



The Poitier Effect: Racial Melodrama and Fantasies of Reconciliation, by Sharon Willis

Allissa V. Richardson

To cite this article: Allissa V. Richardson (2018) The Poitier Effect: Racial Melodrama and Fantasies of Reconciliation, by Sharon Willis, *The Black Scholar*, 48:1, 78-80, DOI: [10.1080/00064246.2018.1402261](https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2018.1402261)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2018.1402261>



Published online: 29 Jan 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 61



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

work. Rodney admired James's discovery that as global capitalism revamped itself in response to slave rebellions, revolutions, abolitionism (i.e. high colonialism), the international proletariat, in turn, revamped itself (i.e. anticolonialism, socialism).³

For James, the Haitian Revolution was not a narrative to be read in isolation, but part of an international history of anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist struggles in which the leading role played by Africans across the world had been obscured by philosophical abstractions of both the Left and Right. James was indeed interested in philosophies of history. But he was more interested in history's concrete manifestations, and in the evidence demonstrating the foundational role of the fight against slavery, initiated by Haiti, in the continuous struggles for black self-determination, and human emancipation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴

Notes

1. See, for instance, C.L.R. James, "The Haitian Revolution in the Making of the Modern World," in *You Don't Play With Revolution: The Montreal Lectures of C.L.R. James* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009), 51–71; C.L.R. James, "The Atlantic Slave Trade," in *The Future in the Present* (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), 23–265.

2. W.E.B. Dubois, *The World and Africa: An Enquiry into the Part which Africa has Played in World History* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 60.

3. Walter Rodney, "The African Revolution" (1972), www.marxists.org. Rodney's essay mainly elaborated on James significant pamphlet *A History of Negro of Revolt* (1938).

4. See, especially, C.L.R. James, "Preface," in Jean Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons: Liberty or Death*, translated by A. Faulkner Watts (New York: Edward Blyden Press, 1981).

Jesse Olsavsky is a PhD student at the University of Pittsburgh. He is currently writing a dissertation titled "'Fire and Sword Will Do More Good': Fugitives, Vigilance Committees, and the Making of Revolutionary Abolitionism, 1835–1859." The dissertation examines how the self-defense organizations, known as vigilance committees, aided thousands of runaway slaves, and how those runways, in turn, taught and radicalized the movement to overthrow slavery in the United States.

The Poitier Effect: Racial Melodrama and Fantasies of Reconciliation, by Sharon Willis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. \$22.50 paperback. 256 pages.

Reviewed by Allissa V. Richardson

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Sidney Poitier emerged as a "handy trope for imagining conciliatory interracial encounters," Sharon Willis explains in her new book, *The Poitier Effect: Racial Melodrama and Fantasies of Reconciliation* (1). In a time when the evening news broadcast images of black bodies being

tossed about by high-pressure water hoses, Poitier represented a cool, sophisticated brand of black dignity that was ready to turn the other cheek at every offense. The stoic characters Poitier portrayed are the palatable black public personae that served as the blueprint for President Barack Obama, some 40 years later. In four parts, Willis deftly explains how each of Poitier's major works contributed to the collective view of black men as friend or foe in the popular white imagination.

Willis views Poitier as a so-called "Magical Negro" who serves as a cinematic moral authority for both blacks and whites. She writes that, for blacks, Poitier represented initially the "internalized voice of black righteousness" (2) and a figure for "double consciousness as the superego of the race" (3). For whites, he represented the appearance of improved race relations at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, without actual structural change to its most virulent manifestations. To suggest that Poitier's presence as a film icon can be evaluated solely on the basis of a black/white racial binary would be limiting, however, Willis writes. She claims that the meaning of Poitier is complicated further through feminist and melodramatic lenses. She pulls from film theory to round out her analysis of the star, in four chapters.

In Chapter 1, Willis suggests that Poitier served often as a racial guide or a sage teacher, who sought to show blacks and whites how to coexist. Specifically, in *The Defiant Ones* (1958) or *Pressure Point* (1962), Willis writes that his roles introduced the concept of racial pedagogy over racial stereotypes. Whereas previous eras of African American actors were relegated to

roles of comical coons or sleeping, simple Sambos, Poitier rose as a new symbol of what it meant to simmer with righteous indignation just below the surface, yet never boil over. With his perfect speech and impeccable style of dress, Poitier wore a Dunbaresque mask that forced whites to consider how they regarded all black men. He was the epitome of black respectability.

As the Civil Rights Movement gave way to the revolutionary Black Power Movement of the 1970s, however, Poitier came to represent something else to black people: inauthenticity. In chapter 4, Willis writes that the era of "keeping it real" meant that black masculinity was no longer synonymous with docility. Instead, the era that birthed Blaxploitation films and hip hop suddenly held in high regard symbols of outward rebellion, such as "the black leather jackets, dark sunglasses, big Afros, and bigger guns" (163). The media spectacles that these protest semiotics engendered made Poitier and his ilk seem like remnants of a bygone era of black obsequiousness. In the best context, he had no place in the modern movement. In the worst context, his name could be hurled as the ultimate insult. Willis explains how Kasi Lemmons examines this tension in her film, *Talk to Me*. The film features the rise of the legendary, Washington, DC-area radio shock jock Petey Greene, whom took pride in being the anti-Poitier. Lemmons depicts Greene as the local DJ that working-class black people trusted. (He is credited in the movie with quelling riots in the city on the night that Dr. Martin Luther King died, for example.) In a pivotal scene in the movie, where Greene is facing off with his black supervisor about a controversial

programming topic, he snickers to his boss, “I thought you was *real*. You’re nothing but another white boy with a tan ... you Sidney Poitier-ass nigger ...” (163). As take-no-prisoners black male on-screen heroes (think: Richard Roundtree’s *Shaft*) emerged as the new hyper-masculine archetypes, Poitier receded into the background for nearly 40 years. America’s first black president resurrected him. As President Barack Obama campaigned in the mid-2000s, headlines such as, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”—which harkened back to an eponymous 1967 Poitier film—boasted a new era of alleged post-racialism. Such bold declarations, that America was now colorblind, rested directly upon Obama’s personification of Poitier’s best-known cinematic tropes of stoicism and racial reconciliation, Willis writes. Poitier had provided the field guide for how to make whites feel safe, and Obama leveraged

it, perhaps unwittingly, to shape the racial rhetoric of his historic bid for the presidency.

Willis has crafted a masterful symbolic trajectory of Poitier’s significance to the American political imaginary. This book should have a place in any cultural studies or film theory course. Students or scholars of feminist thought will especially enjoy the section on how Poitier functions in films as a nexus of melodrama for fictitious white women characters, who often supplant his role as racial teacher. In movies such as *The Help* (2011) or *The Long Walk Home* (1990), Willis argues that we often see a white, feminist character chastising her prejudiced peers, whom are often written as one-dimensional caricatures of contemporary evil. These Poitier-proxy women are somehow always on the right side of history and—like Poitier—lull the viewer into believing that the time of racism and its associated injustices are long gone.

Allissa V. Richardson, PhD is Assistant Professor of Journalism at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. She is a Visiting Journalism Fellow at Harvard University and a two-time Apple Distinguished Educator.

New Negro Politics in the Jim Crow South, by Claudrena N. Harold. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016. \$54.95, hardback. 200 pages.

Reviewed by Erik S. Gellman

When historians consider the New Negro movement, they tend to look to Harlem and other Northern urban centers as the

incubators of ideologies and activism. But, according to Claudrena Harold, this focus “obscures the complexity of a historical moment in which black southerners provided exciting organizational models of grassroots labor activism, assisted in the revitalization of black nationalist politics, engaged in robust intellectual arguments on the future of the South, and challenged the governance of historically black colleges” (2). In *New Negro Politics in the Jim Crow South*, Harold analyzes the Southern labor,