



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Advancing Knowledge, Driving Change

MELODRAMA IN BLACK AND WHITE: Uncle Tom and *The Green Mile*

Author(s): Linda Williams

Source: *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Winter 2001), pp. 14-21

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2001.55.2.14>

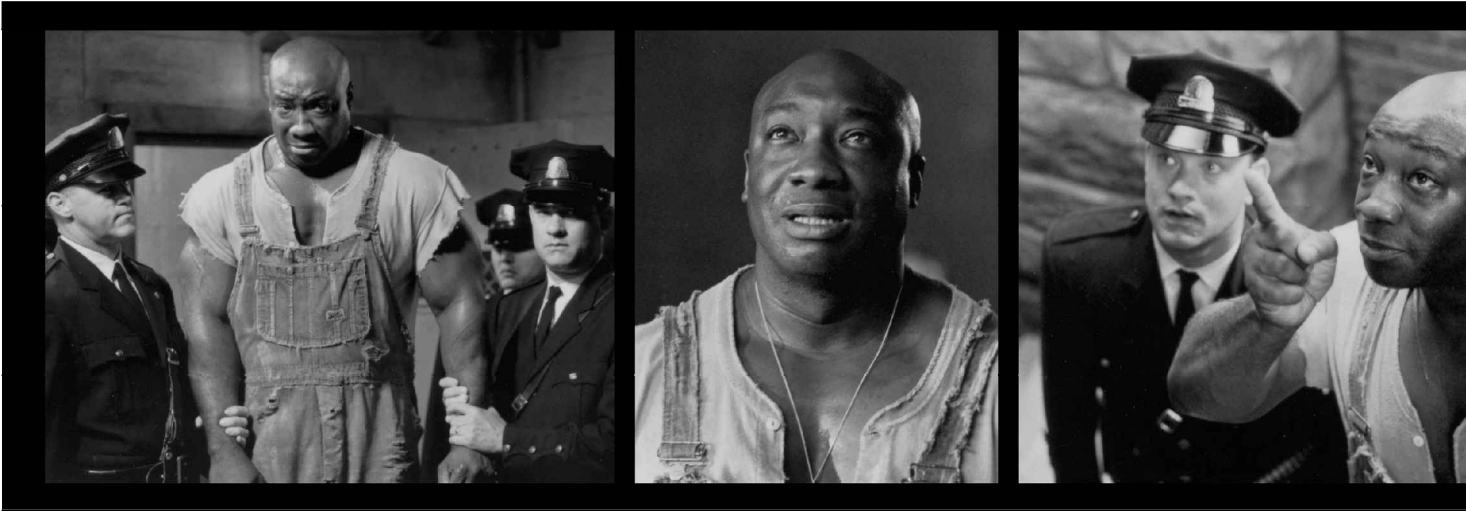
Accessed: 05-01-2017 08:31 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film Quarterly*



MELODRAMA IN BLACK AND WHITE

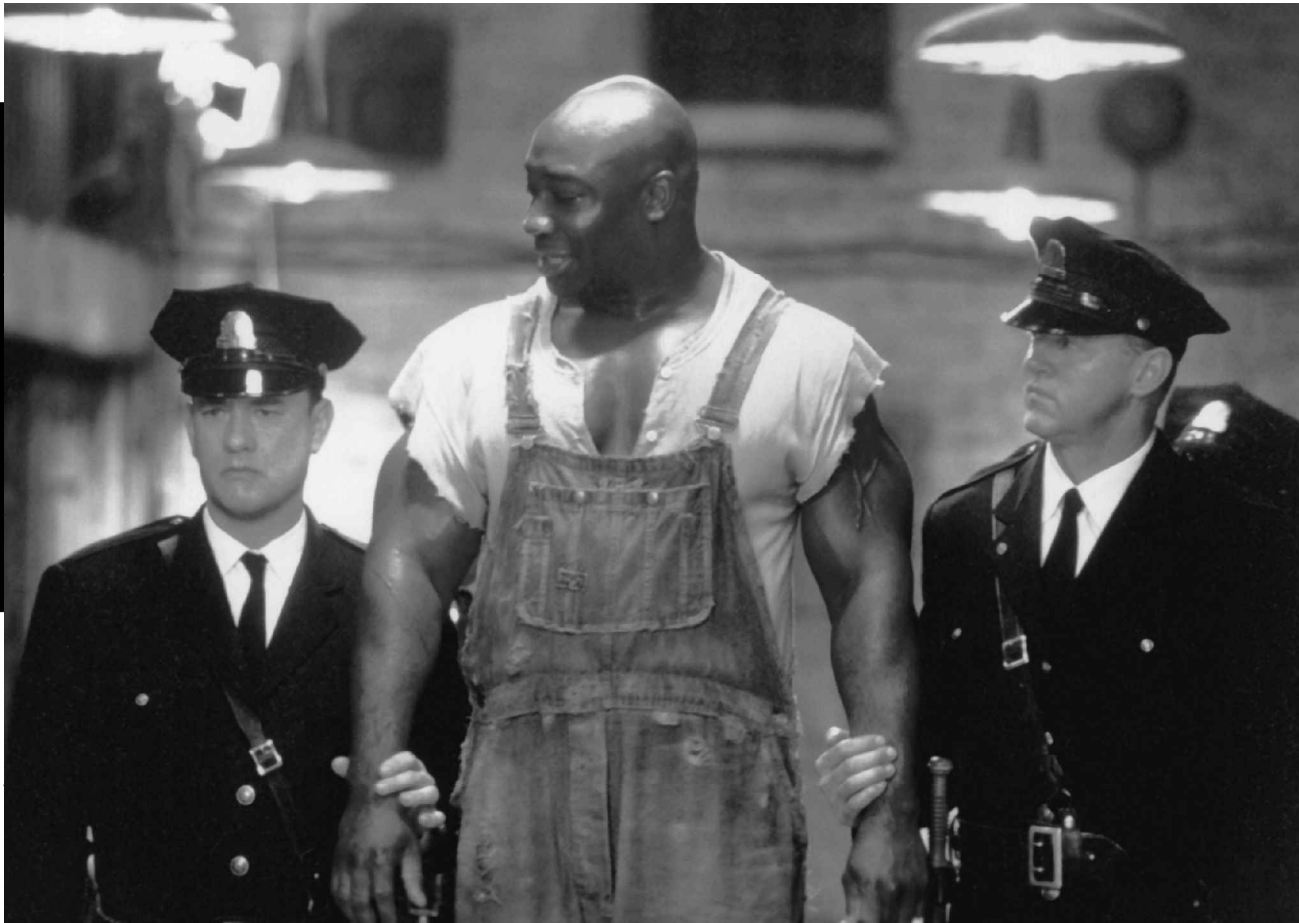
Uncle Tom and *The Green Mile*

Like many people who turned on their televisions to watch the October 3, 1995 verdict in the trial of O.J. Simpson, I felt implicated—by both gender and race—in its melodrama. Though I wanted to think I was angry simply that a man had gotten away with murder, there was no separating my anger on that account from the fact that it was a black man who had seemed to get away with this crime and that it was a white woman he had killed. There was no isolating gender outrage from racial outrage. From the moment I became angry at O. J., I was implicated in a dialectic of racial sympathy and antipathy running through American culture and going back at least as far as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The flip side of this antipathy was the sympathy I had felt for Rodney King, the black man who almost three years earlier had so visibly been the victim of white police violence.

While I was caught up in what felt like positive racial sympathy for the suffering black man in my reactions to the King verdict, I was also caught up in negative racial antipathy in my reaction to the Simpson

verdict. Each of these trials encapsulated a powerful moving picture—in one case, that of a white woman suffering at the hands of a black man, and in the other, a black man suffering at the hands of white male police. In American popular culture, these two antithetical moving pictures have been chasing each other around for a long time in a complex dialectic of feeling. To trace the mass culture genealogy of black and white racial melodrama over the last 150 years is to recognize that these raced and gendered movements to sympathy and antipathy are the very bedrock of American popular culture. I call this bedrock the American melodrama of black and white.¹

Looking back at Uncle Tom from the vantage point of Rodney King and O.J. Simpson, it becomes clear that an emotionally charged “moral legibility” so crucial to the mode of melodrama is intrinsically linked to a “racial legibility” that habitually sees a Manichaean good or evil in the supposed visual “fact” of race itself—whether it is the dark male victim of white abuse or the blonde female victim of black sexual aggres-



Tom Hanks (left), Michael Clarke Duncan (center), and David Morse (right) walk “the mile.”

sion. While the spectacle of Uncle Tom’s suffering at the whip of the white slave driver Simon Legree had once functioned progressively to “humanize” the figure of the slave, the romantic racialism of this negrophilia had humanized him in his very blackness. By the same token, the sympathy I felt for Nicole Simpson, and which I wanted to believe was “race neutral” —uncontaminated by any pre-existing scripts of racial pity or antipathy—could not be untangled from a virulent strand of negrophobia that was inextricably connected to a cycle of racial melodrama begun by the antebellum Uncle Tom and “answered” by the Progressive era’s *The Birth of a Nation*.

Leslie Fiedler once provocatively dubbed the dialectic between these two scenarios as epics of “pro-Tom” sympathy and “anti-Tom” antipathy.² His terms are still useful in that they show us how these works speak to the culture’s most utopian hopes, as well as its most paranoid delusions, about race and gender. Fiedler is wrong, however, to call these works epics, for they are more comprehensible as melodramas, a form that

has been insufficiently understood as a major force of emotionally based ethical reasoning in American mass culture.

The O.J. Simpson murder trial and the previous trial of the police in the beating of Rodney King which so informed it were such galvanizing experiences for Americans of all races, genders, and ethnicities because there was no race neutral, unmelodramatic—or, in Fiedler’s terms, no non-“pro-Tom” or non-“anti-Tom”—way of seeing them. Morally, one had to decide, with each day’s new twist of evidence, who was the racial victim and who the racial villain of these racially saturated scripts. This is not to say, however, as many critics of the Simpson verdict have said, that a pure “colorblind” justice was perverted by the calculated invocation of racialized ways of seeing. Rather, it is to say that from the very beginning of this tradition, the quest for justice has depended upon the application of a melodramatic “Tom lens,” with a habit of seeing virtue in the suffering of the black male body at the hands of white villains and in that of the white

female body at the hands of black villains. In the trial of the police in the beating of Rodney King, this habit of viewing collided with an equally melodramatic “anti-Tom lens” capable of seeing every movement of the black male body as a potential assault on white law and order. Similarly, in the Simpson trial, the alleged attack on the blonde white woman by the jealous black ex-husband invoked an “anti-Tom” lens that immediately racialized the case, as in the infamous darkening of the mug shot of O.J. Simpson as soon as he became a suspect. This racial vilification then collided, in its turn, with a predominantly black jury’s perception that every movement of the white police was an effort to frame the black defendant.

These are exaggerated, delusional, and paranoid racial fantasies that deploy race, even in their most utopian moments, in the most regressive ways possible. For good reason, many thinking people have done their best to resist the lurid confluence of these two trials, to resist being sullied by the commodified frenzy that was O. J. But it is useful to trace the genealogy of black and racial melodrama from a time when white (and male) meant American to a time when that term has come to include diverse races, genders, and ethnicities, not in order to celebrate a progress of inclusion, but to show instead how basic the melodramatics of racial suffering has been to the very process of citizenship in American history.

In considering the confluence of racialized affect in the two race trials mentioned above, we can see that what was happening in the interpenetration of the O. J. Simpson trial with the previous King trial was nothing less than the evolution of the ongoing melodrama of black and white adapted now to the very form of an American jury trial in which verdicts could generate new forms of sympathy and antipathy across and within races. The new entertainment form of the race trial has almost come to usurp fictional filmic courtroom racial melodrama in popularity. Who needs *To Kill a Mockingbird* when we have these true-life trials? Nevertheless, the fictional courtroom race melodrama persists, and it deserves new attention in the wake of the national trauma of the 90s “trials in black and white.”

**To “feel good” is not
to feel happy, but to feel
appropriately identified
with the suffering
of the black saint . . .**

Two recent films suggest ways in which the Tom variation of black and white melodrama continues to be determining of the way mass culture America talks to itself about race: *The Hurricane* (Norman Jewison, 1999) is a literal courtroom drama that climaxes in a verdict of not guilty delivered on appeal to the long-incarcerated middleweight boxer Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, falsely convicted of murder in 1967 and not exonerated until 1985. *The Hurricane* operates in the *Roots* tradition of the proud, self-reliant, seething black man, aggressively rewriting both Tom docility and the paranoid white fantasy of anti-Tom threat. *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999) is about a black man also falsely convicted and incarcerated, and ultimately executed. It is the fictional story, based on a Stephen King serial bestseller, of a seven-foot-tall black giant awaiting execution on death row in a Louisiana penitentiary in 1935. John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) is to be put to death for the rape and murder of two little blonde sisters found bloodied in his arms. Although the film does not actually show the trial that convicts the black man, it replays alternate versions of the evidence, putting the audience in the position of an ideal jury. We are privileged to learn, however—as the jury did not—the truth of Coffey’s innocence and the

circumstances that convicted him. *The Green Mile* is thus a trial movie without a trial, a film structured by an adversarial spinning of stories from defense and prosecutorial points of view.³

Both films are in the mainstream of the negrophilic Tom tradition—that is, in the tradition that privileges sympathy for the unjust suffering of black victims. One film shows righteous black anger at the system; another shows a Christ-like and Tom-like black acceptance of racial injustice. Taken together, they can both be seen to address the problem of an all-white justice that prefers to frame, or accept circumstantial evidence of, black male guilt rather than investigate white evil, as if to remind us, in the wake of the resentful white backlash against the Simpson verdict, that it is white juries who have carried out the vast majority of miscarriages of justice. Rubin Carter and his fan, John Artis, are framed for the murder of whites in a New Jersey bar; the true villain is a New Jersey detective

who is the embodiment of Mark Fuhrman-style race hatred. This detective first arrests Carter as a juvenile offender and then proceeds to hound him for the rest of his life, eventually framing Carter for murder. The bulk of the film concerns the long incarceration and the courtroom melodramas that finally freed the falsely accused Carter.

In *The Green Mile*, Paul Edgecomb (Tom Hanks), the condemned man's kindly jailor/executioner, pays a visit to the attorney who defended John Coffey. In a harrowing scene, this attorney (Gary Sinise), who at first appears to be a just man, launches into a story of a mongrel dog. The dog is likened to a "niggra" that you keep around "because you think it loves you." At the end of the interview the attorney dramatically reveals the mutilated face of his young son, once bitten by such a mongrel dog. At this point it suddenly becomes clear that the fair-minded, loving father who defended Coffey is also a hate-filled racist who believes fervently that "nigras" are dogs. Thus both films pin their unjust verdicts on administrators of justice whose race hatred forms part of a personal vendetta against the animality of black men. And both films pose the question of whether interracial love is possible in the midst of such villainous white racism.

In the bitter aftermath of the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson trials, the question of how blacks and whites feel toward one another is very much on the agenda of both these films so earnestly devoted to some sort of racial healing. "Hate put me in prison," says Rubin Carter to the young black man working with three liberal white Canadians for his release. "Love's gonna bust me out." Love in this film is both interracial (it includes the white Canadians) and intra-racial (it features the troubled black youth who adopts Carter as a surrogate father). *The Hurricane* thus operates both to express and to soothe black anger by showing that there is both race hatred and selfless interracial love. It also operates to soothe white guilt by showing that white justice can correct its errors and cancel out the hate of the rogue cop.

Both films thus answer the question of the possibility of interracial love in the Tom tradition of affirmation. *The Hurricane* presents the familiar post-*Roots* revision of Tom's Christ-like docility in the figure of the proud, righteously angry black man who, like Kunta Kinte, resists becoming a docile slave. In Denzel Washington's assured and underplayed Academy Award-nominated performance we appreciate the ultimately futile effort Carter makes to cut himself off from the love of family and friends on the outside in

order to be hard enough to survive on the inside. In contrast, however, *The Green Mile* anachronistically embraces the Christlike docility of the Tom figure. So how is it possible, in 1999, in the aftermath of both the King beating and the Simpson trial, that a film which reinvents the meek Tom stereotype in the body of a seven-foot, 300-lb, hypermasculine giant should capture the imagination of American audiences in a way that the true story of Hurricane Carter's incarceration and exoneration did not? How do we understand the anachronism of this return to Tom, arguably the most popular story and iconography of nineteenth-century American culture, in the form of a courtroomless courtroom melodrama? For John Coffey's complete lack of anger toward the system that executes extends in a direct line from the Tom tradition. Why, in other words, in an era in which the figure of the Tom has been so thoroughly discredited by blacks and whites alike, has such a kindly but ignorant Tom-like hero been resuscitated in the body of a black giant? I think the answer is not simply that anxious white American audiences still need to be reminded of the humanity of black Americans in the same way that they once learned this lesson through the Christ-like docility of Uncle Tom. Rather, a reconfigured version of the Tom scenario still seems to be necessary to perform the "moral legibility" so important in melodrama's recognition of virtue.⁴ Indeed, moral legibility becomes allied with racial legibility as race melodrama strains to see a Manichaean good or evil in the apparent visual "fact" of race itself. In this case, Coffey's virtue and docility, in conjunction with his hypermasculine physicality, work to allow the film (and King's novel) safely to reenact all the worst anti-Tom scenarios of the paranoid white racist imagination in order to disavow them. It is remarkable, in fact, just how often Coffey's virtue puts him in a position of reenacting all the worst anti-Tom fantasies of black sexual threat.

Consider Coffey's miracles. The first occurs after he has been incarcerated in Edgecomb's death-row cell block. Edgecomb, who takes his duty of conducting smooth and swift executions seriously, and who anachronistically displays no prejudice against his seven-foot-tall black prisoner, suffers from a painful urinary infection. Coffey lures Edgecomb to his cell and grabs him in what at first appears to be a sexual attack, placing his hand on Edgecomb's crotch. The light grows brighter, and something magical passes between Coffey and his jailor, leaving Coffey with the pain and suffering that was once Edgecomb's. Coffey then emits the evil humors of the illness in the form of a large

swarm of insects from his mouth. Whatever his miraculous healing power consists of, it requires Coffey to embrace the pain, to “take it back,” to absorb the pain into his own capacious body, then to emit it orally, in a grand Stephen King coup de théâtre, as swarming insects. Soon Edgecomb urinates with enormous relief and, in a comic sequence not found in King’s novel, makes love to his wife no less than four times that night, later coyly telling Coffey that his missus was pleased by his cure, “several times.” Thus potency passes from the black man to the white through this ritual “laying on of hands.” If love—both the desire for and the fear of interracial love—is one of the important questions that black and white racial melodrama is “talking to itself” about, then *The Green Mile* is the film that seems to most strenuously want to prove, as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did before it, the virtue of a selfless, uncarnal black love. It does so, however, by placing its black and white bodies in the most compromising positions, enacting, in this case, the same interracial homoerotic fear it wishes to disavow.

Consider, for example, the staging of the film’s next miracle. Realizing that Coffey is more saint than sinner, Edgecomb concocts a plan for him to cure the brain tumor of the warden’s wife. This tumor has transformed her from a sweet-tempered woman into a foul-mouthed harridan. Audaciously springing Coffey from death row late one night, Edgecomb drives him in a truck to the warden’s home. Facing down the warden’s shotgun, Edgecomb leads Coffey to the bedridden victim, who looks frail and innocent with her long blonde hair and white nightgown. She greets him at one moment with obscenity—“Don’t come near me, big fucker!”—at another moment with kindly sympathy for his scarred arms. Coffey kisses her forehead and then her mouth, reenacting every white racist’s worst fears of the black sexual attack on the white woman. This sexless interracial kiss seems to want to master prophylactically the white man’s fear of black man’s sexual threat to “his” woman. Like the compromising touch to Tom Hanks’s penis, the kiss disavows the very forbidden desire it enacts, asserting transcendent purity in the face of lurid, interracial carnality.

“Sucking” up all the woman’s pain—and in the process her “dirty” mouth—into his own mouth, Coffey works his miracle under the kindly gaze of Edgecomb and the astonished gaze of the warden. The house shakes, the woman’s appearance changes, and another cure is accomplished. Now it is the wife’s turn to initiate contact: she walks over to Coffey, places her St. Christopher medal around his neck, and, reaching way

up, embraces him. Once again, the kind of contact that would drive a conventional white racist to murder is provocatively offered up under the guise of a sublime form of transcendent love.

This melodramatic spectacle of the black man embracing the pain of whites in the most compromising of ways is repeated several times throughout the film, exceeding even *Uncle Tom’s* always potentially incendiary interracial sympathy for Little Eva. Indeed, it is worth asking why it is that American audiences, apparently both black and white, have chosen to warm their hearts with this story of a black man on death row who suffers mightily, and who does so by acting out so many scenarios of apparent sexual assault, in the end only to cure his jailor and then the warden’s wife. Something more important is going on than the assertion that black prisoners on death row can sometimes be innocent.

Coffey’s miracles entail repeated, ritualistic, prophylactic enactments of interracial sexual threats that ultimately function to master white fear and paranoia. In this fantasy, the white woman becomes the sexually obsessed harridan that the white man fears she might become if corrupted by the black man’s carnality. But—miracle of miracles—it is precisely the contact with that black flesh that cures the woman of her carnality. Neither a threat to the white man’s phallic power nor to the white woman’s purity, John Coffey’s miracles are there to prove—his defense attorney’s claim to the contrary—that the “mongrel” will not screw his master’s wife or rape his children.

The film’s final miracle is not another cure, but—in this courtroomless courtroom drama—it provides miraculous insight into the circumstantial evidence that convicted Coffey. Inadvertently touching the condemned man in the next cell, Coffey has a vision that allows him to see that it is this man who committed the crimes for which he himself is about to be executed. Coffey then uses his powers to orchestrate the premature execution of this condemned man at the hand of a villainous guard. By way of explanation, Coffey then offers Edgecomb his hand, and through this touch Edgecomb attains a true vision of the crime in a cinematic flashback that the film audience now sees as well. We learn that what had looked like the rape and murder of two young white girls was another attempt by Coffey, this time failed, to “take it back.”

So much for the black love, and rescue, of whites. What about the reciprocal white love, and rescue, of blacks, the kind of love that saved Rubin Carter? Having ascertained Coffey’s innocence, what does Paul

Edgecomb do to prove *his* love to the black man? This is where an already strange film gets even stranger. When Edgecomb asks Coffey if he wants to run away, Coffey, like Uncle Tom, has no interest in escape. Escape is futile to a saint fatigued by life's ugliness. It thus remains for Edgecomb to make himself and the audience "feel good" about this execution. To "feel good" is not to feel happy, but to feel appropriately identified with the suffering of the black saint and thus, melodramatically, to recognize one's own. This recognition of virtue does not necessarily mean feeling morally exempt from any culpability in the process—we learn that Edgecomb will quit his job soon after and will suffer life-long guilt for his deed. However, through the jailor's sympathetic suffering with the condemned man, we—like Coffey—are invited to forgive the violence of the execution. For we are led to believe that if anyone else had carried it out, it would have hurt more.

Edgecomb's first act of sympathy is to ask Coffey what he can do to make him happy before he dies. In a departure from the novel, Darabont's film has him answer, "Ain't never seen me a flicker show." Cut to John Coffey, open-mouthed in reverent awe before the image of Fred and Ginger singing, "Heaven, I'm in heaven . . ." in the "Cheek to Cheek" number from *Top Hat*. Backlit from the projector beam, sitting alone in the prison auditorium, John Coffey murmurs, "Angels, just like up in heaven." Instead of escape, Coffey is given Depression-era cinematic escapism. He will now be ready to die happy if he can only negotiate the trials of the electrocution itself. Electrocution, "with love," operates in this film much like the last-minute legal rescue that frees Rubin Carter. The greater or lesser humanity of this execution thus becomes the sole arena with which we are to measure the white virtue of John Coffey's jailors.

Because the procedures of execution by electrocution have become familiar over the course of this nearly three-hour film (which features no less than three excruciatingly detailed examples, one of which is horribly botched due to the sadism of one of the guards), we are thus in a position to judge a "good" as opposed to a "bad" execution. Indeed, the very fact

that we are invited to make such distinctions suggests the degree to which this film is reconciled to the inevitability of innocent black suffering. John Coffey's execution will prove to be "good." However, the very fact that we are engaged in such judgments at a time when the death penalty is under attack for having put to death a disproportionate number of innocent black men—as DNA evidence is rapidly proving—suggests that this film is addressing deeper levels of white guilt than the execution of one black saint in Louisiana.

When Coffey first enters the electrocution chamber he cringes, losing his nerve before the hate exuded by the family of his supposed victims. But Edgecomb and his team of loving, professional executioners tell him to feel *their* love instead. With this love Coffey can proceed to withstand his execution. When asked

if he has anything to say, he apologizes, not for what he has done, since he is innocent, but "for what I am"—by which we can only imagine that he means a black giant whose very bodily existence frightens paranoid white racists. When it is time to put on the hood that will cover his face, Coffey again shows fear—like a little child, he is afraid of the dark. Edgecomb's next kindness is to leave off the hood, his one small act of resistance to state protocol. The execu-

tion then takes place, with Edgecomb and his men hiding their tears.

What are we to make of such an interracial act of violence in the name of interracial love? It is as if Master George, at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, not only failed to rescue Uncle Tom, but wielded Simon Legree's whip in the final beating—with love. It is also as if the relative kindness or brutality of that whiplash were now the only possible measure of white virtue. We are meant to see that what looks like evil—white guards in a Louisiana prison operating an electric chair to execute an innocent black man—is, no less than Coffey's apparently violent embrace of the two raped and murdered white girls, a melodramatic misrecognition of virtue.

This is not the first time mainstream black and white melodrama has posed the spectacle of black punishment by white authority as a disguised form of kindness. In a key moment of the final episode of the

***What are we to make of
such an interracial act
of violence in the name
of interracial love?***

television adaptation of *Roots*, when the kindly and incongruously innocuous white friend whips Chicken George's son, Tom, he is presented as doing so only in order to prevent a more brutal whipping from a racist nightrider. With friends like these we might say that black men in these negrophilic versions of the melodrama of black and white hardly need enemies. This revision of the classic icon of the black man beaten by the white villain operates in marked contrast to the sadistic, vengeance-seeking crackers who taunt Coffey and tell him they hope it hurts. These loving professionals hate their job but do it anyway. Either way, the black man gets beaten and executed. The lesson for the black onlooker may very well be that white love, no less than white hate, is lethal.

How a still-majority white America is to carry out the incarceration and execution of more and more African-American men while still feeling virtuous seems to be the deeper issue at stake in this new twist on the "trial" movie produced in the wake of 90s "trials in black and white."⁵ O. J. Simpson's not-guilty verdict, no less than Rubin Carter's, has proven to be the great exception to the rule of black incarceration and execution. As we have seen, the courtroom melodrama of *The Hurricane* belatedly rescues the falsely accused black man so that we can believe in the possibility of racial justice. The tellingly more popular and much more outlandish fantasy of *The Green Mile* enacts a different kind of rescue: it rescues white Americans from the guilt of putting the innocent black man to death. Both films are designed to deliver the twin morals spoken aloud in *The Hurricane*: that "not all white people are racists" and that "not all black people are murderers"—feeble liberal lessons attempting to answer the resentments raised by the King and Simpson trials.

We can legitimately ask why, in *The Green Mile*, John Coffey is never seen working his miracles for fellow African Americans, only for whites. Even Uncle Tom suffered for the sin of aiding his fellow slaves. We can ask, for both films, why it is not the justice system but only the personal villains who are exposed, when surely the pressing issue before the nation is how to introduce real "moral legitimacy" into a thoroughly

unequal system of justice. We can also ask why it is not possible to tell a story that situates the black man somewhere in between Rubin Carter's righteous anger and John Coffey's apology for being who he is. But we already know that the reason is melodrama in general, and Tom and anti-Tom melodrama in particular. Melodrama, as the very logic of the excluded middle, cannot tell the story of the middle ground. We have seen over and over that a predominantly white America needs to believe in its own virtue vis-à-vis either the extreme suffering or the extreme villainy of the black male body. Much in both of these films is thus predictable.

What is striking in *The Green Mile*, however, is the remarkable extent to which the establishment of white virtue rests upon a paradoxical administration of pain and death to the black body so that white people may weep. What was true in the mid-nineteenth century is thus strangely true today. If the Tom melodrama has always wanted to see the black man's love as the special cure for the white man's hate—even the very hate that kills him—this latest incarnation of the melodrama of black and white offers a new twist: it stages the worst fears of anti-Tom race hatred in the guise of the expression of Tom love. Perhaps

because we are much more familiar with the purer stagings of either pro-Tom love or anti-Tom threat, it is difficult to untangle the threads of both in this particular film. But there is no other testament to the endurance of both the Tom and the anti-Tom traditions of racial love and racial hate than the popularity of this apparently anachronistic film.

Black and white racial melodrama, like melodrama itself, has a strange way of renewing itself for each new age. There is much to deride in this Manichaean dance of victims and villains as it continues into the new millennium. My goal, however, is neither to rehabilitate the mode of melodrama nor even to weigh in on one side or the other of the "black and white" resentments about race. Rather, just as the Simpson verdict showed me how I, as a white woman, have been implicated in the raced and gendered dimensions of this discourse, I consider it sufficient for the moment to recognize its almost incalculable influence on Amer-

***The lesson for the black
onlooker may very well
be that white love,
no less than white hate,
is lethal.***

ican attitudes toward race. We need to trace the genealogies of a story and an iconography that is central to the “moral legibility” of race in American culture. The study of black and white racial melodrama has the potential to explain why it is that in a democracy ruled by rights, we do not gain the moral upper hand by saying simply that rights have been infringed. We say, instead, much more powerfully: “I have been victimized; I have suffered, therefore give me rights.” To understand racial melodrama is to see why repeated calls for more accurate, or more “realistic” representations of racially marked characters are powerless to overturn deeply embedded racial stereotypes that seem hopelessly outmoded, yet live on in the culture. Until we understand the melodramatic imagination that these stereotypes serve, and the historical dynamic of its popular cycles, we will never grasp why we are compelled to feel for the raced and gendered sufferings of some and to hate the raced and gendered villainy of others.

Linda Williams directs the Program in Film Studies at U.C. Berkeley. Her most recent book is *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

Notes

1. There is an extended analysis of black and white race melodrama in my book *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001). This essay is adapted from the conclusion to that book.
2. Leslie Fiedler, *What Was Literature: Class Culture and Mass Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).
3. Carol Clover has offered a fascinating commentary on the importance of the adversarial structure of Anglo-American law and the entertainment form of the trial movie it has generated, which makes Americans, as she puts it, “a nation of jurors.” This is the case even in what Clover elsewhere calls “courtroomless” courtroom dramas—dramas in which trials do not take place but in which the audience is still treated like a jury (unpublished manuscript [1998, p. 272]).
4. These terms are borrowed from Peter Brooks’ influential study of nineteenth-century melodrama, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). Brooks argues that melodrama is a form that seeks to articulate transcendent forms of pure good and evil in a “post-sacred” modern world that no longer believes fully in transcendence (15).
5. I discuss the form and function of these trials as forms of melodramatic entertainment in a chapter of *Playing the Race Card* called “Trials in Black and White.”