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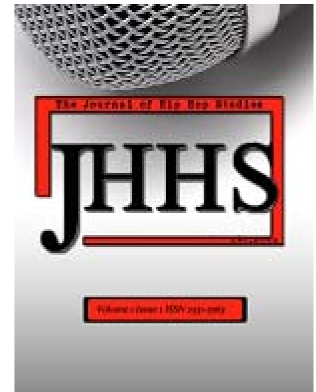

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Abstract

Serving as two of the most visible African American cultural movements, blaxploitation cinema and gangsta rap played essential roles in giving African American artists an outlet to establish a new black identity for mainstream audiences. After exploring the similarities between the cultural and economic conditions that spawned both movements, this essay examines the parallel techniques by which the preeminent entries in both genres established themselves as culturally relevant for African American audiences. These techniques included a reliance on place and space to establish authenticity, as well as employing African American myths and folklore such as the Signifying Monkey and the badman. By establishing themselves as mainstream representations of black identity, the harshest critics and staunchest defenders of both movements came from within the African American community, a clear indication of the important role each would play in establishing a new era of black representation in popular culture.

In October 2012, New Orleans rapper Curren$y released a mixtape online for his fans entitled *Priest Andretti*. Taking its name from the main character of the 1972 blaxploitation film *Super Fly*, this fourteen-track mixtape frequently pays homage to the blaxploitation movement that occurred in the early 1970s by incorporating clips from *Super Fly* throughout, as well as including songs entitled "Max Julien" (star of the 1973 film *The Mack*) and "Cleopatra Jones" (title character of the 1973 film *Cleopatra Jones*). Two months later, in December 2012, director Quentin Tarantino released his newest film, *Django Unchained*. The film, which employs many of the same tropes commonly seen in blaxploitation cinema, includes a soundtrack containing an original song written by Rick Ross, "100 Black Coffins," as well as a mash-up of James Brown's "The Payback" and 2Pac's "Untouchable" entitled "Unchained." The animated series *Black Dynamite*, a parody of blaxploitation cinema based on the critically acclaimed 2009 film of the same name, recently featured rapper Snoop Dogg (aka Snoop Lion) voicing a formidable villain on the show. Even though the blaxploitation cinema movement ended nearly 30 years ago, these recent examples serve as a clear illustrations of the continued cultural relevance of blaxploitation and offer an intriguing look at the persisting and complex relationships and intersections between blaxploitation cinema and rap music.

In the years following the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans attempted to establish a cultural identity within a society that frequently continued to ostracize and systematically neglect them. By the late 1960s, angered by the lack of progress

toward "first-class citizenship," many African Americans began calling for the abandonment of non-violent protest and adoption of a militant resistance to white culture. The rise of the Black Power Movement resulted in many African Americans calling for the establishment of a separate, self-defined black culture, which included Black Art.[1] Artistic depictions in popular culture served as one of the potentially visible and influential ways in which the African American community could create a controlled image of black culture that reflected a self proclaimed identity while simultaneously illustrating the community's continued struggles. Through film, music, television and various other outlets, African American artists began using their mediums to appeal directly to black audiences in an attempt to spawn cultural movements that would display and bring to the forefront the cultural, social and economic struggles of the African American experience. Two of the more visible African American movements that have occurred in popular culture over the past 50 years are the blaxploitation cinema explosion of the early 1970s and the gangsta rap movement that took hold nearly two decades later. While gangsta rap has proven to be a more durable and influential movement, blaxploitation cinema played a pivotal role in providing African American artists a means to redefine black representation in mainstream popular culture, with the potential to result in either empowering or problematic impacts for the community.

Analyzing the genesis of these two subgenres, one can easily identify many similarities in the qualities and characteristics used to classify works as either blaxploitation films or gangsta rap. Because early blaxploitation films and gangsta rap served as parallel subgenres established by African American artists attempting to establish a new identity reflecting the social, political and economic issues impacting the African American experience (even in a metaphorical sense) within their respective mediums, cultural critics and mainstream consumers identified and classified the movements by many of the same qualities and characteristics upon their inception. Likewise, both modes of expression endured much of the same praise and criticisms from within the African American community as they served as battlegrounds for defining black identity in America. In this essay, I first plan to explore the cultural and economic circumstances that spawned each movement and the inherent similarities in both. Next, I will examine gangsta rap and blaxploitation's shared reliance on place and setting as well as African American myth and folklore as a means to establish cultural relevance for African American audiences. Finally, I will consider the polarized responses to these movements within the African American community, and more importantly, how these reactions serve to highlight the important and complex role these movements would play in establishing a mainstream cultural identity for African Americans.

Two Movements Born

[1] Mark A. Reid, "The Black Action Film: The End of the Patiently Enduring Black Hero," *Film History* 2, no. 1 (1988): 23-24.

As with many cultural phenomena, it can be difficult to strictly define and classify blaxploitation cinema. However, in his book *Blaxploitation Cinema: The Essential Reference Guide*, author Josiah Howard gives a reasonably straightforward and concise definition that broadly describes the movement. He defines blaxploitation as "1970s black-cast or black-themed films…created, developed and most importantly, heavily promoted to young, inner-city, black audiences."[2] For the purposes of this analysis, the three main films being discussed as the forebears of the blaxploitation movement are Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), Gordon Parks' *Shaft* (1971) and Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Super Fly* (1972). Not only are these films most relevant to the discussion because of the important role they played in establishing the trends and initiating the explosion of black-centered films in the early 70s, but they also all share the distinction of being directed by African American filmmakers, a trend that did not necessarily persist for the duration of the movement but plays a crucial role in analyzing how black artists used their mediums to appeal to black audiences and create a new mainstream identity.

In order to engage in a meaningful analysis of blaxploitation cinema, one should first understand the conditions and circumstances under which the movement began. Ultimately, blaxploitation cinema would prove to be a product of the combined effects of changes in the political and social structures affecting African Americans and a financially vulnerable Hollywood in desperate search of an economic boom. Entering the 1970s, African Americans emerged from a decade that had produced the first African American movie star, Sidney Poitier. As the first African American actor to win a Best Actor Academy Award (for 1963's *Lilies of the Field*) and the most successful box office star of 1967 (the year he acted in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *In the Heat of the Night* and *To Sir with Love*, three box office hits), Poitier had become a full-fledged movie star, and his widespread popularity (including among white audiences) meant he served as a mainstream representation of the cultural image of the African American community. However, many African Americans resented Poitier's success, believing his popularized filmic image promoted black emasculation and assimilation into white society.[3] Black audiences showed increasing dissatisfaction with the narrowly defined roles he portrayed in these films, and as author William R. Grant IV writes in his book *Post-Soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations and Breakpoints, 1970-1975*, "The Poitier persona was obviously unable and incapable of addressing the growing desires and expectations for a liberated and empowered Black male able to reflect, articulate and represent the changing times."[4]

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[2] Josiah Howard. Blaxploitation Cinema: The Essential Reference Guide. (Guildford: FAB Press, 2008), 7.

[3] Mia Mask, Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 7.

[4] William R. Grant IV, *Post-soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints, 1970-1995.* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32.

With the rise of the Black Panthers and Black Power Movement in the late 1960s, scores of young African Americans sought to emphasize resistance and violent revolt against white society as a means to achieve desired social and political change.[5] As a result, more engaged and demanding black audiences, unsatisfied with the narrowly defined roles that popular culture assigned to them, desired a new, liberated filmic identity. As Ed Guerrero points out in his book *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, this "translated into a large black audience thirsting to see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen."[6] The mainstream image of the black man that had always been defined in film by the visions of white filmmakers no longer served as a relevant or suitable characterization. These audiences now demanded a shift from what they saw as the subservient, white-framed characters portrayed by Poitier to commanding characters and stories created by black artists from a black perspective.

Simultaneously, the Hollywood studio system endured the most financially troubling times in its history. The increasing popularity and relevance of the television coupled with the increased cost of business and an impending recession led to devastating economic conditions for the movie business.[7] However, these economic conditions served as the impetus by which a more engaged and demanding African American audience could influence the market and allow a space for rebellious filmmakers such as Melvin Van Peebles to create films that spoke to the changing culture, challenged political and social assumptions and expectations, and set off a new film movement.[8]

Similarly, the ascendance of gangsta rap as the dominant mainstream image of African Americans in the late 1980s through the works of artists such as Ice-T and N.W.A. shared a similar path of emergence, reflecting the same dissatisfaction amongst young urban dwellers. Born in the ghettos of Los Angeles in the late 1980s, gangsta rap gave an outlet for the black youth who were neglected and had their communities ravaged by policies of the Reagan administration who used their art form to establish a similarly rebellious, independent and admittedly controversial identity. As author Eithne Quinn describes in her detailed analysis of the rise of gangsta rap, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*, rappers established a rebellious presence by "self consciously repudiating uplifting images of black life in a deliberate gesture of rebellion and affront."[9] As young black males in urban locales found

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[5] Marshall Hyatt and Cheryl Sanders, "Film as a Medium to Study the Twentieth-Century Afro-American Experience." *The Journal of Negro Education* 53, no. 2 (1984): 167.

[6] Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 104.

[7] Grant, *Post-soul Black Cinema, 28.*

[8] In describing the rise of the genre, Susan Hayward emphasizes the "irony of the sub-genre's cooptation by White people." This point highlights the persistent trend in the industry (largely run by white men) to focus on profits above all else, embracing anything that sells regardless of content (Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts, Fourth Edition*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 48).

[9] Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 32.

themselves trapped in vicious cycles of crime and poverty and realized they were largely being abandoned by the outside world, the party rap and socially-conscious rap movements no longer seemed relevant. Instead, the focus shifted to music that disrespected authority and purposefully spoke of breaking the rules and laws of an oppressive society, a seemingly parallel (if not more aggressive) evolution of the Black Power cultural influences found at the beginnings of blaxploitation. Gangsta rap can similarly thank an entertainment industry seeking to quickly maximize profits for its rapid mainstream proliferation.[10] These social and economic constructs demonstrate the ways in which the genesis of both blaxploitation films and gangsta rap emerged from similar conditions and appealed to African American urban dwellers' desire to construct a unique and independent identity that simultaneously challenged white society. These conditions and circumstances not only help introduce the initial cause of these movements, but also explain why these movements share so many of the same attributes and employ many of the same techniques to establish cultural relevance and authenticity.

Keepin' It Real: Establishing Authenticity

One of the most important and easily identifiable characteristics shared by blaxploitation and gangsta rap involves the use of and reliance on place, space, and setting to establish cultural relevance, authenticity, and credibility among African American audiences. Many writings on blaxploitation cinema movement analyze and give interesting perspectives on the importance of place for these movies. In her book *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film*, author Paula Massood devotes a substantial amount of time discussing the importance of location and setting. Discussing the ways in which the directors took the time to establish the locales, she states that these films depicting ghetto locations were "framed by an almost near-obsession with providing details of the cityscape, a project facilitated in party by the fact that the majority of films were shot on location. More important, part of what gave black ghetto films their impact was their inclusion of clearly identifiable urban, black monuments, even to uninitiated audiences."[11] She goes on to state that the prominence of the ghetto in these films serves as "not only background for the narrative but also is active in influencing the events unfolding onscreen. The complicated and interwoven dynamics of these films become clearer when it is understood that the city enables events."[12] By analyzing the important role of place and location in early blaxploitation cinema, this "near-obsession" can easily be identified in the vivid depiction of the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, but even more strikingly in the introduction credit sequences of *Shaft* and *Super Fly.*

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[10] Mtume Salaam, "The Aesthetics of Rap." *African American Review* 29, no. 2 (1995): 304.

[11] Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 85.

[12] Ibid.

Both *Shaft* and *Super Fly* begin with extended credit sequences set to their iconic soundtracks that play an essential role in establishing the setting of the movie. In *Shaft*, the film begins with a wide shot of New York City, followed by various establishing shots of the streets, all filmed with no backing score or soundtrack, only the sounds of the honking cars and the chatter and noise from the pedestrians walking the streets. After a few seconds, Isaac Hayes' iconic title song begins as the camera focuses on Shaft emerging from the subway onto the streets of the city. The remainder of the credit sequence (lasting for over four minutes) consists solely of Shaft walking the streets of New York, shoving through sidewalks and streets crowded with pedestrians and taxis, encountering hustlers hawking knock-off watches and other iconic images commonly associated with New York in the '70s. In his essay "The Genre Don't Know Where It Came From: African American Neo-Noir Since the 1960s," author William Covey gives this opening a close reading and describes it as a "carnivalesque celebration of the emergence of black men's identities into mainstream genre films."[13] Shaft's emergence from the subway symbolically represented the arrival of a new type of black hero never seen before in mainstream cinema while simultaneously establishing authenticity.[14] In a similar fashion, *Super Fly*'s credit sequence follows the main character, Priest, as he drives through the streets of Harlem, illustrating a vivid depiction of the harsh, unforgiving streets of the 'hood. As he cruises through familiar urban locales in his well-maintained Cadillac, he seems to exude a commanding presence in the neighborhood.[15] Both of these intros seemingly do little to enhance or advance any sort of narrative. In fact, in director Isaac Julien's documentary *BaadAsssss Cinema: A Bold Look at 70s Blaxploitation Films* (2002), famed director Quentin Tarantino criticizes the credit sequence of *Shaft* for neglecting to fully utilize its iconic title track by seemingly allowing nothing to transpire for the entire scene.[16] However, this criticism seems to overlook the important emphasis blaxploitation directors often placed on establishing the setting and place for the story to help lend their works a sense of street authenticity.

This reliance on the importance on place and authenticity through emphasis on the local is prevalent in gangsta rap in music as well. In his article " 'Represent': Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music," author Murray Forman discusses rap music's emphasis on local setting and the importance of this trend. Specifically discussing the lyrics of gangsta rap artists such as Ice T and N.W.A., Forman looks at the ways in which they

[13] William Covey, "The Genre Don't Know Where It Came From: African American Neo- Noir Since the 1960s." *Journal of Film & Video* 55, no. 2/3 (2003): 64.

[14] Covey also underscores how Isaac Hayes' track "Shaft" employs the call and response technique associated with African American music and its role in further establishing authenticity.

[15] Further giving credence to the importance of establishing authenticity, the Cadillac driven by Priest was actually owned by KC, a well-known pimp in Harlem, which established a recognizable symbol of the neighborhood almost immediately (Charles Michener, "Black Movies: Renaissance or Ripoff?" *Newsweek*, October 23, 1972, 78).

[16] *BaadAsssss Cinema: A Bold Look at 70s Blaxploitation Films,* directed by Isaac Julien (2002. New York: Docurama, 2002), DVD.

incorporate the ‘hoods of South Central Los Angeles within the narrative framework of their songs. He states:

> The subgenre’s narrative descriptions of spaces and places are absolutely essential to an understanding of the ways that a great number of urban black youths imagine their environments and the ways that they relate those images to their own individual sense of self. The spaces of Compton and other similar black communities that emerge through their work are simultaneously real, imaginary, symbolic and mythical.[17]

In other words, in a way similar to how blaxploitation films went to great lengths to emphasize their authentic urban locales, gangsta rap’s emphasis on the importance of settings and place as a means for establishing a cultural identity for the music lent itself to credibility in the African American community. It does not seem coincidental that one of the most successful and influential entries into the gangsta rap genre so closely parallels the early blaxploitation’s trend to quickly introduce and establish the location and setting for the film. Just as *Shaft* and *Super Fly* did with their opening scenes, N.W.A. begins their album with the title track, “Straight Outta Compton” (1988). Wasting no time, N.W.A. delivers a series of fiery verses that depict graphic violence and flagrant sexuality, while always using the final line of each verse to attribute the events and attitude to the authentic location of Compton.

This emphasis on the local and establishing street authenticity also translates visually through N.W.A.’s music video for “Straight Outta Compton.” In her essay “Gangsta Rap, the War on Drugs and the Location of African-American Identity in Los Angeles, 1988-92,” author Elizabeth Grant describes how this visual representation of the song serves to highlight the importance of its Compton setting and N.W.A.’s relationship with the streets. Analyzing the video’s opposing perspectives that follow N.W.A. as they walk the streets of Compton attempting to evade the police and the LAPD as they attempt to stop and arrest the group, Grant explains:

> As the video moves between the counter-perspectives, shots of NWA on Compton’s streets and images of the highlighted map, black-clad, black individuals, NWA and Compton itself become interchangeable entities. Moreover, NWA’s internal relationships to one another and external ties to Compton create a semiotic formulation between the street knowledge and skills of the gangsta/rapper and his origins to Compton that legitimatizes NWA’s perspectives with the stamp of authenticity that urban, African American perspectives in commercial hip hop warrant.[18]

Just as the group does sonically with the track, N.W.A. uses this visual translation to tie themselves to Compton and establish genuine street cred. The video reinforces to

[17] Murray Forman, “ ‘Represent’: Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music,” in *That’s the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader, Second Edition,* ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2012), 264.

[18] Elizabeth Grant, “Gangsta Rap, the War on Drugs and the Location of African-American Identity in Los Angeles, 1988-92.” *European Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 1 (2002): 9-10.

audiences their authenticity and allows them to more effectively appeal to the urban perspective.

These examples highlight the ways in which blaxploitation directors and gangsta rappers understood that in order to successfully connect with African American audiences and establish a level of authenticity needed to successfully appeal to them, they needed to portray a familiarity with and understanding of the unique characteristics and pressures associated with 'hood life. While the characters and situations depicted in these works did not always appeal to audiences on a literal level, the authenticity allowed the works to successfully connect on a metaphorical level. African American audiences watching *Super Fly* may or may not have found that the story of a successful cocaine dealer attempting to break free from a life of crime translated directly to their own lives, but many could relate to an individual attempting to break free from the social and economic constraints and systematic discrimination they still faced on a daily basis, even post-Civil Rights Movement. Similarly, while many African American listeners probably had less than more in common with the literal interpretation to the unrestrained and incendiary lyrics of N.W.A., they still found ways to connect with the insurgent narrator that challenged authority and attempted to create an identity that breaks free from the constraints of white society. In his analysis of authenticity in rap music, Michael Jeffries describes how " 'real' blackness entails loving and celebrating the hood as a spatial reference point for collective identity while trying to escape it as a material reality."[19] Both Blaxploitation filmmakers and gangsta rap songwriters created fictional, mythical stories, but they relied on setting to endow their works with this "real blackness" that could ground the narratives in a reality and relevancy with black audiences while simultaneously depicting characters that challenged the limitations of the 'hood.

Identifying with the Badman

Blaxploitation and gangsta rap also share a common respect for and reliance on the application of African American myths and folklore, particularly in employing the myths of the trickster as seen in characters such as the Signifying Monkey as well as the badman, most commonly associated with the character of Stackolee.[20] Found throughout African American culture, the Stackolee myth's frequent invocation represents "the radical impulse to challenge authority and institutions that seek to repress African American freedom, improvisation, and harmony."[21] In the article "Sweetback's 'Signifyin(g)' Song: Mythmaking in Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*," author Courtney E.J. Bates introduces the discussion by describing the

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[19] Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 75.

[20] For a more on popular African American folklore, see *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* by John W. Roberts (1989).

[21] Tolagbe Ogunleye, "African American Folklore: Its Role in Reconstructing African American History." *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 4 (1997): 450.

importance of cultural myth and folklore, stating that one can view African American folklore as "artifacts of the social, cultural, and political history of black people in the United states."[22] Based on this assumption that African American myth and folklore serve as a creative means through which African Americans could respond to the black experience and carry forward these myths for future generations, it is not surprising that movements in black modern American popular culture would cull influence from this tradition. The most recognizable myth shared across both blaxploitation cinema and gangsta rap depicts the story and character of the badman, often reflected in the tale of Stackolee.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song played an essential role in establishing the badman as a new archetype for black actors in film. *Sweet Sweetback* follows the exploits of the title character, a brothel employee and sex show performer, as he makes his way to the Mexican border in an attempt to evade the police as they hunt him down for the brutal assault of two officers. Using his sexual prowess, his willingness to do anything necessary to survive and with the help of others in the black community, *Sweet Sweetback* portrayed a new black archetype in film that audiences had never seen before – an independent and rebellious black man willing to go to the extreme in order to maintain his freedom and fight the system. In Bates' (2007) article, she describes how the title of the film already sets up the main character's badman status by employing the term Baadasssss, which "explicitly links Sweetback to African American vernacular and illustrates his status as a Badman,"[23] (Josiah Howard (2008) explains that the "oddly spelled title was created so that newspapers and magazines would not object to printing the word 'Ass,' " a piece of trivia that further highlights the revolutionary tendencies of the film itself.[24]) Bates goes on to point out how Sweetback's fearlessness, his "violent acts and general disregard for institutions such as the police," and his ability to "elude the police" all serve as means by which the film further cements his status as the badman archetype.[25] In a sense, the film presented a contemporary version of the Stackolee story that updated itself to maintain a level of relevance for restless and rebellious black audiences hoping to discover a new filmic identity.

Two pivotal scenes in *Sweet Sweetback* perfectly illustrate how director Van Peebles adopted the badman archetype for his main character. The first scene serves as the inciting incident early in the movie that sets in motion the rest of the events that unfold. After Sweetback is picked up by the police and is en route to the station, the officers detain a black militant named Mu-Mu. Minutes later, Sweetback finds himself witnessing the officers as they beat Mu-Mu on the side of the road. In a fit of rage, Sweetback uses the handcuffs dangling from one of his wrists to brutally beat the police officers. He then starts his run for the Mexican border, the journey that will be depicted throughout the rest of the film. Black audiences had never before been exposed to a

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[22] Courtney E.J. Bates, "Sweetback's 'Signifyin(G)' Song: Mythmaking In Melvin Van Peebles' Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song." *Quarterly Review Of Film & Video* 24, no. 2 (2007): 171.

[23] Ibid., 179.

[24] Howard, *Blaxploitation Cinema, 204.*

[25] Bates, *Sweetback's 'Signifyin(G)' Song*, 179

black character like this on film. Not only had he used his ferocious power to overcome the police officers, a symbol of systematic oppression for many African Americans, he had committed the act using the handcuffs chained to his wrist, an object of literal confinement that also serves as an obvious symbolic representation of the struggles African Americans have endured since slavery. Sweetback's escape simultaneously served as a symbol for fearless resistance to oppression by any means necessary as well as harsh retribution for white transgressions.

Making the film even more unconventional and impactful for black audiences at the time was its ending. Given the precedents set in film at the time, audiences expected an unforgiving ending where Sweetback would receive severe punishment for what would be seen as a brutal crime under the law. However, the punishment never came. Instead, Sweetback makes it to the Mexican border and escapes just as the credits begin to roll. The ending shocked (and often delighted) African American audiences. Recounting the audience reaction at a screening of the film, Van Peebles recalled, "When Sweetback got away, there was a stunned silence and then the place just exploded."[26] They had never seen anything like it. White criminals in film often rode off in the sunset and escaped punishment for their crimes, but blacks never did. By maintaining his remorselessness and successfully eluding the police, Sweetback completed his transformation into the mythical badman.

Gangsta rap relies heavily on the same myths, as evidenced by the many explicit and unmistakable instances of gangsta artists evoking the Stackolee character and myth in both lyrics and stage personas. Eithne Quinn argues that gangsta rap is a clear extension of myths such as Stackolee and states, "Artists reoriented and extended the mythic tales of the past, keeping hold of the bold surrealism, while incorporating a documentary quality."[27] As we see consistently across N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), the group maintains many of the same qualities seen in Sweetback. Through tracks like "Fuck tha Police," N.W.A. shows a similar resistance and disdain for not only law enforcement, but for the seemingly discriminatory practices of white culture as a whole. The group creates a narrative that emphasizes the repression of authority, but also "seeks retribution" for their seemingly unjust actions.[28] As they show frequently throughout the album, they also share the consistent reliance on sexuality and extreme violence that Sweetback shows as a means to break through these barriers and maintain their freedom. These myths and themes cannot only be seen in N.W.A.'s work but are also seen regularly in the works of other gangsta rap acts. In his article "Gangsta Rap and Nihilism in Black America: Some Questions of Life and Death," Nick De Genova describes how the genre more broadly embraced the role of the badman. Invoking other gangsta rap acts such as the Geto Boys and Compton's Most Wanted, Genova states that "gangsta rap serves up white America's most cherished gun-slinging mythologies…in

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[26] *BaadAsssss Cinema.*

[27] Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 97.

[28] Donn C. Worgs, "'Beware of the Frustrated…': The Fantasy and Reality of African American Violent Revolt." *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 1 (2006): 36.

the form of its worst and blackest nightmares, while it empowers Black imaginations to negate the existential terror of ghetto life (and death) by sheer force of the will."[29]

Not only did the forbears of both the blaxploitation cinema and gangsta rap movements evoke African American myths such as the badman as an homage to the tales passed between generations, but they also took the opportunity to transform these stories, giving them a contemporary cultural relevance. At their core, these myths reflected the social, political and economic conditions that plagued African Americans, and the artists responsible for these movements utilized the stories and archetypes as a means to emphasize the cultural rebellion and resistance inherent in their works. Serving as two of the most prominent representations of African Americans in popular culture within their respective mediums and time periods, blaxploitation cinema and gangsta rap serve as contemporary extensions of this legacy.

Establishing a New Cultural Identity

Given the inherently controversial nature of blaxploitation and gangsta rap music as well as the unprecedented mainstream success both garnered, it does not seem surprising that these works would serve as sources of impassioned debate. However, the most interesting and fervent responses came from within the African American community itself. The battle to define these movements in the African American community had political roots, and as Ed Guerrero points out in his book, blaxploitation continued the debate regarding a historic divide in the African American community – "the impulse to integrate with the system and the urge to separate from it."[30] He goes on to state that films like *Sweet Sweetback* "brought to the surface of African American discourse the subtle fissures and cracks of class tension, ideological conflict, and aesthetic arguments that had been simmering in the black social formation since the winding down of the civil rights movement."[31] Criticizing blaxploitation as exploiting black filmmakers, actors, audiences and the community as a whole, those against the cinematic movement blasted the films and the industry for producing films that "glorified drugs, imitated successful white stereotypes, set forth impossible and ultimately debilitating fantasies, developed a negative image of the American black man and woman, and took no real cognizance of black oppression in the United States."[32] In fact, the term blaxploitation, a combination of *black* and *exploitation*, was coined by Junius Griffin, the head of the Los Angeles NAACP at the beginning of the blaxploitation explosion.[33]

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[29] Nick De Genova, "Gangster Rap and Nihilism in Black America: Some Questions of Life and Death." *Social Text* 43 (1995): 107.

[30] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 71.

[31] Ibid., 87.

[32] Daniel J. Leab, From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 258.

[33] Lewis Beale, "1970s Blaxploitation Films. A Lot Has Changed, But Much Has Stayed the Same." *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 2009.

Given the purposefully controversial nature of the content and themes in these films, concerns with allowing the films and their main characters to serve as symbolic representations of the African American community understandably arose. These clearly were not traditional heroes and they definitely did not engage in the actions of a role model. Priest of *Super Fly* spends the duration of the film attempting to get his life straight and exit the drug business, but ironically, he must execute the largest drug deal of his career and commits a series of crimes as a means to do so. Sweetback is a hyper-sexualized criminal on the run. However, these films clearly framed the protagonists as heroes. As Mark Reid points out, *Sweet Sweetback* "was criticized by both black cultural nationalists who wanted politicized black films and by other blacks who wanted films in which blacks were identified with middle-class values."[34,35] Similar criticisms would be leveled against other entries into the genre as well. For instance, critics blasted *Super Fly* for "its blatant celebration of cocaine use and the hero's self-indulgent, drug pushing, hustling lifestyle."[36] Additionally, many critics in the African American community "reserved their harshest criticism for black actresses and actors who appeared in these movies" and prominent stars of the movement such as Pam Grier found themselves "a frequent target of scorn for taking roles that critics said favored titillation over substance."[37] To some African Americans it seemed as though the genre (and the black stars that personified the movement) did nothing progressive for the black image in America, but rather, simply perpetuated stereotypes and seemingly confirmed them given the box office success of these films within the African American community.[38]

On the other hand, many African Americans supported the films because they gave them a visible mainstream cultural outlet and depicted a filmic identity that they had never seen before. The early filmmakers had broken free from the subservient image of the black male that had been presented by white directors and had access to a new, radically different set of protagonists. In fact, during *Sweet Sweetback*'s opening credits, Van Peebles lists "The Black Community" as one of the stars, clearly bringing to the forefront his reclamation and presentation of this new identity. Not only that, but

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[34] Reid, "The Black Action Film," 29.

[35] It is important to note that members of the Black Power movement viewed blaxploitation cinema with mixed opinions. While it may seem as though these films highlighted and captured the essence of the violent resistance principle espoused at the time, many black nationalists criticized blaxploitation for undermining the movement or not taking a firm revolutionary stand. In fact, while Huey Newton, the Black Panther Party Minister of Defense, came out as one of the largest defenders of *Sweet Sweetback* and applauded it for its revolutionary perspective, just two years later he criticized black action films such as *Shaft* and *Super Fly* for omitting this perspective or worse yet, making it look "stupid and naïve" (Michener, "Black Movies").

[36] Ed Guerrero, "The Spectacle of Black Violence as Cinema," in *Cinematic Sociology: Social Life in Film, Second Edition*, edited by Jean-Anne Sutherland and Kathryn Feltey (Washington D.C.: Sage Publications, 2013), 92.

[37] Yvonne D. Sims, Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2006), 73.

[38] For more detailed analysis of criticisms of Blaxploitation films, see Richard Simon's "The Stigmatization of 'Blaxploitation'" in *Soul: Black Power, Politics and Pleasure* (1998).

the criticisms of these films created a double standard for the necessary morals of black filmmaking that rarely existed in white films. As Mark Reid points out, white audiences had for years enjoyed the violent action and revenge films that similarly held up actors such as Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson as heroes.[39] The films of these white stars rarely endured the same levels of scrutiny or criticism over a seeming lack of morals that blaxploitation films did.

Additionally, many African Americans within the industry supported the movement because of the barriers the movement broke in Hollywood regarding African Americans' access to jobs. For instance, in an interview in *BaadAsssss Cinema*, Fred Williamson, a frequent actor in many blaxploitation films, discusses how he never understood how the genre exploited African Americans since it finally supplied many acting and production jobs in the business and sometimes highlighted legitimate aspects of black culture. Even though the majority of blaxploitation films may have been funded and distributed by white producers and white-run studios, the movement did open up both acting and production jobs that had previously been off limits due to discriminatory union practices in Hollywood.[40]

However, on the most fundamental level, many felt that the criticisms against the film neglected to realize the real-life foundation of the metaphorical themes around which many of these films built themselves. In a 1972 interview with *Jet* magazine, Curtis Mayfield, who wrote and performed the iconic score for *Super Fly*, defended the films as symptoms of the problem, not a cause. He stated, "I don't see why people are complaining about the subject of these (Black) films…The way you clean up the film is by cleaning up the streets. The music and movies today are about conditions that exist. You change the music and movies by changing the conditions."[41] While the stories these films depicted were often outlandish and unrealistic, they still existed in a realistic world of black oppression and discrimination.

Almost twenty years later, gangsta rap would endure similar criticisms and praise inside the black community. As gangsta rappers seemed to revel in the lifestyle of the ghetto and embrace the badman myth, critics in the community similarly faulted them for seemingly embracing negative stereotypes and establishing them as the prominent black identity.[42] Conversely, just as with blaxploitation, gangsta rap dealt with its own double standards. Thirty years before N.W.A. burst on the scene, Johnny Cash had "shot a man in Reno just to watch him die" in "Folsom Prison Blues" (1957) but received virtually none of the same criticism for perpetuating violence that gangsta rappers would face.[43] Furthermore, just as blaxploitation had done before it, gangsta rap served as a way for urban black youth to challenge the ways in which the government and society surrounding them systematically disadvantaged African

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[39] Reid, "The Black Action Film," 30.

[40] Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 259.

[41] "More Black Movies Will Deal With Drugs: Mayfield." *Jet*, October 12, 1972, 58.

[42] Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 23-24.

[43] Jeanita W. Richardson and Kim A. Scott. "Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny: America's Culture of Violence in Context." *The Journal of Negro Education* 71, no. 3 (2002): 182.

Americans. As Ian Peddie explains in his book *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*, "most listeners to badman stories and songs did not emulate the original gangsta…What thrilled them was imagining someone who recognized no limitations, legal, moral or physical, whatever the consequences when their lives were hemmed in by limitations and consequences."[44] As the living conditions and opportunities for young African American urban dwellers continued to deteriorate and diminish, these listeners found a new means of expression with which they could relate. Even though rappers often presented controversial themes and stories and frequently celebrated acts of sexism and violence that seemed hard to defend, the artists claimed their songs served to portray the perils of urban life.[45] Specifically analyzing the message inherent in the themes of N.W.A.'s lyrics, author Anthony Pinn states, "the anger and violence expressed in gangsta rap is reflective of American society in general. In other words, violence and crime do not originate with rap music, but are part of the American fabric and merely magnified by musical expression."[46] Similar to Curtis Mayfield's defense of blaxploitation, acts such as N.W.A. would defend the music by arguing the songs served as one of the many symptoms of an underlying problem, not the cause. As rapper David Banner stated in a 2007 congressional hearing on hip hop lyrics, "I can admit that there are some problems in hip hop, but it is only a reflection of what is taking place in our society. Hip hop is sick because America is sick."[47]

It should not seem surprising that blaxploitation and gangsta rap would serve as the subject of such intense debate from within the African American community. Because of the levels of mainstream relevance and influence these two movements had throughout popular culture, the debate became a central part of the discussion over black identity in America. The rise and fall of such visible and permeating cultural representations would no doubt play a role in the ways in which African Americans would establish a cultural identity. If the critics of blaxploitation cinema and gangsta rap were correct, the reinforcement of negative stereotypes and the aggressive rejection of white culture could serve as a hindrance to their ability to make progress toward equality and dismantling discrimination and racism in America. If supporters of the movements were correct, African Americans would be given a new empowered voice that could establish a self-created identity and possibly serve to counteract cultural

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[44] Ian Peddie, The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 87

[45] N.W.A.'s Ice Cube has been cited as defending the obscene nature of his work by arguing that "the fundamental thrust of his work is socially responsible and only utilizes vulgarities in order to communicate with people who would otherwise be disinterested" (Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, "Slouching toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music." *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 2 (1999):170).

[46] Anthony Pinn, "Rap Music and Its Message: On Interpreting the Contact between Religion and Popular Culture." In *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, *Revised Edition*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 261.

[47] U.S. Congress. House. Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection. *From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotypes and Degrading Images*. 110th Cong., 1st sess., September 25, 2007, 57.

oppression. Regardless of the outcome, these two movements extended beyond the boundaries of entertainment and became a battleground for African Americans to attempt and define a new black identity.

Conclusion

While gangsta rap has endured and still persists as a relevant and influential art form, blaxploitation movies did not successfully weather the cultural shifts that continued throughout the 1970s. Just as the economics of Hollywood played an essential role in the birth of blaxploitation cinema, they would play an equally consequential role in its death. Soon after the blaxploitation movement began, another film movement ascended as well – the blockbuster. As Novotny Lawrence explains in his book *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre*, blockbusters such as *The Godfather*, *Jaws* and *Star Wars* "profited from both Black and white audiences and effectively eliminated the need for Hollywood to continue producing films targeted specifically toward blacks."[48] Studios operate on market demand and the justification for blaxploitation productions no longer existed. However, even though the blaxploitation movement experienced a relatively brief period of success in Hollywood, the cultural significance and legacy that began with its earliest and most influential entries continue to play an important role in the analysis of contemporary African American popular culture. Blaxploitation cinema not only shares the same characteristics and influences, but serves as an influence on gangsta rap itself, as shown by the links and continuity between the movements explored in this analysis. First, gangsta rappers frequently reference and pay homage to the characters, images and stories depicted within blaxploitation movies in their lyrics as well as their music videos.[49] However, on a more significant level, the blaxploitation cinema explosion set the stage for more authentic and varied depictions of African Americans and urban life (even if they were controversial) in popular culture. It serves as one of the earliest examples of mainstream audiences being exposed to the gritty streets of urban life presented from a black perspective. While blaxploitation movies and gangsta rap may have pulled a large part of their identities from pre-existing myth and folklore and a culture that places a premium on local identity and authenticity, blaxploitation cinema played a critical role in introducing controversial illustrations of urban life to widespread audiences and set the stage for a new era of black representation in popular culture.

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[48] Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 25.

[49] Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 96.

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