Race, suburban resentment and the representation of the inner city in contemporary film and television

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RACE, SUBURBAN RESENTMENT AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE INNER CITY IN CONTEMPORARY FILM AND TELEVISION

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INTRODUCTION

Much contemporary mainstream and radical theorizing on race and popular culture places television, film and advertising outside the circuits of social meanings, as though these practices were pre-existing, self-constituting technologies that then exert effects on an undifferentiated mass public (Parenti 1992; Postman 1986). This essay counters that tendency. In what follows, our discussion of the role of television and film in the production and reproduction of contemporary race relations is decidedly couched in the approach of cultural studies. We situate media technologies within the turmoil of social life as
cultivators and provokers of racial meanings and common sense. We see television and film as fulfilling a certain bardic function, singing back to society lullabies about what a large hegemonic part of it “already knows.” Like Richard Campbell (1987), we reject the vertical model of communication that insists on encoding/decoding. We are more inclined to theorize the operation of communicative power in horizontal or rhizomatic terms. Television and film, then, address and position viewers at the “center” of a cultural map in which suburban, middle-class values “triumph” over practices that drift away from mainstream social norms. In this arrangement, the suburb, in the language of Christopher Lasch (1991), becomes “The True and Only Heaven”: the great incubator and harbinger of neo-evolutionary development, progress and modernity in an erstwhile unstable and unreliable world.

Our suburban dweller is the great philosophical and semiotic meta-subject of daytime and nighttime radio talk shows, television evening news, and tabloid hysteria. He is our contemporary Sweeney Erectus, our last rational man, standing on the pyres of resentment. Suburban dweller here refers to all those agents travelling in the covered wagons of post-sixties white flight from America’s increasingly black, increasingly immigrant urban centers. White flight created settlements and catchment areas that fanned out farther and farther away from the city’s inner radius, thereby establishing the racial character of the suburban-urban divide (Wilson 1994). As tax-based revenues, resources and services followed America’s fleeing middle classes out of the city, a great gulf opened up between the suburban dweller and America’s inner-city resident. Into this void contemporary television, film and popular culture entered creating the most poignantly sordid fantasies of inner-city degeneracy and moral decrepitude. These representations of urban life would serve as markers of the distance the suburban dweller had travelled away from perdition. Televisual and filmic fantasies would also underscore the extent to which the innercity dweller was irredeemably lost in the dystopic urban core. Within the broad vocabulary of representational techniques at its disposal, the preference for the medium shot in television tells the suburban viewer, “We are one with you,” as the body of the television subject seems to correspond one-for-one with the viewer.

As Raymond Williams (1974) argues in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, television, film, advertising, textbooks and so forth are powerful forces situated in cultural circuits themselves—not outside as some pure technological or elemental force or some fourth estate, as the professional ideology of mainstream journalism tends to suggest. These are circuits that consist of a proliferation of capacities, interests, needs, desires, priorities and commitments—fields of affiliation and fields of association.

One such circuit is the discourse of resentment, or the practice of defining one’s identity through the negation of the other. This essay will call attention to this discourse in contemporary race relations and point to the critical
coordinating role of news magazines, television, the Hollywood film industry, and the common sense of black filmmakers themselves in the reproduction and maintenance of the discourse of resentment—particularly its supporting themes of crime, violence and suburban security. We also look at the discursive impact of resentment on the sense of capacity and agency among black school youth at a comprehensive high school (Liberty High) in Los Angeles. For this segment of the essay, we will draw on ethnographic data collected by one of us at this Los Angeles high school some six months before the videotaped images of the LAPD's beating of Rodney King reverberated around the world.

Drawing on the theories of identity formation in the writings of C.L.R. James (1978, 1993) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1967), we argue that the filmic and electronic media play a critical role in the production and channelling of suburban anxieties and retributive morality onto its central target: the depressed inner city. These developments deeply inform race relations in late-century society. These race relations are conducted in the field of simulation as before a putative public court of appeal (Baudrillard 1983).

STANDING ON THE PYRES OF RESENTMENT

"I feel deadly faint, bowed and humped, as though I were Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise." (Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* [1851, p. 535]).

These words uttered in a moment of crisis in the nineteenth-century canonical text of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) might well have been uttered by Michael Douglas as D-fens in the contemporary popular cultural text of *Falling Down* (1993), or by Douglas as Tom Sanders in the anti-feminist, proto-resentment film, *Disclosure* (1995). Douglas is the great twentieth-century suburban middle-class male victim, flattened and spread out against the surface of a narcotic screen "like a patient etherized upon a table" (Eliot 1964, p. 11).

In two extraordinary texts written in the late forties, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live in* (1978) and *American Civilization* (1993), C.L.R. James made the provocative observation that American popular cultural texts—popular film, popular music, soap operas, comic strips, and detective novels—offered sharper intellectual lines of insight into the contradictions and tensions of modern life in postindustrial society than the entire corpus of academic work in the social sciences. For James, comic strips such as *Dick Tracy* (first published in 1931) and popular films such as Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941, based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett) were direct aesthetic descendants of Melville's *Moby Dick*. These popular texts removed the veil that covered twentieth-century social relations "too terrible to relate," except in the realm of fantasy and imagination (Morrison 1990, p 302).
In a remarkable way, popular culture was for James the great storehouse of twentieth-century integrative energies, desires, and frustrations—freely mingling the quotidian with the extreme, the mundane with the horrific, didactic moral values with their prurient undersides, the aesthetic with the grotesque. And so with one brush stroke, James drew a direct line of connection between the canonical work of writers like Melville and the operation of meaning and values in contemporary popular cultural forms. For James, these popular texts foregrounded the rise of a new historical subject on the national and world stage: the resentment-type personality. This subject was a projection of the overrationalization and sedimented overdeterminations of the modern industrial age ("the fearful mechanical power of an industrial civilization which is now advancing by incredible leaps and bounds and bringing at the same time mechanization and destruction of the human personality," [1978, p. 8]). James's new subject was a resentment-type personality who articulated an authoritarian populism: the mutant, azerbic and emotionally charged common sense of the professional middle class (Douglas with a satchel of hand grenades in Falling Down, Harry and Louise of the anti-health care reform ads). This authoritarian personality was, in James's view, willing to wreck all in the hell-bent prosecution of his own moral agenda and personal ambition. According to James, what was unusual and egregious about the resentment personality type in Moby Dick and the nineteenth-century world of Melville had become pseudonormative by the time of The Maltese Falcon in the 1940s—a period marked by the rise of what James (1993) calls "nonchalant cynicism" (p. 125).

Thus in The Maltese Falcon (1941), detective Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) puts the woman he loves in jail for the murder of his corrupt partner, Miles Archer. Their love is overridden by the ideology of professionalism and the socionormative priority of making wrong-doers pay. As the paranoid Spade says plaintively to his lover, "I don't even like the idea of thinking there might be one chance in a hundred that you'd played me for a sucker" (Spade quoted in James, 1993, p. 125). In this version of game theory there are no free riders. Loafers are persona non grata, even when, as in the case of Justice Clarence Thomas, they once were your sister before they went on the dole and before you were nominated for high judicial office. In Sam Spade's world, lovers do not have any special privileges beyond the domestic sphere. Spade is playing by his own ethics and chucking human relations and feelings as encumbering eruptions of irrationality. This is a tart dish of public common sense. As the eternal proxy for middle-American values, Spade holds the line against the threat of invasion by the morally corrupt other, the socially different and the culturally deviant and deprived. The bad guys kill and the good guys kill too. But the good guys kill more efficiently. Morality is on the side of the technologically and materially endowed. The fun and games of law and order are, therefore, part of a deeply ethnocentric and gendered and class-based system of difference—a hierarchy of priorities in the world we live in. It is a
game of exclusions intended to preserve the safety of the suburban domestic space. In popular culture, the public sphere becomes the site of distorted communication and social anxieties and prejudices. By combining detective and gangster rolled into one transcendent subject, Spade enters into the semiotic field, simultaneously, as suburban plaintiff and libidinal cruiser. Contemporary popular discussion of crime and violence also follows this logic of closed narrative where the greatest fear is that the enemy will be let into our neighborhoods. And the greatest stress on public policy may be how to keep the unwanted off the tax-payer: dependent welfare rolls and out of our town, safely in prisons, and so forth. Sam Spade’s worries have had a melt down in our time, at late century. And they have become a potent paranoid resentment brew that spills over from the fantasy land of television and film into the social world in which we live.

What James’s astute comments point us toward is the fact that the filmic and televisual discourse of crime and violence is not simply about crime or violence. Art is not here simply imitating life in some unthinking process of mimesis. Art is productive and generative. Televisual and filmic discourses about crime and violence, as Gerbner (1970) and others argue, are fundamentally urban fables about the operation of power and the production of meaning and values in society. They are about moral re-evaluation, about our collective tensions, crises, and fears. They are about how we as a society deal with the social troubles that afflict us: sexism, racism and the like. In this sense, popular culture—the world of film noir and the grade B movie, of the tabloids, and of the mainstream press—constitutes a relentless pulp mill of social fictions of transmuted and transposed power. At late century, Sam Spade has been replaced by the towering popular and preternatural intelligence of Sweeney Erectus, our guide into the moral inferno. James wrote almost prophetically about resentment mutations and the time lag in the modern in the late forties (Bhabha 1994). The aim of this essay is to describe the operation of resentment a half century later in our time—a time in which racial antagonism has been the host of a parasitic resentment stoked in the media and circulating in popular culture.

**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…(Jack Beatty 1994, p. 70)

Within the past year or so, Time magazine published two articles that together document the contemporary rise of suburban middle class resentment. In these articles, crime and violence are fetishized, transmuted in the language of the
coming invasion of the abstract racial other. Together the articles offer a
dystopic chronology in two installments: In the first phase, indigenous criminal
elements take over the small-town rural suburbs. In the second, nameless third
world infidels housed in the UN make a final conquering manoeuvre to rush
the whole nation, making their first point of attack a leafy Michigan suburb.
In this War of the Worlds, "we" (Sweeney’s suburban militias) have to be
prepared to liberate the nation. According to the first article, "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 quoted and displayed
statistics indicating that crime in the major cities had been declining somewhat
while residents of the suburbs—the place where the middle classes thought they
were safest—were now increasingly engulfed in random violence.

The second article is entitled "Patriot Games." It is about the mushrooming
of heavily armed white militias in training, preparing for the war of wars against
the federal government and nameless invading immigrants and foreign political
forces that the Clinton administration has somehow, unwittingly, encouraged
to think that America is weak and lacking in resolve to police its borders. About
these armed militias we are told:

In dozens of states, loosely organized paramilitary groups composed primarily of white
men are signing up new members, stockpiling weapons and preparing for the worst. The
groups, all privately run, tend to classify themselves as "citizen militias." They are the armed,
militarized edge of a broader group of disgruntled citizenry that go by the label of "patriots."
The members of the larger patriot movement are usually family men and women who feel
strangled by the economy, abandoned by the government and have a distrust for those
in power that goes well beyond that of the typical angry voter. ... Patriots also fear that
foreign powers, working through organizations like the United Nations and treaties like
the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, are eroding the power of America as a
sovereign nation. On a home video promoting patriot ideas, a man who gives his name
only as Mark from Michigan says he fears that America will be subsumed into "one big,
fuzzy, warm planet where nobody has any borders." Samuel Sherwood, head of the United
States Militia Association in Blackfoot, Idaho, tells followers, absurdly, that the Clinton
Administration is planning to import 100,000 Chinese policemen to take guns away from
Americans" (Farley, Time, December 19, 1994, p. 48-9).

What does all of this mean? These articles announce a new mood in political
and social life in the U.S.: a mood articulated in suburban fear of encirclement
by difference, and increasingly formulated in a language and politics of what
James and Nietzsche called "resentment." The dangerous inner city and the
world "outside" are brought into the suburban home through television and
film releasing new energies of desire mixed with fear. As we approach the end
of the century, conflicts in education and popular culture are increasingly
taking the form of grand panethnic battles over language, signs, and the
occupation and territorialization of urban and suburban space. These conflicts
intensify as the dual model of the rich-versus-poor city, splinters into fragmentary communities signified by images of the roaming homeless on network television. For our late twentieth-century Sweeney Erectus, standing on the pyres of resentment in the culturally beleaguered suburbs, the signs and wonders are everywhere in the television evening news. Sweeney’s cultural decline is registered in radically changing technologies and new sensibilities, in spatial and territorial destabilization and re-coordination, in the fear of falling, and in new, evermore incorrigible patterns of segregation and re-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 fortunes of the white middle classes are, in many cases, declining. 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) in the Anti-Aesthetic calls postmodernism’s “other side”—the new centers of the simulation of difference that loop back and forth through the news media to the classroom, from the film culture and popular music to the organization and deployment of affect in urban and suburban communities—Sweeney’s homeground.

THE POLITICS OF AFFECT

The America of the diverging middle class is rapidly developing a new populist anti-politics. (Beatty 1994, p. 70)

You will recall that Fredric Jameson (1984), in his now famous essay “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” maintained that a whole new emotional ground tone separated life in contemporary post-industrial society from previous epochs. He described this ground tone as “the waning of affect,” the loss of feeling. While we agree with Jameson that emotions, like music, art, film, literature and architecture, are historically 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 re-evaluation.

Like James, Nietzsche regarded the deployment of retributive morality as central to the organization and mobilization of power in modern industrial society. He also called this use of retributive morality resentment. In his
Genealogy of Morals (1967), Nietzsche 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 contemporary cultural politics are "virtually defined by bourgeois resentment" (p. 278). As Solomon maintains: "Resentment elaborates an ideology of combative complacency—a 'levelling' effect that declares society to be 'classless' even while maintaining powerful class structures and differences" (p. 278). The middle class declares there are no classes except itself, no ideology except its ideology, no party, no politics, except the politics of the center, the politics of the middle with a vengeance.

A critical feature of discourses of resentment is their dependence on processes of simulation (Baudrillard 1983). 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. Lastly, the inner-city other is known through the very ground of the displaced aggressions projected from suburban moral panic itself: it is held to embody what the center cannot acknowledge as its own (Beatty 1994, Reed 1992). Indeed, a central project of professional middle-class 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 is therefore 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" (p. 279). Sweeney offers his own home-made version of the final solution: take the homeless and the welfare moms off general assistance. Above all, 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 political and cultural life. That is to say, that increasingly the underclass or working-class subject is contemporaneously being placed on the outside of 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 fool's cap; 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 values.

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 (1992) and William Bennett (1994) constantly remind us of their books of values. As Buchanan put it bluntly, sometime ago, “The GOP vote search should bypass the ghetto” (quoted in Omi and Winant 1986, p. 124). From the cultural spiel of the 1992 and 1994 election campaigns—from family values to Murphy Brown, to the new Corporate multicultural advertising—from rap music to the struggle over urban and suburban space—from the Rodney King beating, to Charles Stuart, to Susan Smith, to O.J. Simpson—a turf battle over symbolic and material territory is under way. The politics of resentment is on the way as the suburbs continue to draw resources and moral empathy away from the urban centers.

Of course, a fundamental issue posed by the theories of resentment of James and Nietzsche is the challenge of defining 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). Education is a critical site over which struggles over the organization and concentration of emotional and political investment and moral affiliation are taking place. The battle over signs that is resentment involves the 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, liberal versus conservative, democrat versus republican and so forth, are increasingly being displaced by a more dynamic and destabilizing model of mutation of affiliation and association.

A further dimension of this dynamics is that the central issues that made these binary oppositions 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 period are now, 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 displaced issues concerning equality and social justice. New Right publisher William Rusher articulates this displacement by pointing to a new model of material and ideological distinctions coming into being since the ‘80s:

A new economic division pits the producers—businessmen, manufacturers, hard-hats, blue-collar workers, and farmers [middle America]—against a new and powerful class of non-producers comprised of the liberal verballist elite (the dominant media, the major
foundations and research institutions, the educational establishment, the federal and state bureaucracies) and a semipermanent welfare constituency, all coexisting happily in a state of mutually sustaining symbiosis. (Rusher quoted in Omi and Winant 1986, p. 124)

Let us examine some manifestations of one of the principal articulations of resentment: the discourse of crime, violence and suburban security. In the next section of this essay, we will discuss examples from television evening news, film and popular magazine and newspaper features that show the variability, ambiguity and contradiction in this discourse of conflict. We will see 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 black male directors of the reality of the "hood"... then to the black male 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 3, 1995, 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 text to audience. Its reach is 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 as second nature across the bodies of the inhabitants of the inner city—the black world available to the black director who delivers the black audience to Hollywood. The inner city is thereby reduced to an endless chain of recyclable signifiers that both allure and repel the suburban classes.

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. This 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. In a recent 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 rejection 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." (Wood, August 1993, p. 64)

Here we see the elements of repeatability, the simulation of the familiar, and the prioritization of public common sense that evening television helps to both activate and stabilize. Hollywood drew intertextually on the reality code of television. Television commodified and beautified the images of violence captured on a street-wise camera. Singleton’s claim to authenticity, ironically, relied not on endogenous inner-city perceptions but, exogenously, on the overdetermined mirror of dominant televisual news. *Boyz ‘N the Hood* could safely skim off the images of the inner city corroborated in television common sense. For these Hollywood 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 strenuously will they resist his 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 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 undisputed 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, and so forth, are now supplant by an immigrant and migrant presence in which, in many instances, black people are outnumbered by Latinos and Asian Americans (Davis 1992; Fregoso 1993; Lieberman 1992).

Like the Hollywood film industry, the mainstream news media’s address to black and brown America directs its gaze 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 sensation-cringing evening news programs of the networks—CBS, NBC, and ABC, and CNN—as they pant to keep up with the inflamed journalism of the tabloids—black and Latino youth appear metonymically in the discourse of problems: “kids of violence,” “kids of welfare moms,” “car jacker,” the “kids without fathers,” “kids of illegal aliens,” “kids who don’t speak ‘American.’” The skins of black and brown youth are hunted down like so many furs in the grand old days of the fur trade. The inner city is sold as a 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. The overwhelming metaphor of crime and
violence saturates the dominant gaze on the inner-city. News coverage of the cocaine trade between the U.S. and Columbia routinely suggests that only poor and black inner-city residents use cocaine, not rich suburban whites who are actually the largest consumers of the illegal drug.

The mass media's story of inner-city black and Latino people pays short shrift to the stunning decline of opportunity and social services in the urban centers within the last fifteen years: poor public schools, chronic unemployment, isolation, the hacking to death of the public transportation system, the radical financial disinvestment in the cities, and the flight of jobs and resources to the suburbs. All of these developments can ultimately be linked to government deprioritization of the poor 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 presented by the current new wave black cinema coincide with rather than critique mainstream mass media. Insisting on a kind of documentary accuracy and privileged access to the inner city, these directors construct a reality code of "being there" after the manner of the 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 fabrication and consolidation of specular common sense.

*Menace II Society* (1993), created by Allen and Albert Hughes, is 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. The reality of the hood is built on a trestle of obviousnesses. Its central character, Caine Lawson (Tyrin Turner), is doomed to the life of drug running, car stealing, and meaningless violence that claims 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, and gangbangers demand and enforce respect at the point of a 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 stand-off when the store owner hovers too close to them. The young men feel insulted because the Korean grocer makes it too obvious that he views them with suspicion. In the blink of an eye, O-Dog settles the score with a bout of unforgettable violence. When Caine and O-Dog leave, the store owner and his wife are dead. And the act of violence simply precipitates another: by the
end of the film, Caine too dies in a hail of bullets—a payback by the gang of a young man that Caine had beaten up mercilessly earlier in the film.

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. Shot sequences are dominated by long takes of beatings or shootings, almost always shot in extreme close-ups. 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 film-makers therefore become pseudo-normative hards to a mass audience, who, like the Greek chorus, already knows the refrain. These are not problem-solving films. They are films of confirmation. The reality code, the code of the 'hood, the code of blackness, of Africanness, of hardness, has a normative social basis. It combines and recombines with suburban middle-class discourses such as the deficit and balancing the federal budget; taxes; overbearing, overreaching, squandering government programs; welfare and quota queens; and the need for more prisons. It is a code drenched 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 other sites such as a university town: Higher Learning is Boys 'N 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 violence. Lee obliged with a vengeance in Jungle Fever in the harrowing scenes of the drug addict Vivian (Halle Berry) shooting it up at the "Taj Mahal" crack joint and the Good Doctor Reverend Purify (Ossie Davis) pumping a bullet into his son (Samuel Jackson) at point-blank range (Kroll 1991).

By the time we get around to white-produced films like Grand Canyon (1991) or Falling Down (1993), the discourse of crime, violence and suburban security has come full circle to justify suburban revenge and resentment. In Falling Down, directed by Joel Schumaker, we now have a white suburban male victim who enters the hood to settle moral scores. 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 he is concerned—along, of course, with his ex-wife who won't let him see his infant daughter. D-fens is the prosecuting agent of resentment. His reality code embraces Latinos, who are supposedly all gangbangers, and Asian store owners, who are portrayed as compulsively unscrupulous. In a bizarre 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 world of the films of black realism. However, ironically, blacks are for the most part mysteriously absent from this Los
Angeles (Douglas apparently, feels more confident beating up other racial groups). On this matter of the representation of the "real" inner-city the question is, as Aretha Franklin puts it, "Who's zooming who?"

What is fascinating about a film like Falling Down is that it too is centered around a kind of hyper-normative, anomic individual, who is "out there." He is the purveyor of what Jacques Lacan calls "paranoiac alienation" (Lacan 1977, p. 5). Singlehandedly armed with more socio-normative fire-power than any gangbanger could ever muster, D-fens is ready to explode as everyday provocations make him seethe to the boiling point. We learn for instance that he is a disgruntled laid-off white-collar employee—a former technician who worked for many years at a military plant. Displaced as a result of the changing economy in the new world order—displaced by the proliferation of different peoples who are now flooding Los Angeles in pursuit of the increasingly elusive American dream—D-fens is part of the growing anxiety class that blames government, immigrants and welfare moms for its problems. He is the kind of individual we are encouraged to believe a displaced middle-class person might become. As Joel Schumaker, 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 kind of Rambo nerd, a Perot disciple gone berserk. Newsweek magazine, that preternatural barometer of suburban intelligence, tells us that D-fens is the agent of suburban resentment. D-fens's actions while not always defensible are "understandable":

Falling Down, whether it's really a message movie or just a cop film with trendy trappings, 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 that 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 anticipated 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 type of social subject. Unlike the neo-Nazi, D-fens reacts to the injustices he perceives have been perpetrated against him. Like his alter ego Tom Sanders, in Disclosures (1995), he is the post-civil-rights scourge of affirmative action and reverse discrimination.
With *Falling Down*, Hollywood places 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 *Menace II Society* and many other black new wave films share with *Falling Down* are a general subordination of the interests and desires of women and a pervasive sense that life in the urban centers is self-made hell. Resentment has now traveled the whole way along a fully reversible signifying chain as black film-makers 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 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—hyperreal carcasses on arbitrary display.

**RESENTMENT EFFECTS**

Inner-city black and brown youth are surrounded by this powerful discourse of crime and violence that constructs them as other. Grappling with the reality code projected from the popular media culture, they experience it as a problem of representation. Their experience of the reality code is grounded in material practices. Unlike the cause-and-effect theories of the film culture, police harassment reported by high school students in the Los Angeles school system seems random and vicious.

A good example of the material consequences and challenges of representation 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 Los Angeles Public School system has its own police force. The following excerpt taken from an ethnographic study that Cameron McCarthy conducted in this inner high school gives a sense of the students’ experiences 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. This research was conducted in the summer of 1996. It involved an evaluation of Teach For America’s Summer Institute preservice teacher internship program for its “corps members.” Teach for America is the much talked about voluntaristic youth organization that has sought to “rescue” the inner-city school child by recruiting the best and the brightest graduates from elite universities to teach in the urban setting.

We report on a class that was taught by a Teach For America student-teacher intern, Christopher Morrison. Christopher is a white male. He 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's cooperating teacher was a black female, Ruby Marshall. She was in her sixties, anticipating retirement. Of the 17 students that were in Christopher's classroom, 15 were African American and 2 were Latino. One day this classroom was taken over by accounts of police violence. Christopher had introduced the topic of police harassment based on some queries made by one of his students, Rinaldo, the previous day. But in the torrent of accounts offered by students, Christopher lost control of his class. So, too, did the cooperating teacher, Ruby Marshall. In effect the classroom had become 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 cops and searched for a gun. But in his words "the cops had no probable reason." Another reported that he was arbitrarily beaten up, in his view, for walking on the wrong street at the wrong time of night. One girl in the class told of how she knew of friends whose houses, she said, "was bust into." Many of them talked of intimidating stares and glares and threatening behavior on the part of the police.

In this Los Angeles high school classroom, the topic of some kids' problematic relationship to the law opened up deep wounds of adolescent insecurity and identity crisis. Students were looking for solutions to problems about self-representation from teachers who 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. The responses of the adults, Christopher Morrison and Ruby Marshall, were steeped in the common sense of the reality code—the code of mimesis; the code of resentment. Here are some of 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.... 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.

Here, Ruby was encouraging her students to see themselves from the outside. She was insisting that the students identify with the code of resentment that denies the reality of their experiences. But the students would have none of it. Rinaldo, the student whose queries lead to the torrent of testimony on police
harassment, underscored the incredulity with which he and his peers responded to Ruby's remarks: "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 Morris, 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, Christopher, like Sam Spade, pointed them in the direction of the reality code where actions had real consequences; wrong was repaid by retributive sanctions, and personal errors of judgement—associating with the wrong crowd, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time—were actions that one had to accept responsibility for. 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 Christopher and his black students on the topic of the aggressive actions of the police: "Let me tell you a story about myself. 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," Christopher 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 into 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 sweat me." Christopher 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. They 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 racial meanings 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 borderline between the suburbs and the traumatized inner city is drawn in the public schools like Liberty High. And teachers like Ruby Marshall and Christopher Morrison stand guard on the frontlines—agents of resentment guarding the border zone erected around suburban interests.

CONCLUSION

There is a country-western song popular, we are told, among the rural suburban dwellers of the Southwest. Its refrain is an urgent plea to God to keep the penitent middle American on the straight and narrow. "Drop kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life," the song goes. Here, the importunate penitent draws down lines of social location in an edict of moral specificity and separateness from the contagion of all that dwells outside the security of the home and the neighborhood. The fictive goal posts morally keep the unwanted out. The trope of resentment exists in the empty space of the center, between the homoerotic legs of the goal posts, so to speak.

In many respects, then, the resentment discourse of crime, violence and suburban security that now saturates American popular cultural forms, such as the country-western song quoted above, indicates the inflated presence of suburban priorities and anxieties in the popular imagination and in political life. It also indicates a corresponding circumscription of the 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 the dwellers in America's urban centers 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 the suburban middle classes. Those who articulate the anxieties repressed in and by their own privileged access to society's cornucopia of rewards—dwellers of the suburban city and the parvenu masters of the fictive hyperrealisms of the hood—bear some responsibility to the urban city which their practices of cultural production and over-consumption both create and displace. In these matters, to use the language of the Guyanese poet, Martin Carter, "All of us are involved, all of us are consumed" (1979, p. 44).
REFERENCES
