

“You Self Image is so Powerful, it unwittingly become your destiny.” – Oscar Micheux

Honest, intelligent criticism is an aid to the progress of an effort.

– Oscar Micheaux

I had been holding this in, but I have awoken angry, having been aroused and disturbed by images I saw in the new film on Harriet Tubman over a week ago. It was the lasting image of a black man kicking a black woman to death, while Harriet Tubman, our superhero, is shown quietly expressing horror behind a door. It did not help that the character, played magnificently by singer/artist Janelle Monet, was the film’s most innocent, giving character in the film. I have no concern about the whys and where-fors of “the slavery film.” I care not about the ethnicity or origins of the black lead actress. African American played Africans for a century of cinema, including the roles of Steven Biko and Mandela. So WTFYTB??? Miss me with that shit. I agree with Kareem Abdul Jabbar, who said that the slavery film can be, “. . .vital to correct the misperceptions many have about the shameful practice, but they "risk defining African American participation in U.S. history primarily as victims.” It left me disturbed that her character fell victim to the trope of the “black male beast.” This, in a film about black captivity in America in which we don’t get to see Harriet Tubman shoot one runaway hunting cracker that deserved it the entire film. Coffy, Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones got to do it in the Blaxploitation films, so why not Harriet?? To quote Sam Jackson, then evil fuggers “deserved to die and I hope they burn in hell.” Excuse my indignation. The role and character of Harriet Tubman is projected through a colonial lens, her legacy and agency diminished by the witting accommodation of “negro imp assistants.” I am constantly aware that “Hollywon’t, Hollycain’t, Hollyaint” ever going to decolonize their lens for us.

I don’t like doing this, I don’t want to become involved in the bi-annual Upset Negro Roadshow complaining about Hollywood. But “here I is!”

You get what you pay for. We don’t finance these films. I paid more than most to go to the “Gala screening.” They didn’t even do a Q&A after the film. I saw it at the Chicago Film Festival a week before it opened. The director was there. When the lights came on, there I was in the front row, eye to eye with the director. I did not say a word, I wanted to hear the audience reaction. I was not there with the intent of antagonizing anyone. I suffer the curse of unbridled honesty at times but this was not one of those times.

It has been said that Sam Goldwyn was once asked “When will the Indians win a fight in one of your movies?” “When they pay for the production and distribution,” said he. Edward Buscombe, in his book, *Injuns! Native Americans in the Movies* said, “Indian films will never change Hollywood on its own ground. We won't get alter Native westerns, in which the Indians win, because if Indians make films it seems unlikely that they would want to make westerns. They have their own stories. Sharing stories satisfies a hunger of spirit, and feeding this hunger is necessary for our survival as Native people.”

I have always believed we need a cinema of our own. This is exactly what film editor/director Hugh Robertson (academy award Best Editor for *Midnight Cowboy*, 1969, Editor *Shaft* 1971, *Melinda*, 1972.) told me on my first trip to LA. I asked him what he was going to do next, after his big Award. and he said his plans were to sell *Melinda* and go back to Trinidad and open a film school. I was quite surprised. He did not see a clear future in Hollywood, except as a worker, he wanted the means of production. He did just THAT, opened a film school! Hollywood was how he paid for it. It was mission. I was 18 in Hollywood and got the best lesson in my life in one accidental meeting on Sunset

Blvd at 1:00am at a Denny's restaurant.

This was a revealing conversation as I was actually flown out there to discuss an incomplete screenplay I was writing. A now deceased friend stole it and showed it to someone and they sent me a plane ticket. It was about what happened in my high school years before and after the murder of Black Panther Fred Hampton. The conversation was so weak about how I should tell the story I just turned around and went home. I just was not that hungry, and I always remembered what my cigar chomping Uncle Ben told me is Sardis, Mississippi when I was sweeping out his jook joint/ice cream parlor, "Don't you ever be no buck dancing nigger!" he said. And he followed it with his classic, "Git Me?" That conversation came back in that moment, as I reflected on Hugh's words. Africa was calling, I had more living to do than to get mudbound in a worldview I was already educated away from. Film was controlling my life, and a film by **Robert Van Lierop, The Struggle Continues - A Luta Continua** - 1971 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUdeF2KNeCg>), about the military struggle of the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO) against the Portuguese woke me from a boredom that was about to send me either to the grave or the penitentiary. It sent me off on my expatriate mission, my merantau, my rite of passage, my shugyosha journey, a student of the way of freedom. I was following the old men I knew in Chicago from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who had gone to Spain to fight the Nazi-back fascism of Francisco Franco. I was full of the stories of Charles Burroughs, husband of artist Margaret Burroughs and son of Williana, a New York schoolteacher, who was a socialist and Communist who took her children to Moscow when she attended the [6th World Congress of the Communist International](#) in [Moscow](#) in the summer of 1928 as a representative of the [American Negro Labor Congress](#). Charles told us stories of running away to the Russian circus and working the Trapeze before driving a supply truck during the Nazi Siege of Leningrad. The generation before me confronted racism at the front. I felt it was my generation's turn to do it in Africa. This film cemented my resolve to get the fugg outta Dodge. I did not know Hugh well, but I eventually met many hardcore brothers and sisters in cinema after that. My mentor documentary filmmaker St Clair Bourne, and through him Bill Gunn, Ivan Dixon, Melvin Van Peebles, Ishmael Reed, Med Hondo, Djibril Diop Mambety, Julie Dash, Ben Caldwell, Charles Burnett, Billy Woodberry, Gordon Parks (not very hardcore, but some), Euzhan Palcy...the point has not been fame, it is mission. For me it is always mission. The need to create a significant global black cinema. My blessing and curse. Like Oscar Micheaux before me I have always wanted to "...use my films to elevate the colored race." Being associate producer on Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and an advisor to Djibril Diop Mambety on his film *Ramatou(Hyenes)* (1992) signaled the realization of what I believed in for the development of a black World Cinema.

I saw Harriet at the Chicago Film Festival. The filmmaker, Kasi Lemmons was there. I did not expect much. I wanted to be surprised. I have not seen a film come out of Hollywood that captures the period and struggles against captivity in the way the films of Cuban filmmaker Sergio Giral does in his trilogy on captivity, *The Other Francisco*, *Racheodor* and *Maluala*. Cerebral and physical, this Cuban Series financed and produced by the Cuban film agency ICAIC, sent these films around the world, where many copies still reside.

I have come to believe after 48 years of consideration of the Hollywood system and worldview, "Hollywont, Hollyaint, Hollycaint" deliver to black folk because of their insidious ability and desire to control the images of the world through the white American gaze.

I showed the 35mm print of Giral's *Maluala* back in the 80s at the Film Center of The Art Institute. The introduction, the music, was extremely compelling. The theme song, *Canto A Oddúa* by [Sergio Vitier](#), just floored you from the first moment with this synthesis of Cuban Classical and African

religious music. This was the rhythm of black rebellion, decision and action.

It is often the foreign film that has given us the realities of the political and economic necessities that allowed the inhumanity and exploitation of involuntary HUMAN labor. It was the foreign film that was willing to confront how involuntary servitude powered the west into the Industrial Age. Only one American film I know of, Charles Burnett's small film, *Nat Turner, a Troublesome Property* resonates with me in a way that Italian filmmaker Gilo Pontcorvo's (*The Battle of Algiers*, 1966) and *QUEMADA* (Burn, 1969) did.

These films are really more about rebellion and the necessity of overturning those entire systems that tolerate captivity and the economic theft of labor and wealth institutionalized as "slavery," and partied as colonialism and fascism.

Even tiny films like *Carlos Fernandez Cimmarones* (Peru, 1983) produced by the Canadian film board have given me more satisfaction and catharsis from the resonance of captivity so present in this country. All these films for me, communicate a vision of a radical future for the black global diaspora.

Not so much with *Harriet*.

After seeing *Harriet*, I cannot stop myself from saying it is the most insidiously anti-black shit I have ever seen. It spins the story of slavery in this seductive way, that posits a black man, emerging the most brutal character in the film. And posits Harriet Tubman as unable to exact her own agency in giving us that satisfaction of seeing her do what we know she had to be more than capable, using the power of her agency to off a slave hunting cracker and the "necro" (walking dead negro) who killed her friend. I take that shit personal.

This is the epitome of the studio workshopped film. At this moment the same thing is happening to the Ryan Coogler produced Fred Hampton film shooting in Cleveland, *Jesus is My Homeboy*. That's the title, they started with. Having known Chairman Fred, I imagine he was doing a bit of shifting in his grave and would come back beat that writer to death with a black panther newspaper. Still might, if he can find the right don't give a fuck spirit host. As in the Disney *Black Panther* film, where a western intelligence agency and agent sits on the periphery of the story and plot, in the Hampton film, an FBI agent, William O'Neal is full center. In neither case are the intelligence agent all and never were. It is most apparent in the Hampton story. The idea of the Black Panther character being created as a retelling of the story of Patrice Lumumba is long forgotten, with the mineral rich province of Kitanga becoming Wakanda.

When I was a child, I saw a performance of Lorraine Hansberry's *Follow The Drinking Gourd*, her story of the life of Harriet Tubman. It was a Sunday morning theatrical performance on CBS.

I was never so drained and so elated watching a TV program. I remember feeling the tears falling from my 10 year old eyes. I responded powerfully to the raw emotion of her performance and it's spiritual intensity. Her physical strength radiated at me from that black and white screen.

I felt ten feet tall. I actually fell in love with Harriet and Lorraine. I wanted to run with her through those cold nights and carry folks to freedom. I wanted to talk to the late Ms. Hansberry whose *A Raisin in the Sun* had also set me on fire. The full moon at the beginning the program is how I remember it, the full moon is always how I remember things. The opening title was a huge full moon and the sound of crickets and that song, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*.

That short performance of an uncompleted manuscript will always mean more to me in my visioning of the mystic superhero, Harriet Tubman, rooted in the triumph over our captivity. All I ask is that feeling, that thing I go to the movies for, or read a book for, to get lifted up. So don't be co-signing me, shaking your head in agreement. Explore ways you can help developing filmmakers.

I am not dragging the filmmaker. I am dragging us. You want to see works you can get uplifted by? Assist filmmakers in making those works. We need a Production Fund, we need to become patrons to people like Julie Dash and 'nem, who we KNOW will deliver the goods. If we want it, we need to collectively support the people who can do it, train up new people, present new talent, out Nollywood, Nollywood. This Queenie and Slim road movie has more in common with Ivan in *The Harder They Come* than *Bonnie and Clyde*. Their crime, like Ivan's, was black rebellion. Not bank robbery. Two social media users brought together by fate, on a failing date one moment, runaways slaves the next. They had none of Ivan's violence in them. I love me a good road movie, each stop a destination full of characters.

They were more victims of the circumstances forced upon us by white supremacy. It's journey into the black heartland of the south was fascinating, I am sure, for those who seldom see the dirty south realities. The cross generational crowd in the blues joint, not beat of hiphop to be heard. Like the day I walked down Crenshaw after the riots, old brothers working their little hustles with Little Milton Bobby Blue Bland as soundtrack to their survival. Next scene we get inundated by Fela styled Afrobeat. Yeah, this is my kinda shiznit.

Only the death of the black cop (a conscious decision I am sure, can't have more than one white cop offed in a film by a negro, we got to sacrifice a good black cop to make a point) by the overzealous young boy and his subsequent death rattled me. Can't go alienating white folk. It bothers me. This has NEVER happened in real life.

This is like a slap at 10 year old Samir Rice. It says, he could have been a killer. Its says association with runaways social justice warrior, militants leaders is a gateway to police murder, to be simplistic. Militancy is usually depicted as pathological in American cinema, from Bill Duke's character Abdullah/Duane in *Car Wash* (1976) to the character, Jimmy in *Night Catches Us* (2010).

I got pissed off with this, it took me wayyyy out of the film. But to edit it together with the lovers making love with the gratuitous build up to the implied orgasmic shooting of the gun in the black cops face. This I found insidious and hateful, disrespectful of black love and more desecration of the black body in the temple of white supremacy.

Writers and directors make their own decisions, until a studio exec objects, the producers assert their world view, that ain't the filmmakers. It happens everyday. Its happening right now in every studio financed black film where authenticity being held hostage to the prize trinket offered for black pliability. I don't want to rewrite their films. I just want them to be true to the culture, respect the history, and uplift the creative discourse.

It takes a powerful independent spirit to buck the studio and risk getting put back into the field with the low-class unfinanced independent artists. I think my critique is valid on this. The black kid had to kill the good black cop, to give white folk their obligatory "what about."

But no, I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Where the film plays it safe, with its hustle and flow elements, imperfect as it is, it is a film I needed to see. It is film wrought with procreative moments. A film upon which FILMMAKER'S can build a bold black cinema.

Talking to Julie Dash, she spoke of the director as a “fierce young voice.” We are obligated to support these fierce young voices when they bring so much. This is a nuanced film worth the debate and discussion. It’s scenario we all know is not just prophetic, but inevitable.

Ivan, in *Harder They Come* and *Queenie* and *Slim* all wanted to get to Cuba. None of them made it. For that would have been a revolutionary act. The bounty still stands on Assata Shakurs head and she is protected. Like Chairman Fred said, “You kill the freedom fighter, but you can’t kill freedom fighting.” The ending is as much an indictment of how the institutional body of police see the black body. Obey or die. But the film delivers it cathartic moment in the beginning then loses it in that one disturbing scene.

I know that moment standing at the end of a policeman’s weapon all too well, you could say I have PTSD from moments like that. Let me say it like this, old school, the pig shot the woman for no reason and clearly had murder on his mind, and he got what he deserved.

I created my streaming channel at bwcTV.tv just for this purpose. To create a space using available technologies to present archival and original works that provide alternative stories and entertaining content. It will also provide a platform for the exposure of new filmmakers work.

Ok, that’s off my chest. My eyes are on a proactive future. My mind is on liberating our image and decolonizing our minds in the ways our written literature has always managed to do. We have so much to build on within black culture, so many of our stories have yet to be told.

Edward Buscombe

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Floyd Webb I have lived my entire adult life to this point as a cultural worker/artist/activist, first as a photojournalist, working in East Africa and Europe in my mid-1970s youth. Then following my original desire to work in film as an independent, and then beginning the BlackLight Film Festival(Blacklightfilmfestival.org) in Chicago in 1982, my return from Tanzania and Europe. My goal was to create an audience that would achieve a literacy in the creation of our global images images through exhibition and discussion. That goal was essentially achieved, we broke groundbreaking black international films in Chicago, most importantly, Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have it* and Malian director Souleymane Cisse’s *Yeelen* (1987).