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The Construction of Black Male Identity in Black Action Films of the Nineties

by Kenneth Chan

In five recent black action films designed for crossover appeal, such factors as capitalism and the drug trade, racial self-hatred, and the geopolitics of ghetto space have influenced the construction of a 1990s black male identity.

Film critics have often identified the trends of African American films as appearing in alternating waves of prolific production and sudden dearth. Melvin Van Peebles’s Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song (1971) marks the beginning of a cornucopia of Blaxploitation films from both black and white filmmakers. A sudden scarcity of black films followed the end of Blaxploitation in the early eighties. Only late in the decade did films by directors such as Spike Lee and Robert Townsend begin to gain attention, leading finally to a boom in the early nineties, when, according to Ed Guerrero in Framing Blackness, black film “production in 1990 and 1991 alone easily surpassed the total production of all black-focused films released since the retreat of the Blaxploitation wave in the mid-1970s.” Guerrero attributes the waves of black films to the socioeconomic conditions which affect decision making in white-dominated Hollywood. Realizing the need to appeal to black audiences, which make up a large portion of the movie-viewing audience, major production companies focused their energies on films which deal with issues that speak to African Americans. Guerrero argues that just as

the Blaxploitation boom emerged from a period of militant political activism fueled by the rising identity consciousness and social expectations of African Americans . . . , the black movie boom of the 1990s has materialized out of a climate of long-muted black frustration and anger over the worsening political and economic conditions that African Americans continue to endure in the nation’s decaying urban centers.

From the outcrop of black films of the early nineties emerged a large number of action films, from major studios but directed by African Americans, set in black communities. John Singleton’s Boyz N the Hood (1991), Mario Van Peebles’s New Jack City (1991), Ernest Dickerson’s Juice (1992), Bill Duke’s Deep Cover (1992), and Matty Rich’s Straight out of Brooklyn (1991) are representative of films which critics have variably labeled as “male-focused, ‘ghettocentric,’ action-crime-adventure” films, “trendy ‘gangsta rap’ films,” and “the new Black realism films.” Whatever the genre label, these new black action films apply a clever concatenation of trendy rap music, rap singers turned actors, and volatile filmic action to the political and social issues that concern African Americans,

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thereby increasing both their entertainment and political-aesthetic value. These films are engineered to appeal to the frustration and rage felt particularly by black males. However, they are also carefully constructed to appeal to a crossover white audience, as Guerrero argues here:

While the mainstream production system is willing to admit a few black directors and black-focused films to its exclusive club for obvious reasons of profit, the industry has also been quick to co-opt these new shifts in racial politics and attitude among whites and African Americans. Following trends set in the 1980s, the commercial cinema system has continued to stock its productions with themes and formulas dealing with black issues and characters that are reassuring to the sensibilities and expectations of an uneasy white audience. . . . [T]he 1990s wave has been made by black directors for black audiences with the broader range of crossover consumption in mind.  

The notion of crossover audience appeal is fundamental to the political infrastructure of Hollywood’s mode of production, as box office success guarantees production funding, black filmmakers not excepted. These filmmakers, who are dependent on major studios for production assistance, have to navigate a complex and obviously vicious political terrain through a balancing act of surrendering sufficient political ground to the powers-that-be in Hollywood so as to sustain financial input and yet maintain enough leverage to upkeep an often diminishing artistic integrity. As much as many will frequently find their artistic vision consumed within this power vortex, it is of course unfair to preclude any slippage of directorial politics and filmic vision through the power grid. Many of the black directors of the nineties I have mentioned above have succeeded, in varying degrees, in presenting the experience of African American males within the framework of the black action genre, although most realize the practical need of acquiescing to the dominant narrative tradition of crossover appeal in Hollywood-sanctioned films. The goals of this essay, therefore, are to examine how the black male identity is constructed in these black action films of the nineties and to interrogate the aesthetic effects of crossover appeal upon this identity, hence revealing how this identity construct works toward, in Guerrero’s words, “reassuring . . . uneasy white audience[s].” In my attempt to make a general assessment and analysis of this identity, I will draw examples from Boyz N the Hood, Deep Cover, New Jack City, Juice, and Spike Lee’s more recent Clockers (1995), based on Richard Price’s novel of the same title. My belief is that this model of black male identity will provide the basis for evaluating the appeals these films have for both black and white audiences of both liberal and conservative persuasions.

All these new black action films feature characters that oppose, flourish, or are assimilated into the political and social climate of poverty, crime, drugs, and violence, all of which are generally emplaced within the spatial confines of the inner-city projects or the ghetto. This black inner-city experience clearly can provide a rich reservoir of filmic source material for black filmmakers to spotlight inner-city life and to increase awareness and political pressure for positive change. However, the capitalistic politics of the Hollywood system frequently influence filmmakers into succumbing to stereotypical constructions of black characters. As Mark Reid

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points out, there is a tendency for these films to “portray black urban gangster culture as a ‘bad nigger’ phenomenon,” hence feeding into “Manichaean constructions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ blacks” in film analysis. To go beyond this simplistic and unfortunate dualism in black filmic representation, one must examine, as Reid suggests, the social and political conditions that create the black gangster figure. This move to contextualize the rise of the black urban gangster and to problematize a politically motivated good/bad dualism can also further one’s understanding of the source(s) of frustrations and rage exhibited in these films.

The civil rights movement held out the hope of equal rights and, most of all, equal opportunity for African Americans to advance economically and to step out of the clutches of poverty. However, capitalism, more interestingly described by James Nadell as “racist capitalism” in his essay “Boyz N the Hood: A Colonial Analysis,” works toward maintaining the socioeconomic status of the rich and suppressing the attempts of the black underclass to overcome poverty and suffering. According to Nadell, “European and Euro-American capitalist expansion has in greatest part been fueled by the oppression and exploitation of African and Third World labor and resources,” leading to “the enrichment of Euro-American and European elites and the corresponding underenrichment of Africans and other Third World peoples.” Filmic images of the frustration resulting from the inability of black males to overcome the system and achieve material success clearly strike a chord in African American audiences. Strike’s brother Victor (Isaiah Washington) in Clockers manically struggles to make ends meet by holding down two jobs which so consume his time and energy that he has little left for his children—a “failure” of responsibility on the part of black males which many political conservatives often identify as a cultural, ethnic, or racial particularity. The overwhelming pressures of work, coupled with a painful awareness of a racist system which entraps the black underclass within an urban space of crime, violence, and drugs, ultimately fracture, though momentarily, Victor’s sense of law abidance. The single act of murder he commits, though allowing him, unfortunately, to vent his pent-up frustrations, criminalizes his otherwise unblemished record. It is no wonder that many black youths see drug dealing and crime as apparently easier alternatives to the frustration of subscribing to a work ethic which fails to reward as promised.

American capitalism also facilitates the rise of crime and violence, often through the drug trade within black neighborhoods and urban districts. In highlighting the scholarship that argues for the “ongoing complicity of the American state apparatus” in supporting “the international narcotics trade to further the ends of elite interests,” Nadell observes that

**Furious** [played by Lawrence Fishburne in *Boyz N the Hood*] recognizes a crucial point that remains willfully and scandalously ignored by mainstream capitalist media and the vast majority of its lawmakers: African Americans do not control the means of narcotics production, refinement, or international transshipment, and only marginally control the retail, low-end domestic distribution networks.

This belief in the complicity of American capitalism and government in a criminal enterprise leads many blacks to adopt seemingly “paranoid” notions of racial
conspiracy. Furious echoes the sentiments of many in the black community that “they want us to kill ourselves with booze, drugs, and guns.” Whatever view one holds regarding the validity of these conspiracy theories, it is undeniable that their very presence, as one commentator notes, functions “as a thermometer of racial antagonism, offering a disheartening reading of racial distrust.” In fact, in an opinion poll conducted by the New York Times/CBS in 1990, 60 percent of blacks in New York believe or at least admit the possibility that the easy accessibility of drugs in poor black communities is part of a government conspiracy.

In addition to the debilitating effects, both individual and social, of drug addiction, another by-product of the narcotics trade is the violence resulting from turf wars conducted by the drug dealers in the heart of black neighborhoods. The complicity of the state apparatus in protecting characters like the Latin American diplomat Guzman in Deep Cover further frustrates black activists and law enforcers such as Russell Steven, alias John Hull (Lawrence Fishburne). Undercover cop Hull sees the violence inflicted in drug-related crimes on a young black man gunned down Terminator-style in a back alley in broad daylight and witnesses the death of his Hispanic neighbor, who dies from a drug overdose, leaving her young son without a mother. His frustration is felt by many black characters featured in these films and is shared by many in the black audience.

In light of this relationship between capitalism and the narcotics trade, Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes) in New Jack City provides a significant example of a stereotypically “negative” image of certain black male characters in Hollywood-sanctioned productions. Despite the fact that his character feeds into the Manichaean economy of “good” and “bad” blacks, his is a very interesting parody of the ultimate capitalist, one who works with the system and acquires the riches that the system rewards. At a New Year’s Eve party, Nino pep talks his crew by encouraging them to pursue the “new American dream” in the “entrepreneurial spirit.” He continues on his procapitalist platform in the final court scene when he points out that he does not have “the silver spoon” in his mouth like the prosecuting attorney and that he basically adopted the American work ethic to rise above his circumstances and succeed in a capitalistic world. The parodic nature of his tirades provides Van Peebles a means to critique the American capitalist and criminal justice system. However, the construction of Nino as a monolithically evil character and as one who employs an “evil” form of capitalistic venture works toward exonerating capitalism and placing the onus of blame on the evil nature of Nino as an individual, a person who deserves to die at the hands of the old man who takes justice into his own hands at the end of the film. Hence, Van Peebles appeals to his white audience by, consciously or unconsciously, circumventing the real evil of racist capitalism and its links to the drug trade and by subscribing to the notions of individual morality and personal psychopathology.

The oppression of the capitalistic system and the violence and crime arising from the drug trade fuel an intense frustration within the African American community. This frustration finds two possible outlets in the filmic construction of the black male identity: an obvious distrust of the white dominant political establishment, and the unfortunate phenomenon of autodestruction and racial self-hatred.

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A deep-seated distrust in the political and social bureaucracy is a natural extension of the frustration that African Americans feel, particularly in light of capitalism’s complicitous links to the narcotics network and of the oppositional potentialities of racially inspired conspiracy theories. This distrust is intensified by an insidious and often subtle racism that permeates the system and that hinders many from rising beyond the economic state they are born into. Bill Duke’s basic premise in Deep Cover evokes and appeals to this distrust in his black audience, particularly among poor underclass blacks. He constructs the government as a selfish, pragmatic beast with little concern for the drug epidemic that has plagued the black communities. Russell Stevens/John Hull (Fishburne) sees his junkie father rob a liquor store and later killed by the shopkeeper, a critical mise-en-scène for the audience and a life-altering one for the protagonist; Duke sets the scene on a snowy Christmas Eve and allows John and his father to have a brief but emotionally revealing father-and-son exchange before the fatal shooting, all of which situates the film within the violent and socially crippling landscape of drug politics. It is this image of his father victimizing and being victimized that sears John’s memory and that spurs him to join the police force so as to “make a difference.” By posing as a drug dealer in an undercover assignment, he soon realizes the complicity of the police and the political establishment in the narcotics trade system, hence decimating his initial idealism. Like Doughboy (Ice Cube) in Boyz N the Hood who points out the indifference of the government to the plight of blacks in the hood (“Either they don’t know, or don’t show, or don’t care about what’s going on in the hood”), John abandons himself to a fatalistic attitude of drug dealing and violence. Only after a religious black officer (Clarence Williams III) dies in his attempt to win him over to the right side of the law does John recover his “moral” bearing. Diawara notes that “John is united with him by the force of caring, and realizes that he must fight both the drug dealers and the police to protect his own.”13

What I find particularly fascinating about Fishburne’s character in Deep Cover is the way he initially accepts and internalizes the stereotypes and the labels that the white police establishment places upon him. During the interview at the beginning of the film, John’s obnoxious police superior, Carver (Charles Martin Smith), who has a God complex (a notion that fits neatly into the power structure of domination), tells John that he has the profile of a criminal. The easiest way to deconstruct criminal profiling as a discourse of racial and class domination is to problematize the criteria used to establish any such profilings. Carver’s offensive choice to interview only black officers for the undercover job reflects the racial specificity of criminal profiling. Race and racism also inform the psychological profile he uses to prove John’s “criminal” suitability for the assignment: John’s father’s criminal record, resentment of authority, an abidance to a “rigid moral code with no underlying system of values,” an “insufficiently developed sense of self,” and the presence of “repressed violence.” The use of such culturally and racially prejudicial criteria targets poor underclass black males in particular. The racism of such police practices, however, does not seem to dawn upon John; in fact, he internalizes this negative stereotype when he agrees with the profile by admitting to himself at one point in the film that he is more like a drug dealer pretending to be a cop than a cop pretending to be a
drug dealer. By giving up his idealism, he does not see his need to fight both the drug dealers and the political system. Instead he buys into the fact that he has a “criminal profile” by throwing himself into the role of selling drugs.

The conceptualization of this racist practice of criminal profiling also finds itself on center stage in *Clockers*. Rocco Klein, the police detective played by Harvey Keitel, refuses to believe that Victor (Isaiah Washington) killed Darryl Adams (Steve White), the night manager of Ahab’s, because, being a model citizen, Victor does not fit the “criminal profile” that his brother Strike (Mekhi Phifer) does. The comments of Larry Mazilli (John Turturro), Rocco’s partner, when they arrest Victor as a possible murder suspect reflect the perception the homicide police team have of Victor: “Normally I’d cuff you, brother, but you look like the kind of guy I can trust.” In thinking that Victor is taking the blame for his brother, Rocco tries to pressure Strike into confessing to the crime he did not commit by setting him up as a “snitch” against Rodney (Delroy Lindo), for whom Strike is “clocking.” Strike, who realizes the racism in Rocco’s attitude, tells him that the police are never going to trust what a black man says. Only when Strike’s mother reveals the truth about Victor’s part in the crime is Rocco convinced of Strike’s innocence. Although the truth is out, Strike’s life is endangered and his reputation within the hood is destroyed by Rocco’s persistence.

This notion of internalizing racist stereotypes of African Americans provides a convenient segue into the second expression of this frustration in black male characters: autodestruction. Guerrero observes that “[f]or African Americans . . . the last decade of the century reveals a renewed sense of racial oppression and foreclosure, pessimism, and sinking social expectations . . . . African Americans are now going through an intense period of nihilism, fragmentation, and self-doubt.” 14 These struggles, in conjunction with the physical violence and drug addiction, find their way into filmic depictions of black males “as endangered species.” 15 Singleton opens *Boyz N the Hood* with this statistical warning: “One out of every twenty-one Black American males will be murdered in their lifetime. Most will die at the hands of another Black male.” The images of black-on-black violence which are thematized in all the films discussed in this essay work to support Nadell’s argument of autodestruction within the black community. He isolates two possible reasons for this self-inflicted violence within a racial group. Nadell first posits that the self-inflicted violence is due “in part [to] the result of a scramble for the limited resources available to the suffering masses.” 16 He quotes the following passage from Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* to illustrate his point:

Exposed to the temptations to commit murder every day . . . the native comes to see his neighbor as his relentless enemy. . . . For during the colonial period in Algeria and elsewhere many things may be done for a couple of pounds of semolina. Several people may be killed over it. . . . Every colony tends to turn into a huge farmyard, where the only law is that of the knife. 17

The law of the knife evolves into the law of the assault weapon as one transposes Fanon’s socioeconomic account of the subaltern’s self-hatred onto the violent sub-
culture of inner-city black males. The narcotics turf war, which I discussed earlier, exemplifies this scramble for limited resources, only it takes place on a much wider scale and with greater intensity, as vividly portrayed, for instance, in New Jack City. The opening credits sequence of the film suggests the turf war’s spatiality, a particularized territoriality that is determined by race and economic class, when the camera pans across the spectacular skyline and then zeros in on the narrow streets of New York, a sequence to which Van Peebles juxtaposes a harsh commentary on the violent reality of inner-city existence through an audio montage of radio news announcements describing incidents of drug-related violence and the gang wars over drug territory. The turf war waged by Nino Brown and his gang is significantly linked to Reaganite economics, for Nino espouses the belief that “you have to rob to get rich in the Reagan era.” Unfortunately, this robbing of one another’s drug territory inevitably precipitates violence and death not only of the gang members but also of innocent victims, particularly within poor black communities.

Another reason Nadell posits for black-on-black violence is the internalization of the racial hatred the black man sees directed at his blackness and the rechanneling of that hatred toward members of his own race. Nadell resorts to Fanon again, who suggests that the “hatred of self . . . is characteristic of [intrapsychic] racial conflicts in segregated societies. . . . in reality each man committed suicide when he went for his neighbor.”18 “In acting violently toward another Black person,” Nadell argues, “the individual may be aggressing against a hated aspect of self, Blackness.” The example from Boyz N the Hood that Nadell provides is that of the black officer who harasses Tre and Ricky.19 The officer’s attitude becomes clear when he tells Furious that he should have shot the black intruder so that there will be “one less nigger out in the street.” Furious, who understands the notion of self-hatred, sardonically points out to him that it is “too bad you don’t know what” is wrong, and he caps his retort with an ironic “brother!” In responding to Tre’s suggestion that he should have killed the intruder, Furious didactically admonishes Tre by saying he “will be contributing to killing another brother.”

The detriment and the obvious unacceptability of autodestruction to the African American community, as evidenced in Singleton’s rhetoric, are similarly shared by other black filmmakers. Hence, in the construction of their black male protagonists, these filmmakers generally attempt to present some sort of a solution to the problem of black-on-black violence. What I find intriguing is that these filmmakers frequently turn to conservative values for the answers. One of the most frequently evoked bits of advice is for young black males to assume personal responsibility for their actions. Most of the directors of the films discussed here appear to walk the tightrope of critiquing racism in society and, at the same time, proposing personal accountability as the flip side of the coin. Van Peebles, in New Jack City, strategically constructs touching scenes of Scotty’s (Ice T) rescue of Pookit (Chris Rock) from the destructive effects of drug addiction, highlighting the racial bond between them and their united resistance against the subtle racism of the drug culture. Scotty then becomes Van Peebles’s didactic mouthpiece when he passionately informs Pookit that he owes a lot of people, thereby alluding to Pookit’s need to make amends for his misdeeds. This recourse to personal accountability also permeates Furious’s
instruction of Tre (Cuba Gooding, Jr.) in Boyz N the Hood when he preaches to Tre the need to be responsible for his own life. Furious’s message eventually feeds into the didacticism of Singleton’s film, as Guerrero rightly observes that the “homeboys are rewarded or punished by the end of the film for choices and paths consonant with, or in conflict with, dominant values.”20

Ernest R. Dickerson’s powerful tale of the lives of four young friends in Juice similarly provides a message of personal choice and the consequences it entails. Quincy (Omar Epps) chooses not to succumb to the temptation of using the gun he bought to solve the problem he has with his friend Bishop (Tupac Shakur), who in turn is enamored of the power that comes with firearms and its use in killing his enemies (or, in this case, friends who become obstacles in his path). Bishop, as one critic points out, after watching James Cagney in White Heat, believes that they should take “their fate into their own hands and remak[e] . . . the world on their own terms.”21 The choices that the two youths make lead them down divergent paths, one to safety and the other to ultimate destruction. What Dickerson is essentially suggesting is that Bishop’s downfall can be attributed to his psychological instability and his pathological need for control and power.

These images and the message articulated in them are crucial in their appeal to a politically mixed black audience and to a crossover white audience. The directors of these films, as I have noted earlier, attempt to reach out to liberal audiences with their critique of racism and the system that oppresses young black men. On the other hand, their resort to the message of personal responsibility would appeal to conservatives, black and white alike. White audiences, seeing the didacticism inherent in these films, will feel “assured” by the black filmmakers’ attempt to encourage the young within their own black communities to adopt such conservative values. It is no wonder that in spite of the violence that had accompanied the screening of Boyz N the Hood, the Republican governor of California, Pete Wilson, encouraged citizens to see the film.22 As much as I would venture to situate the solution somewhere between the poles of personal responsibility and the reform of a racist and oppressive environment, an overemphasis on personal responsibility and individual psychopathology will simply reinforce the Manichaean dualism of the “good” and “bad” nigger, an unfair categorization of which Reid has warned critics. Guerrero, in evaluating the character of Bishop in Juice, cogently observes that “the film also makes concessions to dominant narrative convention, particularly by attributing Bishop’s violent rage to individual pathology, rather than connecting it to the collective determinants of discrimination and social injustice inflicted on an oppressed community.”23 In a similar fashion, Doughboy is dismissed as a good-for-nothing hoodlum who chooses not to improve himself like Tre, who goes to college. From these constructions, undiscerning audiences may eventually ignore the racism which still prevails in a corrupt sociopolitical climate and may fail to realize that the choices made by the young black men are often consequences of the resulting oppression.

A final note on black-on-black violence which I believe is significant to make is the question of its ubiquitous presence in black action films. The willingness on the part of black filmmakers to return to this thematic time and again is indicative
of its destructive impact socially and culturally on African American communities. These films, by addressing this issue and in depicting its gruesome reality, understandably serve a mimetic and cathartic function. However, a continuous filmic focus on this social problematic in black films will endanger the black film aesthetic by reductively essentializing a very complex issue into a racial trait and a racially specific problem. The result is the psychological relegation of the problem, on the part of conservative white audiences, within the geopolitically hermetic confines of the ghetto or housing project: this is a black-on-black conflict, a reflection of their inability to cope with living in the democratic-capitalistic system of America and a problem that blacks need to deal with on their own. This is a logic that many white conservatives find themselves comfortable with and are willing to adopt, and, in so doing, collective responsibility is thereby elided and the onus of racism is conveniently jettisoned. In order to construct a counterdiscourse to this rhetoric, liberal filmmakers, therefore, should tread warily the ground of black-on-black violence by, first, reconsidering how and whether this aspect of black male identity and black society should be situated within their filmic narrative, and second, by providing some aesthetic means for their audience to trace the problem to its racist-inspired roots.

The above discussion on the territoriality of autodestruction and of drug-related urban turf wars logically points to the theorization of the ghetto, the hood, and/or the housing project as spatial constructs, hegemonic devices of control and containment. This notion of ghetto space as confinement is coterminous with the coming-of-age trope in numerous black action films of the nineties: the young black man’s rite of passage, in which the ghetto or hood functions as the space where this takes place. Since Diawara’s analysis of Boyz ‘N the Hood provides an excellent examination of the rite-of-passage trope,24 I choose to avoid recapitulating his points by instead evaluating how the locality of this rite of passage further problematizes the black male youth’s internalization of subtly racist notions presented by the white dominant establishments.

This conceptualization of the geopolitics of ghetto space finds its theoretical premise on the concept of space and spatiality as forms of discourse, with the accompanying notions of ideology, power structures, binary oppositions of dominance/subjugation, and political casuistry, all of which deserve deconstructive examination. Edward Soja, in his revolutionary work on postmodern geography, warns us against the perils of ignoring the ideology of spatial constructs, for “space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.”25 In arguing against the marginalization of space and geography (as a discipline) in the social and critical theorization of ideology and discourse, Soja correctly challenges his readers to reexamine the privileging of history and time. For rather than being epistemologically conflictual, spatiality and historicism can be construed as entering into a dialectic which exposes discursive power structures. In an interview with the editors of the French geography journal Herodote, Michel Foucault admits to the significant effects of spatial considerations: “to trace the forms of implantation, delimitation and demarcation of
objects, the modes of tabulation, the organisation of domains meant the throwing into relief of processes—historical ones, needless to say—of power.”

The power relations of race and class in the historical formation and maintenance of black underclass inner-city districts become especially evident when one engages in a consideration of the politics of space and geography. The social containment of inner-city blacks, particularly young black males, within the confines of the drug and violence-ridden ghetto has often been accepted as a historical and social fact; therefore, as an issue of social concern and political action, it has been marginalized within its own historicity. My hope is to redirect attention to this problem through an analysis of how the ideology of ghetto space is raised within black action films and how these constructions contribute to a filmic black male identity and eventually to an implication of crossover politics. It is also my argument that the ghetto, the hood, and the housing projects are ultimately racist spatial constructions intended as physical and psychological barriers to keep underclass blacks in and to contain the drug-related turf wars and violence within this communal space.

My theorization of the ghetto or the hood as a space of containment falls into two categories: physical and psychological containment. Physical containment, the obviously material and, hence, more visible facet of the problem, is evidenced by segregation in urban structuralization, along the lines of race and economic differences. Underclass inner-city blacks find themselves socially confined within a space that drug dealers and criminals invade and where violence is ubiquitously present. All of the films discussed here provide bountiful depictions of this phenomenon, from the network of “clockers” in the housing projects, as in Spike Lee’s film, to the more dramatic and violent colonization of an entire building complex by Nino Brown in New Jack City. A more sophisticated symbolic articulation of the physical barrier and the violence it surrounds is found in Singleton’s opening sequence in Boyz N the Hood: the camera zooms in on the stop sign and then later the police crime-scene yellow tape. The young Tre and Doughboy, together with two of their friends, encounter a bullet-ridden poster of Reagan and find a decaying body at its base.

It is this concatenation of violence, crime, and spatial confinement that essentially gives rise to the belief in racial conspiracies, involving black autodestruction through crime, drugs, and alcohol as exemplified in Furious’s rhetoric. Many believe that the police choose to ignore the crime and the drug rings within the ghetto, just as in New Jack City, where an aged old man candidly informs the police that they purposefully ignore his pleas for their intervention—because he is black—when Nino invades his apartment building. This apathetic response on the part of the law is predicated on the notion that the geographical perimeter of the ghetto functions as a physical barrier to contain the undesirable elements of society. It is generally an effective means of preventing drug pushers and violent criminals from spilling over into predominantly white middle-class sectors of a city. The barrier system of criminal containment is conceptually similar to that of a prison, where the Foucauldian panopticism works in regulating and controlling society’s outcasts from a safe, physically barricaded distance. However, the tragic and manifestly racist difference is in the consequent victimization of innocent residents living in the ghettos.
and the hoods—an example of autodestruction, though at the invisible and
complicitous hands of a mainstream society which has averted its face in abandon-
ment. Larry Mazilli’s (Turturro) response to his fellow officers that “they should
blow these projects to Timbuktu” at the end of Clockers provides a telling gloss on
this notion of racial containment and abandonment: “Why bother? They kill them-
selves anyway, like one of those self-cleaning ovens. . . . No fuss. No mess.”

Complementing the mechanism of physical barriers is the subtle workings of
a psychological means of segregation. Conservatives frequently argue that under-
class blacks have the choice of leaving the hood to improve their livelihood and to
fulfill their aspirations. This argument, though ideally feasible, fails to account for
the questions of social identification and of the obstacles placed to deter assimila-
tion into mainstream society. Individuals who choose to leave the ghetto face the
possible attenuation of strong social and familial ties and encounter a hostile and
culturally conflicting environment which hinders assimilation. Overcome by the
trials of joblessness, cultural alienation, and racism, many, with the exception of a
resilient few, will find solace in their return to the community of their birth and,
hence, to the confines of the ghetto space. Those who do “succeed” in remaining
outside the ghetto often suffer from a sense of psychological and social alienation.
This difficulty of racial integration, mostly arising from a persistent white racism,
cannot be dismissed as a crucial factor in understanding the psychology behind
the reasons for blacks choosing to remain in the ghetto, despite the dearth of em-
ployment opportunities and the destructive violence that infests the area. Ghetto
blacks are once again barricaded within the space of confinement, and the barriers
are reinforced both physically and psychologically. The conservative myth of the
black “failure” to choose correctly is thus “confirmed” and more deeply entrenched.

To critique further the ideology of ghetto spatial constructions, one must ex-
amine its impact on filmic representations and expressions of black male identity.
The young black man’s rite of passage through the space of the ghetto constitutes
a major and formative part of his identity; crime and street violence are a part of
his world, and the way he comes to terms with it frequently determines the path
he eventually takes in life. But the surest way to prevent any entrapment within
the vicious cycles of crime and violence is to detach him from that environment.
Therefore, young black males are often taught, as exemplified in films like Boyz N
the Hood and Clockers, to aspire to get out of the hood or the ghetto in order to
escape crime and poverty. What becomes particularly disturbing is not only that
the geographical space of the hood has been perceived by the outside world as a
means of controlling the crime and drug epidemics but also the fact that some
blacks within this confinement actually internalize the specious nature of this spa-
tial construct by abandoning the hope of cleansing their community of its criminal
elements and by advising their youths to flee the hood instead. This rhetoric basi-
cally reflects a resigned acceptance of the hegemonic notions of spatial contain-
ment: the hood is beyond any salvational efforts of reform and to remain would be
fatal, while to leave would be redemptive. Singleton’s construction of his film’s
ending, for instance, implicitly promotes the latter as the only solution for young
blacks in the hood: Tre and his girlfriend move on out of the hood to college and to

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the hope of a better future, while Doughboy and his gang remain and die. In *Clockers* Strike has no choice but to get out of the housing projects in order to escape the threats of Rodney. He holds out the hope that life may be better for him outside of the projects, as the scenes of him sitting in the train and looking out at the sunset appear to signify. Even Andre (Keith David), a black cop who used to be a father figure to Strike in the past, advises him to look beyond the hood: “There is more than these projects. Don’t you want to go some place you haven’t been before?” Despite his genuine concern for Strike, Andre is still complicitous in instilling the belief that the only salvation for any young black man is to escape the projects and to enter the world outside.

In critiquing these filmmakers’ interpretation of the black male’s relationship to ghetto space, I am in no way criticizing the aspirations of African Americans in seeking a better future for themselves. Rather, I am attempting to deconstruct the false dilemma presented in the logic of these constructions: either leave the hood or die. This “logic” dangerously feeds into the racist notions of containment and, additionally, it is appealing to white conservative sensibilities in that only the “good niggers” who have the wisdom and the fortitude to choose to leave the ghetto will eventually be “educated” and morally “refined” enough to fit into a white world order. Or, less euphemistically put, their assimilation into mainstream American society is contingent on their adoption of white middle-class values and culture. The black filmmakers’ appropriation of this logic forms a critical part of crossover audience appeal. Conservative audiences will favor the “positive” teachings that the film entrusts to its young black audience. This message to leave the hood reinforces the conservatives’ one-sided picture of personal responsibility and choice, conceals the racist underpinnings of spatial containment, and deflects attention from the need of governmental and social agencies to financially and logistically support and assist black inner-city districts in urban renewal and social healing. It fails to raise social and racial consciousness in the audience but rather leaves them with consciences salved and a renewed sense of justification in their politically provincial beliefs.

In problematizing these filmic representations of the racialized themes of capitalistic exploitation, self-hatred, auto-destruction, and spatiality as political discourse within the context of the black male identity, one confronts the broader political implications of the dominant narrative tradition’s influence upon the black film aesthetic. The relationship between black filmmakers and the Hollywood system is a bittersweet one; directors rely on financial backing to prop up their artistic endeavors. Filmic art as entertainment is also inevitably linked to the mechanisms of capitalistic venture, even in the more enticing arena of black independent film production. The question, therefore, is not whether black filmmakers should free themselves from the system but rather how they can circumnavigate the obstacles of big business and its ally, the dominant narrative tradition, in order to produce films which lastingly contribute to a black film aesthetic of social and racial significance.

As a formulaic genre, the black action film has run, to an extent, its course in its present format. Directors such as Spike Lee, Carl Franklin, the Hughes brothers, and a host of up-and-coming filmmakers who have intermittently made valuable aesthetic contributions despite their dependence on Hollywood have begun to
push the genre outside of its present framework. It will, therefore, be interesting to watch and anticipate the metamorphosis of the black male identity in relation to these new filmic possibilities.29

Notes
I wish to thank my two readers for their valuable and insightful comments and suggestions. I would also like to express my appreciation to Mark Reid for his encouragement, and my wife, Mary, for her helpful comments on these films.

2. Ibid., 158–59.
3. Ibid., 182.
6. Guerrero, Framing Blackness, 162–64.
9. The question of responsibility, or the “lack” of it among the poor black underclass, is a major tenet of conservative arguments surrounding the question of welfare in the United States. This racist supposition finds its source in colonialist assumptions. Chinua Achebe, in critiquing colonialist criticism, encroaches upon this issue by uncovering its racist implications and the imperialist justification for continued domination and control: “of course a good deal of colonialist rhetoric always turned on that very question [of responsibility]. The moral inferiority of colonized peoples, of which subjugation was a prime consequence and penalty, was most clearly demonstrated in their unwillingness to assume roles of responsibility. . . . [T]he popular English novelist John Buchan wrote a colonialist classic, Prester John, in which we find the words: ‘That is the difference between white and black, the gift of responsibility.’ And the idea did not originate with Buchan, either. It was a foundation tenet of colonialism and a recurrent element of its ideology and rhetoric.” Chinua Achebe, “Colonialist Criticism,” in Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987 (London: Heinemann, 1988), 79.
12. Ibid., E5. Blacks who argue for conspiracy theories often refer to the government’s use of 399 black men in a forty-year study on syphilis in the early 1930s in Tuskegee, Alabama, as DeParle observes. This historical reference acts as an interesting correlative to the nineties notion of AIDS as an instrument of racial purgation. In the same New York Times/CBS poll, 29 percent of blacks interviewed believe or concede the possibility that AIDS “was deliberately created in a laboratory in order to infect black people.” John Singleton himself argues that the disease “was made in order to kill undesirables . . . [which] would include homosexuals, intravenous drug users and blacks” (quoted in DeParle).
20. Guerrero, _Framing Blackness_, 186.
22. Guerrero, _Framing Blackness_, 186.
23. Ibid., 189.
27. This dichotomy, which provides the means for my analysis, is ultimately artificial, as the physical and the psychological are intricately interrelated and are facets of a single problem.
28. For more detailed analyses of the symbolism in this sequence within Singleton’s film, see Guerrero, _Framing Blackness_, 184; Diawara, “Black American Cinema,” 22; and a more recent article by Paula J. Massood, “Mapping the Hood: The Genealogy of City Space in _Boyz N the Hood_ and _Menace II Society_,” in _Cinema Journal_ 35, no. 2 (1996): 90–91. Massood’s article is of particular relevance to the question of ghetto space, in which she proposes that the hood contributes to the figuration of the city as dystopian, thereby working into the dualism of the city as a utopia/dystopia. See 88–90.
29. Carl Franklin’s noirish _Devil in a Blue Dress_ and the Hughes brothers’ _Dead Presidents_ are recent examples of fresh filmic possibilities.