

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

Film Studies General Honors Thesis

# #CinemaSoB.L.A.C.K.

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A Cinematic History of Black Representation

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### Abstract

American film history has historically been under the hegemonic control white, male directors, producers, writers and audiences. When popular Hollywood films include the "othered" groups in society, rather than celebrating differences between people, they present highly prejudiced, humiliating and condemning stereotypes. But there are those throughout history who have worked to change the stereotypes on the silver screen, filmmakers who strived to represent themselves and their culture accurately. Certain black filmmakers have worked tirelessly for progress and empowerment through their personal representation on film, though these accomplishments have largely gone unnoticed by the average film-goer. This study analyzes films from important moments throughout American film history, moments chosen because they were representative of major shifts in the status quo of their respecting times, and this study considers how these shifts ruptured societal norms. Some films were chosen to set up a standard baseline of mainstream filmmaking; indicative of Hollywood's role as a major exporter of culture and representing the hegemonic, dominant players. Other films were chosen to refute the standard and show a broader truth, not simply a one-sided story. The study begins with D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and contrasts his film with Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920). The study ends with *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (Stanley Kramer, 1967), various films throughout the blaxploitation era and Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1978). The release of these films coincided with powerful Civil Rights movements and contributed to the major leaps toward civil equality. The purpose of this study is to analyze the origins of the stereotypical representations of black Americans in mainstream film while studying the societal effects of these representations. This study will also analyze black films as a counter culture and a tool for social justice, but more than anything this is a celebration of black filmmaking.

## Preface

In light of the recent controversy at the 2015 Academy Awards the notion of representation has become increasingly popular. The social media hashtag "#OscarsSoWhite" struck a chord among the celebrity elite all the way to the everyday user. This year's Oscar Program featured host Chris Rock who acknowledged the controversy in his opening monologue by saying:

"It's the 88th Academy Awards, which means this whole no black nominees thing has happened at least 71 other times.... The real question everybody wants to know, everybody wants to know in the world is: Is Hollywood racist?... You're damn right Hollywood is racist. But it ain't that racist that you've grown accustomed to.... "

The racism that *we* have grown accustomed to. We have grown accustomed to people of color, especially black people, as the "side kick" or the "best friend" as Rock goes on to mention. We have grown accustomed to watching and identifying with one story. Rock then said that, "we want black actors to get the same opportunities as white actors." It is ridiculous and upsetting that in 2015 people of color are *still* asking for the same opportunities as white people. But opportunity was not the only issue addressed at this year's Awards. While equal opportunity is always important, this year's controversy began when word spread that for the second year no people of color were nominated for an Academy Award (see figure 1). As a person of color I was disheartened by the fact that black filmmakers are glossed over and unrecognized for their hard work. For generations the only people young black Americans could look up to were housemaids or tap dancers, or they were forced to believe that their skin color made them less deserving of equal rights and treatment. Diversity is so important going forward as a nation of non-homogenous peoples. Accurate representation on the silver screen must be recognized because it is the truth of the society we live in, but it is not the truth we watch unfold on the screen. So why

does that narrow perspective remain the only choice audiences have?

For my thesis I studied films from specific moments in American history. These particular films stood out to me as indicative of their respective times in history, and ones that generated a cultural knowledge and understanding of the social climate. I would like to thank Professor Elsa Barkley Brown at the University of Maryland for providing me with valuable information and support in regards to my topic; I would like to thank the Separate Cinema Museum and the History of Minstrelsy Museum for their accessible and historical information, and lastly I would like to thank my thesis advisor Professor Erin Espelie for her support, flexibility and guidance through this process.



Figure 1: 2015 Academy Awards, Best Actor Nominees

### Introduction:

Art is a reflection of culture just as culture is a reflection of art. Throughout human history art has served to give a voice to the human condition while reflecting societal norms; in turn what happens in film affects the social climate of the world. Film, being a moving visual and aural medium is, arguably documents reality more effectively as it captures a moment in time, place and culture, no matter how constructed the environment. This reality on film screens often times reflect the social climate as well as the needs and expectations of its viewers. In the United States film has served as one of the leading forms of entertainment and has been exported to the entire world in a fairly homogenous form: that is the culture of white heterosexual male protagonists, directors, producers and writers. Historically speaking, Hollywood films forced audiences to identify with a leading hero in order to understand the film. Moreover, Hollywood as an institution deemed only the stories of a white, male hero as profitable and relatable.

Audiences of American film, and citizens of America, have watched history unfold from the perspective of the most privileged group in American society.

In the contemporary moment, filmmakers attempt to create a diverse world full of many perspectives. Ongoing prejudices about the types of films that should be funded hinder these stories from being released and viewed by a wider audience. However, in the past creating a world for one homogeneous group of people was an expectation and the norm. For audience members who fell outside the norm these viewing experiences was often times alienating. "Othered" audience members watched as people they identified with were portrayed as demoralizing over-simplified caricatures of themselves. One of the most prevalent of these caricatures is that of Black Americans. Black American people have existed in North America almost as long as their white counterparts, and neither as long as the Native American population. But black American's place in society was determined initially during the time of slavery, a time when legally they were given the status of being less than a person--a person defined as a white male. In a culture that sees only opposing cultural binaries the black and white binary was clear, as was who had the power and who did not. Social and systemic norms created

methods of uplifting one group while tearing another down. The method of doing so through art and entertainment will be focused on here, broken into several distinct historical eras: the 1910s and 1920s, the 1960s and the 1970s.

At one point in America, minstrelsy was one of the leading forms of entertainment while solidifying black stereotypes into popular culture. Minstrelsy, as defined by an exhibit titled, "History of Minstrelsy: From Jump Jim Crow to *The Jazz Singer*" is, "an exploitative form of musical theater that exaggerated real-life black circumstances and reinforced dangerous stereotypes during the 19th and 20th centuries." As an artistic movement that lasted over a century minstrel performers, studied black people to create a variety of over-exaggerated stereotypes which added to its complexity as a tradition, with a concentration on "white superiority and black inferiority"<sup>1</sup>(Huse and Sanders). Minstrelsy was not designed to reflect aspects of black culture but to reinforce white domination. Many of the stereotypes portrayed on the stage became so widely believed that many Americans today still believe them. Minstrelsy introduced these stereotypes that became caricatured tropes. Specifically some of those caricatured subjects are the "Buck," the "Uncle Tom," the "Coon," the "Mammy" and the "Jezebel." These stereotypes were not only representative of blackness but also gender performance and sexuality, which served as another form of oppression.

Almost half a century after the decline of minstrelsy, all of these stereotypes reoccurred in the D.W. Griffith film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). This film remains an important staple in American film history, even with its overtly racist depictions of blacks and its glorification of the Ku Klux Klan. These degrading stereotypes which were so deeply rooted in mainstream white American psyches still pervade our society today. However throughout the years black filmmakers and various Civil Rights movements have worked to remove these stereotypes from being explicitly seen and accepted in our contemporary society. One of the first pioneering black filmmakers was Oscar Micheaux, whose film *Within Our Gates* (1925) may have been one of the first to show the truth behind the horrific affects of a racist society. His nearly forty films played an integral part in film history and American history as he began a movement of filmic trends of

redefining and representing blackness as history progressed. *Within Our Gates* was released in 1921, a mere two years after the 1919 Race Riots, which further displays the affects of a changing social climate on film. But this was nowhere near the end of changing society and art reflecting those changes. After Micheaux, black artistic movements including the Harlem Renaissance which inspired black creative expression in the face of extreme racism. Legendary black actors Lena Horne and Paul Robeson starred in countless films and Broadway plays, as a major leap forward in the name of progress. Unfortunately, on a larger, scale black Americans were lacking the accurate representation they so desperately desired. Major Hollywood productions like *Gone With The Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and Shirley Temple and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson films continued to popularize the notion that blacks are still less than their white counterparts.

However, the years from 1960 to 1979 were integral in black filmmaking and black American history due to the various Black Power movements and the Civil Rights Era. In 1969 legendary black actor Sydney Poitier starred in Stanley Kramer's film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. This film takes a look at a blossoming relationship between a white woman and black man as he is introduced to her all white family. After nearly a decade of Civil Rights Movements and new progressive norms in society, *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* tests the liberal views of the white moderate. While this film tries to show society's progress it rehashes outdated stereotypes while confirming white superiority. The film makes a clear statement about interracial relationships and when they are acceptable to occur. In addition these movements paved the way for blaxploitation films that created a new sense of pride within the black community. The majority of these films were made by black people for black people. They featured a specific Black Power rhetoric as black men and women protagonists fought against a white supremacist society. Then in 1978 a UCLA graduate student created a film that rewired black film and representation. Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* painted a picture of a black working class man desperately trying to leave his situation in the past while emphasizing the importance of accurate representation and the humanity of the black community like never



before.

*The Birth of a Nation*, *Within Our Gates*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the blaxploitation movement and *Killer of Sheep* played an integral part in transforming history and representation of black Americans on screen. Nevertheless, they played an even bigger part in representations of gender and sexuality of black Americans. Stereotypes around black bodies, sexuality and gender performance are evident in early films, especially in *The Birth of a Nation*. The minstrel stereotypes as previously mentioned were centered around black sexuality and depicted blacks as either violent sexual predators or asexual cartoon characters. History shows black bodies as exoticized, demonized or objectified by a white power-centric society. Then as society progressed towards times of civil disobedience and social change, black bodies and the sexual implications around them changed: blacks were in control of how their bodies and sexuality would be displayed. New forms of masculinity and femininity were popularized and displayed to black filmgoers. These new types of representations were increasingly important because black Americans were no longer stereotypes and one-dimensional figures, they were people. While these new types of films showed black men and women in control of their bodies and sexuality, they reinforced negative stereotypes in the minds of a mainstream white audience. To the majority white audience, stereotypes surrounding black sexuality correlated with violence and promiscuity that attributed to further dehumanization of black men and women. While this was the predominant and widespread form of representation at the time, there were still many who fought for change. Black men and women designed a new form of expression that suited their needs. Independent filmmaking served as a major outlet of uncensored expression. These new filmmakers were responsible for getting their message out without the restrictions of a production company that decided which stories were worth their time and money, and which would make a profit.

### The Unparalleled Paradigm: A His(trionic)story of the American People

The 1915 hit film *The Birth of a Nation* debuted in theaters, and was an instant success. While members of the NAACP tried to protest the film for its historically inaccurate and racist themes, they were brushed aside by the raving reviews of Griffith's so-called masterpiece. Audiences had never before seen a film like *The Birth of a Nation* and they were mesmerized by Griffith's use of the close-up contrasted with the long shot, his use of the dissolve to indicate the passing of time, and the ways he explored the inner thoughts and emotions of his protagonists. He was a true auteur of his craft in the sense that he mastered storytelling and put forth a new standard of cinema, thus legitimizing the art form. However after viewing his film, the Ku Klux Klan experienced an increase in members and his film was used as a recruitment in decades to come ("100 Years Later"). This film brought the fears of a white audience to the big screen as they watched black men depicted as rapists terrorizing young white women, driving one woman to suicide rather than face such a fate as portrayed as worse than death.

Based on several novels and plays written by a former lawyer, Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Birth of a Nation* is a Victorian melodrama depicting the consequences of abolishing slavery and giving blacks the same freedoms as whites. As a director, Griffith had the ability to suture an audience member into the emotional distress and peril of the defenseless white protagonists, while glorifying the Ku Klux Klan as a group of epic heroes on a quest to stop the black menace. And although there are many explicit themes and examples of racism and sexism, there are implicit messages that reinforce the irrational fear of miscegenation and what would happen if equality were given to blacks. Many of these implicit messages are rooted in gender and sexuality. Griffith manages to demonize black sexuality and oppress white women's sexuality with his Victorian ideas about gender representation. Black male sexuality is first demonized through the male gaze as Griffith offers close-ups on the faces of black men as they gaze lustfully at white women. This gaze conjures up the anticipatory action of violence that will take place once the black man is alone with the white woman.

Griffith plays on the fear of white society by creating black male characters who prey on

young, white women. Gus, or the "renegade negro" (Walter Long) is played by a white actor in black face, personified the black stereotype of the "Buck;" a large and dangerous black man with an obsessive attraction to white women. In *The Birth of A Nation*, Gus is described as "a product of the vicious doctrines spread by the carpetbaggers." As the "Buck" stereotypes, Gus is depicted as a predator as he stalks Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh). One of the most famous scenes depicting black sexuality (also referenced in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* [2000]) is the death of Flora. The scene begins with the young Flora in the woods enjoying nature and playing with a small squirrel. The music as the camera focuses on her is light and hopeful. However after a cut to Gus lurking in the shadows the music changes key, and becomes ominous and foreboding. Gus then reveals himself from the shadows, immediately followed by a title card that reveals his dialogue, "You see, I'm a captain now-and I want to marry." Flora is in turn horrified at the prospect of being a black man's wife-- she hits Gus and a chase ensues. This particular scene is reminiscent of films from the horror genre. Fast-paced cutting, juxtapositions of Gus' lustful expressions and Flora's fearful expressions further integrate a sense of worry and panic into the viewer. During this sequence a Flora runs through tall trees as Gus follows closely behind her (see figure 2). A long take and a deep focus shot make the characters seem small in contrast to the massive trees and ongoing landscape, reinforcing the idea of isolation and that Flora is alone and can only fend for herself. Flora then climbs to the top of a cliff, and in a desperate act to save herself, she jumps to her death. Flora is the basic representation of southern femininity and a martyr for the movement against black equality. Griffith depicts Flora as naive, innocent, youthful, loving, beautiful, and above all violently opposed to interracial marriage and miscegenation. She sets the example of what young, white women must prepare to do if black men desire them in order to preserve their "purity."



Figure 2: *The Birth of a Nation*

Although Griffith's intent was to depict Gus as a rapist and villainous black man, there is some ambiguity in this scene as he chases after Flora. One may assume that after hearing Flora's cries he would leave her alone, but this may be the first time he has ever interacted with a white woman, so he may not know how to interact with her (Du). Even though Gus chases after Flora he never actually harms her. While Gus receives the blame for her death, he is not the true villainous black character. The roles of the violent and villainous blacks are encompassed by the film's "mulatto" characters Silas Lynch (George Seigmann) and Lydia Brown (Mary Alden). These characters are the major villains and they serve as warnings against miscegenation and if Griffith's ideal version of America is not followed. Griffith's goal throughout the film is to set examples of racial construct i.e. "white domination and black subordination" ("The Threat of Mulatto"). An essay titled, "The Threat of the Mulatto in The Birth of A Nation" states that [mulattos] are

"further from subordination and closer to white privilege. Griffith, knowing the potential threat the mulatto poses on his ideological social construct, portrays mulatto characters as deceptive, manipulative, and overly passionate"

Lynch and Brown are by far the most villainous and manipulative of all the characters, and the most unstable. Griffith links their multi-ethnic heritage and their mental state, claiming that the two races are so incompatible that mixing them together leads to insanity. Lynch turns to physical outbursts of rage when Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis) protects his daughter from his advances, where as Lydia rips at her clothes in a moment of anger and frustration after being

treated like a common house slave. Griffith's aims to convince audiences that racial mixing leads to unstable, immoral and impure people. Griffith builds the standards to which white and black people should aspire to, and heeds warning against those who would diminish the good and moral society Griffith understood as represented in his imagined Antebellum south.

The sexuality of the mulatto characters is also the most aggressive and violent in comparison to any other character in the film. Silas Lynch's sexual aggression makes him another representation of the "Buck" stereotype since his libido is seemingly uncontrollable as he lusts after both Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish) and Lydia Brown. Both mulatto characters are represented as more intelligent than their black counterparts and more morally repugnant than their white. The idea of the "tragic female mulatto" motif is further explored in later film history trends (Pineda-Volk). In the simplest of terms, Lydia Brown is supposed to be the mixing of the black mammy trope and the white virgin (see figure 3). In reality she does not share any of their stereotypically desired attributes. Griffith's logic would label these stereotypes as ideal because the "Mammy" is loyal and always obedient, her large stature and dark skin making her undesirable and unthreatening to the white heterosexual marriage; while the white virgin remains standard of purity, beauty and innocence (Pineda-Volk). The mulatto female is, "light-skinned, thin, physically attractive, desirable and sensual. Unlike the white virgin; she is ambitious and is morally suspect, willing to use her sexuality to manipulate men and gain power" (Pineda-Volk). In the film, Lydia manipulates Austin Stoneman and Silas Lynch with her sexuality as a means to further her social standing since both men are in positions of power. She is demonized as a negative example of femininity for acting on her sexual desires and using men.



Figure 3: *The Birth of a Nation*

As Griffith's film was held as a triumph of cinema the social implications of this film so widely distributed across the nation played an important role in the state of unrest during the Race Riots between the years 1915 and 1919. While so many accepted this film as truth others were repulsed, demanding censorship or that the film be removed from theaters. Even today this film is held up as the best example of artistry and auteurship of the silent film era. It is commonly studied as a masterpiece and major contributor of establishing cinema as an art form. At the time race relations were tense in the country as the oppressed black Americans fought for equal rights and treatment, and many white Americans fought for the status quo or for separation. The historical significance of the film is clear and its recognition in American film history is even more important as it legitimized the art form. But its effects on society must be recognized. It popularized racism, bigotry, sexism and false American histories. It made these prejudiced ideologies acceptable and it applauded vigilantes who murdered various individuals. Cinema works as an idealized reflection of society so those viewing this film understood it as the idealized version of their lives and something to strive for. It glorified overt and violent forms of racism and those who committed it.

### Pioneering in Black Filmmaking: "Too Much Truth"

To the white mainstream audience accepting of the status quo of their era, *The Birth of a Nation* provided a very accurate depiction of black Americans and their place in society, while being extremely problematic to black viewers. Their race was represented in demeaning and dehumanizing manners as white actors in black face exaggerated stereotypes used to keep black Americans in an oppressed state. This was also a time in American history where many who sought to fight against this film and the systems that oppressed black men and women.

Independent director Oscar Micheaux stood as a creative and fighting voice for the black community. His trailblazing works were controversial as he confronted the oppressive norms of society and developed black characters as more than stereotypes. Micheaux's 1920 film *Within Our Gates* depicts the struggle of one highly educated black American woman as she tries to find funding for a southern school to teach uneducated black children. This film is thought by many to be a response to Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* as it depicts, "the lynching of black innocents, the near rape of the main character and a subservient preacher who secretly laments that he's selling out his race" (Biography.com Editors). *Within Our Gates* is a "racial reversal" of *The Birth of a Nation*: it shows white men preying on black women as well as historically accurate representations of the effects of a white supremacist society on US culture. (Siomopoulos). While both films faced censorship, Micheaux's film was censored for showing "too much truth" (Butters, Jr.)

*Within Our Gates* takes a serious look at the white supremacy dominated society and the actual affects it had on black Americans. While many of Micheaux's films offered controversial looks at race and race relations, they do not hesitate to make black characters villainous. Unlike Griffith's depiction of blackness, Micheaux did not use black characters as representations for the entire black race; instead he made the statement that one's blackness and their character are not correlated, thus creating three-dimensional black characters. *Within Our Gates* also takes an in-depth look at masculinity by showing various types of black men. While the plot of the film centers around a black woman, Micheaux explores the notion of what it means to be a black

man.

*Within Our Gates* stars Evelyn Preer as Sylvia Landry, a highly educated biracial black American with a dark past and experiences with racism while fighting for the betterment of her race. Sylvia is described as "typical of the intelligent negroes" as she works closely with several black men to find funding for a school for black children. While Sylvia is the main character of the film and the film centers primarily on her experiences, Sylvia's inner psychology is rarely developed, at least in comparison to the black men in the film. Many of the negative tropes associated with black femininity are not challenged in the same manner as black masculinity. There are very few female characters, black or otherwise, in the film that are developed beyond surface level representations. Sylvia's back story is complex, but offers very little evidence as to why she is so determined to educate black Americans. One could speculate that since Sylvia knows the personal benefits of having an education that she would want to fight for all members of her race to have the same access to an education as she, but she has experienced some of the most traumatic events in the film. Being educated did not save her from the violence and hatred committed toward the black community. And while she is given two romantic subplots, she is never truly examined as a comprehensive, three dimensional character. In fact the film features only two other black female characters and neither of them are fully developed. Since Sylvia is not given three-dimensional characteristics her role is cannot to encompass all black femininity which fails to be demonized or lionized; rather black women were simply not given the same attention in the film as black men.

Sylvia is recognized early in the film as inherently "good" since she appears frequently wearing all white, especially around bad characters wearing all black. While her character traits are virtuous and brave she is not just a role model for women, but for all people. Griffith tried to represent the ideal for women, black or white; Micheaux, on the other hand, uses Sylvia as an example for all people. Not only does Sylvia try to fight for the educational rights of black children, she also puts her life on the line to save a young boy from being hit by a car. The driver, an affluent white philanthropist, recognizes Sylvia's bravery, and offers to give her five



thousand dollars for the school. Even though this plan is thwarted by white racism to prevent black children from receiving an education, Silvia remains diligent to get an education for her people.

As previously mentioned, *Within Our Gates* serves as a racial reversal of *The Birth of a Nation*. Micheaux parallels much of the action in Griffith's film thus making the statement that black Americans are the true victims of society. The first parallel drawn is between the "faithful souls" in *The Birth of a Nation* and those figures in *Within Our Gates*. In Griffith's film, blacks are rewarded for their loyalty to whites, but Micheaux shows the reality of what really happened to these men and women. Micheaux introduces Old Ned (uncredited) as an Uncle Tom figure in favor of white supremacy. Old Ned is a priest in an Black American church who peddles the idea that the Earth belongs to white men, and that with their money and education they will go to Hell. But since the black man is uneducated and pure, they will surely go to Heaven.

Old Ned's character was controversial since he was the first faithful soul who is aware of what his attitudes perpetuate to society. There is a scene in which Old Ned speaks with his white friends as they ask his opinion of blacks getting the right to vote. Old Ned assures the white men that he will do everything he can to stop black voting rights. The actor gives big, childlike gestures as he nods along with what the white men are saying. As he turns, one of the white men stand and kick Old Ned in the rear as he continues to laugh along with the white men. Old Ned grabs his things to leave while bowing to the men saying, "Yessir, them white folks is mighty fine." Old Ned exits the room, his face suddenly changing from happy and simple to gloomy and full of disgust. He looks down as he says, "Again I've sold my birthright, all for a miserable 'mess of pottage.' Negroes and whites-- all are equal. As for me, miserable sinner, Hell is my destiny." The inter titles for Old Ned change from a simple southern uneducated accent to refined English. Old Ned puts on an act for the white men knowing perfectly well that what he preaches is wrong. Gerald R. Butters, Jr. describes Old Ned and characters like him in his essay, "From Homestead to Lynch Mob: Portrayals of Black Masculinity in Oscar Micheaux's *Within*

*Our Gates*" as a "tragic figure trapped by the racial system in which he lives. " While Micheaux tries to give the audience insight into the man's inner psychology, he also criticizes Old Ned and his version of masculinity. Old Ned's final words in the film are representative of his self-loathing, but viewers are also inclined to loathe Old Ned for perpetuating a white dominated society. Instead of standing up for what he believes in as a man, he allows himself to be humiliated by his so-called friends and lies about his true inner knowledge and self.

Another faithful soul character is Efram (E.G. Tatum). Efram is introduced during a flashback to Sylvia's past. Sylvia comes from a poor family where her father, Emil Landry (Grant Edwards), is often taken advantage of by a white business owner, Phillip Griddlestone (Ralph Johnson). Her father is framed for Griddlestone's murder and Efram, who sees part of the altercation, runs to tell of what he saw. After a group of white men hear Efram's news they form a lynch mob to hunt down and kill every black man, woman or child until they catch Emil. Emil Landry is blamed for the murder; then both he and his wife are lynched by a mob comprised of middle-aged white men. Efram, assuming he is safe from the mob, is caught and lynched anyway. Efram is another example of undesirable black masculinity. He betrays members of his own race for personal gain. Instead of being rewarded like the faithful souls in *The Birth of a Nation*, he is murdered. Micheaux shows the reality for black men and women, no matter where their loyalties lie, and he provided an accurate depiction of the horrors blacks faced in their everyday lives. In the year 1920 an estimated fifty-three Black American's were lynched in the United States. Micheaux, aware of the murders taking place, displayed this reality for the world to see.

Micheaux contrasts black masculinity through two significant male characters in Sylvia's life, Larry Prichard (Jack Chenault) and Dr. V. Vivian (Charles D. Lucas). Both men are present throughout Sylvia's experiences in the film, however they represent two sides of the same coin to black masculinity. Micheaux was often criticized for displaying villainous black characters instead of glorified ideations of blackness, like many of his black filmmaking contemporaries, (Butters, Jr.) because did not shy away from showing negative representations. Micheaux's

depiction of black masculinity is described as, "all the dirty laundry of Black American masculinity was aired in Micheaux's cinema: gambling, drugs, passing for white, conspiring with white men for selfish advancement, and criminality (Butters Jr.)" Larry Prichard is a black American criminal, he is a representation of the type of black men that exist, and not the flattened idealized version of black men. Early in the film Larry is introduced as a criminal when a police chief is given a telegram with information about Larry as a major criminal wanted by the police. Larry also has his eyes set on Sylvia as he constantly tries to court her and when he is unsuccessful he resorts to black mailing Sylvia. Larry Prichard is the immoral, manipulative side involved in crime while Dr. Vivian is the upstanding, patriotic moral citizen involved in advocating for social justice. Dr. Vivian represents an ideal example for black men. A passionate and loving man, Dr. Vivian is a character that aligns with staples of men in black films of Micheaux's time. Dr. Vivian dresses well and is highly educated. He knows that his social climate is unjust but he encourages Sylvia, and viewers, to hold onto pride in their country and continue to fight for their rights. Micheaux's goal as a director was not to hide the truths about the black American community because doing so is untrue. Micheaux wanted to show realistic portraits of the black community to prove they are a complex and diverse group of human beings.

While Micheaux's work offered examples of black masculinity from the black community, he also showed it from the white community. One of the biggest determining factors that lead to Emil Landry's lynching were the articles fabricated in the newspapers (see figure 4).

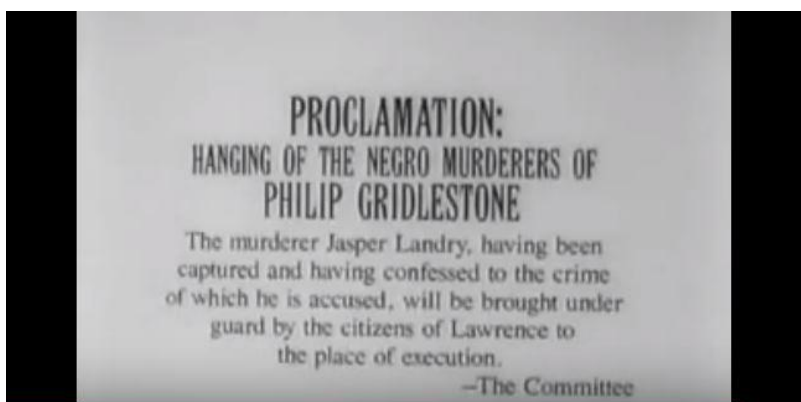


Figure 4: *Within Our Gates*

Thus, there is something of a reflexive nature here about the power and "truth" of the media. After receiving word of Phillip Griddlestones' murder, the media told a story contrary to the truth. They peddled the story that Landry, a drunken brute, stormed into Griddlestones' office and demanded money. While Griddlestone, a sweet welcoming man, turned to face him, he was shot immediately. Micheaux juxtaposes the truth, which the viewer was privileged to watch, with the claims that the media fabricated. The media showed Landry as another out of control and violent black man, thus forcing the reaction from vigilante citizens to ban together and hunt down every black person they found. It is also important to note that the juxtaposition between white masculinity versus black in order to further convey to their readers who is the victim and who is the villain. Micheaux's understanding of how the media represents blackness, especially in regards to men, is displayed in the film as the audience is privy to the truth and what the media presented. He shows the media playing on racist white fears of blackness and black masculinity, thus inspiring citizens to kill the "dangerous" black man before he killed another innocent white man.

In order to depict the truth behind what really happened to black Americans, Micheaux makes the connection between rape and lynching in his film, which serves as another reversal between his film and *The Birth of a Nation*. He uses parallel action between the lynching of Sylvia's parents and the attempted rape of Sylvia to show the range of violent acts committed against the black community. For Gus' supposed attempted rape of Flora in *The Birth of a Nation*, he is captured by a mob and lynched. The rationale behind lynching was given as a, "necessary defense against white women's vulnerability in the face of black men's propensity to rape and murder" (Wood, 1247). Sylvia's assaulter is not punished because he is white. The sexual assault Sylvia faces is reminiscent of the sexual assault Elsie Stoneman faces in Griffith's film (see figure 5). These scenes from both films feature a white character and a biracial character; however the gender roles are switched from a white woman and a biracial man in Griffith's film to a white man and a biracial woman in Micheaux's film. Each woman is cornered



Figure 5: *The Birth of a Nation* and *Within Our Gates*

in a small room by a man while he advances towards her. Micheaux's version of this scene is far more violent and disturbing: whereas Griffith makes the statement that if you are black and rape a white woman you will be lynched, Micheaux makes the statement that if you are black, innocent or not, you will be lynched or raped.

Griffith paints Elsie Stoneman as the ideal white woman as her fragility forces her to faint rather than defend herself against her attacker, Silas Lynch. She at first tries to run from him, screaming for help, even breaking a window so the outside world can hear her cries of terror. But, alas, her delicate nature can no longer bear the struggle against Silas Lynch's advances, so she faints. As she lays unconscious in Lynch's arms, he pauses to gaze lustfully at her pale face. Elsie's purity is only saved by her father knocking on the door. Sylvia is not so fortunate. She fights and screams as her clothes are torn and ripped from her body, her hair grabbed and pulled from her usual neat bun. Sylvia uses chairs and vases in the room to defend herself from her attacker, but she tires from the enduring struggle and her strength to fight wanes. Her attacker stands over her, removing her dress from her shoulder to reveal a scar on Sylvia's chest. This scar indicates that Sylvia is the attacker's daughter, as is revealed by title cards explaining the attack. Micheaux duplicated this scene from Griffith's as another cinematic way to parallel *The Birth of a Nation*. The sets in these parallel scenes are almost identical even though Griffith attempts to recreate upper-class, Antebellum south furnishings and Micheaux attempts to create a modest cabin in the forest. The camera follows Sylvia around the small room in the same manner that the camera followed Elsie. Micheaux's depiction of the brutality and hatred that

black Americans face because of severe racism was successful as his film elicits a powerful emotional response, even now. Viewers in the 1920s were struck by these types of scenes to the point that censorship was demanded of his films. His films were censored not only for content, but for unapologetically displaying the gritty truth of societal norms of his time.

Micheaux continued to make films that featured majority black casts and dealt with issues of race and representation. Many other black filmmakers followed in his footsteps as artists used their voice in creative forms to promote and demand justice. The film genre known as "race films" was known for exhibiting the culture of jazz with all black casts. Then in the 1930s and the 1940s, Hollywood sound films continued with the tradition of displaying stereotypes of black people in so-called "plantation films" or "jungle film." And after the Second World War black American soldiers were given some representation in Hollywood when teamed up with the American military to create war films which occasionally depicted the black soldiers' stories<sup>1</sup>. But accurate representation was still far off. Representation and civil rights were still segregated. Luckily the demand for equal rights and treatment was rising among many Americans. On December 1, 1955 a black woman refused to give up her seat on a city bus, an event that ignited over a decade of protests and social justice to completely, radically change the apartheid that existed in America. Subsequent films began to reflect these systemic changes.

### Social Change in Film Part I:

#### "Civil rights is one thing. This here is somethin' else"--*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*

Many exciting and progressive changes took place during the 1960s when the time of Civil Rights activism was at an all time high in the United States. The changing social climate brought waves of protests and ideas to challenge the conservative status quo. A new liberal and open attitude was popularized by black Americans and white progressives as they fought against social norms which sought to segregate and oppress other Americans. And while the white middle-class moderate was open to the idea of change, it the force of people like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who directly challenged the white "moderate" in his "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." In addition to the white moderate, Dr. King challenged two kinds of people in the black community; the "complacent" and the "black nationalist." Dr. King's letter is especially important in the context of analyzing black filmic movements for the next decade after Dr. King wrote his letter and after he was assassinated. Each of the groups he addressed in his letter are portrayed and confronted in films like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer 1967), Blaxploitation films and *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett 1978).

Beginning with *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the film examines the consequences of a relationship between a middle-aged black man and a young white woman. This film is an attempt to confront the white liberal who makes claims towards equality with their own hypocrisy. Much of this film shows the two white parents and their inability to accept a black man in their home and a part of their family. The film ascribes to the patriarchal notion that the woman must have her father's consent for marriage, in the case of *Guess Who's...* the consent comes from a white father, Matt (Spencer Tracy). In order for him to give his consent he must overcome the bigotry that he hides and his daughter and her black fiancé should marry because of their love for one another. However, given the power structure of this film, black men and women are never fully humanized. John Prentice (Sydney Poitier), the most important black character, is too perfect thus showing that the only way a marriage between a white woman and a black man could work is if the black man is free of any negative traits. He has to be highly educated, kind hearted, and

most importantly uninterested in sex. The filmmakers made an attempt to make the most ideal conditions for an interracial marriage to remove any question of race as an issue. Prentice's moral compass only points North, he is smart and successful, but his lack of a sexuality makes him an unrealistic character. And John being the only character of color with a personal history, means the other characters serve as plot points or comic relief. For example, his parents only serve as enforcers of Joey's parents' attitudes about their marriage, without truly existing as three dimensional characters. And Aside from John Prentice and his family, the only other black characters are representations of minstrel stereotypes; the "Jezebel" and the "Mammy."

The film opens with a very chaste kiss between Dr. John Prentice and Joey Drayton (Katherine Houghton). The kiss is only shown from the taxi from the driver's point of view as he watches them in the rear view mirror, then there is a cut to the taxi driving away as two are shown from a distance embracing. And while this is not the first interracial kiss in film, this was still a time when miscegenation was a taboo, and just barely legalized in many southern states. This kiss is one of the few times in the film when there is any physical affection between the two supposed lovers. The kiss serves as exposition, acknowledging the couple's relationship, although throughout the rest of the film, other than their plans for marriage, any and all romantic emotions the two share are hidden. The film makes a point of expressing Dr. Prentice's reluctance to have sexual relations. And later in the film, Joey explains to her mother, Christina (Katherine Hepburn) that, "He wouldn't. I don't think he could have been in much doubt about my feelings, but he just wouldn't... he's been concerned about my getting hurt somehow." In an effort to distance John Prentice from antagonistic stereotypes surrounding black male sexuality, he is instead actually desexualized, especially in relation to white women. In an essay written by Anne Gray Perrin, the author analyzes John Prentice's sexuality as portrayed in the film and about this kiss the two share. Perrin states that,

"Instead of showing a healthy sexual relationship between two people in love, the film castrates John Prentice. Joey has not slept with her fiancé' and so the white woman retains her sacredness because the black man's sexuality has been repressed" (856).

This film tries to make a statement that interracial marriage and love is acceptable, however by



suppressing Prentice's sexuality, the film instead makes the statement that interracial sex is not acceptable, thus castrating and dehumanizing Prentice.

John Prentice's sexuality is repressed in terms of white women; however, in regard to black women, he is given a small moment of sexual expression. After Joey and John arrive at Mr. and Mrs. Drayton's home in San Francisco, where they plan on divulging to the young Joey Drayton's parents of their sudden engagement, they spot a young, attractive black woman leaving the house. The woman stops as she makes eye contact with John Prentice. Joey explains that she helps their black housemaid on certain days of the week. Then as the woman walks away John continues to ogle her while asking "which days?" This encounter makes the statement that a black man can have a sexual attraction to a black woman because it is acceptable for one to pursue another of their own race. Whereas any mixed racial attraction is deemed unacceptable, so someone (in *Guess Who's...* case John Prentice) must be castrated. While John's lack of sexual attraction toward his white fiancé may be an attempt to further remove stereotypes around black male sexuality with regard to their perceived obsession with white women, John is still in love with Joey. One would assume that his love for Joey would also manifest in sexual desires for her, as he expressed towards the black woman, but he is castrated to avoid any stereotypes with black men. But one could argue that his castration in this film is a form of punishment for the black men who were thought to have abused white women. John Prentice loses a central part to the human condition because he is a black man attracted to a white woman. This form of punishment is what allows their relationship to blossom, because he is the one paying for the sins of those who came before him.

It is also important to note the power difference in Joey and John's relationship and their sexualities. If John were white, he would definitely have more power than Joey because of patriarchal societal norms. He is a highly respected and successful doctor, he is a part of the middle class and he is significantly older than Joey, but he is also black which is a hindrance in the film. If he were white, he would be allowed to have a sexual nature, and it would be Joey, the young white woman, who would be denied her sexuality. Joey implies that she is willing to have

a sexual relationship with John as she talks with her mother, so she is given sexual power. And she is open with her mother when discussing coitus, signifying her sexual liberation. Second Wave Feminism was in full force at this time, Joey is sexually liberated as a white, upper-middle class woman. But if she were in a mono-racial relationship, the white man would still claim power over her sexuality. But she is in a relationship with a black man, she retains power over him because of her privilege as a white woman.

Another important and uneven power dynamic is that of John Prentice and Matt Drayton. The power struggle is not how these two men express their sexualities, but in the manner they seek to control Joey's. While Joey is sexually liberated in her quest to make love to John Prentice, his decision to postpone intercourse is not for her benefit, but for her father's. The ultimate decision of whether these two are married, and thusly have sexual relations, is in the hands of Matt Drayton. White men's control over white women's bodies is not a new concept to society, it dates back to the Civil War era. The fear of miscegenation and black sexuality lead white men to control white women's bodies and sexualities. This created an ideal form for white women and an appropriate set of behavioral guidelines. Anne Perrin states "White women were objectified to rationalize white male power, racial oppression, and even terrorism."<sup>13</sup> White men took control of white women's bodies and behavior to justify punishment to those who disobeyed the norms set in place. Matt Drayton represents power and domination in his household where he acts as the patriarch. So when he sees his daughter who has accepted a marriage proposal without his permission and a black man whom he still views as a danger to his daughter he is, for the first time, in a position without power. As a white man who was given access to the public sphere and privileges, he is for the first time threatened by the potential loss of power that would occur if he were to let a black man gain the control over his white daughter's sexuality. He must therefore regain control of his daughter by finally granting them permission to marry.

This film not only looks at the white moderate and their ability to accept interracial love, but it looks at members of the black community and their opinions on the subject. The Drayton's housemaid, Tillie (Isabel Sanford), represents the "Mammy," or the "faithful soul." She remains

subservient and loyal to the white family she serves, while maintaining the stereotype very similar to the mammy in *The Birth of a Nation*. Both characters are overweight, asexual, sassy and suspicious of blacks trying to, as Tillie says, "get above himself." Tillie represents the older, passé attitudes of her generation, but unlike Mr. Drayton she is never allowed to experience a reform, nor is she given any explanation of why her views of interracial love are wrong. Tillie is suspicious of John from the moment she sees him enter the house with Joey and she confronts him after he showers in the Drayton's home. Tillie barges into the room where John is dressing, she then marches up to him and wags a finger in face while stating, "you're one of those smooth talkin, smart ass niggas just out for all you can get. With your black power and all that other trouble making nonsense." As Tillie marches up to John the camera follows her actions at a medium shot, then in the same motion the camera zooms in and tilts to a Dutch angle (see figure 6). The Dutch angle suggests that Tillie is a force to be reckoned with, especially with respect to young Joey Drayton, whom she cared for since Joey was a child. However, her protectiveness does not account for why she is so fervently against John Prentice and the black power movement. Tillie's suspicions towards John are representative of black Americans whose own internal racial prejudices are so deeply rooted in their minds that they cannot imagine another of their same race having good intentions. To Tillie, and others who are likeminded, black Americans have a designated place in society. So when she sees someone stepping out of their place, Tillie is disturbed to the point of outbursts of anger. She has deeply internalized racist ideologies so that she cannot believe that a black man courting a white woman would have any other intentions but to sexually take advantage of her.



Figure 6: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*

By the end of the film the power struggle between Matt Drayton, and all others society would perceive as below him (i.e., John Prentice, Drayton's wife and daughter, his black housemaid and Prentice's black parents) is resolved. Since Matt Drayton was first introduced to the film, those without societal power were given an equal, deciding voice about the interracial marriage. From his daughter and wife telling him what they think is best, to his maid demanding he take charge, to John Prentice's parents questioning his loyalty to his wife. The film ends with a long speech from Matt Drayton as he expresses his frustrations over learning of his daughter's engagement. While Drayton seems to have experienced some kind of reform as he gives his blessing to John and Joey, he also undermines and belittles those in the room. After Drayton's speech, he views John as his equal and someone befitting of his daughter. He speaks to John with courtesy and respect, but not showing the same dignities to the others. Drayton feels the need to put the others, especially their maid, back in their place as he disputes, refutes and belittles. Drayton, as a trustworthy and powerful man, determines the acceptable kind of black person who can marry a white person. This person, especially if black, must be altogether asexual, and attain a perfect academic and work ethic, and understand how to operate within white middle class society. If the black person in question were poor, uneducated or spoke with an inflection contrary to the white middle America inflection then a marriage or any interracial mingling would not be permissible. If John Prentice were in any way like his parents or Tillie, he would have no chance of marrying a white woman.

The film makes its message very clear about the "right kind" of black person, while maintaining prejudiced attitudes about the "wrong kind" of black person. It tries to be progressive and forward thinking but it fails because it revives old stereotypes and punishes its central characters by limiting their sexual expressions. The film pigeonholes the "wrong kind" of black people into submissive roles and then punishes them for stepping outside of their roles. The film fails to make realistic or empowering representations of gender, sexuality and race as it tries to separate itself from any negative associations or prejudices.

## Social Change In Film Part II:

### "Starring The Black Community"--*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*

Racial changes and sensitivities within filmic spaces were very telling of the social changes going on outside the theater; these changes began to represent a growing state of unrest, unease and constant frustration experienced by the average black American citizen. But, as progressive as they were, these changes were directed towards the middle class bourgeois represented in *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?* The blaxploitation films were directed to the millions of black Americans living in urban and working class community who had felt the full force of systemic racism for decades. This was a movement that protested the perceived "Uncle Tomism" of the Civil Rights Movements and its efforts to get blacks to assimilate into white society. Instead of pleading for justice and playing on the morals of white America, blaxploitation and the Black Power Movement took a more aggressive and rebellious stance for justice. These films were a response to the passive tone of some Civil Rights leaders, and they were a response the rise of Second Wave Feminism, violence against black Americans while showing a perceived power on film. These films featured black antiheroes, usually involved in crime, with anti-establishment rhetoric. Blaxploitation, as having direct correlation to Black Power rhetoric, had an, "emphasis on masculine characteristics and misogynistic tendencies"<sup>15</sup> (Katherine Bausch, 260). In part of its protests against white supremacy and black assimilation, blaxploitation was reacting against the asexual and childlike representations of black men in classic Hollywood films (Bausch). Black filmmakers who created films from their own artistic drive were implementing black men and women as overtly sexual and most of all commanding of respect.

The name blaxploitation has negative connotations especially if a viewer is unfamiliar with the genre and history surrounding the movement. For starters the name was given to these films by white spectators long after they had been released. In addition they were not made to exploit black people or culture, but black money. Urban black audiences came back time and again the watch these films as aspects of their culture were shown and appreciated on film in

never before seen ways. As actor Samuel L. Jackson states in the documentary film *Baadasssss Cinema*, it was "everything we wanted to be." This new definition of blackness was financially exploitable since black audiences wanted black heroes not only surviving through the end of the movie, but escaping with everything they want. Audiences could project themselves onto the screen as they watched actors like Pam Grier and Ron O'Neal fight the Man and make love. As revolutionary as these films were, their messages were eventually distorted to focus only on crime and fashion. As a whole many of these films were flashy and over the top with an emphasis on having the best clothes, cars and hair. They then evolved to focus only on gratuitous violence without the social commentary behind it.

The beginning of the blaxploitation movement featured stories of men and women fighting against those who oppressed or betrayed them, while acknowledging the struggles of the black community. But as these films gained popularity and notoriety Hollywood producers starting creating blaxploitation films by white directors and writers. These were people who had put together some of the typical conventions of a blaxploitation film without understanding the need behind it. Societal tensions were almost palpable as citizens grew restless with the current system. Hollywood as a major exporter of culture was losing money as their films failed to cater to the new needs of the public. Early blaxploitation films showed the reality of urban working class black communities while asserting that these methods of crime and violence are some of the only ways people leave their lives of poverty. And that this lifestyle at least gives them freedom and a choice about how to lead their lives.

The birth of blaxploitation was in 1971 with the release of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Financed independently by director, writer, and star of the film Melvin Van Peebles the film attained an X rating by an all white censorship board and grossed over 10 million dollars (Separate Cinema). The film begins with a French quote and a translation in English from a prologue of the dark ages reading, "... Sire, these lines are a homage to brutality that the artist has invented, but a hymn from the mouth of reality." Van Peebles, like Oscar Micheaux before him, does not show violence gratuitously but with the purpose of reminding the viewer that this is the

reality many people live in. The images of violence in these films were stronger than only talking about the violence as it showed audiences the truths that people were enduring. Early in the film *Sweetback* witnesses two white police officers brutally beating a member of the Black Panther Party. Corrupt white police officers and police brutality are prevalent not only in *Sweetback*, but in all blaxploitation films. In this scene, Sweetback and the Panther were handcuffed together and brought into a field in the middle of the night when suddenly the two officers beat the Panther with Sweetback still handcuffed. After the officers released Sweetback, there is a quick cut to his expressionless face as he watches the brutality ensue, understanding that he will be beaten next. Then he wraps his undone cuffs around his fist and attacks the officers. He beats and kicks them as blood covers his hands until the officers are subdued, even dead. This scene is shot unsteadily, likely using a handheld camera. The camera shows the two white officers beating the young Panther, but only shows Sweetback's movements as he beats the officers. The bias in favor of Sweetback and the young Panther are obvious as the audience must endure the black man's beatings. This is Van Peebles way of showing to his audience, and the world, what is typically made invisible by the media and films.

Aside from violence, which this film is saturated with, *Sweetback* features several sex scenes. In fact, Van Peebles marketed the film as a pornographic film so he could evade any issues with censorship while getting the funding he needed. After the film's opening credits Sweetback is introduced as homeless child who is taken in by prostitutes living in a brothel. One night young Sweetback taken into one of the prostitute's room and forced to have sex with her. This scene is disturbing to view as a young child and an adult woman simulate sex, but also as the woman reaches orgasm and officially naming Sweetback. This scene works as a conception and birth of the man known as Sweetback. He begins as a child of unknown origins, then is transformed into a man with incredible sexual abilities. The gender politics of this scene is important to note because if the roles were reversed, as in a girl child and an adult man, the scene would not be read as a child growing into adulthood but as a perverse moment of pedophilia and sexual abuse.

As the film progresses Sweetback is shown as an adult working as a sex performer. In one scene it begins as two black women engaging in coitus. One woman wears a hat, facial hair and a prosthetic penis as she penetrates the other woman. Then a large black man in a pink fairy god-mother outfit waves his magic wand as the woman dressed as a man changes. Her breasts disappear and the prosthetic penis becomes real. Then the newly formed man takes off his hat as we see the adult Sweetback who begins coitus with the other woman. This scene indicates Sweetback as sex performer and his unique sexual abilities. In the scene a white woman spectator asks to go for a round with Sweetback, the audience become tense as they nervously watch what may happen. The nervousness is another indicator of the ingrained hatred of miscegenation. Another important sex scene in the film is when Sweetback must have sex with a white female leader of a biker gang in order to save his life. Sweetback wanders into a seedy biker bar where is forced to dual the leader. He is given the choice of how to dual to which he pauses then answers, "fucking." The scene ends with the leader screaming "Sweetback!" as Sweetback has won the dual. The emphasis on black sexuality and potency in this film is important as it counters previous cinematic representations of blackness and asexuality. Sweetback as a black man is not only potent but a literal sexual champion.

*Sweetback* is historically important as the beginning of Blaxploitation; the movement that saved Hollywood. Its unapologetic style and form make it an important film to study during this historical moment. Unfortunately, as historical and revolutionary as this film is, its style and form disrupt coherency of the film. Its dreamlike and surreal cinematography, editing and special effects make the film not only strange but visually disturbing. Its commentary on representations of black sexuality and masculinity are clear but its significance is lost in waves of oddly used superimpositions and rapid zoom-ins. However these criticisms have not been widely held by audiences. Its popularity and celebrity stems from the entirety of the film, not just the comments on black sexuality and masculinity. The X rating drew in audiences as violence and sex filled almost every scene in the film. And as former Black Panther Afeni Shakur asserts in *Baadasssss Cinema*, Sweetback's escape at the end of the film is Black Power.



Plots focused around some sort of criminality are central to blaxploitation, especially in the 1972 film *Superfly* directed by Gordon Parks Jr. This film stars Ron O'Neal as Priest, a major drug dealer known for snorting cocaine from a cross that hangs around his neck. As a character Priest is reminiscent of two black male characters from Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*, Larry and Dr. Vivian. As previously stated, the men serve as two binaries to black masculinity. Priest, like Larry, is involved in crime and has little interest in the betterment of the black community. He is almost coerced by members of the Black Panther party into giving them money to finance their cause. But he rejects them stating that once they get more organized he will be in the front lines with a gun "killing whitey" but in the mean time he will keep his money and his life. Priest and Dr. Vivian are also similar in their tenderness towards women and their determination, just towards different goals. Dr. Vivian had a goal to help the black community by any means necessary and Priest had a goal to help himself by any means necessary.

Priest, even though he takes many lovers throughout the film and threatens to put women on the streets as prostitutes, but is "too soft" as quoted by a colleague to actually do it. Priest is, like Sweetback, a very potent and sexually charged man; and like Sweetback he does not shy away from violence. But their difference lies in their humanity. Even though Priest represents a hyper-masculine ideation of blackness he feels doubts and vulnerability. Priest's desperation to "get out of that life" is clear from the beginning of the film. He immediately goes to his closest friend to discuss their big last deal to quit the drug business. His friend scoffs at him saying that he has the American dream: an 8-track stereo, a color television and enough cocaine to snort every day. But Priest asserts that it is not enough, and that he is either going to kill or get killed in his line of work. Priest also has a magnetic sexual prowess that draws in women, but Priest does not have a supernatural ability for sex. These differences in the protagonists' sexual expression is evident in the manner that the scenes are shot; Priest makes love while Sweetback "fucks." Both films feature fully naked black bodies with control over their sexuality, both films also feature long and graphic sex scenes--graphic in the sense of showing full nudity and the

actual simulation of sex.

However, where *Sweetback* shows almost pornographic representations of sex as a mechanistic and emotionally detached act, *Superfly* focuses on the sensual acts and the tenderness of making love. Take the scene where Sweetback uses his sexuality as a weapon in a dual and a scene in *Superfly* where Priest uses his sexuality to subdue a woman's anger. Sweetback is in a dark and seedy bar, "fucking" his way through a dual. This form of intercourse is disconnected and almost robotic as Sweetback does the thing only thing he knows how to do well. In *Superfly* Priest is shown in a bath tub with his one of his girlfriends; this one seeming to be the most serious of his collection. The woman is angry at Priest for endangering his life in his line of work, so lashes out to hit Priest. He catches her hand and begins tenderly licking and kissing her fingers. Priest uses his sexual skills to seduce this woman and subdue her anger. Sexuality is important to these films, but most importantly these films are showing naked black bodies together in sexual situations. Sexuality as a staple of human development was rarely depicted in healthy and normal manners in relation to blackness. While healthy and normal may not apply to *Sweetback's* interpretation of sexuality, the fact that he is a highly potent and powerful man implies his humanity (see figure 7). Priest becomes a three dimensional person because he uses his sexuality potently and romantically, thus humanizing him. Both of these films brought a more human element to a group of people who were desexualized and therefore dehumanized for decades.



Figure 7: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and *Superfly*

While *Superfly* and *Sweetback* showed males heroes getting away and achieving their goals, they also showed blatant misogyny, sexism and female objectification. Both films feature objectification of the female body, no matter the race, with a sexist rhetoric. Women are referred to as "bitches" and "whores." Women have little or no speaking lines, nor do they talk to each other or speak in scenes when a man is not present, and they are often threatened with a slap to the face if they do not stop speaking when told. In addition women are depicted as objects either for pleasure or pure entertainment, and rarely ever fully developed. Blaxploitation was created in part as a response to Second Wave Feminism and the majority white women's cry for equality and sexual liberation, but the blaxploitation response was gendered. From a purely masculine perspective women needed to be conquered in order for men to regain their masculinity; the more women a man conquered, physically, sexually and often times violently, the more masculine he was-- a viewpoint that remains relevant today. The black woman's response to a mainly white feminist movement was to remind the world of her existence and of her strength.

Pam Grier as notably the most influential blaxploitation actress who changed these mainstream ideologies around black femininity, while demanding respect and the acknowledgement of her presence from white women and black men. Pam Grier's characters were dominating yet feminine, powerful yet sexual, and most of all, physically and emotionally strong. Blaxploitation created new depictions of black femininity and black women's place in the Black Power Movement and allowing women to:

" move past the stereotypical roles of mammies and seductresses into more multidimensional characters of physical strength, power to control their lives and communities, and undiluted will that rivaled the roles white women played" (Sims, 585).

Black leading women like Pam Grier paved way for many of the black women actors who star in film and prove that black women make great actors. In Grier's most famous films from the blaxploitation era, *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974) and *Coffy* (Jack Hill 1973) she plays women fighting for not only justice but revenge. Both of these films take on the "hell hath no fury like a woman scorned" rhetoric while displaying Pam Grier as a full blown sex symbol.

Grier's characters Foxy Brown and Coffy are women who lead normal lives but are suddenly thrown into a life of violence and espionage after lovers are murdered. Each of these films center around the inner workings of massive drug cartels involving police corruption, with an emphasis on blacks dealing drugs in the street and white crime lords. Grier is also established early in both films, especially *Coffy*, as highly sexual. In *Coffy*, Grier poses as a strung out prostitute desperate for her next fix. She immediately seduces a well known drug dealer and appears almost naked. Her seduction is powerful because the drug dealer insists that he has plenty of women to chose from, but one look at Coffy and he forgets about his many other sexual prospects. Coffy's sexual magnetism is very similar to Priest in *Superfly* and *Sweetback*, making reference again to the powerful sexuality abilities encompassed by black men and women. Then, before any sort of copulation begins Coffy pulls out a shot a gun and shoots the man in the face. She then reveals to another man shooting heroine in the next room that she is doing this for her little sister as she yells, "shootin' smack at eleven, and you got her on it. Her whole life is gone!" This scene tells Coffy's passion and talent for revenge as well as justice--she understands the impacts the corrupt system has on black Americans in working class and urban communities and she is not afraid to be the one to stand up for the powerless through any means necessary. All while remaining sexual, powerful and confident. In *Foxy Brown*, she is first shown with bare breasts as she dresses in her room, then as she visits her lover recovering from plastic surgery she wakes him up by performing oral sex. And again in the love making sequences between the two, Foxy Brown exudes pleasure and sensuousness.

These films also show Pam Grier's characters using their sexualities and bodies to accomplish their goals--a practice long demonized by the "tragic mulatto trope" in film. However post-sexual revolution, a woman understanding her body and the power of her body can be read as the way women can dominate men. She uses her sexuality not only to best men, but to distract them, playing on the myth that men are only focused on sex. In *Coffy*, Coffy seduces a man sent to kill her. Then while he is distracted when removing his paints Coffy pulls a needle from her afro and stabs him repeatedly in the neck. Both of these characters go undercover as experienced

and very successful prostitutes, where one of the more famous scenes in *Coffy* is Pam Grier standing naked while taking off her necklace in an effort to prove her sexual abilities. Grier's characters, when disguised as prostitutes, wear form-fitting clothing with low cut and revealing necklines, and a wig with very long straight hair. In their everyday lives, the characters wear trendy and relatively modest clothing with a natural afro. The hair as part of the costuming is important to convey certain messages; straight hair means beauty while the afro resembles power--specifically Black Power (see figure 8). Her afro is commonly the largest towards the end of the film as she gets her final revenge.



Figure 8: *Foxy Brown*

While these films share similarities they are still very different and neither are reproductions of the other. That being said, one of the biggest and notable differences is the manner in which sexual violence is portrayed. In *Coffy* there are few moments of sexual violence as Coffy is groped by two armed men after they murdered a police officer and friend of Coffy. Then later she shoots a former lover in the groin after he betrays her. The groping maintains the idea that women's bodies are public property that can be taken and molested when a man wishes. However at the end Coffy castrates a man removing the part of the body that gives men power--the penis. In *Foxy Brown* the sexual violence is significantly more graphic and explicit. There is a castration scene in *Foxy Brown* where the genitalia of one of Foxy's tormentors are cut off then sent in a jar to his lover. This type of brutality and shock factor are so powerful because Foxy

asserts her power and dominance over a white male power centered society.

*Foxy Brown* also features the raping and torture of the main character. Foxy Brown is taken prisoner by the men from whom she is seeking revenge. These men begin by torturing her in an unknown method. The scene shows a woman's grinning face as Foxy's screams and a man's laughter fills the room. Then a cut shows Foxy Brown with her shirt open showing her in her bra and several bruises on her face. After this scene she is taken to "The Ranch" where the implication that the owners are rapists is given by Foxy's torturers. Before the rape begins Fox tries to escape but caught by one of her captors. The man actually pulls out a whip, wraps it around Foxy's throat and drags her back into the small cabin. One cannot help but be reminded of the whippings endured by black slaves at the hands of their white slave owners, even the rapes that were perpetuated by the slave owners. This reference to slavery is intentional so that when Foxy Brown takes her personal revenge, she is also serving justice to the black slaves who endured similar forms of torture before her. The violence committed towards Foxy is the kind of violence that is particularly difficult to watch. From a voyeuristic standpoint pleasure is gained from watching sex<sup>18</sup> or violence but sexual violence is significantly more perverse and disturbing. But the scene is read much like that of a horror scene whereas viewers watch the face of a grotesque man move in slowly on the face of a terrified woman.

However not all viewers and critics would agree that blaxploitation films serve an important part of film history and black history. Many would argue that these films subjugated the black community to minstrel stereotypes revived for a more contemporary moment. Foxy Brown's brother, Link (Antonio Fargas), even states,

"I'm a black man and I don't know how to sing, and I don't know how to dance I don't know how to preach to no congregation and I'm too small to be a football play and too ugly to be a mayor but when I watch TV and see all of them fine house and cars I get all full of ambition. now what am I supposed to do with this ambition?"

Link's attitude towards his place in society may be one way of reinforcing stereotypes about blackness and where their abilities lie, however this sort of thinking may be a reality for black people living without an education and without necessary means to achieve their goals. Link's

thinking stems from a place of internalized racism where even he sees his worth as a black man in either the entertainment business or in the crime business. In addition Link's character is reminiscent of the "faithful souls" trope from *The Birth of a Nation*. He is far more loyal to his white employers to get back in the drug business than his own sister. In fact, Link is the one who sells out Foxy's boyfriend thus causing his death. This turn of events is commented on by one the white antagonists who finds out Foxy Brown's true identity by saying that "*those people*" do not have even have loyalty to their own family." However as a whole these films fought against the films that showed black Americans as entertainers, so Link's comments indicate that he does not want any part of the previous systems that pigeonholed black people, nor does he want to continue the legacy of limiting places where blacks belong.

Blaxploitation films also garnered criticisms for their portrayal of Black Power, black masculinity, black femininity and black liberation. These films are guilty of flattening the Black Power Movement as a staple of entertainment rather than a historically and socially conscious method of rebellion. For example, the image of activist Angela Davis was the inspiration for Pam Grier's characters, but her image was "from a representation of a revolutionist to that of an erotic Black nationalist, largely devoid of historical consciousness" (Robinson). Black Nationalism was often demonized for its extreme, racist and sometimes violent rhetoric. Angela Davis as a pillar of black women's LGBT rights had a powerful message of Black Power and remains today a true social justice warrior. However her image was eroticized in film almost belittling what she stood for (see figure 9). Pam Grier is an extraordinary actress who embodied her roles and became a staple in the fight for black women's liberation and equality. However, these characters were written by men in search of making a sexy character for male audiences to ogle as a staple of blaxploitation films.



Figure 9: Pam Grier vs. Angela Davis

Unfortunately, the blaxploitation era ended almost as quickly as it began. Audiences and organizations like the NAACP called for the end of these films as they grew tired of watching a single dimensional representation of their culture exploited. The focus of these films shifted from a rebellious, anti-establishment rhetoric to a display of the latest fashion crazes, overplayed machismo, and misogyny. As this filmic era ended, the black crews, directors and actors responsible for saving Hollywood were put out of work as their style of filmmaking became a thing of the past. But the evidence of the social impact of blaxploitation is prevalent in the present day. These films, now some forty years old, introduced the idea that black actors could star in successful mainstream films and that black directors could create provocative and interesting stories.



### Social Change in Film Part III:

#### "Be A Goddam Man"

The end of the blaxploitation in the 1970s signaled an end to black super-antiheroes on the screen. But this end came at the cry for black men and women to be represented realistically and without stereotypes that the white mainstream audience can continue to as a means of oppression. Director Charles Burnett quotes that his film *Killer of Sheep* was in some ways a direct response to blaxploitation as a flattened version of his experience, so this film takes place in an urban setting with a focus on the black community. Burnett also speaks to the seemingly positive portrayals of blackness from Sydney Poitier which were directed towards a white audience. Burnett states that and many others who were likeminded was to see a "spectrum... of the full black experience." *Killer of Sheep* is not meant to take a stance on the issues that black people face, only show them in their truest forms. He claims that some films with a social justice or activism theme with a happy ending troubled him almost as much as the blaxploitation films. His intent was geared towards showing the reality, that the main character Stan (Henry G. Sanders) was visibly unhappy with his life but found few precious moments of happiness. Burnett grew up during the Civil Rights Era created this film with the mindset of "you're either part of the problem or you're part of the solution." He used his art as a mechanism to inspire social change, but publicity, copyright issues and little financing hindered this film's potential of being seen by mainstream audiences. *Killer of Sheep* is an art house film with *cinéma vérité* and Italian neo-realism methodologies. Even more so the film uses non-actors and black and white photography which might make the film seem less accessible to mainstream audiences. However, this film proves time and again to be a powerful statement on representation and humanity.

Charles Burnett spent most of his life in Los Angeles but was born in the south. He fondly remembers his life in the south and how much of his adolescence in Los Angeles was similar to the memories he had of the south. He says that there was a sense of community and general goodliness of the people in his L.A. neighborhood. Burnett's own upbringings influenced

the film as characters spent time with their friends and opened their doors to those they cared for. There is also a sense of simplicity in his film. There is very little plot or story development since the film reads as more like a documentary rather than a piece of fiction. It follows a pattern of showing children playing in the streets or run-down vacant lots interwoven with a central focus on Stan's personal plights and moments with his family. Burnett uses long takes and deep focus as way of maintaining a sense of realness throughout the film. The film is a look at life as ordinary people suffer through their ordinary lives. It reads almost as a study of a working class black neighborhood as families and friends live their everyday life. Burnett is able to "persuade[s] you that you're seeing the world as it really is for these characters" (Klawans 36). He does not portray these people as revived stereotypes, sex symbols or constantly fighting action heroes, but just as people fighting their inner demons. Throughout the film the main characters make shallow attempts at improving their lives, whether it be through a business venture or spending a day at the races, but every attempt is thwarted before it can really even begin and after they have put a substantial amount of work into the improving process. These people are much like the sheep Stan leads to their slaughter--unaware of why they are there and who put them in the situation (Clifford). But the most important aspect of the film is cherishing the small moments that make their hard work worth it.

*Killer of Sheep* begins with a close-up of a young boy's face as his father bends towards him. The boy is on the verge of tears as his father lectures him in what is presumably his first lesson in becoming a man. The man yells at the boy as he reminds him that fighting with whatever he can is part of what makes him a man. As the father lectures the boy there is a cut to a woman holding a young crying boy. The man tells the boy that part of his job is to protect his younger brother since one day neither of their parents will be gone. After the man walks away the mother steps to the boy and slaps him across the cheek. This opening scene is telling of our culture and where notions of gender performance start. One can assume that the father received similar talks from his father and so on and so forth. The characters in this scene remain unnamed and unseen throughout the rest of the movie so they serve as a canon for possibly many

experiences in men's lives when they are first lectured how to carry themselves as men. Throughout history and throughout this particular film masculinity is established as having rules- men learn the correct behavior that will establish to others that they are in fact worthy of the title "man." Burnett challenged the learned rules of masculinity to remind viewers of their humanity.

Throughout the film Burnett challenged the notion of masculinity implicitly and explicitly. The main character Stan is introduced as a constantly working father and husband. Whether he fixes small problems around his house or slaughters sheep for work he is rarely shown relaxing. Stan is immediately established as a character in opposition to the men of blaxploitation. When Stan is at home he wears black jeans, a simple t-shirt under an opened button-up shirt. In a scene Stan is propositioned to be an accessory to murder by two men dressed stylishly wearing leather jackets, dress pants and a dress shirt. As Stan sits on the front porch to his modest home they mention their proposition to Stan, his wife overhears and confronts one of the men by saying,

Stan's wife (Kaycee Moore): "why you always wanna hurt somebody?"

Man: "who me? that's the way nature is. I mean a animal has his teeth and a man has his fist. That 's the way I was brought up. I mean when a man's got scars on his mug from dealing with sons o' bitches everyday for his natural life, ain't no one goin over this nigga just going low and slow. We takin' our issue, you be a man if you can Stan."

The man's thinking can reasonably be traced back to the introduction scene where he probably experienced a similar lecture from his father. As characters similar to blaxploitation characters these men bought into the notion of masculinity and followed its rules as they believed that it was necessary to fight in order to earn and maintain their manhood. Even his ending comment to Stan is meant to inspire Stan to reclaim or save his masculinity because his apparent resistance to violence makes him unworthy the "man" title. But Stan's disinterest in violence does not send the message that he is not a man, rather his understanding of his identity as a man. After the man's short monologue Stan's wife interjects becoming increasingly angry and yells,

"just wait one minute, you talkin 'bout be a man, stand up. don't you know there's more to it than just with your fists? you talking about scars on your mug, you think yous an

animal, what you think you still in the bush some damn where? you here, you use your brain, that's what you use."

Stan's wife response, in the more traditional notions of masculinity, is a very aggressive therefore masculine response. Stan, the man and breadwinner of the household, sits silently and uninterested in the altercation as he smokes a cigarette and watches the ground. The role switching of the passive man and the aggressive woman indicates Burnett's views on gender being that there are no rules or assigned behaviors--only individual personalities.

According to the blaxploitation model of masculinity is not only measured in one's affinity towards violence but their sexual prowess and potency. In *Killer of Sheep* Stan never shows his wife any sort of sexual desire. One moment in the film the two are dancing in their bedroom. The dance begins slowly as they step back and forth to Dinah Washington's "This Bitter Earth." Stan's wife moves his arms around her waist and steps in closer and closer until she begins kissing Stan's neck and chest. Her hands clutch at his body while Stan stands rigidly staring blankly into the distance (see figure10).



Figure 10: *Killer of Sheep*

As his wife becomes more and more invested in seducing Stan he removes her arms from around him and walks away coldly, leaving her to cry alone in their bedroom. Stan's inability to have sex with his wife does not make him less of a man but more of a person since his impotency is telling of his depression throughout the film. He mentions to an acquaintance that he does not sleep and that he is growing increasingly unhappy at his job. His friend asks casually, "Why

don't you just kill yourself?" To which Stan sighs and unconvincingly answers, No...I'm not gonna kill myself." As Stan further exhibits signs of depression throughout the film the viewer understands that Stan cannot be measured in terms of ascribing to stereotypical gender norms but in terms of his humanity. Stan exhibits emotional strength as he refuses to kill himself, provides for his family in a job that leaves him feeling depressed, and choosing not to participate in violence no matter how frustrated he becomes with his life.

While one reading of the film suggests that Stan is above the notions of "normal" gender and sexual behaviors, another could suggest that Stan's depression is indicative of his growing identity crisis as a man. The first scene of the movie suggests that men are taught how to be men but the film never suggests that Stan does not believe those gender norms are true. Stan could be feeling the effects of his impotency and lack of aggressiveness which manifests itself in depression. Supposing the blaxploitationist rhetoric about masculinity were true and Stan is depressed because he lost his male potency and power. A close reading of the film, however, and an understanding of Charles Burnett's body of work negate the notion that Stan is depressed because he is not "man enough." Representation is all too important in the film, and to Charles Burnett, as a way to initiate social change. Stan does not lack manhood he is in excess of humanity. The reading of Stan's depression and resistance towards the masculine cult of violence is that he spends his days killing and disemboweling sheep for a meat factory, while the sheep act as metaphors for the people in this film (Clifford). Stan spends his days killing the people in his community and the people he loves, and himself, which is why he refuses to kill himself because he has done it thousands of times.

Even as the film emphasizes the importance of representation, it also emphasizes the importance of humanity. Burnett shows small human moments throughout the film that act as reminder of positivity throughout a bleak plot. The last scene is the most important positive reminder since it shows Stan and his wife having a loving moment together. The two sit at home on the couch and watch their young daughter play then they look lovingly into each other's eyes. Stan reaches out with one finger and gently strokes his wife's knee as she smiles at him gently.

This scene is a long take with medium length shot showing their entire bodies as they sit while clearly showing the expressions on their face. This one moment is more intimate and tender than any intercourse scene in the history of blaxploitation. The two show their genuine love and affection for each other without an erotic sex scene (see figure 11). This moment shows black Americans as human beings capable of romantic love and not as sexual deviants. Sexuality throughout the film is played down as most characters are either children or adults. Teens and young adults are absent from the film since they represent the most sexually driven and hormonal ages. There is a clear separation in this film of childhood and adulthood which revolves around innocence and the loss of innocence. Serious conversations between adults and moments of children playing are paralleled throughout the film. Any moment of physical intimacy between adults has no real parallel among children, except in the odd opening moments of *Sweetback*. These two very different stages of life work as juxtapositions for each other to show where the simplicity of childhood ends and where the complexity of adulthood begins.

Throughout the film Burnett reminds viewers of the importance of representation and of a realistic portrayal of black Americans. This scene near the end of the film seems to show a sense of resolution or happiness, even though Stan will still have to wake up the next morning to go to a job he despises and he may still encounter problems with his wife. However this one moment of happiness and love make it all worth it.



Figure 11: *Killer of Sheep*

### Conclusion

The importance of representation on film cannot be emphasized enough, given the ambassadorial roles that film plays. So when films are exported, it is not only one country that is exposed to a culture on film, but the entire world. Black film had a major impact on changing the social climate of the United States. The end of the 1970s and Civil Rights Era left the country in a more open and accepting state and American films helped guide the everyday viewer in their awareness of other cultures. And after black filmmakers proved themselves to Hollywood producers and executives, more and more black actors and directors were given a chance for new opportunities and visibility on film. These were the movements that paved way for directors Spike Lee and Ava DuVernay and actors like Denzel Washington and Halle Berry. Once black Americans were no longer represented as foolish stereotypes, but a strong and complex people others were able to understand the truth about an entire race of people.

Of course there is much work to be done, as evidenced by the 2015 Academy Awards season. But so many great strides have been made by black filmmakers and they must be recognized, celebrated, and studied in an effort to move forward. The most crucial component about black filmmaking is that it, "does not occur independently of American racial discourse; in fact, it stands in dialectical relationship to it. " (Miller, 182). Black filmmaking is American filmmaking. While it works counter to most hegemonies of Hollywood, its impact is still measurable. It expanded our understanding of larger, broader histories and the multitude of perspectives on shared experiences and events.

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