Danger in the safety zone: Notes on race, resentment, and the discourse of crime, violence, and suburban security

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Danger in the Safety Zone:
Notes on Race, Resentment, and
the Discourse of Crime, Violence,
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Contemporary sociology of education theorists writing on the topic of racial antagonism have tended to focus too narrowly on sites within the classroom and the school (Giroux, 1994). Insights that might be gained from the study of popular media—television, film, and popular music—and their influence on racial formation and racial antagonism have been forfeited. Yet, paradoxically, it is in popular culture that racial identities and interests are constructed, reworked, and coordinated and then infused into the expressive and instrumental orders of school life. American middle-class white youth and adults know more about inner-city black people through long-distanced but familiar media images than through personal everyday interaction or through representations offered in textbooks.

In matters of racial formation, then, we live in the media age—the age of simulation. But in this chapter, we want to go beyond the overly abstract and instrumental reading of simulation that Jean Baudrillard (1983) offers in his Simulations. Processes of simulation cannot be fully understood by merely focusing on the internal dynamics and logics of the new communicational systems unleashed in our late-century society, as Baudrillard does. These developments are, after all, taking place in particular social-historical contexts. Instead, we point to the critical role of processes of simulation in the production of historically specific discourses of resentment—the dominant vector of racial identity formation in the post-civil rights era.
What do we mean by resentment? By resentment, we mean roughly what Friedrich Nietzsche (1967) meant by his use of the term in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: the process of fabricating one's own identity through the strategy of negating the other and the tactical and strategic deployment of moral evaluation and emotion. We are particularly interested in racial resentment because it is a central way in which the white middle class projects itself into the contemporary age as the subject-object of history; this, at the expense of the urban underclasses, constituted in this media age as the primordial racial other. Through this process of displacement the middle class installs itself as the primary victim or plaintiff of public life. Contemporary media mobilize a number of discourses of resentment. This chapter examines how media apparatuses constitute and consolidate one discourse of resentment: the discourse of crime, violence, and suburban security. News magazines, television, the Hollywood film industry, and the common sense of black and Latino filmmakers themselves reproduce and maintain this discourse. We also look at the impact of resentment discourses on the self-representation of black and Latino adolescents at Liberty High, an inner-city high school in Los Angeles—the epicenter of current media representations of the brutality of urban life.

**Danger in the Safety Zone**

*The crisis of the middle class is of commanding gravity. . . The crisis is hardening the attitude of the middle class toward the dependent poor, and to the extent that the poor are urban and black and Latino and the middle class suburban and white, race relations are under a new exogenous strain.* (Beatry, 1994, p. 70)

In a recent issue, *Time* magazine ran two articles on crime and violence almost side by side. In the first, “Danger in the Safety Zone,” murder and mayhem are everywhere: outside the suburban home, in the McDonald’s restaurant, in the shopping mall, in the health club, in the courtroom (Smolowe, 1993, p. 29). The article also displayed statistics indicating that crime in the major cities had been declining somewhat, while crime in the suburbs—the place where the middle classes thought they were safest—was escalating out of control. The second article, “Holidays in Hell,” tracked suburban resentment abroad: “You drool over the alluring brochures. Ah, the pristine beaches. Elegant cafes. Spectacular mountain scenery. It all sounds great. Then you look at the fine print: the beaches are in poverty-racked Gaza Strip, the cafes in bombed-out Dubrovnik, the mountains in war-torn eastern Turkey. They have got to be kidding” (Fedarko, *Time*, August 23, 1993, p. 50).

These articles announce a new sensibility and mood in the political and social life in the U.S.: a mood articulated in suburban fear of encirclement,
a mood increasingly being formulated in the language and politics of resentment. The dangerous inner city and the world “outside” are brought into suburban homes through television and film, instilling simultaneously desire and fear. As we approach the end of the century, conflicts in education and popular culture increasingly are taking the form of grand panethnic battles over language, signs, and the territorialization of urban and suburban space. These conflicts intensify as the dual model of the city, of rich versus poor, splinters into fragmentary communities signified by the images of the roaming homeless on network television. For our late-twentieth-century Sweeney Erectus of the professional middle class (PMC) standing on the pyres of resentment in the beleaguered suburbs, the signs and wonders are everywhere in the television evening news. Sweeney’s decline is registered in radically changing technologies and new sensibilities, in spatial and territorial destabilization and recoordination, in the fear of falling, and in rigid segregation (Grossberg, 1992). Before his jaundiced eyes, immigrant labor and immigrant petty bourgeoisie now course through suburban and urban streets. The black and Latino underclasses after the Los Angeles riots, announces one irrepressibly gleeful news anchor, “are restless.” The white middle classes are experiencing declining fortunes. And the homeless are everywhere.

This new world order of mobile marginal communities is deeply registered in popular culture and in social institutions such as schools. The terrain to be mapped here is what Hal Foster (1983) calls in The Anti-Aesthetic, postmodernism’s “other side”—the new simulations of difference that loop back and forth through the news media to the classroom, from the film culture and popular music to the organization of affect in urban and suburban communities—Sweeney’s homeground.

Suburban Resentment and the Politics of Affect

The America of the diverging middle class is rapidly developing a new populist anti-politics. (Beatty, 1994, p. 70) Fredric Jameson (1984) has maintained that a new emotional ground tone separates life in contemporary post-industrial society from previous epochs. He described this emotional ground tone as “the waning of affect,” the loss of feeling. While we agree with Jameson that emotions, like film, television, newspapers, or school texts, are historically and materially determined and culturally bound, we disagree with his diagnosis that contemporary life is overwhelmingly marked by a certain exhaustion or waning of affect. We maintain that a very different logic is at work in contemporary life, particularly in the area of race relations. Postmodernism’s other side—of race relations, of the manipulation of difference—is marked by a powerful concentration of affect or the strategic use of emotion and moral revaluation.
Central to these developments is the rise of the cultural politics of "resentment." Nietzsche (1967), in On the Genealogy of Morals, defined resentment as the specific practice of defining one's identity through the negation of the Other. Some commentators on Nietzsche associate resentment only with "slave morality." We are here taken genealogically back to "literal slaves" in Greek society, who being the most downtrodden had only one sure implement of defense: the acerbic use of emotion and moral manipulation. But we want to argue along with Robert Solomon (1990) that bourgeois resentment virtually defines contemporary cultural politics (p. 278). As Solomon maintains: "Resentment elaborates an ideology of combative complacency [or what Larry Grossberg (1992) calls 'impassioned apathy']—a 'levelling' effect that declares society to be 'classless' even while maintaining powerful class structures and differences" (p. 278). The middle class declares that there are no classes except itself, no ideology except its ideology, no party, and no politics, except the politics of the center with a vengeance.

A critical feature of discourses of resentment is its dependence on processes of simulation. For instance, the suburban middle-class subject knows its inner-city other through an imposed system of infinitely repeatable substitutions and proxies: census tracts, crime statistics, tabloid newspapers and television programs, and lastly, through the very ground of the displaced aggressions projected from suburban moral panic itself (Beatty, 1994; Reed, 1992). Indeed, a central project of PMC suburban agents of resentment is their aggressive attempt to hold down the moral center, to occupy the center of public discourse, to stack the public court of appeal. The needs of the suburbs therefore become the "national interests." By contrast, the needs of the inner city are dismissed as a wasteful "social agenda." Resentment must therefore be understood as an emotion "distinguished, first of all, by its concern and involvement with power" (Solomon, p. 278). And it is a power with its own material and discursive logic. In this sense it is to be distinguished from self-pity. If resentment has any desire at all, it is the "total annihilation . . . of its target" (Solomon, p. 279). Sweeney offers his own homemade version of the final solution: take the homeless and the welfare moms off general assistance, and build more prisons!

A new moral universe now rides the underbelly of the beast—late capital's global permutations, displacements, relocations, and reaccumulations. The effect has meant a material displacement of minority and other dispossessed groups from the landscape of contemporary public life. That is to say, increasingly the underclass or working-class subject is being placed outside the arena of the public sphere as the middle-class subject-object of history moves in to occupy and to appropriate the identity of the oppressed, the radical space of difference. The center becomes the margin. It is as if Primus Rex had decided to wear Touchstone's foolscap; Caliban exiled
from the cave as Prospero digs in. Resentment operates through the processes of simulation that usurp contemporary experiences of the real, where the real is proven by its negation or its inverse. Resentment has infected the very structure of social value. This battle over signs is being fought in cultural institutions across the length and breadth of this society. We are indeed in a culture war. We know this, of course, because avatars of the right like Patrick Buchanan constantly remind us that this is so (Bennett, 1994; Buchanan, 1992). From the cultural spiel over family values in the 1992 and 1994 election campaigns to Bob Dole’s assault on Hollywood, from rap music to the struggle over urban and suburban space, a turf battle over symbolic and material territory is under way. The politics of resentment is on the way.

A fundamental issue posed by this theory of identity formation, as it was a fundamental issue for Nietzsche, is the challenge to define identity in ways other than through the strategy of negation of the other. This, we wish to suggest, is the fundamental challenge of multiculturalism: the challenge of “living in a world of difference” (Mercer, 1992). Resentment and racial reaction, therefore, define contemporary encounters between individuals and groups as expressed in the extent to which there has been an infiltration of a culture war over signs and identity in the practices of everyday life.

Education is a critical site of struggles over the organization and concentration of emotional and political investment and moral affiliation. The popular has invaded the schools. This battle over signs that is resentment involves strategies of articulation and rearticulation of symbols in the popular culture and in the media. These signs and symbols are used in the making of identity and the definition of social and political projects. Within this framework, the traditional poles of left versus right are increasingly being displaced by more mutable and destabilizing models of affiliation and association. A further dimension of this dynamic is that the central issues that made this binary opposition of race and class conflict intelligible and coherent in the past have now collapsed or have been recoded. The central issues of social and economic inequality that defined the line of social conflict between left and right during the civil rights era are, in the post-civil rights era, inhabited by the new adversarial discourses of resentment. Oppositional discourses of identity, history, and popular memory, nation, family, the deficit, and crime have complicated or displaced issues concerning equality and justice.

In this new phase of racial antagonism, resentment operates through processes of simulation or the constant fabrication of racial distinctions, fields of affiliation, fields of exclusion. Discourses of resentment create the pure space of the folk, the pure space of origins, the pure space of the other who is so different from “us.”
To explore the resentment discourse of crime, violence, and suburban security in greater detail, we need to get beyond abstractions and look at popular culture more closely. In the next section of the chapter, we will discuss examples from television evening news, film, and popular news magazines that show the variability, ambiguity, and contradiction in this discourse of conflict. We will see, for example, that signifiers of the inner city as the harbinger of violence, danger, and chaos loop into the mass media and the suburbs and Hollywood and back again in the constructions of both mainstream and new wave directors of the “reality” of the ‘hood—then, to the black and Latino youth audience constructed as other to itself.

“Reflecting Reality” and Feeding Resentment

Too often, Black artists focus on death and destruction arguing that it is what’s out there so we got to show it! Please!! What needs to be shown is the diversity and complexity of African-American life. (The Syracuse Constitution, August 2, 1993, p. 5)

The logic of resentment discourse does not proceed along a straight line in a communication system of encoding/decoding. It does not work one-way from the text to audience. Its tentacles are more diffuse, more rhizomatic, deeply intertextual. Resentment processes work from white to black and black to white, from white to Asian and Asian to white, and so on, looping in and out and back again across the striated bodies of the inhabitants of the inner city. The inner city is thereby reduced to an endless chain of recyclable signifiers that both allure and repel the suburban classes. The inner city is constantly prodded for signifiers of libidinal pleasure and danger.

But there is also the shared ground of discourses of the authentic inner city in which the languages of resentment and the reality of the ‘hood commingle in films of black realism of black directors such as John Singleton and the Hughes brothers and the Latino realism of Latino director/actor Edward James Olmos. It is a point that Joe Wood (1993) makes somewhat obliquely in his discussion of the film Boyz ‘N the Hood (1992), which is set, incidentally, in South Central Los Angeles. (The film features the coming of age of a black youth, Tre, in a world of temptations: of drugs, fast cars, and teenage sexual promiscuity. Tre makes good in a neighborhood of homeboys who, invariably, end up on the wrong side of the law.) In an article published in Esquire magazine entitled “John Singleton and the Impossible Greenback Bind of the Assimilated Black Artist,” Wood notes the following:

Boyz’s simplified quality is okay with much of America. It is certain that many whites, including Sony executives and those white critics who lauded the film
deliriously, imagine black life in narrow ways. They don’t want to wrestle with
the true witness; it might be scarier than “hell.” Sony Pictures’ initial reaction
to Boyz is instructive: John confides that the studio wanted him to cut out the
scene in which the cops harass the protagonist and his father. “Why do we
have to be so hard on the police?” they asked. An answer came when Rodney
King was beaten; the scene stayed in—it was suddenly “real.” (1993, p. 64)

Here we see how evening television helps to both activate and stabilize
the elements of repeatability, the simulation of the familiar, and the prioritiza-
tion of public common sense. Hollywood draws intertextually on the reality
code of television. Television commodifies and beautifies the images of
violence captured on a street-wise camera.

Singleton’s claim to authenticity, ironically, relied not on endogenous in-
ner-city perceptions but exogenously on the overdetermined mirror of dom-
inant televsional news. Boyz ‘N the ‘Hood could safely skim off the images
of the inner city that television common sense corroborated. For these Hol-
lywood executives, police brutality became real when the Rodney King
beating became evening news. As Wood argues: “What Sony desired in
Boyz was a film more akin to pornography . . . a safely voyeuristic film that
delivered nothing that they did not already believe. . . . But how strenu-
ously will they resist this [Singleton’s] showing how Beverly Hills’ residents
profit from South Central gangbanging, how big a role TV plays in the
South Central culture?” (p. 65).

Of course, what even Joe Wood’s critical article ignores about a film like
Boyz ‘N in the ‘Hood is its own errant nostalgia for a world in which
blacks are centered and stand together against the forces of oppression—a
world in which black men hold and practice a fully elaborated and undis-
puted paternity with respect to their children—a world that radically erases
the fact that the location of the new realist black drama, Los Angeles,
South Central, the memories of Watts, etc. are now supplanted by an immi-
grant and a migrant presence in which, in many instances, black people are
outnumbered by Latinos and Asians.

For instance, Latinos make up about 39% of the city’s population and
blacks make up 13%; Latinos slightly outnumber blacks in South Los An-
egles (Lieberman, 1992). The Asian population is smaller than the black
population; however, Asians are highly visible as small business entrepre-
neurs in the inner city. The complex racial ecology of the ‘hood was appar-
ent during the 1992 Los Angeles riots. According to a RAND Corporation
study of 5,633 adults arrested during the peak days of the riots, 51% were
Latino, mostly young men aged 18–24. By contrast, only 36% of those ar-
rested were black (Lieberman, 1992). Furthermore, approximately 40% of
the businesses destroyed were owned by Latinos (Davis, 1992), although
Korean businesses were the most targeted, partly in revenge for the murder
of 15-year-old Latasha Harlins by a Korean grocer and partly as a signal to build more black-owned businesses in the predominantly black neighborhoods of South L.A.

Like the Hollywood film industry, the mainstream news media's gaze upon black and brown America directs its address toward the suburban white middle class. It is the gaze of resentment in which aspect is separated from matter and substance undermined by the raid of the harsh surfaces and neon lights of inner-city life. In the sensationalistic evening news programs of CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN, black and Latino youth appear metonymically in the discourse of problems: "kids of violence," "kids of welfare moms," "kids without fathers," "kids of illegals," "kids who don't speak 'American." The overwhelming metaphor of crime and violence saturates the dominant gaze on the inner city. News reports imply that only poor black and Latino inner-city residents use cocaine, not rich suburban whites, who are actually the largest consumers of the drug.

On any given day that Jesse Jackson might give a speech on the need for worker solidarity or Congresswoman Maxine Waters on the budget, the news media are likely to pass over these events for the more juicy images of inner-city crime and mayhem. This selection of images has become the reality of urban America (Anderson, 1994). The inner city is sold as a symbolic commodity and as a fetish—a signifier of danger and the unknown that at the same time narrows the complexity of urban working-class life. You watch network evening news and you can predict when black and brown bodies will enter and when they will exit. These bodies become semiotic cargo caught in the endless loop of the electronic media apparatus. The process is one of transsubstantiation; so many black and brown bodies ransacked for the luminous images of the subnormal, the bestial, "the crack kids," "the welfare brigade." The mass media's story of inner-city people of color has little to do with an account about the denial of social services, poor public schools, chronic unemployment, and the radical disinvestment in the cities—all of which can ultimately be linked to government neglect and deprioritization as middle-class issues of law and order, more jail space, and capital punishment usurp the Clinton administration's gaze on the inner city. Instead, the inner city exists as a problem in itself, and a problem to the world. The reality of the inner city is therefore not an endogenous discourse. It is an exogenous one. It is a discourse of resentment refracted back onto the inner city itself.

It is deeply ironic, then, that the images of the inner city produced by the current new wave black cinema corroborate rather than critique mainstream mass media. Insisting on a kind of documentary accuracy and a privileged access to the inner city, these directors construct a reality code of "being there" very much in synch with the controversial gangster rappers. But black film directors have no a priori purchase on the inner city. These vendors of chic
realism recycle a reality code already in the mass media. This reality code operates as a system of repeatability, the elimination of traces, the elaboration of a hierarchy of discourses—the consolidation of the familiar.

*Menace II Society* (1993), created and directed by Allen and Albert Hughes, places the capstone on a genre that mythologizes and beautifies the violent elements of urban life while jettisoning complexities of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and economy. Instead of being didactic, like *Boyz 'N the Hood*, the film is nihilistic. Its central character, Caine Lawson (Tywin Turner), is doomed to the drug-running, car-stealing, and meaningless violence that claim young men like himself (and before him, his father) from the time they can walk and talk. It is a world in which a trip to the neighborhood grocery can end in death and destruction, one in which gangbangers demand and enforce respect at the point of gun. This point is made at the very beginning of the movie when Caine and his trigger-happy buddy, O-Dog (Larenz Tate), feel disrespected by a Korean store owner. The young men had come to the grocery to get a beer but are provoked into a standoff when the store owner hovers too close to them. The young men feel insulted because the Korean grocer makes it obvious that he views them with suspicion. In a twinkling of an eye, O-Dog settles the score with a bout of unforgettable violence, leaving the store owner and his wife dead. One act of violence simply precipitates another. By the end of the film, Caine, too, dies in a hail of bullets—payback by the gang of a young man that Caine had beaten up mercilessly. This film sizzles with a special kind of surface realism. There is a lot of blood and gore in the 'hood in *Menace II Society*. And the camera shots consist, for the most part, of long takes of beatings or shootings. These camera shots are almost always close up and in your face. Caine's life is supposed to be a character sketch of the inevitability of early death for inner-city male youth reared in a culture of violence. We have already seen it on television evening news before it hits the big screen. Black filmmakers therefore become pseudo-normative bards to a mass audience who, like the Greek chorus, already know the refrain. These are not problem-solving films. These are films of confirmation, of black survival by any means necessary. The reality code—the code of the 'hood, the code of blackness, the code of Africanness, the code of hardness—has a normative social basis. It combines and recombines with suburban middle-class discourses about such topics as the deficit, taxes, overbearing and overreaching government programs, welfare and quota queens, and the need for more prisons. It is a code steeped in public common sense. The gangster film has become paradigmatic for black filmic production out of Hollywood. And it is fascinating to see current films like Singleton's *Higher Learning* (1995) glibly redraw the spatial lines of demarcation of the inner city and the suburbs onto a university town; *Higher Learning* is *Boys 'N in the 'Hood* on campus.
It is to be remembered that early in his career, before *Jungle Fever* (1991), Spike Lee was berated by mainstream white critics for not presenting the inner city realistically enough—for not showing the drug use and the violence. Lee obliged with a vengeance in *Jungle Fever* in the harrowing scenes of the drug addict, Vivian (Halle Berry), shooting it up in the “Taj Mahal” crack joint and the Good Doctor Reverend Purify (Ossie Davis) pumping a bullet into his son at point-blank range (Kroll, 1991, pp. 44–47).

While Latinos living in the inner city experience an economic and social marginality as severe as that experienced by African Americans, representations of Latino inner-city experiences rarely make it to the big screen. Despite the numerical presence of Latinos in the cities (especially in L.A.—the home of Hollywood), Latino directors have not experienced the triumphs of the John Singletons and Spike Lees. However, one Latino director and actor has managed to break in to make a film centered on the Latino ‘hood experience. In *American Me* (1992), Edward James Olmos directs and stars in a film about Chicano L.A. gang life that spans the generations—from the Pachucos (Zootsuiters) of the 1940s to La eMe (the “M,” Chicano Mafia) of the ‘60s and ‘70s—and that moves back and forth between the ‘hood out in the street and the carceral ‘hood behind prison bars. In the carceral ‘hood, gang warfare and violence are even more brutal than outside. The lifeline between the street and prison gangbangers is strong. Each needs the other for survival (and for drug-running).

*American Me* is based on a true story about three friends: Cheyenne, a Chicano gang leader who died in prison in 1972, J.D., the white “Chicano brother,” and Santana, the Chicano leader of La eMe. The film tells a story about how *la klika* (the gang)—the surrogate Chicano family—is an integral force in both the survival and dissolution of Chicano communities in East L.A. In her critique of *American Me*, Rosa Linda Fregoso argues that “the film is about the depraved and ruined Chicano *familia*: a savage vision of Chicano gang life” (Fregoso, 1993, p. 123). The survival and strength of *la klika*, for both male and female members, is more precious than life itself. *La klika* is one of the only signifiers of Chicano selfhood. In this Chicano story of the reality of the ‘hood, Olmos’s film does vary the range of racial encounter between dominant and subordinate racial groups. Unlike *Boyz ‘N the ‘Hood*, for instance, resentment is not simply a black-white dynamic. Rather, it is one where at times Chicano prisoners ally with Aryan Nationalist prisoners to avenge an attack against them; where drugs bond across “ethnic” brotherhoods; where a white homeboy is a very bit as Chicano as his *klika* brother; and where, ever so often, Chicanos must kill one of their own to show strength and save face. Gang life and the life of the inner city are not glorified, aspired to, or seen as a sign of exemplary nationalism. *American Me* moves in a somewhat different pseudo-normative direction. The drug-infested inner city is a sign of something gone wrong and
in need of repair. What must be done, the film suggests, is to leave the family of the gang and return to the family of the home and ethnic community where love and affirmation abound. The aspiration is not, then, to flee to the border suburbs but, rather to evaluate the new traditions—gangbanging, drugs, violence, and the like—that have led their inner-city world on a nonstop rollercoaster ride to nowhere.

By the time we get around to white-produced films like *Falling Down* (1993), directed by Joel Schumaker, the discourse of crime, violence, and suburban security has come full circle to justify suburban revenge and resentment. We now have a white man who enters the 'hood to settle moral scores with anything and anyone that moves. Michael Douglas as the angst-ridden protagonist, D-fens, is completely agnostic to the differences within and among indigenous and immigrant inner-city groups. They all should be exterminated, as far as he is concerned—along, of course, with his ex-wife, who won't let him see his young daughter. D-fens is the prosecuting agent of resentment. His reality code embraces Latinos who are portrayed as gangbangers and Asian store owners who are represented as compulsively unscrupulous. In a scorching parody of gang culture, he becomes a one-man gang—a menace to society. In a calculated cinematic twist, the world of D-fens is characterized by a wider range of difference than the worlds of the films of black realism. However, ironically in this world, blacks are for the most part mysteriously absent from Los Angeles. On this matter of the representation of the "real" inner city, the question is, as Aretha Franklin says, "Who is zooming who?"

What is fascinating about a film like *Falling Down* is that it is centered around an out-of-control, anomic individual who is "out there." Armed with more socio-normative firepower than any gangbanger could ever muster, D-fens is ready to explode at the seams as everyday provocations make him seethe to the boiling point. We learn, for instance, that he is a disgruntled laid-off white-collar technician who worked for many years at a military plant. Displaced as a result of the changing economy of the new world order and the proliferation of different peoples who are flooding Los Angeles in pursuit of the increasingly elusive American dream, D-fens is the kind of individual we are encouraged to believe a displaced middle-class person might become. As Joel Schumacher, the film director, explains: "It's the kind of story you see on the six o'clock news, about the nice guy who has worked at the post office for twenty years and then one day guns down his co-workers and kills his family. It's terrifying because there's the sense that someone in the human tribe went over the wall. It could happen to us" (Morgan, 1993).

D-fens is a Rambo nerd, a Perot disciple caught in a sort of yup-draft. *Newsweek* magazine, that preternatural barometer of suburban intelligence, tells us that D-fens is the agent of a suburban resentment, depicting him as a tragic social critic somewhat overtaken by events:
Falling Down, whether it's really a message movie or just a cop film with trendy trimmings, pushes white men's buttons. The annoyances and menaces that drive D-fens bonkers—whining panhandlers, immigrant shopkeepers who don't trouble themselves to speak good English, gun-toting gangbangers—are a cross-section of white-guy grievances. From the get-go, the film pits Douglas—the picture of obsolescent rectitude with his white shirt, tie, specs and astronaut haircut—against a rainbow coalition of Angelenos. It's a cartoon vision of the beleaguered white male in multicultural America. This is a weird moment to be a white man. (David Gates, March 29, 1993, p. 48)

D-fens's reactions are based on his own misfortunes and anger over the disempowerment of the white middle class. Despite his similarities with the neo-Nazi, homophobic army surplus store owner in the movie, they are not the same. Unlike the neo-Nazi, D-fens reacts to injustices he perceives have been perpetrated against him. He is the post–civil rights scourge of affirmative action and reverse discrimination.

In Falling Down, Hollywood unleashes the final punctuation marks on a discursive system that is refracted from the mainstream electronic media and the press onto the everyday life of the urban centers. Unlike D-fens in Falling Down, the central protagonist in Menace II Society, Caine, has nothing to live for, no redeeming values to vindicate. He is pre-existentialist—a man cut adrift in and by nature. What a film like Menace II Society does share with Falling Down is a general subordination of the interests and desires of women and a pervasive sense that life in the urban center is a self-made hell. Resentment has now traveled the whole way along a fully reversible signifying chain as white, black, and brown filmmakers make their long march along the royal road to a dubious Aristotelian mimesis in the declaration of a final truth. The reality of being black and brown and inner city in America is sutured up in the popular culture. The inner city has no interior. It is a holy shrine to dead black and brown bodies—hyper-real carcasses on arbitrary display.

What About the Girlz?

In these films the directors may be different colors and ethnicities, but the main characters are all the same—tough males. An understated but nevertheless significant process of resentment flows from men to women. In this world constructed by male filmmakers, the identities of men are formed out of the ascribed negative or inferior attributes of women: "It's a boyz' world they sculpt ingeniously with gunfire and gutter talk, in which the worst insult to a man is to call him a bitch" (Dowell, 1993, p. 30). From Boyz 'N the 'Hood to Falling Down, women are portrayed as nurturers, victims, virgins, drug addicts, beacons of hope, and havens from the violent world of men. In Boyz 'N the 'Hood, Tre's mother is one of the few examples of
female independence and agency. Yet she still cannot teach Tre to be a man. Thus, she has to give her son over to his father to nurture the boy’s masculinity. After giving up her son and furthering her career, she also leaves the ‘hood. These events imply two problematic images: first, single mothers cannot properly raise their sons; second, independent, professional women cannot be a part of the inner city. The remainder of the women in the film are either the mothers of sons, mothers of their son’s children, or “bitches.”

In American Me, the principal female character, Julie, is the quintessential nurturer, both as lover and as mother figure. Julie offers Santana, the leader of La eMe, experiences of which he was robbed as a consequence of being incarcerated since the age of 16. She teaches him how to dance, how to have sex with a woman, and how to love. She also opens the door through which he can escape the life of the street. In the end, she changes him, but he is killed before he is fully reborn. The power of the woman loses to the power of la klika. Olmos claims that Julie is the heroine of the movie, the hope of the barrio. But Fregoso disagrees. She argues that this claim is suspect: “Something about this flickering lantern that we are expected to hold up at the end of the tunnel, about this burden bequeathed by Olmos to all Chicanas, makes me suspicious. Just as in the ‘real world,’ Chicanas in American Me carry more than their share of responsibility for a man: first as the origins of Santana’s deviance, and second as vehicles for his salvation. This is a very old story indeed” (Fregoso, 1993, p. 133).

The other major female character in Olmos’s film is Santana’s mother. What stands out most about her character is that she is a victim—raped by a gang of white sailors when she was a young pachuca. This violent act resulted in the birth of Santana. She is portrayed as “la Chingada”—the raped Malintzin Tenepal who many blame for the downfall of the Aztec nation, the Mexican inferiority complex, and the creation of the “mestizo” (Fregoso, 1993, p. 132; Huaco-Nuzum, 1993, p. 94).

Ronnie, the main female protagonist in Menace II Society, is also the symbol of emotional security and motherhood—the sanctuary amidst the storm. As Pat Dowell says in “Girlz N the Hood,” Ronnie “functions not so much as a character, but as the alternative to blood on the pavement” (1993, p. 30). She may have the power to nurture, but she does not have the power to save a black male from his inevitable demise. Caine, her lover, is killed in a hail of gunfire just as he and Ronnie are preparing to leave the ‘hood.

Finally, the women portrayed in Falling Down span the gamut of popularly rehashed images of women. From the frustrated young Latina cop, Sandra, who searches for love in the white male world of the police precinct to D-fens’s helpless ex-wife, Elizabeth, who runs away from her crazed ex-husband, women are viewed as defenseless, weak, crazy, and helplessly romantic. Elizabeth fails to convince the police that her life is in danger—that D-fens is stalking her and her daughter. And Sandra fails to
convince officer Prendergast to leave his pathetic wife for her. Neither woman is able to positively affect her life. Both women are at the whim of the men who encircle them.

Most of the women in these films are marked either as mothers or as bitches. Resentment functions negatively and positively. Yet, the positive identification of mother is not wholly positive because the symbol of mother is circumscribed by dependency on men and sacrifice to sons—images that can be perceived as negative. This is not to say that dependency and self-sacrifice are always undesirable but that they are negative in the sense that men are not similarly inscribed. The image of the bitch, in contrast, has no positive moral force. It is a label ascribed to all women, except mothers. In the backdrops painted by many black filmmakers, “bitch” is the most often used noun of young inner-city men. Again, these filmmakers, like the gangster rappers, argue that they are only projecting what they hear in the ’hood. Little attempt is made to problematize or critique this supposed reality. The agency of women is circumscribed through the lens of men who view women as nothing more than a plaything, a mother of their children, their mother, or their metaphoric castrator (the “bitch,” the “man hater,” the “dyke”).

Resentment Effects

As the portrayals of the inner city in these films illustrate, the discourse of resentment has not only powerful rhetorical but also material effects. Such are the consequences for minority youth in the highly masculinized and pejorative views of the inner city underwritten in American popular and establishment cultures. Bushwhacked by the politics of “the” deficit, the Perot brigade and its themes of crime, violence, and suburban security, the democratic administration in Washington; which earlier on declared its commitment to change and a new dispensation for the cities, has rapidly sought to center its policies toward the inner city on the agenda of the suburbs. The centerpiece of Clinton’s plan for the inner city, according to a Time magazine article, is “laying down the law” (Gibbs, 1993, p. 23).

Inner-city school youth are surrounded by this powerful discourse of crime, violence, and suburban security in which they are the constructed other—social objects who grapple with the reality code projected from the popular media culture. But their experience with the reality code is grounded in material practices such as police harassment. Black and brown youth experience the reality code as a problem of representation. The reality code is translated in the discourse of resentment. Democracy asserts its tragic limits in the urban center. Unlike the cause-and-effect theories of the film culture, police harassment reported by high school kids in the Los Angeles school system seems random and vicious.
A good example of the material consequences and challenges of representations for minority youth is provided in the stories told by inner-city adolescents at Liberty High School in Los Angeles. Liberty High is itself an extension of the long arm of the state: The L.A. Unified Public School system has its own police force. Cameron McCarthy conducted an ethnographic study in this inner-city high school about sixth months before the Rodney King beating. This research was conducted in the summer of 1990. It involved an evaluation of Teach For America’s Summer Institute preservice teacher internship program for its “corps members.” The following excerpt gives a sense of the students’ experience with the unyieldingly negative representations of black and Latino male youth generated in the popular media. A switch point of this field of representation is their encounter with the police. The excerpt is taken from McCarthy’s field notes:

We report on a class that was taught by a Teach For America intern, Christopher Morrison. Morrison is a white male who was about 22 years old at the time of the study. He hails from the South and has had some military training. His assignment to do a four-week teaching stint in Liberty High School was his first “exposure” to an inner-city school. Christopher Morrison’s cooperating teacher was a black female, Ruby Marshall, who was in her sixties and anticipating retirement. Of the 17 students that were in Morrison’s classroom, 15 were African American and 2 were Latino. This classroom under discussion was taken over by accounts of police violence. Morrison had introduced the topic of police harassment in response to some queries made by one of his students, Rinaldo, the previous day. But in the torrent of accounts offered by students, Morrison and Marshall lost control of the class. In effect the classroom became a site for a therapeutic release—a show-and-tell on harassment and the “image problem” that black and brown male youth had with the Los Angeles police. Students detailed acts of police harassment that left them disoriented about their own sense of self and identity. One student reported that he had been stopped by the cops and searched for a gun. But in his words “the cops had no probable reason.” Another reported that he was arbitrarily beaten up for, in his view, walking on the wrong street at the wrong time of night. One girl in the class told of friends whose houses, as she said, “was bust into.” Many talked of intimidating stares and glares and threatening behavior on the part of the police. The cops also participate in their language of gangbanging—keeping the peace with shiny guns and lots of leather.

Meanwhile, in this Los Angeles high school classroom, the diffusion of images of the police and the problematic relationship of some kids to the law opened up deep wounds of adolescent insecurity and identity crisis among these inner-city, particularly black male and Latino, school youth. Students were looking for solutions to problems about self-representation, and their teachers did not seem to have any easy answers. The students were concerned about how to represent themselves in ways that might help
them to maintain their sense of adolescent freedom and individual rights and yet avoid the full-court press of the cops. These adults—Christopher Morrison and Ruby Marshall—gave replies to their students and made observations about police harassment that were steeped in the common sense of the reality code—the code of mimesis, the code of resentment. Here are Ruby Marshall’s comments on the students’ reports of police harassment:

I say if you walk like a duck and you hang out with ducks, then you are a duck. I believe that some of the things they [the police] do are not right. But you guys sometimes walk around without any books like the rest of the guys on the street. If you do that, they [the cops] will pull you over. . . . [Here, Ruby Marshall was speaking out of a sense of concern, even a sense of fear, about her students’ confrontations with cops. Maybe, as a black woman, she felt especially responsible for telling these students about strategies of representation that might allow them to survive encounters with the police. She continued.] One day I saw them [some police officers]. They had this guy spread eagle against the car. And they were really harassing him. You should not hang out with these guys. . . . Don’t hang out with the Bloods, or the Crips, or the Tigers! . . . When a group of you guys are hanging out together that gives them cause for concern. You don’t even carry books. You need to be as non-threatening as possible.

To the latter remark, one student replied: “You mean to say that if I am going around with my friends at night I need to haul along a big old bunch of books over my shoulder?”

Some of the responses of the white student teacher, Christopher Morrison, conveyed a sense of ambivalence—great sympathy for the adolescent students as they reported examples of police harassment but also a sense that the police had to go on “images,” that they had to enforce the law, and that school youth had to exercise restraint and respect if they wished to be treated respectfully themselves. To the students’ questions about free speech and freedom of movement, Morrison pointed them in the direction of the reality code where actions had real consequences: wrong was repaid by retributive sanctions, and personal errors of judgment—associating with the wrong crowd and being in the wrong place at the wrong time—were actions for which one had to accept responsibility. Just as ordinary adult citizens had to accept the consequences for their actions, adolescents who challenge the law ought to be aware of the wrath of the law. Here follows an excerpt from a testy but revealing exchange between Morrison and his black students on the topic of the aggressive actions by the police: “Let me tell you a story about myself,” he began. “Maybe this will help. Once I had some friends. They were hanging out on the college campus. But they did not look like college students. They were white, but they had long hair.” A number of students interjected, “You mean like a hippie.” “Like a hippie,” Morrison said. Then he continued with his story: “They arrested these
guys. You have to understand that the police go on images. They rely on images. They need categories to put people in so that they can do their work. And sometimes these categories are right. And if you, Morgan, had a gun [addressing the student who said the cops stopped and searched him for weapons] then you gave them probable cause. You fitted into one of their categories."

Morgan seemed utterly dismayed: "It wasn’t the gun. They were just riding through the hood. If I had given them any trouble they would have sweated me." Morrison disagreed with this assessment of danger: "I don’t think they would do that to you. You can complain if you feel that your rights have been abused. Look, people are being blown away at a faster rate than ever in this country. Just don’t give them cause. If you got something [a gun] on you, then that is giving them cause."

On the matter of police harassment, the teachers, as representatives of the middle class, moved swiftly toward points of ideological closure. Their students—young and black and Latino and in trouble with the law—passed their adult mentors like ships in the night. The students wanted the discourse opened up in ways that would allow their voices to be heard. But the Los Angeles classroom seemed more like a court of appeal in which the students appeared to lose the battle for control over their public identities and self-representation. The process of resentment had insinuated itself into the lives of the students. Black and Latino students had to contend with the burden of an always already existent complex of representations that constructs them as outsiders to the Law. The inner-city classroom, like the inner-city streets, in the language of Thomas Dunn (1993), has become an "enclosure" for the containment of the mobility of black and brown youth. The border line between the suburbs and the traumatized inner city is drawn in public schools like Liberty High. And teachers like Ruby Marshall and Christopher Morrison stand guard on the front lines—agents of resentment guarding the border zone erected to protect suburban interests.

Conclusion

In many respects, then, the resentment discourse of crime, violence, and suburban security that now saturates American popular culture indicates the inflated presence of the suburban priorities and anxieties in the popular imagination and in political life. It also indicates a corresponding lack of control that blacks and Latinos (particularly black and Latino youth) and other people of color have over the production of images about themselves in society—even in an era of the resurgence of the black Hollywood film and the embryonic Latino cinema. The discourse of crime, violence, and suburban security also points to deeper realities of abandonment, neglect, and social contempt for dwellers in America’s urban centers that are now
registered in social policies that continue to see the inner city as the inflammable territory of "the enemy within" and the police as the mercenary force of suburban middle classes. In these matters, "all of us are involved, all of us are consumed," to use the language of the Guyanese poet Martin Carter (1979, 44).

With the politics of resentment now widely diffused throughout society, we have entered a whole new phase in race relations in education and society. These relations are propelled by the processes of simulation built into historically specific resentment discourses such as crime, violence, and suburban security. Of course, it should be noted that both majority and minority groups use resentment discourses. Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism are two such discourses that thrive on the negation of the other. Proponents of these two worldviews attempt to reify moral centers in opposition to supposed peripheries, not realizing that these moral centers are simulations of reality. In the popular film and television culture both these discourses have been refracted onto the inner city with a vengeance. In this period of "the post" there are no innocent or originary identities (Bhabha, 1994). With the politics of resentment, we are descending down the slippery slopes of the war over signs. The traditional divisions of left versus right no longer hold. As Baudrillard (1983) argues, opposition becomes only a hypersimulation of opposition. Collusion of supposed extremes is the more common result. The battle lines over signs are now being drawn down in and around predictable constituencies, and whole new categories of association of affect enter the fray. The war over signs and symbols pits respectable suburban society against the amoral inner city, the nuclear-family residents of the sterilized PMC environments against the urban children without fathers. It pits supporters of academic freedom against the politically correct, a field of affect in which we see Marxists such as Eugene Genovese form a blood pact with slick proto-capitalist third world immigrants like Dinesh D'Souza. Together they harangue embattled indigenous first world minorities. So much for the conservative wing of the traveling theorists.

Resentment is therefore negative and positive, decentering and recentering. While the inner city flounders under the weight of government disinvestment and the scarcity of jobs and services, old and new patriotic and fundamentalist groups led by Rambo, Ross Perot, the NRA, and Teach For America sing Rush Limbaugh's refrain: "We must take back America." Resentment themes may pit the organicists against the polluters or Bill Clinton, Rush Limbaugh, Tipper Gore, Bob Dole, and the cops against the hip hoppers. The battle over moral leadership, as Nietzsche once noted, is "drenched in blood." In a time of the fear of falling, the suburban middle-class subject stabilizes itself by dressing in the garb of "the oppressed"—people whose fortunes have been slipping despite their moral steadfastness. It is the middle class that feels increasingly surrounded by the other, its pub-
lic space overrun by the homeless, its Toyotas and BMWs hijacked by the amoral underclass.

But as those who deploy resentment have shown, affect is a highly contradictory field of conversion, mobilizing unpredictable constituencies. A case in point are the types of alliances and disarticulations reflected in the public responses to the New York City Children of the Rainbow Curriculum Guide: The First Grade (1991). The New York City Central School Board's attempts to develop multicultural curricula that address gay and lesbian identities precipitated alliances among the religious communities historically associated with the civil rights movement, white conservatives, many of whom are members of the Christian Coalition (Moral Majority), and religious Latinos. The controversy that ensued illustrated that homophobia cuts across many identity groups and that one's experience of oppression and marginalization does not necessarily lead to empathy for those similarly oppressed.

But how do we get beyond the cruel and destructive articulations of resentment and the rigidities of privileged experiences, privileged epistemologies, and the like? Our task must be to try and think our way out of the paradox of identity and the other, the paradox of oppressor and oppressed. First, we must affirm and demonstrate that affective statements, sensibilities, and projects can be inclusive and expansive and can articulate and rearticulate individuals and groups into broader coalitions and communities of interdependence and resistance. Such a framework should lead, for instance, to a problematicizing of the exorbitant discourses of crime and violence and the reality of the 'hood. It would mean that we put a wider range of interests, needs, and desires into the public discourse about the inner city; that would include issues of education, jobs, health care, child care, and so on. It would mean, as well, a recognition of a wider range of realities and groups in the inner city than are currently in play in the suburban mythologies of the mainstream media and the constricted discourse of "the" 'hood in some forms of black and Latino filmic realism. There are girls as well as boys in the 'hood, gays as well as straights, love as well as war, agency and momentum as well as defeat and setback.

A few films have constructed such a complex map of inner-city life, but they have not gotten the exposure of the new wave, black male films. Just Another Girl on the I.R.T. (1993), directed by Leslie Harris, is about how the pressures of the 'hood affect a teenage girl and potentially stifle her dreams. Against such odds, Chantel, the female protagonist, manages to give birth to a baby and go to college while her boyfriend takes care of household responsibilities—an alternative to the traditional representations of teenage fathers. Zebrahead (1992) by Anthony Drazan is a story about how an interracial relationship in a Detroit high school leads to violence but, also, to hope and a chance to challenge stifling social norms. Strapped
(1993), an HBO original movie directed by Forrest Whitaker, explores how guns indiscriminately ruin the lives of inner-city residents every day. And Straight Out of Brooklyn (1991), produced and directed by Matty Rich, is a story about the despair of young blacks in the inner city and the shattered dreams of the people in their community. The moral messages of both Strapped and Straight Out of Brooklyn are that despair is destructive and that the solutions to despair and senseless violence are complex.

Unlike popular black realist cinema, these four films dispense with the now commonplace glorification of crime, violence, and the drug lore of the inner city. Yet these films are not immune to Hollywood typecasting. For instance, most of these films portray only a circumscribed sector of the inner city, namely, low-income residents who are in crisis. There are precious few stories about the everyday struggles and small victories of the people who live in American inner cities. Nevertheless, these alternative films critique mainstream constructions of resentment and open paths for change and positive identity formation.

Those of us who are privileged but in some ways condemned to look at the world as perpetual voyeurs—Sweeney of the sightless eyes warming in the glow of our ethereal hearths—cannot forever retreat from this multicultural world of difference. We are part of a world of difference in which our needs and interests must be problematized and our sense of identity and community challenged. Chela Sandoval (1991), in her essay “U.S. Third World Feminisms: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World,” challenges us in precisely this way. She effectively replaces suburban resentment metaphors of space and identity with what she calls the trope of “differential consciousness.” By this she means, in part, that progressive actors must be willing to recognize the mobility of a wide array of interests, needs, and desires within the body of subaltern constituencies. As artists, as intellectuals, as cultural actors, and as members of embattled social groups, we must find the will to affirm the new communities struggling for representation, even in our midst. For some of us this might be our first steps beyond the prison house of the academy and the paralysis of educational suburbia.

Notes

1. In fact, American Me—Olmos’s directorial debut—did not make a profit, while the first feature films of African American directors such as John Singleton (Boyz ‘N the ‘Hood and Mario Van Peebles (New Jack City) made significant profits (Fregoso, 1993; Jones, 1991).

2. For excellent and contrasting views of the representation of inner-city youth in contemporary film see Michael Dyson, “The Politics of Black Masculinity and the Ghetto in Black Film,” Carol Becker (ed.), The Subversive Imagination: Artists, So-

3. Teach For America is the much talked about voluntaristic youth organization that has sought to make a “difference” in the educational experiences of disadvantaged American youth. The organization, patterned on the can-do humanism of the Peace Corps, recruits graduates from elite universities and colleges around the country to serve a two-year stint in the inner-city and rural school districts in need. At its Annual Summer Institute, held at the University of Southern California, corps members or teacher recruits are exposed to an eight-week crash course in teaching methods and classroom management. Four of these weeks are spent in the form of an internship in Los Angeles inner-city schools such as Liberty High.

4. We should note here that these concerns over representation and identity are not limited to minority youth. Like the students of Liberty High, adult residents of the inner city fight for control over and offer critical reflections on the representations of people of color produced in the media. For example, the community-based small newspaper, *The Syracuse Constitution*, used some of its column space to denounce *Menace II Society* and the current wave of films of inner-city realism: “In the midst of the cheering accolades and praises for the movie *Menace II Society*, lies an even more sinister and controversial subject that needs to be addressed—the devaluation of Black life under the camouflage of entertainment fed to an unsuspecting and unconscious Black Public anxious to see themselves on the big screen. At stake is the image of an entire community seeking to speak its own special truth to a world gone mad in the throes of a Eurocentric propaganda war which vulgarizes Black life by unwitting and non-thinking black folk masquerading as social critics/film makers. These social film critics argue that they are “doing the right thing” by perpetuating hopelessness and glamorizing gangsters as the epitome of Black life” (*The Syracuse Constitution*, August 2, 1993, p. 5).

What this quotation from *The Syracuse Constitution* indicates is the deep anxiety that resides within urban communities themselves about the filmic realism that reduces and, in the end, dehumanizes their lived existence.


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