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*African American Youth-Identity, Invisible Powers &
Hypnotic Blaxploitation-Themed Film Tropes:
From Superfly & Drug Culture to Black Panther & Wakanda*

by

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Introduction

On February 14, 1967, the New York Times, published an article that alleged the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was responsible for Operation Mockingbird. Its function supposedly is to manipulate media and other related entities for the Agency's clandestine interests (Goldfarb, 2021). Beginning in the 1960's and 1970's, public curiosity had grown in the CIA. The secretive government intelligence-gathering entity became a familiar plot tool in Hollywood motion pictures. In 1973, the Agency's director, Richard Helms, in a historical first, allowed a Hollywood film to be shot at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia (Redmond, 2017).

Research has shown since the late—1940's that African American youth have suffered from identity issues. The Clarks' introduced the Negro self-hatred thesis. They focused on racial identification, ego development and self-consciousness in "Negro" children and included the infamous "doll tests" (Clark & Clark, 1947). For some time, academics have continued to cite self-esteem issues that negatively affect an unspecified age range of African American students especially in U.S. history classrooms (Allen, 2001; Bailey, 2005; Cross, 1991).

The influence of art within modern American society overall and it's classrooms depends on a "visual culture" context. The educational relevance of the "visual culture" is found in its use as a form of free information, that is important in imparting knowledge to viewers (Freedman, 2003). This visual-cultural art is inclusive of the Hollywood big-screen cinematic film medium. A particular film genre known as blaxploitation cinema was introduced in 1971. Perhaps the most influential African American movie ever released was *Superfly* (1972). Blaxploitation films were hoped by white producers to have a big appeal on the lives of African Americans living in the inner-cities and poor rural areas. The cast of black characters in these movies were in a mainstream spotlight that helped to increase Hollywood ticket woes (Wright, 2014).

The Blaxploitation era emerged during the aftermath of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement (CRM), led by the non-violent philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Also, the Black Panther political party was on the scene as the CRM was waning. They

were influenced by Malcolm X's self-defense philosophical teachings. During this turbulent period, COINTELPRO, a government-sanctioned entity was alive and well. Its central mission was 'to prevent the rise of a [black] messiah, who could unify and electrify the militant black movement' (Evanzz, 1992). Supposedly, COINTELPRO was disbanded after Malcolm X in 1965, Dr. King in 1968, and several key Black Panthers were killed.

Still in the 1960's, before the onslaught of blaxploitation films hypnotizing the minds of African Americans, researchers had cautioned being affixed to movie heroes. The scholars indicated that influential actors with a strong screen presence and engage in negative aggressions as role models could be problematic. Their performance could bring about the same reinforcement of aggressive behavior by filmgoers (Hicks, 1965). This type of mimicked behavior supported the hypothesis that to expose young people to aggression-oriented movies would probably have consequences. More than likely they would see a rise in incidents of the same conscious-aggressive behavioral patterns (Loovas, 1961).

African Americans' lack of "conscious building processes" has led to "self-destructive" behavior (Akbar, 2006). A major flaw of the shortcomings of blaxploitation films is that young black moviegoers being influenced by the thoughts about violence (Lott, 1991). These inner-city movies presented themes involving criminal life, gangsters, hustling, drug dealing, drug abuse and pimping. After the blaxploitation period ended around 1976, there would already be in place, the federal War on Drugs.

This War on Drugs would greatly affect the poor African American urban neighborhoods. Many of these black urbanites influenced by the allure of blaxploitation and its promotion of the new drug culture will become casualties of it by incarceration. Throughout the 1980s, the crack epidemic flooded black inner cities. It caused changes in laws that gave African Americans longer serving time. The prison-industrial complex was now under way as the states' needed prisons full. More and more of these black drug dealers and users would supply this criminal justice system pipeline.

As poor African American communities were continuing to deal with the War

on Drugs campaign mainly targeting them, a new cultural art form was born in the late 1980's. It was called hip-hop and its accompanying rap music that occupied the minds of black youth. Soon afterwards, gangsta rap would follow suit, and its young black adherents would glorify the criminal lifestyles, gangs and drug dealers. A new blaxploitation era comes forth in the 1990's, as the prisons take inmates to-be from amongst them. A new cadre of blaxploitation films will also appear to hypnotize this generation of poor urban blacks. Lastly, into the twentieth-first century, a hypnotic trance will befall African American youth regarding the land of Wakanda. This mystical place originated in the *Black Panther* comic series that will later appear in theaters everywhere.

This transdisciplinary approach presents a central socio-political analysis of government-influenced “invisible powers.” Thus, discussion can be drawn from the academic disciplines of African American Studies, film, history, sociology, psychology, criminology, political science and American government. A major driving force of this paper is film-centered. It seeks to first address the point of departure of the blaxploitation era and its popular and influential hit film, *Superfly*. Secondly, it looks at the movie's hypnotizing influence on African American youth and its lingering generational effects, even until the release of the marvel movie *Black Panther*.

Central Intelligence Agency

The CIA began as the OSS, an acronym of the U.S. Military's Office of Strategic Services, in 1947, shortly after World War II ended. At its core the CIA is a secret society. Its authority evolves inside of its plausible deniability and unchecked manipulation of information. The powers vested in the CIA called for a hypnotic-style propaganda to be used upon targeted people prior to the main centralized event taking place. The CIA was bound by the original goals of an OSS memorandum, “Motion pictures are a potent force in attitude formation, and attitudes are the basis of action and morale.” The agency had formulated their motto from the books, *The Quiet American*, *Animal Farm* and *1984*. These books turned into films were created during the 1950's Cold War period. (Redmond, 2017, pp. 300-301).

In order to keep control of the mainstream populations overwhelming approval

and patriotic allegiance government entities like the CIA have utilized popular media. Especially, they have relied upon Hollywood as the essential mechanism with which to engulf the American population propagandized information. Such has come about by concocting a bent view of history. This includes, promotion of undoubting values and secret agendas. To engineer the story at hand, even when the government has engaged in schemes in opposition to fundamental American values. Such as the supposed rule of law and democratic governance as founded upon by principles of the Constitution. The CIA along with the Pentagon just happen to be the two foremost all-powerful and controlling institutions involved in this form of propaganda in Hollywood. They have created various tactical strategies over many decades nearly reaching scientific perfection (Redmond, 2017).

The CIA's collaboration with Hollywood was able to make anti-government /CIA books and turn them into popular pro-America propaganda films without divulging any CIA involvement. This is proof of the Agency's hidden power to influence and control people's thoughts and opinions via the vehicle of cinematic expression. This connection between the government and Hollywood continued to grow. An established working network was formed. This collaborative relationship marked the future of Hollywood and a new era of CIA film propaganda (Redmond, 2017).

One can easily determine that the legality of the CIA's domestic involvement with Hollywood should long ago, have never been allowed by Congressional oversight. Especially, since the CIA is lawfully charged with a domain of espionage affairs specifically in the international realm. The altering of a Hollywood screenplay for the explicit intent of turning it into a motion picture is a lot of "food" for thought. Such was clearly a tool of direct propaganda to mislead the American people. Afterall, in the 1950's, government agencies were prohibited for using any appropriated funds for propaganda objectives. Despite the morally and ethnically questionable actions by the CIA, their connections with Hollywood appear to have not been disbanded (Redmond, 2017).

African American Cinema

The historical era of black cinema can be separated into four intervals: Early Silent Films (1890 – 1920), Early ‘Soundies’ and Race Films (1920 – 1945), Post – War Problem Films (1945 – 1960), and Contemporary Films (Lott, 1991). When addressing the issues of black film tropes, movie critics struggle with the question of the conceptual structure of cinema expressed within black identity and experience. In the academic work, *Black Film as Genre*, Thomas Cripps, illustrates how problematic it is to determine a suitable meaning for black cinema. Especially, as it is associated almost wholly to motion pictures related to real-life moments in black neighborhoods. He believes such stories be created from the writing, directing and performing of blacks. In essence, he points out that African American cinema is for a predominantly black audience (1978).

Within the political compass of black filmmaking standards, African Americans have developed a serious uneasiness with their historical past. This includes stereotypical-representation in the Hollywood film industry. Such an apprehensiveness gives black folk a gut-wrenching feeling and concern for any black cinema promoting demeaning images. The portrayal of black characters in the movie industry has allowed African Americans to condemn awful films about blacks made by both black and white filmmakers. Some critical analysis of so-called black films may suffer from low-budgeting. This can fall short of being aesthetically satisfying even within problematic political scenarios. Some African American commentators have called for film critics to factor in the politics associated with black filmmaking practices. This type of understanding is tied to “aesthetics” that involve certain need issues. They are steeped in cultural perception as well as adjoined to the reality of authority vested in the film producer and distributor (Lott, 1991).

Therefore, the use of “aesthetics” into a more political accounting of black filmmaking narratives would bring needed spotlight on a cinematic black cultural-criteria. Such is an existential focus on the African American community. In other words, issues concerning the negative black film image have been cited by black leaders. As far as the tropes associated with black cinema, none has gained more

attention than blaxploitation (Lott, 1991).

Emergence of Blaxploitation

The attributes of blaxploitation films and plots were commonly displayed in the 1970s. They are composed of various themes. A description is provided by Watkins (2014),

Blaxploitation films often had some of the following characteristics: (1) an urban geographic setting (the ghetto) in the North, Midwest, or West, (2) an over emphasis on outwardly expressive acts of blackness, (3) a soundtrack of contemporary soul or rhythm and blues music, (4) Black protagonists and White antagonists, (5) promiscuous men and women, and (6) an ample supply of action and violence. The characters were frequently one-dimensional and lacked depth. The plots were simplistic and dealt with one of the following themes: (1) rising from rags to riches, (2) revenge, (3) escaping a life of crime and immoral behavior, or (4) defeating White antagonists (also known as “the man”) (p. 66).

The most profound film to showcase the CIA in the 1970’s short-lived blaxploitation period was *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* (1973). It may be the most radical motion picture that was ever made to depict the Agency. It was Ivan Dixon’s adaptation version of Sam Greenlee’s novel. This was based on the recording of revolution by Blacks in American cities (Willmetts, 2017). Is it coincidental that this blaxploitation movie *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* was released a year after the drug-glorifying cinematic flick *Superfly*? Perhaps no film has captured the minds of young African American filmgoers as the hypnotic alluring effects of *Superfly* did.

The story of *The Spook Who Sat By The Door*, had a protagonist, Dan Freeman played by Lawrence Cook, who emerges as the first black CIA officer. He receives the position after the Agency is mandated to end their racially discriminatory hiring policy. It was a motivated senator who seizes upon a chance to pander the African American vote. To appease the elected official, the Agency hires a small number of middle-class black recruits, who are condescendingly told ‘represent the best of your race.’ This directive came as the black recruits were next going to an intrusive training regimen. The film serves as a scathing criticism of America’s black-bourgeoisie, their pretentious

alma maters satisfied with fools gold sense of privilege. As well as them being within a structure of white dominance and oblivious to the struggling ghetto inhabitants (Willmetts, 2017, p. 236).

Freeman, unlike the other recruits, chooses to deal with his distrust of the appeasement path of the all-white CIA recruiters by using body language. His technique promotes integrationist liberal idealism. A twitch in his eye of betrayal is a message to the movie audience that he has a different reason for undertaking the Agency's training. His type of ominous schooling is inclusive of learning modes of guerilla warfare. Freeman is the only person out of the group of African Americans to finish the course. He receives a reward for his proclivity as a learner by being assigned 'reproduction section chief of menial Xerox dogsbody' at the Agency (Willmetts, 2017. P. 236)

Freeman's [an interesting name Free-Man's] white superiors allow him a more all-embracing role as the Agency's token black man. They seat him at the front desk to make an impression on visitors regarding the CIA's integration compliance. They have him to guide tours of the Langley facility for groups of liberal senators. In his fifth year at the Agency, he has decided to leave the agency. He tells the CIA Director that he plans to go back to Chicago to 'help my people help themselves.' This is a cause that seems to the director to be worthwhile. He believes the young black recruit has been validated by his effective indoctrination into the Agency (Willmetts, 2017, p. 236).

Actually, Freeman has total opposite plans to help his people to help themselves. Even with the fact that the CIA's instruction gave him the tools needed to accomplish his desire for a revolutionary black insurrection. Upon his arrival in Chicago, he shares his CIA training in routines of insurgency to some inner-city hustlers. He is seeking to help them from old blaxploitation archetypes into new well-disciplined revolutionary leaders. They call themselves the 'The Cobras.' They train in military combatant scenarios, while robbing banks to provide funds for other activities. They also raided the National Guard Armory in Chicago to buildup weaponry (Willmetts, 2017).

The key to the successfulness of 'The Cobras' is their stealthiness. Freeman told his recruits, 'a black man with a mop, tray or broom in his hand can go damn near anywhere in this country, and a smiling black man is invisible.' He demonstrates his

message by having one of them dress like a janitor. The janitor in disguise then proceeded to engage in stealing a pipe without being detected. This is successfully done in the presence of an unobservant Chicago business executive. The white law enforcement are never suspicious of 'The Cobras.' Never suspecting them of being the culprits behind the bank robbery and the National Guard. The reason being is they consider the heists too sophisticated to be carried out by African Americans (Willmetts, 2017).

These racial prejudices provide blind areas that are able to be exploited by Freeman and his followers. Once, 'The Cobras' at last come under suspicion as thought they are operating under the guidance of a Soviet intelligence apparatus. The FBI and CIA, thus pursue to neutralize [kill] their imagined white leader of 'The Cobras.' To 'cut off the head and the snake dies.' Freeman has already taken counter steps preparing his cohorts so that 'each man is trained to handle positions three steps ahead of him in grade.' The trope of black invisibility and its exploitative black power advocacy seems to undermine the existential white power bastion (Willmetts, 2017, p. 238).

The blaxploitation era emerged during a time when African Americans were hoping for more positive portrayals of black culture in Hollywood. They had grown tired of the days of the heavily exaggerated and subservient race films. The term blaxploitation came about as a reference to black-oriented films produced in Hollywood starting in 1971, and lasting until around 1976. It was such a short existence for the production of those black blaxploitation movies targeted at black audiences (Lott, 1991). However, reruns of the once popular blaxploitation flicks have been shown to new generations of African Americans since its supposed demise (Lott, 1991).

Juniu Griffin, was the president of the Beverly Hills-Hollywood branch of the NAACP. He coined the term "blaxploitation cinema." The description of this new film genre centered around it usually being produced and written by whites. The aims of these filmmakers tinged on the intent of garnering a profit in economically-challenged black communities (Wright, 2014).

A central issue of the commercialized black films of this period was a lack of independent productions. This occurred because the black independent producers were

in reliance upon major distributors. The production and distribution of a film greatly shapes the aesthetic characterization of a film. During the time of financial crisis, some Hollywood studios became aware of a large black audience craving for black presence on the screen. This reality caused a quick reaction by the studios to exploit the box office blueprint of the black hero (beginning with male and later female), which in actuality became the hallmark for the blaxploitation flick (Lott, 1991).

Some film critics contended that blaxploitation was a “degraded cinema.” Others argue the fact that the genre made a lasting impression. This was done even as it withered into an empty state by the end of the 1970s. The major Hollywood studios began to make less blaxploitation movies by 1974. Many independents ceased making them within around three years (Watkins, 2014) .

Researchers present at the start of the blaxploitation period shared their concerns about its influence. The first Hollywood blaxploitation movie to be released was *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), (Lott, 1991). It resonated with black audiences because it reflected imagery of self-defense by a black hero fighting against racism-induced police brutality. Next was *Shaft* (1971), about John Shaft, the protagonist, a private investigator, hired by a Harlem gangster to free his daughter from the mafia (Cunningham, 2018). Then *Superfly* (1972) was showing at theaters across America, that included many black communities. The scholars were emphatically warning for moviegoers to gain understanding about films. That they were indeed the most influential method of extracting and developing aggressive behavioral displays. This is further realized after their exposure to such aggressive heroes and heroine characters in motion pictures (Bryan & Schwarz, 1971; Meyer, 1972).

Blaxploitation is a historical index and an expression that labels a film that falls short of representing the “aesthetic” ideals of black culture accurately. A major flaw of the shortcomings of blaxploitation period movies is that young African Americans could be influenced by thoughts that whirlwind around violent images (Lott, 1991). The influence upon black young people watching black life in blaxploitation-style on the screen came with consequences.

Black Inner-City Addiction to *Superfly*

Most notably, of the blaxploitation trope was the film, *Superfly*. It caught the attention of well-known researchers (Bryan & Schwarz, 1971; Meyer, 1972; Poussaint, 1974). Usually unrevealed, the inspirational impetus for the making of *Superfly* appears to have originated from a sequence of journalistic writings. Richard Woodley was the author of this story published in New York Magazine in 1971. It would be a year before *Superfly* would be released at the box office. Woodley gave an account of the popularity of the drug known as cocaine. He went undercover with a Harlem drug dealer identified as “Jimmy.” Woodley took note of his style of living, business dealings, speaking style, ambitions and hopes for the future (Ryfle, 2019).

The writings of Woodley would later be merged into the book, *Dealer: Portrait of a Cocaine Merchant*, also released in 1971. The book seems to be a model for the movie *Superfly* to follow. Its cover showcases an up-close man’s chest covered with hair embellished by a coke spoon. This book cover image mirrors an opening film shot in *Superfly*. As well, the phrase “Superfly” is also written as one word in the book and is meant to describe the prime drug the pusher has to offer. Even though drug-themed movies were escalating during the 1960’s, by the end of decade public curiosity waned. However, the drug experience people were seeing in the movies became sensationalized by media reporting on increased drug crimes and addiction in America (Ryfle, 2019).

African American psychiatrist, Dr. Alvin Poussaint, two years after the release of the sensational drug-dealing movie, he made an eye-opening revelation. He revealed, an incredible surge in drug use by black youngsters after the release of the alluring motion picture, *Superfly*. He expressed that the blaxploitation genre exploited black people, and that it was advancing the newest manner of negatively-charged racist stereotypical machinations. This type of film idolatry was oppressing African Americans by their glorification of role models drenching in criminality. Such a deranged pursuit in life, he believed, would manifest into a working vocation within America’s prison system (1974).

Previously, Hollywood was responsible for presenting African Americans on the big screen as happy-go-lucky, shiftless, and lazy, sexually promiscuous and

mentally inferior. Black Americans appear to have bought into the negative stereotypes prior to the release of *Superfly*. After the hit movie reached the psyche of black youth they readily were willing to adapt to its perverse notions and attitudes. This was like a partnership with a dangerous drug culture that was exalted by the film. It presented an enticing life-style choice for poor black youth. The behavioral patterns of the protagonist in *Superfly* were very impressionable. In addition, his smooth communication style attracted countless young black males (Poussaint, 1974).

Superfly as a film box office success linked grandeurs of realism and reverie in the imagination of young African Americans. The fanfare drawn to the authentic ghetto cinematic representation of the movie was beyond surreal. Black filmgoers were vicariously identifying themselves through the ambitions of the protagonist, Priest. Street talk about the realness of the movie portraying a brother seeking to beat the racially aggressive American System was rampant in numerous cities across the nation (Quinn, 2010). Warrington Hudlin, an African American filmmaker, recalls his first time watching *Superfly* in East St. Louis. He gleefully says, "...the entire theater, including myself leapt to our feet and stood and screamed and applauded and stamped our feet...it connected psychically with a people at a certain place and time" (Quinn, 2010, p. 99). Some other comments by the black movie audiences were, "Superfly is what's happening right here on the street," along with, "That's the way it is." And of course, the youthful black female drooling over comment, "Priest is super fine and super bad" (Quinn, 2010, p. 100).

The movie's marketing campaign captivated the realism of the Harlem locality. The film automatically garnered a certain street credulity. This is what some may refer to as "ghetto authenticity." There were African American public relations and advertisement companies that were sought after to market the blaxploitation cinematic flick (Quinn, 2010). The acclaimed film, *Superfly*, was produced on a paltry budget by today's standard. It was shot for an amount around 170,000 dollars. The movie utilized previous survival themes associated with other African American films. These details included anger-filled expressions and bourgeois low-budget reality. Also, a dependence on music scores to push forward the narrative. *Superfly* made use of tropes

that came from old gangster movies. It used the known and expected “one last heist before I go legit” type of story scheme (Ryfle, 2019).

There were effective strategies put in place in the marketing of *Superfly*. It was necessary to have screening lists for key players within the black community. These immediate impact people in Harlem, were hairdressers, barbers, bartenders and random street people. This selling method helped to enhance the film’s bravado of an attractive ghetto accuracy. The approach tremendously helped to aggrandize heightened interest among its young audience, especially black youth (Quinn, 2010).

During the filming of *Superfly* there were encounters with local gangs who sought to collect funds for protection. The gang leaders rationalized that their presence would allow filmmakers to shoot in the neighboring area without any issues. Overall, the producer sought to connect with the community in which filming took place. *Superfly*, it was reported to be the first black-themed film with an all-black and Puerto Rican technical crew, of which it was covered on the front pages of the trade papers (Ryfle, 2019).

The city of Harlem where *Superfly* was filmed, was also referred to as the Negro Metropolis. Back in 1918 until the mid-1930’s, there was an intellectual and cultural revival of African American music, dance, art, fashion, literature, theater, politics and scholarship. This was during the known as the Harlem Renaissance. The movie *Superfly*, was filmed on location in the decadence of Harlem. It had not been long since the mid-1960’s uprising called the Harlem Race Riot of 1964, when residents rose up. They were demonstrating against the killing of a fifteen-year-old boy, James Powell, by a police-officer as other officers looked on (Ryfle, 2019). The movie *Superfly* exposes three key socio-political problems faced by African American youth, which are “different versions of power: (1) the White police officers who represent the slave masters on the plantation, (2) Priest who is the only Black man with power, and (3) the other Black male costars who represent the powerless masses” (Wright, 2014, p. 74).

At the early stages of the post-civil rights era, a pop-culture dedicated to the production and circulation of black political identities cautioned that *Superfly* must be viewed seriously. It must be juxtaposed with the entire cadre of blaxploitation movies

during its heyday. *Superfly* was zealously viewed by black youth. There were high levels of repeat business for the drug-cultured theme movie. It was a runaway hit in black movie theaters and earned over 12 million dollars. A 1972, Jet Magazine cover-story presented the question, how was *Superfly* altering the “behavior of blacks?” Mary Pattilo-McCoy reasoned that the movie “consumed” black young people. During this period racial and political strife was rampant across the country. It is clear there was an overwhelming black audience appeal to the *Superfly* flick. For the first time a movie had the unlimited potential to hypnotically influence the minds of black youth (Quinn, 2010).

Superfly's socially and politically constructed message resoundingly promoted resistance against a systematically racially oppressive American establishment. This type of oppression evident in the film was one that had surfaced thematically. It was from decades of racial aggression targeting African Americans throughout many cities across America. The film also presented magnetizing mythological aspirations for struggling working class black men. Through action genre mechanisms an allowance to black hopes and interest were spoken to. The realities of the racial wealth gap was front and center. This presented a concentrated focus on alternate opportunistic measures to attain status and money. According to Lindsay Patterson, among the few African American critics to praise *Superfly* on its release. She stated, “The movie presented an important message about the failure of American society to freely provide legitimate opportunities for its bright but impoverished young black men” (Quinn, 2010, p. 99).

The roots of *Superfly* can be traced to another successful movie, an Italian \ drama, *Seduto Alla Sua Destra* (“Sitting to his right”). It stars the popular black actor, Woody Strode. This film is a fictional portrayal of Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese independent leader who was eliminated by assassination in 1961 (Ryfle, 2019). In regards to the actual murder of Lumumba, it has been revealed that the U.S. government was involved. Louis Armstrong was sent on a so-called goodwill tour of the Congo, unbeknownst to him at the same time, Lumumba was being overthrown by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), (Evanzz, 1992). So, getting back to the aforementioned

film, it would be made into a blaxploitation drama. The name switched to *Black Jesus*, and it was released in America in 1971, one year before *Superfly* would be on theater screens across the United States. By the way, *Black Jesus* was produced by Indie distributor, Sig Shore, who coincidentally would go on to produce *Superfly*. Shore even wrote the script (Ryfle, 2019).

Ron O'Neal, the star of *Superfly*, as Priest, was an accomplished and award-winning actor on Broadway. He became an overnight superstar after the release of the popular blaxploitation movie, *Superfly*. The character Priest, was a self-made African American low-level criminalized con-man. Paradoxically, he possesses a determination that eclipses non-stop waves of cyclical criminal and dangerous encounters. This is because “the man” has recruited him. Yet, despite the unfortunate roadblocks of the system, Priest relies upon his street-smartness to give him the success he believes he deserves. He is a cold-blooded opportunistic capitalist. He is a man who lacks humor, but seizes the moment to ingest cocaine through his nostrils. After the act is done, there is never an indication it was pleasurable for him (Ryfle, 2019).

The business-minded spirit of Priest fuels the movie. He is involved in a lucrative interracial drug operation, that involves the cocaine trade from his mentor and father-figure, Scatter. He learns from Scatter how he can pull off his big score. It is Scatter, a former dealer, who Priest looked up to and followed into the practice of dealing. Scatter is now a lawful small businessman with some reluctance, but he agrees to help Priest achieve his “getting over” scheme. He is certainly ready to risk all things for his young mentee. He realizes the important necessity to pass down social capital to the next generation (Quinn, 2010).

Actually, the film, *Superfly*, is more of a commentary of the American dream and the pursuit of capitalism, other than the glorifying of a life of drug dealing and crime. It portrays the outlaws taking heed to the revered words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The famous civil rights leader gave a speech at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on a blistering hot summer day in 1963. He said, “one hundred years later, the Negro still living on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.” Really, the alleged bad man in the film is attempting to escape this

‘island.’ Priest has a commitment to make one last score, so that he is able to retire from being a hustler. His aim is to begin to live a legitimate life. In order to fulfill his goal, he receives a loan of 30 keys (kilos) of cocaine from his mentor, Scatter (Wright, 2014, p. 73).

Superfly, highlights the consequences of dealing cocaine. The strong social and political tenseness of the time period relied tremendously on the present-day music and lyrics (Ryfle, 2019). The role of Curtis Mayfield’s “Superfly” soundtrack was to provide justification for vice activities surrounding Priest’s actions. After all, the film does heavily push a glorification of drug dealing message. A news that was not embraced by African American leaders or churchgoers (Quinn, 2010). Mayfield’s song “Pusherman” is a driving thematic and melodic force of *Superfly* (Ryfle, 2019). The monster hit song, according to a famed commentator, was “blasting from every radio and sound system in black America” (Quinn, 2010). A similar hip-hop rap scenario would play out some seventeen years later in Spike Lee’s, *Do the Right Thing*, (1989). It was the group Public Enemy’s memorable “Fight the Power” black nationalist beat. It too was also being etched into the psyche of African American moviegoers.

The film *Superfly*, begins with a focus shot on two drug addicts on a popular Harlem street corner on 125th street. They are determined to get their dope fix via robbery. Then Mayfield’s soulful-rock and rhythmic “Little Child Running Wild” starts as the movie’s musical groove captures the attention of the audience. The piece is more than accompanying instruments. Mayfield’s lyrics provide commentary on the scene as it occurs. Within a progression of transitions leading to Priest’s apartment, he is lying next to a nude white girlfriend. Next, Mayfield’s words reveal the lead character on point, “can’t reason with the pusher man / finance is all that he understands.” The music continues as Priest wears his long fashionable fur coat and wide-brimmed hat. He zips his pant-fly and places himself in the driver’s seat of his customized Cadillac El Dorado equipped with a big size grille (Ryfle, 2019, p. 14).

Black youth present at the time of the opening run of *Superfly*, and even later generations, were greatly influenced by the movie’s myriad of appeal. They applauded Priest’s ideological goal of beating the establishment. They were awed by Priest’s

ability to seize opportunities in fast money enrichment. Therefore, the impactful overtures of *Superfly*, gave its fanbase of African American young people a thought-provoking message. It implied to many out of work individuals, to get what you desire even if illegal methods are actively employed. This tempting subliminal solicitation of *Superfly* would open drug culture floodgates in poverty-stricken black urban neighborhoods (Quinn, 2010). It was the social and political environment of drug culture made to look cool that would inspire and give hope to a new generation of black want-to-be gangsters (Ryfle, 2019).

The intonations of Curtis Mayfield's captivating music, from the *Superfly* movie brought forth a mental mystification to a certain type of "hustling masculinity." It captured the imaginations of young African Americans, especially males. In the song that bore the same title of the film, "Superfly," belts out, "Hard to understand, what a hell of a man / This cat of the slum, had a mind, wasn't dumb." Nelson George, a huge music critic, said of the *Superfly* soundtrack, that it is "arguably the single greatest black pop effort of the decade." Within the soundtrack's contour of lyrics, vocal rawness, and instrumental dynamics of guitars, horns and flutes, is the master musical mind of Mayfield. He symbiotically helps to bring the full hypnotizing effect of the *Superfly* movie into the consciousness of Black America (Quinn, 2010, p. 97).

Curtis Mayfield delineates the praxis of black power in his soundtrack that glamorizes the use of drugs. Some critics attacked misgivings of Mayfield's drug acceptance message embedded in his music. Mayfield did maintain a stance that his song, "Superfly," did embody a positive effect. Basically, he alluded to the fact that the movie, *Superfly*, was actually where a "black dude" really got over. Mayfield attests to this in the lyrics of his infamous "Superfly" refrain. The catchy phrase repeats "tryin' to get over." The socio-politically conscious musical artist, Mayfield, often drew paralleling modes of economic cooperative uplift. They were between black entrepreneurialism in the film plot and his soundtrack lyrics. As well as the opportunities opened through the film and music's production (Quinn, 2010).

Despite the recurring effects of the Black Power Movement, when *Superfly* surfaced, it did not advocate any type of militancy. The thought of black power activism

involvement was chided by Priest. In a crucial scene, a few “black militants” approached Priest and his associate Eddie. They challenged them to be down with the cause and to give to the people. One of them spewed, “We’re out here trying to build a new nation for black people. It’s time for you to start paying some dues.” Priest responds with a straight-face, that they begin, ‘killing whitey’ ...until you can do that, go sing your marching songs somewhere else.” The militants were somewhat fascinated by his words and they retreated (Quinn, 2010, p. 101).

The American media had propagandized the phrase “black power.” Many African Americans didn’t associate militancy to the eyebrow-raising message. They clearly understood the reality of the foremost need for real economic empowerment for the overall black community. There were some black militants who were highly critical of the non-appeal of *Superfly* to black power political dynamism (Quinn, 2010).

Superfly was made on a low-budget largely by amateurs. They were driven up and comers. This successful cinematic crime hit was by Gordon Parks, Jr. Already mentioned, producer of *Superfly*, Sig Shore, disclosed that the movie was ninety-one minutes, and the soundtrack masked the shortness of the film. He also said that the script he wrote was only forty-five pages. In reality, the movie seized a moment when black Americans were battling for “self-determination” across their communities in the country and also on the big screen. The movie’s socio-political directive often detracted with its early 70’s vintage funky clothing styles. It also showcased the movie’s main character, Priest, driving around in his revamped car (Ryfle, 2019).

As the movie *Superfly* plays out, Priest’s dilemma is not a struggle with a malfeasance of taking drugs or being a dealer. He appears most concerned with the sort of man he is arcing into. He becomes the person who may at some point take the life of another person, or his own life may be taken by someone else. He discloses his plan to his business partner to promptly sell away one million dollars in drugs. Then, he wants to begin a meaningful life with his girlfriend, Georgia. As his plan is put into action, he faces betrayal by Fat Freddie, a drug peddler who works for him, as well as Eddie. His business associate just cannot quit the lifestyle he’s become accustomed to. The greedy business partner counts his attainments. An “eight-track stereo, color television in every

room, and can snort half a piece of dope every day. That's the American Dream." Fortunately, for Priest, he is able to leave the drug life behind and enter into a new adventure ahead (Ryfle, 2019, p. 6).

Within a historical context *Superfly* was a milestone showcase of African American involvement in large-scale releasing of a motion picture. The movie's narrative reflects Harlem cocaine traffickers living the American dream through the lenses of hustlers. Selling dope is an experience that provides a business dynamic from the bowels of white-controlled power bastions. Outside of the business moral-issue themes found in this blaxploitation sensation, opportunistic chances in economic upliftment were offered. Outside of the characters in the film "getting over," so too did unprecedented opportunities for African Americans occur. They were rewarded for being contributors to the making of the film (Quinn, 2010).

In *Superfly*, Priest viewed cocaine as a very marketable commodity. A real entrepreneurial enterprise of sort. The consumption of the drug was in demand in his city of Harlem. It is portrayed in the film as being a hip thing to be associated with. A prestigious product that was a booster for dealers' image unlike heroin and the stigmas attached to its debilitating effects (Quinn, 2010).

Superfly espoused values that promoted black entrepreneurial individualism. Sadly, these ideals were not agents of change, what transpired was a troubling and alarming surge in drug consumption. *Superfly* presented impressionable young blacks with occupational choices. Data indicates the film mesmerized black youth into drug dealing as factories in urban areas permanently closed throughout America. In the 1970's, the film's bling-bling appeal led to a chance for ghetto entrepreneurs to lure numbers of youth into drug enterprising. The phenomena the movie opened up to black urban youngsters, has been described as "the black urban answer to capitalism" (Quinn, 2010, p. 102).

Superfly's unrepentant characterization of and deficiency in moralizing about drug dealing and drug abuse came under attack by protestors from various groups. The filmmakers were accused of degrading the black community. They brought forth a high profile media hit against the movie. The controversy created by the movie was being

exposed by an array of prominent black activists such as Vernon Jordan. He was the executive director of the National Urban League. Marion Barry, the initial chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He was also the acting president of SNCC, the District of Columbia School Board.

It would become Blacks Against Narcotics and Genocide (BANG), which was to counter movies like *Superfly*. This organization went after films that endorsed drug abuse and dealers, as well as adverse stereotypes about the African American community. BANG utilized sound trucks and handed out more than 40,000 flyers to boycott the film, *Superfly*. Barry pointed out, “*Superfly* says the way to get a Cadillac is to hustle rather than to get a job” (Wright, 2014, p. 64).

A gathering of black parents protested at a hotel where O’Neal was holding a press conference to promote *Superfly*. He disavowed the allegations that the film glorified criminal activity. He reasoned that the cinematic production addressed circumstantial situations many African Americans encounter. He also argued the wherewithal blacks come across as they seek ways to empower themselves. He mentioned, about certain microcosms of struggling black males to attain power, agency, and define their self-identity in American society. A place he says, that has historically sought to disenfranchise and emasculate them since the period of slavery (Wright, 2014).

The blaxploitation films like *Superfly* had a “black bad man” or “outlaw” as a significant role in this genre. It is thought that such bad men stories were more than just an admiration of deviant behavior and African-American anti-heroes. Despite their shortcomings, those motion pictures were of importance due to the fact that they represented “symbols of power for disenfranchised masses. This type of big screen motion picture also helped blacks to “develop identities through daring tales of adventure and mischief” (Wright, 2014, p. 82).

Superfly was a sensational film in wake of the uncertainty of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. It established itself as the most compelling of the blaxploitation films. The movie has been referred in quotes and references more so than any other blaxploitation flick. In 2018, the movie, *Superfly*, was remade in a more

grandiose production budget, that still gave props to the original film opening in 1972. It's paradoxical that another film later at the center of discussion in this paper, *Black Panther*, was also released in 2018 (Ryfle, 2019).

As it was previously discussed in this work, *Superfly*, seems to have had more of an impact upon African American youth than any other of the blaxploitation movies. The criticism of *Superfly* marked it as a lead blaxploitation example of the repudiation expressed in the African American community against the entire genre (Wright, 2014). Another film during the days of blaxploitation is called, *The Mack*. The movie shared some similarities with *Superfly* in impression-making upon the minds of young blacks. The popularity of both films is legendary. *Superfly* presented a slick individualized lifestyle in drug dealing. While *The Mack* offered the pimp occupation as a way of opportunistic advancement to African American youth. These films presented mythologized illegal business practices for status elevation.

The Mack did not have the overall flair of *Superfly*. Yet it is mentioned in the blaxploitation framework along with *Superfly* as “the two films mentioned most frequently.” With *Superfly* having a leading edge, both of these films would leave a hypnotic blueprint for future black entertainment mediums to follow. Those who have followed are gangsta rap, hip-hop moguls, and 1990's ghetto action films. Even in 2007, *American Gangster* was released, based on a magazine story called, *The Return of Superfly*. One thing for certain, it is not easy to etch out *Superfly* out of the imagination workshops of generations of African American youth (Quinn, 2010).

During the 1970's, diverse stereotypes and subordinations of African American characters led to the Blaxploitation downfall. Hollywood would begin to cast more multidimensional black roles instead of the monotonous crime-ridden blaxploitation narratives. This decision by Hollywood was due to African American-intellectuals critical response to the negative and degrading themes that were shown in films like *Superfly*. The demise of blaxploitation also was due to the movie industry suffering from a challenging financial crisis (Guerrero, 1993a).

Therefore, blaxploitation filmmaking went into a downward spiral that led to its supposed disappearance from Hollywood movies. Despite it all, the messages from the

film *Superfly* continued to have life. It would remain in the captured minds of African American youth going in to the 1980's. During this period, hustling young black drug dealers would become targets of the government's War on Drugs campaign (Guerrero, 1993a).

COINTELPRO

The Civil Rights Movement during the 1960's was a target of a governmental entity called COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program). It was intertwined under the operational auspices of the FBI, CIA and military intelligence. This secretive national program was unknown to the American public at its inception. Its undercover activities would remain oblivious to cities in the United States. In the mid-1970's. COINTELPRO sought to eradicate so-called radical organizations. And to subvert or bring indictment against movement leaders. Included were Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. There was also Huey Newton of the Black Panthers, along with other affiliates of the self-defense advocacy Oakland, California-based group (Montieth, 2008).

COINTELPRO was not an ordinary surveillance program. It sought to 'expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or if needed neutralize' its targets. It utilized a method of escalation. Firstly, to infiltrate by using informants to get information and to cause mistrust and agitation. Secondly, psychological means in which stories were planted, false communications and pamphlets used. Other endeavors were used to slander and cause disunity. Thirdly, to harass via the legal system by unfair enforcing of the tax code, grand jury subpoenas. Use different ways to cause intimidation and ambush by activists. Lastly, to use illegal force, break-ins, aggression and even to assassinate (McQuade, 2019, p. 113).

Sadly, the complete breadth of the program is not known. Officially, the FBI acknowledged many COINTELPRO actions involving unlawful activities against African American communities. Their illegal measures included engaging in warrantless phone taps, and break-ins. Former FBI officials admitted to Congress the "most heinous and embarrassing actions" did not get a written account (McQuade, 2019, p. 113).

The hidden COINTELPRO security lever was unexpectedly exposed for its illegal activities in 1975. The was linked to the same scandalous corruption in government that caused President Richard Nixon to resign in disgrace. This scandal impelled the new president Gerald Ford's Administration and Congress into action. It was Vice President Nelson Rockefeller who headed a special presidential commission to investigate the CIA (McQuade, 2019).

Congress sanctioned the Church Committee in the Senate and the Pike committee in the House of Representatives. Both were to begin the initial investigations into intelligence undertakings. The inquiries revealed that COINTELPRO operated unlawfully and without congressional consent domestically. They also reported that certain groups of American citizens were targeted. There were military and intelligence maneuvers used allegedly to undermine certain socio-political activities. When the hearings finished, Congress kept those two intelligence committees as permanent investigative bodies (McQuade, 2019).

In 1978, congressional legislators voted to pass The Foreign Intelligence Service Act (FISA). It created a unique surveillance court. The surveillance court erected a "wall" structure to block shared information among law enforcement agencies. This included most of the FBI, CIA and other intelligence gathering communities (McQuade, 2019).

War on Drugs

It was in 1971, that President Nixon introduced the phrase, War on Drugs. It was not a comprehensive target, nor an authentic war. It was a domestic political offensive against impoverished inner-cities across the nation. This era had witnessed the previous decade of socio-economic uprisings, also called race-riots. They erupted in economically-disadvantaged African American areas throughout the country (Murch, 2015).

The decade of the 1980's, since the movie *Superfly* was introduced to impoverished black inner cities, saw more drug trafficking and user prison sentences. The main scapegoats of these arrests and convictions in the criminal justice system were young African Americans. Local police departments acted as strongarm enforcers of

the drug war, which targeted especially young black males. It is reported that aside from drug use, poor black areas have been much more hit with violence and disorder due to distribution of drugs (Dilulio, Jr., 1993). It seems as though there was an automatic predilection by law enforcement to go into black ghetto areas to find sellers and users of illegal drugs (Kennedy, 2003).

The War on Drugs also served as a battle zone against black children, who began to enter the foster care system at increasing rates. This was due to cocaine crack addiction that caused the imprisonment of their parents. At the same time there was a growth rate of the number of African American children in the child welfare systems. This occurred due partly to neglect by absent parents who were wards of the American prison system ((Briggs, 2020). Some question whether the War on Drugs did more to alleviate or procreate the black urban drug and crime crisis. Such pondering was due to the first wave of the War on Drugs of President Richard M. Nixon's administration policies during the early 1970's (Dilulio, Jr., 1993).

When Nixon was re-elected in 1972, there were twenty-five African American films that hit the big screen; followed by twenty-three in 1973; and in 1974, twenty-five. It was the black urban audiences who showed up in large numbers. The middle-class African Americans represented by spokespersons relentlessly lambasted Hollywood for the negative portrayal of the black community. During the great wave of critical unacceptance of the blaxploitation genre, there was an accompaniment of a production of a few "serious-minded" films, which included *Souther* (1972) and *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), (Horak, 2015).

Nixon's declaration for a war on drugs actually came with him when he made his arrival at the White House in 1969. He made it known that it was his intention to stamp out those people who fit the description of being "wily, crafty, evil and beyond redemption." (Larson, 2010, p. 88). This was his response to the turbulent 1960's that saw the end of the Civil Rights and Vietnam War Movements. He claimed there was widespread disorder across America. He declared an edict to restore law and order. Nixon put his attention into transforming crime control. He desired to incorporate local matters handled by police into a national operation that would be carried out by a new

approach. He aimed to utilize inclusion of an element of military forces (Larson, 2010).

When Nixon made his announcement about his War on Drugs, he identified drug trafficking as “public enemy number one” (Larson, 2010, p. 89). Nixon emphatically informed Congress:

“Within the last decade, the abuse of drugs has grown from essentially a local police problem into a serious national threat to the personal health and safety of millions of Americans...A national awareness of the gravity of the situation is needed at the federal level to begin to cope with this growing menace to the general welfare of the United States (Larson, 2010, p. 89).

Nixon’s words referred to national security, and thus tying his war against drugs to fight the war in Vietnam. The White House recordings acknowledge that Nixon comprehended very well the abuse of drugs from a clear domestic perspective. As a matter of fact, a whistleblower later revealed that for the president this “whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.” Nixon along these lines would launch a drug war by commandeering Vietnam-era affairs over national security. This would be done by the political spin that American culture was spiraling out of control. In addition, that by his belief in private, although not admitting in a public setting that the problem was solely rooted in the black community (Larson, 2010, p. 89).

Unfortunately, for African American neighborhoods militarism, fearmongering and racism would fuel the drug war for many years to follow. It was noted that Nixon used war rhetoric as president arguing that drugs and its users and dealers were significantly “the blacks.” He cautioned they were now entitled by the Civil Rights Movement, which threaten the very foundations of the American way of life. Thus, this grave threat must be met with military force (Larson, 2010).

As Nixon’s Administration was targeting poor blacks, the blaxploitation movies gave African American directors a chance to direct feature films. These included:

Ossie Davis, [Gordon] Parks, and [Melvin] Van Peebles, as well as Gordon Parks Jr., (*Superfly*) [1972], Ivan Dixon (*Trouble Man*) [1972], Mark Warren (*Come Back Charleston Blue*) [1972], Hugh A. Robertson (*Melinda*) [1972],

Bill Gunn (*Ganja & Hess*), [1973], Sidney Poitier (1974), horror (*Blackenstein*, Dir. William A. Levey, (1974), melodrama (*Souder*) [1972], and contemporary drama (*Claudine*, Dir. John Berry, 1974), (Horak, 2015, p. 121).

Thus, it is imperative to comprehend the African American cinema window of opportunity by the end of the 1970's into the 1980's. This span of time was formulated by various idealized forces with influences over society and Hollywood (Guerrero, 1993b).

The legislative impetus for Nixon's all-out War on Drugs would occur in 1970, beginning with passage of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act. The new law included 220 million for enforcing it, and scheduling drugs into five categories. It also gave police the ability to engage in carrying-out "no knock searches." Another aspect of the legislation warfare included the passage of the Racketeering Influence and Corruption Organizations Act. It produced the initial secretive "special grand juries" and eased regulatory stipulation. These were used for the unlawful attainment of evidentiary materials for prosecutors (Larson, 2010).

This so-called declaration of war decreed an increase in budgets to combat the "imminent drug crisis." It triggered an ongoing conflict with no end in sight. The criminologist, Jerome H. Skolnick, described the term "semi-martial state" to delineate the effects of the drug war on the country at the federal, state, and local settings. Such a punishing directive put in motion a concocted agenda in large part that went after black urban communities. These poor inner-city inhabitants were being surveilled for drug use, possession, and distribution. Skolnick's analytical focus centered on the proposal of a multi-billion-dollar boost for federal enforcement and interdicting of White House and Legislative policies in 1989 (Murch, 2015).

Following the direction of Nixon's War on Drugs, federal and state authoritative entities propagandized a momentous expedition as drug laws were strengthened. Lengthy prison sentences were given and the likelihood of appeals and parole were lessened. As a result, prisons and jails reached capacity across the American landscape. A new form of a maximum harvest for the criminal justice system appeared (Larson, 2010).

Nixon's drug war helped to give birth to the prison-industrial complex. They were both interlaced together as the American news media played its part to oversensationalize the black urban drug problem. A case in point, happened at the White House on April 9, 1970. Nixon was encompassed by executives from main television networks. Others in attendance were production companies and advertising agencies. Nixon seriously asked his audience for their supportive help to "warn our youth constantly against the dangers of drugs...we must wage a total offensive, worldwide, nationwide, government-wide and if I might say so, media-wide" (Larson, 2010, p. 90).

Nixon advisor, John Ehrlichman told Don Baum of Harper's in 2016, that: The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House had, "[an enemy]...black people. We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be...against...black[s]...but by getting the public to associate...blacks with heroin and [crack] then criminalizing...we could disrupt [that] community" (Briggs, 2020, p. 107). Within ten years of Nixon's drug war proclamation, Ronald Reagan would inform the same viewers that "newsrooms and nationwide production rooms of our media centers have a special opportunity to send alarm signals across the nation." He then made a promise of an "unshakable commitment to do what is necessary to end the War on Drugs" (Larson, 2010, p. 90).

A few years after Nixon left the office of president, the blaxploitation era was supposedly over. Hollywood's last big-budget black musical, *The Wiz* (1978), starred Michael Jackson, Diana Ross and Richard Pryor. The same year that blaxploitation was said to have ended in 1976, Pryor starred in the comedy hit, *Silver Streak* (1976). This movie also starred Gene Wilder in blackface and he takes heed to Pryor's guidelines. They instruct Wilder's character on how to act stereotyped as a black person, while doing so will allow him to evade pursuant villains. Also, a similar scene is played out in *Stir Crazy* (1980), as Pryor shows Wilder the way to avoid being mistreated in prison by acting "bad." This represents a comically-interpreted positive for exhibiting back urban "cool" and toughness (Guerrero, 1993b).

Jamaa Fanaka's films like *Emma Mae* (1976) and *Penitentiary* (1979), utilized mainstream production strategies to make black films nearing the end of the 1970s. It was done as cheaply could be. Yet, Fanaka was critical of Hollywood's negative role

in exploiting blaxploitation movies. He dispelled any blaxploitation labels tied to his films (Horak, 2015).

During the War on Drugs period just prior to Reagan taking office, perhaps an argument can be made that 1970's blaxploitation was replaced as a black comedy genre. Comedy or not, the African American films that involve Richard Pryor such as *Which Way is Up?* (1977), and *Blue Collar* (1978) were Hollywood disasters. In disparity, were his buddy films, *Silver Streak* (1976), *Stir Crazy* (1980), *Brewster's Millions* (1987). And to an extent, *The Toy* (1982), (Guerrero, 1993b).

Despite, Pryor's two hit concert films, "the usual consumer spectator" would not accept Pryor on his own self-woven cinematic position. This usually comprised of "sweet ironies of racial injustices and black life in America. It has been observed that by the end of the 1980s, Pryor's "formulaic comedies had evolved into a more cliched directive. This was as "an almost obsessive yet futile desire to please the white movie-going public" (Guerrero, 1993b, p. 129).

A closely resembling came forth in the 1980s work of Eddie Murphy. He starred in a foreign comedy-venture, *The Golden Child* (1986). He also played in black-centered comedies, *Coming to America* (1987) and *Harlem Nights* (1989). This placed Murphy within a Third-World or black environment. The aforementioned, Murphy films were box-office failures in comparison to his big hits *48 Hours.*, *Trading Places*, and *Beverly Hills Cop I* and *II*. All of these films brought isolation for Murphy in white environments and narratives, and with the omission of *Beverly Hills Cop I*, were biracial buddy films (Guerrero, 1993b).

The cinema of "recuperation" and "reassurances" ascending during the Reagan 1980's and War on Drugs, did not align itself with redressing the American public. It would include addressing matters of social inequities, race and minus any means of a socially transformable way of mobility into the hoped-for American Dream. In light of erupting elements of black cultural nationalist ideology, the mainstream commercialized cinema of the 1980s focused upon manipulation of the filmgoers. As well as the reverberation and acquiescence to its reassurance of introspection of predominant socially and political eschewed standards (Guerrero, 1993b).

The zeal whereby Hollywood approached its “recuperative” venture represented a directed barometer to the sharpness and breadth of the upright national feelings. Reagan was centered in the political realm. Hollywood was cemented on the powerful film screen. Therefore, efforts were made to “recuperate” in a non-extant status for those on the outside of mainstream reality like black urban Americans (Guerrero, 1993b).

The 1980’s were a convoluted moment for the African American cinematic appearance. The decade featured some comedic relief during the government’s War on Drugs and attack on the urban black community. Eddie Murphy arose as Hollywood’s top box office attraction. This added a deliberative remuneration as for Hollywood and America’s “rollback” push on racial equality (Guerrero, 1993b).

During the 1980’s, coinciding with the War on Drugs, Hollywood had no issue with seeking to appropriate black culture and music on the big screen. *The Blues Brothers* (1980), blues idiom was a symbolic blackface or “neo-minstrelsy.” It was trivialized by the location of two white comedy stars at the core of a narrative that imitated black music and culture. In addition to their infringed upon slapstick experiences (Guerrero, 1993b).

An idea of the “white Negro” also surfaced in *Soul Man* (1984), which highlights the turnaround of black-white interactions and perceived judgments when a white college student passes for black. He hopes to take away a scholarship to Harvard Law School intent for a truly deserving black student. Another film benefitting from black cultural motifs is *The Cotton Club* (1984). It used African Americans and jazz as historically cultural-based phonemes. This was done in what in essence is a white gangster movie (Guerrero, 1993b).

As Reagan’s War on Drugs got underway, problematic realities that faced young urban black men included:

While black men account for only six percent of the population in the United States, they make up half of its male prisoners in local, state and federal jails. Another hard reality of the 1980s is over 35 percent of all black men in American cities are drug and alcohol abusers (Staples, 1987).

It has been suggested that:

[T]he racial climate created by Ronald Reagan and his minions has led to an unprecedented number of attacks on blacks in white neighborhoods, college campuses and public streets. Racial slurs by public officials are becoming commonplace, lending some observers to claim ‘It looks like an open season on blacks (Staples, 1987).

Borrowing from the proven political protests of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, black people were generally challenging their “devalued representation” in Hollywood. In 1980, African Americans and Puerto Ricans enthusiastically voiced their displeasure against the movie, *Fort Apache, The Bronx*. Generally speaking, a focus must be made about the mainstream cinematic narrative strategies, appearance, and methods of oversight. Thus, the different approaches in which African Americans were visually represented and “devalued” in the 1980s (Guerrero, 1993b).

Maybe African American filmmaker Robert Townsend succinctly zeroes-in on the film industry’s perception of African Americans in the 1980s. He reflects that, “Hollywood is afraid that if you have more than one black person in a movie you have a black movie.” Effectual practices for “containing” blacks, such as the Hollywood strategy of assigning an African American top billing in a movie in which he or she is entirely deserted from other blacks or any innuendos to the black community. Black cultural identity is cemented within the black star’s personal actions inclusive of a appropriation from a white context and narrative for the entertainment of a domineering or traverse audience. This type of comedy action-oriented film was Whoopi Goldberg’s *Jumpin’ Jack Flash* (1986), and *Burglar* (1987), (Guerrero, 1993b, p. 128).

Next in line to Reagan was President George H.W. Bush, who continued the combatant rhetoric of his predecessors. He was also, a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, from 1976-1977. In his first television address to the country, he made the familiar declaration that the gravest domestic threat facing our nation is drugs. The corporate mass media was still on board with the new president’s continuance of the War on Drugs. They knew that the drug war images were as essential for big sales.

So, America not only received presidential warnings, but popular shows appeared. They were “American Vice: The Doping of a Nation,” “48 hours on Crack Street,” and “Cocaine Country” (Larson, 2010).

Television along with print media were responsible for advancing stereotypical tropes related to black ghettos. Such as “crack house, crack mother, and crack baby” were presented to increase hysteria in the public viewers and readers. This demonizing of poor African Americans caused Americans to view them as crack users and vile criminals. The New York Times and Washington Post increased by four times their news coverage of crack between 1983 and 1986. By September of 1986, ABC presented its own poll results. They found that 80 percent of respondents were convinced that America was going through a national drug crisis (Larson, 2010).

Despite the hysterics, crack was mainly confined to some metropolitan places like New York and Los Angeles. Yet, the directives emanating from the media and White House was that the threat of an out-of-control epidemic was inundating every aspect of American society. The threat of course, was proximate and drawn from the generational racial stereotyping and dehumanizing of poor black Americans (Larson, 2010).

Nixon’s “total offensive” to President Reagan and Bush’s White House, hinged upon these leaders’ ability to issue certain edicts to the mass media. These individuals were co-conspirators of the 1980’s War on Drugs. They continued to bind fearful stoking of national security interests along with racial hostilities. Both Presidents Reagan and Bush were not totally dependent upon the media to oversee their drug war (Larson, 2010).

During the same ten-year period, the amount of drug offenders in the penal system in America had doubled. What is going here is the rise of the criminal justice system moneymaker called the previously mentioned prison-industrial complex. It oversaw many drug offenders coming in as inmates. The goal was to help fill the old and newly built prisons to capacity. (Dilulio, 1993). One is left to ponder the number of black youth who chose a life associated with drugs after coming under *Superfly’s* hypnotism. There must have been large numbers of these victims. They were ensnared

by the huge profit-making prison-industrial complex incarceration facilities so it would reach maximum capacities.

Reagan was adamant about winning the drug wars battle. He signed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which provided more intensity to the government response to drugs in America. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act provided a federal government center for drug policy. It was called, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). President Bush continued to remind Americans of the great evil of drugs facing America that must be defeated. He appointed the country's first "drug czar" of the ONDCP, William Bennett. In order to locate the evil highlighted by Bush, Drug Czar Bennett went into what Bush called, "criminogenic communities—where the social forces that create predatory criminals are far more numerous and stronger than the social forces that create decent, law-abiding citizens" (Larson, 2010, p. 92).

As the drug war became more intense, it helped to give more empowerment to the militarization of domestic police agencies. As an example, in Los Angeles drugs were the patsy for law enforcement to storm into low-income black neighborhoods. They needed a culprit that would be tied to drug consumers and dealers. Gang members would get caught up in the fiscal spending of law enforcement. Just as with institutional protocols of law enforcement, they would also be harassed by prisons, courts and parole boards (Murch, 2015).

Supposedly, for the general public, the foremost intention of ONDCP was to bring about the restoration of order and security to American communities. To destroy drug-trafficking organizations and helping drug users to overcome their addictions. As well, to engage in the prevention of any first-time drug experimenters. Even during this time there was push for educational drug-prevention in public schools known as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.), (Larson, 2010).

It is believed that the high rate of African American entanglement in the criminal justice system is largely due to law enforcement practices and social policy. In particular, it was the War on Drugs directives and policies that declared war on black America urban societies. Some have postulated, that black Americans commit more overall crimes than other racial-ethnic groups in the United States. Perhaps at around

three times the rate of whites throughout the country. Blacks have been serving time in prisons roughly seven times the rate of whites (Okundaye, Cornelius & Manning, 2001).

During the War on Drugs African American adolescent findings revealed that there were stronger short-term economically-driven incentives for them (Okundaye, Cornelius & Manning, 2001). These were early impressionistic lives destined to be drug dealers. They would make money from hustling and selling drugs. This type of life-style was similar to the potential behavioral influence of films like *Superfly*. Such a socio-cultural dynamic captivating black youth was warned by a well-known African American psychiatrist (Poussaint, 1974).

Black adolescents do tend to be liked by their peers. They are perceived to carry a certain exalted form of street credibility in their communities. They are less likely than older adults to anguish over being hurt or harmed by their actions. Many of them do not seem fearful. Their attitudes are more upbeat not worrying about excessive penalties heaped upon them. Their age was under eighteen and they are not deemed as an adult yet. They would not spend long periods in juvenile detention type of facilities. The reality is that a high number of the black adolescents end up later serving prison sentences as adults for the crime being a drug trafficker (Okundaye, Cornelius & Manning, 2001).

Regardless of the federal government's anti-drug initiatives, it has been reported that by operations of the CIA, a well-organized plan was masterminded to import drugs. These illegal drugs were cocaine (crack) and heroin. They would flood into poor African American inner-cities. Some leaders within our government made a decision that such a program would ensure political weakness in the black community. While at the same time it would concurrently secure secret funds. They would be used to provide funding support for aggression carried-out around the world (Fine & Turner, 2001).

The Crack Epidemic

There are politically and socially drawn-up issues that greatly concern African Americans. Such as the War on Drugs government-sponsored and colluded attack on the black community. African Americans living in urban neighborhoods entered a

period of more lawlessness, demoralization and self-doubt. These conflicting realities are in concurrence with the physical violence, drug dealing and abuse associated with black males (Chan, 1998).

As the 1980's unfolded, poor African American youth were mimicking the life of Priest, the charming and cool drug dealer from the hit film, *Superfly*. Drug trafficking among low-income urban blacks was a frequent occurrence. It seems to have quickly become the central decadence of inner-city neighborhoods. There was an emphasis on short-term economic gains at the expense of long-term consequences. Influence, monetary increase, recognition and esteem from peers led to success. These things are usually given as reasons by drug traffickers for their career choice and involvement. These African American youth are more likely to become drug dealers. This is due to a lack of economic advancement options in their impoverished communities. Black women cite personal relationships as crucial factors for their participation in drug dealing (Okundaye, Cornelius & Manning, 2001).

Crack cocaine transformed working class communities. The federal and state governments appeared to be abandoning drug treatment business. Treatment became more difficult to locate. This was when heroin initially impacted what was thought to be an intense epidemic. The crack crisis was devastating for low-income black areas, but was even more severe with the policing of addicts (Briggs, 2020).

The most severe ramifications of drug trafficking relate to drug addiction, incarceration and fatalities from drug-related homicide. A study found that two-thirds of those who got involved in drug dealing actually became users of illegal drugs. Drug trafficking is associated with incarceration. It is usually relative to non-fatal violence, non-gang and gang-related deaths. Black youth bore a stereotype of being employed as drug dealers from economically disadvantaged communities. It can be surmised that this resulted perhaps from the lasting effects of the blaxploitation film, *Superfly*. It was revealed in the Bureau of Statistics in 1988, that convicts in prison for drug trafficking could expect a sentence of around sixty months (Okundaye, Cornelius & Manning, 2001).

The urgency of the narrative of the film, *New Jack City*, highlights

destructiveness of urban neighborhoods tormented by drugs, crime and Reaganomics. Even Nino Brown, the main character and antagonist, played by Wesley Snipes poignantly connects his observation by status. He argues, “you gotta rob to get rich in the Reagan era.” And his courtroom message later during the movie articulates an international economic order beyond the powers of one person or inner-city community. He continues,

I’m not guilty. You’re the one who’s guilty. You lawmakers, the politicians, the Columbian drug lords...all of you who lobby against making drugs legal. Just like you did with alcohol during prohibition. You’re the ones who’s guilty. Let’s kick the ballistics here. Ain’t no Uzis in Harlem/ Not one of us here owns a poppy field. This thing is bigger than Nino Brown. This is business. *This is the American way* (Massood, 2013, p. 153).

In reality, Nino signifies that the drug business reflects a global economic and political collaboration fueled by greed. His speech zeroes in on the lack of opportunities for the youth of Harlem, an area that experienced sixteen percent joblessness in 1990. It was two times that of New York city, and twice more as high, if the ones who dropped out of the workforce, and teens without jobs are taken into account. In the film, the CMB provides one of the few opportunities in the hood for employment (Massood, 2013).

The narrative in *New Jack City*, is divided by two plots, the ascent of the “Cash Money Brothers” (CMB), a highly coordinated Harlem drug syndicate and a group of self-aggrandized “New Jack” detectives given the task to apprehend them. The Cash Money Brothers begin as a little corner spot operated by Nino and his partner Gee Money (Allen Payne). It won’t be long after they discover the cash profit possibility of crack cocaine and their organization makes a leap in growth and profitability (Massood, 2013).

Various studies have found that if one is African American, in particular male, then your chances of ending up in jail or prison are greater than fifty percent. Additional studies have determined that black youth who live in low-income urban neighborhoods have a high probability of engagement in criminal activities. Markedly, if it is drug

trafficking. Poverty-ridden black American youngsters' early participation in drug dealing activities give them an almost certainty of being incarcerated. It is a real notion that most of them have been able to accept such a fate (Okundaye, Cornelius & Manning, 2001).

Crack became an out-of-control epidemic as it spread into America's inner cities. This form of cocaine caused poor black community members to exhibit strange behavior. They began showing up at hospitals and also police stations. It would not be long before Congress would pass new laws to increase the duration of criminal sentences. As a result, the prison industry significantly increased the availability of the number of cells (Reinarman & Levine, 2004).

During the crack epidemic of the 1980's, political figures sought to justify their severe crack-era laws. They believed they had an obligation to impose punitive deterrence on those who use and sold crack. It just so happened that mainly young blacks as economically disadvantaged community victims peddled crack. They often faced a life of hopelessness from factors related to high unemployment and devastating poverty (Reinarman & Levine, 2004).

The new crack laws in America were responsible for driving the enormous upsurge of imprisonment within the history of the United States. Those who were incarcerated multiplied each year from 1980 through 2000. This inmate increase caused the American prison population to triple. It gave the United States the greatest rate of imprisonment of a modern democratic government in the world (Reinarman & Levine, 2004).

In the War on Drugs, African Americans were more than likely to serve more severe sentences than whites. The structure for this disparity in federal cases is the memorable sentencing contrast between powder and crack cocaine. Some 90 percent of crack defendants were African American. Federal sentencing for crack cases involving blacks was three to eight times longer than sentences for commensurate powder offenders (Kennedy, 2003).

Black communities where drug dealers were distributing crack was cheaper for users than was cocaine. With the help of the media chiefly, there was mythologized

reporting on crack that began to flood black urban areas. Myth # 1: Crack is a different drug than cocaine. Myth # 2: Crack is instantly and inevitably addicting. Myth # 3: Crack spreads to all sectors of society. Myth # 4: Crack causes crime and violence. Myth # 5: Crack use during pregnancy produces crack babies (Reinarman & Levine, 2004).

The start of the crack generation began as a scare in 1986. This first myth came out when politicians and news outlets used it as propaganda. They conveniently presented the drug as if it was a completely different substance than cocaine. They presented crack as though it possessed unrivaled powers. It was sensationalized falsehood being propagandized. Crack is cocaine which has been cooked into a base form to smoke (Reinarman & Levine, 2004).

Crack was new nonetheless, in a couple of ways. First, it was at the time, the latest style to ingest cocaine. Actually, it was not exclusively a new thing as it had been already frequented by hardcore cocaine users. They smoked cocaine as a process known as “freebasing.” This term was used a few years before the word “crack” was contrived to represent the same drug taken in a way, but by different individuals. The so-called notion that crack was a new seriously harmful drug gave the media the impetus to place the drug with poor African Americans living in inner cities. These youth were characterized as being part of a “dangerous class.” The real stimulus for the highly dramatized crack scare allowed politicians to use it as an excuse to pass more harsh laws against it (Reinarman & Levine, 2004).

The second myth promotes the fear that crack is instantaneously going to be addictive. In Newsweek, an article called, “Kids and Cocaine,” provided a quote. It came from an addiction treatment business owner. He made a claim that using crack results in instantaneous addiction, and was the most addictive drug known to mankind (Reinarman & Levine, 2004).

The third myth supports the hysteria that crack spreads to every societal sector. It was May 23, 1986, that Tom Brokaw of NBC, claimed that crack had risen to become the “drug choice in American society.” At the time, what was thought to be an inner-city drug used by black Americans, was actually very new. So new that the National

Household Survey nor the Monitoring the Future Survey of high school students had yet to measure it. So really it was not known how pervasive crack use was. The media continued to assert that by 1989, an epidemic of use of crack had escalated. This time going into suburban areas and the nation. The New York Times reported on October 7, 1989, that crack is “confined mainly to poor urban neighborhoods.” Within ten years after the crack scare, Congress passed various punitive new laws that helped the police make arrests on tens of thousands of people, including young African Americans (Reinarman & Levine, 2004, p. 186).

The media continued to hype up misconceptions about crack. They sought to misrepresent the drug. They fomented false fears that the media and drug control authorities made misleading claims to the nation. The fourth myth was the narrative that the powerfully addictive drug crack caused users to engage in crime and violence. American political leaders also echoed the same type of rhetoric, which served to provide justification for their somewhat draconian new laws against crack. Studies had shown that the crux of what was called “crack-related crime.” It was an attribute of black market systems in poor communities. It was not direct psycho-pharmacological effects of crack on human behavioral phenomena. Therefore, such was known by the end of the 1980’s, but in reality, drug control officials and political figures were not moved. They did not refrain from a continuance of invoking the appearance of “crack related crime” as justification of severe laws and mass arrests and imprisonment (Reinarman & Levine, 2004).

Politicians continued to elicit their War on Drugs and made sure tough new laws were passed to punish crack dealers and users. In spite of the thousands receiving long required minimum sentences, these laws brought about frequent drug tests. As well, the arrest and incarceration of pregnant women across the U.S. There were mainly poverty-stricken women utilizing the public hospital facilities. Infants were taken away from their mothers when born (Dilulio, 1993).

The mothers faced prosecution charges for child abuse or endangerment. The punitive laws passed during this period reflected a putative connection with cocaine exposure and fetal damage. They had not been proven in medical science. When the

media and politicians helped lodge it into service, in reality, the myth of the “crack baby” had fallen into public discourse. The message relayed was that none of the amount of science adversely appeared to be able to extricate it (Dilulio, 1993).

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics had found that the crime problem in America began as and still continued to be an urban dilemma. A case in point, the average yearly accounting for crime violence and including drugs. In 1987-1989, among city residents was ninety-two percent more than the rate among those living in suburban areas (Dilulio, 1993). This crime and drug problem would also be attached to the hip-hop gangsta era.

Hip-Hop Gangsta Movies

Among African American films, the most profitable genres have been comedies and heavy crime-ridden hip-hop gangsta movies. Even though hip-hop gangsta films are loaded with inner-city gang life violence, studio executives have applauded the idea. The reason being is that hip-hop gangsta cinema appeals to a worldwide audience. Race ideology contributed to nearly all black films of the 1990’s (White-Ndounou, 2013). It continued onward very reminiscent of the blaxploitation flicks of the 1970s.

Since the retreating black exploitation “wave” of the mid-1970s, Guerrero associated, “the waves of black films to the socio-economic conditions which effect decision-making in white dominated Hollywood” (Chan, 1998, p. 350). There was a realization of the exigency to make overtures to African American audiences. So big production companies aligned their focus on movies that dealt with matters which spoke to black urbanites. Guerrero further argued:

the Blaxploitation boom emerged from a period of militant political activism fueled by the rising identity consciousness and social expectations of African Americans...the black movie boom of the 1990s has materialized out of a climate of long-muted black frustration and anger over the worsening political and economic conditions that African Americans continue to endure in the nation’s decaying urban centers (Chan, 1998, p. 35).

During the early 1990s, as the War on Drugs continued to be waged, a considerable amount of action films from key studios were directed by African

Americans, set in black urban areas. John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood*; Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City*; Ernest Dickerson's *Juice*; Bill Duke's *Deep Cover*; and Matty Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), are the type of films which critics have pointed out to be "male focused, 'ghettocentric,' action-crime-adventure films, trendy gangsta rap films, and the new Black realism films." Regardless of the trope labeling, these new African American action films cleverly use catchy rap music, rap singers as actors, heated and explosive movie action (Chan, 1998, p. 35).

Almost two decades later, there were African American filmmakers eager for opportunities in filmmaking and began exploring blaxploitation tradition. Robert Townsend introduced *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), a film about an up-and-coming black actor, Bobby Taylor, who is faced with choosing whether to accept the lead role. The movie is called, *Jive Time Jimmy's Revenge*, a modern blaxploitation film. He successfully auditioned. Keenan Ivory Wayans made a film the next year, *I'm Gonna Get You Sucka* (1988). It venerated blaxploitation via satire. The movie stars Wayans as Jack Spade, a military veteran coming home. He will learn that his brother Junebug has died after an overdose on gold chains (Cunningham, 2018).

The hip-hop gangsta film was not the standard urban crime movie. Due to the fact that there were distinctive depictions of African American women and criminal activities. The hip-hop film *Set it Off* (1996), centered on crime as a business model. This somewhat brought validation to poor inner-city cultural norms with the inclusion of black women playing critical characters (White-Ndounou, 2013).

Black Films such as *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), focused on criminal engagement not as a structured business enterprise, but rather as a social pathology issue. This type of film is like a cyclic portrayal of two clear-cut genre styles. This contrasting plot went international as audiences struggled with race and the escape narrative. Another issue was class ideological realities of the ghetto African American hip-hop gangsta movies. These things were problematic for foreign crowds to grasp because the genre's theme message was that institutional barriers exist simultaneously everywhere. Thus, implying the stark reality that the American dream is not achievable (White-Ndounou, 2013).

The historical escape narrative of African American flight from oppression and terrorism would make its presence within an ideology of escaping from the ghetto. The escape narrative in hip-hop movies like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Set it Off*, communicate an overpowering push toward a cause of action. These actions are reflected in selfhood, escapism, class uplift, wealth, and living the so-called American Dream. These aforementioned life attainment values were also illustrated by Priest in *Superfly*. It's the same ultimate message 'trying to get over' that resonated some two decades later in the plots of *Boyz N the Hood* and *Set it Off* (White-Ndounou, 2013).

Rap music appeared on the tough streets of African American impoverished neighborhoods. It provided an ostensible aspiring hope for its high numbers of unemployed and economically-disadvantaged young people. Rap as a genre was visible during the 1970's, as critics gave predictions of its quick demise. Yet, rap music flourished and helped shape African American youths' minds and attitudes, similar as *Superfly* had earlier done. It also helped to reshape the structure of African American popular culture (Kubrin, 2005).

Rap music continued to undergo significant changes over a few decades. Rap was able to tap into the hustler lifestyle, drug pushers, gangsters, pimps and prostitutes. These characters embodied the black inner-city prototype during the advent of blaxploitation movies, such as highlighted in *Superfly*. This tide of dangerous hustling influence from the big screen would make a great impression upon countless minds. They belonged to the have-nots of poor jobless urban communities willing to accept an identity inundated with vice, criminality and the possibility of deadly violence (Kubrin, 2005).

The representation and delineation of black masculinity was a major factor displayed during the blaxploitation epoch. This type of confident macho character was evident in the attractive personality of *Superfly's*, protagonist, Priest. The hip-hop /rap aesthetic rationalism was an infusion of black masculinity and heterosexuality. This ghettoized character would transition from the 'feel-good,' 1980s, into the onslaught of a more violent manly-attitude steering gangsta rap into the 1990's. Some of these trendy movies went from *House Party* (1990) to *Boyz N the Hood*, *Juice* (1992), and

Menace II Society (1993), (Boylorn, 2017).

The impersonations of black masculinity performance in these films just like in *Superfly* were dependent upon their soundtracks and music videos. They helped ordain black masculinity in actual life. Hip-hop masculinity in African American cinema became defined by violent proclivities and sexual promiscuity. The emergent hip-hop thug was given birth. Films directed by young African American men in the beginning of the 1990's, came to be called "new black realism" and so-called "hood films." The "hood cycle" promoted an alteration in hip-hop movies and purportedly a real representation of inner-city living style of young black males (Boylorn, 2017).

Generally, hood films were found in urban ghetto settings at times that included rapper actors as central characters, and they were consumed by issues of black masculinity and manhood. Black films like *Friday* (1995), *New Jack City* (2001), *Boyz n the Hood*, *Juice* and *Menace II Society* provided an account of the lived experience for black boys. Such will catapult their survivable danger-filled encounters within their dilapidated neighborhoods, while simultaneously exhibiting cold non-caring dispositions (Boylorn, 2017).

The St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture makes an identification of gangsta rap as the most controversy-prone form of rap music. It has received worldwide scrutiny for 'its vivid sexist misogynistic homophobic lyrics. At the same time has been lambasted for its violent depiction of urban ghetto life in America.' It is mostly affiliated with West Coast artists. Gangsta rap is thought to be a consequence of gang culture and street warring of South-Central Los Angeles, Compton and Long Beach. It has a "retromack" pimpish attitude and stylishness of East Oakland. The pioneering rappers were products of gangs. Therefore, gangsta rap is relative to the actual lived experiences of the rappers themselves, and its lyrics. It also highlights gang and ghetto life from a criminal mind's point of view (Kubrin, 2005).

Gangster rap's point of departure from other rap styles is usually spoken of as socially-conscious and more so politically, an Afrocentric perspective. Gangsta rap has continued to differ from other forms of rap chiefly because it is the musical promoter of "ghettocentricity." This is a term that provides engagement for the "black youth

cultural imagination that cultivated varying ways of interpreting, representing, and understanding the shifting contours of ghetto dislocation” (Kubrin, 2005, p. 361)

It is agreed upon by scholars that other rap typifications depict an African American traditional concern. This involves keeping records of the black experience. Contrarily, gangsta rap is mainly focused on the black underclass in the poor urban communities. It is thought that gangsta rap still allows an insiders’ look into African American urban street life through crime and violence (Kubrin, 2005).

The crime and violence of the gangsta rap film stretch is rooted in the alleged demise of the 1970’s blaxploitation trial period. When the hip-hop phenomena appeared in African American film its impact upon American culture could be seen with filmmaker Spike Lee’s arrival. His successful movie debut was *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), just as *Superfly* was shot on location in Harlem, as was also Lee’s later film *Jungle Fever* (1991). Unlike, *Superfly* featuring a black hustling lifestyle, *Jungle Fever* showcased black bourgeoisie lifestyle (Massood, 2013).

When Lee introduced *Jungle Fever*, he did so in response partially to critics who berated him in 1989. They chastised him for neglecting the problems of drugs in black communities in *Do the Right Thing*. Lee’s response when the motion picture was released was to blame his critics of racism. He believed they were errant for hinting that drugs ought to be a factual basis of any African American urban film. Cities like Los Angeles, Detroit, San Diego and New York. These areas were hit hard in the mid-1980’s during the federal government’s War on Drugs (Massood, 2013).

A publication of the “Dark Alliance” series by Gary Webb, appeared in the San Jose Mercury News, starting in August 1996. Within these articles, Webb, an established investigative journalist laid out a key network connection. He discovered the arrival of the first appearance of crack cocaine in South-Central Los Angeles. It had to do with operatives with significant ties to the CIA’s. They had colluded together in a campaign to subvert the socialist government of Nicaragua, in Central America (Fine & Turner, 2001).

Webb’s incredible story and the newspaper’s choice to allow the chronicles available to appear on its website got the attention of many individuals. This caused an

uproar in the printing and broadcasting media. There were objections from the Agency and other bodies of government to the San Jose Mercury News startling accusations. Angry African American elected leaders voiced their concerns about the damning allegations. Congresswoman Maxine Waters was furious at the reported CIA's involvement in siphoning crack cocaine into her representative district of South-Central. She called for a complete investigation (Fine & Turner, 2001).

Waters and other black celebrities used Webb's series to support their demands. They called for law enforcement and intelligence communities to reveal their involvement with any crack cocaine pouring into South-Central. Many local African Americans believed the series highlighted a factual paper trail. They were convinced that it proved information that they already had suspected. Webb stuck by his report. Others who read parts of the record suggested that there were figures involved with at minimum partial CIA support. They were steadfast believing CIA support may have indeed played a role in the transport of cocaine from South America to South-Central (Fine & Turner, 2001).

The effects of crack on both dealers and users in urban black communities became more devastating than any other drug epidemic previously. Crack cocaine made its entry into Harlem in 1985. It annihilated a community having previously been endangered by government divestment. This lack of government subsidies effected public institutions (schools and public housing). There was also a drop in manufacturing and other work that had for generations sustained the residents of the neighborhoods (Massood, 2013).

Unlike Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, other films more thoroughly highlighted the crack epidemic, and the ones mostly victimized by it, young black people. The same year that *Jungle Fever* was set for release, so were a record amount of other movies. Hollywood made motion pictures by other African American filmmakers. They included John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* and Matty Rich's *Straight out of Brooklyn*. As well as Mario Van Peeble's *New Jack City* (1991) was produced. These films were mainly called "hood," "ghetto action," or "New Jack cinema." They paved the way for a black film "renaissance." Studios enhanced themselves financially from the success

of filmmakers like Lee, Townsend and the Hudlin Brothers of the 1980's (Massood, 2013).

As discussed before, within a year after the release of *Superfly*, the War on Drugs was already set to go in motion under the Nixon Administration. Nearly twenty years later, and thereafter, *New Jack City* began showing at theaters. The *War on Drugs* was still in operations continually supporting a very profitable prison-industrial complex at the height of the "hood movies" (Massood, 2013).

The majority of "hood" movies from the early 1990's were set in South Central or Watts sections of Los Angeles or the Bed-stuy Red Hook or East New York parts of New York's Brooklyn. There were a few films shot in Harlem. The most notable one was *New Jack City*, which many critics claim to be the start of "hood" films. They also nearly equally praised *Juice* (1982) that was directed by Ernest Dickerson. The movie, *New Jack City* borrows from the gangster and rogue cop film genres. It was inspired by Francis Ford Coppola's, *The Godfather Part III*, and *The Last of the Finest* (1990), a rarely viewed film about dishonorable Los Angeles Police Department officers who seek to get even with drug dealers (Massood, 2013).

In the pursuit of success in American capitalism, *New Jack City* relies upon one of the central themes of the gangster movie. Like *Superfly*, the film laid a foundation in African American drug and gangster genres. Many black drug distributors and gangsters were criminally motivated in gaining fast monetary wealth. The acquisition of American capitalism and the assimilationist role to play is important. This has become a key groundwork of the African American gangster film over the last few decades. *New Jack City* similar to *Superfly* took an exceptionally postmodernist approach to the pursuit of changing the spoils of capitalism (Massood, 2013).

Such is reflected in the particular thematic areas of deindustrialization and government neglect. As well as a surrogate economic means as reflected in the inner-city. In hindsight, like the gangster film-effect on both *New Jack City* and *Superfly*, there is ambivalence in their attitudinal outlook about big business. They both became inflamed by quick wealth and greed and share certain prejudicial fixation about capitalism. Yet, both Priest and Nino outwardly hate the system, but inwardly they both

love getting rich off of it.

Black Film Tropes and Invisible Powers into the 21st Century

We are left to ponder, why there was so much social and political hopelessness in black urban communities? As previously discussed, the early 1970's introduced the blaxploitation period. The film, *Superfly* seemingly teleported out of nowhere and filled the minds of African American youngsters with grandeur of criminality. This slick beyond alluring movie about drug culture shook the inner core of urban black youths imagination (Toldson, 2018).

Around the close of the twentieth century there was a resurgent effort in sociological research on identity, culture and violence. This type of inquiry for a significant part looks into the inner-city black communities in the United States. There seems to have been a black youth culture or "street code" that developed within African American youth. It has influenced their minds triggered by 1970's cinema (Kubrin, 2005).

There have been a few token-African American film stars. They include Richard Pryor in the 1970's and Eddie Murphy from the mid-part of the 1990's. Hollywood has been unmoved to cast African American film stars without a "white buddy." Therefore, Tinsletown's "white buddy" figure serves as an "ideological chaperone to ensure it's box office" (Guerrero, 1993b, p. 128).

Ice Cube's role in *N.W.A.*, was similar with his role as Doughboy in John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991). His aura and appearance brought forth a personification of the "hardness" and "realness" of gangsta rap. The War on Drugs sought to emasculate black males. It was the emotional acuity of hard black masculinity [reliant] on the interplay of apathy and anger to create the semblance of indestructability. This was as a response to the very destructive modes of surveillance police brutality, housing inequality and other sites of systemic anti-blackness (Manning, 2017).

Ice Cube's film *Friday* (1995) was a nourishing survival "juice." Laughter served as a form of "self-care." The movie's basis was centered upon drug culture, humorous ideals, and young romantics. These themes were positioned their location in

1990's black popular cultural history. The aforementioned "juice" of survival "helped to fortify black existence against the pernicious effects of deindustrialization, Ronald Reagan's War on Drugs, and the evolution of American racism that created an image of black urban decay in the 1980s and '90s" (Manning, 2017, p. 244).

The film *Friday* shows Craig and Smokey over the duration of one Friday. Both of them watch the familiar happenings of the neighborhood from Craig's front porch. They mediate the foreshadowing of the neighborhood bully and Smokey's drug-supplying connection whom he owes money. The slight energized emotions recurring through the film gives implication to gangsta rap folklore by African American life (Manning, 2017).

This style of living is represented in the hood past locality of "grief and anger." They are two emotions that supremely reflected the captivating depictions of black men in rap and film during the gangsta era of the early 1990s. The movie *Friday* profusely revolves around the emotion-filled lines of black men. Such are caught in a whirlwind of "joy, love, and fear," as the most useful panacea of self-care and survival" in the hood (Manning, 2017, p. 244).

Into the twenty-first century, in 2007, a popular film, *American Gangster* would seduce the minds of urban black youth audiences throughout America. The film stars the beloved Denzel Washington, perhaps the most respected actor by African Americans. He plays a real-life Harlem crime figure, Frank Lucas, who was a notorious drug dealer. Most of the characters and story elements of the movie derive from Detroit's crack junkies and "New Jack" gangsters. The gangsters were more than willing to funnel cheap drugs to the crack junkies. The film has a central focus on drugs and the inner-city, very mnemonic of the motion picture *Superfly*. *American Gangster* keeps alive the young nihilistic gangster, the same figure who became a fixture for hood films and rap music in the 1990's (Massood, 2013).

Nationwide around the start of the new century, it was determined that a black man's chances of being incarcerated during his life are greater than one in four. If jails are added to prison's housing African American men, the calculation increases. It becomes around eight in ten African Americans will do time. The odds favor black

men being locked up during their lifetimes, usually before the age of forty (Okundaye, Cornelius & Manning, 2001).

Historically, a considerable number of white researchers have held strong stereotypical attitudes and bias against African Americans. Miscalculation of data has been skewed and ethically problematic. These so-called scholars lack objectivity and professional integrity. Unfortunately, these social scientists and their colleagues as supposed experts consciously or unconsciously share a white supremacist viewpoint. Such an attitude cuts across academic disciplines. Toldson (2018) informed us,

“White men who objectively studied black issues reported that slaves who wanted to escape had ‘drapetomania’...[they] warned of cocaine-crazed Negroes...[they] unethically refused treatment to black men with syphilis...[they] biased the nation against single black mothers...[they] reported that black children born to crack addicts would grow up to damage society...[they] reported black children born in the early 1990’s would become super-predators...[and they] falsely reported that there were more black men in prison than in college (p. 1).

The research agenda for the twentieth-first century was being determined concerning the criminal justice system effecting American poor inner-cities. Researchers moved away from the question, “does race matter?” They provided an indirect answer to this pertinent inquest. Their inquiry was more focused on attempts to identify the circumstantial and contextual situations in which race actually matters. However, problematic areas cannot be entirely realized in which the components of racial instances effectuate case outcomes. Or why blacks receive much harsher prison sentences than whites.

It was suggested that researchers need to focus on the manner in which racial disparities surface within the dynamics of a criminal case. Other discrepancies include bail, pretrial detention, charging, plea bargaining and sentencing. It was also determined that qualitative research aimed at identifying considerations that influence prosecutors and judges. This should be considered because they sentence poor black inner-city residents more severely than whites (Spohn, 2015).

Recently, there have been record number drug overdoses, mostly due to opioid addiction in white communities in what has been called the “heartland” of America. Those neighborhoods are beginning to resemble as previously discussed, 1990’s black communities. A time when pre-gentrified inner-cities were bewildered by unrestricted “government facilities,” possession of guns and crack cocaine. It was during this time, black gangsta rappers joined in alliance. They created songs like, “Self-Destruction” and “We’re All in the Same Gang” (Toldson, 2018).

The popular film, by Ryan Coogler, *Fruitvale Station* was released in 2013. Again, since the blaxploitation era of *Superfly* going into 1990’s, the gangsta films genre of black masculinity is present. However, in *Fruitvale Station*, there is a shifting that occurs in the black masculinity of the main character, Oscar. This slight change happens from black masculinity itself to the ways in which it is perceived. Oscar is shown to be a complicated African American man. He has the capability of doing both marvelous and terrible things (Boylorn, 2017).

Oscar is killed in cold-blood by a white Bay Area Rapid Transit Authority (BART) officer. Any possible influences of progressive masculinity shaping him are now gone. In the film, one has to ponder that the focus moves from how to build upon black masculinity to possibly how to deconstruct prejudicial criteria. Such factors include institutional racist views and paranoia regarding black males. As well as to create an environmental space. To see that a good, but not perfect African American young man can be shot and killed in a subway station. To realize, as hundreds of potential witnesses are watching — and his murderer is just required to serve half of a two-year sentence (Boylorn, 2017).

COINTELPRO allegedly became dysfunctional in 1978. This happened as a result of the Congressional passage of the Foreign Intelligence Service Act. It appears that Fusion Centers have now been identified in aspects of political policing. They do not have a federal mandate like COINTELPRO operated (McQuade, 2019).

The style of political policing in America ought to be a reflection of the intelligence reforms several decades ago. These reforms should be post—9/11 concerns, and contemporary issues regarding the designation of far-right groups being potential

domestic terrorists. TigerSwan, a U.S. intelligence group was in occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, It had gained a reputation of forceful dominance and aggression. There were concerns of it utilizing COINTELPRO-style counter-subversion. TigerSwan shrugged off the allegations as being psychological warfare, which they call a “social engagement plan” (McQuade, 2019).

The intelligence community has sought to give its attentiveness to a national threat known as “domestic terrorism.” In 2006, the FBI was providing intelligence assessments regarding far rights’ and white supremacists. It was thought they were seeking to infiltrate police departments and influence officers. In 2015, the FBI unveiled a counterterrorism policy guide. The manifesto states that “domestic terrorism investigations focused on militia extremists, white supremacists, and sovereign citizen extremists often have identified active links to law enforcement officers” (McQuade, 2019, p. 136).

On August 9, 2017, the FBI revealed its intelligence assessment predictive of an “increase in premeditated retaliatory lethal violence against law enforcement by black identity extremists” (McQuade, 2019, p. 132). Even in the twenty-first century the hidden powers of the CIA may still be involved with Hollywood by spinning films and contriving people’s values. Redmond (2017), believes that,

The CIA and the military are now an accepted and tolerated presence in Hollywood and popular culture. Their influence in crafting films and manipulating people's values and ideas is common practice. This practice is so widespread and effective that a new generation of children and young adults will now live in a world where the relationship between the state and culture is becoming indistinguishable (p. 307).

After a long period of government-sponsored agendas against black Americans, some achievement and progress is being made in this new century. National Public Radio (NPR), reported that African American youth use computer technology more than any other youth of other racial ethnicities in America. The Washington Post also reported that the black incarceration rate is in decline faster than any other ethnic group. There are some two million more

African Americans in higher education today than twenty years ago. As well, overall blacks are making advances in every area of collegiate study (Toldson, 2018).

Neo-Blaxploitation

The term neo-blaxploitation incorporates a means, whereby modern writers that highlight African American protagonists. These lead characters set the terms of the kinds of paradigms, imagery and themes of blaxploitation. This type of concession occurs frankly in cinematic features such as *I'm Gonna Get You, Sucka* (1988) and *Black Dynamite* (2009) (Cunningham, 2018).

Neo-blaxploitation is also found in a compilation of films like John Singleton's remake of *Shaft* (2000) and Director X's redoing of *Superfly* (2018). It can be stated that the markings of blaxploitation with a disquisition on self-consciousness has a defeatist effect. This is reflected in the removal of any imagined political power. Albeit, scholars have resorted to neo-blaxploitation to construe the "Ghetto action" movies of the 1990's (Cunningham, 2018).

The "blaxploitation formula" was originally applicable to films targeting black audiences, such as *Superfly*, during the early to mid-1970's. There are three components thought to have generated the context of blaxploitation: (1) an increasing conscious effect of political and social issues among African Americans that saw heightened fascination for representation in media; (2) a collective move by a variety of black factions in opposition to continuing false light and degeneration in film; and (3) and a need for Hollywood to take action regarding its politically and financially noted deficiencies. It was the last factor, which brought forth the black hero and later heroine movies. They were popularized during blaxploitation's short duration (Cunningham, 2018).

Ossie Davis directed the detective comedy film, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970). It plays on profane language and violent encounters. In addition, naked females was a forerunner for blaxploitation hero films. More contemporarily, neo-blaxploitation was influenced by the "blaxploitation formula" (Cunningham, 2018).

The filmmaker, Quentin Tarantino used as ploys the formula's in blaxploitation cinema as being a main root for vengeance. As well, he utilized it for underground racially-charged ideas found in his films. As an example, his movie, *Jackie Brown* (1997), possesses numerous mindsets found in blaxploitation, from its focal point on drug culture. The lead character played by Pam Grier, who was a heralded female lead during the blaxploitation film era, filled with intense violence. Another Tarantino film was the western, *Django Unchained* (2012). It was neo-blaxploitation and it displayed inner-workings of his films building upon various aspects of the "blaxploitation formula" (Cunningham, 2018).

Black Superheroes in Marvel Cinematic Universe & Hollywood

The blaxploitation enthusiast, marvel comic writer and filmmaker, David F. Walker, wrote "Power Man" and "Iron Fist" (2016-2017). The setting for these works was in the 21st century Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) sphere. Prior to him writing the scripts, *Power Man* and *Iron Fist*, Walker wrote and directed *Macked, Hammered, Slaughtered & Shafted* (2004). He also co-wrote *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak* (2009). Both of the aforementioned, showcased interviews with some of blaxploitation's premiere actor, actresses and directors. One of the key blaxploitation actors interviewed by Walker was Ron O'Neal. Again, he was the one who played the charismatic and influential character, Priest, in *Superfly*. Now remember, this is an extremely alluringly cool lead character from a film, which "habitually" affected generations of poor inner-city African Americans? (Cunningham, 2018).

Blaxploitation as previously discussed somewhat infinitesimal, but it persevered in the comic archives of *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* (1972 – 1973). It continued with *Power Man* (1974 – 1978), and the first *Power Man* and *Iron Fist* (1978 – 1986) series. This Hollywood interracial buddy series tendency would signal Cage's conversion into conventional superhero. Nonetheless, this transformation came to be filled with pitfalls, and *Luke Cage* declined over ten

years after the first volume of *Power Man* and *Iron Fist* was terminated in 1986. Cage's blaxploitation heritage surface at times, most indicatively in the contemporary series *Cage!* (2016) (Cunningham, 2018).

Walker echoed the same type of neo-blaxploitation culture in his second Marvel work, *Nighthawk* (2016). It featured Raymond Kane, an African American corporation adherent. Different than *Luke Cage*, *Nighthawk* did not have its origin in blaxploitation. Actually, this particular *Nighthawk* was born in 2003. His stance as an avenging anti-hero gave creed to neo-blaxploitation (Cunningham, 2018).

Walker's *Nighthawk*, highlighted a street vigilante fighting against police brutality and different social tribulations that blacks encounter. It just survived only a six-issues run. Thus, there was a downfall of Walker's neo-blaxploitation design. The rerun of lack of inclusion in Marvel's publications contradicted the successful black Marvel characters on the silver and lesser screens. Financial success would come for the *Luke Cage* Netflix series, which avoided the nuances of neo-blaxploitation (Cunningham, 2018).

There were limitations of neo-blaxploitation. As Walker's *Nighthawk*, *Power Man* and *Iron Fist* would reveal. They were considered radically having been too profound for Marvel's core audience. Still to Walker's credit, he addressed a lack of diversity and socially-relevant storylines for mainstream—DC and Marvel Comics. During an interview before *Nighthawk* #1 was published, Walker wholeheartedly proclaimed,

The two biggest threats to black people in this country are racism and the criminal justice system that is infected by the disease of racism. At some point, if you are a black superhero, fighting to protect black people, you are going to reach a crossroads where you realize that you must protect them from the forces of law and order—from the status quo. And at that moment, you cease to become a traditional superhero, and you enter into a world where roles are less defined (Cunningham, 2018, p. 109).

Superhero roles in Hollywood throughout history have been reserved for white actors. Their personage and notoriety are important characteristics for them to be considered for the superhero part. Their look is part of the needed periphery of white visual imagery with aesthetics of Euro-American standards. A few African American actors have been given superhero roles in Tinseltown. Halle Berry as Storm in *X-men* (2000). Will Smith in the lead role of *Hancock* (2008), and Samuel Jackson as Nick Fury in eight MCU films (Dokotum, 2020).

Another African American has graced the big screen as a superhero. Chadwick Boseman as “Black Panther” in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). The film *Black Panther* not only has black actors in starring roles. They are also superhero and heroine. *Black Panther* seems to be the first superhero movie that has a large all-black cast from Africa and the African diaspora (Dokotum, 2020).

There were political associations that are affixed to the early comic book. These representations to black heroism Black Panther was the original black superhero in the Marvel Comic Universe MCU. Black Panther first appeared in 1966. It was part of *Fantastic Four* # 52, and was an avenger in 1968. It gave impetus to other black superheroes like the *Falcon* in *Captain America* # 117, was Marvel’s first African American superhero (1969) (Dokotum, 2020).

Other early black superheroes appeared over several decades ago. Mal Duncan was an African American superhero in DC Comics Teen Titans (1970), and DC’s first black superhero, the *Black Racer*, in Kirby’s series *New Gods* # 1 (1971). Storm was the first black superheroine in mainstream comics in *Giant-Size X-Men* (1975) (Dokotum, 2020). *Blade* (1998), *Spawn* (1997) and *Steel* (1997), (C. Kim, personal communication, March 26, 2023). And, *The Day of the Ape*, was a 1972 reprint of *The Jungle Book* from the 1950’s, “which carried all the hard-core Dark Continent tropologies of the Tarzan universe attempt[ing] to [decenter] the negative imaging of Africa” (Dokotum, 2020, p. 252).

Afrofuturism

One of the main aspects of Afrofuturism as a genre is the exploration of the diaspora of Africans in America. It also examines the unthinkable violence against the collective diasporan people. In particular, those who were imported to the so-called New World to be enslaved. *Black Panther* explores this theme in connectivity of its title. As well as spotlight is on its namesake that of the movie's main character. This is done in congruence with the name of the social and political African American group, known as the Black Panthers (Dokotum, 2020).

The Black Panthers formed as a political party in 1966, in Oakland, California. Coogler's *Black Panther* is filled with political innuendos associated with the Black Panther Party and Africans of the Motherland and their African American cousins. The Black Panther Movement began to upstage the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) in its waning years. The CRM called for the integration of blacks into American culture. The iconic black panther image centered around self-defense beliefs, which were elucidated by the groups' co-founder, Huey Newton. He reasoned, "The nature of the panther is that he never attacks. But if anyone attacks him or backs him into a corner, the panther comes up to wipe the aggressor or that attacker out absolutely resolutely, wholly, thoroughly and completely" (Dokotum, 2020).

The movie *Black Panther* is by no means a replica of the 1960's Black Panther political party. Although, some parallels exist centered in knowledge of self and African American upliftment. Afrofuturism helps to locate the *Black Panther*. According to Dokotum (2020),

The Tate Museum provides a definition for Afrofuturism. It is 'a cultural aesthetic that combines science-fiction, history and fantasy to explore the African American experience and aims to connect those from the black diaspora with their forgotten African ancestry.' Further elaboration by Kodwu Eshun, further shed light, that Afrofuturism, 'studies the appeals that black artists, musicians, critics and writers have made to the future was made difficult to imagine' (p. 247).

Coogler's 2018, film, *Black Panther*, greatly presents such social phantasm and

for some is definitive of the term. The movie elicits a lost African history. As well as the perceptive realignment of the Mother Continent in a positive point of view. Science fiction provides speculation regarding the future from an angle of the present moment. This present in the depiction of Africa continues awash with the throwback of European Colonialism (Dokotum, 2020).

Western fabrications about the so-called ‘Dark Continent,’ has been extant for centuries. Some of that conjecture conceptualizes about a future triumphant victory over this pastime via the dream-like comic book. It is imaginative of the glorious heroes’ victorious battle of good over evil. *Black Panther* entails an epic journey from an esoteric tradition entrenched in powerful natural forces through enslavement. Including a brutal diaspora, from a robust diversification of socially-connected cultures, through an imaginary amalgamation of natural resources. As well as latent nativeness genius to a finally secure a victorious win for the human race. This final victory comes by benevolence of African wealth, modernization, humaneness and benefaction (Dokotum, 2020).

The super-power military might of Wakanda comes from its hypersonic weapons system. This awesome technology reveals a future of superior strength within the cultural confines of violence and oppression. It is unleashed to protect the people, wealth, and cultural establishment of Wakanda from outside aggression. As in promoting staunch opposition to making colonial journeys or any calls for a messiah to liberate the land (Dokotum, 2020).

Black Panther Hysteria

There was a lot of heightened anticipation and excitement in the African American community over the upcoming release of the much-heralded pride-film, *Black Panther* in 2018. The image of a hoped-for black excellence was on display by many African American youth, including in the poor ghetto neighborhoods (Toldson, 2018). The fanfare and hoopla over the opening of *Black Panther* was reminiscent of the reaction of black youngsters when the hypnotic blaxploitation film, *Superfly*, started showing in movie theaters across the United States in 1972.

Shortly after the debut of *Black Panther*, a new study, “Healing Our Divided

Society: Investing in America Fifty Years After the Kerner Report,” revealed that black Americans have not progressed in home ownership, employment and incarceration in fifty years.” The original Kerner Commission Report had been published in 1968, two years after the conception of the Black Panther Party. As well the same year, that Marvel Comics created the “Black Panther” superhero, in the same year, a few months later, the socio-political Black Panther Party was conceived. The formation of the Panther Party was during an intense period in America of racial tensions due to social, political and economic inequities as insurrections erupted in many black urban areas (Toldson, 2018, p. 1).

The Kerner Report essentially was utilized as a cloak of objectivity to quantify black “social progress” in contrast to white “social standards.” Nonetheless, various research methods and strategies have emanated from objective research. However, objectivity as a high-level research operational-tool has vulnerabilities laced in error and prejudice. Let’s not forget “objectivity,” was accepted as a standard in research during an era when the academy was predominantly a white male society. They desired others to believe that “They knew more about oppressed people than oppressed people knew about themselves; and being a survivor of oppression limits, rather than enhances, the ability to be a good researcher” (Toldson, 2018, p. 1).

The “Black Panther” series featured a black man being one of MCU’s powerful and intelligent superheroes. He battled against the Ku Klux Klan in 1976. Later he encountered South African apartheid officials in 1989. Yet, there are some troubling issues in the decades since the beginning of the “Black Panther” comic strip. These things include that various barometers continue to point out that black inner-city neighborhoods are not attaining social advancement (Toldson, 2018).

The “Black Panther” comic strip superhero character was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1966. It was put into incarnation on a big screen by African American director Ryan Coogler. Actually, the comic series that mostly inspired the Coogler film is Don McGregor’s masterful narrative, *Panther’s Rage* (1974). The story presents several claimants to the throne notched against one another by a multiplex assortment of characters. They offer different arguments that show legitimacy to become the true

leader of Wakanda (Dokotum, 2020).

Nearly all of the cast from Coogler's movie was black and the film displayed an African soundtrack. As an Afrofuturist film, *Black Panther*, is attached to the struggle for "black counter-memory." This is undertaken through science fiction. Eshun refers to it as a form of 'cybernetic futurism that talks to things that haven't happened yet...oscillating between anticipation and determinism' (Dokotum, 2020, pp. 247-248).

The film introduces "counter-futures of Africa." Non-inclusive is the usual past ills of narratives of the Dark Continent. Those impressions of "ignorance, poverty, war, diseases, cannibalism and so on." These types of stereotypes derived from the colonial imagination. Such a European mindset bolstered the inhumane cruelty of transatlantic slavery, colonial indifference, disarray and loss (Dokotum, 2020).

Today, African American youth are still immensely captivated and hypnotized by certain films like the brilliant *Black Panther* movie. The film gives insight into black imagination, intelligence, inventiveness and accomplishment. At the same time being reconciled by a hidden lurking catalyst. Perhaps there are similarities to the narrative of "Healing Our Divided Society" at play. Just as some have concluded that real lasting black economic advancement in American society may have a fictional design (Toldson, 2018).

At the soul of the *Black Panther* film, is the query into what Africa may have emerged as if it had eluded colonialism. How might the continent have been with no slave trade industry or divisive ruling practices of the colonizers? Or, what would Africa look like now if it had been able to defend itself? Imagine, a successful defense against technological advancement and breakthroughs. As well as no plundering of its natural resources (Dokotum, 2020).

Besides, all of MCU's presentations of criminal activity, evildoers and superheroes, "Black Panther" caused the decrepit Hollywood stereotyping of Africa. This took away from what the reality of what the continent is and the values upheld across the huge land. It brings restoration to Africa to a point of knowledge, which is in opposition to concealment to be discovered to a position to be captive and enslaved. To a position of developmental wealth as opposed to a land of raw materials. To be

mined and sent to Western countries for an eventual re-entry into Africa as expensive “value-added products.” Its inhabitants revere a life of noble and royal titles as opposed to adhering to ignorant and savage tendencies. They are a beacon of light and knowledge as opposed to the daunting forces of the ‘heart of darkness’ (Dokotum, 2020).

Within the colonialism narrative of the *Black Panther* movie, there is a “great white hunter,” who invites himself into the wilds of darkest Africa. He is searching for riches, romantic rendezvous and self-worth. But he turns into a “mild-mannered,” “diminutive,” even “effeminate” officer of the CIA. This is Everett K. Ross (Martin Freeman), spoken of depreciatively as “coloni[z]er.” For the most part, the portrayal of Everett as the white CIA agent is as a somewhat heroic character. He lends a helping hand to save Wakanda, which draws to attention the common “white savior complex” in Hollywood—Africa films. It also epitomizes a grotesque twist given the reprehensible involvement of the CIA setting up puppet governments and dictatorships in Africa. And as well, responsible for the unjust and violent overthrow of many lawful African governments (Dokotum, 2020).

A synopsis of *Black Panther* highlights the assassination of T’Challa’s father, King T’Chaka. He is the firstborn son and heir to the throne, T’Challa, shows up back home. He assumes leadership of Wakanda, the secluded and highly technology-driven East African country made super rich by vibranium. It is a very rare and powerful metal that was dropped from the heavenly skies in the form of a meteor (Dokotum, 2020).

T’Challa’s authoritative rule is soon challenged in ritualistic fighting. First by M’Baku of the Jabari Tribe, and then by his unbending American cousin /brother Erik Stephen (N’Jadaka). His nickname is Killmonger, played by Michael B. Jordan. The character’s name derives from the numerous barbaric killings he committed as part of a US government black-ops unit. Killmonger defeats and appears to kill T’Challa. He then occupies the throne and Wakanda military power and economic riches. He to utilizes them in carrying out his planned liberation of people of African-descent around the world (Dokotum, 2020).

T’Challa returns from a death-like experience. He joins M’Baku, CIA agent

Ross, and community members of the Dora Milaje, the all-women Wakandan commando team. They seek to prevent global war. T'Challa ends up killing his cousin in the final battle. But he is taught a central lesson from Killmonger's black-liberation philosophy. He makes a pledge to get vengeance for his father's betrayal by making available Wakanda's wealth and technology to benefit the world (Dokotum, 2020).

'Imaginary' Wakanda of the African Homeland

The trope of Africa as a huge place filled with primitive people and wild animals in colonization locations. It is recouped by a geographically-specific Wakanda. In different MCU's it is found on the map of Africa. It has been a fictitious shut-in complete country, whose location alternates. At times, nearby South Africa, it is located in equatorial Africa. It is surrounded by Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia. And immediately surrounded by fictionalized places like Azanie (another name for South Africa), Nairobi and Canaan. In the *Black Panther* movie, Wakanda, is situated in the Great Lakes region. It sits between Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and the North Kivu Zone, east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Dokotum, 2020).

In the film, Wakanda is an African country that is not colonized. It is self-determined with an exclusive immaculate culture, enormous wealth and extremely powerful technological advances. It represents the highpoint of African epistemology. The country operates upon an economic strategy of isolationism that rejects globalism to protect itself from corrupt and exploitative countries around the world. As science fiction, *Black Panther* embodies a colloquium for evaluation of Africa's present period and calls for reparations regarding the stolen past. This is so that a desirable future shall commence (Dokotum, 2020).

Wakandan technology effortlessly intertwines spirituality and science. The time-honored African beads serve as exclusive unlimited communication gadgets. Included are shepherds' garments that release electric force fields, and the sophisticated neon-white laboratory of T'Challa's sister, Shuri (Leticia Wright). There is also existent in the identical universal space as a supernatural purple-lit underground cave where the women of Wakanda are prone to luminous plants. They serve as a means of transporting the Black Panther to the ancestral realm (Girish, 2018).

Black Panther presents Wakanda as the foremost civilized advanced nation on earth, in influence and technology. It is an African country that was never colonized. It placed itself in a protective shield from the world of colonial domination and global agendas through a well-developed hologram. Wakanda received its power by vibranium and magnetic levitation trains. The country has remote-operated cars and remote-piloted aircraft with a holographic cockpit (Dokotum, 2020).

King T'Challa wears a nanotechnology outfit. It has vibranium-powered 'kimono' wrist blasters. He also wears sound-repellant boot and carries electromagnetic pulse, which can halt convoys filled with enemies. The army has armored Rhinoceroses. The Afrofuturism of the movie places this novel war tactic as being tied to its analytical idea. It challenges traditional representations of the future world setting of it in conjunction with African and black culture (Dokotum, 2020).

The fatal extremity in which T'Challa kills his cousin Killmonger coincides with King T'Chaka killing his brother (Killmonger's father) N'Jobu. Both sad events amalgamates together the trope of black-on-black violence. It has been speculated that this is a suspicious intolerant trope. It delineates the fractured black family as a microcosm of the black community's inability to get it together (Dokotum, 2020).

Absurdly, the film has been ridiculed for exaggerations in its depiction of Africans as "virtuous and noble." This being done at the expenditure of the appearance of African Americans as "violent," and demented. All things considered, *Black Panther* clearly excelled in its favorable portrayal of Africa. It debunked the racist idea that cinematic movies by black producers do not sell in Western countries or throughout the globe. The success of *Black Panther* in the end, has achieved liberation from the many decades of colonialist representation of Africa. It seems the Dark Continent has shifted to America, while Wakanda "offers salvation from the ghettos of this modern Heart of Darkness" (Dokotum, 2020, p. 256).

Black Panther seems ill-fated to end in apocalyptic earth-saving annihilation that requires conscientious resolutions. The character of Eric Killmonger agonizes immensely toward such a shift into his complicated narrative. As well as his revolutionary political stance. On the other hand, it is inconceivable to contemplate

T'Challa's embracement of internationalism at the end of *Black Panther*. This seems strange without a sensibility of the weightier Marvel storyline. Especially, as he ends up interconnective with the Avengers. They are a group whose plan is to rescue the earth from other-worldly entities. This is a sort of glossed-over "science-fiction imperialism." Therefore, we are left to pontificate perhaps the need of *Black Panther* to assimilate into ceremonious and official brand of the MCU as a paradoxical antithesis to its own themes (Girish, 2018).

One can only ponder the ramifications of *Black Panther* and fictitious Wakanda's influence upon young black minds. Is there any other Hollywood competition to *Black Panther* that can effect a change in African American identity? There were contemporary movies by black filmmakers who arguably addressed diverse messages for African American urban youth to explore in dealing with their issues. These modern African American films were perhaps in an unconscious battle with Coogler's, *Black Panther*. They all were seeking to appeal to the imaginative thought processes of young black filmgoers.

Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016), was victorious at the Academy Awards, the year before the release of *Black Panther*. The movie is a coming-of-age drama of an African American man struggling with his identity and sexuality. Whereas, *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018), is a science fantasy adventure film by Ava Duvernay. It is about the story of a young girl, who is helped by three astral travelers. They go on a space journey to locate her missing father. A surrealist black comedy film written and directed by Boots Riley, is *Sorry to Bother You* (2018). It presents a young black telemarketer who uses a white speaking accent to achieve success at his place of employment (Rapold, 2019).

There was also Spike Lee's biographical crime comedy-drama film, *Black Klansman* (2018). This movie was based on the 2014 memoir *Black Klansman* by Ron Stallworth. In the film, an African American police officer from Colorado Springs, Colorado, successfully is able to infiltrate the local Ku Klux Klan chapter. He is joined by the efforts of a Jewish proxy who becomes its head leader. This story brought to the big screen by Lee, was derived from actual events (Rapold, 2019).

Another motion picture by Barry Jenkins was, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018), a romantic drama. It was adapted as a film, from a 1974 novel by James Baldwin. The story centers on a young woman coming to grips with her pregnancy. At the same time, she and her family seek to prove the innocence of her childhood friend and lover of a crime he did not commit. A documentary film, *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* (2018), is by RaMell Ross. It highlights a humanistic view of the lives of blacks in Hale County, Alabama. Lastly, *Personal Problems*, is a 1980 film described as a “meta-soap opera.” It is a movie by Bill Dunn, which is an ensemble drama, which depicts the life and personal relationships of an African American nurse living in Harlem (Rapold, 2019).

Conclusion

Over the last fifty years, two Hollywood films, perhaps made the most significant impression on the psyche of black youth, *Superfly* and *Black Panther*. African American young people began to vicariously live in fantasy through these two-film’s characters and mimicked their actions. The minds of black youth were affected by the hypnotic powers associated with *Superfly*. It introduced drug culture to the imagination of would-be drug dealers and users. These well-captivated film-drawn inductee drug culture casualties would come under a government-sponsored War on Drugs for around three decades. This period saw numbers of black youth imprisoned and trapped within the American prison-industrial complex.

The prison system has greatly profited by the incarceration of young African Americans. All the while, within this era of black young people searching for their identity, hip-hop, and rap as gangsta rapping, came along. It espoused the violence of street hustling and pursuing capital by means of illegal activities. This type of criminal choice, is akin to the suggestive-lifestyle legacy of the influential classic blaxploitation film, *Superfly*.

Nearly five decades later, there was a crazed-focus on the glory of fictional Wakanda by African American youth. They were not aware of the previous attempts orchestrated by their people to build their dream society. It’s incongruous that within a few decades after Reconstruction followed the end of the Civil War, the former black

slave families made tremendous progress establishing their own co-ops. There were thriving financial centers hoping to fortify their communities economically across America, as well as socially and politically. However, Toldson (2018), shared, “Before the fictitious Wakanda there was Atlanta before 1906, Tulsa Black Wallstreet, East St. Louis before 1917, East St. Louis before 1917, Chicago before 1919, Washington, D.C., before 1919, Knoxville, TN., before 1919 and Rosewood, FL” (p. 2).

The aforementioned examples are seven thriving self-sufficient successful black communities before they were destroyed by white supremacist violence. There is a main distinction for the most part, between Wakandans and African Americans. It is that Wakandans not once accepted or personalized the untrue viewpoints that other countries throughout the world had about them. African American youth may wake up to no longer accept inaccurate data concluded by agenda-oriented objectivist researchers. Perhaps they will begin to believe in themselves. Then maybe there is a chance to begin to build a community /nation after the dream homeland fictitious Wakanda model (Toldson, 2018).

It’s the truth that does set one free and able to wholeheartedly embrace their innate identity. It comes from knowing yourself and your struggles identifying the seen and unseen forces around you to make positive changes. One must also seek to learn the struggles and forces that their ancestors faced. Toldson (2018), says quite succinctly,

African American youth must know their history that, African Americans survived the Transatlantic slave trade, Maroon colony massacres, Reconstruction betrayal, and race riots that targeted black enterprise, Jim Crow Laws, COINTELPRO, the U.S.- Contra crack imports, the prison-industrial complex and a wave of murders of unarmed black civilians (p. 2)

The pursuit by African American youth toward attainment of a knowledge-filled strong self-concept will help to form their identity. So then, if African Americans are to free themselves from the shackles of mental slavery, they must restore their “African consciousness.” The attainment of mental liberation for African Americans through independent action-oriented processes trace back to Africa (Akbar, 2006). According

to Akbar (2004) it is the possession of ancient African knowledge that helps African Americans to achieve the right frame of consciousness.

When African Americans begin to transform their ancestral knowledge base into an awakened consciousness then they begin the most needed education process. This process is operationalized by “self-knowledge.” The “self-knowledge” that African Americans attain in their lives enhances their identity. As a result of this lack of knowledge those African Americans who do not connect with their ancestral roots cannot possibly know their true identity (Akbar, 2004). Therefore, identity is born out of processes of education. Education must therefore present needed, culturally accurate, historical portrayals of Africa (Akbar, 2004).

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