter day. In her sermon, Aunt Vinnie recites the story of “Winona’s strange fortunes” to curious neighbours both “white and black.” She merges political commentary and prophecy in her sermon: “Glory to God, we’s boun’ to be free. Dar’s dat girl, she got black blood nuff in her to put her on de block in this forsaken country, but over dar she’s a lady with de top crus’ of de crus.’ Somethin’s gwine happen” (436).³⁰ Aunt Vinnie realizes the possibility of her own freedom through Winona’s tale. The following sermon blends African American folklore with a message of freedom. An elderly white woman “declared she had been lifted out of her bed three times last night.” A Black listener

³⁰ In *The Motherless Child in the Novels of Pauline Hopkins*, Jill Bergman writes that “Hopkins imbues the novel’s troubling conclusion with an element of hope” using Aunt Vinnie, who speaks in “the folk language of African American culture, pointing to the extant hope of reclaiming the African National Mother” (128-129). Bergman’s analysis of this passage argues that Aunt Vinnie’s message of hope is intended for Hopkins’ *CAM* readers. By deliberately returning the novel to the African American folkloric tradition, Hopkins draws attention to the significance of memory and history as tools of resistance for African Americans at the turn-of-the-twentieth century.

muses that “de mule kicked me three times dis morning an’ he never did dat afore in his life.” A third listener, Tavis, states “a rabbit run across my path twice comin’ through de graveyard las’ Sunday night” (436). The sermon highlights the importance of African American folklore and epistemology to the survival of the race while also signalling the roles of domestic and communal storytelling in the continuation of African heritage.³¹ Inspired by the legacies of women who fought for the abolition of slavery both from the home and in the public, Hopkins ends the novel with the Black maternal figure – a figure that is otherwise absent in *Winona*. Aunt Vinnie draws the novel to a close with a song:

Ole Satan’s mad, an’ I’m glad
Send dem angels down.
He missed the soul he thought he had,
O send dem angels down.
Dis is de year of Jubilee,
Send dem angels down.
De Lord has come to set us free,
O’, send dem angels down (437).

Hopkins concludes *Winona* by turning to the trusted wisdom of folk culture, fundamental to the African American tradition of oral storytelling. The significance of this is two-fold.

³¹ Lois Brown’s analysis reveals that Aunt Vinnie’s sermon was almost a direct reproduction of a similar sermon in William Wells Brown’s *My Southern Home; or, The South and its People* (1880). Hopkins does signal this by sectioning off the excerpt from the rest of the page; however, the sermon, like other copied material in *Winona*, is not cited or referenced otherwise. Brown argues that Hopkins’ reproduction of other author’s works is an example of the “creative license” she took in her writing that would be considered plagiarism by today’s standards yet was a conventional practice of authors of her time. See Brown, *Black Daughter of the Revolution*, 384-385.

For one, as Carla Peterson writes, by privileging the voice of the Black maternal figure, Hopkins “turns back to question the authority of the white founding father” (49). The Black maternal figure, traditionally associated with the home, folk, wisdom, and Mother Africa, is transformed into a symbol of hope in the end. Aunt Vinnie symbolizes the authority within and importance of African American cultural knowledge to a community whose histories had been deliberately erased by slavery. Also, Aunt Vinnie inspires hope through her message to early twentieth-century readers, representing the significance of African American cultural knowledge as a tool of resistance and inspiration for the present. Her sermon echoes the pedagogic and political intent of Hopkins’ fiction – that is, to draw upon nascent African American histories in story and use them to inspire social change for an early twentieth-century African American readership who were witnessing the re-emergence of the Southern Confederacy at the nadir. Aunt Vinnie’s presence, Brown asserts, “haunts the margins” of the novel because she represents the atemporality of Black history in America. The ending serves to resignify the importance of the African American presence in the United States. “It is through Aunt Vinnie that Hopkins ultimately achieves the racial authority that she could not realize in Judah, the most manly and capable of original characters that she would ever create,” states Brown (385). Thus, in a novel that privileges white male versions of heroism, Aunt Vinnie’s presence at the end of *Winona* insists that the value and power of African American women cannot be overlooked.

Coda: African American Western Fiction at the Turn-of-the-Twentieth Century

Winona forecasts a long line of Black Westerns that would transform the traditional Western into an African American story, anticipating the likes of Nat Love

and Oscar Micheaux. Hopkins' revisionary approach to Western history show how African American authors of the early twentieth-century were questioning the frontier promise and the ways in which this promise can be adapted in fiction to reflect the twentieth century political and social conditions of African Americans. While Hopkins employs Western conventions to promote a philosophy of agitation and protest through her protagonists, she also relies on others that complicate this message, particularly in her representation of Indigeneity and womanhood. Likewise, while her account of abolitionist insurrection during the battle of Bleeding Kansas shows readers that progress is possible through protest, the removal of her hero and heroine from the American landscape in the end of the novel ultimately avoids accounting for the issue of Indigenous displacement and colonization. Hopkins subsumes these issues into her novel's portrayal of slavery, replicating the colonial frameworks of the Western by implying that African Americans will become the next 'vanishing' race if slavery persists. The parallel made between Black and Indigenous experiences with oppression reflects the limited discursive choices Hopkins could make in the Western genre.

Chapter 3:

Writing Himself into Myth: Nat Love and the Making of a Black Western Icon

Although African American life in the West had been represented in the periodical contributions of Jennie Carter and Pauline Hopkins' fiction by the early twentieth-century, no Black author had yet to publish a full-length autobiography of their experiences on the frontier until Nat Love published *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick"* (1907). Similar to Hopkins' *Winona*, in his autobiography Love emphasizes the interplay between motifs specific to the African American literary tradition and motifs common to the Dime Western. He represents the frontier as a place where "a man's work was to be done, and a man's life to be lived," where he is able to earn the name "Deadwood Dick," bestowed on him for his exceptional roping and riding skills, and where race does not restrict him from becoming "one of the leading cowboys of the West" (155, 118). His successful assimilation into frontier society runs parallel to Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901), which details Washington's assimilation into society through hard work and merit.

Love's assimilation into frontier society has been the focus of recent critical attention. During the Western section of Love's autobiography there are few verbal references to his racial identity, leaving some critics to question if Love chose to remain silent on aspects of his life that were incongruent with the expected role of a cowboy, such as the racism and discrimination he may have faced on the range (Speirs, Dodge). From another angle, however, these "silences" or verbal omissions can be read as strategic in that they allow Love to insert himself into a generic space (the frontier setting) that traditionally excludes African American subjects. More specifically, I argue,

they allow Love to rely on the visual plane (the illustrations and portraits) to signify his Blackness in the Western setting and, in turn, avoid racial stereotypes inherited in the textual language of Blackness.

In order to investigate this claim, I examine the complex interplay between the written and visual texts -- more specifically, between the textual silences and visual presences of Love's Blackness as they are presented in his autobiography. The first section of my chapter performs a close reading of *The Life and Adventures* to examine how Love constructs an autobiographical self in the written text. I follow this reading with an extended discussion of the portraits and illustrations of Love that are interspersed throughout his autobiography. An analysis of the written and visual modes of storytelling in Love's autobiography allows me to show the ways he incorporates his African American identity into the Western.

Up from Slavery to the "Wild and Woolly West"

The full title of Love's narrative is *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick," By Himself: A True History of Slavery Days, Life on the Great Cattle Ranges and on the Plains of the "Wild and Woolly" West, Based on Facts, and Personal Experiences of the Author*. As the lengthy subtitle promises, only a short discussion on slavery is given: of the twenty-two chapters in the book, the first five describe Love's childhood in slavery and his adolescence after Emancipation. These chapters are balanced with the final five that describe Love's life as a Pullman Porter. The central twelve chapters depict Love's more than twenty years as a cowboy.

During his years as an enslaved boy and adolescence as a sharecropper, Love openly identifies as African American in the text, but once he makes his transition from boy to man, marked by his departure from home and independence from the domestic space, he does not provide any verbal references to his race. Yet, he does not try to pass as white either – the photographs and illustrations make this impossible. Instead, these verbal omissions (or “silences”) are a strategy that Love uses to present himself as “one of the boys,” a phrase he frequently uses to denote his bond with other cowboys.³² In the first part of his autobiography, Love displays his awareness of the limitations society imposes on African Americans. That is to say, he is conscious of his place within America’s social hierarchy, and his ability to move beyond those societal boundaries is an act of the literary imagination that challenges readers’ perceptions of these boundaries. In doing so, Love provides a model for Black male self-representation in the Western that challenges the parameters of racial representation in the genre.

Before turning to the Western components of *The Life and Adventures*, I want to first examine the elements of the text that place it within the African American literary tradition. The first five chapters of Love’s autobiography feature forms familiar to readers of early Black autobiography and suggests Love’s consciousness of African American writing, especially of the slave narrative. In the preface, he follows the structural models of the likes of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Wells Brown through a one-page statement that is meant to verify his work as authentic. In this statement, he assures readers that

³² The term “strategic silences” was used in Kenneth’s Speirs’ article, “Writing Self (Effacingly): E-race-d Presences in The Life and Adventures of Nat Love.”

every event chronicled in this history is based on facts, and my personal experiences, of more than fifty years of an unusually adventurous life I have tried to record events simply as they are, without attempting to varnish over the bad spots or draw on my imagination to fill out a chapter at the cost of the truth. It has been my aim to record things just as they happened, believing they will prove of greater interest thereby; and if I am able to add to the interest and enjoyment of a single reader, I will consider myself well repaid for the time and labor of preparing this history. (1)

The preface has two purposes, one to present Love's autobiography as an authentic text, and two, to perform a service, following the tradition of prefatory letters that accompanied slave narratives. The purpose of these introductory remarks in slave narratives was to authenticate the narrative which was to follow. In the case of slave narratives, the authenticating preface was also a means to differentiate them from fictionalized slave biographies which were popular at the time. Paradoxically enough, by prefacing the narratives, white abolitionists were in fact authorizing the account, thereby placing the slave author in a subordinate position. Interestingly, Love undermines this tradition somewhat by attesting to the truth of his own narrative.

In the chapters that follow Love continues to emulate the conventions of slave narratives in both content and intent, further placing his autobiography within the tradition of African American letters. He denounces slavery as cruel and inhumane through descriptions of his own personal humiliations, as well as those suffered by others. At the time Love published his autobiography, slavery had been abolished for over forty years. Yet, much like Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901), which

was published six years prior to Love's narrative, the opening chapters of *The Life and Adventures* briefly describe the destitute conditions faced by African Americans in the South during slavery and the postbellum period. Unlike Washington, however, Love does not find any redeeming value behind slavery and its aftermath. Although he recalls having a "kind and indulgent" master, his discussions of the cruelty of slave owners supports the negative portrayals in Douglass's *Narrative*. Love echoes Douglass when he refers to slave owners as "perfect devils in human form, men who delighted in torturing the black human beings," demonstrating his knowledge of slave narrative conventions (11).

Similarly, in the tradition of the slave narrative Love learns to read and write against the wishes of his master. Although no schools are available, his father teaches his children "our ABCs" when winter weather prevents them from working on the farm (18). While Love does not reveal how his father learned to read, he notes the inability of institutionalized slavery to continue if enslaved peoples were educated (13, 15). Although his education is seemingly scant, literacy enables Love to claim authorship of his text, an important strategy also used by writers of slave narratives. He further establishes his authorship by elaborating on the many characteristics that he develops at an early age. For instance, Love recounts getting his first job and trying to save up enough money to purchase his mother new clothes. However, when he goes to collect his salary, Love realizes his employer short-changed him:

When at last the month was over he gave me fifty cents, claiming I had drawn my wages during the month. I knew that was not so. I also knew I had a balance coming to me and told him so. But he denied it and the result was that we had a

fight. I hit him in the head with a rock and nearly killed him after which I felt better. (24)

Love's description of his confrontation with his employer signifies his entrance into manhood because it displays his fighting skills. He writes that his predicament elicits the sympathy of the storeowner, Mr. Graves, who proceeds to sell him garments for his mother for half price (24). Thus, like the hero that he is setting himself up to be, Love is able to commit violent acts without punishment or penance. His showdown with his employer is the beginning of his journey towards manhood.

Displaying his fighting skills is also a precursor of other qualities Love develops while enslaved that contribute to his Western identity. One of these skills is horsemanship. When Love is hired by a local rancher, Mr. Williams, to work on his farm, he is offered ten cents for every horse he can break. His aptitude for breaking horses proves lucrative and one day Mr. Williams offers Love twenty-five cents to break a wild colt. No sooner after Love mounts the horse does it start to gallop frantically, almost throwing him off before he gains control and breaks the horse. Love's natural affinity for horsemanship eventually wins him a prize stallion, which he sells to a man for fifty dollars to support his family. Armed with cowboy skills such as horse-breaking and freed from familial responsibilities after the arrival of his uncle, Love sets out to "see more of the world" and ends up in Dodge City, Kansas, where his Western adventure begins (37).

After venturing West, Love drops all verbal references to his race. "Such a move suggests," writes Georgina Dodge, "that after leaving the slave-holding, segregated South, the black body is no longer constrained by the traditions of established African-American narratives, nor, according to Love, by social conditions relegating blacks to

secondary citizenship” (119). While he does note that he encounters Black cowboys and mixed-race Mexican Americans, he does not emphasize a shared racial identity. Love’s sudden omission of these references indicates that he no longer sees his Blackness as central to the identity he is trying to construct in the written text. Instead, Love’s text focuses on his assimilation into his cowboy outfit.

Love’s initiation into his cowboy outfit is presented as a series of tests. His first assignment as a cowboy is to ride old “Good Eye,” a wild horse. Knowing the dangers associated with the task, a fellow Black cowboy, Bronco Jim, offers Love a few clues about the horse. He warns that Good Eye pitched quite a bit, but in traditional heroic fashion, Love expresses confidence that he can master the task. As a reward for successfully breaking the horse, he becomes the owner of “a new saddle, bridle, and a fine 45 Colt revolver,” as well as a new name, “Red River Dick,” given to him by the leader of the outfit (41). The new name is symbolic of his exceptional qualities, validating his merit amongst the men, and thus enables Love, writes Johnson, “to represent his experiences as evidence of Washington’s great law – that merit demonstrated through useful work will enable individual Black men to transcend racial barriers” (*Black Masculinity* 107). However, while Washington’s transformation proceeds at a slow and steady pace, Love’s progress occurs rapidly, through one initiation after the other. After passing the first test, Love completes his transformation into a cowboy by entering into a battle with a local Indigenous tribe, which further facilitates his assimilation into the cowboy outfit. “The presence of a racialized enemy creates a homosocial bond between Love and the other men,” explains Michael K. Johnson, “and violence enables him to enjoy an identity usually reserved for white men – to take part in

(to paraphrase Eve Sedgwick) ‘white men’s relations with other white men’” (*Black Masculinity* 110). This bond is further reinforced by Love’s use of racial epithets against Indigenous enemies. He calls them “red devils,” “demons,” and “savages” throughout the text, imitating colonial representations of the racialized other (42, 65, 57). This language also functions to cement Love’s dominant form of masculinity. While Love is racialized himself, by imitating the colonial language of frontier narratives, he is able to divert attention from his own marginality in order to fit in with his cowboy outfit.

The climax of Love’s story occurs in 1876 when he wins the title “Deadwood Dick” during a roping contest in South Dakota, “after I had proven myself worthy to carry it, and after I had defeated all comers in riding, roping, and shooting, and I have always carried the name with honor since that time” (97). Unlike “Red River Dick,” this new name signifies a special accomplishment because he defeats the “best man of the West” in order to earn it (97). Whereas “Red River Dick” was given to him by the boss of his cowboy outfit, “Deadwood Dick” has more populist connotations, as it was given to him by the people of Deadwood, and the name formalizes the victory he had won. The name further cements Love’s successful assimilation into the dominant culture and provides him with a Western literary identity through which to assert the rest of his story.

The Deadwood Dick of literary fame was the central character in a series of novels published by Beadle's Half Dime Library. but there is uncertainty over whether or not Love was the actual inspiration for the character or adopted the name to market his autobiography.³³ Wheeler’s first novel, *Deadwood Dick: The Prince of the Road, or the*

³³ In *The Negro Cowboys* (1965), Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones speculate that Love’s story of the acquisition of his name may be part of the larger hyperbole found throughout his narrative. They note, “Love said that in 1875, he ‘was known all over the cattle country as Red River Dick’

Black Rider of the Black Hills (1877), was published approximately a year after Love won the contest at Deadwood (July 4th, 1876). This suggests that Wheeler may have drawn on Love's fame as an inspiration for his hero. The Dime Novel gives some indication that this was the case. Although Wheeler's character is written as white, he is initially presented as "a figure in black, who wore a mask," which are potential references to the masking worn by minstrel actors or even to his skin colour. The following description reinforces this speculation:

[Deadwood Dick] wore a broad black hat that was slouched down over his eyes; he wore a thick black veil over the upper portion of his face, through the eye-holes of which there gleamed a pair of orbs of piercing intensity . . . The "Black Rider," he might have been justly termed, for his thoroughbred steed was as black as coal. ("Deadwood Dick" 280)

However, if these descriptions are read as more than just accessories for disguise, they can be understood as metaphors for the tensions between racial presence and absence in the narrative. Susan Scheckel argues that Love's claim of the famous cowboy mantle is arguably a self-reflexive appropriation of the convention of disguise found in Wheeler's novel. Specifically, she writes, this appropriation can be considered an act of "racial ventriloquism" that allows Love to both assimilate into character while also retaining his racial identity. She explains,

and he added that 'many cattle kings of the West as well as scores of bad men all over the western country have at some time or another had good reason to remember the name Red River Dick.' Perhaps. But it is remarkable that none of these rather articulate men did remember. The cattlemen for whom [Love] claimed to have worked for do not appear in the records, and none of the cowboys he worked with seemed to have ridden with other crews" (193). While not questioning Love's autobiography as a whole, Durham and Jones suspect the veracity of any of Love's particular yarns.

Eric Lott has described the blackface performer as ‘a perfect metaphor for one culture's ventriloquial self-expression through the art forms of someone else's’ (17). What separates such ventriloquism from passing is the emphasis upon artifice in the former. The goal of passing is to appear to be of another race; the goal of racial ventriloquism is to display artistic mastery over the other's racial traits while retaining one's own racial identity. By demonstrating his ability to embody the traits associated with white Western heroes while keeping visible signs of his blackness ever present before the eyes of readers (through the book's numerous illustrations and metaphors), Love accomplishes such mastery. (232)

Hence, Love's claim to Deadwood Dick's legacy is not an act of literary passing, but rather a representational strategy used to cleverly insert his identity into the otherwise rigid racial dichotomy of the Western genre.

Furthermore, through Wheeler's character Love is able to use the sensationalized image of the legendary cowboy as a model for the rest of his story. Early Dime Westerns made it more or less implicit that hero-types were fictionalized, an exaggeration of the characteristics first found in Cooper's Leatherstockings tales. However, as Henry Nash Smith observes, the popularization of Western heroes in the second half of the century (notably, Buffalo Bill) provided a degree of verisimilitude wherein the “popular imagination proved powerful enough to shape a man in its own image” (114). By casting himself as the famed outlaw, Love stylizes his narrative with cultural significance of this archetype that would not have seemed remiss during a time when the Western was refashioned for new audiences in both print and early cinema of the twentieth-century.

One of the most important moments that emulates the Deadwood Dick dime series is when Love is captured by the Yellow Dog tribe. This is the only scene in the Western section where Love mentions his race. He writes that the tribe spared him because they were “composed largely of half-breeds and there was a large percentage of colored blood in the tribe, and as I was a colored man myself they wanted to keep me, as they thought I was too good a man to die” (99). In this instance, Love’s race is a device that he uses to justify surviving the capture. Because he is “colored” the tribe decides to adopt him as one of their own. They pierce his ears, teach him a war dance, and rename him “Buffalo Papoose.” They also heal Love’s wounds and teach him their “mode of warfare” (104). However, Love’s assimilation into the tribe is only temporary. He uses the skills they provide him to escape and, while he gains a new appreciation for the Indigenous “enemy,” Love still maintains his role as the archetypal hero by assuring the reader “every man who died at my hands was either seeking my life or died in open warfare, when it was a case of killing or of being killed” (105). Thus, in spite of recognizing that he and the tribe are both racialized, Love ultimately acts on behalf of the dominant culture that enables his sense of personal freedom while collectively denying such freedom to other racialized peoples.

The end of Love’s cowboy career is marked by a final act of transformation. Upon leaving the frontier life, he gets married and becomes a Pullman Porter. The porter life affords him the ability to travel but also relegates him to a position of service where he is expected to obey his superiors. At first, Love finds porter duties to be frustrating, especially when it comes to being friendly to passengers. As he soon discovers, his friendliness is rewarded through tips, and Love willingly complies in order to earn more

money. However, he also discovers that his treatment of passengers is watched by special agents, employed by the superintendent, to report on the service passengers receive from porters. In response, Love governs himself accordingly and eventually earns more tips for his behaviour.

In contrast to the figure of the cowboy he embodied on the frontier, Love's duty as a porter is one of accepting his limitations, being controlled, and seeking the favour of white passengers and superiors on the train. He never complains about racism nor is indignant about his new position. According to Dodge, this is because his porter career serves the greater purpose of his narrative:

Love's reticence to discuss racism is congruent with the self-image that he seeks to project throughout the entire narrative. To depict himself as a victim of racism – especially as an injured party with no recourse to a satisfactory resolution – would contradict the particularly masculine brand of courage that Love claims from the very beginning of the autobiography. (120-121)

Love's service on the train parallels his "duty" as a cowboy, to protect and serve the greater project of Western expansion. However, while the train service keeps Love mobile, he is no longer in control of his movement. In this position of servitude, Love can only claim the agency that whites grant him. Therefore, writes Johnson, "his knowledge of the landscape is no longer essential to his job, and his perspective is reduced to that of a tourist" (*Black Masculinity* 116). Nevertheless, Love describes his porter role within the constructs of Western identity, that is, as a job that ultimately serves to expand the frontier.

In the concluding chapter of *The Life and Adventures* Love reflects upon the “[d]eeds that stamped the men of the Western plains as men worthy to be called men, and while not many of them would shine particularly in the polite society of today, yet they did shine big and bright... at a time when men lived and died for a principle, and in the line of duty” (155). In the long Western section of his narrative, Love did include himself among those who shone forth as “worthy to be called men.” The common language suggests that his present position is a continuation of his heroic story. The language is layered when one considers that Love, as a porter, no longer embodies the Western masculinity and heroism to which he pays tribute. However, the connection between Love as a Pullman Porter and “Deadwood Dick” becomes clearer when one considers the list of heroic Westerners he includes in his final dedication. The first one is Buffalo Bill Cody, who Love describes as a “cowboy, ranger, hunter, scout, and showman” (156). Evidenced by Love’s description, Cody’s commodification as a showman does not erase his other accomplishments. The famous Frank James is also included. Love notes that James is “en-route to the coast with his theatrical company” and this underscores the extent to which Love’s heroic vision of the West is self-consciously produced by his association with other cowboys. Love places himself in a tradition of men who ‘made’ history not only through their actions but, even more importantly, through their allegiance to a shared ideology that supported Western expansion.

The final tribute that Love pays to “these men of action” is a lament for the bygone days of freedom that the frontier offered. He once again acknowledges the separation between the East and West (the civilized and the frontier) by plugging into the “vanished world” trope popularized by Owen Wister (xxxix):

The wild and free life. The boundless plains. The countless thousands of long horn steers, the wild fleet footed mustangs. The buffalo and other game, the Indians, the delight of living, and the fights against death that caused every nerve to tingle, and the everyday communion of men whose minds were as broad as the plains they roamed, and whose creed was every man for himself and every friend for each other, and with each other till the end. (162)

While Love laments the passing of a time gone by in this tribute, he does not explicitly mention or protest against the racial politics that contributed as much to the loss of his freedom and identity as the closing of the frontier. Instead, his final tribute to frontier life once again serves to instill him into a mythology that celebrates masculine camaraderie. Although Love makes it clear in the written text that African Americans participated in frontier life, he does not acknowledge that they were relegated into subordinate positions to protect white land and property. The written text, however, only tells one side of the story in *The Life and Adventures*. Love also includes a series of portraits and sketches throughout his autobiography that serve to reimagine a new racialized image within the Western for his readers.

Reimagining the Racialized Self in the Visual Texts of *The Life and Adventures*

To get a better grasp of Love's complexly negotiated position to the reader/viewer in *The Life and Adventures*, it is necessary to turn to the visual texts interspersed throughout the narrative. In these texts Love's public self is vividly displayed. The portraits and illustrations demonstrate his awareness of the representational power of the visual – its role in the crafting of a literary persona – even as he recognizes the staged artifice of representational practice such as photography. If the reader not only reads but

also produces textual and photographic meaning from the images, they can be instructed in new ways of understanding Love's racialized self.

In *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (2000). Deborah Willis argues that photography was a central instrument by which African Americans could disprove stereotypes created by whites. She writes that "photography "offered a new window for African Americans to be seen – as they had seen themselves" (xi). In the nineteenth-century, famous African American figures, including Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, used portraiture to construct both personal and political images of Black achievement in order to counter the dehumanizing images of African Americans in the wider culture. For Douglass, Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith argue, photography imagined the "ubiquitous and universal" image of the reformed enslaved man and Black abolitionist. They write that Douglass' "pictures enable us to see ourselves as if from the outside and, from this more distanced view, contemplate and assess ourselves" and, thus, "serve as the impetus for progress" (6-7). Similarly, they write, portraits of Booker T. Washington served as synecdochic representations of racial uplift, as images of a formerly enslaved man came to represent what was possible for other African Americans.

The portraits of Love in *The Life and Adventures* serve a similar purpose as those of Douglass and Washington. Although Love never achieved the same level of fame and significance in his lifetime as these men, Love's portraits capture an analogous narrative progression: from slave to freeman, cowboy to porter, and porter to family man to represent what is – or was – possible for Black men in America. Furthermore, they also allow Love to articulate the connection between the two seemingly disparate and

opposing cultural identities – that of an African American man and frontier hero -- to construct a legacy that culminates into one, whole autobiographical self.

Each of the thirty-four illustrations and eight portraits depict Love at important stages of his life. With the exception of the frontispiece portrait and a group portrait of Love and four other railroad men standing before a steam engine, all the photographs are full-length images of Love standing erect and proud, gazing straight at the viewer. Two portraits depict Love as a cowboy and the others feature him in his porter uniform. In addition to these portraits, the autobiography also includes a series of illustrations that portray Love at various moments on the plantation and as a cowboy.

In the first portrait of the autobiography, which serves as the aforementioned frontispiece of the text, Love is pictured with his family, presumably his wife and daughter, though the women are unidentified (Figure 4). The photo is a studio portrait, with Love and his wife sitting side by side on chairs and their daughter standing between her parents in the middle of the photograph. Together they embody African American middle-class success. Their achievements are represented by their attire: the women wear fashionable dresses and elegant hats, while Love is dressed in a tailored suit and holding a pair of gloves that announce his status as an accomplished individual, removed from the toil of farm work and cowboy life.

The photo serves as the frontispiece because it represents the culmination of Love's hard-earned success. Some critics, however, have questioned its placement in the narrative, considering Love all but excludes his family from other parts of his autobiography. Kenneth Speirs observes that the "frontispiece leads the reader to expect that various family members will be central to the story of Love's life. It is rather

surprising, then, that we hear little in the course of the narrative about the importance of various family members to his development and success” (309). Speirs speculates that this is because of the trauma Love’s family suffered during slavery: “It is as if he always carried within himself the perspective of the plantation life, a perspective that produced an intense desire to protect the self and family against the world that can cruelly and immediately sever ties within families” (310). One way to avoid making his family vulnerable again is to insist on their distance from the reader as Love tells his story. However, the strategic placement of the family portrait as frontispiece could also suggest the opposite: that Love’s family is the result of his survival of slavery. Seen in this way, the frontispiece challenges the white reader’s gaze by insisting on his racialized self (vis-à-vis his familial connection to slavery) as an integral component to his autobiographical self.



Figure 6: Nat Love and His Family. Courtesy of docsouth.unc.edu.

The frontispiece is followed by two studio portraits that present Love in traditional cowboy garb. In the first portrait, entitled “The Roping Contest at Deadwood, S.D.” (Figure 5), his ‘uniform’ consists of a lariat, hat, shirt, and rodeo chaps. Love holds his lasso while standing over his saddle and reins. In the second photo, captioned “In My Fighting Clothes” (Figure 6), Love grips the barrel of his rifle with one hand and holds his bandolier with another. These photos invest Love with the spirit of readiness and imminent action. The props and his posture embody the kind of rugged masculinity demanded in the project of taming the Wild West. At first glance they, like other cowboy portraits of the time, endow the subject with a set of qualities that purposefully work to reconstruct a stereotypical performance of Western masculinity. Yet in both portraits Love’s visible Blackness also undermines any received notion of Western masculinity, usually coded as white. Given that Westerns have historically celebrated heroism that is marked by the colonizing of the racialized other, the cowboy portraits clearly put a strain on traditional versions of the racial imagination in the Western and as a result they open up new claims for the African American subject – and more broadly, African American autobiographical subjectivity -- in the genre.



The Roping Contest at Deadwood, S. D.

Figure 7: "The Roping Contest at Deadwood S.D." Courtesy of docsouth.unc.edu.



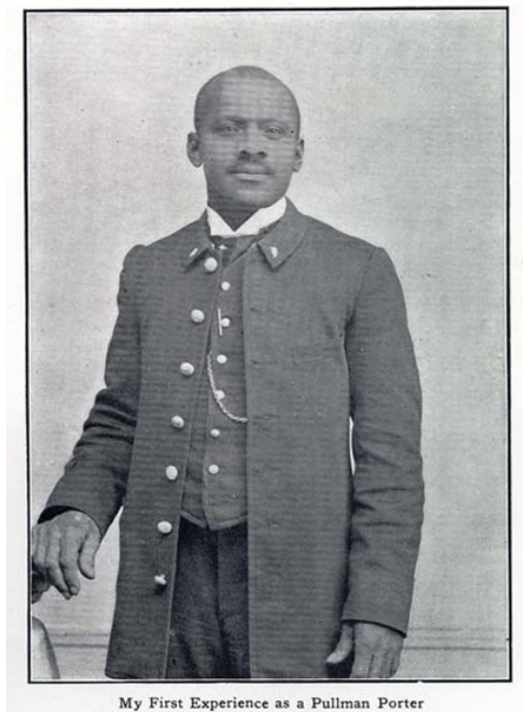
In My Fighting Clothes

Figure 6: "In My Fighting Clothes." Courtesy of docsouth.unc.edu.

An important part of Love's Western journey were his years as a Pullman Porter. It comes to no surprise, then, that a total of five portraits depict Love in his porter uniform, standing erect and conveying the image of pride and dignity at his station in life. In the first photo (Figure 7), he has a pocket watch, which symbolizes industrial discipline and the standardization of railroad time that attended the taming of the frontier. In the second photo (Figure 8), a middle-aged Love is wearing his outfit for the General Securities Company, also acting in this photo as another symbol of his assimilation into modern society. The rest of the photos depict Love at various stages of his porter career and conclude with a group photo that pictures Love with an "old cowboy friend," and his railroad colleagues. The last photo entwines Love's cowboy and railroad careers, showing that the latter is an extension of the former. Taken together, Love's porter

images disrupt the typical fascination with his life as a cowboy to instead underscore the pivotal narrative importance of his transition into a porter. As such, these photos further destabilize the image Love constructs throughout the written text. Both as a cowboy and porter, Love figures as the example of Black mobility and social elevation within predominately white spaces, thus, these photos emphasize his success as a Black man on the frontier.

While the portraits of Love clearly put a strain on received ideas of Western masculinity, their staged artifice calls into question whether or not Love's Western identity is



*Figure 7: Love as a Pullman Porter.
Courtesy of docsouth.unc.edu.*



*Figure 8: "With the General Securities
Company." Courtesy of*

performative. When the various portraits are viewed together, the reader can clearly see the similar scenic background in each. The hanging tapestry, the elaborately designed patterned rug, and ornate potted plant, amongst other decorative props suggest that these photos were produced at the same time in a series of highly-staged settings. Besides his different costumes, the only notable difference between them is his shaved mustache in the cowboy portraits. The staged set-up of the portraits implies that Love was aware of the conventions required to reconfigure the visual practices of dominant turn-of-the-twentieth century representations of the American West and the cowboy figure. The portraits evidence that Love possessed a keen sense of the efforts required to reconfigure the visual practices that excluded African Americans from turn-of-the-century representations of the West. The visual narrative these portraits construct reverses the chronology of Love's life, from family man, to cowboy, then to porter. As they do so, however, they leave a deliberate silence around one of the most significant periods of Love's life, his enslaved years on his Master's plantation.

Instead of portraits or photography recreating his experiences in slavery, this period of Love's life is represented by a series of sketches that depict him on the plantation. These sketches represent Love's past in a pre-modern place and time. Love also includes sketches of himself as a cowboy. The illustration mimics the artistic style and merit of Dime Westerns. Sketches of gunfights, buffalo hunting, roping, and riding incorporate Love in the middle of action. If the sketches are read to further supplement the written text's silences, then it can be assumed that they also act as an intervention in the genre they are portraying. In one particular sketch entitled "A Little Scrap— Hole-in-the-Wall Country" (Figure 9) Love is fighting an outfit of cowboys. Here Love

reconfigures the language of Blackness by presenting himself as a skilled African American cowboy. The corresponding passage in the written text elaborates on the illustration. After Love and his outfit approach the town, they meet locals who start a fight with them (69). This trouble culminates, he writes, in “one of [Love’s] men shooting and killing one of the bad men of the hole” (69). Later in the same paragraph, Love brags about his skills and offers an intriguing image of his body:

I had long since developed into a first class cowboy and besides being chief brand reader in Arizona and the pan handle country. My expertness in riding, roping and in the general routine of the cowboy’s life ... made my services in great demand. ... To see me now you would not recognize the bronze hardened dare devil cowboy. (69-70)

Speirs observes that in the illustration Love is marked as Black and shooting a pistol at a figure, presumably the “bad man” in the aforementioned description. “The potentially threatening story of a black cowboy shooting a white man, while reinscribed in subtle but forceful ways in the pictorial text, is erased or suppressed from the written text” (314). Yet, the description of Love’s “bronze” figure is ambiguous. The term can imply both a darker skin tone and a skin tone made darker by the sun. Likewise, the illustration’s depiction of Love shooting a pistol is also ambiguous, as it does not confirm or deny his participation in the shooting of a presumably white cowboy.

A similar intervention occurs in a sketch entitled, “The First Glimpse of My Spanish Sweetheart” (Figure 10). In the written text, Love avoids accusations of miscegenation by excluding descriptions of his interracial relationship. The sketch, on the contrary, implies interracial love by showing Love as dark-skinned and his sweetheart as

light-skinned. On the whole, the sketches work to compensate for the omissions to his racial identity in the written text. Interestingly, there are no sketches of Love's porter years. While Love may have simply not included any for various reasons, it can be speculated that Love substitutes sketches of himself with portraits to mark his entrance into modern society, serving as proof of his material and moral elevation. Spiers also suggests that Love excluded sketches of himself as a porter because "they would not cohere to the conventions of the traditional Dime Western" because his occupation as a porter indicates his lower status in society (309). Regardless of why he does not include sketches of his porter days, the sketches he does include work to reimagine Love as part of a mythic frontier and challenge assumptions about race in this space.



Figure 9: "A Little Scrap—Hole-in-the-Wall Country." Courtesy of docsouth.unc.edu.

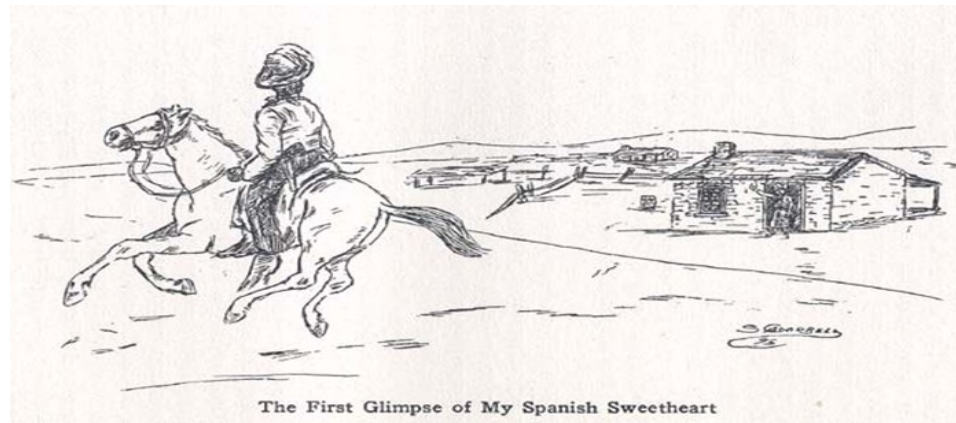


Figure 10: "The First Glimpse of My Spanish Sweetheart." Courtesy of docsouth.unc.edu.

Taken together the photographs and sketches in *The Life and Adventures* do more than itemize Love's journey, but also serve to fill in the silences surrounding Love's race in parts of the written text. In some ways the visual texts included disrupt Western convention – as displayed, perhaps most pointedly by images of Love in a traditionally African American role, a porter – however, in other ways they offer a complimentary narrative that emphasizes the originality of Love's story. If we consider Love's autobiography as part of a larger project of examining the lives of previously marginalized figures and groups in Western literature, *The Life and Adventures* helps to stake new claims for envisioning Black Western identity in the nineteenth-century American West

Coda: From Myth to the Silver Screen

Nat Love's *The Life and Adventures* proposes the possibility of a Black cowboy in an otherwise white literary space. The cowboy identity that Love adopts allows him access to the role of an historical actor, in which he takes part in a larger cultural narrative that signals his claim to official culture. The collection of portraits shows Love

as part of a narrative of uplift, where he figures as the example of Black mobility and (albeit limited) social elevation.

The Life and Adventures of Nat Love precedes a series of Westerns produced by another African American, Oscar Micheaux, who is the subject of the next chapter. Micheaux's Western novel, *The Conquest* (1913), and films, *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) and *The Exile* (1931), imagines the American West as a place for remaking African American masculine identity. The following chapter examines Micheaux's Westerns in light of contemporaneous discussions around racial identity to show how the cinematic medium offered Micheaux new ways to represent race in the West.

Chapter 4:

Mediating Race in the Western: Oscar Micheaux and the African American Frontier in Print and Cinema

Shortly after Nat Love published *The Life and Adventures*, another African American author, Oscar Micheaux, published a memoir of his experiences on the South Dakota prairies, *The Conquest*. While both men engaged in Western autobiography, they did so through different iconic identities – the cowboy and settler, respectively. Micheaux's homesteading experiences in South Dakota became the inspiration for a series of print and cinematic texts, an impressive multi-volume autobiography that he promoted throughout his life. Like most other self-avowed pioneers Micheaux displayed an affinity for the mythic qualities of the Old West: boundless opportunity, self-definition, and individual freedom. He adapted these mythologies into a uniquely African American story by combining the Turnerian narrative of Western progress and opportunity with Booker T. Washington's insistence on economic self-sufficiency to represent a frontier that held unlimited promise for racial uplift.³⁴

Whereas Love represents whiteness obliquely in *The Life and Adventures*, Micheaux directly engages with the white supremacy of Western myth in his novels and films. He adapts one of the central oppositions in frontier literature – the essential difference between the wilderness and the metropolis – to symbolize what W.E.B. Du Bois describes as “double consciousness,” or the psychological turmoil that African Americans experience when they try to belong to two worlds, one Black, the other

³⁴ Micheaux aligned himself with Washington's philosophies of assimilation through useful work (practical education) and of racial uplift through individual effort. Washington speaks about these philosophies in his autobiography, *Up From Slavery* (1901) and *My Larger Education* (1911).

white.³⁵ In his homesteading novel, *The Conquest* (1913), Micheaux depicts the metropolis as the Black world and South Dakota as white. This opposition represents the African American homesteader's struggle to reconcile his Turnerian ideals with his racial identity.

The Conquest was the blueprint for a series of Western films that Micheaux wrote and produced over his career, including *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) and *The Exile* (1931). The material conditions surrounding the production of these films allowed for Micheaux to tackle the theme of double-consciousness and to extend his analysis of racism to represent the early twentieth-century Black sociocultural experience in the Western genre. I argue that Micheaux's cinematic Westerns function as early examples of the mediating force of the Black cinematic gaze which, according to Gladstone Yearwood, is always an act of resistance that uses cinema to filter "film's expressive traditions, formal structure, and meanings" through the African American experience (106-107).

"Out There in the Hollow of God's Hand": Oscar Micheaux and the Myth of the Frontier in *The Conquest*

In 1910 Oscar Micheaux wrote an article for the *Chicago Defender* about his life as a "resident, pioneer, and landowner" in Gregory County, South Dakota. The article, entitled "Where the Negro Fails," begins with an anecdote about an indecisive young

³⁵ "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (*The Souls of Black Folk* 38).

Black railway employee that Micheaux met in Chicago who had drawn a number at a recent land opening in South Dakota. Micheaux relates how he had discouraged the wavering novice from settling on the prairies by curtly advising him, “I think you had better stay in Chicago. For anyone with no force of character has no business in South Dakota or any part of the Northwest” (I). The anecdote, however, must certainly have been a rhetorical device, as Micheaux went on to praise the monetary gain possible in Northwest agriculture declaring, “[a]ny energetic young man with as little as \$1000 and willing to give all his time and attention to the upbuilding of the future can go to Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, get a homestead and in ten years be independent” (I). Then a novice himself, Micheaux believed strongly in the unique opportunities that the frontier offered African Americans and continued to write about his successes in the newspaper. However, in 1912 he lost his land to foreclosure. His dreams of becoming a successful homesteader now gone, Micheaux in turn created the fictional character, Oscar Devereaux, a lone Black homesteader living in Megory, South Dakota, writing in long-hand the details of his life in a composition notebook that he would eventually publish in 1913. This manuscript, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*, became the first installment in Micheaux’s homesteading saga, a saga that would shape his career as a writer and filmmaker over the next three decades.

The Conquest is divided into two epochs. The first epoch tells the Turnerian story of Devereaux going West to avail himself of the opportunity to purchase cheap land and, through the investment of his labour and capital, develop this land into a profitable enterprise. The second epoch relates Devereaux’s attempts to find a wife in Chicago, his subsequent troubled marriage, and the eventual collapse of his homesteading efforts. In

both epochs Devereaux recounts his journeys between South Dakota and Chicago. In the process Micheaux adapts the central structuring oppositions of the Western – the essential difference between the East and the West – to articulate his sense of double-consciousness, or his experience of belonging to two worlds, one white, the other Black. South Dakota is represented as a white world, a place where Devereaux finds himself “a stranger in a strange land, inhabited wholly by people not of my own race” (77). Nevertheless, this “strange land” is also a place of opportunity for him, a place where he develops his land and earns capital, in the process transforming himself into a successful and respected homesteader. The book nonetheless demonstrates the difficulty involved when African Americans attempt to engage with the mythology of the American West. As Devereaux discovers, his plans to build a farm and family on the South Dakota plains is complicated by his connections with the city, as well as his own experiences with double-consciousness.

Devereaux’s story begins near the Ohio River in Illinois, where he is born on his family’s farm. He tells us that his father, Calvin Devereaux, had been born into slavery and that his grandfather was sold off to a slave owner in Texas. After emancipation both men migrated to Illinois, in search of, he writes, “the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire” (14). Following in their footsteps, young Devereaux seeks any opportunity to travel, working his way North to his sister’s home to finish his education, and then to Chicago, where he supports himself in odd jobs, shining shoes, bailing water in a coal mine, and finally on the railroad as a Pullman Porter. The money Devereaux earns from being a porter allows him to make his first investment in land and in the Fall of 1904, he purchases a 160-acre homestead on the

Rosebud Indian Reservation near Winner, South Dakota (61-64).³⁶ Undeterred by his lack of homesteading experience, and armed with government pamphlets, and almanacs, Devereaux teaches himself the rudiments of Great Plains agriculture, a process he describes in painful detail, including purchasing mules, getting the equipment to “break the prairie,” and turning the sod over day after day (74-85). He claims in just over a year of homesteading, he had “broken-out” three times as many acres as his neighbours (145). Shortly after, he claimed “ownership of the land and stock to the value of twenty thousand dollars” (153).

Similar to the homesteaders of white-authored Westerns, land ownership and development symbolize for Devereaux the essential difference between civilized and noncivilized peoples. Devereaux remarks that although the Sioux tribe “owned at one time the larger part of southern South Dakota and northern Nebraska,” they “were always selling” instead of developing their land. Rather than being economical, he states, they spent their money “on fine horses, buggies, whiskey, and what-not” (178). While Devereaux argues that the racial distinctions detrimental to his success in the East are absent on the frontier, which represents a new field of opportunity for African Americans, his utopia is itself built on racial difference – as Devereaux (like Nat Love) aligns himself with white settlers in opposition to Indigenous inhabitants. He contrasts

³⁶ The Rosebud Indian Reservation was established in 1889 after the United States' partition of the Great Sioux Reservation. After defeating the Indigenous tribes in the Plains Wars of the 1870s, the United States confiscated 7.7 million acres of the Sioux's Black Hills and created several smaller reservations. *The Conquest* takes place in the early 1900s, post-Dawes Act (1887), when large amounts of land was sold to settlers. For histories of the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota and for accounts of the Sioux in particular, see Robert M Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 200-230, and Herbert Sh. Schnell's *History of South Dakota*, 133-134, 253-255, 320-332.

the Sioux's resistance to assimilation (to peaceful relinquishment of their land, to repatriation, and to agricultural re-education) with his own ambition to farm as many acres as possible.

Devereaux's utopia involves other racial distinctions as well. If Chicago represents a place where racial prejudice exists, the city is also the place of racial identity and the African American community – a community Devereaux leaves behind and represents negatively. Moving Westward means separating himself from the “class of Negroes” in Chicago who “do not know what it takes to succeed” and suffer “from a love of luxury,” vices Devereaux considers detrimental to the hard work required to become a civilized and respected landowner (143). His purpose, he writes, in leaving this community was not only to escape racial prejudice, but also “to convince them that a colored man could succeed” (145).

Devereaux's attitude to other African Americans is partially influenced by the philosophies of Booker T. Washington. Washington's ideas about success, writes Maurice Wallace, “depended fundamentally on one's demonstrating virility sufficient ‘to do something’ of importance for the race (26). Devereaux, following Washington, constructs an image of Black male success to provide an example for other Black men to follow, a demonstration of virility (“doing something”) to counter the stereotypes of Black masculinity. The dominant discourse of the era classified African Americans as primitive, ‘savage,’ and as a less-evolved class of people who had not yet developed to the higher status of civilized white society. African American men were positioned as the “antithesis of both the white man and civilisation itself. As such, black men embodied whatever was most unmanly and uncivilized,” writes Gail Bederman (49). These

discriminatory views, she continues, “legitimized [Black men’s] social and political disenfranchisement” according to white society (50). To challenge these views, Devereaux believes it is necessary to prove that he, like white men, “can be anything” with enough hard work and sacrifice (145).

Devereaux’s success on the homestead, however, does not provide him with a sense of completion. His desire to become a father and have children who will carry on his success leads him to search for a suitable wife. It is this endeavour, however, that reveals the social limitations that African American men face on the frontier. In South Dakota, Devereaux meets a woman named Agnes, who lives with her father on a neighbouring farm. He discovers that Agnes and her father had immigrated to South Dakota from Scotland shortly after he had settled in the region. They bond over their mutual hardships on the frontier and Devereaux, unwittingly at first, falls in love with Agnes, noting “I became very frightened, for I did not by any means want to fall in love with a white girl” (155). This love is a frontier experience, for it presents to Devereaux the possibilities of frontier freedom in the form of an interracial romance. Their love, however, is momentary and does not flourish because of the “knowledge that custom, tradition, and the dignity of both races are against it” (156).

Complicating the decision to sacrifice his love for Agnes is Devereaux’s race loyalty, his sense that he can do more good for African Americans by marrying within racial lines. This belief leads Devereaux back to Chicago, where he meets a young African American woman named Orlean McCraline, the daughter of Reverend McCraline, a well-known, but infamous figure, in Chicago’s Black community. The Reverend comes to symbolize for Devereaux the “vices” he associates with the city – and

ultimately proves to be the biggest threat to Micheaux's homesteader. Soon after he begins courting Orlean, Devereaux discovers that McCraline is "a man who was by disposition, environment, and cultivation, narrow, impractical, hypercritical, envious and spiteful" (209, 228). "Not only was he the father of two illegitimate children," Devereaux states, "but he had taken another man's wife to become so – and all this while he was one of the most influential men in the church" (311). McCraline's inability to control his behaviour – his temper, his sexual desires, and his lust for power – disgust Devereaux because "these characteristics represent the corrupting values of the Metropolis arrayed in opposition to the hard-working pioneer," writes Johnson (*Black Masculinity* 88). In turn, Devereaux marries Orlean and moves back to South Dakota to escape McCraline. He soon discovers, however, that McCraline insists on making frequent visits to his homestead. "The only purpose of such visits," Devereaux states, "was to demand [Orlean's] subservience to him" (242). He observes that Orlean becomes "perceptibly weak" in her father's presence and that he finds himself becoming increasingly angry at the sight of McCraline (269). The Reverend's corruption is symbolized by Devereaux's inability to curb his temper, which in turn puts a strain on his marriage to Orlean.

Unlike in the first epoch, in which Devereaux achieves success on the frontier, the second epoch follows a series of devastating events that eventually lead to his failure. Michael K. Johnson argues that Devereaux's behaviour towards his wife is partially to blame for the failure of their marriage. Just as "Devereaux had transformed undeveloped land into a profitable enterprise, he looks to transform his wife, the timid and obedient Orlean, into someone who is practical and hard-working like himself and who can provide a feminine counterpart to his own uplifting image" (*Black Masculinity* 86). Their

marriage becomes a type of employer-employee relationship in which Orlean is clearly given what the homesteader deems as suitable female work – cooking, cleaning, and ultimately reproduction. Although Devereaux views this arrangement as practical, Orlean expects more of a partnership, one where her husband shows affection and love, as well as mutual respect.

Devereaux's inability to tend to the expectations of his land and his wife contributes to the failure of both endeavours. This failure is symbolized most strikingly by the delivery of their stillborn son. When Orlean is giving birth, Devereaux is labouring on the fields. After he returns home, Devereaux observes "as he [Devereaux's son] lay stiff and cold I could see the image of myself in his features." Orlean notices Devereaux's gaze and comments, "he looks just like you, dear" (263). At this moment, Devereaux's own attempt at self-making, at being reborn on the frontier, is figured in the end of the narrative in the form of his dead son – a failed attempt at both birth and rebirth. Unlike Turner's frontier, a place of "perennial rebirth," the frontier for Devereaux is symbolized by death (Turner 23).³⁷

Devereaux's bad fortune, however, does not end with the death of his son, but rather is followed by a series of tragedies that serve to reinforce the limitations Black homesteaders face on the frontier. In a "year of coincidences," Devereaux states, "the greatest drought known for years, followed by the coldest winter and the heaviest snows," leads to bad crops and poor profit (295). McCraline arrives at the homestead to

³⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner observed that the American frontier was a space of "perennial rebirth" that he believed was essential to the development of what he called the "American character," the essential qualities that make a person American. By not succeeding on the frontier, it can be assumed that Devereaux can never fully realize his place within the nation. See "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 2.

convince his daughter to leave Devereaux. After McCraline and Orlean depart for Chicago, Devereaux becomes listless, reminiscing on how he “had looked forward joyfully to the time when I should be a husband and father, with a wife to love, and a home of my own. This had been so dominant in my mind that when I thought it over, I could not clearly realize the present situation” (295-296). Aggrieved at the loss of his wife and son, Devereaux decides to travel to Chicago in a last-ditch effort to make amends with his wife. During his stay at Orlean’s apartment, McCraline calls and Devereaux picks up the phone. The confrontation between the two men is a showdown of sorts, one that is fought without physical violence. Instead, McCraline and Devereaux engage in a war of words. McCraline coaxes Devereaux, driving him into a rage before he “viciously” hangs up the phone. His outburst so upsets Orlean that she refuses to reconcile with him. Later that evening McCraline arrives and takes his daughter away, closing the door behind him and ending the homesteader’s marriage. By the end of *The Conquest* Devereaux’s frontier fantasy is but that – a dream that cannot be realized. Despite his attempt to conquer a wilderness that promises Devereaux’s wealth and acceptance into the white myth, he is ultimately undone by this myth at the end of the novel. Along with frontier failure, Devereaux also fails to uplift himself and become an example for the African American community that he believes he represents.

Contrary to white male heroes in Westerns, Devereaux must refrain from violence, however justified. In white-authored Westerns, masculine violence erupts in the form of gunfights, fistfights, and showdowns, that are justified in some way or another in order to maintain the hero’s manliness and control over the environment that threatens to undo it. “Early Westerns,” writes Johnson, “addressed the growing turn-of-the-century

fear that white American men had become too civilized, that too many years of civilized restraint had caused the atrophy of male passion and resulted in the feminization of white manhood.” Novels such as *The Virginian*, he argues, “therefore emphasized the importance of a balanced masculinity” (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 66). While “civilized restraint” was expected of Western heroes, it also justified the exercise of male violence, such as defending the defenseless, or fighting an enemy. Unlike white Western heroes, violence and masculinity cannot be so easily reconciled for Devereaux because it undoes his image of civilized manliness, rendering him vulnerable to the stereotype of Black male savagery.

In a subsequent novel, *The Homesteader* (1917), Micheaux adapts the basic plot of *The Conquest* and alters its conclusion. The novel’s hero, Jean Baptiste, triumphs over the Reverend. The Orlean/Rev. McCraline (renamed McCarthy in *The Homesteader*) plot culminates in a murder-suicide that sends Orlean and her father to their graves. Baptiste is reunited with Agnes and she reveals to him that she is mixed race, relieving Baptiste’s fears of miscegenation. The happy resolution of *The Homesteader* shows that Baptiste’s success rests on the condition that he can resolve his double-consciousness that otherwise prevents him from achieving the frontier dream. This begs the question of whether or not Micheaux’s frontier stories were merely an indulgence in idealism? To answer this question, a brief analysis of the author’s own struggles with double-consciousness is required.

Micheaux’s encoding of twoness, or duality, in his representation of his homesteaders are a projection of his own struggle with double-consciousness. In *Black Novelist as White Racist: The Myth of Black Inferiority in the Novels of Oscar Micheaux*

(1989), Joseph A. Young argues that Micheaux was a victim of the “external side” of double-consciousness. “In effect,” Young writes, “he viewed Blacks and his own self ‘through the eyes of others . . . measuring his soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Young, quoting Du Bois, 144). Unable to challenge his opinions of other African Americans he had adopted from white culture, Micheaux was one of Frantz Fanon’s “alienated,” an African American man who reinforced his own alienation from the dominant culture by targeting his own race.³⁸

However, in discussions of Micheaux’s double-consciousness, it is important to also consider that he was writing in a genre and literary culture traditionally defined by white authors. The mythic Western narrative that is at the heart of his homesteading adventures is a story of Euro-American opportunity and conquest over the racial Other in the process. Micheaux, a racial Other himself, struggled to reconcile his identity with this narrative, resulting in the generic twoness that Young observes. Though he sought to establish the frontier as a space of racial uplift, the frontier became for Micheaux, as it had for thousands of other Americans, merely a repository for fantasy. At the same time, this fantasy and the underlying values of hard work and self-determination associated with homesteading, drove Micheaux to enter into the film business.

³⁸ “The colonial world is divided into compartments...the colonial world is a world cut in two,” writes Frantz Fanon in his essay, “Concerning Violence.” While Fanon is referring the compartmentalization of the colonial world which has been systemically divided into dichotomous milieu, Fanon saw the alienation of the colonized primarily in psychological terms – or in how it shaped the psyche of the colonized and in turn colonizer. Colonized peoples who attempted to “mask” themselves as the colonizer inadvertently reinforced their own alienation, both from the dominant and their race. Fanon, “Concerning Violence,” 31-50.

In 1915 Micheaux founded the Western Book Supply Company. In order to finance the publication of *The Homesteader*, he sold stock in the company, mainly to white farmers in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa. He also expanded his African American audience by launching “aggressive promotional tours” of the Black Belt, visiting schools, churches, and homes in an effort to publicize his work. In an advertising pamphlet he pitched *The Homesteader* to African American readers: “Consider it in the light of a gift to relatives or dear friend and let your order be for more than one copy” (quoted in Bowser and Spence 12). When sales for *The Homesteader* were poor, Micheaux turned to another medium: cinema. Cinema provided Micheaux with a new means to instruct and teach through his characters, but it also made him reconsider and recapture racial life. Using the visual language of film Micheaux directed a critical gaze at the ongoing mistreatment of African Americans, especially in the South. In particular, his cinematic Westerns strove to counter the cruel and mocking minstrel performances that had become popular on stage and in film by portraying African Americans as valiant and dignified. His cinematic Westerns also tackled difficult subjects, such as passing and miscegenation, signalling a shift in Micheaux’s political philosophies.

Mediating Race in Black and White: *The Symbol of the Unconquered as Race*

Western

Oscar Micheaux’s entrance into the moviemaking business coincided with the coalescing of the Hollywood system of representation, production, and distribution of early silent films. He worked outside of Hollywood and against it. This strategy proved successful because in the silent era Hollywood was ill-equipped and uninterested in making films for African American audiences. Their disinterest opened up a space for

Black-owned production companies to make films that specifically targeted African American audiences. These films were known as “race films” or “race cinema.” Besides being produced for African American audiences, what differentiated race films from Hollywood films was how they represented African American characters. Geraldyn Dismond, a columnist writing in *Close Up*, defined “Negro films” as films made by Black-owned companies with two “motives”: to both present a humanizing portrayal of African American subjects, “showing them not as fools or servants, but as human beings with the same emotions, desires and weaknesses as other people,” and to “share in the profits of this great industry” (quoted in Gaines, “Fire and Desire”). Race films reflected the notion of a separate cinema for a segregated audience, but they did not necessarily indicate a shared style, genre, or singular point of view on African American cinematic life.

In the early twentieth-century the majority of race films were made by the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, established by George and Noble Johnson. In 1916 the company released *The Realization of the Negro's Ambition*, which tells the story of a young African American man named James Burton (Noble Johnson) who leaves the South for California's oil fields in search of work. Initially denied a job because of his race, Burton saves the life of a wealthy white landowner's daughter and the landowner gives him a job leading an oil expedition. When Burton returns to the South, he discovers oil on his father's farm and makes a fortune. Starring an African American lead and telling an uplifting story of Black accomplishment, the film earned critical praise and box office success. As Jacqueline Najuma Stewart notes, it also “featured a new setting for race films – the West.” Burton's story, she continues, “reflected the westward migration

of thousands of other African Americans” and “since Lincoln’s president and leading man, Noble Johnson, himself was born and raised in Colorado, he made films that exposed Black life west of the Mississippi to African American viewers in other parts of the country” (*Migrating* 204).

Because of Johnson’s Western roots and his interest in regional stories, it comes as no surprise that he and George Johnson approached Micheaux for the film rights to his novel, *The Homesteader*, after seeing an advertisement for the book in the *Chicago Defender*. In their correspondence with Micheaux, the Johnson brothers tried to convince him that parts of *The Homesteader* – specifically, the miscegenation plot – were too controversial for film. When Micheaux refused to censor his own work, negotiations between the men broke down. Undeterred, Micheaux set up his own production company, the Micheaux Book and Film Company, and made the movie himself (*Writing Himself into History*, 10). *The Homesteader* became the first full-length Western film helmed by an African American director. The film premiered in Chicago and received generally good reviews. In one review the *Chicago Defender* called it “the greatest photoplay yet exhibited by members of the Race” and lauded Micheaux’s “innovative storytelling and stylistics” (quoted in Bowser and Spence, 123-124).

Micheaux approached filmmaking as he had homesteading: as an enterprise. Just as he had learned to farm by talking to farmers, Micheaux learned how to make films through correspondence with directors and producers. He even continued correspondence with George Johnson in order to learn marketing strategies for his films. Like the Johnson brothers, Micheaux built an African American movie enterprise by investing in people from his community, including amateur actors and vaudeville performers, as well as

labourers to work on set. He promoted his own films by marketing and distributing them through African American news outlets, such as *The Chicago Defender*, and local Black theatres. Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence observe that “Micheaux saw the audience for his films in the growth of urban Black communities and in smaller towns in the South, where African Americans were hungry for success stories and eager to see themselves in identifiable roles” (14). He took advantage of this and built an audience around the notion that all of his films represented African American life more accurately than Hollywood pictures could. Because of this, writes Gladstone Yearwood, Micheaux’s films came to represent the “New Negro experience.” In “the New Negro Era” Yearwood writes,

artists and intellectuals explored the soul of the black community from artistic, cultural, social and political perspectives. An emerging aesthetic principle [for Black filmmakers in the early 20th century] defined the Black artist as ‘an interpreter, a voice that makes intelligible the deepest, most meaningful aspirations of the people, a channel through which their resentments, hopes, fears, ambitions, are expressed and become explicit.’ (Yearwood, quoting Samella Lewis, 23)

By addressing such contemporary social issues as miscegenation, passing, rape, and lynching, Micheaux created an expressive response to the social crises that circumscribed African American life in the early twentieth-century.

Micheaux’s second film, *Within Our Gates* (1920), exemplifies this particular approach in its depiction of the horrors of lynching and the racist culture of the American South. While the plotline follows a typical uplift narrative, telling the story of an African American schoolteacher’s (Evelyn Preer) mission to fund a Black school in the South, it

also alludes to the destructive forces that shaped her life in a flashback scene that features a lynch mob and an attempted rape. By addressing such issues, *Within Our Gates* unveils the lynch mob, revealing its perpetrators to be ordinary white people: men, women, and even children who participate in the hunting down and lynching of African Americans. The film was believed to be Micheaux's response to *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) because it reverses *Birth*'s association of 'savage' and barbaric acts of Black men to white men instead.

Within Our Gates was banned in multiple locations after its release because of its stark depiction of lynching. Film boards believed these depictions would lead to race riots. The Chicago censor board banned the film because, according to the *American Negro Press*, "it was claimed the effects on the mind of the spectators would result in a race riot" (quoted in Bowser and Spence 125). Opinions of the film, however, were divided. While many feared race riots, others endorsed the film, such as Willis Huggins, a Black schoolteacher, who believed that *Within Our Gates* established a link to new stories from the South that detailed lynchings. In a letter to the *Chicago Defender* he wrote, "the startling revelation now slowly coming to light that white men committed the murders in Arkansas for which men of our race are condemned to die are indeed fittingly coincident with the present run of the Micheaux picture which aims to expose just that sort of double dealing all over the South" (quoted in Bowser and Spence 126). As Huggins argues, Micheaux's themes resonated beyond the screen to other texts, such as newspaper stories, photographs, and letters, to attest to the shared experiences of African Americans. In turn, he thought, banning such films would erase such experiences with racism and prejudice. Micheaux himself made a similar argument. Convinced that

depicting African American social issues could be marketable, Micheaux called *Within Our Gates* “the greatest preachment against race prejudice and the glaring injustices practiced upon our people,” in a letter to the Lincoln Motion Picture Company after the film’s first premiere (*Writing Himself into History* 143). He believed that sensational storylines were more than just melodrama, they were also a way to resist pervasive racist myths in a public venue.

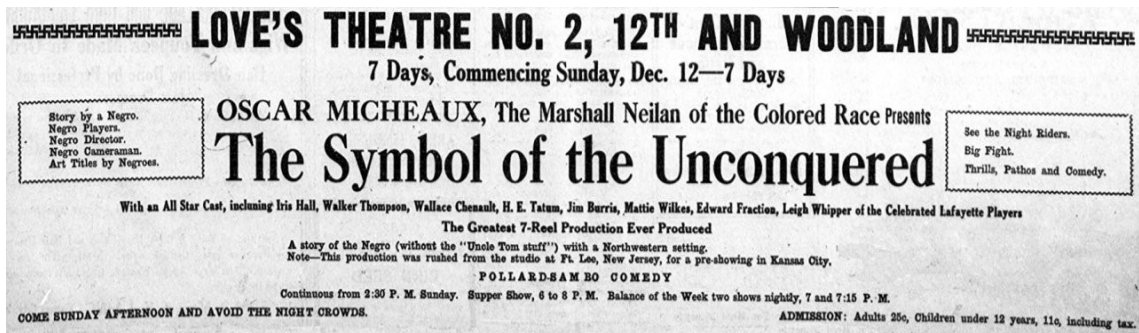


Figure 11: Promotional Advertisement for the *Symbol of the Unconquered*. Courtesy of commons.wikimedia.org

Amid the controversy over the release of *Within Our Gates*, Micheaux produced his third feature film and second Western, *The Symbol of the Unconquered*. In the film, Micheaux returns to the frontier space of South Dakota, adding the subplot of oil discovery to the conclusion. *Symbol* tells the story of a homesteader named Hugh Van Allen (Walker Thompson), a chivalrous and hardworking young man who falls in love with a light-skinned Black woman, Eve Mason (Iris Hall). Eve returns to the fictional town of Oristown to retrieve her late grandfather’s inheritance of 800-acres of land. After a group of local criminals discover that Eve has inherited valuable oil lands, they team up with the Ku Klux Klan and a white-passing African American hotel owner, Jefferson Driscoll, to murder Eve and Van Allen and steal his land.

The main conflict in *Symbol* is not the homesteader's struggle with the KKK, but rather the dilemma of double-consciousness embodied by the mixed-race character of Driscoll. Although the advertising for *Symbol* features the conflict between the homesteader and the "insidious Ku Klux Klan," as Bowser and Spence observe, the presence of Driscoll and his "use of the same forces of intimidation" as the Klan disturbs "the equilibrium of any clear-cut binary opposition" between the races, making Driscoll a far more complex antagonist than Micheaux's other villains (*Writing Himself into History* 160). Because of his fear of being exposed as Black, Driscoll is especially cruel to African Americans he comes into contact with. For instance,



Figure 12: Jefferson Driscoll, the film's antagonist. Courtesy of blogpost.com

when Eve first arrives at his hotel, Driscoll denies her a bed, sending her to the hayloft. After Eve is awakened by a thunderstorm, she discovers Abraham, a Black salesman, in the barn and is so startled by his dishevelled appearance she runs out into the pouring rain. Observing her from his bedroom window, Driscoll takes sinister delight in her suffering, thrashing his arms up and down and laughing hysterically.

Because of his fear of being exposed as Black, Driscoll is especially cruel to African Americans he comes into contact with. For instance, when Eve first arrives at his hotel, Driscoll denies her a bed, sending her to the hayloft. After Eve is awakened by a thunderstorm, she discovers Abraham, a Black salesman, in the barn with her and, startled by his dishevelled appearance, runs out into the pouring rain. The *mise-en-scène* contributes to Driscoll's sense of triumphant whiteness: "surrounded by an aura of shimmering whiteness (in a white nightshirt and sheets, lit as if he were aglow), he thrashes his arms in triumph" (Bowser and Spence, 159). The window through which Driscoll watches Eve, made translucent by the rain, also suggests a movie screen. Driscoll is both the maker of his own cruel joke (or at least the conditions that lead to this joke possible) and the spectator who receives pleasure from the joke. This scene also plays out the minstrel joke that African Americans have an excessive fear of ghosts and spirits. Seen in an extreme close-up, the poorly lit face of Abraham distorts his features and makes it seem as if he is grimacing. Eve's flight from the barn imitates many scenes of African American minstrel characters fleeing supernatural occurrences, positioning her as the Black object of ridicule for Driscoll's pleasure.

Unlike his interaction with Eve, Driscoll cannot assume a position of superiority with Van Allen in the saloon. When Van Allen approaches him in the saloon to demand his money back for the horse Driscoll sold him, Driscoll tries to draw his pistol to shoot Van Allen, but Van Allen grabs it from Driscoll and wrestles him to the ground. The brawl takes place in front of a group of white spectators, who heckle Driscoll for being beaten by an African American. After being beaten by Van Allen, Driscoll leaves the saloon. On his way out, Abraham, who had been refereeing the brawl, kicks him in the

backside to hurry his exit. Using a common convention in the Western – the saloon fight – Micheaux stages an inversion of the Black minstrel routine. In this instance, Driscoll, who presents and acts white, is made the ‘butt’ of the joke, whereas Van Allen and Abraham both play the role of the trickster. As in typical minstrel scenes featuring Black male characters, Driscoll is emasculated by other men (in this case, both Black and white) and made into a spectacle for their (and the audience’s) amusement. “For Driscoll,” writes Johnson, “this is a reversal of his own racial expectations . . . Whether or not the spectators in the bar are aware of his racial identity, Driscoll has to recognize that he has had forced on him precisely the identity he has worked so hard to escape: the ridiculed Black object of the joke whose humiliation amuses white spectators” (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 136). Driscoll’s humiliation drives him to seek revenge by enlisting the KKK to help him hunt down Van Allen, resulting in the film’s climatic showdown.



Figure 13: Driscoll confronts, and is beaten by, Van Allen. Courtesy of blackcinemaconnection.com

The climatic showdown in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* is Micheaux's most significant revision of Western convention. Micheaux inverts the conventional dichotomy between white "good" characters and racialized "bad" characters to portray the defeat of the Ku Klux Klan and Driscoll as a symbol of the African American homesteader's triumph. This sequence begins with Driscoll enlisting KKK members to leave threatening notes outside of Van Allen's tent in an attempt to get him to sell his property. After multiple attempts, Driscoll and the KKK decide to ride out to Van Allen's tent one night. Van Allen discovers them, and the fighting begins. Whereas in white-authored Westerns the showdown usually involves brawling, shooting, or other forms of physical violence, the showdown in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* is anticlimactic, at times amusing. Abraham, witnessing the violence from afar, runs to the scene with a pile of bricks. He proceeds to carry them to the top of a barn and drop them on the KKK leader, Bill Stanton. Eve, who is alerted by the commotion, comes to Van Allen's defense. In a reversal of the traditional "rescue" scene in Westerns where a male hero rescues the damsel in distress, Eve rides on horseback to defend Van Allen from the KKK and helps him to safety. Eve's heroism stands in contradiction to the frail femininity of Orlean in *The Homesteader*. Instead, Eve in this scene is represented as a courageous frontierswoman. The conflict ends with an ironic twist. In the darkness of the night, the KKK mistake Driscoll for Van Allen and murder him. The ironic death of the film's antagonist inadvertently fulfills the implications of his own racial self-hatred.

The climatic showdown in *Symbol* also revises the conflict between the KKK and African American mobs in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* that uses cinematic techniques to invert this dichotomy between the races. Griffiths' film orchestrates melodrama and

affect to the degree that it renders its political motive as part of the backdrop and scenery. The language of Griffith's film often revolves around presenting the spectacle of a lost past. The use of flashback and parallel editing sentimentalize the grandeur of the antebellum South and help to build the KKK's inevitable triumph at the end. Specifically, shots of the South which reveal it to be a kind of utopian, idyllic landscape, are intercut with scenes showing the encroaching fervour of Black Reconstruction, which threatens to destroy the 'virtue' and 'honour' of the Old South. The depiction of African Americans in *Birth* renders them as two types: the evil, brutish man and the servile, happy slave (or "Tom" character). As its subtext, the film exploits racist stereotypes against African American men by emasculating them. Micheaux's response to the representations of African American men in *Birth* is Van Allen. Van Allen's character is contrasted to the Klansmen's tendencies towards deception and brutish violence. The former characteristics are rewarded with monetary gain and marriage, while the latter are defeated unceremoniously. In the final scene of *Symbol*, Van Allen discovers oil underneath his land. The frontier in *Symbol* promises not only African American success, but also freedom from the constraints of white violence.

The spoiled landscape of the New South is replaced by the rich oilfields of the Midwest, where the African American homesteader resides in a newfound utopia. Similar to Micheaux's homesteading novels, *The Symbol of the Unconquered* concludes by positioning the Black homesteader as the settler-colonizer, who exploits oil from the land to claim his fortune. The film, however, does not address these contradictions. Instead, it dramatizes what Du Bois labelled "life within the veil," the line that separated whites from African Americans. Because of the film's stark confrontation with this subject, it

was initially censored from theatres. While film critics generally gave the film good reviews, the subject of passing stirred controversy. One critic, Theophilus Lewis, writing about *Symbol* alleged that Micheaux's interest in passing seemed to stem from his own "infatuation with colour" as a melodramatic trope.³⁹ Others saw the film as a critical take on a timely issue. The *Competitor* magazine praised *Symbol* as making a significant thrust at "more than 500,000 people living in United States "passing for white" (quoted in *Writing Himself*, 168).

For Micheaux, however, the problem with passing was the denial of African American ancestry and the disloyalty that comes from trying to hide it. Reflecting on a South Dakota mixed-race family Micheaux wrote in *The Conquest*, "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" (162). African Americans who could pass as white looked upon other Blacks with the dread of discovery that would not only expose their racial identity, but also their deception. Micheaux felt that this was ultimately harmful to the cause of uplift and took to the subject again in his next Western, *The Exile*.

***The Exile* and Contemporary Race Western of the 1930s**

In 1931 Micheaux produced his first talkie, *The Exile*. In *The Exile* he reformulates his earlier works, casting *The Homesteader*'s Jean Baptiste as the protagonist in a story about an African American pioneer travels West to seek land and

³⁹ Speaking of *Daughter of the Congo* (1930), Lewis accused Micheaux of associating "nobility with lightness and villainy with blackness." See Lewis, *New York Age*, 4/16/30, for example. However, as Charlene Regester argues in *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies, and Women* (1995), the practice of individual performers using make-up that lightened their skin was well established on stage and may have carried over to early film, appearing in Black films as early as 1914. Micheaux likely adopted such a convention to appeal to theatre-goers at the time.

fortune. Whereas in *The Homesteader* the conflict of double-consciousness is represented by Baptiste's struggle to assimilate into frontier life as a Black man, there are very few scenes in *The Exile* featuring Baptiste homesteading on the South Dakota landscape. Instead, Micheaux represents Baptiste's struggle with double-consciousness through his relationship with his fiancée Edith Duval.

The film centres around Jean Baptiste and Duval. Duval, the young owner of the magnificent Southside Mansion, gives elaborate parties, attended by socialites in the community. Before their marriage, Duval informs Baptiste that she plans to transform the Mansion into a jazz club that offers all sorts of rackets to attendees. Baptiste, disheartened by Duval's plans, decides to break off the engagement and move to South Dakota. In South Dakota he meets Agnes, a light-skinned Black woman who believes she is white, and their romance is cut short by the fear of miscegenation. Baptiste returns to Chicago to try to convince Duval to come out West with him; however, Duval's dark past, involving the rejection and ruin of a student named Jango, haunts her. Jango reunites with Duval at a party and murders her. The blame is put on Baptiste, until he is eventually released when they find the true murderer. Leaving Chicago behind, Baptiste returns to the plains to marry Agnes, who has informed him that she is mixed race.

Micheaux's cinematic style reflected changes in the film industry in the 1930s. Race films during the decade began to take on elements of the Harlem Renaissance, a period in the twentieth-century marked by the revival African American musical and cultural forms, literature, and art. Characterizing the Harlem Renaissance was an overt racial pride that came to be represented in the idea of the "New Negro," who through intellect and production of literature, art, and music could challenge the pervading racism

and stereotypes to promote progressive or socialist politics, and racial and social integration. The creation of art and literature would serve to uplift the race.

In the 1930s African American cinema was divided into two, oppositional artistries: social realism and modernism. The social realists (formally Micheaux's camp) sought to continue the narrative of uplift in their images of Black domestic and communal life. Black social realism in cinema tracks back to early race films, such as *The Realization of the Negro's Ambition* and *Birth of a Race* (1918), and focused heavily on the subjects of racial uplift. Politically these films sought to counter the harmful stereotypes perpetuated in Hollywood and elsewhere by showing African Americans as upwardly-mobile characters. The modernists focused on the Black experience by rejecting middle-class values in favour of Afro-centric and folkloric traditions. Blues, jazz, and all musical forms unique to this experience were wrapped up in the artistry.⁴⁰ Recycled storylines aside, *The Exile* takes the cultural fusion of Afro-American city life in the thirties out West, a trope that would further develop in Herb Jeffries' *Harlem* trilogy.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Yearwood, *Black Film*, 23-25.

⁴¹ In *Two-Gun Man from Harlem* (1938) Herb Jeffries stars as a gunslinging hero who is forced to leave town after he is accused of murder. He moves to Harlem, where he meets with "the Deacon," the kingpin of a local gang. After killing the Deacon in a shootout, Jeffries' character disguises himself as the kingpin and goes back out West to confront his accusers. The film presents the cultural fusion of two geographically and socially-opposed places, the inner city and the frontier town, a convention that can be traced back to *The Exile*.



Figure 14: Jean Baptiste and Edith Duval. Courtesy of rarefilm.net

The film begins with a crosscut scene of Baptiste and Duval, each dressing in front of a mirror in their rooms. The opening scene suggests a “mirroring” of the two characters, writes Johnson: “that the camera is placed to Duval’s left and to Baptiste’s right reinforces the uncanny effect of mirroring, creating the illusion that we are cutting back and forth between one person and that person’s reflection in the mirror, with right and left reversing with each cut” (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 141). While Baptiste and Duval are separate characters, they represent two inextricable parts of the Black condition in the thirties. This mirroring is further represented by musical scores. In the opening sequence, the introduction of Duval’s character is accompanied by a “sweet jazz” number “suggesting a sweet personality and a gentle beauty that might easily be associated with the cinematic star-quality portrait of Edith at the mirror,” writes J. Ronald Green. However, the sweet jazz number may also denote a kind of duplicity. As Duval is standing in front of the mirror, she picks up a bottle of what looks like perfume, then she pours it into a glass and drinks. The music modulates quickly into a hot jazz idiom (Green 131). The scene cuts to Baptiste grooming himself in front of a mirror. The music

again changes to an intrusive drum roll and then back to a hot jazz idiom as Baptiste opens up a letter which reads:

[...] finest land in the state of South Dakota – enough to make you a rich man in less than five years.

So looking forward to seeing you in these parts soon, so remain,

Yours very truly,

Western Land and Townsite Co. (12:25-12:40)

The letter acts to parallel and contrast Duval's drink. "The editing for comparison between the drink and the letter," continues Green, "suggests two different sets of values in postwar America. The drink conjures up the roaring twenties, the jazz age, and the prosperous urban life. The letter, from a company opening new lands for development in the South Dakota, suggests new agrarian fortunes" (132). This scene is the first indication of the geographical opposition between the frontier and the city used to symbolize the opposing values of the Baptiste and Duval.

This doubling is played out further on the dance floor, where Baptiste and Duval move from their rooms to a meeting in the mansion's ballroom. During their conversation, Baptiste proposes to Duval, who accepts. The two leave the party for Duval's chambers, where Baptiste reveals that he has "plans" to move to South Dakota after they are married. Duval protests, saying that she has plans also to open a "social club" in the city. Baptiste dismisses the idea, arguing that her "club" will eventually become a "joint, a dive" built on "bootlegging and gambling" (30:02-30:15). It is made clear from their ensuing argument that Duval's appeal to the protagonist is ultimately threatening to his desired class position. She represents a kind of shadow to Baptiste's

socially-conscious and bourgeois Blackness. Whereas Duval is comfortable in the smoky jazz scenes of Chicago, as a sort of matriarch to the attendees, Baptiste views this type of lifestyle as immoral and distasteful. He resents Duval's free-spending and her attendees' gambling and chooses the plains because he is able to exert control over the land that he lives on. Essentially, Baptiste is offended by Duval's desire for a risk-taking, underground lifestyle.

Through the relationship of Duval and Baptiste, Micheaux presents the dilemma of double-consciousness. Although Baptiste finds Duval's lifestyle offensive, he is drawn back to her a second time in the film, five years after he leaves Chicago for the South Dakota prairies. Baptiste's double-consciousness is best represented by the scenes of trains moving in all directions that are intercut with him travelling back and forth from the prairies. The scene is a metaphor for Baptiste's dilemma. Does he belong on the open prairies with his new love, Agnes, who appears white throughout most of the film, or in the film's African American frontier: the city?

Compared to *The Homesteader*, in *The Exile* Chicago is presented as vastly more appealingly than South Dakota. Upon Baptiste's return to Chicago, Duval's mansion is represented as lavish and sophisticated. The dance hall is an emblem of modernity, with the Heywood Orchestra playing a jazz number. "The stage," writes Johnson, "is as every bit as much a field of opportunity for African American success as the plains of South Dakota . . . The long sequence devoted to displaying the skills of African American performers, full of sound and motion, initially marks a distinct contrast with the static scenes of South Dakota life" (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 145). However, as the film's plot develops, music in the film suggests a continuity between South Dakota and Chicago.

Musical scores accompany the parallel editing that present Chicago and South Dakota as both promising frontiers for African Americans. Donald Heywood and his orchestra lead the audience through a stratified series not just of tempos but of musical genres that might be characterized as theatre music, early swing orchestra, and hot jazz in these scenes. When Baptiste first arrives in South Dakota, for instance, the soundtrack repeats the jazz theme of Duval's dressing room sequence. "The repetition of the same melody behind the South Dakota scenes" writes Johnson, "suggests a continuity between one frontier and another, in effect urbanizing the South Dakota" (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 146). The continuity between these two spaces is also represented by the reunion of Baptiste and Duval.

However, before Duval and Baptiste can reconcile, Duval's former lover, Jango, returns and symbolically breaks the continuity between the two spaces by murdering Duval. We learn Jango is resentful of Duval, whom he blames for his arrest and decides to kill her before she can "ruin another man's life" (70:21-70:38).⁴² Baptiste is accused of the murder, although he is exonerated when a witness appears. The climatic ending of *The Exile* reworks *The Homesteader's* concluding murder-suicide plot and Baptiste's eventual rescue from false accusations. As in *The Homesteader*, Baptiste eventually returns to South Dakota to reunite with Agnes, who reveals her Black ancestry. In the final shot of the film, we see a train riding West into the sunset, a clear reference to the

⁴² The name of *The Exile's* antagonist, Jango, is African, of Xhosa origin. The significance of characterizing the antagonist as African is noteworthy because it shows how Micheaux was portraying what he perceived as "another class" of African Americans, such as Jango, who are associated with savagery. A parallel can be made between Jango and the Rev. McCarthy/McCraline, who is similarly portrayed as an antagonist connected to his African origins. In *The Conquest* the Reverend is a supporter of Back-To-Africa Resettlements and Garveyism. See *The Conquest*, 3, 143).

resolution of Baptiste's double-consciousness that also conjures up a familiar scene in Western films. The pioneer, finally separated from the city, can begin his life anew on the frontier.

The Exile's murder-mystery subplot prefigures some of Micheaux's later detective films, such as *Lying Lips* (1939) and *Murder in Harlem* (1935), both of which explore similar themes and set their plots on urban frontiers. However, *The Exile's* merging of the two regions, the East and West, and two styles, African American and Western, prefigured Black Noir fiction that would feature the same link. The emergence of the Black detective film in the thirties featured the urban cowboy, or detective, and the city saloon, or Harlem nightclub, as mainstay characters and settings. As Johnson notes, "the vision of the frontier as an abstract representation of Black freedom and mobility provides a model for later race movies, such as *Two-Gun Man from Harlem*, which similarly imagine both the rural West and the urban East as appealing frontier spaces" (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 127). Although the protagonist in *The Exile* ultimately chooses the frontier West, his connection to, rather than rejection of, the city adds another dynamic to Micheaux's pioneering frontier saga. Rather than promoting the separation of the African American pioneer from his roots, Micheaux's cinematic Westerns of the new era explored the distinct link between the African American cultural renaissance and the metaphor of the frontier, bringing African American Westerns to the mainstream.

Coda: Revisioning the American West through Black Cinema

Oscar Micheaux's Westerns demonstrate that while his novels and films are patterned on popular Westerns, they also question, criticize, and revise the ideological basis of the genre in many ways. *The Conquest*, depicts the African American

homesteader's struggles with double-consciousness, an issue he continued to explore in his cinematic Westerns, *The Symbol of the Unconquered* and *The Exile*. Whereas *Symbol*'s action takes place in the West, the narrative emphasis in *The Exile* shifts to the East. Rather than portraying East and West as opposing ideological spaces, Micheaux represents them as alternate frontier spaces for the African American homesteader – a representation that would later be seen in Herb Jeffries' *Two-Gun Man from Harlem*.

In *Two-Gun* the African American frontier is represented by two spaces: the rural Western town and Harlem. The hero of the film, Bob Blake operates as a symbol of both places. *Two-Gun*, along with the other *Harlem* films, popularized the West for an all-Black audience. Chapter 5 explores these films as well as Chester Himes' Noir novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* to show the emerging African American West in cinema and literature of the mid-twentieth-century.

Chapter 5:

East Meets West: Herb Jeffries, Chester Himes, and the Twentieth-Century

Representations of African Americans in the West

The Great Depression proved a shattering experience for independent African American filmmakers, forcing many Black-owned production companies to shut down. However, the sound film era held promise for African Americans in the film industry. Hollywood production companies, such as MGM and Fox, stumbled over each other trying to exploit sound film through the use of African American themes and motifs (Cripps 30). These studios were so successful that their work instigated the gradual turning away of Black audiences from race movies to Hollywood films. During this time, Hollywood film companies increasingly began to view the Black community as a lucrative market for cinema. Many of the films produced by these companies were commercial projects aimed at Black neighbourhood theatres: Westerns, detective stories, and romances, written and set in Black locales with all-Black casts. These films were cheaply made but reached larger audiences because of the influence of Hollywood (Yearwood 35).

The *Harlem* Westerns were a product of this era. Directed by white directors (Jed Buell and Richard C. Kahn) and starring jazz singer Herb Jeffries, the films were marketed as “novelty” B-plot Westerns to Black audiences and consequently had limited distribution and commercial success. In spite of this, the *Harlem* Westerns provided a vision of Black life in the West that revised traditional conventions of the Western by transporting African American cultural forms, from musical and dancing styles to Black Vernacular into a frontier setting, a process Julia Leyda refers to as “reterritorialization” (50). The *Harlem* series show Black reterritorialization of Western spaces to reflect the

growing desire for a Black national identity, one that appropriates powerful symbolism associated with popular Hollywood Westerns. Cinema allowed the creators, including Herb Jeffries, to construct a speculative landscape that marketed the American West to Black audiences. In turn, they revise the cinematic Western by depicting African American participation in national expansion.

The analysis of the *Harlem* Westerns leads into a discussion of how the frontier is portrayed in Himes' Noir novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Himes' novel was published in the 1940s, shortly after the *Harlem* Westerns were released, but portray a frontier that is vastly different than the films. *If He Hollers* shows that Black identity is effectively deterritorialized in the West due to growing racial tensions caused by World War Two. In contrast to the open and accessible West of the *Harlem* films and previous Black renderings of the frontier in fiction, Himes' portrayal of mid-century California renders this region and its symbolism inaccessible to African Americans. The novel protests the exceptionalism of the frontier myth using the perspective of its narrator, Bob Jones, to highlight his struggle with achieving success and acceptance in the West. Print Noir allowed Himes to construct an intimate portrait of Jones' experiences with racism on the frontier.

Herb Jeffries, the *Harlem* Series, and the Black Cinematic Western of the 1930s

In the mid-1930s Herb Jeffries was a singer and performer who had been touring with Earl "Fatha" Hines at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair when he met a young Black boy who inspired him to make a Western starring a Black cowboy.⁴³ When Jeffries arrived in Los Angeles to pursue an acting career, he proposed the idea to Jed Buell, a

white independent producer of Hollywood B-movies and novelty Westerns. At first Buell was reluctant, stating that Jeffries was “not black enough” to be an African American film star, but agreed to allow him to play the part if he darkened his skin (McLellan). The first film of the series, *Harlem on the Prairie* (1937) was shot that year. Despite its moderate success at the box office, the film attracted the attention of Richard C. Kahn, a white director who owned Sacks Amusements. Kahn approached Jeffries about continuing the saga of Black Westerns. Kahn provided the financial backing for three more Westerns.⁴⁴ Since Buell owned the rights to the original character played by Jeffries, Kahn and Jeffries created the character of Bob Blake and introduced his trusty horse Stardusk. The following three films, *The Bronze Buckaroo* (1938), *Two-Gun Man from Harlem* (1938), *Harlem Rides the Range* (1939), feature Jeffries in the lead role as the singing cowboy.⁴⁵

On the surface, the *Harlem* movies are typical B-Westerns. Their plotlines evoked the designs of popular Westerns of the early twentieth-century. However, in order to make Black Westerns appealing to African American audiences, Kahn added urban locales, gangsters, Black vernacular and cultural references, as well as jazz and blues

⁴⁴ While the first generation of Black films had examined Black social issues, the new crop focused on tried and proven genre formulas recast in Black form, with an admixture of racial awareness. Thus, in the years preceding World War Two, more so than ever would Black film be identified by its content more than its technique. This shift represented the ways in which Hollywood was “beginning to see the value of Black characters in film and, more so, the value of Black audiences as a profit venue,” writes Thomas Cripps. While Black actors and actresses would still be cast in stereotypical roles for the decades to come, the movement towards a Black cinematic space in Hollywood was significant in shaping the roles that Black performers could play in the future. See Cripps, *Black Film as Genre*, 24-31.

⁴⁵ Jeffries’ ‘inspiration’ story has been recorded in several texts, including the documentary, *Midnight Ramble* (1994), and Alan Governar’s, *African-American Frontier* (2000). Alternatively, it has also been cited that he made Black Westerns because he saw a market in the South for Black theatregoers, most recently in the *LA Times* tribute article, “Herb Jeffries dies at 100; Hollywood’s First Black Singing Cowboy”

music, to create regional juxtapositions, complex new characters, and an amalgamation of various artistic influences. By doing so, he created a speculative cinematic landscape where audiences could imagine African American culture as part of a frontier setting.

Reterritorialization is an important concept for understanding how the *Harlem* Westerns incorporate an urban Black milieu into an otherwise standard cinematic Western setting. In response to Manthia Diawara's argument that mainstream genre cinema deterritorialized an African American presence in their representations of Black characters as stereotypes and stock characters, Leyda argues that the *Harlem* Westerns reterritorialize "African American characters back into a predominantly Black milieu" for the purposes of audience identification (61).⁴⁶ She explains:

while black audiences in the late 1930s may not have had full access to the histories of African Americans in the West—these histories having been suppressed until very recently—black audiences would have immediately recognized the twentieth-century signifiers of black culture that the films transpose into the Western genre, particularly a black culture that was invisible to white movie audiences: the black middle classes. The anachronisms, along with the geographical juxtapositions of East and West, function as ideological anchors for audiences to identify the movies and characters as "black." (62)

46 Leyda explains: "as Manthia Diawara points out in his important revision of Laura Mulvey's thesis on visual pleasure, 'the dominant cinema situates Black characters primarily for the pleasure of White spectators (male or female).' This race-specific pleasure in Hollywood cinema is often created by representing African American characters as nonthreatening, usually 'deterritorialized from a Black milieu and transferred to a predominantly White world' (50). For more information, see Diawara's essay, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" in *Black American Cinema* (1993), 211-219.

These “strategic anachronisms” are a form of signification that create a dual present in the films. Although characters appear to be in classic Western settings in the nineteenth-century, the use of comedic dialogue and non-verbal exchange, as well as references to specific African American cultural practices, such as musical styles (i.e. jazz) and oral culture (i.e. folklore), make the films relevant to audiences in the 1930s. As a result, the *Harlem* Westerns challenge the racial exceptionalism of Westerns while also imagining African American participation in national expansion.

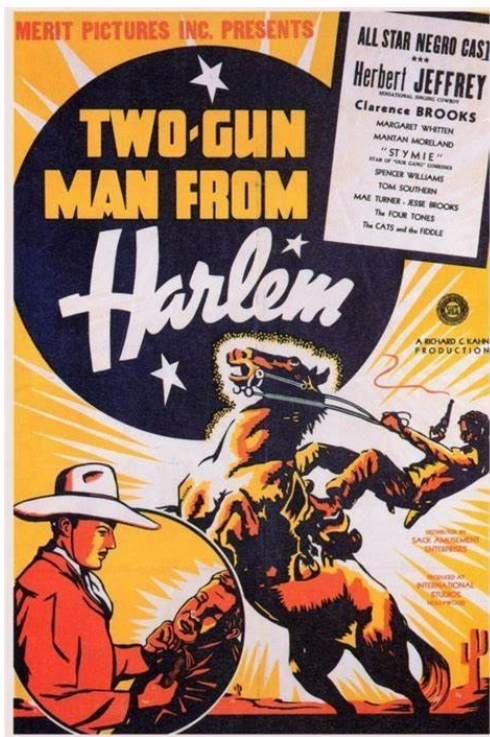


Figure 15: Poster for *Two-Gun Man from Harlem*. Courtesy of [wikimediacommons.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Two-Gun_Man_from_Harlem_poster.jpg)

This is especially true in *Two-Gun*, the only film in the series to use Harlem as a setting. *Two-Gun*, as the title of the film suggests, presents a doubling of spaces and characters. Harlem, rather than being presented as the cultural antithesis of the West, becomes its mirror. Bob Blake travels to Harlem from the West after being falsely-accused of the murder of the husband of a local townswoman, Mrs. Steele. The first place

that Blake enters when he arrives in Harlem is a jazz club. Like its Western counterpart, the saloon, the jazz club is a space that is essential to the Harlem frontier because it functions as a microcosm of the setting. In the club a performer plays a drum solo on pots and pans. A vaudevillian dancer follows, taking the stage to perform with a swing tune. Men at the bar are seen engaging in the traditional African American rhetorical practice of signifyin' by playing a game of the dozens. The club collapses the binary between Eastern and Western traditions by incorporating both in its environment.

The doubling of Bob Blake and Deacon further serves to collapse this binary. After confronting "the Deacon," an infamous Harlem gangster, over the affections of a young woman, Blake defeats him in a duel and adopts his identity to disguise himself before he travels back West. The gangster's identity transforms the image of the clean-cut Blake into a grittier, more complex, hero. He is street-smart, mysterious, and quintessentially cool – an amalgamation of qualities associated with the Black urban environment. In his dual roles as the cowboy and "the Deacon," Jeffries infuses the traditional Western hero with a more urbane Black awareness and collapses generic conventions between Westerns and hard-boiled detective films in the process.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Black crime cinema of the decade was a popular genre that brought Black urban life to screen, albeit in sometimes troubling ways. In these films, the city backdrop (usually Chicago or Harlem) is essential to imagining the speculative urban frontier that criminal and cops, both Black, faced in major metropolitan spaces. Critics have often linked Black crime dramas and Noir films to their Western counterparts, but also remark on how these films imagine the urban frontier as a reflection of the modern Black experience. For a comparison between the Western and crime drama, see Blake Allmendinger's *Imagining the African American West* (2005), pp. 86-89.



Figure 16: Doubling of Blake and Deacon. Courtesy of blackcinemaconnection.com

The significance of the correlation between Black urban culture and modernity in *Two-Gun* is another example of how the film revises the genre. Black presence is imagined as “ubiquitous” across the nation, reflecting a speculative space of Black nationhood and belonging, regardless of regional differences: “Blake’s movement insists upon the presence of blackness in all national spaces and makes blackness ubiquitous in spatial articulations of power . . . Signifying beyond the body of the actor, blackness becomes a spatial principle that represents civilization and power” (64). This is the most obvious ways in which Blackness is a reterritorializing agent in the films. The physical and metaphorical transportation of Black men to and from fictional Western regions represents their position as powerful agents of national expansion; however, in these films, rather than bringing Euro-American culture to the periphery, they bring African American culture to the West.

Two-Gun and the other *Harlem* films signify from the Western by representing African Americans’ struggles for citizenship rights using the genre to articulate the possibility of Black participation in expansion and nation-building. By having Black characters participate in nation-building, the *Harlem* Westerns reveal the limitations all-Black Westerns faced in representing the African American presence on the frontier. In particular, as Leyda states, the all-Black setting attempts to sidestep the “incongruity of

African Americans portraying American imperialists,” by excluding Indigenous and Mexican characters from this setting (52). In doing so, the films restore colonial conventions by erasing Indigenous characters. The inclusion of Black characters in a conventional Western setting result in replicating dominant myths of Western history, including the myth of the Vanishing “Indian” or Indigenous presence from this landscape.⁴⁸

In the *Harlem* films the replication of this myth functions for audience identification. An all-Black Western setting allows Black men to access the cultural relevance of the cowboy image. Cowboys offered a celebrated image of American masculinity that audiences would have found accessible at the time. Giving Black men access to this image offered them a romanticized identity that was characterized as stoic, individualistic, and powerful, all characteristics that were denied to them in cinema of the era. The sense that the hero is a “hybrid” or syncretism of both Afro-centric and Euro-centric modes of cultural and artistic expression builds on the notion that the *Harlem* Westerns employ regional metaphors to signal the significance of a Black Western space that is inextricable from its Black Eastern influences. Although *Two-Gun* transforms Blake into a sharp-shooting gangster, he still reserves many of the characteristics of his previous identity. Rather than relinquishing one identity for the other, he is imagined as a hybrid of two worlds -- as accommodating, rather than combating or erasing, his own

⁴⁸ The Vanishing Indian trope is a self-perpetuating cultural myth that has existed since early contact and persists to the present day. The myth both describes the decline of Indigenous populations and justifies government policies and state violence directed against them. Western films regularly reproduced this myth in their representation of Indigenous characters. The myth relies on the assumption that there is something incompatible between indigenous and modern “civilized” culture. In the *Harlem* Westerns, this myth is portrayed by the absence of Indigenous characters, which suggests that the landscape was a free and open frontier, ready to be taken.

multitudinous nature. This is a significant development from Black Western texts of the early and previous century, since accommodating Afro-centric and African American experiences, ideologies, as well as linguistic and cultural practices in traditionally white genres allows the *Harlem* Westerns to integrate Black-specific renderings of the Western narrative.

In addition, the presence of all-Black settings in what was usually a segregated Western cinematic setting also transforms those settings into hospitable spaces that we could regard as on-screen representations of the social space of the Black movie theatre. At a time when most African Americans could not see a first-run Hollywood film except from balcony seats or at after-hours midnight rambles, Leyda argues, “Black-audience movies, including singing-cowboy features, created an on-screen America in which African Americans had access to all locations in life, both high and low and even tall in the saddle” (50). In the private space of the Black movie theatre, entertainers can perform (and African American viewers can be entertained) without the intrusive presence of the white gaze. This is particularly evident when considering the films’ portrayals of minstrel characters, who traditionally would have been objects of amusement in white films. In the *Harlem* Westerns, however, the minstrel characters are “inside jokes” for Black audiences to reverse the typical racist scenario portrayed in films. These characters are referred to as “hybrid minstrels” (Johnson *Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 117). They were popular stock characters in early Hollywood cinema, derived from the even more popular ‘Black-Face’ minstrel character. Similar to their Black-faced antecedent, the hybrid minstrel was a comic whose purpose on screen was to entertain and amuse white audiences by engaging in self-deprecating humour. The popularity of hybrid minstrel characters in

Hollywood cinema may have resulted from the demand for more Black actors in film, however, in many cases white audiences preferred these characters occupied non-threatening roles that appealed to the nostalgic image of a romanticized Southern tradition “in which blacks were believed to be happy and contented in their subservient roles in American society,” states Mark Reid (23). The hybrid minstrel was a popular character in Westerns of the twenties and thirties where, as Michael K. Johnson writes, “the idea that African Americans are out of place in the Wild West is a repeated source of gags.” Films like *Cimarron* (1931) and *Haunted Gold* (1933) he states took particularly hostile approaches to Black characters by including routines that emasculated and abused the Black bodies of actors playing these characters (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 105-106). These films show that Black characters were not only out-of-place in the West but served the function of being ‘put into place,’ so to speak, by white cowboys for the amusement of white audiences.



Figure 17: Dusty from The Bronze Buckaroo. Courtesy of rarefilm.net

Satiric hybrid minstrelsy, a form of hybrid comedy, offered a subversive revision of the racist ‘joke’ in minstrel comedy by positioning a Black character as the subject, rather than object, of ridicule. Reid writes, “unlike hybrid minstrelsy, satiric hybrid

minstrelsy also appealed to a Black audience who negotiated the contents and laughed with, and sometimes at, themselves as well as white Americans” (34). As a result, satiric minstrel comedy can counteract some of the ridicule that traditionally comes from minstrel acts by employing elements of African American humour, such as wit, storytelling, and mockery, to reverse the joke back onto the (usually white) teller (35). Although satiric hybrid minstrelsy was not a popular form until the latter twentieth century, satiric minstrels did appear in race cinema prior to this era. Arguably, in all-Black Westerns this dynamic would cease to work, since the teller of the joke would be another Black character; however, in both *The Bronze Buckaroo* and *Two-Gun*, the characters of Dusty and Bill are counterposed against relatively clear color and class lines. Both men appear as darker-skinned than the hero, Bob Blake, and they are employed as a ranch hand and cook, respectively. Yet, despite these clear designations, they are not ridiculed, nor objectified. Rather, the *Harlem* Westerns position them as wise fools, who take on qualities of the traditional Trickster archetype of African folklore. This is especially true of Dusty in *The Bronze Buckaroo*. Like Bill, Dusty is initially portrayed as a hybrid minstrel, but his character evolves and challenges this stereotype later in the film. In one scene, Dusty realizes he has been tricked into buying a mule that he was told could talk. In response, he becomes a ventriloquist to earn back the money he gave for a “talking” mule (a trick initially pulled on him) by charging cowboys to hear the mule “read” poetry. Using the mule, he impersonates famous actors, including Greta Garbo and Clark Gable, for the amusement of an all-Black audience. By caricaturizing Hollywood stars, Dusty turns the joke back on to the entertainment industry for the pleasure of Black audiences. In this scene, Allmendinger writes, the film “acknowledges

its imitative tendencies, devoting the subplot to the subject of racial impersonation and mimicry . . . Dusty impersonates Hollywood stars, just as *The Bronze Buckaroo* puts a Blackface on white musical Westerns” (71). Thus, by transforming a typical vaudevillian routine into a meta-cinematic joke, Dusty’s performance appeals to the oppositional (Black) spectator.

Black humour in cinema often requires oppositional readings, since it usually derives from the foreknowledge of the signifying practices being employed. An oppositional reading offers spectators the opportunity to acknowledge both the racist practices that preceded the performance, as well as the recoding of these practices that take place in the film.⁴⁹ In the case of Dusty, an oppositional reading would require that audiences were aware of the degrading images of hybrid minstrel comics and their racially-determined function in Hollywood film and stage. The application of this reading in all-Black Western leads to an even more resistant reading, since the genre’s representations of Black Americans revitalized the image of the minstrel, usually in the form of a cook or maid, whose lack of agency and general degraded status is intended to draw laughter and hostility from audiences. Instead, the all-Black setting invalidates the hostility and transforms Dusty’s predicament into an inside joke that appeals to the

⁴⁹ The concept of “oppositional reading” derives from Stuart Hall’s essay, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” in which Hall calls for the recognition of the Black spectator as an oppositional spectator of mainstream cinema. In her essay on Black female spectators, bell hooks develops this concept in her writings on the Black oppositional gaze in the space of the theatre: “spaces of agency exist for Black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for Black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that ‘looks’ to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggles, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating “awareness” politicizes *looking relations*—one learns to *look* a certain way in order to resist.” See hooks, *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators*,” 288-302.

African American spectator. This scene also satirizes Blackface by presenting Dusty white-face as Hollywood celebrities. The reversal of this typical racist performance is a particularly subversive revision of the common practice of Blackface in minstrel performances of the era.

Scenes with Bill in *Two-Gun* offer some of the most important examples of Black revision in the series. For example, in the film's opening after Blake and his band, *The Four Tones*, perform the soulful song, "I'm a Happy Cowboy," Bill performs a brief comedic exchange with Blake, stating that although he can't sing, he can "cook musical," and that his chili is "just as sweet as a swing tune coming from Cab Calloway's band . . . red hot, honey, red hot!" Later in the scene he is encouraged by Blake to go along and play "a symphony on his pots and pans." This scene can be paralleled to a later one, when Blake enters the Harlem jazz club, where a man plays a drum solo on pots and pans for the entertainment of an all-Black audience. Here and elsewhere, as Batiste writes, "Bill fulfills a very urban performative style" that serves as "a symbolic hyperlink between a new expansionist American Negro at the urban center and the one at the redefined periphery," where conventional roles (i.e. the hero and the sidekick/comic) are also being redefined within the boundaries of genre and the cinematic space using Black cultural practices (Batiste 65). Bill also tells jokes and stories that show an engagement with the African American rhetorical practice of signifying. When he tells the story of "Lot's Wife,"⁵⁰ Bill speaks in vernacular, replacing words and phrases (Soda and Sonora for Sodom and Gomorrah), to add comic insinuation that also references contemporary American culture and adapts a Biblical tale using African American storytelling

50 For a full analysis of this scene, see Michael K. Johnson, *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the African American West* (2011). 112-114.

practices. In the cases of both Dusty and Bill, these comics offer important revisions of the minstrel stereotype using humour that derives from African American cultural practices. They, like the hero Bob Blake, serve as examples of how the *Harlem* Westerns reterritorialize a Black presence into the genre, by symbolizing the importance of contemporaneous Black cultural practices to American culture.

To conclude, all Black cast Westerns of the 1930s began a process of revision and re-appropriation of anti-Black tropes in the Western genre by casting Black actors as the main protagonists. Jeffries's *Harlem* trilogy resemble white musical Westerns in their plot and structure, but transports cultural forms, from musical and dancing styles to vernacular, from urban Black life onto the frontier. The significance of this is apparent but speaks to a longer tradition of Black ideological migration – the transportation of elements native to Black culture and, in this instance, Harlem, into spaces that have formerly excluded or expressed hostility towards them. By incorporating Black American subculture into their plotlines, dialogue, and settings. The films also offered positive portrayals of African Americans that showed the possibility of Black men and women occupying traditional roles in Westerns. The placement of African American culture on the frontier is a cinematic sleight-of-hand which intentionally moves Black geographical and ideological signification out West to effectively reterritorialize a Black presence in the American West through a creation of a “predominately black milieu” within the setting of the Western. The harmonious dynamics between African American characters and the Western genre portrayed in these films contrasts the troubled relationship that Chester Himes' protagonist, Bob Jones, has with the frontier in the 1940s wartime Noir

novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Himes' novel, which adapts frontier motifs into the Noir formula, represents the impossibility of the frontier promise for African Americans.

Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Noir, the Limitations of the Frontier Promise for African Americans

In the introduction to the 2002 edition of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, author and critic Hilton Als describes Chester Himes' semi-autobiographical novel as "a portrait of race as an economic and psychosexual prison – or padded cell" (xv). Als' description captures the novel's disturbing portrait of wartime California as a culture of racial confinement. *If He Hollers* follows Bob Jones, a Black man who leaves Harlem for California in search of economic opportunity and racial equality. When he arrives in Los Angeles, he takes up a job as a shipyard worker labouring on the docks of Los Angeles with an interracial crew. Jones' hopes of achieving social mobility on the West Coast are soon interrupted when he becomes entangled in a conflict with a white woman, Madge, who accuses him of a crime he did not commit. The novel combines the conventions of Noir fiction and autobiography to create a portrait of a Black man who must confront his own abjection in an environment that has been structured by historical myths that play into the present. Ultimately, *If He Hollers* rejects the frontier promise to protest the limitations faced by African Americans in mid-twentieth century California.⁵¹

⁵¹ Like many African Americans who arrived in Los Angeles before him, Chester Himes had been led to believe that the discrimination he would encounter in Southern California would be less severe than the persecution Blacks endured in other cities. His experiences frustrated his expectations. According to Kevin Allen Leonard, Himes' experiences were likely shared by many other African Americans who had come to the region. Although the war had created many jobs with good pay for African Americans, discrimination and segregation were common experiences. However, as Leonard states, "If World War II did not alleviate many kinds of discrimination, it did offer African Americans a potentially more effective way to attack unfair treatment. The war presented blacks with the opportunity to use its rhetoric in their efforts to attack segregation and

Prior to the release of *If He Hollers* Noir fiction was predominantly concerned with white male subjects and their relationship with the urban frontier. Scholarship that discusses this relationship primarily focuses on film Noir of the mid-twentieth century. Julian Murphet and Eric Lott have both examined mid-twentieth century film Noir and, what Lott terms, “the uses of Otherness” (543). Both Murphet and Lott agree that film Noir is devoid of the Blackness that its genre’s title intimates. Instead, Blackness is referred to indirectly using visual motifs and stylistics (dark streets, shadows, tinted frames) that “threaten to throw its protagonists into the predicament of abjection,” Lott states (549). Blackness becomes a racial signifier of moral rot, degradation, and ambiguity that haunts the white subconscious. Murphet specifically attends to film Noir’s “racial unconscious.” In Noir, he states “blackness is ever-present, but intentionally repressed [by white male subjectivity] . . . black urban everyday life is necessarily 'seen', and seen to be a spreading, threatening tissue of systematic deprivations and counter-cultural affirmations; it is then repressed from view as it contradicts national mythologies of democracy” (30).

In Noir’s construction of white male subjectivity, white manhood is mediated through “tropes of blackness,” which usually connotes the imminent threat of erasure (death) of the white protagonist (31). In many ways this dynamic, articulated through the relationship the protagonist has with his environment, corresponds to the frontier narrative’s line between the civilized and savage. Crooks writes, in urban manifestations

other forms of racial discrimination” (313). At the heart of Himes’ novel is an attack on the idea of patriotism during wartime, which Himes felt was contradictory for African Americans. See Leonard, Kevin Allen. “In the Interest of All Races: African Americans and Interracial Cooperation in Los Angeles during and after World War II,” 309-342.

of the frontier myth “black criminality” could easily be substituted for “Indian savagery.” Much in the same way that the “Indian question” functioned as “the unifying factor that transformed various frontiers into a unity by posing a common danger of absolute otherness” on the Western frontier, the “black question” posed a similar threat. Crooks traces this dynamic to the mass migration of African Americans into cities in the early twentieth-century, which resulted in the segregation and subsequent ghettoization of Black communities in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. Unofficial and official lines of segregation reinforced frontier ideology’s objective to maintain white civilization through the erasure of non-white communities by means of physical separation or assimilation (38-39).

Noir’s dramatization of the dynamic between white manhood and the racial frontier is reversed in *If He Hollers*. Himes’ novel focuses its narrative lens on the subjective experience of its narrator in a city that is defined by racial barriers that threaten the protagonist with persecution if he dares to transgress them. Using the Noir genre’s preoccupation with spatial enclosure (whether real or metaphorical) and dark and light metaphors, Himes revises these conventions to show how systemic racism structures the Black man’s surroundings on the urban frontier. Whiteness replaces Blackness as the racial signifier that haunts the Black psyche. Jones comes face-to-face with his own abjection when he confronts white characters who threaten his physical and social death. In doing so, he is transformed into the object that he fears most: the Black criminal.

Himes’ reversal of the conventions of Noir in *If He Hollers* serves as a critique of the limitations Black men face on the frontier, but also more broadly the limitations that Black men face in the United States. When the novel was first published, it was lauded by

critics, who placed him in the “protest novel” tradition of writers like Richard Wright (Jackson 42). Yet Himes was dismayed by this affiliation. Although he was friends with Wright, Himes felt that the racial protest novel was delimiting to Black writers like himself. A few years after the novel’s publication, in a speech entitled ‘The Dilemma of the Negro Novelist,’ Himes suggested that the agency of the Black “protest” writer was hampered by the “habits” and “limitations” of an oppressive “American environment.” He characterized this environment by an audience demand for stereotypes pertaining to the African American psyche: “homicidal mania, lust for white women, a pathetic sense of inferiority” (Himes, 53, 56). Rather, Himes saw his writing as autobiographical – as a “witness” to the “Black condition . . . but one that can be misunderstood if the only one looking is white” (56).

As in Black cinema, Himes was aware of effects of audience mediation of his novels. Thus, he strove to separate the writer and the “voice,” write Jonathan Eburne and Kevin Bell. “As Himes was painfully aware,” they write, “any possibility of laying claim to an authentic black “voice” was seriously overdetermined, since any such voice was always subject to the conditions of its appropriation or reinvention in response to new imaginative forms and historical extremes alike” (226). Bob Jones, according to Himes, was more of a “parallel – rather than mirror – image” of himself (227). The autobiography’s limitations, especially for Black writers, was not its claim to authenticity, but its claim to being representative of any particular Black experience in the mid-twentieth century. Thus, Himes’ found the voice of Black experience in the U. S. to be subject to a crisis in authenticity at the very moment it coincided with his experience as a writer: “I would sit in my room and become hysterical about the wild

incredible story I was writing," Himes recalls in the second volume of his memoirs, *My Life of Absurdity* (1976). "And I thought I was writing realism. It never occurred to me that I was writing absurdity. Realism and absurdity are so similar in the lives of American blacks one cannot tell the difference" (*My Life* 109). The genre he chose to write about this absurdity in – the Noir – allowed him to explore the depths of psycho-social prison that Bob Jones finds himself in.

When Jones first arrives in Los Angeles, he believes that through hard work he will achieve the quintessential American dream. He states, "[a]ll I had when I came to the Coast was my height and weight and the fact I believed that being in America gave everybody a certain importance . . . In three years in L.A. I'd worked up to a good job in a shipyard, bought a new Buick car, and cornered off the finest coloured chick west of Chicago" (153). The image of wealth and success that he initially prides himself in is quickly replaced by fear, self-doubt, and resentment. When the Second World War begins, Jones soon realizes that the conditions for Black and other non-white Americans in California is not much different than it is in the South. Wartime containment increases hostility towards those deemed as enemies, creating an environment of fear and paranoia. The limitations of this "new frontier" become even more apparent when Jones observes the removal and internment of Japanese Americans. He parallels their internment to his own precarious status as an African American:

it wasn't until I'd seen them send the Japanese away that I'd noticed it. Little Riki Oyana singing 'God Bless America' and going up to Santa Anita with his parents the next day. It was taking a man up by the roots and locking him up without chance. Without a trial. Without a charge. Without even giving him a chance to

say one word. It was thinking about if they ever did that to me, Robert Jones, Mrs.

Jones' dark son, that started me to getting scared. (3)

Jones' fear of being imprisoned without a trial or a charge sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Repeated run-ins with white people on the streets and at work lead to a further sense of unease and anticipation that he will be coaxed into committing an act of violence out of defense. Jones states, "Every time I stepped outside I saw a challenge I had to accept or ignore. Every day I had to make one decision a thousand times: *Is it now? Is now the time?*" (4). In accordance with the conventions of Noir, Jones' surroundings are characterized by uncertainty that reflects his own precarious existence as a Black man in America. However, rather than this uncertainty depicted through motifs that connote Blackness as a threat, such as shadows and dark alleyways, ambiguity is embodied by white characters.

Racial restrictions define Los Angeles for Jones and other non-white migrants. For instance, in the shipyard where Jones works, he and his "Jim Crow gang" are assigned to the vessel's dark and cramped interior, where "the air is thick with welding fumes, acid smell, body odour, and cigarette smoke" (20). In the shipyard, white guards and gatekeepers patrol the docks. One morning when Jones arrives late for work, he is grilled by the guards and subjected to offensive remarks that imply his tardiness is due to his race (13). Even on the streets of Los Angeles, a city where no official lines of segregation are enforced, Jones is met with looks of "cold hatred," suspicion, and deference from white pedestrians (37). White presence in Los Angeles symbolizes the institutional barriers that prevent Black social and physical mobility. It also takes on metaphorical connotations in the novel, as Lynn Itagaki writes,

Instead of military guard towers policing Japanese Americans in remote internment camps, the civilian police monitor and circumscribe the physical and economic mobility of African Americans within the various areas of Los Angeles. Both racial groups are thereby effectively interned: the Japanese Americans in desert prisons, the African Americans in neighborhoods constrained by residential ordinances and segregation. (68)

Los Angeles is a metaphorical prison for Black and other non-white migrants. She further argues that throughout the novel Jones becomes a “transgressive figure” who “continually migrates just as he constantly moves, traversing the different segregated spaces of Los Angeles . . . However, this transgressive figure is ultimately fixed into a stereotypical identity of a black man” (66). Jones’ growing desire to commit acts of violence against the white people he meets replaces his initial fears of transgressing the limits imposed on him. Through these transgressions, whether accidental or deliberate, he is “transformed into the hunted racial body of America itself” (68).

In Noir protagonists are often caught in a self-destructive cycle that leads to their fateful end. *If He Hollers* adapts this convention to show Jones’ victimization by white society, which “traps” him into the role of the perpetrator. The second half of the novel centres around a lynch drama between Jones and another shipyard worker, Madge. Madge is the archetypal femme fatale. However, in Black Noir frameworks, she also embodies a “historical racial schema,” a term I borrow from Frantz Fanon, that serves as an example of how Himes uses the Noir genre to articulate a very real social threat Black men face.⁵² The sexual tension that builds between the characters is marked by hostility

⁵² For a description of this concept, see Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89-95.

from the beginning. After he discovers that Madge refuses to work alongside Black men on the ship, Jones insults her, calling Madge a “cracker bitch,” which leads to his demotion from the position of leaderman (27). Resentful that he has been demoted, Jones seeks revenge on Madge and the two characters engage in repeated confrontations for the rest of the novel that ultimately lead to Jones being incriminated on false rape charges.

Michael K. Johnson writes that the “lynch drama” both characters engage in corresponds to the “ritual hunt” in frontier narratives. The “ritual hunt” imagines Jones’ and Madge’s relationship as an inversion of this conventional trope which positions Jones as the “hunter” and Madge as the prey, at least temporarily: “if Bob plays the hunter, he does so, Himes implies, because he has been positioned there as part of the white ritual of mastery in which the equality between the hunter and hunted exists only so that those distinctions can be asserted ‘more brutally than ever’” (Johnson, quoting Sundquist, *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth* 167). The game of cat and mouse that Jones and Madge engage in blurs the lines between subject and object for Jones. When he attempts to confront her over his job loss with the intention of “racking her back” he ends up losing his nerve when she meets his gaze: “I couldn’t say a word . . . She was pure white Texas. And I was Black. And a white man was standing there. I never knew before how good a job the white folks had done on me” (124). Jones is aware that if he transgresses the racial lines that exist between them, he would become the objectified body of Black America that haunts him.

On the urban frontier, Madge embodies the ultimate limitations of the frontier promise for Black men. Given that frontier narratives often represent the landscape as feminine, Jones’ lack of sexual access to Madge’s body signifies his inability to conquer

the landscape he is on. This interpretation applies Annette Kolodny's argument that the frontier landscape can be personified as female: as a "'maternal garden' receiving and nurturing human children" or as a virgin that "invites sexual assertation" (*The Lay of the Land* 5, 65). According to this theory, colonizing the landscape allows the colonist to experience a "perennial rebirth" and transform from figurative infant into a man. Given that African Americans have been historically colonized, segregated, and oppressed, access to this landscape and its figurations are complicated, as Himes' novel shows. In Jones' case, the landscape and its mythological connotations have already been conquered and defined by white men and, thus, remain inaccessible to non-white men. The role that Jones ends up occupying on this landscape – the savage other – reinforces this notion. On the new frontier Black men must contend with racist myths (of Black savagery) that have been transported from the south, as Itagaki writes,

as Bob terms it, [Madge] "performs" her fear of him, pushes him unwillingly into the stereotypical role of a black man rapaciously desiring a white woman. In their tense and often violent interactions, Madge comes to signify white America, an intolerant and unforgiving racist hegemony that proscribes interracial sexual desire and relations. (74)

The notion of performance is important when considering the novel's protestation of the frontier promise. Itagaki's argument that Jones performs Black savagery suggests that Jones has no agency or control over how he is identified. Each confrontation with Madge leads Jones into reflecting on his own objectification. He is aware, he states, that if he were to sleep with her, he would be transformed into the object he fears:

And without having to say one word she could keep all the white men in the world feeling they had to protect her from black rapists. That made her doubly dangerous because she thought about Negro men. I could tell that the first time I saw her. She wanted them to run after her . . . I could imagine her teasing them with her body, showing her bare thighs and breasts. Then having them lynched for looking. (125)

Jones views Madge as an extension of white male power. This is confirmed when he discovers that Madge is not “pure.” She, like himself, is poor and an object that is controlled: a working-class woman who lives in a tenement and substitutes her income with prostitution. However, Jones also realizes that Madge’s power comes from what she symbolizes to white men. As indicated by the previous excerpt, she is a symbol of a codified history that maintains control over Black men using the indirect sexual power of white women.

Himes reverses the formula of Noir by showing Jones as the scapegoat of the plot in the end. Although Noir fiction contends with the forces of civilization and savagery to present the protagonist with the predicament of abjection, Noir usually asserts white male defeat of this abjection. Himes reverses this formula to represent the inevitable defeat of the Black subject. The importance of symbolism in this dynamic is not only obvious historicity, but also its powerful rendering of a contemporary metaphor: the abjection of the criminalized subject in a supremacist system which relies on the racist mythification of the criminalized as the “Other” subject. Jones *performs* the criminal stereotype for Madge and conversely Madge *performs* white purity for Jones. Both are subject to the

white patriarchal myth of superiority, a myth which only renders the American landscape accessible to white men.

The “lynch drama” that plays out from Madge’s accusation leads to Jones’ being beaten and imprisoned. In the “dirty and dark” prison, Jones is the “prey,” states Johnson. More so, in the society in which he lives, his preyed upon Black body renders him helpless to the stereotypes he now embodies. After the extensive beatings he endures, Jones ends up in prison hospital ward:

nude. My knees, elbows, and one wrist were bandaged and taped, and I was splotched all over with mercurochrome. I reached for my head, felt a thick turban of bandages. My face felt raw and my lips were swollen several times their natural size. I explored with my tongue and felt my teeth but I couldn’t tell how many. I hurt in the groin as if it had been ruptured. (183)

Itagaki writes that “Bob’s raw, bloody body collects racial signifiers, representing the multiracial condition of racism in Los Angeles” (75). His thickened lips, swollen face, and turbaned head transform him into a caricature of Blackness. They also, as Itagaki continues, represent the “silenced minorities” of Los Angeles (76). The first and last lines in this passage indicate that Jones has not only become the image of a caricatured Black America, but he has also been emasculated and, at least metaphorically, castrated in a symbolic lynching.

The events that occur after Jones has been hospitalized and imprisoned are the novel’s most powerful commentary on the limitations for Black men on the frontier. After he is released from hospital, Jones discovers that Madge has decided to not press charges because she is afraid of causing “racial tension amongst the employees” at the

shipyard (200). Her actions, according to one guard in the prison, are viewed as a “patriotic gesture comparable only to the heroism of men in battle” (201). In her ‘act of mercy’ towards Jones, Madge once again asserts her role in maintaining boundaries between the races. In this quote, Madge’s mercy towards Jones is construed as a “patriotic gesture” that levels her with white men on a battlefield. Thus, the novel renders the outcome of the “lynch drama” as one where white men and woman ultimately assert the most brutal forms of punishment as an act of patriotism in a ‘battle’ for supremacy.

Himes shows that the racist actions of white characters in the novel are performed under the guise of patriotism, thus, adapting the frontier myth’s colonial ethos in a modern-day context. By the end of the novel, Jones has been symbolically lynched, imprisoned, and ordered to be drafted into the military. The phrase that Jones utters in prison, “I’m still here,” when asked by two Mexican inmates if he had been in a “war” because of his weakened state. As a Black man in a white supremacist society, the phrase “I’m still here” suggests that Jones is still imprisoned, enslaved, and reduced physically and mentally by the ideological forces that shape his world. The statement, much like the rest of the novel, transcends history in its figuration of Jones’ life.

In conclusion, the novel’s articulation of Jones’ relationship with the frontier points to the ways in which structural and ideological barriers cohere to imprison the Black body and psyche. Himes’ revision of the frontier narrative and its adaptation of the Noir genre reflects the contemporary African American experience in this region to show how Black male identity is deterritorialized and made rootless. Through Himes’ chronicling of Jones’ struggle to achieve the American Dream in California, Himes draws

upon the historical “lynch drama” to show the fate of Black Americans who attempt to transgress ideological barriers that have been determined by white society.

Coda: Black Westerns in the Mid-Twentieth Century

The *Harlem* Westerns and Chester Himes’ *If He Hollers Let Him Go* engage in strategic revisions of the popular Western to reflect how Black men were represented in the genre in the early twentieth century. The *Harlem* Westerns includes a predominately Black cultural milieu in a Western setting, effectively “reterritorializing” the Western genre by incorporating elements from African American culture for Black audiences. On the contrary, Himes’ *If He Hollers* portrays a de-territorializes a Black presence from the genre. The distinct representations of African American experience in Western spaces in the two texts reflects the mediums each text was produced in. The *Harlem* Westerns used the cinematic medium and the Hollywood B-Western plotline to create a setting for African Americans in the popular Western, in turn, representing a shift in the way that Black performers characterize themselves on screen. Himes’ novel relied on both the Noir genre and the Black protest novel to elucidate on the psycho-social impacts of racism in this setting.

The *Harlem* Westerns and *If He Hollers* show the paradoxical ways that African Americans were representing Black experience in the twentieth century West, building on the idea that there is no such thing as a ‘representative’ African American Western experience. This idea would be reinforced by novelist, Era Bell Thompson, in her works *American Daughter* (1946) and *Africa: Land of My Father* (1954). Thompson, the daughter of Black homesteaders who settled in North Dakota, wrote about how her childhood on the prairies shaped her identification with race and nationhood. Thompson’s

memoirs provide an interesting contrast to frontier narratives written by Black men, especially in its representation of the regional double-consciousness. The next chapter explores this relationship to examine Thompson's representation of her experiences in the West.

Chapter 6:

Race, Region, and Midwestern Identity in Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter* and *Africa, Land of My Fathers*

As the Black film industry began to gain a foothold in American culture, African American periodicals continued to flourish. In 1945 businessman John H. Johnson founded *Ebony*, a magazine that focused on Black arts and culture. Thompson, then a novice journalist, caught the attention of Johnson after the publication of *American Daughter*, an autobiography that recounts her life growing up on her family's homestead in North Dakota, her adulthood in Chicago, and her years as a journalist working for various African American newspapers in the city. She followed *American Daughter* with *Africa, Land of my Fathers*, a travel memoir based on Thompson's three-month assignment in Africa for *Ebony* magazine. Both memoirs articulate Thompson's complex relationship with race, region, and Midwestern identity. In this chapter I examine how both memoirs contribute to what Katherine McKittrick calls a "re-presentation" of place. In *Demonic Grounds* (2006), McKittrick argues that Black women "cite/site underacknowledged black geographies" that are separate from dominant (white, male) constructions of space. Using McKittrick's ideas as a framework, this chapter argues that *American Daughter* revises conceptual understandings of region to reflect on her experiences with double-consciousness in the Midwest.

The analysis of *American Daughter* leads into a discussion about how Thompson represents the relationship between race, region, and national identity in *Africa, Land of My Fathers*. In the second memoir Thompson examines the spectrum of social and political realities that exist in Africa, illuminating the complex character of its social and

political landscape during decolonization. As in *American Daughter*, on the African continent she experiences double-consciousness – or perhaps more accurately, a palpable double estrangement that reflects the tensions existing between her ethnic and national identities. Still, even in Africa, Thompson interprets the continent through the eyes of a Midwesterner, shedding light on the significance of regional identity in global interactions during the mid-twentieth century.

In *American Daughter* and *Africa* Thompson casts the Midwest as a multicultural, integrated region that she is able to call home. By representing the Midwest as the heart of her own progressive vision, Thompson turns a critical eye on the ways in which institutionalized racism dislocates African American subjects from a sense of place, regionally and nationally. As her travels to Chicago, the American South and apartheid South Africa reveal, she drew on parallels between places to show the psycho-social impacts of systemic oppression that denied Black subjects a claiming of birthright and nationhood. Thompson's accounts of her own experiences as an "outsider within" in both memoirs amplifies her critique of the effects of systemic racism and sexism on the Black woman's journey towards personhood.⁵³

⁵³ Using the term "outsider within" Patricia Collins recognizes that the doubly marginalized status of African American women allows them to occupy a unique position within society. This concept resembles double-consciousness in the sense that an "outsider within" understands "both sides," but is only allowed exist in one reality – that of being raced and sexed, an outsider who must function as such within oppressive dynamics. Collins' essay renders the perspective an important contribution to understanding the sociological complexities of race and the intersectional nature of oppression. It is used here to acknowledge Thompson's unique social location as a Black female Midwesterner whose autobiographical accounts not only recognize, but also explore, the implications of such a position in a nation with uneven demarcations for Black citizens. See Patricia Collins' "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought."

“What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like That?": Era Bell Thompson and the African American Midwest

“Ever since I left the state in 1931,” Era Bell Thompson later recalled, “people have asked, ‘where is North Dakota?’ and ‘what in the world was a nice girl like you doing in that godforsaken country in the first place?’” (“What's A Nice Girl Like ...”). In 1944 Thompson applied for the Rockefeller Fellowship in Midwestern Studies from the Newberry Library to answer the first question and ended up answering the second. In *American Daughter* Thompson recounts her life growing up as the sole Black daughter in one of rural North Dakota’s only Black families. After her parents died, Thompson left North Dakota for Chicago with the ambition of becoming a writer. Soon after settling in the city, she saw an article in the paper about Rockefeller Fellowships for regional writing “saying the same thing that I’d been hearing ever since I’d come to Chicago: ‘what is North Dakota?’ (Era Bell Thompson and Helen J. Dowling). Her application for the fellowship metamorphosized into *American Daughter*.

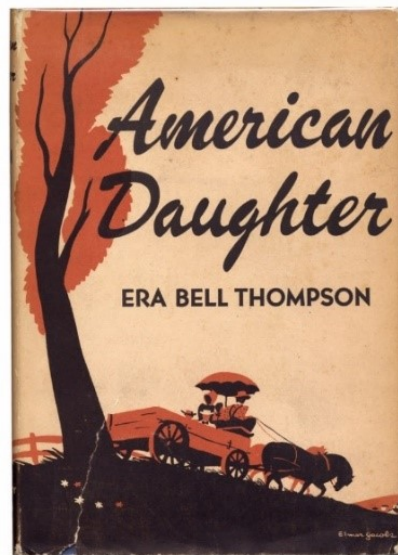


Figure 18: Dust Jacket of the First Edition of American Daughter, published by the University of Chicago Press, 1946. Courtesy of Ian Brabner, Rare Americana

Upon its publication, *American Daughter* was met with generally positive reviews from critics. One critic lauded the memoir because it “set forth in no unmistakable terms that discrimination is not confined to below the Mason-Dixon line.” The review continues by remarking on Thompson’s journalistic objectivity, stating that she recounted events “in a calm, logical case history, yet with an appealing individual presentation that is more effective than [Richard] Wright’s rage against his environment.” The comparisons between Thompson and Wright occupied subsequent reviews. In a later review a critic wrote, “most would agree that Wright has a more impressive talent for serious literary production than has Thompson . . . [though] certainly Wright with a little less bitterness and a little more of Miss Thompson’s humor and friendliness would be more sympathetically received” (quoted in Hardison 185).

African American critics were more hesitant to praise Thompson. One of them was then little-known journalist, Ralph Ellison, who contended that *American Daughter* was too “exceptional” for the majority of African Americans to relate to. He went as far as to accuse Thompson of literary assimilationism by nodding to the racial politics that motivated the memoir’s publication, concluding his review by reminding readers that “writing, too, like the ointments with which some Negroes attempt to bleach their dark skins to a ‘white’ esthetic standard, can be a form of symbolic bleaching” (quoted in Hardison, 185). According to Ayesha K. Hardison, Ellison’s accusations accurately, if inadvertently, revealed the mediating influence of Thompson’s white editors on her memoir’s racial agenda. Hardison writes that Pargellis and the University of Chicago press editors strove to establish *American Daughter* as an authority on civil rights during its production by “advocating for harmony over protest, happiness over bitterness, and

social unity over political partisanship.” They believed that by doing so *American Daughter* could serve to counter “the negative effects on race relations that they felt Wright’s *Black Boy* had caused” (Hardison 186).⁵⁴

In spite of these influences, *American Daughter* offers more thoughtful and understated mediations on race relations than Thompson was initially given credit for. As in Oscar Micheaux’s *The Conquest*, in *American Daughter* Thompson challenges the exceptionalism rooted in the frontier myth by focussing on the experiences of African American homesteaders. Like Micheaux, Thompson adapts the geographical opposition between the frontier and the city to externalize the division between the Black community in the Eastern metropolis and the white Western world. For both authors, this division represents double-consciousness as they struggle to fit into two worlds separated by race. However, while Micheaux represents his experiences with double-consciousness as his failure to attain the frontier dream, for Thompson they are primarily connected to the loss of -- and eventual search for -- home. In *American Daughter* home takes on metaphorical connotations. It is representative of a place -- both physical and psychological -- where Thompson can reproduce the sense of security and wholeness she experiences as a child in North Dakota. She links regional understandings of community and identity in North Dakota with larger ideas of nationhood, citizenship, and belonging. In doing so Thompson not only challenges the underlying racism that erased African

⁵⁴ In her study of the letters from Thompson to her editors, Ayesha K. Hardison discovered that *American Daughter*’s editors chose the title of the memoir, specifically to signify on Wright’s *Native Son*: By choosing such a title, Hardison writes, “Thompson’s representation of self as a nurtured “native” daughter offsets the themes of racial subjection and violence in Wright’s southern memoir, published just one year prior to her text . . . reflecting the frequent critical, generic blurring of these two works” (186-187).

American's – and particularly Black women's – lives from the rural Midwest, but also demonstrates how their experiences helped to create Midwestern history and culture.

Katherine McKittrick's theorization on how Black women participate in re-signifying place is a useful framework for analyzing Thompson's representation of the relationship between racial identity and region in *American Daughter*. McKittrick contends that Black women's perceptions of place have historically been erased by dominant modes of geographical thought ("made ungeographic") and that when examined as legitimate perceptions of their own in relation to the spaces they inhabit, show how they reimagine this discourse (xxi). Midwesternness is bound to white masculinity through stories of pioneer farmers and frontiersmen who settled the region throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Thompson's revision of these associations effectively challenges what is considered the "moniker Midwest." By the early twentieth century the "moniker Midwest," writes Michael Lansing, "emerged as the trans-Missouri West emerged in public discourse" that resulted in the creation of a imagined past. "This imagined past," continues Lansing, "featured prosperous rural economies based on small-scale, family-based agriculture, created by hardworking white male pioneers through great struggles with both Indigenous people and the landscape itself" (6). The focus of these narratives on white male pioneers sublimated issues of race, excluding the histories and lives of Black homesteaders. In turn, Black homesteaders like Thompson challenged the exceptionalism of this myth by revising the relationship between race and place.



Figure 19: Era Bell as a child with her father, Tony, in Driscoll, ND. Courtesy of State Historical Society of North Dakota

In the first chapter of *American Daughter* Thompson positions herself as a Black feminine interjection in the masculinist tradition of travelling West. She opens the chapter by recounting her early life with her family in Des Moines, Iowa. The only girl in a family of boys, Thompson remarks at how her birth surprised her father: “The Lord had heretofore been good to my father, for he had three sons: Tom, Dick, and Harry.” She goes on to explain that there had been another daughter born “with fair skin and blonde hair” who died shortly after birth (13). In contrast to these markers of past miscegenation, Thompson writes that “after I lost my newborn pallor, I began to take on racial traits so quickly that my mother became alarmed” (15). She points out her dark skin in order to affirm there is no tragedy in being born a Black girl. “Colored storks,” Thompson jokes to account for the stark difference between her and her sister, “are notoriously inconsistent” (5).

Despite Thompson's insertion of herself in this familial and collective Black history, the first chapter increasingly focuses on her parents' efforts to make enfranchised men out of her three siblings. While Tom, Dick, and Harry constantly get into trouble in school, Thompson jokes that she acts as a carrier pigeon for them, bringing home their study notes. Worried that his sons will be expelled, Thompson's father decides to move his family to North Dakota after receiving a telegram from his brother praising the "boundless prairies" where, he writes, "a man's fortune is measured by the number of his sons, and a farm could be had without money" (21). The family "strikes out for far-off North Dakota to find a new home in the wide-open spaces of the prairies," where she writes, "there was freedom and opportunity for a man with three sons. Three sons and a daughter" (21-22). Although Thompson positions herself as marginal in her father's plans for freedom and opportunity, the closing sentence of the first chapter presents her as an equally-endowed daughter of this Western project.

Thompson's first encounter with the prairie landscape is also her first encounter with double-consciousness. She represents this experience using the landscape. On a train ride to North Dakota, she observes the scenery passing growing bleaker as she travels West:

Past Fargo and the Red River Valley came the barren prairies of North Dakota – vast, level, gray-green country . . . Suddenly there was snow, miles and miles of dull, white snow, stretching out to meet the heavy, gray sky; deep banks of snow drifted against the wooden snow fences along the railroad. And with the snow went our dreams of Indians, for some how they didn't fit into this strange white world. (26-27)

The bleak whiteness of the snow-covered landscape is used figuratively to represent the white world they are entering (Johnson *Hoo-Doo Cowboys*, 75). The unravelling of her frontier dreams coincides with the absence of “Indians” from this scenery, which reinforces the Thompson’s estrangement from this place. Her life at school also reinforces these feelings of estrangement. As the only Black girl in her second-grade class, Thompson is made to feel self-conscious of her differences by the other children, who gawk at her features, pull at her hair, and inspect the “white palms” of her hands. When she tries to make friends, some of the children go further with their mistreatment: “they called me “black” and “nigger,” and I was alone in my exile, differentiated by the color of my skin, and I longed to be home with the comfort of my family, but even with them I would not share my hurt. I was ashamed that others should find me so distasteful” (83-84).

Thompson's life on the homestead does little to comfort her. While her father and brothers tend to the farm, Thompson's mother is busy with housework. In the Thompson household, the frontier life divides labour by gender, much to young Era Bell's chagrin, who envies her brothers' horse-riding capabilities. As she grows, Thompson's mother enlists her to perform housekeeping duties. This brings her into conflict with her mother and Thompson longs to run away from the farm. Carole Boyce Davies writes that in Black women's autobiographical writing “home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement” and “the family is sometimes situated as a site of oppression” for Black women and girls because this space recreates the patriarchal and racial structures of white society (21-22). Thompson's heightened awareness of her racial and gendered estrangement forces her to develop a sense of home that is separate from the definitions

she had received as a young child. She turns to the natural world to find expression for her emerging Black womanhood.

Thompson's representation of her relationship with the natural world accentuates the harmony between herself and the prairie landscape. In these descriptions she develops what Joanne Braxton refers to as a "perceptual unity with nature" that models her desire for acceptance in the social world (162). Repeated throughout her landscape descriptions are references to the beauty, harmony, and silence. Describing a summer heat wave, Thompson observes the stillness of the "silent, hot, motionless days where not a blade of grass stirred, not a stalk of grain moved." Thompson understands these periods to be part of a natural cycle and responds accordingly: "You didn't talk much then, you hated to break the prairie silence, the magic of its stillness, for you had that understanding with nature, that treaty with God. There was no need for words. The silence wore hard on those who did not belong" (50). In such passages, her descriptions achieve a poetic quality. Describing the species of birds on the prairies, Thompson writes:

fall was a time of threshing, of hunting, and of cold, drizzling rains. As the sloughs and ditches filled, wild game flying out of the North paused to feed in the fields and swim in the muddy water. There were little brown-flecked teals and big green-necked mallards with their gray coasts and white dickies; in grain and high grass were prairie chickens, close kin to the grouse and the pheasant; and far, far up in the blue heavens came the melancholy cry of the wild geese, kings of the sky, flying like sliver-arrowed squadrons on their pilgrimage to the Southland. (60-61)

Thompson's relationship to the natural world differs from that of Black male homesteaders. Rather than viewing the landscape as virgin soil waiting to be conquered and transformed, she "comes to appreciate the prairie in and of itself," writes Johnson (190). She goes on to tell the reader that her brother, Tom, waited for the ducks each morning "with his old shotgun" ready to shoot. Unlike her brothers and father, Thompson is less interested in taming the landscape for profit and sustenance than in appreciating its pastoral beauty and wide, open spaces. Her representation of the prairies as a place of belonging and wholeness shows Thompson what it means to identify with a place that does not exclude her because of her race and gender and, thus, the intimate bond she forms with the prairies serve as "cover memories" that remind her of her humanity in places where her Black womanhood is not accepted.⁵⁵

Johnson argues that the problem that remains for Thompson is that her connection to the natural world comes "at the cost of her separation from the social one" and this "leads to the central question of the narrative: how does one achieve a sense of wholeness and unity as part of a world divided by race?" (192-193). Like other families in Driscoll, the Thompsons live precariously in tune with the seasons. Thompson observes that the scarcity of food and resources on the homestead during one particularly harsh winter fosters connections within the community. When Christmas plans are dampened because

⁵⁵ In her essay, "Indelible Grasslands: Place, Memory, and the Life Review," Molly P. Rozum studies 'life reviews' or memoirs recounting the young lives of authors from the prairies. She argues that these memoirs "often reveal microenvironments of intense personal experience impressed in childhood," formed through a geographical sensory experience that is "remembered, formed, and reformed over a lifetime." According to Rozum, these memoirs serve as a "act of creation of place" that become cover memories "bound to adult identity" (120-121). In Thompson's memoir, her prairie childhood is best remembered through her interaction with the natural landscape and how she signifies the landscape to represent internal unity with the external world.

the Thompsons fail to make ends meet during the harvest, the small Black community of Driscoll celebrates together. Even within the “blurry whiteness” of the storm, the African American community is able to bring a sense of belonging to the Thompson household that had been left behind:

Now there was fifteen of us, four percent of the state’s entire Negro population. Out there in the middle of nowhere, laughing and talking and thanking God for this new world of freedom and opportunity, there was a feeling of brotherhood, of race consciousness, and of family solidarity. For the last time in my life, I was part of a whole family, and my family was a large part of a little colored world, and for a while no one else existed. (74)

In this passage Thompson connects to her Black identity (“race consciousness”) and with ideas of family and community (“family solidarity”), as well as a sense of stability and location (“a little colored world”). Feelings of “brotherhood” amongst the African American community in Driscoll are eventually extended to their white neighbours. At the Christmas celebration, “two white families stopped by to extend their greetings,” she writes, “and the spell of color was broken, but not the spirit of Christmas, for the way Mack greeted them and their own warm response erased any feelings we may have had of intrusion” (74). As time goes on, the Thompsons begin to kindle friendships with families outside of their race. Soon Thompson herself finds a community amongst the children of immigrant families. Because of these friendships and networks, she is able to form an idea of race separate from her parents (both Southern born) that becomes central to her vision of what America could be if prejudices were put aside.

The death of Thompson's mother shatters this brief feeling of wholeness. Once again using descriptions of nature to convey emotion, Thompson imagines the “frozen earth” where her mother is buried to be symbolic of her mother’s passing: “[t]hey lowered my mother into the frozen earth at the close of day, as the sun sank behind the snow-blotched hills. We stood on the brink of the grave, listening to the clods of dirt fall upon her coffin while neighbours sang, “Nearer my God to Thee.” And for the last time, there were six of us” (90). Before her mother’s death, Thompson represented the plains as an enchanted landscape in which to restore the self. The death of her mother destroys this enchantment. Braxton observes that Mary Thompson’s death symbolizes the loss of “Era Bell’s primary connection to her Black and female identity” (156). With this loss she must figure out the complexities of Black womanhood herself, evidenced by her struggle to maintain her hair: “I worked hard at the end-of-the-braid project, but it was no use-my hair was too short. The bow slid off as fast as we tied it on” (108-109). Thompson is also given the biggest “burden” after her mother’s death: keeping up with domestic chores. In spite of her fondness for her mother’s cooking, Era Bell “never truly learned to cook” and struggles in the role as homemaker (111). The break-up of the nuclear family after Mary’s death, however, ensures that this role is short-lived. Thompson's brothers move to Chicago and her father eventually sells the homestead to move to Bismarck with his brother.

In spite of being a “beautiful prairie town” Bismarck is noticeably segregated, with communities of whites and Blacks living in separate quarters of the city. Era Bell and her father are part of a minority of African Americans living on the “big hill” along with their white neighbours, “the colored folks were mostly down-under-the-hill folks,

and folks who lived under the big hill that led to the river bottoms were mostly bad” (124). The second night in Bismarck Thompson has a run-in with the police, who knock down the back door of their house thinking they were moonshiners. Although the community shows them general friendliness, “lurking suspicions” still separate people in a way Thompson had not encountered in Driscoll (124-125). These events come after Thompson hears of the news of the Chicago Race Riots from Dick, who forwards a copy of the *Chicago Defender*, “the first Negro newspaper” she had ever seen. Spread across the front page is a picture of “a Negro hanging from a tree. Followed by an account of a Southern lynching in all its diabolical horror, of a man being dragged behind a speeding car through the streets of the Negro section, past his own home, the mutilating of his body, and his final death from a rope” (113). Thompson’s first encounter with Black Eastern culture, here represented by the front page of the newspaper, is also her first encounter with Jim Crow violence. Thompson is distraught by the violence that creates an even bigger wedge between her and Chicago, the city that represents Black identity for her:

For a long time, I could see the lifeless body dangling from the tree. To me it became a symbol of the South, a place to hate and fear. And Dick’s civilization was a riot, where Black and white Americans fought each other and died. I wanted never to leave my prairies, with white clouds of peace and clean, blue heavens, for now I knew that beyond the purple hills prejudice rode hard on the heels of promise, and death was its overtaking. And I wondered where was God? (113)

Hardison observes that “Thompson equates southern lynching with urban riots,” extending the South’s racist horrors to Chicago. Unlike her brother, Dick, who finds the prairies to be isolating for Black people, Thompson is nostalgic for the prairie landscape she lived on as a child. “Since the prairies provide a spatial reprieve from the racial tensions she reads about in the *Defender*,” continues Hardison, “Thompson renders them as a figurative state of spiritual and social peace,” once again using the landscape and imagery of nature to signify this (188).

In the second half of *American Daughter* Thompson develops the themes of independence and self-reliance. Both of these themes are realized through mobility and movement across geographical and ideological space. Her transgression of physical and psychological boundaries marks the beginning of Thompson’s maturation into independent Black womanhood. In the chapter, “Where the West Began,” she recounts the family’s move to Mandan, North Dakota, “the real West.” The small frontier town of Mandan is where Thompson begins to develop her own voice. She becomes a writer for the *Chicago Defender*, submitting nonfiction and poetry under the pseudonym “Dakota Dick,” whom she characterizes as a “bad, bad cowboy from the Wild and Woolly West,” alluding to Nat Love. Her early journalism focused exclusively on North Dakota, detailing her childhood on prairies in the city press. In her columns Thompson not only spotlighted her home state in the *Defender* but also affirmed her authority over the rural landscape popularly configured as lawless, masculine, and white. Although her stint as “Dakota Dick” was short-lived, it convinced Thompson to pursue journalism.

The following year Thompson attended the University of North Dakota, where she was one of the few African American students. Feelings of estrangement and

isolation return when Thompson is refused housing on campus. She seeks work and lodging as a live-in babysitter for Sol and Opel Block, a Jewish couple, who likewise find themselves excluded from the larger community. In the Block household, Thompson adds “Yiddish” to her already wide vocabulary of Norwegian, German, and African American vernacular (174). Once again, substituting for the loneliness of being Black in a white place, Thompson seeks the friendships of those who accept her and forms a “multiethnic social community” whose members transgress official boundaries that separate groups of people (Johnson 88).



Figure 20: Main Street, Mandan, circa 1920. Courtesy of Mandan Historical Society

Thompson’s time at the University of North Dakota is cut short by a bout of pneumonia, which ends her athletics education and leaves her far behind her peers, scholastically and financially. After dropping out of university, Thompson travels to Chicago to find employment. The Black metropolis is a “city of splendor and squalor, excitement and disappointment” where “black poverty and black prosperity sit side by side.” Situated in between the Black neighbourhoods were “white food stores, foul with the smell of rotting vegetables, ... clothing stores, displaying cheap, gaudy merchandise and encouraging credit” (194-195). “Thus,” Braxton writes, “in Thompson’s psychic

landscape, dense with oppositions, between the black worker and black bank stands a white merchant class living parasitically off the community, draining it of the economic resources necessary for growth and development” (167). In Chicago, Thompson must navigate her physical and psychic existence according to how she and other African Americans are racialized. Although she is initially marked as a “foreigner” by the Black community of Chicago, she soon realizes that the city contains a multitude of people “from all over the United States, even from Africa and the West Indies” (194). The cultural atmosphere of Black Chicago springs to life at night: “blues poured from the open doors, thumped from drugstore jukeboxes. There were smells again: barbecue, fried shrimp, creole dishes” (195). Here, at the height of the Chicago Renaissance, Thompson discovers the city. As she did on the prairies, she describes Black Chicago:

Negro churches were endless . . . ceremonies were usually long, collections numerous, choirs robed, some even capped. Emotions ruled the sermons. All the various faiths and picturesque names, staid Episcopalians and shouting store-fronters sought the same God; for some it took an hour, for others all day. The music was a thing apart, incomparably beautiful. (195-196)

The sights, smells, and sounds of the city streets present to Thompson an environment that is both familiar and foreign. This uncanniness marks a transition in Thompson’s life as she begins to merge her otherwise geographically-opposed lives.

Thompson’s life in Chicago is interrupted by the illness and death of her father, which forces her to return to North Dakota, “[a]lone this time”:

I stood at the grave. Dry dust. Death. Emptiness. Then a merciful numbness crept over me, stifling unwept tears. Between two deaths I stood at prairie eventide; the

last symbol of my family lay lifeless at my feet. Gone, too, were the bonds and obligations, and in their stead a bereftness, a desolate freedom. My life was my own choosing, and there could be no more coming home. (201)

Tony's death is also a rite of passage for Thompson as she realizes that she is no longer bound to the obligations of family. His death signals her entrance into a "pattern of locations and dislocations," observes Johnson, "where she seeks to resolve her double-consciousness by establishing, even tenuously, a sense of home and belonging in both the city and the plains, in both Black and white worlds" (88). In rendering this separation as analogous to the breaking of familial bonds and ties, Thompson also speaks to the larger necessity for African Americans to cultivate a sense of place outside of the oppressive dynamics that determine their navigation of identity in a divided nation.

Thompson's return to university is a period of her life that is marked by attempts to reclaim the integrated world she was part of in North Dakota. After paying off her father's debt, she manages to make enough money publishing articles and poems for the local newspaper to attend college. She meets Dr. Riley, a white minister, and the president of Morningside College, who promises to support her through school. As the "President's Daughter" she enjoys a position of social privilege. At Morningside College, for a brief time, she transcends her feeling of estrangement. When confronted with segregation that prevents her and other Black students from entering the pool at the YMCA, Thompson successfully flouts these rules with the help of her white friends and schoolmates, who organize a protest against the pool's segregation. After integrating this place, Thompson attends the traditional Morningside College mother-daughter banquet with Susan Riley, their interracial appearance a first in the college's history (246-248).

Thompson's college years with her surrogate family renew her childhood sense of racial harmony for a brief time, but old attractions prevail and after graduating Thompson travels to Chicago again to continue her quest for "work and a home among [her] people" (250).

Thompson's journey to Chicago revises the conventional Westward journey to instead represent her search for home in the city. This journey is also symbolic of her efforts to resolve her double consciousness by closing the chasm between the two places. Thompson initially "feels uneasy" in Black neighbourhoods where, she writes, there existed "a color line within a color line, boundaries within black boundaries" between herself and black southerners (268). She rents an apartment with a Black couple "who didn't like white people." When she brings a white friend from work home, Thompson and her friend are met with "cold, hostile silence" (270). After a white friend of hers visits from North Dakota, Thompson is careful not to repeat this mistake again: "Remembering my landlady, I took Gwyn to lunch at a corner drugstore and found a shady knoll in Washington Park where we could sit in the cool grass and talk, where, under the pure blue sky, under the whispering trees, no shadow of race would come between us" (271). The friends reminisce about the childhoods "under the pure sky" and this moment briefly merges Thompson's two worlds by renewing her childhood sense of wholeness and perceptual unity with nature.

Through work and friendship, Thompson finds a way to learn about Black people and their culture. Friends, both Black and white, help her to close the cultural chasm. At work, Esther, a Jewish stenographer, tells Thompson about African American operatic singer Marian Anderson:

That night I went to her home, and a Jew, a Scotchman, and a Negro sat on the floor and listened to a phonograph while a colored girl sang. The more I talked, the more I became conscious of my ignorance of Negroes, and the more anxious they were to help me, so they loaned me books, took me to concerts and lectures, dance recitals and forums. (271-272)

Thompson's introduction to the Black community of Chicago takes place through these friendships, which serve to compensate for her family. While her friends offer advice and knowledge about African Americans, Thompson still feels estranged from the Black community in Chicago. She enrolls in a journalism class in university in an attempt to "better understand my people" (275).

Journalism provides Thompson with the opportunity to develop her racial consciousness, reflecting the importance of the periodical in establishing a sense of community for African Americans. As she begins to write, her work primarily focuses on African American city life and what it feels like to be a Black woman from the plains. Journalism also connects Thompson to the rest of America by giving her the opportunity to travel across the country. The trip is a "search for *her* America" (Braxton 185). She once again attempts to recover the sense of wholeness and home she had in North Dakota by locating places where she belongs on her first journalistic assignment. In New York, she "climbed inside the Statue of Liberty, went through the liner 'Queen Mary,' waded in the Atlantic Ocean, mounted every observation tower and monument, and few were things I didn't see, didn't do. The last thing I did was visit a colored newspaper and apply for a job. I wanted to hear 'no'" (281-282). From New York, she travels to Washington to visit the Capitol Building. Here she encounters "Jim Crow, Southern Style" for the first

time: “While ascending the narrow stairs of the Capitol on my way to the dome. I was caught between two groups of southern white people who outaccentuated Amos and Andy, and I thought my lynching days had come” (282). In spite of being in the house of democracy, Thompson cannot escape being harassed by white people. In Maryland she is refused service at an all-white bus stop. She writes, here in Maryland “with its green velvet hills and its red clay mads” she is again faced with reality of racism. Her trip to the South further reinforces this reality. In St. Louis, Thompson changes to “a Jim Crow car.” Although she tries to affiliate with the place by admiring her natural surroundings, “instead of cotton blossoms and magnolia trees,” she sees only “vast areas of inundated land and raging torrents caused by spring rains.” She cannot identify with the Southern landscape and concludes that “if this was the Spring in the South, give me North Dakota” (284-285).

American Daughter concludes with Thompson returning to North Dakota. Coming home, she rides “through the pleasant greenness of Minnesota into the bright blue autumn of my Dakota, through the sun-burned prairie grasses and the fields of threshing grain.” She sees “familiar things, the town, the highways, red elevators, windmills with spangles gleaming in the sun, discarded railroad ties, grazing stock in endless pastures . . . And blue sky stretching out to the purple bluffs and distant buttes” (288-289). In contrast to the feelings of estrangement she felt as child when encountering the prairies, Thompson feels a sense of belonging in North Dakota as an adult. In these moments, Thompson resists seeing the prairies and the city as separate places, with distinct markers of difference based on race. Instead, she calls both places home. She concludes with the statement, “the chasm in America is growing narrower. When it

closes, my feet will rest on a united America” (296). Although *American Daughter* chronicles Thompson’s encounters with estrangement, she does not abandon her efforts to resolve double-consciousness by establishing a sense of home wherever she goes. In her second memoir, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (1954), Thompson revisits the theme of double consciousness in her journey through the continent.

“The Prodigal Daughter Returns”: The African Frontier in *Africa; Land of My Fathers*

In the “Introduction” of her travel memoir *Africa; Land of My Fathers* Thompson wrote, “I, too, wanted to return to the land of my forefathers, to see if it was as dark and hopeless as it had been painted and to find out how it would receive a prodigal daughter who had not been home for three-hundred years” (10). In the resulting text she recounted her travels through the continent, from Liberia to the Congo and South Africa, and finally Egypt, where she concluded, “Africans are my brothers. We are but one race. But Africa, the land of my fathers, is not my home” (281). Like many other African Americans who travelled to the continent in the twentieth-century, Thompson believed she would be welcomed in Africa with open arms, but she quickly loses her illusions when she finds herself in a bewildering mess of visa red tape. Her subsequent journey across the continent awakens her to the harsh realities of racism on a global scale. While she is in Africa, she encounters apartheid-era colour-lines that prevent her from entering countries. Thompson draws from her experience with double-consciousness in America to interpret her time in Africa. In her attempt to merge the gap between her Midwestern American and African journeys, she highlights the complex ethnic and national relations that shape her identification with these places.

In 1953 Thompson visited Africa for three months on an assignment for the African American magazine, *Ebony*. The goal of the trip was to collect information about Black Africans and to tell their stories in order to challenge the stereotypical representations of Black Africans in the mainstream press. Her *Ebony* articles covered a range of topics, including Independence movements, race relations, and anticolonial protests. Speaking of these articles Jinx Coleman writes, “Thompson clearly wanted to be one of the journalists who were telling the story of Africa.” In her coverage of specific localities, she sought to educate and inform her readers about the history and geography of these places. “Arguably, Thompson was placing on the record the greatness of Black people, an image that she and her publishers believed their readers did not have, and that would enhance their feelings of self worth,” continues Coleman (17-20). However, Thompson’s publishers at Doubleday were interested in a more intimate portrait of the continent. Offered the chance to further publish, Thompson took the opportunity and informed Stanley Pargellis about her intention to do so, joking that the memoir’s tentative title was ““You Can’t Come Home!” in reference to her passport troubles (Letter to Pargellis, 1953). *Africa*, produced over the course of her four-month sojourn, provided a more candid picture of her experiences on the continent than her articles. She included conversations with government officials, members of the anticolonial forces, and ex-pats to give a full range of opinions on Africa’s ongoing decolonization. Thompson also did not hold back on providing intimate details of her own experiences with racism, misogyny, and colorism. The memoir highlights both her joy and disappointment with the continent.

When *Africa* was published in 1954, it joined a series of memoirs produced by African American authors that emphasized the changing relationship between African Americans and Africa. Most notable of these was Richard Wright's memoir, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in the Land of Pathos* (1954), published shortly after Thompson's memoir. Similar to *Africa*, *Black Power* attempts to show diasporic connections between Black Africans and African Americans by highlighting the shared struggles between anticolonial movements in Africa and the Civil Rights movement in the United States. However, his attempts to do so are disrupted by his inability to escape his Western perspective.⁵⁶ Instead of discovering diasporic connections between Africans and himself, Wright is alienated by Africa and ends up reinforcing rather than escaping colonial discourse. Wright's failure to form diasporic connections with Black Africans, argues Paul Gilroy, simultaneously affirms and negates the American values and ideologies that formed him and this, writes Michael Lansing, was "an evocation of a broader, transoceanic double consciousness that affected all those descended from black Africa" in the mid-twentieth century (10).

While Thompson is successful at achieving diasporic connections with her "African brethren," she too struggles with a palpable double estrangement in Africa that is made more intense by her gender. While Thompson was not the only Black American woman to write a memoir of Africa in the mid-century, she was one of the first female foreign correspondents to report from the continent for a major American publication.

⁵⁶ This interpretation has been influenced by John Cullen Gruesser's analysis of *Black Power* in *Black on Black: Twentieth Century African American Writing about Africa* (2000), in which Gruesser argues that the Africanist discourse that operates throughout Wright's memoir undermines his attempts to provide a coherent picture of the New Africa. For full analysis, see *Black on Black*, 135-144.

This created suspicion from many people she met regarding her potential communist ties. As a result, Thompson had to tread lightly while in Africa in order to avoid such accusations about her reporting. Conscious of the troubled political climates on both sides of the Atlantic, she “used her identity as a Midwesterner – hailing from the most American and supposedly most democratic of all regions – to emphasize her adherence to the American nation state,” writes Lansing (13). Thompson’s regional identification, cemented in the literary world by the publication of *American Daughter*, helped her to do just this. Taking a similar approach to her construction of her narrative perspective in *Africa* as she had in *American Daughter*, she forwarded her subjective experience. When asked by a white African why she was writing about Africa, she responded that she “had neither the intention nor the desire to do a book on Africa, that I was writing only what I saw and what happened to me . . . What I would write was in their hands” (160). While Thompson’s experiences in Africa are similar to those of other African American writers of the 1950s, she articulated a much more complicated vision of race and colonialism on the continent which echoed her complex self-identification with the regional Midwest.

Upon landing in the former free colony of Liberia, she witnesses a country that claims its sovereignty based on ethnic pride and one that welcomes her, at least briefly, with open arms. The nation boasts a colonial history, emulated by the expensive and high-brow Firestone country club, an antiquated structure that looms large over the present, and missionary camps, scattered throughout Liberia and the rest of the West Coast. As Thompson observes, Blacks and white enjoy the freedom to mingle together and racist tensions seem almost non-existent:

whites from the Deep South mingle freely and socially with Negroes who were quite at ease in their company. I had to keep reminding myself that this was Liberia, a Black man's country, where the tables were turned and white men were the minority group, striving for acceptance in a Black society . . . That was why the Negro was so relaxed. For once in their lives they did not need to prove they were as good as the next fellow because here the next fellow was just like themselves. (25)

In Liberia, where the "tables are turned," Thompson is able to briefly imagine the country as a long-lost "home." Thompson's short trip through the country acts as a backdrop for her sojourn in the ancient Nigerian city of Ife, where she visits the recovered shrines of African gods and goddesses, claimed to be the original occupants of the Garden of Eden. In a clear attempt to educate readers, Thompson discusses the history of the shrine and concludes, "here, indeed, was proof of the African cultural past, priceless art fashioned by black hands many centuries ago. If these were my ancestors, I had a reason to be proud" (53-54). Nevertheless, in the "cradle of black humanity" Thompson cannot help but notice the impact of colonialism. She describes "a beggar clothed in a loincloth dragging himself along on ropes and rags" being photographed by a tourist. Two women "dyeing cloth with colors made by mixing ashes and water with certain leaves, shied away [the tourist's] camera until they could cover the upper parts of their bodies" (54). Thompson questions whether the invading lens of camera is ultimately a tool for profit for the photographer. The awkward juxtaposition of native and colonial cultures in Ife does not dissuade Thompson from appreciating the full majesty of the city's history. She catalogues the sites and shrines, explaining their significance in Yoruban culture and

concludes, “in the city of the Yorubas, I had found my Eden, found it in the paved streets of Oluwo’s city and in the imagery of Odudua and his fellow gods, in the iron hammer of Ladi, and in the bronze and brass sculpture in the new museum” (54). In these examples, Thompson is careful not to replicate the colonial gaze, but rather, through passive observation, acknowledges the dominant, myopic view of Africa that has reduced the continent and its multitudinous legacies to an object of colonial and white supremacist imaginations.

However, such romantic notions of her ancestral homeland are short-lived. As soon as Thompson lands in Lagos, she discovers that immigration officials are looking for her, “as there were a few formalities I had to complete before leaving Nigeria and I needed a new visa to re-enter the Gold Coast” (57). During her short stay in the city, Thompson is repeatedly marked as foreign by strangers on the street. Being “more annoyed that when [Nigerians] paid no attention to Europeans but stopped when they saw me” Thompson finds that she once again is an outsider: “all through childhood I lived in towns where a dark face was a novelty and because of it I was a marked person. However, I did not expect to find myself in the same category here” (58). Her feelings of alienation draw sympathy from white Europeans, who feel they must “protect” her from the “foreign threat” of Black Africans (60). Thompson finds her nationality makes her an exception to the colonialist attitudes displayed by white Europeans against Black Africans; however, this does little to resolve her feelings of estrangement.

Thompson’s journey through the continent henceforth becomes difficult. Her identification with Africa is negated by the ways she is labelled as an outsider by locals and expats. Among some of the designations she is given include “foreigner,”

“American,” “white,” “stranger,” “persona non-grata.” Her ambiguous status in Africa ultimately comes to parallel her experiences in the American South. One scene is particularly worth mentioning in this context. On board a plane to Accra, Thompson notes the seating arrangement: “All the Africans were taken up front. In the four-chaired back compartment, he placed the four whites. I was put in the last seat rear of the forward compartment, all by myself” (64). Thompson’s placement on the plane is situated, metaphorically, in between a three hundred-year-old narrative. The anticolonial sentiments of the country’s leaders, as well as the wave of anticolonial revolutions sweeping the continent at the time, also place Thompson in the position of an outsider within. She travels to the continent in search of a lost (ancestral) home, only to discover the complexities of being an African American (and a Midwesterner) in a land defined by the markings of recent history. This is further demonstrated by how she is marked by locals. In the Congo, one Belgian guide speaks of the beatings he gave to his Black African workers, boasting of the aggressive attitude required to hold down a team of serfs. When Thompson mentions that she too is Black and, technically, African, the guide concedes that she is nevertheless different from Black Africans (136). Her travel memoir henceforth renders the image of Africa that she had known as a child – the “dark heart” – as the last stronghold of colonialism, where the ever-shifting definition of her ethnic and cultural identities were determined by what country she was leaving and entering (2).

Thompson’s mistaken and confused identities are important because they allow Thompson to examine the potential relationship between African Americans and Africans. Although she was a journalist, Thompson does not claim objectivity in *Africa*.

Rather, she establishes a perspective that allows her to forward her subjective experience. Lansing argues that by doing so *Africa* rejects

what historian Kevin Gaines has identified among some African Americans traveling to Africa in the 1950s as the “therapeutic return” of heritage seekers. Instead, Thompson established a position that was of Africa but not from Africa—an ambiguity she knew all too well as a black woman, as an African American from the prairie Midwest, as an African American with Midwestern sensibilities living in a southern black community in Chicago— and as a black person in America. (21)

Using this perspective, Thompson is able to reckon with being a “prohibited immigrant” in Zanzibar. Although the label makes Thompson think that it must “mean something very loathsome, like a criminal or communist,” she realizes the complexity of her situation in Africa is not too far removed from her experiences with racism in America (202).

In Johannesburg she is initially placed on the Jim Crow-like car, or “cattle car,” before they discover she is American, after which she is given, “First-Class, Non-European,” once again placing her in-between the ethnic and national boundaries created by colonial history (157). In the city, Thompson also encounters threats to her womanhood for the first time. On one occasion, white men on a train discuss the punishment for Black men raping white women, agreeing that in the reverse situation was merely “unfortunate” because it “begets mulattoes” (153). Later that day, a white man tries to coerce Thompson to coming to the market with him and she has to forcefully

reject him (157). South Africa's strict colour lines remind Thompson that she must adjust her behaviour according to notions of race and gender:

I kept reminding myself, as I had done on my first journey to the Deep South at home: be careful, be polite, and for heaven's sakes, *read the signs*. Then a horrible thought struck me. The signs would be in Afrikaans! . . . I thought about the sign addressed to Negroes which once stood in a southern Illinois town. 'If you can't read,' it advised, 'run away!' I could not read and there was no place to run. (172)

In South Africa, as in America, Thompson is excluded from geopolitical spatial categories that predominate in Africa. With nowhere to travel safely, Thompson leaves soon after her arrival.

On board the train to Portuguese East Africa, she describes her departure as an exodus from the apartheid state: "I felt like Eliza crossing the ice, like Harriet Tubman on the underground railroad, for the train I was riding was taking me out of the land of *apartheid* to the free soil of Portugal" (178). Allusions to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Underground Railroad reinforce Thompson's positionality in an apartheid state. In such a place she cannot transcend race nor gender and because of these restrictions, she is not able to recognize South Africa as a potential "home," similar to how she could not recognize the Deep South in America as part of her vision of home.

As Michelle D. Commander writes, African American diasporic narratives about Africa are not so much about returning to the continent but on reflecting the limitations and possibilities of such a journey for the American subject (17-19). A part of such a reflection is the realization that her kinship with Black Africans can only be

acknowledged once Thompson recognizes the three-hundred-year separation between her and Africa as well as her affiliation with Black Africans via colonial history. On the Gold Coast, Thompson visits a slave castle and her skepticism of easy conclusions about the diasporic relationship harden. Peering out the window of a slaveholding cell, she turns and looks at her Black African guide: “For an instant our eyes held, and in that infinitesimal moment, we heard the chains, smelled the stench of my forefathers. He had remained. I had slipped through the window. Three hundred years had passed. We weighed each other, the African and I, but by different standards, on different scales” (98-99). In this moment Thompson recognizes the separate experiences between her and the African guide, but she is also able to comprehend the implied connection, and shared history, between them. The “dark continent” that she enters at the beginning of the narrative gives way to a space in continuous, if not tumultuous, transformation, where Thompson’s initial hopes of a homecoming are suddenly usurped by a continent that can no longer be perceived by the imagination as “home,” but rather requires her to ask a more self-reflexive question, best articulated in Countee Cullen’s poem, “Heritage”: “What is Africa to me?” (4, 37).

Over the course of the twentieth-century, the relationship between African American authors and Africa changed from embracing Du Boisian and Garveyist understandings of the continent to rejecting the exoticism of Ethiopianism.⁵⁷ John Cullen

⁵⁷ John Cullen Gruesser explains that by the mid-twentieth century, Ethiopianism’s influence had greatly diminished for a variety of reason. African American writers began to recognize the problematic assumptions Ethiopianism made about Africans. He writes, “African anticolonial struggles leading to the creation of dozens of independent African nations in the late 1950s and early to middle 1960s focused black American attention on contemporary political and economic conditions on the continent, diminished African American exceptionalism, and in many cases occasioned a wholesale reassessment of the relationship between black Americans and the people of Africa” (135).

Gruesser observes that African American authors began to move away from Ethiopianism's influence by the mid-twentieth century and instead focussed on the concept of a "New Africa." Gruesser writes, "as conditions in the United States failed to improve and Africans began to demand self-government, Black Americans started to look to Africa for inspiration and guidance" (136). Alongside Thompson's memoir he cites Richard Wright's *Black Power* (1954) and Eslanda Goode Robeson's *African Journey* (1945). Gruesser writes that all of these memoirs share a similar narrative pattern, what he identifies as a "dream that becomes a nightmare" plotline that reflected African American's growing disillusionment with the realities on the continent (16).

While Thompson is able to mediate some of her own disillusionment with Africa by relying on her nationality and regional identification, she cannot ignore the estrangement she felt on the continent and reflects on what this estrangement reveals. At the end of *Africa* Thompson claims that "Africans are my brothers, for we are of one race." By this she meant that racism worked to exploit and deny people with Black skin on both sides of the Atlantic. Carefully, however, she tells the reader: "But Africa, the land of my fathers, is not my home." Thompson ends her memoir the same way she does in *American Daughter*: by pledging an allegiance to America. In her mind she was ultimately "an American by nationality, a citizen of the United States by birth" (280). While Thompson's overall search for identification with place in *Africa* leads her to reclaim her allegiance to America, the memoir both troubles and celebrates her perspective of homecoming. Observing Africa from the perspective of a Black Midwesterner, Thompson's critique is similar to other African American authors who experienced estrangement while travelling the continent. Given that the memoir was

written in the 1950s, decades after the Back-to-Africa resettlement and the Garvey Movement led African American emigrants to the continent, it displays a counter-ethnographic eye for the prospects of homecoming. In doing so, she ultimately acknowledges that the African American subjective experience is one that is constructed uniquely; thus, in effect breaking from traditional conventions of expression that subject African American and Black autobiographers to the role of object – to use Henry Gates, Jr’s term, as, “object[s]-of-history” that ultimately assimilates African American life-writing into conventional and expected roles (3).

Coda: Going Home

In her explorations of racial and national identity in *American Daughter* and *Africa, Land of My Fathers* Thompson insists on claiming a Midwestern identity in the midst of a simultaneous reflection on being African American in Africa and Black in the United States. This demonstrates Thompson’s dependence on two traditions, Midwestern and African American literary traditions, in her construction of her Black Midwestern perspective. Each memoir serves as a personal account of a Black woman’s rendering of duality and wholeness and concludes with a final assertion of returning home to the Midwest to find wholeness. The idea of home in both memoirs was a place where Thompson conceived of the possibility of reconciling both, and indeed all, parts of herself.

Conclusion:

Straight Outta Compton to the Old Town Road

“I, too, am America” – Langston Hughes, “I, Too”

Riding along the streets of Compton, California, ten Black men on horseback cut a curious profile, their cowboy hats tilted towards the Los Angeles sun. They are the Compton Cowboys. Their small enclave has been home to African American horse riders for over three decades. To most people, Compton is home to rap giants N.W.A., Ice Cube, and Kendrick Lamar, and has been made infamous by the media for its association with gang violence. But in 1988, in a semi-rural area of the city, Mayisha Akbar founded the Compton Jr. Posse, a non-profit organization in Richland Farms. The Jr. Posse introduced young adults from the area to the equestrian lifestyle and horseback riding. The Jr. Posse eventually transformed into the Compton Cowboys of today. The cowboys include Randy Hook, Mayisha’s nephew, Keiara, a young woman pursuing her dream of winning a national rodeo championship, and a close family of young riders – Kenneth, Keenan, Charles, and Tre. The Compton Cowboy’s slogan, “Streets Raised Us, Horses Saved Us,” carries the legacy of Mayisha’s mission to aid in the reconstitution of Compton’s African American population.

In recent years, thanks to fame gained on social media, the Compton Cowboys have acquired a loyal public following around their mission to challenge stereotypes not only affecting African Americans today, but also in the past. One of the Compton Cowboys’ goals is to educate the public on the rich legacies of Black cowboys in American culture. In a *New York Times* feature story, Hook explains that he hopes to use the exposure to connect with other Black cowboys around the United States who, like

himself, represent a growing number of African Americans whose experiences have been underrepresented in the rodeo world. “At the end of the day,” he states, “we want people to also think about us when they think about cowboys, not just a bunch of white guys in cowboy hats who smoke Marlboro cigarettes” (*New York Times*). In some ways, Hook’s wish is coming true. While we still know woefully little about African Americans in the West, the Compton Cowboys show us that Black Western presence does not remain unknown in contemporary cultural memory. Instead, they show us that such a presence is hidden in plain sight, buried just below the surface of regional history that has up until recently told a very narrow and white-washed story of the American West.

One of the aims of this dissertation was to challenge the presumptions and stereotypes associated with the American West by looking at Black authors and cultural producers who offer different perspectives of frontier mythology and history. The variety of texts chosen for this study – including the contributions of Jennie Carter and Philip A. Bell, *Winona*, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, Oscar Micheaux’s homesteading novels and films, the *Harlem* series, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, *American Daughter*, and *Africa, Land of My Fathers* – display that the histories of African Americans in the West are complicated and many-sided. In these works, Black protagonists and storytellers struggle to identify with the West as it has been constructed by the dominant culture. Writers such as Micheaux and Himes respond to these dominant constructions of frontier identity by presenting us with characters that contend with double-consciousness, representing their political and existential struggle to achieve an identity that excludes them. From a different perspective, Hopkins uses a frontier setting to imagine a society (John Brown’s encampment) that accommodates both racial and gender differences yet

shows that such as society cannot be fully realized until slavery ceases to exist. On the other hand, in the *Life and Adventures* Nat Love writes a narrative to highlight his experience as a successful cowboy in the West. Although separated by almost a hundred years and two-thousand miles, Carter and Thompson both envisage the frontier as a place of freedom for African Americans. In *Africa, Land of My Fathers* Thompson's contact with others Black people of African descent represents the possibility of reimagining the African American Midwestern self in terms of a pan-African identity and also in terms of political alliance with other oppressed peoples throughout the world.

Central to the construction of the frontier in each of these texts is the theme of belonging. To explore this theme, this dissertation examined the relationship between racial identity and region in each text and probed the question, "how does each author/cultural producer represent themselves in this region?" My methodology was informed by Eric Gardner's New Regionalism and Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds*. Gardner explains that New Regionalism "demands a revision of our thinking about location and particularly about the ways in which 'region' as a construct has been de-emphasized, ignored, and/or buried under (or Other-ed through) 'safe' phenomena like the language of 'quaintness.'" ("Nineteenth-Century African American Literature"). McKittrick asks us to examine texts that "cite/site underacknowledged Black geographies" and to consider the ways that these texts contribute to a "re-presentation" of space (111). Both critics allow us to rethink the relationships between race and place, race and genre, as well as the functions of textual production, reception, and circulation in texts. In other words, it allows us to consider the many factors that have influenced –

and continue to influence – how Black Western authors and cultural producers represent their racial experiences on the frontier.

Gardner's and McKittrick's ideas also ask researchers to move away from Anglo-centric visions of the West. One way this dissertation has done this is by focussing only on texts produced by and alongside African Americans, with a particular emphasis on autobiography. With the exception of *Winona* and Jeffries' *Harlem* series, all of the texts examined are autobiographical. However, even in *Winona* and the *Harlem* series, instances of the autobiographical can be found. For Hopkins, the question of an African American future in the United States was one that influenced her life's work. For Jeffries, the autobiographical impulse is most presented in music and performance, in which he imitates the stylistic, linguistic, and musical conventions of traditional jazz, blues, and flamenco. The significance of African American Westerners telling of their experiences is that it challenges preconceived ideas about Western experience.

This begs the question: is the African American Western a tradition? Does it belong in a genre of its own? As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has observed,

literary works configure into a tradition not because of some mystical collective unconscious determined by the biology of race or gender, but because writers read other writers and *ground* their representations of experience in *whom they feel akin* [emphasis mine]. It is through this mode of literary revision, amply evident in the texts themselves – in formal echoes, recast metaphors, even in parody – that a tradition emerges and identifies itself. (Gates, Jr. xviii)

Gates' point is well taken but also shows that Black Western stories are inherently hybrid narratives. Part Western storytellers, part African American autobiographers, Black

Western cultural producers are invariably grounded in kinship with their literary and artistic antecedents, from authors of slave narratives to African American intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois and to the works of other Westerners, both Black and white. Black Westerns are still very much connected to two traditions, two seemingly separate histories, and in some ways are products of double-consciousness themselves, but this does not mean that Black Western texts cannot contain multitudes. The variety of texts included in this dissertation testify to the diverse responses to the frontier narrative by Black cultural producers and reflect how they employed different modes of storytelling to share these experiences.

In spite of the variety of Black Western texts included in this dissertation, there is still room for further research, especially of the contemporary twentieth and twenty-first century Black West. In the past fifty years or so, African Americans in the West have been the subjects of a number of literary texts, films, music, and games. Literary works by Toni Morrison (*Paradise*), Percival Everett (*Watershed*, *Grand Canyon Inc.*, *Wounded*), and David Anthony Durham (*Gabriel's Story*) all imagine African American protagonists on speculative Western landscapes as agents, rather than objects, of regenerative violence and retribution, sometimes against a white foe. These narratives are revisionary in the sense that they imagine Black Westerners at the centre of the frontier journey, but also revise the genre by challenging the logic of frontier conquest and white supremacy (this is especially true for *Paradise*, which criticizes frontier mythology and patriarchal hegemony through a Black Feminist lens). Furthermore, late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century Black Westerns ask us to consider how their speculative landscapes serve as metaphorical spaces, reflecting the contemporary African

American political landscape. More work on these narratives may offer new and surprising interpretations.

In contemporary film the Black Western has been reimagined most recently by Quentin Tarantino in *Django Unchained* (2012). *Django Unchained* has some clear connections to earlier Black Westerns, most obviously in Tarantino's casting of an enslaved man (Jamie Foxx) in the role of a gunslinging Black cowboy who saves his beloved from an especially cruel and sadistic slave owner (Leonardo DiCaprio), echoing to the informed viewer the likes of Nat Love and Judah from *Winona*. However, as Michael K. Johnson writes, connections to earlier Black Westerns in the film "seemed to have developed logically from the situation of placing an African American character in a Western plot rather than from any extensive awareness of that tradition by writer-director Tarantino, who seems completely unaware that such a tradition exists . . . and who believes he invented the African American Western" (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 236). As Johnson acknowledges, one of the issues facing writers and directors of contemporary Black cinematic Westerns is recognizing that they are working within a tradition, one that stems back a hundred years in cinema. Most of the films examined in this dissertation, including those involving white directors and producers, have involved some sensitivity not only to how African Americans are being represented in their works, but also more generally to the African American cultural and literary traditions. It would be interesting to examine such a film as *Django Unchained* against the history of representation in Black cinematic Westerns and Black Westerns in general to analyze the ways that Tarantino's film compares to and departs from these traditions.

Another film, the soon-to-be released all-Black cast Western *The Harder They Fall* (2021), evidently contains multiple references and allusions to famous figures of the Black West. Directed by Jeymes Samuel and produced by Jay-Z, the film tells the story of an outlaw named Nat Love (Jonathan Majors), who discovers that the man who killed his parents (Idris Elba) two decades ago is being released from prison. Nat then reunites with his gang to track the criminal down, seeking revenge. While certainly not the Nat Love of literary fame, the film's protagonist carries the mythological connections to Love's life and character, echoing such a history in casting him as central to an all-Black cast Western.

There have been similar 'echoes' and intertextual references made in recent music, perhaps most famously in Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road," a song that quickly became a hit upon its release in 2018. The music video, which features Lil Nas X as a Black cowboy from the past who is transported to the present, plays on the 'novelty' factor of Black cowboys. Spectators who meet Lil Nas X's character frequently express surprise at a "Black man on a horse!" While the novelty factor is a common tactic found in white-produced Black Westerns, "Old Town Road" spurred a brief, albeit spirited, renewed interest in Black Westerns and also gave spotlight to other musicians such as Dom Flemons, who had devoted much of his recent work to recovering the African American West through song. Most recently, Flemons' *Black Cowboys*, released in the Spring of 2018, is a deeply historically-minded album of Western songs that traces the forgotten cultural history and musical lineages of Black cowboys in the American West.

Despite recent interest in acknowledging and celebrating Black Westerns, much work is still needed to recover lesser-known works by Black Western authors and cultural

producers. In his introduction to *Jennie Carter: A Black Journalist of the Early West* (2007), Gardner asks us to consider how the Black West expands our understanding of the literary and move beyond traditional definitions of genre. He writes, “Carter’s life and work call on us to begin to re-examine just what the ‘literary West’ and the ‘black West’ might mean” (xxviii). Developing an accurate picture of African Americans in the West asks us to seriously consider the intellectual and aesthetic value of multiple types of documents and narratives – both literary and cinematic works, as well as other kinds of media, including music, gaming, and photography.⁵⁸ “If we are to have a fuller sense of the black women, black literature, and the black West,” continues Gardner, “we need to use the archive more and to build that archive into something much more widely accessible” (*Jennie Carter* xxxi).

Among others whose scholarship focuses on the African American West, Gardner’s work on nineteenth-century Black periodicals builds this archive. Likewise, Johnson’s recent work, *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the Black West*, as well as *African Americans on the Great Plains: An Anthology* (2009), edited by Bruce A. Glasrud and Charles A. Braithewaite, suggest further ways of building this archive by focussing on a host of authors and creators from non-traditional places and backgrounds. Most recently, *Black in the Middle: An Anthology of the Black Midwest*, a compilation of works produced by Black Midwestern authors and scholars is the result of a mission to recover the Black Midwest. Projects such as the Black Midwest

⁵⁸ There are few, if any, substantial African American characters in Western video games. The sequel to 2010’s *Red Dead Redemption*, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) is perhaps the only Western game in recent memory to feature Black characters, but all of these characters are background characters, with little or no agency. The paucity of critical literature regarding this subject and these observations points to the liminal representation of Black characters in Western games, but also presents an opportunity to explore the subject further.

Initiative offer new ways of reimagining the archive by bringing together artists, academics, and authors from across the Midwest to both celebrate and re-examine this region's past and present in literature and other artistic forms.

In essence, the works of Black Western authors, performers, and producers in the past and present are all part of the greater narrative of the African American West, a narrative that continues to evolve and develop in a full range of imaginative forms. This dissertation seeks to further this development by showing that, although much work still needs to be done, the African American West as a subject of scholarly endeavour is a continually expanding field, one that asks us to examine Black Western texts using investigative frameworks that consider the complexity and importance of these texts, as well as offer culturally sensitive ways in which to examine them. It is hoped that as the scholarly archive of Black Western texts is expanded and made more accessible, we will begin to have a fuller picture of how the African American West has been – and continues to be – experienced, performed, and imagined.

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