

# **BLAXPLOITATION FILMS OF THE 1970s**

## **Blackness and Genre**

**Novotny Lawrence**



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*For Rachael, Cheyenne, Jordan,  
Andrew, Alexis, and Allison:  
Always remember that you can achieve  
your greatest ambitions.*



# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	
The Historic Labeling of Blackness in Cinema	1
<i>Chapter One</i>	
“Two Detectives Only a Mother Could Love!”: <i>Cotton Comes to Harlem</i> and the Detective Genre	26
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
“Deadlier than Dracula!”: <i>Blacula</i> and the Horror Genre	45
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
“Now that You’ve Seen the Rest...Make Way for the Biggest and the Best!”: <i>The Mack</i> and the Gangster Genre	62
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
“6 feet 2” and All of it Dynamite!”: <i>Cleopatra Jones</i> and the Cop Action Genre	78
<i>Conclusion</i>	
The Demise and Aftermath of the Blaxploitation Movement	94
Notes	99
Filmography	107
Bibliography	111
Index	123
	vii





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## Introduction

# The Historic Labeling of Blackness in Cinema

Since the development of the motion picture industry in the late 1800s, the medium has presented blacks in a manner that reflects their sociopolitical status in America. Considered inferior by the white majority, blacks were depicted as such in films. Early film titles, such as *Pickaninnies Doing a Dance* (1894), *Dancing Dark Boy* (1895), *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904), *The Wooing and the Wedding of a Coon* (1905), and *For Massa's Sake* (1911), reinforced prevalent racist attitudes. These films, in addition to many others from the period, depict blacks as the objects of ridicule not to be taken seriously unless they are sacrificing themselves for their white masters.

The aforementioned films were a prelude to what several film historians call the greatest motion picture ever made—*The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which was adapted from Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*. Dixon, a minister and lecturer, wrote *The Clansman* to offer what he felt was an accurate view of the South during the Reconstruction era. His book stereotyped African Americans as wild, sex-starved beasts and glorified the actions of the Ku Klux Klan, who were in his view the savior of Southern whites tormented by black savages.

The production of *Nation* was difficult, but D. W. Griffith<sup>1</sup> effectively converted Dixon's novel into motion-picture form. Shooting was suspended three times due to a lack of funds. Finally, after two years of work and a budget of \$500,000, the film was completed, and in early February of 1915, *Nation* was privately screened at the Clunes Auditorium in Los Angeles (Cook 110–11).

*Nation* tells the story of the Old South, the Civil War, the Reconstruction period, and the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. It focuses on the Cameron family, who live in Piedmont, South Carolina. Before the war, the family lives in an idyllic “quaintly way that is to be no more.” Dr. Cameron

and his sons are gentle, benevolent “fathers” to their child-like servants. The slaves themselves could be no happier. In the fields they contentedly pick cotton, and in their quarters they dance and sing for their masters. In the Big House, Mammy joyously goes about her chores. All is in order. Then the Civil War breaks out, and the order cracks (Bogle, *Toms* 11–12).<sup>2</sup>

The war years take their toll. In Piedmont, the Cameron family is terrorized by a troop of black raiders, and the entire South undergoes “ruin, devastation, rapine, and pillage.” Then comes Reconstruction, and “uppity niggers” from the North move into Piedmont, exploiting and corrupting former slaves, unleashing the sadism and bestiality “innate” in the Negro, turning the once-congenial darkies into renegades and using them to “crush the white South under the heel of the black South.” “Lawlessness runs wild,” says one title card. The old slaves have quit work to dance. They roam the streets, shoving whites off sidewalks. They take over political polls and disenfranchise the whites. This results in a black political victory and a congressional meeting depicts the ruling blacks eating chicken legs, drinking whiskey, and legalizing interracial marriage. Matters reach the peak when Gus, a black soldier and a renegade, sets out to rape the youngest Cameron daughter. Rather than submit to his aggressive wooing, she throws herself off a cliff. Her bravery becomes the catalyst and inspiration for the Klan to retake the South. Klan members hunt Gus down and lynch him. In the meantime, the mulatto Silas Lynch is attempting to force the white Elsie Stoneman to marry him. After hearing of Gus’s death at the hands of the KKK, he commands his black soldiers to reestablish order in Piedmont (Bogle, *Toms* 13).

The last reel of the film is a series of crosscutting between scenes of the black mob in the Piedmont streets, Elsie bound and gagged, the siege at a cabin, and the Klan riding cross-country to the rescue. The Klan soon arrives and restores order in Piedmont, thwarts Lynch’s marriage plans, and rescues the group at the cabin at the last possible minute. The final segment of the film shows the Klan dominating the next election by barring blacks and their white supporters from the political process. Black rule is ended, and Margaret and Phil and Ben and Elsie are shown on a double honeymoon, symbolic of the reunion of North and South (Leab 31–32).

Despite its racist content, many critics recognized that *The Birth of a Nation* was technically innovative. Griffith presented the story using unique camera angles and difficult shots that displayed his command over the medium. The *New York Times* credited the film as “an impressive new illustration of the scope of the motion picture camera” (“Mayor” 9:4), and the trade magazine *Variety* called *Birth* “the last word in picture making. . . . Mr. Griffith set such a tone and pace in the film that it will

take a long time before one can come along that can top it in the point of production, acting, photography, and direction” (“Birth” 8).

C. F. Zittel’s review in Hearst’s *Evening Post* comes the closest to giving a sense of the enthusiasm experienced by early viewers of the film.

First of all children must be sent to see this masterpiece. Any parent who neglects this advice is committing an educational offense, for no film has ever produced more educational points than Griffith’s latest achievement. *The Birth of a Nation* will thrill you, startle you, make you hold on to your seats. It will make you cry. It will make you angry. It will make you glad. It will make you hate. It will make you love. It is not only worth riding miles to see, but it is worth walking miles to see. (qtd. in Schickel 267)

While some heralded *Birth* as a masterpiece, its ludicrous portrayal of blacks outraged both African Americans and liberal whites alike. Specifically, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) formally protested against the film, and many intellectuals attacked *Birth* for its inherent racism. For example, Garrison Villard stated that the production was “immoral, improper and unjust” (qtd. in “Mayor” 9). In addition, Frederick C. Rowe, U.S. Commissioner of Immigration, characterized the skewed portrayal of blacks as “cruel, vindictive, and as untrue” (qtd. in “Mayor 9). The president of Harvard University stated that the film perverted white ideals. Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House, was also greatly disturbed over the picture and wrote vigorously against it (Mintz and Roberts 47).

Despite the controversy surrounding *Birth*, it was an extremely successful motion picture. The film had extended runs at both Clunes and New York’s Liberty Theater of seven months and eleven months, respectively (Mintz and Roberts 47). Furthermore, it grossed more than \$10,000,000 and is still considered the first epic motion picture ever made.

Unfortunately, *Birth*’s contribution to the motion picture industry extended far beyond the aforementioned proportions. The film’s racist content proved equally, if not more, detrimental to the motion picture than its technical innovations were progressive. Significantly, *Birth* solidified the five major stereotypes that circumscribed black performers in Hollywood cinema—the noble, loyal manageable Toms, the clownish coons, the stoic, hefty mammy, the troubled, tragic mulatto, and the brutal black buck (Bogle, *Blacks* 21). In *Blacks in American Films and Television*, Donald Bogle notes, “All the types had appeared in previous short films; indeed they were carryovers from popular fiction, poetry, and music of the 19th

century. But never had they been given such a full-blown dramatic treatment—and in a film seen the world over” (21). Indeed, *Birth* helped further position blacks as the quintessential Other.

*Birth's* assault on black life prompted Emmett J. Scott, a former secretary of Booker T. Washington, to make a black film to challenge the epic. The film, which was originally planned as a short, was titled *Lincoln's Dream*. However, the project grew when scriptwriter Elaine Sterne expanded the screenplay into a feature-length film (Bogle, *Toms* 103). Scott enlisted the black bourgeoisie to finance *Dream*, and the film was shot in Chicago and Florida. According to Bogle, the film's production proved extremely difficult due to bad weather, poorly designed and constructed sets, an inexperienced cast and crew, and inadequate lighting facilities (*Toms* 103). The production also ran into financial difficulties, and Scott had to seek support from white backers, who altered the film in both theme and content. *Dream*, finally completed after three years and retitled *The Birth of a Race*, was promoted as “A Master Picture Conceived in the Spirit of Truth and Dedicated to All the Races of the World” (Bogle, *Toms* 103). *Race* premiered on December 1, 1918, at Chicago's Blackstone Theater, one of the most fashionable theaters of the day (Leab 62).

The *Birth of a Race* begins with the Kaiser and his counselors discussing when to open hostilities. A workman, who seemingly represents Christ, breaks in on the meeting and for over an hour relates the history of the world since the Creation, including such unrelated episodes as the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the Jewish flight from Egypt, the Crucifixion, and the discovery of America by Columbus. The second part of the film is set during World War I and deals in extremely melodramatic fashion with sabotage, suicide, murder, and the divided loyalties of a family of German Americans (Leab 64).

*Race* proved to be both a financial and artistic disaster after its release. For example, *Variety* described the production as “a ghastly example of terrific waste. . . . Magnificent gorgeous settings run alongside of shoddy drops. . . . Stock battle cut-ins are used in a manner which advertise their ‘stockness’” (“Birth of a Race” 39). In addition, *Billboard* characterized *Race* as “perhaps the worst conglomeration of mixed purposes and attempts ever thrown together” (“Birth of a Race” 48).

Although *Race* failed to successfully combat *Nation's* racist propaganda, the film inspired black filmmakers to challenge the anti-black bias that permeated all levels of America's ascendant motion picture industry. Significantly, “blacks established a film movement of their own with the purpose, in the words of the pioneering editors of the first black newspaper, *Freedom Journal*, ‘to plead our own cause’” (Everett 108). In *Returning the*

*Gaze*, Anna Everett writes, “To plead their own cinematic cause, African Americans embarked on an audacious independent film movement replete with theaters, ‘race films,’ performers, directors, producers, distributors, and critics all dedicated to bringing truer identities of the customs and aspirations of the diverse black community to the silver screen” (108). “In their heyday, ‘race movies’ took something from every existing Hollywood genre” (Gaines 17). This diversity is apparent when viewing the plethora of race films produced by various companies.

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, founded by black actor Noble P. Johnson and his brother George Johnson, was among the first independent black race film companies (Bogle, *Toms* 103). Lincoln produced race films across varying genres, such as the company’s first release, the drama *The Realization of a Negro’s Ambition* (1916),<sup>3</sup> and its second release, a war film, *The Trooper of Troop K* (1916).

In addition to the Johnson brothers, Oscar Micheaux emerged as the most well-known race film director. Prior to working in motion pictures, Micheaux worked as a professional novelist and authored ten melodramatic novels in a ten-year period after forming his own company to publish them. Once a novel was completed, Micheaux arranged aggressive promotional tours to launch it. During these tours, he traveled across the country where he met with the leaders of black communities—doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and schoolteachers—as well as with black laborers, domestics, and farmers. Micheaux also lectured in schools, churches, and even in homes, promoting himself and his work. Using this strategy, he established a name for himself (Bogle, *Toms* 110).

During his tenure as a director, Micheaux produced a string of dramas that dealt with controversial subjects. His first film, *The Homesteader*, premiered in Chicago in 1919 where it was advertised as “a powerful drama of the Indian Reservation of the Great Northwest into which has been deftly woven the most subtle of all America’s problems—THE RACE QUESTION” (*Homesteader*). Micheaux followed *The Homesteader* with other dramas addressing themes such as miscegenation, passing, and lynching. *Within Our Gates* (1920), *The Brute* (1920), *Son of Satan* (1922), *Birthright* (1924), *Body and Soul* (1924), and *Millionaire* (1927) serve as examples (Bogle, *Toms* 111).

Unfortunately, many race film companies encountered problems that eventually led to the demise of the independent black film movement. For example, black filmmakers were consistently plagued by exhibition problems. In “Hollywood’s Golden Economic Age,” Eric Pierson notes that in the 1920s the United States had over twenty thousand theaters, but only a few hundred of them were interested in exhibiting race films (14). Instead



they opted to utilize their screens to project Hollywood's more polished mainstream pictures.

In addition to exhibition problems, financing was also a dilemma for race filmmakers. Many of the early filmmakers had primarily produced films in the interest of presenting a more positive depiction of African-American life, not as money-making enterprises (Leab 75). During the latter 1920s, control of the race film industry was acquired by a number of white-owned companies that in many cases hired blacks as front men (83). These companies were profit driven, and the films' content suffered as a result. Specifically, motion pictures emphasizing African American uplift soon disappeared as the companies fell back upon Hollywood's stereotypical conventions to boost box office returns. In *Blacks in Film*, Jim Pines notes:

Whether produced by whites or blacks, race movies generally required a peculiar sense of ethnic life and expression, that is, a quality completely ignored by Hollywood movies. However, a vital factor involving the commercial viability of the "race film" business, in the final analysis is based on the disparity between the white-owned and the black-owned companies; the fact that white-owned companies enjoyed a distinct advantage over black companies. What this meant basically was that white economic power sustained the viability of the ethnic film market. It thus played a decisive role in the decline of the "race film" industry and the ghetto circuits in the thirties. (42)

The final factor that led to the decline of race films was that the novelty of the motion pictures faded. This was evident as early as 1920 in an article in *Age*: "The day of expecting charitable consideration in business even of our own people just because we are Negroes is past" (10). Furthermore, the attendance of ghetto audiences declined, prompting a writer for the *Afro-American* to summarize, "The worst enemy of the race productions is the race movie fan himself" (9).

Despite these factors, race films saw a brief resurgence of production in the 1930s. These films imitated Hollywood's most notable genres and included gangster pictures, such as *Dark Manhattan* (1937), *Bargain with Bullets* (1937), *Underworld* (1937), *Mystery in Swing* (1938), and *Double Deal* (1939). Furthermore, films, such as *Harlem on the Prairie* (1938), *Bronze Buckaroo* (1938), *Two Gun Man from Harlem* (1939), and *Harlem Rides the Range* (1939), featured Herb Jeffries as the first black singing cowboy.

Unfortunately, the resurgence was short lived, and the production of race films ceased at the end of the 1930s. According to Thomas Cripps,

by the close of the decade both African Americans and liberal whites felt that race movies represented “reactionary vestiges of past oppression” (5). Unfortunately, Hollywood’s stereotypical portrayal of blacks would continue.

Although the production of race films officially ended in the late 1930s, Hollywood, perhaps influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, made its first attempt in the 1920s at producing black films.<sup>4</sup> These motion pictures were referred to as “all-black” productions.” While black film producers utilized the term “race film” to describe a motion picture made for blacks by blacks, they inadvertently aided in cementing a system of classification that would permeate Hollywood for years. Ethnic terms had been used to describe motion pictures as early as 1905 when *The Wooing and the Wedding of a Coon* was billed as a “genuine Ethiopian comedy” (Mapp, *Blacks* 16). The trend was standardized when Hollywood began producing all-black productions, such as *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and *Hallelujah* (1929). Unfortunately, these films perpetuated traditional stereotypes by depicting a glimpse into the supposed shuckin’ and jivin’ black lifestyle.

Hollywood’s pioneer all-black motion picture, *Hearts in Dixie*, did little to dispel the stereotypes commonly held about blacks. Produced by Fox and directed by Paul Sloane, the film was described as “a musical drama of the South.” *Hearts* stars Clarence Muse, a Dickinson Law School graduate, in his film debut as a farmer named Nappus (Bogle, *Blacks* 432). The movie also features Lincoln Perry, better known as Stepin Fetchit, as Gummy, the lazy son-in-law of Nappus.<sup>5</sup>

*Hearts* tells the story of Nappus and his family. His daughter Chloe is married to Gummy, and they have two children, Trailia, a girl, and her brother Chinquapin. When Chloe and Nappus’ wife become ill with swamp fever, the voodoo woman appears, and a gathering of neighbors tries to restore the health of the sick by singing spirituals, but it does not work. By the time Nappus decides to send for a white doctor (the only nonblack in the film), it is too late. Gummy remarries, but his new wife is a shrew, mainly, it seems, because she makes him work. Meanwhile, the worthy Nappus sells his farm and a mule to pay for his grandson’s education, hoping that one day he may return from college to help his people. The film ends with a sad but resolute Nappus bidding farewell to Chinquapin, who boards the riverboat that carries him north to his destiny (Leab 86).

According to Leab, the thinly veiled plot in *Hearts* was merely an excuse for the singing, dancing, and comedic episodes (86). Among the songs performed were “Ring de Banjo,” “Go Ring Them Bells,” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” The dances included a cakewalk and a solo jig by Gummy, while much of the comedy derived from his attempts to avoid

work (Leab 86–87). Peter Noble comments about *Hearts*, “We were given no new slant on Negro life and thought, just the same old hackneyed routine. The story was so slight as to be almost nonexistent, but apparently we were to be compensated for this by a succession of endless musical numbers, spirituals, prayer meetings, cotton picking and the like” (qtd. in Mapp, *Blacks* 21).

Unfortunately, some critics praised the film. For example, *Los Angeles Examiner* journalist Louella Parsons called it a “remarkable talking picture in which one glimpses the real soul of the Negro. . . . [There is] nothing in *Hearts in Dixie* . . . at which any race can take offense, it is a true and sympathetic picture of the colored folk” (15). These comments are illustrative of the manner in which a segment of the white population accepted Hollywood’s stereotyped assessment of black life as authentic representations. In short, blacks sang because that’s what blacks do, blacks danced because that’s what blacks do, and Gummy was lazy because by nature, all blacks are lazy.

After *Hearts* was released, the terms “all-black” film or “Negro” film could have functioned as a disclaimer for the offensive representations presented in the films that utilized the classification. In these motion pictures, black life, black characters, and black beliefs are marginalized in black spaces instead of a multicultural world. Hence, the all-black Hollywood productions featured the Other lifestyle rather than the normal one that race films sought to depict.

Significantly, *Hallelujah* (1929) serves as another example of an all-black Hollywood production. This Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer release was supposed to be more positive in its portrayals of blacks, because its director, King Vidor, sincerely wanted to make a movie that accurately represented African Americans (Leab 92).<sup>6</sup> Specifically, in a *New York Times* interview, Vidor called *Hallelujah* his greatest ambition: “I’ve always wanted to make it. . . . I don’t know what will happen to it, of course, but I think it either will be one of the greatest hits of the year or one of the greatest flops” (“King Vidor” 33).

*Hallelujah* also fell back upon familiar black stereotypes, which are prevalent in the film’s opening sequence. Its story begins with a group of blacks picking cotton and singing “Swanee River.” The audience is introduced to Parson Johnson and his family: Mammy, his wife; Missy Rose, his adopted daughter; and Zeke, the pivotal character, who prefers loafing to working and whose antics distract the rest of the family from doing their chores (Leab 90). The remainder of the film continues in the same manner, demonstrating the simple nature of content, shuffling darkies.

In the end, Vidor’s greatest ambition did little to enhance the image of black life. He depicted blacks as superstitious people who derive happiness

from singing spirituals while performing manual labor. In addition, the film also shows blacks as happy crap-shooting darkies. “Moreover, the characters are presented as living in a community that was self-contained and entirely black. Therefore, their erratic behavior appeared to arise out of their own shortcomings rather than from any pressures or limitations imposed by white society” (Leab 93). Because the film was presented as a serious view of the black experience, its depictions only served as a reinforcement of white America’s perception of African Americans.

*Hallelujah* drew much criticism from the black community. Audiences were dismayed that Vidor continued to stereotypically portray African Americans. For example, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that black moviegoers “who belong to what one might tap as the middle and upper classes” viewed *Hallelujah* as “representing conditions in which they have no pride” (qtd. in Leab 93). One letter to the editor of a black paper charged that King Vidor’s “filthy hands were reeking with prejudice,” while another writer referred to the movie’s “insulting niggerisms” (qtd. in Leab 93–94). A review in *Variety* explained how white audiences would view the film: “Whites will accept it as a camera reproduction of the typical Southland with its wide-open cotton spaces, where the good natured singing Negro continues to eke out a bare existence” (“Hallelujah” 18).

This criticism, combined with a lack of profitability, forced Hollywood to temporarily cease production of all-black motion pictures. However, in the attempt to bolster black support for the war, the industry returned to the formula during World War II. In “Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion Picture Propaganda during World War II,” Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black note, “White America fought . . . as a remarkably unified country. In black America, however, a strong current of apathy, and sometimes barely muted opposition to the Allies, was evident” (383). Significantly, blacks were reluctant to fight for a country that continued to systematically oppress them. Sociologist and black leader Horace Clayton summarized the dilemma perfectly in December 1941 when he posed the question: “Am I a Negro first and then a policeman or soldier second, or should I forget in any emergency situation the fact that . . . my first loyalty is to my race?” (qtd. in Koppes and Black 371).

Black resistance to the war effort prompted President Franklin D. Roosevelt to consolidate several propaganda agencies into the Office of War and Information (OWI), which came into being on June 3, 1942 (Koppes and Black 384). Polls taken by the OWI’s Bureau of Intelligence produced “formidable evidence of the degree to which racial grievances have kept Negroes from an all out participation in the war effort”; in one survey, the interviewers asked Harlem blacks whether it was “more important right

now to beat Germany and Japan or to make democracy work at home” (Koppes and Black 385). Fifty percent of black respondents agreed that defeating the Axis ought to take priority, but thirty-three percent believed it more important to make democracy work at home. A poll of poor whites revealed that race, not class, was the distinguishing element, as an overwhelming ninety percent gave priority to winning the war, while only five percent chose home-front democracy (Koppes and Black 385). When asked whether a Nazi victory would improve their lot, a mere one percent of black respondents told OWI’s black interviewers that it would, while sixty-three percent believed they would be worse off under Japanese rule; embitterment ran deep enough, however, that twenty-two percent of blacks thought that their behavior would not change. “The endemic racism of Nazi doctrine made blacks shudder; by contrast the perception of the Japanese as fellow ‘people of color’ stimulated strong positive identifications from blacks” (Koppes and Black 385). Harlem leader Adam Clayton Powell Jr. cleverly used American racism to explain Nazism: “Despite our apathy toward the war, it is not because we don’t recognize the monster Hitler. . . . We recognized him immediately, because he is like minor Hitlers here. . . . The Gestapo is like the Ku Klux Klan here” (qtd. in Koppes and Black 385).

Blacks’ attitudes toward the war led the OWI to adopt what Deputy Director George A. Barnes described as a “direct and powerful Negro propaganda effort as a distinct crusade for Negro rights” (Koppes and Black 389). Thus, the OWI worked behind the scenes in a campaign with Hollywood to “depict the Negro as a normal human being and an integral part of human life and activity” (Koppes and Black 392). Specifically, a number of strategies, including writing out, tokenism, and a return to the all-black musical, were employed to ensure better treatment of blacks onscreen.<sup>7</sup> The most notable all-black musicals from the World War II period include *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Stormy Weather* (1943), and *Thousands Cheer* (1943).

Vincente Minnelli’s *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) was based on a successful Broadway play starring Ethel Waters, who reprised her role as Petunia in the motion picture. In addition, the film features Eddie “Rochester” Anderson as Little Joe Jackson and Lena Horne as the temptress Georgia Brown. *Sky* tells the story of Jackson, a harmless, little colored man who enjoys shooting craps and raising a bit of Cain. He is married to a decent, God-fearing woman, Petunia, who worries plenty about him. But neither Joe nor Petunia knows of the battle between the General of heaven and Lucifer Jr. of hell for the rights to Jackson’s soul. To win his victim, Lucifer Jr. throws everything—including a winning sweepstakes ticket and the temptress Georgia Brown—Little Joe’s way. But, in the end Petunia’s prayers save

him, and together the two are able to walk hand in hand to their cabin in the sky (Bogle, *Toms* 157).

Prior to its release, *Sky* was marketed as an all-star production. It did indeed feature many of the most popular black performers of the day, but even they were not exempt from hackneyed depictions of black life as the traditional stereotypes of happy, religious, singing darkies prevailed: "The film contained the standard scenes of psalm-shouting and crap-shooting, in addition to emphasizing the superstitious aspects of black religion" (Leab 121). Furthermore, *Time's* review criticized *Sky*: "Like many star-filled pictures, this one never really shows off its crowded heavens. The Negroes are apparently regarded less as artists (despite their very high potential of artistry) than as picturesque Sambo-style entertainers" ("Cabin" 96).

Unfortunately, *Thousands Cheer* and *Stormy Weather* portrayed blacks similarly to *Sky*, failing to enhance portrayals of African American life. While Hollywood and the OWI attempted to present blacks more accurately, Koppes and Black note, the organizations were "limited by their inadequate understanding of the black perspective" (395). Hence, the all-black Hollywood productions were unsuccessful and are indicative of the way that black characters as well as black performers were marginalized. More importantly, these films further illustrate when labeling productions with ethnic terms became a staple of the industry. Significantly, the practice was appropriated from black independent filmmakers who categorized their films as race films in order to distinguish them from Hollywood motion. Although the all-black musical emerged as a result of the race films, a sharp contrast exists between the two. In sum, race films emerged from within the black community, while Hollywood's all-black films perpetuated white cultural myths about African Americans.

During the postwar years, the race issue became a prevalent theme in a group of motion pictures commonly referred to as social problem films. However, the social problem film expands beyond race and covers a gamut of problematic situations. For example, Charles J. Maland asserts, "It would be misleading to claim that every relatively widespread phenomenon in society which leads to human deprivation, conflict, or suffering is automatically considered a social problem" (306). Maland outlines several factors that are integral in defining a social problem.

First, a social problem refers to an undesirable social condition affecting a significant number of people. Second, it must be perceived by a considerable segment of society to be a problem. Third, the definition of what constitutes a social problem presupposes power: an individual or a group must have enough power in society to get the matter into

public debate, or the condition may never be considered a social problem. Finally, implicit in the very notion of the term “social problem” is the belief that something can be done about it—that the problem has a solution. (306)

Taking these factors into account, Maland contends:

[The social-problem film] is a feature film whose central narrative concern or conflict relates to or includes the presentation of a social problem. The social problem film also has a contemporary setting, though it may include scenes from the past that lead up to that contemporary setting and help to explain the roots of the problem. Finally, the social problem film is generally animated by a humane concern for the victim(s) or of crusader(s) against the social problem and, often, by an implicit assumption that the problem can be treated or even eliminated through well-intentioned liberal social reform. (307)

Social problem films have existed for many years. Early titles include D. W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), which examines how the wealthy enrich themselves at the expense of the poor, and Mervyn LeRoy's *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), which explores the Southern chain gang and the judicial system. These films both serve as prime examples, examining different social problems plaguing America. However, no descriptor is used to demonstrate that the former explores poverty and the latter critiques the legal system.

Hollywood returned to the production of problems films in the late 1940s and early 1950s, using the medium to critique U.S. race relations. Ethnic labels were once again employed to describe social problems films scrutinizing black-white relations, as forces within and outside the industry commonly referred to them as “Negro” problem films.

The social problem film reemerged in the 1940s as a result of two factors. First, after fighting anti-Semitism during WWII, many soldiers returned home feeling that if racial inequality was unjust overseas, then it was unfair in the United States as well. Secondly, Hollywood turned to the production of social problem films in order to profit from America's newfound consciousness. By 1946, television had emerged as a formidable adversary to motion pictures; between 1946 and 1949, the film industry's profits slid 45 percent (Leab146). Studio executives' solution to declining profits was summed up by a headline in *Variety*: “More Adult Pix Key to Top Coin.” Daniel Leab writes, “Movies with so-called ‘adult’ themes such as anti-Semitism, juvenile delinquency, and mental health did well at the

box-office, and the race problem seemed a topic ideal for raising profitable controversy" (146).<sup>8</sup> With this in mind, producers rushed to capitalize on the Negro problem picture. One of many *Variety* stories about the frenzy began: "1949 is definitely lining up as the year of the Negro problem pic; result has been the development of a race to be first on the screen with the subject" ("1949" 3).

United Artists's *Home of the Brave* (1949) was the first Negro-problem picture to grace the silver screen. The film was based on a mildly successful play by Arthur Laurents (Leab 146) that initially dealt with anti-Semitism (Koppes and Black 405). Stanley Kramer had attempted to adapt the play for the screen in 1946 after its run on Broadway ended, but his efforts fell short. He still wanted to produce the film in 1949; however, the success of two other films dealing with anti-Semitism made his project seem redundant until the prospect of changing the main character from Jewish to black was proposed (Leab 146). Kramer responded enthusiastically to the idea because he felt that "an audience could see the difference in terms of color rather than having one white man saying he was Jewish and another saying he was Christian" (qtd. in "Home," *Ebony* 60–61). Other studios had announced their plans to release Negro-problem films, but their projects were far from completion (Bogle, *Toms* 144). Realizing that the first of the Negro-tolerance pictures would garner the most attention and reap enormous profits, Kramer swore his cast and crew to secrecy. Significantly, *Home* was filmed under the title *High Noon*,<sup>9</sup> and it created a stir throughout the film industry and country after its release (144).

*Home* introduced audiences to James Edwards, an up-and-coming actor who studied drama at Northwestern University (Bogle, *Blacks* 386). Edwards stars as the lead character, Moss, a black soldier fighting in the Pacific for his country. While on a five-man mission to a Japanese-held island, he becomes the victim of white-GI bigotry. His consequent paralysis and eventual recovery are linked to a psychological exploration of the reaction to racism. The film reaches its climax when a white psychiatrist deliberately provokes Moss with the line, "You dirty nigger, get up and walk!" (Mapp, *Blacks* 37). This infuriates Moss and gives him the motivation to walk again. *Home* ends with him having recovered and preparing to leave the military hospital. Before making his exit, he is approached by a white soldier who, with the war now over, plans to open a bar. He asks Moss if he'd like to be his partner, and he accepts the offer from the benevolent white male and looks forward to a bright future.

After its release, *Home* was a critical and commercial success. *Time* magazine commented that the movie "has novelty, emotional wallop, and excitement that comes from wrestling with a real problem, rather than



fencing with a cooked up plot. . . . Even when it fumbles the statement of its message, the movie retains a sort of rough and ready strength" ("Home" 100). In addition, the *Dallas Morning News* called it "brilliant," noting that it "abashes the white man for both his habit of Negro prejudice and worse, his unconscious tactlessness" (qtd. in Bogle, *Toms* 145).

Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation followed United Artists' lead, releasing Elia Kazan's *Pinky* (1949), which deals with the dilemma of the tragic mulatto and the issue of passing. White actress Jeanne Crain plays the film's title character,<sup>10</sup> a nurse who returns to the South after passing for white in Boston. Once she returns home, she has to decide whether to live as a black woman in the South or return to the North where she can marry her Caucasian fiancé and continue living as white. Eventually, with the help of a terminally ill, aristocratic white woman who leaves her estate to Pinky when she dies, she realizes that she must stay in the South and accept her identity. Pinky is forced to go to court to hold onto her inheritance. She wins her case, and when her white fiancé from the North comes to take her away, she tells him of her intentions to stay in the South. The two split, and Pinky converts her property into a school for young, black nurses. The film ends with Pinky, standing alone, melancholic and misty eyed, facing a future with a new racial pride.

*Pinky* was one of the weakest of all the social problem films. Perhaps its biggest drawback was casting a white woman to play a black role. According to Bogle, "*Pinky* typified the movie industry's methods of grasping audience identification" (*Toms* 152). He illustrates how Pinky's grandmother (Ethel Waters) is depicted as nothing more than a mammy and contrasts that image with Pinky's.

Granny, the typical Negro domestic, is shown washing, ironing, or performing other menial chores. No one expected any more from her, and audiences were neither surprised nor outraged by her behavior. But when Jeanne Crain's Pinky was forced to take in washing to earn money for her lawyer's fees—as she stood over a scrubbing board with the carefully placed studio sweat rolling off her perfect porcelain-white face—white audiences were automatically shocked and manipulated so that they sympathized with this lovely white girl compelled to work like a "nigger." (152)

Despite its shortcomings, *Pinky* was even more successful than *Home of the Brave*, which grossed over \$2 million in domestic film rentals on its way to becoming one of United Artists' biggest draws of 1949. *Pinky* doubled

the success of its predecessor managing over \$4 million in domestic rentals and was estimated to be the second-highest-grossing film of 1949 (Leab 156).<sup>11</sup> *Home of the Brave* and *Pinky* performed so well at the box office that *Variety* declared, “the film’s leading b.o. star for 1949 wasn’t a personality, but . . . a subject—racial prejudice” (“\$20,000,000” 1). *Brave* and *Pinky*’s success led to an influx of the so-called Negro social problem films. Other titles include *Lost Boundaries* (1949), *Intruder in the Dust* (1950), *No Way Out* (1950), *The Defiant Ones* (1958), and *Imitation of Life* (1958).

While the social problem film flourished for a short period of time, the genre is considered somewhat of an anomaly in Hollywood. Since the emanation of the social problem film in the 1930s, it has been the subject of discussion by both those working within the industry and scholars. For example, many people working within the industry adhered to the traditional notion that motion pictures are a form of entertainment and provide an escape from the grind of everyday life. That being the case, motion pictures need not contain social messages. Martin Quigley, one of the authors of the Production Code, stated, “The entertainment picture is no place for social, political, and economic argument” (Roffman and Purdy vii).<sup>12</sup> Many Hollywood producers shared Quigley’s opinion, using the ever-popular quip, “If you want to send a message, use Western Union” (Roffman and Purdy vii). In contrast, Stanley Kramer was highly in favor of message films and challenged traditional notions by asking, “What’s wrong with pictures about people who have problems?” Darryl F. Zanuck echoed Kramer’s sentiment: “A film can provide diversion and at the same time have something to say” (qtd. in Gehring 305).

While those working within the industry debated whether motion pictures are vehicles for social, political, and economic messages, scholars have discussed social problem films in a variety of ways. Charles J. Maland examines the films in regard to genre, concluding, “The social problem film is not considered a film genre, but exists as an anomalous form in Hollywood” (307). He refers to Thomas Schatz’s *Hollywood Genres*, which notes that a genre film “involves familiar, essentially one-dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar setting” (6). Schatz distinguishes between genres of order, such as Westerns and gangster films, and genres of integration, like screwball comedies and musicals. Furthermore, Schatz delineates the characteristic settings, iconography, character types, plot structures and conflicts, and thematic concerns central to the various genres (6). Using this methodology, Maland presumes, “Social problem films are too various in their narrative and thematic characteristics to warrant the label ‘genre’” (307).

In *The Hollywood Social Problem Film*, Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy describe the social problem film as one that “combines social analysis and dramatic conflict within a coherent narrative structure. Social content is transformed into dramatic events and the movie narrative adapted to accommodate social issues as story material through a particular set of movie conventions” (viii). This definition is broad and allows the authors to discuss a range of motion pictures as social-problem films, which they do not believe is a distinct genre because they recognize many types of films as social problem films (viii).

In “The Rise of the Problem-Film,” sociologist Herbert Gans defines the problem film:

[The problem film] deals explicitly with social, sexual, and political problems and their solution. The typical problem-film shows how an individual or group is beset by the problem, weaves a plot around the causes and consequences of the problem, describes the moral or ethical issues—and dilemmas—raised both by the problem and possible solutions, and finally ends with the hero taking appropriate action, usually including a morally difficult choice, which solves the problem at least for him and his loved ones. (327)

Furthermore, Gans views the problem film as a phenomenon of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which emerged out of the problem films of the late 1940s and early 1950s. His opinion illustrates yet another assumption that divides scholars on the question of social problem film categorization. Specifically, if the films are a phenomenon of the late 1950s and early 1960s, then earlier titles, such as *A Corner in Wheat* and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, are not.

Here, the point is not to hypothesize whether films should contain social messages or to establish the social problem film as a genre. Instead, the intention is to demonstrate the controversy that surrounds the body of films. As illustrated above, neither industry workers nor scholars place the films within traditional conceptions of Hollywood genres. Therefore, the addition of a social problem within the narrative constitutes difference. While problem films are regarded as anomalous, it is important to note that films such as *Home* and *Pinky* are categorized as “Negro” problem films. This illustrates the practice of using an ethnic term to distinguish black-related problem films from others. The racial examination is the inextricable link that positions the social problem films of the late 1940s and early 1950s within the body of motion pictures. However, blackness or race makes the films different or a subcategory of a body of films already considered an abnormality in the motion-picture industry.

Thus, a dichotomy exists between white social problem films and Negro social problem films.

As America moved through the 1950s and 1960s, the social, political, and economic climate vastly changed. The Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and a host of other events transposed the national attitude, leading to the eventual emergence of “black exploitation” or “blaxploitation films.”

These films were made possible by the rising political and social consciousness of black people, which translated into a large black audience thirsting to see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen. This surge in African American identity politics led also to an outspoken, critical dissatisfaction with Hollywood’s persistent degradation of African Americans in films among black leaders, entertainers, and intellectuals. (Guerrero 69–70)

The outcry from the black community forced Hollywood to slowly shift away from the stereotypical caricatures that they had traditionally used to circumscribe black performers.<sup>13</sup>

Sidney Poitier’s work clearly reflects Hollywood’s slow evolution. Poitier made his film debut in the social problem film *No Way Out* (1950) and continued his rise to stardom appearing in films such as *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and *The Defiant Ones* (1958). However, it was during the 1960s that Poitier reached the apex of his career, becoming America’s first black superstar. He starred in box-office hits such as *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *Lilies of the Field* (1963), *A Patch of Blue* (1965), and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). In addition to garnering box office success, the films also received a great deal of critical acclaim. Poitier became the first black man to win an Academy Award for his leading performance in *Lilies*, while *In the Heat of the Night* was awarded Oscars for Best Picture and Best Director.<sup>14</sup>

According to Bogle, Poitier succeeded because he was “the model integrationist hero” (*Toms* 175). In all his films he was articulate, well dressed, and above all, non-threatening to the white majority. With that in mind, Bogle asserts that Poitier was also able to succeed because the characters that he played were “mild mannered toms”<sup>15</sup> (*Toms* 176): “When insulted or badgered, the Poitier character stood by and took it. He differed from the old servants only in that he was governed by a code of decency, duty, and moral intelligence” (*Toms* 176). Finally, Bogle contends that Poitier emerged as a star because of his undeniable talent, which he used to imbue every role with his strength and sensitivity (*Toms* 176).

In stark contrast to Poitier was former football-player-turned-actor Jim Brown, who emerged as a “Big Black Buck Hero for a Separatist Age” (Bogle, *Toms* 220).<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the greatest advantage that Brown had when he began his career in motion pictures was that he was already a bona fide star. In *Jim*, James Tobak asserts, “It was Jim Brown who, during the decade from 1957 to 1965, had done more than any other man to originate what became a national obsession with the game [football]. He was a consistent and spectacular warrior, the embodiment of his team, a crystallization of physical potency. More, he introduced a new dimension to the sport, as its first black hero” (6).

Brown demonstrated the same strength that made him a star on the gridiron on the silver screen. He made his motion picture debut as a Union soldier in *Rio Conchos* (1964) and followed it with appearances in films such as *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *The Split* (1968), and *100 Rifles* (1968), among others. Each of Brown’s roles relied upon his physical prowess and “suggested power . . . never before exhibited by a black male” (Bogle, *Toms* 220). Nowhere is this more prevalent than in *100 Rifles*, which positions Brown as America’s first black, male sex symbol. His character beds Raquel Welch, who plays a Mexican in the film. However, as Leab notes, *Rifles*’s advertising campaign treated her as white: “The 1970 National General western *El Condor* made it clear that a white woman’s sexual lust for the Brown character led her to betray her white lover” (235).<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Brown’s sexuality is also on display in the film’s posters, which depict him baring his forty-five-inch chest, while Welch holds him from behind.

Both Poitier and Brown’s motion pictures were significant precursors to the blaxploitation movement. For the purpose of this book, blaxploitation films are defined as movies made between 1970 and 1975, by both black and white film directors alike, to exploit the black film audience. The movement began with the release of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) (discussed in Chapter Two), which was followed by germinal films such as *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1970), *Shaft* (1971), and *Super Fly* (1972). These movies presented blacks in a variety of three-dimensional roles and solidified the characteristics that came to define the blaxploitation movement.

Blaxploitation films feature a black hero or heroine who is both socially and politically conscious. They also illustrate that blacks are not monolithic by depicting the films’ protagonists in the roles of police detectives, vigilantes, and pimps, among others. The characters are strong because they possess the ability to survive in and navigate the establishment while maintaining their blackness. Characters like John Shaft may work for

or within the system; however, they do so on their own terms and for the betterment of the black community.

In addition, blaxploitation films feature a variety of African American supporting characters. Significantly, the black hero or heroine does not emerge as a token character or an exception to the stereotypical ideals generally held about blacks by whites. The protagonists are surrounded by other black characters who are integral to the plot. Often, the films' protagonists function with or in opposition to these characters. For example, *Shaft* features the title character joining the forces with a group of black militants, while *Super Fly* depicts drug dealer, Youngblood Priest, rejecting the politics of a similar group.

Blaxploitation films present a range of characters because they are set in predominantly black urban spaces. Prior to the emergence of these films, all-black Hollywood motion pictures were generally set in the South. Blaxploitation films replace the traditional Southern settings with urban locales in cities like Harlem and Oakland. For example, as the title suggests, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was shot on location in the former, while *The Mack* (1973) was filmed in the latter. These spaces add to the authenticity of the films and, more importantly, put the conditions of the impoverished communities on full display on the big screen.

Significantly, in blaxploitation films, whites are often cast as villains who feel the wrath of black justice. Films like *Super Fly*, *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1973) all portray an evil, white crime boss. While these films depict the protagonists defeating the white villains, it is important to understand that the conflict operates as a metaphor in which whites represent the oppressive establishment. Hence, their defeat at the hands of the African American protagonists is symbolic of blacks overcoming the racism perpetuated by the machine.

Often times, blaxploitation heroes and heroines use any means necessary to overcome the oppressive establishment. Therefore, the films also feature excessive violence, necessary and significant to the plot. For example, *Sweetback* depicts the renegade title character bludgeoning two bigoted cops with handcuffs in order to save a young black militant from their assault. Additionally, Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Three the Hard Way* (1973) features Jim Brown, Fred Williamson, and Jim Kelly as government agents using martial-arts and weapons to defeat a white villain who has poisoned the black ghetto's water supply. Whether the violence stems from the characters' occupations or emerges as a form of revenge, the motive is always justified by the protagonists' standard of living.

Furthermore, the heroes and heroine emerge as sexually liberated characters. Prior to the emergence of the blaxploitation movement, black

males were typically depicted as a sexually savage or sterile, while black female sexuality was either nonexistent or deviant because it resulted in biracial offspring. In contrast, blaxploitation films frequently depict overt displays of black sexuality to counter the images offered in films such as *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Imitation of Life*, and a host of others. In many instances, performers like Richard Roundtree, Pam Grier, and Melvin Van Peebles are desired by both black and white characters alike. Furthermore, they are in control of their sexuality, and they often dictate the circumstances of their erotic encounters.

In addition, many black exploitation films include contemporary rhythm-and-blues soundtracks that match the filmic images in theme and content. Significantly, both well-known and up-and-coming artists such as Curtis Mayfield, Earth Wind and Fire, and Isaac Hayes composed the soundtracks. The films often feature extended montages that are enhanced by the funky, upbeat songs.

Finally, blaxploitation films often contain plot themes that address the black experience in America. As previously mentioned, oppression is often addressed metaphorically, while issues like the perils of drug use, police brutality, and racial profiling are presented more directly. Notably, Grier battles drug dealers in *Coffy* (1973), and Fred Williamson seeks revenge upon a bigoted white cop in *Black Caesar* (1973).

These elements were popularized on screen in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and quickly became central to subsequent blaxploitation films. The films afforded black directors the opportunity to work in the Hollywood system and became extremely successful at the box office. This popularity prompted the release of a number of other films: *Coffy*, *Melinda* (1972), *Black Caesar*, *The Soul of Nigger Charley* (1973), and *Black Belt Jones* (1974), among others.

The wave of black films was an occurrence that was previously unmatched in Hollywood. The label “blaxploitation” is the moniker still used to describe the movies today. The term, however, is reductionistic because it fails to assign individual films to their respective genres. Before this can be fully addressed, it is necessary to discuss exploitation pictures in general.

In *Teenagers and Teenpics*, Thomas Doherty writes that when used to describe motion pictures, “exploitation” has three different meanings that at times overlap. In its first sense, exploitation refers to the advertising and promotion used to lure the audience into the theater (2). Doherty explains this by referring to the early days of the motion picture industry when studios such as Columbia and Paramount maintained full-scale “exploitation departments” or special agencies in public relations to promote their films.

In short, “exploitation personnel” were responsible for “devising eye-catching advertisements and concocting newsworthy stunts linked to the movie in question” (3).

The second definition of exploitation refers to the manner in which the film endears itself to audiences. In this context, communications rather than marketing defines the meaning of the term: “A movie is said to ‘exploit’ an audience when it reflects on screen the audience’s expectations and values” (Doherty 5). Significantly, in the early days of cinema, artists like Buster Keaton found that moviegoers wanted to believe every story that they were told. The movie industry learned that film was primarily a storytelling medium and that narratives affirming the audience’s beliefs were the most profitable. Thus, moviemakers exploited what was known about an audience by catering to its desires and meeting its expectations (Doherty 5–6).

In its third categorical sense, the term “exploitation” defines a particular kind of film. The expression was originally used in this manner in 1946 by *Variety* columnist Whitney Williams, who spoke of “exploitation films” as “films with some timely or currently controversial subject which can be exploited, and capitalized on, in publicity and advertising” (36). Williams cited major studio products, such as RKO’s *Back to Bataan* (1945), which was released “almost simultaneously” with the return of American forces to the Philippines, and Warner Bros.’ *Hotel Berlin* (1945), whose release was “a race against Russia’s entry into Berlin and the end of the European war” (36). Doherty notes that at this time, the term “exploitation film” seems to have had no negative connotations (6).

By the mid-1950s the term “exploitation film” had developed the derogative stigma that it maintains today. According to Doherty, “to qualify easily for motion picture exploitation, subject matter now had to be timely *and* sensational, not simply timely after the fashion of a war movie or celebrity biopic” (6–7). Like their antecedents, exploitation films of the 1950s drew on society’s curiosity and free publicity surrounding popular current events: “The films were ‘exploitation naturals’ because the real occurrences that inspired them had already aroused widespread interest and charted a clear promotional path for ‘ad-pub’ (advertising-publicity) departments” (Doherty 7). For example, libel suits involving *Confidential* and *Whisper* magazines were the focus of MGM’s *Slander* (1956), which told the story of an unscrupulous editor of a *Whisper*-like magazine. The film’s promotional campaign played off of the real-life controversy by featuring a tagline that boasted: “MGM Brings America the FIRST Insider Account of How the Scandal Magazines Operate” (Doherty 7). Thus, Doherty notes, Hollywood’s exploration and marketing of questionable content led to the negative connotations surrounding the term “exploitation pictures” (7).



According to Doherty, as a production strategy, the 1950s's exploitation formula typically had three elements: (1) controversial, bizarre, or timely subject matter amenable to wild promotion; (2) a substandard budget; and (3) a teenage audience (7). "Movies of this ilk are triply exploitive, simultaneously exploiting sensational happenings (for story value), their notoriety (for publicity value), and their teenage participants (for box office value)" (Doherty 7).

As previously noted, black exploitation films are defined as motion pictures made by both black and white filmmakers between 1970 and 1975 in order to exploit the black film audience. Taking this into account, Doherty's definitions overlap. First, many blaxploitation films were traditional genre films. However, the movies did not exploit specific events. Instead, blaxploitation films often included an intertextual relay within the narrative that focused on past and present issues plaguing America's black population. Secondly, while some blaxploitation films were cheaply made, not all were produced on a low budget. For example, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Cleopatra Jones* were produced on healthy budgets by United Artists and Warner Bros., respectively. Finally, the advertising-publicity campaigns were directed toward blacks who could relate to the material presented in blaxploitation films. However, this is historically the manner in which all Hollywood films were marketed. Therefore, ad-pub departments implemented standard industry practices when marketing blaxploitation features.

Although the definitions provided by Doherty are applicable, there is a significant problem with categorizing blaxploitation films under one rubric. Randall Clark calls attention to this dilemma in *At a Theater or Drive-In Near You*, which details the history, culture, and politics of exploitation films. His paradigm features a discussion of exploitation film categories that includes but is not limited to teenage and sexploitation films. The former are "studies of America's youth culture," while the latter exist to "offer the viewer frequent scenes of nudity and sexual activity" (Clark 49, 77). While the aforementioned categories are easily defined, Clark's assessment of blaxploitation films problematizes the use of the term to categorize all of the films made during the movement, and it helps organize the design of this study. Significantly, regarding blaxploitation films, "it might not be entirely accurate even to refer to blaxploitation pictures as an exploitation film genre. Blaxploitation films actually transcend generic boundaries" (Clark 149). Clark's assertion illustrates that utilizing the term "blaxploitation" as an all-encompassing label is reductionistic because the films were made across a range of genres.

In "Melodrama and the Women's Picture," Pam Cook further problematizes the practice of utilizing all-encompassing terms to define a body of films.

One question insists: why does the women's picture exist? There is no such thing as 'the men's picture,' specifically addressed to men; there is only 'cinema,' and 'the women's picture,' a sub-group or category especially for women, excluding men; a separate, private space designed for more than half the population, relegating them to the margins of cinema proper. The existence of the women's picture both recognises the importance of women, and marginalises them. (qtd. in Aspinall and Harper 18)

The question that Cook raises in regard to the "women's picture" is applicable to blaxploitation films. Here the issue is "Why do blaxploitation films exist?" Because whites represent the "norm" and constitute the mainstream audience, films that exploit whites are referred to as "exploitation films." There is no such thing as the white exploitation film—there is only cinema, which includes many genre films yet excludes blaxploitation films. The term "blaxploitation" recognizes the addition of blackness but marginalizes the films by constructing them against whiteness and excluding them from generic categories.

The addition of blackness into the narratives marks a significant revision to traditional Hollywood films. However, this inclusion should not change or eliminate the films from their respective genus. Instead, it demonstrates the flexibility of genres. Steve Neale asserts that genres are best understood as processes and that these processes are dominated by similarity and repetition, in addition to difference and variation ("Questions" 165). Furthermore, Neale asserts, the process-like nature of genres manifests itself as an interaction among three levels: the level of expectation, the level of generic corpus, and the level of the "rules" or "norms" that govern both. Due to the open nature of genres, each new genre film can be viewed as an addition to the existing generic corpus, and it involves a selection from a repertoire of generic elements available at a given time (Neale, "Questions" 165). Some elements are included while others are excluded. Neale uses horror films as an example:

Each new genre film tends to extend this repertoire, either by adding a new element or by transgressing one of the old ones. Thus, for instance, *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1979) transgressed the division between psychological and supernatural monsters, giving its monster the attributes of both. In this way the elements and conventions of a genre are always *in* play rather than being simply *replayed*; and any generic corpus is always being expanded. ("Questions" 165)

Blaxploitation films function in much the same manner. For example, prior to the emergence of the movement, detective films featured a white

protagonist surrounded by a primarily white supporting cast. In contrast, Gordon Parks Sr.'s *Shaft* replaces the white protagonist with a black protagonist who is surrounded by a predominantly black supporting cast. As a black man, John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) faces the challenge of navigating through the oppressive establishment while solving cases. Thus, in addition to keeping the generic conventions in play, the inclusion of blackness expands the generic corpus by including a protagonist who must face conflicts that exist along ethnicized lines.

The aforementioned examples indicate the process-like nature of genres as well as the manner in which they change, develop, and vary. The issue of change is integral in establishing blaxploitation films as members of traditional genres. Specifically, while the narrative structure of films such as *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Blacula*, *The Mack*, and *Cleopatra Jones* are similar to their white counterparts, the locales and themes change. Still, there is a general expectation of what a gangster or detective film is; therefore it can be hypothesized that audiences still know what to expect because of existing generic conventions.

In *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman regards genres as processes and hypothesizes: "New cycles are usually produced by associating a new type of material or approach with already existing genres" (60). Again, the current volume proposes that the new material that is added to existing genres is blackness. This addition extended beyond the creation of a new genre because it inspired a new movement or cycle of films.

Furthermore, Altman also theorizes, "When conditions are favourable, single studio cycles can be built into industry-wide genres" (61). United Artists produced *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, the first blaxploitation film, and quickly began planning the sequel *Come Back, Charleston Blue* (1972) after its successful performance at the box office. Other studios quickly imitated the company's success by injecting blackness into various traditional genre films. Those studios include MGM, American International Pictures (AIP), and Warner Bros., which released *Shaft*, *Blacula*, and *Super Fly*, respectively. The participation of these companies and a host of others established the blaxploitation movement as an industry-wide phenomenon.

Finally, Altman concludes his examination of the generic process noting: "Once a genre is recognized and practised throughout the industry, individual studios have no further economic interest in practising it as such (especially in their prestige productions); instead; they seek to create new cycles by associating a new type of material or approach with an existing genre, thus initiating a new round of generification" (62). The blaxploitation film movement came to an end in 1975, due in large part to the criticism

that surrounded the films. In addition, Hollywood turned its attention to a new phenomenon that began during the blaxploitation movement—the emergence of the blockbuster feature. Thus, the new cycle began as blockbusters, such as *The Godfather* (1972), *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars*, (1977), which were produced across varying genres, became a staple in Hollywood. These films profited from both black and white audiences and effectively eliminated the need for Hollywood to continue producing films targeted specifically toward blacks.

Although blaxploitation films clearly reflect the genrification process, the films were castigated and all but forgotten once the blockbuster emerged as a profitable and viable form of entertainment. However, the purpose of this book is to establish the films within traditional Hollywood genres. Variation or the addition of a new element is essential in expanding the generic corpus. Thus, the inclusion of blackness within traditional genres represents a significant revision. Utilizing *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Blacula*, *The Mack*, and *Cleopatra Jones*, the remainder of this text illustrates how the addition of blackness expands the detective, horror, gangster, and cop action genres.

## Chapter One

# “Two Detectives Only a Mother Could Love”

## *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and the Detective Genre

The detective genre initially began to flourish in the 1930s with the release of the original version of *The Maltese Falcon* (1931), *The Thin Man* series (1934–1946), and *Satan Was a Lady* (1936). These films are typically referred to as “classical” detective films because they feature a detective who “had a cultivated wit and used scientific methods of deduction” in order to resolve the film’s conflict (Schatz 124). In addition, the detectives featured in the aforementioned films were “part of a generally organized society whose occasional problems could be solved with deductive reasoning” (Schatz 125).

The classical detectives and the worlds that they inhabited are a stark contrast to the genre’s subsequent films, which are often referred to as hard-boiled detective films because they were imbued with the noir style. Many of the quintessential detective films are film noirs (black film), which is the title that French critics bestowed upon a group of American films produced between the early 1940s and the late 1950s.<sup>1</sup> As the name suggests, films noir were dark in theme, style, and content: “The world of the film noir is the city, primarily at night, indifferent to suffering, with the possibility of violence or death around every corner. Within this world, characters lie, deceive, and kill one another in a desperate struggle to avoid their own fated destructions” (Nachbar 65).

Many noir films were adapted from the writings of authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, whose novels were transformed into the classic noir films *The Maltese Falcon* remake (1946) and *The Big Sleep* (1946), respectively. These stories feature lone detectives, Phillip Marlowe and Sam Spade (both played by Humphrey Bogart), searching for truth in the sleazy cityscape. Although the classic and hardboiled detective films differ in theme and style, they share significant commonalities. Specifically, both belong to the detective genre and prominently feature whites as the

protagonists, but the diegesis unfolds in a multicultural world that features few minorities. In short, *The Thin Man* series and *The Big Sleep* adhere to the exclusionary racist practice traditionally implemented by Hollywood at the time the films were produced.

While the aforementioned films excluded significant minority representation, they are classic embodiments of the detective genre and their influence can be viewed in the pioneer blaxploitation film *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970). However, the film’s inclusion of blackness, in the form of its protagonists, setting, supporting characters, music, sociopolitical themes, and the use of humor, leads to a significant revision of the genre. The remainder of this chapter discusses how *Cotton* functions as a hybrid detective/comedy film while also transgressing the traditional conventions of the detective genre.

Many accounts of the blaxploitation movement begin their explorations with Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1970), which is commonly credited as the motion picture that started it all. Although *Sweetback* is a landmark film, it was not the catalyst of the blaxploitation movement, as is suggested. The first film to prominently feature the characteristics that would come to define the movement was the detective/comedy film *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, which was released approximately nine months prior to *Sweetback* by United Artists in the summer of 1970 (Masood 87).

The screenplay for *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was based on a series of novels by Chester Himes, who began writing while serving an eight-year prison term for armed robbery (Chelminski 60). Himes sold his first short story to *Esquire* in 1934 while still in prison. After being paroled in 1936, Himes worked odd jobs and continued writing. In 1945 he produced his first novel titled, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, which was based on his experiences working in a Los Angeles shipyard. The novel became a bestseller and earned Himes a literary award (Chelminski 60). Unfortunately, his next two efforts, *Lonely Crusade* and *Cast the First Stone*, were not well received, and by 1953 he was unpublishable in the United States (Chelminski 60). This, along with racial discrimination, served as the catalyst for Himes’s relocation to Europe, where his publisher proposed that he write a detective novel (Chelminski 61). Himes’s initially scoffed at the suggestion; however, he eventually conceded, and the result was *La Reine de Pommes*, which became a bestseller in France. It was also named best detective novel of the year (Chelminski 61). Significantly, *Pommes* was the first of Himes’s novels to feature the detectives popularized in *Cotton*. These detectives were born in the same tradition as those featured in noir films because Himes modeled his writing style after famous detective novelist Dashiell Hammett (Chelminski 60).

Himes sold the screen rights to his detective series to producer Samuel Goldwyn Jr., who envisioned making a franchise out of the novels (Gold 62). Goldwyn initially hired white scriptwriter Arnold Perl to write the film adaptation of *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. However, after reading the first draft of Perl's screenplay, Goldwyn was not satisfied because he felt that it lacked an authentic representation of black life. He contacted Ossie Davis, whom he had originally hired to star as one of the film's detectives, for suggestions about how the script could be improved.<sup>2</sup> Davis provided minor revisions, and Goldwyn was so impressed by his work that he asked him to provide a major rewrite of the original screenplay. After Goldwyn assured him that Perl was no longer committed to the project, Davis rewrote the screen adaptation (Davis and Dee 335–36).

While Davis was rewriting the script, Goldwyn asked him who he felt was qualified to direct the project. Davis never suspected that he would be called upon to fill the position. In *With Ossie and Ruby*, Davis recounts the conversation in which Goldwyn informed him that he would direct *Cotton*. Goldwyn stated, "Ossie, I've found the director. I ran him by United Artists—they're financing *Cotton*—and they've agreed." When Davis asked who the director was going to be, Goldwyn replied, "You are" (Davis and Dee 336).<sup>3</sup> Davis accepted the position.

After accepting the job as director, Davis assisted Goldwyn in casting Arthur Johnson, who adopted the screen name Raymond St. Jaques to take his place as police detective Coffin Ed Johnson (Davis and Dee 336). Prior to appearing in *Cotton*, St. Jaques established himself as a promising actor of both stage and screen. Significantly, he appeared onstage in *High Name Today* (1959) and *The Cool World* (1960); his film credits included roles in *The Comedians* (1967), *The Green Berets* (1968), and *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (Bogle, *Blacks* 466).

*Cotton* also features comedian Godfrey Cambridge as Coffin Ed's partner, Gravedigger Jones. Cambridge was a versatile performer who appeared in Davis's stage and film versions of *Purlie Victorious* (Mabunda 823). As a comedian, he amused "The Tonight Show" audience with material that was drawn from contemporary racial situations, and he thoroughly entertained moviegoers in Melvin Van Peebles's satiric comedy *Watermelon Man* (1970).

In addition to St. Jaques and Cambridge, *Cotton* also stars Calvin Lockhart as Reverend Deke O'Mally. Lockhart originally moved to New York to study engineering, but after a brief stint in school, he dropped out to pursue an acting career (Bogle, *Blacks* 412). He made his acting debut in New York theater productions alongside St. Jaques in *The Cool World* (1960) and later appeared in *The Dark Moon* (1960) (Bogle, *Blacks* 412).

Although Lockhart gained acting experience in the theater productions, he received a small number of roles, which prompted him to move to Europe. He remained in Europe for eight years where he appeared in BBC television shows as well as in the film *Joanna* (1968). He eventually returned to the United States, and starred in films such as *Dark of the Sun* (1968), *Melinda* (1972), and *Uptown Saturday Night* (1974), among others.

Comedian Redd Foxx made his film debut in *Cotton* as a junk dealer named Uncle Bud. Prior to appearing in the film, Foxx gained notoriety working as a stand-up comic whose frank discussions about race and sex were considered obscene by some and hilarious commentaries by others. He made the transition to television in the 1960s, appearing in popular shows such as “Mr. Ed” (1965), and “Green Acres” (1966). Foxx later starred in his own television series titled “Sanford and Son” (1972–1977).

*Cotton* tells the story of Reverend Deke O’Mally, a preacher and a con man, who has organized a Back to Africa crusade and swindled \$87,000 from poor people in Harlem. However, O’Mally is not alone in his racket. He has a white partner named Calhoun (J. D. Cannon), who seizes the money, escapes in a meat truck, and hides the cash in a bale of cotton. During a chase sequence in which Calhoun is followed by O’Mally, and both are pursued by Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, the bale bounces from the truck and is found by Uncle Bud, who sells it as a prop to a stripper. While she is undressing on stage, Calhoun and O’Mally appear, search for the money, and are arrested by Gravedigger and Coffin Ed. The \$87,000, however, cannot be found. Eventually, the detectives coerce a Mafia leader into compensating O’Mally’s congregation for the missing money, and at the finale, they receive a postcard from Uncle Bud, who found the loot and is living the high life in Africa (Magill 528–29).

*Cotton*’s narrative structure follows the same pattern as traditional detective films. First, a crime is committed, which prompts the hero/heroine’s search to discover the perpetrator and uncover his/her motives. This standard formula is prevalent in classic detective literature, such as *Red Harvest* and *The Glass Key*, as well as in detective films like *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*. While *Cotton*’s narrative structure is similar to other prominent detective works, the film is not presented in the traditional lily-white Hollywood style. *Cotton* injects the conventions of the detective genre with blackness as the film’s detectives, setting, sociopolitical themes, and music are rooted in the black experience.

Police detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones are revisions of the standard white detective protagonist. Prior to the release of *Cotton*, ethnic detectives appeared both in popular fiction and on the silver screen. However, these detectives, functioning as native informants,



“explore cultural differences—in perception, in way of life, in visions of the world—and act as links between cultures, interpreting each to each, mainstream to minority and minority to mainstream” (MacDonald and MacDonald 60). Additionally, these ethnic detectives are constructed through the stereotypical tropes that position them as the exotic other rather than the subjects of serious explorations. Charlie Chan serves as a prime example of this type of ethnic detective. Based on an actual Honolulu police detective, he was known for his flowery Confucian aphorisms, his lapses into Pidgin English, his patience, attention to detail, character analysis, and discourses on justice, tradition, and cultural identity (MacDonald and MacDonald 60). Chan provided the mold in which future ethnic detectives such as John P. Marquand’s Mr. Moto and Del Shannon’s Lieutenant Luis Mendoza were constructed.

*Cotton’s* detectives, however, are considerably different from traditional white detectives as well as their stereotyped ethnic predecessors. Significantly, more often than not, white detectives are depicted as loners. In *Black and White Noir*, Paula Rabinowitz notes, “They may have started out with partners as do Phillip Marlowe in the *Maltese Falcon* or Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past* (1947). But, conveniently, the partners always die leaving the partner free of the institutional structures of the bureaucratic workplace” (143).

In “Chandler Comes to Town,” Peter J. Rabinowitz offers an explanation for this difference in black and white detectives:

[Chester Himes] had to deviate from the tenets of the hard-boiled school because, being a dispossessed black writer, he simply could not go along with its underlying ideology. Chandler’s brand of individualistic heroism, that is the lonely detective’s maintenance of his principles in the face of an intrinsically evil world, is impossible for Himes’ black precinct detectives, and indeed, the fact that they always appear as a team is itself a clue that individualism of the Marlowe sort is not available on the streets of Harlem. (21)

Coffin Ed and Gravedigger maintain the hardboiled attitude, but as a team they operate under a different set of circumstances than white private detectives. This is particularly related to W. E. B. DuBois’ notion of the “twoness” of American racial life that “describes the anomaly of American racial arrangements, which segregate black from white, discriminate along racial lines, and yet oblige Afro Americans to assimilate the values of White America” (qtd. in Cripps, *Black* 5). These circumstances are magnified by the Harlem neighborhood in which the detectives work. Significantly, in *The Ethnic Detective*, Peter Freese notes:

Gravedigger and Coffin Ed have to perform their duty in the black ghetto, that is, in a world which is defined by racial discrimination, in which most people [ . . . ] consider the police as public enemies and in which, moreover, “colored folks” [don’t] respect colored cops. Thus, Himes’ black policemen are not only up against a social order in which it [is] the rigid code of colored people to stick together against white cops, but in which, consequently, black detectives are looked upon as traitors to their race, because although their very color should put them among the oppressed, their badges make them representatives of the oppressive machinery of “The Man.” (60)

Thus, Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones work in an environment where they are both black and detectives. They must protect and serve in a manner that illustrates that they will not tolerate criminal activity but more importantly, that also demonstrates that they do not share the oppressive views of the establishment that employs them.

A particular scene that emphasizes Jones and Johnson’s struggle to protect and serve while maintaining order occurs after viewers are initially introduced to the detectives. Specifically, Coffin Ed and Gravedigger suspect that Reverend O’Mally’s Back to Africa campaign is a scam but realize that many of the good citizens of Harlem believe in his cause. During the rally, the two prevent the Black Berets, a group of black militants modeled after the Black Panthers, from disrupting the event. It becomes evident that the militants have no respect for the detectives when one states, “One thing I hate more than a honky pig cop is a nigger pig cop” (*Cotton*). Here, the detectives face blacks who do not identify with them, yet the detectives still prevent the militants from ruining the rally. This scene demonstrates the circumstances that the two black detectives must face in Harlem.

Despite garnering mistrust and disrespect from some Harlem residents, the detectives are heavily connected to the black community and the people they are trying to protect. A prime example of this can be seen in the way that they pursue Reverend O’Mally for conning the people of Harlem. After O’Mally’s scheme is exposed, he and Coffin Ed have a final confrontation in which the reverend tries to offer Johnson the \$87,000 in return for his freedom. Johnson, who believes in black unity, responds to O’Mally’s offer: “When you steal from white people, that’s your business, but when you steal from black people, that’s my business” (*Cotton*). This statement reflects Johnson’s knowledge of the importance of black unity in a white-dominated society.

In *Conversations with Chester Himes*, Himes discusses the significance of his detectives in an interview with Michael Fabre:

MICHAEL FABRE: So you don't believe that Coffin Ed and Gravedigger are traitors to their race?

CHESTER HIMES: Not the way I've portrayed them.

FABRE: So Coffin Ed and Gravedigger could be said to represent the kind of detectives that should exist, living in the community, knowing the people, enforcing the law, dealing humanely with everyone.

HIMES: This is what I thought. I replaced a stereotype. I've taken two people who would be anti-black in real life, and made them sympathetic. (85)

In addition to the detectives, the setting that the characters occupy is an important aspect of *Cotton*. With the exception of a few scenes, the film was shot on location in Harlem, which caused alarm for studio executives familiar with the community's unsavory reputation. While the production was well guarded by both the New York City Tactical Patrol Force and the Harlem-based Black Citizens Patrol (Patterson 2:15), Davis aided in eliminating the threat of violence by generating enthusiasm about the production among the inhabitants (Sweeney 8).<sup>4</sup> The director featured several Harlem residents in the film as extras. A reporter present at the filming remembered, "The excitement was like August lightning as extras recruited from the neighborhood swarmed around . . . and waited for shooting to begin" (qtd. in Leab 241).

While the real-life threat posed by Harlem was minimized during production, its depiction in the film coincides with traditional representations of the city in detective films as places that can sometimes be corrupt and dangerous. However, this setting marks an important revisionist aspect of the film much like the space presented in Sam Peckinpah's revisionist Western *The Wild Bunch* (1969). The setting presented in *Bunch* differs from classic Westerns because it features the period when the old frontier is vanishing, giving way to new technology. There are now telephone poles on the vast landscape and there are also more sophisticated weapons, which ultimately prove to be too much for the film's antiheroes.

The space in *Cotton* also presents a shift away from the traditional detective story, which usually takes place in a multiracial city while failing to prominently feature its ethnic or racially diverse inhabitants. In contrast, *Cotton* uses the diegesis to showcase the predominantly black urban locale, which had previously not been a convention of the detective genre or the majority of films featuring all-black or predominantly black casts. According to Paula J. Massood, Hollywood films such as *Hallelujah* (1929), *The Green Pastures* (1936), and *Cabin in the Sky* (1942) are generally "set in

the time and place of the antebellum idyll and each incorporates some form of city motifs into its more rural spaces in order to construct a moral contrast between them” (16). These films utilize iconography such as music, clothing, and gambling to represent city values but ultimately feature blacks who stay in their places while adhering to old-time Southern values (Massood 16).

*Cotton* features an urban setting and depicts its predominantly black inhabitants and iconography. While the film remains fairly true to Himes’s novel, Ossie Davis decided to downplay the threat posed by the novelistic Harlem (Massood 87). Davis commented that he wanted to show that Harlem “is a complete world, one which includes moments of joy and laughter as well as misery and discontent. We hope to show the entire scope of the picture, not just a facet of it” (“Harlem on My Mind” 62).

The scale of Harlem is apparent in the film’s opening sequence, which begins with what appears to be a tour of Harlem as it follows Reverend Deke O’Mally’s limousine to the Back to Africa rally. This sequence establishes Harlem as the setting for the action and showcases the space. As O’Mally’s car rolls through the streets, Harlem establishments, such as Square’s Department Store and the legendary Apollo Theater, are depicted. The residents who occupy this space are shown going about a range of daily activities, which include working, shopping, and sitting on the stoops of apartment buildings. Later, Harlem is reintroduced to viewers as the film’s action shifts from day to night. In this sequence, Harlem is depicted as a busy metropolis in a montage that once again features the brightly lit, large signs of businesses and other establishments. Particular emphasis is provided to local businesses, such as Frank’s Chop House, Dotty’s Lounge, the Harlem Grill, and the Ebony Supermarket. Massood notes that the exploration of the setting in *Cotton* and subsequent blaxploitation films “offered their audiences undeniable voyeuristic pleasure, either acting as anthropological documents for audiences unfamiliar with the ghetto or as sources of identification for those who were familiar with it” (85). Moreover, Harlem also introduces a new locale that had not previously been associated or viewed within the detective genre.

Furthermore, the setting in *Cotton* is unique because it represents a world that whites cannot easily navigate. Much like Peckinpah’s new West overcomes the old cowboys, Harlem represents a space that whites lack the understanding to control without meeting resistance. In the Harlem depicted in *Cotton*, the white male detectives have been emasculated because they are perceived as outsiders and garner little or no respect from the residents. This is apparent many times throughout the film as Jones and Johnson’s white superiors are continually forced to let the detectives

operate in “their way.” This “way” is one that whites lack the agency to attain or fully understand, thus rendering them somewhat powerless in the Harlem setting.

*Cotton Comes to Harlem* addresses social, political, and economic issues that are specifically connected to the black experience in the U.S. These explorations function as commentary and provide insight into the status of blacks in cotemporary America. As the discussion of the social problem film demonstrated, the issue of including messages in Hollywood films has previously been the subject of debate. While some theorize that Hollywood films can contain a message, others believe the medium is simply a form of entertainment. *Cotton* avoids the debate because addressing or solving the problem is not the goal of the film. Adhering to the conventions of the detective genre, *Cotton* focuses on the discovery of the missing money while subtly weaving into the narrative specific problems plaguing blacks living in America.

One of the many commentaries that can be found in the film is contained in the title itself—*Cotton Comes to Harlem*. The title, which refers to the stolen money being hidden in a bale of cotton that is lost in Harlem, is also a sociopolitical statement. The word “cotton” is a reference to whiteness and black oppression under the institution of slavery. A portion of dialogue that appears in the novel but was excluded from the film establishes this connection directly when Reverend O’Mally speaks to the audience at the Back to Africa rally: “Africa is our native land and we are going back. No more picking cotton for the white folks and living on fat-back and corn pone” (Himes, *Cotton* 7). For Freese, this line of dialogue is central: “It conjures up the well-known connection between cotton and black slavery in the South, which even extends northward, as it were, when O’Mally adds that these damn southern white folks have worked us like dogs for four hundred years and when we ask them to pay off, they ship us to the North” (82).

Although the line of dialogue spoken by Reverend O’Mally is omitted from the film, the theme of slavery is also established the motion picture. When the truck that was used in the heist is discovered and examined by detectives Jones and Johnson, they find strands of cotton in the back of the vehicle. Defining them as unprocessed, the two detectives cannot understand why the cotton is in Harlem and are more concerned with solving their case rather than the value of the material. In contrast, Uncle Bud, who is older and from a different generation, immediately recognizes the value of the bale—premium-quality Mississippi cotton. “This is emphasized by Uncle Bud’s answer to Mr. Goldman’s [the man he sells the bale to] questions regarding the origins of the cotton, in which Uncle Bud replies that he

has picked enough cotton in his lifetime to recognize its origins” (Massood 92). It is poetic justice that the money that Uncle Bud finds in the bale of cotton eventually provides him with a better life.

In addition to the cotton, the Reverend Deke O’Mally character and his Back to Africa campaign are representative of an important part of African American history. The reverend is modeled after Marcus Garvey, who was one of the most colorful figures of twentieth-century Harlem. Born in Jamaica, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) with its goals of: (1) promoting unity among blacks of all nationalities, (2) improving their living conditions, (3) founding independent black states in Africa, and (4) establishing black commercial enterprises. After moving to New York, Garvey founded the *Negro World* newspaper and began to collect supporters for his Back to Africa movement. According to Freese, Garvey’s first commercial venture was the Black Star Line Steamship Company, which consisted of three ships that were supposed to make triangular journeys between New York, the West Indies, and Africa. Although Garvey had collected subscriptions in the amount of half a million dollars, the line failed, and he was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison for fraud (Freese 87).

This history makes it clear that Himes used Garvey as inspiration for the Reverend Deke O’Mally character and his fraudulent activities. In *Cotton*, O’Mally uses black dissatisfaction with the racist social, political, and economic system in America to con the Harlem residents into donating \$87,000 dollars for passage back to Africa, which for them represents the promised land. While speaking at the rally O’Mally says, “We are going home. Goodbye rats and roaches. Goodbye being kicked and low-rated. Goodbye being robbed and cheated. Goodbye having to live on the white man’s welfare. We are going home!” (*Cotton*). Furthermore, O’Mally is planning to return to Africa on a ship that he calls Black Beauty. Thus, Himes used literature and film to comment about Garvey’s Back to Africa Program: “I thought the Back to Africa program in the U.S was one of the most absurd things the black people of America had ever supported. How were we going back to Africa? Who was to take them? Who was to support them? Protect them? Feed them? It was an opium pipe smoker’s dream. But it was perfect for a con. And that was my story” (*My Life* 258).

In addition to providing commentary about these aspects of African American history, *Cotton* also contains humor and wit. However, *Cotton* was not the first detective film to make humor central to the narrative. Perhaps the most well-known detective films to do so are the films in W. S. Van Dyke’s *Thin Man* series, which feature the detective duo Nick and Nora Charles, whose glamour and upper-class status aid the team in solving

murder cases. Importantly, Wes D. Gehring categorizes this series of films as screwball comedies because the first installment was released in 1934 when the genre initially began to flourish with the release of the Howard Hawks's *Twentieth Century* and Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*. Each of these films deals with whites living in high society and places the main characters in wacky or zany situations to garner laughter (106). Furthermore, the films often contain a tenuous plot while featuring romantic slapstick encounters between the main characters.

Employing the formula that the *Thin Man* films perfected, *Cotton* also includes humorous and satirical material throughout the narrative. The use of humor does not exclude it from the detective genre but instead illustrates the point that genres are open systems that at times borrow conventions from other existing genres. This flexibility marks the formation of hybrid films. When this transpires, "not only do the members of a generic classification have multiple relational possibilities with each other" (Cohen 17), they "also have multiple relational possibilities with members of other classifications as well" (Neale, *Genre* 219). David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have illustrated that generic traits are heterogeneous in kind, which means that traits can be combined simultaneously (as well as sequentially) and that genres can therefore "cross-breed" (qtd. in Neale, *Genre* 219). The authors also contend that the flexibility of genre definitions is illustrated by the ability of genres to cross-breed freely—for example, a musical Western, such as *Cat Ballou* (1965), or gangster film, such as *Bugsy Malone* (1976) (qtd. in Neale, *Genre* 219), or a combination of science fiction and horror, as in *Jason X* (2001).

*Cotton* serves as an additional example of genre hybridization. In this film, the detective genre displays conventions of comedy for a specific purpose. Significantly, the humor serves as commentary, much like the cotton and the Deke O'Mally character. In many instances, the comedy derives from stereotypical views that are held about predominantly black urban spaces as well as other common misconceptions generally held about black people. At the same time, humor enables Himes to advance otherwise-unpopular criticisms of some black experiences, that is, the Marcus Garvey history. These elements are comedic, yet they are satirized to illustrate their ridiculousness. There are multiple examples of these satirizations during the car chase that ensues after thieves interrupt the Back to Africa rally and steal the \$87,000 that has been donated. The thieves escape in a meat truck, and Coffin Ed and Gravedigger pursue them. Harlem, which at the time was considered to be dangerous and drug infested, is presented as nothing less. For example, at one point during the sequence, a drug user who is lighting a marijuana joint stumbles into the middle of the street, and

the vehicles involved barely avoid hitting him. The junkie is so interested in getting his fix that he hardly even notices the danger of oncoming traffic and other events that are taking place around him.

Another example takes place during the same sequence when a male Harlem resident is shown trying to gain the attention of three attractive women who have just walked past him. He follows them and tries to woo them but they ignore him as they continue walking. At the same moment, the car chase roars past them, and the man and the women all manage to ignore the sound of gunfire and the bullets that fly by them. Here, the implication seems to be that dangerous car chases and gunfire are such common parts of their daily lives that they are just as easily ignored as unwanted sexual advances.

As previously noted, *Cotton* also satirizes stereotypes that are commonly held about blacks. Perhaps the best example of this occurs at the end of the chase scene, which concludes when Coffin Ed and Gravedigger inadvertently crash into a watermelon cart. According to Gerald Butters, watermelon is a strong visual symbol that was heavily associated with black males in early motion pictures (113). For example, in the Thomas Edison film *The Watermelon Contest* (1901), a black male is consuming the fruit in such a frantic manner that he is regurgitating seeds and mush (Butters 114). An earlier film released by American Mutoscope titled *A Watermelon Feast* depicted black males in a similar fashion. In addition, early history classified the watermelon as a representation of black male sexuality: black men love and desire the fruit in the same manner that they love sex (Butters 21). In short, black males have a watermelon “appetite” and are always trying to see “who can eat the most,” with the strength of this “appetite” depicted by black males uncontrollably devouring watermelon (Butters 114). The power of the “appetite” is illustrated in *Cotton* after the detectives crash into the watermelon cart. Although the criminals have eluded capture, Coffin Ed picks up a piece of crushed melon and is about to take a bite of it until Gravedigger slaps it out of his hand. While the criminals have escaped, Coffin Ed’s concern is getting a “piece.”

An additional scene that functions in much the same manner occurs after Reverend O’Mally has been arrested as a suspect in the theft of the \$87,000. After hearing of his arrest, a group of O’Mally’s followers march through the streets of Harlem and gather in protest outside the police station. Things further escalate when a group of white males who join the protest catch the attention of a group of local black militants who happen to be watching the events unfold. At this point, the scene becomes symbolic of one of the questions frequently asked during the Civil Rights Movement—should whites fight alongside blacks in the struggle for equality, or,



as Stokely Carmichael and others purposed, should whites fight racism in their own communities? During the Civil Rights Movement, organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) struggled with the idea of including white volunteers in the effort. In *The Struggle for Black Equality*, Harvard Sitkoff relates that while organizing the 1964 Freedom Summer voter-registration campaign, representatives from SNCC and CORE were split on the idea of the role of whites in the movement (158). While some felt that the inclusion of whites indicated an admission of weakness by blacks, others felt that it was important to include whites because integration was a major goal of the fight (Sitkoff 158–59). In addition to Civil Rights organizations, Malcolm X initially rejected the idea of white help during the Civil Rights Movement. He expressed hostility toward all whites by referring to them as “white devils” and created a sense of unity among young blacks as he spoke of revolution (Sitkoff 159).

The scene in *Cotton* is reflective of the opposing viewpoints held by blacks about white involvement in the movement. Significantly, when the white men begin to chant “Free Deke O’Mally,” they are met with hostility by some blacks while others welcome their support. As Coffin Ed and Gravedigger appear and calm the majority of the crowd by expressing their loyalty to them, the white males continue to protest and try to storm the jail. The Black Berets, who have been bystanders up to this point, immediately step in to stop the whites. A fight ensues, and stereotypes are satirized again as Coffin Ed and Gravedigger break open a crate of live chickens and throw them into the crowd. The black residents, who, of course, love chicken, stop fighting, collect the birds, and happily begin to disperse.

The racial satire in *Cotton* is also recognized in a *Variety* article that contains an excerpt of an interview with a United Artists executive who commented: “A white director would never have risked scenes like the hilarious bit with the junkie staggering about in traffic; he would have been afraid of somebody calling him a bigot. But Davis did not have to worry about that, and was free to see things like that as the genuine satire they are” (Gold 62). The article also reveals that black audiences were responding to the humor and satire in *Cotton*. Results from a poll of black moviegoers indicated that their opinion was that “*Cotton*’s success with black audiences is directly attributable to its unalloyed use—perhaps for the first time on screen—of ‘ghetto humor’” (62). With that in mind, Ronald Gold commented, “*Cotton* might be described as the first motion picture with soul” (62).

The soundtrack for *Cotton* is also indicative of the film’s inclusion of “soul.” The film contains a soundtrack that features popular recording

artists of the day. This is also a revision of the detective genre as well as a change in the type of music that was traditionally featured in the majority of motion pictures. Prior to the release of *Cotton*, a small number of films had utilized rock-and-roll songs in their soundtracks. The first film to do so was *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955), which featured “Rock Around the Clock” in the film’s opening and closing credits. By the end of the 1960s, rock-and-roll was used in the soundtracks of other films as well. *The Graduate* (1967), which features a soundtrack by Simon and Garfunkle, and *Easy Rider* (1969), which features songs by various artists like Steppenwolf, the Band, and the Birds, serve as prime examples.

*Cotton* also incorporates music from popular artists of the day, but instead of rock-and-roll, the film utilizes rhythm-and-blues tracks that contain messages about black unity as well as social commentary.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, Melba Moore performed “Salvation” and “Ain’t Now but It’s Gonna Be;” Leata Galloway sang solo in performing “Down in My Soul” and paired with Sakinah Muhammad on “Going Home.” These songs’ lyrics address social injustice and the desire of the Harlem residents to return to Africa. The film’s title track, “Cotton Comes to Harlem,” performed by George Tipton, further illustrates that cotton is symbolic of oppressive whiteness. The lyrics reflect the attitude that blacks held about Southern whites who implemented and perpetuated the system of chattel slavery.

Down South, we sweat and strained, we were the prisoners of Cotton,  
but when cotton comes to Harlem, we kick cotton’s ass.  
Down South, cotton was king, a black man’s life meant not a damn thing,  
so when cotton comes to Harlem, I kick cotton’s ass.  
What is cotton doing here, we gon’ make him disappear.  
We don’t need him to remind us, the bad old days are long behind us.

While *Cotton* was both unique and original at the time of its release, Davis was limited in his role as screenwriter and director, which stymied the film’s content. “He initially hoped to stress the black experience more but the producer . . . worried about too strong an emphasis” (Leab 241). Davis recalled, “The fear was that if you didn’t make a film that white folks would see and appreciate since they constituted in Hollywood’s mind the audience to whom you appeal, that you were . . . cutting your own throat” (qtd. in Leab 241). Consequently, Davis was not fully satisfied with the *Cotton*: “Using a maximum [of] 100, I give myself a score of fifty or sixty on a sliding scale in terms of artistic accomplishment” (“Cotton Comes to Harlem,” *Jet* 62). Still, he predicted that the film would be a financial success.

Davis's prediction was accurate, as the movie, which featured the tagline, "Two Detectives Only a Mother Could Love," performed well at the box office. In its first week in release, *Cotton* grossed \$90,000 and appeared twenty-third on *Variety's* list of top films ("50 Top," *Variety*, 10 June 1970: 13). Its success continued as it earned \$152,000 in its second week and produced more revenue in the following weeks ("50 Top," *Variety*, 17 June 1970: 9). It finally reached its highest ranking on *Variety's* list of top films in its seventh week of release when it grossed \$428,500 and placed second behind Universal's *Airport* ("50 Top," *Variety*, 22 July 1970: 11). *Cotton* eventually accumulated over \$6 million in three months and over \$8 million in its total box office run (Chelminski 58). According to United Artists sales representative James Veld, an estimated 70 percent of that total came from the black audience (Gold 1). *Cotton* also appeared twenty-first on *Variety's* list of top films for the year 1970 ("Big Rental Films of 1970" 11).

In addition to performing well at the box office, *Cotton* also received positive reviews. *Newsweek* credited Ossie Davis for a fine job: "The director is democratically flamboyant in his treatment of street people, precinct house people, show people at the Apollo . . . and junkies reeling around a 'Dope is Death' sign as a car chase passes them" ("Cotton Comes to Harlem" 82). Jerry DeMuth of the *Christian Century* also raved about the movie in his review: "Humor often tells much about people besides being funny. As such *Cotton Comes to Harlem* opens up the black community for all to see and feel, and it provides excellent entertainment besides" (1455). Arthur Knight of the *Saturday Review* commented on the messages within *Cotton*: "Ossie Davis views the scenes with humor and understanding perhaps possible only to a highly intelligent and sensitive Negro. In any case, that intelligence and sensitivity hopefully can help many whites to understand the black man better" (22).

In addition to praising *Cotton* at the time of its release, critics, who play a large role in the construction of genre, used different generic categories to describe the film. For example, a review in *Esquire* called the film a "crude, energetic comedy about a couple of black cops in Harlem" ("Cotton Comes to Harlem" 67), while *Life* referred to the film as an all-black comedy (Chelminski 59). Lindsay Patterson compared *Cotton* to the James Bond action films (15), and Knight referred to Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones as hardboiled detectives (22).

Although *Cotton* was described in many different ways, the movie was not initially referred to as a black exploitation film. However, the germinal film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* emerged and expanded upon the characteristics presented in *Cotton*, making strong displays of

black sexuality and violence staples of the ascendant movement. The film also placed more emphasis on the black/white ghetto action formula.

Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* played a key role in advancing the blaxploitation movement. Prior to directing *Sweetback*, Van Peebles entered Hollywood via Europe where he moved after he was initially denied entry into the film industry as a director because of the color of his skin. He first moved to Holland where he studied at the University of Amsterdam and later relocated to France. During his tenure there, Van Peebles authored five novels, converting one of them into the successful film *The Story of a Three Day Pass* (1968) (Murray, *To Find an Image* 73).

*Pass* challenged racial taboos by depicting the story of a black GI who falls in love with a French woman. The two share one weekend together, and she eventually breaks his heart when she leaves him for another suitor. *Pass* was first screened at the San Francisco International Film Festival where it garnered a great deal of critical acclaim, winning the San Francisco Film Festival Award (Murray, *To Find an Image* 72).

Studio executives took notice of *Pass*, and Columbia Pictures signed Van Peebles to a three-picture deal. The first film that he directed for the studio was *Watermelon Man* (1970), which also challenged racial politics. The story centers on a bigoted white man who wakes up one morning to find that he has turned black and chronicles his daily activities as he experiences what it is like to live as an African American. *Man* was successful; however, it was a comedy. Understanding the hostile and tense racial climate in the United States, as well as the way that blacks had been traditionally depicted in Hollywood films, Van Peebles decided that he wanted his next film to make a serious revolutionary statement: “I wanted a victorious film. A film where niggers could walk out standing tall instead of avoiding each other’s eyes, looking once again like they’d had it” (Bennett 112).

Van Peebles ventured outside the Hollywood studio system to make his radical film. He wrote, produced, directed, scored, edited, and starred in *Sweetback*. The film was shot in Southern California in roughly three weeks for approximately \$500,000. This cost represented about \$100,000 of his own capital in addition to borrowed funds and fees he managed to defer. Van Peebles also received \$50,000 from his friend Bill Cosby, who came up with the money when it was vitally needed to continue production (Bogle, *Blacks* 247).

After *Sweetback* was completed, Van Peebles submitted it to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) for a ratings evaluation. Due to the film’s violent and erotic content, it was given an X rating, which theoretically banned audiences under the age of seventeen from viewing the

film, making it difficult for Van Peebles to find a distributor (Parish and Hill 297). His struggle to find distribution eventually led him to choose Cinemation, a company that produced low-budget porn flicks, to bring his film to the screen (Reid, *Redefining* 82).

*Sweetback's* opening title card reads, "This film is dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who have had enough of the Man." The film begins with an adolescent Sweetback being taken in by prostitutes working in a brothel. Shortly after, he is seduced and engages in intercourse with one of the females who exclaims, "Oh God, you got a Sweetback." The film moves ahead several years to when Sweetback is an adult working as the star attraction in a sex show. As a favor to his manager, he lets two white policemen take him into custody because they need a suspect in a murder case they are having trouble solving. They promise to question Sweetback as a way to appease their boss, who is frustrated because they are not making sufficient progress on their case. On the way to the police station, the cops arrest a young black militant and decide to "teach him a lesson" before proceeding to the station. They take Sweetback and the militant to a deserted oil field, where they partially uncuff Sweetback and begin beating the other prisoner. Sweetback becomes enraged as he watches and retaliates by beating the officers to death with his partially removed handcuffs. He then goes on the run in the attempt to cross over into Mexico. The rest of the film is composed of an experimental musical chase, which crosscuts between the police as they scour the ghetto in search of Sweetback. With the help of the black community and armed with his sexual prowess, Sweetback manages to escape, and as the film ends, a title card flashes a warning: "Look out! Cause a bad-ass nigger is coming back to pay some dues!"

After its release, *Sweetback* quickly became one of the most controversial films in the history of motion pictures. Both black and white critics alike blasted the film for its explicit portrayal of sex and violence. In "The Emancipation Orgasm," Lerone Bennett Jr. noted:

It is disturbing to note Mr. Van Peebles' reliance on the emancipation orgasm. Sweetback saves himself three times by seduction: First by using his sexual power to persuade a black woman to free him from his handcuffs; secondly by defeating Big Sadie in the sexual duel; thirdly by raping or simulating the rape of a black sister at a rock film. Now with all due respects to the license of art, it is necessary to say frankly that nobody ever f\*\*ed his way to freedom. And it is mischievous and reactionary finally for anyone to suggest to black people in 1971 that they are going to be able to sc\*\*w their way across the

Red Sea. F\*\*\*ing will not set you free. If f\*\*\*ing freed, black people would have celebrated the millennium 400 hundred years ago. (118)

Howard University instructor Don L. Lee shared in Bennett’s contempt of *Sweetback*, which he described as a money-making fantasy of Van Peebles’s that put the “filth” of his “distorted” view of the African American community up on the screen (48). If *Sweetback* is “coming back to collect some dues,” Lee asks, “From whom? The police, the brothers who didn’t help him, the most visible elements of our suppression? . . . What about the real enemies—the State Department, local and federal government? What about an organized nation that controls the world and ain’t worried about no long-lost nigger coming back to collect anything?” (48).

In contrast, Huey P. Newton, Black Panther Party minister of defense, *Sweetback*, commending Van Peebles’s depiction of the black experience. In *To Die For*, Newton commented on the highly controversial opening sex scene between the young boy and the woman.

The music indicates that this is not a sexual scene, this is very sacred manhood and the act of love, the giving of manhood, is also bestowing upon the boy the characteristics which will deliver him from very difficult situations. People who look upon this as a sex scene miss the point completely, and people who look upon the movie as a sex movie miss the entire message of the film. (116)

In addition to Newton, black critic Sam Washington of the *Chicago Sun Times* also supported *Sweetback*. While he criticized Van Peebles’s stiff acting style, he concluded: “*Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* is a grotesque, violent, and beautifully honest film that takes no crap from whitey and his over civilized hang-ups while it deals with some specifics about the black experience. . . . For the first time in cinematic history in America, a movie speaks out of an undeniable black consciousness” (qtd. in Bennett 112).

Despite the negative controversy surrounding *Sweetback*, it performed extremely well at the box office, grossing \$70,000 and appearing twenty-third in its first week in release on *Variety’s* list of top films (“50 Top,” *Variety*, 14 April 1971: 11). It continued to perform well, accumulating \$119,500 in its fourth week and \$191,300 in its sixth week in release (“50 Top,” *Variety*, 5 May 1971: 11; “50 Top,” *Variety*, 19 May 1971: 9, respectively). By May 16, 1971, *Sweetback’s* seventh week in theaters, the film was number one on *Variety’s* list top of films, grossing \$357,000 (“50 Top,” *Variety*, 26 May 1971: 11). It held the top spot the following week

earning \$421,100, bringing its grand total to \$1.2 million dollars in just eight weeks ("50 Top," *Variety*, 2 June 1971: 11). *Sweetback* remained on the charts for months, and in September 1971, it appeared in the number one spot again, with a total gross of over \$2 million in domestic film rentals. By the end of its theatrical run, *Sweetback* earned \$10 million making it the highest-grossing independent film of all time.<sup>6</sup>

*Sweetback's* success further demonstrated that African American audiences would support black-oriented films. As previously noted, the film also added sex and violence to the conventions that *Cotton Comes to Harlem* had established. Hollywood studios rushed to capitalize on the success of the two films, imitating (albeit to a lesser extent) *Sweetback's* titillating elements in films like *Shaft* and *Super Fly*. By the time *Cotton Comes to Harlem's* much-anticipated sequel, *Come Back, Charleston Blue* (1972) was released, the film seemed light in comparison. It failed at the box office and effectively ended the Coffin Ed and Gravedigger series.

The flood of black-oriented films depicting sex, violence, vigilantes, pimps, and drug dealers was welcomed by some black moviegoers but sparked controversy from a segment of the African American community. *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was not initially referred to as a "blaxploitation" film. Ironically, it was not until an article featured in the August 16, 1972, issue of *Variety* that the term "black exploitation" appeared when Junius Griffin, president of the Beverly Hills-Hollywood branch of the NAACP, criticized the rush of black films that he considered a detriment to the black community.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that the films were made across varying genres, critics appropriated the blaxploitation label, utilizing it to describe subsequent black-themed films as well as those that preceded them. This is illustrative of a hypothesis proposed by Rick Altman in *Film/Genre*: "Any group of films may at any time be generically redefined by contemporary critics" (81). Thus, blaxploitation films were both classified and reclassified to describe the phenomenon and reflect the themes, content, and controversy surrounding motion pictures.

Still, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* is a detective/comedy film that revised the genre. It is the appropriate place to begin this analysis because it represents the pioneer film in the blaxploitation movement. *Cotton Comes to Harlem* features black heroes, black supporting characters, a predominantly black urban setting, social commentary, and a soundtrack that features popular artists of the day. This laid the foundation for the emergence of the films that compose the remainder of this text—*Blacula*, *The Mack*, and *Cleopatra Jones*.

## Chapter Two

# “Deadlier than Dracula!”

## *Blacula* and the Horror Genre

The horror genre is an anomaly when compared to other popular Hollywood classifications such as the Western, screwball comedy, and the gangster film. Gerald C. Wood notes, “The major genres traditionally give the audience a peek at discomfiting images, but then quickly draw a curtain over the troubling sights” (211). The Western often depicts a man alone on a friendless landscape and then reassures the audience that solitude fosters an integrity and moral purity not available in groups. In addition, the whimsical behavior depicted in screwball comedies is potentially disruptive to society, but it “becomes normative as long as appropriate mates are found and the screwballs discover room to be themselves in a surprisingly open and expansive landscape” (Wood 211). In short, the Western and screwball comedy as well as the majority of other genres function to reaffirm cultural values. In the Western, the loner destroys the villain, and love conquers all in the screwball comedy.

In contrast, the horror genre is anomalous in two ways. First, in “Genre and Hollywood,” Tom Ryall comments, “The horror film is defined in a way that highlights the intended effect on the audience” (330).<sup>1</sup> Secondly, horror operates as a subversive genre that contains imagery that demands no apology. Consider early gangster films, in which the criminal is always punished or killed at the end of the film in order to demonstrate the perils of the criminal lifestyle. While classic horror pictures, such as *Frankenstein*, include similar fates for the antagonists, contemporary horror films, like *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980), demand no such action.

The horror film gained popularity during the early twentieth century mainly because it derived from three “enobling” sources (Wood 212). In *Image and Influence*, Andrew Tudor states that horror stories originated from respectable literature, its look was artily European (German and



Scandinavian), and its monsters were sentimentalized as misunderstood, good-hearted sacrificial lambs (204). The early films were literary adaptations featuring stories such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1908), *Frankenstein* (1910), and the werewolf story, which was filmed as early as 1913 and 1914 (Wood 212–13).

It was not until the 1930s that the classical period emerged when the literary tradition of horror and the sentimental monsters was transformed into a major genre by forces within and outside of the film industry. This began in the 1920s when large growth in the national consensus and awareness led to a new emphasis on popular entertainment. During this period, the studio system sought to create and repeat familiar stories to shape as well as reflect the national consciousness. Artistically, the major influences derived from Germany as the styles of expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and *Nosferatu* (1922) were imitated, and then the artists themselves immigrated to Los Angeles (Wood 212–13).

The horror genre began to flourish in Hollywood after Universal Studios released *Dracula* (1931), which was adapted from Bram Stoker's 1897 novel. The title character was based on Vlad Dracula, a fifteenth-century figure renowned for his excessive cruelty and horrifying acts of torture. According to legend, he frequently impaled his enemies and drank their blood: "Regarded as a hero and liberator by his own people, he defeated the Turkish conquerors and preserved the independence of his Transylvanian kingdom" (Zito, et al.13). Significantly, Stoker combined historical details with European folklore to create the character in his novel, in which a five-hundred-year-old Transylvanian nobleman has bled his country dry and relocated to England to feed upon a new unsuspecting community (Zito et al. 13).

Although a similar story is told in the German silent film *Nosferatu*,<sup>2</sup> it was not until Universal released *Dracula* that Bram Stoker's title character first appeared onscreen. The film starred Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi, who had also played the title character on Broadway. His performance captured the essence of Count Dracula, who is, above all, an aristocrat (Zito et al. 196). Despite his noble blood, Randy Loren Rasmussen describes the personality of the villain: "Count Dracula combines the menace of Old World tyranny and violence with the forbidden disguised prospect of sexual indulgence. Dracula's intense gaze reveals his obsessive desires. His craving for blood is irresistible. And his arrogant disdain for the victims of his strange lust is boundless" (Zito et al. 196). These are the qualities that Lugosi's Dracula possessed and it was also the model that subsequent actors portraying the character would imitate.

Additionally, *Dracula* also established the narrative structure that many subsequent horror films would employ. In “Nightmare and the Horror Film,” Noël Carroll defines the structure as the Discovery Plot, which he explains as follows: “The monster appears or is created (onset); it is then noticed by the human protagonist (discovery); its horrible existence is acknowledged (confirmation); and the film ends with a fight to the death between human and monster (confrontation)” (23).<sup>3</sup>

Like most Hollywood genres, the popularity of horrors has risen and declined since its emergence in the 1930s. However, there have been several reincarnations of its classic monsters in films such as *The Mummy’s Hand* (1940), *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman* (1945), *Mark of the Vampire* (1950), *Revenge of Frankenstein* (1958), and a host of others. New stories and villains were also created in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Carrie* (1976), *The Exorcist* (1973), as well as the *Halloween* (1978–2002), *Friday the 13th* (1980–2001), and *Scream* series (1996–2000).

Despite the longevity of the horror tradition, black representation within the genre has been extremely limited. Prior to 1972, black performers most notable contributions to the genre were playing the roles of frightened coons in horror/comedy hybrids, such as *The Monster Walks* (1931), *The Ghost Breakers* (1940), *The Smiling Ghost* (1941), *Whispering Ghosts* (1942), and *A-Haunting We Will Go* (1942) (Bogle, *Toms* 71–72). These films featured performers such as Willie Best and Mantan Moreland as characters whose bulging eyes provided comic relief in scary situations.

While the aforementioned depictions circumscribed the majority of black performers in pre-1970 horror films, George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) cuts against such representations. Specifically, the film stars Duane Johnson as a black protagonist in a group of people trapped in a house being attacked by zombies.<sup>4</sup> This is the singular example of a horror film that prominently features a three-dimensional black character as an integral part of the action. *Dead* subtly reflects the anxiety surrounding America’s racial politics by placing an assertive black male character amongst a group of white characters who must either accept him as an equal to survive or abide by established societal conventions that position them as superior. Johnson’s character meets opposition from one man, but he holds his ground, eventually becoming the group leader. This depiction works an important prelude to the blaxploitation movement.

Four years after the release of *Dead*, Blacula appeared as the first African American horror monster. This chapter includes a brief overview

of American International Pictures (AIP), which released *Blacula*, and then discusses how the inclusion of blackness revises the horror genre by examining the monster, the protagonist, the predominantly black urban setting, the film's sociopolitical commentary, and the soundtrack.

AIP was founded as the American Releasing Corporation in 1954 by James H. Nicholson, Samuel Z. Arkoff, and Joseph Moritz, who each contributed a thousand dollars toward the development of the company (Pierson 85). The formation of ARC came at a time when the film industry was suffering from an attendance decline that began at the end of World War II and would take another twenty years to reverse itself. The decline of theater attendance was largely attributed to the advent of television, which emerged as both a popular form of entertainment and a worthy adversary to motion pictures. The arrival of television cost theater owners a great deal of money during the 1950s when approximately twenty-one thousand U.S. theaters went out of business (Arkoff 27). Despite the overwhelming odds, the three ARC founders saw beyond the obstacle and implemented a new system of production, marketing, and exhibition to deliver films to audiences (Pierson 85).

ARC's first production, *The Fast and the Furious* (1955),<sup>5</sup> was loaded with car chases and women in tight clothes, and its lobby posters promised "High Speed Excitement," "Wide Screen Thrills," and included the tag line, "As a wanted man . . . meets a wanting woman" (McGee 18). Following the example set by the Lincoln Motion Picture Company in distributing race films during the 1920s, Nicholson and Arkoff traveled the U.S. projecting the film for local distributors and theater owners, promising similar films in the future (Pierson 87). Many theater owners welcomed the independent films because those produced by Hollywood were not performing well at the box office. In addition to establishing connections with theater owners while promoting their films, Nicholson and Arkoff also created a network of theater exchanges, which along with the company's fresh product, established ARC as a major distributor over the next decade when "the company became a haven for independent producers whose films were often ignored by major studios" (Pierson 87).<sup>6</sup>

During the years following ARC's formation, the company changed its name to the American International Film Distribution Corporation and finally to American International Pictures. Although the name changed, the company's reputation and formula for creating films remained the same. Specifically, AIP was known for producing and distributing films that gave audiences what they wanted to see. AIP functioned under guidelines created by Nicholson:

OBSERVE trends in emerging taste.

KNOW as much as possible about your audience.

ANTICIPATE how you will sell your chosen subject.

PRODUCE with prudence, avoiding expense for what won't show on-screen.

SELL with showmanship and publicity.

HAVE good luck. (“AIP Formula” 54)

Following these tenets, AIP became the quintessential exploitation-picture producer, quickly creating low-budget films such as *Girls in Prison* (1956), *The Bonnie Parker Story* (1958), *The Wild Angels* (1966), and *Born Losers* (1967). Because the company was willing to hire unknown talent as well as shoot its films in less than a month, the average cost of each of its features was \$500,000.

Prior to releasing *Blacula*, AIP had also enjoyed a great deal of success with its horror films. The company profited from titles such as *The Beast with 1,000,000 Eyes* (1955), *The Phantom from 10,000 Leagues* (1956), *Voodoo Woman* (1957), *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957), and *How to Make a Monster* (1958). The emergence of the blaxploitation movement and prior experience with horror films prompted AIP to test the black film audience with the creation of the first black horror monster—*Blacula*.

Joan Torres and Raymond Koenig wrote the screenplay for *Blacula*, and William Crain directed the film. Before working on *Blacula*, Crain had directed episodes of the popular television series, “Mod Squad” (1968–1973).<sup>7</sup> *Blacula* stars William Marshall as Mamuwalde, the first black vampire to appear on motion-picture screens. Prior to starring in the film, Marshall had appeared onstage in productions of *Carmen Jones* and *Peter Pan*. He was also featured in television shows such as “The Nurses” (1962–1965), “The Man From U.N.C.L.E.” (1964–1968), and “Mannix” (1967–1975).

*Blacula* also features Thalmus Rasulala as Dr. Gordon Thomas. Before appearing in the film, Rasulala had been featured in a number of television series that include “Perry Mason” (1957–1966), “The Twilight Zone” (1959–1964), “Rawhide,” (1959–1964), and “One Life to Live” (1968-present). He also benefited from the emergence of blaxploitation films as the growing demand for black actors presented him the opportunity to transition from television into films like *Cool Breeze* (1972) and *Willie Dynamite* (1974).

Additionally, *Blacula* also stars Vonetta McGee in dual roles: first she appears as Mamuwalde's wife, Luva, and later portrays Blacula's love interest, Tina. McGee first appeared on screen in films such as *Faustina* (1968), *The Lost Man* (1969), and *The Kremlin Letter* (1970). Her popularity increased in the 1970s when she became one of the most recognizable female performers to appear in black-themed films. She starred in blaxploitation classics, such as *Melinda* (1972), *Hammer* (1972), *Shaft in Africa* (1973), and *Thomasine and Bushrod* (1974).

While *Blacula* was in development, William Marshall collaborated with the producers to ensure that the image of the first black horror monster contained a level of dignity. Specifically, in the original script Blacula's straight name was Andrew Brown, which is the same as Andy's in the blackface white comedy team of Amos and Andy. Marshall criticized the name commenting: "I wanted the picture to have a new framing story. A frame that would remove it completely from the stereotype of ignorant, conniving stupidity that evolved in the United States to justify slavery" (Martinez et al. 42). With that in mind, Marshall suggested that that character's previous life be one of nobility. He suggested to the producers that Blacula's straight name should be Mamuwalde, and that he had been an African prince before falling victim to vampirism. The producers were hesitant to accept Marshall's suggestions: "Well we don't know if any of that will work." (Martinez et al. 42). Marshall responded, "Well none of us really know, it's an experiment. Getting up out of bed in the morning is an experiment. So it's well worth the energy and time, let's look and see and sit down together and talk about it like equals" (Martinez et al. 42). Marshall eventually persuaded the producers to incorporate his suggestions, and the first black vampire emerged as a regal character.

*Blacula* begins in 1780 where Prince Mamuwalde of Africa and his wife, Luva, are visiting Transylvania. There, Count Dracula attacks him, and he is locked in a coffin where he is to spend all eternity craving the taste of blood. As Dracula closes the tomb, he curses the prince in his name calling him "Blacula." Luva's fate is sealed after Dracula locks her in the room that houses Blacula's coffin. Two hundred years later, a pair of interior decorators visit Dracula's abandoned castle in search of antiques. Among the items they purchase is Blacula's tomb, which they ship back to Los Angeles. They become the vampire's first victims after opening the coffin, and at this point, Blacula begins walking the streets of Los Angeles in the attempt to quench his thirst for blood. One evening he sees Tina, who bears a striking resemblance to his late wife. He believes that she is the reincarnation of his beloved spouse and enters into a relationship with her. Meanwhile, Dr. Gordon Thomas is investigating the deaths of the interior decorators and other

victims, which he soon links to Blacula. The film ends with a final confrontation between the police, Dr. Gordon, and the vampire.

Blacula marks a prominent revision to traditional vampires whose origins are repeatedly linked to Transylvania. In classic horror movies, vampires are typically European outsiders and never hailed from Africa despite the fact that vampires are allegedly everywhere. According to Ken Gelder, the vampire’s association with Transylvania actually comes late in the day (228), while Dr. Abraham Van Helsing’s account in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* places no limits on the vampire’s whereabouts and history: “For, let me tell you, he is known everywhere that men have been. In old Greece, in old Rome; he flourish (*sic*) in Germany all over, in France, in India, even in the Chersones; and in China. . . . He have (*sic*) follow the wake of the beserker Icelander, the devil-begotten Hun, the Slav, the Saxon, the Magyar” (239). In *Blacula*, audiences are introduced to the first vampire to hail from the Dark Continent, and his blackness transgresses the traditional horror genre.

In addition to representing the first black horror monster, Blacula is constructed as a victim who is cursed by his vampirism. In *Children of the Night*, Rasmussen states, “Many of the horror genres most sympathetic monsters are victims of fate, circumstance, or of their own minds” (196). Blaxploitation horror films more than other horrors emphasize this “victim of fate” convention, redirecting audience sympathy “toward the figure of the monster, a specifically black avenger who justifiably fights against the dominant order—which is often explicitly coded as racist” (Benshoff 37). Indeed, Blacula emerges as a victim of circumstance who succumbs to European vampirism that he did not even realize existed. Although he possesses the same bloodlust as his antecedents, it manifests itself as a curse. For example, prior to attacking his victims, Blacula undergoes a metamorphosis that transforms him from noble aristocrat to bloodthirsty savage. Specifically, hair grows out of his face, which makes him appear more like a wolfman than Count Dracula.

Blacula’s actions are also unlike his predecessors’. For example, in *Dracula*, Lugosi’s portrayal of the character presents him as manipulative and evil. He uses his bite as well as his gaze to strike fear into the hearts of his victims and to control the woman whom he desires. This theme is prevalent in Dracula’s reincarnations in subsequent films, such as *Mark of the Vampire* (1935) and *House of Dracula* (1945). In contrast, Blacula’s behavior toward the film’s heroine is significantly different. He has no ill intentions toward Tina, who fills the void left by his late wife. He treats her with a great deal of love and respect. Unlike Lugosi’s character, Blacula does not attempt to control her with his gaze, and he does not intend on

passing his curse along to her. It is not until Tina is shot that he bites her in an attempt to save her life.

Blacula's death also revises the horror genre. As previously explained, Carroll notes that horror films following the Discovery Plot end with a final confrontation between the monster and the hero. In preceding films, Dracula is slain by Van Helsing, and peace is restored to Victorian England. *Blacula* reworks the Discovery Plot by changing the dynamic of the final confrontation, pitting Blacula against multiple enemies. Specifically, the final conflict involves Blacula, police officers, and Dr. Thomas. During the confrontation, Blacula manages to kill several police officers in his attempt to escape with Tina. However, after she is shot and he is unable to save her life, he no longer has the desire to live. Rather than succumbing to Dr. Thomas, he exposes himself to the sunlight, taking his own life. In *Horror Films of the 1970s*, John Kenneth Muir notes, "It is a powerful sacrifice, and another moment that speaks to the fact that, though cursed by Dracula, Mamuwalde is a man of noble character" (175).

In addition to the monster, another significant character presented in horror films is what Rasmussen defines as the "wise elder."

The wise elder possesses a keen nose for evil and an ability to conjure up an effective defense against it. While government officials, the police, and distraught parents of endangered youth feebly confront a menace with conventional weapons, the wise elder brings something unorthodox to the fight. Though sometimes ridiculed, he or she never suffers from a lack of faith. (84)

Rasmussen contends the prototypical wise elder is *Dracula's* Professor Van Helsing (Edward Van Sloan), who is called upon when strange cases of death due to blood loss baffle English police and physicians (85). Like Count Dracula, the wise elder is from the Continent. Thus, the plague and the antidote are foreign born (Rasmussen 85).

Dr. Gordon Thomas represents the wise elder in *Blacula*. Like Dracula and Van Helsing, Blacula and Dr. Thomas's origins can be traced to the same Continent—Africa. Moreover, Dr. Thomas is also the first black wise elder to appear in the horror genre, which marks a significant revision to the archetype. Dr. Thomas is a young, handsome, black doctor, who is called in to investigate the strange death of one of Blacula's first victims. Building on the tradition established by blaxploitation characters, such as John Shaft and *Super Fly's* Youngblood Priest, Dr. Thomas is well dressed and desired by both black and white women alike. He has a significant other but remains the object of affection for women. This is illustrated in a

scene that depicts a white receptionist making advances toward him when he visits the local police station.

*Blacula*'s setting also transgresses previous vampire films, which traditionally occurred in Victorian times or the 1930s at the latest (Muir 51). The film expands the horror genre by shifting the locale of one of its oldest monsters to a modern, predominantly black, urban community. Shot in the traditional low-budget AIP style, *Blacula* does not feature extensive locations like preceding blaxploitation films, such as *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Shaft*. However, there are signposts in the film's diegesis that establish the primary setting as a predominantly black urban space. One is a mortician's line of dialogue in the beginning of the film. *Blacula*'s first victims are a black interior decorator and white interior decorator. While viewing the black victim's body at the funeral home, Dr. Thomas asks to see the other corpse. The mortician informs him that he does not have the body: "Well, he was white. I don't get too many whites in here, you know" (*Blacula*).

In addition to dialogue, the nightclub that the main characters frequent also establishes the setting as a black space. The patrons are black, and the rhythm-and-blues trio, the Hughes Corporation, is performing. Throughout the scene, the latest dances and fashions are highly visible. Not only does this nightclub assist in establishing the setting, it also depicts blacks as prosperous city people instead of the shucking and jiving coons traditionally presented in horror films.

*Blacula*'s presence in the modern-day Los Angeles setting creates a set of circumstances that preceding vampires were not subjected to. For example, Count Dracula's white skin and aristocratic nature were not strange in Victorian England. In contrast, *Blacula*'s skin color places him at a socio-political disadvantage in 1970s America. The character finds himself in a world where blacks are systematically oppressed and not fully accepted by the white majority.

In addition to suffering from racial discrimination from whites, *Blacula* is also an anomaly in the predominantly black community. While his skin color renders him the same, his noble African background positions him as the Other amongst contemporary black Americans. This reflects the relationship that exists between African Americans and native Africans living in the United States. In "Conflict or Cooperation?," Akwasi Assenoh compares the two groups, which are bound by their skin color and a history of oppression: "American born blacks and their African counterparts often disagree on a range of issues and vary widely in cultural norms. . . . The relationship between Africans and African Americans takes no one particular form. Instead, the relationship can be most adequately characterized as a pendulum that swings from conflict to cooperation, depending on the



time, the histopolitical and economic context, media images, and cultural norms" (113, 130).

Blacula's appearance in the nightclub that Tina frequents positions him as an outsider because he represents an African tradition foreign to the black inhabitants of 1970s Los Angeles; "Blacula's position in contemporary Los Angeles is put in opposition to the assimilated blackness of Dr. Thomas" (Koven 73). This contrast is visible in a scene when Blacula meets Tina's friends and family at the nightclub. His unfamiliarity with contemporary modes of dress and speech emphasizes his otherworldliness among his modern-day counterparts. Blacula has arrived dressed in an outdated black ensemble, topped off with a cape. He displays his aristocratic background by ordering champagne instead of beer, and when he speaks, he is extremely articulate and does not use slang like the characters that surround him. When he leaves for the evening, he comments, "Please forgive me. I must depart now. I have indeed had a rare pleasure." In this setting, Blacula represents the Other, and he is described perfectly by a male character who comments, "Say, man, that is one strange dude" (*Blacula*).

While Blacula is an outsider in the predominantly black setting, Dr. Thomas represents normalcy and success in the environment. People who respect him and his judgment as a physician surround him. His voice is clearly heard in the community; however, when he ventures outside the urban area, his agency is limited (discussed later in the chapter).

*Blacula* contains commentary directly related to the black experience in America. One of the most significant revisions made to conventional Dracula films in *Blacula* is that viewers actually witness the origin of the vampire. Traditional Dracula films often introduce the character as a creature of the night; this film initially depicts Mamuwalde as an ambassador for African nations. He and Luva are visiting Dracula's castle to discuss the abolishment of the slave trade when he is attacked and turned into a vampire. In *Horror Films of the 1970s*, Muir states, "This very experience of becoming a vampire is thus related to the abolishment of slavery and the early black experience in the United States" (174).

The allegory of slavery is further emphasized when Dracula renames Mamuwalde in his own image: "You shall be Blacula, a living fiend doomed to never know that sweet blood that will become your only desire" (*Blacula*). This renaming parallels that endured by African slaves at the hands of whites after they were unwillingly shipped to America, and it was vehemently preached against in rallies held by Malcolm X and the members of the Nation of Islam during the Civil Rights Movement. Significantly, Elijah Muhammad noted: "The black man was Original Man, who had been kidnapped from his homeland and stripped from his language, his culture, his

family structure, his family name, until the black man in America did not even realize who he was” (Haley 227). With that in mind, ministers of the Nation of Islam changed their last names to X, which symbolized their true African family name that could never be known (Haley 227). Thus, *Blacula* is equating white slave owners with the white vampire master, and Blacula is Mamuwalde’s slave name (Muir 174). Ironically, much like the slaves he was attempting to free, Blacula finds himself transported to America by no choice of his own.

*Blacula* also comments on the position of blacks in modern American society. Dr. Thomas is well respected in his black community. However, when he ventures outside that community, he becomes locked in a battle against the white establishment. For example, Dr. Thomas suspects that a ghoul is terrorizing the black community and has proof to support his claims early on. Despite his evidence, his investigation is interrupted when he is denied permission to exhume a body and further complicated when several reports that he requests on the matter are continually lost at the hands of a white man (Muir 174). Furthermore, even Dr. Thomas’s friend, a white police captain, is hesitant to accept his theory concerning Blacula’s vampirism. Muir contends, “Because he can’t stop Blacula sooner (due to these impediments), it is again white America that is to blame for bloody murder. As a black man in a white hierarchy, Thomas’ is a voice that, if heard at all, is rarely listened to” (174).

The *Blacula* soundtrack also transgresses the horror genre by including rhythm-and-blues music rather than the haunting classical scores, which had traditionally been employed to create an eerie mood befitting the nature of the genre. By 1972, a growing number of films were utilizing contemporary music as a result of the success of the *Shaft* and *Super Fly* soundtracks, which were composed by Isaac Hayes and Curtis Mayfield, respectively. These films cemented the use of funky music in blaxploitation films, and AIP followed the trend to further modernize *Blacula*. The soundtrack was composed by Gene Page, who used “the full world of sounds for the sounds of *Blacula*” (Parish and Hill 59). Page and his fellow musicians created a funky, melodic complement to the filmic image by “using old instruments in new ways, new instruments in new ways and sometimes non-instruments to produce effects” (Parish and Hill 59). The funky sound is apparent in the film’s animated opening credits, which are accompanied by the song “Blacula (The Stalkwalk).” In addition, the soundtrack features the songs “Heavy Changes,” “Run, Tina, Run,” “Good to the Last Drop,” and the African-inspired “Wakeeli” (Swahili Farewell). Although the soundtrack was not as popular as others from the period, it was the first time that contemporary music was featured in a horror film.

Prior to *Blacula*'s release, AIP's marketing department worked to ensure that the film would be highly anticipated by black audiences. According to AIP marketers, a host of methods could be used to "stimulate response from Negro patrons," which included displaying posters in churches, food markets, and stores frequently visited by blacks ("On Old Broadway" 29).<sup>8</sup> With that in mind, the advertising-publicity campaign included posters that alluded to the film's allegory of slavery by featuring the tagline, "Rising From the Echoing Corridors of Hell an Awesome Being of the Supernatural—with Satanic Power of Sheer Dread. Chained Forever to a Slavery More Vile than any Before Endured." In addition, another poster tagline proclaimed, "Deadlier than Dracula," and played upon themes of miscegenation by depicting the black vampire biting the neck of a white woman, even though that never happened in the film.

The movie trailers were also an important part of AIP's marketing strategy. William Marshall recalled that the previews featuring the first black vampire were well received throughout the United States.

In many theaters the audiences were so wild about the trailers that they couldn't stop applauding through the opening of the next features. The trailers became so popular that people were coming to the theater just to see them. In some places the opening of *Blacula* was postponed so people could continue to enjoy the trailers. People were so excited about seeing people of color on the screen. (Martinez et al. 42)

AIP also attempted to draw audiences to the theaters by promising free admission. On the marquee of two New York theaters, the company displayed messages that read: "Vampires that wish to gain free admission to the Juliet 2 and Criterion Theatres . . . must appear in long flowing capes" ("On Old Broadway" 29). According to a Criterion Theatre worker, on the day *Blacula* opened, only six people took advantage of AIP's offer ("On Old Broadway" 29).

After *Blacula* was released, *Variety* enthusiastically reviewed the film asserting: "The Joan Torres-Raymond Koenig screenplay is well developed and catches the spirit of the past renderings, replete with chilling sequences and all the paraphernalia relating to vampires and their modus operandi" ("Blacula," 2 Aug. 1972, 18). The review also praised the cast: "William Marshall portrays the title role with flourish and gets first rate support right down the line. . . . William Crain, debuting as a feature director after a brief career in TV, establishes and maintains the sort of pace and mood identified with past Dracula entries. Music score by Gene Page is a further asset as *Blacula* embarks upon his carnage in L.A." (18). A review

in the *Chicago Defender* proclaimed, “It is indeed the world’s first Black Horror motion picture designed especially for film entertainment! The film combines in ‘Blacula’ just the right amount of genuine terror . . . to leave the viewer satisfied and less blood thirsty than he might have been had he just seen the earlier post-Lugosi efforts” (“Blacula Stars” 21).

*Variety* and the *Chicago Defender*’s assessments were not shared by all. *New York Times* critic Roger Greenspun wrote: “Anybody who goes to a vampire movie expecting sense is in serious trouble, and ‘Blacula’ offers less than most. But it does provide such bits of knowledge as the well-known fact (not well-known to me) that vampires multiply geometrically . . . or the useful information that a silver cross will also work against Third-world vampires from emergent African nations” (“Blacula” 15:1). In *Films and Filming*, Richard Weaver heavily criticized *Blacula* as well as AIP for producing the film: “Apparently seeking even wider success within a field in which it once reigned supreme, AIP has now seemed to have taken a side-ways step and over-reached themselves in their endeavor to cash in on the lucrative black film market. The result is an unfortunate feature debut for director William Crain” (49). Weaver concluded that the film is “totally unconvincing on any level; someone should lay garlic at the studio door, cross themselves, and pray that *Blacula* is never resurrected” (49).

Despite mixed critical reception, *Blacula* was a box-office success. It debuted in the twenty-fourth position on *Variety*’s list of top films and grossed \$108,000 (“50 Top,” 9 Aug. 1972: 11). In its second week, *Blacula* made \$200,000 and ranked twelfth on *Variety*’s list of top films, which marked the film’s highest position on the chart during its release (“50 Top” 16 Aug. 1972: 11). It continued to perform well over the next three weeks accumulating, \$181,000, \$141,000, and \$130,575, consecutively (“50 Top,” 23 Aug. 1972: 11; “50 Top,” 30 Aug. 1972: 9; “50 Top,” 6 Sept. 1972: 11, respectively). By the end of its theatrical run, *Blacula* grossed over \$1 million in domestic film rentals and was one of the highest grossing films of 1972 (“Big Rental Films of 1972” 36). *Blacula* was also named the Best Horror Film of 1972 by the Academy of Horror Films and Science Fiction Films (Koven 73).

In July 1972, an article in the *Chicago Defender* titled “‘Blacula’ Stars William Marshall,” declared: “‘Blacula’ will no doubt set a trend, as the film public has overwhelmingly shown a strong and lasting interest in horror fiction as witnessed by the long time popularity of the Dracula, Werewolf, Phantom of the Opera, and Dr. Frankenstein types of movie features” (24). This prediction was accurate as *Blacula*’s success sparked an influx of black-themed horror films, which also attempted to inject blackness into the narratives of Hollywood’s most notable monster tales.

AIP continued the trend that it successfully began by releasing a sequel to *Blacula*, titled *Scream, Blacula, Scream* (1973). As with the previous installment, Joan Torres and Raymond Koenig penned the screenplay, and William Marshall reprised his role as the title character. He was joined by Richard Lawson, who portrays Willis, and the notable blaxploitation star Pam Grier, who plays Lisa. Director William Crain was replaced by Bob Kelljan, who had directed *Flesh of My Flesh* (1969) and *Count Yorga, Vampire* (1970).

*Scream, Blacula, Scream* begins with the death of local voodoo queen Mama Lao. After her passing, her ambitious son Willis is furious when her former apprentice Lisa is unanimously chosen as her successor. Attempting to seek revenge, Willis buys some very powerful bones to use in a ritual that he plans to conduct against Lisa. As it turns out, the bones are those of Blacula, who is brought back to life. He bites Willis, turning him into his vampire disciple, and once again begins walking the streets. Blacula falls in love with Lisa, and upon discovering that she is a voodoo queen, he convinces her to conduct a ritual to remove Count Dracula's curse. Unfortunately, the police arrive during the ceremony, and Lisa drives a pin through the heart of a Blacula voodoo doll, killing him before the police have the opportunity to do so.

*Scream, Blacula, Scream* opened to mixed reviews. *Variety's* critique complimented the cast and the crew.

Marshall displays the same flourish again in his performance . . . and Grier continues the good impression that she has made as an actress. . . . Isidore Mankofsky's color photography contributes strongly to frequent high suspense and Bill Marx' music score is another potent asset in this department. Editing by Fabien Tordjmann is dramatic and Alfeo Bocchicchio's art direction captures the note demanded for the story. ("Scream, Blacula Scream" 18)

In contrast was Roger Greenspun's critique in the *New York Times*: "*Scream, Blacula, Scream* fails for lack of incident, weakness of invention, [and] insufficient story" (31:1). Despite receiving mixed reviews, *Scream, Blacula, Scream* performed well at the box office, grossing \$1,000,000 in domestic film rentals (Parish and Hill 248).

Among the first films that attempted to capitalize off the success of the *Blacula* series was the African American version of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which was appropriately titled *Blackenstein* (1973). AIP initially planned to release *Blackenstein* ("AIP's 'Blackenstein'" 2); however, the company pushed the project back, instead focusing its

attention on *Scream, Blacula, Scream*. The company eventually withdrew from the project altogether, leaving it open to other potential suitors.

Although AIP did not pursue *Blackenstein*, the film did make it to the big screen. Specifically, little-known distribution company Exclusive International Pictures produced the film in an attempt to cash in on the black movie boom (Parish and Hill 56). Frank R. Salertri produced and wrote the screenplay for *Blackenstein*, while the film marked the directorial debut of William A. Levy. Prior to working on the feature, neither Salertri nor Levy had any film credits to their name. Interestingly, Parish and Hill note, in an attempt to ensure quality production values, Exclusive International “hired special effects wizard Kenneth Strickfadden (who had created the electronic gadgetry for the Boris Karloff classic motion picture *Frankenstein*, 1931)” (56).

*Blackenstein* starred John Hart in the role of Dr. Stein. Hart brought much-needed experience to the film. He had worked as an actor in both television and film in “Perry Mason,” “The Lieutenant” (1963–1964), *Riot on Sunset Strip* (1967), *Simon, King of Witches* (1970), and other features as well. *Blackenstein* also featured newcomers Joe De Sue, Ivory Stone, and Roosevelt Jackson, as Eddie Turner, Dr. Winifred Walker, and Malcomb, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

*Blackenstein* tells the story of Eddie Turner, a black soldier who lost his arms and legs after stepping on a land mine while serving in Vietnam. His girlfriend, Dr. Walker, who badly wants to restore Eddie’s limbs, seeks help from her mentor and Nobel Prize-winning scientist, Dr. Stein. She visits Stein’s gothic Beverly Hills laboratory where he informs her of his newly perfected DNA formula that will allow him to graft new limbs onto Eddie. Eddie submits to the experiment, but things run afoul when Dr. Stein’s assistant, Malcomb, who has fallen in love with Dr. Walker, sabotages the operation. Eddie emerges as a maniacal killer monster, murdering Dr. Stein and destroying his laboratory. The monster then goes on a rampage, reeking havoc on the community until he is killed by a pack of vicious Doberman pinschers.

*Blackenstein* makes a slight attempt to include relevant social commentary within the narrative. The film critiques the Vietnam War and the treatment of its disabled veterans. As Mikel J. Koven notes, when audiences are initially introduced to Eddie, he is in a veteran’s hospital where the conditions are horrible (75). His simple request for ice cream is met with hostility by an orderly. Furthermore, “Knowing that Eddie is going to become *Blackenstein* also possibly echoes the subtext that the Vietnam War made monsters out of men” (Koven 75).

Despite its attempt at significance, *Blackenstein* emerged as one of the worst films of the blaxploitation movement. According to Parish and Hill, “Everything is abysmally handled in this bottom-of-the-barrel production.

There is little logic to this presentation. . . . There are naïve teenagers parked in the hills and being terrorized by the monster; and at almost every turn a nubile young lady is having her blouse (partially) ripped off" (57). Consequently, *Blackenstein* performed terribly at the box office, and the monster was never resurrected for a sequel.<sup>10</sup>

Although *Blackenstein* failed to turn a profit, AIP continued to test the horror market with the release of *Abby* (1974). The film was a bold attempt to capitalize upon the recent success of Warner Bros.'s *The Exorcist* (1973), which was an adaptation of William Peter Blatty's novel with the same title. *The Exorcist* tells the story of a twelve-year-old girl's demonic possession and the two priests who attempt to exorcise the spirit before it kills the child. While considered graphic at the time of its release, the film performed well at the box office. *The Exorcist* was produced on a budget of \$10,000,000 and grossed \$89,000,000 in domestic film rentals (Parish and Hill 5).<sup>11</sup>

Originally titled *The Blacorcist*, *Abby* was written and directed by William Girdler, who had previously directed a low-budget drive-in flick titled *Three on a Meathook* (1972).<sup>12</sup> Seeking to capitalize on his successful appearances in *Blacula*, AIP cast William Marshall as Bishop Garnett Williams. *Abby* also features Terry Carter as Reverend Emmett Williams and Carol Speed as the title character.

*Abby* begins with Bishop Williams, PhD, journeying to Nigeria to study Yoruba religious folklore. Williams leads an archeological dig where he discovers a box with the image of Yoruban trickster God, Eshu, on it. He opens the container, unleashing the spirit, which finds its way back to the United States, where it possesses his daughter-in-law, Abby. Abby soon begins exhibiting strange behavior—she cuts herself after becoming enamored with the sight of chicken blood, and she has a seizure during her husband Emmett's church sermon. After noticing her abnormal behavior, Emmett calls upon his father, who returns home and exorcises Abby during the film's climactic final sequence.

*Abby* was poorly reviewed after its release. A. H. Weiler of the *New York Times* described the film as "more silly than shocking even if it seems to take itself seriously" (qtd. in Parish and Hill 5). Additionally, *Variety* also criticized the film commenting: "[*Abby*] hovers close to parody in its cartoonish approach to character and plot. . . . Screenplay by G. Cornell Layne . . . is utilitarian and doesn't do much with the situation but milk it for shock and gag value" (qtd. in Parish and Hill 6).

While unimpressed with *Abby*, *Variety* did predict that the film would play well with its intended market. The publication was correct; *Abby* overcame the poor reviews, accumulating \$2,600,000 in domestic film

rentals after only a few weeks in release. The figure would have been higher had the film not been pulled from theaters prematurely after Warner Bros. threatened to sue AIP, claiming that *Abby* too closely resembled *The Exorcist*. Warner Bros. assertion was legitimate because *Abby* includes entire sequences of dialogue from the earlier film (Koven 77). When asked in an interview years later about stealing from *The Exorcist*, Girdler alluded that he was well aware of what he had done: “I know what my other pictures were. I know what was bad about them. I also know that they were pretty good when you consider how inexpensively they were made. Anybody should be able to make a good movie if they spend \$20 million the way they did on *The Exorcist*. Comparatively speaking, for what we spent on it, *Abby* was probably a better picture than *The Exorcist*” (Koven 77).

In addition to the aforementioned titles, several other black-themed horror films were released during the blaxploitation movement, further demonstrating *Blacula*'s influence. Among these films are *Blood Couple* (1973), *Ganja & Hess* (1973), *Sugar Hill* (1974), and *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* (1976). However, none of these movies reached the same level of success as the *Blacula* films or *Abby*, and studios eventually ceased the production black-oriented horror movies.

African American representation within the horror genre dwindled during the post-blaxploitation era. Significantly, blacks were removed from the center of the narratives and appeared as token characters that were often the first to die in horror films featuring multiracial casts. Still, a small number of black-themed horror films similar in style, theme, and content, such as *Candyman* (1992), *Tales from the Hood* (1995), and *Bones* (2001), demonstrate that *Blacula*'s reworking of traditional generic conventions remains influential.



### Chapter Three

## “Now that You’ve Seen the Rest . . . Make Way for the Biggest and the Best!”

### *The Mack* and the Gangster Genre

Although the gangster film appeared in embryonic form before World War I, it did not become a distinct genre until the late 1920s when “prohibition provided a new, lucrative, and well publicized field of activities for racketeers, one which required a high degree of coordination and organization, transforming the ‘crook into the gangster’” (Raeburn 47). During this period, criminals such as Al Capone and Bugsy Moran supplied alcohol to otherwise law-abiding citizens and were regarded by many Americans as suppliers of legitimate needs. Figures like Capone and Moran were newsworthy, and the film industry moved in to capitalize on their illegal exploits (Raeburn 47). Among Hollywood’s earliest gangster films were *The Racket* (1928), *Alibi* (1929), *Thunderbolt* (1929), and *Born Reckless* (1930).

While early gangster films proved lucrative, it was not until the release of Mervyn Le Roy’s *Little Caesar* (1931) that the genre’s most notable conventions were established. According to John Raeburn, *Caesar* is “the first genuine gangster film focusing explicitly and unansweringly on the gangster and his relation to larger cultural values and beliefs” (48). The film tells the story of Caesar Enrico Bandello (Edward G. Robinson), a petty thug, who dreams of becoming a major-league gangster. On their way to the big city, Rico and his sidekick Joe Massara (Douglas Fairbanks Jr.) stop at a roadside restaurant, and during their meal, Bandello reveals his overwhelming ambition to become an underworld kingpin. Arriving in town, Rico manages to worm his way into the gang of racketeer Sam Vettori (Stanley Fields) and begin his career as a bodyguard and triggerman. His brilliant performance during several jobs earns him a promotion, and it isn’t long before he is Vettori’s right-hand man. Rico eventually succeeds Sam as the leader of the gang and quickly rises to the top, becoming the town’s number-one gangster. Meanwhile, Rico’s boys, becoming fearful

that their boss’s penchant for cold-blooded murder will be their undoing, overthrow him. He is blackballed in the rackets by the criminal higher-ups and sinks lower and lower until he is reduced to living in a flophouse for transients. The police eventually lure him out of hiding, and Rico is killed in a final shootout with the authorities (Bookbinder 11–12).

After its release, *Caesar* emerged as the prototypical gangster film, establishing the themes, motifs, and conventions that went on to define subsequent classic motion pictures, such as *The Public Enemy* (1931) and *Scarface: The Shame of a Nation* (1932). According to Stuart Kaminsky, the 1930s gangster films “were generally semiconscious attempts to deal with the Depression and the public’s shaken confidence” (22). The major conventions include a small, ethnic gangster who attempts to obtain the American Dream through illegal activities. The gangster’s rise to a position of power is depicted, at which point the genre’s iconography—the city as a seedy backdrop, machine guns, black limousines, tuxedos, and the acquisition of women—is on display (Kaminsky 34–35).

The adoption of the Production Code (1930 to 1960) was also a force in establishing the conventions of the gangster genre. Daniel J. Lord, a Catholic priest who believed that movies were corrupting American values, played a major role in implementing the system.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, to counter the influence of immoral films, Lord drafted a set of regulations to ensure the integrity of motion pictures.

A basic premise of the code was that movies did not enjoy the same freedom of expression as the printed word or theatrical performances. This most democratic of art forms had to be regulated . . . because movies cut across all social, economic, political, and educational boundaries, attracting millions of people to its theaters every week. In order to protect the masses from the evil influences of the movies, they had to be censored. (Black 1)

With that in mind, Lord’s code prohibited films from glorifying gangsters, adulterers, and prostitutes. Furthermore, it forbade motion pictures from depicting nudity, excessive violence, white slavery, illegal drugs, miscegenation, lustful kissing, suggestive posture, and profanity. In addition to banning “inappropriate” content, the doctrine also held that films should promote the institutions of marriage and home, defend the fairness of government, and present religious institutions with reverence (Black 1). Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), approved of and sponsored Lord’s code. It was formally adopted by the motion picture industry in 1930.

Gangster pictures were affected by the implementation of the Production Code because, as Black notes, they “cut to the very center of what was acceptable onscreen” (108). Hays considered the films dangerous and police, judges, lawyers, mayors, newspapers, and civic organizations shared in his condemnation (Black 109). With that in mind, the Production Code mandated that the gangster must be punished for his life of illegal activity so that audiences could witness the consequences of a life of crime. Thus, in the last scene of the film, the law often gunned down the criminal, establishing his death as a major convention of the genre.<sup>2</sup>

The gangster film has flourished in Hollywood since the 1930s and has undergone many transformations since the classic period, which lasted from 1930 to 1940. During World War II, the films featured a taller, more handsome gangster who possessed faith in American ideals. Throughout this period, “the gangster became a conscious stricken American, anxious to help his country, willing to put aside his ruthless quest ‘to be somebody’ so that he could join in the battle against the common enemy” (Kaminsky 22). *High Sierra* (1941) and *All Through the Night* (1942) feature this type of criminal.

In addition to depicting a wartime mobster, the genre also featured young, antisocial, rural gangsters between 1960 and 1970. During this period, the criminals were anti-establishment, and the stories reflected the social turmoil that was prevalent in the United States as a result of the Vietnam War as well as a lack of confidence in the solidarity of state. Rural gangster films were often set in country towns, and the movies tended to focus on armed robbery (Kaminsky 34). Moreover, the criminal is often considered the “social bandit” or “the outlaw who represents or fights for the aspirations of the poor, the oppressed, and the socially disenfranchised” (Neale, *Genre* 211).

Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), which details the criminal exploits of real-life gangsters Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, serves as the best example of a rural gangster film. Like its classic predecessors, *Bonnie and Clyde* takes place during the Great Depression; however, small Texas towns, where the duo commits a spree of bank robberies, replace the city as the setting for the action. In *Focus on Bonnie and Clyde*, John Cawelti observes, “For some, Bonnie and Clyde came to exemplify the most perverse, and cruel kind of killer. For others, they were modern Robin Hoods” (1).<sup>3</sup>

Despite its longevity and many transformations, the Hollywood gangster genre did not feature a black performer in the role of the criminal until the 1970s. Although black gangs existed from 1910 on, “Hollywood clearly felt that black aspirations were not as such that they had to be included in

the genre as a mainstream element, and the black moviegoer did not protest not being depicted as a criminal” (Kaminsky 32). The emergence of the blaxploitation movement provided black performers the opportunity to play gangster roles. This chapter discusses how the inclusion of blackness in the gangster film revises the genre. Specifically, *Super Fly* (1972) is discussed as an antecedent to *The Mack* (1973), which is the primary focus.

In 1972, the blaxploitation movement was quickly emerging as one of the most lucrative phenomena in motion picture history. Films like *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, and *Shaft* had all performed incredibly well at the box office, demonstrating the power of black moviegoers. In an attempt to cash in on this increasingly viable segment of the population, Warner Bros. released the first Hollywood gangster film to focus on a black criminal. The film was *Super Fly* (1972), which at the time was the ghetto name for cocaine (Leab 255). Although released by Warner Bros., *Super Fly* was funded by a group of black businessmen, making it the first time that a Hollywood film was completely financed by African Americans (Nash and Ross 2162).

Little-known author Philip Fenty<sup>4</sup> wrote the screenplay for *Super Fly*, while Gordon Parks Jr. handled the directorial responsibilities (Parish and Hill 290).<sup>5</sup> Prior to directing the film, Parks Jr. had no major works or accomplishments in the industry. Despite lacking significant experience, he exhibited a good feel for music and a sharp eye for the density of a tough, urban setting as well as a fondness for a moody renegade hero. According to Bogle, *Super Fly*’s authenticity was a result of Parks Jr., who “touched base with an audience anxious for a glimpse of black male self assertion and for some comments on the terrors and tensions of contemporary urban life” (*Blacks* 437).<sup>6</sup>

*Super Fly* stars Ron O’Neal, who began his acting career onstage, performing in Cleveland’s Karamu Playhouse and later in the Negro Ensemble Company’s productions of *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* (1969) and *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1971). O’Neal made the transition to the big screen in *Move* (1970) and *The Organization* (1971). His big break came when he landed the role of Youngblood Priest in *Super Fly*.

*Super Fly* tells the story of Priest, a cocaine dealer who has acquired the American Dream through his illegal activity. Among his possessions are an array of fancy clothes, an \$18,000 Cadillac, and a hip downtown apartment. In spite of his success, Priest is tired of selling drugs and concocts a plan to make one final score before retiring. He plans to buy thirty kilos of cocaine for \$300,000 and sell them for a total of \$1,000,000. Priest, however, is hindered by his partner and corrupt, white police officers, who promise them protection from the law as long as they agree to sell the

cocaine that the police commissioner is distributing throughout the black community. The film ends as Priest outsmarts the white police officers, makes his score, and walks away a free man. It is important to note that Priest's victory over the system is possible due to the implementation of the ratings system that replaced the Production Code in 1968.

Like its blaxploitation predecessors, *Super Fly* contained a popular soundtrack composed by Curtis Mayfield, who also had a cameo appearance in the film. The album featured popular tracks, such as "I'm Your Pusherman" and "Freddie's Dead," and rose to the top of the album charts after its release. The soundtrack occupied the number-one position for five weeks, staying on the charts for forty-six weeks in all; it also sold over two million copies and earned Curtis Mayfield four Grammy Awards (Parish and Hill 292).

*Super Fly's* critical reception was not monolithic, and the film added to the controversy that accompanied the emergence of blaxploitation films. Roger Greenspun of the *New York Times* admitted that the film had faults but found it to be a "very good movie," particularly praising Parks Jr.'s "brilliantly ideomatic" direction ("Super Fly" 14). Stuart Byron of *Rolling Stone* also provided an enthusiastic review: "*Super Fly* is clearly the debut film of 1972, maybe the best first feature by an American in several years, and the only black film so far to emerge with chances of becoming lasting art. Happily, it represents one of those rare occasions when art and commerce meet" (14).

In stark contrast, many intellectuals despised the film, alleging that it glorified the depiction of criminal life. Junius Griffin, president of the Beverly Hills–Hollywood branch of the NAACP, became one of the film's most persistent critics:

Whether the producers intended it or not, *Super Fly* is one of the most expensive and sophisticated commercials for cocaine ever conceived. Young people are more concerned with style and symbolism than with substance and can't understand that this is the most insidious behavioral manipulation by the most sophisticated propagandistic industry in the world. The movie tells young people that if you can't beat the man in reality, you can beat him in fantasy. This is counter-revolutionary because our leaders have always emphasized the importance of dealing with reality. (qtd. in "Super Fly Called" 56)

Tony Brown, who at the time of the film's release was executive producer of television's "Black Journal" and dean of the School of Communications at Howard University, also openly criticized *Super Fly*:

Self hate . . . is being packaged in such films as *Super Fly*. The major film studios appear to have become the new pushers in the black community—selling dope, prostitution, and degenerate heroes in a careful mixture of sex, violence, and white women. Obviously what is needed by the Black community to counteract this type of *Super Fly* blaxploitation is a BIG BLACK SWAT. (qtd. in “Super Fly Called” 57)

Despite the controversy surrounding *Super Fly*, it was a major success. It grossed \$145,000 in its first week of release and appeared eighteenth on *Variety*'s list of top-grossing films (“50 Top,” *Variety*, 16 Aug. 1972: 11). It gained momentum the following weeks grossing \$308,000 its second week of release, and an additional \$227,715 in its third week of release (“50 Top,” *Variety*, 23 Aug. 1972: 11; “50 Top,” *Variety*, 30 Aug. 1972: 11, respectively). *Super Fly* earned \$523,347 in its fourth week and it appeared third on *Variety*'s list of top films (“50 Top,” *Variety*, 6 Sept. 1972: 11). The film continued its amazing run, and eight weeks after its first showing at Loew's State Theater in New York City, *Variety* announced that *Super Fly* had done \$1,000,000 in business in New York alone and \$5,000,000 throughout the rest of the country (Verrill 3). *Super Fly* appeared at number one on *Variety*'s top list of films in its ninth week of release, accumulating \$457,050, and it eventually earned over \$10 million in its theatrical run (“50 Top,” *Variety*, 11 Oct. 1972: 9).<sup>7</sup>

Although *Super Fly* overcame the intellectuals' assault, the film confirmed their worst fears as Youngblood Priest “became a role model for impressionable young filmgoers, who thought it cool the way he punched and outmaneuvered honkies and snorted coke while hot-tubbing or fornicating” (Parish and Hill 290). This was confirmed by merchandisers who capitalized on the film by selling paraphernalia associated with the Youngblood Priest character. Specifically, the crucifix that Priest used for a cocaine spoon was one of the items that stores began to sell. A sales clerk at In Stitches, a variety-type clothing store in Los Angeles, said, “We've sold a lot of those crucifixes since the movie came out. They're still selling. We didn't have any at first but after several people kept asking about them, we got some” (Berry 55).

The demand for crucifixes was not isolated to stores in California. The item was also sought after in Fairchild's Wisdom Tooth, which was located in Houston, as well as The Barnyard in Miami (Berry 55). While the purchasing of crucifix cocaine spoons was a fad that took place in various U.S. cities, most of the consumers shared a common characteristic. In every location, salespeople noticed that the majority of the patrons were youths who appeared to range from age sixteen to twenty-one (55).

In addition to purchasing cocaine spoons, many *Super Fly* fans also modeled their appearances after Youngblood Priest. A random survey of five barbershops across the U.S. revealed that many youths had their hair treated with chemicals to achieve a straightened look like the one worn by Priest in the movie (Berry 55). Hyacinth Carter, a beautician at New York's Coif Camp (the firm that styled Ron O'Neal's hair for the movie), stated, "Although some men can't wear the straight look because their hair is too short, they still get it straightened. I think the movie had something to do with this too" (Berry 56).

While *Super Fly* fans mimicked Youngblood Priest's behavior, studios attempted to duplicate the film's success at the box office. Thus, imitators chronicling the exploits of black gangsters, such as *Hit Man* (1972) and *Black Caesar* (1973), were quickly released by MGM and AIP, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Although these films also cut against the gangster genre's reliance upon white criminals, their narratives closely resembled traditional features. Specifically, *Hit Man* is the story of a lawyer (Bernie Casey) who explores the criminal underworld in attempt to avenge his brother's death, while *Black Caesar* chronicles the rise of Tommy Gibbs (Fred Williamson) to the position of Harlem's most notorious gangster kingpin.

In contrast, Cinerama Releasing Corporation's *The Mack* (1973) presented a new variation of the traditional gangster movie. Robert J. Poole conceived of the idea for *The Mack* while serving a five-year prison term for having worked as a pimp (Parish and Hill 211). After his release, he managed to get a copy of his forty-page treatment to producer Harvey Bernhard, who found the script intriguing and agreed to produce the film. Bernhard quickly enlisted white director Michael Campus to direct the feature. Prior to directing *The Mack*, Campus had little experience. His resume included work on documentary films, and he had also directed a science fiction picture *Z.P.G.* (1972).

*The Mack* stars Max Julien, who learned about the film from his girlfriend, actress Vonetta McGee. Bernhard had contacted her to play a role in the film, which she declined. She did, however, recommend that he grant Julien an audition, and Bernhard agreed to do so. After meeting with Julien, Bernhard was so taken by the actor that he offered him the lead role of John "Goldie" Mickens. Moreover, he also gave Julien a great deal of creative control over the film, allowing him to expand and revise the original treatment as well as providing him final approval on all casting decisions.

In addition to Julien, *The Mack* stars Roger E. Mosley as Goldie's brother Olinga and Carol Speed as a prostitute named Lulu. Don Gordon and William Watson play bigoted white police officers Hank and Jed, and

Juanita Moore appears as Goldie’s mother.<sup>9</sup> Finally, *The Mack* features comedian Richard Pryor in a dramatic role as Goldie’s best friend and partner, Slim.

*The Mack* was shot entirely on location in a predominantly black section of Oakland, California, on a budget of \$200,000. Interestingly, obtaining approval to shoot in the locale was not an easy task. Before production was underway, Campus spent two months in Oakland in the attempt to develop a feel for the community. During his stay, Campus had to gain consent to shoot in Oakland’s ghetto from Frank D. Ward and his brothers (Ted, Willie, and Andrew), who at the time controlled the neighborhood. In *Mackin’ Ain’t Easy* (2002), the documentary chronicling the making of *The Mack*, Campus discusses his initial meeting with Ward, who wanted to know how he would benefit from allowing him to shoot the film in his community. Campus responded explaining that he was not the producer of the film but informed Ward that he wanted him to appear in the picture. After considering the offer, Ward commented, “Okay, my man, I take you in my world, you take me in your world. I show you what I do, you show me what you do.” Ward’s endorsement allowed Campus to film in the Oakland ghetto and provided him admittance into the underworld. This access positioned Campus among real gangsters, which lends to the film’s authenticity.

In *The Mack*, Goldie, a recently released convict, returns home to Oakland after serving a five-year prison term. He arrives with nothing but has ambitions of obtaining the American Dream by working as a pimp. The film traces Goldie’s rise to the top of the “pimp game” and depicts his acquisition of women, clothes, and a fancy car. However, Goldie faces opposition from rival pimps who try to muscle in on his women, his brother, who is a black nationalist trying to clean up the impoverished community, and the two bigoted white cops who had arrested him for his prior offense. His fortunes take a dramatic turn when unknown assailants murder his mother. At this point, Goldie and Olinga take to the streets to avenge their mother’s death. Upon discovering that the two white cops are responsible, they kill them, and Goldie leaves town, ready to rediscover his roots in Alabama.

*The Mack* features the narrative structure prevalent in gangster films—the criminal’s humble beginnings, his ascension to power in the underworld, the quick demise and the fate of the gangster. Although *The Mack* follows this narrative structure, the inclusion of a black gangster, a new criminal element, and a predominantly black urban setting function as an expansion of the generic corpus.

Since its inception, the gangster film has featured many ethnic criminals. As previously noted, many of the films were an attempt to cash in on



the popularity of real-life second-generation immigrant gangsters like Al Capone, whose families were cast at the bottom of the social, economic, and political scale after migrating to America. The difficulty of obtaining the great American Dream created a moral division among immigrants. Many attempted to achieve prosperity through what Richard Cloward defines as legitimate means (167), while others employed illegitimate means, which were chronicled in Hollywood gangster pictures.<sup>10</sup> For example, *Little Caesar* features an Italian bootlegger, and *The Public Enemy* depicts James Cagney as an Irish gangster illegally distributing alcohol.

Goldie is similar to his ethnic predecessors because he also employs illegitimate means to gain wealth and respect. In discussing the character, Max Julien stated that Goldie feels justified by his means because of his desire to elevate his sociopoeconomic status. Julien commented that the film allows the audience to take the trip with the human being and that Goldie's sentiment is, "If I have to be a pimp to do it, then I'll be a pimp to do it" (*Mackin'*).

Although Goldie and his ethnic predecessors have chosen illegitimate means in their pursuit of the American Dream, Goldie's blackness represents a significant revision to his criminal antecedents. According to Neale, "1970s blaxploitation films . . . have highlighted the extent to which the gangster film has centered since the 1920s in particular on ethnic outsiders, and the extent to which, with the exception of the Chinatown films, those outsiders have hitherto been portrayed as exclusively white" (*Genre* 81). While classic gangsters battled Depression-era racial and economic oppression, their skin color did not function as an identifiable marker that positioned them as the Other. In *Born to Lose*, Eugene Rosow asserts, "*The Mack* features a conflict that is visible along ethnicized lines and Goldie's fight also represents the refusal to accept racial oppression" (279). Therefore, one of Goldie's most dangerous enemies is the white establishment.

Goldie's struggle to overcome the oppressive system is reflected in his dealings with Hank and Jed, the bigoted white police officers. On the evening Goldie returns to Oakland after serving his prison sentence, Hank and Jed immediately confront him, informing him that they will be waiting for him to commit another crime so that they can send him back to jail. The tension mounts when Hank draws his gun on Goldie and threatens to shoot him. The officers eventually retreat, and Goldie emerges from the confrontation seemingly unaffected. However, this encounter fuels his desire to acquire wealth and power, which he views as a viable means of overcoming racial oppression. At one point, Goldie tells his brother that he will not quit his illegal activity because, "Being rich and black means something! Being poor and black don't mean shit!" (*The Mack*).

Goldie discovers that being a wealthy African American in the United States does not exclude him from racial bigotry when he has another encounter with the police officers. In this scene, Goldie has established himself as a powerful and wealthy pimp, which is signified by his fancy attire. However, his prosperity seems to heighten Hank and Jed’s hatred, which is predicated upon Goldie’s blackness rather than his illegal activity. The officers view him as uppity and reaffirm his second-class status by using racial slurs to demean Goldie and remind him of his place in society. Once again, the tension escalates when Hank draws his weapon and attempts to coax Goldie into walking away so that he may shoot him in the back. These encounters clearly demonstrate that Goldie’s existence as a black criminal in 1970s America set him apart from his white ethnic predecessors. Specifically, the law’s pursuit of classic gangsters was based on their illegal activities instead of the normative racial bias perpetuated by the establishment against blacks.

As previously noted, the Production Code mandated that gangsters had to be punished for their illegal actions. Their demise generally began with the loss of social power: “In *Little Caesar*, Rico is reduced to poverty (as are Cagney in *The Roaring Twenties*, George Raft in *If I Had a Million*, and Robert De Niro in *Once Upon a Time in America*), emphasizing what happens to those of lower class who dare to challenge society on its own terms” (Kaminsky 38). In addition to being reduced to poverty, the gangster was traditionally killed at the end of the film. Thus, Rico is gunned down by police at the end of *Little Caesar*, and *The Public Enemy*’s Tom Powers meets the same fate at the hands of a rival gang. The gangster’s death prompted Robert Warshaw to label the criminal as a tragic hero.

The gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful. In the deeper layers of modern consciousness, *all* means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is *punished* for success. This is our intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous is ultimately—impossible. The effect of the gangster film is to embody this dilemma in the person of the gangster and resolve it by his death. The dilemma is resolved because it is his death, not ours. (88)

*The Mack* revises the traditional gangster ending. Like previous criminals, Goldie is reduced to poverty; however, he is not killed at the end of the film. Instead, he exacts revenge upon his mother’s killers and leaves town. This does not mark the first time that a gangster survives at the end of the film. Both *The Godfather* and *Super Fly* depict gangsters who stay alive

and are successful. In contrast, Goldie survives but is worse off than when he initially returned home. He loses his wealth, and his mother is killed as a result of his illegal activity. This strains the once-healthy relationship that he shared with his brother. Therefore, Goldie's punishment is worse than death, because he must live in poverty while dealing with the consequences of his actions forever. This makes him an even more tragic figure.

In addition to rewriting the traditional gangster ending, the illegal activity presented in *The Mack* is also an expansion of the generic corpus. Preceding films focused on bootleggers, bank robbers, and drug dealers. *The Mack*, however, is the first gangster picture to feature pimping, which depends on attaining women, as the illegal activity. In early gangster films, "women are acquisitions for the gangster, who has no conscious interest in sex. He is ascetic. Women and liquor are to be displayed—not trusted. Both can betray a gangster" (qtd. in Kaminsky 28–29). This misogyny is prevalent in gangster films, such as *Little Caesar* and *The Godfather*. For example, Rico's disinterest in women as sex objects is implied in his speech at his testimonial banquet: "The liquor is good. I don't drink it myself. . . . Good to see you gents with your molls." In *The Godfather*, "it is obvious early on that James Caan will make a poor 'Don' because of his interest in sex. . . . The 'pure' gangster disdains women as sex objects. Women, jewels, paintings, big houses, flashy cars, tuxedos, cigars are all evidence that the gangster has 'made it' in his business—and in American society" (Kaminsky 29).

Similarly, women are acquisitions in *The Mack*, yet their function is twofold. First, they must be acquired before Goldie can achieve prosperity because they *are* the illegal commodities that are to be sold. Significantly, Goldie's mentor reminds him: "Remember a pimp is only as good as his product and his product is women—now you gotta go out there and get the best ones you can find and you gotta work them broads like nobody's ever worked them before" (*The Mack*). Success in the pimping business heavily relies upon the gangster's ability to view women as erotic objects and use his sexuality as well as his smooth vocabulary to recruit and control them.<sup>11</sup> This is illustrated in a sequence that depicts Goldie on what appears to be a first date with a young woman he is luring into working for him. After a romantic walk, the two sip champagne while sitting on a boat:

WOMAN: I really have a lot of good feelings. You know when I first saw you, I just wanted to touch you and hold you. There's an incredible excitement about you. Something very powerful.

GOLDIE: Yeah, I had those same good feelings about you when I first saw you.

WOMAN: So where do we go from here?

GOLDIE: We go all the way to the top if you're not afraid. Everything's gonna be all right. I'm gonna be everything to you. I'm gonna be your father. I'm gonna be your friend. I'm gonna be your lover. But you gotta believe in me. You gotta believe that everything I tell you to do is the best for the both of us. (*The Mack*)

Much like early criminals competed with rival gangs for control over the bootlegging business, Goldie battles other pimps for control over women. This competition is presented in a scene that depicts a confrontation between Goldie and a rival pimp named Pretty Tony (Dick Anthony Williams). During the scene, a prostitute that works for Pretty Tony “chooses” to work for Goldie instead. Thus, after Goldie establishes himself as a major pimp, women become acquisitions or commodities in the traditional sense. The number of women he “employs,” as well as cars, clothes, jewelry, and money validate his success.

As noted earlier, gangster pictures, such as *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*, established the city as a major convention of the genre. According to Rosow, “The sights, sounds, smells, and language of the city define the texture of the gangster film” (37). Like preceding motion pictures, *The Mack* also features a city setting; however, the film transgresses the gangster genre by shifting its locale from predominantly white or immigrant-populated locales in New York or Chicago to Oakland’s black ghetto. This space transforms the genre’s customary iconography. Clothes and cars continue to validate the gangster, but tuxedos and limousines hold little merit in this community. Instead, colorful suits, wide-brimmed hats, fur coats, and walking canes are prominent accessories, while Cadillacs replace limousines as the vehicle of status.

In addition to transforming the iconography, the predominantly black urban locale revises the genre’s most prevalent themes. In *American Film Genres*, Stuart Kaminsky describes the major issues that have permeated the genre since its emergence in the 1930s.

1930–1933: the gangster film chronicles the American Dream vs. American Reality; 1934–1938: social-political responsibility, poverty and morality; 1939–1945: the search for family, and concern for loved ones in a gang; 1946–1959: fear of loneliness; 1960–1970: questioning of accepted ideals of society and simplistic responses to violence, an evaluation of the past, the picturing of the gangster as a lone heroic figure, and 1971–present: the fear of moral and social chaos. (34)

Prior to the emergence of black gangster films, the aforementioned themes were addressed in terms of whiteness. In contrast, *The Mack* explores the struggle to achieve the American Dream, the concern for loved ones in a gang, and poverty and morality from an African American perspective. Specifically, *The Mack*'s storyline functions as a metaphor for the struggle that took place between the Black Panther Party for Self Defense and Oakland's underworld during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland in 1966 with a core membership of less than one hundred. However, in *New Day in Babylon*, William L. Van Deburg notes, "Their penchant for the dramatic soon carried their image and influence far beyond the Bay area. Chapters formed in England, France, and Israel, and in such North American locales as Des Moines, Iowa, and Halifax, Nova Scotia" (155).<sup>12</sup> The organization advocated the gun as a means of self-defense as well as a method of recruitment: "They pointed out that California law made it legal for any citizen to carry a loaded, unconcealed weapon," and each member was certified to carry a gun after taking classes in firearms conducted by the Party (Van Deburg 156).

In addition to advocating their right to carry arms, the Black Panther Party stood for community control and black self-help. They instituted a survival program that provided free breakfasts for children, free shoes and clothing, legal assistance, medical care, and screening for sickle-cell anemia. They protested the eviction of black tenants, counseled welfare recipients, and accompanied community residents as they sought redress of grievances from school or government officials (Van Deburg 160).

While the Black Panthers were trying to uplift the Oakland ghetto, the Ward brothers resorted to illegitimate means to elevate their status. They were heavily involved in drug trafficking, prostitution, and countless other illegal activities. In sum, the Ward brothers were the antithesis of the Black Panther Party, and they emerged as the nationalist organization's adversaries.

The conflict that existed between the Panthers and the Ward brothers is reflected in the relationship that Goldie shares with his brother Olinga. Specifically, Goldie represents the Ward brothers, while Max Julien modeled the Olinga character after his friend Huey P. Newton, Black Panther Party minister of defense. The first time that Olinga appears onscreen, he is delivering a speech to the black nationalist organization that he founded to rid the streets of criminals and unify the community: "We have first of all got to protect our brothers and sisters from themselves and those in the community that would rip them off. We have got to do it! We have got to stop sacrificing our sisters to the streets

and our brothers to the drugs! We have got to turn it around and start taking it from them!” (*The Mack*).

As Olinga’s speech illustrates, Goldie’s illegal activity is in direct conflict with his beliefs, and their relationship becomes more strained as the film unfolds. For example, when Goldie initially reunites with Olinga, the two are excited to see one another, and Olinga believes that Goldie will join him in his fight to save the community. However, when the two meet later, Olinga discovers that Goldie has become the very enemy that he is trying to defeat. In this scene, Goldie has established himself as a pimp, and he is taking Olinga for a ride in his new Cadillac. As they cruise through the streets of Oakland, Goldie explains that he can buy anything that he wants and that the criminals on the street are his people. Disappointed, Olinga responds, “These people on the streets are your people, huh? And here I am, young brother trying to clean up the streets, and you tell me the people on the streets are your people” (*The Mack*).

Perhaps the most powerful scene illustrating the rift between Goldie and Olinga occurs when they meet to discuss the paths that they have chosen. During this scene, Olinga tries to convince Goldie to quit pimping, explaining that the criminals must be removed from the streets to improve the community. Goldie responds that he will help him get rid of the drug dealers but explains that he will not quit pimping. His unwillingness to change forces Olinga to choose between his values and his brother. He eventually opts to continue fighting for the betterment of the neighborhood.

Despite the division that exists between Goldie and Olinga, the two ultimately end up fighting on the same side before the film concludes. After their mother’s death, Goldie and Olinga vow to avenge her. Here, *The Mack* falls back upon the black-versus-white formula that permeated blaxploitation films, when it is revealed that the two white police officers committed the murder. In a final confrontation, the two brothers settle the score, killing Hank and Jed. This is a significant call for black unity because it demonstrates how powerful two brothers as well as “brothers” can be if they fight alongside one another. In a literal sense, Goldie and Olinga defeat the racist cops, while their unification is symbolic of the Black Panthers and Oakland’s black underworld joining forces to defeat a larger, more dangerous enemy—the oppressive white establishment or “The Man.”

Following in the tradition of its blaxploitation predecessors, *The Mack* features a contemporary rhythm-and-blues soundtrack composed by recording artist Willie Hutch and released by Motown Records. The soundtrack features songs such as “The Theme from *The Mack*,” “I Choose You,” “Mother’s Theme,” and “Brother’s Gonna Work It Out,” which perfectly captures the essence of the period. The album was popular after its

release and is considered one of the finest recordings from the blaxploitation era.

*The Mack* premiered at the Roxy Theater, which was located in the black Oakland community where the film was shot. All proceeds from the event were donated to the Black Panther Party,<sup>13</sup> and the film was dedicated to Frank Ward, who was murdered shortly after the film was completed. Featuring a tagline that boasted, “Now That You’ve Seen the Rest, Make Way for the Biggest and the Best!,” *The Mack* lived up to the hype and was an instant hit with Oakland’s black community. According to Don Gordon, the audience talked to the screen throughout the film and cheered when his character, Hank, was killed (*Mackin’*). In addition, Carol Speed, who portrayed the prostitute Lulu, recalled that when the film ended people stood up and cheered, while producer Harvey Bernhard noted that the people in the balcony pulled the chairs from the floor and threw them down to the lower level to express their approval (*Mackin’*).

After entering into wider release, the box-office receipts illustrated that the Oakland community was not alone in its endorsement of *The Mack*. During its first week in release, it earned \$79,000 and was twenty-seventh on *Variety*’s list of top-grossing films. It continued to build momentum, grossing \$243,000, \$219,500, and \$319,200 in its second, third, and fourth weeks, respectively (“50 Top,” *Variety*, 4 April 1973, 15; 11 April 1973, 9; 18 April 1973, 9, respectively). *The Mack* reached its highest position on *Variety*’s list during its fifth week of release when it held the fourth spot, accumulating \$363,250 (“50 Top,” *Variety*, 25 April 1973, 10). The film eventually earned over \$3,000,000 in domestic film rentals and appeared on *Variety*’s list of top-grossing films of 1973 (“Big Rental Films of 1973” 19).

Despite profiting at the box office, *The Mack* opened to mixed critical reception. *Variety* praised the film, complimenting the director and the cast: “Michael Campus’ direction is strong and he handles the violence effectively. Julien . . . underplays his character convincingly and as the two crooked cops, Don Gordon and William C. Watson, are slickly cast” (18). *Los Angeles Times* critic Kevin Thomas also praised the film:

“The Mack” . . . is a lot more realistic and a lot less sensational than most black action pictures. But then, according to its director Michael Campus, its writer Robert J. Poole actually was a pimp and every incident in the film really happened. It’s easy to believe Campus because the film has a ring of authenticity to it. It’s an honest, well-acted, effort of considerable insight, pertinent yet entertaining and neither preachy nor exploitive. *The Mack* possesses both a pulsating vitality, underlined by Willie Hutch’s dynamic score, and keen sense of tragedy. (“Ring” 4.20)

Richard Thomas, a member of the board of Pittsburgh’s branch of the NAACP, also endorsed the production: “‘The Mack’ is an outstanding movie filled with truth and realism about black street life. I urge every black person, young and old, to see it” (qtd. in “‘The Mack’ Makes It Big” 18).

In contrast, *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby blasted the film: “*The Mack* is a very noisy, very exploitative black film. . . . The film is inept, so confused it seems surreal. Plot elements bump into one another like air bubbles in a mostly empty stomach. . . . Michael Campus directed the film in a manner that suggests that much of the time he must have sat in his canvas chair, afraid to look” (“The Mack” 51.3).

While the *Chicago Defender* did not formally review *The Mack*, the paper criticized the film in a short article, titled “The Mack Makes It Big.” The editorial reports the film’s high grosses but concludes by calling *The Mack* a “disgusting movie” (18). Another black newspaper held similar sentiment about the film, singling out and attacking Max Julien. The newspaper expressed disappointment about his participation in the film because it did not seem to correspond with his political views. Julien responded to the critique, comparing *The Mack* to other popular gangster pictures: “Have you ever heard anyone come out and say that *The Godfather* should never have been done? Never. If Max Julien and Ron O’Neal had of starred in *The Sting* it would have been called blaxploitation. Because of the dichotomy that exists in politics and in the world period—we can’t do what our white counterparts can do” (*Mackin’*).

Although *The Mack* was a controversial film, its inclusion of blackness and a novel criminal element represents a significant revision to the gangster genre. Additionally, the film continued to demonstrate that black audiences would support black themed films and paved the way for ensuing blaxploitation pictures such as *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), *Hell Up in Harlem* (1973), *Black Belt Jones* (1974), and *Friday Foster* (1975).

Moreover, *The Mack*’s influence is still visible in the entertainment industry today. In music, performers, such as Nelly and Outkast, have paid homage to the film by adopting the characters’ style of dress and including references to the film in their song lyrics.<sup>14</sup> *The Mack* has also been influential in film and television. For example, the popular television series “Martin” (1992–1997) dedicated an episode titled “All the Players Came” to the blaxploitation era and recreated the Players Ball that takes place in *The Mack*. Finally, films such as *New Jack City* (1991), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), *Juice* (1992), *Menace to Society* (1993), *Original Gangstas* (1996) *How to Be a Player* (1997), *Shaft* (2000), *Four Brothers* (2005), and a host of others, contain themes similar to those depicted in *The Mack* as well as other blaxploitation films.



## Chapter Four

# “6 feet 2” and All of It Dynamite!”

## *Cleopatra Jones* and the Cop Action Genre

In *Films by Genre*, Daniel Lopez defines the action movie as “a film in which the action predominates and becomes the main concern in the picture’s composition,” emphasizing “car chases, crashes, explosions, gun-play, and violent fights” (4). These characteristics have appeared across varying genres for years. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is a Western dictated by action; *The Dirty Dozen* is a war film that stresses similar conventions (Lopez 4).

While the aforementioned films illustrate that multiple genres emphasize action, cop action films create a genus of their own. In *Heroes in Hard Times*, Neal King explains that these films often feature a police officer intent upon protecting and serving while giving little regard to the rules of his or her profession (4). The cop movies center on themes, such as delinquency among children, the sale of drugs to children and the poor, violent crime in general, control of that crime by police, corruption among ruling-class men, and conspiracy theories of economic crisis (4).

According to Stuart M. Kaminsky, cop action stories originated in the early works of fiction writers, such as Emile Gabouri and Edgar Allen Poe (108). However, the genre emerged late in the motion picture industry. It was not until the release of Peter Yates’s *Bullitt* (1968) that the conventions of the cop action film began to crystallize. *Bullitt* features Steve McQueen as the title character, a police lieutenant assigned to protect a government witness scheduled to testify against a national crime syndicate. The informer is hidden in a motel and guarded by Bullitt’s aides, but killers break inside, wounding the cop on duty and killing the witness. To give himself time to investigate and draw the killers back to complete their unfinished business, Bullitt orders the body kept in the morgue under a “John Doe” tag, later telling his superiors that he is holding the still-alive informer incognito. He has no real leads on the case until the body of a murdered woman is found

in a motel. Bullitt and his partner who investigate this crime find luggage, which tells them that the murdered informer is not the real witness but a plant paid to impersonate the syndicate informer. Meanwhile, the real informant is fleeing the country with millions of dollars stolen from syndicate offices in Chicago. The film concludes as Bullitt tracks the man to the airport where he eventually kills him during a climactic confrontation (Nash and Jay 316).

*Bullitt* solidified many of the conventions and themes that would come to define the cop action genre. Kaminsky characterizes the genre’s heroes:

The protagonist is often a male who finds himself alone and in need of defining himself, or proving himself, through an act or acts of violence; The protagonist, as in most adventure tales, may be in his position out of choice or by chance, but when the physical challenge comes, he not only accepts it, but welcomes it; The protagonist . . . must learn to exist without love as long as he is committed to his action of protective violence. Sex, if it exists at all—and it frequently does not for the protagonist in any normal way—is rapid, informal, and uninvolved. (111)

Additionally, Neal King views the cop action films as a mix of elements:

Whether in law enforcement or civilian work, heroes protect people from harm. They face combinations of threats to their happiness: alienation from employees, estrangement from loved ones, and violence from criminals. Heroes join forces with fellow employees or bystanders (sidekicks) who give support. By the conclusions of these stories, many heroes have bettered their lives—reconciled with intimates, forged bonds with sidekicks, massacred enemies, or earned reprieve from communities they have saved. (2)

Thus, Bullitt represents the quintessential action hero. He is a white male who prefers to work alone. In addition, he pays little regard to his superiors or the law of his profession in his attempt to capture villains. This is exemplified by the manner that Bullitt does his job. He lies to his employers in order to destroy the syndicate and is quick to resort to physical, violent, or dangerous action in his pursuit of criminals. This lawlessness became a staple of the genre’s ensuing protagonists.

Cop action films have flourished since their emergence as a viable form of entertainment and box-office revenue. *The French Connection* (1971) and *Dirty Harry* (1971) serve as examples of the genre’s classic works,

while the *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984–1994), *Lethal Weapon* (1987–1998), and *Die Hard* (1989–2007) series, *Speed* (1994), *Bad Boys* (1995), and *Hollywood Homicide* (2003) are also notable films. While the cop action film has been a staple of Hollywood for many years, black representation within the genre has been limited. When the films began to flourish in the 1970s, blacks were almost completely omitted, as white male performers, such as Steve McQueen, Gene Hackman, and Clint Eastwood, dominated the form.

This chapter provides a brief overview of black female representation in motion pictures and examines *Coffy* (1973) as an antecedent to *Cleopatra Jones*. The remainder of the chapter focuses on how *Jones* rewrites the cop action genre by replacing the white hero with a black heroine. The film also contains a black-oriented plot theme and a white female villain that both function as significant revisions to the cop action film.

In “The Politics of Sexual Stereotypes,” Mae King writes that representations of black women historically revolved around four central figures: the matriarchal figure or mammy, the comical domestic servant, the tragic mulatto, and the sex object (13). Of all these types, none has circumscribed black femininity more than the matriarchal figure. In *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, K. Sue Jewell describes the mammy as “the antithesis of the American conception of womanhood” (39). For example, the caricature is typically a big, fat, cantankerous woman. More often than not, she has very dark skin and wears oversized dresses, which are topped off by the handkerchief that she wears on her head (Bogle, *Toms* 9). Furthermore, the mammy is asexual, and her only goal is happily serving her white surrogate family.

According to Bogle, “the mammy made her screen debut around 1914 when audiences were treated to a blackface version of the *Lysistrata*” (*Toms* 9). The comedy, *Coon Town Suffragettes*, tells the story of a group of bossy mammy washerwomen who organize a movement to keep their lazy husbands at home (*Toms* 9). The women’s militant and feisty nature served as the model that ensuing black actresses followed when portraying the matriarchal figure in classic Hollywood films, such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *Imitation of Life* (1934). While the archetype was popularized in the aforementioned classic motion pictures, contemporary films like *Big Momma’s House* (2000), *The Ladykillers* (2004), and *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) illustrate that mammy is indeed still alive and well.

In stark contrast to the matriarch is the comical domestic servant, which is a member of Bogle’s coon triumvirate.<sup>1</sup> This group features characters that “emerged as . . . lazy, crazy, subhuman creatures good for

nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language" (*Toms* 8). While black males were more commonly relegated to this type, Butterfly McQueen's portrayal of Prissy in *Gone with the Wind* embodies the caricature. Specifically, Prissy has a high voice and is rarely seen doing work. At one point in the film, she boasts about her ability to deliver children but eventually shrieks the famous line, "I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies!" when Melanie (Olivia de Havilland) goes into labor. For all intents and purposes, Prissy is indeed a worthless coon.

Black women depicted as the tragic mulatto perpetuated cultural myths about the dangers of miscegenation. The term "mulatto" has been used to describe the offspring of a horse and a mule, and it easily crossed over to describe people of biracial ethnicity who are perceived as "tragic" because of their mixed blood. In motion pictures, the characters are typically depicted sympathetically, and audiences are led to believe that their lives would have been better were it not for the black blood coursing through their veins. The most prevalent examples of the tragic mulatto appear in both the original and the remake of *Imitation of Life* (1934, 1958) as well as the social problem film *Pinky* (1949).

Although progressive in many ways, blaxploitation films often portrayed women as sex objects. Significantly, Bogle asserts: "Very few [blaxploitation] films attempted to explore a black woman's tensions or aspirations or to examine the dynamics of sexual politics within the black community" (*Toms* 252). Instead, females often emerged as sex toys for the films' protagonists. In "Brother Caring for Brother," Mary E. Mebane notes, "*Shafts Big Score* (1972) actually opened on an explicit bedroom scene," while "*Black Caesar* (1973) included a scene in which a black woman was beaten and sexually assaulted by the title character" (11.13.6). *Super Fly* depicts women in a similar light. Youngblood Priest has both a white girlfriend and a black girlfriend whom he often treats with contempt. While his black love interest is significant to the film's conclusion, her most lengthy appearance is in an explicit sex scene between her and Priest.

The films featuring black action heroines either challenge or work in direct opposition to the traditional portrayals of black women. Several of the movies depict African American women as strong, three-dimensional characters who exercise a great deal of agency as they fight the establishment on their terms.

*Coffy* was among the first blaxploitation films to depict a black heroine. The film emerged as a direct result of *Cleopatra Jones*. Specifically, Max Julien wrote a script centering on a female crime fighter named Cleopatra Jones, whom he conceived of as "a new and different kind of image of the

black woman for the screen” (“Cleopatra Jones’ Stars” 14). He gave the script to producer William Tennant, who shopped it around Hollywood until he reached a verbal agreement with AIP’s head of production, Larry Gordon. However, familiar with AIP’s low-budget style of filmmaking, Tennant reneged on the deal when Warner Bros. offered him a larger amount of money to develop the project (Martinez et al. 137–38). Gordon was so upset with Tennant that he set out to scoop *Jones* by making his own action film featuring a black female protagonist. Instead of telling the story of a law-abiding heroine, he decided that AIP’s film would focus on a black female vigilante. Gordon hired Jack Hill to develop his idea and direct the project, which was eventually titled *Coffy*.

*Coffy* stars Pam Grier, who emerged as the blaxploitation movement’s most notable female star.<sup>2</sup> Prior to appearing in films, Grier worked as a switchboard operator for AIP, which she parlayed into a career in motion pictures. Grier auditioned and gradually won supporting roles in AIP productions such as *The Big Doll House* (1971) and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1971) (Bogle, *Blacks* 398). She made the transition to leading lady in *The Big Bird Cage* (1972) and found herself playing one of the industry’s first action heroines in *Coffy*.

*Coffy* is the story of the title character, who works as a nurse by day and seeks revenge upon drug dealers by night. The film opens with Coffy murdering the small-time pusher responsible for turning her eleven-year-old sister into a heroine addict. The next day, Coffy’s childhood friend Carter Brown (William Elliott), an honest policeman, is badly beaten when he threatens to expose his partner for corruption. With information that Brown had previously given her, Coffy poses as a call girl and infiltrates a drug-and-prostitution ring headed by the people responsible for injuring him. The remainder of the film follows Coffy as she exacts revenge upon those responsible for hurting Brown and for pushing drugs into her community.

Although *Coffy* presented a strong female lead, it is important to note that the film is an AIP production. With that said, the movie contains many of the titillating elements of the company’s previous exploitation fare, such as *The Big Doll House* (1971), *Women in Cages*, (1971), and *Black Mama, White Mama* (1972). Thus, Coffy’s position as an action heroine is complicated by her construction as a sexual object. In her quest for revenge, Coffy works as a prostitute and twice uses seduction to escape danger, much like Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweetback*.<sup>3</sup> In the film’s opening sequence, Coffy kills a drug dealer by seducing him and employs the technique again to escape from a group of henchmen who have orders to murder her.

Critics did not appreciate *Coffy*'s explicit sexual content or the film. A. H. Weiler of the *New York Times* wrote, "Despite a good deal of lip service against the evils of drugs and the like, there's a maximum of footage devoted to exposing Miss Grier" ("*Coffy*" 13:3). Maurice Peterson of *Essence* blasted *Coffy*: "By now trash has begotten so much more trash that, more than ever before, the thinking brother and sister have to be selective about movie going. . . . Movies can offer something a little more subtle and a lot more elegant than this shoot 'em up pulp" (qtd. in Parish and Hill 101).

Despite negative criticism, *Coffy* generated a great deal of box office revenue, bringing in \$85,000 its first week of release and landing twentieth on *Variety*'s list of top films ("50 Top," *Variety*, 23 May 1973: 9). *Coffy* earned an additional \$116,750 in its second week and \$226,250 the following week ("50 Top," *Variety*, 30 May 1973: 9). By week five, *Coffy* was number eight on *Variety*'s top list and earned an additional \$191,405 ("50 Top," *Variety*, 20 June 1973: 10). The film continued its successful run and eventually earned over \$6 million in domestic film rentals. It was also sixty-eighth on *Variety*'s list of big rental films of 1973 (19).

While *Coffy* demonstrated that a film featuring a black action heroine could indeed make a profit, it was released just three weeks prior to *Cleopatra Jones*. Warner Bros. had little indication of how their black female protagonist would fair at the box office. With that in mind, the studio spent more on production, advertising, and publicity than AIP in the attempt to ensure the success of *Jones* (Martinez et al. 138).

*Cleopatra Jones* was directed by Jack Starrett, whose previous work included *Nam's Angels* (1970) and the successful Jim Brown action vehicle *Slaughter* (1972). As a part of Warner Bros.'s affirmative-action efforts, *Jones* employed a multiethnic crew of African American women and men: "three black women—Ann Wasslington, Cheryl Kearney, and Bertha Brock—filled key positions as hairdresser, set decorator, and wardrobe assistant, respectively" ("Black Craftsmen" 19). Paul Williams helped supply craft services, and Walter McCovey worked as an electrician (19). Finally, the film's stunts were coordinated by Ernest Robinson and performed by the Black Stuntmen's Association (Parish and Hill 96).

Max Julien developed the Cleopatra Jones character for his girlfriend, Vonetta McGee, who had appeared in successful blaxploitation pictures, such as *Melinda* (1972) and *Blacula*. However, Warner Bros. opted to cast a different actress as the lead and conducted a national search, auditioning over twenty-five hundred potential candidates in New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Atlanta, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles ("Cleopatra Jones: Tamara" 49). The field was narrowed to twelve finalists

before casting agents finally selected the statuesque, six-foot-two-inch Tamara Dobson to play the title character. Dobson had worked as a fashion model, appearing in twenty-five television commercials and magazine photo spreads in *Vogue*, *Ebony*, *Harper's*, and *Essence* ("Cleopatra Jones: Tamara" 50). Her only film credits were small roles in *Come Back, Charleston Blue* (1972) and *Fuzz* (1972) (Bogle, *Blacks* 385).

*Jones* also features football-player-turned-actor Bernie Casey as Jones's love interest, Reuben Masters. Antonio Fargas portrays an up-and-coming drug dealer named Doodlebug; among the other actors are Brenda Sykes as Tiffany, Dan Frazer as Detective Lou Crawford, and Bill McKinney as Officer Purdy. Finally, Academy Award winner Shelley Winters appears as the evil villainess, Mommy.<sup>4</sup>

*Cleopatra Jones* chronicles an international police agent working for an undisclosed government organization. The film opens in Turkey as Jones oversees the destruction of a thirty-million-dollar poppy field belonging to Mommy, one of Los Angeles's most notorious drug dealers. Upon learning about the field's annihilation, Mommy arranges for crooked policeman, Officer Purdy, to raid the B & S House, a halfway home for recovering drug addicts run by Reuben Masters. This brings Jones back to L.A. where she seeks out the corrupt police officers responsible for the raid and destroys Mommy's underworld organization.

The appearance of a black female protagonist in a cop action film represents a significant revision to the genre. As previously noted, white males portrayed the heroic protagonists in cop films, and significant black male or female representation was limited. As Neal King asserts, "The genre gives space to those not white and male, to be sure, and sends some of them through some of the same hoops; but in the end it seems to meditate more on white manhood than anything else" (65). *Cleopatra Jones* replaces the traditional white male action hero with a powerful and assertive black heroine. She is different than her predecessors because she works as an officer of a secret government organization; Bullitt and Dirty Harry Callahan work for local police precincts. The main distinction that her position as a government officer affords her is widespread influence, and at one point in the film she boasts, "My jurisdiction extends from Ankara, Turkey to Watts Tower" (*Cleopatra Jones*). This authority affords Jones more power than her white male antecedents who are at times limited by jurisdiction.

Like her predecessors, Jones fights to end drug trafficking and police corruption, which are two of the action film's most prevalent themes. However, her fight is directly related to improving the black community rather than reaffirming the dominant ideology's cultural values. Therefore, Jones struggles to rid the black community of drugs and expose the corruption

that exists in the Los Angeles Police Department as a result of racial bigotry.

Like the detectives in *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Jones must contend with blacks who do not fully trust her because she works for the establishment. This conflict is depicted in a scene in which she visits the B & S House after the police have raided it. Upon arriving, Jones is immediately confronted by an angry woman who clearly feels that she has forgotten her roots.

WOMAN (stopping Jones as she walks past): Cleopatra Jones?

CLEOPATRA: That’s right.

WOMAN: Somebody told me that you used to live around the corner.

CLEOPATRA: I did.

WOMAN: You a little late for the party, ain’t ya? How come you ain’t out here with the rest of us? Or don’t you know what’s goin’ on out there in the streets? (*Cleopatra Jones*)

In addition to facing resistance from the community, Jones battles racial intolerance from within the establishment. One of her minor adversaries is a bigoted police officer named Purdy. His disdain for blacks is established at the raid on the B & S House, where he uses excessive force on the occupants and attempts to shoot a recovering addict in the back when he tries to escape. Jones resolves the conflict when she arrests Purdy for selling weapons illegally. Before he is taken to jail, she asks him who was responsible for the raid on the B & S House. Purdy responds, “I wouldn’t lift a finger to help you or any of your kind.” Here the conflict is not merely good versus bad but also white versus black.

Jones’s appearance as an action heroine coincides with the Women’s Liberation Movement, which reemerged in the 1960s, challenging traditional sexual politics governed by the binary opposition men/superior, women/inferior. In *America Divided*, Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin write that Betty Friedan played a major role in the revival of the movement. In the 1950s, Friedan, a graduate of Smith College, retired from a ten-year career as a labor journalist to focus on raising her three children. She continued to free-lance as a writer, contributing to women’s magazines. At the end of the decade, on the occasion of the fifteenth reunion of her graduating class, Friedan conducted a survey of her classmates, measuring how they felt about their life’s achievements (Isserman and Kazin 122). Nearly 90 percent of the respondents were housewives, and many expressed dissatisfaction at



their failure to better use their education. After compiling the survey results, Friedan argued that the women's unhappiness stemmed from the unequal relations of men and women in American society (Isserman and Kazin 122). She began writing about these issues for women's magazines and presented her conclusions in a book titled *The Feminist Mystique* (1963).

According to Daniel Horowitz, Friedan's text asserted that "a sexual counterrevolution" had taken place in the 1950s, "a moratorium during which many millions of women put themselves on ice and stopped growing" (217). Hence, "they accepted the notion—or 'mystique'—that the true glory of womanhood lay in the role of wife and mother, and nowhere else" (Isserman and Kazin 122–23). Friedan argued that the solution to this problem was in the re-creation of mutually enhanced lives of men and women in a new world of sexual equality (qtd. in Isserman and Kazin 123): "Who knows of the possibilities of love when men and women share not only children, home, and garden, not only the fulfillment of their biological roles, but the responsibilities and passions of the work that creates the human future and the full human knowledge of who they are?" (Friedan 378).

While many people scoffed at Friedan's idea of women's rights, public-opinion polls demonstrated that most women and many men embraced the "second wave" of American feminism. The movement sought "equal pay for equal work, equal responsibility of men and women for housework and child rearing, an end to domestic violence, an end to the 'glass ceiling' that kept women out of managerial positions, and an end to sexual harassment in the work place." Significantly, "the movement for women's rights in the 1960s realized many of its goals with astonishing rapidity" (Isserman and Kazin 122).

The emergence of a black female action heroine is an indication that the motion picture industry was also making important strides toward gender equality. Jones is depicted as a strong woman who is more adept at hand-to-hand combat, gunplay, and driving than Mommy's best henchmen. For example, when she is ambushed by several of Mommy's thugs in the airport as she returns from Turkey, Jones defeats them using her martial arts training. Furthermore, when a gunman opens fire on her as she is leaving the B & S House, she calmly avoids the barrage of gunfire, retrieves a weapon from her Corvette, and eventually kills the shooter. Finally, Jones further demonstrates her capabilities as she is pursued by several of Mommy's henchmen in a car. Although not as epic, the sequence is reminiscent of the pursuit in *Bullitt* when the title character pursues hoodlums through the streets of San Francisco. In this scene, Jones races through the streets of L.A. in her Corvette, evading capture and methodically outdriving the men.

These sequences, as well as others, validate Jones's strength, which is so impressive that it prompts Detective Crawford to jokingly question his own masculinity. When Jones firmly refuses to accept his assistance in her investigation, he asks his partner, "Do you ever have feelings of inadequacy?" (*Cleopatra Jones*).

Although Cleopatra Jones is a physically capable heroine, the character is not masculinized. Screenwriter Max Julien noted: "She neither suffers indignities in silence nor does she put up a monumental struggle merely to survive. She fights with all of the tools available to every man in a battle against an evil that afflicts the black ghettos and yet she remains entirely feminine while doing it" ("Cleopatra Jones' Stars" 14). This is reflected in Jones's wardrobe, which was directly influenced by Tamara Dobson's career as a model. The actress requested that fashion mogul Giorgio di Sant'Angelo design her character's attire (Lucas, "Super" 43). Thus, gone are the days of oversized mammy dresses. Instead, Jones dons an array of costumes that includes fur coats, eccentric blouses, and an assortment of different jewelry. She also wears turbans and sports several different hairstyles throughout the film. In 1970s America, she is living proof that black is beautiful.

Cleopatra Jones also emerges as a sexually liberated character. As previously mentioned, sex for the action hero is "rapid, informal, and uninvolved" (Kaminsky 111). Jones contradicts this convention, challenging previous constructions of black females as asexual or mere erotic objects. She and Reuben are depicted in a love scene that is slow, personal, and involved. Dobson took a level of pride in the inexplicit, yet sensual nature of the scene, using it as a platform to criticize *Coffy*'s more overt displays of sexuality. Dobson contrasts the two heroines: "The only similarity between the characters Coffy and Cleopatra Jones is that Coffy is a woman and so am I. The difference is that Cleo is a lady, and ladies are always sexy and well-groomed. Ladies don't have to take anything off to excite anyone" (Horton 150). Significantly, Mebane also viewed the scene as well as the film as a breakthrough: "*Cleopatra Jones* portrays relationships between black men and women as supporting and lasting" (8). Indeed, Jones and Masters's relationship is a rare and important representation of black intimacy.

In "From Mammies to Action Heroines," Yvonne Denise Sims writes that black heroines, such as Cleopatra Jones, "represented empowerment, liberation, and an opportunity to have agency" (15). Ironically, Tamara Dobson did not view Jones as an advocate for women's liberation. In an interview with Judy Klemesrud of the *New York Times*, Dobson stated: "I don't believe in that for black people. We're trying to free our men. I

believe in equal pay, but the rest just doesn't involve me. I don't want to talk about it, because I don't think of Cleopatra Jones as being a women's libber. I see her as a very positive, strong lady who knows what she has to do" (11).

Dobson's response illustrates a common sentiment among black females regarding the women's movement. In *Disfigured Images*, Patricia Morton explains, "Feminism has been very suspect from some Afro-American perspectives. Often seen as a white woman's movement, some have seen it as anti-black" (114). Nathan Hare supports Morton's assertion and describes women's liberation as a self-serving, white woman's movement that "sought to exploit the spirit, the metaphor, and the rhetoric of the black movement" (16). Moreover, he notes, the feminists' demand for equal employment opportunities for women was at the expense of the black man's opportunity "to prevail and compete in a perpetually patriarchal society" (18). Dobson's dismissal of feminist politics in favor of a commitment to freeing black men is in line with components of Hare's views. Still, Cleopatra Jones is an empowered, black female who contradicts the stereotypes that historically circumscribed black femininity.

While this chapter focuses on the manner in which blackness manifests itself as a revision to the cop action genre, it is necessary to discuss Shelley Winters's role as the white villainess, Mommy. Prior to *Jones*, white women had portrayed the role of the antagonistic femme fatale in noir films. In *Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark Mirror*, Bruce Crowther writes that the femme fatale "was calculating, manipulative, cruel and she used her sexual attractions blatantly" (115). Performers like Mary Astor, Barbara Stanwyck, and Gloria Swanson popularized the character type in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), respectively.

In addition to the noir femme fatales, Faye Dunaway, a gangster in *Bonnie and Clyde*, portrays Bonnie Parker in one of the earliest depictions of a gun-toting female criminal. She plays an equal role in the armed robberies, and like her male counterparts, Parker meets her brutal demise at the conclusion of the film.

While white women had previously appeared as villains, their characters existed in predominantly white worlds where black femininity posed no threat. The appearances of black actresses (if they are present at all) in the aforementioned movies are not significant to the film's diegesis, and the white female villains, while flawed, remain so in the presence of other whites. As Patricia Morton contends, the absence of blackness liberates the white woman from Southern mythology, which constructed her as "delicate, pure, and devoted above all to her family" (8). This mythology is

prevalent in Hollywood films such as *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Imitation of Life* (1958), which present significant interaction between black domestics and beautiful white performers, Lillian Gish, Vivian Leigh, and Lana Turner, respectively. In "Black Women in Film," Edward Mapp describes the parade of jolly and warm screen mammies as "huge, tough, and masculinized enough to emphasize the ultra-femininity of the white female stars" (42).

Mommy cuts against traditional representations of black and white females. Instead of representing the "norm" that black women were traditionally constructed against, Mommy is constructed in direct opposition to the black heroine. While Cleopatra Jones is tall, thin, and attractive, Mommy fails to fulfill mainstream conventions of beauty, because she is loud, short, and overweight. Additionally, as her name suggests, she assumes the role of the matriarchal figure; however, instead of acting as the servant, Mommy employs several white men whom she constantly scolds for their incompetence. In contrast to the asexual mammy, Mommy is presented as a sexually charged lesbian whose behavior toward women perpetuates gay stereotypes. For example, Mommy is preoccupied with sex and is often distracted from chastising her employees by her assortment of scantily clad girlfriends who temporarily sooth her nerves. She is often shown fondling her female companions' rear ends while telling them, "You're the only one around here who understands Mommy." Thus, while *Jones* empowers women and uplifts blacks, it is hindered by its unnecessary subjugation of gays and lesbians.

*Cleopatra Jones* is not overtly political; however, in *Mackin' Ain't Easy*, Max Julien explains, "The film was originally conceived as a serious anti-drug film." With that in mind, the movie denounces the perils of drugs while introducing the theme of black unity into the cop action genre. Mebane notes that the motion picture contains "the story of black people helping each other in many ways" (6). Significantly, Jones is overseas fighting the war on drugs until Mommy orchestrates the raid on the B & S House in the attempt to close it down. Upon hearing about the raid, Jones immediately returns to L.A. to ensure that black people who have fallen into drug addiction will still have a place to go for assistance. In discussing her character, Tamara Dobson said, "She's defending an important freedom for her people: the freedom to exist without drugs" (Klemesrud 11).

The best example of the significance of black community is depicted in the film's climax, which occurs in a junkyard. Jones has been captured by Mommy and is about to meet her demise in an automobile compactor. However, Mommy's plan is thwarted when Jones's friends from the B & S House arrive and free her from the trap. As Jones pursues and eventually

kills Mommy, members of the neighborhood simultaneously take action, fighting her henchman and assuring that none of them escape. The film concludes with Jones standing alongside Reuben and the members of the community in front of the B & S House celebrating their victory.

*Cleopatra Jones* follows the trend established by its blaxploitation predecessors and introduces a rhythm-and-blues soundtrack into the cop action genre, replacing the conventional instrumental scores. J. J. Johnson composed the *Jones* soundtrack, which features Joe Simon singing "Theme from Cleopatra Jones" and Millie Jackson providing the vocals for "Love Doctor" and "It Hurts So Good" (Parish and Hill 96). Additionally, rhythm-and-blues instrumentals echoing the sound employed by Isaac Hayes in the *Shaft* soundtrack accompany the film's action sequences. "Goin' to the Chase," "Wrecking Yard," and "Go Chase Cleo" are among the most notable titles. The music perfectly articulates the period and serves as an authentic accompaniment to the filmic image. The soundtrack was successful after its release, selling well over 500,000 copies (Parish and Hill 96).

*Cleopatra Jones* opened to favorable critical reception. The film, which included a marketing campaign with taglines boasting, "She's ten miles of bad road for every hood in town" and "6 feet 2" and all of it dynamite," did not disappoint critics. For example, Janette C. Tolbert of *Encore* magazine proclaimed, "This thrilling and sometimes funny movie will have you on the edge of your seat, jabbing your neighbor in the ribs, and yelling, Right on, Cleo! Do it, mama!" (qtd. in Parish and Hill 96). *Variety's* review stated: "Tamara Dobson makes a smart feature film starring debut. . . . The film provides a regular flow of rough and tumble, utilizing some rare-to-film, L.A. location areas, thereby adding more freshness to the 89-minute film" ("Cleopatra Jones" 4 July 1973: 18). Moreover, *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kevin Thomas also raved about *Jones* calling it "an exceptionally well-made black action picture. . . . From start to finish this fast-moving Warner's release is shrewdly calculated and affirms the gifts of its director Jack in bringing style and meaning to the exploitation picture. In her first starring role Miss Dobson more than makes up for her lack of acting experience by her dazzling looks, sultry personality, and unwavering poise" (IV:11).

In addition to receiving positive reviews, *Jones* enjoyed success at the box office. The film grossed \$110,000 in its first week of release and appeared twenty-third on *Variety's* list of top films ("50 Top," *Variety*, 18 July 1973: 11). It earned \$71,000 the second week, and collected \$524,300 for week four, taking spot five on *Variety's* list of top films ("50 Top," *Variety*, 18 July 1973: 11; 25 July 1973: 9; and 1 Aug. 1973: 11, respectively). Week 5 saw *Jones* coming in second on *Variety's* list with a gross of \$444,000 ("50 Top,"

*Variety* 8 Aug. 1973: 11). The film eventually made over \$8 million and was forty-third on *Variety*'s 1973 list of big rental films (19).

Both Grier's and Dobson's emergence as action heroines created a greater demand for black actresses during the blaxploitation movement. In “The Battle Among the Beauties,” Horton describes the evolution:

In recent times the typical woman's role in black films has been a fairly predictable one: she's involved in a bedroom scene right at the beginning; she's making love with her man; his telephone rings. Right away, he has to get on the case. She asks him to stay, but no, he's got man's work to do—somewhere else. The woman then has little to do until the end of the movie when she welcomes her man, the hero, back home. . . . In almost total disregard for black women, such films for the most part have shunned realistic images in favor of stereotypes. But new variations of old themes have seen women thrust into increasingly larger roles, and the magic formula reversed in some instances to give us the woman as hero or super-hero. (144)

The female performer's emergence as an action heroine created a fierce competition among black actresses, including Gloria Hendry, Rosalind Cash, Sheila Frazier, Judy Pace, and Brenda Sykes, who gained more exposure in supporting roles that cut against the aforementioned blaxploitation formula (Horton 144). Additionally, Jeannie Bell played the lead role of action heroine in the poorly received film *T. N. T. Jackson*.

While the abovementioned stars appeared in a variety of films, it was Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson who remained the most popular female stars of the blaxploitation movement. Grier followed *Coffy* with *Foxy Brown* (1974), which was very similar in theme and tone.<sup>5</sup> She also starred in ‘*Sheba, Baby*’ (1975) and *Friday Foster* (1975), both of which marked the appearance of a less sexual and more domesticated Pam Grier, who was attempting to distance herself from roles that relied upon her sexuality rather than her acting skills. While her later blaxploitation films did not fair well at the box office, Grier remains proud about her work from the 1970s:

[My films] reflected the black community through language and music. We basically documented what was going on . . . musically, religiously, and politically. I appreciate that happening now because now we can look back and see what we were about, and what we were saying. In the '70s we reaped the rewards of the '50s and '60s. . . . It was a time of freedom and women saying that they needed empowerment. There was more empowerment and self-discovery than any other decade than I can

remember. All across the country, a lot of women were Foxy Brown and Coffy. . . . I just happened to be the first one that these filmmakers—Roger Corman, Jack Hill, Sam Arkoff, and AIP, found to portray that image. (Martinez et al. 53)

Tamara Dobson also continued to contribute to the surge of empowered female characters. She reprised her role in the *Jones* sequel, *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975), which was co-produced by Warner Bros. and the Hong Kong studio Run Run Shaw (Parish and Hill 98). Dobson's costars included Ni Tien (Tanny) and Stella Stevens, who plays the villainess, the Dragon Lady. Finally, Albert Popwell and Caro Kenyatta also reprise their roles as Matthew Johnson and Melvin Johnson. While *Gold* features recognizable characters in front of the camera, director Jack Starrett was replaced by Charles Bail, who had worked as both an actor and stuntman in the television series "Gunsmoke" (1955–1975), "The Big Valley" (1965–1969), and in the movies *The Green Berets* (1968) and *Werewolves on Wheels* (1971).

*Gold* depicts Jones traveling to Hong Kong to free government agents Matthew Johnson and Melvin Johnson, who have been captured by the Dragon Lady. Jones rejects police help but teams with private investigator Tanny, who helps her in her mission. Their search for clues regarding the Johnson brothers, leads them to the Dragon Lady's casino, which serves as a front for her illegal drug activities. Jones and Tanny eventually raid the casino and overcome several of the Dragon Lady's henchmen. In the film's final climactic scene, Jones and the villainess square off in a fight to the death in which the antagonist is killed.

While *Gold* attempts to incorporate elements of community into the narrative by using the Johnson brothers as Jones's motive to travel overseas, the film failed to successfully capture the feel of the original. In *Black Action Films*, Parish and Hill largely attribute *Gold's* shortcomings to the Hong Kong setting; the Jones character "seems at a loss. . . . In the original film *Cleopatra* is in her true element bringing law and order to the streets of her black community in Los Angeles, but in *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* she is a stranger in a strange land. . . . She must rely on female partner, Mi Ling, and her tactical squad to help out" (98).

Advertised as "6'2" of Dynamite Caught in a Web of International Intrigue," *Gold* failed to live up to the hype, opening to poor reviews after its release. Verina Glaesner of the *Monthly Film Bulletin* stated, "With little to do between shoot-outs and bouts of martial-arts action, the title character is effectively reduced to a joke" (218). Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* complained, "Miss Dobson is a large beautiful overwhelming presence whose real sexuality is denied by her movie costumes that seem to have been

designed for a female impersonator" ("Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold" 16.4). In addition to garnering negative reviews, *Gold* failed to produce at the box office, which effectively ended the franchise, dashing Dobson's hope of reprising her role in at least four more *Cleopatra Jones* films (Murphy 23).<sup>6</sup> Released two years after the original, the film also demonstrated that the interest in blaxploitation movies had declined.

Despite *Gold's* shortcomings, the Cleopatra Jones character effectively revised the cop action film and advanced the black female image in motion pictures. "For the first time, action storylines centered on black females and the characters marked the transformation of the liberated woman that was later appropriated by the dominant culture" (Sims 105). This appropriation occurred with astonishing rapidity as the action heroine migrated to mainstream network television where black actress Teresa Graves starred as an undercover police detective in the made-for-TV film *Get Christy Love* (1974) and in the short-lived weekly series with the same title. Soon, white actresses began to fill the role of assertive crime fighters in shows like "Police Woman" (1974–1978), which featured Angie Dickinson as police detective Sgt. Pepper Anderson. Viewers were introduced to three capable female protagonists in Aaron Spelling's "Charlie's Angels" (1976–1981). During the show's five-year run, it underwent several casting changes and featured performers including Farrah Fawcett, Kate Jackson, Jaclyn Smith, Cheryl Ladd, Shelly Hack, and Tanya Roberts as members of a trio of private detectives.

In "Here Come the Killer Dames," Molly Haskell notes, "Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson managed to become stars without the benefit of studio promotional machinery, by playing the kinds of roles no white woman ever played" (46). Unfortunately, the emergence of white action heroines in the abovementioned TV shows phased black actresses out of the roles that they once effectively occupied. Ensuing film series like *Alien* (1979–1997) and *The Terminator* (1984–2003) depict white females as either the heroines or the villains. A plethora of films and television series including: *V. I. Warshawski* (1991), *Thelma and Louise* (1991) *Strange Days* (1995), *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *Eye for an Eye* (1996), *Set It Off* (1996), *Charlie's Angels* (2000), *Die Another Day* (2002), *Kill Bill* (2003), "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (1997–2003), "Dark Angel" (2000–2002), and "Alias" (2001–2006) also feature assertive female characters. While the quantity of films and television series featuring female action heroines indicates progress, it is important to note that with the exception of *Strange Days*, *Set It Off*, *Die Another Day*, and *Kill Bill*, the aforementioned films and series center on white female protagonists, failing to fully explore the aspirations of African American women.<sup>7</sup>



## Conclusion

# The Demise and Aftermath of the Blaxploitation Movement

In *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale argues, “Traditional accounts of a number of genres are inaccurate or incomplete” (1). With that in mind, the purpose of the current volume has been to establish blaxploitation films within traditional generic categories, thus making the concept of genre more complete. *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Blacula*, *The Mack*, and *Cleopatra Jones* are indeed noteworthy films, and their inclusion of black protagonists, predominantly black urban settings, black sociopolitical commentary, and rhythm-and-blues soundtracks operate as significant revisions to the detective, horror, gangster, and cop action genres, respectively.

In addition to transgressing their respective genres, blaxploitation films are reflective of industry trends and practices. In *Film/Genre* Rick Altman asserts, “Once a genre is recognized and practiced throughout the industry, individual studios have no further economic interest in practicing it as such” (62). While the blaxploitation movement is not monolithic and features films across varying genres, the cycle underwent a transformation much like traditional Hollywood fare. After the success of pioneering black-themed films like *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, and *Shaft*, studios such as United Artists, MGM, Warner Bros., Cinerama, and AIP produced blaxploitation films, making them an industry-wide phenomenon. This standardization, as well as other factors, contributed to the demise of the blaxploitation movement.

The criticism that mounted over popular blaxploitation films also played a major role in bringing the movement to an end. In 1972, Junius Griffin, president of the Beverly Hills–Hollywood branch of the NAACP, condemned the burgeoning movement:

We must tell both white and black movie producers that we will not tolerate the continued warping of our black children’s minds with the

filth, violence, and cultural lies that are all pervasive in current productions of so-called black movies. We must tell black and white movie producers that the transformation from the stereotyped Stepin Fetchit to super-nigger on the screen is just another form of cultural genocide. (qtd. in “NAACP Blasts” 2)

Griffin was not alone in his assault on blaxploitation films. A group of Los Angeles civil rights organizations—the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)—combined their resources to form the Coalition against Blaxploitation (CAB). One of CAB’s main goals was to establish a review board to rate black movies with classifications such as “superior,” “good,” “acceptable,” “objectionable,” or “thoroughly objectionable” (“Black’Lash” 5).

CAB’s proposal sparked a public debate that included a host of actors, producers, directors, writers, and intellectuals. *Super Fly* star, Ron O’Neal, was among the first to speak out against CAB: “They’re saying they know better than the black people themselves what they should look at, that they’re going to be the moral interpreters for the destiny of black people. I’m so tired of handkerchief-head Negroes moralizing the poor black man” (“Black’Lash” 5). Walter Burrell, the chairman of CAB’s ratings board, fired back at O’Neal, “Since black people are hungry to see the black image on the screen they’ll go to see anything, there’s got to be some responsibility” (“Black’Lash” 5).

The dispute continued in a *New York Times* article titled, “Black Movie Boom—Good or Bad?” When questioned about his position on the issue, *Shaft* director Gordon Parks Sr. stated:

The so-called black intellectuals’ outcry against black films has been blown far out of proportion. It is curious that some black people, egged on by some whites, will use such destructive measures against black endeavors. . . . As for a black review board to approve scripts and pre-edit finished films, forget it. The review board is already established and is moving from one theater line to another. (“Black Movie Boom—Good or Bad?”3.19)

Jim Brown, former professional football player-turned actor, said, “The so-called ‘black’ film has made some important contributions not only to black people but to the film industry as a whole. It has allowed black directors, black producers, black technicians, black writers, and black

actors to participate on a higher level than ever before” (“Black Movie Boom—Good or Bad?” 3.19).

In contrast, Roy Innis, the national director of CORE, blasted blaxploitation films:

Some defenders of these Black films have defended them on the ground that they are no worse than, say, John Wayne films, that Black youth recognize them as fantasy, as escapist entertainment. But these defenders fail to see that John Wayne . . . is usually portrayed as a man with guts and strength and positive aggressiveness. He is not portrayed as the psychopathic superdude, as are the present crop of Black superheroes. (“Black Movie Boom—Good or Bad?” 3.19)

Furthermore, writer and director Lonnie Elder commented, “The moral concern and alarm on the part of a growing number of black people about the harmful images these films insist upon reflecting in the name of blackness is in order and should be supported by all black people” (“Black Movie Boom—Good or Bad?” 3.19).

The backlash against blaxploitation films continued and at one point escalated into violent protest when an unnamed black militant group torched the car of Richard Zimbert, AIP vice president, while it was parked on the company lot. CAB’s figurehead, Junius Griffin, denied having any knowledge of or participating in the incident: “I disavow it and I will not condone it. You cannot preach against violence and actually partake in it yourself” (qtd. in McGee 187). Due to the immense controversy surrounding blaxploitation films, major studios by 1974 shied away from producing the features. By the end of 1975, Hollywood’s production of black-themed films had all but run its course.

The emergence of blockbuster features also contributed to the blaxploitation movement’s demise. In *Framing Blackness*, Ed Guerrero relates that by the end of 1973, Hollywood perceived that black audiences were tiring of the endless reworking of the crime-action-ghetto formula and observed that successful black films like *Sounder* (1972) and *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), which toned down the black-white confrontation, attracted black and white audiences alike (105). “The film industry realized that it did not need an exclusively black vehicle to draw the large black audiences” (Guerrero 105). This was further emphasized in surveys that demonstrated that as much as 35 percent of the audience for the mega-hits *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973) was black. Thus, Hollywood reasoned, the production of crossover films appealing to both white and black audiences could potentially double box-office revenue (105). The ensuing years

witnessed the emergence of highly successful films like *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), and *Saturday Night Fever* (1978) that solidified the blockbuster marketing practice. Significantly, the strategy is still employed today with Hollywood effectively utilizing the summer months as its blockbuster season.

The combination of the aforementioned factors effectively ended the blaxploitation movement as well as the strong black presence that emerged as a result. Black cinema was progressing beyond the blaxploitation pictures of *Shaft*, *Blacula*, *Cleopatra Jones*, and *Foxy Brown*. During the blaxploitation movement and the years immediately following its demise, several black-oriented films were made that did not focus on drugs, prostitution, and excessive violence. Titles such as *Cornbread Earl and Me* (1973), *Five on the Black Hand Side* (1974), *Uptown Saturday Night* (1974), *Cooley High* (1975), *Sparkle* (1976), *A Piece of the Action* (1977), and *Car Wash* (1977) serve as examples. Although these films were reasonably successful, Hollywood's crossover films proved more lucrative, and black-themed movies soon disappeared from motion picture screens.

As America moved into the 1980s, the number of black stars and film directors dwindled. Perhaps the most popular black performer of the decade was Eddie Murphy, who began his career on the sketch-comedy series *Saturday Night Live* (1975–present). Murphy is multitalented, and his raw humor captured the attention of Hollywood movie producers. He made his motion picture debut alongside Nick Nolte in the box-office hit *48 Hours* (1982), which effectively launched his film career. Murphy quickly established himself as an A-list star, appearing in successful vehicles like *Trading Places* (1983), the *Beverly Hills Cop* series (1984–1994), *The Golden Child* (1986), *Coming to America* (1988), and *Harlem Nights* (1989). Murphy's most recent films include *Bowfinger* (1999), the *Shrek* series (2001, 2004, 2007), *Daddy Day Care* (2003), and *Dreamgirls* (2006), which earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor.

While Eddie Murphy was arguably the most popular black performer of the 1980s, director Spike Lee emerged as his counterpart behind the camera. Lee garnered acclaim and captured Hollywood's attention with the release of his first full-length feature, *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), which tells the story of a black woman and her intimate relationships with three different men. The film was a critical success, and it earned Lee a great deal of notoriety. He followed *Have It* with *School Daze* (1988), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Jungle Fever* (1991), and *Malcolm X*, all of which examine race in America. Lee's latest work includes *Summer of Sam* (1999),

*Bamboozled* (2000), *25<sup>th</sup>Hour* (2002), *She Hate Me* (2004), *Inside Man* (2006), and the critically acclaimed mini series *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006).

The 1990s witnessed an increase in black representation with actors like Angela Bassett, Halle Berry, Don Cheadle, Morgan Freeman, Samuel L. Jackson, Will Smith, and Denzel Washington solidifying their positions as bona fide stars. These performers continue to work today and have combined to earn both Academy Award nominations and victories for their performances in films like *Ali* (2001), *Training Day* (2001), *Monster's Ball* (2001), *Million-Dollar Baby* (2004), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), and *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006).

Other notable black directors have also emerged in Hollywood. While the number remains small, progress has been made. Among the most prominent black directors is John Singleton, who garnered critical and commercial acclaim for his debut feature, *Boyz in the Hood* (1991). He has worked consistently in Hollywood since, directing films like *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Higher Learning* (1995), *Rosewood* (1997), a remake of the blaxploitation classic *Shaft* (2000), and *Four Brothers* (2005). In addition to Singleton, Carl Franklin has also established himself as a capable director. While not as popular as Singleton or Lee, Franklin has demonstrated an impressive range, directing thrillers and dramas like *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), *One True Thing* (1998), and *Out of Time* (2003).

While the discussion of the aforementioned actors and directors illustrates that there is significant African American representation in Hollywood, the industry is still dominated by white screenwriters, producers, performers, and directors. The blaxploitation movement is an interesting phenomenon because it represents a unique era when more blacks were working either in front of or behind the camera than at any other time in motion picture history. While this book assists in providing a more complete account of genre, it is also meant to function as an homage to the long list of blaxploitation stars: Ron O'Neal, Gordon Parks Sr., Richard Roundtree, William Marshall, Ossie Davis, Tamara Dobson, Isaac Hayes, Calvin Lockhart, Pam Grier, and a host of others who paved the way for today's stars and warrant critical examination in America's ongoing discourse on race and popular culture.

# Notes

## NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1. For more on D. W. Griffith, see Robert Lang, *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Karl Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1973); Barry Iris, *D. W. Griffith, American Film Master* (New York: Doubleday, 1965); Martin T. Williams, *Griffith, First Artist of the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Homer Croy, *Star Maker: The Story of D.W. Griffith* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1959).
2. The quotes in this plot summary were taken from the actual title cards of *Birth of a Nation*.
3. The Johnson brothers were inspired by the production of *The Birth of a Race*. Due to the difficulties encountered during the filming of *Race*, *Ambition* was actually shot and released prior to *Race*.
4. The Harlem Renaissance began in the early 1900s and is regarded as an important movement in the struggle for racial and cultural democracy. During this period, black artists and scholars, such as Sterling Brown, W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Zora Hurston Neale, and a host of others, made significant contributions to art, music, and literature. For more on the Harlem Renaissance see David Kasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in the Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Aaron Douglas, *Art Race and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1995); Bruce M. Tyler, *From Harlem to Hollywood: The Struggle for Racial and Cultural Democracy* (New York: Garland, 1992).
5. Fetchit was a former vaudevillian who began working in films after a Fox agent discovered him. He became famous for playing the servant role most often referred to as the coon. He used his appearance to add to his comic antics. He was tall and skinny, and his head was always shaved completely

bald. He also wore a huge smile and spoke in a broken dialect that made it appear that he could not say a word containing more than one syllable.

6. Prior to making *Hallelujah*, Vidor had established himself as a notable director with films such as *The Turn in the Road* (1919), *The Jack Knife Man* (1920), *Woman Wake Up* (1922), and *The Big Parade* (1925), which was his greatest triumph.
7. "Writing out" involved excluding scenes that featured blacks negatively from motion pictures, while tokenism involved including a lone black character alongside a group of whites.
8. Despite its newfound awareness, Hollywood did not immediately begin to produce problem films that addressed anti-black discrimination. Producers already knew that a large portion of the American population felt that anti-Semitism was wrong. Therefore, *Crossfire* (1947) and *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1947), which were the first of the 1940s social problem films, dealt with anti-Semitism. Both films were successful and provided the perfect transition into films dealing with the race problem.
9. Kramer subsequently used the title for his revisionist Western *High Noon*, which unfolds in real time, exploring themes of fear, paranoia, and isolation. Released in 1952, many scholars view it as a metaphor for the Communist witch-hunts conducted during the period by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities.
10. Talented black actress Dorothy Dandridge was originally supposed to play the role of Pinky; a casting change was made in order to avoid depicting love scenes between the black actress and the man portraying her white fiancé.
11. *Pinky* was second to *Jolson Sings Again*.
12. Quigley's statement is considerably hypocritical when one considers that the Production Code created the rules that motion pictures would have to follow in order to be released. Among the tenets was the rule that gangsters had to be punished in the final scene of films for committing criminal acts, thus sending the social message that crime does not pay.
13. According to Guerrero, blaxploitation films also emerged because Hollywood was in a state of economic crisis in the late 1960s (70). Specifically, studios were on the verge of bankruptcy and were seeking ways to pull themselves out of the financial slump. After the release of highly successful films like *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Hollywood realized the consumer power of the black audience, which led to an influx of blaxploitation movies (83).
14. Poitier remained the sole black male to receive an Academy Award until nineteen years later when Lou Gossett Jr. earned an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for his role in *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982). Cuba Gooding Jr. also earned an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *Jerry McGuire* (1996). It was not until 2002 that another black male won an Academy Award for Best Actor in a Lead role. Specifically, Denzel Washington earned the distinction for his role in *Training Day* (2001). Jamie Foxx followed suit, receiving the Oscar for Best Actor in a Lead role for his performance in *Ray* (2004).

15. Here, I disagree with Bogle's assessment. The characters that Poitier played had a great deal of agency, considering the era in which they appeared onscreen. Significantly, Poitier was among few black males who were shown reacting to white violence with violence as he does in the *Defiant Ones* and *In the Heat of the Night*. Additionally, Poitier's characters still embodied the nonviolent spirit key to Martin Luther King Jr.'s politics. Thus, while King marched in the streets, Poitier was the embodiment of his philosophy on the big screen. For more on Poitier, see Samuel L. Kelley, *The Evolution of Character Portrayals in the Films of Sidney Poitier: 1950–1978* (New York: Garland, 1983).
16. Bogle's classification of Jim Brown as a buck is problematic. Significantly, Brown was and still is considered one of the greatest running backs to ever play in the National Football League. Sunday after Sunday, audiences cheered him on as he imposed his will on both black and white players alike. In a sense, it seems as if Brown was readily accepted as physically dominant in motion pictures because viewers realized that he really was a force to be reckoned with in real life. With that in mind, motion picture executives used that to their advantage, casting him in roles that reaffirmed what audiences already knew. Motion picture producers continue to use this strategy, casting former and current WWE wrestlers such as Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, and John Cena in films as action heroes. Furthermore, Brittany Spears, Eminem, Ludacris, and many others have appeared in motion picture roles that rely upon their pre-established reputations as talented musical entertainers to generate box office revenue.
17. It is ironic that the advertising campaign for *100 Rifles* treated Welch as if she were white considering the fact that she is actually Bolivian and Caucasian. This serves as an example of Hollywood's attempt to remove her from her ethnicity. This was also done to Rita Hayworth, who was Spanish, and Hollywood continues the tradition, constructing Cuban-American actress Cameron Diaz as Caucasian.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. For more on film noir, see Bruce Crowther, *Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark Mirror*, (New York: Continuum, 1989); Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (New York: Twayne, 1994); Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (New York: Longman/Pearson Education, 2002); Megan E. Abbott, *Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, *Noir Anxiety* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
2. In *Blacks in Films and Television*, Bogle notes that Ossie Davis began his acting career while serving in the Army during World War II. During his tenure in the service, he wrote and produced shows for the other troops ( 378). After leaving the military, Davis made his Broadway debut in *Jeb*



Turner and continued to act in the late 1940s and 1950s in small theater productions. In 1951 Davis appeared on Showtime USA's production of *The Green Pastures*, and in 1955 he won the title role in a television version of the play (378). During the 1960s, Davis continued to act, appearing in television episodes of "The Doctors" and in films such as *The Cardinal* (1963) and *Shock Treatment* (1964) (Bogle 378).

3. Ossie Davis became the third black man to direct a Hollywood film when he agreed to direct *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. Only Gordon Parks Sr., who directed *The Learning Tree* (1968), and Melvin Van Peebles, who directed *Watermelon Man* (1970), preceded Davis.
4. In "Movies: a James Bond with Soul?," Lindsay Patterson relates that *Cotton's* white script girl was hit in the head with a bottle thrown from a rooftop. Godfrey Cambridge sent her a note with flowers saying, "Some people throw flowers" (8). This was the most serious incident that occurred in Harlem during the film's production.
5. Prior to the release of *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, the only film to feature a rhythm-and-blues soundtrack was the independent film *Nothing but a Man* (1964). The album was released by Motown Records and features tracks by several of the company's most notable performers, including "Heat Wave" by Martha and the Vandellas, "Fingertips" part 2, by Stevie Wonder, "You Beat Me to the Punch" by Mary Wells, and "I'll Try Something New" by the Miracles.
6. *Sweetback* remained the highest-grossing independent film of all time until 1999 when the *Blair Witch Project* surpassed it. *Witch* had an estimated budget of \$60,000 and earned over \$140 million during its theatrical release. It was surpassed only three years later by *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), which grossed over \$240 million.
7. Junius Griffin resigned from his position as president of the Beverly Hills Branch of the NAACP one week later. Significantly, Griffin's denunciation of the emergent black-themed films as "exploitive" was his opinion and not the sentiment of the organization, which took offense to him using the NAACP to launch his personal crusade ("Junius Griffin Out" 5).

## NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. Other popular genres with similar classifications include comedies and thrillers. Tom Ryall notes that genres such as Westerns and gangster films derive from the historical subject that is dealt with; musicals are recognized by formal qualities like the presence of musical numbers (330).
2. Several names and characters were changed in this adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel because the producers had not paid for the screen rights to the film and therefore sought to avoid a copyright-infringement lawsuit.
3. Carroll also defines another horror narrative structure that he calls the Overreacher Plot. According to Carroll, this structure "makes a virtue of childlike powerlessness and superstition, and it vilifies adult, scientific

- knowledge” (23). Films such as *Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Man with the X-Ray Eyes* employ this structure.
4. Interestingly, none of the zombies attacking the home are black. Perhaps, the idea of having black zombies attacking and killing a group of whites would potentially have been the subject of controversy in 1967.
  5. *The Fast and the Furious* was directed by Roger Corman, who would go on to produce a number of successful low-budget features for AIP. For more on Corman see: Corman, Roger. *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime*. (New York: Random House, 1990).
  6. According to Eric Charles Pierson, theater exchanges were the sites where prints were stored and the point from which the studio would deliver them. The more exchanges, the faster the studio could respond to the needs of the market.
  7. Crain learned moviemaking by working as an apprentice to a director in Toronto, Canada. Due to the systematic racial oppression that permeated the U.S., it was common for black writers and directors to hone their skills overseas where they enjoyed more artistic freedom and acceptance.
  8. At one point, AIP’s marketing department discussed the idea of distributing Vampire Protection Kits consisting of a small plastic bag of bay leaves. However, the plan ran into problems and never fully crystallized (“On Old Broadway” 29).
  9. *Blackenstein*’s production illustrates one of the fundamental problems that occurred during the blaxploitation movement. Several studios, both large and small, began to mass-produce black-oriented films. The projects often suffered under the direction of companies like Exclusive International Pictures, which employed second-rate writers, production crews, and performers when creating their products.
  10. In *That’s Blaxploitation: Roots of the Baadasssss ’Tude*, Darius James claims that two sequels, *The Fall of the House of Blackenstein* and *Blackenstein III*, had also been written.
  11. *The Exorcist* spawned two sequels, *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977) and *The Exorcist III* (1990), as well as a prequel, *Exorcist: The Beginning* (2004). None of these films achieved the level of success as the original installment.
  12. Koven notes that while *Meathook* did not perform well at the box office, it functioned as an audition movie for AIP’s Samuel Z. Arkoff, who extended Girdler an invitation to work for AIP. While working at AIP, Girdler directed two blaxploitation films in addition to *Abby: Zebra Killer* (1974) and the Pam Grier vehicle ‘*Sheba, Baby*’ (1975) (78).

## NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. For more on Hollywood censorship see: Martine Quigley, *Decency in Motion Pictures* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1937); Frank Walsh,

*Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

2. In 1968 the Production Code was dropped, and the film industry adopted the ratings system, which is governed by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). Under the system, American producers and the importers of foreign features submit their films before release to the MPAA's Code and Rating Office. Originally, films were given one of four ratings: "G" (general audiences), "PG" (parental guidance suggested, indicating that some material may not be suitable for children), "R" (restricted, indicating that persons under seventeen may not be admitted unless accompanied by a parent or guardian), and "X" (no one under seventeen admitted). The code that exists today is different from the original ratings system. Specifically, the "X" rating was appropriated by the pornographic film industry and is no longer used as a standard to judge Hollywood films. In 1982, a "PG-13" (parental guidance suggested, indicating that material may not be suitable for children under thirteen), and in 1990 the scarcely used "NC-17" (no children under seventeen admitted) rating was implemented.
3. For more on *Bonnie and Clyde* see: Sandra Wake and Nicola Hayden, eds., *The Bonnie and Clyde Book* (London: Lorrimer, 1972) and Lester D. Friedman, *Bonnie and Clyde* (London: BFI, 2000).
4. Fenty claimed that he based the story on the life of a successful New York drug dealer whom he had long admired. The film features a nameless character who was known as KC in real life. KC was apparently well known as a drug dealer in Harlem, and he actually owned the car that Youngblood Priest drives in *Super Fly*.
5. Gordon Parks Jr. is the son of the Gordon Parks Sr., who was a famous photographer. He worked for *Life* magazine, and in 1968 he became the first black man to direct a feature film for a Hollywood studio with *The Learning Tree*. He also directed *Shaft* (1971), one of the pioneering blaxploitation films.
6. *Super Fly* was shot entirely on location in Harlem, which adds to the film's authenticity. Much like earlier gangster films, the cityscape functions as the dangerous seedy backdrop; however, it takes its exploration of the space further, highlighting the ghetto conditions by juxtaposing Youngblood's wealth against the poverty-stricken black community.
7. *Super Fly* also spawned a sequel titled *Super Fly T.N.T.* (1973), which once again featured Ron O'Neal as Youngblood Priest. Additionally, he directed the feature, which was based on a screenplay by Alex Haley, who later penned the book *Roots*. Set in Rome, the film chronicled Priest as he attempted to settle into his new life as a reformed drug dealer. He eventually joins a gunrunning mission to Africa where he helps a small oppressed country fight against French imperialists. According to Parish and Hill, "the music was blah, the pacing sluggish, the photography and editing crude, and Youngblood Priest, the black prince of the streets who seems so at ease snaking down Fifth Avenue or bashing chins in a dark alley, seems lost in Rome, while attempting to live *la dolce vita*" (292). Critics and moviegoers agreed, and *T.N.T.* failed to live up to box-office expectations. Unfortunately, the *Super Fly* films marked

- the peak of Ron O'Neal's career. He spent the rest of his career battling the Youngblood Priest typecast and playing supporting roles well beneath his talent level. O'Neal died of pancreatic cancer January 14, 2004.
8. *Hit Man* was released on December 20, 1972, just four months after *Super Fly*. *Caesar* hit screens soon after on February 7, 1973.
  9. Prior to starring in *The Mack*, Juanita Moore appeared in a number of Hollywood films. Her most notable role was as Annie Johnson in Douglas Sirk's remake of *Imitation of Life* (1959). This film featured her as the mother of a biracial child struggling with her ethnic identity.
  10. Cloward identifies the legitimate means as labor, retail, small business, professions and semi-professions, clergy, and entertainment.
  11. In *Mackin' Ain't Easy*, Todd Boyd theorizes that the influence of the pimp trade is apparent in rap music and contends that like pimps, rappers must utilize a smooth vocabulary in order to convey a message to their audience. If they are successful, they become prosperous.
  12. For more on the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, see Huey P. Newton, *War against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America* (New York: Harlem River, 1996); Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994); Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (Baltimore Black Classic, 1991); and Earle Anthony, *Spitting the Wind: The True Story behind the Violent Legacy of the Black Panther Party* (Malibu, CA: Roundtable, 1990).
  13. In *Mackin' Ain't Easy*, Michael Campus explains that the decision was made to dedicate the opening to the Black Panthers after he was approached and asked by the organization to do so. Campus quickly agreed because he felt that had he not complied, the Panthers would not have allowed for an opening to take place in the black Oakland community.
  14. Outkast's first single, "Players Ball" (1994), was an homage to *The Mack*, and in 2003, Max Julien was featured in Nelly's music video for the song "Pimp Juice."

## NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. Bogle's triumvirate includes the pure coon, the pickaninny, and the Uncle Remus (7).
2. *Coffy* made Grier one of the biggest superstars of the 1970s and a pop-culture icon. However, as Bogle describes in *Blacks in Films and Television*, Grier enjoyed a "lopsided type of stardom" (398). She was not considered a respectable actress because of her tendency to disrobe in AIP's exploitation pictures (398). She attempted to tone down the sexuality in several of her films, but by this time the blaxploitation movement was coming to a close, and Grier's star soon faded. She reemerged in the 1980s appearing in television shows and films like "The Cosby Show" (1984–1992), "Miami Vice" (1984–1989), *Stand Alone* (1986), and *Above the Law* (1988). Additionally, Grier appeared in the blaxploitation throwback *Original Gangstas* (1996); director

- Quentin Tarantino paid homage to her in *Jackie Brown* (1997), in which she also starred. Grier's latest work includes appearances in *Jawbreaker* (1999), *Bones* (2001), *The Adventures of Pluto Nash* (2002), "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit" (1999–present), and "The L-Word" (2004–present).
3. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* also features a hero who relies upon his sexuality to escape trouble. After killing two bigoted white police officers Sweetback seeks help from a female who refuses to free him from his handcuffs until he sleeps with her. When confronted by a motorcycle gang, Sweetback engages in a sexual duel against Sadie, the female leader of the gang. He wins the showdown and once again escapes a potentially dangerous situation. Scenes like this prompted Lerone Bennett Jr. to criticize *Sweetback* for relying upon what he called "the emancipation orgasm."
  4. Winters began her acting career in small New York stage productions such as *Rosalinda* and made the transition to film in 1943 when she appeared in *What a Woman!* She continued her career starring in films like *Tonight and Every Night* (1945), *Johnny Stool Pigeon* (1949), and *Executive Suite* (1954). Winters became a critically acclaimed performer winning Oscars for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayals in *The Diary of Ann Frank* (1959), and *A Patch of Blue* (1965) (Vinson 654).
  5. According to director Jack Hill, *Foxy Brown* was conceived of as the sequel to *Coffy*. Initially titled *Burn, Coffy, Burn*, the title was changed after AIP's sales department noticed that blaxploitation sequels were not performing well at the box office. To avoid this disturbing trend, the producers changed the character's name and the film's title to *Foxy Brown* (Martinez et al. 138–39).
  6. Unfortunately, Tamara Dobson's career was seriously affected by *Gold*'s financial failure and the decline of the blaxploitation movement. The remainder of her acting career consisted of appearances in *Norman Is That You* (1976), *Murder at the World Series* (1977), "Buck Rogers in the Twenty-fifth Century" (one episode, 1980), "Jason of Star Command" (1980–1981), *Chained Heat* (1983), and *Amazons* (1984). She soon disappeared from the pages of magazines and from television and motion picture screens altogether. While researching for this chapter, I attempted to contact Dobson using a phone number from the Screen Actors Guild. No one answered, and I ended my search, assuming that she did not want to be reached. Whether that is true or not, I will never know. However, on October 2, 2006, the day that Miss Dobson passed away from pneumonia and multiple sclerosis, I discovered that it was difficult to reach her because she had been living in Keswick Multi-Care Center in Baltimore. Dobson was included in the Memorial Tribute at the Seventy-Ninth Annual Academy Awards.
  7. Of all of these films, *Set It Off* is the only one that centers on the black experience with the story of four friends portrayed by Jada Pinkett-Smith, Queen Latifah, Vivica A. Fox, and Kimberley Elise, who turn to bank robbery as a means to escape their poverty-stricken South Central L.A. neighborhood. *Strange Days* and *Die Another Day* feature Angela Bassett and Halle Berry, respectively, but their characters emerge as the capable sidekicks of films' white male protagonists. In *Kill Bill*, Fox portrays a deadly assassin, but her screen time is minimal, and she is killed early in the film.

# Filmography

- Abby*. Dir. William Girdler. Perf. William Marshall, Carol Speed, Terry Carter, and Austin Stoker. AIP, 1974.
- Black Belt Jones*. Dir. Robert Clouse. Perf. Jim Kelly, Gloria Hendry, Scatman Crothers, and Alan Weeks. Warner Bros., 1974.
- Black Caesar*. Dir. Larry Cohen. Perf. Fred Williamson, Gloria Hendry, Art Lund, and D'Urville Martin. AIP, 1973.
- Black Connection, The*. Dir. Michael Finn. Perf. Bobby Stevens, Sweet Louie, Sonny Charles, and Pepper Davis. Box Office International Pictures, 1974.
- Blackenstein*. Dir. William A. Levey. Perf. John Hart, Ivory Stone, Joe De Sue, and Roosevelt Jackson. Exclusive International Pictures, 1973.
- Black Gestapo, The*. Dir. Lee Frost. Perf. Rod Perry, Charles Robinson, Phil Hoover, and Angela Brent. Bryanston Distributing, 1975.
- Black Girl*. Dir. Ossie Davis. Perf. Brock Peters, Claudia McNeil, Leslie Uggams, and Louise Stubbs. Cinerama Releasing Corp., 1972.
- Black Gunn*. Dir. Robert Hartford Davis. Perf. Jim Brown, Martin Landau, Brenda Sykes, and Vida Blue. Columbia, 1972.
- Black Lolita*. Dir. Stephen Gibson. Perf. Yolanda Love, Ed Cheatwood, Joey Ginza, and Susan Ayers. Cinema Epoch, 1975.
- Black Six, The*. Dir. Matt Cimber. Perf. Robert Howard, Gene Washington, Cindy Daly, and Carl Eller. Cinemation, 1974.
- Blacula*. Dir. William Crain. Perf. William Marshall, Vonetta McGee, Thalmus Rasulala, and Denise Nicholas. AIP, 1972.
- Bone*. Dir. Larry Cohen. Perf. Yaphet Kotto, Andrew Duggan, Joyce Van Patten, and Casey King. New World Pictures, 1972.
- Boss Nigger*. Dir. Jack Arnold. Perf. Fred Williamson, D'Urville Martin, William Smith, and Barbara Leigh. Ambassador Film Distributors, 1975.
- Bucktown*. Dir. Arthur Marks. Perf. Fred Williamson, Pam Grier, Thalmus Rasulala, and Tony King. AIP, 1975.
- Bus Is Coming, The*. Dir. Wendell Franklin. Perf. Mike B. Sims, Stephanie Faulkner, Tony Sweeting, and Sandra Reed. Video City Productions, 1971.
- Candy Tangerine Man*. Dir. Matt Cimber. Perf. Mike Angel, Barbara Bourbon, Dria Calhoun, and John Daniels. Moonstone Entertainment, 1975.

- Cleopatra Jones*. Dir. Jack Starrett. Perf. Tamara Dobson, Bernie Casey, and Shelly Winters. Warner Bros., 1973.
- Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*. Dir. Charles Bail. Perf. Tamara Dobson, Stella Stevens, Ni Tien, and Albert Popwell. Warner Bros., 1975.
- Coffy*. Dir. Jack Hill. Perf. Pam Grier, Booker Bradshaw, Robert DoQui, and William Elliot. AIP, 1973.
- Come Back, Charleston Blue*. Dir. Mark Warren. Perf. Godfrey Cambridge, Raymond St. Jaques, Peter De Anda, and Dick Sabol. Warner Bros., 1972.
- Cool Breeze*. Dir. Barry Pollack. Perf. Thalmus Rasulala, Judy Pace, Sam Watkins, and Pam Grier. MGM, 1972.
- Cotton Comes to Harlem*. Dir. Ossie Davis. Perf. Godfrey Cambridge, Raymond St. Jaques, Calvin Lockhart, Red Foxx, and Judy Pace. United Artists, 1970.
- Darktown Strutters*. Dir. William Witney. Perf. Trina Parks, Roger E. Mosley, Shirley Washington, and Stan Shaw. New World Pictures, 1975.
- Detroit 9000*. Dir. Arthur Marks. Perf. Hari Rhodes, Vonetta McGee, Scatman Crothers, and Rudy Challenger. General Film Corp., 1973.
- Dolemite*. Dir. D'Urville Martin. Perf. Rudy Ray Moore, Lady Reed, D'Urville Martin, and Jerry Jones. Dimension Pictures, 1975.
- Final Comedown, The*. Dir. Oscar Williams. Perf. Billy Dee Williams, D'Urville Martin, Raymond St. Jaques, and Celia Kaye. New World Pictures, 1972.
- Foxy Brown*. Dir. Jack Hill. Perf. Pam Grier, Antonio Fargas, Terry Carter, and Peter Brown. AIP, 1974.
- Friday Foster*. Dir. Arthur Marks. Perf. Pam Grier, Yaphet Kotto, Godfrey Cambridge, and Thalmus Rasulala. AIP, 1975.
- Hammer*. Dir. Bruce D. Clark. Perf. Fred Williamson, Bernie Hamilton, Vonetta McGee, and William Smith. United Artists, 1972.
- Hell Up in Harlem*. Dir. Larry Cohen. Perf. Fred Williamson, Julius Harris, Gloria Hendry, and Margaret Avery. AIP, 1973.
- Hit Man*. Dir. George Armitage. Perf. Bernie Casey, Pam Grier, Lisa Moore, and Sam Laws. MGM, 1972.
- Honky*. Dir. William A. Graham. Perf. Brenda Sykes, William Marshall, John Neilson, and Lincoln Lasel. Jack H. Harris Enterprises, 1971.
- House on Skull Mountain, The*. Dir. Ron Honthaner. Perf. Victor French, Mike Evans, Janee Mitchell, and Ella Woods. Twentieth Century Fox, 1974.
- Lady Cocoa*. Dir. Matt Cimber. Perf. Lola Falana, Gene Washington, Millie Perkins, and Alex Dreier. Moonstone Entertainment, 1975.
- Legend of Nigger Charley, The*. Dir. Martin Goldman. Perf. Fred Williamson, D'Urville Martin, Gertrude Jeannette, and Alan Gifford. Paramount, 1972.
- Mack, The*. Dir. Michael Campus. Perf. Max Julien, Richard Pryor, Roger E. Mosley, and Juanita Moore. Cinerama Releasing Corp., 1973.
- Mean Mother*. Dir. Al Adamson. Perf. Doobie Grey, Denise Safren, Albert Cole, and Al Richardson. Independent International Pictures, 1974.
- Melinda*. Dir. Hugh A. Robertson. Perf. Calvin Lockhart, Rosalind Cash, Vonetta McGee, and Paul Stevens. MGM, 1972.

- Scream, Blacula, Scream.* Dir. Bob Kelljan. Perf. William Marshall, Pam Grier, Don Mitchell, and Lynne Moody. AIP, 1973.
- Shaft.* Dir. Gordon Parks. Perf. Richard Roundtree, Moses Gunn, Charles Cioffi, and Gwenn Mitchell. MGM, 1971.
- Shaft in Africa.* Dir. John Guillerman. Perf. Richard Roundtree, Vonetta McGee, Frank Finlay, and Neda Aeric. MGM, 1973.
- Shaft's Big Score!* Dir. Gordon Parks. Perf. Richard Roundtree, Moses Gunn, Kathy Imrie, and Julius Harris. MGM, 1972.
- '*Sheba, Baby.*' Dir. William Girdler. Perf. Pam Grier, Austin Stoker, D'Urville Martin, and Rudy Challenger. AIP, 1975.
- Slams, The.* Dir. Jonathan Kaplan. Perf. Jim Brown, Judy Pace, Bob Harris, and Frank Dekova. MGM, 1973.
- Slaughter.* Dir. Jack Starrett. Perf. Jim Brown, Stella Stevens, Rip Torn, and Don Gordon. AIP, 1972.
- Slaughter's Big Rip-Off.* Dir. Gordon Douglas. Perf. Jim Brown, Don Stroud, Gloria Hendry, and Dick Anthony Williams. AIP, 1973.
- Soul of Nigger Charley, The.* Dir. Larry G. Spangler. Perf. Fred Williamson, Denise Nicholas, D'Urville Martin, and Kevin Hagen. Paramount, 1973.
- Soul Soldier.* Dir. John Cardos. Perf. Robert DoQui, Isabel Sanford, Barbara Hale, and Rafer Johnson. Fanfare Films, 1970.
- Sugar Hill.* Dir. Paul Maslansky. Perf. Marki Bey, Robert Quarry, Betty Ann Rees, and Zara Cully. AIP, 1974.
- Super Fly.* Dir. Gordon Parks Jr. Perf. Ron O'Neal, Carl Lee, Sheila Frazier, and Julius Harris. Warner Bros., 1972.
- Super Fly T. N. T.* Dir. Ron O'Neal. Perf. Ron O'Neal, Sheila Frazier, Roscoe Lee Browne, and William Berger. Paramount, 1973.
- Sweet Jesus Preacher Man.* Dir. Henning Schellerup. Perf. Roger E. Mosley, William Smith, Marla Gibbs, and Chuck Wells. MGM, 1973.
- Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song.* Dir. Melvin Van Peebles. Perf. Melvin Van Peebles, Hubert Scales, and John Amos. Cinemation Industries, 1970.
- That Man Bolt.* Dir. Henry Levin. Perf. Fred Williamson, Byron Webster, Miko Mayama, and Teresa Graves. Universal Pictures, 1973.
- Thing with Two Heads, The.* Dir. Lee Frost. Perf. Ray Milland, Rosie Grier, Don Marshall, and Roger Perry. AIP 1972.
- Thomasine and Bushrod.* Dir. Gordon Parks Jr. Perf. Max Julien, Vonetta McGee, George Murdock, and Glynn Turman. Columbia, 1974.
- Three the Hard Way.* Dir. Gordon Parks Jr. Perf. Fred Williamson, Jim Brown, Jim Kelly, and Sheila Frazier. Allied Artists, 1974.
- T. N. T. Jackson.* Dir. Cirio H. Santiago. Perf. Jeannie Bell, Stan Shaw, Pat Anderson, and Ken Metcalfe. New World Pictures, 1975.
- Together Brothers.* Dir. William A. Graham. Perf. Glynn Turman, Anthony Wilson, Owen Pace, and Kim Dorsey. Twentieth Century Fox, 1974.
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# Index

## A

*Abby, The* (1974), 60–61, 107  
Academy of Horror Films and Science Fiction Films, 57  
Adamson, Al, 108  
Addams, Jane, 3  
Affirmative action, 83  
*Afro-American*, 6  
All-black productions, 7, 9, 11  
Allied Artists, 109  
Altman, Rick, 44, 94  
Ambassador Film Distributors, 107  
American Dream  
    difficulty in obtaining, 70  
    in *The Mack*, 69, 70, 73, 74  
    major convention in gangster films, 63, 69, 73  
    in *Super Fly*, 65  
American International Pictures (AIP), 94, 96  
    *Abby* (1974), 60–61, 107  
    background, 48–49  
    *Black Caesar*, 68, 107  
    *Blackenstein*, 59  
    *Blacula*, 49, 53, 56, 57, 103n8, 107  
    *Cleopatra Jones*, 82  
    *Coffy*, 82, 92, 105n2  
    music, 55  
    other movies, 108, 109, 110  
    *Scream, Blacula, Scream*, 58–59  
American Mutoscope, 37  
American Releasing Corporation, 48  
Amos, John, 109  
Anderson, Eddie “Rochester,” 10  
Anderson, Pat, 109  
Aneric, Neda, 109

Angel, Mike, 107  
Arkoff, Samuel Z., 48, 92, 103n12  
Armitage, George, 108  
Arnold, Jack, 107  
Assenoh, Akwasi, 53  
Avery, Margaret, 108  
Ayers, Susan, 107

## B

*Bad Boys* (1995), 80  
Bail, Charles, 92, 108  
Bassett, Angela, 98, 106n7  
Bell, Jeannie, 91, 109  
Bennett, Lerone, Jr., 41, 42, 106n3  
Benshoff, Harry M., 51  
Berger, William, 109  
Bernhard, Harvey, 68, 76  
Berry, Halle, 98, 106n7  
Berry, William Earl, 67, 68  
Best, Willie, 47  
*Beverly Hills Cop* (1984–1994), 80  
Bey, Marki, 109  
*Big Momma’s House* (2000), 80  
*Billboard*  
    review, *Birth of a Race*, 4  
*Birth of a Nation, The* (1915)  
    gross, 3  
    reviews, 2–3  
    sexuality, black, 20, 41  
    Southern mythology, 88–89  
    stereotypes of blacks, 3, 80, 81  
    story line, 1–2, 99n2  
*Birth of a Race* (1918)  
    as inspiration, 99n3  
    reviews, 4–5  
    scriptwriter Elaine Sterne, 4

- story line, 4  
*Birthright* (1924), 5  
 Black, Gregory D., 9, 10, 11, 13, 63, 64  
 Black audiences/community, 9, 96  
     *Cleopatra Jones*, 89–90  
     *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*, 92  
     *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, 38  
     effects of consumer power, 6, 100n13  
     Grier, Pam, 91–92  
     Hallelujah criticism, 9  
     *The Mack*, 76, 77  
     outcry against stereotypes, 17  
     *Sweetback*, 44  
*Black Belt Jones* (1974), 20, 107  
 Black Berets, 38  
*Blackboard Jungle, The* (1955), 17  
*Black Caesar* (1973), 20, 68, 81, 105n8, 107  
*Black Connection, The* (1974), 107  
*Blackenstein* (1973), 58–60, 103n9, 107  
 Black exploitation films, see Blaxploitation films  
*Black Gestapo, The* (1975), 107  
*Black Girl* (1972), 107  
*Black Gunn* (1972), 107  
*Black Lolita* (1975), 107  
 Black Panther Party, 43, 74, 75, 76, 105n12, 13  
 Blacks  
     as the Other, 4, 8, 53, 54, 70  
     attitudes toward whites, 39  
     heroes/heroines, 18, 19, 67, 81, 82, 87  
     objects of ridicule, 1  
     sex/sexuality, 18, 19–20  
     sociopolitical status, 1  
     women  
         and the women's movement, 87  
         as action heroes, 80, 81, 87, 91, 93  
         as sex objects, 81, 87  
         violence against, 81  
     stereotypes, see Stereotypes  
*Black Six* (1974), 107  
 Black Stuntmen's Association, 83  
*Blacula*, see chapter 2  
     Blacula  
         as the Other, 53–54  
         as victim of fate, 51  
         differences from predecessors, 51–52  
         first black horror monster, 47  
     cast, 49–50, 107  
     comments on blacks' position today, 55  
     director, 49, 56, 107  
     financial performance, 57  
     image of, 50  
     marketing, 56  
     music, 55  
     reviews, 56–57  
     revisions to *Dracula*, 54  
     revisions to genre, 51, 52, 53, 55, 61, 94  
     screenwriters, 49, 56, 58  
     sequel, 58–59  
     setting, 53  
     slavery allegory, 54  
     story, 50–51  
     wise elder, 52–53  
 Blaxploitation films, 20, 49, see individual movies, actors, directors  
     advertising/marketing, 20, 22, see also individual films  
     communications, 21  
     decline and demise, 25, 61, 93, 94, 96, 97, 106n6  
     definitions, 17, 18, 20, 22  
     emergence of block busters, 96–97  
     financial performance, 65, see also individual films  
     genres, see also Detective genre, Horror genre, Gangster genre, and Cop action genre  
         expansion of genres, 25  
         genre as process, 23–25  
     germinal films, 18  
     music, 55, see also individual films  
     precursors/preludes, 18, 47  
     reason for existence, 22–23  
     settings, 19, see also individual films  
     subsequent genre, 97–98  
     term as reductionistic, 22  
     themes, 20, 41, 97  
*Blood Couple* (1973), 61  
 Blue, Vida, 107  
 Bocchicchio, Alfeo, 58  
*Body and Soul* (1924), 5  
 Bogle, Donald  
     *Birth of a Nation*, 2–3  
     *Birth of a Race*, 4–5  
     Brown, Jim, 18, 19, 101n16  
     *Coffy*, 84, 105n2  
     Davis, Ossie, 101n2  
     *Hearts in Dixie*, 7  
     *Home of the Brave*, 13  
     Micheaux, Oscar, 5  
     *Pinky*, 14  
     setting, 19

- Sidney Poitier, 17  
   stereotypes, 3, 17, 80, 81, 105n1  
   *Super Fly*, 65  
*Bone* (1975), 107  
*Bones* (2001), 61  
 Bookbinder, Robert, 63  
 Bordwell, David, 36  
*Boss Nigger* (1975), 107  
 Bourbon, Barbara, 107  
 Box Office International Pictures, 107  
 Boyd, Todd, 105n11  
 Bradshaw, Booker, 108  
 Brent, Angela, 107  
 Brock, Bertha, 83  
 Brooks, Tom, 110  
 Brown, Jim, 18, 83, 95, 101n16, 107, 109  
 Brown, Peter, 108  
 Brown, Tony, 66  
 Browne, Roscoe Lee, 109  
*Brute, The* (1920), 5  
 Bryanston Distributing, 107  
 Buck as stereotype, 3, 101n16  
*Bucktown* (1975), 107  
*Bullitt* (1968), 78, 84, 86  
 Burrell, Walter, 95  
*Bus Is Coming, The* (1971), 107  
 Butters, Gerald, 37  
 Byron, Stuart, 66
- C**
- Caan, James, 72  
*Cabin in the Sky* (1943), 10–11, 32  
 Cadillacs, 73, 75  
 Cagney, James, 70  
 Calhoun, Dria, 107  
 Cambridge, Godfrey, 28, 102n4, 108  
 Campus, Michael, 68, 69, 76, 77, 77,  
   105n13, 108  
 Canby, Vincent, 77, 92  
*Candyman* (1992), 61  
*Candy Tangerine Man* (1975), 107  
 Cannon, J. D., 29  
 Capone, Al, 62, 63, 70  
 Cardos, John, 109  
 Carmichael, Stokely, 38  
 Carroll, Noël, 47, 102n3  
 Carter, Terry, 60, 107, 108  
 Casey, Bernie, 68, 84, 108  
 Cash, Rosalind, 91, 108  
 Cawelti, John, 64  
 Challenger, Rudy, 108, 109  
 Charles, Sonny, 107  
 Chase, Annazette, 110  
 Chavez, Andres, 50, 56, 82, 83, 91  
 Cheadle, Don, 98  
 Cheatwood, Ed, 107  
 Chelminski, Rudolph, 27, 40  
*Chicago Defender*  
   *Blacula*, 57  
   *The Mack*, article, 77  
*Chicago Sun Times*  
   *Sweetback* review, 43  
*Christian Century*  
   *Cotton Comes to Harlem* review, 40  
 Cimber, Matt, 107, 108  
 Cinema Epoch, 107  
 Cinemation Industries, 42, 107, 109  
 Cinerama Releasing Corporation, 68, 94,  
   107, 108  
 Cioffi, Charles, 108  
 Civil Rights Movement, 17, 54  
 Clark, Bruce D., 108  
 Clark, Randall, 22  
 Clark, Randall, 22  
 Clayton, Horace, 9  
*Cleopatra Jones* (1973), 19, 22, 108  
   advertising/marketing, 83  
   cast, 83–84, 107  
   character, 86–87, 88, 93  
   community, 84, 85  
   contrasted with Coffy, 87  
   Corvettes, 86  
   crew, 83  
   femininity, 87  
   financial performance, 90  
   gender equality, 86  
   influence, 93, 94  
   music, 90  
   reviews, 90  
   revisions to genre, 80, 84  
   script, 81  
   sequel, 92  
   sex, 87  
   story, 84  
   themes, 84  
*Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*  
   (1975), 92–93, 106n6, 108  
 Clouse, Robert, 107  
 Cloward, Richard, 70, 105n10  
 Coalition against Blaxploitation (CAB), 95,  
   96  
*Coffy* (1973), 20, 92, 107  
   antecedent to *Cleopatra Jones*, 80  
   cast, 82, 83



- financial performance, 83
- first black heroine, 81
- influence, 93
- reviews, 83
- sequel, 106n5
- as sex object, 82
- story, 82
- Cohen, Larry, 107, 108
- Cole, Albert, 108
- Columbia Pictures, 20, 41, 107, 109
- Come Back Charleston Blue* (1972), 44, 108
- Comedy
  - Cotton*, see *Cotton Comes to Harlem*
- Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), 38, 94, 96
- Cook, Pam, 1, 22–23
- Cool Breeze* (1972), 108
- Coons, the stereotype, 3, 47, 81, 105n1
- Cop action genre, see chapter 4
  - Bullitt*, 79
  - classics and other examples, 79–80
  - definition of action film, 78
  - female protagonist, 84
  - heroes/heroines, 79, 81, 84
  - origins, 78
  - sex, 79, 87
  - themes, 78
  - violence, 79
- Corman, Roger, 92, 103n5
- Corvettes, 86
- Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), see chapter 1, 94, 107
  - Back to Africa Program, 34, 35, 36
  - blaxploitation film movement, 18, 20, 27, 40, 44
  - cast, 28–29, 102n4
  - detectives, significance of, 31–32
  - differences between black and white
    - detectives, 30–31
  - Davis, Ossie, 28, 39, 40, 102n3, 108
  - financial performance, 22, 39, 40, 65
  - humor, 35–36
  - hybrid, 36
  - issues addressed, 34
  - music, 38–39
  - narrative structure, 29
  - novel versus screenplay, 33, 34
  - racial satire, 38
  - reviews, 40
  - sequel, 44
  - setting, 32–34, 53
  - slavery, 34–35
  - stereotypes, 37
  - story line, 29, 30
  - title meaning, 34–35
  - whites, 37–38, 39
- Crain, Jeanne, 14
- Crain, William, 49, 56, 57, 58, 103n7, 107
- Cripps, Thomas, 6–7
- Crothers, Scatman, 107, 108
- Crowther, Bruce, 88
- Cully, Zara, 109
- D**
  - Dallas Morning News*
    - Home of the Brave* review, 13
  - Daly, Cindy, 107
  - Dancing Dark Boy* (1895), 1
  - Dandridge, Dorothy, 100n10
  - Daniels, John, 107
  - Darktown Strutters* (1975), 108
  - Davis, Ossie, 28, 39, 40, 98, 101n2,3, 107, 108
  - Davis, Pepper, 107
  - Davis, Robert Hartford, 107
  - De Anda, Peter, 108
  - Dee, Ruby, 28
  - Defiant Ones, The* (1958), 15, 17
  - Dekova, Frank, 109
  - DeMuth, Jerry, 40
  - De Sue, Joe, 50, 107
  - Detective genre
    - Cotton*, see *Cotton Comes to Harlem*
    - definition, 26
    - race differences, 30
  - Detroit 9000* (1973), 108
  - Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), 80
  - Dickinson, Angie, 93
  - Die Hard* (1998–2007), 80
  - Dimension Pictures, 108
  - Dirty Dozen, The* (1967), 18
  - Dirty Harry*, (1971), 79, 84
  - di Sant'Angelo, Giorgio, 87
  - Discovery Plot, 47
  - Dixon, Ivan, 109
  - Dixon, Thomas, 1
  - Dobson, Tamara, 93, 98, 106n6, 108
    - action heroine, 91
    - background, 84
    - contrast with Cleopatra Jones, 87
    - influence, 87
    - review, 90, 91, 92
    - and women's liberation movement, 88–89

- Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* (1976), 61  
 Doherty, Thomas, 20, 21, 22  
*Dolemite* (1975), 108  
 Domestic servant as stereotype, 14, 80–81  
 DoQui, Robert, 108, 109  
 Dorsey, Kim, 109  
 Douglas, Gordon, 109  
*Dracula* (1931), 46–47, 50, 51  
 Dreier, Alex, 108  
 DuBois, W. E. B., 30  
 Duggan, Andrew, 107  
 Dunaway, Faye, 88
- E**
- Earth, Wind, and Fire, 20  
 Eastwood, Clint, 80  
 Edwards, James, 13  
 Elder, Lonnie, 96  
 Eller, Carl, 107  
 Elliott, William, 82, 108  
 Elsie, Kimberley, 106n7  
*Encore* magazine  
     *Cleopatra Jones* review, 90  
*Esquire* magazine  
     *Cotton* review, 40  
*Esence* magazine, 83  
 Ethnic detectives, 20–30  
 Equality, gender, 86  
 Evans, Mike, 108  
*Evening Post*  
     *Birth of a Nation* review, 3  
 Everett, Anna, 4, 5  
 Exclusive International Pictures, 59, 103n9,  
     107  
*Exorcist, The* (1973), 60, 61, 96, 103n11  
 Exploitation films, 20–22
- F**
- Falana, Lola, 108  
 Fanfare Films, 109  
 Fargas, Antonio, 84, 108  
 Faulkner, Stephanie, 107  
 Femmes fatale in films noir, 88  
 Fenty, Philip, 65, 104n4  
 Films noir, 26–27, 88, 101n1  
*Final Comedown, The* (1972), 108  
 Finlay, Frank, 109  
 Finn, Michael, 107  
*For Massa's Sake* (1911), 1  
*Four Brothers* (2005), 77  
 Fox, Vivica A., 106n7  
 Fox Film Corporation, 7
- Foxx, Jamie, 100n14  
 Foxx, Redd, 28, 108  
*Foxy Brown* (1973), 19, 91, 92, 106n5,  
     108  
 Franklin, Carl, 98  
 Franklin, Wendell, 107  
 Frazer, Dan, 84  
 Frazier, Sheila, 91, 109  
*Freedom Journal*, 4  
 Freeman, Morgan, 98  
 Freese, Peter, 30–31, 35  
 French, Victor, 108  
*French Connection, The* (1971), 79  
*Friday Foster* (1975), 91, 108  
 Friedan, Betty, 85, 86  
 Frost, Lee, 107, 109
- G**
- Gaines, Jane M., 5  
 Galloway, Leata, 39  
 Gangster genre, see chapter 3  
     anti-establishment gangster, 64  
     beginnings, 62  
     *Black Caesar* (1973), 81  
     conventions/iconography  
         cars, 63, 65, 69, 72, 73  
         city or black ghetto setting, 73  
         clothing, 63, 65, 69, 72, 73  
         death of gangster, 64, 71, 88  
         guns, 63  
         women, 63, 69, 72  
     issues, 73–74  
     *Little Caesar* (1931), 62–63, 70, 71, 72  
     and Production Code, 63–64, 66, 71  
     *Public Enemy, The* (1931), 63  
     revisions to the genre, 70, 71, 73  
     rural gangster, 64  
     *Scarface: The Shame of a Nation* (1932),  
         63  
         as tragic hero, 71  
         wartime gangster, 64  
*Ganja & Hess* (1973), 61  
 Gans, Herbert, 16  
 Garvey, Marcus, 35, 36  
 Gehring, Wes D., 36  
 Gelder, Ken, 51  
 General Film Corp., 108, 110  
 Genre film, definition, 15  
*Get Christy Love* (1974), 93  
 Gibbs, Marla, 109  
 Gibson, Stephen, 107  
 Gifford, Alan, 108

Ginza, Joey, 107  
 Girdler, William, 60, 61, 103n12, 107, 109, 110  
 Gish, Lillian, 89  
 Glaesner, Verina, 92  
*Godfather, The* (1972), 72, 71, 77, 96  
 Gold, Ronald, 38, 40  
 Goldman, Martin, 108  
 Goldwyn, Samuel, Jr., 28  
*Gone with the Wind* (1939), 20, 80, 81, 88  
 Gooding, Cuba, Jr., 100n14  
 Gordon, Don, 68, 76, 109  
 Gordon, Larry, 82  
 Gossett, Lou, Jr., 100n14  
 Graham, William A., 108, 109  
 Graves, Teresa, 93, 109  
*Green Pastures, The* (1936), 32  
 Greenspun, Roger, 57, 58, 66  
 Grey, Dobie, 108  
 Grier, Pam, 93, 98, 103n12, 107, 109  
   career, 91  
   *Coffy*, 20, 82, 83, 91, 105n2, 108  
   *Scream, Blacula, Scream*, 58, 109  
 Grier, Rosie, 109  
 Griffith, D. W., 1, 2, 12, 99n1  
 Griffin, Junius, 44, 66, 94–95, 96, 102n7  
 Guerrero, Ed, 17, 96, 100n13  
 Guillerman, John, 109  
 Gunn, Moses, 109

## H

Hackman, Gene, 80  
 Hagen, Kevin, 109  
 Hale, Barbara, 109  
 Haley, Alex, 55, 104n7  
*Hallelujah* (1929), 7, 8–9, 32, 100n6  
 Hamilton, Bernie, 108  
*Hammer* (1972), 50, 108  
 Hare, Nathan, 88  
 Harlem Renaissance, 7, 99n4  
 Harris, Bob, 109  
 Harris, Julius, 108, 109  
 Hart, John, 59, 107  
 Hayes, Isaac, 20, 55, 90, 98, 109, 110  
 Hays, Will, 63, 64  
*Hearts in Dixie* (1929), 7–8  
*Hell Up in Harlem* (1973), 108  
 Hendry, Gloria, 91, 107, 108, 109  
 Heroes/heroines, 19, 79, 81  
 Hill, George H.  
   *Blacula*, 55  
   *Cleopatra Jones*, 90

*Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*, 92  
*Coffy*, 83  
*The Mack*, 68  
*Scream, Blacula, Scream*, 58  
*Super Fly*, 65, 66, 67, 104n7  
 Hill, Jack, 82, 92, 106n5, 107, 108  
 Himes, Chester (*Cotton Comes to Harlem*)  
   background, 27–28  
   comment on Back to Africa Program, 34, 35, 36  
   detectives, 30–32  
   humor, 36  
   novel versus screenplay, 33, 34  
*Hit Man* (1972), 68, 105n8, 105n8, 108  
*Hollywood Homicide* (2003), 80  
*Home of the Brave* (1949), 13–14, 14, 15, 16  
*Homesteader, The* (1919), 5  
*Honky* (1971), 108  
 Honthaner, Ron, 108  
 Hooks, Robert, 109  
 Hoover, Phil, 107Horne, Lena, 10  
 Horowitz, Daniel, 86  
 Horror genre  
   *Abby*, see *Abby*  
   anomalous character, 45  
   black actors/actresses, 47  
   *Blacula*, see *Blacula*  
   enobling sources, 45–46  
   *Night of the Living Dead*, see *Night of the Living Dead*  
   origins, 45–46  
   other black-themed films, 61  
   popularity of, 47  
   *Scream, Blacula, Scream*, 58–59  
   wise elder, 52–53  
 Horton, Luci, 87  
*House on Skull Mountain* (1974), 108  
 Howard, Robert, 107  
*How to Be a Player* (1977), 77  
 Hughes Corp., 53  
 Hutch, Willie, 75, 76  
 Hybrid films, 36, 47

## I

*Imitation of Life* (1934), 80, 81  
*Imitation of Life* (1958), 15, 19, 81, 89, 105n9  
 Imrie, Kathy, 109  
 Independent black film movement  
   decline and demise, 5–6

Lincoln Motion Picture Company, 5, 48  
 problems, 5–6  
 resurgence, 6  
*Sweetback*, 102n6  
 Independent International Pictures, 108  
 Innis, Roy, 96  
*In the Heat of the Night* (1967), 17  
*Intruder in the Dust* (1950), 15  
 Isserman, Maurice, 85, 86

## J

Jack H. Harris Enterprises, 108  
*Jackie Brown* (1977), 105n2  
 Jackson, Millie, 90  
 Jackson, Roosevelt, 59, 107  
 Jackson, Samuel L., 98  
 James, Darius, 103n10  
 Jeannette, Gertrude, 108  
 Jeffries, Herb, 6  
 Jewell, K. Sue, 80  
 Johnson, Arthur (screen name Raymond St. Jaques), 28, 108  
 Johnson, Duane, 47  
 Johnson, George, 5, 99n3  
 Johnson, J. J., 90  
 Johnson, Noble P., 5, 99n3  
 Johnson, Rafer, 109  
 Jones, Jerry, 108  
*Juice* (1992), 77  
 Julien, Max, 109  
*Cleopatra Jones*, 81, 87  
*Coffy*, 81, 83  
*The Mack*, 68, 70, 74, 76, 77, 105n14, 108

## K

Kaplan, Jonathan, 109, 110  
 Kaminsky, Stuart  
   absence of black gangsters in film, 65  
   black gangster films, 72  
   cop action genre, 78, 79, 87  
   gangster genre, 63, 64, 71, 72, 73  
 Kaye, Celia, 108  
 Kazin, Michael, 85, 86  
 Kearney, Cheryl, 83  
 Keaton, Buster, 21  
 Kelljan, Bob, 58, 109  
 Kelly, Jim, 19, 107, 109  
 Kelly, Paula, 109  
 Kenyatta, Caro, 92  
 King, Casey, 107  
 King, Mae, 80

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 101n15  
 King, Neal, 78, 79, 84  
 King, Tony, 107  
 Klemesrud, Judy, 87, 89  
 Knight, Arthur, 40  
 Koenig, Raymond, 49, 56, 58  
 Koppes, Clayton R., 9, 10, 11, 13  
 Kotto, Yaphet, 107, 108, 109  
 Koven, Mikel J., 54, 57, 59, 61, 75, 103n12  
 Kramer, Stanley, 13, 15, 100n9  
 Ku Klux Klan, 1, 2, 10

## L

*Lady Cocoa* (1975), 108  
*Ladykillers, The* (2004), 80  
*Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), 96  
 Landau, Martin, 107  
 Lasel, Lincoln, 108  
 Latifah, Queen, 106n7  
 Laurents, Arthur, 13  
 Laws, Sam, 108  
 Lawson, Richard, 58  
 Layne, G. Cornell, 60  
 Leab, Daniel  
   *Birth of a Nation*, 2  
   *Birth of a Race*, 4  
   *Cabin in the Sky*, 11  
   effect of television on movies, 12  
   film financing, 6  
   *Hallelujah*, 8, 9  
   *Hearts in Dixie*, 7  
   *Home of the Brave*, 13  
   100 Rifles, 18  
   *Super Fly*, 65  
 Ledeman, Michael, 46  
 Lee, Carl, 109  
 Lee, Don L., 43  
 Lee, Spike, 97  
*Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), 108  
 Leigh, Barbara, 107  
 Leigh, Vivian, 89  
 LeRoy, Mervyn, 12, 62  
*Lethal Weapon* (1987–1998), 80  
 Levin, Henry, 109  
 Levy, William A., 59, 107  
*Life* magazine  
   *Cotton* review, 40  
*Lilies of the Field* (1963), 17  
 Lincoln Motion Picture Company, 5, 48  
*Lincoln's Dream*, see *Birth of a Race*  
 Ling, Mi, 92  
*Little Caesar* (1931), 62–63, 70, 71, 72

- Lockhart, Calvin, 28, 98, 108  
 Lopez, Daniel, 78  
 Lord, Daniel J., 63, see also Production Code  
*Los Angeles Examiner* newspaper  
   *Hearts in Dixie* review, 8  
*Los Angeles Times* newspaper  
   *Cleopatra Jones* review, 90  
   *The Mack* review, 76  
*Lost Boundaries* (1949), 15  
 Louie, Sweet, 107  
 Love, Yolanda, 107  
 Lugosi, Bela, 46, 51  
 Lund, Art, 107  
 Lynching as theme, 5
- M**
- Mabunda, L. Mpho, 28  
 MacDonald, Andrew, 30  
 MacDonald, Gina, 30  
*Mack, The* (1973), 19, 108  
   American Dream, 70  
   cast, 68–69  
   director, Michael Campus, 68, 69, 108  
   financial performance, 76  
   influence, 77, 94  
   music, 75–76, 77  
   narrative structure, 69  
   pimping/pimps, 69, 70, 72, 75, 76,  
     105n11  
   producer, Harvey Bernhard, 68, 76  
   reviews, 76–77  
   revisions to genre, 70, 71, 72, 77  
   screenwriter, 68  
   setting, 69, 72  
   story, 70–71, 72, 75  
   themes, 74  
   Ward brothers, 69  
*Mackin' Ain't Easy* (2002), 69, 105n11, 13  
 Magill, Frank N., 29  
 Maland, Charles J., 11–12, 15  
 Malcolm X, 38, 54  
 Mammy as stereotype, 2, 3, 80, 89  
 Mamuwalde, 49, 50, 54, 55, see also *Blacula*  
 Mankovsky, Isidore, 58  
 Mapp, Edward, 7, 8, 13  
 Marks, Arthur, 107, 108  
 Marshall, Don, 109  
 Marshall, William, 49, 50, 56, 58, 59, 98,  
   107, 108, 109, see also *Blacula*  
 Martin, D'Urville, 107, 108, 109  
 Martinez, Diane, 50, 56, 82, 83, 92  
 Martinez, Gerald, 50, 56, 82, 83, 92  
 Marx, Bill, 58  
 Maslansky, Paul, 109  
 Massood, Paula J., 27, 32–33, 35  
 Mayama, Miko, 109  
 Mayfield, Curtis, 20, 55, 66  
 McCovey, Walter, 83  
 McGee, Vonetta, 50, 68, 83, 107, 108, 109  
 McKinney, Bill, 84  
 McNeil, Claudia, 107  
 McQueen, Butterfly, 81  
 McQueen, Steve, 78, 80, see also *Bullitt*  
*Mean Mother* (1974), 108  
 Mebane, Mary E., 81, 87  
*Melinda* (1972), 20, 50, 108  
*Menace to Society* (1993), 77  
 Metcalfe, Ken, 109  
 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 8, 68, 94,  
   108, 109  
 Micheaux, Oscar, 5  
 Mickens, John “Goldie,” 68  
 Milland, Ray, 109  
*Millionaire* (1927), 5  
 Minnelli, Vincent, 10, see also *Cabin in the*  
   *Sky*  
 Mintz, Steven, 3  
 Miscegenation as theme, 5, 56, 81  
 Mitchell, Don, 109  
 Mitchell, Gwenn, 109  
*Monthly Film Bulletin*, 92  
 Moody, Lynne, 109  
 Moonstone Entertainment, 107, 108  
 Moore, Juanita, 69, 105n9, 108, 110  
 Moore, Lisa, 108  
 Moore, Melba, 39  
 Moore, Rudy Ray, 108  
 Moran, Bugsy, 62  
 Moreland, Mantan, 47  
 Moritz, Joseph, 48  
 Morton, Patricia, 88  
 Moses, Gilbert, 110  
 Mosley, Roger E., 68, 108, 109  
 Motion Picture Association of America  
   (MPAA), 41, 104n2  
 Motion Picture Producers and Distributors  
   of America (MPPDA), 63  
 Motown Records, 75, 102n5  
 Muhammad, Elijah, 54  
 Muhammad, Sakinah, 39  
 Muir, John Kenneth, 52, 53, 54, 55  
 Mulatto as stereotype, 3, 80, 81  
 Murdock, George, 109

- Murphy, Eddie, 97  
 Murphy, Frederick Douglas, 93  
 Muse, Clarence, 7  
 Music, 7, 20, 90, 91, 102n5  
     *Blacula*, 55  
     *Cleopatra Jones*, 55  
     *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, 38–39  
     *Hallelujah*, 8  
     *Hearts in Dixie*, 7  
     *The Mack*, 75–76, 77  
     *Scream, Blacula, Scream*, 58  
     *Super Fly*, 66  
     *Sweetback*, 43  
*Musketeers of Pig Alley, The*, 73
- N**  
 Nachbar, Jack, 26  
 Nash, Jay Robert, 65, 97  
 National Association for the Advancement  
     of Colored People (NAACP)  
     and *Birth of a Nation*, 3  
     Junius Griffin/Beverly Hills–Hollywood  
     NAACP, 44, 66, 94–95, 102n7  
     and *The Mack*, 77  
     and *Super Fly*, 66  
     Richard Thomas/Pittsburgh NAACP, 77  
 Nation of Islam, 54, 55  
 Neale, Steve, 36, 64, 94  
 Negro films, see All-black productions  
 Negro problem films, see Social problem  
     films  
 Neilson, John, 108  
 Nelly, 77, 105n14  
 Neuhaus, Mel, 46  
*New Jack City* (1991), 77  
*Newsweek*  
     Ossie Davis, 40  
 Newton, Huey P., 43, 74, 105n12, 105n1  
 New World Pictures, 107, 108, 109  
*New York Times*  
     Abby review, 60  
     *Birth of a Nation* review, 2  
     on black movies, 95  
     *Blacula* review, 57  
     *Cleopatra Jones* article, 87  
     *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*  
     review, 92  
     *Coffy* review, 83  
     *The Mack* review, 76  
     *Scream, Blacula, Scream* review, 58  
     *Super Fly* review, 66  
 Nicholas, Denise, 107, 109  
 Nicholson, James H., 48  
*Nigger in the Woodpile, A* (1904), 1  
*Night of the Living Dead* (1968), 48, 103n4  
 Noble, Peter, 8  
 Nolte, Nick, 97  
*Nosferatu* (1922), 46  
*No Way Out*, 15, 17
- O**  
 Office of War and Information (OWI), 9–10  
 Old South, 1, 88–89  
 O’Neal, Ron, 65, 66, 77, 95, 98, 104n7, 109  
*100 Rifles* (1968), 18, 101n17  
 Oppression, 20, 34, 70, 75  
*Original Gangstas* (1996), 77  
 Orman, Roscoe, 110  
 Other, the  
     blacks as, 4, 8, 53, 54, 70  
     *Blacula*, 53  
 Outkast, 77, 105n14  
 Overreacher Plot, 102n3
- P**  
 Pace, Judy, 91, 108, 109  
 Pace, Owen, 109  
 Page, Gene, 55, 56  
 Paramount Pictures, 20, 108, 109  
 Parish, James Robert  
     *Blackenstein*, 59  
     *Blacula*, 55  
     *Cleopatra Jones*, 90  
     *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*,  
     92  
     *Coffy*, 83  
     *The Mack*, 68  
     *Scream, Blacula, Scream*, 58  
     *Super Fly*, 65, 66, 67, 104n7  
 Parks, Gordon, Jr., 19, 65, 66, 104n5, 109  
 Parks, Gordon, Sr., 24, 95, 98, 102n3,  
     104n5, 109  
 Parks, Trina, 108  
 Parsons, Louella, 8  
 Passing, as theme, 5  
*Patch of Blue, A* (1965), 17  
 Patterson, Lindsay, 32, 40, 102n4  
 Peckinpah, Sam, 33  
 Perkins, Millie, 108  
 Perl, Arnold, 28  
 Perry, Lincoln (Stepin Fetchit), 7, 95, 99n5  
 Perry, Rod, 107  
 Perry, Roger, 109  
 Peters, Brock, 107

- Peterson, Maurice, 83  
*Pickaninnies Doing a Dance* (1894), 1  
 Pickett, James, 110  
 Pierson, Eric, 5, 48, 103n6  
 Pinkett-Smith, Jada, 106n7  
*Pinky* (1949), 14–15, 16, 81, 100n10, 11  
*Pittsburgh Courier*  
   *Hallelujah* review, 9  
 Poitier, Sidney, 17–18, 100n14, 101n15  
 Pollack, Barry, 108  
 Poole, Robert J., 68, 76  
 Popwell, Albert, 92, 108  
 Powell, Adam Clayton, Jr., 10  
 Priest, Youngblood, 19, 52, 65, 67, 68, 81, 104n4,7  
 Production Code  
   authors, 15, 104n2  
   effect on movies, 63, 64, 66, 71, 100n12  
   premise, 63  
 Pryor, Richard, 69, 108  
*Public Enemy, The* (1931), 63, 70, 73  
 Purdy, Jim, 15
- Q**  
 Quarry, Robert, 109  
 Quigley, Martin, 15, 100n12
- R**  
 Race differences, 9–10, 11  
   between social problem films, 17  
 Race films, 7, 100n8  
 Racial bigotry, 71, 85  
 Racial intolerance, 85  
 Raeburn, John, 62  
*Raisin in the Sun, A* (1961), 17  
 Rasmussen, Randy Loren, 46, 51, 52  
 Rasulala, Thalmus, 49, 107, 108, 109  
*Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916), 5, 99n3  
 Reconstruction, 1, 2  
 Reed, Lady, 108  
 Reed, Sandra, 107  
 Rees, Betty Ann, 109  
 Reid, Mark A., 42  
 Rhodes, Hari, 108  
 Richardson, Al, 108  
*Rio Conchos* (1964), 18  
 Roberts, Randy, 3  
 Robertson, Hugh A., 108  
 Robinson, Charles, 107  
 Robinson, Ernest, 83  
 Roffman, Peter, 15
- Rolling Stone* magazine  
   *Super Fly* review, 66  
 Romero, George A., 47  
 Roosevelt, Franklin D., 9  
 Ross, Stanley Ralph, 65, 79  
 Roundtree, Richard, 20, 98, 109  
 Roxy Theater, 76  
 Run Run Shaw Studios, 92  
 Ryall, Tom, 45, 102n1
- S**  
 Sabol, Dick, 107  
 Safen, Denise, 108  
 St. Jaques, Raymond, see Arthur Johnson  
 Salertri, Frank R., 59  
 Sands, Diana, 110  
 Sanford, Isabel, 109  
 San Francisco International Film Festival, 41  
 Santiago, Cirio H., 109  
*Saturday Review*  
   *Cotton* review, 40  
 Scales, Hubert, 109  
*Scarface: The Shame of a Nation* (1932), 63, 73  
 Schatz, Thomas, 15, 26  
 Schellerup, Henning, 109  
 Scott, Emmett J., 4  
*Scream, Blacula, Scream* (1973), 58–59, 109  
*Set It Off*, 106n7  
 Sex/sexuality, 19–20, 37  
   *Black Caesar*, 81  
   black men, 37  
   *Coffy*, 105n2  
   cop action hero sex, 87  
   *Dracula*, 46  
   emancipation orgasm, 42–43  
   *Shaft's Big Score*, 81  
   *Super Fly*, 67  
   *Sweetback*, 42, 43, 44  
   watermelon as metaphor, 37  
 Shaft, John, 18, 52  
*Shaft* (1971), 18, 19, 94, 104n5, 109  
   financial performance, 65  
   imitation of *Sweetback*, 44  
   music, 55, 90, see also Isaac Hayes  
*Shaft* (2000), 77  
*Shaft's Big Score* (1972), 81, 109  
*Shaft in Africa* (1973), 50, 109  
 Shaw, Stan, 108, 109  
 'Sheba, Baby' (1975), 91, 103n12, 109  
 Simon, Joe, 90  
 Sims, Mike B., 107

- Sims, Yvonne Denise, 87, 93  
 Singleton, John, 98  
 Sirk, Douglas, 105n9  
 Sitkoff, Harvard, 38  
*Slams, The* (1973), 309  
*Slaughter* (1973), 109  
*Slaughter's Big Rip-Off* (1973), 109  
 Slavery, 34, 54  
 Sloane, Paul, 713  
 Smith, Will, 98  
 Smith, William, 107, 108, 109  
 Social problem films  
   definitions, 11–12, 15–16, 16  
   entertainment, 15  
   examples, 12–14, 17, 81  
   message, 15, 34  
   Negro social problem films, 13–15, 16  
*Son of Satan* (1922), 5  
 Soul, 38  
*Soul of Nigger Charley, The* (1973), 20, 109  
*Soul Soldier* (1970), 109  
*Sounder* (1972), 96  
 Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), 95  
 Southern mythology, 88–89  
 Spangler, Larry G., 109  
*Speed* (1994), 80  
 Speed, Carol, 60, 68, 76, 107  
*Split, The* (1968), 18  
 Starrett, Jack, 83, 90, 92, 108, 109  
 Stepin Fetchit, see Lincoln Perry  
 Stereotypes, 2, 6, 7, 8–9, 11, 14  
   gay and lesbian, 89  
   major types, 3–4  
     bucks, 3  
     coons, 3, 8, 47, 80, 81, 105n1  
     domestic servant, 14, 80–81  
     Toms, 3, 17, 105n1  
     mammies, 2, 3, 80, 89  
     sex objects, 80, 82, 87  
     tragic mulattoes, 3, 14, 80, 81  
   modern examples, 80  
   reactions against, see Black audiences/communities  
   watermelon, 37  
   women, 80–81, 91  
 Stevens, Bobby, 107  
 Stevens, Paul, 108  
 Stevens, Stella, 92, 108, 109  
 Stoker, Austin, 107, 109, 110  
 Stoker, Bram, 46, 51, 102n2  
 Stone, Ivory, 59, 107  
*Stormy Weather* (1943), 10  
*Story of a Three Day Pass, The* (1968), 41  
*Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), 77  
 Strickfadden, Kenneth, 59  
 Stroud, Don, 109  
 Stubbs, Louise, 107  
 Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), 38  
*Sugar Hill* (1974), 61, 109  
*Super Fly* (1972), 18, 19, 52, 55, 109  
   as antecedent, 65  
   cast, 65  
   depiction of women, 81  
   director, 65  
   financial performance, 65, 67  
   first black gangster, 65  
   imitation of *Sweetback*, 44  
   marketing, 67  
   music, 66  
   reviews, 66–67  
   as role model, 67, 68  
   screenwriter, 65  
   sequel, 104n7  
   setting, 104n6  
   story, 65–66, 71–72  
*Super Fly T. N. T.* (1973), 104n7, 109  
 Sweeney, Louise, 32  
 Sweeting, Tony, 107  
*Sweet Jesus Preacher Man* (1973), 109  
*Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* (1970), 109  
   financial performance, 43–44, 65, 102n6  
   music, 43  
   reviews, 41, 42–43, 44  
   role in blaxploitation movement, 18, 27, 40–41, 94  
   sex, 43, 44, 106n3  
   story line, 19, 41, 42  
   violence, 44  
 Sykes, Brenda, 84, 91, 107, 108
- T**  
*Tales from the Hood* (1995), 61  
 Tarantino, Quentin, 105n2  
 Tennant, William, 82  
 Tessari, Duccio, 109  
*That Man Bolt* (1973), 109  
 Themes of black movies, 5  
   drug use/drug dealers, 20, 44, 67, 97  
   lynching, 5  
   miscegenation, 5, 56, 81  
   oppression, 20, 70, 75



- passing, 5, 14  
 police brutality, 20, 84  
 prostitution, 97  
 racial profiling, 20  
 violence, 41, 42, 44, 46, 79, 81, 97  
*Things with Two Heads, The* (1972), 109  
 Thomas, Kevin, 76, 90  
 Thomas, Richard, 77  
*Thomasine and Bushrod* (1974), 50, 109  
 Thompson, Kristin, 36  
*Thousands Cheers* (1943), 10  
*Three the Hard Way* (1973), 19, 109  
 Tien, Ni, 107  
*Time* (magazine)  
     *Home of the Brave* review, 13  
 Tipton, George, 39  
*T. N. T. Jackson*, 91, 109  
 Tobak, James, 18  
*Together Brothers*(1974), 109  
 Tokenism, 100n7  
 Tolbert, Janette C., 90  
 Toms, see Stereotypes, major types  
 Tordjmann, Fabien, 58  
 Torn, Rip, 109  
 Torres, Joan, 49, 56, 58  
*Tough Guys* (1974), 109  
*Trooper of Troop K, The* (1916), 5  
*Trouble Man* (1972), 109  
*Truck Turner* (1974), 110  
 Tudor, Andrew, 45  
 Turman, Glynn, 109  
 Turner, Lana, 89  
 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation  
     *Pinky* (1949), 14  
     other movies, 108, 109  
 Twoness, 30
- U**
- Uggams, Leslie, 107  
 United Artists, 13, 22, 38, 94, 108  
 Universal Negro Improvement Association  
     (UNIA), 35  
 Universal Studios, 46, 109, 110
- V**
- Van Deburg, William L., 74  
 Van Patten, Joyce, 107  
 Van Peebles, Melvin, 20, 27, 28, 82, 102n3,  
     109  
     background, 41  
     criticism, 42–43  
     and the MPAA, 41–42
- Variety*  
     *Abby* review, 60  
     *Birth of a Nation* review, 2–3  
     *Birth of a Race* review, 4  
     *Blacula* review, 56  
     *Cleopatra Jones* review, 90  
     *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, 38  
     exploitation films, 21  
     *Hallelujah* review, 9  
     *The Mack*, 76  
     *Pinky* review, 15  
     *Scream, Blacula, Scream* review, 58  
     *Sweetback* article, 44  
 Ventura, Leno, 109  
 Video City Productions, 107  
 Vidor, King, 8, 9, 100n6  
 Vietnam War, 17, 59  
 Villains/Villainesses, whites as, 19, 88, 89,  
     92  
 Villard, Garrison  
     *Birth of a Nation* review, 3  
 Violence  
     *Dracula*, 46  
     *Sweet Sweetback's*, 41, 42, 44
- W**
- Waite, Ralph, 109  
 Walker, Joyce, 110  
 Ward, Andrew, brother of Frank D., 69  
 Ward, Frank D., 69, 74, 75, 76  
 Ward, Ted, brother of Frank D., 69  
 Ward, Willie, brother of Frank D., 69  
 Warner Bros., 94  
     and *Abby* lawsuit, 60, 61  
     *Cleopatra Jones*, 22, 82, 83, 90, 92  
     *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*,  
         92  
     *Coffy*, 82  
     other movies, 107, 108, 109  
     *Super Fly*, 65  
 Warren, Mark, 108  
 Warshow, Robert, 71  
 Washington, Denzel, 98, 100n14  
 Washington, Gene, 107, 108  
 Washington, Sam, 43  
 Washington, Shirley, 108  
 Wassington, Ann, 83  
*Watermelon Feast*, A 37  
*Watermelon Man* (1970), 28, 41, 102n3  
 Waters, Ethel, 10, 14  
 Watkins, Sam, 108  
 Watson, William, 68, 76

- Weaver, Richard, 57  
 Webster, Byron, 109  
 Weeks, Alan, 107, 110  
 Welch, Raquel, 18, 101n17  
 Weiler, A. H., 60, 83  
 Wells, Chuck, 109  
 Whites  
   as enemy, 70  
   bigots, 70, 71, 106n3  
   black versus, 75, 84, 88  
 Williams, Billy Dee, 108  
 Williams, Dick Anthony, 109  
 Williams, Oscar, 108  
 Williams, Paul, 83  
 Williams, Whitney, 21  
 Williamson, Fred, 19, 20, 68, 107, 108, 109  
*Willie Dynamite* (1974), 110  
 Wilson, Anthony, 109  
 Winfield, Paul, 109  
 Winters, Shelley, 84, 88, 106n4, 108  
*Within Our Gates* (1920), 5  
 Witney, William, 108
- Wood, Gerald C., 45, 46  
*Wooring and the Wedding of a Coon, The*  
 (1905), 1, 7
- Women  
   as iconography, 69  
   black, see Blacks, women  
   sex objects, 72, 81, 82  
   and violence, 81  
   white, 67, 88
- Women's Liberation Movement, 85, 86, 88  
   black women and, 87, 88
- Writing out, 100n7
- Y**  
 Yates, Peter, 78
- Z**  
 Zanuck, Darryl F., 15  
*Zebra Killer* (1974), 103n12, 110  
 Zimbert, Richard, 96  
 Zito, Zach, 46  
 Zittel, C. F., 3