MELODRAMAS OF ETHNICITY AND MASCULINITY: GENERIC TRANSFORMATIONS OF LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN FILM GANGSTERS

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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The gangster film genre in America has enjoyed a long history, from the first one-reelers *The Silver Wedding* and *The Black Hand* in 1906, through a rich classical period in the 1930s, and more recently transitioning onto television in series like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-present). The most remarkable characteristics of the gangster genre are its ethnically or racially non-white protagonist and the tendency for the gangster to experience an identity-challenging loss. Central to understanding the appeal of each iteration of the gangster is his essential victimhood, a melodramatic trope that encourages identification with the protagonist based on the careful diegetic construction of his moral virtue.

This dissertation focuses on four distinct cycles of gangster film production, beginning with the genre's revival in 1972 with *The Godfather* and its 1974 sequel and continuing through the gangster films of the early 1990s. I analyze approximately 30 years of American gangster films to explicate the connections between contemporary cultural politics of gender, race, and ethnicity, and the suffering gangster protagonist. A transhistorical analysis of the gangster genre reveals not only that the gangster changes in response to new or reemerging worries in the wider culture about masculinity and race,

but that the gangster is always an ethnic or racialized character whose appeal is in some way due to his experience of loss or lack. Thus the gangster genre constitutes a melodramatic model of masculinity embedded in an American context of unjust gender and racial politics and focuses on a character whose suffering reflects men's location in a vexed social structure.

Drawing on historical analyses of American cultural politics, gender studies, a syntactic/semantic/pragmatic theory of genre informed by Rick Altman's seminal work *Film/Genre*, and close readings of seven films, I relate four distinct gangster film production cycles—the revival of the genre in the early 1970s, the Blaxploitation gangster's heyday in the early- to mid-1970s, the 'hood gangsta film of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the "off-white" gangster of the 1990s—to contemporary public debates about, and challenges to, American masculinity.

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For the Ennis Sibs

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

THE MELODRAMATIC TRADITION OF THE AMERICAN GANGSTER FILM

Late in Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 gangster tour de force *The Godfather*, Tom Hagen informs Don Vito Corleone of his oldest son's murder by a rival mob. Hagen is Vito Corleone's adopted son, rescued from the streets as a child and made consigliore in Don Vito's mob hierarchy. The disheveled Don Vito, bearing the signs of convalescence from an assassination attempt on his own life, shuffles into the dimly lit library as the soundtrack plays the familiar "*Godfather* theme." He has recently suffered the news that his youngest son Michael murdered the would-be assassins and fled to Sicily to escape imprisonment. The power that Don Vito wielded at the film's opening, symbolized in his formal dress and his indulgent but wise doling out of favors, seems to have fallen away, leaving Vito a wounded old man who moves slowly under the weight of physical and emotional pain. Tom, voice quavering, tells the Don that Sonny Corleone has been murdered. Don Vito's shoulders fall, his face collapsing as he blinks through tears. After stating that he will foreswear vengeance in order to avoid further bloodshed, Vito stands and embraces Tom, who leans forward to rest his head on his adoptive father's stomach. The camera rests in long shot on the tableau of Don Vito comforting Tom with a paternal embrace. This moment is poignant, emotional, touching.

In a long reverse shot Don Vito shuffles down the hall to the staircase. His bent frame and shambling gait convey the grief that the following scene will study at greater length. Taking Sonny's body to undertaker Bonasera, Vito requests that the man disguise the bullet holes in his son's body for the funeral. The camera lingers on Don Vito's face

in low-angle close-up, a long take allowing pain, sorrow, grief, and regret to play across his face. The soundtrack is nearly silent, playing the same *Godfather* theme in a hushed pianissimo. In the funeral parlor's somber, high contrast lighting, Vito demands that Bonasera (and the viewer) share his pain, proclaiming sadly, "look how they massacred my boy." Vito is calling for a witness to acknowledge the injustice of his loss. Pathos is the primary emotion of this scene, and our sense of Don Vito Corleone and the men of his family as victims of unjust violence and pathetic loss is paramount to the scene's grave emotional register. The vision of the gangster as a man whose emotional ties trump his personal or political power defies the conventional understanding of the gangster genre as concerned primarily with violent masculinity and the machinations of American capitalism. Throughout *The Godfather*, and throughout the genre since the early 1970s, melodramatic suffering characterizes the gangster.

The gangster has been a vexed figure in American culture since long before *The Godfather* gave it new dimension in its ability to portray manly, virtuous suffering. The gangster first appeared in America as the excoriated star of urban newspaper headlines in the early twentieth century. Sensational tales of the gangster's illegal activities in gambling and so-called "white slavery" sold newspapers in the urban centers of the United States. Such spectacular exploits were roundly condemned by Victorian-style social reformers leading a moral crusade against the supposedly corrupting influences of the city. Reformers warned against anti-American sentiments propagated in the ethnic ghettoes, and blamed the constant influx of immigrants for most social problems, such as public drunkenness, truancy, and crime. This racist discourse propagated by nativist white Americans assumed immigrants to be inassimilable to American culture, and

claimed that the newly arrived "hordes" adhered to old world values that would clash with the burgeoning consumerist ethos of the new world. Moreover, the "teeming masses," as they were viewed, were considered a threat to the prevailing moral order characterized by the Protestant work ethic and Puritan-derived denial of bodily pleasure.

Gangsters were the most visible examples of the moral rot supposedly brought to America by "degenerate" immigrants. The earliest gangsters were almost universally denounced by cultural commentators; but as the century matured, the gangster became a multivalent symbol of American progress and obstacles to it in addition to representing the fears of moral decay in urban America. Hoping to capitalize on the infamy bestowed upon real-life gangsters by popular news accounts, filmmakers seized upon the gangster as a potent symbol of social problems that would bring audiences flocking to theaters. This dissertation re-reads the gangster genre since 1970 through the lens of melodrama, paying close attention to gangster films' constructions of masculinity and ethnicity. I aim to tease out the ways that the gangster responds to contemporary cultural concerns about a perceived loss of white male hegemony on the one hand, and frustration with institutionalized racism that continues to affect Black men in post-Civil Rights America on the other.

These contradictory threads constitute an enduring function of the gangster genre, to bring attention to and critique the racial and gendered status quo in twentieth-century America. Reading these narratives as melodramas opens up the films' affective content and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the cultural work of the gangster. The psychic traumas of modern life and doubts about American men's essential goodness increasingly came to the fore in the postmodern twentieth century, and the gangster genre

functions melodramatically to acknowledge these wounds. Gangster films are narratives in which moral legibility, a shared understanding of justice, simplifies a complex and confusing world, allowing an imaginative—but not imaginary—engagement with questions of self and other. This genre employs tropes of victimhood and villainy to validate, and propose solutions to, viewers' fears about the changing roles of men in America and pervasive social inequity based on racial and ethnic difference. Thus the gangster film provides an imaginative field of play for the working out of social anxieties about masculinity and ethnicity in an increasingly race- and gender-aware nation.

Critical definitions I: genre and the gangster genre

Genre is more than a convenient shorthand to discuss a group of films that have similar themes or narratives; it is a critical category that helps us conceive of the relationship between films, their creators, and their various audiences. Film genres have often been spoken of as "contracts" entered into by filmmakers and audiences where both agree on an interpretive framework denoted by the genre to which a film is said to belong. For example, films in the Western genre share similar settings: the western frontier of the United States; stock characters: the lone gunslinger, the threatening outlaw or "native"; and certain narrative conceits: the shootout between the hero and villain, the protection of women and children from the antisocial forces that the villain represents, and the escape from or return to civilization. In the contract model, audience expectations are set by publicity campaigns, including film posters, trailers and previews, and word of mouth. Increasingly, the publicity surrounding a film is spread through online media and social networks, widening the potential audience as well as offering new venues for setting audience expectations. However, while the contract model explains how

audiences and filmmakers share interpretive schemata for specific groups of films, it does not explain why. I will briefly survey the major theories of genre, and explain the methodology that I employ in this dissertation.

Scholars have put forth multiple competing theories of genre. Foremost amongst film genre theorists are Thomas Schatz, Steve Neale, and Rick Altman. Schatz's foundational *Hollywood Genres* was published in 1981 and defines genre according to the contract model, as "the cooperation between artists and audience in celebrating their collective values and ideals" (15). Schatz argues that the genre contract allows a "ritualistic" (15) experience that individuals enter into for its pro-social benefits, where filmmakers work to reflect their audience's beliefs on-screen and viewers receive pleasure from it. This theory fits neatly with the classical Hollywood style, where audiences identify with the questing hero, obstacles are overcome, and the film ends happily. Schatz takes most of his examples from the studio era, including John Ford's Westerns and Warner Bros.' 1930s gangster films, and while this early work has provided a strong foundation for genre theorists to work from, it is dated. Schatz's theory leaves inadequate room for those who read a genre film against the grain, who actively refuse suture with the protagonist, or for any meaning-making system outside the closed loop of industry-audience, which Altman describes as "a symbiotic relationship" akin to "two serpents biting each other's tails" (16).

While Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* (2000) is a thorough analysis of the history of genre theory, it ultimately does not provide a useful methodology for genre-critical work. Neale points out the disparities between the definitions of genre, and argues that critics would be better served by a more inclusive definition of "genre:" instead of using

genre as exclusive—to define rigid boundaries between the Western and the action-adventure film, for example—film scholars should acknowledge instead the multiplicity of genres and the permeable boundaries between them (223-24). Neale argues that genre is both "multi-dimensional" and "ubiquitous," something that all films take part in and that is not and should not be narrowly defined (2). He insists that the critic's job is to explore the intersections between multiple genres, intimating that these are productive nexes for theories of interpretation; but Neale fails to explain exactly how these intersections and gaps should be read. While Neale's expansive analysis of genre is useful in re-examining a generic corpus, I find Altman's theory of genres much more apt and practical for an historical analysis of a particular genre.

Rick Altman has advanced a useful and thoughtfully considered theory of genre, a "semantic/syntactic/pragmatic" approach (207), which I employ in this project. Altman argues that genres have a powerfully social function, aggregating individuals into interpretive communities, which he calls the "generic community" (156). A genre is "simultaneously defined by multiple codes" which are read by "the multiple groups who, by helping to define the genre, may be said to 'speak' the genre" (208). Further, "[w]hen the diverse groups using the genre are considered together," Altman asserts, "genres appear as regulatory schemes facilitating the integration of diverse factions into a single social fabric" (208). Altman's semantic/syntactic/pragmatic theory is based on recognizing that film structure is a language of sorts, with the individual elements or tropes (semantics) structured in relationship to one another (syntax) and deployed by a linguistic or, in this case, generic community, the use of such language forming the pragmatics.

First, films of the same genre share semantic elements, “common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, set, and the like” (219). These elements are structured in relationship to one another, with these relationships generating meaning within the film’s narrative and intertextually across individual films. Thus, a genre’s syntax is composed of “certain constitutive relationships,” the “structures into which” the semantic pieces of the genre “are arranged” (219). Pragmatic assessment “treats reading as a [. . .] complex process involving not only hegemonic complicity across user groups,” in other words the tendency of audiences to decode a genre according to an ideologically uncomplicated rubric, “but also a feedback system connecting user groups” where meanings are variously discussed, contested, confirmed and rejected (211). Examining the pragmatics of a genre illuminates the potential reading positions hailed by the films, identifies potential interpretations of texts by its generic communities, and postulates conversations about and responses to genre films according to negotiated or counter-hegemonic reading strategies. Thus the semantic/syntactic/pragmatic model accounts for not only individual tropes or motifs in film and the significance of these motifs, but also the context in which the film’s motifs and their interrelationships are activated during the viewing process.

Altman’s theory provides a method of reading not just how a film genre creates community amongst filmmakers and potential audiences, but also why. Moreover, “[r]ather than breeding stability and security,” a trait common to much genre theory that fails to capture the complexity of relationships between film texts and their readers, “this system thrives on borrowed time and deferral” (209). This theory gives equal weight to “textual uses and generic uses” of films rather than simply reading an established set of genres in terms of a set audience, not only yielding a more “problematic and unstable”

hermeneutic but one that better identifies complex and ultimately unknowable variables of film production and spectatorship (209). Further, previous theories privilege the encoding of the film text, assuming that the industrial definitions of genres are accepted unquestioningly by film audiences, leaving little room for negotiation about the meanings of genres and assuming an ideologically homogeneous audience. But "by shifting attention" from an all-or-nothing approach, where either the filmmaker or the audience determines generic significance, "to the broader—and conflicting—usage patterns of all users," we "escape the residual tyranny of the text-king" (213) as well as the conceptual paradoxes of making claims about audiences that are always temporary, contingent, and in flux. Thus, the work of a genre is to connect text with audience, to conceive of the different meanings that adhere to a group of films based on the interplay between viewer expectation, the fulfillment or flouting of those expectations, and the viewer's interpretation of films in a specific genre.

A gangster genre film is thus identified not by whether it has a certain number of gangster-esque elements, but rather in a synthesis of generic tropes, the interplay of these elements, and cultural contexts in which the film is consumed, interpreted, and reconfigured by its audiences. For example, while the trope of a man questing for power in the face of adversity is common to gangster films, not all films featuring this trope are gangster films: *Citizen Kane* (1941) and the more recent *The Aviator* (2004) immediately disprove this theory. What gangster films do have in common is the quest for power in the context of the protagonist's racial or ethnic difference, and in a putative world where illegal activity is their only and best means to achieve power. Further, the gangster film must be taken by an audience to be a gangster film, to enjoy an extra-textual life as

fodder for digesting and negotiating a position in the gangster pantheon. Thus the caper film, the crime film, and the heist film have some elements in common with the gangster genre, but they lack one or more fundamental constitutive elements.

For the sake of this project, I define the gangster genre as being constituted by films that share the following semantic elements: an ethnic or racially non-white protagonist; a culture in which race and/or ethnicity are grounds for conflict; a capitalistic economy and a patriarchal society ("America") in which the gangster participates illegally; and the gang, a group or family that the gangster holds membership in. These elements are structured according to these syntaxes: a loss or lack of cultural power stymies the ethnic gangster's quest for power in the existing socioeconomic system; a loss or lack in the family or gang structure challenges the protagonist's stable identity; elements either within the gang or outside of it contribute to the gangster's eventual downfall or abandonment of the gang. And the pragmatics of the gangster genre include audiences' tendency to view gangsters as empowering examples of masculine identity; the trend of young people of color appropriating the term "gangster" or "gangsta" to mean a positively inflected, transgressive notion of subaltern identity; and the potential of the gangster genre to be a conduit for salving the psychic wounds of white men, who have experienced unprecedented challenges to their position in American culture since the Civil Rights era.

In researching this project I have viewed dozens of gangster films, which helped me to define the boundaries of the gangster genre corpus. In my view, the gangster genre includes films that deal with organized crime—not just the Mafia variety, but all varieties of a criminal underworld—and excludes films that do not deal with race or ethnicity.

Thus, films like *Hoodlum* (1997) and *Bugsy* (1991) are gangster films, though they treat widely different ethnic milieu—Black gangsters and Jewish gangsters, respectively. At the same time, Arthur Penn's iconic and oft-cited *Bonnie and Clyde* does not qualify as a gangster genre film, in my estimation, because while it deals with masculine impotence, a common trope among many films of its era, it ignores racial strife and does not comment upon its characters' ethnicity. Gangster films, crucially, deal with race and ethnicity, and films that feature illegal activities are better placed in the wider crime genre rather than the gangster oeuvre.

Critical definitions II: melodrama

One might say that melodrama is a difference engine that determines moral legibility by presenting competing claims to moral righteousness. In the absence of competing claims, melodrama functions to illuminate the distinctions between right and wrong and to enlist audience sympathy for a narrative's victim-hero and antipathy for the villain. Linda Williams' "Melodrama Revised" laid the groundwork for a scholarly reconsideration of the term "melodrama" and its use in film scholarship. She argued that, far from being a simple and manipulative sentiment in American film, "melodrama represents one of the most significant, and deeply symptomatic, ways we negotiate moral feeling" (61). Following Williams' essay, scholars began to reexamine melodrama outside of its generic ghetto—the "women's weepy"—and acknowledge melodrama as occupying a fundamental position in the American social imaginary.

While Linda Mulvey claimed in 1987 that "melodrama [is] a safety valve for ideological contradictions centered on sex and the family," (75) more recently scholars, especially Linda Williams, have added the consideration of race to the mix. In Williams'

2001 book *Playing the Race Card*, she gives unprecedented insight into how race and melodrama have been irrevocably intertwined in American literature and culture since Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Williams elaborates a history of raced melodrama in American film that begins with early cinematic treatments of Uncle Tom, and claims that D.W. Griffiths'1915 *Birth of a Nation* later re-appropriated the trope of raced victimization from Uncle Tom in service of white fears of miscegenation and the threat of black men raping white women (247). Tracing this history through to the Rodney King and OJ Simpson trials, when two not-guilty verdicts touched off waves of racial violence and enmity in 1990s Los Angeles, Williams illuminates the construction of racial politics in twentieth-century America as inherently melodramatic, with many groups vying to claim victim status in order to assert their own moral innocence. In this dissertation, I use Williams' definition of melodrama as a structuring logic that elicits audience sympathy for a victim, who is figured as the hero of the narrative, and that is principally concerned with illuminating justice in the American social context.

Critical definitions III: race and ethnicity

Race is arguably the most important determinant of American cultural politics in the post-Civil War era. Citizenship in the United States, including the right to own property, vote, and receive full legal protections, was long conferred only upon white men. The imaginative "United States of America" that we inhabit has been conceived of from its founding as a nation of white men, with the franchise, equal protection under the law, and full acknowledgement of the humanity of women and non-whites realized only gradually and after arduous and at times violent struggle. The major determinant of

American racial politics is the history of the transatlantic slave trade and its myriad cultural legacies, including Jim Crow, anti-miscegenation laws, and invisible structural discrimination. Race is both a social fact and a social fiction. The common-sense definition is that one's race is determined by one's skin color. Although race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably, they are distinct concepts. Race refers to groupings determined by putative biological differences, what Frantz Fanon famously termed "epidermal" race (112). Ethnicity refers to cultural as opposed to biological distinctions that account for differences between groups of people. Thus it is possible to be racially white but ethnically Italian, Irish, or Jewish.

Race critic Ella Shohat describes the American national identity as being imaginatively "constituted by an Anglo-American core, subsequently supplemented by ethnic 'accretions'" (216). Despite—and possibly due to—being a nation of immigrants, the United States continues to conceive of itself first and foremost as a white nation, with foreign cultures invited to assimilate but not alter the nation's imaginary makeup. "Off-whites"[1] or ethnic whites, such as Italian-Americans, Jewish Americans, and Irish-Americans, benefit from white privilege in the late twentieth century but are not culturally Anglo-Saxon. They provide especially apt figures through which to represent struggles over the nature of social power because of their liminality. Positioned outside the cultural dominant of Anglo-Saxon whiteness, and simultaneously not displaying the markers of Black identity (notably skin color), ethnically inflected white gangsters throw into relief the falsehoods of black/white binary racial relations and provide a convenient

[1] I borrow this term from Linda Mizejewski, whose essay "Movies and the Off-white Gangster" greatly informs my chapter on 1990s ethnic gangsters.

displacement for white guilt, as they represent "successful" assimilation to American culture.

As a scholar engaging in an antiracist project, I seek to criticize racial essentialism and the history of racism in America. While I use the term "race" throughout this dissertation, I acknowledge that all racial identities are contingent, temporary, socially imposed, and ultimately inadequate rather than inherent, unchanging, or outside of history. In this dissertation I use "race" to refer to Black/white relations represented in films starring and concerned with Blacks—the Blaxploitation gangster of the 1970s and the 'hood film of the late 1980s and early 1990s. I use "ethnicity" to describe off-white characters, who at one time in American history were understood to constitute racially distinct groups but whose skin tone has allowed for full assimilation to Anglo-Saxon America.

Gangster genre history and scholarship

For many years, genre critics identified D.W. Griffith's 1912 *Musketeers of Pig Alley* as the first gangster film.[2] While it is certainly tempting to identify "the father of cinema" as the progenitor of one of its lesser creations—the "low" genre pic—the commonplace of identifying Griffith's *Musketeers* as the first gangster film has been

[2] For example, Eugene Rosow (1978) claims that "*Musketeers* launched the genre with an episodic slice of pictorial realism [. . .] Griffith began the genre with a sympathetic gangster [which was] to become basic to gangster films" (79). John G. Cawelti (1975) asserts that "the urban gangster [] in various forms has been a staple of the American film since D.W. Griffith's" 1912 film (326). As late as 1993, John McCarty quotes Kevin Brownlow's claim that *Musketeers of Pig Alley* is "the first gangster film of any importance to survive" (2).

revealed as inaccurate by more recent historicist criticism.[3] Film scholars Giorgio Bertellini and Lee Grieveson now identify much earlier films, such as American Mutoscope's 1906 *The Silver Wedding* and Biograph's (also 1906) one-reeler *The Black Hand*, as the first examples of the genre (Grieveson 13, Bertellini 217). A number of silent gangster films dealing with the spectacle of urban, often ethnic (and frequently Italian) criminality followed. The earliest gangster films were based on the exploits of real-life gangs, and the tone of these films is derived from late nineteenth century reformers' concerns about the corrupting forces of the modern city (Grieveson 16-17).[4]

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[3] Until the 2005 anthology *Mob Culture*, no one had interrogated the critical commonplace that posits the talking gangster of the early 1930s as the authentic progenitor of the genre. Much of the work of more accurately defining the genre has been enabled by more recent archival efforts dedicated to recovering, restoring, and preserving early films. If early critics did not have the benefit of an expanded repertoire from which to draw their conclusions about the genre, it is through no fault of their own; it is equally true that later critics, in failing to interrogate the standard narrative of generic origins have, as the *Mob Culture* editors put it in their introduction, "serve[d] the need of the critic at the cost of the historical period" (Grieveson et al 3). Claims that locate the origination of the gangster protagonist with the roles played by Edward G. Robinson, Paul Muni, and James Cagney in this early talking gangster cycle ignore the fact that gangsters were well established as filmic fodder long before 1930, and that "the so-called classic paradigm," emblematized by *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*, "was a variation on already common formulae" (Grieveson et al 3). These formulae were borrowed from "[l]ate nineteenth-century accounts of city life in urban guides, muckraking journalism, visual culture, and realist literature," which "frequently articulated a sense of a criminal underworld threatening civil society" (Grieveson 15). Grieveson adds that the codification of these themes into filmic conventions occurred in the silent era, when a number of films featured the criminal activities of shady, slum-dwelling underworld figures whose illegitimate enterprise reflected the corruption at the heart of the modern city. The most recent gangster criticism thus complicates the simplistic ahistorical narrative of the genre that has prevailed since its inception, a practice that I continue in this project by rigorously historicizing my observations about gangster films and examining the genre's context as well as its content.

[4] Lee Grieveson's "Gangsters and Governance in the Silent Era" is a fascinating examination of the too-often ignored silent gangster in the context of contemporary social concerns about immigrancy and the modern city. *Mob Culture* 13-40.

Some argue that the gangster did not come fully into his own until he could speak—until the silent movies gave way to the talkies, where the dialects of urban America marked the gangster as "other." [5] As gangster film scholar Jonathan Munby points out, the first all-talking film was, in fact, a gangster film, Warner Bros.' 1928 *Lights of New York* (20-21). The Prohibition gangster was the first wildly popular gangster cycle, and on the strength of *Little Caesar* (1930) and *The Public Enemy* (1931), Warner Bros. became the preeminent studio of gritty urban realism. Howard Hawks' *Scarface* (1932) is commonly considered along with *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* to be the "classic" gangster archetype, which quickly became a fixture on American screens. Gangsters of the Prohibition era were criminals who challenged the moral status quo by flouting Prohibition laws and police control to achieve material success.

Due to the strength of the Production Code Administration and its demand that any film depicting illegal acts should end with the moral of "crime doesn't pay," the gangster often died in the last reel. After the flurry of gangster films throughout the early 1930s, including the big three and extending to dozens more, the gangster genre was forcefully disbanded by censors. The PCA banned the gangster film in 1935 in response to outcry by multiple factions, namely the Catholic Legion of Decency and other moral arbiters arguing that the gangster corrupted the character of urban children, and ethnic groups who decried the stereotyping of Italian (and, though less vocally, Irish)

[5] I certainly agree that the component of ethnic dialect and immigrant accents greatly affected the meaning of the gangster genre, but I do not think this justifies dismissing the silent gangster as simply "underdeveloped" or "immature," a teleology in which the talking gangster becomes the inevitable and proper gangster just waiting for the innovation of film sound to be born.

immigrants, according to gangster film scholar Jonathan Munby (5).[6] Over the next 30 years, the themes of the gangster genre would go underground, so to speak, and be transformed into the psychologically disturbed characters and settings of film noir as well as the alienated angry white men of the syndicate film (Munby 7-9).[7]

The ethnic gangster would not reappear on American screens until the late 1960s, when the PCA lost its power and the MPAA ratings system took its place as a more permissive censorship organ, allowing studios to control transgressive content from within. Though some few gangster films were released before 1972, none is remembered in film history, for good reason. Martin Ritt's 1968 *The Brotherhood* has many themes in common with *The Godfather*—a focus on the Italian Mafia, a journey to Sicily to escape prosecution, the messy politics of an illegal cooperative—but earned little on its release and was quickly forgotten. *The Godfather* became the top-grossing film of all time in 1972, and its sequel enjoyed a smaller share of the box office take but opened to great critical acclaim in 1974. In addition to rebirthing the Italian gangster seen in early films

[6] For a thorough treatment of the impact of studio-era industry censorship on the gangster film, see Jonathan Munby's *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*, where the author argues that framing devices such as prologues preceding *Scarface* and *The Public Enemy* decrying the gangster's immorality were "the product[s] of negotiations with civic and moral interest groups who were seeking to establish federal censorship of Hollywood. [. . .] The rhetoric of civic responsibility comes to form a frame narrative, as it were, which attempts to impose a preferred reading on the rest of the text" (51). Munby's book-length study analyses the gangster film in the context of many social forces of the time, of which censorship is the main, but not lone, controlling factor.

[7] Interestingly, the tendency to dissociate the gangster from the crime or noir film of the 1940s and 1950s is a relic of recent times: America's "increasingly preponderant fascination with crime" after World War II "was understood in its day not as something new or discontinuous with Hollywood's traditions, but as a rejuvenation of the illicit themes and issues associated with the earlier Depression-era gangster cycle" (Munby 7). In this way it is possible to draw connections between the earliest and the most recent gangsters, and remain historically accurate as well.

of the genre, the 1970s saw the creation of a new type of gangster, in part because of industrial conditions, and in part due to changes in the American political atmosphere. Black gangsters came on the scene in the 1970s, beginning with the titular protagonist of Melvin Van Peebles' 1971 *Sweet Sweetback's BaadAsssss Song*. The success of this independently financed film in Black markets convinced Hollywood that there was a large audience willing to pay to see Black protagonists, a market segment previously unrecognized by studios.

Very soon, B movies and low-budget "exploitation" films were overtaken by Black gangsters, from *Black Caesar* (1973) (a contemporary remake of *Little Caesar*) and *The Black Godfather* (1974) to the effective end of the cycle around 1975. Many of these films served as inspiration for Black directors in the 1980s and 1990s, when the gangster morphed into the gangsta. The 'hood cycle took up the mantle of representing the new gangster milieu; whereas gangster films of the 1930s reflected a society concerned about urban immigrants, gangsta films dramatize fears about rampant violence fueled by drug abuse, poverty, racism, and the absence of parental figures in the ghettoes of those same (or newer West Coast) cities. The 1990s and the fin-de-siècle saw a cycle of period gangster films that portrayed ethnic gangs of the past in a newly violent and bleak manner. Such films include *Miller's Crossing* and *GoodFellas* (1990), *Bugsy* (1991), *Road to Perdition* (2002), and *Gangs of New York* (2002). And television has been invaded by the gangster, too: the astounding popular success of and critical praise for *The Sopranos* has lately rejuvenated both the gangster genre film and gangster genre criticism.

It is imperative to read the history of gangster film criticism as a narrative of attempts to define the genre in terms of its themes, characters, and its reception by audiences. Critics, like films, are products of their age, and thus gangster genre criticism has been subject to the changing concerns of scholars as film studies has developed as a discipline. The first gangster genre criticism, long before the institutionalization of film studies as an academic discipline, is Robert Warshow's 1948 essay in *Partisan Review*, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero." Though its focus is inconsistent and its survey of films cursory, Warshow's essay identifies major themes of the gangster film, and has informed scholarship ever since. Warshow argues that the gangster in film illuminates fundamental contradictions of American culture regarding success and individuality, and that the gangster voices opposition to the problems of modernity itself.[8] Warshow identifies the gangster as a unique product of the city that signifies for film-goers the dangers of urban life that, he implies, are endemic to what it means to be an American. He claims, "[i]n ways that we do not easily or willingly define, the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects 'Americanism' itself" (13). Thus, because the gangster is an "other," an outsider to legitimate society, the figure necessarily comments on what it means to be an American.

Warshow avers that the basic narrative of the gangster film consists of one man embracing anarchy and violence to rise above mediocrity and attain power and monetary success. The narrative rise is always, Warshow asserts, followed by a "very precipitate

[8] In this aspect, Warshow's argument is an early example of cultural studies in film scholarship. At the same time, his argument is not always clear or coherent; his piece also suffers from the lack of a codified metalanguage for discussing film critically.

fall" (15), where the gangster's ambitions are thwarted by the power of the state, usually embodied by police.[9] Above all, Warshow argues, the gangster voices dissatisfaction with the status quo of American capitalism and bootstrap upward mobility by embodying the paradox of the obligation to succeed and the inevitability of failure to achieve the American Dream because "failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous" (15). Writing soon after World War II, Warshow is responding to a trenchant optimism in American culture, the culture of liberal consensus, that for him and the gangster rang hollow. In their portrayal of successful challenges to the status quo, gangster films give voice to a sublimated cynicism about the promise of the American Dream. Warshow's assessment of the "work" of the gangster film identifies salient characteristics of the gangster figure that have persisted throughout much of the genre's history. Though Warshow covers only the "classical" gangster cycle (*Public Enemy*, *Little Caesar*, and *Scarface*), his identification of themes of "otherness" and his assertion that the gangster figure represents paradoxical notions of identity and success are certainly visible in even the most recent American gangsters. But Warshow's narrow view of the gangster as tragic hero, based on a tiny sample of Hollywood's full oeuvre of gangster genre films, has become a critical commonplace that scholars have only recently begun to challenge.

Warshow's critical legacy

Gangster genre criticism of the 1970s reflects the newness of the discipline of academic film studies in its varied foci and lack of a cohesive discourse.[10] Many writers

[9] Nick Browne echoes Warshow's thesis some 40 years later: "The genre is structured by a fundamental antagonism—between the gangster and the law" (14).

[10] The gangster film genre has been given more attention and granted a larger presence in popular culture than academic culture has been willing to provide, whereas some genres,

of this period build on Warshow's thesis, enriching his observations with nascent ethnic studies, cultural studies, and sociological analyses of the gangster's significance. Some writers of the era are simply concerned with establishing the salient features of the genre, engaging in early discursive debates over what constitutes a genre and which genre conventions withstand the test of time. The first sustained critical interest in the gangster genre occurred in the 1970s, at which time the themes of the gangster genre were defined by critics who predated politicized and historiographical film scholarship.

Stuart M. Kaminsky's 1972 article "*Little Caesar* and Its Role in the Gangster Film Genre" claims that the 1931 film starring Edward G. Robinson is "archetypal," the template that sets up the trenchant themes of the gangster film which "evolve" as the genre ages but remains relevant (47). Kaminsky lists a number of themes and motifs of the genre, among them the setting of the modern, perilous city, the treatment of women as acquisitions, acquisitions as crucial to the gangster's "rise," and the inevitable death of the gangster as producing a profound ambivalence in the audience. Kaminsky argues that "[d]eath is the result for the gangster, but ambivalence is our reaction to his existence and demise" because the gangster is above all admirable in his defiance of the status quo that

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notably the Western and the musical, have long been considered worthy of scholarly attention. Many academic books analyzing the gangster film genre simply provide plot summaries and a line or two from the director's or writer's biography. This type of book is common, and in fact many of the "academic" studies of the gangster film are directed towards the general interest reader, consisting of similar plot summaries, auteur biographies, and trivia or urban legends related to each film. This is not surprising due to the gangster genre's long-standing status as "low" or popular entertainment rather than subject for serious study. Examples of this type of study include Richard whitehall's "Crime, Inc.: A Three-Part Dossier on the American Gangster Film," from 1964; John Baxter's 1970 *The Gangster Film*, Colin McArthur's 1972 *Underworld, USA*, James Robert Parish and Michael R. Pitt's 1987 *The Great Gangster Pictures II*, and John McCarty's 1993 *Hollywood Gangland*. Marilyn Yaquinto's 1998 *Pump 'Em Full of Lead* is a hybrid of the academic film study and a broad survey of the genre's major themes for a popular audience.

average people find stymieing (60). Kaminsky's piece is akin to Warshow's in its concern to list rather than explore in-depth a number of repeated themes in gangster films. Its weakness also lies in the brief and broad strokes with which it paints the history of the gangster film up to that point. While I do not address the "classic" gangster film cycle, I intend to broaden the definition of the genre to include issues of ethnicity and masculinity that are visible even in the earliest iterations of the genre.

The title of Jack Shadoian's 1977 book, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film*, indicates his belonging to the group of gangster film critics who do not distinguish between the crime film and the gangster film, which they often refer to as a sub-genre.[11] Shadoian's 2003 second edition, he admits, does not depart significantly from the first edition, and both argue that the gangster responds to deeply felt needs in our culture to reconcile contradictions about contemporary identity.[12] Shadoian argues that "[i]f there is a problem the society is worried about or a fantasy it is ready to support,

[11] Many of the critics writing in this vein do not distinguish between the varieties of crime films, such as the heist/caper film, the syndicate film, and even the crime procedural, all of which have different central themes and respond to different cultural concerns. Such critics include Nicole Rafter (*Shots in the Mirror*), Carlos Clarens (*Crime Movies*), and John G. Cawelti ("The New Mythology of Crime"). There is a particularity to the gangster film which I believe merits it genre, rather than sub-genre, status. The gangster film has always spoken to concerns in American definitions of masculinity, and particularly ethnic masculinity. Moreover, the sheer number of films focusing on a gangster protagonist elevate it to a crucial part of American film culture. For an in-depth discussion of the critical arguments over genre status, see Rick Altman's *Film/Genre*.

[12] The change of subtitle in Shadoian's second edition, from *The American Gangster/Crime Film* to *The American Gangster Film*, is significant in that it reflects the eventual acknowledgment of the singularity of the gangster film as central to a specific genre and its growing stature in scholarly discourse.

odds are it can be located in the gangster (5)."[13] He concurs with Warshow's claim that the gangster represents American viewers' idealized self-image, averring that the gangster embodies the contradictions of American self-image on an individual level: "The gangster is a paradigm of the American dream. [. . .] Our involvement with the gangster rests on our identification with him as the archetypal American dreamer (3-4)." Shadoian builds on Warshow's analysis to argue for an understanding of the gangster as responding to various cultural concerns—about insider/outsider status, about failure and success as a central tenet of American ideology, and about violence as an unavoidable aspect of the modern world. Gangster films "speak[] not merely to our fascination/repulsion with aspects of our socioeconomic milieu [. . .] but also to our fascination/repulsion with the most haunting depths of ourselves" (3). Thus Shadoian argues that the gangster figure in American cinema encapsulates the problems of identity and proposes violent solutions to metaphysical questions of good and evil, and of what it means to belong to a human community.

Born to Lose: The Gangster Film in America (1978) is Eugene Rosow's apt analysis of how the gangster film responded to twentieth century American fears regarding immigration and otherness, the myths of American success, and the inherent injustice of a capitalist economy in a supposedly classless society. Rosow combines archetypal and sociological analysis of the gangster genre, arguing that it treats the gangster as a mythical figure embodying the conflicts of "a society in the throes of accepting its industrialization and urbanization" (xiv). The gangster represents the fears

[13] While I agree with Shadoian that gangster films serve to embody audience fantasies, I think the gangster responds to more specific concerns than Shadoian is willing to grant: the particular fantasies of minority groups and men of color in response to real social injustice.

of otherness, moral decay, and alienation of the modern city. Rosow's approach is, interestingly, a strongly moralistic one. He warns against the dangers of the normalizing gangster narratives, claiming that "the durability of the gangster genre is also an indication of the growth of a cancer in the American mind—a pervasive criminal mentality that is a threat to our self-concept as a nation founded on democratic liberty, justice, and equality" (xv). As an early example of academic film studies, Rosow's work does a great deal of summarizing, including facts from urban legend rather than archival work. Rosow often over-generalizes about the gangster films (and films in general), claiming that the gangster genre maintained a unified focus and moral message aiming to socialize its viewer to the American values of hard work and meritocracy. However, the limitations of his approach do not overwhelm Rosow's still-applicable survey of gangster films. I build on Shadoian's and Rosow's observations analyses to examine the gangster in his cultural contexts, illuminating specific instances of gangster films' reflections and refractions of cultural concerns.

The 1980s did not see many critical assays at the gangster genre, most likely because the Sicilian gangster, who became synonymous with "gangster" due to the popularity and myth-making success of *The Godfather*, was not highly visible in American film of the decade. While this form of gangster narrative lay dormant, another type of gang became a vexing presence in the American mind: the Black and Latino gangs of city ghettoes and barrios became a fixture of the nightly news and the frequent subject of social-problem and race-relations films in the 1980s. Most gangster genre criticism, however, does not recognize the "'hood" or "gangsta" film as belonging to the same genre as the Mafia, Italian, or Irish gangster film. For this reason, there is very little

scholarship that treats both as part of the same filmic phenomenon, and very little gangster genre scholarship published in the 1980s when these films were being made.[14] Thus one of my aims in this dissertation is to advocate for including the 'hood or gangsta film under the aegis of the gangster genre.

One notable essay published in this decade is Edward Mitchell's 1986 "Apes and Essences: Some Sources of Significance in the American Gangster Film." Mitchell argues that fundamental myths in American culture—"the subconscious convictions of a culture" (204)—are represented in the narratives of gangster films. Mitchell identifies these cultural belief systems as Puritanism, which values work and rejects pleasure; Social Darwinism, the early 20th century pseudoscience that postulated an inherent aggression that determined which individuals survived the march of history; and the Horatio Alger myth, that the individual rises to success through good fortune and resourcefulness. These American myths combine to provide irreconcilable contradictions in the national imaginary, which Mitchell argues play out as the binary pairs of freedom/fate, good/evil,[15] and passive/active. These are interesting claims, but Mitchell

[14] Another possible reason for the lack of genre-focused scholarship in this decade is the shift in film scholarship itself: the rise in American film studies of psychoanalytical criticism and the focus on questions of subjectivity and ideology were hotly debated in the scholarly discourse during the 1980s, pushing aside concerns of genre, reception, and cultural studies until the 1990s, by which time intradisciplinary arguments about semiotics and subjectivity theory had run their course.

[15] Ironically (for my purposes), Mitchell uses the language of melodrama to describe the work of the gangster film. At the end of his essay, he claims, "the contradictory attitudes toward freedom and fate; the irreconcilable conflicts regarding the sources and signs of good and evil; the simultaneous and mutually exclusive admonition to accept/wait and adapt/initiate" are endemic to the American imaginary. "These same dynamics provide the bases of the significance of American gangster films" (211). Melodrama critics will recognize in the "accept/wait," and "adapt/initiate," the too soon/ just in time/ too late

fails to flesh out his argument; he identifies these elements of the gangster film but doesn't go into depth in terms of industrial or genre history, individual films, or the specific historical events that influenced the creation of gangster narratives.

David E. Ruth's 1996 book, *Inventing the Public Enemy: The Gangster in American Culture, 1918-1934*, analyzes the classical gangster from an anthropological and sociological perspective, with the aim of explaining the role played in American cultural mythology by the gangster figure. Ruth argues that gangster narratives in the popular media of the early twentieth century, including newspapers, radio programs, and magazines in addition to films, portrayed a set of contradictions about changing social realities. The extrapolation of these real-world contradictions into narrative fantasies allowed ordinary Americans to see their concerns worked through and resolved in productive ways. Ruth avers that "the gangster was a central cultural figure because he helped Americans master this changing social world" (3) where wealth and poverty, crime and legitimate society, and desire and constraint met head-to-head in everyday life as well as in the movies. These sociological perspectives provide a preliminary framework for my argument that the gangster is alternately a reflection of and a reaction to cultural politics of late twentieth century America.

Gangster film criticism has experienced a resurgence since the late 1990s and into the early twenty-first century due to the popular and critical interest in HBO's gangster

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rhythm of melodramatic anticipation. "Good/evil," and "freedom/fate" are basic dualisms of classical melodrama.

series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007).[16] Scholars have recently begun to analyze gangster narratives with the tools of ethnic studies, television studies, antiracist cultural studies, and queer and feminist theory. The most common type of critique uncovers ethnic, antifeminist, or homophobic stereotypes in the genre, for example Jonathan Cavallero's 2004 "Gangster, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos: The Historical Roots of Italian-American Stereotype Anxiety." Cavallero analyses the rhetoric of representations of Italian-American men in 1930s films with an eye to charting the "evolution" of an Italian-American ethnicity and its media representations. He argues that Depression-era audiences were able to critique American norms while blaming the bankruptcy of the American Dream and the failure of the "Protestant Success Ethic" on Italian-Americans and other ethnic groups in gangster films.

This intriguing analysis takes part in the long-standing debate in film and cultural studies over whether the gangster narrative constitutes a critique of the status quo or a denunciation of ethnic minorities. Those who argue that Hollywood's prevailing discourse determines the meaning of films in general argue that the gangster film creates an ethnic scapegoat for the problems of modernity, a scapegoat that many find convincing. Those who agree that the audience's work in decoding the film text matters as much as its encoding by producers [17] see a radical potential in gangster films to make

[16] A good bellwether of this recent critical reinvestment in the genre is the first-ever collection of classic gangster genre scholarship, *Gangster Film Reader*. Eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini, Limelight Editions, 2007.

[17] See Stuart Hall's "Encoding, Decoding" for an elaboration of the political reasons for embracing a reader response approach to film meaning. In this dissertation I focus on the decoding process, which values the audience's reception and engagement with films. While I briefly discuss the industrial conditions that contribute to the creation of gangster film cycles, I do not engage this encoding process at length. It would be productive to

apparent to a wide audience the rampant social inequalities of modernity's progress. I intend to illuminate some of these contradictions, linking the genre's content to readings of the gangster figure that at times challenge cultural anxieties and in other instances provide a soothing narrative solution to them.

Politicized gangster genre studies

Recent analyses of the gangster reflect broad trends within film studies towards a more rigorous historicism and an increasingly complex reading of the political meanings of film. This more sophisticated debate moves beyond the simplistic binaries of earlier debates over the conservatism or subversive potential of Hollywood cinema in general and gangster films specifically. Jonathan Munby's 1999 *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil* is a historicist reevaluation of the gangster film from the classical cycle through the gangster's noir incarnations. Munby aims to illuminate the gangster film as a site for competing voices speaking from and against the modern city and the modern condition. Tackling censorship and ethnic studies interpretations of early gangster films, Munby argues that the gangster's construction as a social menace in early films was a displacement of social anxieties about racial purity and threats to white hegemony into filmic form. He identifies the gangster as a specifically racialized threat that explicitly challenged normative notions of white American identity.

Public Enemies, Public Heroes also examines the history of social forces influencing the production of gangster narratives and audience interpretations of those

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read the gangster genre as a history of industrial conditions that encourage or discourage filmmaking that is relatively low-budget and low-prestige, and to analyze these films' productions as resulting from the contemporary political economy.

meanings. The major factor in Munby's analysis is institutional censorship, and through careful analysis of Production Code Administration archives, he is able to reconstruct a history of negotiations between film producers and PCA censors, and the concrete results of these interactions in terms of how films changed to suit the demands of both. Munby argues the gangster is part of a "dissenting cinematic tradition" that "dramatize[s] an enduring sense of collective grievance" (225, 226). In this way, the gangster figure has displaced ethnic anxieties for viewers of color, as well as for white Americans, into a filmic avatar that makes visible the tensions between competing ideologies of success and cultural legitimacy in the early to mid-twentieth century.[18] Munby's scholarship serves as both a model for my work to re-historicize the gangster and the most direct critical antecedent to my own argument that the genre often constitutes a critique of social inequalities.

Another important recent entry into gangster film scholarship is Martha Nochimson's 2007 *Dying to Belong*. In this comparative and formal analysis of Hollywood and Hong Kong gangster films, Nochimson argues that these films are borne from immigrant nations that narrativize concerns about insider/outsider national identity. She focuses on the formal qualities of gangster films, arguing that through both form and theme, American gangster films express contemporary anxieties about identity, place, and the instability of subjectivity. One of Nochimson's contributions to criticism on the genre is an elaboration of the ways in which gangster protagonists are self-aware and through self-referentiality criticize the conditions of their own existence. She claims that central to the themes and cultural work of the gangster genre is a questioning of the self

[18] Munby's analysis is the most rigorously historical and the most carefully attuned to ethnic and racial politics, and thus influences my argument in these pages.

that many other of the so-called "low" genres, such as comedy and maternal melodrama, lack. In the gangster's self knowledge, Nochimson argues, the genre finds much of its gravitas, and "the spectacle of self-knowledge, the gangster's realizations about who he was within the confusing modern context" that most appeal to audiences who also inhabit the modern milieu (14). Nochimson's groundbreaking application of melodrama criticism to the gangster film is a welcome intervention into the genre and informs my similar departure from traditional gangster genre scholarship and into new critical territory.

The most exciting recent entry in the gangster film bibliography is the 2005 anthology *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*, edited by Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield. The contributors to this volume expose the limitations of previous gangster scholarship, illuminating facets of the gangster genre that previous criticism had ignored. The authors analyze overlooked cycles and forgotten films of the gangster genre, subjecting gangster films to feminist, historical, and industrial analysis. A tendency to read the gangster film in terms of positively inflected masculine attributes also runs throughout the history of genre scholarship. Contributors to *Mob Culture* challenge the perception that gangster films are solely concerned with male characters in masculine pursuits. For example, Esther Sonnet's essay, "Ladies Love Brutes: Reclaiming Female Pleasures in the Lost History of Hollywood Gangster Cycles, 1929-1931," reveals that what she calls the "gangster-inflected society melodrama" (106) hailed female audience members, and that these "films pivot on the capacity for *female* sexual desire to disrupt and destabilize class and ethnic boundaries." (107, italics original). Sonnet shifts the focus from the conviction that the genre treats male concerns for a male audience to complicate the readings of the gangster—generally acknowledged

as a destabilizing, anti-social archetype—as transgressive of social mores for women as well as men.

The subtle misogyny that I claim exists in gangster genre criticism is in part attributable to the undue influence of Warshow's essay, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero." Warshow's most influential declaration regards the sensibility of the gangster. Warshow's oft-quoted analysis is that "[f]rom its beginning, [the gangster film] has been a consistent and astonishingly complete presentation of the modern sense of tragedy" (12). Most gangster film scholars until 2005 accepted this claim without further interrogation. Critics have found Warshow's argument—that the gangster represents a tragic and manly response to the vagaries of modernity—to be so compelling as to preclude further consideration of the gangster's mode of presentation.[19]

Little critical work on the genre has benefited from the insights of politicized cultural studies and feminist film scholarship. Even the analyses that have drawn on such insights, such as Beretta E. Smith-Shomade's 2003 analysis of Black women in hood films, "'Rock-A-Bye, Baby!': Black Women Disrupting Gangs and Constructing Hip Hop Gangster Films," often assume that the genre's significance lay in its treatment of a violent male protagonist who challenges the strictures of law and order. Smith-Shomade argues that female gangstas, specifically in the 1996 film *Set It Off*, appropriate the

[19] For example, Stuart Kaminsky perhaps unconsciously confirms the claim that the defining mode of gangster narratives is tragedy, averring that viewing a gangster film is "a cathartic experience" (24). Arthur Sacks (1971) claims that the gangster "is a prime example of American rugged individualism," (7) and even more recent ethnic studies approaches often center on masculinist readings of the gangster, as Fred Gardaphe (in 2002) writes, "the original American gangsters represented a traditional, patriarchal sense of manhood that came from an old European model" (65). Shadoian argues, "[t]he 'gangster' is tragic-heroic; the term itself carries some weight (19)." Shadoian is right: the term "tragedy" has weighed down genre criticism and has inhibited clear thinking about the affective qualities of the gangster genre.

masculine attributes of gangsters and in doing so challenge gender binaries. But Smith-Shomade relies on Warshow's definition of the gangster as one man fighting against the status quo, whose inevitable failure is a tragic statement of individual ineffectiveness against forces larger than the individual. In failing to reexamine the assumptions of earlier genre criticism, Smith-Shomade reifies a vision of the gangster that lacks nuance and misses the ways that these female gangsters signify on the emotional content of the traditional gangster film, a much more potent political critique than viewing them as simply masculinized women—women made masculine by their appropriation of male roles.

Another example of gangster genre criticism's thread of unconscious misogyny is seen in Christopher Shannon's 2005 essay on the Irish-American gangster, a work in which the author takes pains to distinguish the early Italian gangster films and their themes from the early Irish American gangster films. Claiming that the Italian American gangsters of *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* represent tragedy, while the Irish American Tom Powers of *The Public Enemy* represents an investment in community, Shannon nevertheless likens the latter to tragic generic roots, claiming that Cagney's Tommy Powers "responds to [his brother's] murder with an act of self-sacrificial revenge that enacts a kind of gangster version of the Oedipal surrender to fate" (57). Oedipal drives and desires are of course most familiar in the Freudian twentieth century, but Aeschylus' great tragedies are the referent here rather than Freud's concept of the familial Oedipal struggle to supersede the father. The tendency to name the gangster a "tragic hero" is another aspect of unconscious misogyny that runs through scholarship on the genre, one that perpetuates a masculinist notion of the genre and compels scholars to overlook the

perplexing affective content of the gangster genre. In this project I am to counter this masculinist framing of the gangster genre by attending to the ways cinema's most powerful men are also its most emotional and vulnerable.

The critical tendency to malign melodrama and the entrenched resistance to consider the gangster genre outside of "realist" conventions are a result of gender bias in film scholarship. Christine Gledhill explains that the propensity of critics to value tragedy over melodrama is due to the masculinist assumptions of academic film studies, "in which tragedy and realism became cornerstones of 'high' cultural value, needing protection from mass, 'melodramatic' entertainment" (5). Gledhill recognizes this fallacy as ubiquitous in film scholarship: "The 'classic' genres were constructed by recourse to masculine cultural values—gangster as 'tragic hero'; the 'epic' of the West; 'adult' realism—while 'melodrama' was acknowledged only in those denigrated reaches of the juvenile and the popular, the feminised spheres" (34). Thus the inaccurate use of the masculine-inflected term "tragedy" to describe the gangster becomes increasingly problematic. The term itself has inherited the connotation of high art from its classic Greek authors, and this meaning has carried over to previous scholarship of the gangster film. Melodrama is the more accurate category in which to place the gangster and his confrontation of the unjustly withheld promises of the American Dream.

Martha Nochimson is the only gangster genre critic to date to analyze the fallacy of describing the gangster figure as tragic. She disputes Warshow and his critical descendents, arguing that "if it is tempting to resort to the old definition of tragedy to describe the agon of immensely capable men (gangster protagonists) who fall as a result of their best (deviant) efforts to achieve success, this comparison has ultimately produced

more heat than light" (19). Gangster genre scholars have not yet taken up Nochimson's challenge, but the genre deserves reconsideration in light of a melodramatic understanding of the genre's narrative import.

Critics who define the gangster film as tragedy acknowledge the value of pathos but displace its power to affect the viewer into a masculine abstraction, rationalizing pathos by identifying it with the classical, valorized, male-authorized term. The main principle of such criticism is that the gangster tragedy represents an antisocial response to state control and hegemonic structures of law and order. Critics' reluctance to acknowledge melodrama as a structuring logic of the gangster narrative perpetuates the sense that this genre realistically portrays relations between one anarchic man and a masculine social construct—morality as policed by the law. On the contrary, gangster films are highly stylized constructions that feature an excessive man whose ethnic difference and experiences of loss are central to his identity. Acknowledging melodrama's central role in gangster narratives enables a reading of the gangster protagonist as challenging normative gender roles, defying masculine stoicism with exaggerated emotions and excessive violence. Additionally, the gangster's status as ethnic other complicates his perceived virility and vexes the common reading of the gangster as embodying audience fantasies of (white, normative) masculine potency.

The critical silence on the pathos of the gangster has been all but deafening. Despite the genre's enormous importance to American popular culture—it permeates both "low" cultural forms like rap music as well as relatively "cultivated" forms like pay-cable television's *The Sopranos*—there is a surprising dearth of critical work on many aspects of the genre. Notably absent is a systematic analysis of the gangster's excess,

apart from the character's violence, which is most often acknowledged as necessary. The rational (if extreme) means of a counter-culture figure critiquing the status quo, violence is understood as the language of masculine dominance and manly aggression inherent to the gangster figure. But more often excess manifests in gangster films as overwhelming or infantile emotions, a concern with masculine community and the threatened loss of such community, and the plight of the gangster protagonist as racialized victim. These generic tropes are inherently melodramatic, working to enlist viewer sympathies and identification based on a feminized and thus traditionally derided sense of pathos.

In this dissertation I examine 30 years of the gangster genre from a gender and ethnic-critical perspective to uncover some of these overlooked reasons for the gangster's immense popularity and enduring appeal to generations of Americans. By exposing the "hidden history" of melodrama running through gangster narratives, I aim to reconsider the cultural work of the gangster genre and to argue that it is structured in dialogue with American popular cultural concerns about masculinity and ethnicity. Claiming the gangster genre as melodramatic is part of a feminist project to challenge the gendered stereotypes underlying certain emotional registers in American culture and film. The assumption that pathos is feminine, denoting weakness, and that emotional men are suspect permeates our culture and its texts. American culture has increasingly[20] emphasized the need to reinforce manly strength—of character, of will—against encroaching feminizing, or even queering, emotions. By analyzing the ways some of the most masculine men in cinema history are centrally melodramatic, we deconstruct the

[20] Since the 1980s, according to Susan Jeffords in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, phallic masculinity in the realm of filmic representation has become increasingly aligned with the public policies of American conservatism.

binary of emotion-passivity-feminine and stoicism-action-masculine, notions that continue to rigidly define gender roles in America.

Also of central importance to the gangster genre and my argument is the fact that the gangster, as a man of determinate ethnicity, seems to represent a more "authentic" ethnic identity, indeed a more authentic masculine identity, than does whiteness. Vera Dika argues that "one of the *conventions* of the genre, almost from its inception, has been its claim for authenticity, its connection to the 'real'" (80, emphasis original). Here Dika refers to the ripped-from-the-headlines discourse of early gangster films; more recent gangster films draw on a similar sense of authenticity, but in later iterations it is the gangster's ethnicity that conveys a sense of realism. The gangster figure is constructed as uniquely empowered to convey the violence, desperation, and power struggles of the underworld because, after all, he is of the racial underclass in America's white heteropatriarchy.

Authenticity is a hotly contested and problematic term. While postmodernism has taught us that no one has access to the "real," many gangster films reference the supposed ethnic authenticity of the protagonist, emphasizing the genre's ability to voice a uniquely racialized understanding of what it means to be an American. The Corleones are authentic Sicilians and therefore take part in unique rituals as part of an Italian-American community; yet the famous opening utterance of *The Godfather*, "I believe in America," reverberates throughout the trilogy as the Corleones look to expand their illegal trades to take advantage of American capitalism. Popular discourse (and the films' promotional materials) construct the makers of 'hood films as Black men who are by virtue of their own racial subjectivity "keeping it real" in their depictions of Black ghetto violence.

David Chase, creator of *The Sopranos*, often references his own life story in interviews to claim a closeness to the series' "source material"—as though the HBO show were a documentary rather than a work of fiction. These claims for the gangster genre's realism reveal a yearning for a sense of authenticity that is permanently lost to us in a postmodern world where ethnicity is illusionary but paradoxically still matters.

The gangster performs a melodramatic masculinity that is specifically ethnic, at times fulfilling viewers' fantasies and assuaging cultural anxieties. A transhistorical analysis of the gangster genre reveals not only that the gangster changes in response to new (or reemerging) worries in the wider culture about masculinity and ethnicity, but that crucially the gangster is always an ethnic or racialized character whose appeal is in some way due to his experience of loss or lack. The gangster genre showcases suffering masculinity embedded in the American context of unjust gender and racial politics. His suffering reflects his location in a vexed social structure. Central to understanding the appeal of each iteration of the gangster is his essential victimhood, a melodramatic trope that enables identification based on the "moral legibility" of the protagonist. The personal wound suffered by the gangster is most often the loss of a father, son, or the mob community; these losses are threats to masculine ethnic community. Creating the gangster as victim allows films of this genre to enlist the sympathies of the audience. We identify with the gangster because doing so allows us to indulge in a variety of fantasies, including the spectacle and jouissance of violence justified by victimization, and the pleasure of cross-ethnic identification with the gangster protagonist. Thus gangster films also make possible a transethnic experience of victimized masculinity, helping explain the genre's widespread appeal.

The ways in which the gangster is or becomes a victim are many. In some narratives, such as *Super Fly* (1972), he is trying to "go legit" and renounce the criminal way of life, in the process losing the mob community that legitimates his power and through which he constructs his identity. In *The Godfather* trilogy, Don Vito Corleone is a victim of outside agents, while his son Michael suffers as the result of his own cunning. Often, the gangster figure is constructed as a response to a perceived loss in masculinity in general. The 1990s 'hood films dramatize the peril that the absence of fathers constitutes to young Black men in the ghetto, echoing cultural concerns about Black men abandoning their families and the social burden of Black mothers on public assistance. And the off-white variety of the gangster film from 1990 to the turn of the century, in films such as *Miller's Crossing* with its warring Irish and Jewish gangs, and *GoodFellas* (both 1990), with its multiethnic crew of mobsters, responds to the crisis of white masculinity posed by multiculturalism. It is as though the rise of identity politics created two strains of the gangster, one representing the lessons to be learned from social awareness of racism and one deflecting attention from this same problem by presenting white gangsters as ethnic subjects, victims of social forces just like their black gangsta counterparts. Gangster films thus play out anxieties of whiteness *as* hegemonic, particularly engaging fears of what Richard Dyer calls "whiteness [a]s nothing in particular," an inchoate belief that "white culture and identity have, as it were, no content" (9), over and against a bounded sense of racial identity available to people of color and off-whites.

The gangster genre is an international phenomenon, as tensions between racial and ethnic groups, crises of masculinity, and questions about identity and belonging, are

by no means exclusive to the United States. The yakuza, the Hong Kong gangster flick, and the British gangster film are all examples of the genre's globalized form. I focus on the American version of the gangster to assess how Hollywood produces texts addressing problems whose complexities are unique to the American cultural context. This dissertation examines four cycles of gangster narratives from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s to illuminate the ways that gangster films in this 30-plus year period represent manhood as constantly threatened, under siege, victimized. This combines with changing ethnic and racial politics over the years to yield a culture of victimized masculinity, potently depicted in post-9/11 images of firefighters, police, and soldiers.

In chapter I, I focus on *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather, Part II* (1974), exploring how the films respond to a culture of defeat and a loss of faith in white patriarchy in 1970s America. With challenges to white male hegemony rampant, *The Godfather* and its sequel present a nostalgic construction of victimized ethnic fatherhood through the figure of Vito Corleone while condemning the younger generation, embodied in Michael Corleone, for its greed and abandonment of traditional values. Thus a "good" off-white masculinity from the nation's past is defined against a "bad" contemporary model of manhood, displacing anxieties about America's loss of moral righteousness, thanks to the Vietnam War and the Watergate affair, onto a convenient and arguably appropriate scapegoat: the politico who idealistically served his country in World War II but lost his soul to capitalism. The *Godfather* saga also focuses the energies of the gangster genre inward, placing the gangster in the domestic space of the family home and bringing to the fore the affective rather than business relationships of the ethnic gangster.

I chose to read these films as emblematic of the cultural milieu and as reviving the gangster genre from its long slumber.

While white men experienced new challenges in the 1970s and the gangster genre responded imaginatively by idealizing a past patriarch, Black men, long the victims of white racism, found a contemporary figure working through these problems: the Blaxploitation gangster. Chapter II focuses on the Blaxploitation gangster cycle's attempts to free Black masculinity from its psychic fetters and proclaim a powerful subject position for Black men in the face of violent racism. These films feature a Black man taking control of his destiny, with mixed results. *Black Caesar*'s Tommy Gibbs pursues money and power without interrogating the troubling racist underpinnings of the American Dream, leading to his alienation from his community and eventual downfall. On the other hand, Youngblood Priest, the hero of *Superfly*, is firmly aware of the racist conditions of city life, and escapes from a life of drug dealing by outsmarting the racist white cops who control the inner-city drug trade. Gangster genre tropes allow the Blaxploitation gangster to imaginatively engage in fantasies of power, redefining Black manhood as self-determined and positively inflected, rebutting long-held racist stereotypes of impotent Black masculinity. I chose *Black Caesar* because of its clear ties to the gangster genre, as a remake of a classic film; *Superfly* is the ideal text for analyzing the triumphant version of Black masculinity that the Blaxploitation gangster engages.

Despite the empowering visions of Black masculinity offered by the Blaxploitation gangster, the rightward shift in national politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s led to the use of Black men as a convenient figure to represent the ills of American society. In chapter III I focus on the 1980s and 1990s 'hood "gangsta," arguing that this

cycle of films responds to contemporary cultural concerns about young Black men's antisocial behaviors, spectacularized by the mainstream media and political figures, by valorizing an idealized Black fatherhood. Various cultural commentators of the post-Civil Rights era claimed that Black men were inadequate or absent fathers, laying the responsibility for rampant and worsening social inequality for Black Americans on Black men's shoulders. *Boyz N The Hood* argues that the real reasons for social inequality are the crack epidemic, governmental neglect, and structural discrimination. The film presents Furious Styles, a young Black father raising his son, the speaker of this truth-to-power, engaging in the discourse about inadequate Black fatherhood to refute it. I chose *Boyz N The Hood* because its popularity (as the highest-earning 'hood film) is a testament to its ability to speak important truths about the vexed social positioning of Black men at the time.

Around the same time as the 'hood gangsta's prime, and thanks to continuing cultural anxieties about white masculinity, a racially white but ethnically Other gangster hailing back to the original Italian, Irish, and Jewish gangsters of the 1930s emerged in mainstream American film. In chapter IV, I argue that the 1990s "off-white" gangster performs a spectacularly wounded masculinity that demonstrates nostalgia for white men's formerly unchallenged cultural hegemony. The 1990s saw a large-scale investment of white Americans in the notion of multiculturalism not to embrace its tenets of an inclusive American national identity, but rather to appropriate for themselves the historical victim status of their putatively discriminated-against ethnic forebears. Gangster films of the 1990s displace contemporary anxieties about diminishing cultural hegemony and decentered white masculinity into a past where white gangsters are recent

immigrants and themselves inhabit a world of social inequality. By imagining white men as victims of America's history, off-white gangster films expiate the guilt attached to white privilege and dramatize a fantasy of shared trauma that resonates with contemporary psychic wounds that white men experienced upon being identified as the villains of history and oppressors of the nation. I examine the two 1990 films *Miller's Crossing* and *GoodFellas* to illustrate the prestige films of the era and their draw. These films initiated both a popular (*GoodFellas*) and an independent (*Miller's Crossing*) refocusing on the gangster in the context of white masculinity, a revision of the gangster that is remarkable.

I end with the off-white film gangster of the 1990s, as the next gangster figure to capture the nation's imagination would be Tony Soprano. *The Sopranos* began airing on HBO in 1999 and represents a shift from the big screen to the small screen, a transition that I will touch on briefly in the Coda. The gangster's overwhelmingly successful move from film to television says much about the genre's ability to speak to continuing and critical concerns of American culture, a history that I've elucidated in the chapters here. The gangster is emblematic of a type of American masculine yearning for wholeness, meaning, and solidity in a postmodern world that repeatedly refuses to give solace to those whose identity is forged in the crucible of conflicting social dynamics. All of these imaginary subjectivities are problematic—and the protagonists of *The Godfather I* and *II* provide the contemporary era's first victimized gangsters.

CHAPTER II

PATERNAL MELODRAMA: *THE GODFATHER* SAGA[21]

The Godfather (1972) and its 1974 sequel *The Godfather Part II* dramatize the challenges to white male hegemony represented by the Civil Rights, gay rights, and feminist movements of the 1960s, ultimately valorizing a powerful ethnic patriarch at a time when America had lost faith in white patriarchy. These liberation movements coincided with a public loss of trust in the United States government resulting from the Vietnam War, domestic struggles over school integration and the end of Jim Crow, and the counterculture's open defiance of law and promotion of an alternative lifestyle celebrating peace and challenging the status quo. The differing representations of the films' two Godfathers—Vito Corleone and his son, Michael—reflect concerns about the contemporary status of men in America. Vito, the patriarch, is a just man and a melodramatic victim, and through him the films valorize a nostalgic construction of past father figures. Michael, the contemporary man forged (like so many of the Vietnam-era's parents) in World War II, is the melodramatic villain, preying on the weak and absent a moral compass.

Speaking for director Francis Ford Coppola's generation, who were in early adulthood during Vietnam and Watergate, *The Godfather* and *Part II* argue that their parents' generation morally bankrupted America by abandoning the values of thrift and hard work, inherited from the Depression generation, in favor of material comfort and self-serving violence. *The Godfather* films ask us to remember a time of ethnic solidarity and a strong, righteous patriarch as the fitting predecessor to the coming generation.

[21] The writing of this chapter was supported by an Oregon Humanities Center Graduate Research Fellowship in the spring of 2008. I give grateful thanks to OHC for its support.

Looking back on a reassuring, loving, and affectionate father figure like Vito Corleone, contemporary audiences can reassure themselves that the moral foundation of America is just. Its current set of leaders, for example President Richard Nixon and even the beloved John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who mired the US in a southeast Asian land war, is cold, merciless, and corrupt (like Michael Corleone), but "our" national origins are, if not peaceful, at least morally righteous. The generation formed in the conflict of World War II should have upheld the morally righteous position that the US enjoyed during and in the aftermath of that war, as a force allied against evil in the world. Instead, the nation's leaders engaged in corruption, showing a lack of faith in the idea of America as the great liberator, the city on the hill, a democratic exemplar for the world. Thus, *The Godfather* and its sequel are allegories of America—not American capitalism, as many have claimed, but of America the idea, the project, the experiment. *The Godfather* and *The Godfather, Part II* allegorize the Corleone family to the nation's imagined moral fiber, condemning America's current leadership but validating the nation's roots in an ethnic patriarch whose violence is always justified by his love for his family. In this chapter I argue that through comparisons of the two Godfathers Michael and Vito Corleone, *The Godfather* and *The Godfather, Part II* rehabilitate the ethnic father figure to shore up a notion of morally righteous national origins.

Melodrama constitutes a structuring logic of *The Godfather* and *The Godfather, Part II*. Nostalgia, the presumed sanctity of the home/land, loss, and revenge represent the melodramatic affective devices in the *Godfather* films. The very meaning of nostalgia is melodramatic—imagining ourselves in a more innocent time, when moral righteousness was defined, definable, and resided in "us." Present conditions are morally

ambiguous at best, and not only do we not have the monopoly on justice—we have lost the right to consider ourselves righteous. This loss is *felt*, not simply comprehended, and the difference engine of nostalgia points up what we are missing, and that we are right to mourn what we have lost.

The home is a densely connotative space in film, and the changing roles of men in the home and public life in 1970s America are taken up in *The Godfather*. Thus the film repatriates the home—reclaiming domestic space for men and their concerns—to both retaliate against men's loss of power in the public sphere in the era of liberation movements, and to reclaim a generic space that up until that point in American film and culture had been dominated by women. "Home" as a metaphoric space of innocence is a uniquely melodramatic trope. Linda Williams' essay "Melodrama Revised" argues that the melodramatic mode is "often suffused with nostalgia for rural and maternal origins that are forever lost yet—hope against hope—refound, reestablished, or, if permanently lost, sorrowfully lamented" (65).[22] The yearning for home represents the desire to recapture the innocence represented by childhood, the family home, or a mother's love. The yearning for an unambiguously righteous and just state, whether that be emotionally or physically, encodes the desire to achieve moral absolution, a pure state that in the human mind and American film is often marked as the body of the mother.

[22] While Williams' points here are taken from her essay "Melodrama Revised," her earlier "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" touches on the function of home in the melodramatic mode, elucidating that the space of innocence that melodrama yearns to return to is layered over with pathos and nostalgia. Williams argues that many films exude a "melancholic sense of the loss of origins—impossibly hoping to return to an earlier state which is perhaps most fundamentally represented by the body of the mother" (712). While her assertions are in regards to the genre of the "melodramatic weepie," her description of the logos of home applies to the melodramatic mode as well as genre, as we see her scholarship evolve to treating melodrama as a structuring logic rather than a discrete set of films.

The Godfather signifies a cultural yearning for pure parental origins; but the body/place of the mother is replaced by the body/place of the father; instead of the motherland, the film's protagonist escapes to the fatherland. And instead of a beneficent mother representing ultimate goodness, the affectionate father is the entity whose beneficence centers the characters. No matter that Don Vito Corleone is a criminal, ordering his subordinates to coerce, corrupt, and murder; *The Godfather* invites us to understand that his warmth and care create a domestic space suffused with love unequalled elsewhere in the world. When this is violated—when Don Vito learns of Sonny's death in his own den, or when Michael lies to his wife about having killed his brother-in-law Carlo Rizzi—we are invited to lament the loss of this original state, where Vito's love and paternal care made the Corleone's world safe and nurturing.

Loss is coupled with revenge in a melodramatic cycle that is self-perpetuating and self-justifying. Revenge is itself a melodramatic motif, which comes as no surprise to those familiar with the French stage roots of melodrama. But even more current versions of the revenge pattern, which have discarded the easy Manichean opposites of black hat/white hat, are based on a melodramatic logic of justified violence. Revenge is a central aspect of gangster narratives. The device recognizes loss and the victim's right (nay duty) to lament the trauma of loss by punishing the victimizer. Revenge asks us to recall an injustice and to feel that consequent violence is a justified response to the losses of the victim. In the 1970s, a whole generation felt the loss of a fundamental certitude about America's moral righteousness, a loss that resounded throughout films of the day, and which is taken up in the gangster genre thanks to *The Godfather* and its sequel.

Historical context

From the late 1930s until the early 1970s, the transgressive ethnic protagonist of the gangster genre was forced into hiding, per se, by the strictures of Hollywood censorship. In 1935, as Jonathan Munby explains, the Production Code Administration declared a moratorium on all ethnic gangsters (7), with two immediate results: the rise of the "crime doesn't pay" moral, intended to deflect the criticisms of censors that the gangster made corruption look attractive; and the substitution of ethnic gangster by the white bandit. Films in this cycle include *The Petrified Forest*, *High Sierra*, and *White Heat*.[23] The struggles of the gangster also morphed, from poverty and Prohibition in the 1930s to mental illness in the 1940s. As Jonathan Munby explains, the PCA's attempts to silence the seditious messages of the gangster film were only superficially effective, as filmmakers abandoned the ethnic type but not the socially critical aspect of the gangster narrative: "[t]he shift toward the fugitive gangster type unanchored from ethnic moorings [. . .] prefigured the kind of existential crime dramas we now call film noir" (114). With its psychosexual disturbances and omnipresent foreboding, film noir took up the mantle of representing the public's concerns about crime and society, usually with a nihilistic undertone that reflected the anxieties of a world facing the horrors of both the Holocaust and the atom bomb. *The Big Sleep*, *Murder, My Sweet*, and *Double Indemnity* are examples of the film noir mode.

In the 1950s, the Hollywood syndicate film replaced film noir in its representation of crime and its impact of society, with the "caper-gang of social misfits as dark metaphor for outmoded and fatally flawed American community" (Munby 139). Films in

[23] Munby calls these "the fugitive gangster type," "pre-war gangsters who encoded country-styled outlawry" (114, 136).

this cycle include Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing*, Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat*, and John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle*. The syndicate film gave way to New Hollywood's vision of social banditry: Arthur Penn's 1969 *Bonnie and Clyde*. This crime film explores a disturbingly romantic vision of the eponymous white bandits, anti-social subjects plagued by sexual dysfunction. Penn's film is credited with setting the New Hollywood standard for violence and sexually explicit content, and was tremendously popular on release. But bandits are not gangsters, and these films' settings in dusty and bleak badlands, and characters, generic middle-American whites, have more in common with the genre of the western than to the urban genre of the gangster. The ethnic gangster reminiscent (and generically most closely related to) the earliest examples of the genre did not reappear until 1972, with Paramount's production of Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather*.[24]

The atmosphere of 1960s America created a crucible of social foment, out of which was born identity politics. The newly fractured notion of belonging that the Civil Rights era created in public consciousness between the end of World War II and the Watergate scandal shifted Americans' focus away from nation as the most important factor of identity, as war-time propaganda called on ordinary Americans to sacrifice for the war effort, and towards race or ethnicity, followed by gender, as defining one's group membership and collective subjectivity. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant posit that the postwar political landscape was transformed by a paradigm shift: "the very nature of racial politics as a whole [was] radically transformed during the 1960s" (91).

[24] *The Brotherhood*, Martin Ritt's 1969 Sicilian gangster film, attempted to capitalize on the rise of the ethnic protagonist and the recent popularity of the Mafia mythos created by Puzo's novel. The film was a critical and popular bomb, failing to draw in the rapidly shifting urban film-going demographic, a set that flocked to see *The Godfather*, released just 3 years later.

Spurred by mass protests against Jim Crow policies in the South, the liberation theology teachings of spiritual leaders like the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and continuing discrimination both on the streets and in national politics, the black movement "*redefined the meaning of racial identity*, and consequently of race *itself*, in American society" (italics original, Omi and Winant 93). Coupled with the gay rights movement, feminism, and Equal Rights Amendment debates over the parameters of equality for women and gays as well as people of color, the Black activism of the postwar decades mounted powerful challenges to a unified and singular notion of Americanism that ignored the structural inequalities that made some Americans more equal than others. The results of these challenges to white male hegemony resonate throughout popular cultural texts of the era.

The Hollywood hero has always been an avatar of his culture, and triumphant masculinity in film had long signified America's positive self-image. In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, America experienced a crisis of self-confidence, and films mirrored this trend. Hollywood films of this era bear the impact of counter-cultural challenges to the American status quo, the political unease of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, and a concomitant loss of faith in public authorities and the United States government. Thomas Elsaesser explores the cultural determinants of the defeatist stance of 1970s cinema in his essay "The Pathos of Failure." Elsaesser argues that "the heroes bring to [these] films an almost physical sense of inconsequential action, of pointlessness and uselessness" which "speak[s] of a radical skepticism about American virtues of

ambition, vision, drive" (282).[25] Christian Keathley links this aimlessness directly to the Vietnam War and the cultural trauma experienced by Americans as they watched (for the first time, on the nightly news) their country engage in a protested and unwinnable war in a foreign landscape.

Though many films of the era did not overtly represent or acknowledge the traumas of the Vietnam war or the lack of faith in public or personal authority, "these films often le[ft] their protagonists not dead, but rather wounded and helpless, disconnected from their surroundings, often muttering to themselves in a catatonic, traumatized state" (Keathley 297).[26] The most trenchant example of Keathley's argument is Jack Nicholson's lobotomized Randall P. McMurphy in the last frames of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). Milos Forman's film treats a mental asylum as a microcosm for the outside world, and reveals the triumph of the forces of conformity in the face of challenges to the status quo. It leaves us with a vision of a drooling, emotionally absent shell of a (white) man as the apotheosis of the counterculture's rebel-hero, warning us that authority figures (and, on the macrocosmic level, the United States government as nanny-state) have as their goal the normalization of catatonia and the eradication of individuality. Other films that belong to this cycle include *Deliverance*,

[25] Elsaesser makes the intriguing claim that the aimlessness of the late-1960s and early-1970s protagonists challenge realist conventions of the classical Hollywood style, replacing the satisfaction of narrative closure with "pathos [which] provides the emotional closure to an open-ended structure and retrieves affective contact with the audience" (287). Connecting character motivation to formal concerns in this era is not unique to Elsaesser's analysis, but his linking of melodrama and pathos to the challenging of the conventions of realism is.

[26] Keathley figures the loss of masculine potency as "emasculation," though neither Keathley nor Elsaesser address the racialized and gendered nature of the cultural malaise they discuss.

The Deer Hunter, and *Taxi Driver*. Sydney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon*, for example, explicitly treats the social injustice so present in the public imagination by having its protagonist (somewhat ironically) shout "Attica! Attica!" as police refuse to meet his demands, referencing the prison riots in Attica, New York, where police opened fire on inmates protesting inhumane conditions. "Truth, justice, and the American way" echo ironically across the desolate landscapes of *Badlands* and compound the desperate frivolity of violence in *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Films that did not directly treat the on-going conflict in Vietnam or the new political and race consciousness within their narratives displaced such commentary into history or allegory (or both). While some contemporary films such as *The Deer Hunter*, focus on the Vietnam War experience and its damage to the psyches of individual soldiers, plenty of others map social conflict onto other spheres, such as domestic life. John G. Cawelti writes that in 1975, Americans had an "increasingly ambiguous feeling about the unlimited power of the government which has been so strongly intensified by our disturbing course of action in Vietnam" (354). Cawelti links this pervasive feeling to films of the day, arguing that they helped assuage feelings of national self-doubt: "there is some reassurance in the vision of unlimited extralegal violence being used in responsible and meaningful ways by men [. . .], as in *The Godfather*" (354). Elsaesser states it bluntly: "the movies [in 1970s America] reflect the moral and emotional gestures of a defeated generation" (287). *The Godfather* works to offload this emotional baggage onto the previous generation of pioneers of industry, making Michael, a veteran of World War II, the embodiment of all that has gone wrong with America.

Michael Corleone does not belong to Coppola's cohort, the defeated generation: instead, he belongs to their parents' generation. He begins the film a seemingly average son of a powerful family, a war veteran who enlisted in the armed services in response to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Young Michael is an idealist, but as the film progresses he becomes distant, calculating, cold. Late in *The Godfather*, Michael has become a cynical man with a politician's gift for deflecting attention from his own misdeeds. Michael's gradual descent into amorality emblematizes the corruption of the World War II generation whose children, Coppola's generation of counterculture idealists who espoused Civil Rights and challenged entrenched traditions, found morally bankrupt. Moreover, the defeated generation blamed the establishment, their parents' generation, for the war in Vietnam and the unparalleled deceit that characterized the Nixon administration.

Michael Corleone is the embodiment of the betrayal of American ideals. His machinations in the pursuit of power eventually lead him to murder his brother Fredo and alienate his family, including his wife and children. The final frames of both films show Michael alone, cut off from the world around him. He has lost his family, the most important thing to a Sicilian man, thanks to his own monomaniacal drive for success. So while *The Godfather* and its sequel are set believably in the 1940s and 50s, their ideology is all 1970s, reflecting doubts about the moral righteousness of the current generation of governmental and business leaders. By making Vito Corleone a warm, affectionate, and just man, however, the films show us a recuperated white (ethnic) masculinity that has overcome victimization to become a morally righteous (if illicit) victor. In Vito we are

encouraged to find a warm and idealized father-figure who redeems in retrospect all that Michael will defile: white male hegemony.

Critical analyses

Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film stars Marlon Brando as Don Vito Corleone, Al Pacino as Michael Corleone, James Caan as Santino (Sonny) Corleone, and Robert Duvall as Tom Hagen. The film is based on Mario Puzo's bestselling 1969 novel *The Godfather*. As industry scholar Jon Lewis recounts, Paramount's Robert Evans optioned the novel before it was published, reportedly securing the rights to a film adaptation for the low sum of $12,500 (25-26). Evans hired Coppola only after attempting to interest a number of more established directors, including Elia Kazan and Arthur Penn (27). Coppola was a risky choice, and Paramount hired him in part because he was in substantial debt and needed the job; moreover, producers believed his relative lack of experience would make Coppola easier to control on the set (27-28). Although *The Godfather* has become one of the most highly esteemed American films of the century,[27] Coppola was not hired to make a prestige film, and Paramount producers constantly challenged his control over the production. These facts are in marked contrast to the often-laudatory scholarship of the film.

Auteurist criticism constitutes a large portion of scholarship on *The Godfather*, as though the film were a product of Coppola's unique genius rather than a text created and influenced by a myriad of forces, many of which famously sought to lessen Coppola's

[27] *The Godfather* occupied third place, behind only *Citizen Kane* and *Casablanca*, in the American Film Institute's 1998 "100 Years… 100 Movies" list. The tenth anniversary edition in 2007 saw *The Godfather* listed in second place: the American Film Institute considers Coppola's gangster genre picture the second-greatest film of all time. (www.afi.com.)

control over the film.[28] Lewis avers that *The Godfather* "is generally and justifiably credited with starting the so-called auteur renaissance in the 1970s" (29-30), a claim that he makes in full awareness of the problems of auteurist bias, but others do not question. Because of the unique timing of the film's creation in the nascent New Hollywood era of young upstart directors, the tendency to read *The Godfather* as an auteur's film, a masterpiece of storytelling and aesthetics, has bestowed upon the film an exceptional status among gangster films; it is set apart, a shining example of American film and too fine to be considered a "mere" genre picture. In fact, the Cambridge Film Handbook devoted to study of the films—*Francis Ford Coppola's "The Godfather" Trilogy* (2000, edited by Nick Browne)—in its very title frames the films as Coppola's, framing an interpretation of the films from within an auteurist bias.

Auteurist criticism

Browne's essay introducing the Cambridge Film Handbook aptly argues that too much of the work on the series is journalistic in nature, cataloguing the films' production and Coppola's biography but remaining inadequate to the demands of film critical scholarship. While this anthology contributes greatly to a richer understanding of *The Godfather* trilogy, Browne himself engages in auteurist criticism, stating that the films evidence "a directorial [sic] intelligence operating within the most distinctive traditions

[28] In fact, Coppola's preferred mode of self-representation is as the beleaguered victim of antagonistic forces who bravely overcame the injustice of Paramount's attempts to steal control of the film. He is the melodramatic hero of his own myth. The 1990 documentary "A Look Inside," packaged with the special edition of the *Godfather* trilogy on VHS and DVD, is rife with the director-as-victim motif. Cast members including Robert DeNiro, Al Pacino, and James Caan recount how Coppola had to fight for his casting decisions, and Jon Lewis' "If History Has Taught Us Anything" outlines the feuds that famously complicated the film's production.

of American theater as adapted to cinema" (4).[29] He identifies in the films what he calls "the Coppola aesthetic" (2), praising Coppola's artful direction and attributing the films' exceptional quality to Coppola's ability to "reveal" rather than present the drama, using a "transparent" filming technique, "a cinematic style that has no need to call attention to itself but only to display the inherent theatricality of the action taking place in the middle distance" (3). This type of vague, evocative criticism is often present in aesthetic analyses of the films, where praise of Coppola's genius is substituted for meaningful criticism. The notion that a "transparent" filming style—if such a thing is possible—is somehow less constructed than another conventional mode demonstrates the tendency of critics to wax rhapsodical over the films rather than explore their deeper significance. Browne does make an argument about the films' ultimate significance, finding *The Godfather* trilogy a meditation on the limits of human, institutional, and theological authority.

Browne avers that "the law of the civil order (police and so on) has been replaced by the iron law of familial self-preservation in the name of the father" (15). The church, however, trumps this secular patriarchal law, Browne claims: the films "reinstat[e] the Church as the arbiter of justice [. . . .] The Church is a law above the family" (14, 16). Other scholars, including Thomas J. Ferraro, have echoed the argument that *The Godfather* films compare the authority of the church to that of the patriarchal family. Ferraro finds that in *The Godfather* films, "the Sicilian Mafia is understood as a

[29] While Coppola may have seen any number of plays and might have been influenced by them, he never worked in the American theater, rendering Browne's claim questionable at best. Such vague claims do little to overcome the lack of quality critical work that Browne himself recognizes (4). Further, Browne locates *The Godfather* trilogy as belonging to the crime genre, a categorization that is defied when we consider that many if not most viewers of the film consider it the superlative gangster, not crime, film.

sanctification of the family, [. . .] the father standing in, as it were, for God" (512).[30] While I agree that the Mafia structure visible in *The Godfather* mirrors the myth structure of Christian belief, with the Don meting out justice as he sees fit and others in his organization doing his work or incurring his wrath, I find that the church becomes even more peripheral than civil order, as Michael Corleone is able to disregard and defy both at will but spectacularly flouts the authority of the church.[31] Authority for the gangster is never drawn from ecclesiastical or secular sources; rather, his acts are justified by the suffering he has experienced, a wholly secular, and very specific, type of authority that is rooted in a melodramatic vision of justice and morality.

David Ray Papke continues the auteurist line, arguing that in *The Godfather* Coppola compares the illegitimate dealings of the Corleone family to American rule of law, exposing the faults of the corrupt United States government. Unfortunately, Papke claims, audiences did not make the connection between Michael Corleone's violent breakdown of Corleone family values and America's legal institutions. Thus, Papke argues, Coppola failed at his goal, "to expose the falsehood of American legalism and to

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[30] Ferraro's essay focuses on Puzo's novel, and for this reason I do not discuss it at length. However, on this point, Ferraro claims that Puzo's novel creates the parallel between the head of the Mafia family and a Christian God, and "Coppola runs with it" (512).

[31] The film proves that virtue does not reside in civil institutions, with the corrupt Captain McCluskey providing protection for drug dealer Solozzo the Turk and attempting to kill Don Vito Corleone while he convalesces in the hospital. When Michael kills Solozzo and McCluskey, he defies the civil order. But Michael is not then reprimanded by the authority of the church; rather, the famous final scenes of *The Godfather* demonstrate the failure of the church's authority over the secular power of a man exercising his judgment. As Michael stands godfather at his nephew's baptism, repeating a promise to renounce Satan, intercut shots of his soldiers murdering Michael's rivals contradict his sworn vow to be a good Catholic. There remains an aura of the sacrosanct, as Michael bears the judgment, in turn, of the audience; but his secular power trumps the empty pageantry of the baptismal ceremony and its ritual without substance.

tear the mythic fabric with his critical messages" (2). In Papke's view, the filmmaker lost control over his subject, and the creator's intentions have not been realized by the public's experience of viewing the films. Imposing a top-down structure of meaning-making—the director creates meaning, which is read or mis-read by the audience, and the extent to which the audience reads along with the director constitute the measure of his success—is quickly exposed as problematic when we consider first the lack of control Coppola had on the set; and, secondly, the fact that meaning-making is a process that the audience engages in with the film text and not the filmmaker per se.

Some scholars conflate Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather* with the films directed by Coppola, and in so doing make arguments that are not useful for study of the film.[32] For example, John G. Cawelti focuses mostly on Puzo's novel, but at times seems to gesture towards Coppola's films, arguing that "*The Godfather* reflects a significant change in our myths of crime" (327). This thesis is potentially useful for enriching our understanding of the films; but without making a clear delineation between the novel and the film narratives, Cawelti's analysis becomes murky. Likewise, Chris Messenger's book *"The Godfather" and American Culture: How the Corleones Became "Our Gang"* has an exciting premise: that *The Godfather* influenced American culture in ways that no other text had yet done. But Puzo's book receives the bulk of Messenger's attention, and the film is again at times conflated with the novel, with the result that Messenger's

[32] James Thomas Chiampi makes such an argument, refuting critics who find Puzo's novel to be a realist documentary-style novel, and arguing instead that the novel *The Godfather* is "deeply prophetic, because it has become the agent of new perceptions that have subtly altered our understanding of society" (18). Chiampi's focus is entirely on the novel, and though it is tempting to read the film and the novel alongside one another, as many critics have done, doing so ultimately does not further our understanding of the film, as it is completely separate in formal structure, reception, and production context than the novel.

findings are simply not applicable to analysis of the film. Ferraro's "'My Way' in 'Our America': Art, Ethnicity, Profession," argues compellingly that "[i]ntegral to" the book's and the film's "courage and wisdom is the irony they infuse beneath the family's seductive halo" (512). But his argument compares the novel to the book, rendering his criticism most applicable for a comparative analysis and not one that focuses solely on the films.

Formal and ideological approaches

Formal scholarship on the trilogy is often inflected by the films' iconic status in American cinema. Film scholar Phoebe Poon argues that the structure of the films makes them examples of "epic" storytelling rather than gangster films; William Simon argues that the films combine "epic structure and highly individuated family melodrama," (76), but never really explains what he means regarding form. Poon argues that the *Godfather* trilogy is epic in structure because each film has a four-part narrative consisting of "exposition (prologue), disruption (conflict), transition (bridge), [and] restoration (conclusion)" (188). While this structure seems more common to narrative in general than to a specifically epic structure, Poon makes the more persuasive assertion that "the integrity of *The Godfather* trilogy is such that it creates its own set of myths in the first film, challenges those myths in the sequel, and completes the progressive act of deconstruction by the end of *Part III*" (192). Still, these conventions are not exclusive to epic form; rather, they are conventions of politically conscious films in general, and can be read into many films that are neither politically conscious nor epic in structure.

While Poon's observations about the progression of the trilogy are interesting, I disagree with her thesis. She argues that *The Godfather* and its sequels are not gangster

films, as they "depart[] radically from any gangster film previously released in cinema and maintain [their] individuality from anything released in [their] wake" (187-88). Poon's argument is based on an unsophisticated, restrictive theory of genre, one that posits that individual films either conform to a genre based on its conventions or do not belong. A more inclusive definition of genre, which I employ, sees individual films as transformative of a particular genre based on whether they add to the constellation of critical work of the larger oeuvre. Seen in this way, *The Godfather* saga does depart from prior iterations of the gangster, but instead of excluding the films on that basis, we can assess how they have changed the genre itself. It is easy to see the ways that *The Godfather* does in fact carry on the conventions of previous gangster genre films, and suggests new ones that later films in the gangster genre take up. *The Godfather* and its sequel make fatherly and brotherly love a central focus of the gangster genre, and for decades after the 1972 and 1974 releases, gangster films continue to investigate the contours of masculine affection, conventions that were not as visible in the genre prior to Coppola's groundbreaking films.

Ideology critique has provided the most influential and widely agreed-upon (though, surprisingly, seldom explicitly argued) reading of *The Godfather*. Seeing the film as an allegory comparing gangsterism to American capitalism, Fredric Jameson is the first to persuasively argue that the films advance the thesis that American capitalism is godless, amoral, and, ultimately, as flawed a system as Michael Corleone is a protagonist. In his essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," Jameson claims that while we watch the drama of the Corleones unfold, "surely it is not about the Mafia, but rather about American business itself that we are thinking, American capitalism in its

most systematized and computerized, dehumanized, 'multinational,' and corporate form" (145). His famous 1979 essay, a broad ideological critique of commercial art, does not focus on *The Godfather* at length but merely gestures toward the proposition that Coppola's films about Italian ethnic gangsters speak to deeply held doubts about the righteousness of American capitalism. Jameson also links the ideological work of the films to their ethnic content, but only in passing.

Jameson's attention to *The Godfather* is only as an exemplar of his overall thesis, but his stance on the film nonetheless set the tone for much of the scholarship to come. For example, Nick Browne argues that the films focus on "a flawed American protagonist as an emblem of American empire" (1), while David Ray Papke sees *The Godfather* as an "extended metaphor for the ruthless and predatory aspects of capitalist America" (3). Though few scholars attend to the task of applying Jameson's thesis to a close reading of the films, his argument is so influential that it has formed the point of departure for most of the scholarship on the films that has come in its wake.

Ethnicity

Some critics read *The Godfather* in terms of its ethnic content. David Sutton and Peter Wogan, cultural anthropologists, argue that *The Godfather Part I* presents the struggle between the Old and New Worlds in the realms of business versus family, public versus private, and Italian versus American. The conflicts between Italian oral (verbal) communication and American written communication; affectionate ethnic Italian family gatherings, such as Connie's wedding, and cold American business practices; and the replacement of the Corleones' original trade, olive oil, with Michael's investment in Las Vegas casinos, demonstrate the erosion of Old-World values and their replacement with

New World values that ultimately lead to Michael's spiritual corruption. While there are many flaws to this argument—the symbolism of olive oil as the Corleones' first trade is illustrative of a shift in values, but it is naïve to propose that a trade in food goods precludes horrific violence—Sutton and Wogan illuminate one of the central themes of the film—the dilution of Italian ethnic values with American cultural bankruptcy, as defined by Michael Corleone's actions.

Martha Nochimson reads *The Godfather* films as narratives about ethnic difference and psychosocial alienation, suggesting that in these themes the trilogy shares and expands the concerns of the gangster genre. Nochimson's 2007 book, *Dying to Belong: Gangster Movies in Hollywood and Hong Kong*, claims that the gangster genre essentially tells the story of the cultural outsider, the immigrant. Nochimson argues that through both form and theme, American gangster films express modernist anxieties about identity, place, and the instability of subjectivity, and that these insecurities are at base related to the gangster's status as someone who fundamentally does not belong in the culture he resides in. Michael Corleone, the American-born offspring of a strongly Italian-identified family, struggles with his identity as an Italian-American. Nochimson describes Michael's conflicting ethnic and national identity as "a self caught between a dying ethnic definition of identity and an American self not yet born, or perhaps stillborn" (56). Michael "is the continually traumatized immigrant self (once removed from Italy)" who is "paradoxically assimilated [to American culture] but rootless" (125, 126). In addition to representing the internal struggle between Italian and American ethnic practices, Nochimson argues that Michael Corleone brings to the gangster genre an aesthetic that would define gangster protagonists for the next 30 years: "With *The*

Godfather, the genre took tentative steps toward a new vocabulary of place" in depicting the protagonist "as if he were behind a pane of glass staring at a world of rich sensuous vitality which he had conquered and owned but couldn't touch" (123). Nochimson focuses on the environment of the gangster, suggesting that the gangster is displaced spatially as well as culturally, and that the nexus of these two axes of experience speak to American audiences. I argue that it is through melodramatic tropes that these experiential facts of the gangster genre ring true for American audiences: it is through the shock of recognition that the individual watching Michael Corleone struggle identifies with the gangster protagonist.

Vera Dika's "The Representation of Ethnicity in *The Godfather*" argues that the trilogy presents a fantasy of ethnic identity that audiences find reassuring. The members of the Corleone family share an emotional and physical intimacy that was and remains seldom seen in popular culture representations of American families.[33] Dika argues that Italianicity, the particular type of ethnic identity presented in *The Godfather*, has a particular function or connotation: "this ethnic type is rendered so that its very meaning is nostalgia—nostalgia for something lost, for something left behind" (92). Moreover, the warm southern climes of the Italian Mediterranean and the supposedly fiery Italian personality type are alien, "other" to cold, proper WASP culture. As the films are set in

[33] The timeline of the first film begins in 1946, a time when the American family was characterized by kindly but distant patriarchs and benevolent but flustered housewives. The war had recently ended, and the shock of men returning home from battle impacted the American family in immeasurable ways. Two children and the family dog rounded out the tableau; the ideal WASP family was presented in televisual fantasies as the cohesive unit of American society. In 1972, when *The Godfather* was released, the veneer of perfection overlaying the Anglo suburbs had been chipped away, revealing the unpleasant truths underneath: Dad was a binge drinker and Mom got through her day by popping a valium before the kids came home from school.

the past, and the Corleone's ethnic solidarity is presented in a positive light, ethnicity itself becomes fetishized, imbued with nostalgic symbolism. Dika argues, "In *The Godfather I* and *II* the Italian is a construct that connotes pastness, a nostalgic category," symbolizing a wish "for the solidarity of the family, for a return to ethnic purity and to the lost power of the individual subject" (105). Nostalgia in *The Godfather* is both thematic and visual: Dika contends that the sepia tones that characterize *Part I* contribute to the nostalgic themes of family and ethnic solidarity. She quotes cinematographer Gordon Willis as saying he wanted to give the film a "Kodachromy, 1942 kind of feel" (93); the early 20th century portions of *Part II* are shot in a faded, slightly overexposed manner that reminiscent of "the faded quality of turn-of-the-century photographs portraying the lives of recent immigrants [. . . .] seen through the golden light of nostalgia" (93).

Onslaughts against white male heterosexual hegemony by the Civil Rights movement, the government's violation of the public trust in the Watergate scandal, and the disastrous land war in Southeast Asia tarnished the image of the all-American man, the white hero of Hollywood film. Dika explains: "The wish now is for something that has been shaken, and perhaps is forever gone: the power and control of the singular, white, male subject" (97). The fond light with which *The Godfather* presents the ethnic Italian family—and, ironically, makes a family whose livelihood is murder and theft a relic of a past time, evoking nostalgic longing in the viewer—imagines "a time when American pride and moral purpose were intact" (Dika 96). This is the kind of hero audiences could invest in, recasting (Italian) ethnicity as virtue and overlaying the (Italian-) American past with a sense of lost glory.

The Godfather and its sequel revitalized the gangster genre, influencing future films as a result of its aesthetic richness, its wild popularity, and Hollywood studios' awakening to their ability to make big money from a genre film.[34] These films elevate the conventions of the genre to a new level of psychological depth and visual richness. Film scholars have frequently examined the ways in which *The Godfather* allegorizes the illegal doings of the Mafia to the amoral philosophical foundations of American capitalism, and Coppola's role as director has received its share of attention. But seldom have critics considered the affective content of the films. While some critics have illuminated the centrality of family values to the Corleone business model and the corruption that America brings to an Italian conception of the family, few delve beneath the violence and coercion of the "Family business" to analyze the relationships between the Corleone family members, and the importance of these bonds to the narrative. Violent and strongly displayed emotions carry the affective tone of the film, with episodes of physical violence simply punctuating plots that center around family relationships. These aspects of the *Godfather* narratives firmly establish a melodramatic sensibility at work, one that creates an interpretive framework for the gangster genre's new foray into the family. It is Vito Corleone's emotional warmth, and Michael Corleone's coldness and distance that structure the films' look backward at ethnic masculinity and embody a wish for a redeemed white manhood in the wake of political and social strife in the immediate post-Civil Rights era.

[34] 1972 is, of course, well before the blockbuster era. Nowadays to say that a genre pic can make big money at the box office would be to state the obvious.

"A man who doesn't spend time with his family can never be a real man": *The Godfather*

Synopsis

The Godfather chronicles the late years in Vito Corleone's life and the rise of his son Michael to the head of the powerful Corleone Mafia family. Vito begins the film a man in the prime of his life, marrying off his daughter and commanding respect and an army of Mafia soldiers. Due to his unwillingness to participate in the trade in illegal narcotics, Vito experiences many losses, as his oldest son Santino is murdered by a rival gang and an attempt is made on his own life. Vito's youngest son Michael flees to Sicily after avenging the assassination attempt, confounding Vito's hopes that Michael would find success in the legitimate world. Michael weds an Italian woman during his sojourn in Sicily, but after she is murdered by a car bomb meant for him, he returns to the United States and marries Kay, his college sweetheart. Vito dies while playing in the garden with Michael and Kay's son, and as the film ends Michael assumes his father's place as head of the Corleone crime family. His first act as Godfather is to murder the rival mob bosses during his nephew and godson's baptismal ceremony, a blatantly hypocritical act that demonstrates the distance Michael has come from reverent war hero at the beginning of the film to ruthless killer and commander of a Mafia army.

Home

The first two films of the *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974) introduced new conventions to the gangster film genre, first of all by relocating the gangster. *The Godfather* takes the ethnic gangster off the streets and brings him into the home. The home was, before *The Godfather*, the place the gangster yearned to escape because it was

the domain of the ethnic matriarch, usually a first-generation immigrant, as in *Scarface* (1932) and *The Public Enemy* (1931). While Mama Corleone (who, tellingly, does not have a first name) is a first-generation Italian immigrant, by the 1970s social concerns had shifted, resulting in generic conventions that dramatized not the alienating Old World ways of the immigrant mother in the ethnic enclave of the 1930s American ghetto, but rather the potential for men to play new roles in the domestic sphere. In *The Godfather*, there are two types of "home"—the Corleone family compound, setting of the first scene, and Sicily, the "homeland" where Michael goes into hiding after committing murder.

The Godfather begins in the home, a space of seeming (and melodramatic) innocence: the wedding of Don Vito Corleone's only daughter takes place in the garden while the Don entertains guests in his den. Despite the joyous occasion, the topics commanding the Don's attention are virtue and victimhood, the stuff of melodrama. The undertaker Bonasera's voice is the first thing we hear on the soundtrack, and his words, "I believe in America," are in counterpoint to the account he follows them with. As the scene fades in, the balding middle-aged man recounts in a strong Italian accent his daughter's beating at the hands of American boys. The camera slowly and deliberately zooms out to reveal the interlocutor as a shadowy figure behind whose shoulder the camera comes to rest. Bonasera proudly asserts that despite being raised "in the American fashion," his daughter also learned "never to dishonor family;" for her troubles at resisting the sexual advances of the American boys, Bonasera's daughter was brutally beaten and disfigured. Bonasera tears up when he declares that his daughter's beauty is gone, and asks Don Corleone to avenge her by murdering the men who were responsible

for it. This is the first of many scenes to feature men weeping, an uncommon sight in American film and especially the gangster genre prior to *The Godfather*.

What is remarkable about this scene is not so much its content—one man asks another, more powerful man, to right a wrong—but its setting. Don Corleone grants his visitors an audience inside his darkened den, while the wedding festivities go on outside. The atmosphere of the room is close, intimate; the warm lighting and repetitive close-ups of the men who converse emphasize this sense. Only after a number of back-and-forth shots between the faces of Bonasera and Don Vito does the camera cut to a wider establishing shot. From this shot we see that Don Corleone pets a young cat as he discusses murder with Bonasera, his caring actions juxtaposed to his words. His affection is clear: he caresses the cat, adjusts its position, is attentive to it. This foreshadows the consideration with which Don Vito attends to all his affective relationships. The darkened and intimate atmosphere of Don Vito's inner sanctum is in contrast with the content of his conversation with Bonasera and the tenor of his business this day. The celebration outside is bright, noisy, festive, in counterpoint to the tale of loss recounted to the Don. Bonasera's story echoes with later instances of familial loss that the Corleones encounter, most notably Sonny Corleone's murder and Don Vito's subsequent calling in of Bonasera's favor. In this first scene, as Don Vito escorts the newly loyal Bonasera out of his sanctum, the Don says to the undertaker, "accept this justice as a gift on my daughter's wedding day." [35] The very fact that Don Vito Corleone metes out what is

[35] This is one of many phrases from *The Godfather* that have entered the common argot. Another is, "no Sicilian can refuse any request on his daughter's wedding day," a phrase Tom repeats to his wife and which I have heard used casually in conversation; and perhaps most famous are "leave the gun, take the cannolli," and "Luca Brasi sleeps with the fishes," testaments to the film's singular status in American culture.

considered "justice" is a gesture towards melodrama: he weighs the claims of victims and adjudicates based on their "moral legibility."

Michael Corleone enters his family's home as an affectionate young man who paradoxically is also an outsider: though he physically embraces Tom Hagen and his brother Fredo, Michael takes pains to distance himself from the "family business." Michael instead allies himself with his girlfriend, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Kay. The film's casting of the Italian-American Al Pacino, a swarthy and dark-haired young man, as Michael Corleone against Diane Keaton, a lily-white blonde woman portraying the WASPy Kay Adams, highlights the differences in their ethnic backgrounds. Kay is practically the only blonde at the Corleone wedding, and seems very out of place in her broad sunhat and prim dress. Michael, wearing his Marine uniform, is also set apart from the other men in the scene, who wear suits and tuxedos in honor of the wedding. Michael and Kay are outsiders at this very ethnic and family-oriented event, a difference that is highlighted by Michael's efforts to distance himself from his family's business. After relating to Kay a story in which his father threatened a bandleader's life if he didn't bend to the Don's will, Michael insists to his WASP girlfriend, the only prominent non-ethnic white in this scene,[36] "That's my family, Kay. It's not me." Michael's oldest brother Sonny greets him as "college boy," further emphasizing the difference between Michael and the very "Italianicity" (Dika 93) that his family's ethnic celebration embodies.

[36] While it is true that Tom Hagen and his wife Teresa are also white, he is informally the adopted son of Vito Corleone, who Michael says "took Tom in off the streets when he was a kid." With an Irish surname, we can assume that Tom's religious heritage is Catholic, which is more akin to the Corleone's Italian values than Kay Adams' ultra-white, upper-class demeanor and dress reveal about hers.

Michael is a man outside his own family, and though the Family's business is illegal and Michael is on the side of the law by denouncing it, being involved in the Corleone mob family has a romantic aura that Michael misses out on. In this scene Michael is only depicted outside the home, unlike his brothers Tom, Sonny, and Fredo, who at different points participate in the inclusive warmth that suffuses the Don's inner sanctum. While the wedding celebration outside in the sunshine is brightly lit, open, and joyous, it is also characterized by an uncommon gender imbalance: the women hold court outside during the wedding, while the men inhabit the interior of the home. This subverting of the traditional public/private gendered spatial dichotomy consolidates the family home as the appropriate place of masculine control.[37] While we share Michael's perception that acts of violence against bandleaders (or anyone, for that matter) are reprehensible, we also apprehend that his denial of family belonging is also a loss: Michael must renounce his family, divorce himself from it and become an outsider, in order to achieve success in the legitimate world. Thus instead of belonging in Don Vito's home, the masculine stronghold, Michael's rightful place is outside of it, and we lament his distance from the welcoming warmth of the rich experience offered in his father's den.

Thus the first scene of *The Godfather* constructs the family home as a conflicted space, representing both paternal love and the loss of that love, male community and the

[37] Unfortunately, this does not lead to the empowering of women in the public realm; rather, women in *The Godfather* serve as little more than plot devices to motivate some (though very few) critical actions in the film. For example, though the first scene is set at Connie Corleone's wedding, her real function in the larger narrative is to serve as leverage: her husband Carlo beats her (while she is pregnant, no less), motivating her to call Sonny for help. On his way to "rescue" his sister, Sonny is murdered at a toll-booth, which Carlo had arranged with the rival Tattaglia mob. Connie is thus little more than a fulcrum on which the fortunes and desires of the men in the narrative pivot.

renunciation of that community. This scene portrays the home as site of joyous celebration and Italian ethnic tradition, as well as the violence of the Mafia business and the irony that the smiling men who hug and kiss each other in greeting also commit murder. In the following scene, when Tom travels to Hollywood to meet film producer Woltz, another man's home is violated because he refuses to grant a favor to Don Corleone. This scene demonstrates that Don Vito uses home and family, what he values above all else, to intimidate and coerce his enemies. But while Woltz is a victim of home invasion, the murder of his beloved racehorse, and a threat against his life (as the decapitated horse and its placement in the intimate space of Woltz's bed suggests metaphorically), Woltz's ugly bigotry and sexual license encourage us to feel that he gets what he deserves. This scene confirms that Vito is a man of strong emotions, and his retaliation against the film producer is shocking but commensurate with Woltz's own moral legibility—his melodramatic import—as a lecher and a bigot. Thus Vito is figured as a powerful man who will not hesitate to resort to violence when it is called for, but is judicious in its use, consolidating our sense that he is fundamentally a righteous patriarch.

Tom Hagen visits the producer at his studios and explains that in exchange for casting Johnny Fontaine in his upcoming war film, Woltz would receive the benefit of the Don's friendship: the producer's labor problems would disappear, and a potential public relations disaster with a drug-addicted star, Tom suggests, could be avoided. Woltz refuses, saying, "I don't care how many dago guinea wop greaseball goombahs come out of the woodwork" to intimidate him. When Tom protests that his heritage is German and Irish, Woltz replies, "let me tell you something my kraut-mick friend. I'm gonna make so much trouble for you, you won't know what hit you." Tom takes Woltz's vitriol in stride,

shaking the man's hand and professing an admiration for his work as he departs. As the representative of Vito Corleone, Tom's equanimity in the face of Woltz's prejudice conveys the don's moral superiority over the producer's petty crudeness.

Once Woltz realizes whom Tom represents, his attitude changes. The scene at the studio back-lot dissolves to Tom Hagen arriving at Woltz's Hollywood mansion. From a stationary long shot, we see the courtyard of Woltz's home as a car pulls up to the front door. In this long take we are invited to admire the opulence of Woltz's Mission-style hacienda. Grecian urns, a central garden, and a beautiful yellow coupe parked in the driveway signify Woltz's wealth and taste. In the sequence that follows this long static shot, Woltz gives Tom a tour of his grounds, showing off his property and demonstrating the taste that he has acquired as a successful Hollywood producer. Towering urns, a huge fountain, a pool and gazebo surrounded by statuary, and carefully manicured gardens lead to Woltz's pride and joy: the racehorse Khartoum.

As the horse is drawn out of his stall by a groom, Woltz rhapsodizes: "$600,000 on four hooves, I'll bet Russian czars never paid that kind of dough for a single horse. […] I'm not gonna race him, though; I'm gonna put him out to stud." Woltz gazes at the horse with deep respect bordering on affection. This tour of his estate is intended to impress Tom Hagen, but when Woltz admires Khartoum, one of the few living things in this mostly empty paradise, it is clear that his interest in the horse is not merely for its dollar value. While Woltz boasts about the price tag for this magnificent animal, and stands to profit handsomely from selling its stud services, his decision to put a horse in its prime essentially out to pasture betrays a real respect and care for it as a living being. This is the only moment in the film when Woltz seems worthy of redemption: he shares

Don Vito's affection for animals, and his regard of the horse is neither crass nor feigned, unlike his emotions regarding people. Kindness to animals says a lot about a man; but Woltz does not extend this regard to humans, and his affection for Khartoum is a vulnerability that Don Vito will exploit.

While Woltz is respectful of his racehorse, his treatment of women marks him as a lecher. Woltz claims that his grudge against Johnny Fontaine is justified: Fontaine "ruined" one of Woltz's up-and-coming female stars, who left the producer for the Italian singer/actor. He protests that he invested "hundreds of thousands of dollars" in the starlet; that she was "She was young, she was innocent! She was the greatest piece of ass I've ever had [. . .] And then Johnny Fontaine comes along with his olive oil voice and guinea charm, and she runs off." Ironically, in this rant Woltz figures himself as a victim of Fontaine's Italian wiles. In reality he is presented as a disgusting lecher, preying on the young starlet despite his advanced age and feeling as though he were the wronged party in the transaction. Also ironically, Woltz praises the innocence of a young woman and in the next breath reveals that despite her youth and purity, he used her for sex. And all the while, he spouts hateful ethnic slurs: olive oil is Italy's most famous export (and, in fact, the import that founds the Corleone's legitimate business in the early 20th century, as the sequel makes clear). Woltz seeks revenge on Johnny Fontaine for stealing his girl, justifying his refusal of Don Corleone's request. In play are questions of just and unjust treatment, with Woltz presenting himself as victim but displaying repulsive values around ethnicity and gender. Woltz finishes his rant by telling Tom Hagen, "If that goombah tries any rough stuff, you tell him I ain't no bandleader." Woltz does not limit his slurs to those who have wronged him; calling Vito Corleone a goombah is proof that Woltz's

bigotry is not simply a result of the wrongs done him by Johnny Fontaine, but rather a part of his worldview.

While the Corleone home is sacrosanct to Don Vito, he does not hesitate to violate Woltz's. The very vulnerability of Woltz's home to invasion, and the decapitating of Khartoum to send the message that Woltz must comply with Vito's demands, demonstrate a chilling logic of violence that acknowledges the very importance of the home. The following sequence echoes the earlier tour of Woltz's estate, but this time with a horrifying conclusion. A static head-and-shoulders shot of Woltz watching Tom depart dissolves to a stationary long shot of Woltz's home from the back garden. With the pool in the foreground and the mansion filling the frame, we are given to understand that it is early morning; all is peaceful. Crickets chirp and the *Godfather* theme comes up softly on the soundtrack, hinting that this peace is about to be disturbed by the interference of the Corleones. A series of rapid, dissolving pan-and-zoom shots lead us inside Woltz's bedroom, where the camera slowly advances on the sleeping man's ornate bed, complete with satin sheets that reflect the early-morning light.

The camera tracks into a close-up of Woltz shifting under the sheets, while on the soundtrack, the theme becomes shrill with the addition of a flute, horn, and eventually strings. Woltz awakens to find his clothes and bedding soaked in blood. Horrified, he flings back the sheets to reveal the decapitated head of Khartoum, his beloved horse, at the foot of his bed. The camera rests for a moment on the horse's head; then cuts to a medium-close up of Woltz screaming. Rhythmic cuts to increasingly wider shots, punctuated by Woltz drawing breath to scream, lead backwards from the bed and end outside the mansion, reprising the first shot of the sequence. Woltz's screams turn into

sobs. We are left with the impression that this peaceful home has been violated by the Corleones, Woltz's most beloved possession ruined in a show of power and a threat against his life. Only someone who understood what a violation and what terror can be conveyed by killing a man's beloved animal and placing its bloody head in the man's bed knows the value of these things in the first place, and while Vito Corleone is understood to be calculating and at times vicious, this scene ironically consolidates the sense of his actions as just and measured.

From the long external shot of Woltz's mansion, we dissolve to a head-and-shoulders shot of Vito Corleone welcoming Tom Hagen home from his Hollywood trip. He looks off camera right as though listening, and with Woltz's anguished yell fading into the background, the connection is made between the Godfather and the violation of Woltz's home and the sole object of his affection. Don Vito's eyes slide to the left, and he raises his eyebrows in a shrug; the juxtaposition of these shots suggests that he is both the source of this act against Woltz, and that he weighs it and considers it just. Don Vito's expression changes, and his first words are of concern for his adopted son: "You're not too tired, are you Tom?" This shot is almost humorous in its presentation of Don Vito as both ruthless puppet master and caring patriarch. But because the previous scenes have characterized Woltz as crass and bigoted, we do not feel that Don Vito is, to put it bluntly, an evil man: his actions are justified by the victim's perceived lack of virtue. Woltz adheres to an offensively and openly racist mindset. His crudeness makes his discovery of the horse head in his bed no less horrifying, but justifies Vito's retaliation by making Woltz a virtue-less victim.

Moreover, the home space that he inhabits is presented as empty of the love and affection that makes the Corleone home-space so appealing, that enlists our sympathy for the Corleone men in spite of their violent acts. Unlike the Corleone home in the previous scene, Woltz's grounds are empty of people, save a handful of servants in traditional uniforms. Moreover, all of his servants are Black; they serve silently, standing in the background ready to cater to Woltz's every need. Thus, while the violence against him is horrifying, we do not feel it is undeserved. Woltz's moral standing is clear, and not only does he get his just desserts, we feel a satisfaction that Don Vito has the ability to punish Woltz's violations of the social order. Don Vito's extralegal form of justice is a fantasy of paternal power that might make the world a better place. Thus, while Vito's actions have been violent, they have been melodramatically justified, and the villain is, ironically, the victim as well in this scene.

Homeland

The homeland also takes on symbolic weight in *The Godfather,* comprising another example of "home" and its melodramatic import. After avenging the attempt on his father's life by killing the gangster Solozzo and police Captain McCluskey, Michael flees to Sicily to avoid the mob war that ensues. While the landscape of Sicily seems bare, parched, hardly Edenic, it is the Corleone family homeland, and Michael's flight there gestures towards origins that have a bucolic veneer of innocence. Sicily is rural and pastoral: the streets are dirt tracks, horses are as numerous as cars, and the only visible industries are sheepherding and café proprietorship. While in Sicily, Michael courts and marries a beautiful Italian woman, Appollonia Vitelli. Their romance transforms the dry and quiet landscape of Sicily to one redolent with Old-World music, voices, and values,

and Michael's respect for these values signifies a nostalgia for a simpler time encoded in the pastoral patriarchal homeland.

A series of scenes form a montage of Michael's courtship of Appollonia. First, he is formally introduced to her entire family, who sit in a circle in the Vitelli courtyard. Michael wears a suit and tie, and brings gifts for each member of the family. Next, he eats with the whole family at a long picnic table. He sits across from Don Vitelli, and the two men converse; at the opposite end of the table, Appollonia sits with the women of the family. It is clear that the Sicilian manner of courtship first consists of winning the family over, and then the girl. Michael and Appollonia progress to a romantic stroll—accompanied by all the Vitelli family women. Appollonia stumbles, and Michael catches her: this is their first physical contact, and Michael's behavior is chivalrous, respectful, decorous.

In direct contrast to the peace and quiet of Sicily, New York is a city teeming with immorality, made visible in the marital relations of two of Michael's siblings. We cut from the women of the Sicilian village chaperoning the young lovers' walk,[38] to men waiting outside the apartment of Sonny Corleone's mistress. As Sonny leaves her to resume his duties as acting Godfather, the woman slouches in the doorway, loose-limbed, barely dressed, and smiling languidly. The pleasure she takes in Sonny's visit is obvious, as is his enjoyment of his infidelity as he kisses her upon his departure. The comparison with the shy, demure, and silent Appollonia could not be clearer. In the first scene of the film we witnessed Sonny's dalliance with this woman, who is not his wife, and his continued relationship with her makes his lust seem a disgrace: Sonny is not a virtuous

[38] Significantly, the "*Godfather* Theme" also fades into silence just before this cut from rural Sicily to urban America.

man. After leaving his mistress, Sonny visits his pregnant sister Connie, finding that she bears a black eye and a split lip from an argument with her husband Carlo. Sonny is infuriated, and finds Carlo on the street, administering a brutal and humiliating beating to his brother-in-law. The streets teem with children laughing and playing in the spray from a fire hydrant. The contrast to the streets of Sicily is shocking: from the quiet of crickets chirping and murmured conversation, we come to the city streets assaulted by the radio, cars, children. Sonny leaves Carlo lying (literally) in the gutter while the neighborhood children watch. A cut brings us back to Michael's Sicilian wedding; a church bell tolls and a Catholic priest reads Latin words over the heads of the kneeling bride and groom. Seen this way, in juxtaposed sequences, the comparison between New and Old Worlds leaves us preferring the quaint and virtuous simplicity of Sicily to the corrupted morass of America.

The soundtrack contributes greatly to this sense: the *Godfather* theme plays loudly through the Sicily scenes. During Michael's courtship with Appollonia, the music is primary in the soundtrack, with the diegetic sounds much lower in the sound hierarchy. The theme is even played during Michael and Appollonia's wedding procession, conveying that the most important information is not the content of these conversations, but rather the montage of Sicilian life that Michael has become a part of. Seeing these scenes, we can't help but compare Michael's simple, humble wedding to Connie Corleone's opulent bash from the beginning of the film. Where Connie and Carlo accepted envelopes full of money in their reception line, Appollonia serves mints to the elders of the village. While Connie's wedding guests include powerful Mafia family heads and the famous crooner Johnny Fontaine, the guests at Michael's wedding are all

humble locals. The procession from the church to the reception site is on foot, with nary a vehicle in sight, quite a difference from the full parking lot at the Corleone compound in the first scene. Michael and Appollonia's first dance is shown from a high-angle long shot; encircled by the townspeople, they dance a simple waltz. The ostentation and display of the Sicilian-American wedding has been supplanted by a simple, seemingly more "authentic," wedding filled with the traditions of the Old Country rather than the new. These scenes suggest that America itself is a corrupting force, at least in Michael Corleone's narrative strand, and that the fatherland is a morally pure sanctuary from the ugliness of contemporary American life.

If Michael flees New York to escape violence and seek safety and the roots of his Italian-American identity in Sicily, the illusion of sanctuary is not sustained for long. His young wife Appollonia is murdered as he watches, the victim of a car bomb meant for him. The violence that plagues the Corleones in America has made its way to the Old Country—a violence that, we learn in *The Godfather Part II*, originated in Sicily in the first place—and Michael is victim of a terrible loss. Martha Nochimson suggests that Michael's marriage to Appollonia is an attempt to "re-root" himself in his Italian identity, but that his wife's murder blocks this "seeming path to authenticity" (56-57). By the time his bride is killed, Michael has successfully assimilated to Sicilian life: his old-fashioned courtship of Appollonia and their simple wedding ceremony reflect Michael's ability to negotiate an Italian identity as measured in its cultural customs. Appollonia's murder does not seem to affect Michael emotionally in its aftermath; we cut away from Michael being blown backwards from the bomb blast, to Don Vito's meeting with the heads of the Five Families in New York. The next time we see Michael, he has been in America for

more than a year, and he seeks out Kay Adams and marries her. The trauma of seeing his first wife obliterated before his eyes is not mentioned in this film or its sequel, and it is strangely as though the episode is lost to Michael's memory.[39]

While the "home," here homeland, signifies the desire to return to a space of innocence, Sicily proves to be anything but a safe haven. Agents from America have managed to infiltrate Michael's corps of bodyguards, making his sojourn in the relatively safe Old Country a brief respite from the danger he is subject to now that he has joined the family business. While it seems that the melodramatic logic of revenge moves from west to east, in that Michael's killing of McCluskey and Solozzo on American soil spawns the attempt on his life in Sicily, we learn in *The Godfather, Part II* that this cycle is Sicilian in origin (and which contemporary audiences know, having absorbed the Mafia mythos presented in Puzo's novel). However, the vision of Sicily as a place of simple and pure traditions is left an open question after Appollonia's murder. Since the acts that instigated the murder took place in America, it seems the parched Sicilian landscape is more aptly characterized by Michael's old-fashioned courtship and the simple wedding ceremony where he and his bride honored the elders of the village by serving them (and not the other way around, as in Connie's American wedding in the first scene). But the film cuts away from Sicily after the bomb blast, not to return, leaving our interpretation of Appollonia's murder necessarily incomplete: did seeing his wife murdered in front of his eyes change Michael fundamentally? Did he learn to turn off his emotions and become a ruthless businessman as a result of his experiences in Sicily? Are

[39] Michael's stoicism in the face of the terrible murder of his wife, and the fact that Appollonia is never mentioned again until 1990's *The Godfather III*, can be read as the effects of war on the young man's psyche. I am indebted to Carter Soles for suggesting this reading of Michael as a war veteran.

we to believe that Sicily is a place of sanctuary, or an indifferent landscape that merely plays out whatever narratives are brought there? These questions go unresolved, and whether the result of inept filmmaking (as the production history might suggest, with Coppola struggling to meet deadlines and rumors of a drastic re-edit and final cut by Gordon Willis) or simply a nod to the inability to know the modern man's soul, Michael has spent time getting to know his Italian roots and has experienced a tremendous loss before he returns to America.

Loss, Revenge

Bonasera has "lost" his daughter's beauty. Michael renounces his family. Luca Brasi is killed. Vito is wounded. Sonny is murdered. The men in Corleone, Italy are all dead from mafia vendettas. Appollonia is murdered. Vito has lost his dreams for Michael in the legitimate world. Connie loses her husband to revenge. Kay loses Michael to the family business. Acts of revenge in response to a loss—visiting a wound upon an enemy for a slight to oneself, real or perceived—abound in *The Godfather*.

I opened this work by discussing Don Vito Corleone's response to the murder of his oldest son, Santino "Sonny" Corleone. This scene constitutes the most salient instance of Vito's emotion, his warmth, and his role as a father, all motivated by the loss of his son.[40] In this scene Don Vito is fully a melodramatic patriarch. Most of the events of *The Godfather*, including Sonny's murder, are set in motion by one meeting between Don Vito and a potential associate, Virgil "The Turk" Solozzo, who proposes to partner with

[40] In the 1990 Behind the scenes footage included in the *Godfather* Trilogy special edition, Coppola names his influences in the filming of this scene as the obvious Arthur Penn from 1969's *Bonnie and Clyde*. He draws this line back through Kurosawa, and eventually to Shakespeare. Talk about a masculine canonization of your own filmic mythology. Caan claims the stunt master put 147 squibs on his body. This is certainly an excessive murder scene.

the Corleones to sell heroin. Don Vito refuses because drugs are "dirty" and "dangerous,"[41] and in return for his refusal, the Tattaglia family (Solozzo's Mafia support) puts out a hit on Don Vito. The scene of the attempted assassination is unusual in its editing and framing, and consists of quick cuts to a number of unconventional angles that emphasize the Don's fear and inability to control the factors set in motion by his decisions. The sequence's soundtrack is also unusual for the film, and highlights an unsettling quiet that is broken by the sound of the shooters' feet on pavement, Vito's cry, and gunshots. The formal elements of this scene present Vito Corleone as a victim, and enlist audience sympathy for Vito, who does not deserve this treatment.

This scene also demonstrates Vito Corleone's thoughtfulness as a father, as he is attacked while buying oranges to bring home to his family. This motif—purchasing oranges for his family—is repeated in *The Godfather, Part II*, as the young Vito Corleone stops to purchase oranges from a street vendor in 1920s Little Italy. Oranges signify sustenance and sweetness, fitting with Vito's personality: though the aging and powerful don could simply send a subordinate to purchase the oranges, he crosses the street to the fruit seller and selects them himself. This extraordinarily caring gesture is also, it is clear, something Don Vito enjoys, a fact that makes him that much more sympathetic despite his illegally gained wealth and power. As Vito crosses to the fruit vendor, the ambient sounds of the alley become primary in the soundtrack: a trumpet practices scales, a fire crackles in a barrel, a baby cries over the low rumble of traffic noises. The following

[41] Vito refuses to enter the drug trade against the counsel of Tom Hagen and Sonny, who believe the families that do invest in the drug trade will amass the resources to challenge the Corleones in the future. Apparently Don Vito does not feel that the other illegal activities the family is involved in, including gambling, racketeering, and prostitution, are either dirty or dangerous.

sequence intercuts fast takes of two men approaching the Don Vito from screen right, with equally quick takes of Vito growing wary and glancing around him.

From a reverse angle of a long establishing shot, Don Vito becomes aware of the assassins' presence. He stumbles with a cry over the bin of oranges, which roll into the street and fan out bright against the dingy gray of the alley and the men's muted clothing. An unconventional shot from above the street looking down follows, showing the Don running to his car as the gunmen fire, followed by a high-angle shot of the street with the Corleones' car on one side and the bright fire, fruit, and grocer's station on the other. Fredo, acting as his father's (ineffectual) bodyguard, frantically stares after the men as they run away, a dog barking adding to the soundtrack as their footfalls fade away. Vito has been shot, and as he rolls off the sedan onto the pavement, the minor-key *Godfather* theme comes up on the soundtrack. Fredo collapses onto the pavement, crying over the bullet-riddled body of his father. Vito's vulnerability and Fredo's emotional breakdown signify their victimization: Vito is the victim of a violent attack and bears the bloody wounds on his body, while Fredo believes his father has been murdered in front of him as he fails to protect his father or respond with force to an outside threat.[42]

The framing and soundtrack of this scene invite us to view Don Vito as the victim of an unprovoked assault: as he is thoughtfully purchasing oranges to bring home to his family, a man returning home from work like any other, he is gunned down. This attack takes place in front of his own son, who is so simple-minded that he cannot even respond in kind to this violence: he too is a victim, left weeping over his father's wounded body.

[42] Fredo is ultimately the weakest, least potent of the Corleone men; he is simple-minded, is passed over in favor of Michael, his younger brother, to be Don; and in *The Godfather II* he is cuckolded by his wife and betrays Michael to Hyman Roth, resulting in an attempt on Michael Corleone's life.

The victims of violence and loss (of life, of virility), the two Corleone men in this scene are sympathetic characters who we feel are unjustly assaulted. This wordless sequence passes quickly, adding blameless victim to Vito Corleone's list of character traits, along with righteous, caring, and judicious.

In the aftermath of the attempt to assassinate Vito Corleone, Michael avenges his father's murder by killing Solozzo and the police Captain McCluskey, entering the world that he had forsaken at the beginning of the film. Michael transforms from war hero and college boy to ruthless gangster by taking part in the venerated Sicilian ritual of revenge. When Vito returns home from the hospital, he is carried upstairs on a stretcher and he lies in bed, weak and unable to speak. The powerful patriarch has been forcefully retired, and we see him from a high-angle shot, a lamp in the corner casting shadows over his face etched with wrinkles and age lines. In the first scenes of the film, Don Vito is a kind but powerful man; now he seems old, shrunken, debilitated. Vito is unable to fulfill the role of Don while he is incapacitated, and this loss of power is symbolic as well as physical, a fact that garners even more sympathy for the righteous patriarch.

Once he has convalesced, Don Vito calls a meeting of the Five Families to broker peace and avoid more bloodshed, another act that marks him as a just man. Vito concedes that, despite his distaste for it, the narcotics trade will become Mafia business; and in exchange for the others benefiting from protection from the officials in his pay, he demands that Tattaglia forswear revenge for the murder of his son. Vito reasons that both he and Tattaglia have "lost a son," that they are even, "quits;" vengeance will not bring back Sonny Corleone or Tattaglia's son. Revenge satisfies a desire to make things even, to exchange blow for blow, but its aim is irrational. Therefore Don Corleone rejects it,

pledging to "forego the vengeance of my son" as long as Michael is held safe from harm. Tattaglia nods his assent, and the two men embrace and kiss to symbolize their agreement with this peace treaty. The assembled heads applaud Corleone and Tattaglia's accord. This conversation has been deceptively simple. These men—wounded, powerful, emotional patriarchs—have made life-and-death decisions, and all on the basis of a shared understanding of what constitutes justice, what is fair, and what types of losses are worth what kinds of compromise.

It is these scenes of negotiation and communication among men that are the heart of *The Godfather*, even more than scenes of violent attacks. Violent acts—the attempt on Don Vito's life, the murders of Santino and Appollonia, and Michael's ultimate purge of his enemies—serve to punctuate the narrative's general tone of camaraderie and masculine closeness. In fact, *The Godfather* brings to the screen [43] what was to become the hallmark of Italian gangster films: the commonplace of ethnic men sharing affection, or using affectionate gestures to express hostility. That the affective content of the gangster genre has not been plumbed is a surprising oversight when we consider this fact. The *Godfather*'s work to repatriate the home space constitutes an imaginative counter-attack to the loss of white male hegemony in the real public sphere of postwar America. Displacing women from the domestic sphere[44] and bringing an ethnic patriarch into the

[43] The exception is Martin Ritt's *The Brotherhood*, which failed to resonate with audiences in the way that *The Godfather* did due to many factors, not the least of which was the success of Mario Puzo's novel and Paramount's evocative press campaign for Coppola's film. For more about the industrial conditions that determined the popularity of Coppola's film, see Jon Lewis' "If History Has Taught Us Anything. . . Francis Coppola, Paramount Studios, and *The Godfather Parts I, II, and III*."

[44] Which, again, does not equate to women gaining power in the public sphere. Women in *The Godfather* are tertiary characters and melt into the background much of the time.

home to rule it accomplishes the claiming of a new space for both the gangster genre and the white American male.

The gangster's locus of power is now the family home rather than the ethnic ghetto or the city streets, and in this way *The Godfather* transforms the gangster narrative from focusing on ethnic struggles to succeed in the public sphere, to a narrative that brings the gangster into the nuclear family enclave. This imaginative retreat into the private sphere reclaims the work of raising children, especially boys, as the province of fathers, lionizing a domestic patriarch and representing a shifting of affective energy from the work world to the family home. Thus the genre moves from voicing "an enduring sense of collective grievance" experienced by ethnic minorities (Munby 226) in the public realm, to a charismatic ethnic patriarch ruling in the private realm. The off-white gangster functions in a way that an Anglo-Saxon man could not: powerful white masculinity is itself is so troubled in the age of the Vietnam War, the shooting of peaceful protestors by National Guardsmen at Ohio State, and the Watergate debacle, as to be unredeemable. The off-white gangster represents a cultural history of victimization and difference, and as a liminal figure creates a comfortable distance for the white viewer, allowing spectators to project cultural anxieties onto an "other" that is paradoxically close to home, the idealized victim-self.

These shifts in the gangster direct the energy of the genre inward, dramatizing personal loss and struggle rather than public and collective striving to achieve success in the face of social prejudices. *The Godfather* ultimately works to establish Vito Corleone, a Mafia boss, as a kind, generous, and affectionate man despite what he does for a living. Vito's emotionality is the core of *The Godfather* and represents the film's most important

contribution to the genre: the affection between men and the consolidation of an inclusive *and emotional* male enclave transformed the gangster genre into a mode that dramatized more than just the struggle for power, but also the struggle for acceptance, support, and love. Through the loci of the home a definition of Vito Corleone as virtuous victim, *The Godfather* reestablishes a just ethnic patriarch as the ideal man. Michael, whose emotional distance at the outset is never overcome despite his entering the family business, becomes a ruthless don when Vito passes away, and the contrast between the two men emphasizes our sense of Vito as virtuous and Michael as (in the first film, in any case) a cold and calculating man. *The Godfather, Part II* continues the comparison of the two dons by presenting their narrative strands in alternating vignettes, working to further venerate the Old World father figure of Vito Corleone while vilifying his son Michael, the powerful contemporary American man.

"You broke my heart": *The Godfather Part II*

As much as 1972's *The Godfather* is about the ascendancy of a son to power while his father fades, *Part II* (1974) celebrates the father's back-story and more explicitly compares the ascent/descent of the two Dons. *The Godfather Part II* stars Robert De Niro as the young Vito Corleone, and Al Pacino reprises his role as Michael. Talia Shire plays Connie Corleone, Diane Keaton portrays Kay (Adams) Corleone, and Robert Duvall returns as Tom Hagen. *The Godfather, Part II* employs a flashback structure that parallels significant moments in the lives of Vito Corleone and his youngest son Michael Corleone. While *The Godfather Part I* takes the ethnic gangster off the streets and brings him into the home, *Part II* imagines an immigrant back-story that casts criminality in the fond light of nostalgia, with Vito Corleone as victim-hero of one

narrative thread and his son Michael the villain of the second. Nostalgia is itself the focus and the main emotional tenor in *Part II*, and violence justified by suffering figures largely in the film's melodramatic logic.

While *The Godfather* introduces us to an already-adult Michael and chronicles his rise to power while his father becomes increasingly less powerful and more infirm, *Part II* presents the young Vito Andolini's escape from Mafia violence in Sicily, and later his rise to power as Vito Corleone in the immigrant neighborhoods of early twentieth-century New York. Conversely, as suggested in the second half of Part I, Michael continues to bring the Corleone family into decadence throughout *Part II*. The narrative structures of the films make one the obverse of the other: while Michael rises, Vito declines into a fond and impotent old man; while Vito gains power in America, Michael loses it. In this way, paternal suffering is offset by filial gain, and vice versa. Carlos Clarens sees this juxtaposition as "contrast[ing] a romantic past—bucolic, primitive Sicily; Little Italy through a patina of affection—to the harsh and somber present" (112). Michael grows increasingly distant from his family as he rises in stature as Don, and both the narrative and formal elements of the film construct a nostalgic sense of the righteous beginnings of the Corleone Family with the unjust and greed-inspired expansion of Michael's power in the second half of the twentieth century. This is the harsh and somber present (in the real world) of Watergate, where a just patriarch like Vito Corleone would be a welcome corrective to the nation's contemporary cadre of cold, self-interested, and corrupt powers-that-be, who are represented in this narrative by the cold and calculating Michael Corleone.

Synopsis

Vito Corleone escapes Sicily after the men in his family are murdered for disrespecting a local Mafia don. Vito's entry into theft rings and his rise as a local gangster are chronicled, with his first bold act being the assassination of Don Fanucci, a local gangster and bully who preys on the Sicilians in his own neighborhood of Little Italy. Vito starts a protection racket with his friends Tessio and Clemenza, and begins an olive-oil importing business to provide their gang a legitimate front. Meanwhile Vito marries and has children, and we see young Santino, Fredo, Michael, and Connie Corleone as they grow up in Little Italy.

In the present-day sequences of *The Godfather, Part II*, Michael has moved his family to Lake Tahoe and is being investigated by the Kefauver Committee for suspected Mafia ties.[45] Fredo has been given control of the Corleone investments in Vegas and manages them poorly; Connie is a multiple divorcee who neglects her children in favor of living a fast and glitzy life. Michael's various business deals bring him into contact with titans of industry, and he is in Cuba when the Communist Revolution takes place. Fredo betrays Michael to a Jewish gangster, Hyman Roth, and Michael thus narrowly misses being killed in an assassination attempt at his compound. Michael has Fredo killed for this betrayal, Kay leaves Michael after aborting what would be their third child, and Mama Corleone dies. The film ends with Michael alone at his compound, an older man surrounded by dead leaves but absent the family he believes he worked hard to protect.

[45] For a detailed analysis of the Kefauver hearings and their impact on the gangster films of the contemporary era, see Ronald W. Wilson's "Gang Busters: The Kefauver Crime Committee and the Syndicate Films of the 1950s." *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*. Eds. Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005. 67-89.

The two Godfathers

Michael Corleone does not fare well in the comparisons implied by the dissolves from his time period of the late 1950s to his father's in 1920s Little Italy in *The Godfather Part II*. This film is structured in a way that presents Vito Corleone as the victim-hero of the narrative, and his son Michael as the melodramatic villain of the saga. The melodramatic villain has played a central role in American film since the birth of cinema. Edwin Porter's 1903 *The Great Train Robbery* grabbed audiences' imagination not simply because of the apocryphal tale of spectators cowering in terror as a bandit fires a gun while into the camera (as though these audiences had built-in 3-D glasses), but because its compelling narrative pitted good—the telegraph operator, taken by surprise and held against his will—against evil: the marauding robbers. Melodramatic narratives dominated early American cinema, and Linda Williams argues that the narrative aspects of melodrama have been subsumed into a mode that structures all American film. The "victim-hero" is no less essential to a melodramatic worldview than is the villain.

Virtuous victimhood: Vito Andolini/Corleone

From the first frames of the parched Sicilian landscape in which he is introduced, Vito Corleone is an innocent victim. The brief, wordless prologue, which features a sinister rendition of the *Godfather* theme on the soundtrack, fades in to a dry, rocky landscape, a sepia tone enhancing the scene's austerity. A procession enters the frame and crosses it, the human shapes dwarfed by the rocky hills, as titles explain that this is the ancestral home of the Corleone family.

The godfather was born Vito Andolini, in the town of Corleone in Sicily. In 1901 his father was murdered for an insult to the local Mafia chieftain. His older

brother Paolo swore revenge and disappeared into the hills, leaving Vito, the only male heir, to stand with his mother at the funeral.

He was nine years old.

As Vito and his mother march in solemn procession in extreme long shot, a gunshot interrupts the mourners and they learn that Paolo has been killed. Vito's mother begs the local Mafia don, Don Ciccio, to spare her remaining son, but he refuses, Ciccio's men brutally shotgunning Vito's mother when she threatens the Don with a knife. The amount of suffering this young boy has witnessed is unimaginable, and the entire saga of *The Godfather* is founded (imaginatively, in retrospect) in these moments of violence that make this young Sicilian boy an orphaned refugee in America.

The very roots of the Corleone family[46] are pain, loss, and unjust violence. The frail, silent Vito Andolini is a potent symbol of innocence, and makes for a heart-wrenching victim. Upon arriving at Ellis Island, Vito is quarantined at for smallpox contamination, and he sings to himself in his tiny cell while looking out the window at the Statue of Liberty. This stalwart symbol of American freedom contrasts sharply with the pathos of this single figure, weak and alone, having lost his entire family due to the anger of one powerful man. As Vito ages into a young man, he is portrayed as quiet, just, and kind. He resorts to crime—killing the Black Hand, Don Fanucci, and then becoming a respected mob boss himself—because he is an orphaned immigrant who arrives on America's shores frail with smallpox, ostensibly simple-minded (but really just selectively mute), with few options for supporting his family as he matures.

[46] For they are not "Corleone" until Vito arrives in America and is assigned this name at Ellis Island, when the intake processor reads his name incorrectly, substituting his place of origin—Corleone, Italy—for his last name, Andolini. Vito never corrects this mistake, and the Corleone family is established as such by a clerical error.

Vito's early life in America is a Robin Hood tale: he steals from the rich, and serves the poor immigrant Italians by protecting them from exploitation. His crimes are never portrayed explicitly, with the one distinction of his justified murder of Don Fanucci, who is offensively self-aggrandizing and cruel to the hard-working Italians of Little Italy. Vito's crimes are usually presented as comical, as when he and young Clemenza steal a Persian rug from a well appointed home and are almost caught by police, or are elided from the narrative entirely.[47] Thus Vito's illegal activities are portrayed in the same nostalgic manner as his tenderness with his young family, whom he looks on with visible affection and concern. The one violent crime Vito does commit is a justified act of protection rather than avarice. Thus young Vito Corleone, and the Corleone Family itself, is portrayed as righteous, just, and sympathetic: the audience apprehends the value of rewarding virtue and punishing evil, and the narrative enacts a melodramatic identification with Vito Corleone and the morally righteous, if not innocent, beginnings of his Mafia family.

Vito's inherent goodness is made clear to us when he loses his job at Don Fanucci's insistence, but doesn't blame the shopkeeper he has worked for. He refuses even a severance package of food that Abbandando offers him. Don Fanucci exploits the people of Little Italy, demanding protection money from shopkeepers, punishing them with violence if they do not pay up, and exacting obeisance from them. Physically Fanucci resembles an early cinema villain: though he wears a white suit, his eyes are ringed by dark makeup, his moustache is curled up at the ends, he sports a hat jauntily tilted to the side and his ill-fitting dentures make his smile seem both oily and rapacious.

[47] For example, Don Fanucci demands a cut of Vito's profits from stolen dresses, but details of the theft are never portrayed.

In contrast, Vito is clean-shaven, wearing the dark and slouchy clothing of a common peasant. His hair is slicked back in a utilitarian ‘do, and Vito wears the same cap as many of the other workingmen who traverse the streets of Little Italy.

Fanucci is presented in stark contrast to Vito in a scene where the mob boss coerces Vito’s employer, Abbandando. When Fanucci enters Abbandando Grosseria, Vito looks alarmed and warily follows the caped man with his eyes. Fanucci towers over the grocer Abbandando, insisting that he take in Fanucci’s nephew and fire Vito. When Abbandando assents, Fanucci slaps him lightly on the face, in a display of insouciant patronizing. Rather than get angry with Abbandando for giving in to the neighborhood bully, Vito consoles Abbandando, assuring him that Vito understands the grocer’s position. The men embrace, and Abbandando wipes away a tear. As Vito walks away from the grosseria and his job, Abbandando chases him down the street, offering him a box of food for his family. Vito refuses. Whereas Fanucci extorts his neighbors, Vito refuses to take from them what he is honestly due. In the next shots, Vito returns to his humble apartment, where he grabs his wife’s hand and kisses her tenderly. Though he has just lost his job, Vito Corleone is not an angry or embittered man. He values his family and friends to such an extent that he is visibly happy despite having lost his job to nepotism and extortion. The construction of Vito as an emotionally invested and loving man continues as his children are born, further enriching Vito’s backstory.

Our next vision of Vito is of his sad mien as he watches his young son Fredo being treated for pneumonia. The narrative has flashed forward a few years, and Vito is more sentimental than ever: most of this sequence consists of a medium shot of Vito’s reaction to the crying Fredo. He looks increasingly more concerned as the child’s wails

affect him emotionally, and the last shot before we cut away is Vito rubbing his eyes and covering his mouth with his hand, visibly in tears as he empathizes with and worries for his sick son. Vito's sentiment is in direct contrast to Michael's present-day coldness.

The sequence in which Vito kills Fanucci suggests that Vito is a much more ruthless person than we have been given to suppose, but as Fanucci has been constructed as evil and exploitative, Vito is still morally legible as a hero. Vito awaits Fanucci in the hallway of the powerful man's apartment building as a religious festival goes on outside. After unscrewing the hall light, Vito wraps his revolver in a towel, ostensibly to muffle the sound of gunshots, and hides in the shadows he has created. The camera cuts back and forth from Vito, lying in wait, to Fanucci's shoes mounting the stairs, to the crowd outside, creating a sense of heightened tension. In the darkness of the hallway where Vito hides, the towel-wrapped revolver is the only thing we see clearly. This is contrasted via cuts back and forth to the brightly lit street scene outside, a Catholic priest in his white and gold embroidered robes standing out amidst the dark-clothed people.

Dark browns and dull blacks dominate the color palate, with a few visual elements standing out in white: the towel, the Catholic priest, and Fanucci's white hat. The striking difference in color of gun-robes-hat, the fact that they alone are distinguishable in the dark of these shots, aligns the sacred with the profane. The film begs a comparison between sacred and profane acts, much as *The Godfather* juxtaposed Michael's baptism/massacre. Whereas Michael's standing godfather for his nephew while having his enemies murdered was an act of hypocrisy, in Vito's case the sounds of the festa provide a cover for an act of (vigilante) justice. Thus though we are surprised by Vito's cunning in planning and executing this murder, we have adequate evidence that

this act will benefit the community. Michael's acts were to benefit himself; Vito's to make Little Italy safe for his people. When Fanucci arrives at his apartment, Vito kills him quickly, mercilessly, and with little visible emotion.

Immediately after committing murder, Vito returns to his family who sit on their apartment stoop watching the festa. Mama Corleone sits with the three young boys. Vito takes the youngest from her arms, and kisses the infant. Vito is attentive to his youngest son, playing with his hand and scrutinizing his face. We cut to a medium shot, the infant in the foreground and young Sonny in the background of the shot. Vito says to the infant in Italian: "Michael, your father loves you very much, very much." The last shot of this scene is of the family on the stoop, Vito caressing the infant's head and clutching the baby's hand. His attentiveness to Michael is endearing, and this tender family tableau is in direct contrast to the horrible act we just witnessed him commit. Vito goes from murderer to family man in the space of a few moments and a few shots. But these two images are not incongruent, violent and shocking though his killing of Fanucci is. We believe that Vito has killed Fanucci for the benefit of his community, with the result that the people will be better off without the lecherous Black Hand oppressing them (much like the killing of film producer Woltz in Part I).

The last scene featuring the 1920s timeline is of a trip Vito makes with his young family to his hometown of Corleone, Sicily. The ostensible reasons for his trip are to expose his family to the ethnic homeland and build business relationships for his import company; but he also plans to take his long-awaited revenge on Don Ciccio, the man who murdered his father, mother, and brothers. This scene is a montage of Vito and his family—with all 4 children—touring Italy, tasting olive oil, and visiting with extended

family. The “Godfather theme” plays to the exclusion of dialogue, the setting and the washed-out palette of pale yellows powerfully reminiscent of Michael’s visit to Sicily in *The Godfather*. This scene resonates with both Vito’s future as presented in *The Godfather* and with Michael’s contemporary timeline in which he methodically alienates his family in his greed for power. There is a profound and sweet melancholy to these scenes, as we see the doting Vito feed Michael an olive as he holds the boy in his arms, and recall that in the diegetic present, Michael has estranged his wife and will soon kill his brother Fredo. Vito’s loving guidance is absent from Michael’s reign as Godfather, and this scene evokes nostalgia for what the Corleone family was at its beginning: affectionate, close-knit, and centered as a family unit by the love of its patriarch. In the present-day scenes of *The Godfather, Part II*, Michael Corleone has none of his father’s warmth, and his failure to maintain the cohesive family unit is the main focus of his tenure as Godfather.

Virtue-less Villainy: Michael Corleone

In *The Godfather*, Michael was a victim of circumstance and unjust violence, having lost his brother and wife to assassins; in *Part II*, Michael is the perpetrator of unjust violence, no longer a sympathetic character. While Don Fanucci is a potent figure of oppression and exploitation in the first half of the film, he is almost a caricature of a silent film villain, menacing a “helpless” woman and intimidating a meek Italian shopkeeper. 1970s audiences required a more nuanced and psychologically motivated antagonist, which they found in Michael Corleone. Michael’s villainy is carefully constructed throughout *The Godfather Part II*, visible in his abandonment of the Italian style and traditions that characterized his father’s home, and in his personal coldness and

preference for business over time spent with family. The first full scene in the present day of the late 1950s is in direct contrast to the joyous wedding celebration that opened *The Godfather*. A party celebrating Michael and Kay's son's Catholic confirmation takes place at Michael's Lake Tahoe estate. It is shot in a bright, harsh light, in direct contrast to Connie Corleone's wedding, which featured the same rich golden hues as the interior of the Don's den where he accepted obeisance and granted favors on his daughter's wedding day. In Tahoe, sunlight glitters off the lake, and overexposed yellows and greens dominate the color palette. The scene seems washed out, and this is highlighted by the flashback scenes that precede and follow it with their warm, faded sepia tones.

The entertainment and food have changed too, reflecting the assimilation of the family under Michael's leadership: where Connie's wedding featured traditional Sicilian songs and dances, the Tahoe guests are entertained by a sexy and savage samba, and Pentangeli complains that instead of red wine and peppers and sausage, Michael serves champagne cocktails and Ritz cracker canapés. Whereas at Connie's wedding, Sonny berated the police surveilling the mob gathering from their cars, Michael's waiters serve the police champagne. Connie Corleone is now an irresponsible mother and frequent divorcee, asking Michael for money so she can marry her newest non-Italian boyfriend. Fredo has also married a WASPy blonde, who gets drunk, dances flirtatiously with another man and kisses him, and disgraces Fredo in front of the party, yelling "never marry a wop, they treat their wives like shit!" Only Tom Hagen seems untouched by the moral decline of the Corleone family, but he is soon to be exiled to the Family business hinterlands in Las Vegas. Michael's rule has brought the family into the garish style of

the nouveau riche, a shameful departure from the dignified and deeply ethnic rituals celebrated in his father's time.

Michael's rule of the family might be no more ruthless or crime-ridden than his father's, but Michael's negotiations in the day-to-day operations of the family business are made visible in *The Godfather, Part II*, whereas Vito's generally were not. The first film shielded the audience from most of Vito's business decisions, with the notable exception of the meeting with Solozzo where Vito refused to enter the narcotics trade. Significantly, that transaction helped represent Vito as a caring and just man, since his opposition to dealing drugs was due to his belief that it was immoral, an "infamia." In the first film, when Vito was Godfather, the attention was on Vito's family relationships. But *The Godfather, Part II* devotes much of Michael's narrative to cataloguing his business transactions and Michael's role as the head of the Corleone crime family, spending comparatively little time on his role as father and husband. In Michael's tenure as Godfather, we see few interactions with his family and many of the internal machinations of running a Mafia empire.

Michael's villainy is crystallized by his final act in the film: murdering his brother Fredo. Michael "shops" the work out to his soldier Al Neri, but murdering Fredo breaks the cardinal rule of Sicilians: family is to be protected at all costs. Michael's ability to divorce his anger at Fredo's betrayal from his filial love for Fredo marks him as cold, brutal, almost soulless, especially in comparison to his father's warmth. Fredo is portrayed throughout *The Godfather* and its sequel as simple-minded, incompetent, and frail, which we attribute to his illness in infancy, which is presented earlier in the film. The final present-day scene of *The Godfather Part II* consists, very much like the baptism

scene in *The Godfather*, of cross-cutting between multiple events engineered by Michael: the killing of Hyman Roth at the Miami airport, Frank Pentangeli's (coerced) suicide in his barracks housing, and Fredo's murder on Lake Tahoe. This scene presents Michael as a man alone, isolated, and pathetically distanced from the love that suffuses the contrasting scenes of Vito at roughly Michael's same age, and Fredo's murder is an atrocity; Michael is irredeemable.

During these simultaneous murders, Michael paces in his Tahoe den, adjacent to the lake where Fredo's murder takes place. The den is presented entirely in static long shot throughout the sequence. The room is very dimly lit, with low or no fill light; a high key light on Michael provides the only illumination in the room other than some meager light provided by the wall of windows overlooking the lake in the background. Michael paces calmly in his den, betraying little emotion. We cut between the long-shot of Michael pacing in his den to Al Neri and Fredo loading and then motoring out onto the lake to fish. As Neri revs the boat engine to accelerate, a menacing refrain enters the soundtrack; this is the music that has played during all of Michael's violent acts in *The Godfather, Part II*. An external reverse shot shows Michael watching the boat motor away through one of the full-length windows of his den. He is perfectly in control and watches expressionless as Fredo goes to his death.

From these two quick deaths of Hyman Roth, which takes place in the Miami airport, and Frank Pentangeli, who is being protected by FBI agents at a military barracks as a witness for the Kefauver Commission, we cut back to a stationary long shot of Lake Tahoe. The lake fills much of the screen, with the boat carrying Neri and Fredo in the foreground. The men have dropped fishing lines in the water, and Fredo speaks aloud a

Hail Mary as the two men hunch against the cold. In his simplicity, Fredo believes that saying a Hail Mary will help him catch a fish. Fredo's simplemindedness and his recitation of this holy Catholic rite underlines our sense that Fredo is an innocent victim, guilty of making bad decisions but not deserving death as punishment. As Fredo recites the devotional, the camera zooms in; as the frame shrinks, we see Neri reach into his pocket. Neri is eventually cropped out of the frame by the quick zoom; at the last moment of Neri's presence in the frame, we see his hand extend a revolver at Fredo's back. Fredo, unaware that he is in danger, continues reciting the Hail Mary. The camera's zoom stops and becomes stationary with Fredo and the bow of the boat filling the frame.

As Fredo recites the words "Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners," the camera cuts back to the long shot of Michael standing motionless in the window of his den. The soundtrack has quieted greatly, and a few seconds into this shot of Michael, long enough for Fredo to have intoned the end of the Hail Mary, "now and at the hour of our death," we hear a single gunshot from off-screen. After Fredo's death is confirmed by a cut to the long-shot of the boat with only one passenger, a cut back to Michael's den shows him entering and then taking a seat with his back to the camera (opposite where he sat at the beginning of the sequence). He leans his head back over the edge of the chair as if releasing tension in his neck; then crosses one leg over another and leans his head into his hand, a familiar gesture that communicates his weariness. This shot lingers, and the ambient sounds are no longer; but the soundtrack of ominous horns and strings dies away, replaced by inexplicable noises that betray a festive, party atmosphere. The reason for this sound bridge is explained as we slowly dissolve from Michael sitting alone in his den to a flashback sequence set in 1941.

After Michael commits the ultimate betrayal by killing his brother Fredo, the film presents one last scene, a flashback to December 7, 1941. It is Vito Corleone's birthday, and his family has gathered to surprise him with a celebration. This scene is shot in the "old-masterly" (Clarens 108) light of the first film, the family is young, and the time portrayed takes place before the events of *The Godfather*. The family assembles at the long dining room table, Michael reading a newspaper whose heading announces the bombing of Pearl Harbor.[48] The family seems innocent in this scene; even hothead Sonny is playfully rather than menacingly mercurial, and Michael seems young and carefree. The nostalgia is palpable. This scene reminds us of the man Michael once was, with lofty hopes for his own future that were bigger than the family, and a man who actively distanced himself from his Family business.

This scene also, however, hints at the direction that Michael's life might take, as he is shown as idealistic in support of values that his family doesn't share. Reacting to the newspaper announcing the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the resulting enlistment of thousands of young men, Sonny neatly verbalizes a family creed. While the bombing of Pearl Harbor was an atrocity, the young American men who conscripted in response to the attack have a misguided alliance with their nation. Sonny believes that only the family is worth risking one's life for, and that the 30,000 men who enlisted on Pearl Harbor Day are fools to offer their lives to the nation. Michael defends these men, revealing that he too joined the Marines that day. The family reacts with shock, surprised that Michael holds an affiliation deeper than and potentially in competition with his own family. Michael has bought into the myth of national identity, that America is worth

[48] Notably, Pearl Harbor is the first time in history, and the only time until September 11, 2001, that America has been the victim of a successful foreign attack on its own shores.

fighting and dying for, whereas his older brother (and Vito, Sonny avers) believes that one must identify with family above all else. Michael and Sonny exchange heated words about Michael's conscription, and Michael opts to stay at the table while the rest surprise Vito, who arrives home but does not enter the frame during this scene.[49] Michael sits alone, frustrated with Sonny's criticisms, and apart from the rest of his family. This separateness is repeated in the next shot, the final image of the film.

In the final shot of *The Godfather, Part II*, we return to the narrative's present-day, with Michael alone at his Tahoe compound. He sits outside, the ground covered in fallen leaves, signifying the season of winter. Our first vision of Michael in *The Godfather Part II* is of him accepting feudal obeisance, and the film ends by displaying the wages of his sins: he sits alone at his Lake Tahoe estate, the dead leaves on the ground and Michael's graying hair completing the visual reflection of his inner, moral decay. Michael is alone, justifiably abandoned by his family. The two final scenes of the film juxtapose a loving and affectionate father and an alienated man whose suffering is deserved. These final shots of the film reinforce the film's work, the comparison of these two men who wield their power so differently and come from such different circumstances. Michael's solitude, pictured *outside* the family home in the last shot, contrasted with Vito's warmly welcome into the family home, serves to reinforce the sense that Vito was a very different patriarch than Michael, and that Michael has squandered all that he could have enjoyed as Don Corleone.

[49] Vito is more potent through his absence from the birthday preparations than he would be were he present. Jon Lewis (41) relates that Marlon Brando refused to appear in *The Godfather Part II* due to a dispute over payment, so Coppola had to imply his presence off-screen. I believe this makes for a more potent symbol of power: the man being feted is never seen, which reinforces his mythical quality.

Conclusion

The Godfather, Part II compares Vito and Michael Corleone through the technique of crosscutting, the juxtaposition of the tender Vito to the increasingly callous Michael a call to the audience to assess the two men's moral legibility. This film constructs Vito as the faultless hero of the narrative and Michael as the villain. Vito is introduced as a child menaced by an outside force, orphaned by Mafia violence, whereas Michael begins the film as a savvy and ruthless businessman. Michael's affection is reserved for his wife and children early in film, but quickly dissipates as he becomes singularly focused on business and revenge. Vito is a generous, loving man worthy of respect, an ideal father. Michael is a calculated strategist who shuns emotion for reason.

The melodramatic significance of cherishing the father while excoriating the son can be found in an understanding of nostalgia. Nostalgia is fond, warm, sweet; even Vito's criminal doings are excusable if not comic. Michael's are execrable. The film's structuring of victim-hero and villain creates a sense of melancholic loss. We value the past more than the present, enjoying the young Vito's exploits and lamenting the absence of a strong and righteous father figure in the present-day sequences. Throughout the film Michael has grown increasingly distant from his nuclear family, increasingly surrounded by his consigliore, increasingly enmeshed in the world of his business and divorced from his affective family. The less we see Michael as a caring person, the more we see Vito as such, and the more we see Michael as functioning simply as head of a bloody business model, the more we identify against Michael and with his father.

Even the ethnic makeup of the Corleone family signifies nostalgia. As Vera Dika argues, in *The Godfather II*, the Italian-American "ethnic type is rendered so that its very meaning is nostalgia—nostalgia for something lost, for something left behind" (92). She

identifies this nostalgia as specifically "the wish [. . .] not only for the solidarity of the family, but also for a return to ethnic purity and to the lost power of the individual subject" (105). Allegorically, Vito is a member of "the greatest generation" who suffered through the Great Depression to provide his children with a better life. Though he is violent when necessary, Vito is more of a Robin Hood character, defending the downtrodden from those in power. Vito's emotional investment in family is paramount, constituting his most important identity as father. Michael displays a much less nuclear notion of identity, joining the Army after Pearl Harbor, becoming alienated from his wife and children, and eventually murdering his own brother. Michael belongs to the pre-Baby Boom generation, parent to director Francis Ford Coppola's own generation, and associated with many of the national crises: Jim Crow, women's inequality, the Vietnam War and Watergate. Michael stands in for a whole generation of corruptible men, the anger at contemporary moral laxity and degeneracy neatly transferred to him while we lament his difference from his father.

In the films' representations of the two dons' quotidian lives, we perceive Michael as less invested in family than Vito, more interested in business and financial gain, and ultimately less warm and affectionate than his father had been even when Vito was consumed with Mafia business. On the surface this may simply be attributable to the films' focus on different stages in the dons' lives; Michael is a young don assuming power and securing his place in the Mafia structure, whereas we see Vito in the first film at the end of his life, comfortable in his power and long accustomed to it. However, the construction of Michael as Vito's foil carefully omits the violent acts that created and sustained Vito's power as don of his Mafia family. Though *Part II* shows us Vito

murdering Fanucci and coercing an exploitative landlord into lowering the rent for a poor widow, these acts are presented in the narrative as service to the Italian-American community, making Vito a hero of the people.

These omissions are not accidental, but rather work to cement our sense of Vito as paradoxically a good father and a good Mafiosi.[50] *The Godfather* and its sequel must obscure Vito's crimes in order to maintain his romanticized veneer of respectability and moral righteousness. It is possible to see Michael Corleone as simply the result of his upbringing in a culture of violence, coercion, and illegal acts. But the films are careful to conceal Vito's villainy, because to do so would lose him the viewer's sympathy. If we were to understand Michael as the product of his environment, raised by an affectionate father into a dangerous life, Michael would then be a victim, confounding the films' aim of constructing a fond and nostalgically remembered father figure and condemning the generation that allowed Vietnam, Watergate, and Ohio State to derail the myth of American righteousness.

The Godfather films represent a turning point in the popular filmic depiction of the gangster. *The Sopranos* frequently quotes the series both in homage and self-reflexively as the fin-de-siècle gangsters often repeat lines from the films.[51] Martha Nochimson sees *The Godfather*'s concerns with interiority echoing in the later gangster films, claiming that *The Godfather* created "a new vision of the gangster in a post-World

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[50] I am grateful to Betsy Wheeler for pointing out this productive paradox.

[51] For example, Paulie Walnuts' car horn plays the *Godfather* theme, and Silvio Dante is often asked to do his Michael Corleone impression: interestingly, the quote he repeats is from *Part III*: "Every time I think I'm out, they pull me back in." This quote is significant in that *The Sopranos* also confronts the tension between belonging and longing to escape that this quote encapsulates, a common theme among gangster films.

War II time period" as being suffused with "angst" (60). The hybridization of the gangster genre with the family melodrama in *The Godfather* saga problematizes the role of men and specifically fathers in American culture, and represents a new mode of representation of the gangster in American film. That the Corleone men are characterized by their affective roles and their emotional investments signals a shift in the gangster genre's treatment of masculinity, concerns that would suffuse later genre films like *Miller's Crossing*. I will return to the off-white, ethnic gangster figure in chapter 4; meanwhile, I turn to another 1970s cycle of gangster narratives, the Blaxploitation gangster, to investigate these films' responses to contemporary visions of non-white masculinity in conjunction with social problems in post-Civil Rights America.

CHAPTER III

A VICTIM OF GHETTO DEMANDS: BLAXPLOITATION GANGSTERS

While *The Godfather* and its sequel dramatized a fantasy of morally righteous paternal origins for a broad and multiethnic audience, the Blaxploitation films of the early- to mid-1970s cast a violent black man or woman as a hero of the people, mounting a cultural response to institutional and everyday racism in America. The term "Blaxploitation" combines the race of the cast and putative audience of these films, and exploitation, which, according to some scholars, these films engaged in. The Blaxploitation cycle represented blacks as violent, sexual, and spectacular beings, spurring a debate over the value of these representations: did this cycle symbolize progress for Blacks in Hollywood, or signify a retreat from the newly-forged dignity of Black film characters, represented by star Sidney Poitier?[52] The question of whether Blaxploitation films constituted a liberating fantasy, celebrating Black bodies and characters, or a degrading misrepresentation of authentic Black life, began with the release of *Sweet Sweetback's Badassss Song* in 1971 and continues to this day in critical examinations of the film cycle, spawning a rich scholarly debate.[53] [54] In this chapter I

[52] For more on Sidney Poitier's role in dignifying Black characters on screen, see Daniel J. Leab's *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*.

[53] Of course, the debate over who is best able to speak truths about Black life in the United States long precede and influence this interrogation of the Blaxploitation film cycle. I am indebted to Sarah Stoeckl for this insight.

[54] While Blaxploitation is most commonly referred to as a "genre," I deploy "genre" to discuss films' use of highly conventional narrative tropes. Thus I refer to Blaxploitation films as a "cycle," to acknowledge that they were made within a certain time period and under a specific set of industrial constraints, but do not necessarily share a narrative focus or set of conventions. While many Blaxploitation films do share narrative similarities, the use of the much-debated term "genre" to describe these films does not activate the critical

build on arguments that Blaxploitation films honor some version of authentic Black experience, arguing that the cycle appropriates gangster genre tropes to empower a triumphant vision of Black masculinity while giving voice to inner-city Black men who experienced racist oppression in the early 1970s.

The gangster films of the Blaxploitation cycle create a narrative of Black experience and Black responses to oppression in a way that acknowledges the history of Black subjugation and the limited avenues of self- or community betterment available to Blacks in the 1970s. Blaxploitation films often employ a Black gangster in a revenge fantasy as the vehicle for Black empowerment, giving further insight into the gangster genre's pliability to give voice to social injustice for a popular audience. Moreover, these narratives are melodramatic in their employment of a trope new to popular film: Blacks are figured as victims of social injustice, the racism, poverty, violence, and corruption endemic to the ghetto setting. This denotes a large-scale shift in racial representations in film: mainstream film had long portrayed Blacks as the causes of social problems, making Blacks the object of social criticism. The Blaxploitation protagonist was one of the first, and most visible, examples of Black self-representation as the subjects of history, a response to the racism endemic to American film and culture.

Sweet Sweetback is commonly considered the inaugural film of the Blaxploitation cycle. This guerrilla production was written, directed, and financed by Melvin Van Peebles, a Black filmmaker. *Sweet Sweetback*'s revolutionary and disturbing themes of sex, violence, and anti-white sentiment, and its black authorship, inspired many filmmakers to follow in Van Peebles' footsteps. Some scholars, however, date the

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dimensions of the term in the way that referring to the gangster film as a "genre" lets us trace its path across time and circumstance to illuminate enduring cultural anxieties.

beginning of the Black film boom as early as Ossie Davis' 1970 *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, another Black-authored and directed film but one that debuted to less fanfare, and less sensationalism, than Van Peebles' controversial *Sweet Sweetback*. The Blaxploitation style was well established by 1972, with that year's *Superfly* widely recognized as the peak and the consolidation of Blaxploitation themes. Some claim the end of Blaxploitation as early as 1973's *Coffy*, 1974's *Foxy Brown*, or as late as 1975 or 1976 with coming-of-age story *Cooley High* or the comedy *Car Wash*. The cycle's exceptionally short existence can be attributed to Hollywood's opportunistic latching on to the Black audience at the end of the 1960s, when the industry found itself deep in debt and losing its foothold in the popular audience. The success of Black-authored films treating Black characters and Black concerns demonstrated to the industry that here was an audience hungry and willing to spend money at the cinema, a practice which the wider (and whiter) audience had abandoned in the exurban migrations of the post-World War II era.

Blaxploitation films were most often produced by whites but were exhibited in inner-city theaters and aimed at Black audiences, "racially targeted for the huge black audience eager to see a broader representation of its humanity and aspirations validated on the commercial screen," as film and race scholar Ed Guerrero notes (95). The Blaxploitation film was crucial to the salvaging of Hollywood studio fortunes at a time when cinemas failed to keep up with the geographical movements of populations. Massive exurbanization of whites, northern migration of Blacks, and the decline in wealth in the inner city led to an economy in which films produced by mainstream studios did not appeal to those who lived near the theaters. Hollywood simply failed to

keep up with the pace of population shift in the post-World War II era, and thus in the late 1960s the studios faced imminent economic disaster. Melvin Van Peebles released his controversial independent project *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* in 1971, and its success in raising interest in Black-produced, Black-starred films inspired Black filmmakers to seek independent and even studio funding for film projects. The startling commercial success of *Shaft* later in 1971 and *Superfly* in 1972 signaled to studio executives that a large market of Black Americans was ready and waiting to flood the theaters if Black bodies and Black concerns were on the screen (Guerrero 70). Thus the Blaxploitation cycle was born: the progeny of both Black aspirations and white profit motive, the political loyalties of the Blaxploitation cycle have been debated ever since.[55]

Blaxploitation films draw from a narrow repertoire of narratives. Most films of the Blaxploitation cycle dramatize the efforts of one man or woman to overcome adversity, often from whites in control of illegal ventures in the ghetto, to emerge from the conflict injured but victorious. Some, like *The Mack*, *Willie Dynamite*, and *Dolemite*, feature a pimp who struggles to maintain both his lifestyle and his control over his stable of prostitutes in the face of competition from other pimps. Female-led Blaxploitation films, such as *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, and *Cleopatra Jones*, feature similar revenge themes but with the added perils of threats to women in a racist and sexist world. Many of the women protagonists of the Blaxploitation era face not just gratuitous ogling from both characters and the voyeuristic camera; they also experience the violation of rape. Oftentimes the plot of these films is set in motion by a stereotypically "female" concern:

[55] Black audiences saved the majors from bankruptcy; and then, Steven Spielberg's 1975 *Jaws* showed Hollywood a new way to make money: the summer blockbuster would change the movie business forever, and signaled the end of a viable low-budget Black-focused film boom.

the protagonist's boyfriend or sister is in peril, and it is the job of the heroine to care for them while finding the perpetrators and exacting revenge.

Blaxploitation films featuring a gangster protagonist constitute a considerable portion of the cycle's output. The Blaxploitation gangster film borrows themes, narrative conceits, and character types from the classical Hollywood gangster film. Some, like *Black Caesar* (1971), are explicit remakes of classic gangster films (1931's *Little Caesar*). Many films of the Blaxploitation gangster cycle follow the established "classical" narrative structure: the gangster, an ethnic man from inauspicious beginnings, rises through the ranks of the gang hierarchy through cunning and violence. Upon reaching the pinnacle of success, usually leadership of the gang, he dies a violent death (classically, at the hands of the law), the victim of his own meteoric rise and the violent logic of an illegitimate life. This strain of the Blaxploitation gangster film, for example, *Black Caesar*, served as a warning to Black men who would seek power at the expense of the community: enriching oneself at the cost of one's brothers and sisters perpetuates the cycle of racism and violence that all suffer in the ghetto. While some of these films feature the traditional rise and fall of the gangster, many have an interesting twist: some Blaxploitation gangster films, such as *Superfly*, eschewed the narrative fall and instead celebrated the hero freeing himself of psychic and social fetters at the top of his game. This imaginative mental decolonization functions as a model for Black men seeking self-realization and validation of impulses toward a violent and self-righteous overthrow of the individuals and institutions that perpetuate inequality and injustice.

Victimhood and revenge, the major plot devices common to Blaxploitation films, are melodramatic tropes, creating moral legibility and inviting the viewer to sympathize

with the films' victim-heroes. The viewer is called upon to acknowledge the innocence of a character in a melodramatic scenario, and that innocence is in turn license for violence that would right the wrong experienced in the victimization. Further, Blaxploitation films encourage identification with the protagonist-as-victim through techniques of framing, self-reflexive references to shared Black experiences inclusive of the putative audience, and through the protagonists' sex appeal. The Blaxploitation protagonist is therefore an idealized figure that gives voice to a collective sense of Black victimization and presents an idealized Black subject, overcoming victimhood to establish a recuperated identity that is itself melodramatic in its triumph over adversity.

Critical analyses

Like much of pre-politicized film scholarship, the early years of Blaxploitation film criticism were characterized by a tendency of scholars to biographize and to employ criticism inherited from literary scholarship. For example, Daniel J. Leab's 1975 *From Sambo to Superspade* examines a broad swathe of film history to discuss the prevalence of racist and racial stereotyping in Hollywood movies. His examination of individual films is cursory, and he focuses on biographical information about the filmmakers, summarizes popular and media responses to films, and makes broad (though relevant) general claims about racial ideologies and imagery. Leab's final chapter briefly considers the Blaxploitation cycle, concluding that in these films, the "image of the black is as condescending and defamatory as it has ever been" (263). Leab expresses a desire for a more "realistic" representation of black life than that offered in Blaxploitation films,[56]

[56] I point again to the history of film criticism that values a positively inflected, masculine "realism" and denigrates melodrama, with its connotations of feminine weakness and tendency to excessive emotion.

which would include middle-class families as well as ghetto realities without whitewashing or expiating guilt for the existence of racism. Leab broke ground in his analysis of media stereotypes and thus provides and important point of departure for later scholars focused on race.

After Leab, Thomas Cripps' 1978 book *Black Film as Genre* represents one of the few serious academic film analyses of Blaxploitation films to come out of the 1970s. His major argument is that Black films constitute a genre, and individual films fall into various subgenres, for example, gangster films, social problem films, and heroic epics. My definition of genre differs strongly from Cripps' exclusionary and top-down definition: he argues that generic formulas dictate a film's content and message without a feedback loop wherein individual films proceed to transform the generic template. Further, while Cripps anticipates the next round of Blaxploitation film criticism, which would attempt to define an authentically Black aesthetic based on the history of African American literature and culture, he falls into the trap of biological essentialism when attempting to define Black film, rejecting anything touched by "white hands" as being inauthentic to a putative "Black experience." Considering that many films of the cycle were financed by whites and yet managed to give voice to some element of Black oppression, Cripps' dismissal of these films as incapable of performing ideology critique is shortsighted.

Many of the academic studies that followed Cripps were concerned with defining a radical Black cinema as an endeavor that would challenge racism and work within established African American aesthetic traditions. Many critics, for example Gladstone Yearwood, advocated a unique and liberatory Black aesthetic and dismissed

Blaxploitation films as inauthentically Black and merely exploitative. Yearwood's 2000 book *Black Film as a Signifying Practice* defines a "Black aesthetic" by rejecting the biological essentialism of Cripps' approach, instead measuring film against historical modes of Black artistic production. These modes include generic hybridity such as jazz music's influence on literary improvisation and fracture, and tropes common to Black literature such as the trickster. However, Yearwood only measures Black films against other Black-produced texts, and his readings of films as signifying within specifically Black traditions advocates a separatist view of Black cultural products that does not take into account the interplay and hybridity of all products of culture.

Other film scholars such as Mark Reid (*Redefining Black Film*, 1993) and Ed Guerrero have detailed the ways that Blaxploitation responded to contemporary problems of Black identity. Ed Guerrero's analysis of Blacks in film, in his 1993 book *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* is the most thorough documenting of the breadth of issues attended to in Blaxploitation films. It lacks some of the theoretical sophistication of later considerations of the cycle, such as Paula Massood's 2003 *Black City Cinema*, but Guerrero's approach illuminates the institutional, historical, and social circumstances of the cycle's genesis. Guerrero defines the Blaxploitation formula as portraying "a pimp, gangster, or their baleful female counterparts, violently acting out a revenge or retribution motif against corrupt whites" in a specific location—"the romanticized confines of the ghetto or inner city" (94). While Guerrero's summary of the Blaxploitation formula is superficially accurate, he is among the critics who condemn the cycle of films as exploitative of Blacks' desires to see themselves onscreen while suppressing any sense of revolutionary spirit that was such a salient aspect of Black

culture at the time (Guerrero 94-95). Thus these critics emphasize the negative aspects of the Blaxploitation film—the unsavory character of the protagonist, the violence of the plot, the unrealistic portrayal of ghetto life—but are satisfied to paint their disapproval in broad strokes rather than examining individual films for a more nuanced analysis.

More recent film scholars influenced by cultural studies re-examine the received wisdom about Blaxploitation films' moral bankruptcy and exploitative practices. Harry Benshoff (2000), for example, claims that "Blaxploitation filmmaking contributed to the ongoing social construction of race during an especially labile era of the nation's civil rights struggles," engaging with the political discourses of "black nationalism, black pride, and black macho" (33). Jon Kraszewski meanwhile convincingly argues that critics focus too much on black nationalism as the major force behind Black filmic self-expression, and instead argues that during the Blaxploitation cycle "three relatively autonomous influences on black identity operated simultaneously[:] Competing black nationalist groups," the growth of the black middle class while "black poverty worsened," and "anxiety about black identity" (49). So while militancy was one proposed solution to the problem of continuing racism and the ineffectiveness of political advances, more recent scholars have illuminated how it was simply one in a constellation of worries about Black identity in the era of the Blaxploitation film.

Most recently, influenced by rising interest in "place" in academic criticism, film scholars have explored the significance of the city to black films. Paula Massood's *Black City Cinema* analyzes the cityscape as it is transformed in the public imagination by Black films, linking Blaxploitation narrative and representational concerns with contemporary social politics, such as urban rebellions, style, and the differing focuses of

the Civil Rights movement as the decades of the 60s and 70s progressed. She argues that "[t]he ghetto mise-en-scene is not only background for the narrative [in many Blaxploitation films] but also is active in influencing the events unfolding onscreen. [. . .] the city *enables* events" (85). Similarly, Peter Stanfield employs sophisticated theoretical analyses combined with cultural studies approaches to illuminate the unique ways the Blaxploitation film responded to its time and culture, and the ways it changed American film in general. Stanfield's article "Walking the Streets: Black Gangsters and the 'Abandoned City' in the 1970s Blaxploitation Cycle" shifts the focus on film form—the city as trope—to the trope's significance in cultural and political terms to its contemporary audience. He argues that "the wider political import of the cycle [. . .] lies [. . .] in its *particular representation of street life* in black inner cities" (italics original, 287). Massood and Stanfield represent the forefront of Black film scholarship, launching from earlier discourse analysis and debates over the import of Black filmmaking as a whole, to specific analyses of repetitive tropes and loci in Black film of the 1970s. Thus the most recent scholarship on Blaxploitation films benefits from sophisticated theoretical and cultural studies insights into how film texts reflect and construct Black urban experience in the context of political and social concerns about identity and place.

My original contribution to Blaxploitation film scholarship is to consider the centrality of the gangster genre's concerns and tropes to the cycle, and vice versa: to theorize the transformations wrought in the gangster genre resultant from Blaxploitation gangsters' additions to the canon. I aim to bring Linda Williams' focus on race and melodrama to an examination of the Blaxploitation film, an era notably absent from her influential 2001 *Playing the Race Card*, which I discussed in the introduction. I apply

Williams' framework to the gangster genre, arguing that the genre's melodramatic tropes and narratives encourage an identification with the gangster, a man racialized by his ethnic heritage, deploying race strategically to claim a victimized status. Moreover, such a project makes visible the ways that racial politics in America are weighted with questions of emotion, pathos, and sympathy for the ethnic other or the victimized self. The standardized elements of the gangster narrative—ethnic difference, social transgressions, overblown emotions, and innocent victimization—register in the mode of melodrama, and Blaxploitation films make the most of the ability to play the race card by figuring their protagonists as victims of social circumstance and racism.

Further, we should consider the Blaxploitation gangster as a significant addition to the gangster genre because it carries on the project of making visible racial or ethnic oppression explored in the genre since its earliest examples. Blaxploitation gangsters play on and reinvent the gangster genre by proclaiming Black men's resistance to racial oppression through the figure of a sexy, violent, and confident man who operates on the wrong side of the law as a result of a lifetime of victimization. The Blaxploitation gangster film appropriates the gangster from its ethnic Italian and Irish roots and uses many of the same conventions that are layered onto the gangster's significance, as I have explored so far in this dissertation: hardship, loss, righteous anger and revenge are mainstays of both Black and ethnic gangster narratives. In fact, a surprising number of Blaxploitation films pit a Black gangster against ethnic Italian mobsters. This generic appropriation and racial inversion underlines forms of Black oppression that are perpetuated by whites, and at the same time works to undermine the social perception of equal multicultural access to oppressed status in the identity politics-driven national

racial imaginary of the 1970s. Racism is revealed to be unequally distributed across ethnic lines, with Italian-American whites symbolizing the bounty of privilege that falls to any person deemed "white" despite differences among white ethnicities, while Blacks suffer the same skin-color-based discrimination as ever.

The Blaxploitation hero's violence and sexuality were a direct response to the onscreen history of foolish, hypersexualized, and neutered Black men—the Toms, Coons, and Bucks described by Donald Bogle. Sidney Poitier's film roles in the 1960s paved the way for mainstream Black roles, but his star persona represented a non-threatening, integrationist paradigm of Black/white relations. Poitier starred in a highly successful series of race problem films in the 1960s that themselves responded to the stereotypical portrayal of Black men as lascivious playboys, lazy bounders, or kindly servants. Poitier played dignified, educated young Black men, but became the object of frequent criticism from those who desired a more "realistic" portrayal of Black experience onscreen. Cripps claims that the Poitier persona was too tame for Black cinemagoers: Poitier's characters were "too reasonable and too lacking in passion for revenge. [. . .] They wanted not merely a man apart, but a genuine black outlaw" (129-30). While the narratives of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*, *To Sir With Love*, and *Lilies of the Field* are revolutionary in their focus on a Black man challenging the monochromatic screen and the white status quo, many viewers and scholars ultimately found Poitier's roles "powerless, assimilationist, sexless" (Guerrero 73). These are precisely the screen images Blaxploitation films reacted to in featuring Black men who are sexually and socially powerful, who defy established institutions of white racism represented by the police and

white gangsters, and have the cunning to succeed in a culture where the deck is stacked against them.

The rest of the nation was also vexed by difficulties of identity formation attributable to new instabilities in the gender and racial hierarchy of the United States. I argued in chapter 1 that the effect of the Vietnam War, along with other social crises in the early 1970s, on contemporary representations of masculinity and ethnicity was a melodramatic construction of subjectivity—the self as victim. As Blacks struggled with the same cultural conflicts of challenges to masculine hegemony, doubts about the forthrightness of American government, and the demoralizing and traumatic effects of seeing American bodies of all colors disintegrating in a foreign landscape, they faced the additional burden of attempting to self-define under an oppressive racial hierarchy. And Blaxploitation gangsters responded to these crises in the same way as white gangsters: by becoming, and often protesting against becoming, victims. Almost all Blaxploitation films deal in some way with victimhood, whether Pam Grier as Coffy exacts revenge for her sister's forced drug addiction, or Richard Roundtree as John Shaft asserts that his only problem is that he "was born poor and Black." And a notable number of Blaxploitation films center on a gangster figure as a protagonist. While the gangsters of this cycle differ from the traditional version in that they are more often individuals in loose crime syndicates rather than families in a tightly structured caporegime, I argue they add to the shifting significance of the gangster and carry on the social critique levied by gangster narratives since the genre's early examples.

Black Caesar: Harlem's "a jungle, and it takes a jungle bunny to run it"

Black Caesar (1973) is a remake of the 1930 gangster classic *Little Caesar*. Written and directed by Larry Cohen, it stars Fred Williamson, who would later star in many more Blaxploitation films including the *Black Caesar* sequel *Hell Up in Harlem*.[57] While the film is often mentioned in surveys of Blaxploitation films, few if any critics have analyzed the film in-depth.[58] In the source film *Little Caesar*, Italian-Americans Caesar Enrico Bandello ("Rico") and his friend Joe Massara plan to make it big in the city by breaking into the mob and taking control of it. Along the way, Joe gets a job as a dancer, falls in love with his partner Olga, and betrays Rico by choosing a legitimate life of dancing and heterosexual companionship over Rico's gang. Joe turns informant to protect himself and Olga from Rico's jealous rage, and Rico eventually ends up dying in a hail of police bullets.

Black Caesar recasts the plot of *Little Caesar* to fit a 1970s Black ghetto setting. The film Afro-Americanizes the gangsters' names to Tommy Gibbs and Joe Washington, and complicates the plot by portraying "Caesar" as a Black man trying to break into the Italian-American Mafia with hopes of controlling it. When Gibbs finds ledgers

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[57] While *Black Caesar* ends with Tommy Gibbs shot in the gut and presumably dead, Cohen thought the character interesting enough to revive him for a sequel, which was released in December of 1973, just 10 months after *Black Caesar*. While low production values and short shooting schedules are common among Blaxploitation films, this is the only one to my knowledge that resurrects its protagonist for a sequel.

[58] Most scholars writing about Blaxploitation films use the formulaic repetition of the cycle as a justification to avoid close readings of most of the individual films. While *Sweet Sweetback*, *Shaft*, and *Superfly* are often the subject of close analysis by Blaxploitation film scholars, *Black Caesar* is largely left out due to its perceived similarities with other Blaxploitation films. The fact that it is a remake of a classical gangster film sets it apart, I would argue, from the bulk of Blaxploitation movies. Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness*, for example, mentions the film twice but devotes no serious consideration to it.

documenting the mob's payoffs to police and other officials, he uses the records to blackmail and murder his way to the top of the mob hierarchy. Gibbs' reach exceeds his grasp, and he is shot in the stomach by a corrupt police officer, has a bloody confrontation with another cop whom he has been blackmailing, and dies in the ruins of an abandoned building taunted by a group of Black youth who steal his watch and leave him for dead.

Black Caesar is the closest Blaxploitation descendent of the classical gangster film, and makes a two-pronged argument familiar from the earliest films of the genre. Tommy Gibbs is shown to be both a victim and an exploiter of a racist paradigm that makes it impossible for a Black man to gain success in anywhere but illegal realms, and then punishes him for his transgressions. Like Rico Bandello, whose use of illegal means to enter high society constituted a critique of ethnicity-based power distribution in early twentieth century America, Tommy Gibbs gains power the only way a Black man in Harlem can: by beating the Mafia at its own game, which is to say, exploiting the disenfranchised while living well off the proceeds. The film thus makes clear the disparities between white and Black cultural cache: whites have immediate and unquestioned access to legitimate power, while Blacks struggle to achieve comparable influence on the wrong side of the law. As Jonathan Munby says of the 1930 film, "*Little Caesar* played on the hyphenated American's frustrated desire for cultural and economic inclusion"(49). Just as Rico Bandello is disallowed from entering polite Anglo-Saxon society, marked as lower-class and ethnically Italian through his accent and mannerisms, Tommy Gibbs is barred from achieving real equality with the white gangsters he emulates because of his racial difference.

Further, Tommy's education takes place as a young man on the streets, and violence and coercion are all he knows. The film demonstrates that Tommy's method of achieving power is ill conceived, a rehashing of power relations that perpetuates inequality rather than leveling the playing field. Thus *Black Caesar* critiques both the circumstances of entrenched racism and Black men's potentially violent and exploitative response to these conditions of the 1970s ghetto. Ultimately the film argues that Black men from the inner city find themselves in a catch-22: they are offered entrée into the ranks of the wealthy and powerful solely through illegal and immoral means, but are destined to suffer the consequences of their anti-social and illegal behaviors. Thus Blaxploitation gangster makes visible the structural inequalities endemic to Black inner-city life in ways unprecedented in the history of American film. The gangster genre is uniquely positioned to give voice to the double-sided argument that both spectacularizes and condemns antisocial excess, and *Black Caesar*'s appropriation of the genre contemporizes its concerns for Black audiences of the 1970s. The film achieves its critique by exploring binary themes: victimhood and power, and the conflict between community and individualism brought about by the gangster's questing for power.

Victimhood and power

Tommy Gibbs begins life on screen as a victim of white racism and corrupt white institutions. A young shoeshine boy in 1953, Gibbs makes money by running errands for the mob. In the film's opening scene, Tommy Gibbs is accomplice to a murder, and then meets his nemesis police Lieutenant McKinney, while doing favors for a mobster. McKinney, a white cop, is the face of racist evil. While he is shown to live in a cramped apartment building with a baby screaming in the background, the leitmotif of inner-city

poverty, McKinney's first remark to Gibbs is, "they don't let niggers in this building." McKinney asserts his superiority and "natural," race-based access to power to a Black teenager whose very appearance in McKinney's segregated building threatens McKinney's invisible and reified claims to superiority. McKinney threatens Gibbs with castration—"I'll cut your black balls off"—if Gibbs ever admits to seeing McKinney take a payoff from the mob. While McKinney is a caricature of the angry Irish-American policeman familiar to viewers of silent-era melodramas and the early gangster films[59], the persistence of the stereotype and the especial menace of the character represent a troped Black fear of white abuses of power. This trope is especially significant in its portrayal of racial hierarchy because Gibbs is initially simply an errand boy for the mob, while McKinney is already a lieutenant in the city police force whose uncalled-for verbal and physical violence against the protagonist is at least disguised as legitimate and at worst sanctioned by his position as an officer.

McKinney accuses Gibbs of skimming money from his payoff, then, when Gibbs angrily defends himself from the accusation, McKinney pushes Gibbs down the stairs, beating the youth with his baton. McKinney's anger about the missing cash is compounded by Gibbs' emotional response to his accusations: Gibbs is defiant, demanding that McKinney stop harassing him. Thus McKinney's violence is both situational—punishing Gibbs for presumably stealing the money—and racial, re-affirming the white/Black racial hierarchy that Gibbs challenges by commanding McKinney to leave him alone.

[59] For example, the two most prominent police officers in *Little Caesar* are Crime Commissioner McClure and Detective Flaherty, names that mark these men as ethnically Irish.

The formal elements of the scene reflect the narrative of power differentials. The camera shows Gibbs at eye-level looking up the stairs at McKinney in a low-angle shot; when the cop pushes Gibbs down the stairs, the camera cuts between extreme high and low-angle shots, showing McKinney's enraged grimace as he chases the angry but injured young man onto the ground. The classic shot/reverse shot of high angles up at McKinney and low-angled shots looking down at Gibbs is a formal reminder of their respective positions in power: the white cop is monstrously powerful while he thrashes the innocent young Black man. Gibbs fights back, defending himself with the lid of a garbage can, until McKinney breaks Gibbs's leg, and the youth lies on the ground, grimacing in pain, defeated. From another low angle shot McKinney swings his baton in triumph, and the camera pans down to watch him step over Gibbs, prone on his back in garbage. The themes of segregated housing, which reflects differing access to standards of living in the city, and the formal high- and low-angle contrasting of Gibbs and McKinney during a fight are purposefully repeated later in the film to underscore the dichotomy of high/low and its relationship to personal and institutional power in the inner-city.

The soundtrack emphasizes sense that Gibbs starts at the bottom of the social food chain, literally downtrodden and amongst the rubbish. James Brown, famous for his dramatic performance style and soulful voice, performs the soundtrack. "Down and Out in New York City" plays during the first sequence, echoing the protagonist's social position and setting the tone for viewing Gibbs as a victim of forces outside his control. From the outset, Gibbs is presented as just trying to get by in a system of poverty and violence, but with aspirations to rise in the criminal world and gain power. Later, Gibbs is

released from prison ostensibly serving a sentence for carrying a switchblade, which McKinney finds on him during the beating. It is 1965 and Gibbs walks the streets of New York dressed in a tailored suit and hat.

To achieve the gangster's aim of power at any cost, the genre requires a rise from his inauspicious beginnings to the top of the criminal food chain. The only way for Gibbs, a typical gangster, to achieve this is through violence, and thus Gibbs's first post-prison move is to murder a white mobster, Grossville, in hopes of gaining the favor of Mafia head Don Cardoza. The sequence in which Gibbs confronts and murders Grossville and demands that Cardoza hire him as a hit-man rehearses the already established power differential between white and Black men, and asserts that it can only be overcome through violence. Grossville sits in a barbershop thoughtfully expounding to the Black barber, Sam, that the Las Vegas syndicate should allow Blacks in the casinos, because "nobody likes to lose like the Negro. They're born losers." Grossville's offhand comments display just how casual racism is, and how callous men in positions of power are to those below them in the racial and social hierarchy. All the while, Sam has a straight razor inches from Grossville's throat.[60] Making Grossville a blatant and offensive racist enlists the sympathy of the audience against him, and in favor of Gibbs.

Gibbs prepares to assassinate Grossville just as nonchalantly as Grossville remarked about the "natural" inferiority of Blacks, taking on a self-confident pose that had been established as the hallmark of Blaxploitation protagonists. Whereas Sam the barber silently endures Grossville's verbal abuse, Gibbs speaks to Grossville as a peer,

[60] This scene must have been rehearsed in real life all over New York City in the 1960s, and an audience looking back in 1973 would be reminded of the everyday injustices that Blacks once had to endure—and, likely, endured to that day.

calmly informing the mobster that the hit will be his own entrée into the gang. Grossville challenges the idea that the Italian-American Mafia will allow a Black man into its ranks, astonished that someone would make the attempt. Gibbs eventually shoots Grossville, and does so dispassionately. His efficiency as a killer is established, as is the sense that Gibbs is breaking new ground for Black men, using violence as a tool to achieve success in the only dignified avenue open to him. While Sam stands by and silently endures the racist vile Grossville spews, and likely makes a spare living as a barber, Gibbs proclaims his right to a better standard of living, and his willingness to do what it takes to achieve one. In this scene where a Black man has mastery over a white man, Gibbs lays claim to the self-confidence that white men take for granted, treating Grossville with the same casual contempt with which Grossville describes Black stupidity. Thus *Black Caesar* upends the customary power balance, the racist white man getting his just desserts and a Black man triumphing, even in a small way, over the ideology of white superiority.

Black Caesar inverts the customary race-power dynamic, wherein whiteness is valuable and Blackness is an impairment, as Tommy Gibbs claims his race as a boon to his future employer. When Cardoza and Gibbs debate the terms of Gibbs's employment, the Italian resists because the Italian-American mob, in its long-since assimilated whiteness, would never let him hire a Black man. But Gibbs convinces Cardoza otherwise, claiming that he would be an asset to the organization: "I got a built-in disguise. They never look at me, they never look at my face, my nose, my lame foot. All they know is that I'm Black." Here, Gibbs turns a detriment, his invisibility as a Black man, into a benefit by playing on racist social codes. Being Black excludes Gibbs from success in the mainstream, as Blacks are subject to racist assumptions of inferiority and

overt oppression. But Gibbs turns this to his advantage: his invisibility to racist eyes becomes a strategy of adaptation, helping him elude recognition and capture in an illegal enterprise. While he is thus figured as cunning, subverting a negatively inflected invisibility into a positive disguise, Gibbs is also renouncing an authentic sense of empowered Blackness, embodied best in the contemporary phrase "Black is beautiful." Thus his initial steps toward success are problematic, inflected with a note of suspicion because Gibbs is, in essence, selling out his racial identity in order to gain power.

Following this scene is a version of the classic "rising" montage, where the gangster is displayed as gaining success. This montage intercuts high-lit shots of Cardoza, presumably giving Gibbs orders, and rapid cuts showing Gibbs firing a shotgun, riding in the back of a car on the way to a hit, enjoying the company of white women, and walking around his neighborhood with an entourage of mean-looking Black men in sunglasses. James Brown sings "Paying the Cost To Be the Boss" on the soundtrack, and the only diegetic sounds heard over the song are the shotgun, a truck exploding, Gibbs firing a Tommy gun (in an ironic nod and an homage to the original *Scarface*, which features a similar shot in Tony Camonte's "rise" montage), and a bus driving by while Gibbs' guards stab a man to death. The montage ends with a reference to Gibbs' beginnings: he pauses outside a shop window where a neon sign advertises shoeshines. Gibbs raises a hand to touch the window, longingly; then drops it and walks away, frowning to himself. This brief and conventional sequence encapsulates the pleasure of gaining power and the protagonist's ambivalence about leaving behind his roots. Giving something up in order to gain something greater is a fact of life, but Gibbs' bittersweet gesture toward his past and putative long-lost innocence signals a melodramatic

sensibility at work in the narrative, reminding us of Gibbs' original innocence as a boy and his involvement in gang life as a default rather than a character flaw.

Gibbs completes his material rise by further inverting the race/power paradigm: he purchases his white accountant's home, contents included, and then revealing that his mother has long been the accountant's housekeeper. Gibbs tells the accountant Coleman that he grew up wearing Coleman's hand-me-downs, "everything you wore out, got dirty, outgrew. I even ate your leftovers." When Gibbs tries to give his mother the apartment as a reward for all her years of service, she is shocked that he would do something so audacious. In an echo of the early scene between her son and McKinney, Mrs. Gibbs protests that Blacks aren't allowed in the apartment building; "why they'd hang me off that terrace. Jewish folk ain't even allowed in here!" Despite Gibbs' reassurances that he will protect her, she is ill at ease, having no sense of entitlement in the place where she has served for so many years. Though Gibbs promises her a white maid and a chauffeur, she refuses, saying she wouldn't know how to relate to them as "help," since she herself is a servant. The film points out that upper-class status is not simply a matter of having money, it is a set of learned behaviors that mark as outsiders those who attempt to climb the social ladder. Thus Gibbs and his mother are automatically at a disadvantage when trying to join the elite class.

Black Caesar echoes *Little Caesar* in illustrating the principle that money can't buy class; as Munby says of the comparable banquet scene in the 1930 film, the gangsters' "poverty [. . .] becomes equated with cultural inadequacy" (48). Tommy Gibbs' inability to seamlessly assimilate into the elite class does not, however, signify him as a failure. Rather, Gibbs' elation at freeing his mother from servitude, his mother's

melancholy as she describes her alienation from any sense of entitlement, and the mournful soundtrack music incite our sympathy. So while the Gibbs are "culturally inadequate" to high society, it is the culture's fault for stacking the deck against them. This hailing of sympathy for the protagonist is melodramatic, justifying Gibbs' immoral acts so far in a scene of redemption.

But this rise to power has been at the cost of Gibbs' humanity, as the following scene demonstrates. Gibbs rapes his fiancée Helen, when she rejects his advances because of the crimes—specifically, murder—that he has committed. While the trope of on-screen Black sex is by 1973 a standard of Blaxploitation films, seeing naked Black bodies in film was a revolution in the depiction of Black bodies and desire, rehearsing the axiom "Black is beautiful" and a significant element in drawing audiences to the theaters (Guerrero 95). But this sex scene makes a disturbing statement: read against the grain, it can be read as a Black woman crying out against exploitative displays of Black bodies, and especially the history of treating Black women like property sold at auction, and Black women's abuse by Black men, a theme treated in literature by Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.[61]

In this rape scene a trope that has been a source of such pleasure for Blaxploitation audiences—the visibility of Black bodies and desire—is used to critique Tommy Gibbs' gangsterism. He has come to believe that he can have whatever he wants; he says to Helen, "I see this is the only way you like it, huh, you have to be raped. Well I got no objections, lady." The conventional high-angle camera shots and low lighting caress their naked bodies, in disturbing juxtaposition to her angry shouts as Gibbs forces

[61] I am grateful to Kathleen Karlyn for pointing out the connection to literature about Black women's victimization by Black men.

himself on her. This sequence of Gibbs using sexual violence against a woman who has aided his rise to power demonstrates his lack of self-control and his growing need to control others. Now the relations of power that have portrayed Gibbs as a victim of injustice shift; now Gibbs is the transgressor and his exploited friends become victims as he takes on the mantle of social power. Implicit is a critique of the social relations inherent in any hierarchy: if someone has power, someone else lacks it. So if a Black man rises to power in a coercive organization in the absence of a radically egalitarian ideology, he is bound to replicate the conditions that determine structural inequalities.

Community versus individualism

In an expository scene that compliments the "rise" montage, Gibbs meets with his partners in crime—Joe Washington, Tommy's brother Rufus, a corrupt Black preacher, and the white accountant Coleman. Rufus crows that the money they earn will go untaxed because he will report it as donations to the church, and income from prostitution and illegal gambling will be laundered along with it. Gibbs will launder the tax-free proceeds through legitimate enterprises, and they will get rich from the investments. Their discussion of how to process the illegal funds coming through their criminal organization reveals that Gibbs' priorities are contrary to those he has long espoused to Joe. From the beginning, Joe has advocated for bettering the ghetto with Gibbs' money, building community centers to invest in more than a simple lifestyle change for the gangster, and Gibbs has tacitly agreed. When Joe speaks up in favor of diverting some of the money to the communal good in this scene, asking for Gibbs to commit to such an investment, Gibbs smirks and ignores him. Changing the subject to his plot to obtain ledgers

recording the Mafia's connections to local politicians, Gibbs dismisses the positive and transformative potential of his illegal income.

Joe intends to use Gibbs' ill-gotten wealth for community betterment, whereas Gibbs sees the money as the means to his success and power, his self-interest and not community well being determining his investments. *Black Caesar* critiques the gangster for his greed and selfishness, while at the same time asking the spectator to revel in the extravagance he indulges in as he gains in political and economic stature. This simultaneous celebration/condemnation is characteristic of gangster genre films and asks for a complicated response from the audience, encouraging identification with the protagonist but also demanding enough distance to remain critical of his excesses. The result is, ideally, a self-critical audience response to the film, wherein the viewer recognizes similar desires for power and dominion in themself and then rebukes those desires. This film serves to both realize and criticize a widespread fantasy of self-interested individualism, demonstrating its appeals and pitfalls.

In order to consolidate his power and take over control of the Harlem racket, Gibbs orchestrates a mass assassination of Italian-American Mafiosi. Speaking to the remaining Italian mob heads, Gibbs lays out his scheme to control the Mafia and Harlem. The threat of violence is never spoken or alluded to, but Gibbs stands to deliver his proclamation, while the others sit. He speaks in a carefully measured tone, asserting his right to control Harlem. He has gained much power simply by confounding white racist expectations of Blacks. No one expected a Black man to infiltrate the Mafia; no one thought they were in jeopardy from Gibbs's appetite for power. Now he makes clear what he planned to do all along: run Harlem and grow rich from the profits. Gibbs says, "You

tell me, who's going to control these people? [. . .] It's a jungle. And it takes a jungle bunny to run it. [. . .] I'll keep 'em in line." Instead of subverting the paradigm of white power and Black subordination, Gibbs has merely inverted it, stepping into the vacuum he created by murdering the Mafia family heads. While he fantasized about hiring white women to clean his mother's apartment, a reversal in the master-servant race hierarchy, Gibbs does not even attempt to challenge the status quo once he establishes himself as the head of the organization. Earlier in the film, the white policeman McKinney demonstrated the social evils of the gang-controlled city: the civil servants who vow to "protect and serve" are actually violent racists. Despite having his leg broken by this representative of endemic corruption, Gibbs does not learn that power is itself the problem; rather, he sees the cycle of violence and corruption as endemic to the life of the city. He cannot imagine a life outside of the self-perpetuating cycle, so he wants to be at the top of it, determining its path rather than attempting to end it.

On the other hand, Joe Washington, like Joe Massara in *Little Caesar*, can see a way out of the cycle of racist violence and poverty. Joe Massara planned to dance his way out of "the life," with an assist by heteronormativity. In marrying Olga and finding a niche in the legitimate world, even as an entertainer (not a high-caste profession in the 1930s), Joe Massara escaped the gang world, and survives the film. Joe Washington is not so lucky. While Joe is allied with Tommy, he plans to use Gibbs' money to build a community center to give the Black children of Harlem a place to go after school, which will take them away from street life of gangsters and provide opportunities he and Tommy did not have. When Gibbs reveals that he will not let Joe invest the money in building a better community, Joe deserts Tommy and marries Helen, leaving the gang

behind to enter the legitimate world as an accountant. But Joe Washington is not allowed to escape the gang life, as Joe Massara, an ethnic man who was able to "pass" in white society, was. Instead, Joe Washington is blackmailed into helping Gibbs one last time, during which he is shot and killed. Joe Washington is Tommy Gibbs' moral foil: a just man who wants to invest in the Black community to better the lives of everyone, he is a sharp contrast to Gibbs, who is content to leave things as they are as long as he can live in a high-rise apartment and enjoy the power that he has violently appropriated from the Italian mob.

In short order, Gibbs sends Helen to California with Joe, hoping to protect them both from Gibbs' enemies. Helen and Joe become lovers and start a family, which Gibbs interprets as a betrayal. Gibbs meets his absentee father for the first time, his mother dies, and the Mafia begins a turf war against him. Gibbs alienates his social support network, refusing to invite anyone to his mother's funeral. He attempts to make friends with his father because no one else is around, but even his father is uninterested. On the soundtrack, Brown sings "Momma's Dead," a sad song that plays out as Gibbs leaves his mother's funeral, asking us to experience pity for Gibbs, the little boy who could never make his mother happy and who has no friends left. As the song says, "No one to cry, no one to sit by the bedside, no one to watch the light in my window, no one—no one to come in come in and pull the covers over my head at night." Gibbs is devastated by his mother's death, and has so thoroughly alienated his friends that he does not know of Joe and Helen's relationship until Mrs. Coleman, a white woman who is ironically better in touch with Gibbs' own community than he is, informs him of the infidelity. Gibbs' thirst for power has led to his own isolation; he has effectively demolished his community in

his quest to rule the mob. The allegory is clear: individualism, aspirational capitalism, and the desire for control destroys communities. The same argument is made in *The Godfather*, released the previous year but aimed at a different audience; Tommy Gibbs is, in a way, a Black Michael Corleone.

When Gibbs goes to California to confront Joe and Helen, Joe voices this critique of exploitative relationships. Gibbs attacks Joe for stealing Helen, claiming that Gibbs must exact a price for Joe's betrayal or risk losing respect from his "people," the gang. Joe counters, "I'm not one of your people, white nigger! All you wanted was money, cash, to live in whitey's house, run with his women." Gibbs counters that Joe could have been as powerful as he himself has become, if only Joe had tried harder, saying, "[y]ou coulda owned the whole town, and everybody in it." Joe's response points out the difference between his aspirations, which are community-oriented, and Gibbs', which are selfish and exploitative. "I never wanted to own anybody," Joe asserts pointedly. The context of one bloodied Black man, lying on the ground (as Gibbs did himself in the first scene) accusing another of wanting to own people recalls the historical fact of slavery and implies that Gibbs' actions are identical to a slave master. Rather than community uplift, which is Joe's hope, Gibbs has used his power to enrich himself at the cost of others and their dignity.

Gibbs's downfall comes because he alienates himself from his community, and is out of touch with what is going on in his own territory. By isolating himself from his friends and family, at first to protect them and later by attacking them, Gibbs has made himself vulnerable. The same is true of Gibbs' contemporary, the Italian-American Michael Corleone: it is by seeking unchallenged power that each gangster ends up

turning against those close to home and destroying the affective support structure that enabled their rise to power in the first place. Seeing an opportunity as Gibbs' power wanes along with his entourage, McKinney begins to take Gibbs down by picking off his associates. Any gangster with Gibbs's connections could easily find out who is killing his men, but Gibbs has so distanced himself from his own employees that he has no allies to turn to for help. This lesson—that the gangster's antisocial behavior will eventually bring him down—is present in the earliest talking gangster films and is the plot point that Robert Warshow latched onto in his seminal 1948 essay, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero." As I argued in my introduction, the gangster is not so much a tragic hero as a melodramatic one: Gibbs engineers his own downfall, becoming a victim of his own machinations, because he is not allowed transcendent awareness of how the conditions of his existence are perpetuated by the violence that he sees as the only way to gain power in an unjust world.

McKinney uses Gibbs' alienation against him by blackmailing Helen in a plot to bring Gibbs down. The corrupt cop threatens to kill Helen's children unless she copies the key to the safe deposit box in which the ledgers, the lynchpin to Gibbs' empire, are stored. Helen gains access to Gibbs in a stereotypical reduction of women's power to feminine wiles. She seduces Gibbs, and this time their sex scene is replete with soft light on naked Black bodies and groovy music on the soundtrack. After collecting a gift for Helen at Tiffany's, Gibbs is intercepted by a uniformed officer, who shoots Gibbs in the stomach on the street in the middle of a crowd. Gibbs staggers along the sidewalk, slouching against buildings, as people crowd around, staring but offering him no assistance. Gibbs' drawn-out death scene is a tour of some of the important settings in the

film and his life. After a car chase in which an ambulance tries to catch Gibbs fleeing in a cab, Gibbs ends up in Rufus' church. Though Rufus gleefully counted his money from illegal enterprises earlier in the film, he has since found God and refuses to help Gibbs flee the police. Rufus prays aloud for Gibbs while Gibbs looks on in disbelief, lamenting the loss of his money and not caring a bit for his soul. Joe agrees to help Gibbs out of loyalty and pity, and attempts to find the ledgers and hide them. Instead, McKinney kills Joe; in the end, the one favor that Gibbs can call in fails to do him any good, and the man who advocated for the disenfranchised throughout is murdered by the representative of corrupt white institutions.

Turning the tables on racist tropes

The penultimate scene of the film pits the Gibbs and McKinney against each other in a fight that both echoes their first encounter and invokes the history of white racism in film. McKinney ambushes Gibbs in Coleman's office, bringing a shoeshine kit to force Gibbs to replicate the master-servant relationship in which Gibbs' career began. McKinney both literally and symbolically brings Gibbs to his knees in making the Black man shine his shoes. But Gibbs manages to gain the upper hand, proceeding to beat McKinney with the shoeshine box. Gibbs takes McKinney's gun, and McKinney taunts him, demanding, "[d]o it, nigger, do it!" Gibbs replies in a rage, "[y]ou are the dumb nigger McKinney. You're gonna die like a FIELD NIGGER!" Gibbs' voice rises to a shout as he threatens McKinney with the gun. As McKinney lies on the ground bloodied and gasping, a heartbeat is heard on the soundtrack and Gibbs paints McKinney's face black with the shoe polish, as he demands of McKinney, "sing me one of them good ole massa tunes, McKinney! I bet you even like Jolson. [. . .] SING MAMMY FOR ME!

SING! SING IT! SING IT RIGHT!" McKinney is bewildered, misunderstanding the context of Gibbs' attack. McKinney's failure to read the context of Gibbs' attack can be read as another example of white racists' ignorance of the history of American racism. McKinney's confusion makes clear that he does not understand the significance of blackface and the history of white theft of Black culture that blackface minstrelsy signifies.[62]

The shots in this sequence combine a disturbing flashback montage with alternately low- and high-angle shot/reverse shots as Gibbs beats McKinney with the gun. Shots flashing back to Gibbs' earlier victimization are intercut with his enraged face as he rains blows on McKinney, who cowers on the ground terrified and bloodied. Match cuts align the officer's baton falling on young Gibbs' body with Gibbs' blows falling on McKinney. This scene both reverses McKinney's victimization of Gibbs and invokes powerful images of racism in American popular culture. The invocation of Al Jolson's blackface routine from *The Jazz Singer* functions as an iconic screen image of white appropriations and caricatures of Black culture. Gibbs makes McKinney, the white oppressor, perform a particular formulation of race while the images on screen recall Gibbs' personal history of trauma. *Black Caesar*'s protagonist turns the tables on his white oppressor, forcing him to play the subservient and submissive role that Blacks have been made to play throughout film and cultural history. If the film ended on this note, it would see Gibbs return to power through physical prowess and cunning, redeeming the greedy exploiter by having him defeat the racist white cop, emblem of both individual and institutional racism.

[62] For an extensive analysis of blackface minstrelsy and its significance in the American cultural context, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*.

But the film continues, its denouement purposefully avoiding making Gibbs a hero. Gibbs grabs the ledgers and, still bleeding and fatally wounded, limps away from the dead McKinney. On the soundtrack, James Brown sings "I wanna go home," as Gibbs returns to the burned out building that he earlier introduced as his childhood home. Stumbling in the abandoned ruins, it seems he has gone home to die in the only place he was ever happy in his life. Then, ironically, a group of Black teens approaches Gibbs in the rubble of the apartment building and beat him to death. They steal his watch and flee, leaving the ledgers in the trash with Gibbs. Though the previous scene sees the protagonist triumph over his racist tormentor, the film's last images reverse the apparent victory of the individual gangster and return him to the community that he has exploited for his personal gain. It would be tempting to end the film with Gibbs winning a symbolic victory over white racism, redeeming his greed by making him a race warrior. In the context of the disintegrating community, however, surrounded by the visible wreckage of the inner city, Gibbs is no longer a victim of these circumstances but rather is in some part responsible for the conditions of the ghetto. Thus his senseless death at the hands of the poor teens is poetic justice: once a victim of ghetto realities, he has failed to change the conditions though he had the power to do so.

Black Caesar critiques the state of the inner cities in 1970s America. While the film has followed the standard gangster film format, documenting the rise and fall of a man striking out on his own, the subtexts of the film constitute a critique of rapacious capitalism, anti-social individualism, and the social conditions of poverty and ignorance that fuel senseless violence within the Black community. *Black Caesar* is the most overt use of the gangster genre in any Blaxploitation film, and it carries on the work of the

genre to both glorify and demonize the gangster. This film employs a gangster narrative to point out the corruption in the system, the difficulty (or impossibility) of combating racism and poverty from within the ghetto, and the constant assaults on Black manhood by outside forces, in this context the agents of law enforcement. Unlike most other Blaxploitation films, however, the individual is not redeemed by heroics in the end. Whereas the standard Blaxploitation narrative ends with the Black protagonist triumphing over racist whites, *Black Caesar* holds out the possibility of such success but then withdraws the happy ending. This condemnation of the Black gangster results from the gangster genre's tendency to "dramatize an enduring sense of collective grievance" (Munby 226). Bringing the gangster film genre so explicitly into the Blaxploitation cycle, with its focus on how Blacks suffer under the weight of oppressive white institutions, results in a heightening of the social critique already apparent in the genre. This critique applies not simply to the social conditions that spawn gangsterism, but to the role of the gangster in perpetuating those conditions.

The narrative logic of *Black Caesar* is thoroughly melodramatic. The Black man is portrayed as a victim of the social order in which white men in positions of power exploit them, and options for living a life of one's own choosing are few. The early scenes of the film encourage identification with Tommy Gibbs as he suffers unjust police brutality. As Gibbs gains power, we understand his desire to do so as a reaction to a childhood lived in poverty and its social inadequacy, his father absent and his mother a maid for a rich white family. Even as Gibbs starts to lose sympathy as a character due to his greed, the construction of his victimization is carried on as his mother dies, his best friend and fiancée betray him, and he revisits the wreckage of his childhood. For much of

the film we are asked to understand Gibbs' longing for power and his need to control others as resulting from his early trauma at the hands of the racist McKinney and the social conditions of the ghetto, where a Black man is either a shoeshine boy or a successful crook. As he brutally beats McKinney and forces him to perform a bankrupted notion of Blackness, we are invited to see Gibbs as acting out a fantasy of Black rage against white racism, a possibility that makes him a potential hero using violence justified by a life of discrimination.

In the final scene, with Gibbs returning home to die, his senseless death at the hands of Black youth further invoke a (mitigated) sense of pity for him: Gibbs is thoroughly implicated in the conditions of the ghetto, but can't stand outside the problem long enough to understand it. Without that knowledge, he is condemned to reify the social hierarchy and repeat the cycle of violence that constitutes unequal power relations in the first place. As we see, even in his villainy Gibbs is a victim: without the tools to comprehend the inevitability of systemic violence in a hierarchy predicated on power differentials, he is simply a cog in a perpetual motion machine that guarantees social injustice and inequality. In his individuality and sympathetic character, Gibbs stands in for Every(Black)man, and his plight, as the film constructs it, is the plight of all men trapped in the ghetto.

"That's the American dream, niggah"[63]: *Superfly*

Gordon Parks, Jr.'s 1972 film *Superfly* was a phenomenon. The film stars Ron O'Neal as Youngblood Priest, a cocaine dealer seeking to become a legitimate business man and fighting against the forces that would keep him from achieving his dreams. Parks, Jr. is the son of Gordon Parks, a famous Black photographer and filmmaker. *Superfly*'s tremendous success—made for just $500,000, it grossed over $11 million in its first two months of release (Guerrero 95)—confirmed the newly emerging Blaxploitation cycle's box office draw. The film's protagonist, like the classical gangsters, influenced the fashion of the real inner city by portraying an imagined one that exchanged the camouflage and berets of 1970s Black Power couture for flash and excess. Ed Guerrero explains that after *Superfly* came to the screens, the Afros and dashikis of Black Nationalist style were traded for Youngblood Priest's long straightened hair and pimp couture (96-97).[64] The appeal of the character is not simply due to his sartorial style: Priest's defiant posture, pose, and attitude make him an attractive figure for young Black men yearning for a macho role model in the face of the decade's challenges to masculine hegemony.

Though *Superfly* does not follow the traditional gangster narrative of the protagonist's rise to success and wealth followed by a precipitous fall to his starting point

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[63] During *Superfly*'s famous drug-dealing montage mid-film, Curtis Mayfield's "Pusherman" repeats the lyric "A victim of ghetto demands; I'm your pusherman." During this hip sequence where cocaine distribution and use is made to look cool, the message is clear: Black men who resort to illegal ventures are victims of the world they born into.

[64] Unlike *Black Caesar*, film scholars have not shied away from analyzing the text of *Superfly* for its revolutionary—or anti-revolutionary—meanings. Guerrero and Massood devote pages to the analysis of *Superfly*'s influence on popular culture, construction of a filmic Black city, and its glorification of the gangster at the cost of Black community solidarity.

in poverty and obscurity, its narrative of a Black man already at the height of his game trying to escape a life of crime constitutes a commentary on the gangster genre. Moreover, as genre films tend to do in order to maintain audience interest or simply fulfill its makers' creative desires, *Superfly* adds to the repertoire of the gangster genre by countering the customary closure of the gangster's death, long a trope signifying the ultimate triumph of law and order over chaotic or anti-social forces,[65] with the possibility that the gangster can escape the destiny of a violent end at the hands of white institutional powers. This signifies doubly in the Black gangster film, where social conditions for all Black men in the ghetto compound the gangster's desire for an alternate ending by making the observation that all Black men, not just the pimps and gangsters, are subject to racial injustice. In the African-American literary and social tradition, the gangster enjoys a central role in the social mythos: Guerrero explains that "the sly victories of the gangster or trickster persona were one of the few ways that African Americans could turn the tables on an unjust racist society" (94). *Superfly* thus transforms the gangster figure and the film genre for a contemporary audience very much concerned with how to value Black social experience and form a positive Black identity in the face of tenacious structural and everyday racism.

Youngblood Priest is a cocaine dealer who plans to make one last big score so he can retire from the business. The narrative of *Superfly* begins with Priest setting into

[65] Though *The Godfather* would influence the genre to depart from its classical rise-and-fall narrative structure, it had only been released a few months before *Superfly*, and its effect on gangster films was not fully realized until much later. Since Blaxploitation films are repetitive, highly conventional, and predictable, it makes sense that they would borrow from easily identified generic structures and examples, eschewing subtlety and nuance for the pleasures of creating and fulfilling audience expectations offered by genre entertainments.

place the processes for leaving the business, notably planning to obtain a large amount of cash to sustain him once he leaves his moneymaking enterprise. As the film progresses, many obstacles to his success appear, such as his partner Eddie's reluctance to leave the business, a white dealer demanding Priest's distribution services on an unlimited basis, and the threat of violence when Priest defies the dealer's mandate. Ultimately Priest outsmarts all his foes, and "waltzes off into the sunset" at the helm of his Cadillac.

Priest strives throughout the film to avoid being a victim, counter to the strain of instant victimization in Blaxploitation films. Many times throughout the film it is made clear that Priest is working within a limited set of options in the ghetto, and that dealing cocaine is the only way he knows how to make money. This narrative critiques the lack of opportunities for young Black men in the early 1970s, suggesting that civil rights did not go far enough; in its insistence on equal rights, it lacked a focus on equal opportunity. Moreover, the trope of escape is a melodramatic one. "Going legit" narratives feature a gangster renouncing the criminal way of life, in the process losing the mob or criminal community that legitimates his power and through which he constructs his identity. This loss is traumatic, demonstrating the difficulties of defining the self and doing so in a culture of violence and coercion. Therefore, masculinity, at the crux of self and group identity in patriarchal culture, is figured as inherently painful, traumatic, and melodramatic.

The first scene shows Priest defying the white racist patriarchal order for which miscegenation is a powerful fear. He and a white lover recline in bed, their nudity and her pleas for him to stay or return soon make obvious the sexual nature of their relationship and his mastery over both his own body and hers. She pleads with him to return to her,

and by refusing to answer her question, “Are you coming back soon?” Priest rebukes the desire of a white body present on screen. Priest asserts power over the racist paradigm which would have him stay in bed, overwhelmed with animal lust for the forbidden fruit. The playing out of the taboo against sex between Black men and white women, a trope that has signified a special type of racial tension in the history of American culture, positions Priest as a figure that challenges racist paradigms of desire and mastery. While this scene is also utterly misogynistic, the specter of a Black man using a white woman for sex and answering her needy requests with silence are a deliberate play on white fears of miscegenation. In effect, *Superfly*’s first scene throws down the gauntlet of racist stereotypes and flaunts its ability to subvert the paradigm for the benefit of Black men and Black male self-image. We have only to imagine the response in the theater to Priest’s defiance of his white lover’s pleading to guess how this scene’s refiguring of the taboo against interracial sex might have empowered a number of men to re-imagine Black masculinity as agents rather than victims of changing social codes regarding sex.

Within the first ten minutes of the film we move from the heights of privilege down to the street level, where poverty and violence are the rule. The credits sequence that comes between Priest leaving his white lover and being mugged by two Black junkies follows Priest as he drives his tricked-out Cadillac through the streets of the city. This sequence is intended to display Priest cultural cache: the flashy Cadillac belonged to a real pimp, well known in New York City, as many viewing the film in the theater were aware (Massood 106). But it also portrays him as having mastery over the streets, for he moves with ease throughout the city. Further, the gangster is often portrayed as being chauffeured while lounging in the back seat (this is true in *Black Caesar* and is a trope

recognizable in many genres), but Priest drives himself. His manliness is asserted in this act, and other representations of Black masculinity are made to seem effeminate in retrospect: Priest drives himself, declaring his right to move throughout the city of his own volition. Being driven takes on the valence of being cared for, exactly the opposite of mastery over space and movement.

The framing of Priest and the car itself makes it seem like a tank rolling through the streets. The many low-angle shots of the chrome grill fill the screen while the camera tracks backwards. Combined with close up eye-level shots of Priest in the driver's seat casually driving one-handed, Priest is insulated from the streets, enigmatic, silent, distanced, stoic—oddly enough, the archetype for white American conceptions of masculinity. Priest's car is a metonym for his self-image: physically imposing, space filling, flashy, a display of confidence and machismo. This exposition of Priest's character through spectacle follows a well-known trope of the gangster genre—his rise climaxes in material largesse that the gangster uses to trumpet his arrival at the top of the social food chain. *Superfly*'s narrative begins after Priest has ascended to the wealthy class, in the second act, so to speak, of the traditional gangster picture.

Another early scene sees Priest violently mugged but fighting back. He refuses to be a victim to two Black attackers who the camera has followed since the first frame of the film. The two junkies plan to rob Priest to buy drugs, but Priest fights back. As one man aims a wooden post to strike, Priest kicks him, and then furiously chases the other man, who takes Priest's wallet and runs. The foot chase takes us in fast-moving tracking and handheld shots through filthy alleys strewn with garbage, abandoned cars, and stray dogs. Everywhere we see evidence of society's neglect of the ghetto. Priest's physical

prowess is such that he leaps a fence in a single bound and pulls himself up a fire escape ladder by sheer strength. This scene also works to establish Priest as physically strong and emotionally detached, anything but a victim.

The chase ends in yet another location of victimization: Priest follows the junkie into a dirty, crowded apartment where a young Black mother and three infant children sleep on a mattress on the floor. An oven with its door hanging open, a bathtub, and a laundry line share the same room as the family's bare mattress. The squalor of this tenement home is immediately contrasted with Priest's apartment in the following shots, which is spacious and tastefully decorated, the result of a drug dealer's wealth. The presentation of these two extremes of poverty and conspicuous wealth constitutes a visual critique of the disparities in a world where access is not equal and illegal means are the only guarantee of material comfort; as Massood argues, "[t]he juxtaposition between the more impoverished spaces of the city and these signs of affluence is also a form of indictment. [. . .] Priest, after all, makes money from the community but returns nothing to it" (104). The message is clear: Priest must fight to avoid being just another Black man mired in poverty on the streets of the modern city, even as he perpetuates the iniquitous system in the same manner as did Tommy Gibbs.

Since the film begins in the second act of the customary gangster narrative, we would expect to see Youngblood Priest grow overconfident in his ability to control his business, fail to keep his women in line, or simply challenge someone more powerful than him and lose his position in the criminal underworld (all of which happened to Gibbs in *Black Caesar*). Instead of the "very precipitate fall" (Warshow 15) of the main character, *Superfly* changes the gangster narrative to one of escape: instead of becoming a

victim of the conventional path of the gangster protagonist, *Superfly*'s Priest aspires to create his own destiny. He has formulated a plan to make one last big "score" of cocaine, and then take the profits and leave town and the drug dealing lifestyle. The film follows Priest as he negotiates with his suppliers, dealers, partner, and girlfriend over the particulars of how to obtain one million dollars worth of cocaine, sell it quickly, split the profit with his business partner, Eddie, and then leave town. All who he informs of his plans are skeptical at best and dismissive at worst. When Priest informs Eddie of his plans to quit the business, Eddie is incredulous and suspicious. Eddie reminds Priest that they have the material wealth that everyone wants: "That's the American dream, niggah!" In Eddie's narrow interpretation of the ideal American life, conspicuous consumerism is the road to equality, and while cocaine dealing is "a rotten gig," "it's the only one the Man left us to play." Priest, however, has a broader vision of what the American Dream promises: freedom of choice and opportunity. Explaining the urgency of making one last deal to his girlfriend Georgia, Priest asserts that *how* they will make a living is much less of a concern than the freedom to choose his own destiny: "It's not so much *what* we do; it's having a choice, being able to decide what it is I want, not just to be forced into a thing because that's the way it is." Priest's vision of the American dream values individual agency and opportunity, eschewing the trappings and signs of wealth and instead respecting the sovereignty of the individual.

Even Georgia questions Priest's plan, not on the difficulty of renouncing the gangster lifestyle but on his need for half a million dollars to leave the business. When Priest tells Georgia of his plan after a romantic walk through the snowy city streets, she wants him to leave immediately without hoarding the money, "before something really

bad happens." Priest argues that leaving without the money is unrealistic due to his limited options in the legitimate world: "With my record I can't even work the civil service or join the damn Army," Priest protests, pointing out the lack of opportunities to make a dignified living open to a Black man from the lower socioeconomic class. He needs the money to get out because there is no job waiting for him in the legitimate workforce.

Priest has few options for earning money in the legitimate world, and he is not satisfied with taking the risk of escaping a coercive and violent life to end up in one that is demeaning and in which he cannot achieve self-fulfillment. The necessity of leaving the drug trade with a considerable amount of cash—and Priest's assertion that he can't find a reasonable job "with his record"—makes clear that Priest is one of a number of Black men who have criminal records, no doubt the result of a childhood spent in the ghetto and therefore the result of institutional racism and poverty, that limit them to making do with unsatisfying careers. As unlikely as it sounds, Priest is a dreamer, and doubtless many young men in the theater audience identified with Priest's aspirations to simply live a dignified and meaningful life. Thus *Superfly* invites the viewer to identify with its protagonist and reflect on their own conditions of existence, the gangster genre's ability to speak powerful truths about being an "other" in a white world realized through Priest's uniquely American dream.

Superfly also mounts a critique of racism in the police force, the most visible and experientially common form of "the Man" keeping the Black man down. The film formally juxtaposes white-on-Black violence with Black-on-Black violence to argue that Blacks engage one another as embodied beings, while whites engage Blacks as faceless

oppressors. In a fast, close-up scene, Fat Freddy—one of Priest's dealers—fights another Black man in an alley and is arrested. The camera is hand-held for the fight scene, two faceless white cops break the fight and haul Freddy in. This scene reflects the impersonality of white-black relations and the disjunction between close-up, messy, personal interactions of Blacks, and the distanced, faceless, disembodied relationship of whites to Blacks. When Freddy fights with another Black man, the camera is in extreme close-up, constantly moving, physically subjective and present. When the police strike Fat Freddy with their batons during his arrest, the camera is distanced, stationary, and objective, focused on Freddy's face. When the police show up, the camera shifts from extreme close up of bloodied faces to close ups of handcuffs, restraints, shot mostly from behind the officers' backs. Freddy is transformed into an object to be subdued rather than a subject engaged in a struggle with other people. We never see the faces of the officers arresting Freddy. The police uniforms enhance the sense of impersonality of the enforcing arm of the law that Black men deal with regularly.

The following scene visually juxtaposes the distance and coldness of the police with Priest's embodied physicality. This scene, in which Priest spars with a karate instructor, is full of Black bodies in motion, graceful agents. The men circle each other like boxers, their hands and bodies constantly moving, their faces reflecting thoughtful concentration as they engage each other. Meanwhile Freddy is viciously interrogated by police, their blows bringing him to tears. The film uses match cuts to switch between Priest and his instructor sparring and the police beating Freddy. The instructor leaps into a kick in a medium shot, and we cut to a high-angle medium close up on Freddy under a spotlight as a hand chops from up-screen right to land on Freddy's neck. The matching of

the Black body's kick in the graceful and meditative sport of karate with the dehumanizing brutality of the police is puzzling. According to filmic conventions, a match cut confers a correlation between actions happening in two sequences. While we would then customarily read this set of match cuts as Priest and his karate instructor enacting a symbolic violence on Freddy through the (literal) arm of the police, I think this sequence intends to place these acts in counterpoint rather than continuity. The suggestion is then a furthering of the previous sequence, during which Freddy is arrested: Blacks engage one another as embodied individuals, while whites engage Blacks as objects. While this may seem to echo the stereotype that whites are of the mind and Blacks are of the body[66], I argue that this sequence, and the film as a whole, intends to unite the two and posit that embodiment is a powerful, pleasurable aspect of Blackness—and is central to a sexualized notion of masculinity that imbues the strong Black male body with cunning in addition to physical prowess.

Priest's plan requires a large amount of cocaine, and Scatter, Priest's former supplier and mentor, suggests that the only place to get the 30 kilos needed is a man named The Source. On their way to meet a potential dealer, police detectives intercept Priest and Eddie, the (white) cops informing them that they are to be the new permanent outlet for The Source's supply. Eddie is ecstatic, telling Priest to imagine how much money they can make distributing an unlimited amount of cocaine. Priest is disturbed, knowing that he will not be able to leave the business without fearing for his life once The Source depends on Priest to deal for him. Eddie tries to talk Priest out of dreaming

[66] In *White*, Richard Dyer elucidates whiteness as a cultural repository for many notions of superiority, humanity, and normality. He asserts that "Black people can be reduced (in white culture) to their bodies and thus to race, but white people are something else that is realized in and yet is not reducible to the corporeal, or racial" (14-15).

and back into reality, reminding Priest of his limited options: “You got this fantasy in your head about getting’ out of the life [. . .] What the fuck are you gonna do, except hustle? [. . .] I’m not tryin’ to put you down, I’m just tryin’ to make it real, like it *is*.” Eddie reminds Priest that he has no life skills to carry into the legitimate world, making his bid for freedom a foolish one when faced with the opportunity to succeed in the illegal world of dealing cocaine. Priest has no response, silenced in the face of a new threat to his freedom.

This sequence is especially notable because it is one of the very few moments of direct-address in the film. Subjective shots are used sparingly, but here the camera is clearly positioned as representing Priest’s point of view while Eddie implores him to face the reality of their situation. The effect is that Eddie is addressing the audience, who experiences Priest’s perception. Eddie tells the viewer that it is a fantasy to dream of getting out, when they should just get real. Rather than intending to discourage the audience, I aver, this direct-address mode is intended to awaken the Black audience into recognition and outrage at their own positions in the social and racist hierarchy. It is almost Brechtian in its disruption of the narrative and realistic mode that has structured the movie thus far. In a film that relies on suture, this scene of one Black man addressing the audience and speaking about the real conditions of Black existence in a white-hegemonic city is striking.

Youngblood Priest’s encounter with Black nationalists critiques the idealists: the “brothers” want money since Priest is operating in their neighborhood, and Priest accuses them of being all talk and no action. Immediately after the dealing montage, Priest enters a bar for a potential sale and three Black militants surround Priest’s table. Priest tries to

dismiss them, saying he's there for another purpose, but one of the men sits down and insists, "We out here building a new nation for Black people. It's time for you to start payin' some dues, nigga!" Priest responds angrily that he owes nothing to the Black Power movement, and insists that when the nationalists are ready to take action, he will happily take part: "You go get you a gun, and all those Black folks you keep doin' so much talking about get guns and come back ready to go down and I'll be right down front killin' whitey." Until then, Priest says, "go sing your marching song someplace else," dismissing the nonviolent Civil Rights approach emblematized by protest marches as impotent.

This sequence is structured by over-the-shoulder shot/reverse shots, placing Priest and the Brother on equal footing, but their antagonism to each other is clear. While the militant first addresses Priest as "brother," and speaks to him in a confiding tone, when Priest refuses to talk to him he switches to calling Priest "nigga," essentially reinstating the antagonism that the familial slang term "brother" rejects. The Brother sneers at Priest when he asserts that Priest owes the Black nationalists some "dues," his opinion that if Priest is going to exploit Black people, he ought to at least pay a pittance to further the nationalist cause. Priest becomes enraged at the suggestion: his eyes widen, his nose flares, and he accuses the militant of not being militant enough. The brothers are all talk, no action, and Priest implies that to really deserve his money they have to walk their talk. Priest dismisses the militants from his presence and denies their claims upon him. In *Superfly*, the Black Power militant is figured as a hustler—one with ideals, perhaps, but part of the system of street exploitation nonetheless. Thus the film figures powerful self-realization, in the manner that Priest embodies, as preferable and ultimately more

effective than collective action. This stance is troubling, as it echoes the history of American film's insistence on the lone male protagonist as self-sufficient. *Superfly*, however, appropriates this filmic convention to imaginatively liberate Black men, until now not included in the Hollywood protagonist role, from the fetters of psychic servitude, for so long represented on screen by Stepin Fetchit's "coon" persona.

Priest's urgent desire to renounce the dealing life is validated late in the film when the underside to the lavish lifestyle he lives is exposed as inherently violent and coercive. The real threat, which Priest alluded to earlier, is not simply the everyday dangers of making a living illegally but the power of one criminal over another, a relationship which amounts to ownership. Priest is explaining to his (unnamed) white girlfriend his compulsion to leave the life when Scatter arrives at her apartment, revealing that he's on the run from The Source. Scatter tells Priest he will never be let out of the business now that he's working for The Source. "The man," as Scatter calls him (echoing the slang term in Black culture for the faceless white oppressor) was "nothin' but a rookie cop" when he and Scatter started out. "He owns you now!" Scatter blurts out to Priest, the exploitative relationship a reversion to the master-slave dichotomy. As long as the Man/The Source has more political and social power than Priest, he will be able to control Priest; he will own Priest's destiny, which Priest is working so hard to take control of.

After a scene in which Priest meets with some unidentified white men, he returns to his and Eddie's apartment, suggesting that they cut out now. Eddie does not like the idea, telling Priest not to "rock the boat." Eddie is happy with the success he has to look forward to; but now it is Priest's turn to awaken Eddie to the reality of the situation.

Priest insists that the situation has worsened, because "that man *owns* us [. . . .] To him we're not *real*." Eddie responds that being owned is nothing new: "people been using me all my life. Yeah, that honky's using me—so what?" Eddie has accepted that his destiny is not his own, and is trapped in the mindset that he can do no better for himself than to deal drugs for a white man. Eddie is satisfied with the material success of the white ownership paradigm; Priest has bigger hopes for himself.

Now that Eddie has allied himself with The Source, he and Priest treat each other like enemies. Eddie's choice is understandable, given the coercion of the system he was born into: in the absence of a free choice, Eddie betrays his friend in order to save himself. Priest pulls a gun and demands all of the cash they have on hand; after Priest leaves with the money Eddie calls the white cops who coerced them into dealing for The Source. Eddie has sold Priest up the river, telling the detective that Priest has the cash and will be outside their apartment building momentarily. Priest, however, has anticipated this betrayal, and Georgia meets him in the elevator to switch bags. Thus when the cops—faceless, their backs to the camera just as in the scene of Freddy's arrest—stop Priest, he has no money on him. The detectives take Priest to the docks, where Priest is to meet The Source and suffer his wrath for trying to cut out on dealing. The Source is a well-dressed white man who condescendingly chastises Priest for trying to leave the business, asking him, "What else can you do?" The Source plays on the knowledge of Priest's limitations in the real world, which Priest himself acknowledged earlier in the film. Priest could never make the kind of money or even be moderately successful with his background, a fact that the Source tries to exploit by telling Priest, "You're gonna work for me until I tell you to quit."

To counter the sting of The Source's assessment—Priest's options really are few—Priest asserts his own right to self-determination and then calls into question The Source's manhood. Priest defies the Source, saying "you don't own me, pig, and no motherfucker tells me when I can split." When the Source responds incredulously, demanding, "who the fuck do you think you're talking to?" Priest replies, "I'm talking to you, redneck faggot." This equation of masculinity and heterosexuality with the ability to choose one's destiny has been present in the narrative all along: identity is constructed from a multiplicity of factors, including lifestyle, career, and sexual practices. Priest's homophobia is of a piece with his desire to remake himself as a man in control. This scene further illuminates the ways in which a strident Black masculinity can be not only sexist but heterosexist and homophobic.[67]

A slow-motion fight ensues with Priest taking on and defeating three white detectives. Slowing down the fight emphasizes the exaggerated facial expressions of the combatants, and allows a moment of humor when Priest throws a cop into a garbage can headfirst. The slow-motion sequence stops when The Source points a revolver at Priest and says "Freeze." With the gun in Priest's face we cut to a point-of-view shot, again positioning the viewer as Priest, experiencing this threat as a subject. The Source's use of a gun to threaten the unarmed Black man yet again demonstrates the power differential between the physically engaging and powerful Priest and the distance even in violent contexts between whites and Blacks.

[67] Deborah E. McDowell's "Pecs and Reps: Muscling in on Race and the Subject of Masculinities" explores the conjunction of Black masculinity and homophobic heterosexism in academia as well as popular culture. I am indebted to Carter Soles for bringing her argument to my attention.

As Scatter hinted, The Source who has been identified as the connection to massive quantities of cocaine is a well-respected figure in the police force. So when Priest outs The Source as "Deputy Commissioner Reardon," tables are turned, and Priest uses a disembodied threat to protect himself, claiming that he "took a $100,000 contract out on your life, your wife, everybody" as insurance against threats to his own life. Moreover, Priest insists, "I hired the very best killers there are. *white killers*. white ones, baby." While Priest's assertion that whites are better than Blacks at anything makes him suspect of reiterating stereotypes about Black incompetence, I think his statement that whites are superlative at murder is instead another attempt to play the race card, as it were. The claim that whites are expert killers invokes the history of slavery and reminds the audience, even as Priest ostensibly doubts Blacks' ability to follow through on a hit (a rather backhanded insult), that Blacks have long endured violence at the hands of whites. After this exchange, Priest gets in his car, and after a shot focusing on his winged hood ornament the car roars triumphantly out of the shot. Priest has fulfilled one of his goals: to leave "the life" on his own terms. Though Priest escapes without the money needed to be set up for life, his victory over the police commissioner and the white cop thugs demonstrates that if a Black man is clever enough and strong enough, he can create his own destiny despite the limitations of his social circumstances. After Priest's car speeds away, the camera slowly focuses in on a phallic needle-like structure at the top of a nearby skyscraper, and the credits roll while the theme song plays on the soundtrack.

The narrative of *Superfly* signifies in the context of other narratives of Black masculinity and entrapment. It functions on the meta-level, as spectators are themselves very aware of at this time. Never before had Black viewers been hailed as the target

group for cinema, and the conflict over Hollywood's belated recognition of the importance of Black audiences to film revenues was the talk of popular commentators as well as industry commentators like *Variety*. Viewers understood and viewed *Superfly* in the context of other representations of Black masculinity. Thus Priest's machismo and his refusal to become a victim are a response to the history of representation of Black men. Donald Bogle, in his influential book on stereotypes of Blacks in the history of film, asserts that Youngblood Priest clearly falls into the category of the Black buck (237). I disagree: I have shown that, while no doubt asserting Priest's sexual prowess, the film recasts the powerful Black man as a positive subject rather than object of racist Hollywood stereotypes.

Thus *Superfly* arrives on the scene at a time when doubts about Black masculinity were a cultural concern, famously challenged by the perception of failures in the Civil Rights movement, as well as the 1965 Moynihan report, which I will discuss at greater length in the next chapter. In 1972, the gangster is reborn as a Black man who ends up escaping not just the ghetto and an illegal way of life, but also the generic conventions that few if any gangster films had thus far challenged. *Superfly* is therefore a victory on many levels: a victory against Black men's self-doubts, racist paradigms of desire, police corruption, and a self-image that is positive and casts Black masculinity as triumphant and as taking control over the limited options available to Black men.

Conclusion

In *Black Caesar*, Tommy Gibbs' death at the hands of Black children playing amongst the ruins of his childhood home comments on the abandonment of Black children by social structures and the powers-that-be. These young boys are in the same

boat as Tommy, growing up poor with little hope for the future. In *Superfly*, Priest Youngblood does not die, subverting both the crime-doesn't-pay moral of the classical gangster films that the Blaxploitation version appropriates, and the depressing and defeatist dénouement of *Black Caesar* and other Blaxploitation gangster films. *Superfly* is triumphant, re-envisioning the destiny of Black men, who can have it all through a powerful stance coupled with violence against those who would oppress him regardless of race. *Superfly* is thus both a fantasy of empowerment and an indictment of Black Power strategies of gaining equality with whites. This film proffers individual cunning and agency as preferable to and more effective than collective action in the fulfillment of America's promise for Blacks.

This is a troubling and essentially conservative notion borrowed from the classical Hollywood style, whose protagonist overcame adversity through individual courage and strength of will. But it is revolutionary in its freeing the Black male protagonist not only from death as ending but also from the moral responsibility for producing collective racial uplift. Embracing anarchy and self-determination over collective action, *Superfly* rebuts the Black Power and Civil Rights movements as inadequate to the demand to imaginatively free Black men from the mental bonds of oppression.

Paula Massood argues that "films from the 1970s reflect[] the formation of a new black sociopolitical identity and agency" (116). Blaxploitation gangsters find identity through agency, action being both a method and a raison d'être for a newly empowered Black protagonist. George Lipsitz argues that "[m]embers of aggrieved racialized groups appear most often as threatening strangers or servile sidekicks in the stories we tell about our past and present, and only rarely as self-active agents operating in their own behalf"

(xiv). The Blaxploitation gangster subverts the history of stereotypical Black characters, substituting an active, engaged, and self-determined man for the impotent and threatening Black figures of film history. Even Sidney Poitier's dignified Black man is dismissed as assimilationist, inadequately aggressive; the Blaxploitation gangster takes what he wants without apologizing, functioning as a powerful fantasy of empowerment in the face of real-life limitations in opportunity for Black men.

CHAPTER IV

HOODS IN THE 'HOOD: BLACK GANGSTAS OF THE 1980S AND 90S

The brief but poignant epigraph to John Singleton's 1991 *Boyz N The Hood* is dramatically set against a soundtrack of violent confrontation. The sounds of a drive-by shooting play over a black screen: Automatic weapons fire as screams fill the soundscape. Over the sound of a peeling-out car and a police radio call naming the location, the corner of Crenshaw Avenue, and the crime, a "possible 187" (California penal code for murder), one title fades in, then another. "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." Sirens and helicopters play as a young boy cries out, "They shot my brother, they shot my brother!" A percussive bang marks the cut from the black screen to a daylight tracking shot of a stop sign set against the sky; the camera's deliberate and steady movement toward the word STOP carries the weight of an admonishment, a command, and a plea. Before we meet the characters of this hood film, before we see a human figure on the screen, we know the setting, the problem, and the emotional tenor of this film: South Central Los Angeles. Violence against Black males, perpetrated by Black males. And the moral that killing Black men wounds the youngest men of the community, with the imperative that this must end.

In the hood film of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as in the Blaxploitation films of a decade before, Black men are both aggressors and victims. But whereas the Blaxploitation gangster himself became the idealized figure for the working out of concerns about Black masculinity, the 'hood film presents a racial male melodrama that ultimately proposes Black fatherhood as the solution to the epidemics of violence and

victimhood continuing to affect Black communities. While the contrast between idealistic Black Power slogans and the realities of Black poverty in America informed the Blaxploitation film cycle of the 1970s, in the 1980s and 90s public concern about and popular attitudes toward Black communities in crisis influenced the cycle of gangster films that came to be known as the "'hood" subgenre.

Films in this cycle focus on the emotional and social lives of young Black men in poor neighborhoods, chronicling their turn to violence and crime as they come to realize their limited social, educational, political and economic opportunities and the failed promises of the Civil Rights movement. These social factors were also the concern of the Blaxploitation gangster a decade earlier, and their continuing relevance to American social life indicates the failure of American culture to reconcile widespread fears of Black male "degeneracy" or "abnormality" with the complex political realities of continuing racial discrimination and limited opportunities for Blacks in America. John Singleton's 1991 *Boyz N the Hood* represents another new cycle of Black filmmaking influenced by the gains made by Blaxploitation directors of the 1970s, and according to film scholar Massood, in 1991 and 1992, "more films were released than the total number of black-directed films released during all of the 1980s combined" (145, 152).

The 'hood gangster film is characterized by a focus on young Black men in the suburban neighborhoods of California (or, more rarely, New York City) as they struggle with rampant violence, drug addiction, and street gangs in the contemporary era. The first film in the 'hood cycle is widely acknowledged to be Spike Lee's 1989 *Do The Right Thing*, with its focus on race relations between African- and Italian-Americans in Brooklyn. Lee's film is the rare auteur entry in the 'hood cycle, a series of films more

often directed by young Black independent filmmakers working with small budgets. John Singleton's *Boyz N The Hood* (1991) and Albert and Allen Hughes' 1993 *Menace II Society* constitute the core of the 'hood cycle, with a dozen or so films following, including Ernest Dickerson's *Juice* (1992) and the only woman-starring 'hood film, *Set It Off* (F. Gary Gray, 1996) representing a late entry in the cycle, which was effectively over by 1998. [68] A few Latino-focused 'hood films also joined the cycle, including *American Me* (Edward James Olmos, 1992) and *Carlito's Way* (Brian De Palma, 1993), but these were few and far between, whereas Black-directed and –starring 'hood films dominated this production cycle.[69] *Boyz N the Hood* was the highest grossing film of the 'hood cycle, and paved the way for representations of young Black men's struggles in mainstream Hollywood filmmaking.

Just as the Blaxploitation film had used the gangster genre to analyze the state of Black masculinity in the 1970s, the 'hood gangsta constituted a re-imagining of the genre in response to contemporary concerns about Black masculinity. Masculinity is always in

[68] A comedic take on the 'hood genre is F. Gary Gray's 1995 *Friday*, which starred Ice Cube and Chris Tucker as young Black men living through a day full of comic incidents in 'hood life, including run-ins with drug dealers, sexual escapades, and a host of entertaining characters from the neighborhood.

[69] It should be noted that Brian De Palma's 1982 *Scarface*, a remake of the 1932 film focusing on Cuban gangster Tony Montana, also uses gangster genre tropes, and is an outlier in that it is a remake of a classic gangster film set in the contemporary period, its production values are high but its essence more spectacular than critical, and its main character is Cuban, an anomaly in the annals of gangster films. *Scarface* has earned a cult following, becoming incredibly popular as a cultural referent for Black rappers, basketball players (Shaquille O'Neal once threw himself a birthday party with a *Scarface* theme, and dressed as Tony Montana), and anyone who wants to imagine themselves as the coke-binging power-monger. *Scarface*'s narrative follows the traditional rise-and-fall pattern, with a spectacular death scene in which Tony Montana aims a machine gun at rival gang members entering his house and utters the famous line "Say hello to my little friend," which has enjoyed a long afterlife in popular culture.

crisis in one way or another, and the gangster genre of each successive generation addresses the emotional aspects of these crises. Jonathan Munby claims that "[t]he black 'gangsta' films of today draw on the power of 1930s 'classic' prototypes, which addressed similar problems of an American ethnic lower class struggling to overcome problems of cultural and economic ghettoization" (3). In the 1980s, narratives about Black social pathology became inextricable from conversations about cities, drug problems, and violence, or, more succinctly, about crime. These concerns stemmed from criminological data no less than from pervasive anxieties within dominant (white) culture about the direction of Black men's energies in the post-Civil Rights (indeed, the post-World War II followed by the post-Vietnam) era.

The terms of the debate were set in the late 1960s by Civil Rights discourses, and distilled to their essence by the Moynihan Report, a 1965 study commissioned by the Department of Labor (headed by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York) to examine the reasons for Black "underachievement." This report, written from a liberal perspective, would set the tone for public debates about Black families for decades to come, and played a crucial role in changing the public debate about Black men in white America from one of striving for equal rights, to one focusing on social deviance, juvenile delinquency, and pathological reliance on violence and drugs. Following the Moynihan Report, popular media and political commentators would trace the roots of all social ills facing ("plaguing," in the argot of such commentators) Blacks in the late twentieth century back to an absence of fathers and father figures in Black life. This lack was supposedly visible in the home, where, the Moynihan Report argued, mothers took over and created a dangerous matriarchy, and in the public realm, where strong Black

male leaders were assassinated (Malcolm X, MLK Jr.), or dismissed as radicals (Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan) by mainstream media and politicians.

Put simply, Black men were believed to be absent from positive roles in public and private life, and prevailing discourse in white communities and white-controlled media attributed this absence to moral inferiority as visible in drug abuse and anti-social behaviors believed to be rampant in the Black community.[70] The gangster film of this era, the 'hood film, dramatizes the contemporary moral panic about threats by Black men to the "fabric" of American society and "the American family," imagined also as white. *Boyz N The Hood*, John Singleton's 1991 film about gang violence in South Central Los Angeles, proposes that a reinvigorated Black manhood is only possible through the resuscitation of a positive Black father figure. As a Black filmmaker, Singleton carried on the project of representing authentic Black life popularized by Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song*, and benefitted from the groundbreaking representations of empowered Black men of the Blaxploitation gangster. In this way, the film both plays into and counters larger social debates around Black delinquency and lack.

In this chapter I explore how *Boyz N The Hood* exemplifies the concerns of the hood cycle of films as it laments the lack of strong male role models for young Black men faced with economic depravity in the ghetto. I examine the ways that hood films construct the "gangsta" as social problem in response to the popular cultural sense in the 1980s and 90s of Black communities' self-destruction. Ultimately, the gangsta film

[70] I use this fallacy, of naming a singular "Black community," in cognizance of its inaccuracy as it fixes one monolithic idea of Black life as constituting all Black life in America.

blames the victimization of Black youths on inadequate fathering, an extension of the male melodrama of previous gangster films. *Boyz N the Hood* also proposes a corrective in the character of Furious Styles, an educated and righteous Black man who counsels the young Black men in his life to choose self-actualization over drugs, guns, and violence.

Location, location, location

If *The Godfather* took the gangster off the streets and brought him into the home, and the Blaxploitation cycle made the gangster the street hero of a downtrodden race, the 'hood cycle brings attention to the dysfunctional "private" lives of families as they play out on the streets of lower class Black neighborhoods.[71] The most enduring legacy of the Blaxploitation cycle of gangster films is that spaces coded as "Black" become locations ripe for filmic narratives recounting tales of loss and anguish, memorably figured in the final scene of *Black Caesar* where Tommy Gibbs dies alone and taunted by schoolchildren in the rubble of the project housing he grew up in. In the 1980s, the space representative of Black life shifted from the ghettoes of the inner cities of the northern states to the 'hood, the poor suburbs of southern states. Murray Forman explains this migration, asserting that while the ghetto "formed the dominant spatial configuration of [. . .] early 1970s blaxploitation films, [. . .] the 'hood offers a generational variant on the term 'inner city' and the landscapes of urban oppression that prevail there" (254).

Furthermore, the threats to Black male agency posed by the ghetto and its racial politics (white police, Italian gangsters, and other Blacks who have it in for Youngblood

[71] Making private life public by portraying it on the streets is also a move towards masculinizing the nuclear family, taking it out of the realm of women and bringing it into the public, traditionally male, realm. When *The Godfather* repatriated the family home, it did so to retreat from public challenges to white patriarchy; the 'hood film brings the problems of the family out into the streets, a move figuratively similar to *The Godfather* but instigated by different challenges to racialized masculinity.

Priest, for example) are re-imagined in the exurban 'hood cycle. Forman finds that "the 'hood is visually coded and communicated in black cinema of the early 1990s as a zone of chronic danger and risk, a spatialized social landscape [. . . .] locating black urban youth experience within an environment of continual proximate danger" (258). These dangers differ from those of the ghetto-centric gangster film, notably in that the 'hood film focuses on young Black men and teens, commensurate with current worries about the lack of suitable male role models for Black youth.

Moreover, in this cycle the congested inner cities of the ghettocentric Blaxploitation gangster of old, East Coast cities, are replaced by exurban locations of new, sprawling Sun Belt cities. This reflects the creeping fear that Black drugs like crack cocaine were gaining entry into white culture by their proximity to white neighborhoods. The ethnic inner city became a less immediate threat to the stability of white communities once the large-scale exurban migrations to the suburbs moved whites out of the cities and into areas perceived as safer due to their distance from the centers of Black life and the disintegrating inner cities. The moral panic about Black crime and drugs in this period was made more salient by the seeming similarities of the landscapes of Black life to those of dominant white culture—the wide paved streets of South Central had more in common with white suburbia and gated communities than the dirty urban alleyways of the Blaxploitation gangster, the sun blocked by skyscrapers.

Gangster style also shifts from one generation to another. The sartorial excess of the pimp, who often sported tailored suits and outrageous hats, gives way to the slouchy, less structured style of sagged pants, sweatshirts and bandannas, Starter jackets and baseball caps bearing the logos of sports teams. This casual west-coast style of dress,

suitable to warmer southern climates, was made popular by contemporary gangsta rappers like Tupac Shakur, Snoop Dogg, and Eazy-E, and was used in the 'hood film to indicate the verisimilitude of the life represented on screen to life in the 'hood. This shift in style mirrors the migration of hip-hop music from the South Bronx to the west coast, reflecting a large-scale move in the representation of Black culture from the northern inner cities to the southern and western suburbs.

The stomping grounds of the 'hood film represents the evolution of the Blaxploitation ghetto: ten or twenty years after the inner-city ghetto of the East Coast is the representative space of Black banditry, West Coast suburban spread removes the gangster from high-rise tenement buildings and deposits him in the wide paved streets of the Compton projects.[72] This spatial shift reflects the changing focus of the news media from inner city Black men to exurban Black boys. In her book 2003 *Black City Cinema*, scholar Paula J. Massood delineates the space of the hood as differing from the ghetto in important ways: "representations of the [ghetto] are distinguished by a redefinition of the inner city during the Reagan and Bush (Sr.) years" coupled with an "increasing conflation of African American popular culture (specifically film and music) with youth culture, especially as it relates to a rap and later to a gangsta' rap aesthetic" (147). The change in social configurations of Black space translates from the ghetto to the 'hood, due in part to the changing sociopolitical landscape of the time.

[72] Gangsta films set in the ghettos of New York are also made in this era, for example Ernest R. Dickerson's 1992 *Juice*, Mario Van Peebles' *New Jack City* (1991), and 1994's *Sugar Hill*. But the focus of popular news media and much of the attention on young Black delinquency is on the California neighborhoods of Compton, Stockton, and South Central (Los Angeles).

Another legacy of the Blaxploitation gangster is his mode of employment. Blaxploitation gangsters are street-level drug dealers, and the 'hood film continues this focus on street life and the small-time Black criminal. The gangster film's treatment of black gangsters differs strongly from contemporary white gangsters and indicates a socioeconomic shift in the lifestyle of the gangster protagonist when he is Black. While early gangster films' ethnic protagonists bootlegged liquor in defiance of Prohibition, *The Godfather*'s gangsters are white-collar criminals who use indirect means of coercion, bribing judges and senators and delegating violent acts to underlings like the bumbling Luca Brasi. Thus ethnic gangsters like the Corleones keep their hands clean. Youngblood Priest and Tommy Gibbs, the protagonists of *Superfly* and *Black Caesar*, however, are cocaine dealers doing the labor of the drug trade, selling product on the streets. Their relation to their trade is not mediated, like the Corleones'; gangstas dirty their hands.[73] Future gangster narratives would deal with such scenarios as well, placing their protagonists on the streets of Compton or Los Angeles, in the thick of illegal drug and gun culture. Black gangsters are street-level criminals, reflecting both the reality of socioeconomic disparity along racial lines but also responding to public perceptions of Black crime and violence. The 'hood cycle of gangsta films thus inherited many of the concerns of the Blaxploitation gangster film, but shifted the geographical focus to a more contemporary location of threats to and by Black men.

The United States of diminished opportunity: the Reagan years

The successes of Civil Rights-era social movements seemed to promise that the tide had turned and America's openly racist past—the institutions of slavery, Jim Crow,

[73] While *Boyz N The Hood*'s protagonist, Tre, is not a drug dealer, the negative examples of young Black manhood that surround him are.

anti-miscegenation laws, segregated schools and busing, and visible and invisible racism throughout all layers of American social life—was behind us. The 1970s continued to see widespread political activism among progressive groups calling for an end to the Vietnam War, increased governmental transparency, equal rights for women and gays, and the restoration of dignity to Black men and women. The mood across the nation was one of expectancy that the United States would continue to aspire to justice for all, that equality was an impending reality, and that partisan divisions would fall away as we marched together into the future. President Nixon's corruption had been uncovered, his cronies were being prosecuted while their leader retreated from Washington in shame, and the potential for a national process of healing old and deep rifts seemed at hand. The policies of a new, youthful and idealistic president, Jimmy Carter, promised to diminish the power of Washington insiders and give the average person a voice in national politics, returning "power to the people" and unifying a nation polarized by the previous decade of cultural divisions.

Unfortunately, as historian James T. Patterson relates, this idealism was shortsighted and short-lived, and the promise of real change was never realized due to a number of factors. Carter's presidency was marred by his political naïveté and his untempered idealism; he believed that what was right was more important than what was possible, and so failed to court allies on Capitol Hill who might help him achieve his goals and implement his socially progressive policies (Patterson 110-13). Carter did manage to see some of his campaign promises through to fruition, including increasing the budgets of the federal food stamp program and expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit, policies that benefited the poor (Patterson 114). Carter also worked to counteract

the institutional discrimination that had plagued Black communities, appointing "thirty-eight African American federal judges," directing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to work vigorously "to curb discrimination in the labor force," and by passing 1977 Public Works Act, "which included a provision stipulating that minority contractors [. . .] receive 'set-asides' of 10 percent per year of federal grants for public works" (Patterson 113). But Carter's successes were few, at least in part due to the slow but increasingly apparent rightward shift in the national political conversation.

Carter lost the 1980 election to California governor Ronald Reagan, a former actor who had once headed the Screen Actors Guild union but had increasingly turned away from his Democratic roots, a move encouraged by the Red Scare in the 1940s, during which Reagan had cooperated with the House Un-American Activities Committee (Kendrick 8). Reagan's campaign drew popular support from working-class whites, who felt that Carter had pandered to minority interests and ignored the needs of the (white) majority. The vocal and visible activism in the 1960s and 70s of previously silenced and marginalized groups led many whites to feel under attack, and growing resentment at the real and symbolic successes of Blacks, women, and gays in these years made many whites nervous. As Ronald Reagan began his presidential campaign, these disaffected and displeased white voters began to coalesce in groups such as the Moral Majority, and the Religious Right was born.

As Patterson explains, the Religious Right consisted of "several previously unconnected groups—white blue-collar workers, southern white foes of civil rights, Republicans who opposed big government, and socially conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants" (131). Reagan "adeptly exploited" these conservative groups and

moved the party rightward to meet these more extreme elements, “dramatically alter[ing] the landscape of politics in the United States” (Patterson 131). Reagan won the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections by courting these religious conservatives, pandering to the still-festering resentments of unconscious and unacknowledged racism by calling for cuts to government programs that helped support needy Black families, and by implementing cuts to social programs while in office.

While Reagan was building the Conservative Coalition and facilitating the rightward shift in national politics, media representations of Blacks also grew notably more regressive. The Black Power movement, which included the militant Black Panthers in addition to small, community-based groups, had gained visibility throughout the 1970s. Images of Black men promulgated in the late 1960s and 1970s evolved: from the contradictory messages of the peaceful Martin Luther King, Jr. and the radical messages of Malcolm X and Farrakhan, to the angry Black Panther whose Afro and bulging muscles were symbols of a threatening new Black masculinity backed up by guns, and then, as the Black Power movement faded, to the junkie and the crack-head, symbols of a failed masculinity that survive into the ‘hood cycle. This narrative of a declining Black manhood played out across news media, political campaigns, and films of the era.

Urban Black activism of the Civil Rights era and the years immediately following it received media attention that focused on the movement’s “race riots,” protest marches, and sit-ins. In this period, the northern cities, such as New York City and Chicago, and southern U.S. cities, for example Watts, California, and Birmingham, Alabama, received roughly equivalent news coverage. In the 1980s and 90s, however, American popular

media outlets focused more on California cities' problems with racial violence and drug addiction. As scholars Sorin Adam Matei and Sandra Ball-Rokeach relate, the Watts riots of 1965 were spurred by a white officer's arrest of a Black man and represented a large-scale release of tension over police brutality, which residents had suffered for years (308). The nation's eyes were riveted on the Los Angeles suburb, with the images of rioting Blacks reported on the nightly news, entering the homes of white families, as had the violence of Vietnam, through the news media. Ronald Reagan's rise to the presidency put California back in the national spotlight beginning in the late 1970s, and his frequent citing of his home state as plagued by Black violence and drugs during both presidential campaigns brought renewed attention to the region. Thus, by the late 1980s, Los Angeles and its suburbs (specifically Compton and South Central) became code for the 'hood, and were frequently the focus of discourse surrounding the problems of Black communities.

Much of the new attention to southern cities resulted from the crack cocaine epidemic. Legal scholar David A. Sklansky argues that during the 1980s, "drug abuse was transformed in the public mind from a social problem of moderate importance to a national crisis of the first order" (1286). President Reagan's War on Drugs, begun in 1986, was to have an enormous impact on public perception about drug crime, and "the association between blacks and crack cocaine played a significant role in shaping public and congressional perceptions of drug abuse in 1986" (Sklansky 1289-90). As Beverly Xaviera Watkins, Robert E. Fulilove, and Mindy Thompson Fulilove explain in their article "Arms Against Illness: Crack Cocaine and Drug Policy in the United States," Reagan's War on Drugs not only failed to alleviate the public health nuisance of crack cocaine, but in fact exacerbated the epidemic by creating a feedback loop between

prisons and communities. Rampant crack addiction meant that once offenders were released from prison, they would quickly be remanded again due to their continuing use of crack.

Further, as Sklansky points out, defendants in crack cocaine cases were "almost always black;" "[t]he particularly harsh federal penalties for trafficking in crack cocaine thus have a particularly disproportionate impact on black defendants" (1289). The War on Drugs instituted minimum sentencing rules for drug violations and led to laws that punished crack cocaine offenses much more harshly than powder cocaine, a split that commonly followed racial lines (Watkins et al 52-53). Sklansky argues that the severe disparities between the treatment of mandatory minimum sentencing for possession of crack cocaine, used more frequently by Blacks, and the possession of powdered cocaine, mostly used by whites, indicate "at least unconscious racism on the part of Congress" (1284). Thus Reagan's War on Drugs was both reflective of and constitutive of national perceptions about race and degeneracy, with the resulting widespread concern about crack cocaine addiction and selling that "plagued" Black communities and resulted in the incarceration of unprecedented numbers of Blacks for drug offenses.

The geographic shift in the nation's attention from north to south is also attributable to the growing popularity of gangsta rap, which variously criticized and sensationalized the gangsta. Music scholar Murray Forman argues that West Coast rappers such as Eazy-E, Too Short, and Ice Cube, along with rap groups like NWA and Sugar Hill Gang, received wide play in both large urban and smaller regional markets. Forman cites Eazy-E's 1986 release of the song "Boyz-N-the-Hood" as "establish[ing] 'the 'hood' as an emergent term in the spatial discourse of young urban blacks and

Latinos—and eventually other youth as well—across North America" (263). The rhetoric of gangsta rap, and its referents of South Central Los Angeles and life in the drug- and crime-afflicted exurban zones, became familiar to audiences across ethnicities and geographic regions in the 1980s and 90s. This auditory language and coding, paired with the visual representation of the gangsta in film, promulgated the popular conception of the 'hood as a "highly threatening urban enclave" that becomes, at least in the public mind, "the privileged space of authentic blackness" (Forman 264, 267). The American imagination was primed to accept this image of the 'hood by the growing moral panic over the crack cocaine epidemic and the concomitant fear of young Black men who lacked appropriate moral guidance from parental figures.

The 'hood film, often starring the gangsta rappers who gained fame by popularizing the 'hood in their music, is thus a generational variant on the gangster film, engaging contemporary debates about the social deviance of young Black men in poor neighborhoods rife with drug abuse and gun violence. The gang of the 'hood film is not a family affair, as it is in *The Godfather*. Rather, the gang or crew of the gangsta era is a loose organization of young Black or Latino men whose ties are affiliative rather than constituted by "blood." In this cycle of films, the neighborhood one grows up in determines one's crew or gang: for example, the Crenshaw Mafia named in *Boyz N the Hood* hails from Crenshaw Avenue, and in its use of the term "Mafia" claims a tie to the Italian cosa nostra-style gangster, an invocation of generic commonality and a claim to a gangster genealogy. The 'hood is the most powerful determinant of young men's identities. *Boyz N the Hood* focuses mostly on Tre Styles, a young Black man in South Central. Tre is not a "gangbanger," but his "crew" of neighborhood friends consists of

many young men who are crack dealers. While 'hood films differ from the gangster films that came before them in their focus on less structured gangs, and some gangster films with Mafia narratives are produced during the hood film era, hood films take up the work of the gangster genre, dramatizing subjectivity-challenging threats faced by ethnic men in the United States. So while Tre is not a gangster, the "crews" of the hood film are the 1980s and 90s version of the gang and do the important cultural work of expressing historical and contemporary frustrations with racism and institutionalized discrimination.

'Hood history, 'hood reception

Spike Lee's 1986 directorial debut *She's Gotta Have It* is credited with being the first in a new cycle of Black-authored films after the blockbuster era in Hollywood dried up opportunities for independent filmmaking. Since Melvin Van Peebles broke into the business in 1971 with his guerilla production *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song*, independent film had been the realm where Black filmmakers, for example Gordon Parks, Sr. and Jr., and Ossie Davis, could make inroads into the industry. Further, the Blaxploitation film, with its central figure of the gangster, represented a new visibility for Black actors in starring roles. Though these were B-movies, with low production values and seldom directed by Blacks, the narratives dealt with issues important to Black communities and, for the first time in mainstream film, made Blacks victorious protagonists, frequently against white antagonists. But with the rise of the blockbuster film, studios no longer needed dependable year-round productions, instead betting that summer openings of big-budget films with stars and high production values would put their operating budgets into the black (much like retailers depend on the day after Thanksgiving, "Black Friday," to bring them out of the red) (Lewis 94-98).

The paucity of Black filmmakers and Black-centric, Black-starring, and Black-helmed films in the late 1970s and early 1980s is of course also the result of racism: Melvin Donalson argues, "Hollywood powerbrokers have easily excluded blacks from the inner circles of creative development, financial planning, production, and distribution" (5). Thus, Donalson avers, "[t]he movement toward using black directors in the 1970s was hardly an explosive one" but rather "a trickling of opportunity" (5) that allowed only a few Black directors to gain a foothold in the industry throughout the 1980s.[74] This decline in the number of successful Black filmmakers indicated Black communities' waning influence on the film industry in the post-Blaxploitation era: once Hollywood found its sure bet in blockbusters, it no longer needed to court the Black audience with targeted, thematically relevant films treating Black life.

The success of Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* demonstrated that a "niche" film made independently could attract an audience, and after almost 10 years of dormancy, Black independent production was once again a viable proposition in Hollywood (Rhines 70). Film scholar Jesse Algernon Rhines explains that in the early 1990s the majors, seeing their folly in creating the niche market where Lee found an audience, "experimented with hiring young Black filmmakers untested even in the independent arena" (74). These filmmakers include John Singleton, whose 1991 Boyz N the Hood was produced by Columbia Pictures and "grossed nearly $60 million on a production budget of between $6 and $8 million" (Rhines 75). The 'hood cycle includes both

[74] Donalson identifies these few breakthrough Black filmmakers: Berry Gordy, Jr., Stan Lathan, Michael Schultz, and Jamaa Fanaka (66-94). It is also notable that the most successful of these few filmmakers, Michael Schultz, directed big-budget films that were aimed at the wide (and white) market, including *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1978) and 1985's *The Last Dragon*.

independent and mainstream films, and begins with such films as Matty Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), Mario Van Peebles' 1991 *New Jack City*, *Juice* by Ernest Dickerson (1992), and *Sugar Hill* (1994, Leon Ichaso). These films (along with Spike Lee's later entries in the cycle) take place in New York City and represent a transitional phase from the ghetto to the 'hood. The creation of the 'hood cycle proper is generally credited to *Boyz N the Hood*. The 'hood film represented Blacks' next big break into filmmaking after the wave of independent Black-helmed films in the early 1970s and the success of Black starring films, namely the Blaxploitation cycle. This generation of filmmakers would prove remarkably prolific: in 1991 and 1992, "more films were released than the total number of black-directed films released during all of the 1980s combined" (Massood *Black City* 152).

Scholarship on the 'hood film tends to fall into two categories, similar to the divide between those who celebrated the Blaxploitation gangster's virility and symbolic energy and those who condemned the cycle's stereotyping and caricatures of Blacks; the tendency to either celebrate or condemn Black film for its ideological allegiances perseveres in scholarship on Black films of the 1980s and onward. For example, S. Craig Watkins, an African-American scholar, argues that the films of the 'hood cycle are exploitation films like those released in the 1950s, marketed towards the teen drive-in audience and devoid of substance. "The job of film industry executives was to select scripts that translated the popular appeal of hip hop, and especially hard-core, into salable film product" (187); in other words, the 'hood cycle came about because Hollywood could make money by treating Black characters in stock situations catering to

contemporary images of Black life, and discard these narrative conceits when they had reinvigorated their audience and when the films stopped making money (171-76).

Watkins' condemnation of the 'hood cycle stands in marked contrast to the second major strain of film scholarship, which finds in the 'hood film (as a sub-set of reinvigorated Black filmmaking in general) a self-conscious and politically engaged cinema. For example, Clyde Taylor (also ethnically African-American) compares the New Black Cinema, as he identifies Black film in the Spike Lee era, to the Harlem Renaissance in its efforts to free Black artistic production from the tyranny of white forms, imagery, and conventions: "The writers of that period advanced a fertile decolonization from western aesthetic norms. Almost without notice, the contemporary filmmakers have gone further towards decolonization of a more blatantly colonized medium" (178). While Taylor's praise is exceptional in his linking of this era of filmmaking with the avant garde and "high art" Harlem Renaissance, other scholars have joined him in arguing that the 'hood genre speaks important truths about Black life that white filmmakers have ignored, erased, or substituted with racist caricature. Ed Guerrero, writing contemporaneously with the 'hood cycle, counters the binary impulse of scholarship to either praise Black filmmaking practices as insurgent or to denounce Black filmmakers who pander to a broad crossover audience, arguing that "it is important to think of black cinema as a continuum of connected stratagems, practices, and perspectives" (181).

A common criticism scholars level at the 'hood cycle is that in its focus on violence that ends the lives of Black men, these films celebrate nihilism and constitute yet another racist fantasy of Black (self-)destruction. Black scholar Todd Boyd argues

that *Menace II Society* (1992), one of the most popular 'hood films, nihilistically celebrates violence for the sake of spectacle absent any moral consideration (98-104). Norman Denzin (also African-American) avers, "the hood movies have failed to expand the discussions of race and representation beyond debates about good and bad imagery" (129); further, Denzin claims that with their spectacularization of Black-on-Black and male violence, these "realistic social-problems texts fueled conservative racist discourse" in the 1980s and 90s (112). Denzin claims that this is due to a mis-reading of the films: while Black filmmakers do not intend to celebrate the violence of their subjects, "by invoking the genre, stylistic conventions, and narrative devices of the classic and new gangster films (*The Public Enemy*, *White Heat*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*)," these filmmakers "erode[] the power of their moral and cinematic position; namely that this violence on the screen is meant to be a deterrent to real violence in the real hood" (113). This position is problematic because it reveals an expectation that Black films should be realistic social texts that perform consciousness-raising. This places the burden of antiracist work on the shoulders of Black filmmakers. Not all white-made films are expected to portray realistic social relations in an ideologically progressive manner, and to expect such of Black filmmakers is a troubling echo of racist essentialism.

Massood echoes Denzin's charge of nihilism, finding that both the hood film and gangsta rap "document the hood, and have increasingly transformed it into a space marked by a stylized nihilism removed from the Black Nationalist politics of the 1960s and 1970s." (152) Nihilism is an apt descriptor only when viewing a medium from a moral perspective; this could be a result of the tendency to see hood films as social problem narratives, as documenting the problems of the colored "other" and proposing

correctives, like the earliest of gangster films with their censor-imposed, moralistic framing devices constituting a call to action to end the gangster threat. And invoking realism and documentary is an interesting move—it is naïve to see in the 'hood film a realistic treatment of problems with racial violence and to see in many another film a carefully constructed notion of racial disharmony. For example, 1989's *Driving Miss Daisy*, a contemporary of the 'hood cycle, appealed to white audiences by assuaging fears about racial difference, positing that a white woman and her Black chauffeur (even in the racially charged South) could become the best of friends.

Critics' claims to the didactic intent of 'hood filmmakers reveals a widespread assumption of both popular and scholarly commentators, an assumption that proves problematic when analyzed in depth: that the 'hood film takes up the mantle of the social problem film, with the moral imperative and aim to change prevailing attitudes and influence behavior. If we accept this charge, we can draw parallels between the 'hood film of the 1990s and the Prohibition gangster cycle of the 1930s, where censorship and social pressures served to make the gangster film a cautionary tale of greed and antisocial behavior. But it is a particularly white conception of Black media that it must deal with the social problems diagnosed by white culture. The moral imperative angle implies a community bootstrap theory—that whites can diagnose the problems, but only Blacks can solve them, and that "uplift" is the responsibility of Black communities. A more nuanced analysis of this subgenre views the 'hood film as being structured in response to and in conversation with prevailing notions of Black male absence in the home and menace in the streets, part of a wider conception of Black social pathology that 1980s popular media inherited from 1960s Civil Rights' focus on Black families and communities.

A "tangle of pathology": popular conceptions of Black manhood

The United States of the 1980s and 90s saw a crisis of Black masculinity that had its roots in the power struggles of the 1960s, the ideologically conflicted but ultimately disappointing 70s, and the striking swing to the right and the rise of the Moral Majority in national politics in the Reagan era. Sociologists and ideology critics in the 1980s began excavating the nation's recent history to make sense of this rightward swing, the pervasive image of Black male delinquency, and the castigation of Black communities as incubators for violent offenders and the source of major threats to the so-called American way of life. Scholars began referring to a 1965 report by the Department of Labor's Office of Policy Planning and Research titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." Popularly known as the Moynihan Report, this 55-page booklet details social ills facing Black families with the aim of explaining Black underachievement in public life by examining social, rather than political, factors.[75] The Report is framed from a liberal-left standpoint, but couched in its language are the paternalistic and patronizing values of a white Congress. This report would exert an enormous influence over the next 40 years of public policy and popular discourse on the Black family.

The Moynihan Report indirectly responded to the arguments of Civil Rights activists that Black Americans had long faced, and were still subject to, racist laws and social practices. While Jim Crow laws, which had disenfranchised Black voters,

[75] While I am unsure why the Moynihan Report did not figure largely in public conversations about Black masculinity in the 1970s, it is possibly due to the absence of a critical mass of Black sociologists studying Black families from a liberal standpoint before the 1980s. In the mid-80s, sociologists began questioning the received wisdom on reasons for Black "underachievement." Further, the tendency of politicians of the early-to mid-80s to make hay of the failures of Black men (who were figured as Willie Hortons, violent recidivist criminals) and Black women (figured as "welfare queens" gaming the system) also inspired a defensive position by social scientists working to challenge these insidious stereotypes.

criminalized interracial marriage, and relegated Blacks to second-class status for decades, had been outlawed, Blacks still faced entrenched racist policies and unacknowledged discrimination in jobs, housing, and schooling. The Civil Rights movement worked to make these practices visible, and attempted to build coalitions of the like-minded by protests, marches, and consciousness-raising campaigns. These activists laid responsibility for the differences in white and Black achievement on the doorstep of American governmental policies and a racist status quo, aiming to effect changes in laws and public consciousness. In contrast, the Moynihan Report unintentionally changed the focus of contemporary analysis of Black problems from the examination of racist white policies and institutions, to an inadequate, failing, "endangered" Black nuclear family.

The Moynihan Report gives only passing mention to the fundamental truth that America's own history of racist subjugation of Blacks destroyed the Black family. Slavery disallowed Blacks to sustain, develop, or nurture any notion of the nuclear family that is so central to the American notion of nation and self. Under slavery, a woman gave birth, whether from a strategic mating encouraged by a slave-owner or as the product of rape by the white owner (or, less commonly, out of her own desire), only to see the infant taken away and replaced with the slave-owner's own child, turning women into reproductive machines and wet-nurses. Slaves who did somehow manage to simulate a nuclear family were under constant threat of separation and frequently were removed from one another, sold away to other slave-owners, if the bonds of the family unit threatened the slaves' productivity. Furthermore, the organization of social life and kinship units in the multiple African regions from which first-generation slaves came were likely arranged in ways that did not mimic the nuclear family, making the Western

notion of the patrilineal nuclear family an unfamiliar concept to enslaved Africans and their descendants.

Under slavery, Black families were forbidden, divorced geographically and emotionally from one another, and forced to relinquish even the hope of a stable nuclear family unit. It is a brutal irony that, only 80 years after the end of the Civil War, responsibility for the lack of a stable familial structure in Black family life is laid at the doorstep of the same people whose grandparents were not allowed to raise their own children. That such a systemic shift was expected to take place in just 3 generations is naïve and shortsighted, and the Moynihan Report's failure to explore the historical reasons for the lack of stable Black families renders its conclusions insulting at best.

The legacy of slavery and institutionalized discrimination was such that, in the immediate pre-Civil Rights Act era, Black men were unable to find living-wage jobs to support their families. Structural and overt racism, Jim Crow laws, and segregation kept Black men from holding jobs that could earn a respectable living and give the Black community pride. The traditionally feminine service sector was one of the few employment opportunities open to Black men, whose other choices were also low-pay and low-prestige jobs. It is no surprise that Black families were viewed as unstable: Blacks were denied every opportunity to develop a strong family structure, and that many Black families did manage to replicate the "stable" (read: white, patriarchal, ideal) nuclear family model is a testament to the human spirit in the face of overwhelming odds and adversity.

The Moynihan Report posits that Black families of the 1960s were facing a crisis of paternal origins: the Black father was largely absent from the lives of his children, and

Black women were left in control of their families. The report recounts the findings of dozens of studies commissioned to analyze the structure of "the Negro family," using census data, Department of Labor employment data, fertility rates, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) data, and other government-sponsored research statistics. The report frequently uses the term "matriarchy" to describe the status of the Black family, and the unmistakable message is that female-headed households are unstable and dangerous to children, especially boys. The direct effects of matriarchy are never defined; it is simply left to the imagination what the detriments are. This fact is spoken of as a "family pathology" defined by "divorce, separation, and desertion, female family head, children in broken homes, and illegitimacy" (19). The most direct attribution seems to be a simple emasculation, that Black male authority is undermined by Black female authority:

> Many Negro fathers literally cannot support their families. Because the father is either not present, is unemployed, or makes such a low wage, the Negro woman goes to work. [. . . .] This dependence on the mother's income undermines the position of the father. (25)

The Report damns Black mothers for succeeding despite all precedent to the contrary, simply because it is hypothesized (without supporting data or reason) that if Black mothers succeed, the fathers of their children must fail. The presumption that women working causes male inadequacy is antifeminist in addition to pathologizing—making personal and individual what is constructed and institutional—a set of political and social facts.

The Moynihan Report contextualizes the historic levels of single-parent homes and Black poverty as the long-term results of slavery, the Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and discrimination in employment. That the report so openly acknowledges the institutional racism endemic in American public life at the time is surprising, and one would think commentators would have cleaved to this argument: that it is the fault of the larger culture that Black children do not receive adequate socialization. However, the legacy of the Moynihan Report is the popularization of the phrase "Black Matriarchy." The clearest statement in the report regarding the dangerous nature of female-headed households comes in its fourth chapter:

> There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. (29)

Thus, an organ of the federal government reifies patriarchy—a specifically white patriarchy, as it has proved "most advantageous"—as normative, positing that assimilation is the only and best avenue to equality for Black citizens who occupy lower socioeconomic strata due to the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow. Black women are blamed for "usurping" the power of men in the household, and Black men are damned as being absent from the lives of their children.

The Moynihan Report names absent Black fathers as one of the fundamental reasons for Black social "deterioration," and this perception of failing Black masculinity persists in 1991. The 1965 publication's subheadings neatly summarize "facts" regarding

the absence of Black men from their children's lives: "Nearly a Quarter of Urban Negro Marriages are Dissolved." "Nearly One-Quarter of Negro Births are now Illegitimate." Of course this panic over the dissolution of Black marriages is ironic in hindsight, with divorce rates since the 1970s approaching 50% for all couples regardless of race (Patterson 50). Paired with graphs and charts with such titles as "THE NONWHITE ILLEGITIMACY RATIO IS 8 TIMES THE WHITE RATIO," and "ONE THIRD OF NONWHITE CHILDREN LIVE IN BROKEN HOMES" (8-9, 18), these assertions about the dissolution of the Black family lay responsibility at the feet of absent Black men.

The report concludes that federal policy on Blacks must be aimed at strengthening the father's role in the Black family. Oddly, the Report displaces this claim to a quote from a much earlier essay, a 1950 article in *Journal of Negro Education* in which author E. Franklin Frazier claims that "the widespread family disorganization among Negroes has resulted from the failure of the father to play the role in family life required by American society" (qtd. in Moynihan 48). Frazier, and the Moynihan report, concludes that "the mitigation of this problem must await those changes in the Negro and American society which will enable the Negro father to play the role required of him" (48). This curious vagueness comes after 50-odd pages detailing how Black families are failing because of the confluence of factors stemming from illegitimate births, unemployment, lack of education, and juvenile delinquency. Each and every measure of Black failure is traced back to Black fathers' lack of involvement in Black family life. The report names this causal relationship "the tangle of pathology," linking time and again the cycle of poverty, lack of education, unemployment, to absenteeism among Black fathers.

In ensuing years, sociologists used a variety of positions to attack the results of the Moynihan report and defend Black masculinity and/as fatherhood.[76] Sociologists William D. Allen and Michael Connor, for example, argue that "[t]he 'matriarchal' black family with its 'absent father' was the predictable focus [of such studies] resulting from a poverty of investigative concepts and methodology applied to the study of African American life" (57-58). But even sociologists who were race-conscious and working to counter the negative pathological construct of Black manhood would unconsciously attack the matriarchy hypothesis from the standpoint of defending its supposed obverse, patriarchy.[77] John Lewis McAdoo and Julie B. McAdoo's 1994 article on "The African-American Father's Roles within the Family" criticizes prior research that neglects institutional racism as a leading cause of inadequate fathering in the Black community. They claim that much of the sociological debate ignores the contributions of Black researchers, and thus betrays both a Eurocentric bias. But McAdoo and McAdoo unconsciously reify other problematic underlying values in this debate.

McAdoo and McAdoo claim that African-American women embraced matriarchy "because American society was unwilling to permit the African-American male to

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[76] Interestingly, many critics of Moynihan-inspired public debates resorted to claiming a superlative victim status for Black men compared to Black women. Chester Pierce claims that daily racism is "particularly damaging to the sense of competence, efficacy, and dignity of Black males, who are more likely than Black females to face the brunt of these assaults" (qtd. in Gibbs, 135), and that Black males "have been the principal victims of the legacy of racial discrimination and prejudice in American society" (129). However, much feminist criticism argues that Black women are victimized to a greater extent because of the nexus of race, class, and gender on their social positioning; they are triply disadvantaged by racism, sexism, and classism in America.

[77] The language of such critics is often concerned with virility or its loss: Useni Eugene Perkins claims that claims "the system of American racism and oppression begins to cripple African-American males so that when they reach adulthood they are socially, physically, and politically impotent." (qtd. in Kunjufu vii).

assume the legal, psychological, and social positions necessary to become a dominant force within his family" (288). The authors cite studies by the National Research Council that found "no evidence to support the theory of the Black matriarch" (288). While McAdoo and McAdoo discount the troubling conclusions of the Moynihan Report, they reify a positive treatment of patriarchy. Their work attempts to refute the Moynihan Report, but does not challenge its assumption that white patriarchy is normative, and appropriately so. Jewelle Taylor Gibbs also argues along these same lines, claiming, "nearly half of Black children under eighteen are reared in female-headed families, [thus] many males have never known a strong male parent figure who can model appropriate masculine behaviors and provide positive models of identification" (131). Gibbs thus also reifies the stance that men are the only and best role models for young men, and that female-headed households are damaging to young Black men.

What the authors of such analyses ignore is their own investment in theories of pathology for women's empowerment that led to this debate in the first place. By discounting the theory of the matriarch, sociologists do nothing to challenge the misogynist values underlying such theories, values that state that fathers should be the head of the household and should wield decision-making power. Further, the assumption that the presence of a biological male equals positive, appropriate, "healthy" male role modeling is regressive, essentially conservative, and unsupported by objective analyses. By failing to challenge the ideological underpinnings of the matriarchy hypothesis, sociologists in the 1980s unconsciously strengthened the grounds for the onslaught against Black families, reified a Eurocentric vision of family structure, and gave ground to the social pathology model of Black manhood.

In the decades after the publication of the Moynihan Report, not coincidentally the politically active and turbulent 1960s and 70s were followed by a backlash against Civil Rights-era policies, and American popular media saw an explosion of news stories detailing the criminal exploits of Black men, disseminating a vision of Black social deviance that was made to stand in for the whole of Black life. Clyde W. Franklin II argues in a 1994 essay, "the Black man recognized by mainstream society today is fearsome, threatening, unemployed, irresponsible, potentially dangerous, and generally socially pathological" (Franklin 11). This popular discourse about Black manhood affected not only whites' impressions of Black values and behaviors, but also constituted a negative self-image for young Black men. Franklin avers, "mainstream society and Black males themselves overwhelmingly receive images of Black males that link them with highly publicized statistics of social pathologies" (17). Thus it is appropriate to read 'hood gangsta films as one response to the construction of Black males as criminals whose antisocial behaviors stem from a lack of positive male role models and a failure to cleave to a white heteronormative patriarchal version of the nuclear family. Whether these "observations" about Black life may or may not be true, the creation of the Black male criminal in the public imaginary derives from the pathologies named in the Moynihan Report and was furthered by media at the time.

The gangsta cycle's concern with violent crime committed by youths of color in an inner-city wasteland is also a convenient diversion from the real losses of minority communities in the era of Reaganomics. Marilyn Power's 1984 article "Falling through the 'Safety Net'" enumerates the early Reagan administration's project to enact fiscally and socially conservative policies, which negatively affected poor families,

disproportionately composed of non-whites. The conservative Republican Reagan administration made deep cuts to social programs, including, in the 1982 federal budget, approximately $3.6 billion from the Medicare program, $700 million from Medicaid's budget, $900 million from the federal food stamp program providing food to families in poverty, and $500 million from AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) program (Power 36-37).

In addition to reducing direct aid programs that benefited non-white families, the Reagan Administration made deep cuts to agencies that were instituted to counter the biases against Blacks in the job market and educational realms. For example, the Reagan Administration reduced the budget of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission by $17 million in 1982, and then cut "forty-eight permanent positions, on top of ninety either cut or unfilled in fiscal year 1981" (Power 44). This resulted in a closure of the commission for "107 days because the administration delayed appointment of a commissioner needed to make a quorum" (Power 44). This hobbling of the EEOC, which monitored hiring practices nation-wide to address unfair treatment of women and people of color by employers, resulted in real losses of gains that Civil Rights leaders had achieved, and, further, lessened the importance of race- and gender-based equality measures in the national imaginary.

In drastically reducing the budgets of social aid programs, dramatically lessening the financial and social support received by poor families, and de-fanging federal agencies tasked with abolishing race- and gender-biased hiring practices, the Reagan administration reversed the benefits of Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society policies (Patterson 85) and changed the terms of the national discussion on poverty and race. John

Brenkman argues that the worsening circumstances of Blacks in the 1980s were thanks to the fact that "Reaganism excised *racial justice* from public discourse, transforming this powerful, tenuously shared expression of a common good into a tabooed slogan" (4, emphasis original). By cutting social programs drastically at a time when those social programs were most needed, during the deepest recession since World War II, the Reagan Administration's economic policies "would involve [. . .] the banishment of a large number of workers, particularly women and nonwhite people of both sexes, to a life of poverty because of greatly reduced welfare payments, unemployment, and low-paying, dead-end service jobs" (51). These reductions in support, both financial and figurative, for social programs performed a two-pronged attack on Blacks in the United States. By removing social betterment programs, Blacks had fewer resources to make the climb out of endemic and structurally enforced poverty. Furthermore, there were fewer advocates to help enforce antiracist policies and practices.

The concurrent popularizing of representations of Black males as criminals (viz Reagan's infamous Willie Horton ad in the '84 election cycle) perpetuated the notion that Black men threatened the "American way of life." And the increasing real rates of homicide and suicide amongst Black men and boys were a prop to these notions of Black inferiority, which became coded as social pathology through the discourse of "family values," one of Reagan's campaign platforms that was seized upon by the Religious Right. All these aspects of the representation of Black life created a sense of Black masculinity in crisis. The gangsta cycle of the 1980s and 90s responds to the prevailing notions that Black life, and specifically Black men, were in a fundamental crisis.

In 1965 the Moynihan report claimed “Negro children without fathers flounder—and fail” (35). Once the concern entered the public imagination, it quickly took hold, making Black women a convenient shorthand for social problems. The Reagan reelection campaign used the image of the Black “welfare queen,” as indelible as Willie Horton, to demonize Blacks and curry votes from conservative whites. But while Black women got the rap, the image of Black men suffered as much for being erased from the discussion or cast in a strictly negative light. The patterns of family life outlined in the Moynihan Report are explicitly linked to juvenile delinquency. The “fact” of a “disastrous delinquency and crime rate” (38) was seized upon as well, and images of young Black men terrorizing neighborhoods, shooting one another, and generally flouting the law became ubiquitous on the evening news across the nation in the late 1980s. The television show *COPS*, which debuted in 1989 and is still broadcasting original episodes 21 years later, turned delinquency into spectacle and entertainment, and the blame was lain at the feet of the Black community and absent fathers especially.

While Black-helmed films were a highly visible response to the problems of Black masculinity, many Black sociologists and cultural commentators also suggested solutions to the crisis of Black male inadequacy. In 1984, Jawanza Kunjufu, a Black social reformer and advocate of Afrocentric education, published a three-volume work titled *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*, in which he identifies ways to raise Black male children with positive self-image and pride in their origins. Kunjufu’s central argument is that Black boys need Black men to inculcate in them the pride of their African ancestry and a positive, powerful notion of what it means to be male, and that “[u]ntil African-American women admit that only men can make boys into men, and

African-American men become responsible for giving direction to at least one male child, the conspiracy will continue" (27). While Kunjufu lays a shared responsibility at the feet of both men and women in the Black community, his separatist approach inspires echoes of the feminist critique of many Civil Rights advocates who insisted on separate spheres for men's and women's activism (influenced largely by Malcolm X and the Brotherhood of Islam's conservative religious approach to African-American liberation theology). But Kunjufu, in attempting to solve the problem, falls into the same trap of the Moynihan Report's reification of patriarchy, of placing the burden on Blacks rather than on political and social institutions and ignoring the fact of sexism within Black communities. Kunjufu's polemical approach to Black uplift is echoed throughout the 1980s and 90s by scholars from many disciplines, including sociology and psychoanalysis. But the 'hood gangsta film constituted the most visible, vocal, and vivid response to this ethnic crisis of masculinity.

Making a case for fathers: *Boyz N The Hood*

John Singleton's first film, 1991's *Boyz N the Hood*, was well received both critically and popularly, making $10 million on its opening weekend and grossing almost $60 million at the domestic box office, unprecedented figures for a Black-helmed film. Singleton earned an Academy Award nomination as Best Director for *Boyz*, becoming the first African-American to be nominated for direction (Donalson 129). The film was generally praised by both critical and popular audiences, though critics did find fault with *Boyz*' representation of Black women. As Black cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson protests, "welfare queens and promiscuous black women" dominate the film's treatment of women, rendering its overall message of racial uplift problematic in that it seemed to

apply only to Black men (352). *Boyz N the Hood* focuses on a young Black man, Tre, and his friends Ricky and Doughboy, as they come of age in a drug- and gang-plagued suburb of Los Angeles.

Synopsis

Boyz N the Hood's first half focuses on young Tre Styles and the beginning of his training to be a man at the hands and in the home of his father, Furious. Reva, mother to eleven-year old Tre, sends the boy to live with his father after a fight at school.[78] Reva treats Tre like a grown-up, taking him to task for failing to live up to a contract that they agreed to, delineating that Tre would no longer get in fights at school. Tre is intelligent but hotheaded, and Reva, having failed to train Tre to contain his temper, fulfills their agreement by sending Tre to live with his father. Furious is a homeowner in a South Central, Los Angeles neighborhood, and a strict father who believes that in order to do right by his son, he must teach him responsibility and self-respect. Furious' neighbor, a single mother named Brenda, has two sons, Doughboy and Ricky, who become Tre's best friends. Brenda berates Doughboy for being fat and lazy, and lauds Ricky for being talented at football. Brenda serves as an example of the negative matriarch, shaming one son and favoring the other, doing irreparable damage to both. While Furious works to teach Tre about respecting Black struggles and finding solidarity with "brothers," negative forces abound: a racist Black police officer, a group of Black teens who bully

[78] Tre scuffles with a classmate who, during a lecture on the origins of humanity that Tre interrupts with a lecture on Africa, insists he isn't from Africa, but rather from "Crenshaw Mafia." The first scene of the film establishes two competing notions of identity and belonging: an ascendant and proud Afrocentrism is contrasted with a 'hood- and crew-based notion of group identity, and the invocation of the "Mafia" links this *Boyz N the Hood* to the history of gangster films.

Tre and his friends, and a school system that teaches Black children about the white pilgrims but ignores Africa's contributions to human history.

The film's second half fast-forwards to 18-year old Tre and his cohort. The neighborhood welcomes Doughboy home from a stint in prison with a barbecue, at which we are introduced to adult Ricky, who has fathered a child. Chris, another neighborhood boy from the earlier scenes, is now paralyzed, wheelchair-mobile from a gang-related shooting. The neighborhood has gone downhill since Tre's childhood: crack-addicted mothers let babies wander in the streets; cars with tinted windows patrol, intimidating the residents, their drivers on the lookout for rival gangs. After a series of run-ins with local thugs, Ricky is murdered in a drive-by shooting. Furious initially dissuades the angry and bereft Tre from getting revenge on the gangbangers for killing Ricky, but Tre goes with Doughboy to find the "bangers" anyway. Tre comes to his senses and backs out of the plan; Doughboy and his crew find the responsible gang, and kill three of them in a drive-by shooting. Titles over the final scene, a conversation between Tre and Doughboy the next morning, reveal that Doughboy is murdered two weeks later, while Tre and his girlfriend Brandi leave the 'hood to attend Morehouse and Spelman, two historically Black colleges in Atlanta.

Analysis

John Singleton's 1991 film takes as its starting premise Kunjufu's assertion that "only men can develop boys into men" (27). Reva, though a positive female figure when compared to Doughboy and Ricky's harpy mother Brenda, gives up on disciplining her son and relinquishes Tre to his father, saying to Furious, "I can't teach him how to be a man. That's your job." The primary concern in *Boyz*, gang violence, is undergirded by a

deeper concern, that of inadequate fathering within the African-American community. This crisis is made visible through two types of father figures in *Boyz N the Hood*: good fathers, who raise their sons to be "men," and absent/bad fathers, who are either invisible or consist of individuals and institutions that harm young Black men.

Good fathers

In a scene from the first half of the film, the father-son dyad is structured as a mentorship, a wise sage training up a young novice, by both dialogue and camera work. Furious takes Tre fishing on the California coast, where they have a serious talk about serious subjects, a manly pastime filled with what we take to be Furious' first fatherly intervention in his son's life. In this scene, Furious is framed from a medium-shot, slightly low angle against a background of rocks that rise from the ocean, while Tre is framed from a higher angle, against the boulders and the water where he skips rocks. Furious grills Tre on what the boy knows about sex, and Tre's childish understanding of the mechanics of sex is charmingly naïve. Furious imparts many lessons in this scene, but this is perhaps the most important: he tells Tre that "any fool with a dick can make a baby, but only a real man can raise his children." In this scene of father-son bonding, Furious' most strident point is that raising one's children differentiates men from boys, as witnessed by Furious joining the Army instead of joining his friends robbing people and "getting drunk, getting high."

As they return home from this outing, Furious and Tre watch Doughboy and Chris arrested and taken away for stealing. The song playing on Furious' car radio, which enters the soundtrack as the two exit the car, is "Ooh, Child," an uplifting song that promises a better "someday" for the singer's son. The song provides a confirmation of

Furious' good fathering and an ironic counterpoint to Doughboy's lack of a father: while Tre can look forward to better days because he has a father to guide him, like the addressee of the song, Doughboy is going away to begin a life in and out of jail, because he has no one to guide him in making good choices.

This scene's use of contrasting angles and cutting on dialogue constructs this shot-reverse shot sequence as a conversation between unequals, framing first Furious from a low angle as he asks Tre a question, then Tre from a high angle as the loquacious young boy responds. The takes are rhythmic, expressing a kind of gentle camaraderie between the interlocutors, an easy (though at times uncomfortable) rapport developing between the father and son. The shots get progressively closer and closer in, and the camera lingers on Furious' expressions. Furious betrays awkward bemusement when he asks Tre what the boy knows about sex; sweet nostalgia when he shares his recollection finding out his girlfriend was pregnant with a son[79]; seriousness with a slight tinge of regret when Furious mentions his stint in the army and suggests that it damaged him. In this scene we get to know Furious as a father and male role model. He is warm, amused by his precocious young son, and wise. The camera structures the viewer's vision of Furious from below, as though from a child's perspective: we trust him, we like him, we are, like Tre, eager to hear Furious' thoughts and opinions. We feel warmth for this

[79] Reva is not mentioned in this scene, functioning only as a vessel for Furious' child. Furious "just knew" that the baby Reva carried would be a boy, and the bond here is, we understand, especially important because of its male biological sex. Many scholars have noted the sexism of the 'hood genre, whose protagonists refer to women as "bitches," and narratives that seldom focus on a female Black experience (with the notable exception of F. Gary Gray's *Set It Off*). For example, scholar Michelle Wallace avers that *Boyz N The Hood*, along with Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* and other entries in the 'hood cycle, "demonize[s] black female sexuality as a threat to black male heterosexual identity" (130), and that the film ultimately "confirm[s] hegemonic family values" (125).

parental figure, for his humanity and his love for his son. Furious is a wise advisor and conscientious father, taking his responsibility to turn his son into a man seriously.

In a scene in the second half of the film, Furious takes it upon himself to educate Tre, his friend Ricky, and the people of Compton about the powers that be and what Black people must do to survive. In this guise, he is a modern-day Malcolm X, preaching to his people the importance of Black solidarity. Furious takes Tre and Ricky, who have just completed their SATs, to a street corner in Compton, a neighborhood frequently mentioned on television news and in the public imagination as one of the most dangerous areas in the nation. Gangsta rap can be heard in the background, a soundtrack to life in the 'hood. Young Blacks congregate on a stoop across the street, and Rick and Tre are nervous, glancing warily at the other youth loitering in a yard nearby. Ricky expresses his discomfort at standing on a street corner in this dangerous place, saying, "I don't know about all this, Furious. You got us walkin' around mothafuckin' Compton and all that." Furious responds by referencing the status that Ricky shares with the people he fears, that of race: "Rick, it's the 90s. We can't afford to be afraid of our own people anymore." Furious leads the young men to an empty lot, above which stands a billboard that reads "Cash for your home…. Seoul to Seoul Realty." As Furious explains to Tre and Ricky the process of gentrification that the billboard represents, the group of teens loitering across the street joins them, curious to hear Furious' lecture. An older man also stops and joins the crowd; it is as though Furious is a street preacher, and community members gather to hear his sermon. But he's not talking about banking up good deeds for the afterlife; Furious argues that Black people need to take steps to build up Black ownership of property and services in their community.

The framing of this sequence echoes that of the earlier scene at the shore. Furious is framed from a low angle against the bottom portion of the billboard he stands in front of. At first the camera cuts back and forth between Furious and a long shot with Ricky and Tre filling frame right; cutaways show the young gangbangers approaching them. The long shot slowly fills with the 'bangers drinking out of 40-oz containers of malt liquor ("forties") on the right and the old man joining Furious on the left side of the frame. Furious explains that the billboard's message is gentrification, that property values drop and developers buy the houses cheap, "raise the property value," evict the inhabitants, then sell the homes at a higher price. The camera cuts back to the low-angle shot framing Furious from the midsection up, an angle that accentuates Furious' stature as a father to this community by placing the camera at a child's eye-level.

Furious makes an argument to the assembled crowd, a hypothesis that mainstream white audiences might describe as a conspiracy theory: that "they," presumably whites in power, want Blacks to kill themselves.

> Furious: Why is it that there is a gun shop on almost every corner of this community?
>
> Old Man: Why?
>
> Furious: I'll tell you why. For the same reason that there's a liquor store on almost every corner of the Black community.[. . . .] Why? They want us to kill ourselves. You go out to Beverly Hills, you don't see that shit. They want us to kill ourselves.

Furious demands that these neighborhood inhabitants, Black people of all ages, question the status quo: why violence is an endemic part of their lives, why drug addiction is a

lived reality in the ‘hood, why a Korean realty company wants to give Black people in the ‘hood cash for their property.

One of the gathered “hoods” counters Furious’ Black empowerment stance with a claim to self-preservation: he can’t be expected to respond to a threat to his life, “some sucka try to roll up on me,” with nonviolence. Furious challenges the young man, locking eyes with him and exhorting the crowd to think not in terms of grievances, with eye-for-an-eye logic, but in terms of brotherhood, of investing (literally and figuratively) in the future. In an over-the-shoulder shot from just behind the young hood at Furious’ eye level, Furious asserts that when Black men respond to violence with violence—directed at other Black men—they become pawns in the larger game of racial injustice that Blacks perpetuate via homicide and drug use but which only benefits whites. Furious claims that when young Black men trade bullets instead of ideas, “[y]ou doing exactly what they want you to do. You have to think, young brother. About your future.” The invocation is to move on from thinking about past injustices, to let bygones be bygones in both gang conflicts and in the national political realm, and to focus on saving young Black men for their mutual future and survival. Here Furious acts as the voice of reason and as a concerned father who must protect his child, and as a call to action for young Black men both diegetically and in the audience.

In fact, Tre is more of an authority on child-raising than the women in his neighborhood, as witnessed when he rescues a toddler from the street while the baby’s mother, a nameless crack addict, is fixated on feeding her addiction rather than keeping her child safe. When Tre returns the baby to the woman, he commands that she keep her baby out of the street. She asks if he has any dope, and Tre shakes his head in disgust.

The irony of a childless teen knowing how to parent better than an adult mother is not lost on Tre, and is endemic to life in the 'hood, where irresponsibility and parenting seem to go hand-in-hand, with the exception only of Furious Styles.

Challenges to good fathers come from Black women in *Boyz N the Hood*. In a scene late in the film, Reva takes Furious—and all Black men—to task for a history of inadequate fathering. The conversation between Tre's estranged parents is a referendum on the state of Black fatherhood, and further concretizes *Boyz*'s representation of women as wresting control from men in insidious ways, confirming the hypothesis of the Moynihan Report and supporting the notion that what young Black men need to succeed are strong father figures to replace overbearing mother figures. This antifeminist message is carried throughout the film, contradictorily celebrating "good" parenting when it is done by fathers, and denouncing women for parenting in any manner. Furious and Reva meet in a fancy restaurant for a tête-à-tête that Reva has called. The two face off like adversaries, but the deck has been stacked: they meet on Reva's turf. Furious enters Reva's space, which is notably not the home, the space traditionally controlled by women, but the public sphere, and she sets the tone for the conversation as an inquisition. So far we have only seen Furious in his home or on the streets of the 'hood, so this public place that is populated mostly by whites is where Reva feels comfortable and Furious visibly less so.

The restaurant where they dine is an example of California cuisine and décor, with mauve walls, floral drapes, and a mostly white clientele. The restaurant patrons dress nicely in business attire, a marked difference from Furious' comfort zone in the 'hood. The mise-en-scene thus further feminizes the space and cements the sense of

Reva's dominion and Furious' awkwardness. Furious sits across from Reva with shoulders hunched, more conciliatory in this feminized public space than in his home, where he stands upright and is purposive and forceful. He is unmanned, or at least threatened, in Reva's world. Reva orders an espresso, a drink that marks her as trend-conscious and upwardly mobile. She is mildly surprised when Furious orders a café au lait: Reva does not expect such sophistication from a man who lives across the street from a crack dealer, while she herself lives in a high-rise apartment with the accoutrements of upper-middle class life. The difference between their lifestyles and milieu reflect the different choices they have made, which reflects in turn on the film's representation of women and men. Here, a mother has abandoned her son and her people to the wide streets and dry lawns of the 'hood, while she herself lives a lifestyle that is constructed as inauthentic to Black experience. Reva is a Buppie or Black yuppie, a demographic of young, upwardly mobile Black professionals who assimilated well to the white middle-class vision of life in America but who were viewed with much derision by lower-class Blacks in the 1980s for "acting white." Furious, meanwhile, practices what he preaches, living in the dangerous 'hood despite having an education and continuing a life of the mind.

The scene's formal elements construct this confrontation as deflating of Furious' physical presence, presenting him as diminutized and on the defensive in this white space where he is under siege from Reva's tongue-lashing. However, instead of being unmanned by the challenge to his fatherhood, Furious is triumphant as Reva is made out to be unreasonable, and the restaurant as pretentious. This scene thus functions to privilege Black spaces over white locations as the sites of "real" versus "fake" knowledge

and values for the Black community. As Furious enters the restaurant, he is filmed from an unprecedentedly high angle in long shot. Furious inquires where to find Reva, “Miss Devereaux,” and the hostess replies “She’s right over there,” pointing Reva out. The hostess’ familiarity with Miss Devereaux implies that Reva is a regular at this restaurant, and the (white) staff knows her by name. This is a comfortable space for Reva, but Furious is minimized physically by the high-angle shot, which pans and tracks to follow Furious as he mounts the steps to the upper level where Reva sits at a table.

As Furious bends to kiss Reva on the cheek, the camera comes to rest at eye-level in a medium shot that frames the interlocutors as equals who sit at the same height across the table from one another. Reva thanks Furious for agreeing to meet with her, making it clear that she has requested the tête-à-tête, further cementing our understanding that she is in control of the situation. While they start off trading barbs, the real topic of Reva and Furious’ conversation is Tre, and an ongoing argument about how to raise their son. Reva’s real agenda is to interrogate Furious on Tre’s desire to cohabitate with Brandi when they leave for college. The two disagree over whether Tre is mature enough to make the decision to move in with Brandi: Reva believes that Tre’s desire to cohabitate with his girlfriend reflects a lack of understanding of what it means to take a relationship to a more serious level, and blames this on Furious. She claims, “You’re his father. That means you were supposed to guide his decisions.” Reva’s accusation that Furious has been an inadequate father to their son echoes the widespread belief in American culture that Black men were not living up to their responsibilities, making this conversation about not just their own diegetic son but about the state of Black fathering in general.

Furious rejects Reva's claim that he has been a bad father by going on the offensive: he accuses Reva, in turn, of infantilizing their teenage son, asserting that Tre is a man capable of making his own decisions. Furious tells Reva to figuratively cut the apron strings: "It's time for you to let go. I know you wanna play the mommy and all of that, but Tre is a grown man now." Furious dismisses Reva's sudden concern about Tre as too little, too late, accusing her of wanting to "play mommy." Furious has turned the tables, implying that Reva, and not he, is the inadequate parent. Further, Furious jabs back at Reva for being an absent mother: "[Tre] is not a little boy anymore. That time has passed, sweetheart. You missed it." Angered by Furious' accusation, Reva speaks tersely, again invoking the widespread problem of absent/inadequate Black fathering: "You taught [Tre] what he needed to be a man. I'll give you that, because most men ain't man enough to do what you did. But [. . .] what you did is no different from what mothers have been doing from the beginning of time. It's just too bad more brothers won't do the same." Reva's dressing down of Furious amounts to a dismissal of the work he has done to make a man out of his son, implying that raising his child is a responsibility rather than a choice, and lumping Furious in with the many Black men who have not done their duty. Regardless of Furious' efforts to be a good, Black-affirmative role model for Tre, Reva claims that Furious deserves no special regard, simply fulfilling a necessary (and, in a way, "natural") role. Furious' efforts do not make up, Reva seems to be saying, for the failure of other Black men to raise their children.

This scene amounts to a conciliatory measure gesturing to the work done by Black women in the audience who have raised their children without acclaim. While Reva is right, according to contemporary opinion, to challenge Furious' self-

congratulatory position on raising his son, this sequence also makes Reva something of a villain. Reva's tone and attitude towards Furious, whom we have come to identify as the hero of the narrative, is critical and belittling. Our loyalties lie with Furious; we have seen him work to raise Tre responsibly, to inculcate in his son the values of self-respect and accountability. Further, he has worked to educate the Black community, and labors daily for Black advancement in terms of home ownership. Reva's attack on Furious, therefore, seems unjustified and misdirected.

While she has a point in claiming that Black women have done without acclaim and for centuries what Furious is so proud of himself for doing, we perceive her attack as unprovoked and unfair. Despite the conflict in this scene, and its capping of an ongoing theme of disagreement between Tre's parents, this episode does not function as a major obstacle for the narrative. In another film, perhaps a family drama, Reva and Furious would fight about their differing views on how to raise their child; the focus would be on the relationship between the two, and the resolution of the narrative would come with the reconciliation of Tre's parents and the promise of happily-ever-after. But in this film, the central conflict is not relational; it is social, structural, political, so this scene functions more to vilify Reva and celebrate Furious than to serve as a major obstacle that the narrative must resolve.

In all of these scenes, Furious Styles is constructed as a good father, one who invests emotionally in the work of raising his son to be a Black man who does what's right. Resisting the lure of gangs, succeeding in school, going to college, and being responsible regarding sex and the potential of teenage fatherhood are all lessons Furious teaches, and values that Tre has internalized. That Furious is a good father figure is

represented in this patterning of his character after Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan. Tellingly, Furious is not constructed as a stand-in for Martin Luther King, Jr., the most famous Civil Rights activist and iconic Black leader. Furious does not preach nonviolence and cooperation or assimilation, nor does he call on whites to take action to better the lot of Blacks, as King did. Rather than espousing peaceful confrontation via protest, Furious owns a gun and uses it to defend his home. Furious advocates Black self-interest and action, and preaches Black empowerment rather than appealing to whites to sympathize with the plight of Black communities, as Martin Luther King, Jr., faced criticism for. In later scenes, Furious even wears black-rimmed glasses reminiscent of Malcolm X's iconic eyewear.

The modeling of Furious after Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan, separatist rather than conciliatory leaders of Black communities, is a nod to Black Power and the history of Black self-advocacy and activism. In fact, Doughboy calls Furious "motherfuckin' Malcolm Farrakhan," intentionally conflating the two strident leaders into the one figure of positive fatherly male role modeling in their 'hood. Furious Styles redeems Black men and Black fathers from the historic charge of inadequacy. *Boyz N the Hood* conveys a didactic message that Black men must emulate Furious Styles, a "brother" who stepped up to become a father, if they want to reverse the trend of Black male endangerment and find a way of escaping the cycle of violence, drugs, and poverty that renders the 'hood a war zone.

Absent fathers, bad fathers

Furious Styles is the only Black father visible in Tre's neighborhood, with the exception of Ricky, a teenage father. Doughboy and Ricky's fathers are present through their remarked-upon absence, but these Black men are named only as a missing piece of their sons' lives. The other gang-bangers in the neighborhood never speak of their fathers, nor are their fathers ever seen. *Boyz N the Hood* takes up this concern, and it is because of absent fathers that most of the young Black boys in the 'hood grow up to be failing—dead—Black men.

Doughboy's father is not present, and Brenda denigrates both this absent Black man and his son, calling Doughboy a "piece of shit, just like his father."[80] Brenda speaks of Ricky's father, on the other hand, in positive tones. This absent Black man is symbolized by the football given Ricky by him, which Ricky throws around as a child. This object from his father is imbued with pride that carries through to Ricky's high school years, when he is a star quarterback and hopes to get a football scholarship to USC. Even this meager symbol of Ricky's fatherly presence has a significant impact on the boy and, later, the young man. Doughboy, in being compared to his father and denigrated as a result, resorts to whatever identity the 'hood can offer him, which is as a drug dealer and gang-banger. Though Ricky has some pride for his father, however, he is not saved from the violence of the 'hood. Thus absent Black fathers are figured as the cause of real-world homicide rates among young Black men, who have no guides to teach them responsibility, self-respect, and "brotherly love."

[80] Brenda is reminiscent of the symbolically castrating "Black matriarch" of the Moynihan Report.

The damage done to Black boys by absent fathers is compounded by the harm perpetrated by bad Black fathers, which are figured as both individuals and institutions in *Boyz N the Hood*. The narrative presents two bad father figures: the police, represented by a racist Black officer, and the United States Army, a nameless, faceless stand-in for the white government. The Black police officer, whose beat includes Tre and Furious' neighborhood, represents the damage done by internalized racism. This officer repeatedly claims to hate young Black men, wishing they would all die and leave the streets empty. Tre has two encounters with this officer, one as a child and one as a teen. The first night Tre is with his father, a Black man breaks into their home and Furious shoots at the man, barely missing him but leaving two holes in the front door. Tre, excited and naïve, is disappointed that Furious did not succeed in killing the burglar, but Furious reprimands him for this attitude, saying that to do so would have been "contributin' to killin' another brother." While Tre has so far understood group identity as family-based, Furious begins to widen his horizons, teaching Tre that Black self-interest must be balanced with the needs of the community. By referring to all Black men as "brothers," Furious invokes a larger imagined family that extends fraternal responsibility to all Black men. Furious' lesson on brotherhood is immediately challenged by the officer responding to his 911 call, whose disregard for Black men in the 'hood serves as a counterexample to Furious' pro-Black stance.

The unnamed Black officer arrives an hour after Furious' call, and saunters slowly from his cruiser, eating a pastry and drinking coffee. Responding to a call from the 'hood is clearly lower in priority than taking a break for this officer, a somewhat unfortunate invocation of the stereotypical donut-shop cop. Clearly, however, the police

took their time in responding, knowing that the neighborhood the burglary took place in is a Black one. The Black officer treats Furious with disrespect, casually taking down information about the burglar and dismissing the emergency because of where it took place. He seems to suggest that Furious should expect nothing less than a break-in because he lives in the 'hood. When Furious explains that he took two shots at the intruder, the officer expresses a wish that Furious would have aimed better: "Be one less nigger out here on the streets we have to worry about." Furious shakes his head in disbelief and looks at Tre, raising an eyebrow to express his disgust with such an attitude. The officer asks Furious if there is something wrong, in the same sneering tone. Furious responds: "Something wrong, yeah. It's just too bad you don't know what it is. Brother." Furious calls the Black officer "brother" in a sardonic tone, implying that the officer is betraying his own race by wishing death on the individuals who commit crime. The death of another Black man would solve nothing, Furious implies, and the police officer who believes the opposite is a threat to the community just as much as drugs and gang violence.

Young adult Tre's run-in with the same racist police officer occurs after an episode on Crenshaw where Ricky is insulted by Ferris, the leader of the Blood gang. Tre and Ricky are pulled over by police as they leave the scene, though they have broken no laws. As the officers roughly frisk the teens, Tre claims his innocence, saying "I didn't do nothin'." The Black officer takes Tre's self-defense as insolence, and responds by intimidating and brutalizing Tre, shoving a cocked and loaded pistol under his chin. The camera cuts between close-ups of Tre squirming, his eyes wide with fear, and the officer, pressing into Tre, his face a grimace of malice. The cop spits, "That's why I took this job.

I hate little motherfuckers like you. Little niggers, you ain't shit! I could blow your head off [. . .] and you couldn't do shit." Tears roll from Tre's eyes, and (just in time) the police scanner blares an alert: "Possible 187 in a blue VW at corner of Florence and Vermont."[81] The officer backs down, pulled out of a heated moment back into reality, and the officers leave. Tre is shaken, terrified by how close he has just come to become a statistic, one that has been repeated throughout the film: Black male on Black male violence is an epidemic, and it is perpetrated by those who have promised to fight crime, not commit it.

The brutality of the Black police officer in these scenes makes the argument that the Black community cannot rely on police to keep young Black men safe—in fact, the very people sworn to "serve and protect" are some of the most dangerous, because their status elevates them above the law. If this man decided to pull the trigger, Tre would die, powerless in the face of state-authorized violence. This officer is an example of internalized racism, a Black man who hates Blacks and who, rather than fighting the institutions that cause endemic poverty and lessened opportunities, deals with individual problems, thinking that to eliminate one Black gang-banger will make life better in the 'hood. The officer makes the same mistake as white America does, by seeing Black male individuals as the cause of social ills rather than tracing back social facts—young Black men commit crimes—to larger political, institutional causes—young Black men commit crimes because they are raised in a culture of crime, drugs, and violence, and have few options for creating a dignified life.

[81] It is ironic that the police are called away to a potential murder in a blue VW bug—the same car that Tre drives. The voice over the radio provides an ironic commentary on the events of the scene, implying that if the officer pulled the trigger, it would be a 187—a murder.

As the Black police officer represents bad father figures—individuals that are meant to protect the people of the community, but in reality cause egregious harm—so does the United States Army. Furious and Tre describe the Army as a place where, instead of becoming a man and finding one's purpose (as the advertisements promise), a Black man will lose himself and become akin to a slave. In the early scene where Furious and Tre go fishing, Furious recalls joining the Army to become a man, to be somebody that Tre would respect and "look up to." Furious continues after a pause: "So, I guess that's why I went to Vietnam." His expression changes from nostalgic as he recounts his teen years, to somber as he warns his young son. "Don't ever go in the Army, Tre. Black man ain't got no place in the Army." Furious does not elaborate on his experiences in the Army or explain what soured him against it, but the change in his tone from light and joking to ominous and warning expresses just how serious he is about this topic. The Army, according to the narrative's hero, is a dangerous place for a Black man.

In the latter half of the film, Tre has internalized Furious' lesson and tries to dissuade Ricky from joining the Army. Ricky reclines on the couch watching football as Tre and Doughboy's crew sit on the stoop outside. Ricky lies back, spinning a football—the symbol of his absent father—between his hands. When a commercial comes on for the Army, he sits up, paying attention. The commercial promises that the Army will teach a man "skills that employers want. Like how to motivate yourself. How to lead others. How to perform under pressure. You can learn all these things in the Army." As the announcer's voice lists these manly attributes, Ricky picks his head up, slows and then stops spinning the football, and eventually sits up and leans toward the television, a thoughtful look on his face. The absence of Ricky's father is made present by the football

Ricky spins, the one gift from his father that has had a lasting impact on Ricky's life. The Army promises to teach Ricky responsibility and self-respect, values that Tre has learned from Furious. Immediately following the commercial, Ricky and Tre walk to the store so that Ricky can calm down after a fight with his brother Doughboy. As they walk, Ricky tells Tre he's thinking of enlisting in the Army to work with computers and get money for college. Tre tries to convince Ricky not to join the Army, saying, "What they don't tell you is that you don't belong to *you* no more. You belong to them. The government. Like a slave or something. See, my daddy told me, a Black has got no business, no place in the white man's Army." Ricky responds that he wants to live a dignified life, he wants to "*be* somebody," and insists that the Army would teach him a trade and treat him like a man. Tre replies that the Army is in the business of erasing, not embracing, individuality: "When you join that Army, you ain't gon' be nobody."

Tre's opinions about the Army are predicated upon his father's teachings, and this father-wisdom is exactly what Ricky lacks and is searching for. Further, Ricky's desire to join the Army is described as the desire to obtain an identity—he wants to "be[come] somebody," rather than just another young Black man with few options thanks to his upbringing in the 'hood. The comparison to his drug-dealing brother Doughboy is apparent, as Ricky doesn't want to end up doing nothing with his life and sell drugs to make ends meet. But there is a larger identity crisis being hinted at here, and when we understand that the Army is a stand-in for a father, we see that what Ricky is really clamoring for is someone and something to give his life meaning. The film implies that if his father were present, Ricky would not have such a need; the example of Tre, a young man with direction and self-respect, proves that a father would give Ricky the identity he

longs for. It is in the scene following Tre and Ricky's conversation that Ricky is murdered.

Conclusion

It is perhaps a simplistic reading of *Boyz N the Hood* that Ricky dies because he has no father while Tre survives and thrives because he does. Nevertheless, this is the message that the film expresses through its portrayal of Tre's sense of self and his opportunities, contrasted with Ricky's searching for a role model. Doughboy, another fatherless boy, also becomes a statistic, literally disappearing from the screen in a dissolve as titles impart that he was murdered two weeks after burying his brother. Though Doughboy's murderers are never named, we are left to assume that his death is the natural consequence of his long history of delinquency, drug dealing, and gang violence. Ricky is an innocent victim of the 'hood, and much is made of his death, while Doughboy's murder is unremarkable, the seemingly natural outcome of his role as drug dealer and gang-banger. Tre is able to escape and attend a historically Black college in far-off Atlanta, Georgia. Tre's movement represents real upward mobility, as he does better than his father, who joined the Army to become a man, by leaving to get a college education and presumably join the Black middle class. Tre's path out of the war zone that is the ethnic 'hood is made possible by his father's strict but loving guidance. Instead of having a father to teach them responsibility and self-respect, Ricky and Doughboy have an overbearing mother who plays favorites. Had Ricky and Doughboy had a father, we gather, they would have all the same opportunities that Tre has. Furious Styles represents a Black masculinity that is self-aware, proud, and conscious of its responsibilities to the "brotherhood" of Black men who are struggling under the history of racial oppression.

The ‘hood film of the 1980s and 90s updates the gangster film to consider what happens to young Black men when systemic inequality renders their options few and largely unattractive. The cycle of poverty, violence, and drug abuse that is the legacy of centuries of racist practices, laws, and policies leaves young Black men few opportunities for self-betterment or even self-respect. The lack of progress in civil rights and equality that the Blaxploitation gangster stylishly protested against has worsened in the 1980s, thanks to conservative fiscal and social policies enacted by the Reagan administration and continued by the first Bush administration. These real-world losses in Blacks’ potential to achieve the “American Dream” are reflected in filmic representations of the ‘hood.

Further, popular sentiments about the lack of appropriate and present father figures for young Black boys and a damaging, unmanning Black matriarchy are refracted into the ‘hood film’s portrayals of Black teens struggling to find identity when faced with the historic legacy of few opportunities and even fewer positive role models. Thus, the ‘hood gangsta carries on the work of earlier iterations of the gangster figure to give voice to the conditions facing a historically silenced group. Jonathan Munby argues “[t]he recourse to gangster imagery by African Americans is more than a reflection of the ‘criminal’ reality of ghetto” or ‘hood “life. It has a deeper symbolic worth in connecting today’s disenfranchised with a tradition of dissent” (3). By turning the gangster into the gangsta, ‘hood films appropriate the genre’s power to imaginatively respond to threats to racialized masculinity in American culture, and do so to specifically redeem a vision of Black masculinity and/as fatherhood. Ultimately this cycle argues that only Black men

can teach Black boys how to succeed in an America where you have to be asleep to believe in the American Dream.[82]

[82] Thanks to George Carlin for this phrasing.

CHAPTER V

THE OFF-WHITE GANGSTER OF THE 1990s

As I have argued throughout this project, white male hegemony faced increasingly insistent challenges throughout the second half of the twentieth century, beginning in the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement, feminism and Women's Liberation, and the gay rights movement. In chapter 1 I argued that *The Godfather* responded to this challenge by re-imbuing the (racially white) ethnic father figure with a moral righteousness that many then believed had been lost to white patriarchy. Chapter 2 explored the ways in which the Black gangster of the 1970s continued the challenge to white patriarchy by making visible the historical oppression of Black men, now countered by a Black gangster hero. Chapter 3 argued that Black gangsters of the 1980s and early 1990s challenged the then-dominant narrative of Black male inadequacy by valorizing a positive Black father figure. In this chapter, I argue that the focus of the gangster film comes full-circle in the 1990s, centering on white men whose ethnic identity is foregrounded in order to join the ranks of those claiming historical victimization and to deny white privilege.

I will demonstrate that a cycle of gangster films released in the early- to mid-1990s projected contemporary gender and racial politics into a past figured as hostile to white men. This cycle, which includes *Miller's Crossing*, *GoodFellas*, *State of Grace*, *The Godfather Part III*, *King of New York* (all 1990), *Mobsters* (1991), *Billy Bathgate* (1991), *Donnie Brasco* (1997), *Hoodlum* (1997), and late entrants *Gangs of New York* and *Road to Perdition* (2002), displaces contemporary concerns about slipping white male prestige into the past. These films present men as victims of discrimination, placing

them in social moments where their access to power is troubled by their ethnic positioning.[83] This cycle attempts to legitimate contemporary white men's feelings of victimization in the face of identity politics and the multiculturalist movement in America. This defensive posture is melodramatic, creating a moral legibility for white men that, with unintentional irony, belies the actual conditions of American gender and racial politics. These films argue for victim-hero status for the group who has most benefitted from the historical inequalities of the American experiment. By making white male hegemony problematic, the feminist and antiracist movements of the post-Civil Rights era deconstructed the cultural power of white men; gangster genre films of the 1990s work to revalorize and re-center white masculinity by claiming that they, too, were once victims.

Identity politics, multiculturalism, and whiteness

The cultural moment of the 1990s in America was characterized by a turning inward of national anxieties that had long been focused outward, thanks to the end of the Cold War, the 1989 demolishing of the Berlin Wall, which symbolized the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the dissolution of the USSR in 1990-91. The United States entered an era where enemies within the borders were more threatening than the Communist threat without, which had sustained Reagan-era protectionist policies and rhetoric. With these changes in the geopolitical landscape, historians Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Capella argue, "the Republican coalition lost its international enemy" (66) and turned its focus to the enemy within: the multiculturalist threat to the white heteropatriarchal status

[83] For an extended, nuanced discussion of the politics of liminality or "in-betweenness," see Priscilla Pena Ovalle's 2011 *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom*.

quo. Multiculturalism and identity politics, legacies of the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s, became buzzwords in the late 1980s and structured a new understanding of identity and belonging in the multiethnic American nation.

The 1960s liberation movements engaged in widespread consciousness-raising work to make the public aware of, and bring an end to, entrenched and institutionalized discrimination that women and minorities faced in the workplace, in education, and in the home. The efforts of feminists, Civil Rights advocates, and gay rights activists changed the way the American nation had seen itself (or, rather, was encouraged to see itself) in the World War II era: as a unified people, working together to rid the world of fascism and defend democracy.[84] After the troops came home in the late 1940s, the promise of an egalitarian America never took shape: the Black regiments who had fought on foreign soil came home to a Jim Crow South and widespread segregationist policies nationally, while Rosie the Riveter returned to the domicile, facing traditional expectations of child rearing and homemaking. The subsequent demands by minority groups for equal treatment brought to light deep fissures in the national reality, which soon became reflected in the national imaginary as identity politics: the notion that individuals could collectivize and advocate for their own interests by aggregating into groups composed of people sharing racial, sexual, or gender identities. Identity politics has come to be

[84] Of course this notion of an unfragmented polity and populace is also a fond fiction, a narrative much relied upon when recalling "the good old days" of circa-World War II America. The *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave It to Beaver* lifestyle was already a fiction, an image of American family life that was never not unscripted. For more on the nostalgia of the fictitious American family, see Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992).

understood specifically as the fracturing of the American public along the newly problematic lines of gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity.[85]

The phrase "identity politics" has a troubled history. According to feminist historian Cynthia J. Davis, the term was first used by the 1977 Combahee River Collective, a gathering of black feminist lesbians who decried the unconsciously racist and classist bent of the middle-class white-defined feminist movement (Davis online). The notion that a political feminism must account for the differences among those who benefit from its tenets inspired vigorous debate within the movement. "Identity politics" became shorthand for the notion that different groups of people benefit differently from racial privilege, patriarchal hegemony, and the liberation movements that sought to end these structural inequalities. Moreover, "identity politics" implies a common alliance to a group identity, whether or not the members of the group acknowledge their position in the race and gender hierarchy. As race and class scholar Todd Gitlin explains, identity politics has become not just a catchphrase or an intellectual ideal: "[i]t is a pattern of belonging, a search for comfort, an approach to community" (153) that validates individuals' desire to be an acknowledged part of something greater than themselves.

As identity politics became more and more central to academic and activist debates, it entered the public argot along with and wedded to another contested notion: multiculturalism. Stemming from disputes over the academic canon and fueled by the growing importance of racial justice to the national political discourse, multiculturalism,

[85] It would be more accurate to describe these categories as once-again problematic, as the history of American culture is the story of struggles over defining the nation in terms of its racial and gendered makeup. See, for example, Gaylyn Studlar's analysis of masculinities in the early 20th century, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996).

as historian Lisa Lowe asserts, was "represented in both utopian and dystopian terms" depending upon who employed the term, and to what ends (Lowe online). "Multiculturalism" signifies a broad attempt by many parties to include a more diverse perspective in the literary canon, in schools, and in public life. The main result has been an opening of the canon to non-male, non-white authors and voices, an acceptance of alternate lifeways of non-white peoples, and attempts to celebrate the racial and ethnic backgrounds of all rather than championing assimilation to white standards. And while, as race scholar Jon Cruz argues, "American society (not the polity) has always been 'multicultural,' […] only recently has this been recognized and *named* as such" (27-28, emphasis orig.).

The twinned notions of identity politics and multiculturalism have been used as both a rallying point for those engaged in working towards equality, and as a verbal cudgel for conservative factions who deem the focus on historical inequalities, and the legacies of racism and sexism in the current political climate, to result in a damaging fracturing of American society. While identity politics and multiculturalism were first deployed in the service of understanding the nexuses of oppression and the efforts to combat white privilege, public commentators appropriated the terminology beginning in the mid-1980s to decry what they believed to be minority groups' demands for special treatment. For example, Rush Limbaugh, who rose to prominence as a conservative talk-radio host during—and likely, in part, due to—the national conversation about multiculturalism in the late 80s and early 90s, took many opportunities on his radio show to criticize the movement and demonize its adherents. Saying that "multiculturalism is the label for all those groups who have failed to make it in America" (Cruz 33),

Limbaugh often lumped together efforts towards equality for gays, people of color, and women into one supposedly cohesive and unified front: the "cultural 'liberal' elite" (Jamieson and Capella 63-64).[86] By claiming that efforts to recognize a more diverse nation and canon were coming from a group allied against the interests and well-being of the "common man," Limbaugh and other conservative commentators capitalized on the resentment simmering among those who thought they were not to blame for institutional discrimination and who felt, in turn, discriminated against by the attention brought to bear on privilege in the United States.

Many of those who contested the usefulness of identity politics and the efforts to dismantle racial, sexual, and gender discrimination benefited from ignorance and denial of the inequalities endemic to American society: upper- and middle-class white men and women.[87] Multiculturalism and identity politics threaten privileged groups' stranglehold on wealth and power in this nation, and the conservative backlash against measures to equalize the playing field for people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, and social classes has influenced the discourse surrounding multiculturalism. Cruz argues that conservative factions' agitation against this egalitarian

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[86] Limbaugh also coined the term "feminazi" to lambaste feminists and feminism. Hearing Rush Limbaugh on the radio in the 1990s was my first exposure to the vitriol directed at feminists, and the experience doubtless had an impact on my own nascent feminism. Ironic thanks to Mr. Limbaugh.

[87] Of course there is a grand old tradition in America of persuading those who do not benefit from white patriarchy to vote against their own interests by using emotional pleas to create illogical alliances in support of ideological claims. This explains, for example, why president Bush won the popular vote in the 2004 presidential election despite failing to foresee the threat posed by Osama Bin Laden's terrorist sect, starting two very unpopular wars in foreign countries, mandating the punitive No Child Left Behind Act, and overseeing the largest disinvestment in public services since the Reagan Administration.

movement "convey[s] a nostalgia for cultural boundaries that were once less pervious" (30)—a longing to return to an uncontested social terrain that never really existed in the first place, except for straight white men who had everything to lose and nothing to gain from the leveling of the playing field brought about by the politically progressive 1960s.[88]

The rise of a politics of identity allowed "minority" groups—women, gays, people of color—to protest the history of unjust practices and policies that kept power and money consolidated in the hands of one group in particular: heterosexual white men. White men had accrued benefits, privilege, and power by and in the course of maintaining the status quo, which meant white male ownership of property, businesses, and presence in government. Naming white men as the beneficiaries of discrimination in America came to be seen as an effort to make white men the villains, with minority groups as the victims, of history. This Manichean construct is melodramatic, with the moral legibility of race and the assumed virtue of whiteness itself at stake. If to be white was to be unfairly privileged, then the just thing to do would be to rectify the wrongs of history with acknowledgement, reparations, and a promise to change the unfair policies that led to historic discrimination in the first place. But the burden of accepting

[88] Also figuring in the national conversation about white male victimhood in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Men's Movement constructed a melodramatic, talking-back response to multiculturalism and identity politics by re-centering men's concerns and giving men a "safe place" to talk about their emotions and needs. This desire for a monocultural space to experience "authentic" masculinity was crystallized by the mythopoetic men's movement, spearheaded by Robert Bly and his myth of the Iron Man. As Margo Adair argues, the mythopoetic men's movement was "a backlash—men clamoring to reestablish the moral authority of the patriarchs" (55) that had recently faced unprecedented challenges. For more on the men's movement and responses to it, see Robert Bly's *Iron John*, Judith Newton's *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men's Movement*, and the 1992 anthology *Women Respond to the Men's Movement*.

responsibility or even acknowledging the ways whites benefited from racial privilege was too much a burden to bear; a much easier path would be to reject the notion that white men benefit from injustice and to reframe them as victims.

A national rhetorical (and politically conservative) reframing of multiculturalism/identity politics followed from this logic. One real result of the work of civil rights groups had been the enacting of legislation and policies to give minority groups a leg up, a set of policies that became known as Affirmative Action. At the level of legislation, then, efforts were being made to right the tipped scales of racial injustice. But when the vocal conservative backlash began, decrying these efforts to level the playing field as requests or demands for special treatment by the sore losers of history, Affirmative Action became aligned in the national imaginary (though not without contestation) with "quota hiring" and the sense that Blacks were being chosen over more qualified whites. Political campaign ads played on this widespread sense that the balance had shifted in minorities' favor and had begun to penalize whites for the color of their skin, serving to further justify the backlash and garner votes for conservative candidates.

One truism that was believed to justify the counter-Affirmative Action trend was the argument that racism no longer existed in the 1990s as it had in the 1970s, when such policies had been put into place. Affirmative Action had achieved its goals of leveling the playing field for minorities, many felt, and now was penalizing white men for being white men. Another counter was that slavery, the most visible and obviously unjust racist practice of American history, had been abolished in 130 years ago with the 14th Amendment, and that present-day America no longer contained vestiges of such a vicious and ubiquitous racism. The protest "my grandparents didn't own slaves, so why should I

pay reparations" (either literal or metaphorical) was commonly heard throughout the 1990s, as was the claim "I'm not a sexist; why am I being punished?" The drive to deflect criticism and deny responsibility for the history of injustice was widespread, and the move to personalize structural inequalities—the framing of racism and sexism as individual, rather than societal, problems—helped make the case that the attention paid to America's history of discrimination was doing more harm than good to the nation.

Another counter to the historical trend towards lessening inequality was a kind of "me-too" claim by white males to the history of discrimination in America. This trend saw an attempt—a very successful one—to appropriate ancestral ethnicities, turning "white European-American" into a fragmented notion of identities, such as Irish-American and Italian-American.[89] This hyphenation deliberately echoed the switch from "Black" to "African-American" to describe Americans of the African diaspora. Race scholar Charles Gallagher argues that "this everyone-was-a-victim mentality serve[d] another important function for whites" by "allow[ing] whites simultaneously to be victims and not to be held accountable for [. . .] white racial privilege" (146). At the same time, a national trend towards white acceptance of identity politics saw a reexamination

[89] It is instructive to note that the wave of nonwhite ethnicities popularized in the 90s consisted largely of the Irish-American, German-American, the Italian-American groups. The potential construct of "Jewish American" did not achieve wide usage, which I would argue is due to this positionality being reliant not on a shared national ancestry but rather on religious and ethnic commonalities among a multinational diasporic people. Italy, Germany, and Ireland became frequent hailing points for white Americans "exploring" and celebrating their particular ethnic heritage. Some reasons for the preeminence of these ethnicities are that Irish, Italians, and Germans constituted a large percentage of the actual immigrants to America in the early twentieth century. The visibility of the Irish in the popular press was also increasing, as Thomas Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, a best-selling nonfiction book, was published in 1996. Ethnic Italians were known for having close-knit, Catholic families, and the Mafia myth had structured the public's understanding of Italian-American family life since Puzo's 1969 novel, informing broad assumptions about Italian-American family styles.

of American history and a nostalgic construction of that history as having treated whites as badly as more obvious ethnic minorities. Whites proudly proclaimed their ethnic heritage and along with it, a narrative that their group's history of brutal treatment was followed quickly by successful assimilation to white Anglo-Saxon American values. The argument follows from this narrative that Irish-Americans, for example, did not need Affirmative Action, government intervention, to better their lot; they did so through hard work and without whining about their lower stature.

Constructing and claiming an ethnicity descended from immigrant parents in a patriarchal line reifies, shores up the boundaries of whiteness against the onrushing flood of brownness represented by multiculturalism. *Time* magazine's September 1993 issue featured the brown visage of "Eve," above the title "The New Face of America: How Immigrants Are Shaping the World's First Multicultural Society" (Roediger plate 1). Supposedly the future face of the American public, Eve's image was synthesized from a non-scientific analysis of population trends, the editors of Time magazine determining that immigrants' high birth rates would lead to the feminizing and browning of the American populace. Eve's gender and skin tone symbolized the masses that would soon, the feature story explained, overtake whites as the majority population in America (Roediger 4-5). Eve appeared amid vigorous debates in conservative as well as liberal political circles about immigrants' high birthrate and the decline of the birthrate among whites, in a kind of moral panic about the future of "the white race." Population statistics, and images like Eve's predicting the browning and feminizing of America, fueled the backlash against Affirmative Action and multiculturalism.

My argument about white males retaking the moral high ground from beset minorities is not a new one. Richard Dyer's foundational 1997 monograph on whiteness studies, *White*, identifies the recent trend of "white men, specifically, as a new victim group, oppressed by the gigantic strides taken by affirmative action policies, [who] can't get jobs, can't keep women" (10). Race scholar George Lipsitz, author of the influential 1998 book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, argues that imaginative national investments in identity politics did not result in whites losing the comparative advantages and privileges of their racial status. Rather, whites gained the ability to portray themselves as victims of Affirmative Action, immigration policies, and social welfare programs. All the while, whites (and especially white males) continued enjoying and accruing more of the political power they claimed to be losing to ethnic and racial minorities, women, and the poor. I extend the existing conversation about white male victimhood in the 1990s to the gangster film, demonstrating how the genre in this period illuminates and participates in the attempts to take back ethnicity for white men by constructing "off-white" gangsters as victims. The gangster film of this period absolves white men of the charges of racial and gendered privilege, further testifying to the genre's unique ability to represent cultural struggles with weighty questions of gender, race/ethnicity, and power.

Whiteness and the gangster: 1990 and beyond

1990 represents the start of a new cycle of gangster films and a new vision of the film gangster. I will use the phrase "off-white" to describe the 1990s gangster, following film scholar Linda Mizejewski's "Movies and the Off-White Gangster" in *American Cinema of the 1990s*. The off-white gangster functions to reimbue white men with a

distinguishable ethnic identity, allowing white men to claim the victim-hero positioning proffered by the ethnic gangster's history of struggle. Mizejewski finds that the gangster genre of the early 1990s "was under particular pressure to reinvest not only in whiteness but in white masculinity," for "masculinity is what's most invested in routes of privilege and power—that is, in whiteness" (42, 41). In exposing and reinforcing contemporary dynamics of gender, ethnicity, and power, the gangster films of the 1990s illuminate their cultural moment. In a postmodern moment that saw popular culture beginning to reference itself,[90] these films themselves do the cultural work of deconstructing the alliance of whiteness and masculinity with power by making their protagonists' ethnicity visible, at issue, and therefore problematic. The off-white gangster film is set in the past, hearkening back to a time when white masculinity was (supposedly) unchallenged in its hegemony. And these films present ethnic masculinity through a nostalgic lens that allows white male viewers to participate in a shared feeling of loss for the unchallenged hegemony that they once enjoyed, making possible an imaginative appropriation of a victimized identity.

Thanks to the increasing complexity and nuance of gangster genre scholarship, scholars have begun to take on the racial/ethnic and gender politics of the genre. For example, film scholar Rachel Rubin's essay "Gangster Generation: Crime, Jews, and the Problem of Assimilation" explores the cultural work of the off-white gangster, focusing

[90] Self-referentiality and intertexuality are hallmarks of postmodern aesthetics. This era saw the beginning of a trend toward film and television's tongue-in-cheek nods towards the mediated nature of media products. *The Simpsons*, an animated prime-time series that makes much of other film and television texts, first aired in 1989; *South Park*, an animated series about foul-mouthed children in South Park, Colorado, with similar intertexual borrowings, debuted in 1997. Both continue to air to this day. For more on postmodernity and/in 1990s media, see Douglas Kellner's 1995 *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics between the Modern and Postmodern*.

on the ethnic Jewish gangster and the particularities of a Jewish response to generic and cultural history. She argues that, "rediscovered as ethnic heroes, [Jewish gangsters] stand as a powerful white, middle class 'me too' retort to the general acceptance of 'multiculturalism' in the American educational system" (8-9). Further, Rubin argues that gangster films of the 1990s perform "a kind of cultural Viagra" for their male audiences, inspiring faith in masculine potency where it had been lost (7). In an essay titled "Westerns and Gangster Films since the 1970s," genre scholar Steve Neale identifies the major strands of the gangster film in the 1990s, including the "urban retro" gangster film influenced by *The Godfather*, the "ghetto gang" cycle, more influenced by industrial than generic factors, and a new cycle of gangster comedy or spoof films represented by *Jane Austen's Mafia!* (1998) and *Analyze This* (1999), both featuring Italian-American gangsters. Neale concludes that "male vanity, male codes of honour, male power, male violence and male rage," in addition to "extravagant displays of machismo," are the interests that gangster films of the 1990s share despite treating a variety of ethnic gangsters (40). What these two critics make clear is that the 1990s off-white gangster cycle is principally concerned with the trappings of masculinity—power, violence, and potency—in a specifically non-white milieu.

Esther Sonnet and Peter Stanfield's essay in *Mob Culture*, on "Masculinity, Dress, and the Retro Gangster Cycles of the 1990s," focuses on costuming and the cultural work performed by codes of dress in the period gangster films of the 1990s. While Sonnet and Stanfield do not examine the ethnic politics of this gangster film cycle, they acknowledge the gender politics present in the 1990s' look backwards to an unchallenged male hegemony. They argue that the "overall ideological project" of the retro gangster film is

"to offer its spectators an American past in which the national condition is mirrored by an uncorrupted form of masculinity that will be superseded by the events and transformations of the late 1950s and 1960s" (165). Whereas my argument focuses on ethnic identity, Sonnet and Stanfield argue that this cycle of film "operates on the more covert terrain of sexual politics, where the nostalgic invocation of period setting is ideally placed to articulate fears and pleasures in the recuperation of 'lost' gender certainties" (177). This marks "a powerful articulation of 'nostalgia' as the vehicle for retrogressive, antifeminist, and 'hypermasculinized' ideologies" (177). I extend their argument to analyze the ways that nostalgia in this film cycle depends upon ethnicity as a means of recuperating white male virtue.[91]

Off-whiteness proves to be a crucial intersection that allows deep analysis of threatened masculinity in the gangster film. In the America of the off-white gangster film, white men are "others," victims rather than villains of racial/ethnic discrimination. The problems of these narratives are loyalty, identity, and male love, indicating the centrality, seldom spoken, of these values to American masculinity. *Miller's Crossing* and *GoodFellas* are the exemplary films of this cycle, showcasing off-white gangsters of Irish, Italian, and Jewish backgrounds to recuperate a sympathetic white masculinity for an American audience who had in recent decades become very familiar with white men's failings.

[91] Even the popular press acknowledged the effect of the cycle's temporal displacement into the past: *Time* movie reviewer Richard Corliss acknowledges the sentimentalism of this cycle's backward looking: "Whatever charm the Mafia boss still possesses is not contemporary but nostalgic" while gangster protagonists in this cycle get "one last chance to strut their maleness in a traditional setting" (84-85).

Miller's Crossing: white ethnic nostalgia and male romance

Joel and Ethan Coen's independently produced *Miller's Crossing* (1990) fared poorly at the box office, grossing only $5 million domestically against a budget of $10 million (Mizejewski 26; Russell 68). Coming at the beginning of this new cycle of gangster films and overshadowed by that year's *The Godfather, Part III*, a return much spoken of in the press, and Scorsese's *GoodFellas*, which was eagerly anticipated as a return to the auteur's Italian-American roots, it is not surprising that the Coens' art-house style failed to resonate with popular audiences. *Miller's Crossing* features a complex plot that resists narrative closure, with unexplained bursts of excessive violence and a dark humor that filmgoers unfamiliar with the Coen style might find off-putting. Despite its unimpressive box office draw, *Miller's Crossing* has become an important part of the Coen brothers' and the American independent film oeuvre.

The story focuses on an Irish-American gangster, Tom Reagan (played by Gabriel Byrne), and his relationship with his Irish-American boss Leo O'Bannon (portrayed by Albert Finney),[92] and the double-crosses and changes of fortune brought into the gangster milieu by a two-timing Jewish bookie, Bernie Birnbaum (played by John Turturro). Taking place during the Prohibition Era, Leo is the top gangster in town and begins the film with the local officials in his pocket, a dangerous position that must be defended throughout the film. Complicating Tom's friendship with Leo is their shared romantic object, the feisty Verna, Bernie's sister (Marcia Gay Harden); moreover, the power plays

[92] These characters never claim to be "Irish-American," more often (fondly) calling each other and themselves "mick" or even identifying verbally as Irish. As either first- or second-generation immigrants, however (Tom's accent is thicker than Leo's, who has a more tony New York accent than an Irish brogue), they are on the Irish side in the ethnic divide in the mob war between the Italians and the Irish, with Jews on both sides and playing one side off another.

of the upwardly mobile Italian-American Giovanni Gasparo (aka Johnny Caspar, played by Coen regular Jon Polito) threaten the stability of the mob culture that Leo rules over. Through a series of double- and triple-crosses, Johnny Caspar and Bernie are murdered, as are their associates Eddie the Dane (played by J.E. Freeman) and the bookie Mink (Steve Buscemi). Tom and Leo survive but their friendship is irreparably damaged, their rupture bringing to light the gangster film's investment in homosociality as simultaneously constitutive of the gang and threatening to a heteronormative culture.

While *Miller's Crossing* received mixed reviews from popular critics, academics saw the film as a sophisticated and historically allusive play on the gangster film genre, and it received high praise in many book-length studies of the Coen brothers' work, including Carolyn R. Russell's insightful *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*. Film scholar John Flaus argues that *Miller's Crossing* displays a "sensuousness, especially in its mannered pictorialism" (8) of wide shots, rich palette of brown and green tones, and its carefully periodized sets. Writing in the journal *Post Script*, William Nolan finds the film's treatment of homosexuality and homophobia (coded in the romantic triangle between the openly homosexual Bernie Birnbaum, Mink the bookie, and the vicious Eddie the Dane) to be "critically anti-homophobic" in its exploration of the violence ensuing from regulatory heterosexuality (48). And Mizejewski's cogent essay on the off-white gangster identifies *Miller's Crossing* as a commentary on "the gangster genre itself, parodying its excesses and exposing its ironies" through the ethnic rivalries and brutal violence of its characters (43).

Miller's Crossing is a reconsideration of the early talking gangster films, focusing on Prohibition bootleggers, similar to the protagonists of *Scarface, The Public Enemy,*

and *Little Caesar* (1930-32). Moreover, its ethnic cast of recent Americans of Italian, Irish, and Jewish descent mirrors the central figures of the early 1930s ethnic gangster cycle. In one sense this is a move to claim an unrivaled authenticity in representing the gangster: going back to the "source," the earliest examples of the genre, bestows on *Miller's Crossing* an aura of realism that other gangster films of its era, notably the teen heartthrob-cast *Mobsters*, attempted but did not adequately realize.[93] The nostalgic return to the earliest film gangster types, with their brutal violence toward and control of women, enjoyment of a male-dominated public sphere, and the excitement of a highly public flouting of the law via bootlegging, overlays *Miller's Crossing* with a romantic aura that plays out in peculiar ways between its male leads.

Tom Reagan and Leo O'Bannon's relationship is the heart of *Miller's Crossing*, motivating the social and political maneuvering that drives the convoluted plot. The film includes intriguing meditations on homosexuality in the 1930s and the relationship between violence and love, and its complexity and the richness of its interests make it much more than just an apt example for my argument about contemporary trends in American cinema. For my purposes, *Miller's Crossing* serves as a film that reimagines the history of white masculinity as a history of victimization, a trend that resonates with the cultural attempt to revalorize white masculinity in the 1990s. Film and cultural scholar Sally Robinson argues that popular cultural texts in the 1990s presented rampant "images of a physically wounded and emotionally traumatized white masculinity" (6). These images abound *Miller's Crossing*, and the repeated wounding of Tom Reagan

[93] In addition, the film's carefully sourced costumes, props, and décor create a richly periodized world that resembles as fully as possible the time it represents. The intricacy of the sets and props makes for a beautiful and historically accurate mise-en-scene, enhancing the diegesis' appearance of realism.

illustrates the move toward victimizing white men in the 1990s. The film resonates with the contemporary culture's fetishizing of off-white ethnicity and lends insight into why ethnic masculinity in the gangster film is first and foremost a wounded masculinity. First I will establish that *Miller's Crossing* creates a world where ethnicity is omnipresent, a reflection of American culture's newfound interest in ethnic histories. Then I will explore the ways in which violence between men, and the physical wounding of Tom Reagan, makes the gangster protagonist a punching bag on whose body is written the cultural politics of a dangerously homosocial and potentially homoerotic ethnic masculinity.

Showcasing off-white ethnicity

By placing its protagonists in the Prohibitionist past, *Miller's Crossing* not only calls upon the earliest gangster films as generic precedents, but displaces its male characters from contemporary concerns about male sexuality and white male hegemony, with a national focus on multiculturalism and "just getting along," into a past where ethnic strife was open, welcome, and part of the exclusively male world of the gangster, a way men could banter among themselves, a method of identifying in- and out-group members, and a support to the masculine interchange of jests and the struggle over and negotiation of power relations.

Every important character in *Miller's Crossing* is of some determinate ethnicity; there are no unmarked men or women.[94] Tom Reagan and Leo O'Bannon are Irish; Johnny Caspar is Italian; Eddie the Dane's moniker gives away his national origin, and Bernie Birnbaum and his sister Verna are Jewish. These are not simply facts of identity,

[94] Some of the supporting characters—the police chief, the mayor, Rug Daniels and a few others—are white, with no commentary upon their ethnic identity. But these omissions are glaring, since so much of the dialogue of the film is taken up with identifying one ethnic "side" and another.

they are cruxes upon which the plot turns, and loyalties are tested and contested; the drama of the film plays out upon the ground of ethnic identity. Just the naming of these ethnic groups is a dramatic shift in contemporary mainstream American filmmaking, though this aspect was visible and remarked-upon in the early '30s cycle that *Miller's Crossing* reimagines. The conflict in *Miller's Crossing* is not racial: the groups fighting for power are aligned along off-white boundaries rather than splitting across a black-white dividing line. The shift towards identifying whites as members of ethnicities worthy of group status is due to the shift in identity politics on the national stage that I discussed earlier in this chapter.

The opening scene of *Miller's Crossing* introduces the ethnic antagonism that will continue through the film and which forms the most important schisms other than the relational ones between Tom and Leo. Johnny Caspar comes to Leo with a complaint about a bookie, Bernie Birnbaum, who is selling information on Caspar's fixed fights to make a profit. Caspar plans to kill Bernie for this double-cross, but since Bernie pays protection money to Leo, Caspar shows appropriate deference by letting Leo know of his plans. In the film's first scene, Caspar uses ethnic epithets to refer to Bernie and to Leo, introducing in the first frames of the film the notion that this world is structured by group ethnic identities in conflict with one another.

This scene creates the tensions and the themes that will play out through the narrative. First are the ethnic slurs that Caspar uses to describe not just his enemies, but also his own ethnic group. Caspar's case against "Bernie Birnbaum, the Schmatta Kid," is that "the sheeny" (slang for Jew) is "selling the information I fixed a fight." Leo refuses

to allow Caspar to kill Bernie, a move that is out of character. Caspar, angry at Leo's refusal, growls that he isn't "some guinea fresh off the boat," and that he is "sick of marching into this goddamn office to kiss [Leo's] Irish ass." Contemporary audiences might not know that "sheeny" and "schmatta" are derogatory terms meaning Jew, and that "guinea" was a slur used early in the twentieth century to signify people of Italian descent; but their use makes clear that these terms are derogatory. Caspar uses the disparaging term "guinea" to put words in Leo's mouth, assuming that Leo thinks of him as an ethnic stereotype. While it might seem hypocritical for Caspar to characterize Bernie as an ethnic stereotype and then assume that Leo is unfairly doing the same of himself, the fact is that all of the characters in *Miller's Crossing* traffic in the language of ethnic slurs, and to the detriment, it seems, of no one—these ethnic identities are not hierarchized. No one seems to lose face or stature based on their ethnic identity or heritage; rather, the only distinguishing characteristic among these ethnic men is the amount of violence they are willing to employ and the loyalties they can depend on in saving their own skin. This construction of a world set in the past, where all white men are marked as ethnics and the struggles they undertake involve not a sexually or racially integrated public sphere but a white male-only power structure, is a fantasy of an ethnic past that allows escape from the turbulent 1990s debates over white men's moral positioning and challenges to their cultural power.

Later in the film, an assassination attempt on Leo's life is overlaid with a stereotypically Irish soundtrack that confirms the correlation of ethnic masculinity with victimhood and violence. During the attempt on Leo's life, the soundtrack plays the well-known song "Danny Boy," sung by a male tenor, a lament commonly played at Irish

wakes and funerals and identified with Irish immigrants to America. The song's lyrics speak of loss: Danny Boy is urged to leave and follow "the pipes" that are calling, while the speaker will "stay and abide." Leo lies in bed, his eyes closed as he listens to the gramophone recording, nodding along with the lyrics as the singer laments Danny's leaving. He is in a sublime reverie, transported to another place (presumably Ireland) by the music. The lyrics of the song foreshadow the upcoming rift between Leo and Tom Reagan, with Tom as Danny Boy who must leave the fold and leave Leo behind. Further, the juxtaposition between Leo's enjoyment of the song and his sudden subsequent leap into violent action is almost humorous, his remorseless murdering of the men sent to kill him in stark contrast to the reclining man whose face is beatific with pleasure at a simple song from his homeland. This spectacular scene is aurally operatic, visually balletic in its precise choreography, and evinces a macabre humor in its grotesque violence. It is completely devoid of dialogue. It enacts a perfect combination of white male victimization, violence, and ethnic nostalgia.

Leo is almost preternaturally hard to kill, a fact that is in ironic counterpoint to the soundtrack, with its sentimentality bespeaking a melodramatic suffering, in this scene. Leo is alerted to the presence of the assassins in his home when he smells smoke from a (now-dead) guard's cigarette, which has lit his home's lower level on fire. The camera cuts between shots of Leo sensing danger, and shots of the killer's boots advancing up the stairs and down the hallway towards Leo. Their steps are in unison, and between the two pairs of boots we see the barrels of the tommy guns they carry. They advance steadily, without haste, their confidence bespeaking a prowess: these are professional killers, working for someone who can afford to hire skilled assassins. That the killers have

brought two Thompson (tommy) submachine guns to kill one man is absurd, both a measure of their esteem of Leo, a man so dangerous they must bring extra firepower to ensure they are able to kill him, and a period-appropriate nod to gangster films of the Prohibition era, when every gangster worth his salt carried a tommy gun. As the killers calmly and inevitably approach Leo's bedroom, he sits up slowly, slides his feet into his slippers beside the bed, and deliberately stamps out his cigar, putting it in the pocket of his dressing gown. Leo's slow movements bespeak a lack of fear; he is alert rather than afraid, and though his life is in danger he does not act the victim, instead leaping into action and besting his would-be assassins.

A series of rapid shots ensues that is violent in both its rapid cutting and in the "hit" it represents. The two killers enter Leo's bedroom, and he grabs a revolver from his nightstand and rolls under the bed. The killers begin firing their tommy guns, throwing up splinters and feathers from the floor and bedding. The camera cuts to Leo's point of view of the gunmen's legs from under the bed, as Leo shoots both men and scoots out from under the bed, retrieving the dead man's dropped tommy gun. The song "Danny Boy" becomes non-diegetic soundtrack as Leo takes the Tommy gun from his would-be murderer and dispatches the man's colleagues without haste and with style. Up to this point, the volume and clarity of the song's lyrics has signaled that the source of the music is the gramophone in Leo's room; now, as he leaves his home, "Danny Boy" becomes part of the soundtrack, making it a commentary on the scene.[95] At the end of this scene the tracking camera comes to rest on a slightly low-angle medium-long shot of Leo,

[95] The Coens use this technique in another film, too, as Roy Rogers' "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" moves from non-diegetic soundtrack to grocery store muzak and back in the opening scene of their 1998 absurdist neo-noir comedy, *The Big Lebowski*.

"Danny Boy" coming to a crescendo in its final lines as Leo places the stubbed-out cigar back in his mouth, sneering at the failure of his would-be assassins and pleased with his victory. The song's soaring vocals that speak of a sweetly remembered boy are in direct and ironic contrast to Leo's passionless gunning down of four men.[96]

The juxtaposition between the soundtrack's wailing, sorrowful lament and the visuals of Leo O'Bannon calmly dispatching the men sent to kill him is not only ironic, but also functions to make this scene both visually and aurally impressive. This sequence stands out from the rest of the film due to its combination of the aural and visual spectacle. It becomes a rallying point for the character of Leo O'Bannon, a celebration of his Irish ethnicity. While in the narrative the assassination attempt marks the beginning of a gang war, for the viewer this scene imbues Leo, the white patriarch of the film, with a positively inflected sense of ethnic manliness: this is a gangster who can go from transcendent, sentimental bliss over his Irish roots to cold-blooded killing in a moment's notice. Not until Tony Soprano graced the small screen in 1999 would viewers see such a sublimely emotional and powerful gangster character. Moreover, the very typically Irish soundtrack, though ironic in counterpoint to the murders Leo commits, reminds us that it is an Irish-American, a man uniquely formed by a white immigrant experience, who has such power, such presence, such manliness. This sequence contributes to the fetishization of violence in *Miller's Crossing*, which I will discuss in the next section, and it does so

[96] As Leo escapes his house, *Miller's Crossing* makes homage to two earlier films in the gangster/bandit lineage: *The Godfather* (1972) and *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Many scholars include Arthur Penn's 1967 *Bonnie and Clyde* in the gangster oeuvre, but based on my definition of the gangster film as centrally concerned with ethnically inflected protagonists, *Bonnie and Clyde* is excluded. In my estimation, it is more accurately a bandit film, belonging to a group that includes 1941's *High Sierra* and 1973's *Badlands*.

while calling attention to Leo's specifically Irish ethnic heritage, consolidating the notion that ethnicity is a special thing, in this case to be desired.

The very fact of *Miller's Crossing*'s investment in ethnicity and its all-male milieu functions as a counter-point to the contemporary culture's attempts to subvert masculine hegemony, to expand the historical and literary canons, and to break the glass ceilings of the public sphere. Released into a culture where white male power had long been under siege, *Miller's Crossing* functions as a powerful re-imagining of a past where white men were secure in their ethnic identities and social power, and when challenges came from other white men and not women and people of color. That the film is aesthetically pleasing, with its sense of historical accuracy, its studied and deliberate camera movements, and its long takes and slow pacing, provides the sense of a hermetic diegesis, making its treatment of ethnic masculinity even more seductive. The 1930s might very well have looked and felt *just like this*, the viewer is encouraged to think, invited to engage in a fantasy of white male potency and wholeness, a salve to contemporary decentering and deconstruction of white heteropatriarchy.

Male romance vis-à-vis violence

Miller's Crossing doesn't bother much to veil its romances between male characters, although "the love that dare not speak its name" is only spoken of in code throughout the film, in phrases like "Mink is Eddie Dane's boy." There is the (coded) homosexual romantic triangle of Bernie-Mink-Eddie the Dane, and the homosocial triangle of Leo-Tom-Johnny Caspar. There is also a courtly love triangle constituted by Tom, Verna, and Leo, with Leo the proper and distant King Arthur to Verna's Guinevere, and Tom the Lancelot who robs his king and confidante of his lady's physical affections.

In the end, the triangle constituted by the homosexual characters is destroyed by murder; Caspar is also murdered, and the Verna-Leo-Tom triangle is destroyed because Tom vows that he and Leo are "through." The only thing holding Leo and Verna together is the promise of a legal consecration of their bonds through marriage. All of *Miller's Crossing*'s romantic triangles dissolve except for the one centered on a woman, the sole normalizing character in what is an economy of male desire and violence. Meanwhile, the body of Tom Reagan is the victim of this economy, becoming a veritable punching bag for his several transgressions. In this sense, beating Tom becomes an outlet for the homoerotic energies that cannot be expressed by the film's characters.

Miller's Crossing's treatment of masculine love turning violent brings to the gangster genre a uniquely 1990s twist: when we allow the gangster narrative to spool out to its logical conclusion, *Miller's Crossing* illustrates, we are forced to acknowledge the potentially destabilizing effect of a homosocial and often homoerotic gangster milieu. This disruption is social, in that the exclusion of women from the gang echelons renders any gang conflict to be a questioning of male power and privilege, a dangerous thing to bring to light in a world that is predicated upon the invisibility of patriarchy. Regulated by carefully choreographed steps and intricately plotted negotiations, the gangster world has always been concerned with maintaining balance—moderation in all things, including moderation, and the gang capos get to keep their heads. As Vito Corleone reminds the heads of the Five Families in *The Godfather*, war is costly; vengeance will not return their dead sons, so a compromise must be struck between the wounds each man has endured and his desire for revenge. So, too, gangster affections must be balanced, and

Miller's Crossing illustrates the danger of disproportionate male homosocial love. When one's allegiances are too strong, the intramob hierarchy is threatened.

One might call this reading of the gangster genre, and the attention that *Miller's Crossing* pays to male love, the queering of the gangster, a reading that film scholar William Nolan persuasively takes on. He argues that *Miller's Crossing* is principally concerned with regulating male sexual energies, and that Tom Reagan's understanding of and ability to manipulate the male-male homosocial (Leo-Johnny Caspar-Tom-Eddie Dane) and homosexual (Bernie-Mink-Eddie Dane) relationships in the film "confer upon him a certain critical queerness that demands attention" (50). Nolan argues that "there can be little doubt that [the social organization's] eventual breakdown inheres precisely in the dissolution of the stabilizing effect that male-male desire can engender" (55). It is the disruption of equilibrium in *Miller's Crossing*'s homosocial world, the dangerous excess of the affective bonds between the gangsters, that generates the gang war that kills all but Tom and Leo.

In *Miller's Crossing*, emotional overinvestments bring about the film's many betrayals: Leo is too fond of Verna, so he won't let Caspar kill her brother Bernie in order to keep the peace among rival gangs (the equivalent, say, of Vito Corleone exacting vengeance for the murder of Sonny rather than proposing a truce). Eddie the Dane is too fond of his lover Mink, so when Mink goes missing (dead at the hands of *his* lover Bernie Birnbaum), Eddie assumes Tom murdered Mink and tries to get revenge. Caspar is so fond of Eddie the Dane that when Tom convinces Caspar Eddie has crossed him, Caspar viciously murders Eddie with a shovel, enraged at the supposed betrayal. But above all, Tom is too fond of Leo to see Leo ruin his empire; so Tom alienates himself from Leo by

exposing his and Verna's affair, switches sides to seemingly join Caspar's gang, and then double-crosses Caspar. In the end, Leo realizes that Tom has been loyal to him all along, and invites Tom to rejoin his gang; but Tom inexplicably refuses, having crossed a line that the film never openly identifies. We are left to interpret for ourselves Tom's reasons for not rejoining the fold, and I believe that Tom's attachment to Leo has grown too strong for his comfort. Through blocking and characterization, *Miller's Crossing* demonstrates that the only touching that Leo and Tom can engage in is violent, the sublimation of a desire that cannot be openly acknowledged and that ultimately drives Tom out of Leo's gang.

The male-on-male violence is so brutally and lavishly treated in this film it is, in a way, fetishized. Tom receives a great number of body blows throughout the film—from Caspar's goons, from Lazar the bookie's henchmen, and from Bernie Birnbaum—and he takes them all like a professional punching bag, neither backing down nor defending himself. When Tom reveals his and Verna's carnal relationship to Leo, Leo consequently beats Tom all the way from one end of the building to another. This display of masculine love turned to violence is motivated by jealousy over a woman, but ultimately reveals that Leo's heart is broken not by Verna's betrayal but by Tom's. At the beginning of the film, before the disequilibrium that will upset the gang world, Tom and Leo's relationship is characterized by respect, affection, and a carefully maintained physical distance from one another. This distance is bridged by violence in the middle of the film, and ultimately Leo attempts to reestablish this safe but collegial distance in the film's denouement. The physical and visual boundaries that keep Leo and Tom in a productive camaraderie belie—and keep in careful check—the great emotional investment each has

in the other, underline Tom's betrayal of Leo, and in the final scene separate the two forever, the dangerous excess of love they have for each other threatening the stability of their homosocial world.

The camaraderie between Tom and Leo is maintained by distance rather than touching. In fact, the first time Tom and Leo touch, it is after the attempt on Leo's life, and the congenial touch—Leo lays his hands on Tom's shoulders, giving him a pep-talk like a coach—is quickly traded for punches when Tom reveals his affair with Verna.[97] Tom only outs himself in this way when Leo, despite his and Tom's closeness and their history, refuses to take Tom's word that Verna is taking advantage of him. Leo, unable to think of Verna except in a paternal, infantilizing manner,[98] demands that Tom give a reason; Tom replies, "trust me on this or to hell wit' you." This figurative damning of his bosom friend is hurtful, but Leo continues to demand an explanation; so Tom reveals his secret tryst with Verna. Leo responds by silently turning his back to Tom and the room. This move, a refusal to communicate further, signals Tom's excommunication from Leo's gang. It seems that his cold silence will be Leo's response to Tom's betrayal, but after Tom leaves his office Leo comes after him to communicate his anger with his fists.

[97] It should be noted that Leo and Tom almost touch in an earlier scene at Tom's apartment, when Leo comes to Tom because he can't find Verna and wants to get Tom's thoughts on where to look next. In this situation too, Tom expresses his concern that Verna is pulling the grift on Leo, using him and stringing him along with the promise of a romantic future if Leo saves Bernie. In this scene too, Leo assures Tom that he can take care of himself, and does a pretend shadow-boxing move at Tom, as though to show how tough Leo is and to engage Tom in play. But this shadow boxing does not end in a touch, and when Leo leaves, Tom returns to bed—with Verna.

[98] Earlier in the film, Leo explains that while he is seeing Verna, he has been "a gentleman," insinuating that they have not engaged in sex. He is also much older than Verna, closer to her father's age likely, and their relationship is a chaste one so far.

Tom is not much of a fighter, never raising a hand in self-defense throughout the entire film, and especially in the following sequence where Leo beats Tom bloody for his transgressions. Tom has every opportunity to parry a punch or even fight back. His refusal to defend himself is masochistic, but Tom believes the beating is justified; Tom has, after all, been carrying on an affair with the object of Leo's affections. But Leo has never laid a hand on Tom out of anger, and this trouncing bridges the physical distance between the two. What these observations reveal is an economy of men touching—or fastidiously *not* touching—one another. Eddie the Dane lays a calming hand on Caspar's shoulder, a move that Tom duplicates later in the film, a trusted advisor cooling down the boss; the kiss-off is communicated by blows and finalized with words, but we would have gathered as much without the words anyway. When all is right in Tom and Leo's world, when their relationship is stable and on good ground, they do not touch; it is only with the breaking down of their friendship that the invisible boundary between them is breached, and violently. The visiting upon Tom's body of the violent logic of the hypermasculine social world illustrates that, ultimately, the fantasy of homosocial exclusivity is dangerous, and poses a threat not to heteronormative pairings, but rather to the maintenance of the homosocial world of the gangster.

The film's final scene signals the end of a romance, a platonic but dangerously strong affection between two men who do not touch except in anger; the strength of their bonds is witnessed by the brutality of Leo's attack on Tom. The final touch between Tom and Leo takes place during a homoerotically charged moment, with Leo begging Tom to come back to him. As the two men walk side-by-side away from Bernie Birnbaum's final resting place, Leo stops and grabs Tom's arm, and the camera cuts to an over-the-

shoulder shot of Leo in close-up. Leo says, “Jesus, Tom, I’d do anything if you’d work for me again.” The men are so physically close that they fill the frame. Leo continues, “I need you. Things can be the way they were. I know it. I just know it!” The image of an older man imploring with a younger man to come back, the reversal of the lyrics to “Danny Boy,” looks and sounds like a plea to a lover, revealing a destabilizing desire at the base of this gang’s structure.

The dialogue in this final plea is romantic, Leo attempting to revive the platonic romance he and Tom had, when they shared an easy manner and jokingly told each other to go to hell. Tom’s refusal concludes the film in a state of sorrow and loss. This context hints at what I believe to be Tom’s real, unspeakable reason for not returning to Leo: the fondness between the two men is too strong to remain platonic. Their friendship hinges on a homoeroticism that neither can admit, for to do so would threaten each man’s self-knowledge[99] and upset the carefully balanced affective ties that keep O’Bannon’s gang a matter of homosocial—but not homosexual—community. *Miller’s Crossing* has shown us the fate of homosexual bonds, as the three characters coded as homosexual are murdered, and only Tom and Leo, who are demonstrably heterosexual, survive the gang war that is begun due to excessive emotional bonds.

The careful observance of a physical distance between Tom and Leo early in the film, followed by the spectacularly violent bridging of this gap, is mapped onto the stability and subsequent fracture of their warm, intimate friendship. Tom’s ultimate

[99] Tom doubts the stability of knowledge and self-knowledge. Earlier in the film Tom expressed the belief that Leo ran the town as long as people think so, and “as soon as they stop thinking it, you stop running it.” Tom puts forward the very modernist notion that “nobody really knows anyone else, not that well.” In many ways *Miller’s Crossing* is deeply existential, questioning the ability to know oneself and other people.

abdication of Leo's friendship, his rejection of the pleading supplicant, registers in the form of melodrama. There is pathos in Leo's self-abasing request that Tom return to his fold, and a self-denying masochism in Tom's refusal to return. The final homoerotic moment of Leo's pleading and Tom's refusal once again brings to light the melodramatic logic of the gangster genre—and also the homoerotic undertones of the current cultural desire for a closed, all-male (and all-white) social world. The presentation of an all-male ethnic milieu in which homosexuality is punished and homoeroticism carefully regulated reveals a preoccupation with negotiating male desires, providing a warning about the logical outcome of a culture that is concerned exclusively with male power, male emotions, and male control.

My reading of *Miller's Crossing* is the result of repeated viewings and a close and careful reading of the dynamics between the two main characters. Casual viewers of the film would likely come away with a different reading, feeling the film's conclusion to be ambiguous, inscrutable; in fact, this was my conclusion after the first few screenings. A product of its age, when neat narrative closure common in mainstream Hollywood film could be discarded as too simplistic, *Miller's Crossing* creates a productive ambiguity, demanding further thought and leaving the viewer wondering about Tom's motivations and the overall "message" of the film. My finding, of a dangerous homoeroticism in the film's central relationship that serves to regulate homosocial and homoerotic desires, is one of many possible readings thanks to the film's ambiguity. Ambiguity is taken to an extreme in *GoodFellas*, where Henry Hill, the protagonist, is more than an anti-hero: he is decidedly a bad guy in a traditional moralistic sense, but this does not matter. In

GoodFellas, style matters more than substance. We might identify with Henry Hill, but we do not sympathize with him.

GoodFellas: lamenting the death of the boys' club

Martin Scorsese's 1990 gangster film *GoodFellas* was hailed as revolutionary in its self-referentiality, its rock-and-roll soundtrack and postmodern filmic techniques like freeze frames and fast zooms, and its use of dual voice-over narrators Henry and Karen Hill. The film was well received both popularly and critically, making $46 million at the US box office (against a budget estimated at $25 million) and, as critic John McCarty claims, is "one of the most critically acclaimed gangster films of the post-*Godfather* years" (203). *GoodFellas*' popularity extends to other media representations of gangsters: in a number of episodes, the Italian mob men in *The Sopranos* (in an example of the series' extreme self-referentiality) debate the relative authenticity of screen gangsters, arguing over whether *The Godfather* or *GoodFellas* is a more accurate vision of their own lives. *GoodFellas* is adapted from journalist Nicholas Pileggi's 1985 nonfiction book *Wiseguy: Life in a Mafia Family* (Nochimson 62), about ex-gangster Henry Hill's experiences as a half-Irish, half-Italian member of an Italian crime family involved in the protection racket.

GoodFellas follows Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) from his childhood in Brooklyn, where he grows up admiring the gangsters who operate a cab stand across the street from his boyhood home and joins their ranks as an errand boy; through his 20s as Henry begins doing heists with his friends Jimmy Conway (Robert De Niro) and Tommy DeVito (Joe Pesci), and woos and marries a Jewish woman, Karen (Lorraine Bracco); and eventually to his betrayal of the Cicero family when he enters the Witness Protection Program to

avoid being killed by the increasingly paranoid Conway. My analysis of *GoodFellas* will be focused less on close reading than my examination of *Miller's Crossing* for the simple reason that *GoodFellas deconstructs itself* and the gangster genre; instead, I will discuss more extensively the generic implications of the gangster genre in and after *GoodFellas*.

Stepping fully into a postmodern, intertextual, and referential world, another new thrust of the genre in the 1990s is to deconstruct, examine, and parody the genre. *The Sopranos* will extend this self-critical, self-referential energy into television beginning in 1999, to become one of the most successful, and most frequently analyzed, television series of all time. The roots for the character of Tony Soprano are laid all along the history of the gangster genre, but it is only in the 1990s that a self-referential, intertextual, and self-questioning gangster becomes possible, thanks to *GoodFellas* and its critical take on the excesses of the genre. Henry Hill becomes a rather different type of victim than Tom Reagan: whereas Tom is an Irish-American punching bag, Henry is a mutt, an ethnic hybrid, which excludes him from fully belonging in the mob, and a fact which leads him to eventually betray his beloved gangster cohort.

Ethnic hybridity and the longing for identity

Henry Hill begins his life wanting to belong to the gang. He can never fully join, or become a "made guy," because he is of mixed ethnicity: his father is Irish, and his mother is Italian. Henry accepts that his mixed ethnicity excludes him from full membership in the Cicero mob, though he maintains his friendship with Tommy De Vito in part because Tommy does have access to full membership in the Mafia thanks to his

full Italian blood. Jimmy Conway, the third in this homosocial triangle, is Irish.[100] The film's first scene presents a young Henry Hill's idealized vision of Mafia life as he looks down from his bedroom window across the street from Paulie Cicero's cabstand. Henry's understanding of Mafia life is romanticized, and remains so until the end of the film, when he turns state's evidence against his mob friends and enters the witness protection program to save his own life. The end of Henry's involvement in the mob is figured as the end of a meaningful, fulfilling life, an end that is inevitable because of his inability to gain full membership in the mob. Henry is, in other words, a victim of his ethnicity.

The opening scene of the film presents a sequence that makes visible from the start the brutality of the gangster milieu, commenting ironically on Henry Hill's romanticized notion of what it means to be a gangster. In the first scene, Henry, Jimmy, and Tommy are on their way to bury the body of Billy Batts, a made man who Tommy has killed in a childish rage. The body, stashed in the trunk, is still alive, as is revealed when the men stop to open the trunk. The sequence in which the men open the trunk, finding Batts still alive, and then successfully kill him, is bathed in red light, ostensibly from the car's brake lights. Upon opening the trunk and finding that Batts is not dead, Tommy stabs the body multiple times, mumbling invectives at "this fucker who refuses to die." Tommy steps back and Jimmy fires his revolver into the trunk, just in case Batts

[100] Jimmy is played by Robert De Niro, who is well known for his Italian-American ethnicity and whose role as Vito Corleone in *Godfather II* settled his status as go-to Italian actor for gangster films. De Niro's later casting as the Jewish casino-owner Ace Rothstein in Scorsese's *Casino* (1994) and the Irish-named Neil McCauley in Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995, opposite Al Pacino playing Vincent Hanna, also an Irish name) demonstrates the flexibility of white ethnicities when attached to a star text. Still, De Niro's Italianism is unavoidable in an intertextual sense: viewers watching *GoodFellas* will experience to some extent an intertextual connection to De Niro's role as Vito Corleone.

was able to survive the multiple deep stab wounds he just received from the livid Tommy. As Henry stands over the trunk ready to close it after the excessive re-murdering of Billy Batts, his voiceover starts up: “As far back as I could remember I always wanted to be a gangster.” The image zooms in to Henry Hill’s face, then freezes on a close-up as he utters “gangster” in voiceover. The irony of this sequence is obvious: while the film will immediately turn to the child Henry’s idealized view of gangster life, the bulk of the film details the gang’s less savory deeds, and the killing of Billy Batts is one of them. This opening scene introduces the film’s tone as one of sardonic commentary on a gangster’s life, juxtaposing the brutal, excessive murder of Billy Batts with Henry Hill’s utterance of a childish wish for belonging.

Immediately following this brutal and ironic sequence we are introduced to the young Henry Hill, whose wish to become a gangster is really a desire to belong to a warm and welcoming community. This sequence is introduced from young Henry’s point of view, encouraging the viewer to identify with Henry and to see things, literally, from his perspective. The camera cuts from a brief credits sequence following the Billy Batts scene, to an extreme close-up shot of a blue-green eye looking off-screen right. The camera pulls back as Henry’s voiceover begins again, “To me, being a gangster was better than being the President of the United States.” We cut to a long shot panning to the right and eventually tilting down to street level, of apartment-house windows, from young Henry’s perspective as he scans the world across the street from his home. A subtitle adds “East New York, Brooklyn. 1955,” a time marker that enhances the film’s opening title card “This film is based on a true story.” The cabstand across the street is busy with cars and men in suits though it is late at night. We cut back to a close-up of

Henry's face from outside the window, blinds cutting across the screen, as he casts his eyes downward at the activity below. The camera slowly zooms in to focus attention on Henry's eyes, cementing the sense that what Henry sees is being presented in this scene and can tell the story of Henry's early infatuation with the mob. We cut to a close-up from inside Henry's bedroom of the right side of his body as he looks out the window. The camera tracks from right to left, stopping behind Henry's shoulder, the focus shifting from Henry to the gangsters across the street in long shot from a high angle. A cut to street level, though still high-angle, shifts the perspective from Henry watching, filtering the narrative of gangster life he shares in his voiceover ("They did whatever they wanted"), to a semi-detached point of view. The roving camera becomes, in the first part of the film, the young Henry's proxy, showing us the glamorous life of the gangsters in a kind of reverie over a nostalgic soundtrack of musical hits from the 1950s. But Henry can never fully belong to the gang, a fact that tinges the life that we see from Henry's perspective as sadly just out of reach.

In the next few scenes, which detail young Henry's involvement with the cabstand and Paulie Cicero's gang, Henry's vision is still privileged, foregrounding his subjectivity and cementing his role as proxy for the audience. Henry parks cars for the gangsters despite being underage and unable to see over the dash; he gets arrested selling cartons of stolen cigarettes and is congratulated rather than punished by Jimmy and Paulie; and he drops out of school to become a full-time errand boy for Paulie Cicero. The gangsters' lives seem charmed, with scenes of men sitting in bars and playing cards, planning heists and drinking. The men keep no other company, associating only with each other and their wives and mistresses. This romantic view of mob life could be

tempered by an understanding of the dangers the gangsters face from both the police and from rival mobs, but Henry's idealized vision of mob life continues until his own life is threatened. *GoodFellas* is unique in that it does not show rival gangs, except for the Billy Batts character. Rivalries between gangs in these films serve to demonstrate loyalties and show the gangster beset on all sides, not just from the law but from extra-legal forces too. It is ironic, then, that Henry Hill's downfall comes from within his own crew.

The major threat to Henry's life is Jimmy Conway's paranoid killing off of anyone involved in a heist of millions of dollars from the Lufthansa airline. Henry and Jimmy were partners in the deal, and in order to keep all involved parties from alerting police suspicion, Jimmy murders each conspirator in horrific ways: one man is hung in a freezer truck, another's body appears in a garbage truck, and a couple who had purchased a pink Cadillac with the proceeds from the heist is found dead in the car. Henry is convinced that Jimmy, despite being Henry's best friend, will kill him to keep him silent. If Henry was fully Italian and "a made guy," he would have nothing to fear from Jimmy, who has no Italian blood, as Henry's membership would protect him. But without blood ties to the ethnic enclave of the mob, Henry is on his own. Henry's membership in the mob family is provisional at best, and while he has been an important member of the Cicero family for many years, this affiliation ends with Henry saving his own hide by "ratting out" the entire Cicero family and escaping into the Witness Protection Program, a betrayal that illustrates the high stakes of the gangster life and renders Henry's life empty and barren, a melodramatic positioning.

"Some schnook": life after the fellas

Henry and his gangster friends enjoy almost complete impunity, only answering to the law that Jimmy names when young Henry gets arrested for the first time: "never rat on your friends, and always keep your mouth shut." Upon betraying his gang and entering the Witness Protection Program, Henry Hill becomes "some schnook" living in nondescript cookie-cutter middle America. This is the crux of the film's nostalgia: we have watched for two hours as Henry Hill's lavish, exciting life is raced through at warp speed, and now at the end he has lost everything he ever wanted—to be somebody. Now he is a nobody, one of the average people he lambastes in voice-over at the beginning of the film as "those goody-good people who work shitty jobs for bum paychecks" while the gangsters eat lobster and their wives wear fur coats.

The end of *GoodFellas* is the end of the good life for Henry Hill. The final shot of the film is a tracking long shot from left to right across a housing development in progress, a bulldozer smoothing over dirt for a new house to be built. We dissolve from one brick-façade house with a station wagon in the driveway to another; in the gap between the houses, we see a mover's truck. This new housing development is staunchly middle-class: the colors are nondescript; the skyline shows trees and no tall buildings. The Hills have moved from Brooklyn, the center of the mob universe, to the middle of nowhere. The camera zooms in as it continues to track, moving into a close-up of the morning newspaper and panning up Henry's body as he picks it up. The camera comes to rest on a medium shot of Henry looking straight at the camera. He wears a blue terrycloth robe, and in voice-over he laments the lack of good food, the lack of culture, and the lack of all the perks that made his old life wonderful. Henry smirks briefly, and then his expression subsides into resignation, as on the voice track he says, "I get to live the rest

of my life like a schnook." A guitar riff plays over a cut to some undefined and unreal location as a suited Tommy De Vito (who is dead in the diegesis) fires a gun at the camera. We cut back to Henry Hill as he turns and walks into his average house and slams the door. The soundtrack plays Sid Vicious' version of Frank Sinatra's famous "My Way," which starts out with the lyrics "Regrets/ I've had a few/ But then again,/ Too few to mention."

The final shot of *GoodFellas*, with its accompanying voice-over, acknowledges what Henry has lost by leaving the mob. The film's use of direct address and voice-over openly and self-reflexively laments Henry Hill's regrets, and the viewer understands both that Henry has received his just desserts for betraying the mob, and that Henry is like one of the average schnooks who likely fill the theater as audience for this film. We feel, along with Henry, that the average life, where we work hard for barely enough, is deadening, and that to live the life of a gangster, where men have impunity in their actions as long as they don't kill the wrong person, is to really live. Martha Nochimson agrees, asserting that "the audience experiences with Hill the terrible loss of the 'magic' of gangster illusion" (67). Mark Nicholls glosses the film's final shot, of Tommy aiming a gun at the audience in obvious homage to *The Great Train Robbery*, as "a symbol of the romance and excitement which Henry has lost forever" (100). Even Mauricio Viano identifies the nostalgic content of the film, arguing that Scorsese demonstrates "occasional spurts of nostalgia" for "a period forever gone" (46). This nostalgia, these regrets, this feeling of loss: these are melodramatic.

"Expressive realism": Scorsesean melodrama

While much gangster genre analysis has become more sophisticated with the mainstreaming of feminist and ethnic studies approaches to film, the gendered assumptions that have plagued scholarship on the gangster genre from the beginning—with Robert Warshow's tenacious observations about the genre dating back to 1948—still persist in some criticism. Style and convention have taken on the veil of gender, with melodrama being gendered feminine, and realism, epic, and tragedy being gendered masculine. Thanks to the long history of hypermasculine epic and tragic narratives in many mediums, including Homer's *The Iliad*, Aeschylus' *Oedipus Rex*, and more recent film adaptations of classic Greek narratives, such as *Troy*, the descriptors "epic" and "tragic" are hardly thinkable in a non-masculine setting. Scholars and critics since Warshow call on epic, tragic, and realistic styles as aesthetic and narrative ancestors to the gangster genre. These claims work to defend the genre against many (supposedly feminine) traits present in gangster films, such as hysterical emotionality, the potentially disturbing physical closeness between men who hug and kiss one another, and the repeated trope of loss as foundational to the gangster's identity.

The tendency to claim a masculine set of filmic ancestors in gangster genre criticism has extended to *GoodFellas*: many scholars and critics assert that the film is realistic, even documentary, in style, a claim that seems absurd given *GoodFellas*' high degree of stylization. Journalist Maurizio Viano argues that Scorsese's *GoodFellas* attempts to bring "some realism into a fictional genre" influenced by the epic and tragic Corleone saga (43, 48). Viano claims that "Scorsese's adoption of cinematic conventions associated with realism," including "repulsive material, factual information and seemingly unstructured narrative," makes for a realistic gangster film and influences the

genre in turn to be more realistic. The claim that *GoodFellas*, an absurdly hyperbolic film, introduces *realism* into a genre characterized as epic and tragic is humorous at best. *GoodFellas* is anything but realistic: not only is it non-linearly constructed in plot and postmodern in Henry Hill's direct address to the audience late in the film, but *GoodFellas* also switches between voice-over narrators, uses a rock-and-roll soundtrack to reflect on the narrative, and overall is more accurately described as a hyperreal, ironic commentary on the realist cinematic tradition and the gangster genre. By focusing on content rather than form or style, Viano reads *GoodFellas* as fundamentally realistic, even documentary, in its execution; unfortunately, he is not alone.

Film scholar Constantine Verevis also argues that *GoodFellas* represents a realistic take on the gangster genre, arguing that Scorsese achieved his goal of making a "Maysles cinema-verite documentary" about Henry Hill (Scorsese qtd in Verevis, 210-11). Verevis finds that *GoodFellas* "sets out to present a *realistic* portrayal of organized crime and how it operates" (emphasis orig., 210). But Verevis further qualifies this assertion, arguing that Scorsese invented a new style in order to tell Henry Hill's story in as true-to-life detail as possible: "Scorsese not only developed a brand of *expressive realism*, but also adopted the classical (if ironically inflected), biographical, rise-and-fall structure of the traditional gangster film." (211). Further, Verevis finds the fates of Henry Hill and his compatriots Jimmy Conway and Tommy De Vito "tragic" (212). Verevis insists on a masculine notion of *GoodFellas*' generic precedents and is much concerned with normalizing or regularizing the fantastic and highly unrealistic style of the film. Scholar Gilberto Perez also claims realism as the dominant cinematic style in *GoodFellas*, claiming that the film "works as comedy, without the comic exaggeration

that would have detracted from its everyday realism" (190).[101] And within one paragraph, popular reviewer Roger Ebert goes from describing *GoodFellas* as "an epic on the scale of *The Godfather*" to describing its final scene as "handled by Scorsese with the skill of a great tragedian" (121). Epic, tragedy, *expressive realism*: these repeated assertions of the generic legacy of *GoodFellas* is too much protestation indeed.

On the other hand, a few scholars more accurately view *GoodFellas* as a frenetic, absurd, and ultimately ironic gangster film. Kathleen Murphy, in a review in *Film Comment*, finds that a "terrible, tawdry glamour suffuses the saga," and that *GoodFellas* "celebrat[es] energy and style wherever found" (25), an anarchic style. Further, Murphy reads the film not as a realistic or documentary-style saga, but as using conventions rather different: the film begins with "an audaciously melodramatic shot" consisting of an "urban wild bunch backlit by a hellish red glow" (25). Here, Murphy intends "melodrama" to mean a style rather than a structuring logic: *GoodFellas*' first scene is overladen with meaning, visually ham-handed, self-indulgent. This "melodramatic" style continues and becomes more intense throughout the film.[102]

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[101] Perez structures his argument about Scorsese's films in response to Warshow's argument that the gangster is a tragic hero, betraying the underlying reason for Perez's claim that *GoodFellas* is realistic: masculinist solidarity.

[102] Many of the early scenes in the film are also suffused with a red glow, including Henry, Tommy, and Jimmy's meeting at the Bamboo Lounge to plan the Air France heist; the two double-date scenes between Tommy and a "Jew broad" and Henry and Karen, at a restaurant with red upholstered seats and the women wearing red dresses; and the traipse through the back hallways and in the lounge at the Copacabana, in Scorsese's famous and much-referenced single-take tracking shot over "And Then He Kissed Me" by the Shirelles. The red color theme is an obvious reference to blood; but it is also used to establish a theme of carnality and ruthlessness, which transfers to Karen when Henry hands her a gun covered in the blood of a neighbor boy who had treated her badly.

In the original definition, melodrama meant the combining of music with image, and *GoodFellas* is replete with musical overlays that both establish the period and create a logic whereby sound comments ironically on image. *GoodFellas* is hysterical, hyperbolic, ironic. Scorsese's style in *GoodFellas* is not realistic, not documentary, not epic, and not tragic, despite the claims of many scholars and critics; it is melodramatic, an excessive style that functions in *GoodFellas* to inflect its treatment of the gangster world with irony. However, this is not the only type of melodrama in *GoodFellas*: the film participates in the contemporary practice of making white men into victims, presenting men who lose their gangster community. This is not an injustice done to Henry Hill; in fact, he brings about his exile from the gang by turning state's evidence in court against his gangster family, becoming a villain in their eyes.

But the fact that Henry experiences the jouissance of the gangster life, where, he says, "we could have anything we wanted," only to lose it, makes him a poster child for self-indulgent men decrying their former omnipotence. In a way, then, Henry Hill is an ironic version of the average white man in America circa 1990: he had it all, and by his own machinations lost it all, because the tides had begun to turn towards justice for women and people of color. Of course in America writ large, white men only created the conditions for their loss of power unintentionally, and fought against attempts to equalize the playing field by activists in the Civil Rights, women's lib, and gay rights movements. The very construction of (white male) privilege losing out to equality for others is itself melodramatic—only in the context of melodrama is this reading possible.

As an ironic commentary upon the gangster genre and the culture that loves it, we can imagine a straight reading of *GoodFellas*: Henry Hill got what was coming to him,

because it was never just for him to enjoy a life free from prosecution for his crimes, breaking the law and stealing from others with impunity. So too, white men have received their just desserts for the history of oppression visited upon people of color, women, and gays; their slipping social prestige, the (in their eyes) castigation of the "Dead white European Men" of the literary canon, and the decentering of white men from the cultural conversation by the multiculturalist movement are steps toward social justice—except from the standpoint of a white masculinity that persists in seeing individual merit, and not structural conditions, as the grounds for the history of white male success in the United States.

Conclusion

The nostalgia with which Henry looks back at his life as a gangster resonates with the American cultural moment of 1990, when white men experienced a sense of loss for a historical masculinity that was invisibly white and unchallenged in its moral righteousness. With the Civil Rights, gay rights, and feminist movements that began in the 1960s, stretching through to the multiculturalist 1980s and 90s, white men had faced decades of challenges by oppressed groups and "minorities." Forced to become self-reflective of their cultural power, white men since the 1960s had adopted defensive positions, the most recent of which was to imbue whiteness with ethnic meaning, an identifiable, solid group identity that replaced the villains of history, "heterosexual white men," with "Irish-Americans" or "Italian-Americans" and thus appropriated a history of legitimate oppression to shift the discourse about who were the victims and who were the villains of history. Michael Omi identifies "the themes and dilemmas of white identity in the post-civil rights period: the 'absence' of a clear culture and identity, the

‘disadvantages’ of being white with respect to the distribution of resources, and the stigma of being perceived as the ‘oppressors of the nation’” (182-83).

Forced to take stock of and account for their role in history, white men’s anxieties were imaginatively displaced into the realms of history and ethnic minoritization in order to cleanse the national conscience of guilt for white privilege. The off-white gangsters of the 1990s helped to shore up a nostalgic construction of white masculinity that was both a victim of ethnic politics and an unquestioned beneficiary of all-male homosocial spaces, two loci lost to white heterosexual men in the 1990s. Set in the broad context of revalorized ethnic masculinity, these gangster films bring to light the centrality of male romance—and the pain of its loss—to the gangster genre and to American culture more generally. In a time when attention to minorities and women furthered the construction of white men as the villains of history, the gangster film functioned as a potent response, re-imbuing white men with an ethnic heritage they could be proud of.

Further, the films I have examined here figure white men as victims of identity-challenging losses: Tom Reagan must leave Leo O’Bannon’s gang because he has become aware of his too-strong emotional attachment to his boss. Henry Hill must betray his gang to save his own life, but anticipates and laments the consequences: exile to homogeneous, undistinguished white Middle America. Combined with the loss of an exciting life suffused with male camaraderie and a closed world impervious to outside forces like women’s liberation and Civil Rights, Henry Hill’s literal fall into obscurity as a result of entering the Witness Protection Program exposes the melodrama of the gangster narrative as being centrally about a fear of losing one’s self, one’s identity. This fantasy of a cocooned social landscape in which ethnic men enjoy unfettered access to

power and pleasure functions as an escape valve for contemporary white men's feelings that recent cultural politics had treated them unjustly.

CHAPTER VI

CODA:

THE GANGSTER IN FIN-DE-SIECLE AMERICA

In this dissertation I have examined approximately 30 years of American gangster films, beginning in 1972 with *Superfly* and *The Godfather,* and ending in 1990 with *GoodFellas* and *Miller's Crossing*. This period begins with the reemergence of the gangster film upon the disbanding of the restrictive censorship organ, the Production Code Administration. During the reign of the Hays code, which the PCA began enforcing in 1934, the ethnic gangster film had been expressly forbidden as encouraging vice and discouraging virtue in its viewers. The result was a shift of gangster themes—otherness, belonging, and organized crime—into different genres, notably film noir. Less restrictive censorship codes that came into play in 1968 with the dissolution of the PCA gave New Hollywood filmmakers unprecedented ability to present challenging ideological and "moral" content, including grisly violence and explicit sex. It is in this industrial context that the ethnic gangster was revived and returned to popularity, largely thanks to Francis Ford Coppola's films *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather, Part II* (1974). I end this analysis in 1990 with two films that constitute the peak of this rich period of gangster film production, epitomizing the genre's rise to popular, high quality, high-impact films.

The gangster remains a potent figure for working through questions surrounding identity, masculinity, and what it means to be an ethnic or racialized figure in a white nation. But the genre has, in effect, switched mediums: beginning in 1999, the gangster

invaded television with *The Sopranos*;[103] the success of this and later series, such as *The Wire* (2002-2008) and *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-), proves the continuing relevance of the gangster to American audiences. While the occasional gangster film is released to box-office success, and video games have provided a new medium in which to imaginatively inhabit the gangster persona,[104] television is where the gangster has come (literally) home to roost. *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Boardwalk Empire* are produced for Home Box Office (HBO), which made its reputation for violent, "realistic," high-quality programming on the strength of *Oz* (1997-2003), a series about the inmates of a maximum-security prison ironically nicknamed Emerald City. With *The Sopranos*, HBO established itself as a major player in the original-content arena, and that success has continued to its two subsequent gangster genre series.

Each of these shows carries on the work of a particular genre cycle that I have identified in this dissertation: *The Sopranos* takes up the Italian-American/Mafia focus of *The Godfather*; *The Wire* is an extension of the 'hood cycle, focusing on Black street gangs dealing drugs, though the focus of the series shifts its attention from the West Coast 'hood to an East Coast city, Baltimore. The series also carries on the style and swagger of the Blaxploitation gangster, notably in the character of Black gangster Stringer Bell. And *Boardwalk Empire* furthers the 90s ethnic gangster's focus on off-

[103] It should be noted that *The Sopranos* is not the first television gangster series: from 1987 to 1990, *Wiseguy*, a CBS series, focusing on an undercover federal agent infiltrating the Mafia. It ran for four seasons, and garnered a Golden Globe win for star Ken Wahl. However, it remains an anomaly, an outlier in a period during which network television was not as central to popular culture as it would become in the 1990s and into the 21st century.

[104] Much fanfare was made over the 2006 release of the video game *Scarface: The World is Yours* on the PlayStation 3 console, taking the tagline from the 1932 Howard Hawks original but based on the Tony Montana character from the 1982 Brian De Palma film.

white characters, but this time around the protagonist, Nucky Thomson, is of an indeterminate ethnicity, though he deals frequently with the Italian and Irish gangs running booze into and out of Prohibition-era Atlantic City. The success of these series and their ability to engage critics and popular audiences alike demonstrate that the conventions and concerns of the gangster genre are alive and well.

The gangster genre also remains inherently melodramatic, concerned with narratives about emotions and male community. For example, Tony Soprano, *The Sopranos*' larger-than-life Italian-American paterfamilias, represents a new type of melodramatic protagonist. A suburban gangster overwhelmed by the quotidian challenges of taking care of both his nuclear and his gang families, Tony struggles with his overbearing mother, long-repressed emotional baggage from the death of his father, his mercurial Uncle Junior, and his two precocious and spoiled millennial children. Tony's wife, Carmela, wrestles with questions of morality and religion, but Tony is the real heart of the series and of the family. In this way, *The Sopranos* is clearly a legacy of *The Godfather*, with its focus on the Corleone men dealing with matters both business and domestic.

The Sopranos adds to the Italian-American gangster strand a crucial ambiguity: despite Tony's reprehensible crimes and his self-indulgent narcissism, we like him. We might not want to *be* more like him, but we derive pleasure from watching Tony Soprano attempt to balance work and family life, which all too often for him overlap, as when his mother puts out a contract on his head in season two, and his uncle does the same in season six. In these and many other examples, *The Sopranos* brings to light the coercion within the nuclear and extended family structure that all American families are, to one

extent or another, guilty of—with particular aptness, for the necessity to repress rage at loved ones is essential to maintaining the family as a functional unit. *The Godfather, Part II* demonstrated the failure of its present-day protagonist Michael to adequately negotiate powerful emotions about family, with the result that he murdered his own brother; remarkably, Tony Soprano is more adept at suppressing similar impulses (remarkable because of his general inability to deny himself any promise of immediate gratification). Pointing up these painful but productive contradictions makes *The Sopranos* a cathartic experience for the viewer struggling with similar challenges of caring for both their children and their parents—the "sandwich generation," in current argot.

It hardly seems necessary to argue that *The Sopranos* is essentially melodramatic. Tony Soprano's physical collapses, psychological probing, anxiety attacks, and the excessive emotional content of the series all reveal its melodramatic nature. Martha Nochimson has successfully argued this point in her article "Whaddaya Lookin' At?: The Gangster Genre as Re-read Through *The Sopranos*," asserting that the series "reveals the media gangster as the core of a highly emotional mode of storytelling in which the pleasures of action and violence speak not only about macho aggressiveness [. . .] but also about vulnerabilities that the display disguises about troubling social conditions" (2). Nochimson has neatly summarized, in this sentence, what I have aimed to tease out in this dissertation: that the gangster genre speaks to complex and contradictory messages about men's emotions and men's power in post-Civil Rights America.

The gangster genre's melodramatic foundation is flourishing on television, bearing witness to the argument I have made in this dissertation. In the feminized medium of television, where serial dramas have so often featured women's concerns in

daytime soap operas, the gangster has become a prime-time soap star. The blossoming of the gangster on television proves its melodramatic essence, as the form of television is itself inherently melodramatic: episodic, delaying resolution, and focused on domestic life. Further, the richness and extraordinary popularity of televisual gangster narratives bring to light our culture's preoccupation—even obsession—with narratives that consider a powerful figure at the mercy of social and individual forces around him.

The dominant cultural narrative about male gender roles in film and in culture—that men are encouraged to reason rather than feel, to hide their emotions, and to be providers instead of nurturers—ignores a whole host of well loved cultural texts in which men are primarily affective beings. My research has, I hope, shown that for at least 30 years a genre that men identify with strongly has argued the opposite: that men are warm, affectionate beings who not only experience but also express their emotions. The melodramatic structuring of these narratives, placing men in the position of victims, helps to justify both the emotions the characters experience and the audience's identification with the protagonists. The gangster genre has provided a rich set of texts through which the complexities of ethnicity, race, and gender have been refracted, inviting an identification with the gangster protagonist and creating a rich imaginative playing field on which challenges to ethnic and racialized masculinity can be worked through and resolved, if only on screen.

In this dissertation I hope I have illuminated the ways in which the stereotype of strong silent males is not only a false social construct, but also a false history of American film. While the Western might feature a laconic protagonist whose silence belies great depth of character, American audiences have long embraced the excessive,

emotional, and ultimately melodramatic gangster. Gangster films appeal to men across ethnicities and generations for the reason that these narratives imaginatively solve complex problems of masculinity and race that men face in a world where power and justice do not always—in fact, seldom—align. As Linda Williams explains in "Melodrama, Revised," "In melodrama there is a moral, wish-fulfilling impulse towards the achievement of justice that gives American popular culture its strength and appeal" (48). The utopian yearning for justice is a core component of the American Dream and the American experiment, helping form who we believe ourselves to be as a nation. That the gangster genre dares to imagine a more just world is a testament to the cultural work of this genre specifically and the cinematic medium more generally: our fears, hopes, and dreams, play out on the screen, and if we watch carefully, we just might leave the theater with a better understanding of ourselves.

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