FROM TYLER TEXAS TO TYLER PERRY: RACIAL IDEOLOGY AND BLACK FILM

by

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(Under the Direction of James Dowd)

ABSTRACT

Over the past seven decades, a transformation has occurred in the racial ideology of the United States, initiated by the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. What was once a coercive ideology has become hegemonic, or "colorblind." Using Bonilla-Silva's concept of Racial Social Structure, this project analyzes the process of this transformation as it is reflected in the artistic production of African American film directors. I have developed a sample of 29 films in four eras from the late 1930s to the present (Race Films, Blaxploitation, Spike Lee, and Tyler Perry) as the basis for this inquiry into the ways in which the change in racial ideology becomes evident particularly in the solidarity of local African American communities and in the perception of the degree to which upward mobility, or Opportunity (assessment of racial barriers to economic participation and advancement), is possible.

INDEX: Race, Films, Racial Social Structure, Colorblind Ideology, Blaxploitation, Spike Lee, Tyler Perry

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B.A., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2008

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ART

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014

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May 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my thesis committee: Dr. Dowd, Dr. Cooney, and Dr. Parker. Without their patience and insight this project would not be possible. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With the critical and commercial success enjoyed by such recent films like *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Fruitvale Station* (2013), *Lee Daniels' The Butler* (2013) and even *Django Unchained* (2012), it would appear Hollywood is now interested in telling stories of race and racism that center on the experience of African Americans. At the same time, however, there is a much longer tradition of films about race and the relationships between white and black Americans whose stories are told from the perspective of the white character with the inevitable result that the presentation of racism is seen through the eyes of a central white character, one whose decency is often enough to overcome the biases against racial minorities. Recent examples include *The Blind Side* (2009) and *The Help* (2011). These films center on the experience on the white characters because they are made for white audiences and the narratives provide a guilt-free viewing experience.

Films that center racism on the experience, and resolution, of white people diminish what minorities must navigate in a racist society. Furthermore, by treating racism as an issue of personal bias (see the film *Crash*, 2005, for a good example), these films aid in the dissemination of a colorblind racial ideology that makes actual progress toward racial equality more difficult. The nature of film makes it an ideal tool for the spreading of ideology because film is where Americans culturally come to understand themselves collectively and individually (Denzin, 1995).

Film also allows one to know others, people whom they would never meet; this effectively turns the spectator into a voyeur of unknown groups and hidden meaning (Collins, 2004; Denzin, 1995). While not always given mainstream attention, there have existed films that place the narrative focus on minorities.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze how films targeted for black audiences have treated race. By focusing on four distinct eras (Race Films, Blaxploitation, Spike Lee, and Tyler Perry) the analysis will be able to focus on the central tendency of each era and similarities across eras.

The analysis utilizes Bonilla-Silva's Racial Social Structure (1997, 2001) as the theory from which the themes were developed. The benefit of using Bonilla-Silva's theory is that it is a structural theory of race. Bonilla-Silva argued that existing racial theories are flawed in multiple ways. One such flaw is that racism is typically treated as a product of psychology or ignorance; as such, it is a symptom that could therefore be cured or fixed (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; 2010). Whatever the root cause, these perspectives viewed racism as irrational. Other perspectives, such as class-based analyses, treated racism as a tool for the powerful to use in order to manipulate the working class into being divided against itself (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2010) argued that this is a similar flaw with the racial formation perspective. The racial formation perspective argues that racial categories are formed through social, political, economic influences; these formations also occur along various projects, a well-known example being the Census (Omni &Winant, 1994). While recognizing the structural nature of race the perspective still prioritizes the efforts of elites in the shaping of race.

Racialized Social Structure

To correct the flaws he perceived in other theories, Bonilla-Silva (1997, 2001) instead argued that race forms its own distinct social structure within societies. This social structure is hierarchical and grants benefits to the group at the top of the hierarchy while limiting those who are at the bottom (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). In America, that hierarchy is known as white supremacy and what is defined as racist are actions that support that existing hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva 2010). This means that racism is not irrational but wholly rational as a group's material realities are affected by the racial social structure.

The racial social structure also produces ideologies. These ideologies can change, as the coercive ideology of the pre Civil Rights era gave way to the hegemonic Colorblind Racial ideology of the post Civil Rights era (Bonilla-Silva 2001; 2010). Similar to Du Bois's (1904) concept of double consciousness, Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2010) asserts that while no one is free from the realities of an existing ideology, being lower on the racial hierarchy can produce a more critical understanding of race. For Bonilla-Silva (2010), Colorblind racial ideology has essentially four frames: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism.. Because Bonilla-Silva (2010) stated that abstract liberalism is the most important frame of the new racial ideology and also the most difficult to grasp, I will briefly define it. Abstract liberalism has four elements: “individualism, universalism, egalitarianism, and meliorism” (pg. 27). The abstract liberalism frame is using the language of political and economic liberalism to “explain racial matters abstractly” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, pg. 28). This frame allow concepts such as equal opportunity to justify not seeking further remedies to racial inequality.

Three aspects of Racialized Social Structure perspective allowed me to derive my themes. The first is that Bonilla-Silva (1999) treats racial groups as real, and not an arbitrary or reified group classification. The second element is the material impact of race. By making racism a product of rational acts, and rebellions against the racial hierarchy as well, the economic benefits and limitations of a racialized social structure are not merely accidental byproducts of historical contingencies but predictable consequences of these rational acts. Finally, Bonilla-Silva points to the distinct ideological periods divided by the Civil Rights Movement. These three elements aided me in the creation of the Community and Opportunity themes. The Racialized Social Structure shifts the focus of the analysis on something different than what many other analyses of race and film often center on, stereotypes.

When conducting an analysis of African Americans and film, the focus often centers on the depiction of the character and classification of a character type. Bogle (2001) has produced the most thorough example of this work, tracking the archetypical characters African Americans have played throughout film. The approach has been used to discuss the negative cultural narratives about African Americans (Rhines, 2003; Denzin, 2002; Guerrero, 1993; Hill-Collin, 2004; Simpson, 1990). Other times that focus can be used to try to explain contemporary conditions of African Americans or structural elements of film production (Hughey, 2009; Gleen & Cunningham, 2009; Sausers, 2012).

Violent, hypersexual, subservient, overly dignified, or saint-like are often the qualities found in these stereotypes. Whether or not the characters of the Blaxploitation era are similar to the buck characters of the past, and both are similar to the violent characters seen in later years, the focus on the depiction of blackness as an understandable trope is well-covered territory.

The focus on depiction is important but by accepting the definition of a stereotype, even to subvert or dismiss it, the analysis of necessity must focus more narrowly than I desire to do. The frame of any particular trope calls to attention the evidence that supports and detracts from it. This limited focus on character types or attributes can take focus away from other elements of racial ideology being shown, contested or not, within these films. As the approach I will take in this thesis is to analyze black film over a number of years, I will demonstrate how films from and for African Americans adopt and adapt dominant racial ideology. In so doing, it is important to place the films in an historical context and, by so doing, keeping the characters free from definitions that emerged either before or after the time the film was produced and released. In this section, I will describe the eras and the films that will represent each of the four cinematic eras. Following that section will be the analysis of each of the two major themes, Community and Opportunity.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Each of the films selected for this study was chosen in order to represent a particular historical era in the struggle for racial equality over the past 75 years. One era represents the pre-Civil Rights era, while the remaining three cover the immediate post-1960s, post-Civil Rights era of American History. The last of these eras incorporates the election of the first black President of the United States of America. These eras keep with the demarcation theorized by (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) and allow for what- in the context of this research-could produce a significant effect. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 is such an event. The four eras include the films of directors like Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams from the 1930s and 1940s. These films have been archived in the G. William Jones Film and Video collection at Southern Methodist University. Referred to as the Tyler Black Film Collection, these films were originally created for African American audiences during the segregation era but only discovered in 1983 in a warehouse in Tyler, Texas. The next major era in the evolution of films created by African American writers and directors was the well-known Blaxploitation series of movies made during the immediate aftermath of the passage of such historic legislation as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and largely set in poorer urban neighborhoods in the 1970s. The third major era is defined by the films of the most prominent African American film maker, Spike Lee. Lee has been an enormously prolific director, whose first major feature-length film, *She's Gotta Have It*, was released in 1986. The final era of Black film-making is represented by the commercially successful films of Tyler Perry.

The general criteria for selection was that the film be featured length, involve a majority black cast with black participation behind the camera (writer(s) and or director) and be available on DVD or to digital streaming format[1]. The number of films selected for each era ranged from six to nine; in all, twenty-nine films, out of a possible eighty-four (all seven feature length films from the Tyler Texas collection; fifty-two from Blaxploitation; thirteen from Spike Lee; and twelve from Tyler Perry) were selected for inclusion in this study. Due to the limitations of the project a more expansive selections of films were not possible[3]. While there were some general criteria, more specific criteria were created for the individual eras. These criteria reflected the source of the films, the breadth of the era, or the oeuvres of the filmmakers. In the following section, I will discuss the specific selection of films from each of the four eras; the method of analysis; and the themes that emerged from the analysis.

Tyler Texas Black Film Collection

The era of Race Films will be represented by the Tyler Texas Film Collection. Race Films, as they were known, were independent films produced for African American audiences (Reid, 1993). Race Films offered black audiences a chance to see characters like them that did not have to fulfill the negative roles found in mainstream movies (Reid, 1993). The Tyler Texas Black Film Collection was discovered in 1983 by the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas in the warehouse of a Real Estate firm (Stewart, 2011). There were roughly one hundred items found in the original nitrate prints ("Forgotten", 2003).

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[1] An exception to this rule was made for *Foxy Brown* and *Cleopatra Jones*, which both had white writers and directors. The involvement of creative talent was to insure the development of a black response to racial ideology of the film's time. However, it is theoretically consistent that whites can adopt the black racial narratives or counter-narratives to the existing ideology, even if these writers were simply following what they understood to be narrative convention.

[3] Such films include *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), *Menace II Society* (1993)

The film collection includes many types of films, ranging from features to shorts, and even some newsreels. For this thesis, I chose only the feature films in order to compare similar types of films across the four general eras covered in this research.

Scholars of so-called "Race Films" have faced a number of challenges in analyzing these films, for many race films only a few prints of the actual film were ever made. The curated film collection, then, allows a selection of films I know to be readily available for viewing. The seven films selected from the collection were:

- *A Murder in Harlem* (1935)
- *Midnight Shadow* (1939)
- *Where's My Man To-nite* (1943)
- *Girl in Room 20* (1946)
- *Juke Joint* (1947)
- *Miracle in Harlem* (1948)
- *Souls of Sin* (1949)

Blaxploitation

Blaxploitation was coined by Junius Griffin, head of the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP, as he and much of the organization felt the images of these films were stereoptical and exploiting African Americans for money (Lawrence, 2008). Blaxploitation films often featured violence, drug use, and sex (Reid, 1993). While the notion of the images being negative has been challenged, Blaxploitation films did come at a time of crisis in Hollywood (Guerrero, 1993; Reid, 1993).

Films were not making the money they once were but when articles published in Variety and Ebony showed the increasing size of the black movie going audience, studio executives began producing films that cater to black audiences (Guerrero, 1993). This new focus on black film was not only beneficial to black audiences but even entertainers who were once limited by the use of black actors in Hollywood films. No actor embodies this reality more than Sidney Poitier.

Increasingly, Sidney Poitier's films were falling out of favor with black audiences (Reid, 1993). Called Saint Sidney, many felt his characters- such as the traveling handyman Homer Smith from *Lilies of the Field* (1963) or the accomplished doctor, John Prentice, from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) – were were too assimilationist and did not reflect the realities of being black in America (Bogle, 2001). During the Blaxploitation era, however, Sidney Poitier began making his own films, quite different from the *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). During the Blaxploitation era, Poitier's roles became more varied including a farce he directed *Uptown Saturday* Night (1974).

For the Blaxploitation films I decided to include only those films that were clearly naturalistic with no supernatural elements, for example, and were set within urban, realistic environments. While the features I was ultimately looking for could have been present, in the other three film eras, non-naturalistic or supernatural elements were for the most part absent. To include these films from the Blaxploitation era would thus create a lack of equivalence in the analysis. Further, since many Blaxploitation films were produced, and the majority fit easily within a more naturalistic style, the exclusion of the vampire sub-genre serves to capture more accurately the central tendency of the films from the 1970s era.

Among the many Blaxploitation films that were released, I chose a group that appeared in theaters between the years of 1970 and 1975. It has been argued that after these initial years, the blaxploitation phase had been reduced to parody and the studios were moving away from the films as well (Guerrero, 1993). From the filmography used, I selected six films[3]:

- *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970)
- *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* (1971)
- *Shaft* (1972)
- *Super Fly* (1972)
- *Cleopatra Jones* (1973)
- *Foxy Brown* (1974)

The six films were selected using a purposive sampling method. *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song* were selected for being the first two of the era, and signaling a break from the more conventional, white-produced films of the 1960s, such as previously mentioned Sidney Poitier films, or *Lilies of the Field* (1962) (Guerrero, 1993). The other four films were chosen due to the popularity of the films, in terms of viewership and subjects of research. Popularity meant that the films were much more readily available for viewing, while being the focus of existing research allows me to demonstrate how the application of Bonilla-Silva's work will generate different results and conclusions.

[3] Filmography used from Lawrence (2008).

Spike Lee/Tyler Perry

For the last two film eras I decided to focus on two directors, each of whom came to prominence during the last two of the four eras to be analyzed in this thesis and arguably best represents the central tendency of African American filmmaking during these periods. These two directors are Spike Lee and Tyler Perry[4]. This decision was made for two reasons. The first is that in each respective time span, no other director was as prolific as these two. In what Ed Guerrero called "Hood Homeboy movies" many of the feature directors during the 1980s had sparse work after their initial films, this includes Jon Singleton and the Hughes Brothers. Spike Lee, however, has maintained a high level of productivity and visibility since his early films from the mid-1980s. Since the early 2000s, a similar case can be made for Tyler Perry. Tyler Perry is not only one of the most successful black directors since the turn of the century but is also one of the most powerful people in Hollywood.

For these two directors, I chose not to include films that were based on other works not occurring contemporaneously or films based on the lives of well-known historical figures such as Malcolm X, for example. This meant *Malcolm X* (1992) and *For Colored Girls* (2010) were ineligible for consideration. The reason to exclude these works is due to their dependence on material and sources from earlier periods; because of this, the filmmakers would be restricted and the films would not have the same ideological freedom of those set in contemporary times. Made for TV movies and documentaries were not included. Also excluded from consideration were directorial efforts of stage plays; while Tyler Perry is known to have several Spike Lee directed the one man play *A Huey Newton Story*.

[4] Filmographies generated from imdb.com

Films, like *Alex Cross* (2012) or *3a.m.* (2001), that featured Spike Lee or Tyler Perry in acting roles but not as directors, were also excluded. The character of Madea presented a potential problem for the Tyler Perry film selection; I was concerned that his famous character could potentially overwhelm the analysis. However, on viewing the initial selection I discovered that Madea is often only a supporting character, or makes only a cameo appearance. I conlcuded, therefore that the presence of the character would not overwhelm the analysis. *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008), Spike Lee's World War II movie, had to be excluded for its inclusion of supernatural elements. Much of Spike's work in the 2000s had to be excluded for failing to meet general conditions. The Spike Lee films selected were:

- *She's Gotta Have It* (1986)
- *School Daze* (1988)
- *Do the Right Thing* (1989)
- *Mo' Better Blues* (1990)
- *Jungle Fever* (1991)
- *Clockers* (1995)
- *Get on the Bus* (1996)
- *Bamboozled* (2000)
- *Red Hook Summer* (2012)

The Tyler Perry films included in the analysis are:

- *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005)
- *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006)
- *Daddy's Little Girls* (2007)
- *Meet the Browns* (2008)
- *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (2009)
- *Why did I get Married, Too?* (2010)
- *Madea goes to Jail* (2009)

Variables

The variables used for the analysis emerged after an initial viewing of some of the films and preliminary coding efforts. Soon, the focus of the analysis emerged and the nine variables were constructed. What I refer to as Community and Opportunity are the main two, and will be the primary focus of the subsequent analytical sections. Each has two variations; Community 1 is defined as an appeal to, or acknowledgment of, Community as representing race. Community 2, however, is defined as a character using Community to represent a nonracial group (geographic, religious, professional). Opportunity 1 represents characters that state their economic choices or social mobility is limited by their race; Opportunity 2 is a variable that codes characters who state their race or racism is not limiting their chances for mobility. The variations are not dichotomous. This allows for the possibility that one or multiple characters may express either sentiment within the same film. A second benefit is that the expression itself will be contextualized. Simply, a character fitting one or either variant does not mean their position is supported within the film. Making Community and Opportunity the centerpiece of the analysis is also fitting with Bonilla-Silva's (1997,2010) structural approach to race; concentrating on how hegemony may affect conception of group identity as well as the material ramifications of that group membership. The thematic variables do not have to be fulfilled by the protagonists.

There are two variables concerning conflict: Conflict-Race and Conflict-Resolution. Conflict-Race denotes whether the central conflict is intra- or interracial. Conflict-Resolution measures measures the means by which the central conflict in the film is resolved, that is by the protagonist individually or aided by others.

I included a measure of lethal violence as it is a potentially relevant point of contrast between the Blaxploitation films, for example, and those of Tyler Perry. The final group of variables are the standard demographic measures of occupation and other measures of social class, gleaned, carefully, from examinations of the situational context of the film and what filmmakers describe as *mise-en-scene*.

CHAPTER 3

COMMUNITY

Reducing Bonilla-Silva's racialized social structure to its two basic elements, race and material interest, members of those groups (white, black, Asian, Latino) are either denied or afforded benefits based on racial premises alone. For a community that has seen its greatest gains from concerted collective action, the importance of solidarity cannot be overstated. Drawing upon this realization, it is important to recognize that communities are reflections of various cultural influences, moral judgments, and social boundaries established by members of the group. Therefore, solidarity is included but is not the singular focus of this analysis. Interpreting how the characters in the films defined their "community" allows the viewer to differentiate why the "black radical" was no more respectable than the "pusherman". In these films, community was generally invoked to mean their racial group or geographic location, even when said location is racially homogeneous. In the following pages, I will discuss, in chronological order, how each era of film included in the analysis invoked community, if at all, and how this understanding influenced the story of the movie as well as, how the changescould be understood during the transition of racial ideologies.

Tyler Texas Film Collection

None of the Tyler Texas films analyzed included explicit references to a community based on race, location or membership to a group not defined by race. However, one film in particular is of note and that is *Where's my Man To-Nite* (1943).

Where's my Man To-Nite centers on Rodney Tucker Jr. (Hugo Martin), a young African American that was recently drafted to fight during World War II. Initially, Rodney does not want to go war, questioning why any African American would fight for America given how the country treats them. Rodney's reluctance receives substantial pushback from his family and fiance[5]. It is Rodney's mother, who eventually convinces him to enter the war by stating that Rodney should fight not because of how his country has treated him but because when seen fighting to protect his country it becomes impossible to deny him as an American and an equal. While not fitting the parameters of the analysis, this movie clearly has a sense of racial community. The ambivalence, initially, is what that smaller community owes to the larger society and what the larger society owes to said community. Rodney's real concern, however, should not be mistaken: while Rodney is invoking his racial group and framing this dilemma in racial terms, the resolution he seeks is purely for his individual circumstance and not for black draftees as a whole.

In most of the other films in this collection there is no invoking of community as defined in the analysis. These films were devoid of mentions of race, be it explicitly or implicitly. The only other film to have race as a subtext was *Murder in Harlem* (1935). *Murder in Harlem* was about a night watchmen who was falsely charged of a murder committed by his white boss. While covering his tracks the employer, Brisbane (Andrew Bishop), enlists the help of a hapless janitor, Lem Hawkins (Alec Lovejoy). For his involvement, Lem is paid off by Brisbane. The scene where the cover up occurs the audience sees Lem as a slow-witted pawn. However, as the scene progresses we are witness to a subtle play where Lem pretends to be just dumb enough to be useful but not so dumb, or intelligent, as to be a threat to Brisbane.

[5] Rodney's fiancee Ginny sees his reluctance as cowardice

Lem is thereby spared his life and receives a greater sum than was originally offered. *Murder in Harlem* also has the distinction of being the only selected film in the collection to feature an interracial conflict. The other films' conflicts are all intraracial.

The lack of interracial conflict could reflect the effects of the Great Depression on black independent film. Before the Great Depression, Oscar Micheaux, director of *Murder in Harlem*, produced racially controversial films in the 1920s; this included a film about lynching and the Ku Klux Klan (Reid, 1993)[6]. At the start of the depression, not only were black film producers losing their stars to Hollywood but they also had to contend with market concentration, as fewer people (almost all white) controlled film distribution (Reid, 1993). This resulted in black film producers being forced into interracial and unequitable partnerships that diluted the radical filmmakers just a decade prior (Reid, 1993). All the conflicts of the films can be described as individualist, concerning the interests of an individual or small group of individuals. While these films mostly remained silent on community, the subsequent sections offer a stark contrast, none more than Blaxploitation films.

Blaxploitation

The theme of community, as defined by race, permeates most of the Blaxploitation films selected. Of the eras being analyzed, the Blaxploitation films were the most uniform in this category, as five of the six films invoked community to be defined by race[7].

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[6] *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) is the film being referenced

[7] The lone film that did not being *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* (1971)

The theme of community generally operated in three ways within these films: motivation for central conflict, moral admonishment, and as a means of resolution. Finally, I will comment on two representatives and iconic films from the 1970s: *Super Fly* and *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song*.

The theme of a racially based community drives the story of many of the Blaxploitation films by giving the threat or the central conflict a larger, more social significance. Each of these films have what could be described as a mostly standard plot. What sets these Blaxploitation films apart is that the plots are imbued with a deeper meaning, that even if a degree of self-interest is present there is still a larger concern for the community. Examples of this can be seen in *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), and *Shaft* (1971). For each, the antagonists in the film did not just pose a threat specifically to themselves as individuals but also the broader neighborhood or community. *Cleopatra Jones* and *Foxy Brown* share a similar story of two women trying to rid their community of a drug ring, and running afoul of said drug ring to the detriment of loved ones. Cleopatra Jones (Tamara Dobson) did so by burning poppy fields while on a mission for the CIA. When she returns home, the local syndicate targets her for assassination, though fails repeatedly. Not only is Cleopatra motivated by having become a target of an assassination plot but also because of her understanding of the devastation drugs have inflicted upon the community. Foxy Brown, the eponymous heroine of Jack Hill's 1974 Blaxploitation classic, was not a secret agent. While recognizing the consequences the presence of drugs has had in the community, what pushes her to action is the murder of her lover.

The central conflict of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* is the theft of community funds during a pledge drive by a local religious figure, Rev. Deke O'Malley. The two detectives on the scene of the crime, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, are tasked with figuring out who was behind the robbery and trying to get the funds back to the community. What sets the story apart from a standard crime story is that those funds were being collected, nominally, for a migration to Africa. The donation of those funds was also presented as causing a degree of hardship for the donors, most of whom were community residents. What, then, is on the line is not just money but what a trip to Africa entails. Rev. O'Malley called it going home, and for those attending the rally there is a sense that to go to Africa would be a homecoming, a return instead of going to a new destination. *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was not the only detective story selected from this era. The other was *Shaft*.

The plot of *Shaft* is that John Shaft, a private detective, is hired by a Harlem crime boss to find his daughter. Bumpy Jonas, the crime lord of Harlem, tricks Shaft into taking the job all the while suspecting his daughter was kidnapped by a rival mob. Bumpy convinces Shaft, who is initially reluctant, to continue on the case by stating that while Shaft may not like what Bumpy does he, Bumpy, is better than the alternative. The alternative being the Italian mob taking over in Harlem because for his faults, Bumpy does not have disdain for black people but the mob does.

How a character's actions affect fellow African Americans goes a long way in how other characters, and the general perspective of the film perceive him or her. For Gravedigger and Coffin Ed, the characters in *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Deke O'Malley is the worst kind of criminal. Not because he uses physical violence, or even the magnitude of his crimes.

Deke is a con artist and while his schemes could certainly have a negative impact on individuals within the neighborhood, it would hardly be ruinous for the community at large. However, as observed by Gravedigger and Coffin Ed, Deke is taking from his people as white people have done, but is selling false hope to do so. We see the topic of false hope appear in *Shaft* as well. Bumpy Jonas has a discussion with Ben Buford, local leader of a black militancy organization. Ben admonishes Bumpy for selling heroin, what he calls poison, to fellow black people. Bumpy, in return, admonishes Ben for selling the people false hope. Since there is not further pushback on either position, the scene plays out leaving the viewer to consider both positions as having some merit given the larger context[8]. In *Cleopatra Jones*, another film in which drug dealing enters the story, one might assume that Cleopatra Jones has very little tolerance, or respect, for drug dealers. However, that is not the case. When she returns to the states, from her CIA mission abroad, Cleopatra seeks out information and help from a local drug dealer, Mrs. Johnson. While having a more amicable relationship than Shaft had with Bumpy Jonas, there is a sense in both movies of a grudging acceptance of black criminals when faced with the larger threat of white criminal organizations.

The Blaxploitation genre is filled with action movies. What may come to one's mind is the action movie hero that goes it alone, the rogue. Rambo, who can wage and win the Vietnam War all by himself, John McClain, of the *Die Hard* franchise, defeating terrorists with virtually no help, etc., are among the better known examples of this rugged individualist theme. What sets these films apart is that while all of the protagonists of the Blaxploitation films selected are shown to be highly competent, arguably hyper-competent, many of the protagonists required additional help to resolve the their stories.

[8] Both scenes will be explored further during the discussion of economic opportunity in the next chapter

Cleopatra Jones, Foxy Brown, and Shaft all get help from black militants. Cleopatra Jones is also aided by the sons of Mrs. Johnson. Cleopatra Jones and John Shaft seek help immediately, acknowledging their limitations. Foxy Brown seeks help after attempting to go it alone and getting in over her head. This group effort demonstrates a reciprocal relationship between the protagonist and the communities they are seeking to protect. This is especially important because many of the resolutions involve instances of lethal violence. Instead of playing a passive role, the community in these movies is just as active as the main character.

Super Fly and *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* contain individualistic stories, which distinguishes them from the other Blaxploitation film. However, in *Super Fly*, Youngblood Priest did express a willingness to engage in revolutionary activity, as opposed to the sloganeering of the black militant he was talking to. This was a feature in both *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Shaft*, and given the affinity that many of the characters and stories of Blaxploitation movies have for the principles of the Black Power Movement, it is interesting to see a wariness of black radicals as disrespectful and ineffectual compared to others within the films. Sweetback's quest, however, is simply to escape capture by the police. The reason he is wanted by the police stems from his having come to the defense of another black man who was being attacked by a police officer while the man was in custody. While Sweetback does not articulate a particular view of community, throughout his odyssey he is cheered on by black people. He also engages in call and response with disembodied voices proclaiming "they got" various family members while he asserts they will not get him. One can only surmise that Sweetback's own family had been victimized at some point by racial violence and oppression.

Made during the height of the Black Power Movement and feeding off the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, the Blaxploitation films analyzed were in near consensus in how community was defined. These films also, generally, share a utilization of violence as a means of resolving conflict. The next era of film, Spike Lee's, is not as consistent in its definition. His treatment of community is constantly in flux from film to film.

Spike Lee

Spike Lee's filmography represents the most expansive, temporally, of the eras selected, spanning almost 30 years. These films offer the most variation in defining community. Four of the films defined community racially, three did so geographically, while two of the films did not define community. The following discussion will group the movies accordingly

I define inorganic solidarity as an appeal to racial solidarity that is largely rebuffed by other characters and, or the larger context of the film; the result being the character making the appeal is presented as naive and the appeal itself anachronistic. Sometimes, it is the characters themselves who undermine their own appeals. Of the four films that fit this classification, all told stories in which intraracial conflict played a central role. However, an intraracial conflict in and of itself would not be sufficient. What makes these conflicts unique is the tension between the individual and the larger community. That is, in each of these films, one party is interested in collective interests while the other party, or parties, is trying to advance individual interests. The films discussed in the section will be *School Daze*, *Get on the Bus*, *Bamboozled*, and *Clockers*.

School Daze (1986) and *Get on the Bus* (1996) showcase their inorganic solidarity through the eventual defeat or rejection of the main characters. The protagonist of *School Daze* is Dap (Laurence Fishburne), a student attending Mission University (HBCU). Dap demonstrates an appreciation or understanding of racial membership as a connected community. This view of a loosely connected racial community, similar to the Islamic concept of Ummah, is not just limited to the United States as Dap understands blackness as a transnational struggle which is why he leads a movement to have the University divest all of its financial interests in South Africa until Apartheid is abolished. His advocacy of divestment is not entirely welcomed by the University's administration.

Dap's agitation is treated as disruptive, being called as such by President McPherson (Joe Seneca). In the scene we have two members of the old guard, McPherson joined by a Board of Trustees member Cedar Cloud, people who had taken part in the Civil Rights Movement but have since adopted incrementalist approaches to their social justice goals:

Dap (addressing Cloud): … *So what, you marched with [Martin Luther] King in the 60s. Big deal, that was over twenty years ago. Black people still catching hell all over the world, you know.*

McPherson: *We have made progress.*

Dap: *Says who? There is no way you can defend not divesting completely. No ifs ands or buts about it.*

Dap is warned that if he continues he could be expelled from Mission, with Cedar adding insult to injury by noting that he had classmates like Dap and they are now old and bitter.

Undeterred by the threats of the University President, Dap convinces his ambivalent friends to take part in his next stunt, whatever it may be. Dap accomplishes this by setting them apart from fellow classmates, stating that the others are too concerned with "graduating and getting a Brooks Brothers' suit". For Dap, putting self-interest above the needs of blacks, globally, only serves to diminish your sense of self-worth and integrity. The inevitable outcome, Dap believes, is the creation of "okie-doke Negroes" or Uncle Toms who are not down for the cause. During his diatribe, Dap's friends bring up the reality that being in University and graduating carries more significance than advancement, some being the first members of their families to have ever gone to college. This would not be the last refutation of Dap's ideology.

In the following scene, Dap and his friends are taunted and then confronted by some local townspeople, who have little interest in Dap's vision of racial solidarity. Not only are the University students taunted as effeminate and entitled, but that they are also deluding themselves if they believe a college education can overcome their race. During this confrontation, the racial boundary incorporates a class component, as well. The Mission University students, would likely have better career prospects than the townspeople, even if the townspeople do not believe education can negate racial barriers. Instead of interpreting the townspeople's reaction as being anti-intellectual or deriding education, the reactions can be understood as a response to an assumed chauvenism. Throughout the film, characters with socially desirable traits are shown to look down upon those who do not. The Gamma Rays being a primary example. The Gamma Rays are a sorority that includes light skinned women with straightened hair. They deride the darker skinned women on campus, especially those who wear their hair naturally. While Dap may be portrayed as more or less correct, the movie also shows him as isolated.

Not physically but ideologically as very few people agree with him or are willing to go to the lengths he has. He receives constant pushback, with little reason to continue on outside of his own convictions. By the end of the movie, driven almost mad by the lack of progress and unity Dap rings a bell in the courtyard and screams for his fellow students to wake up.

Get on the Bus (1996) is about a group of men traveling across country to attend the Million Man March. The men on the bus extol the importance of the meeting, of a gathering of black men to discuss how to improve themselves and the ills facing their community. The march is divisive, as the women in the movie point out how it is sexist to exclude them from a large discussion about the needs of the black community. The march is also contrived, as the relationships on the bus demonstrate. The men on the bus were enticed by Minister Farrakhan's call for a mass meeting of black men to get their self-respect back, to be pillars of the community. However, throughout the trip cracks are shown as conflicts arise amongst the bus riders. Some of the tension is personality driven, others containing deeper biases.

Flip (Andre Braugher) finds himself at center of several of these conflicts. He is brash, misogynistic and homophobic. He questions how one passenger, Gary (Roger Guenveur Smith), can claim to be black when he is biracial and was raised by his white mother. He also intimates that Gary has no place on the bus, since he is not really black. Flip's primary targets were the two gay men, Randall and Kyle (Harry Lennix and Isaiah Washington, respectively) on the bus. When discovering they were gay, Flips wonders about the "faggots on this bus". The taunts eventually lead to a fight between him and Kyle.

While Flip was the most pronounced in his rejection of Randall and Kyle, he was only rebuffed by one fellow passenger, X (Hill Harper). Other reactions ranged from stereotypical comments to lukewarm support. While the cause of much of the strife on the bus, Flip was not the center of all the conflicts.

Two other characters, Gary and Jamal (Gabriel Casseus), were also a source of tension among the bus riders. The ultimate source of this tension is that Gary, a second generation police officer, lost his father to a violent incident on the job. Jamal, a practicing Muslim, was once a criminal and told a story of how he killed someone and was never arrested for it, out of many. Jamal, then, discusses how he eventually came to change his life through religion and found the desire to help at risk kids. Gary, being unmoved by Jamal's tale, informs him of the best way he could help break the cycle of violence:

Gary: *You know what will end the cycle, Jamal? Locking up someone like you behind bars.*

Jamal: *Of course, you've got to make your quota, don't you, officer?*

Gary: *Someone just like you murdered my father. You can rationalize it all you want, brother, but living in the hood is no excuse for taking the life of another human being.*

By the end of the movie, Gary promises Jamal to do all he can to make him pay for his past crimes. Throughout the film, it is stated that this undertaking is something that only Minister Farrakhan could accomplish. The divisions on the bus imply one important role of the Million Man March is to give these black men a uniting definition of blackness.

The characters are trying to construct a boundary around what it means to be a black man. Dap engaged in similar behavior because during this era, there does not seem to be a definition to adhere to. Flip's version is heteronormative, Gary's cannot allow for deviance.

These are men who desire to come together but are held back by their own concerns and experiences. What makes the Gary and Jamal dynamic interesting, and one that is present as well in another Spike Lee film, *Clockers*, is that in the previous era you could see Gary and Jamal potentially working together for a common goal, like Shaft did with Bumpy. In Spike Lee's filmography, the criminal becomes a much less sympathetic character. *Get on the Bus*, like *School Daze* featured protagonists making appeals to define community racially, appearing to do so against much resistance. In the next two films, *Clockers* and *Bamboozled*, the appeals are made to main characters.

It may not be readily apparent why the source of the claim concerning a racial community is significant. But it is in this distinction that we start to see more clearly the logic of a colorblind ideology that operates in Spike Lee's films. While traces can be seen in *School Daze* and *Get on the Bus*, the presence is masked by the plots of the movie. Yes, Dap is disappointed in the Mission University student body, but his goal is to combat global anti-blackness. The Million Man March is a meeting to help black men combat the racism they experience and endure in spite of it. But with *Clockers* and *Bamboozled* we have stories in which the real, prescient threat isn't a larger white power structure but fellow black people who cause harm from within.

In *Clockers* (1995), Strike (Mekhi Phifer) is a drug dealer who, in order to advance, is instructed to murder a thief in Rodney's (Delroy Lindo) organization. *Clockers* revolves around the investigation into the murder and how Strike would navigate both the ever increasing police focus on him and also suspicions from Rodney that Strike may betray him to the cops.

Throughout the film it is not known if Strike or his brother, Victor (Isiah Washington), killed Darryl (Steve White). During the investigation, Strike befriends and enlists a neighborhood kid, Tyrone "Shorty" Jeeter (Peewee Love), to start selling drugs for him. It is implied that Strike is continuing a pattern he learned from Rodney, whom he had started to work for in his early teens as well. This leads to a confrontation with Tyrone's mother, Iris (Regina Taylor) in which she states Strike is "[g]ood for nothing, death dealing scum" that is "selling death to [his] people". Strike's involvement with Tyrone also leads to a second confrontation, this time with Officer Andre`. Officer Andre` attacks Strike when Tyrone kills someone in defense of Strike. What Andre` does not know is that the assailant is sent after Strike because Rodney was tricked into believing Strike had informed on him by Det. Rocco (Harvey Keitel).

The two pieces of information that are given, or implied to the audience add complexity to Strike's arc but the question of whether it changes how we, the viewers, should ultimately assess Strike is left ambiguous. He may not be outright villainous but he is still clearly presented as a problem, even if the source of the problem can be traced to a series of bad choices rather than a fundamentally flawed character. The revelation that Victor killed Darryl, at the behest of Strike, adds an additional complication to Strike's character and to Victor's as well. Victor, throughout the investigation, was shown as a dedicated worker, calm, and professional. The viewer sees the instances of disrespect Victor must accept without reaction. Victor cites the anger over those various slights as his justification for killing Darryl. From his position in the working class, Victor understands that – in order to make minimal gains – he must cater to deviants, to death dealing scum.

This dynamic strains any sense of community that these characters can muster because, unlike Officer Andre, Victor is not in a position to utilize their illicit activities. He can be negatively affected by them, which makes their existence not just a threat to their safety but a detriment to the material interests of law-abiding community members.

In the Blaxploitation era, it is not difficult to imagine that these details would make Strike a sympathetic character, a la Youngblood Priest (from *Super Fly*), where the acknowledgement of an onerous racial power structure was almost reflexive. Now, however, that diminishes in significance because Strike represents the immediate threats. It does not really matter why he sells the drugs or how he learned it was ok to enlist children into his operation because he is harming his people. The irony being that if he had more help from his people, if there were the unity and collectivity that Iris yearned for, maybe Strike would not have been in the position he found himself.

Finally, in *Bamboozled* (2000) Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) is a television network executive. Frustrated by his failure to get intelligent black shows on the network, and after being insulted by his white boss for not understanding what black people want, Pierre sarcastically pitches a minstrel show. To his, and his assistant Sloan's (Jada Pinkett Smith) shock, the network gives the green light to Pierre's appallingly bad idea. Pierre casts Manray (Savion Glover) and Womack (Tommy Davidson), two street performers, as the leads of the show and to the surprise of everyone the show is an instant success. While both Pierre and Manray are initially ambivalent to the success of the show, they eventually accept the benefits of having a hit. Sloan and Womack both become increasingly uneasy with the program, selecting to leave their respective jobs because of it.

Sloan's brother, Big Bad Africa (nee Julian, portrayed by Mos Def) is part of a black radical performance group, the Mau Maus. The Mau Maus' radicalism increases with the success of the Minstrel show. After an audition with Pierre goes poorly, Big Bad Af exclaims that those behind the show are "fucking it up for everybody".

The Mau Maus are not the only detractors of the minstrel show, as a protest lead by Al Sharpton exclaimed that a modern day minstrel show will not be allowed to exist and disrespect black people. Again, we see black characters frustrated by racism but their primary critiques are targeted to other black characters. The Mau Maus kidnap and kill Manray, resulting in the execution of the majority of this radical group by the police; Sloan, distraught over the death of her brother shoots Pierre.

The movie also depicts an attempt to define and maintain a boundary defining good, or legitimate blackness, from that which is harmful or deviant. The Mau Maus refer to the black talent and executives behind the minstrel show with several racial slurs, including Tom, Sambo, and monkey. The Mau Maus do not know that Pierre was insulted for not being black enough and when he brought up concerns he was lectured by a white executive with a Ph.D from Yale in African American studies. But that may not actually matter. What the Mau Maus, Iris, Gary, and Dap can react to is what they perceive to be fellow community members failing their community, failing their people. The irony is, by these characters' failure to locate the source of the disappointment in larger factors, they are undermining – or drawing attention to the nonexistence of – the racial unity they are invoking.

"Yo, what you want to live in a black neighborhood for, anyway?" Buggin Out asks during a confrontation with a white man, Clifton (John Savage) who stepped on his new shoes, and bought a Brownstone in a largely black neighborhood in *Do the Right Thing*. The exclamation, and acknowledgment, of the black neighborhood represents the second way in which Spike Lee has defined community. The lynchpin becomes the physical. The physical characteristic of being black and the physical location. The neighborhood, the block is what unites them. The recognition that the neighborhood is black, while not incidental, also does not represent a sense of collective responsibility or fate due to their shared race but because of their proximity to each other and lack of it to others. Before incredulously asking why a white person would want to live in a black neighborhood, the chief concern of Buggin Out was his shoes. Even as his friends encourage his tirade, they focus on the shoes. Oh, and the gentleman is a Celtics fan. Besides *Do the Right Thing*, the other films included in this section *Jungle Fever* and *Red Hook Summer* demonstrate a recognition of black spaces. Discussions of race and racism are not necessarily absent from these films, instead these discussions take on a different tenor, a different form. Things are being reframed, the individual and interpersonal become the focal point.

Do the Right Thing represents Spike Lee's most explicit statement on the confluence of race and space. The film takes place during one of the hottest days of the year. As the day wears on, tempers flare and eventually a riot takes place. While the film does not shy away from depictions and dissections of racism, defined as personal animus, the invocation of race as a group is reflective of where they are located. Buggin Out's argument with Sal over pictures on the wall is an example:

Bugging Out: *Sal, how come you ain't got no brothers up on the wall here?*

Sal: *You want brothers up on the Wall of Fame, you open up your own business, then you can do what you wanna do. My pizzeria, Italian Americans up on the wall….*

Sal: *Don't start on me, today.*

Buggin Out: *Sal, that might be fine, you own this, but rarely do I see any Italian Americans eating in here. All I've ever seen is Black folks. So since we spend much money here, we do have some say.*

The goal here is largely unimportant. Buggin Out is a provocateur and Sal provided a foil. Buggin Out's goal is, in that moment, his alone. Even when he enlists help from others, Bugging Out is mostly ignored as a nuisance. The only lethal violence shown is the strangulation of Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) by police officers; the response is a riot by the community members that witnessed it. There is anger and shock at the event, possible even an understanding that the excessive force is influenced by Raheem's race. The anger, however, does not pertain to a larger injustice or police brutality in general. There is not a cause that unites everyone, just a sudden burst of anger that dissipates. The only evidence is the physical damage done to the neighborhood. The conflation of race and space takes a new dimension when in Spike Lee's following film, *Jungle Fever*, as the subject shifts to the highly charged subject of an interracial extramarital affair.

In *Jungle Fever*, Flipper (Wesley Snipes) is an architect who has an affair with a temporary employee, Angie (Annabella Sciorra) assigned to his firm[9]. One night, while working alone, we see how place becomes a colorless representative of race:

[9] Flipper, initially, wanted an African American to be his assistant but was rejected using the language of colorblindness

Angie: *Where are you from?*

Flip: *Uptown*

Angie: *The Bronx?*

Flip: *No, Harlem*

Angie *Wow*

Flip: *You ever been there? No? You've never been to Harlem?*

Angie: *No, I've never met anyone from Harlem. Not in Bensonhurst, anyway.*

The exchange started as a simple exchange of biographical information, the racial element emerges when Angie asserts she has never met anyone from Harlem while in Bensonhurst. The confidence of the claim makes sense if she can readily recognize Harlem residents from non-Harlem residents. What she acknowledged was Bensonhurst as a white space and Harlem as a black one.

The acknowledgment extends when, after discovering the affair, some of Angie's neighbors discuss what has happened to the black men brought to Bensonhurst by white women and what could potentially happen to Flip. Another scene finds Flip in an argument with a waitress while out on a date with Angie. The waitress, black, sees Flip as a "tired brother" who is parading his white woman around in what is implicitly a black space. While none of the characters have an issue with identifying others racially, the offense is articulated as being an affront to a spatial boundary. The interracial nature of the affair adds additional complications, Flip's wife, Drew (Lonette McKee), is hurt that Flip cheated with a white woman because she is fair skinned and felt black men often desired her for appearing almost white.

Angie's father, Mike (Frank Vincent), beats Angie and kicks her out of the house when he learns of the affair. Eventually, the pair breaks up and Angie and Flipper return to their more familiar racial spaces, resigned now to the fact that there were too many barriers to their relationship.

Red Hook Summer (2012) is about Flik (Jules Brown) who spends the summer in Brooklyn, New York with his Pastor Grandfather, Enoch (Clarke Peters). Enoch is the Bishop of a struggling church that is preparing for Old Timers Days, which could lead to much needed cash infusion to the church. There are three invocations of community, as location, found in the film. The first, simply is a church member reassuring Enoch that there will be ample turnout for his Old Timers Days. The second is a conversation between Enoch and sister Sharon Morningstar (Heather Simms). In that scene Sharon discusses being priced out of New York and the trend of reverse migration, a return of African Americans to the American South. Finally, Enoch tells Flik about the transition of Red Hook, from one ethnicity to another:

Enoch: *You know, uh, they built this place in 1938 for the dock workers; 7,000 of them. Then they stuffed the poor here. The Irish first, then the Italians, the blacks, the Puerto Ricans. Folks were suppose to use this place as a stepping stone but there was no place to step to because they gave it all away.*

Enoch and Sharon have expressed an understanding of their neighborhood as raced, and even speculated about returning to a previously raced space. Taken chronologically, we see a progression in Spike Lee's treatment of this kind of Community. It is not straightforwardly colorblind, there is always an understanding of a racial boundary but whereas in his other films this was about identity, here the boundaries are physical.

Do the Right Thing was the most fraught treatment, showing how this space could be a place of sudden mass violence. In *Jungle Fever* we see how raced spaces affect interracial relationships and how this acknowledgment extends to white Americans, they too, understand the racial boundary of the neighborhood.

Finally, *Red Hook Summer* shows what happens when the boundary is steadily shrinking, being encroached upon because the residents are poor. As the current boundary is threatened, as it crumbles or simply becomes too expensive to maintain, there is talk of another space, a return of sorts. What is consistent among these videos is that while the current of race runs through them this is not a source of unity. While Spike Lee was inconsistent in how he defined Community, those that were not racial appeals still kept race as a significant part of the story of the film, until *Red Hook Summer.*

The story of *Red Hook Summer* could, without significant alterations, star an all white cast. Of the films selected, this is the most colorblind, as Spike Lee offers a class-based analysis, showing the harm in when the lower classes can no longer keep up and have very few options. There is a decided change over his career as we see a filmmaker struggle with a racial ideology designed to make the visible invisible. This, and a medium where one should show not tell, means the filmmaker must either flout convention, lean on the broadest and rarest occurrences of racism or adapt stories that feature action and agency, people affecting change of some kind. In Tyler Perry, we see a filmmaker who, while not colorblind, embraces an occasional implicit invocation of race.

Tyler Perry

The final era analyzed is that of Tyler Perry. While it could be said that Tyler Perry's films were continuing the trajectory of the later Spike Lee films, the Tyler Perry films most closely resemble the Tyler Texas films than any other era. Of the seven films analyzed, only two had a clear invocation of Community (*Daddy's Little Girls* and *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*) one racial, one not. The other five films prioritized immediate ties, such as family and friends. Religion, namely Christianity, was also seen as important; however in only one of the films, *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, was the church as a community referenced.

The characters, then, can represent good or evil and the need for redemption without it representing a larger racial narrative, the characters are treated as pure individuals. For this reason they are very conservative films and even more so than the Tyler Texas collection since, in the 1930s, the de facto and de jure reality was racial separation with all of the associated bigotry, condescension, and limitations that the apartheid ensured. The plots of these movies contain almost no references to structural factors that could provide an interpretive lens through which to understand the backstory or context to these films. They are similar in this way to the later films of Spike Lee and but whereas Spike Lee might use these plots to explore issues of race and racism, the Tyler Perry plays are straightforward dramas. This does not mean, however, that there is no implicit racial narratives to be found in Tyler Perry's movies. As seen in *Daddy's Little Girls*, the treatment rises to the level of trope by taking well-known issues of African Americans and using them as plot points in service of the story.

Daddy's Little Girls is about an auto mechanic Monty (Idris Elba) and his quest to get his children back from their mother, Jennifer (Tasha Smith) who is staying with a drug dealer named Joseph (Gary Strugis). He enlists the help of attorney Julia (Gabrielle Union) with whom Monty starts a relationship. After discovering that Joseph was physically abusive to one of his girls, Monty attacks Joseph in the street. During this stretch of the film we discover that Joseph was once falsely accused and convicted of raping a white girl and fears recidivating. This is meant to explain why he is reluctant to take direct action against Joseph, and also demonstrate how far he was pushed when he eventually does. The definition of Community comes from Monty's boss and friend, Willie (Louis Gossett Jr.) during a community meeting with an elected official.

During a town hall meeting with a local official, the community members complain about the lack of progress on removing Joseph and other drug dealers from the community. Willie, in an attempt to inspire his fellow inhabitants, states that the history of black people is one of self-help, that to rid their community of the drugs and crime the law-abiding neighbors must take action. Willie is essentially advocating for Sampson and Raudenbush's (1997) concept of collective efficacy by arguing that the neighborhood can only be saved by its inhabitants. Like Spike Lee did in *Clockers*, Tyler Perry speaks of a racial unification to meet an intraracial threat. While Willie spoke of a past racism, the present threat is not white racism but black criminality. In the end, Joseph and Tasha are arrested and will likely be convicted this time because the community members will testify, the solution is to work within the criminal justice system.

I Can Do Bad All By Myself invokes the church as community early into the movie, as April (Taraji P. Henson) receives custody of her late sister's children, when her mother passes. April is reluctant to care for the children because it would not fit her lifestyle, a hard drinking lounge act that is also the a mistress. April begins to embrace her new maternal role, especially when she discovers her lover tried to sexually assault her niece. This discovery compels April to confess to experiencing a similar incident when she was a child. With the removal of the bad boyfriend, April is then free to move on with the god-fearing handyman. In many ways, this is a similar plot construction of many Tyler Perry movies. The details may change but the elements of faith and the love of a man aiding a woman in overcoming her obstacles or bad behavior is found in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, *Meet the Browns*, *Madea's Family Reunion*, and *Madea goes to Jail*. There is very little moral complexity with the characters with plot details to explain their behavior added right before the character changes or to explain their bad behavior. These films are colorblind in the sense of having very little mention of race, generally the reference is to actual skin tone, and only implicit depictions of blackness. The issues are individual and the resolutions are as well. As stated previously, these films are much more similar to the Tyler Texas Black Film Collection in plot.

The historical shifts of American racial ideology makes the findings in this section understandable. There is no mystery as to why in a racially oppressive society, including both the post Civil War years of the infamous Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision of 1896 and the pre-Civil Rights era in which racial lynchings were commonplace throughout the South (Tolnay and Beck, 1995), that critical black voices may be muted, with the racial elements of their stories having to be implied.

During the rebellion of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, it is expected that the films targeted toward African Americans would reflect this sense of solidarity and clarity of purpose but also a sympathy for the victims of the existing racial order[10]. This is why criminals were not universally reviled, even if some were quite pathetic, while others were obviously dangerous and prone to violence.

It is in the Spike Lee era that we see some interesting conflicts arise. The era following the Civil Rights Movement finds Spike Lee's characters continually conflicted by race. It is very telling that when grappling with a hegemonic ideology, the targets of criticism and methods to combat inequality become less clear. There is also a rise in the immediacy and individualization of the concerns. If *Foxy Brown* were made during Spike Lee's era, would Link (Foxy's brother who gets involved in the drug trade) be the main antagonist? The treacherous brother that turned on his own sister? These films showed that the structural context can be visible when it might serve to explain that character's problems but that understanding is limited and does not extend to others. When Spike Lee seeks unity, his targets are often both intra and interracial as the failure of fellow blacks becomes an equal and sometimes even more pressing obstacle to the uplifting of black people. Moreover,-Lee’s protagonists struggle to find suitable ways to combat the issues they see. In a colorblind era, the protest and the boycott can seem like relics instead of viable options for challenging inequality.

[10] Bonilla-Silva (2001) calls this era one of racial rebellion, I use similar language because of the application of his theory.

Finally, we get to Tyler Perry who in many ways mirrors the race film era. This may be due, in part, to the distance Tyler Perry's initial work has to the Civil Rights Era where the hegemonic ideology has had more time to exist and rise to the level of common sense. However, like many African Americans, Tyler Perry also struggles with the colorblind narrative. While his films rarely discuss race, there is an understanding that the criminal justice system can be unfair to black males and that the Civil Rights Movement did happen. This acknowledgment is complicated by the resolution of *Daddy's Little Girls* being cooperation with the criminal justice system. If nothing else, colorblind racism takes away the clarity that a more racially coercive ideology granted African Americans.

CHAPTER 4

OPPORTUNITY

How achievable is the American Dream ? If there were a single question that could encapsulate the theme of this chapter it would be that. The Opportunity variables sought to represent how much access characters felt they had to legitimate economic participation. It is telling, then, that this theme was often expressed in the form of the divergent paths taken by two central characters. The categorization of these films reflect the Community section. The Tyler Texas films could not be categorized on either concept of Opportunity but there is some feature that encapsulates the era while aiding in understanding subsequent eras. The Blaxploitation film had only a few instances of invoking Opportunity but the films were unanimous. Spike Lee's films were varied in their responses and Tyler Perry could not be placed just like the earlier race films.

Tyler Texas Black Film Collection

As was true with the prior theme of Community, the films in the Tyler Texas Film Collection were somewhat different from any of the films in the three more recent eras included in this analysis. Specifically, none of the films in the Tyler Texas Film focused on a character for whom the struggle to achieve the American Dream was a paramount motivation. However, some of the films did contain plots that centered on material well-being.

A typical plot device in these films centers on a character being swindled. Sometimes this is the main conflict of the plot (*Girl in Room 20* and *Juke Joint*) while at other times the swindle enters the film as a means of leading to a larger conflict (*Miracle in Harlem* and *Midnight Shadow*) but these were generally things that happened to the protagonist and if not the wrongdoing was played as farce.

Among the films in the Tyler group, *Souls of Sin* (1949) stands out as one in which the theme of opportunity is clearly present. It distinguishes itself from the other films of the collection by having the protagonist, "Dollar Bill" Burton (Jimmy Wright), strive for success not in the conformist mode typical of films from this era but in what Merton (1938), in his classic "Social Structure and Anomie" paper, would describe as a more innovative strategy, i.e., outside the law. In the end, however, it is the more ideological message of acceptance of both the cultural values of success and the accepted means of achieving success that wins the day.

In the film, Dollar Bill is a down-on-his-luck gambler who decides to work for a local gangster, Bad Boy George (Powell Lindsay). The benefits and success Bill gains are short lived as he has a falling out with Bad Boy George and leaves the gang. When a man whom Bill tried to scam wants a return on the money, the two exchange shots and both men are fatally wounded. Although Bill's more deviant path leads ultimately to his death, we learn that his two roommates, Alabama (William Greaves) and Bob (Emory Richardson) both achieve some success following a more conformist path. William has booked a television show while Bob has been hired as a writer. While not speaking directly to the issue of how barriers to success may or may not justify criminal behavior, it does valorize the behavior of the two characters who choose legitimate work by according them greater success in the long run.

Blaxploitation

Of the six films from the Blaxploitation era of African American films included in this analysis, three could be categorized as having a clear statement on Opportunity, all consistent in the view that race is a sizable barrier to Opportunity. All three films had the sentiment expressed by a criminal. While this did not make the characters more sympathetic necessarily, it did add dimension to them and grounded their decisions in a larger context. What the selected Blaxploitation films never did was undermine these characters' claims or call into question their worldview. The three films that articulated the theme are *Shaft*, *Super Fly*, and *Foxy Brown.* After delving into these movies I will then pay special attention to *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, which is a film that – while not fitting the definition of either Opportunity variable – is a film that is important in the way in which it anticipates many of the positions taken in the films that were made by later directors like Spike Lee and Tyler Perry. Analyzing this film will aid in framing subsequent eras.

Bumpy Jonas, of *Shaft*, and Link Brown, of *Foxy Brown*, are the characters who clearly recognize that their opportunities are limited by race. Both characters state as much while talking to the more respectable, "good," characters: Link to his sister Foxy and Bumpy to Ben Buford. Whereas Link personalizes it, stating he has no chance of becoming either an entertainer or an athlete, Bumpy universalizes his claim. This articulation of their limits is interesting because the characters occupy very different niches in the criminal underworld and so differ not only from the respectable characters but also from one another. Bumpy is the leader of the Harlem crime syndicate while Link lives far lower on the food chain, being a low level drug dealer.

When Bumpy is speaking to Ben, what Ben has over him is the righteous indignation that Bumpy's activities harm Harlen. However, Bumpy, responds that Ben's selling the false hope of liberation and equality is equally poisonous to selling heroin. Link, in his exchange with Foxy, comes off as weak and defeated; Bumpy is defiant. Bumpy would appear to have what Link lacks: intelligence, cunning, and the ability to succeed at a criminal enterprise. Viewing their behavior through Robert Merton's (1938) classic typology both would be categorized as innovators, accepting the cultural goals of success while rejecting the means. The characters, however, could not be more different.

Link is often shown as weak and sniveling, Bumpy is proud and unashamed of his actions. It is telling, then, that these two films take both characters' understanding as legitimate. The reason being that whether a person is intelligent and capable or lacking all apparently talent, the existing barriers to economic success are such that it makes both equally justified in turning to crime for a chance at social mobility. Neither Foxy nor Ben could disagree in those instances, both conceding that Link and Bumpy understand their material circumstance. *Super Fly* distinguishes itself from the previous two films by having the exchange occur between two criminals, Youngblood Priest and Eddie.

Priest and Eddie are partners in a drug syndicate but early in the film Priest is considering leaving drug dealing for a life of legitimate employment. At this point, both Priest and Eddie would be considered innovators but Priest wants to become a conformist, accepting both the cultural goals of social mobility and material comfort but with socially approved means of earning it. Eddie, however, sees this as a foolish dream. Stating that Priest already has whatAmerica says he should want, he questions why at this point he should change?

More important, Eddie feels that neither Priest nor he ever had much choice than to turn to a life of crime because society's racism would not allow them to achieve their dreams any other way. The conflict of the movie is Priest trying to make one final score[11] while removing himself from the control of corrupt, white officers who seek to keep him selling drugs for them. However, when Eddie betrays Priest to said officers, the story becomes about these two ideologies playing out. Eddie does not struggle to leave the life he has created from himself, even if he has to answer to corrupt law enforcement but Priest cannot do anything but fight to get out of the situation. While Bumpy could not be more different than Link, and Priest different from both of them, none of these characters were truly treated as exceptional. This is not the case for Rev. Deke O'Malley, from *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, who was thought of possessing something neither Bumpy nor Link had.

There is no indication in the dialogue in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* that any of the characters believed that his or her economic opportunity was limited due to racial discrimination or other external constraints. Despite its silence on this issue, this film serves as a bridge between the Blaxploitation films and those that followed in later eras. Rev. Deke O'Malley, as described by Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones is a clear example of Weber's (1978) concept of charismatic leadership. Rev. O'Malley is a religious leader, running a scam, but Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones recognize his potential. Something about Rev. O'Malley connects with the Harlem community, as people do not just believe in his cause but in him. He could have been the next Malcolm X or Martin Luther King Jr., the detectives state.

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[11] In this context, a significant payout from selling a large amount of drugs

This fuels the animus they feel for the religious figure, as he could obtain a measure of success by doing well for, and serving, his community but would rather fleece them with the false hope of a new beginning in the motherland of Africa where they would be liberated from an oppressive racial system in America.

Of the selected films in the Blaxploitation era, Deke O'Malley is the most detested black criminal of the bunch. By acknowledging his promise, by acknowledging he is capable of one of the rarest and most difficult forms of leadership, we see that success is possible even under a coercive ideology. That success just comes to a very small number of people, people who may have rare gifts and are fortunate enough to navigate the system properly. Deke could have chosen this path but did not.

Going forward, the last two eras do not share the same affinity for the criminal element and were much more likely to deny racism as an excuse for lack of success or remain silent on the issue. This does not mean the characters see racism as nonexistent, simply that it is a more manageable hurdle for black people than it once was. An unfair system, to be certain, but not an unconquerable one.

Spike Lee

As with the Community section, it is Spike Lee who offers the most varied response on Opportunity. Of the nine films selected, six had a character who invoked one of the Opportunity variables or both. Only one film, *Clockers*, stated that opportunity was limited by race without stating racism was not an excuse for a lack of success. Two films (*School Daze* and *Bamboozled)* fit the Opportunity 2 variable exclusively while three (*Do the Right Thing; Get on the Bus* and *Red Hook Summer*) offered examples of both variables.

When focusing on the Opportunity theme, the pattern of dichotomous characters emerged in the films that expressed one perspective exclusively while the two films with the competing perspectives were broader in the application.

Clockers is the lone film that expressed the view that racism was a legitimate barrier to success. Det. Rocco stated as much during an argument with Strike as he is being pressured to testify against Rodney. Det. Rocco states that he knows it is tough for black males, who must contend with a history of discrimination and the legacy of institutionalized racism. He also stipulates, however, that Strike is a snake and an "evil, junkyard Nigga". Strike responds that Det. Rocco has no idea what it is like for black males and accuses Rocco of being a racist "nigga hating cop," one who does not know what is actually going on in Strike's neighborhood. In this exchange, we see Det. Rocco asserting social barriers for black males but he still sees Strike as a uniquely bad individual, particularly when compared to Strike's brother, Victor.

Victor would be a conformist on Merton's (1938) typology. The film treats Strike and Victor as opposites. One who takes respectable employment and the other who earns through criminal means. One is single, the other a family man. It is because Victor appears to be such an upstanding citizen that Det. Rocco cannot believe he would commit this murder and applies greater and greater amounts of pressure on Strike to get him to confess. By removing the sympathetic portrayal of criminals that was seen in the previous era, Strike is not given the same leeway as previous characters. He may exist within a biased system but he could have selected to struggle and work hard at a real job. However, the film does not present this as a better personal choice.

While Victor is the good son, the disrespect and constant struggle to improve economically causes an enormous amount of mental strain, that very strain is why he is willing to kill. *Clockers* does not leave you with a sense that there is a good option as both are detrimental to the characters.

The films that take the position that racism is not a sufficient barrier to justify lack of economic success follow a similar formulation by giving us comparative characters in which to view the claim. In these movies the claim was stated by a character of a higher, or potentially higher, economic class said to or about a character of a lower class. In *School Daze* the statement on opportunity occurs after Dap and his friends have their argument with the local townspeople. During the exchange, one townsperson states that an education does not make Dap and his crew less black or better than those without an education. When the situation is resolved and the students are driving back to campus, wondering if there was some hidden truth to the words, Grady (Bill Nunn) responds that people have to, "start and try and better themselves." Others in the car react to this comment, noting that it is not as simple as he is making it seem. Grady seems unpersuaded, noting that, "you work or your starve." This leads some of the others to the conclusion that the townspeople were right, at least about some of them.

A similar instance occurs in *Bamboozled* when Pierre Delacroix is having a discussion with this father, Junebug. Junebug is a standup comedian, and had been an entertainer for Pierre's entire life. The conversation takes place after a recent performance by Junebug in which his jokes are not only raunchy but racially charged as well. For Pierre, the conversation takes place during a time of great ambivalence for him.

The outrageous minstrel show has started to air amid growing fanfare but he still is not comfortable with it. Backstage, Pierre asks why his father never progressed beyond comedy clubs, to which Junebug responds that he simply could not do what Hollywood wanted him to do and say the things they wanted him to say. Pierre, incredulous, states there has to be more to it than that and asks if Junebug thinks it could possibly be because he was not good enough. Junebug, citing audience reaction, responds that Pierre "must be crazy".

For both Grady and Pierre the context in which they have made these statements is important. As previously stated, Pierre was ambivalent about the product he was releasing to the public. For Grady, this comes after not just a confrontation with townspeople but follows him getting lectured by Dap on not adequately supporting black people and putting his economic interests ahead of the cause of black equality. The truth is, both men are doing that. Their actions also suggest that both men would express belief in some form of meritocracy, with talent ultimately being rewarded. If the individual can succeed then there is not a collective cause to sacrifice for. Or if you succeed then doing so with racist material still reflects a degree of talent and skill on your part. Bonilla-Silva (2001) contends that the belief in a meritocracy is an element of a colorblind racial ideology, one rooted in abstract liberalism. Here, we see black characters struggling with that very notion themselves as they strive to reconcile their own success with the inability of others to do the same. Their personal mobility obscures collective concerns, fragmenting them into competing interests. While not eligible for categorization, in *Jungle Fever* we see this dynamic played out on screen.

Flipper is an architect who is seeking to become a partner in his current firm. He mistakenly believes that the business he brings to the firm, and the work he does assures him of this promotion. When preparing to ask for his promotion, his wife Drew warns him that he may not get what he desires. That is exactly what happens as the partners refuse to permit him into the inner circle. Flipper perceives that the reason for the snub has everything to do with race. Undeterred, he decides to start his own firm. The startup is occurring during a tumultuous time in his life as his marriage is dissolving due to his affair but we never see this affect his professional life.

Flipper's brother, Gator (played by Samuel Jackson), is the polar opposite. Gator is a drug addict who will threaten to harm older women to get money from Flipper. Gator is an unwelcomed presence for Flipper and Flipper's father, who has banned Gator from his home. Gator is simply a detestable character, there is nothing redeeming about him at all. The amount of self-awareness Gator demonstrates, proclaiming himself a crackhead that will do what crackheads do, gives the viewer a sense that this all a choice. Gator could decide to do right but simply does not. By the end of the movie Gator is murdered by his father while Flipper reunites with his wife.

The previous films expressed, or demonstrated, one but not both of the Opportunity variables. The next group of films contain expressions of both of the Opportunity variables. In two of the films, the contradiction was resolved by undermining one position (*Do the Right thing* and *Get on the Bus*) while the other was an example of competing views expressed by one speaker who may not realize his beliefs are inconsistent (*Red Hook Summer*).

In *Do the Right Thing* the discussion of opportunity takes place between ML (Paul Benjamin), Sweet Dick Willie (Robin Harris) and Coconut Sid (Frankie Faison). The conversation centers on the existence of the Korean Market, one that occupies a once abandoned building. ML points out that the owners have recent immigrated and within a year they own a business, whereas the neighborhood residents had allowed the building to go unused for years. He concludes his rant by noting that the owners must be geniuses or black people must simply be dumb. Coconut Sid counters that it must be because they are black, no one wants black men having anything. Both ML and Willie dismiss that argument as being invalid, an "old excuse". While ML would be delighted to spend money at a black owned business, Willie states that ML is also part of the problem because he is waiting on someone else to do something instead of taking action himself. By exclaiming it is an old excuse, we do not know if Willie thinks racism is no longer an issue or simply not an insurmountable obstacle; we *do* know, however, that he does not accept it as an explanation for the lack of black owned businesses in the neighborhood. He admonishes ML for not taking action, and for likely never taking action, to resolve what he sees as a problem. If ML, or anyone, wants an increase in black owned businesses the only thing stopping them is their own inertia.

In another Spike Lee film, *Get on the Bus,* we see a similar discussion take place between two black Republicans.Wendell (Wendell Pierce) and Kyle (Isaiah Washington) have just revealed themselves to be black Republicans. Wendell is a vulgar and brash individual who insists that racism is not an impediment for African Americans. Kyle believes racism is still a very real issue for African Americans but believes liberalism is paternalistic and keeps blacks dependent on the social safety net, where they never achieve social mobility.

While the majority of the bus's passengers is shocked to find two black Republicans, the two seem to share little more than race and political party. Wendell is a college graduate, but not from an HBCU which he calls a "nigga school." His interest in the Million Man March extends to how many cars he can sell to attendees; the communal ramifications do not interest him in the slightest. Eventually Wendell is removed from the bus, quite forcefully. By ejecting Wendell from the bus, the film positions itself on the side of Kyle's argument, in effect asserting racism to be true and rejecting as myopic the worldview that it does not exist. This may also mean that Sweet Willie's proclaiming racism an old excuse is not a denial of its existence but an assessments of its overall impact.

In the last of the Spike Lee films to be analyzed in this section, *Red Hook Summer* (2012), there is another analysis of the opportunity issue with the by now familiar opposed positions staked out. In this film, however, these competing views of opportunity, are just expressed by one person, Bishop Enoch Rouse.

Bishop Enoch Rouse has what would appear to be competing views on opportunity. However, he does not seem aware of this. During a sermon, Enoch chastises young people who get tattoos as he sees it as limiting their ability to find employment. He says tattoos makes them eligible only to be an athlete or a rapper. However, in a scene referenced in the previous section, Enoch notes that the Red Hook projects were once a temporary location as a community slowly migrated upwards, socially speaking, and out to better communities. That movement has stalled, he says, as the once present stepping stones had all been given away. It is not surprising that Enoch may have contradictory views, admonishing people for limiting their chances for success in what is already a limited market of employment options;

Bonilla-Silva (2001,2010) states that African Americans often have seemingly contradictory views as they are trying to reconcile the way things should be with the way things are[12]. Tattoos may limit job prospects and in a fair economic system, that would be a pressing concern but it is also true that Red Hook is isolated from avenues of advancement. That these views are at loggerheads, unless specifically pointed out, may never occur to Enoch. The final era of films analyzed here represents a closing of the circle, as the themes running through most of the Tyler Perry films were earlier seen in the race films of the pre-Civil Rights era.

Tyler Perry

Like the films of the Tyler Texas collection, none of the selections of Tyler Perry's filmography could be categorized as stating an opinion on Opportunity. Furthermore, like the race films, Tyler Perry films are narrowly focused on individual morality. In the Tyler Perry films, some of the antagonists are upper middle class successful professionals. Social honor, however, accrues not necessarily to those who have achieved professional success but to those who treat others kindly and honestly. Religious convictions are, in most cases, another indicator of one's basic goodness. *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, *Madea Goes to Jail*, and *Madea's Family Reunion* all feature an antagonist, or offenders, who are part of the professional-managerial class (or a group one still occasionally hears described as "yuppies"). In both *Diary* and *Madea Goes to Jail*, these characters are abusive spouses.

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[12] Bonilla-Silva (2001) labeled this a "Yes and no, but" response style (pg. 179).

Of the seven Tyler Perry movies included in this analysis, six feature protagonists who are working class[13]. The working class status of the protagonist is used by Perry as a signifier of a kind of authenticity and moral correctness, particularly in contrast to the inauthentic behavior of those who may have gained economic success but who otherwise have lost their way through a betrayal of basic principles. In *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, it is when Helen (Kimberly Elise) leaves her lawyer husband that she finds a good man in Orlando (Shemar Moore). In *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, when April (Taraji P. Henson) stops relying on her married boyfriend, she eventually enters a far more loving relationship with an upstanding repairman, Sandino (Adam Rodriguez). These movies also had a similar story of the protagonist accepting or returning to family. For every female protagonist of this era, the resolution required outside help. To contrast this, *Daddy's Little Girls* had Monty (Idris Elba) need an attorney to gain custody of his girls but he ultimate solved his own problem by ridding the community of a local drug dealer.

Like the Tyler Texas films, Tyler Perry tells stories of everyday life. Even if these stories are heightened for humor or drama, the stakes remain personal without a larger cause. What becomes jarring in the similarities of these films is the context in which they were created. The filmmakers found in the Tyler Texas collection existed in an era of Jim Crow and domineering racial oppression. Presenting respectable characters was, in a sense, subversive. A more radical or confrontational story selection may not have been feasible. Tyler Perry, however, is under no such restriction. Even as Spike Lee focused on individualistic stories, there was still an acknowledgment of larger structural forces in existence. As such, while inconsistent, Spike Lee offered a cinema of resistance along with the Blaxploitation era.

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[13] In the Case of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, her class status is determined after being forcefully removed by her husband

Not only has Tyler Perry deemphasized race as a group of collective interested people, he has made invisible structures of oppression. Misfortune is caused by the personal failings of characters, the characters not being deeply rooted in religion or family. When this lacing is fixed, the characters see improvement in their lives. Tyler Perry's films, then, are silent on opportunity because the resolutions he offers are so inwardly focused that it suggests a level of complacency or disregard for class advancement.

Initially, the concept of Opportunity was meant to judge fairness, at least the perceptions of fairness. Do you believe the economic system is fair to you or biased against you? However, the concept of fairness oversimplifies the understanding these characters have of systemic barriers. As seen in the Spike Lee era, a character denying racism as a barrier to success is not denying the existence of racism. Instead, the challenge racism posed was recalibrated to be a manageable when compared to the pre Civil Rights period. While most clearly depicted in Spike Lee's films, the notion that one could succeed despite racism was shown in Blaxploitation and the race film movies. Then, the understanding was that the systemic racism required the truly exceptional to find their success.

The post Civil Rights understanding of racial barriers, then, also syncs with the focus on the failures or disappointing behavior of African Americans. Tyler Perry continued the trend of focusing on black characters in nearly exclusively black settings. However, whereas Spike Lee's films were ones of striving for unity, for prosperity, for equality, Tyler Perry seems either uninterested or suspicious of such things. It would be possible to conceptualize a critique of overprioritizing economic advancement that was critical of the racial and capitalist social structures.

This is not what Tyler Perry offers, as his concerns are with fixing the individual so he or she could be content with where they are. This is especially alarming if Tyler Perry represents a sentiment that no longer believes in the possibility of equality for African Americans.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Visually, it is quite easy to place a particular film in its proper era. Technology has advanced, language and fashion has evolved to the point that films "feel" or carry the signature of their eras. Even the Spike Lee and Tyler Perry films are noticeably distinct from each other. However, when analyzing these films on the basis of racial ideology, those with the most temporal distance are surprisingly the most similar. What has been shown through the analysis of these films is that the understanding and invocation of race, as a community, and as a barrier to economic advancement, has shifted throughout the eras, only to make a return. Considering that our society has made considerable progress in the area of our understanding of racial differences (to the extent that the eminent sociologist, William Julius Wilson has written of the *declining* significance of race) the fact that many of the most recent films in this analysis are similar to those that were produced in the 1930s and 1940s was not a finding that one could expect. As one realizes, however, that the difference between 1944, say, and 2014 is one between a coercively oppressive society and one could describe as hegemonically oppressive, the continuity between the race films of the 1940s and the Tyler Perry movies of recent years begins to make sense. These similarities are why a structural theory of race is needed. By basing an analysis of racial imagery strictly on the surrounding social context in which the films took place, one would almost certainly miss the operation of a racial hierarchical system, one that has remained constant in its placement of white and black Americans.

How this hierarchy has been maintained is what has changed and that is why I chose to focus on ideology as disseminated through a cultural product like Hollywood films. It is not surprising that the films mirrored themselves on the themes, even if that meant an internal inconsistency within any particular era.

The Blaxploitation films were the most consistent in the expression of race as the basis for community formation as well as informing the belief in structural blockages to upward mobility for minority group Americans. While the high-water mark of the Blaxploitation movies occurred during the height of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, it is important to understand the clarity that comes from a regime of domination. Since the racial oppression was not hidden, when African Americans were ready and able to openly challenge the racial hierarchy, there were clear targets to be challenged. We see this clarity expressed in the Blaxploitation films as a majority (5 of 6) featured an interracial conflict as central to the plot. These films also had examples of lethal violence, more so than the films of other eras. With the clarity of domination also came a sense of shared fate: what was bad for the whole was bad for the individual. This is the reason why it was possible for Blaxploitation films to portray their criminals more sympathetically than they would be in other eras.

Another fascinating feature of these films is how many of the characters are in law enforcement or in fields adjacent to it. Three of the films show main characters as being officers or having professions that make working with law enforcement a necessity. Considering this era precedes the mass incarceration of African Americans, the idea that the Criminal Justice can be a fair system if the bad apples or agents are removed strikes one today as quaint, a sign of the lingering innocence of that period.

Spike Lee's films follow immediately after the Blaxploitation era and the fluctuant treatment of both the Community and Opportunity themes is likely a result of that. By being the first era in which the outright oppression of minorities gives way to a more hegemonic racial ideology, Spike Lee is torn between the tactics and rhetoric of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, on the one hand, and an ideological belief system that is meant to obscure the structural nature of continued inequality, on the other. This created what was, in effect, a moving target for artists like Spike Lee; racist institutions are the theme in some films while, in others, the focus shifts to the personal failings of certain of his characters. Often the targets were fellow black people but the nature of the criticism was as varied as the targets.

Dap (from *School Daze*, 1986) was motivated by a transnational black liberation movement, even as much of the campus disregarded this. ML and Sweet Dick Willie, however, two members of the Greek chorus from Lee's 1989 classic, *Do the Right Thing*, felt racism was not an adequate explanation for the lack of black owned business. Flipper, the central character in Lee's 1991 follow-up to *Do the Right Thing*, *Jungle Fever,* was a disappointment as a husband but the good son because he was a successful architect while his brother, Gator, was a drug addict. Strike, a central character in *Clockers* (1995) was caught in a web of oppression but was also a death peddling menace who was a justifiable recipient of police violence. Strike also aided in turning his law-abiding brother into a murderer. Then there is the pair of characters from Lee's 2000 film, *Bamboozled,* Pierre and Manray, whose ambitions for success and achievement blinded them to the fact that they became, in effect, sellouts because both chose not to fight against the racism that provided them material success.

For Spike Lee, the question is not whether racism is present but if black people are up to a task that is quite different from the one facing past generations. Bonilla-Silva (2001) detailed an answer as he identifies a strategy he labels, "Yes and no, but." Bonilla-Silva (2001) found this strategy utilized by white respondents when they wanted to express a racial view but not be open to the charge of racism. The respondent will, seemingly, consider all sides of an issue but will eventually reveal their true position. Bonilla-Silva (2001) did not find black respondents as likely to engage in this rhetorical style, however I would posit they would but in a way that reflects their positions on the racial hierarchy.

This is a method of response available to someone today when faced with the irreconcilable realities of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic positions. While Spike Lee may not have been familiar with Bonilla-Silva's arguments, I would assert that he utilizes this approach in his films. The characters in his films struggle with what blackness is and the responsibilities that would follow the definition. While acknowledging racism, Spike Lee's films also seek to make black characters culpable for their circumstances. Because of this dilemma, even collective concerns are resolved primarily by individuals rather than collectively by community members acting in concert as was seen in the films of the Blaxploitation era.

The most surprising finding was the mirroring of the Tyler Texas and Tyler Perry eras. The films share similar features, like race neutral, individualist narratives. Characters are, generally, good or bad with little in between. This result is not because these eras are somehow contextually comparable but likely a demonstration of the respective ideologies working. While no film is created without a purpose, the treatment of race and economic activity are embedded in these films rather than being consciously developed themes.

They are, in effect, unsolicited. Silence on this issue in an ideology of domination simply demonstrates a community not quite in a position to challenge that dominance. Silence on this issue in the present era, however, should be taken as an understanding that while racism still exists and can be an impediment it is not the limitation it once was. The Tyler Perry movies embrace a more conservative narrative approach as the films were set in exclusively black settings, allowing for the tales of good and evil to be deracialized. For Tyler Perry, the theme of Opportunity is, for the most part, completely absent indicating that Perry considers opportunity to be freely available although comes with a possible cost of losing one's moral compass. His antagonists are often upper middle to upper class, while the protagonists were often working or lower class. This may have been used as a narrative shorthand for the difference in power between the characters but higher social status had also been used as a signal of not being as authentic or real as working class African Americans. Because his stories are simple and direct, to valorize economic elevation while also demonizing the few successful characters in his films would have added a complexity the filmmaker may not have wanted to contend with.

The transition of racial ideologies coincided with increasingly individualistic stories. Spike Lee used this approach to explore the meaning of race and racism in the post-Civil Rights era, while Tyler Perry adapted the approach of setting movies in primarily black spaces what he chose to write about is good, evil, and the struggles of everyday life. The work of each of these successful directors can be understood as being crafted within a hegemonic ideology as the results of racial inequality are present although the causes have become ephemeral. No longer were there clear targets but situations and contexts that the filmmakers acknowledged as incorrect but with no solution.

Spike Lee's films often ended without a resolution to the stories, just a frustrated protagonist yelling at the heavens. Both eras, at one time or another, struggled with the history of social movements and cohesion while neither illuminated what may be undermining the mobilization that was seen in the 1960s and 70s.

Since the hegemonic racial ideology does not, generally, stop African Americans from sensing the presence of racism the effects of the ideology are that it prevents clear action from being taken. One such preventive measure is the decline of community, at least community defined with a high degree of racial solidarity and collective interest. The threats to the success of individual African Americans or the black community as a whole come from within and without. This split focus limits the amount of attention that can be paid to structural racism. Spike Lee never was able to resolve this dilemma in any of his films and Tyler Perry never tried. Instead, the later period films saw a retreat inward. The moral health of black people became the focus. This focus inward, initially, was intraracial but eventually became metaphysical. Bishop Enoch Rouse, then, the troubled preacher from *Red Hook Summer* (2012) becomes an inevitable personification of the troubled souls living in the era of retreatism and the perfect vehicle for Spike Lee, a filmmaker who had rarely incorporated religion into his films, to explore the moral character of black people. This, then, may be the most pernicious result of the colorblind racial ideology; a belief that the lack of success is, at least partially, a failure of character.

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APPENDIX

Selected Films Synopses		
Title	Year	Synopsis
A Murder in Harlem	1935	An attorney, and authur Henry Glory helps Claudia prove her brother did not commit a murder. The murder was comitted by Brisbane, the owner of the Chemical Factor where the murder took place. Brisbane enlisted the help of a seemingly hapless janitor, Lem, to help cover the murder up. Lem's behavior eventually leads to Brisbanes downfall.
Midnight Shadow	1939	Margaret Wilson, who will have generous inheritance in the future, is being courted by two gentleman. One night her family home was burglarized and someone murdered her father. The investigation reveals the murder to be Prince Alihabad, who is no prince at all but a grifter.
Where's My Man To-nite	1943	Rodney is drafted to fight in the Army. He is reluctant to do so, partially because of the existing racial inequality of then contemporary America. When Rodney does go to fight in WWII, he manages to become a hero by preventing an attack from Japanese soldiers.
Girl in Room 20	1946	Daisy Mae is a singer that migrates from Texas to New York to follow her dreams. She soon finds herself at the mercy of a corrupt nightclub owner. With help, Daisy Mae is able to follow her dreams
Juke Joint	1947	Two small-time con artists move from Memphis to Dallas. Due to a case of mistaken identity the men gain room and board in exchange for acting lessons they do not know how to give.
Miracle in Harlem	1948	The owner of a candy store is tricked out of ownership, much to the dismay of her mother. With some help, the rightful owner manages to gain her business back.
Souls of Sin	1949	"Dollar" Bill is tired of being broke. He starts to run errands for a local gangster. The life of fast women and excessive drinking eventually catches up with him as Dollar Bill is killed in a bar room gunfight.
Cotton Comes to Harlem	1970	When the funds for a back to Africa drive are stollen, amid a shootout, Harlem detectives Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones seek to solve the case. Their primary suspect? Rev. Deke O'Malley, local religious leader behind the emmigration movement. As the community grows increasingly disconcerted and the investigation more fraught, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger eventually get enough evidence to arrest Deke.

Selected Films Synopses		
Title	Year	Synopsis
Sweet Sweet Back Badass Song	1971	A prostitue, Sweetback, is on the run when he attacks a police officer in aid of another African American man in custody. Sweetback is desparately trying to escape from the city in order to remain free from imprisonment and harm. Sweetback's journey catches the attention of the African American community as they cheer him on while he successfully escapes the police dragnet
Shaft	1972	John Shaft, a private investigator, helps the head of the Harlem mob, Bumpy Jonas, whose daughter has been kidnapped. Shaft enlists the help of a local black radica organization, led by Ben Buford. When Shaft learns the kidnapping was done by a rival, white, mob looking to move into Harlem he makes a daring rescue to retrieve Bumpy's daughter.
Super Fly	1972	Youngblood Priest, with his partner Eddie, runs a local drug gang. Priest, however, tires of the lifestyle and decides he wants out, but first he will make one last big score to finance his new start. When Priest goes to a former mentor to aid in this plan he becomes ensared by corrupt police officers that demand he sell drugs for them. Priest manages to get free from the control of the police officers but not before being betrayed by Eddie.
Cleopatra Jones	1973	Cleopatra Jones is a CIA agent who returns home from a mission of burning Turkish poppy fields. When local drug Queenpin, Mommy, learns of her lose of supply she vows to get even with Cleopatra Jones. Cleopatra enlists the aid of a local drug dealer, Mrs. Johnson, and her family to take Mommy's operation down.
Foxy Brown	1974	When Foxy Brown's boyfriend is murdered, she decides to get revenge on those responsible. On her quest, she discoverys she was betrayed by her brother Link, who has become indepted with the very people Foxy was looking for. With tenacity and some allies Foxy was able to get her revenge.
She's Got to have it	1986	The story of Nola Darling and her simultaneous relationships with Mars, Jamie, and Greer.
School Daze	1986	Dap, a senior at Mission University (an HBCU) fights for apartheid divestment, the Greek System, and being seen as a problem by Dean McPhreson and Cedar Cloud. Dap also has to fight the reluctance found in his friends, especially his friend Grady a football player that does not see racism as the barrier to success others do. Eventually, Dap is driven mad in his quest, or more specifically by the apathy of the schoolbody to it.

Selected Films Synopses		
Title	Year	Synopsis
Do the Right Thing	1989	A story about a Brookly neighborhood on one of the hottest days of the year. Mookie, a pizza delivery boy, Buggin Out with Radio Raheem, and Sal, owner of the pizzeria all take center focus as the decisions they make lead to the eventual riot. On the periphery of the main plot, sits Sweet Dick Willy, Coconut Sid, and ML operating as a greek chorus for the events of the movie
Mo' Better Blues	1990	Bleek Gilliam, a jazz trumpeter, juggles multiple romantic relationships and strained relationships within his band. When a vicisous attack inables him to play, Bleek must decide is truly important.
Jungle Fever	1991	Flipper, an architect, has an interracial affair with temporary employee Angie. The couple faces inumerable obstacles and objections as it appears no one, white or black, wants the couple together. Not only must Flipper contend with the dissolution of his marriage and a new relationship, but also his cocaine addicted brother, Gator.
Clockers	1995	Strike and Victor are brothers, suspected of being involved in the murder of Daryl, a local drug dealer. Det. Rocco believes Strike is allowing Victor to take the blame for the crime because his lack of criminal record means he could get off. To get Strike to confess, Rocco makes Rodney Little (the drug dealer Strike works for) believe Strike is implicating him. The killer of dealer is eventually revealed to not be Strike but due to the mechanications of Det. Rocco Strike must leave New York City.
Get on the Bus	1996	A group of black men of various backgrounds are taking a bus from Los Angeles to Washington DC for the Million Man March. While black unity is the goal, the tensions between Flip (actor), Kyle (former marine, gay, Republican), Gary (bi-racial police officer) and Jamal (reformed gangbanger) threaten to make true unity impossible. While the men make it to DC, no real resolution is offered as the men remain just as fractured as when they left Los Angeles.
Bamboozled	1999	Pierre Delacroix is a television executive who continually fails to get smart, black programming on air. He then, sarcastically, pitches the idea for a minstrel show which does get green lit for air. Pierre enlists two street performers (Manray and Womack) to star in the show. The sucess of the show leads to protests from African American groups and the eventual murders of Manray, by the Mau Maus, and Pierre, by Sloan.
Red Hook Summer	2012	Flik, an Atlanta native, spends the summer with his grandfather, Bishop Enoch. Enoch is shown struggling, not only to save his church but also to guide Flik down the spirtually correct path; this concern is expressed to Sharon Morningstar, whom Enoch is in a relationship with. Eventually a dark secret from Enoch's past is revealed.

Selected Films Synopses		
Title	Year	Synopsis
Diary of a Mad Black Woman	2005	Helen is thrown out from her comfortable, upper class life when her husband, Charles decides to leave her for another women. Helen slowly starts to rebuild her life, including starting a relationship with Orlando, but is pulled back to Charles when he is attacked and left partially paralized. Through love and faith, Helen and Charles reconcile, as friends as she chooses to be with Orlando.
Madea's Family Reunion	2006	Vanessa and Lisa are sisters who are both experiencing relationship troubles. Vanessa, has left her spouse and is staying with family until she can support herself. Lisa is currently in an abusive relationship that her mother encourages her to stay in. Past instances of abuse is revealed for characters as through faith and family the sisters slowly heal and overcome the abuses they have experienced
Daddy's Little Girls	2007	Monte, a lower class mechanic, fights for custody of his daughters when they are taken from him and placed with their mother and her drug dealer boyfriend. Monte's aided by Julia, an attorney and new love interest. With a little self help and cooperation from the community, Monte is able to get his girls back.
Meet the Browns	2008	Brenda, a lower class single mother moves when she discovers she has a family she never knew about. While intergrating with the new family, Brenda must also navigate a new relationship and the return of a deadbeat father looking to cash in on an athletic son. Eventually, Brenda is accepted by the Browns and her son is protected from his father.
I can do bad all by myself	2009	April, a lounge singer, must take in her sister's kids after her mother dies. April also takes in a kind, religious handyman. With his support April begins to turn her life around, accepting her new responsibilities and healthy relationships
Madea Goes to Jail	2009	Candace, a college dropout turned sex worker, gets into legal trouble. The ADA happens to be an old lover, Joshua. With help, Candace is able to heal from her past sexual assault and start anew
Why did I get Married Too	2010	A set of married couples experience the trials and tribulations that comes with maintaining a marriage. Most of the relationships are rocky but some are beyond repair. Topics range from finances, fidelity, to gender roles and emotional affairs.