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John Wayne in Sophiatown: The Wild West Motif in Apartheid Prose

Troy Blacklaws

The young hero of apartheid stories inhabits a hazardous frontier world, pervaded by violence and calling again and again for proof of bravado. As Bloke Modisane once put it: “South Africa has a frontier or voortrekker mentality, a primitive throw-back to the pioneering era, the trail-blazing days, when the law dangled in the holster and justice was swift” (Modisane 17). While the influence of US gangster culture on *Drum* journalism in the 1950s has been vividly explored by Mike Nicol in *A Good-Looking Corpse*, this article focuses on the cowboy hero as an imported mode of male identity in prose narratives from the apartheid era. This prose plays out in worlds as polarised as dull, parochial white towns (akin to towns in Westerns) and jiving, dodgy townships (such as Sophiatown and District Six, doomed to become ghost towns). During this time of “gritting the teeth and enduring” (Coetzee 14), the young hero has to learn to be as flinty and heroic as a cowboy if he is to survive to manhood, when he will (if he is white) be drafted and sent to the border to shoot at the foe or (if he is black) be hounded and shot at by the police. Thus fathers in apartheid stories are almost to a man stoic and hard on their sons. Like cowboys, they never cry and they hardly ever reveal their feelings. Such fathers tend to be distant (they are out roving the farm or hunting; they are away on the mines or in jail), so it is from seeing the fictive antics of cowboys on the silver screen that the young hero learns how to be a cowboy.

And it is not just white characters, harking after a fading pioneer spirit and “lost in the illusion of the historic heroism of [the past]” (Ndebele 24), who draw on cowboy-film metaphors. *Drum* journalist Bloke Modisane tells

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us in *Blame Me on History* that “the [cinema] films were always the same blood and thunder tuppenny horrors with memorable titles like: *Two Guns West* and *The Fastest Gun Alive* [a 1956 film starring Glenn Ford]” (6), and that he was “always playing cowboys and Indians” (17). The surprising inversion (given the stereotypes of the cowboy-film genre and one’s naïve imagining that this imported trope of cowboys and Indians would always slide along lines of colour) is that young Modisane and his black playmates are (during their ‘playing’) the cowboys: “The mud pool was the Wild West of America or the dark interior of Africa; and to us, out there in the pool, the white boys were the Red Indians, and we were the cowboys. The symbols were undoubtedly reversed in the white camp” (17). It is hard to imagine white boys under apartheid thinking otherwise (of being anything other than cowboys) in a context of *playing* where blacks were on hand to fall into the role of Red Indians. After all, it was (if they were Afrikaans) their pioneering Voortrekker forefathers who shot at spear-toting Zulus in Natal or (if they were English) their Settler forefathers who defended their Eastern Cape farms from raiding Xhosas. One wishes Modisane had revealed whether he or any of the other black boys was ever conscious at the time of the irony of being black cowboys.

The historical overtones were again undone when white boys played with other whites (typically the case under apartheid), for some white boys then had to be Indians. But white boys were hardly fazed by drawing the short straw. Indians in films were, after all, lithe and cunning. They had uncanny tracking skills and rode bareback. Perhaps inheriting the historical upperhand let white boys play Indians without feeling that their underlying identity as a paleface (below the warrior paint) was at risk. Besides, it is not a universal that boys would rather be cowboys. For instance, Karl May’s cult stories of the innately good Apache chief Winnetou (penned before the Great War) created a lingering romantic image of the Red Indian in Germany (an empathy lacking in post-war Hollywood Westerns other than *Broken Arrow*, in which a white actor plays Cochise).

Another allusion to the cowboy-film trope, this time in Fred Khumalo’s *Touch My Blood*, similarly subverts the idea of cowboys being by definition white: “I loved the characters [in comic books] as it was easy to lose myself in their fantasy world. [. . .] I could be the gun-slinging Kid Colt blasting away the Apache Indians with his Colt 45” (48–49). One might think that the colonised in one context would identify with the colonised in all other contexts, but then one forgets that childhood games are a playing out of fantasy and that the game of cowboys and Indians is not so much about white invaders hunting down and killing the indigenes in distant and dusty

lands as it is about heroes and villains. In the mind of the South African boy (or any boy for that matter), cowboys and Indians is about his longing to be a hero by gunning down his pesky, ululating foes. And the cowboy, being tantalisingly husky and hardy, is among the cast of romanticised heroes he can play in order to experience an illusion of power.

Maori author Witi Ihimaera's "Nobody Wanted To Be Indians" (a sketch from "Short Features") is narrated by a Maori boy and plays on this theme:

Of all the movies that came to our town my mate Willie Boy and I loved westerns the most. The local theatre would put on a matinee of two features and, if we were lucky, both were westerns. If we were unlucky we had to suffer through one of those boring romance films full of kissing. [. . .] The white man was always right in the Westerns and only in a very few were the Indians anything other than wrong. The Indians smoked peace pipes but you knew they were as mean as snakes. Not only that, but they were an illiterate lot. All they could say was 'How' or 'Heap big medicine' and they communicated by smoke signals [. . .]. They were mean sons of a bitch. Even when they were played sympathetically, they weren't really Indians at all but simply Rock Hudson all browned up as Taza, Son of Cochise [. . .] or Burt Lancaster as Apache. [. . .] When we came out of the theatre Willie Boy and I saw ourselves as white, aligning to our heroes and heroines of the technicolor screen. Although we were really brown, we would beat up on each other just to play the hero. Neither of us wanted to be an Indian.

(221ff.)

In "Maori Cowboys, Maori Indians," Alice Te Punga Somerville remarks on how Ihimaera's Maori boys, in their desire to "play the hero," defy an "expectation" that Maoris, being indigenous, "will identify with Indians" (663) when they play at Westerns. It is profoundly telling of the potency of youthful fantasy that this alignment happens along lines drawn by the imagination, in this case the desire to "play the hero," the good guy. One wonders, though, whether Ihimaera intended the shift from "play[ing] the hero" to "be[ing] an Indian." Was he hinting that a Maori boy can merely *play* at being the hero in a story scripted by a history of invasion and conquest, but *is*, at the end of the day, inescapably an Indian? A black boy under apartheid (and this may be true of Maori boys of the time of Ihimaera's youth) is denied by racism and poverty the freedom ever to escape *being an Indian*, other than fleetingly when he plays the cowboy.

A handful of black actors (such as Canada Lee and Sidney Poitier) monopolised the few screen roles that had to be played by a black actor (such as the role of the Zulu priest Kumalo played by Canada Lee in Zoltán Korda's 1951 film of *Cry, the Beloved Country*). In such films, the camera was required to focus on the character for a long time, whereas a masked witchdoctor or distant Indian might be played by a white actor in blackface. Bearing in mind the flat, bit parts typically handed to black actors, a boy anywhere in the world during this time would have identified with white heroes such as Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster or John Wayne. On this score Ihimaera says:

“Short Features” plays on the way Hollywood movies of the 1940s and 1950s privileged Whiteness and therefore deprivileged Blackness. It looks at how heroes and heroines were always White, and even when they were Black (i.e. American black or Red Indians or Polynesians) they were most often played by White actors and actresses in blackface anyway.

(Email correspondence, 2 April 2012)

The apartheid government let blacks see Westerns despite the dim-witted view held by a few that the medium (rather than racism and poverty) was “a root cause of theft and violence in African townships” (Burns 110). The regime thought the Western was the kind of lowbrow *skop, skiet en donder* movie that blacks would not find too tricky to follow. As Burns puts it:

Westerns undoubtedly appealed to non-Western audiences because they were driven by action rather than dialogue [. . .]. Presenting simple dichotomies of good and evil (often color-coded by costume) and following a well-established narrative trajectory, the simple plot of a Western emerged despite the heavy editing and absence of dialogue.

(115–16)

And there was a hardly a risk of “stir[ring] up black desire” (Crow 133) for white women (women being so peripheral in Westerns) or for white privilege (cowboys being Spartan in their lifestyle). In fact, it was obscurely felt that letting blacks see Westerns was a way of defusing pent-up black resentment towards apartheid, and that “secondary exposure of the kind provided by [Wild West] films help[ed] to satisfy the drives and needs [of black mineworkers]” (Burns 109). And, after all, Westerns reflected the South African landscape of racial polarisation and white rule.

Thus it was from the type of cowboy in '50s films (Glenn Ford, Alan Ladd, John Wayne) that young blacks in Sophiatown derived romantic images of unflappable manhood, of men unbowed by life, and of the cowboy as a good authority – something alien in the South African context where authority figures, other than teachers, perhaps, seemed intent on putting them down.

The hard-fighting cowboy, moving freely on his horse in wide-open spaces, surmounting all obstacles and always winning, is indeed an attractive hero [for black Africans]. The cowboy is white, but not European. Through identification with him, the African can fantasy [sic] unconsciously or consciously, being as white as the dominant group and always winning [. . .].

(Powdermaker, cited in Burns 109)

That the cowboy was American rather than one of the European colonisers of Africa thus created a way for the young hero of apartheid stories to be potent in a world that otherwise dehumanised him. He goes to the cinema and (once he has lost himself in the film) becomes in his mind the American silver-screen cowboy: alone on the range, fighting off outlaws and Indians. He is never troubled, this cowboy. The world may fall apart around him but he waves a gun and, like a magician waving his wand, the threat is defused.

This, for a black boy in South Africa in the 1950s, was a projection of his dreams of being a hero and of the hope of finding a life beyond the bleak reality of apartheid, where evil was as relentless as the bulldozers that preyed on Sophiatown and where there was no end in sight to injustice. It was a chance to revert in his fantasy to that mythical time before his land was lost, when a black man had the freedom to drift at whim across 'wide-open spaces' without a pass. In a time of few iconic black heroes (the names of Mandela, Mbeki and Sisulu gaining mythical resonance only after Rivonia), a black boy looked to film to find a man of power who stood up to evil: to find John Wayne.

Part of Wayne's cult allure is that he is flawed and therefore not dauntingly distant. This was the time when cowboys were human, before they had their character pared down to the taciturnity of Clint Eastwood: focused on the job at hand, stoic as a totem pole. John Wayne in Howard Hawks's films is rambunctious and blustery. He loses his cool. He laughs if a man falls off his horse. And so he, young Modisane, comes out of the cinema squinting an eye, adopting John Wayne's vaunting walk ... until a policeman comes along and demands to see his pass and the illusion of potency is undone.

Whatever may be going on in the outside world, in the cinema John Wayne goes on killing Indians. So the young hero can vicariously enact male rituals (taming a horse, riding a bull, killing his foes) through projection and mimicry, and so absorb by a kind of osmosis the cowboy's masculinity and heroism. In *Blame Me on History*, Modisane confesses to wearing a mask of white mimicry to survive the sting of racism. Though no longer a schoolboy at the time he dons this mask, there is something *boyish* in his bid to create an (inevitably transitory) illusion of flamboyant freedom that no black South African had in reality:

[D]ressing in European fashions, entertaining guests with the latest jazz imports, and studying dramatic monologues in his one-room Sophiatown shanty [. . .] Modisane inhabit[s] a liminal space [. . . in which he] gains partial empowerment from ironic imitation of white screen and literary heroes, claiming the autonomy denied him [by apartheid] through a self-consciously theatrical mode of selfhood.

(Goldsmith 110)

This idea of a 'liminal space,' a space in which one might act out fantasies, is another key to the allure of Westerns for the young heroes of apartheid stories. Modisane's love of film draws him again and again into the cinema, a liminal space where reality is suspended and where he might forget that he is black in the "anonymity of darkness" (Goldsmith 114). Modisane himself hints at the irony of forgetting the stigma of colour in the dark of a racially-divided cinema: "even though I was segregated in the Indian-owned cinema I managed to lose myself into the darkness, and in the dark I could not see my hand" (171). The phrase "into the darkness," instead of the slickly idiomatic 'in the darkness,' connotes a sliding away from the hobbling consciousness of his blackness (the colour of his hand so fortunately invisible in the dark) "into" a liminal space where skin colour was no longer relevant or defining.

Modisane finds that such a space is not confined to the cinema but is the entire figurative world found behind the masks borrowed from film and books: "behind the shell of these nothing could touch my life: not the police raids, the violence of Sophiatown, not the injustice and the humiliation of being black in white South Africa" (166). And yet, however heady it was for him to wear such fantasy masks in the dark of the cinema or off the street, Modisane soon had again to don the dumb mask his father wore. In the grim reality of apartheid he had to abandon the filmic heroics of a hand "hovering over the imaginary gun in the imaginary holster, poised for the

draw" (51–52) and fall into "emasculating silence" (62) at the sight of police harassing a man, or of township gangsters murdering a man.

For Modisane such mask-wearing was a chance to experience again "the fantasy of childhood" (31) and wish himself "to another place, in another time" (31), such as the illusory world of colour travelogues about "some island seemingly away from the prejudice of man" (168). So that "[e]very cinema ticket [. . .] was a few hours away from South Africa" (168) and a chance to encounter and worship cinema idols as one might a god; to have that god's goodness "mark" him and lift him out of the sordidness of survival amid the din and dust of a township.

Every characterisation I saw on the screen seemed to leave its mark on me; the performances of Spencer Tracy, in particular, filled me with a special kind of nobility. There was something Christ-like in the very way he looked, in every character he portrayed, he seemed to represent for me, the spirit of man, the pure concept of goodness [. . .]. I felt that as a man Spencer Tracy is good.

(168–69)

And if, as in Ihimaera's narrator's reading of Westerns, blacks are seldom cast as right or good and inevitably go down, then it is no wonder that nobody wanted to be an Indian. The catch is, as Goldsmith puts it, that this "white gaze forces black men [and boys] into self-alienating mimicry" (110). He reports that "Black South Africans in the 1950s were trained by popular culture and mission school education to esteem white heroes and devalue their own" (110). And yet not all black South African boys were taught in mission schools and it is hard to imagine that Hollywood was at all conscious of 'training' colonised black boys in South Africa in the art of mimicry and mask-wearing. Hollywood did not even have black Americans in mind in the 1950s. Is Fanon not going too far in saying in *Black Skin, White Masks* that a black man "only claims an identity through approval from the world of whites" and that "only a mastery of white colonial discourse affords escape" (qtd. in Goldsmith 110)? Surely black boys and men in South Africa found individual (rather than colonially-defined) identity in a myriad other ways: through undergoing an initiation into manhood in a tribal context (as Mandela did); through a loss of virginity to a girl (a milestone Khumalo alludes to); perhaps through seeing his words published (as Es'kia Mphahlele did); and by wrong-footing, outwitting and out-surviving others. Boys in apartheid stories, like most boys anywhere on the planet, had their hero fantasies fleetingly: in the liminal space found in a

film or a comic, or just beyond, in the lingering glow of illusion. That said, Don Mattera describes, in *Sophiatown: Coming of Age in South Africa*, a sustained form of mimicry that went beyond mere play. Gang boys mimicked the habits of John Wayne, whom they “nicknamed Motsamai (swaggerer)” (75), and they loved all American imports. “[I]f you rejected the American fad, you would quickly be dubbed moegoe [a dolt] or greenhorn” (75). That Mattera opts for the American word “greenhorn” reflects this passion for Americana. “[A gang called] The Americans had a gunman called Chanaam, alias The Durango Kid [. . .] who always carried two guns and had the reputation of being the fastest gun alive” (103). And yet the absurdity of this theatre of mimicry was that “[n]obody among us dared to ask why we chased and fought and killed one another” (111).

The frightening thing about gangs playing cowboys in Mattera’s *Sophiatown* is that it results in real violence and killing, not just play-play killing or filmic killing where the dead may hop up again once the game is over or once the director yells: “Cut.” But if, as one kills in reality, one is playing John Wayne, then perhaps one is freed from having to feel pity for the dead, or regret about one’s deed. After all, the role of the filmic or comic foe, upon being shot at, is to fall and be forgotten. The risk under apartheid was that, if one “dared to ask,” such deadly killing (justified as a mimicking of a scripted routine?) would be revealed as sordid and dehumanising. It was wiser then not to ask but merely to play.

Peter Godwin in *Mukiwa* (the memoir of his boyhood in a Rhodesia that had all the stage-props of apartheid South Africa) learned how to handle guns, how to “crack the sjambok, an Afrikaans whip made out of cow hide” to herd cows, and how to ride horses like cowboys, “like the ones in the bioscope” (123). In his eyes the black “herd boys were loyal Apaches” and the chief herd boy (therefore chief of the Apaches) was a man called Isaac, who had “an old, scarred .303 rifle” that was unloaded and “there simply as a totem of his status” (123). This status was in fact lower than that of the white farm boys with their loaded guns. And yet here they were all in cahoots in their ‘epic struggle’ against a common foe, “the bandits” (123). One wonders whether Isaac was ever aware of being cast as a Red Indian in young Godwin’s imagination, and how he and his metaphorical Apaches ended up so “loyal” (123) to white cowboys, historically invaders and land-snatchers.

In Godwin’s throwaway line about a “totem” lurks a likely answer to much of the macho parading by men during the time of apartheid: the shotgun-toting, jeep-riding white farmer; the war-dancing warrior brandishing his spear; the riot policeman tauntingly tapping his *sjambok*

against his boots; the teacher flexing his cane; the father dangling his tongs over the braai. Such gadgets are totemic in the 'epic struggle' against undefined foes. And Isaac the Apache chief's unloaded gun is a succinct metaphor for the history of Southern Africa, where again and again blacks stood up to their armed colonisers with an 'unloaded' gun – with spears, stones, chants and jeers.

In Michiel Heyns's novel, *The Children's Day*, the young hero Simon becomes disillusioned with the "hegemonic, rigidly heterosexual masculinity" (Horrell 6) of small town life through his encounters with Steve, a white *tsotsi* from Johannesburg, whose flamboyant way of being is such a threat to the slow, smug rhythms of a provincial town. Steve is a sympathetic character despite his having drawn far younger boys under his spell, "his persona constructed in contrast with male figures of authority in the town" (Horrell 6). And so we find the paradoxical image (through Simon's eyes) of a young city slicker oozing the bravado of a cowboy: "Steve got onto his bike and kicked it into life with that nonchalant energy that always reminded me of the way Gene Autry leaped onto his horse" (30).

In *Blame Me on History* young Modisane, on seeing his dead sister carted off in a white coffin, is told by an uncle: "A Man does not cry" (19). His father whisks him away from the scene and thus saves him from the shame of being less than a man, of "disgrac[ing]" his "masculinity" (19). Thus Modisane's wry, after-the-fact verdict on his youth: "I became, as they say, a man before I was a Boy [sic]" (20). And yet when a policeman shouts at his father for sitting on his "black arse" (instead of handing over his pass) and his father stays overtly calm (24), young Modisane is ashamed of him for not standing up to the policeman. The hint of cowboy-like defiance Modisane discerns in his father is too slight to redeem him in the eyes of his son: "only a hardness came in his eyes" (24). Modisane recalls how "the walls of [his] world came tumbling down [. . .]" and that his "hero image disintegrated" (24). Modisane can never forgive his father for this loss of face. His father had, in his eyes, lost "his integrity as a man" (24). "Thus," Nkosi notes in his introduction to Modisane's memoir, "are sons fathered and lost in the bewildering wilderness that is life in racist South African society" (xxii). And that again defines '50s Westerns. There is no ambiguity about the manhood of the cowboy. His masculinity is fixed. There is no question of John Wayne being corrupted or emasculated, or of his ever falling for Glenn Ford.

Amusingly young Mark Mathabane in *Kaffir Boy* imagines that the mythical world of whites is riskier even than his township world, where dope-smoking *tsotsis* kill on a whim. He is (ironically) happy that apartheid

law curbs his freedom to wander into other zones, for otherwise he would “unwittingly wander into a [Red] Indian village [. . .] or into a cowboy shootout [. . .]” (54). And, as much of the violence on the silver screen plays out in a white-ruled world, films conjure for him an elusive place, however bloody, that he is morbidly lured towards and yet fearful of. That world, only figurative in film, is literally a world apart in apartheid South Africa. Thus Mathabane notes (in retrospect): “the illusions and fantasy of the movies were the stark reality of a world I was forbidden to enter” (54). Absurdly, the landscapes of Hollywood Westerns were less foreign to a black boy in apartheid South Africa than urban white South Africa, just down the road.

A further irony that a reader might see in Modisane’s mud-pool wars is that skin colour would blur as naked boys played in mud, so that it would become tricky to tell white from black from afar, thus muddling the reversal of symbols. However muddled things got, though, the outcome of such conflict was foreseeable as the whites (Indians in the eyes of the black boys, though cowboys in their own eyes) had guns. Modisane reports: “we threw stones at each other [but] the white boys usually dominated the contest in the end, invariably resorting to pellet guns” (17). Such *playing*, ending (for the black boys) in being stung physically by pellets and psychologically by the humiliation of losing, echoes the formulaic finale of the Hollywood Western and the recurring cadences of colonial history.

Mattera, so accustomed to being victimised and dehumanised, confesses to a “perverted expectation and desire” that the police (“captors” he calls them) raiding a political rally would shoot: “I wanted to see the familiar hand shoot the familiar shot; wanted to see the familiar limp body drenched in its own blood” (86). The word “expectation” reveals just how ritualised the role-play of domination had become; while the word ‘desire’ hints at the warped thrill gained from viewing the evidence (‘blood’) of visceral violence. There is a hint here too of theatre: of actors acting out their “familiar,” scripted roles as captor and captured, shooter and shot. However filmic the macabre routine, Mattera has not got the blood from the Hollywood Westerns he saw in Sophiatown. There was no blood in Westerns until Peckinpah. In the 50s, shot Indians just fell off their horse amid salvos of gunfire.

Alex La Guma partly draws on the imagery of Westerns to convey his coloured hero’s journey through the dark, dodgy world of District Six. In *A Walk in the Night* young Michael Adonis has just lost his job. Riled by the “white bastard” foreman, he had told him (in laconic cowboy-style) to “go to hell” (3). That was a moment of euphoric bravado. But then he is waylaid by the cynical, brutal policeman called Raalt, who commands him (in a “hard and flat” voice) to empty his pockets to prove he has no *dagga* (marijuana)

on him. Adonis's bravado fades. Raalt further humiliates Adonis by forcing him to call him "baas" and by demanding "without humour" to know where Adonis stole his money from (8). The warped axiom in the mind of the racist Raalt is that all coloureds are dopers and bandits. Now Adonis strolls through the alleys of a derelict District Six like a wounded lone outlaw through a cursed town, futile rage gnawing at his gut. He sweeps through swinging saloon doors into a sketchy bar where "the disillusioned gained temporary hope" (9) and downs a half-pint of sweet wine. As his rage subsides, he slides into fantasy:

[. . .] looking at himself in the mirror behind the bar and saying in his mind to the young tan-coloured, dark-eyed face with the new stubble and the cigarette dangling from the lips, Okay trouble-shooter. You're a mighty tough hombre. Fastest man in Tucson, until he saw the swing doors behind him and Foxy and the two youths in the tropical suits come in to wipe the fantasy away.

(10)

It is a measure of the allure of the Western that (despite the visual reminder of his coloured skin reflected in the mirror) he fleetingly becomes a cowboy. Instead of the dark of a cinema, wine blurs stark reality to create a liminal space. But he is jolted out of his fantasy by "tropical suits" that jar with the atmospherics of a cowboy film, and by the sight of Foxy and his fellow gangsters: symbolic of the inescapable reality of District Six, where life is tenuous and cheap. In the end, he vents his pent-up rage not against a gangster or a policeman but against a doddering, derelict white man. He kills him by cracking a bottle over his head, an act that is cowardly, lacking all the heroism of a cowboy film. And yet Adonis salvages from this fiasco the "distorted" feeling that his killing a man (and a white man at that, however threadbare and far gone) renders him somehow less "nondescript." "He felt as if he was the only man who had ever killed another and thought himself a curiosity at which people should wonder" (46).

Another character in this story, the layabout and drifter Willieboy, looks to cinema for a way to lend his life a note of heroic resonance, to defy the downward tug of obscurity. But however hard he mimics filmic modes, he cannot change the fact that he is heading nowhere.

He had looked with envy at the flashy desperadoes who quivered across the screen in front of the eightpenny gallery [. . .]. And when the picture faded and he emerged from the vast smoke-laden cinema [. . .] he was always aware of his own inadequacy, moving

unnoticed in the mob. He had affected a slouch, wore [. . .] peg-bottomed trousers [. . .]. But even with these things he continued to remain [. . .] inconspicuous as a smudge on a grimy wall.

(50)

La Guma's writing is pervaded by the language of film. Raalt's "hard grey" eyes pan for a flicker of defiance "from face to face like the expressionless lenses of a camera" (40). He sees himself as flamboyantly heroic: "He was out on the runningboard before the van came to a stop" (40) to investigate a reported murder. He loves playing a role: "He was the hunter now, stalking" (57) Willieboy, his "quarry," and he finds himself "enjoying this stalk in the dark" (59). When he shoots Willieboy in cold blood there is a figurative allusion to choreography, a finale of fluidity in the boy's dance of death: "The bullet slapped into the boy, jerking him upright, and he spun, his arms flung wide, turning on his toes like a ballet dancer" (60).

Recurring macho images, a tone of bravado, and the manly rituals and codes so evident in stories from this time defined a literary type (the antithesis of Raalt) who falls short: the anti-heroic hero, the focaliser who wishes to be heroic but is otherwise wired and so fears being found out to be in fact no cowboy. He exists, this wavering type, in a world where men project a veneer of faux bravado that hides fears of the foreigner, of out-of-the-box (and therefore subversive) thought, of female mysticism and sensuality; in short, a fear of the unfamiliar, or "a dread of the bizarre," as Heyns puts it (18). In his novel a boy unwittingly voices a crude yet apt metaphor (drawn from folklore?) for a commonplace South African fear of anything seeming "threateningly incomprehensible" (123): "If you give a baboon anything he doesn't understand and can't eat, he'll piss on it to make it smell of himself" (212). The South African macho in apartheid stories (epitomised by Raalt) acts like a wary baboon when he recasts the thing he fears, ridding it of its unfathomable *otherness*, so that he can tame it.

Not merely was the humanity of *the white man* in apartheid South African tainted by the injustices he inflicted (Morrell 1998: 607) or mutely witnessed, but so too was that of the young white hero of apartheid stories, by his having to hide his doubts about white rule and/or his sexual ambivalence. In Behr's *The Smell of Apples* Marnus's father ends up raping a young boy (Marnus's friend Frikkie). The burden of having had to hide his lust for boys for so long behind a macho façade "as emblem of patriarchal control, the Afrikaner volk, and apartheid South Africa" (Stobie 80) results in a sick, clandestine act of violence that Marnus happens to witness. The soldier-father physically hurts the boy Frikkie and (unwittingly) psychologically scars his son Marnus. Having discovered that the man he hero-worships is predatory, Marnus is at a loss as to who is friend and who is foe.

And, conversely, *the black man* (often old) was lamed by his fear of being accused (by a young and volatile youth) of going cap in hand.¹ Thus neither man, white or black, was free to merely be himself, an individual seeking his way in the world. Instead, he had to be seen either to stamp down on the underdog, or to cock a defiant fist at injustice. And his son, white or black, suffered from being fathered by a father who, estranged from himself, wore a mask. This curbing of the true self (of individual yearnings, fears, dreams) to conform to scripted roles took its toll then and has a lingering resonance in a post-apartheid South Africa, as men flounder in a bid to redefine their manhood. The struggle over, men are now free to be vulnerable, feeling, wavering, feminine even; in theory, they are free to no longer be cowboys. Yet, unless born into this freedom, they have to learn how to be free.

Apartheid was a time that called for a theatrical male bravado from all men, white and black, and a tone of bravado was the trademark of the *Drum* reporters who loved American jazz and were “decked out” (Nicol 35) in American garb. One of the staff writers, Arthur Maimane, “pack[ed] a gun in case he met up with the gangsters he wrote about” (Nicol 15), gangsters who were photographed like “movie stars” (Nicol 35). The *Drum* reporters wrote (in Nkosi’s words, again in his introduction to *Blame Me on History*) in “a wry, deadpan style” (xxiii). *Drum* magazine was “a symbol of the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve – urbanised, eager, fast-talking and brash” (vi), in a word an Americanised African. And *Drum* put out, like lines in a cowboy film, “grim stories of farm brutalities, police torture and township riots in a cool sober prose” (vii): “the *Drum* style [. . .] was a writing scrupulous in the observation of the ugly facts of life in racist South Africa, a writing equally rigorous in the exclusion of self-pity, the crudely sentimental or maudlin in the presentation of the Self” (vii).

Yet in his memoir Modisane at times abandons this cool cowboy-voice for the voice of one who (Nkosi feels) is “cowed, disheartened and unnerved” (xxi), and who hands on to his children no land or destiny, just (in Modisane’s words) “the debris and humiliation of defeat” (10) and “the dry-beast barrenness of being black in white South Africa” (20). Nkosi notes that Modisane’s memoir offers no hero figure “who would have explained the emergence of a Mandela” (ix). Who then is this Modisane? The “victim and puppet” (x) of *Blame Me on History*, or the coolly ironic *Drum* journalist? And is this not the fate of all heroes (as in focalisers) of South African stories – to want to be wryly invulnerable, but in fact never transcending their scarring victimhood?

Donald Woods, who would one day write *Biko*, was the son of a frontier trader in the tribal reserve of the Transkei. So it was that Woods learned to

speak Xhosa as a boy and witnessed the “backward” (his word) antics of the Xhosas:

most of whom wore loincloths and blankets, and [were] in the grip of [. . .] sorcery and witchcraft, one of whose effects appeared to be an alarming degree of callousness and cruelty [. . .] in certain specific aspects of their society such as faction fighting and ritual murder. The faction fighting was done with axes, the combatants literally chopping each other open [. . .].

(41)

Thus Woods’s boyhood was spent in two worlds: one the tribal “physical world of making tiny clay oxen and toy spears, running, and stick fighting,” the other his “white world of English school stories and American comic books” (42). He ventured into this latter world alone, and encountered there, among others: “Dick Tracy, Batman, Superman, the Lone Ranger and Hopalong Cassidy” (ibid.) – male heroes all. One infers that the “running” he alludes to, although left undefined, is not a choreographed (white-school) running around a track or running within the lines of a rugby field, but rather a free, barefoot running across the veld. And that when he ventured into the fictional world, he no longer ran on his own two feet, but let his mind range, now as a superhero, now as a cowboy.

However “alarming” (his wording: the jarringly paternal diction of a man in retrospect rather than of an innocent boy) Woods found tribal violence, it was not from playing with black boys but from being schooled with other white boys that he learned his racism. His white schoolmates insidiously “reinforced the [. . .] white version of the black stereotype – that blacks could never be the same as us; that they did not want to be the same as us [. . .]” (42). Young Woods was a white boy in a tribal reserve where, at a glance, the hegemonic masculinity was black. To borrow a metaphor from Westerns, Woods was a cowboy boy in an Indian world. Other white boys in rural farming contexts would have encountered black hired hands and perhaps have had black playmates, yet still spent their boyhood in a context where the hegemonic masculinity was white.

The idea that we take our sense of who we are from film is pivotal to the cult film *The Harder They Come* (1972), another story where the cowboy hero idea is imported into an un-American and (glibly seen) *indigenous* context. This time it is a young Jamaican played by Jimmy Cliff, dreaming of being a reggae star, who (despite surviving on a shoestring) lopes cowboy-like through the film, his hat somehow angled to convey a cocky faith in his destiny. This young Jamaican mimicking a Bogart-type

film hero recalls Modisane in Sophiatown. As Cliff's hopes are shot down again and again by the moneymen and by the police he becomes an outlaw. The image from the film that lingers in the mind is of Cliff, sixguns defiantly cocked at the camera (and at authority, as he is hoping a photo will surface in the papers). So we see a young black man drawn to the cowboy film myth and slide so far into this role that he feels invincible: that 'the hero can't die until the last reel.' In the finale he is so lost in the myth that the film cuts between images of him taunting the police ("Who can draw?") and of an imaginary film audience, mesmerised by his heroic stand, spurring him on.

In that context, though, the oppressor of a young black dreamer had a black skin too. What rendered the playing of cowboys and Indians so loaded in South Africa was the racial polarisation. Unfortunately Woods's experience as a white boy in a reserve instilled in him scorn rather than empathy for blacks. It was a long time until he unlearned this visceral racism so focused on their *otherness*: their having "a different color, different smell, different language [. . .]" (43). Woods was a student at the University of Cape Town before he was "jolted" into seeing how warped his thinking was, how callow his dictum: "Either send them back to the reserves or shoot them – it's them or us" (43).

For *them*, for black boys under apartheid, such animated mimicking of Westerns was a chance, however fleeting, to escape a stifling and hobbling reality of violent and virulent racism. And for *us*, for white boys under apartheid, it revived a romanticised colonial destiny: to tame the land by chasing the wild tribes off it, measuring it out, and imposing Western law and order on it. For black and white boys in apartheid stories such playing, however light-hearted on the surface, revealed a deep yearning to match up to a mythical idea of manhood projected onto the screen and held up to them by their fathers. So all played at being cowboys, unaware of just how far the media directs the roles we play and of how we tend to decipher racism through film.

NOTE

1. And yet this again over-polarises things. There were the Mandelas and Tambos, so potently symbolic and bowed-down-to by young black men, yet other older black men (historically revered for their wisdom) feared being accused by younger black men of not fighting against apartheid in the way the latter so visibly were.

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