

“Mama How Come Black Men Don’t Get to
Be Heroes?”: Black Poets and the Movies
Laurence Goldstein

INVITATION TO A GUNFIGHTER

you rode into town on a mighty tall horse, Durango
and now it’s time for that last showdown

and the townspeople who sired you
have all turned against you
in their arrogance ignorance and fear
and the subject of your love
is as fickle as the wind

and you’re punch-drunk as a skunk in a trunk
looting and shooting for pleasure—tearing up
their peace of mind

and they’re all too scared to take you on—
the gutless lot of ’em

and you’re too bitter and fed up with the bad hand
fate has dealt you in the form of black skin
and deadly aim

it’s time to get out of town, Durango
time to get the first thang smokin’
go on and get on
to whatevah is waitin’ in that wild way out yonder

time to take that long slow technicolor ride

before they ambush you in the saddle
and leave you face up in the sun

Wanda Coleman
African Sleeping Sickness (1990)

Born in 1943, I am probably typical of most white males of my generation in my addiction as a child to western movies. A small number of these I saw in theaters, especially at matinees where serials like *The Durango Kid* and a B feature starring Hopalong Cassidy or John Wayne were Saturday afternoon staples. But I viewed the majority of westerns on television, developing a special fondness for Ray (“Crash”) Corrigan, Bob Steele, and Hoot Gibson. Armed with my white Hoppy holster and gun, I would join friends after school and on summer days for mimed shootouts with the bad guys, picking them off where they hid in trees—these were usually Indians—or in *High Noon*-style duels where the man in black leaped out from behind hedges or advanced toward me from the other end of the street.

Stories about the wild west appealed to me for the same reasons they attracted city kids in the nineteenth century: they provided a heroic model of masculine risk-taking and character-building in a native landscape. There were plenty of cowboys, cattle, and cattle rustlers in Southern California and stations east during the late 1940s and 1950s, so that the fantasy of actually running off to join the Three Mesquiteers had an invigorating touch of possibility. I practiced the terse, tough-guy linguistic style of cowboys just in case I ever got the opportunity to mount some spotless white horse and ride out against the “hostiles” in what was even then called the “inland empire” of California. And unquestionably the scenarios of physical struggle appealed to me and my friends, all of us athletic but never the kind to engage in brawling. “The staging and viewing of violent spectacles are among the genre’s prime attractions,” writes Philip French, who sees “the murderous algebra of the Western” as its defining artistic form.

For this reason, many film critics have argued that the western thrived in the 1940s and 1950s because its narrative situations recalled and simulated the World War of recent memory, as well as the Cold War that pitted good against evil with the same simplistic archetypes. Probably I knew this intuitively as a child, if only because some actors, like John Wayne, Alan Ladd, Robert Taylor, and Ronald Reagan moved between westerns and war movies as virtually the same character; and because the Russians and

Red Chinese I was taught to hate and fear were so abstract to my imagination that any villain on the screen could be accommodated to the threatening alien figure constructed by years of newspaper and magazine copy. It seems likely that my fantasies of holding off hordes of Indians from fort or village had something to do with the drills in grammar school where I was trained to hide under the seat in case of nuclear attack, or the trauma of seeing movies like *Invasion U.S.A.* in which marauding hordes of Communists raped and murdered innocent Americans on the west coast. Having assumed the habit of decoding and fantasy substitution, I was well on my way to Indian-hating as a rite of citizenship. But one day I asked my parents about the occasional cross-burning in the Baldwin Hills above my home in Culver City, and when I learned that I, as a Jew, was a despised alien in so many other people's fantasies, my devotion to the western genre began to wane.

It never occurred to me then to wonder how present-day Native Americans might feel about films in which General Sheridan's famous remark that "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" informs the scenario. There *were* good Indians in the movies: loyal scouts and sidekicks, peace-loving tribes that let the settlers share, or take over, their land. And after the groundbreaking *Broken Arrow* (1950), an occasional film of overt sympathy with the Indians' situation appeared, culminating in the Academy Award-winning *Dances with Wolves* in 1990. But the majority of westerns before the 1960s made the Red Man into a menacing figure, the scourge of innocent settlers, whose savagery justified the white man's vindictive violence inflicted upon the tribes. Such a morality play must have forged an oppositional stance among Native American spectators at an early age, as they watched all the horrors enacted upon them in their history endorsed by the melodramatic rhetoric of the western movie.

Louise Erdrich, a poet of Chippewa descent, recalls in her poem "Dear John Wayne" how in North Dakota she and her teenage friends would watch westerns at a drive-in, where the domineering technology that brings John Wayne's face into focus above them symbolizes the immense power of the civilization the white settlers brought into the prairies:

The sky fills, acres of blue squint and eye
that the crowd cheers. His face moves over us,
a thick cloud of vengeance, pitted

like the land that was once flesh. Each rut,
each scar makes a promise: *It is
not over, this fight, not as long as you resist.*

*Everything we see belongs to us.*¹

The actor's smile shows them "a horizon of teeth." His colossal presence confines them to a small reservation, a low ceiling of opportunity, a sense of the futility of resistance. The phrase "His face moves over us," adapted from the opening of Genesis, suggests a godlike figure of vengeance and wrath, punishing the infidels by firepower and by denial of the blessings needed for redemption in his new Zion. He has taken from them not only their land but their self-respect, their humanity. When the group of kids drives away, drunk and noisy, she can hear his monitory voice in her head, recording their feckless behavior as a rationale for further punishment. Referring to Wayne's death by cancer in the final lines, she remarks mordantly, "Even his disease was the idea of taking everything. / Those cells, burning, doubling, splitting out of their skins." Erdrich's Dear John letter is not an elegy for the movie star in the manner of Frank O'Hara on James Dean or so many poets on Marilyn Monroe, an expression of homage and affection, but an anti-elegy, a bitter commentary from the victim's-eye view of the movie mythology that continued to oppress Native Americans long after the white settlers had dispossessed them of their heritage.

In her prose poem "Angel Baby Blues," Wanda Coleman recalls a childhood spent "hating John Wayne rooting for the chinks Japs Apaches cannibals. . ." Hating John Wayne became something of a national pastime during the 1960s when the Vietnam war and the civil rights movement initiated a revision of national mythology among the generation raised on westerns. Indeed, westerns virtually disappeared after the mid-1970s, and one reason is that they could not respond to the child's question posed in Coleman's blues lament: "mama how come black men don't get to be heroes. . .and where are the heroines who look like me?" In actual fact, some twenty-five percent of working cowboys on the frontier were black, as William Loren Katz has documented in *The Black West*. And after the 1960s there were a few "soul westerns" featuring black gunfighters, such as *Soul Soldiers* (1970), *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), *Charley One-Eye* (1972), and *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972). But something about the genre

militated against switching the categories of black and white. Reform-minded filmmakers found it easier to move the formulas of westerns into the urban space, where macho black heroes could achieve more credible triumphs, or into outer space where the good alien had always been a consolatory scifi convention.

Coleman's poem "Invitation to a Gunfighter," written in the 1980s, captures a complex period in American culture because it is informed by the assumptions of the classic western *and* by the countercultural response of the 1960s when African Americans picked up the gun in an effort to write themselves into the A budget scenario of modern American history, *and* by the aftermath when Black Power subsided under the dual pressures of liberal reform and conservative backlash. The sarcastic wit, supposedly directed at the hapless gunfighter, assaults the reader as well, especially the white reader, who recognizes that he or she is one of the "gutless" townspeople in need of a white knight, or the Duke, to drive this historical menace out of sight and out of mind.

Who is this gunfighter? The first thing to say is that he is someone with black skin who is uppity enough to take the mythology of the western movies seriously. This native son has the name Durango, derived from westerns where heroes and villains alike are commonly named for western places. Usually the name "Kid" is preceded by the place name, as for example, Idaho, Oklahoma, Mojave, Pecos, San Antonio, Silver City, El Paso, Michigan, and dozens more in the pantheon. Here the western genre gives Coleman the opening she needs for her social fable. The gunfighter in most western movies is a nomad known only by his name, an outcast, a loner who can't settle down and become part of the domestic tranquility of the community. The sign of his ambiguous relationship with the townspeople is his gun, which he uses either to defend the town from its enemies of whatever color, or to threaten the town with depredations until a rival gunfighter challenges and defeats him. Anti-social impulses link the hero and the villain. The sheriff is sometimes an ex-outlaw, the outlaw is sometimes an ex-lawman. The rhetorical action of the film is often a wooing of one side by the other, as the costs and benefits of defending or preying upon the community are calculated. In the precise synecdoche of common idiom, the person becomes "a hired gun," whether deputy or outlaw. His identity is fixed by whom he kills, but also by the authority that conscripts him.

In their standard history of the genre, George N. Fenin and William K. Everson remark that "In 1940 the tendency to glamorize outlaws began in earnest, most notably in Henry King's *Jesse James*." As with gangster movies, whenever an outlaw is humanized or glamorized, the audience is invited to recognize the excluded or alienated figure as legitimately "American." That is, the outlaw is conceived as a sign of the essential national character. In this reading, the American as historical type was self-created by the subversive act of revolution against the parent authority of England during the late eighteenth century, and grew to adulthood by pushing across boundaries in the westward movement that settled the continent. At each stage of development violence initiated and resolved the new definition of the individual in a society whose laws could only be provisional stays against the self-interested claims of an imperial consciousness. The Civil War is often used in westerns as a trope of the political and moral chaos that empowers its embittered veterans for a life of semi-justified aggression against corrupt communities, banks, railroads, and the law itself. Emerson's and Thoreau's essays became the canonical authority for the continuing assault of Americans upon the idea of authority. "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist," Emerson wrote in "Self-Reliance." "He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world." Much of the American literary tradition, as critics have repeatedly demonstrated, proceeds from this endowment of legitimacy upon the individual's stance of resistance to the ideal of social solidarity.

If the outlaw can be considered the essence of the American type, then African Americans have a good claim to be the essential Americans. Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and a pervasive stereotyping in every medium of social discourse made the point a million times over that the Negro was an embarrassment and a danger to the social elements conformed against whoever was "diff'rent." Richard Wright had argued that the black man is America's metaphor long before the idea became popularized in the postwar period, when Ralph Ellison, for example, could claim that "In a sense, the Negro was the gauge of the human condition as it waxed and waned in our democracy."² Radical writers of the 1960s and 1970s asserted that establishment white society in the United States had become as foreign to the

American spirit as the English colonial governors, and that a second revolution in the name of Black Power was necessary to reclaim the native character and redeem the American Zion.

Black poets often had reference to white popular culture in order to illustrate how such a reclamation could take place. These authors did not have to read Gramsci or the Frankfurt School to recognize that radio, films, journalism, and television constituted an ideological hegemony that had shaped or colonized the political consciousness of the American public, including blacks. Hating John Wayne became the paradigm for such resistance to role modeling for citizenship. Don L. Lee wrote to his black readers, “. . . if all you are exposed to is Charlie Chan, you’ll have a Charlie Chan mentality. A better example is Tarzan. Remember Tarzan grew out of one man’s imagination, but because of pervading anti-black conditions, he immediately became a nation’s consciousness. What Tarzan did was not only to turn us away from Africa, but from ourselves.” Lee’s poetry demands that readers stop thinking of “Tony Curtis, Twiggy” as “cool,” stop getting their ideas of themselves from the black characters in TV shows like “Julia” and “The Mod Squad,” and especially, as in his poem “Wake Up Niggers (you ain’t part Indian),” to stop emulating Tonto, the white hero’s loyal sidekick. Similarly, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones in his playlet *Jello*, shows a subversive Rochester murdering Jack Benny, and usurping his custodial power. Gwendolyn Brooks addresses a poem “To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals” and praises them in this way:

You never worshipped Marilyn Monroe.
You say: Farrah’s hair is hers.
You have not wanted to be white.

Wanting to be a white woman is the charge Welton Smith lodged in a poem of the ’60s against black women *and* black men too brainwashed to join the war of liberation: “you want to be lois lane, audrey hepburn, ma perkins, lana turner, jean harlow, kim stanley, may [*sic*] west, marilyn monroe, sophie tucker, betty crocker, tallulah bankhead, judy canova, shirley temple, and trigger.” Such accusations could be cited indefinitely, and testify to the conviction among those who felt colonized that if an African-American nation were ever to be created from the ruins of white civilization—and some advocates conceived of a separate and sovereign

territory carved out of the western states—black people needed to reject white media icons in favor of black ones.

Withdrawal from white paradigms means that blacks should construct for themselves alternative narrative structures germane to their own ethnic identity. When Ishmael Reed proclaims in a widely-anthologized poem, “I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra,” he is imagining an Afrocentric character for himself that both exploits and ironizes the conventional myths of the West and the western:

I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra,
sidewinders in the saloons of fools
bit my forehead like O
the untrustworthiness of Egyptologists
who do not know their trips. Who was that
dog-faced man? they asked, the day I rode
from town.

The last sentence refers to the closing speech of every Lone Ranger episode (“Who was that masked man?”), as the savior of the community rides into the countryside with his trusty sidekick. During the '60s black poets conspired to reverse the roles of The Lone Ranger and Tonto, giving supreme power to the man of color so long subordinated by a white master. Reed plots an insurrection in which he rides into town, a mysterious stranger, with an Afrocentric cultural identity powerful enough to hijack the stage of Western civilization, and dispossess it of its confident mythology. The western movie gives this desperado-poet the opening he needs to insert himself into white fantasy worlds in the subversive role prepared for him by so many narratives of young guns breaking the peace.

Wanda Coleman’s persona non grata of the black gunfighter is a means of measuring her own distance from a society seemingly immune to the rhetoric of civil rights. For her, too, the wild west is the West, including the segregated domains of socioeconomic power in the author’s own personal experience. Horse operas enable her to make signifyin’ fun of her situation using the genre’s own terms and tropes. In “Job Hunter,” the western movie imagery is displaced to the westernmost American city. The speaker as “outlaw” has been prowling Los Angeles, willing to test her hard-won

business skills against the white establishment. The poem marches toward its seriocomic denouement:

it's high noon
the sheriff is an IBM executive
it shoots 120 words per secretary
i reach for the white-out
it's too fast for me
i'm blown to blazes

it's the new west, Durango
the sun never sets
and death is an elevator on its way
down to the lobby

As in “Invitation to a Gunfighter,” this poem uses western movies to situate the speaker credibly within the dreary social dynamics familiar to a black person. Coleman imagines herself as the only kind of gunfighter she can be in the “badlands” of the corporate society: a job hunter not a bounty hunter, a supplicant whose mere presence at an interview triggers a nervous shootout in which her ambition to integrate causes her to be “whited-out,” that is, her name removed from the job application files. Presumably the white audience cheers, and the black audience grudgingly acknowledges the inevitable victory of the “dough-flesh / desk-riders” who have the power to “fire” whomever and whenever they wish.

Coleman is a free-spirited resident of Watts, a fiction writer as well as a poet, and the winner of an Emmy award in 1976 for her scripts for “Days of Our Lives.” When she wishes to characterize the “new west,” she often uses Hollywood as a metaphor for the white power structure she knows at firsthand. “Hollywood” is sometimes the movie-making capital, as in the poem “Casting Call,” in which Coleman as aspiring actress is looked over by the camera crew and the unemployment office and pronounced ill-equipped for success. “[W]e don't do black on black” she is told emphatically. In her poem “Trying to Get In,” Coleman writes, “i stand at the door of hollywood. beat at it.” In other poems “Hollywood” is the site of elite privilege of any kind—the academy, the social circles of Beverly Hills and BelAir, and the literary citadel which she can never storm. Instead, she

nurses her 4,500 rejection slips, wondering when she will be admitted to the tonier parts of the city. In poems like “On Heaven Street at One A.M.,” “Hollywood Zen,” “The Co-Star,” and “Sessions” Coleman depicts one-on-one showdowns in the movie capital that show just how much self-reliance is necessary to land a role in movie-made America. The “death” she suffers at the end of “Job Hunter” may be a somewhat exaggerated way of figuring each rejection, but as the closure of every western movie, the experience of being shot down figures accurately the emotional feel of her encounters with the sheriffs of the new west.

The “Durango” of “Invitation to a Gunfighter” is more threatening than the “Durango” of “Job Hunter,” however, even though they are clearly related as outlaws in their respective frontiers. This “Durango” comes from the Black Power struggles of the 1960s and early 1970s; he’s an amalgam of the names collected by Gwendolyn Brooks in her poem on the Blackstone Rangers: “King, / Black Jesus, Stokely, Malcolm X, or Rap.” One might add other names: the Eldridge Cleaver of *Soul on Ice*, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Bobby Hutton, George Jackson. It’s crucial to remember that the black poets of the 1960s and early 1970s deliberately and persistently honored the gunfighter, or more generally, the rebel, with poems of homage. As the 1960s progressed, the violent deaths of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, not to mention many blacks in the South, including children, made the nation look like a moral wilderness surpassing even the imagination of the western. As the uprisings in Watts, Detroit, Newark, Attica, and elsewhere intensified the sense of slave rebellion among the disaffected and desperate of the black community, poets turned to the tradition of regeneration through violence in American culture. Nikki Giovanni’s mantra is the most famous of the decade:

Nigger
Can you kill
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill a honkie
Can a nigger kill the Man
Can you kill nigger
Huh? nigger can you
kill

*

We ain't got to prove we can die
We got to prove we can kill

Sonia Sanchez expresses the same sentiment:

we got some BAADD
thots and actions
like off those white mothafuckers
and rip it off if it ain't nailed
down and surround those wite/
knee / grow pigs & don't let them
live to come back again into
our neighborhoods . . .

By performance poems such as these, with their percussive sound effects and street epithets, black poets constructed the figure of Durango, “too bitter and fed up with the bad hand / fate has dealt you in the form of black skin / and deadly aim.” By “looting and shooting for pleasure” Durango revenged himself in the manner the black poets advised, making himself into the Terror represented in western movies as marauding Indians or outlaw gangs.

Indeed, in his poem “Black Art” Amiri Baraka called for a poetry as violent as the fists and guns used on blacks by whites: “We want ‘poems that kill.’ / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / guns.” Any other kind of poem is “bullshit,” he says, fit only for “mulatto bitches / whose brains are red jelly stuck / between 'lizabeth taylor's toes.”³ Elizabeth Taylor may seem an unlikely antagonist to place among the venal cops, landlords, and politicians who populate the poem's urban landscape, but Baraka recognizes that white models of glamour constitute the ultimate oppressors in a media culture. His claim to carry forward the work of emancipation depends on his ability to shape a poetry of violence that will extirpate from the brains of black people the seductive images of movie stars. Directing attention away from the blandishments of Hollywood and toward black artists—preeminently jazz artists—is not just a matter of taste but a primary act of slave rebellion for his generation.

The genealogy of the rebel figure in black literature is very complex. Scholars have usefully traced it back to the escaped renegade of nineteenth-century slave narratives, of which Frederick Douglass's autobiographies

provide the most comprehensive model, as well as historical agents of violence like Nat Turner and Cinquez of the slave ship *Amistad*. But just as narratives about slave rebellion justify their claims to be essentially American by their kinship with Emersonian ideas of extralegality and self-reliance, so the “Heroism in the New Black Poetry,” to use D. H. Melhem’s phrase, derives inevitably from spectacles of heroism in the dominant culture, including the movies. Amiri Baraka remarks in an interview in Melhem’s book, “I’ve been influenced by all the moviemakers that I’ve seen. I’m a moviegoer. I’ve always been a moviegoer. It always insults me when people try to say that movies are some kind of inferior art form. I can never understand that. That always seems to me the most bizarre thing in the world to say.” As moviegoers, the poets who construed the Black Panthers or figures like Malcolm X as heroes naturally made use of movie formulas, and especially the violence and melodrama of the western, to glamorize their outlaws. Larry Neal’s poem on Malcolm X, for example, describes his Michigan Kid traveling east rather than west in order to fulfill his destiny.

Out of the Midwestern bleakness, I sprang, pushed eastward,
past shack on country nigger shack, across the wilderness
of North America.
I hustler. I pimp. I unfulfilled black man
bursting with destiny.
New York City Slim called me Big Red,
and there was no escape, close nights of the smell of death.
Pimp. Hustler. The day fills these rooms.
I’m talking about New York. Harlem.

Robert Hayden describes the same existential, self-created figure in “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.” Hayden’s Malcolm X takes to the road—“he fled his name, became the quarry of / his own obsessed pursuit”—and finally adopts the Muslim name that titles the poem, only to be shot down by assassins who have been the implied shadows of violence from the leader’s own origins. Leaders like Malcolm X are more than political agents; they are self-willed seekers of a name and an archetypal identity that transcends temporal issues. Hayden compares Malcolm X to Captain Ahab, whose quest is to “strike through the mask” and lay bare the fundamental reality

of human experience. Like the films that create characters bigger than life, as indicated by their capitalized code-names—The Virginian, The Gunfighter, The Plainsman, The Westerner—such Black Power figures emerge from the poetry of their admiring bards as archetypes of resistance, revolutionary leaders available to every generation.

Hollywood was unwilling to glamorize anything more than the “pimp . . . hustler” part of the exemplary history of up-from-the-depths figures like Malcolm X. A version of the black experience became available in films like *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*—with its final message printed on the screen, “A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES”—or *Shaft* or *Superfly* or *Slaughter* or *The Mack* or *Hammer*. The title figures of these blaxploitation pics are examples of the racial type identified by Donald Bogle as the stereotypical “buck” or “hardman” going all the way back to the rapacious Gus in *Birth of a Nation*, “looting and shooting for pleasure.” Bogle calls such films of macho black aggressiveness “daydreams of triumph” that mirror the conventions of white melodramas like the western in which the “hostiles” are beaten down by white authority. But just as the daydreams of triumph inscribed in the poems of Gwendolyn Brooks, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Don L. Lee, Nikki Giovanni, Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka and others yielded to more moderate statements, or were pushed in the late 1970s and 1980s to the margin of public attention, so these films metamorphosed into the feel-good ironics of Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor vehicles. Bogle remarks that “The great subconscious goal of the 1980s may often have been to rid American films of the late 1960s/early 1970s rebellious figures. In actuality, the movies wanted audiences to believe that such figures no longer existed, or, if they did, they could really be tamed, disposed of, or absorbed into the system.”

Thus, the advice given to the gunslinger in Coleman’s poem is unequivocal: get lost. “It’s time to get out of town,” she says, and the repetition of “time” sounds the knell twice afterward for this enemy of the people. Coleman’s admonition is after-the-fact advice, for by the time she writes the poem the doomed gunfighter had already become a subject for belated elegy. Malcolm X and Huey Newton were actually slain, not by Mister Charlie but by “the townspeople who sired you,” and other Black Power figures did “take that long slow technicolor ride” out of public consciousness into the anonymity of the “wild way out yonder” beyond the media’s

selective gaze. The poem bids farewell at once to the weapon-wielding activist and to the poets who believed art should be a weapon trained upon a culpable white community. “Durango” is now a spectacle to be recalled, by the townspeople who read the poem, with a shudder, a whisper of “good riddance,” and the kind of nostalgia that allows desperadoes a certain glamour in retrospect. As irony and nostalgia usurp the bardic tributes of former days, history becomes legend; Spike Lee produces a life of the fallen Malcolm, who safely terrorizes the establishment in some Dodge City of the historical imagination preserved by set decorators and costume designers. Meanwhile, the surviving Black Power spokesmen wander the hinterlands of the public imagination, like aged gunfighters in the movies, where journalists, and even poets, can gain some repute by taking a remorseful shot at them.

Robert Hayden (born 1913) told me that one of his earliest memories was of the turmoil caused in his mixed-race Detroit neighborhood by showings of *Birth of a Nation*. He recalled the fear in the household as whites stirred up by the heroics of the Ku Klux Klan in Griffith’s film ran shouting through the streets, breaking windows and setting fires. One film he spoke lovingly about, however, was Lon Chaney’s silent version of *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925). Hayden savored the disguise and unmasking of the hideous Erik, the scenes under the Opera, the final pursuit of the phantom by an enraged mob that flings him into the Seine—and most of all Hayden thrilled at fifty years distance to the Technicolor scene of Erik costumed as Red Death. Hayden would rise and imitate the daunting looks and dashing gestures of the Opera’s spectre as he descended the staircase, appalling the Paris beau monde. It does not take Sigmund Freud to see that Hayden read the film as a parable of his own status, a talented outcast in a civilization that feared his colored presence. Erik could have no public role except as a spook, a haunt, a disturbing shadow that must be extirpated by violence when and if it rose from the depths to threaten the higher culture.

Characteristically, Hayden did not approach these or other movies in a polemical way in his poetry. Rather, “Double Feature” is one of many nostalgic genre pieces devoted to the Paradise Valley neighborhood of Detroit where he spent his childhood.

At Dunbar, Castle or Arcade
we rode with the exotic sheik
through deserts of erotic flowers;
held in the siren madonna's arms
were safe from the bill-collector's power.

Forgave the rats and roaches we
could not defeat, beguiled by jazzbo
strutting of a mouse. And when
the Swell Guy, roused to noblest wrath
shot down all those weakéd men,

Oh how we cheered to see the good we were
destroy the bad we'd never be.
What mattered then the false, the true
at Dunbar, Castle or Arcade,
where we were other for an hour or two?

There is no way of telling from this full-throated poem that the author is black, though when one knows his color the last line is especially poignant. Movies allowed Hayden to cross the color line, inhabiting the blessed position of the "other" for a short period, the "Swell Guy" like William S. Hart or Tom Mix who defended a fragile civilization from its discontents, before returning not only to the bill collector but to the cultural situation that stigmatized people of color as "bad" not "good." (For example, the "exotic sheik" portrayed by Rudolph Valentino is treated as a fearsome seducer, and his passion for Agnes Ayres as just short of bestial, until it is revealed in the last scene that he is not an Arab but the son of an English nobleman and a Spanish lady.) Hayden uses the movies here as a means of registering his willingness to forgive. His gratitude for the pleasure of the movies has the effect of repressing rebellious feelings of the kind he will attribute in other poems to Nat Turner, Cinquez, Harriet Tubman, and the martyrs of the 1960s' "mourning time." The poem implies that the movies had helped to make him into a "good" man by providing him with a bracing, if often "false" morality play.

"Double Feature," a late poem in Hayden's oeuvre, postdates his meditations on the 1960s; like other works from his last book, *American*

Journal, it seeks to evoke a means of healing the wounds opened in the national psyche by a decade of racial violence. Hayden's palliative—one could not call it a solution—is the romantic-nostalgic strategy of privileging the uncritical eye of childhood as a model for pluralist tolerance in a society undergoing radical change. The faith in high art as a redemptive force exhibited in Hayden's poems extends to popular culture in "Double Feature." Movies are not "poison light," as Ishmael Reed calls them, but a vital restorative in effecting a joyful and justice-seeking body politic. Hayden's commitment to a color-blind or universalist aesthetic made him vulnerable to criticism by many contemporaries less forgiving of Hollywood. James Baldwin, for example, incorporates the sentiments of "Double Feature" into his early fiction and then derides them in his later polemic, *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), as the apologetics of an Uncle Tom.

Baldwin's autobiographical first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), established the terms by which his later essay can be understood. For the boy John Grimes, raised in a pious if contentious Harlem family, the movies are an escape from the restricted life to which his color and his poverty condemn him. And yet, to the extent that movies represent escape from church and family, his destined salvation, they also represent damnation. Moviegoing is an intensified experience of sin for the boy, not just in his rebellious act of attending these forbidden pleasures but in the charismatic sinners he gazes at while seated comfortably in "the gloom of Hell." In one scene he watches a movie that sounds like *Of Human Bondage* and feels a powerful attraction to the sadistic woman who again and again betrays the innocent student who loves her. John is seized, surprisingly, with sympathy: "He wanted to be like her, only more powerful, more thorough, and more cruel; to make those around him, all who hurt him, suffer as she made the student suffer, and laugh in their faces when they asked pity for their pain. . . . One day he would talk like that, he would face them and tell them how much he hated them, how they had made him suffer, how he would pay them back!"

When the woman dies, John, Hollywood's ideal moviegoer, is struck with remorse for the vicarious empowerment he had experienced in watching her cruel treatment of the student. He has learned to abhor the temptation of revenge, and that "it was the Lord who had led him into this theater to show him an example of the wages of sin." By revealing to him, in his moment of sympathy with the scarlet woman, his own iniquity, the

Lord has put John on the narrow path, which he pursues until the end of the novel when he becomes a preacher like his father. The child is redeemed by his capacity for self-knowledge and his will to act upon the moralistic messages delivered to him by Hollywood—virtually a second church if rightly understood. Race is simply not an issue in this case study of the impact of film. Having performed their miracle, movies play no part in the novel after this scene.

The Devil Finds Work is a much angrier look at the subject. Now that the civil rights struggles and the passions of the 1960s and early 1970s have intervened, Baldwin remembers his childhood fascination with movies in a different way than when trying in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to account for his own career as a boy-preacher. In this essay Baldwin offers John Grimes's desire for revenge as a positive guide to revolutionary action. Baldwin's polemical purpose leads him not to melodramas like *Of Human Bondage* but to social protest films which construed reality as a struggle of the privileged and oppressed—a recognizable scenario of young James's Harlem experiences. Because "We were all niggers in the thirties," the anger of screen whites and black audiences converged in at least an illusion of solidarity. In the 1930s blacks were given no image of black rebellion, neither in westerns where a film celebrating Cochise or Sitting Bull would have served the purpose, nor, of course, any film chronicling black insurrection analogous to the novel *Native Son*. But Baldwin recognizes that films like *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Fury*, and *You Only Live Once*, and any picture that featured prisoners, were relevant to his experience and his destiny. *Prisoner of Shark Island*, he tells us, exerted an attraction solely on the basis of its title. But these stories could never be *his* stories because the historical settings were always foreign, even, as in *Dead End*, when the location was proximate to his ghetto home. And the actors, or "escape personalities," as he calls them, could never offer him genuine escape because of their skin color.

After the 1930s, according to Baldwin, filmgoers were denied realistic social commentary, at least of the revolutionary kind practiced in the Depression era when anger against the system was a more saleable commodity. Now the movies began to close out the black audience, not only by continuing to deny blacks entrance to any but singing-and-dancing roles, but by reducing the scope and seriousness of proletarian films that depicted a reality blacks shared with whites and thus could have been used as tutorial instruments for initiating radical social change. Films became

escapist, practicing “the American self-evasion, which is all this country has as history.” Especially evasive, in Baldwin’s view, are films like *The Defiant Ones* and *In the Heat of the Night* which create black characters who are admirable to the extent they forgive and befriend and even love their white co-actors. (This is the formula Donald Bogle calls “the huckfinn fixation.”) By underestimating black rage such films constitute an erasure of the racial problem from the screen; they offer pat resolutions relieving whites of responsibility at the same time they evade the spectacle of historical depredations. Writing this book in the mid-1970s, then, Baldwin sees all the movies in which Sidney Poitier portrays some virtuous or even saintly figure as attempts to exorcise the black gunfighter from the conceptual field of white and black audiences alike.

That Baldwin prefers to approach the movies as an adversarial critic can be seen most clearly in the longest of his poems, “Staggerlee wonders,” a meditation on the America of the 1980s that uses the persona of the murderous Staggerlee to score points against the culture of violence in white America. In folk balladry Staggerlee is the unredeemable black gunfighter who shoots his friend Billy Lyons in a quarrel over a Stetson hat. That Baldwin adopts this persona to rage against the racism of America, as institutionalized in the ascension to power of Ronald Reagan, suggests something of the poet’s vindictive feelings toward a culture that has given him such dead-end folk heroes while blazoning the likes of John Wayne and Ronald Reagan as champions:

Oh, noble Duke Wayne,
be careful in them happy hunting grounds.
They say the only good Indian
is a dead Indian,
but what I say is,
you can’t be too careful, you hear?
Oh, towering Ronald Reagan,
wise and resigned lover of the redwoods,
deeply beloved, winning man-child of the yearning Republic,
from diaper to football field to Warner Brothers sound-stages,
be thou our grinning, gently phallic, Big Boy of all the ages!

Baldwin's sarcastic tribute to Ronald Reagan calls attention to a source of despair for blacks during the 1980s. Bad enough, they might say, that movies reflected the racism of American whites, intensified into myth by the experience of the frontier. As in Louise Erdrich's poem, John Wayne's war against people of color, from *Stagecoach* to *The Green Berets*, signifies the irresistible cancer that threatens longtime historical victims "on the auction block / of Manifest Destiny." The rise of Ronald Reagan to power ensured that the racism of the movies would be reduplicated with double power by a national government whose values came entirely from the simplifications of the movies. What chance was there for Americans to outgrow their juvenile myths when the "Big Boy of all the ages" continued to set national policy according to the melodramatic formulas of B movies?

Baldwin's suspicion of the movies, with that of other black writers, helped to make an oppositional stance normative for black poets of the '80s and '90s. It has strengthened their ability to expose and condemn movies on racial themes, but it has also diminished their opportunities for creative play by imposing upon them a political agenda forged and sanctified in the civil rights era. Younger authors who inevitably see themselves as the beneficiaries of the revolutionary re-visioning of popular culture undertaken by the older generation are susceptible to charges of ingratitude if they seem to compliment their image in Hollywood's mirror. But just as Baldwin had freed himself from the influence of his predecessor Richard Wright by means of his critical essay "Everyone's Protest Novel," so some black poets have tried to free themselves from the thematic constraints of movie discourse imposed by Baldwin and the poets discussed above. Thylias Moss's poem "Birmingham Brown's Turn" (1991), for example, selects as subject not some weapon-wielding black man dangerous to whites, but a seemingly degraded role, that of the chauffeur for Charlie Chan in the parodic *Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen* (1981). Peter Ustinov is only the most recent white man to portray the Chinese detective, suggesting an anxiety about racial identity on the part of filmmakers and audiences alike. But the driving agent in the film is no white in yellowface, or blackface, no "caricature" or "effigy." Birmingham Brown knows who he is and where he is going, Moss asserts, and his cool "entitlement" reassures her about the place and fate of black people in a friendlier decade than the '50s or '60s. Brown is an authentic and vibrant example of an American whose profession makes him one with the natural world prolif-

ically summoned in the poem as part of the chauffeur's continual presence on the open road. The poem cannot be called complacent about the "bottom-hugging black // race" but in the manner of Robert Hayden it eschews the temptation to bitterness in favor of an upbeat endorsement of the survival skills black writers admire in their people. As she says of Hattie McDaniel in another poem, "This one is about dignity. . . . she / is what outlived Tara in significance."

Moss's poems seem to critique Wanda Coleman's lament that movies have never presented her with a recognizable image of a black hero or of herself. "[B]lack was beautiful / once / for a civil minute // before the dream up and died," Coleman remarks. As an elegist for the Black Arts generation, Coleman has reason to be bitter that black aspirations reached the screen in such distorted ways, even in the 1970s. More recently, however, the achievements of the New Black Wave in the 1990s (Bill Duke, Spike Lee, Matty Rich, John Singleton, Mario Van Peebles) have begun to circulate the sound and imagery of ghetto streets to all Americans. Rap lyrics on the soundtrack are bringing news of black attitudes to many spectators who don't read poetry or watch MTV.

And these attitudes are not always those of formulaic resentment against white power. In John Singleton's film *Poetic Justice* (1993), the young black woman named Justice uses Maya Angelou's poems to explain to herself and her black co-characters how personal needs, not political agendas, deserve attention if meaningful reform is ever to occur in the lives of people of color. Such films open a moral space for the redefinition of black society as a congregation of individuals, not types, even in the devastated locale of South Central Los Angeles.

The theoreticians of the Black Arts Movement hoped that some new mythology based on black history and culture could be constructed to compete with an oppressive and evasive white mythology signified by the western. Black film and black poetry could then cooperate at last in articulating the recognizable consciousness of the race. Whether or not this convergence comes to pass, these new films present new challenges to black poets, who will keep us posted on whether Hollywood does or does not continue to play the Devil when it represents the most recent history of different races in America.

NOTES

1. Louise Erdrich, *Jacklight* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 12-3. Likewise, in Frank Chin's story "The Eat and Run Midnight People," the Chinese-American narrator imagines himself the John Wayne of *North to Alaska*: "John Wayne stepping outside and turning a piece of the outdoors into the goddamned Old West. His West." *The Chinaman Pacific & Frisco R. R. Co.* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1988), 15. For the characteristic Latino-American view of Wayne, see the title story of Nash Candelaria, *The Day the Cisco Kid Shot John Wayne* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1988), 7-22. "Looking back," the narrator remarks, "I realized that Wayne, as America's gringo hero, was forever to me the bigoted Indian hater of 'The Searchers' fused with the deserving victim of the attacking Mexican forces at the Alamo . . ." (21-2). For an iconography of Wayne roles, see Judith M. Riggins, *John Wayne: a Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1992).

2. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 104. Ellison accounts for his fascination with archetypes, folk figures, and legendary heroes by saying of himself and his young friends, "we were under the intense spell of the early movies, the silents as well as the talkies" (xvi). The title essay of *Shadow and Act* is about the portrayal of blacks on film.

3. "Black Art," *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (New York: Morrow, 1979), 106. Elizabeth Taylor returns as a bad example in "Poem for Halfwhite College Students," in which black youth are exhorted not to take Taylor and Richard Burton as their models, nor any other star: "check yourself, / when you find yourself gesturing like Steve McQueen, check it out, ask / in your black heart who it is you are, and is that image black or white" (109).

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