Superflies into Superkillers: Black Masculinity in Film from Blaxploitation to New Black Realism

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In the 1971 film *Shaft,* its protagonist bemoans that he "has two problems." He was "born black and I was born poor." Nearly 20 years later, the narrative of John Singleton's film *Boyz in the Hood* seemed to be the period on Shaft's complaint by proclaiming that "One out of every 21 Black American males will be murdered" in the poor streets of South Central Los Angeles. Obviously, there is a link between these movies created decades apart that goes beyond having black protagonists. What is this link and how do we understand its relevance for the study of the history of film and cultural resistance? How did the 1970s' characterization of superflies become the 1990s' superkillers?

Film theorist Noel Carroll first coined the term "allusionism" to explain how contemporary filmmakers use old cinematic conventions in their films. He also explored *why* they use old conventions in their films. He argues that because filmmakers in the 1990s were the first generation to have grown up with intense film watching, they possessed a more solid knowledge of what had come before them. Therefore, they were able to comment on iconographic symbols in the past films, knowing that their audience would also recognize these icons. Carroll states that:

> allusionism, specifically allusion to film history, has become a major expressive device, that is, a means that directors use to make comments on the fictional worlds of their films … quotations, the memoralization of past genres, the reworking of past genres,

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> *hommages*, and the recreation of "classic" scenes, shots, plot motifs, lines of dialogue, themes, gestures, and so forth, from film history, especially as that history was crystallized and codified in the sixties, and early seventies. (Carroll 52)

One such genre that crystallized film history in the 1970s was Blaxploitation. Blaxploitation films focused on black narratives, featured black casts in action-adventures in an urban setting, and were released roughly between 1969 and 1974 (Guerrero 69). This article investigates how New Black Realist films alluded to Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. New Black Realist films were made in the early 1990s, and were directed by young African-American men. Aesthetically contemporary urban settings, young black male protagonists, and an emphasis on nihilistic violence characterize New Black Realism. According to film theorist Paula J. Massood, these films "were directly influenced by black focused films from the 1970s and the changing industrial, political and economic environment in the 1980s" (Massood 145). While several theorists like Massood have explored the relationship between Blaxploitation and New Black Realism from an artistic point of view, noting their similar use of urban music, sepia lenses, and swift editing, the use of allusion theory expands our understanding. It allows us to put the films into a historical narrative about the culture of resistance in urban African-American communities. By understanding the strikingly similar contexts in which these films were made, but also the disparate political frameworks to which they spoke, we begin to see that the link between the films goes beyond their aesthetic. Blaxploitation films' images of African-American men were rooted in a fantasy of liberation and Black Power rhetoric. New Black Realist filmmakers alluded to Blaxploitation films and critiqued the fantasy and what they felt it became in reality.

In this article, I will briefly describe the rise and fall of both Blaxploitation and New Black Realist films and I will also tease out the artistic relationship between the two. There are several films from both the Blaxploitation and the New Black Realist film period, however, this article, while mentioning several films, will focus on the two forerunners of both genres: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *Boyz in the Hood* (1991). While many allusions exist

between Blaxploitation and New Black Realism, this article looks specifically at New Black Realism's allusions to sex and sexuality in Blaxploitation films as it pertained to black masculinity. Specifically, I will look at three themes: sexuality and its relationship with maturity, sexuality and violence, and sexuality and black women. Black masculinity is a relevant site of cultural discussion in this context not only because the majority of the protagonists in both Blaxploitation and New Black Realist films are male but also because of the wider consequence of the black male identity in American society. While black men have always been a site for anxiety and imagination in American society, in the 1990s, *young* black men became the target of a renewed sensibility. They received attention from all forms of media: newspapers, television reports, music, sports, and so on. As major forces in the entertainment industry, the faces and voices of young black men pervaded the American consciousness. Moreover, the news media in America zoomed in on the role of young black men in violent crime, especially gang violence (Gibbs 2). Therefore, an interesting dual consciousness existed in America in the early 1990s. The American populous was at once afraid of young black men and also drawn to participate in their perceived culture.

The significance of black masculinity in American culture is teased out in an analysis of the relationship between Blaxploitation and New Black Realist films, one in which New Black Realism alludes to Blaxploitation techniques and, in so doing, analyzes its own context. New Black Realist filmmakers reworked the Blaxploitation genre, exploded what they saw as the old fantasies of black masculinity, and revised these images into a gritty reality. Films do not only serve as entertainment for a willing audience but also act as a contested space for debate on the society in which we live. New Black Realist film engages in this debate by referring to the fantasy world created by Blaxploitation.

Blaxploitation films, mostly produced between 1969 and 1974, began a new era in filmmaking. For the first time in Hollywood history, films made by African Americans and featuring mostly black casts became financially viable. As Melvyn Van Peebles, producer, writer, director, and star of one of the original Blaxploitation films *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* states, the films "sought to reclaim the black spirit from centuries of manipulation by the white power structure" (Verney 84). However, the reasons for the rise of Blaxploitation films are more complicated than Van Peebles states. The rise

can be explained by the social climate at the time, the realities of the film industry, and how the content of these films satisfied the demands made by the other two factors.

By the late 1960s, there was a perceptible shift in the mainstream civil rights movement, which had gained prominence in the 1950s. By 1970, many leaders in the black community were frustrated with what they felt was the conciliatory attitude of such organizations as Martin Luther King's SCLC and the NAACP. These organizations were seen as largely beneficial for the black middle class and those that wished to succeed by integrating themselves into white middle class society. The Black Power movement developed as a response to this perceived "Uncle Tomism" of the black middle class (Van Deburg 133). In 1966 when Stokely Carmichael proclaimed "Black Power!" for the first time, there was renewed mainstream attention paid to black radicalism.[1] Many observers at the time and now see the Black Power revolution as explicitly masculine. As cultural critic Michelle Wallace states, Stokely Carmichael "was a black man with an erect phallus, and he was pushing it up in America's face …. Stokely was the nightmare America had been dreading-the black man seizing his manhood, the black man as sexual, virile, strong, tough and dangerous" (Wallace 36). While a vocal black feminist, Wallace's critique of the Black Power movement has been hotly debated; Black Power seemed to call for virulent race pride, physical resistance to white supremacy and colonialism, and raising the social and political consciousness of the entire race. Black Power was also known for its emphasis on masculine characteristics and misogynistic tendencies.[2]

At the same time that the Black Power movement was sweeping through the cultural consciousness of America, the film industry was changing under the burden of financial difficulties. With the rising popularity of television, the failure of several huge Hollywood blockbusters, and the retirement of older members of management, major studios were suffering severe monetary losses. Desperate to get back into the black, the Majors devised new strategies for making money. The Majors' first attempt at profit was proposing building massive movie complexes in the suburbs, much like what we see today. However, as a result of the 1948 Paramount Consent Decrees, legislation that broke up vertical integration (studios owning every tier of movie production from the studio lots to the movie theaters), studios could not build movie theaters without the explicit consent of the courts. When they

proposed building theaters in the suburbs, the courts refused (Stanfield 286). Therefore, the only way that the studios could profit was through the theaters that already existed, those in urban locations.

By the 1970s, urban centers in the United States were comprised mostly of African-American blue-collars workers, the white and black middle class by this time having begun moving to the suburbs. Therefore, the audiences for films at urban theaters were going to be comprised of mostly black, working class customers. Paula J. Massood maintains "what started out as the identification of a specific market sector with a high profit potential ironically resulted in the first acknowledgement by the industry of an urban African American population" (82). The plan would go as such: the studios would produce films that appealed to the urban African-American audiences, they would produce these films on extremely low-budgets, and would thus turn over an enormous profit (Guerrero 69). Ironically, this plan would also address another problem that the major American movie studios were having. In October of 1969 when the American Justice Department threatened to sue six film studios for discrimination, Hollywood was coming under repeated attack for their racist hiring practices and racist depictions of African Americans (Guerrero 85). Therefore, creating a new kind of film that appealed to an urban African-American audience would not only turn profit for the studios, but would also alleviate some of the tension between them and minority rights groups. The Black Power movement, and a small film that became a big phenomenon, influenced what kind of film would be made in order to appeal heavily to black urban audiences.

Melvyn Van Peebles, director of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* is widely considered the architect of a new black aesthetic in the 1970s. In making his film, Van Peebles wished to create "a victorious film. A film where niggers could walk out standing tall instead of avoiding each other's eyes, looking once again like they'd had it" (Guerrero 76). While rooted in the tradition of Black Power rubrics, Van Peebles did not want to create a film that was so political that it would not speak to a wide audience. "The film couldn't be didactic discourse which would end up playing (if I could find a distributor) to an empty theater except for ten or twenty aware brothers who would pat me on the back and say tell it like it is" (Reid 76). Van Peebles created a film then that would speak to the black community in a way that no other film had in the past. It is the story of a young

African-American man who has been raised in a brothel. He is accused of assaulting white police officers and spends the rest of the film fleeing. Colombia Pictures originally offered Van Peebles a three-film contract, one of which could be *Sweetback,* but he refused it, preferring to maintain control of his film. He told the industry that he was making a pornographic film so that he could avoid hiring people from the craft union, instead hiring black technicians who had previously been excluded from the unions. In the end, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) gave the film an X rating, and Van Peebles made posters with taglines that read "Rated X by an all white jury," merely increasing its appeal (Rhines 43). Released in April of 1971, initially in only two theaters (one in Detroit and one in Atlanta), *Sweetback* became an instant success, grossing $70,000 in its first week alone (Variety 9). Why and how did this small film speak to such a large audience? And where did it fit in the context of a mainstreaming Black Power movement?

Film theorist Lola Young argues that "gender, sexuality, and racial difference can be seen as part of a matrix of ideas in which the white, bourgeois male at the center was perceived as the norm and thus left unexamined, whilst the identities of those seen as 'other' were constantly interrogated, investigated, and monitored" (43). The sexuality of the black male, as the other described in Young's quote, has been interrogated and monitored by mainstream America. In the 1970s under the influence of the Black Power movement, the interrogation of black male sexuality was also discussed at length within the African-American community. Controlling one's own sexuality as opposed to having it monitored by white America, and being proud of one's manhood rooted in sexual prowess and control, was a vision of Black Power (Verney 83). This vision appeared in the fantasy of Blaxploitation films.

The sexuality of a young male being linked to his maturation is an archetypical image. The man fully comes of age when he engages in his first sexual experience. However, historically, this archetype has not functioned in the same way in Hollywood representations of the African-American community because of the sensitivity of mainstream racist audiences to any kind of sexuality associated with African Americans. The majority of black characters in classic Hollywood films were asexual, and often childlike.[3] In fact, in many ways, black men were not only denied their sexual maturity in Hollywood films,

they also were denied any maturity, often being referred to as "boy" no matter how old they were. These images reflected the racist rhetoric of the times. Therefore, while in many other literary and filmic representations, sexuality as maturity was an archetype, it had yet to be claimed by the African-American community. With the Black Power rhetoric of the 1970s, it finally was.

In Eldridge Cleaver's book *Soul on Ice,* he describes how exerting his sexuality finally allowed him to become a real man, something that white society had been denying him. Michelle Wallace described how Black Power activist Stokely Carmichael was shoving his "black … phallus … up in America's face" and in so doing, he was "seizing his manhood, the black man as sexual, virile, strong, tough, and dangerous" (Wallace 36). An ideal and an icon of black masculinity in the Black Power Movement of the 1970s, then, was the black man finally coming of age in the American imagination. This ideal was appropriated into the fantasy world of Blaxploitation films.

This is nowhere more apparent than in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. In the film, Sweetback works in a brothel from a very young age. In a central scene, the young Sweetback is enticed into entering one of the prostitutes' rooms and then is, depending on your specific interpretation, either raped or willingly participates in sexual intercourse with the much older prostitute. Whether you believe this event to be consensual or not, it is apparent from the cues that director Melvyn Van Peebles gives to the viewer that the event is meant to be significant in the growth of the character. During the scene, the camera focuses on Sweetback's young body, then, immediately after the encounter, the camera cuts to an image of Sweetback's prime body and an image of his adulthood. This event is the bridge between the character as a young boy and the character as an adult. In fact, the audience only learns the character's adult name, Sweetback, in this moment, a name that is prompted by his ability to perform well in bed.

In Blaxploitation films one also notes the obvious relationship between sexuality, violence, and freedom. As mentioned, in *Sweetback*, the title character's first sexual experience can be interpreted as rape, an event that often defines the relationship between sexuality and violence in any society. Furthermore, the narrative of Sweetback's escape from the law signals to the viewer that freedom from oppression is obtained by taking sex by way of violence. In the middle of the film,

Sweetback is practically cornered by white authorities. In order to escape the trap, he rapes a woman. While this may seem extreme and somewhat arbitrary, for a 1970s audience, it could have rung true. Several prominent men in the Black Power movement emphasized that their literal freedom could be understood as their sexual freedom.

Again, Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* provides an ideal example of this thinking. In it, Cleaver discusses the value of rape as a means to freedom; especially, when this involved the rape of a white woman. Cleaver states "rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law … I was defiling his women" (Cleaver 14). Michelle Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* identifies the relationship between black male sexuality and freedom in the 1970s Black Power movement when she contends that after centuries of attack on the black male penis, black men were "bestow[ing] all sorts of magical powers on it" and "this organ beg [an] to represent the very essence of [their] struggle against the oppressive race" (Wallace 71). Both Cleaver and Wallace, insiders in the Black Power movement, emphasized that a black man's freedom was perceived to be bound to their ability to take what they wanted sexually.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song spoke to a political consciousness that was growing in popularity in 1970s urban black America. Due to its success, several other films in the same genre were produced, *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972) being among the most popular. However, even in the height of Blaxploitation's popularity, its demise was apparent. While the 1948 Paramount Decrees disabled major studios' ability to control exhibition, this did not preclude private businesses from owning theaters. Stanley Durwood opened the American Multi-Cinema (AMC) in 1963 in the middle class suburbs. At the time, it was perceived to be a novelty, not a permanent fixture. However, its success convinced other businessmen to build multi-theater complexes in malls and the suburbs. In 1984, Cineplex Odeon opened an eighteen-theater complex in Toronto and a Los Angeles shopping mall (Haines 87–91). This new exhibition structure not only altered where movies were being seen, but also to whom the movie studios were directing their films. Blaxploitation films were popular with young urban audiences. These new theaters needed films that appealed to middle class white Americans who were living in the suburbs.

There was also a growing dissatisfaction with Blaxploitation among its prime audience in the black urban community. The Coalition Against Blaxploitation was set up in Los Angeles with members from the SCLC and the NAACP. While these organizations alone did not stop urban African Americans from attending the films, this urban audience did recognize that the later Blaxploitation films carried little value (Guerrero 102–03).[4] In the end, Hollywood returned to the status quo. Film theorist Donald Bogle notes, "the sad irony was that the decade, which had opened revealing to the industry that there [was] a black audience, closed with the industry believing that the 'black film' and the black audience were both dead" (Bogle 266).

New Black Realist films, not coincidently, fermented under similar conditions to Blaxploitation. Within the African-American community by the 1980s, the Black Nationalism of the Black Power variety had diminished. In its stead, a conservative agenda for black America developed, praising self-help and accountability in a move reminiscent of the "politics of respectability" of the early twentieth century. Like the politics of respectability, politicians in the late 1980s and early 1990s felt that the black middle class would be the best role model for inner city African Americans (Smith 263–65). Many black leaders demanded that African Americans stop acting like victims and take responsibility for their lives. This self-help platform in African-American politics was in line with the general trend in American politics under the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations. Political scientist Preston H. Smith commented that "under the guise of empowering the poor and promoting new social contract policies such as welfare reform, the Clinton administration expects the impoverished blacks to ask less of the state and to do more for themselves with still less" (288).

In a direct response to the politics of self-help, critics emerged in the early 1990s in the African-American community. These critics called black conservatives traitors, and likened them "to the Jews who led their brothers and sisters into the ovens of the Holocaust" (Van Deburg 142). These critiques came in the form of popular culture more than institutional politics. Having been denied access to political power for centuries, and perhaps feeling as though the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s push for access to political power had failed them, young African Americans often funneled their frustrations through their access to popular culture. As mentioned in the intro-

duction, African-American culture had always been a site of curiosity and affinity for white America. In the 1990s with the growing popularity of rap and hip-hop, these affinities became even more powerful. And the voices of young critics only gained more credence when the savage beating of Rodney King was broadcast to the world, an event to which self-help agendas spoke very little. Amongst these critics were Mario Van Peebles, Spike Lee, John Singleton, and Albert and Allen Hughes, themselves members of the "truly disadvantaged" (Dyson 351; Boyd 98–99). In their art, these gentlemen criticized those that minimized the role that racism plays in American society and those that were politically conservative—art termed New Black Realism. Their criticisms became mainstream when the film industry opened itself, for the first time since the 1970s, to a huge wave of black talent.

Film historian Jesse Algeron Rhines argues that "during the 1980s, debates about black people, representation and history, centered on absences and invisibility, and cultural activists sought to redress imbalances," and a viable option for this was film (Young 185). Films in the 1980s involving African Americans focused mostly on interracial bonding. In these films, a black character and a white character, usually both male, are brought together to solve a crime or some kind of life problem and race is rarely a factor. Historian William L. Van Deburg describes these films as "the cinema of recuperation" (Van Deburg 172). Similar to the period before Blaxploitation, there were few African Americans in the film industry, which brought it under the scrutiny of several political organizations. This, along with an economic downturn in the industry similar to the late 1960s, opened Hollywood's doors to black filmmakers.

Starting in the mid 1970s and continuing through the 1980s, major film studios produced several high-cost, high-profile films termed "blockbusters." While certain of these films produced a tremendous profit, others cost the Majors dearly, such as *Ishtar* and *Hudson Hawk*. In an effort to offset the risk of producing high-budget films, production companies set their sights on independent filmmakers, whose films would cost the studio little, making them low risk. Also, in the early 1990s, major studios, such as Disney, bought out many of the independent studios. With this buyout major studios gained control over the independent artists and could benefit from their financial success and if successful, the profit from independent

films could finance blockbusters (Rhines 81). Finally, several of these new independent filmmakers were producing films with a high black content, which would solve the industry's problems with political activist groups (Ellison 161).

The genre of New Black Realism was marked with several features that made it unique from the films of the 1980s. They most often took as their subject matter young black men living in the inner city who sometimes engaged in deviant behavior. These young men's lives were portrayed as chaotic and nihilistic, ripe with violence and drugs. They were represented as having little to no political affiliations or solutions to their problems, and had no real identifiable leaders (Boyd 18). While this imagery can be seen as merely another version of the mainstream media's depiction of young black men in America—as "dump, deprived, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed"—these filmmakers made an active attempt to imbue these young men with humanity (Gibbs 2–3). Aesthetically, these films focused on an urban environment and an "affective immediacy" of events (Gormley 183). From their inception, film theorists and directors alike acknowledged the similarities in the aesthetic and narrative tactics of New Black Realism and Blaxploitaion films. These films came about in the Hollywood industry under similar conditions, and were similarly made by those African Americans who felt that the traditional politics of the African-American community had failed them in some way. Like Blaxploitaion, the camera techniques imbued the films with a sense of realism, both used music as narrative constructions, both paid attention to fashion and language trends in the African-American urban community, and many other comparable elements. New Black Realist films were well aware of what had come before them. Most importantly, not only were they aware, but also the young filmmakers alluded to the past Blaxploitation genre to comment on their reality. This is strikingly apparent in their treatment of sex and sexuality. By the 1990s, the perception of male sexuality in African-American communities encompassed the AIDS epidemic, teenage pregnancy, and single-parent households. Far from the idealism of sexual empowerment in the 1970s, perceived black male sexuality in the 1990s seemed to be hindering freedom. New Black Realism, through homage of Blaxploitation, critiqued this perception.

In a sociological study of black masculinity in the 1990s, many of the same trends of young black men claiming their masculinity were

observed as those noted by 1970s critics such as Michelle Wallace. Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Bilson, in their seminal work *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America,* point out that sexuality, masculinity, and adulthood are inextricably linked together in the 1990s' urban social landscape. They argue that the African-American male feels a sense of emasculation due to his inability to be a traditional provider in the community (Majors & Bilson 1). Michael Eric Dyson adds that this is complicated by the fact that the African-American male's sexuality has been under attack by white society since the days of slavery, evidenced in hundreds of years of lynching (Dyson 138). In their study, Bilson and Majors document how the African-American male, overwhelmed by a sense of emasculation, uses promiscuity and sexual prowess to denote his manhood. His ability to be sexually active and desired makes him a man in the eyes of his peers according to this study.

The representation of a black male's coming of age as being linked to his sexual initiation is an image that viewers of New Black Realism can see recycled in several prominent films. John Singleton's 1991 film *Boyz in the Hood* is the story of a young African-American man coming of age in Los Angeles. He is being raised by his father as his mother believes that she cannot give Tre what he needs to become a man. Throughout the narrative, the viewers are introduced to several people and issues that are pertinent to this community, such as violence, police racism, drugs, AIDS, and gentrification, and black male sexuality. As with Sweetback, Tre's maturity is linked to his virginity in the film. However, it is also complicated by the narrative. When Tre appears as a teenage man to the audience for the first time, his father, Furious, teases him for being young, and when Tre defends his adulthood, Furious asks him if he is a virgin. This narrative tactic links sexuality to maturity directly. In order to prove that he is a man to his father, Tre fabricates a story about his sexual skills and prowess, with the film flashing to a fantasy sequence. What is important to note is that it is *only* in fantasy that Tre's manhood is linked to his sexuality. In reality, Tre is a virgin. Unlike in Blaxploitation films, the male protagonist in *Boyz in the Hood* cannot attribute his growth, or lack thereof, to his sexual experiences.

The dialogue of *Boyz in the Hood* also complicates the relationship between sexuality and manhood. When Furious is educating a young Tre on the rules of life, he explicitly points out that sex does not

make you a man. He asserts that you have to take responsibility for your life in order to become a man. Furthermore, Doughboy, Tre's friend, points out to his peers that sex is a dangerous thing with the rate of AIDS in the black neighborhood. He warns his friends about promiscuity. The 1970s' fantasy of freedom through sexuality had been restricted by the perceived shackles of reality in the 1990s, a phenomenon that obviously did not go unnoticed in New Black Realist films.

New Black Realist films' reference to the relationship between freedom and sexuality is obvious from the visuals and narratives of the films. In *Boyz,* Tre is threatened by police officers when he is driving back from the city. Emasculated, he goes to his girlfriend's house and engages in sexual intercourse for the first time. While he does not attack her, she is at first bewildered by his desire. Tre, then, in order to throw off the yoke of the police authority, sexually asserts himself. However, while viewers are cued thematically to sexuality and freedom, this is complicated by the conclusion of the film. In the conclusion of *Boyz,* Tre's best friend Ricky is murdered and the representation of Ricky's sexuality, his son, screams when Ricky's murder is revealed. Furthermore, Doughboy, Ricky's brother, a stereotypical player having different women under his gaze throughout the film, is also killed at the end of the film. Tre is the only male character who engages in monogamous, heterosexual, and protected sex, and is also the only protagonist to survive.[5] *Boyz in the Hood*, then, cues the viewer to the fantasy of sexuality and freedom when Tre attempts to gain his by having sex with his girlfriend, but ultimately complicates this in the conclusion of the film.

Finally, there are several representations of African-American women and their relationship with African-American masculinity in Blaxploitation; however, most of the images are of women being in some way detrimental to African-American men. Women in Blaxploitation films range from drug addicts to prostitutes. This imagery reappears with a vengeance in black cinema in the 1990s. In *Boyz,* all of the women living in the neighborhood that Tre grows up in are either crack addicts, or are responsible for delinquent sons. This phenomenon was widely critiqued at the time. For instance, Michael Eric Dyson argues that John Singleton's representation of African-American women in *Boyz in the Hood* merely reinforced popular notions of black women as detrimental to their communities. Film critic Patricia Smith argued that now (the 1990s) "brilliant new films

by young black directors have set the entertainment world on its ear" but that the black women in these films are still "mammies, seductresses, whores, mulattoes … and ornaments snapped onto the end of male arms," the only difference being that now "the male arms are black" (Smith A5). The degradation of African-American women in these films seemed to be exacerbated by the fact that the stars of many of these films were rap artists: black men who were already being accused of misogyny. Rap stars such as Ice Cube, whose lyrics include "Women they're good for nothing, no maybe one thing, to serve needs to my din-a-ling" and "your daughter was a nice girl, now she's a slut, a queen treatin' niggers just like King Tut" (Ice Cube). However, the degradation of the dark female body is somewhat complicated in New Black Realist films because of a changing artistic movement in the 1990s.

In the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, many African-American artists and critics decried the lack of favorable representations of African-American women, and more specifically, dark-skinned women. Art historian Judith Wilson argued that in fact during the nineteenth century, artists never made black female nudes, and that even today, this is quite rare. Artists have shied away from embracing the dark body as beautiful. In the 1980s and 1990s, African-American artists and scholars were disentangling this phenomenon in an effort to remedy the lack of dark beautiful bodies in American art, a remnant of the treatment of the black female body in American history (Collins 122). This movement was supported by the strong and vocal black feminist movement.

The market in American cinema was also changing in the early 1990s in a way that allowed for stronger representations of African-American woman. For the first time, several African-American actresses, such as Angela Bassett, were considered not only financially viable, but in fact a box-office draw. As with the creation of Blaxploitation and New Black Realism, then, the changing cultural perception of African-American women was supported not only by an important political shift, but also a willing market.

As part of this trend, images in New Black Realism complicate the Blaxploitation fantasy surrounding the reverence of light-skinned women at the expense of dark-skinned women. The example of *Boyz* is complicated by the main theme that runs throughout the film that black men who are raised by fathers survive, not those that are raised

by single mothers. Tre's mother takes him to live with his father because she "can't teach him to be a man, that's your job." In fact, film theorist Rinaldo Wolcott argues that Singleton's focus on the black male as savior to his family and community serves to reinforce heterosexual patriarchal ideas about family life. He adds that this should be seen as a "father fantasy" film in which Singleton can live out his desire to have a strong father figure (Wolcott 69). Coming from an environment where a lot of young black men come of age without the presence of their father, Singleton, in Wolcott's opinion, engages in a fantasy of his own, in which a strong father will save young black men from the dangers of the streets and ultimately from death. However, Tre's mother, Reva, who not incidentally has dark skin, is not written off as the cause of problems. Cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson points out that this character is intelligent, commanding, and defiant. She has her Masters degree, she earns her own money, and she does not bow to Furious, Tre's father's, call (Dyson 101). Furthermore, in a scene where Furious and Reva meet at a restaurant, Reva proclaims that she is buying the drinks and demands that Furious sits down. Her characterization is much more complicated than light-skinned is good, dark-skinned is bad. In *Boyz,* Tre's mother is a more nuanced representation of an African-American female than some feminist critics allow.[6]

New Black Realist films alluded to Blaxploitation conventions as they pertained to sex and sexuality, but often complicated these conventions. The young black filmmakers, a generation removed from the era of Black Power, critiqued the 1970s' black fantasy film with a portrait of what they perceived to be the gritty reality of 1990s' inner city life. What is important to note, though, is that the historical context of both of these genres allows us to see how political movements and critiques were often supported by the desires of the American cultural market. And unfortunately the power of this market dictated not only a powerful beginning to mainstream critiques of American life but also their end.

By 1994, New Black Realism declined in abundance and popularity. The 1990s came to a close with several new genres of black cinema attracting large audiences. The black romance film and the black comedy were two of the most prominent, employing standard Hollywood narratives populated with a black cast. There was also a return to the buddy film variation, this time linking white teachers with

urban African-American students, or interracial dance teams. While black narratives by young African Americans and set in urban spaces still existed, none of them matched the popularity of the forerunners of New Black Realist films (Bogle 370–90).

It seemed as though a cultural moment had passed. Similar to the historical period after Blaxploitation films were at the height of their popularity, Hollywood, and the American public more generally, appeared to lose interest in urban black narratives. Perhaps the demise of these two genres, New Black Realism and Blaxploitation, seems similar because the genres themselves were produced under similar conditions. Historical investigation proves that both Blaxploitation and New Black Realist films arrived in moments where the movie industry was experiencing structural and financial change and was under public pressure to include more minorities in the filmmaking process. At the same time, sociological and political studies of urban African Americans were the focus of many academics.

Beyond these contextual similarities, the style and format of these genres' appeared to be parallel. In fact, one may argue that New Black Realist films in the 1990s merely recycled standard themes from Blaxploitation films. However, a closer analysis of the films exposes the superficiality of such an argument. The relationship between Blaxploitation films and New Black Realist films is much more complicated. Narratives, styles, and themes in New Black Realist films allude to Blaxploitation conventions and ultimately challenge them. Using masculinity as a site for conceptual analysis, one can see how New Black Realism alludes to the fantastical images of sexuality. These images are then entangled in contradictions, complications, and puzzles. Given the changed political and social climate in the 1990s, one in which the hope and promise of Black Power seemed far from the lives of young black men, New Black Realism posed questions for its audience to consider: questions about the constructions of black masculinity in the heyday of the 1970s and their relevance for the world of 1990s' America.

A cultural moment truly did pass with the demise of New Black Realist films. It is fair that African-American directors are indeed entitled to tell whatever story they please, but still, when young directors stop telling the stories of young black men living in the inner city, one does wonder what will become of these narratives. As long as directors such as Spike Lee, John Singleton, the Hughes

Brothers, and Mario Van Peebles were cultural agents of their own history, the American public could bear witness to the subculture of 'hood life that affects so many young men in America. Perhaps it will be these young men, the subjects of New Black Realist films, who will be the foundation of a new movement in Hollywood filmmaking. One can only guess at what that movement will look like, but is assured that both Blaxploitation—the vanguard of black filmmaking—and New Black Realism—its protégé—will inspire it.

Selected Appendix on Films*

Blaxploitation Films
Cleopatra Jones (1973), dir. Jack Starrett
Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970), dir. Ozzie Davis
Shaft (1971), dir. Gordon Parks
Shaft's Big Score (1972), dir. Gordon Parks
Superfly (1972), dir. Gordon Parks Jr.
Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971), dir. Melvin Van Peebles

New Black Realist Films
Boyz N' the Hood (1991), dir. John Singleton
Clockers (1995), dir. Spike Lee
Juice (1992), dir. Ernest R. Dickerson
Menace II Society (1993), dirs. Albert and Allan Hughes
New Jack City (1991), dir. Mario Van Peebles
Sugar Hill (1994), dir. Leon Ichaso

* All of the information pertaining to the filmmakers, producers, and release dates of these films was obtained from the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com).

Notes

1. Black radicalism has a long history well beyond this moment. While Black Power was recognized by a mainstream American audience in the late 1960s, its roots can be traced back as early as the 1920s and 1930s. For more details on the "long civil rights movement," see Jacqueline Dowd Hall or Peniel Joseph.
2. Many current historians are now challenging the perception that the Black Power Movement was misogynistic, or even patriarchal in nature. These historians include James McKeever at the University of Southern California, and Matthew Richman at the College of New Jersey.
3. For a detailed description of these characterizations of African-American males, see Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*.
4. The later Blaxploitation films were often cartoonish copies of the originals. They were mass produced and pumped out by studio executives, had little to no African-American involvement at the production level, and rarely succeeded financially. In fact, several of the films

were doomed sequels to the earlier Blaxploitation films, such as *Shaft II: Shaft's Big Score*. Interestingly, the less successful films often featured female black protagonists.

5. It is important to note that New Black Realist films troublingly focus primarily on heterosexual sex. In so doing, they position heterosexuality as the norm in the African-American community and therefore position homosexuality as either invisible or deviant. In fact, the dialogue of most of these films serves to reinforce the homosexual-as-deviant by using "fag", "pussy", and "queer" as derogatory insults.
6. There is a need for an extended critique of not only how non African-American masculinities are constructed in these films (white-American masculinities, Korean-American masculinities, Mexican-American masculinities) but also the way in which heterosexuality is always set up as the normative masculinity.

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