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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 preexisting, self-constituting technologies that then exert effects on an undifferentiated mass public (Parenti, 1992; Postman, 1986). This chapter counters that tendency. 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 harbingers of neoevolutionary development, progress, and modernity in an erstwhile unstable and unreliable world.

Suburban dweller here refers to all those agents traveling 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 traveled away from perdition. Televisual and filmic fantasies would also underscore the extent to which the inner-city 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 chapter 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.

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 channeling of suburban anxieties and retributive morality onto its central target: the depressed inner city. These developments deeply inform race relations in late-twentieth-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 antifeminist, protoresentment 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 *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).

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 articulated an authoritarian populism: the mutant, acerbic, 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 antihealth 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) called "non-chalant 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 wrongdoers 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 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.

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 meltdown 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 reevaluation, 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.

In the late twentieth century, Sam Spade was 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 world in the late forties (Bhabha, 1994). The aim of this chapter 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. 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 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.” . . . 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, pp. 48–49)

What does all of this mean? These articles announce a new mood in political and social life in the United States: 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 enter a new 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 recomposition, in the fear of falling, and in new and evermore incorrigible patterns of segregation and resegregation (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 postindustrial 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 rela-
tions—of the manipulation of difference—is marked by a powerful concentration of affect, or the strategic use of emotion and moral reevaluation.

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 is "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. Last, 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). Moreover, 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 homemade 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 such as Patrick Buchanan (1992) and William Bennett (1994) constantly remind us of their books of values. As Buchanan put it bluntly, some time ago, “The GOP vote search should bypass the ghetto” (quoted in Omi & 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 dynamic 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 postcivil 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 1980s:
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 verbalist elite (the dominant media, the major foundations and research institutions, the educational establishment, the federal and state bureaucracies) and a semi-permanent welfare constituency, all coexisting happily in a state of mutually sustaining symbiosis. (Rusher quoted in Omi & 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 chapter, 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.”

"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 text to audience. Its reach is more diffuse, more rhizomatic, deeply intertextual. Resentment processes work from white to black and back 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 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." (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 Beverley 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, etc., are now supplanted by an immigrant and migrant presence in which, in many instances, black people are outnumbered by Latinos and Asian Americans (Davis, 1992; Fregosi, 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-dripping evening news programs of the networks—CBS, NBC, 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 jackers,” 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 United States 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 usurped 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 of black cinema corroborate 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 consolication 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 (Tyin 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 one 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 filmmakers therefore become pseudonormative bards 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 such as 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 Boyz '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 such as 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 as he is concerned, along, of course, with his exwife, who will not 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 on 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 such as Falling Down is that it too is centered around a kind of hypernormative, anomic individual, who is “out there.” He is the purveyor of what Jacques Lacan calls “paranoiac alienation” (1977, p. 5). Single-handedly 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 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 Angelinos. 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 Disclosure (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 preexistentialist—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 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 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.

**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 anc 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 overconsumption 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).
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