Traps
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The system-wide, and systematic, devaluation (and simultaneous idolization) of Black men in the nation’s movies and popular culture is not a new or, given its pervasiveness, a particularly remarkable phenomenon. Long before the O.J. verdict, the Million Man March, Rodney King, the self-fashioning of Dennis Rodman, the vogueing of RuPaul, the much celebrated retirement of Michael Jordan, or the rise and fall (and rise again) of Joe Jett, for mostly worse, but sometimes better, Black men have been prized media fetishes captured in high print, cinematic, and televisual relief. Moreover, film critics, media scholars, and cultural historians have frequently commented on this paradoxical fascination with the Black male image in all of its incarnations from urban criminal to gangsta rapper to multi-millionaire entertainment or sports icon . . . and beyond. So we must return to rephrase and refocus Du Bois’s enduring question on Black men, and ask “How does it feel to be a problem?” . . . while simultaneously that problem’s solution? Exploring the society’s convoluted psychic desires and media projections, novelist Toni Morrison says it another way through the sardonic voice of her rebel character Sula, when she humorously observes that because of penis envy, rape fantasies, and a ubiquitous attraction/repulsion, “everything in the world loves” the Black man.¹ However, most images of Black men in social memory tend to evoke a nightmare history of barbarism or stereotypic insult: from photos of the mutilated body of man-child Emmett Till to the videotaped police torture of Rodney King or the gladiator Mike Tyson biting off a chunk of Evander Holyfield’s ear. Occasionally this melancholy gallery is punctuated with triumphant images like
Tiger Woods’s athletics, or Jesse Jackson’s negotiated return of U.S. prisoners from Kosovo. Generally though, the construction of the Black male image in commercial cinema follows a paradoxical mix of stereotype and adoration that has taken a convoluted course over cinema history, seemingly driven by a defined yet complexly contradictory formula. While Black men have consistently been held in the lowest social esteem and relentlessly stereotyped as a group, a few have been simultaneously elevated as “exceptions” and worshiped as accomplished individuals, movie stars, and sports icons. This representational gambit has served dominant society well. For through it, the mass of Black males is perceived and fixed in their “place” at the absolute lowest rung of the social order, while an indifferent majority looks on, as Du Bois famously said, “with contempt and pity.” Postmodern racism tries hard not to be “personal.” Most in that vast consumer audience are personally distanced from social inequality’s systemic workings, as they look to high profile Black celebrities for psychic comfort and assurance that the society is making racial progress.

However, a line-up of the “usual suspects” in commercial cinema’s historical view convincingly reveals this attraction/repulsion, kiss/kill dynamic. From the inception of the nickelodeon on New York City’s Broadway, the spectacle of Black men lynched and swinging from Southern trees was hawked as cheap newsreel entertainment. At minimum, Gus of Birth of a Nation, the black and fantastic King Kong clutching his blonde object of desire, or the irrepressible Candyman haunting Chicago’s projects with interracial desire, all express powerful, ongoing metaphors for barely contained fears of Black masculinity, sexuality, miscegenation, and perhaps at the bottom of it all, latent political power. And complementing their usual Manichean duties as social and psychic threats to white order and civilization, Black men have long been (and continue to be) cast as minstrels in literature and the cinema. For over two centuries ending only with the resistance of the Civil Rights Movement, “Sambo” was one of America’s most popular, and exportable, images. It’s not surprising, then, to see echoes of his persona in Eddie Murphy’s ’80s resurrection of “Buckwheat,” or the inept, fumbling tyranny of “Mister” in The Color Purple (1985), or in more bluntly throwback caricatures like Jar Jar Binks, the inter-galactic Steppin’ Fetchit.

Yet to grasp the social ambivalence and confusion of the dominant love/hate dynamic, we cannot dwell entirely on visions of Black brutes and buffoons. Structured in counterpoint to the beast and fool, commercial cinema has also produced a succession of Black male heroes and idols from Sidney Poitier’s “ebony saints,” to Melvin Van Peebles’s sexual rebel “Sweetback,” to Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy’s bi-racial buddies, right up to the more deeply drawn ’90s characters played by Lawrence Fishburne, Denzel Washington, Samuel Jackson, Danny Glover, or Will Smith, with the latter cohort almost invariably cast with white co-stars or chaperones to assure a given film’s successful “crossover.” In any event, one could never miss the box
office wisdom of Sylvester Stallone's "loving" symbiotic attachment to Black men while symbolically battling them, with his most successful ventures resulting from epic struggles and/or bonding with Black men in the Rocky cycle or his contest with a punked-out dystopian, super-villain played by Wesley Snipes in Demolition Man (1993).

Conversely, filmmakers, from the pioneer Black independents Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams, to Blaxploitation's Melvin Van Peebles and Gordon Parks, to contemporary directors, including Spike Lee, Rusty Cundieff, Carl Franklin, and Kasi Lemmons have all struggled to define and contextualize Black manhood in broader terms, and against the grain of Hollywood's flattened out, negative/positive binary. Take a scene in Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing (1989), depicting the suspicion and antagonism with which dominant society routinely measures Black manhood, as two working-class white cops on patrol pause to exchange hostile stares with a group of Black "corner men." "What a waste," the cops mutter in judgment as they drive off. However, the contempt is mutual. While these cops, as the mediating gaze of dominant society, see idle, wasted lives, the Black corner men also have a perspective and return society's gaze with insight and irony. If the corner men know nothing else, they know that incarceration is a growth business and these cops' jobs are entirely dependent on the Black men trapped in America's ghettos or warehoused in its jails and prisons. Undereducated and unemployed Black men are the throwaway people, the "raw material" that feeds society's burgeoning prison industrial complex as Lee's camera captures an illuminating, counter-hegemonic moment in the popular discourse about the shape and crisis of Black manhood.

Society's bond to its indispensable fetish, is played out daily on our screens, cinematic and televisual, against the backdrop of a media paradox and cruel social mockery. As argued, according to our schizophrenic social vision, the representations of Black men tend to gather at the poles of celebrity and pathology. While we are treated to the grand celebrity spectacle of Black male athletes, movie stars, and pop entertainers conspicuously enjoying the wealth and privilege that fuel the fantasies of the consumer system, we are also subjected to the real time, devastation, and body count of a constant stream of faceless Black males on the nightly news. Besides Black men being the very metaphor of "crime," as an audience we are led into the trap of false perception and reasoning. By following the logic of our screens, the spectator arrives at some variation of a reductive query that runs something like "If Bill Cosby or Bryant Gumbel can 'make it' in America, why can't all of those Black men standing on ghetto street corners?" So the social fear of Black men is subtly fed by the adulation of Black celebrity, inviting us to dismiss the vast majority of Black males as suspects, dependents, or victims. Or cinematically, as the bigoted Pino tells Mookie in Do the Right Thing, Prince and Magic Johnson are "exceptions," and the rest are "just niggers."

But we must also factor in the social contradiction, (or, if you prefer, "joke") inflicted on Black men, originating in the very definitions of self-
worth and manhood in American society. It has come to be a cruel charade that in a culture where material wealth is the highest measure of self-worth, and that defines “manhood” foremost as the ability to provide economically for one’s self and family, the very means of achieving such a narrowly mapped “manhood” (or any measure of self-esteem) are systematically and institutionally kept beyond the reach of all too many Black men. To cite one overdetermining reality out of the entire, grim statistical litany: for over the past two decades Black male unemployment has consistently been kept approximately twice as high as that of white males. Of the Black men between sixteen and sixty-two, 46 percent are not in the labor force. Combine this wanting condition with the Black male’s increasingly shrinking educational and social horizons, mix with the hypnotic, electronic flood of images of consumer goods, fantasies of easy money, luxury cars, and romantic tropical vacations that our screens tell us are instantly attainable, and it is not that hard to extrapolate the violent, deadly results that we see daily in the confines of our inner cities.

Sadly and dangerously for us all in an increasingly diverse, multi-racial nation, we have constructed in our films and media, between the love/hate polarities of Tiger Woods and O.J., a vast, empty space in representation. Missing from Hollywood’s flat, binary view of Black manhood is the cultural, political, intellectual complexity and humanity of Black men, as well as their invaluable contributions to the culture and progress of the nation. To say this is not to argue simplistically for a wave of insipid, compensatory “positive images” of successful doctors and athletes or happy, middle-class fathers modeled to dominant cultural expectations. Hollywood has given us enough “noble Negroes,” de-(or hyper-)sexualized comedians, bi-racial buddy combos, and upwardly mobile, Black “exceptions” to fuel several film waves to come, Black or otherwise. Based as it is on the pursuit of short term profit mainly through the “blockbuster” commodification of juvenile fantasy, for the moment (perhaps forever) the Hollywood vision mostly stands at odds with the broader conceptualization and humanization of the Black male in popular culture. Consequently there’s much work to be done on an expanded, heterogeneous range of complex portrayals of Black males that transcends the misshapen characters caught within Hollywood’s formulaic narratives and habitual strategies for representing Blackness, that is, channeling most Black talent and film production into the genres of comedy or ghetto-action-adventure. We must now work to fill the missing images and gaps with movies about the deeply complicated and brilliant “brothermen” that populate the African American life and its narrative tradition, be that tradition expressed as barbershop ruminations, love or street corner stories, social action, or literary production. Where are the films transposing the illuminating novels of such authors as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Gayl Jones, Richard Wright, John Edgar Wideman, Toni Cade Bambara, Ishmael Reed? At the same time we must jump out of the film industry’s genre traps by demanding, making, and consuming a broader range of Black films.
Importantly, we need to fill representation’s empty space with many more Black dramas, family films, films with Black men in loving relationships and with broadened sexual identities. But also our genre horizons must include science fiction and horror, and dramatic transcriptions from Black intellectual and political culture.

Black people struggling to define and speak for themselves is the quintessential energy and liberating current in African American cultural production. Accordingly, Black filmmaking, from the Lincoln Motion Picture Company’s Birth of a Race (1918) to Marlon Riggs’s Tongues Untied (1991) to Denzel Washington’s portrayal of Easy Rawlins in Devil in a Blue Dress (1995) and Spike Lee’s break with limiting Black directors to a Black focus with Summer of Sam (1999), has attempted to challenge and fill the gaps and traps in the dominant film industry’s confining expectations of Black men. Whether “mainstream” or “independent,” a number of Black-made or Black-focused features have endeavored to define, portray, or diagnose those vital aspects of Black male humanity so often subordinated or missing in dominant cinema. Across a range of brilliant feature films, Black cinema as well as Black performances in the commercial mainstream has struggled against Hollywood’s delusions about Black men, attempting to break out of the confines of its master narrative and genre ghettos. Thus it is sadly ironic that while much of the best of Black filmmaking has won worldwide acclaim for its aesthetic innovation, social vision, and dramatic power, the depth and range of this work is hardly known to the mass consumer audience. One can’t catch the most profound expressions of Black cinema on late night cable T.V. or at the mall-multiplex, and one can speculate that this might have more than a bit to do with these productions’ uncompromising insights about the very real dangers (and pleasures) of being a Black man in this society.

As constricted as the situation has been, a number of feature films have managed to work against the odds, speaking up for the brothers, posing alternatives to their subordination or erasure. Seldom screened masterworks, such as Billy Woodberry’s Bless Their Little Hearts (1984), Michael Romer’s Nothing But a Man (1964), or the cinematic adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun (1961), all meet the issue of Black male survival head on, depicting their protagonists’ struggles to achieve manhood and the care of their families against the insult and injury of an unsympathetic world. Duff (Ivan Dixon), in Nothing But a Man strives to break a cycle of absent fathers, while painfully rebuilding a family against the political and economic racism of the pre-Civil Rights South. Charlie Banks (Nate Hardman) in Bless Their Little Hearts, isn’t so lucky. Defeated by institutional forces far beyond his control, unemployed and ghettoized, he drunkenly stumbles off into the emptiness of a weed choked vacant lot that aptly symbolizes his bleak social and economic horizon. Walter (Sidney Poitier) in A Raisin in the Sun struggles to recoup his manhood and dreams by standing up to the local housing association that wants to keep its neighborhood “all

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white.” Significantly, all of these seldom seen but brilliant productions situate their Black, male protagonists in the broader contexts of the daunting economic, institutional, or social forces that conspire to marginalize and destroy them. These films tell it from the Black side, in that what happens to one of us, happens to us all, as they refute the Hollywood convention of avoiding serious political engagement by reducing collective consciousness and social struggle to the isolated travails of the individual.

Like rhinoceros horn, poached and smuggled from the “dark continent,” Black male sexuality, in all of its variations and identities, is a socially charged and highly prized commodity in Western industrial societies. Making the point humorously in *The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999), Austin Powers’s sexual mojo, marked as the essence of Marvin Gaye (“Let’s Get It On”), is one recent variation on this endless and vital motif of American psyche and society. Coming from their distinct perspectives, films like Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), Wendell Harris’s *Chameleon Street* (1989), Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989), and Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning* (1990), all explore aspects of Black male sexuality, and as importantly, locate it specifically in the broader context of the outlaw subjectivity and marginality that Black men must endure in the West. Made at the height of the heavily, male-inflected Black Power rebellion and controversial for its deprecatied view of Black women, Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* marks a turning point for the Black male image on the commercial screen. *Sweet Sweetback . . .* provided the Black audience with a new paradigm for the Black male: as action movie hero and as a rebuttal to decades of Hollywood’s stale “noble Negroes.” Drawn on the “bad nigga” archetype of African American oral tradition, the sexual rebel and outlaw Sweetback, fantastically and single-handedly battles the white power structure and wins, thus spawning the wave of ghetto-action sex symbols and flicks like *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972), that comprised much of the “Blaxploitation” 70s. Because of its independent “guerilla financing” strategy, and the aesthetic, gender, and political debates that it still inspires, *Sweet Sweetback . . .* stands as a salient marker in the discourse on the construction of Black manhood. Playing on many of the same themes but coming up with different results, William Street in *Chameleon Street* bitterly evokes the invisibility metaphor of Ralph Ellison’s legendary novel of the same name. Dissembling and dodging, Street lives on the run, at society’s margins, in its shadows, and against the racist protocols that stunt or foreclose so many aspects of Black men’s lives. Street (Wendell Harris) masquerades as a doctor, lawyer, and journalist, and thus rebels by infiltrating the exclusive zone of the elite professional caste kept out of the practical reach, and aspirations, of most Black men. Yet, because of hypermasculinist compensations for the dubious sexual role society has assigned him, most of Street’s victims are women—from his wife and daughter to his African girlfriend, to the dozens of women he inflicted hysterectomies on as a bogus M.D.
With the '90s Black movie boom, many films, through their oppositional narratives, innovative styles, and the existential resistance of their protagonists, have attempted to directly comment on and broaden the debate about Black male representation and identity. Sustaining the traditional labors of Black protest, Hollywood Shuffle (1987) interrogates dominant cinema’s ongoing addiction to stereotypes. After examining his conscience, aspiring actor Bobby Taylor (Robert Townsend) ultimately rejects playing Hollywood’s standard fare for Black men: criminals, pimps, comics, slaves, and butlers. Drop Squad (1994) evolves its resistant stance by questioning the very possibility of a static, cultural, nationalist, macho orientation in a world of shifting postmodern identities. Isaac Julien’s avant garde Looking for Langston (1989), confronts the silences and lacunas of Black literary history and sexual identity in its exploration of poetry, beauty, and desire in the Black gay world. This work is augmented through the features of the late Marlon Riggs’s Tongues Untied (1991) and Black Is . . . Black Ain’t (1994). In the stark realism of their “gangsta” noir styles, films like Juice (1992), Menace II Society (1993), or the more hopefully resolved South Central (1992), Clockers (1995), and Belly (1998), all explore the Black underworld and interrogate its “code of the streets” which narrowly defines manhood while leading so many young Black men to the nihilistic alternatives of prison or the morgue. What is interesting about these two latter currents (films mapping the Black gay world and the urban ‘hood), is that they’re not as distanced or opposed as one might imagine. As Jennie Livingston’s documentary sojourn through the various “houses” of Black men competing at an annual cross-dressing ball in Paris Is Burning (1990) points out, in addition to the slings of homophobia, Black gay men suffer from all the limitations, discriminations, and problems of the ‘hood-homeboy, and usually on the same turf: the racial and economic ghetto. Moreover, the organization of the “houses” in Paris Is Burning (add the gay nightclub in Looking for Langston), and the street gangs of the ‘hood are not dissimilar in their ultimate purpose: the survival of different social collectivities of Black men facing the varied and sustained attacks of the same discriminatory system.

In all, the dialogue on Black men and their “place” in America, going on in film, literature, drama, painting, dance, and music, is just beginning to gather voices and, once again, take off. Most of the films mentioned here, while they are expressly dramatic narratives, are meant to confront, entertain, and edify with a range of sights and insights about the complex, heterogeneous nature of Black male identity. They are certainly part of that vast cultural project aimed at rearticulating Black male survival and Black manhood in the more relevant and heterogeneous terms of the new millennium. Through these films the brothers speak for themselves, introducing the consumer audience to the issues and stakes in the debate going on, both in Black discourse and mainstream media culture, about the tangled and unresolved fate of Black men (and indeed, Black people) in the nation.
NOTES
