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Allegories of Empire

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Allegories of Empire

Django/Dorner/blackness/blowback

Walter Johnson

Name; A word or set of words by which a person, animal, place, or thing is known, addressed, or referred to. Synonyms: reputation, title, appellation, denomination, repute.

—CHRISTOPHER DORNER

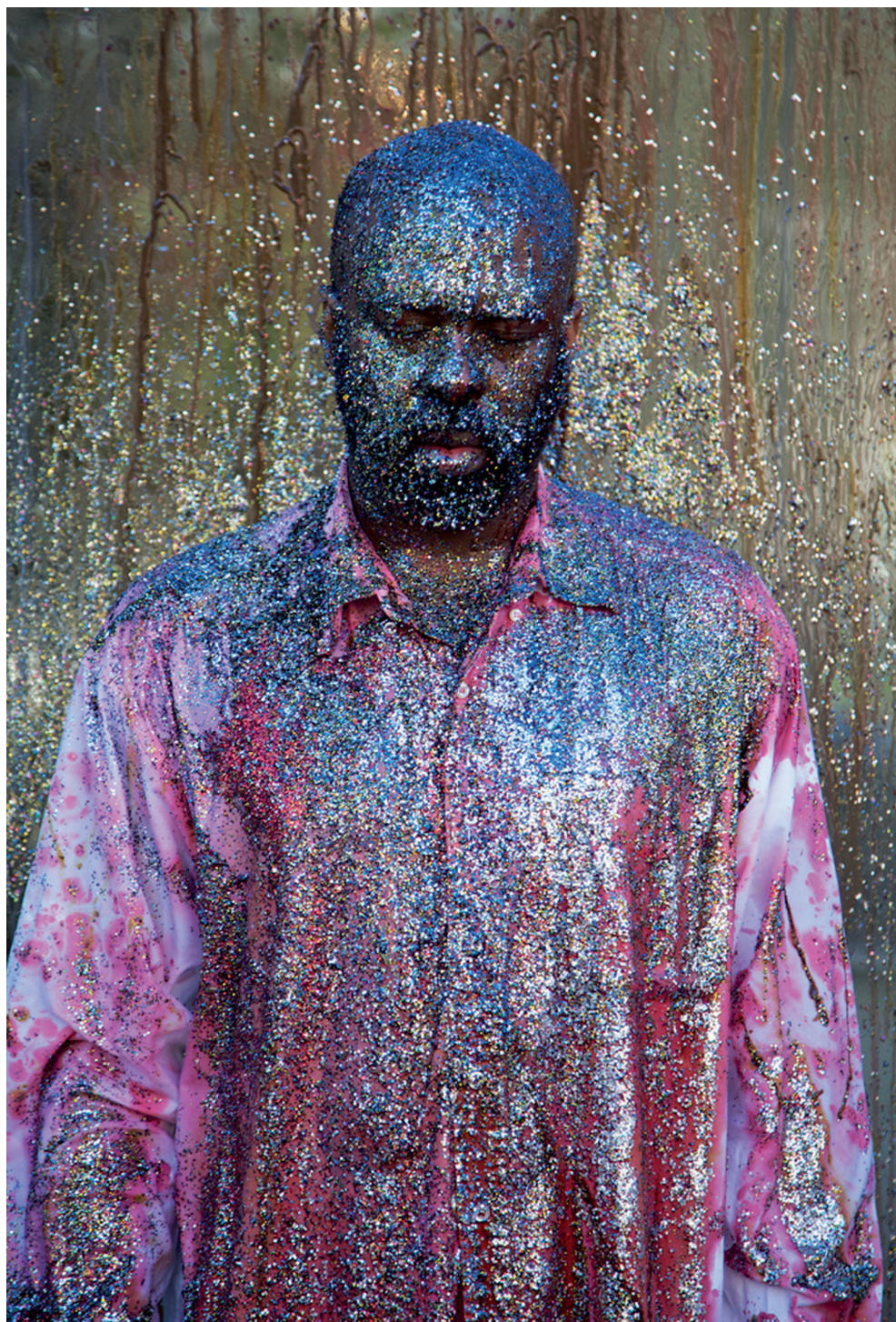
The ‘D’ is silent.

—DJANGO

*What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
... Or does it explode?*

—LANGSTON HUGHES

LET US BEGIN with a declaration of war written by a man who wanted only to clear his name. Several days before he began murdering people in the hope that their deaths would avenge the racism he had suffered during his career as an officer in the LAPD, Christopher Dorner posted it on Facebook. Dorner, a thirty-three year-old retired Naval Reservist who had been recently fired by the LAPD, apparently went on to kill four people, before dying on February 12, 2013 in a shootout with local, state, and federal law enforcement near Big Bear Lake in Southern California. About midway through the document, Dorner mentioned the movie, *Django Unchained*, which was playing in theaters at the time of his own brief, murderous debut. The reference to *Django* was a passing one, part of a list of name checks (Charlie Sheen, Larry David, Ellen Degeneres), thumbnail reviews (“Dave Brubeck’s ‘Take Five’ is the greatest piece of music ever, period”), and political opinions (in favor of Gay Marriage, Hilary 2016, and a ban on Assault Weapons). “Christopher Walz,” Dorner wrote, addressing one of *Django*’s leading actors, “you impressed me in *Inglourious Basterds*. After viewing *Django Unchained*, I was sold. I have come to the conclusion that you are well on your way to becoming one of the greats, if not already, and show



Production photograph from “The Marked Man.”

Photo credit: Jayson Keeling and Andy Brown. ©2011 | Jayson Keeling

glimpses of Daniel Day Lewis and Morgan Freeman-esque type qualities of greatness. Trust me when I say that you will be one of the greatest ever.” The tone typifies the document. Dorner addresses those whom he has followed at a distance as an equal; he encourages them, he consoles them, he praises them; or, if he sees fit, he smacks them down and puts them in their proper place. He sits in judgment. His is the voice of a Regular Guy metastasized into importance—omniscience, omnipotence?—by the threat of violence. Coming in the middle of an exposé of racism in the LAPD and a long list of threats against named individuals and their families, these lists are disorienting: the dying thoughts of an observant man who thought people would actually care what he had to say about anything.

There was something obviously filmic about Dorner’s plot from the beginning. The storyline is a familiar one, a legend. Disillusioned hero repossesses his life by declaring war upon the corrupt powers that have created and subsequently abandoned him: Rambo, the Deer Hunter, the Shooter, Jason Bourne, Christopher Dorner. He knows how they will try to track and trap him, their tools, their methods, their weapons, their secrets. In case there was any doubt, Dorner listed them: AAFs, ACMs, AIFs, JAMs, TACs, BGEs, AQAPs, AQIMs, AQIZs, TTPOs; airships, gunships, SA-7 Manpads, Winchester Ranger SXT 9mm 147 grain bullets, and Barret .50s—the last being a semi-automatic weapon in his possession capable of stopping a truck, or, indeed, an APC (Armored Personnel Carrier). But it is the oblique connection to *Django* that drew the most attention. It was made, criticized, disavowed, reasserted to the point that we might say that the comparison of *Django* and Dorner has become inescapable.

After Dorner, *Django* began to look different. I do not yet mean different in a moral sense, although I will come to that. I simply mean that the impact of scenes in the movie is amplified into new meaning by the feedback of Dorner’s document and his bloody death: by his trying to use the master’s tools to tear down the master’s house, by his revulsion at being called n—r, by his outrage at adjutant blacks lording it over the rank and file, by his lone-ranger stand against the withering fire of the small army assembled to hunt him, by his ultimate immolation in a burning house, by his claim of personal, individual, transcendence—“I’m not an aspiring rapper, I’m not a gang member, I’m not a dope dealer, I don’t have multiple babies mommas,”—and by his insistence on murdering people in the cause of curating his proper

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name. "I am that one in ten thousand," he seemed to want to say. But how did Dorner and Django both get the same idea?

I want to suggest that the similarities between *Django* and Dorner are not only inescapable, but overdetermined. I use the word "overdetermined" in the strict sense (see Louis Althusser's book *For Marx*), as in "framed by the same historical and social parameters" rather than in any more generous sense. And the material parameters I have in mind are defined by the hypertrophic triad characteristic of Southern California at the dawn of the twentieth-first century and emblematic of the United States as a whole: the entertainment industry in the age of black celebrity; the "defense" industry in the era of imperial aggression; and the prison industry in the time of Three Strikes, Stop-and-Frisk, and the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA). I am thus suggesting that there is something fundamental to be learned about our moment in time by analyzing these two angry men side by side.

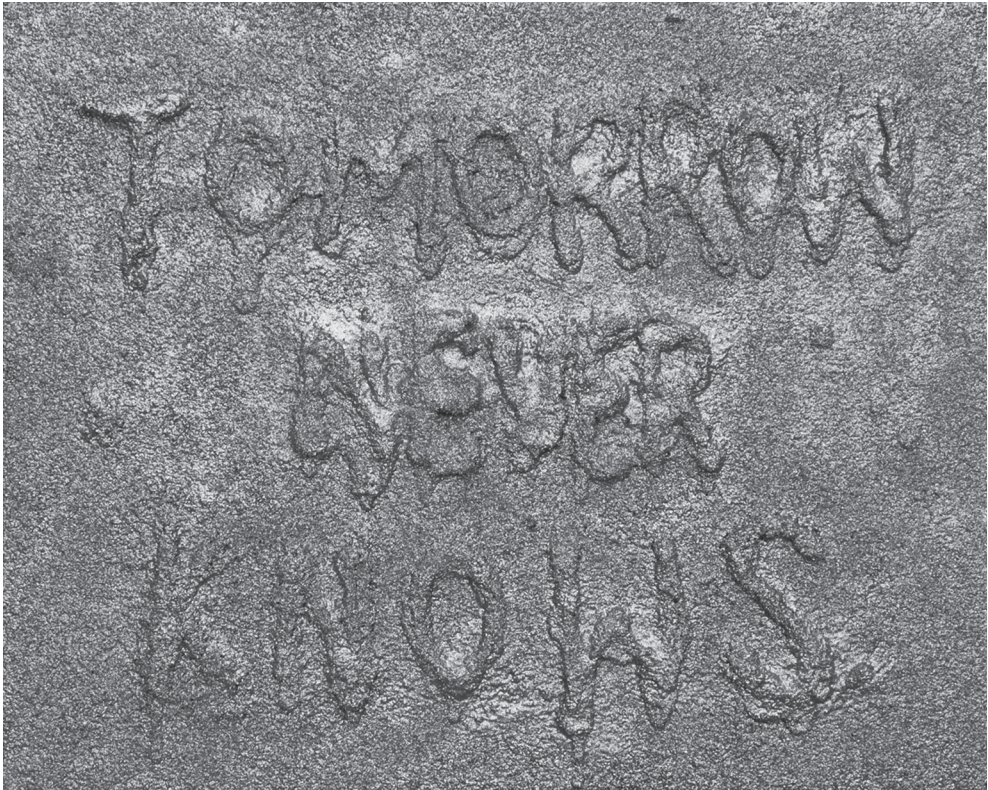
To begin with, neither Dorner's war, nor Django's, was framed by the master narratives of Black History Month: the story of the free-

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dom struggle, the quest for civil rights. Dorner's declaration of war recounts his life-long struggle against racism and his eventual disillusionment with the failure of the set terms of the civil-rights-style freedom struggle: his outrage at continued racist malfeasance within the LAPD in the aftermath of the consent decree by which the LAPD was governed in the years following the Rodney King beating, and the whitewash of police misconduct that framed the Board of Review hearing that led to his own firing. As much as any man—any black man—could play the game by the rules,

Dorner claims, he had. Failing that, finally, he went to war—but in his own name, not that of civil rights, nor even "freedom." He went to war for revenge: to take from others what he felt he had himself been denied.

Like Dorner, *Django*'s origin is beyond the horizon of civil rights. Although there is a lot of back-and-forth about "freedom" in *Django*, the film follows a plotline drawn according to some other start than the Northern one. In the film's opening scene, when Dr. King Schultz tells the slaves in the coffle that they are free to go, they shuffle over to kill the trader who was taking them to market rather than taking off their chains. More outrageously, at the film's end, a mirror-image group of slaves sit, slack-jawed in their cage, as Django rides away and the credits roll them into eternal bewildered bondage. For a movie that is ostensibly concerned with its title character's emancipation, *Django* is casual to the point of incoherence about the moment and process



by which Django actually gains his freedom. Indeed, the entire movie pivots on a casual dismissal of Django's stated aspiration to free his wife. Standing in Calvin Candie's parlor with Broomhilda's free papers in his pocket, Dr. King Schultz gestures Django's "freedom struggle" into meaninglessness with his refusal to shake on it.

The resulting carnage disrupts not only the narrative momentum of the movie theretofore—the plot hatched by Django and Dr. King Schultz to get Broomhilda free—but also the existing narrative conventions of mainstream movies about slavery and, indeed, of African American history as more generally written. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Glory*, *Amistad*, *Lincoln*, *Mississippi Burning*, etc: all these movies tell the same essential story of how good white people helped good black people become free. They are parables of right-minded white liberalism; historical legends of the era of civil rights. With the death of Dr. King (!) Schultz, *Django* becomes a different sort of movie, one in which the plot is no longer framed by the meta-narrative of freedom struggle and the aspiration of interracial cooperation; or, put more pointedly, by the thematics of white racial mentorship made seemingly inevitable by the historical extension of previously all-white rights to blacks. With the death of Dr. King Schultz, Django becomes, instead, something

**Tomorrow
never knows.**

Mixed media
on canvas, 20
× 24 in. ©2010
Jayson Keeling.

new, challenging, and disorienting in the history of mainstream film: a movie about a black man taking revenge upon white people. “Kill white people and get paid for it?” says Django, bespeaking as much *Django*’s novel approach to making money off of movies as its hero’s amazement at the bounty that lies ahead of him.

Imagining revenge as a motive force of African American history has an interesting effect. It displaces, if only for a moment, the movie-made notion of the Civil Rights Negro as the once-and-for-all subject of black history. Freedom, to Django, doesn’t mean being “free to go.” It means being free to stay, and to punish at will those white people who have wronged him in the past, to make his own history in the South rather than in exile. *Django* and *Dorner* are stories of self-possession, of black men making their bodies

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into weapons, rather than tools, and of the embodied knowledge of violence. As such, they resonate with the detailed descriptions that escaped slaves like Frederick Douglass, John Parker, and Solomon Northup gave of their fights with slaveholders and overseers, descriptions that richly detailed the sanguinary pleasure of kicking the shit out of white people (Parker bragged that he could have written an entire book about the employment of “the hob-nailed boot” as a weapon). And they are the memorials of men whose stories would not otherwise have been told. This is most obviously the

case with Christopher Dorner, whose accusations of systemic racism and police misconduct were only recognized (would only have been recognized . . . were, in some way, only recognizable) when he began to lay them edge-to-edge with dead bodies: a young couple in a parking lot; two of the police officers who were hunting him; and, finally, himself.

But it is also true for *Django*. Quentin Tarantino’s suggestion at the Oscars that the over-the-top violence and race-baiting language in the film were designed to “start a conversation about slavery,” was irritatingly dismissive of the “conversation about slavery” that has been going on among Africans and African Americans since the middle of the fifteenth century (in a way that is surely related to the way that the movie is utterly dismissive of the aspirations, capabilities, and struggles of the enslaved people who provide the backdrop for Django’s bloody auto-apotheosis—the nine-thousand, nine-hundred, and ninety-nine pusillanimous losers for whom Calvin Candie, Django, and Quentin Tarantino all seem to have equal contempt). And yet it is suggestive of what Tarantino, at least, thought it took to grab the spotlight. Django

and Dorner, then, seek inclusion not through integration—not through civil rights, or even “freedom”—but through recognition as men; as killers; as Americans.

As men, okay. Killers, obviously. But, as Americans? Well, yes. Begin with the obvious: Django, the civilian subcontractor, and Dorner, the soldier, were both federal employees. And their stories are, in different ways, aligned with the story of the United States of America and with patriotism. Dorner, for his part, directly and repeatedly pledges his allegiance. His “manifesto” was addressed to “America,” and contained the declaration “I am an American by choice” as well as repeated references to his status as a veteran, a testament of his loyalty to the President of the United States, and an explicit declaration that his intention was to wage war on (and only on) the LAPD that included the offer of a sort of non-aggression pact to the FBI. In the days immediately following this declaration of war, media outlets apparently struggled to find a photograph of Dorner where he was not wearing a Navy uniform and standing smiling in front of an American flag; a dilemma finally resolved by the discovery and wide-distribution of a photo of him frowning in front of a bank machine. *Django*’s alignment with the sovereign power of the United States is less overt, but nevertheless frames the story: his status as a bounty hunter working under the auspices of federal marshals allows Django to murder white men in both Texas and Tennessee and then walk safely away from the mobs assembled to murder him.

Indeed, in *Django* the United States functions as a sort of a refuge from slavery, as the site of imagined freedom. When, at the outset of the movie, Dr. King Schultz unfastens the chains from the ankles of the coffle of slaves in which he had found Django, he urges the others to take themselves out of the state of Texas to some “territory” where they would be free—a touchingly patriotic interpretation of laws, specifically the Fugitive Slave Law, that ensured that the legal status of those slaves *anywhere* in the United States of America in 1858 was exactly the same as it would have been under what the psychopathic slaveholder Calvin Candie menacingly terms, “the laws of Chickasaw County.” Where was he telling them to go? Canada? Haiti? Liberia?

As American as these legends of federal power are, Dorner and Django are Americans of a very particular sort. They are outlaws, seekers, survivors, gunmen. They are characters determined by the moral and psychological parameters of the spaghetti Western: socially isolated, emotionally wounded, and preternaturally deadly; apostle avengers

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of a moral code seated above the law (“America”) and set against the standing order of a fallen world (the LAPD, Chickasaw County). And they live lives framed by the recent history of U.S. imperialism that provides the backdrop to their stories. As the historian and cultural critic Richard Slotkin argued long-ago in *Gunfighter Nation*, Westerns are allegories of imperialism. They are tales of the “wild zone” that forms the bedrock of the subsequent social order, of the lawlessness endemic to the establishment and perpetuation of sovereignty—of law. Of how the West was won. Another way to say this would be to suggest that the Western-as-allegory-of-empire occurs at the point where redeeming the fallen polity in the names of its own stated aspirations requires a lone hero to step beyond the boundaries of law (see *Rambo*). Dorner and Django embody

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and reconfigure the gunfighter role emblematic of the history of America-as-Empire: they reflect the ideological parameters of an age in which liberty, self-possession—in both the classically liberal and the ruthlessly lethal sense—and conquest have become as indelibly associated as the red, white, and blue of the ubiquitous flag.

But lone heroes sometimes go over the edge, only to return with their guns blazing. Most notably, of course, one-time CIA client Osama Bin Laden; nurtured and deployed according to the dictates of one fight, only to grow into the figurehead monster of another. This seems to me to be the final, fiercely determined and yet radically potential meaning of the war fought by Dorner, at least. Christopher Dorner represents the explosive recombination of the frustrated aspiration and lethal firepower unstably compressed in the word “America:” the history of contemporary blackness as imperial blowback.

Django’s patriotism domesticates that fearful possibility. The film’s identification of the United States of America with Freedom allows audience, protagonist, and polity to remain aligned as Django guns down dozens of officially certified villains. The power of the film resides in its ability to provide a sort of racial catharsis, a historical do-over in which America was anti-slavery (even if Mississippi was not) and a man like Django (even if he were the only one in ten-thousand) might lead us home. But this is where Dorner has a lesson to teach us about Django. There is no place in the history of the actually existing United States for a black gunner: not Nat Turner, not Robert Charles, not Fred Hampton, not Christopher Dorner. Django, alight at film’s end on his dancing horse at the edge of the cane field, is about to meet America in its other guise: the “domestic insurrection” clause in the

Constitution, enlisting the United States Army in the defense of slavery; the Dred Scott decision, rendering the idea of being black and American at the same time a legal oxymoron; the Fugitive Slave Act, rendering even legally free people (and we're never actually assured that Django is) susceptible of kidnapping and transportation to the South. A story, that is, likely to end like that of Christopher Dorner: with a single, self-inflicted gunshot wound in the basement of a burning house. 🌐