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**Uplifting The Black Race - Only Males Need Apply: Black Male
Militancy in *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz N' The Hood*, and *Get On The
Bus***

Cheryl Dabreo-Ramharack

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

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**Uplifting The Black Race - Only Males Need Apply: Black Male Militancy
in *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz N' The Hood* and *Get On The Bus***

Cheryl Dabreo-Ramharack

This thesis examines *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz N' The Hood* and *Get On The Bus*, and reveals that a deliberate attempt is made on the part of these narratives to construct a specific black identity in relation to black activism. These films position black males in a space which allows them to directly affect issues regarding black identity, political activism, the black community, and the nation. Furthermore, *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz* and *Get On The Bus* specifically address young black males, and favor a discourse that is from a particular male standpoint. As a result, the films articulate black manhood through militancy and its subsequent sexual appeal.

Since the focus of these films is intentionally on the male characters, the black woman's role in the liberation struggle is portrayed as being of little consequence. This is not to say that the narratives do not make an effort to confront and challenge narrow visions of black masculinity. In essence, black women are included, even if it is through their mere "visibility." However, each film promotes a discourse which reiterates that the black liberation struggle and uplift of the race as a

whole is dependant on black men. In other words, it is the black man who represents the entire black community and its concerns for equality and freedom. In effect, black masculinity is presented as *the* “essence” of black nationalism.

This was evident at the Million Man March of 1995 for instance, as is portrayed in Spike Lee’s 1996 film *Get On The Bus*. Not only does this film present a renewed emphasis on the plight of black manhood, it also recapitulates the argument that black activism is the sole business of black men. The dilemma facing many black women in the United States is barely acknowledged, both in reality and in symbolic representations as is revealed in these four films. Therefore this thesis confronts the kind of gender politics that *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz N’ The Hood* and *Get On The Bus* promote through their filmic discourses, and by extension the kind of gender representations that are offered.

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INTRODUCTION

In October of 1996 I attended a panel discussion at Harvard University in honor of the thirtieth anniversary of the Black Panther Party. Amongst the guest speakers were Bobby Seale and Kathleen Cleaver, two of the party's most prominent leading figures during its existence in the 1960's and 1970's.

The experience proved to be both enlightening and critically challenging. Overall, it demystified my comprehension of what the black revolutionary movement was all about. More importantly, I realized that I had a tendency to not only canonize these young black revolutionaries, but also to view them with a sense of romanticism. This perspective was attributed in part to the film *Panther* (1995) which is a fictitious and revised version of the black liberation movement via the Black Panther Party. One author describes the film as the "sanitized Disney version" of events which serves to idealize the party's leading male characters (1)

Needless to say, after having heard Seale and Cleaver engage in a critical dialogue about the pitfalls of the black liberation movement, the Party, and the state of black America today, I knew that I had to approach the films and the problematic of this thesis from a standpoint

that was not in search of the “truth” per se. As Seale pointed out “95 percent of what was presented in the film *Panther* was bullshit. Just not true.”⁽²⁾ In one interview he criticized the film’s artistic license and political reality saying, “they (Melvin and Mario Van Peebles) say it’s poetic license. I call it poetic lies.”⁽³⁾

In consideration of these revelations the challenge then would be to reconcile some of the many contradictions that have arisen out of my examination. Again, my main concern with the films studied here is not to establish whether or not what is presented is indeed factual, but to look at the manner in which the various representations function, with regard to issues such as race and gender. In fact, the very definition of the term representation includes;

“all kinds of media imagery that, no matter how convincing their likeness to everyday social reality, are always to be recognized as constructs taken from a specific social and physical viewpoint, selecting one activity or instant out of vast choices to represent, and materially made out and formed by the technical processes of the medium and its conventions.” (Dines & Humez. 1995:573.)

There is also a political and cultural dimension which underlie representations. It is this dimension that this thesis focuses on, particularly because it speaks directly to the different expressions of power that are at play in the given texts. In this instance power relations refer to who controls the various images, the kinds of gender representations that are offered and the particular interests they are

intended to serve.(4)

The spectator should keep in mind that regardless of who is producing the text, it is of utmost importance to continuously confront and challenge representations of blackness. Here the term “blackness” is used as a social, cultural and political construct. Wahneema Lubiano defines it as follows:

“By blackness I mean conscious awareness by an individual of being part of a group-Negroes, black Americans, Afro-or African Americans-with a particular place in history and a political relationship to other groups within the geopolitical site of the United States. Blackness is also a way of referring to the existence, as a socially constructed fact, of that group.” (Lubiano, in Morrison. 1992:330)

This thesis looks at the manner in which black identity is constructed and functions in *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee:1992), *Panther* (Melvin & Mario Van Peebles:1995), *Boyz N’ The Hood* (John Singleton:1991) and *Get On The Bus* (Spike Lee:1996). The term identity is used here to refer to the ways in which people come to know or define themselves, and also the ways in which others come to know or define them. The practice of determining one’s identity is also a process that is not static. It involves the politics of position and is something that individuals negotiate in consideration of the stories or histories that surround them.

In addition, media representations of a particular group serve as an indication of how that group may view themselves or how they may

be viewed by society as a whole. Stuart Hall says, “there is no escape from the politics of representation...It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are.” (Hall, in Wallace. 1992:30) Approaching issues surrounding identity and representation with this understanding is central to this analysis.

The problematic being dealt with in this thesis argues that *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz N’ The Hood* and *Get On The Bus* make a deliberate effort to construct a particular black identity, and specific gender roles with regard to black activism. A close examination of the films reveals that distinct patterns of the female’s strategic absence and marginalization exist despite the visibility of female characters. The spectator should be aware that the mere visibility of particular characters does not necessarily mean their inclusion. In fact, visibility can often serve as a regulated presence that functions to maintain the system of inequality based on the given character’s race, gender, class or sexuality. Furthermore, it is important to consider the manner in which these socially constructed categories are mutually informed.

Another important issue confronted in the problematic is the fact that all of the films mentioned above address a young black male audience and privilege a discourse that is specifically from a male perspective. In effect, the space that black men occupy on the screen

is directly linked to issues of black identity, political activism, the black community as a whole, and the nation. Despite their attempt to interrogate and challenge narrow visions of black masculinity, these films continue to allocate black women to a subaltern position and represent them in a manner which renders them powerless. When they are not being objectified, they are villainized and blamed for the conditions that the black male, and by extension the black community, is faced with. This representation in turn allows for the creation of a politics of articulating the plight of black men. These narratives reinforce the assumption that the status of black males in the United States is synonymous with the status of the race as a whole. It is for these reasons that it is necessary to question the choice of particular representations, patterns of strategic absences and the various messages that are conveyed in *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz N' The Hood* and *Get On The Bus*.

CHRONOLOGY OF *MALCOLM X*, *PANTHER*, *BOYZ N' THE HOOD* AND *GET ON THE BUS*.

Malcolm X (1992), *Panther* (1995), *Boyz N' The Hood* (1991) and *Get On The Bus* (1996) have been analyzed in their chronological order of events in history, as opposed to when they were actually produced. I

have chosen this order because the narratives trace a particular period of black history, namely the 1960's, and brings the viewer up to date with the conditions that many African-Americans are faced with in the 1990's.

In *Malcolm X* the lead character played by Denzel Washington undergoes an evolutionary process which not only politicizes his way of thinking, but also enables him to become the leader of a revolutionary movement in a political climate that saw him as a threat to the powers that be. This film not only contributes to a discourse of the origin of the black liberation movement, it also informs the narratives portrayed in *Panther* and *Boyz*, and to a large extent that of *Get On The Bus*.

Panther is significant in this analysis because in terms of black history it continues where *Malcolm X* leaves off. The purpose of including *Panther* in this analysis is not to focus on the Party's internal shortcomings, nor to discuss the flawed personalities of its leaders. The film illustrates that the Black Panthers credited Malcolm with providing the genesis for their organization. They emulated his call to action and his militant stance. When Malcolm X is assassinated the future of the movement seems to momentarily stand still. However, the film states that the Panthers, who were motivated by Malcolm's death, made a concerted effort to carry on his work. It is this effort which carries on the tradition of black militancy, and attempts to explain the social and

political climate that confront black America today.

In *Panther*, the young militants uncover a shocking plot by a United States government agency to systematically annihilate the African-American population. The film contends that this is done by flooding the inner-cities with crack, a highly addictive and cheap derivative of cocaine, which is intended to destroy the black community. The lead characters in this film are portrayed as martyrs willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to put an end to trafficking of this deadly drug, but their efforts are to no avail.

The final scene in *Panther* reveals the devastating effects the drug has had on the black community in the 1990's. Chronologically, *Panther's* conclusion which takes place in 1995 is the introduction to the world depicted in *Boyz N' The Hood* where the drug conspiracy theory is recapitulated. *Boyz* clearly asserts that the U.S. government had a direct hand in the drug trade and the conditions that presently confront black America. Historically speaking, and in relation to *Malcolm X* and *Panther*, *Boyz* updates the state of affairs of the inner cities, therefore its inclusion is essential to this analysis.

Malcolm X, *Panther* and *Boyz N' The Hood* provide the black spectator with three distinct interpretations of the history of the black liberation movement in the United States. My analysis concludes with Spike Lee's *Get On The Bus* which is the trajectory for where the

discussion of the previous films has lead. *Get On The Bus* serves as a vehicle for discussing *Malcolm X*, *Panther* and *Boyz N' The Hood* because each of these narratives equate concerns for black masculinity with black identity, the black community and black activism.

Get On The Bus was released on the one year anniversary of Louis Farrakhan's 1995 Million Man March on Washington. Although the film pays tribute to the event it does so without actually portraying it. In fact, the film does not direct its attention to Farrakhan or his speeches. What is reiterated is the march's call for black men to atone for their wrong doings and to be accountable for their own lives.

This film is not about the destination (the march on Washington itself) but about the journey, and what the men on board learn about themselves and one another. The film attempts to exemplify the diversity of the black community by having each character represent a different part of the whole. Will Geeslin describes the *Bus* as a "kitchen sink affair"⁽⁵⁾ where issues of skin color, sexuality, religion, age, fatherhood and a host of other concerns are given voice. The premise of this narrative is that individual black men come together as a group, and as their journey progresses they are forced to confront and eventually come to terms with their differences.

Get On The Bus presents the spectator with yet another narrative which concerns itself primarily with the lives of black men. The fact that

black women are not included in the event is addressed as an aside, but ultimately it is these men who represent and speak for the black community as a whole. The ideological message put forth by the Million Man March was that once these million men rectify their wrongs and begin to take responsibility for themselves and their families, the state of the race will be elevated. In other words, only black men are considered to be effective agents in initiating change in the black community. At the 1995 African-American Leadership Conference Louis Farrakhan was quoted as saying "we want to ask our sisters if they would permit us to make the point."⁽⁶⁾

Get On The Bus and *Boyz N' The Hood* also illustrate that unlike *Malcolm X* and *Panther* there has been a shift in the black community's current political agenda where the sense of community seems to be replaced by individual needs and grievances. Furthermore, whereas black men in *Malcolm X* and *Panther* distanced their struggle from that of the black women who fought beside them, the black men in *Boyz* and *The Bus* have excluded black women altogether.

Malcolm X, Panther, Boyz N' The Hood and *Get On The Bus* make it very clear that there are distinct differences between the practices of black women's activism as opposed to those of black men. With regard to *Get On The Bus* Stanley Kauffmann contends that,

"The conversation and argument in the first half of the film convey one fundamental view: for many black people- black *men*. I

should underscore- it's better to have a galvanizing, aggressive, challenging leader, whatever his faults, than to have no such figure at all." (Kauffmann. 1996:26)

In contrast, Nikki Giovanni says that "the purpose of any leadership is to build more leadership. The purpose of any spokesperson is to speak until the people gain a voice." (Giovanni. 1988:135) What is evident is that while these narratives tell the story of different time periods in a continuous struggle, filling gaps along the way, they create vacancies of their own. These vacancies or exclusions are relevant to the issues being dealt with in this thesis.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Wallace, Michele. "'Panther': The Hollywood Version of Black Power." Ms. Magazine. (V 5, #6) May/June 1995: 83.
2. Seale, Bobby. "30th. Anniversary of the Black Panther Party Conference." (Boston, MA: Harvard University.) October 1996.
3. Mensah, Dean. "History or Histrionics?" Insight On The News. (V 11, #22) June 5, 1995: 26.
4. Dyer, Richard. "The role of stereotypes." The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation. New York: Routledge. 1993: 11.
5. Geeslin, Will. "The Point of the Journey is Not to Arrive." Cahiers du Cinema: (Reviews.) East Side Productions. February 8, 1997.
6. Remarks made by Louis Farrakhan at the 1995 African-American Leadership Conference in Houston, TX. Quoted in Emerge. October 1995: 65.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 BLACK IN AMERICA TODAY

The 1991 film *Boyz N' The Hood* opens with the gruesome statistic that "1 in every 22 black males will be murdered in their lifetime" and "most at the hands of another black male." This statistic contextualizes the violence and sense of hopelessness that is portrayed in the film. In reality, the plight of black life, particularly in the inner cities, does not fare much better.

Henry Louis Gates claims that there is a real and immediate crisis facing African-Americans. Despite the fact that his focus is primarily on black males, the statistics he provides reflect this crisis quite accurately. He argues that:

"When we consider the plight of black males today in American society, we encounter the most horrible statistics, reflecting a nightmare reality for a large percentage of that half of the African-American community. In 1990 alone, for instance, 2,280,000 black boys and men were jailed or imprisoned, while 23, 000 earned a college degree, a ratio of 99 to 1 (compared with a ratio of 6 to 1 for whites). To this alarming fact add the fact that every forty-six seconds of the school day, a black child drops out of school, every ninety- hours of every day in the year a black young adult, age twenty to twenty-four, is murdered. (Gates in Golden. 1994:13)

Behind these numbers lie the reality of poverty in black America.

Compared to their white counterparts in almost every state, for the most part, blacks are living below the poverty line. For instance, when examined by region, statistics reveal that the number of whites living in poverty in the Northeast is 9.9% compared to 31.6% of blacks. In the Midwest, the figures are 10.1% of whites compared to 35.7% of blacks living under those conditions. In the South 12.4% of whites live in poverty as opposed to 34.1% of blacks, and in the Western United States, whites account for 13.5% compared to 24.4% of blacks. (Hacker. 1992:259)

In addition to the perils of poverty, recent statistics also shed light on some of the consequences brought on by this condition. Crime being one of the many is reflected in the high number of blacks who are incarcerated. A random sample of a Southern state shows that the black population in the state of Mississippi is approximately 35.4%. The percentage of black prison inmates in that state is 62.2%. When these numbers are compared to a Northern state like Massachusetts, the population of blacks living in that state are considerably lower, only 4.6% of the general population. However blacks account for 31.0% of the prison population. (Hacker. 1992:262) When the extremely high number of black prison inmates is compared to the black population as a whole in the U.S. it is evident that they are disproportionately represented in the penal system.

Statistics also reveal that homicides have become the leading cause of death amongst blacks, and where young men are involved, these crimes are now more than likely to be committed by another black person. AIDS is another leading cause of death on the rise in the black community today. The CDC (Center for Disease Control) says that to date, minority women now lead the population in those who have contracted the disease.⁽¹⁾ What these statistics reveal are the real discrepancies that exist between blacks and whites in America. These issues continue to be at the forefront of the political arena.

On June 14, 1997 while addressing a crowd in San Diego, President Bill Clinton announced "I want to lead the American people in a great and unprecedented conversation about race."⁽²⁾ Interestingly enough, this dialogue has been ongoing throughout time in the United States. Race and race relations are integral to the American identity. Michael Eric Dyson says that "the refusal to face race, or our courageous confrontation with its complex meanings defines our national identity." (Dyson. 1997:92)

Although President Clinton's desire to "lead" the discussion may be somewhat tardy, his desire to address race issues comes at a time when there are no extreme circumstances (that is, in relation to what is commonly referred to as a "crisis") which have forced the issue to the forefront of the political arena. By this I mean that, in the history of the

United States, the complexities of race tend to be explored preceding such politically charged events like the 1963 march on Washington, the assassination of well known black activists like Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, the 1992 riots in Los Angeles following the Rodney King verdict, and the Million Man March in 1995, to name a few.⁽³⁾

The United States is not currently engaged in any mass public protests or explosive expressions of racial tension, however, this does not mean that all is well between and within the races. In fact, there are instances where these tensions are systematically emerging throughout the country on a daily basis. For instance, the burning of black churches during the period of the 1960's by white supremacists is a tactic that has reemerged in the 1990's.⁽⁴⁾ These incidents of arson have not been officially acknowledged as a racist conspiracy, but are nonetheless racially motivated.

The history of the United States is informed by segregative practices which African-Americans have fought long and hard to eliminate in favor of racial equality. For example, in South Carolina, a black nurse was fired for filing a discrimination complaint against the hospital where she was employed. According to her claim, nurses were ordered by their supervisors to deny certain services and supplies to those patients who had no health insurance, or to those on Medicaid. Incidentally, most of those patients were minorities.⁽⁵⁾

In "Criminally Suspect," an article on racism within the police force Nick Charles and Christina Coleman report that,

"because of what they see as a fatal trend and not isolated incidents as claimed by police authorities, many Black law enforcement officials have been clamoring for reform of training methods, closer scrutiny of police culture and investigations by federal authorities." (Charles & Coleman. 1995:28)

Although no one is officially keeping track of the number of black police officers who have been shot by fellow white officers, it is believed that these incidents of "tragic mistakes" are quite high.⁽⁶⁾

The point of mentioning these everyday occurrences is to show that although Americans have made tremendous strides as far as race and race relations are concerned, the divisions along racial lines are still quite significant and ever increasing. These divisions are not only confined to the justice system, the field of medicine, or the educational system, they pervade every area of the American society. Furthermore, the point is also to illustrate that some of the most crucial issues faced by blacks during the 1960's have resurfaced in the 1990's in a much more modernized, insidious and sophisticated manner. Some of these cases often go unnoticed and appear to be played out in isolation, however, these instances often bring the black community together and force the issue of race to the table.

One of the most recent cases occurred on August 9, 1997 at a Brooklyn police department. It was here that a young black man

named Abner Louima was allegedly assaulted by New York police officers. The victim claims that the officers forced a stick up his rectum, then placed the stick in his mouth. Although the victim's injuries were life threatening the officers claim they are not guilty of this heinous crime. The black community in New York city rallied to Louima's defense in a show of protest against the police force, and once again race was catapulted to the forefront of the political arena.⁽⁷⁾

The President's call for a dialogue on race, must go well beyond rhetoric. Michael Tomasky agrees with this view, he say that "the main problem with the national conversation is that it's therapeutic-politics-as-usual, conducted at the level of the television confessional talk shows."⁽⁸⁾ Therefore, a dialogue on race is essential, but only if it is accompanied by concrete solutions and effective government policies that will assist in remedying the social, economic and political conditions of all black Americans.

1.2 REPRESENTATION AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF BLACKNESS

The state of black life in the United States is alarming for several

reasons, some of which are mentioned above. Also of importance though, is the fact that the social reality that blacks confront on a daily basis, manages to play a significant role in the social construct of what it means to be a black person in the United States. This construction includes various stereotypes which Henry Louis Gates notes are otherwise referred to by Barbara Johnson as “already-read texts” “the already read text of debasedness and animality.” (Gates. in Golden. 1994:13)

Being black in America is a social construct which is much more complex than simply looking at the social and economic conditions which inform blackness. In this analysis, the manner in which black people are represented is crucial to understanding and contextualizing black life in the particular films. Representations have a political resonance and often serve as a site of struggle. They also play a significant role in determining how other groups in society respond to blacks both socially and politically, and how blacks respond and think about themselves. Pratibha Parma agrees when she says that,

“images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individual and marginalised groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves.” (Parma. 1990:116)

Despite the wide range of African-American representations that exist in the American culture alone, and the various ways in which

blacks see themselves, there is a particular image of them that takes precedence in mainstream representations. Where black men are concerned, this image involves a character who is threatening, who preys on society, who must be constantly feared, and ultimately confined. This image is further reinforced and justified through the different media, which inadvertently result in the vilification of black males.⁽⁹⁾

The image of these males as threatening, combative and aggressive is nothing new to America's collective memory. Writing on the demonization of black men, Tricia Rose claims that the viewing public has been

“inundated with images of young black men who appear fully invested in a life of violent crime, who have participated in drug-related gang shoot-outs and other acts of violence for “no apparent reason.”

This last representation is crucial to the fear that current crime reporting encourages and crucial as well to the work of demonizing. Such people are violent for no apparent reason; *they* are not like *us*. Dehumanizing others facilitates depriving them of the very social rights and considerations that we desperately want reserved for ourselves.” (Rose, in Golden. 1994:153)

One of the main differences in the ways in which black men and women are represented seems to be the intense focus that is placed on the plight of the male characters. Referring to them as an “endangered species” for instance, not only places a specific value on their lives, but also tends to focus primarily on their status in society.⁽¹⁰⁾ As revealed

through the films' discourses and the discussion here, it is quite clear that black women are essentialized in many ways. This is particularly true of the manner in which they are represented when the discussion revolves around the state of the family, black males, or the state of the race as a whole.

Since racial solidarity is promoted as being first and foremost on the black agenda, it is not always easy to recognize when the black woman is being targeted as the object of male rage, both in reality and in symbolic representations. In fact Black men have always articulated the belief that they are targeted more than any other group in society, including black women. The period of the black liberation movement (the late 1960's and early 1970's) was, and continues to be portrayed as a male endeavor, where the struggle to liberate the race as a whole rests solely on the shoulders of black men. During this period, black masculinity became the "essence" of black nationalism. The black man's activism, his "black nation" rhetoric became synonymous with his manhood and managed to separate itself from black womanhood.⁽¹¹⁾

By portraying the black liberation movement as a male struggle, a predominantly male interpretation of black history has emerged. To a large extent, this perspective indulges in historical amnesia as far as revolutionary black women are concerned. *Malcolm X, Panther* and

Boyz N' The Hood privilege this masculine interpretation and serve as an indication of how most people have chosen to remember the struggle. But these films are also addressing a male audience and make a deliberate attempt to bring about political consciousness and social change via the black male. In effect, the films construct a black identity which mediates activism from a male centered standpoint.

In *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz N' The Hood* and *Get On The Bus* there is a deliberate effort to emphasize the black man's experience while focusing on the romanticization of militant black masculinity, and the construction of black sexuality. The black male occupies an albeit limited space of dominance in these films, but it is the positioning of the black woman in what Jacquie Jones refers to as the "accusatory space" which oftentimes propels him to the role of Savior.⁽¹²⁾ According to Jones, black women in these films are assigned the position of either "bitch" or "ho." She acknowledges that,

"I now realize that this positioning is not ironic at all. Its' functional. It assigns the accusatory space from which representation in the media, and more generally in society, can continually be reprogrammed along gender lines." (Jones. in Wallace. 1992:96)

1.3. BLACK WOMEN AS SPECTATORS

I have been employed as a domestic worker for most of my adult life, and for most of that time I cannot say that this position has afforded me a sense of self-esteem. In fact, it has only been since the time in which I began contemplating my position as both a woman of color and a spectator, that I have come to realize that despite feelings of inferiority, I was able to develop strategies which enabled me to distance myself from my subaltern position.

One of those strategies was the act of “looking” which I now believe has never been a passive act, but one of resistance. I have not always been able to articulate the power of my gaze as a black woman but I am well aware of its effects. For this reason I agree with bell hooks who states that “there is power in looking.”⁽¹³⁾

For many female domestic laborers the act of observing but maintaining silence can serve as a powerful act of resisting the dehumanizing aspects of domestic labor. It is the personal nature of the job which allows domestic workers to observe and gain knowledge about the private lives of their bosses, particularly when these said employers choose to objectify their employees to the point where they become “invisible.”⁽¹⁴⁾ For domestic workers the critical gaze affords them agency and a sense of power thereby allowing them to refuse the

position of the subaltern. Since many domestics are objectified and belong to a so-called vocal minority, their employers rarely seem to be aware of the critical gaze. Black female film spectators are also often overlooked as critical gazers who look from an oppositional stance in much the same way as domestic workers do.

Until quite recently, black women were never considered in terms of being spectators for whom pleasurable or identifiable images could be constructed. For the most part, black female representations serve someone other than black women. For example, the sexually promiscuous stereotype known as Jezebel, served as the object of male desire. The longevity of this character is evident in the more contemporary versions, namely the "Skeezer," and the unemployed single mother who is constructed as the "welfare queen."⁽¹⁵⁾

The range of black female symbolic representations that exist in mainstream film is limited and follows quite precise patterns. Nonetheless, of the few that do exist almost all make assumptions about black women and their experiences. Furthermore, these representations perpetuate the black woman's oppression based on gender, race, class and sexuality. *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz n' The Hood* and *Get On The Bus* address young black males specifically as a means of inspiring them to political activism. Meanwhile, black women are called upon to serve and enhance the performance of the leading

men. Through their representations black women are not only objectified, but in many instances are erased altogether from the screen. It is very difficult for black female spectators to embrace the female characters in these films given the limited range of characterizations, and the distorted view of them that is perpetuated.

The black woman as welfare queen is one of the more contemporary representations that is conjured up to explain the state of black urban life. As many of these films would have spectators believe, the black woman is at the root of black destitution and the dysfunction of the family. Jacqueline Bobo argues that,

“One of the most damaging portraits is given in the 1985 network television documentary “The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America,” hosted by Bill Moyers. The CBS documentary shows young, black, unwed mothers who are living on government assistance. The program indicts them for what it presents as their perpetuating a cycle of poverty and government dependence.” (Bobo. 1995:35)

One needs only to examine *Boyz N' The Hood* or read the *Newsweek* article titled “Endangered Family,” to see that these kinds of media representations of black women are rampant and imply their culpability in the destruction of black life.⁽¹⁶⁾

Considering the ways in which black women have been represented in Hollywood traditionally, and the fact that for the most part, their histories have not been accurately reflected in symbolic representations, it is interesting to see how they respond to films which

perpetuate this trend. It is also important to keep in mind that despite the persistence of negative female representations, we need to resist the tendency to interrogate the texts simply for the purpose of determining which images are “good” as opposed to those that are “bad.” For one thing this approach reveals very little about the political motivation behind the images. More importantly though, as Jacqueline Bobo explains:

[this process] “can be self-defeating in that it diminishes any hope for change. As a critical practice the hunt for and dissection of negative imagery also centers and makes concrete the thought of black women as being something other than human...Furthermore, these fictionalized creations of black women are not innocent; they do not lack the effect of ideological force in the lives of those represented in that black women are rendered as powerless and useful commodities in a very serious power struggle.” (Bobo. 1995:35-36)

My interrogation of *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz N’ The Hood* and *Get On The Bus* takes into account the fact that different texts have different meanings for different people. At the same time, my interpretation is specifically from the perspective of a woman of color who is conscious of the oppressive nature of black women’s representations in the media. Therefore, I approach the films with the oppositional gaze. Bell hooks argues that,

“Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that “looks” to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating “awareness” politicizes “looking” relations.” (Hooks. 1992:116)

It is important and necessary that black female spectators develop critical ways of looking at their media representations, because their responses are not only expressions of exercising agency, but also allow for the transformation of these representations. A critical engagement is crucial to self-representation and ultimately, to having a voice in the construction of one's own identity. As Audre Lorde once said "it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others-for their use and to our detriment." (Lorde. in Hill-Collins. 1991:26)

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CHAPTER TWO

2.1 RECREATING A NEW BLACK IDENTITY

During the late 1960's, the United States experienced a change in its social and political climate. This was partially attributed to a dramatic transformation in the nature of black activism. This shift involved a move away from the more non-violent civil rights movement, to an era of militant black power. The black power movement articulated both the rage and aspirations of the African-American community, but it was the philosophy and political agenda of Malcolm X which provided the genesis for the movement's brand of militancy. As Cornel West argues, "his (Malcolm's) profound commitment to affirm black humanity at any cost and his tremendous courage to accent the hypocrisy of American society made Malcolm X the prophet of black rage-then and now."

(West. 1994:136)

Looking back at the black power movement and the influence that Malcolm X had during his lifetime, it is obvious that the progressive rhetoric of black liberation, is not easily reconciled with the sexist and misogynistic ideology that was also being promoted at the time. In other words, even though black men were quite adept at confronting the detrimental effects of racism on the black community, they failed to acknowledge the oppressive nature of their own sexism. In fact, at one

point leaders like Malcolm X believed that black men had to dominate black women in order to reclaim their manhood and the respect that they were so often denied.⁽¹⁾

It is very easy to condemn the complete disregard that black men had with regard to the manner in which race, gender, class and sexuality are mutually informed. However, it is also necessary to consider the historical context in which the black power movement came into existence, and to realize that this particular context grew out of a social system which was based on patriarchal rules.

Where *Malcolm X* (1992) and *Panther* (1995) are concerned it seems only natural that these films would reflect and recall their narratives from a predominantly male perspective. In fact, both the Nation of Islam represented in *Malcolm X*, and the Black Panther Party portrayed in *Panther* were historically male dominated organizations. Nonetheless, this does not allow black people to condone ways of thinking about masculinity which do not challenge, and subsequently alter, the construction of a community ideal. Furthermore, to wholeheartedly embrace representations of blackness based on this ideal is to also accept the system of oppression that subordinates black women.

The spectator can conclude from the representations in *Malcolm X*, *Panther*, *Boyz N' The Hood* and *Get On The Bus* that black men are

addressing other black men both in the films and in the liberation movement as a whole. Meanwhile, the black woman's intervention in the struggle to uplift the race is barely acknowledged. These narratives employ a basic process and strategy of identification which allow for militant black masculinity to be romanticized to the point where even the most progressive and militant black feminist found this kind of masculinity to be seductive and powerful. This romanticism was also true for the ways in which many people viewed the movement. For example, Angela Davis, who was studying in Germany during the 60's admits that, while she continued to adamantly criticize the movement's insistence on male supremacy, she also found the image of the fearless, armed black man to be extremely sensual. She concedes that, "that image, which would become so problematic for me, called me home." (Davis. in Wallace. 1992:319)

During the period of the black power movement, the black man became the equivalent of black nationalism. Despite the years of struggling for recognition and equality alongside their male counterparts, black women still found that these men continued to fortify their masculinity through patriarchal rules and misogynistic practices. Ed Guerrero suggests that "a politicized black woman's agenda was generally submerged under a male-focused black nationalist discourse aimed at rediscovering and articulating the mystique of a liberated

“black manhood.” (Guerrero. 1993:91) Ultimately, black men not only distanced themselves from the black woman’s struggle, they also managed to position themselves above those women involved in the movement. This stance proved to be both divisive and counter-productive to the movement’s political agenda.

Malcolm X, Panther, Boyz N’ The Hood and *Get On The Bus* attempt to reaffirm black masculinity but there is very little insistence in these films on portraying strong female characters who actually participated in the black power movement. There is no attempt made to construct female role models who can be emulated and respected by both males and females. Instead, the emphasis is on the strategic marginalization and subjugation of black femininity. Incidentally, this manner of representing black women is not arbitrary. On the contrary, Mary Gentile believes that these representations are deliberate and fulfill a specific goal. Her assertion is that,

“The oppressive and restrictive representations of women found by feminist film theorists (as well as literary and social critics), fall primarily within these two categories of conflict and gap. Women are either expected to live within predetermined and conflicting roles, or they are excluded altogether and displaced.” (Gentile. 1983:64)

2.2. REDISCOVERING MALCOLM X

(The Commodification of "X")

From my research I have noticed that the field of film criticism and theory rarely confronts the issue of the politics of black film making despite the fact that black films appear to abide by a completely different set of rules when it comes to their production, distribution and circulation. These aspects of film making are extremely complex, but the bottom line remains how successful the film will be financially.

For a very long time, black film makers have contended that audiences both black and white would be receptive to films that moved away from specific narratives that tend to be associated with blacks. For instance, those of the Blaxploitation genre produced roughly between the period of 1969 to 1974 ⁽²⁾ and later on those films of the "hood" genre which dominated the early 1990's. The main theme of "hood" films relates to young blacks, primarily males who engage in a senseless gun battle but ultimately, the protagonist is guaranteed an escape from his life in the ghetto.⁽³⁾

Providing the black community with appealing and identifiable narratives would also tap into a profitable market that was previously neglected. Nonetheless, this is not always enough to convince the film Studios to take on black film projects. Spike Lee's book on the making

of his film *Malcolm X* attests to this fact, its title By Any Means Necessary: The Trials And Tribulations Of The Making Of Malcolm X...(while ten million motherfuckers are fucking with you, speaks volumes.⁽⁴⁾ In the book he explains:

“For me the title says it all. That’s exactly what’s it been like trying to make this film. The static, the resistance came from everywhere. From Warner Brothers, the Completion Bond co., the Teamsters, High Minister of Black Culture and Ethics Amiri Baraka and his gang, the media. Everyone got in some swings. But you know what? This is the only way the film could have been made. We had to fight tooth and nail, fight like hell to get what we wanted on the screen. (Lee. 1992:Preface)

It is not necessary to go into detail here about the politics that are involved in the production and distribution aspect of the film making process. I raise the issue of the politics involved in black film making because it is intricately linked to yet another which is also of great importance to the black community. This has to do with control and power over the images. For black people, controlling their representation enables them to take one step closer to dismantling the system of oppression that is based on race.

Julie Dash’s 1992 independent film *Daughters of the Dust* was one of those landmark films for the black community, because it established control in the reconstruction of a black identity in relation to femininity. For black women in particular, the film serves as a space where their voices could be heard. It addresses the black female

community, the issues of historical reconciliation, and black women's resistance and collective action with regard to community formation. But these themes, symbolically represented in the film, were also embodied by black women who were intent on getting the film produced and distributed. Jacqueline Bobo maintains that black women;

“Proved to be invaluable for the film's nationwide exposure. Without their support, the film may have gone the route of other black independent media: limited distribution on the festival circuit and minimal exhibition elsewhere. Black women's wide embrace of the film served as impetus for the critical acclaim it eventually achieved...The film's production and distribution background is important because it establishes the magnitude of black women's contribution. (Bobo. 1995: 6-7)

Alice Walker's novel The Color Purple (1982) was another black cultural product which addressed black female readers, celebrating and giving voice to the triumph of the black woman's experience. Compared to the novel however, the 1985 film adaptation also titled *The Color Purple*, which was directed by Steven Spielberg, received quite a different reception from the critics. The problem with Spielberg's film version is not simply that he is a white man adapting a black narrative, it is that his interpretation and representation reinscribes racist stereotypes of black people, particularly of Mister (Danny Glover,) the leading male character. Rita Dandridge argues that, “Spielberg's credentials for producing *The Color Purple* are minimal. He is not a Southerner. He has no background in the black experience, and he

seems to know little about feminism.” (5)

The issue of black people controlling black images was also debated in the making of *Malcolm X*. In his book, Spike Lee responds to the negative publicity surrounding the dismissal of Norman Jewison who was originally chosen to direct *Malcolm X*. He admits, “I did have serious reservations about a Caucasian directing a film this important to our existence in this country. Norman wanted to feel wanted by the Black community. When it got out that Norman was going to direct this film, that’s when I started to speak out about it.” (6)

The controversy surrounding films like *The Color Purple* and *Malcolm X*, relates to questions and issues of appropriation, who controls the images, from what perspectives the stories are being told and what purpose these representations are meant to serve. Black self-representation is crucial to challenging and confronting racist oppression, as whosoever controls the image, also controls the system that promotes domination. These issues relate directly to the problematic and to the films that have been selected for this analysis.

Spike Lee’s long awaited but controversial film *Malcolm X* was released in 1992. Due to the significance of the film for the black community, and the tremendous budget required to produce a work of such epic proportions, Lee and his production team were forced to launch a marketing blitz that contributed to making “X” a true cultural

icon. The marketing strategy for *Malcolm X* began in 1990, when Lee designed a silver X on a black background for a select number of baseball caps. Initially, they were only given away to black celebrities, but were later sold at Lee's stores- "Spike's Joint."⁽⁷⁾ "X" quickly became trendy and almost anyone could get their hands on an "X" T-shirt, jacket, or hat.⁽⁸⁾ Most of these products were inexpensive imitations, which really did not seem to bother the consumers or Lee for that matter. What was important was that the interest in Malcolm X was growing and the film itself was getting an unprecedented amount of publicity.

Interestingly enough, many of the people who proudly wore the "X" attire had no idea what Malcolm X the man, was all about. It appeared that the rediscovery of Malcolm X was limited to the "power of the image(s)" which would explain why these people saw Malcolm X as a mythic and abstract figure. Despite this, his legacy continued to convey a sense of empowerment and racial pride. The film's main objective was to try to fill in the blanks-to educate and to validate African-Americans by recalling a legacy that had long been neglected. However, in the end it all came down to successfully marketing the product.

The initial budget estimated for *Malcolm X* was \$38 million, which was instantly rejected by Warner Brothers, the studio responsible for the

film's production and distribution. They agreed to spend no more than \$20 million on this project, therefore, the rest of the money would have to be raised through marketing, and through private contributions. Lee was able to convince a few influential black figures like Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey and Bill Cosby, to contribute significant amounts of money to ensure that the film be made. This was yet another instance where black people took control of the black economy in order to define their own identity. Moreover, Lee's efforts to amass the capital and sell the idea of a black economy to these investors truly made the enterprise a black one.

The commodification of Malcolm X by Lee's team proved to be a tremendous success in marketing the film and the many products associated with the image. However, this strategy had an adverse effect which is that it reduced the revolutionary leader of his iconic status. Instead, "X" became just another commodity of popular culture, an abstract icon likened for instance, to the Nike "swoosh" symbol. Consequently, the film does not succeed at imparting any political or radical meaning to these images, and so the spectator does not come away from *Malcolm X* with an understanding of Malcolm's radical philosophy in any great depth. This is particularly evident when one considers the turmoil that was engulfing black America as a whole and Malcolm's significant impact on these events.

The film traces the progression of Malcolm X's life up till his assassination, and includes his continued influence throughout the world, on the lives of black people to date. The first image in this film is of an American flag. This image is cut back and forth to video footage of Rodney King being beaten by Los Angeles police officers. All of the images are accompanied by Malcolm X's powerful voice while the flag slowly burns leaving the symbol of a bold X. The King video is significant in the opening scene of this film, not only because the incident was quite recent at the time, but also because it actualizes Malcolm X's discourse. With regard to this discourse Tamar Jacoby comments,

"most (black) Americans have been seeing the world in "Malcolm X's terms. That American society is inherently racist; that skin color equals identity; that blacks form a community apart; that they are at least as African as American; that their rage is legitimate, and that only good can come of expressing it."
(Jacoby. 1993:27)

The King video is incorporated into the film to illustrate the black community's urgency to address the situation. It also exposes the racism that is experienced by many blacks in America today.

Malcolm X is structured into three distinct parts which constitute Malcolm's eventual rise to the position of leader of the black liberation movement. The first part portrays his life as a young thug, the second focuses on his incarceration and subsequent conversion to the Muslim

religion, and the final part portrays his rise to becoming the most influential black leader of all time.

The film's protagonist is a young man originally named Malcolm Little, otherwise known as Red, (Denzel Washington.) Malcolm is a street hustler, who has recently moved to the city. Early on in the film it is apparent that Malcolm's priorities are limited to taking a great interest in his appearance and engaging in illegal activities. He is portrayed as a young man whose understanding of manhood is limited to machismo. His goal at this point is simply to achieve what Richard Major labels as the "Cool Pose" which "manifested by the expressive lifestyle, is also an aggressive assertion of masculinity...This is the subliminal message which black males signify in their oftentimes flamboyant performances. Cool Pose, then, becomes the cultural signature of black men." (Majors. 1990:180)

The young Malcolm's definition of masculinity includes a stoicism which enables him to maneuver cautiously on the streets. His impoverished childhood revealed early on, hints at the socio-economic and political conditions of the time. It also confronts the racism and injustices that the Little family had to endure, and the circumstances which lead Malcolm to choose a life of crime. In many ways these early scenes address young male spectators, and are meant to enable them to identify with the protagonist.

The narrative of *Malcolm X* is not linear. It moves between the present and the past to reveal snapshots of Malcolm's family history. These flashbacks are also made available to account for some of the events which lead to Malcolm's particular life choices. As one of eight children, he and his siblings are raised by their mother Louise (Lonette McKee), after their father Earl is murdered. Soon after her husband's death, Mrs. Little is left to fend for herself and her children. She is told by her insurance company that her husband's death was a suicide therefore, she is not eligible to receive benefits from his life insurance policy. With limited financial resources the Littles' are faced with destitution. The children are taken away from the mother, separated and placed in foster care as wards of the state. Due to the sudden loss of her entire family Louise has a nervous breakdown and is placed in a mental institution.

Malcolm's memories of his mother appear to leave him tortured. The narrative seems to imply that Louise is an instrumental part of his young life, despite this implication, she is portrayed simply as a marginal character who has no voice and is soon abandoned in the film. As an adult, Malcolm seldomly visits Louise, in fact, he seems uncomfortable in her presence. However, there remains a fierce defensiveness on his part toward her. This is evident in one scene where Malcolm breaks a bottle over the head of a man who attempts to

defile her character. The way in which Malcolm and Louise are positioned on the screen suggests that the two are not close. There is an unavoidable distance between these characters which seems to excuse the mother's marginalization. Once Malcolm becomes the powerful leader, Louise is eliminated from the narrative altogether. In fact, the entire Little family disappear having no influence whatsoever on the young Malcolm.

When Louise is informed by a white social worker that she will lose her children because she cannot control them, she is automatically positioned in what Jacquie Jones labels the "accusatory space."⁹ Mrs. Little's character calls to mind the "bad" single mother, Mrs. Baker (Tyra Ferrell) from *Boyz N' The Hood*. Both mothers are looked upon as "bad" parents who must assume the responsibility for their so-called delinquent children.

There appears to be very little room for maternal figures in these films, particularly since the focus is on affirming masculinity, and encouraging black men to become responsible fathers in order to save their young sons. The message here is that fatherless young men are doomed to end up in jail (like Malcolm) or dead. This argument is one of the major themes underlying the narrative of *Malcolm X*.

Malcolm's earliest memories of his own father are recalled in the first part of the film and serve to explain the absence of a father figure.

In one particular scene he describes an incident where members of the Klu Klux Klan torch his family's home and try to chase his parents out of town. Armed with a shotgun, his father Earl tries to defend his pregnant wife and young children. In a scene that follows Mr. Little is beaten and tied to the train tracks where an oncoming train crushes him to death. This scene is reminiscent of the King beating as a real sense of actualization takes place between the two incidents. It is also a scene that is recalled later on in Malcolm's own life as he struggles to defend his family from similar attacks.

The second phase of Malcolm's life is explored when his criminal association with his best friend Shorty (Spike Lee), eventually lands them both in prison. It is here that Malcolm meets a man named Baines (Albert Hall), a member of the Nation of Islam. Baines forces Malcolm to examine the direction in which his life is heading, and encourages his religious conversion. Since Malcolm lost his father at a young age, Baines is the first influential male role model that he has encountered in his life.

Baines teaches Malcolm that real manhood involves a mental liberation and appreciation of one's blackness. Malcolm soon comes to the realization that even though he is physically imprisoned, he has gained a spiritual freedom from the older man's teachings. His way of thinking becomes politicized and he develops both a purpose and a

new sense of self. Under these confined circumstances Malcolm Little goes through an empowering transformation. As a result he changes his name to Malcolm X. The X represents the shedding of a colonial mentality and a new found freedom. Once again, the film reinforces the message that young black men need father figures, who will instill in them a sense of responsibility, accountability and duty. It is the older man's intervention in Malcolm's life which saves him and sets him on the path to greatness.

In the final phase of the film a militant, radical and revolutionary thinker emerges. Malcolm X is a great orator, a protective husband and father, and a responsible black man who is motivated by his quest for black liberation. He is portrayed as a man who is constantly evolving as he increasingly becomes politically and socially conscious. However, in this film his evolutionary thinking is portrayed as being extremely limited.

For instance, Malcolm's visit to Mecca is portrayed as a major turning point in his consciousness since this journey changes his perspective on race relations. The discourse originally suggests that it is the ominous presence of white people that is to blame for Malcolm's misfortune. These include his flashback of the attack by the Klan members on his family, his mother's encounter with both the social worker and the insurance salesman, and his own incarceration.

Toward the latter part of the film however, Malcolm claims that the pilgrimage enlightened him about people of the white race, and that he would no longer view all whites in the same negative light.

This is an important revelation on Malcolm's part, but some authors argue that scenes like these only serve to appease certain viewers. Bell hooks for instance adds that, "young white folks leave the theater pleased and relieved that the Malcolm they see and come to know is such a good guy and not the threatening presence they have heard about." (Hooks. 1994:162) Tamar Jacoby claims that the film is "just "bad" enough to appeal to blacks but also reasonable enough not to repel white moviegoers."⁽¹⁰⁾

Incidentally, Malcolm's changed perspective in terms of gender are not addressed in this narrative. He was indeed sexist in his thinking and openly acknowledged this fact, however, toward the end of his life he recognized that misogyny and sexism were divisive obstacles which stood in the way of black liberation. He would later say: "You don't have to be a man to fight for freedom."⁽¹¹⁾

Malcolm X however, implies that in terms of black liberation, gender is not as significant an issue as are the issues of race and racism. Even though Malcolm was willing to confront and challenge his own sexist attitudes, the film seems unwilling to acknowledge and reconcile his status as an icon of black liberation and the essence of

black manhood, with his transformed consciousness where gender is concerned.

2.3. GENDER STRUGGLES IN *MALCOLM X*

One of the issues that is of importance in the analysis of *Malcolm X* is the way in which men and women are represented. For instance, the female members of the Nation of Islam occupy a submissive role in the organization as a whole. Throughout the film, it is the male members of the Nation who work towards improving the lives of black people. The women are never at the forefront of the struggle, instead they are relegated to the background where they assume a supporting role. Their actions exist solely for the purpose of serving or presenting the male characters in a more positive light. In relation to the representation of both the black community and black politics, the spectator is lead to believe that black manhood alone will redeem the African-American community and that black politics is the business of black males.

In the one defining scene in this film which truly expresses Malcolm's potential for militancy, he leads a contingency of male members of the Nation of Islam to a local police station, where they

protest the beating of a black man who has been denied medical attention. This scene not only illustrates the patriarchal nature of the organization, it also intensifies the racial tensions that existed at the time. This scene reveals the desire by black men to defend, empower and uplift the black race therefore women are excluded from this protest. Furthermore, one of the defining principles of the Nation is that black men must protect "their" women.

This belief is made explicit in another scene where a Nation of Islam rally is taking place. A huge banner hanging overhead reads "WE MUST PROTECT OUR MOST VALUABLE PROPERTY-OUR WOMEN." Referring to women as "our" and "their" infers that they are viewed as possessions, or more accurately "property." There may be a strong desire to romanticize this kind of relationship between men and women, however, one cannot deny the sexism that this ownership entails.

In one scene where Malcolm goes out to recruit perspective members for his mosque, he addresses several women, encouraging them to embrace Allah and the Nation. These women stand in line on the side-walk, where they are inspected by a white woman who is looking for the appropriate candidate to fill a domestic position. Malcolm intervenes, telling the black women that they should take pride in their blackness and their womanhood. He says that they do not have to

bow down to white authority and that they should not be submissive to anyone, again referring to white authority. Malcolm's message is in reference to the upliftment and empowerment of black people.

However, the black woman's role in this racial struggle is limited to taking part in self-help meetings, child rearing and secretarial duties, and with attending to their wifely duties. Malcolm makes no suggestion that black women will serve in the same capacity as their male counterparts as far as black liberation is concerned. Nor does he indicate that they will eventually be considered male property and consequently, accept a position of submission and marginality in the Nation of Islam.

Nonetheless, this is the representation of these women that is promoted in this narrative.

In *Malcolm X*, it is obvious that Malcolm's sexist approach to women is shaped by the prevailing social system of values of the time. It is also evident that his sexism was intensified by the religious teachings of the Nation. In a scene which takes place toward the latter part of the film, Malcolm explains his position to Betty Shabbaz (Angela Bassett) who would later become his wife. He says: "I'm a hard man on women. You want to know why?" As he proceeds to explain the scene cuts to the Nation's leader, Elijah Muhammad (Al Freeman Jr.) giving his reasoning. Muhammad accuses: "Women are deceitful. They are untrustworthy flesh. I've seen too many men ruined or tied

down or messed up by women.”

Betty listens patiently and quietly as Malcolm continues in his own words: “Women talk too much. To tell a woman not to talk is like telling Jesse James not to carry a gun, or a hen not to cackle. And Samson, the strongest man that ever lived, was destroyed by the woman who slept in his arms.” By cutting back and forth to the image of Malcolm and Betty, to the image of Elijah Muhammad, the film is able to show that it is the leader who speaks, but it is through Malcolm that he gets the Nation’s message across.

A direct link is made between what Elijah Muhammad says here, and a scene that takes place later on in the film. When Malcolm has reason to believe the allegations that Muhammad has fathered several children with different young women in the Nation, he reluctantly investigates the matter. Muhammad first denies the allegations then attempts to dismiss the women as trouble makers. The women claim that they were banished from the organization when they asked for support for their children. It is soon after this scene that Elijah Muhammad becomes ill and his leadership hangs in the balance.

Here again black women are positioned in the “accusatory space” that Jacquie Jones refers to. They are vilified and portrayed as traitors. They initiate the downfall of Elijah Muhammad, and ultimately bear the burden of raising his children alone. Neither he nor the Nation take

responsibility for these children. In fact, Muhammad makes light of the situation saying that men have sexual needs that need to be fulfilled. Since the women of the Nation are expected to serve the men, bearing children simply becomes part of that servitude. In this case, it is evident that the men use sex as a weapon to assert masculine control over these women who are positioned in normative roles. Relegating women to this space serves to explain their culpability in Muhammad's downfall. Moreover, it advances Malcolm's position beyond criticism, and propels him further to the head of the Muslim organization.

In *Malcolm X* those black women who have not been saved by the Nation of Islam, remain accountable for their contribution to the deterioration of the black community. In one scene in particular, prostitutes are included in the narrative as incidental characters. One of the women is Malcolm's ex-girlfriend Laura (Theresa Randall), whom Malcolm had once told to save herself for "Mr.Right." Laura and the other women walk the streets soliciting male clients, while a male voice asks, "What is happening to our women?"

The question that accompanies the image is accusatory, and implies that these women are solely responsible for their situation. The manner in which they are represented places very little value on their lives, except to place them in the "accusatory space." This space allows black men to judge black women as being "unfit" based on "an

abstracted femaleness.” (Jones. in Wallace. 1992:97) Once again these women occupy this position in order to enhance the representation of the male characters and to reinforce the belief that only responsible black manhood will save the black community.

In *Malcolm X* the women who seem to play a significant role in Malcolm's life are his three love interests. They are Sophia (Kate Vernon), Malcolm's white lover and partner in crime, Randall's character Laura, who portrays his young, naive black girlfriend, and Angela Bassett who portrays Betty, a member of the Nation of Islam who would later become his wife, and the mother of his six daughters. Each woman plays a different role in the film but in terms of characterization, they are all connected to each other for the purpose of supporting the male lead as his love interest.

Sophia, Laura and Betty also represent different periods in Malcolm's life. Again, they are significant only in terms of the ways in which they support and heighten the position of the male protagonist. Malcolm's relationship with Sophia in particular, is portrayed as eventually leading to his downfall, since she accompanies him on many of his criminal activities.

When Malcolm and Shorty are arrested and incarcerated for robbery, Malcolm contends that their real crime was “sleeping with white girls.” The film relies on the sexual politics and stereotypes

associated with the sexual relations between black men and white women. *Malcolm X* plays on the fear of black male sexuality which is made explicit in the manner in which the relationship between Malcolm and Sophia is treated. This is explicit in one scene where he questions her motives for being in a relationship with him. He says: "you one of those white bitches can't get enough Colored stud?...when you gonna holler rape?" The relationship between Malcolm and Sophia is portrayed as something that will lead to no good, this view is in keeping with the fact that inter-racial relationships were considered taboo at the time. Later on when Malcolm is able to politicize his relationship with this white woman, he remembers her only in terms of being "pure evil." But it is not her actions which represent evil as much as it is the fact that she is a white woman.

On the other hand Betty Shabbaz is the female character who epitomizes true purity and goodness. Her sole purpose in *Malcolm X* is to provide the protagonist with a suitable love interest. In fact, she is portrayed as the one who pursues Malcolm and initiates the relationship. When Malcolm asks her how tall she is, her response is that she's been told that she is tall enough for a tall man. Here the spectator is reminded of an earlier conversation that Malcolm had with Elijah Muhammad who stated that the choice of a wife depended on the following:

"We do not practice celibacy. If a woman is the right height for a man, the right complexion, if her age is half the man's plus seven, if she understands the man's essential nature is strong and woman's weak, if she loves children, can cook, sew and stay out of trouble..."

Betty tells Malcolm that she is insistent when she sets her mind to getting something. When Malcolm asks what it is she has set her mind to, she says: "being a good Muslim, a good wife and a good nurse." Malcolm stares intently at Betty as though assessing her according to Muhammad's criteria. It is not long after this scene that Malcolm asks Betty to marry him but before he is able to complete the proposal she says yes. From her initial introduction in the film, she is portrayed as being overly eager to become Malcolm's wife.

As a member of the Nation of Islam, Betty willingly accepts a subservient position both in the organization and in the home. She raises their children almost single-handedly, while he fights to protect the Family (ie. The Nation of Islam) and to uplift the race. The spectator assumes that since Malcolm rarely occupies the space of the home this would be Betty's territory, but this is not an accurate assumption. When she confronts him about the impropriety within the Nation, he shouts, "woman, don't you raise your voice in my house." Betty looks at Malcolm without saying a word. He has established his control over the household and reminds her of her subaltern position.

Betty is represented as the character who opens Malcolm's eyes

to the evils around him. She humanizes him, and helps him to realize that it is in his own best interest to leave the Nation of Islam. Although she accepts a subaltern position, her character as played by Basset is strong but silent. Her role in this film is not to fight for black liberation, but to stand firmly behind the man who does. Her only concern is for the safety of her family. She is not a militant character, nor does she have much to contribute to Malcolm's vision of racial equality, or the means by which this equality is to be obtained. Nonetheless, even the fact that Betty is a good wife and mother serves as a model of female militancy within the Nation of Islam.

Malcolm X is based on Malcolm X's auto-biography, where the story being told is from his point of view. But, it is Lee's direction which determines that female characters in the film will be considered only in terms of their relationship to the plight of the protagonist. Therefore, female characters like Betty Shabbaz do not have a voice. They do not exercise agency, and if they do play a role in the liberation struggle, it is to be silent partners to the militant male characters. In terms of masculine identities in this film, Stuart Hall would say that they claim visibility for their hardness at the expense of the vulnerability of black women. Hall asserts that,

"certain ways in which black men continue to live out their counter-identities as black masculinities and replay those fantasies of black masculinities in the theaters of popular culture are, when viewed from along other axes of difference, the very masculine

identities that are oppressive to women.” (Hall. In Wallace. 1992:31)

2.4 *PANTHER*

In 1995 Melvin and Mario Van Peebles released their film *Panther*, based on a novel written by Melvin Van Peebles. In terms of chronology this film can be described as a spin-off of *Malcolm X*. One particular note of interest is the fact that the character of Betty Shabbaz, played by Angela Bassett appears in the film *Malcolm X* and reprises her portrayal of the character three years later in *Panther*. According to Mario Van Peebles, the film's director, the choice was a conscious one which not only allowed him to salute the memory of Malcolm X, but also Spike Lee's artistic vision, and the casting of Bassett for the part.⁽¹²⁾ Bassett's revival of the role also creates a sense of continuity in the history of the Black movement.

Panther is about the Black Panther Party which was established in 1966 by two young college students named Bobby Seale (Courtney Vance) and Huey Newton (Marcus Chong.) The Panthers claimed to be more than a paramilitary group. Their aim was to articulate the grievances and needs of the black community, particularly those of the

younger generation. They strongly adhered to the premise that black people had to be responsible not only for their own personal upliftment but the empowerment and eventual upliftment of the entire race.

With this agenda in mind they established programs which would provide children of the black community with the basic necessities. These included a breakfast program, refurbished shoes and eye glasses and free sickle cell anemia testing. They also established political education classes and sought different ways to encourage African-Americans to actively participate in the improvement of their communities.

The film maintains that the mainstream media however, convincingly portrayed the Panthers to white America as a group of militant, anti-white, gun-toting ghetto thugs. The film also claims that the popular media was not willing to condone or perpetuate an image of disciplined, articulate young militant blacks carrying guns for their own defense. Consequently, *Panther* attempts to counter this image and aims to convey the essence of the Black Panther Party, but, in no way does it tell *the* entire story of the party's existence. In fact, the title *Panther* suggests the singularity of the narrative's point of view. The narrative is a fictitious account of events told from the point of view of an individual black male.

Mario Van Peebles says that the main premise behind this film is

that the Panthers:

“Knowing that they would be infiltrated by the FBI and recognizing that their greatest resource was the human resource, picked loyal members to be double agents. The protagonist finds himself between the proverbial rock and a hard place, with the FBI on one front and the Panthers on the other, and through his eyes we’re exposed to the inner workings of both.” (Van Peebles/ Taylor/ Lewis. 1995:131)

There is a significant amount of truth to the fact that the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) worked feverishly to bring down the party and destroy its leaders.⁽¹³⁾ But, the party’s failure was also due to the internal divisions within the organization itself. *Panther* makes a deliberate effort to veer away from this hypothesis and relies heavily on Malcolm X’s discourse, particularly his justification of anger and retaliation. Wallace asserts that

“the Van Peebleses are taking a calculated risk, guessing that idealizing Huey, Eldridge (Cleaver,) and Bobby will prove more inspirational and constructive for the young black male audiences this film is sure to attract than weighing them down with the messy, complicated, and still not fully disclosed truth.” (Wallace. 1995:84)

Panther goes on to illustrate that the militant activism exhibited by the Panthers is indeed justified. The film suggests that the death of Dr.Martin Luther King fueled the rage that was burning within the black inner-cities. In one scene, this rage is intensified when Dr.King’s assassination sparks a riot and the city is set on fire. As the protagonist Judge (Kadeem Hardison) stands before a window, his own image is

mirrored with a backdrop of the rioting and looting that is taking place in the outside world. In his own words "the nation was on fire."

According to Amanda Lipman this landscape represents both "the exterior world and his (Judge's) own feverish mind."⁽¹⁴⁾ This scene represents Judge's political awakening which eventually leads to his involvement with the Black Panthers. It is at this point in the narrative that the Panthers harness the black community's rage and direct it toward the white Establishment, whom they claimed were responsible for the oppressive reality that blacks were facing.

The Panthers demanded equality, freedom and control over their own communities, and even though the Party was a male dominated social movement, the film portrays the male characters as being first and foremost concerned with elevating the existence of all African-Americans. Many black feminists however, are convinced that the movement was about black men regaining their so-called lost manhood. According to Michele Wallace,

"The driving force behind the movement had really very little to do with bread and butter needs. The motive was revenge. It was not equality that was primarily being pursued but a kind of superiority-black manhood, black macho-which would combine the ghetto cunning cool, and unrestrained sexuality of black survival with the unchecked authority, control, and wealth of white power." (Wallace. 1990:34-35)

This is a narrow vision of the motivational influences that lead black men to action, but it is a critical view that should be taken into

consideration, particularly since *Malcolm X* and *Panther* are films which make a concerted effort to fortify black manhood. These narratives adopt a male point of view which could also be seen as narrow. When they speak of black nationalism, militancy and the desire to bring justice to the race they are speaking solely in terms of the black man's participation in this struggle.

Where black women are concerned in *Panther* they are recognized as an essential presence in the black liberation movement, but that recognition seems to be a mere acknowledgment of their intervention. Overall their presence is portrayed as relevant but not significant, and their contributions are acknowledged only in passing.

Wallace echoes this point of view:

"As far as representations of women are concerned, father and son (Melvin & Mario Van Peebles) might seem to have turned over a new leaf with *Panther*...there is nothing blatantly objectionable about the presentation of female Panthers-except that they barely exist."(Wallace. 1995:83)

Alma (Nefertiti,) the most dominant female character in this film is introduced as a quiet woman associated with a rival pseudo-revolutionary organization. In the film these individuals are referred to as the "Punk Panthers," a group of men who claim to be revolutionaries but who take no real militant action. They wear African clothing and adopt what they claim are traditional ways of life. Abiding by this tradition, women like Alma stand quietly on the side-lines serving their

men. There is a distinct division of gender roles set up by this organization which closely resemble the gender relations established by the men of the Nation of Islam.

Initially Alma accepts a subaltern position but her understanding of black liberation and "black is beautiful" is transformed when she meets the Black Panthers. She realizes that they are serious about their revolutionary rhetoric and militancy, and later seeks membership in their organization. As a Black Panther, Alma is represented as a strong female character who is quite outspoken about her refusal to be in the background taking care of a man. In one scene in the film Alma challenges the male leadership, when they appear surprised by her interest to enlist with the party. She says: "I'm black ain't I? I care about improving the plight of my people just like you, don't I? Or you figure oppression stops with that thing dangling in between your legs?"

Here Alma makes the sexual politics, or the links between power and sexuality involved in the black liberation struggle an explicit issue. Since she is portrayed as an isolated figure it appears as though her character represents all the female members in the party. Her character is modeled after Angela Davis who by her own admission, became a cultural icon in the 1970's.⁽¹⁵⁾ In fact, Alma is constructed as Davis' alter ego, however unlike Davis, her militancy fails to elicit feelings of sexual power and danger. Since she is portrayed as being unique her

character does not evoke a real sense of emulation, instead she appears simply as an exception to the rule. Alma stands by and in defense of the male leaders of the party, but she is not portrayed as a leader herself. In fact all the women in this film are depicted in a manner which does not allow them to have a voice.

Alma also serves as the love interest of a Black Panther who eventually dies for the cause. She seems to accept that her role is to support the male figures who become the representatives of black liberation. These men speak on behalf of the entire black community and it is their fearlessness and sexuality that white America ultimately fears. However, since the narrative implies that gender is not a significant issue or deterrent to action, Alma like any other member must prove herself. In one scene she does this by being able to assemble and load a gun with an efficiency and competence that rivals most of her male counterparts. Since the film's focus remains on the centrality of the male characters, Alma's inclusion in the film does not allow her to occupy a significant position. Militant female images are included throughout the film, but these women are all incidental to the melodramatic portrayal of the male characters. They are cast as secondary characters who are vital to the narrative, but since they are positioned in subordinate roles they are viewed only in the context of the actions of the male characters.

The women in *Panther* appear to be included in the narrative for the visual pleasure of male spectators. Their representation is mediated by a set of gender and racial codes that maintain a system of oppression and inequality. Wallace claims “the glossing-over of the role of women is symptomatic of a much more disturbing and widespread tendency to reverse the legacy and lessons of the Panther experience in order to retrospectively clean up Black Power.”⁽¹⁶⁾ This claim is true when one considers the sexually exploitative nature of the movement.⁽¹⁷⁾

Compared to the female characters in *Panther* the male characters are represented in a manner which elevates their position in the movement, in black history and in the narrative as a whole. The film situates black male sexuality both at the center of its narrative, and at the core of black self-definition. It plays on the stereotype often associated with black male sexuality in an effort to manipulate the image in the black man’s interest. Wallace for one, refers to this stereotype as “the myth of the black man as sexual monster.”⁽¹⁸⁾ In this film the black man’s sexual power is constructed in a manner which makes it appealing, seductive and threatening. This is best exemplified in those scenes where the armed Panthers stand up to the Oakland police.

The sexual connotation that these scenes evoke is not explicit.

but remain powerful all the same. In the United States during the period of the black liberation movement, the Panthers became sex symbols who were the materialization of the white construction of the black menace. Wallace adds that they were “the nightmare America had been dreading—the black man seizing his manhood, the black man as sexual, virile, strong, tough and dangerous.” (Wallace. 1990:36)

The Panthers drew their strength not only from their numbers but also from the sensual power and sense of danger that they were associated with. As a result, *Panther* normalizes militant and sexualized maleness in an attempt to equate it with the social and political obligations of black liberation. Although this image can be inspirational for black men, it undermines the political solidarity between revolutionary black men and women. This is particularly true when one considers that women were, and continue to be a significant force in the liberation movement.

What is also explicit is that gender and sexuality constitute positions from which individuals construct their own relation to self-representation, to the nation, and to their place in history. In *Panther* these constructions are made by romanticizing black masculinity and black sexual power. In turn, the spectator acknowledges the romanticization, while simultaneously objecting to the divisive and marginalizing effects these representations foster. *Panther* thrives on

the sensual appeal of the fearless, armed black man, despite the effort to confront and challenge these problematic representations.

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CHAPTER THREE

3.1 *BOYZ N' THE HOOD*

In 1991 John Singleton released his first feature film titled *Boyz N' The Hood*, which depicts the lives of three young black men growing up in the inner city. The protagonist Tre Styles, played by Cuba Gooding Jr, is cast as the aspiring college student, his friend Ricky (Morris Chestnut) dreams of playing professional football, while Ricky's older brother Darren, otherwise known as Doughboy (Ice Cube) is a young but seasoned gangster. These are the only three career options offered to the film's main characters, which does not go against the general tendency to construct young African-American men either as violent criminals or as stars, whether it be athletic or otherwise.

Boyz is a ghettocentric, male centered coming of age film, that is categorized within the "hood" genre. "Hood" or "gangsta" films like *Boyz N' The Hood*, *New Jack City* (1991), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), *Juice* (1992) and *Menace II Society* (1993) concentrate on the narrative theme of the young black male's struggle to survive in the inner city, which is plagued by gang violence, crime and drugs.

Boyz focuses on Tre, Ricky and Doughboy's personal struggle to overcome life in the ghetto. Despite the fact that they are assigned different roles, their paths are closely linked to each other, and it

becomes evident that there are no guarantees that any of them will survive. This is the reality that Tre's mother Reeva a single parent must confront on a daily basis. Voicing her concern that she will eventually lose her son to the lure of the streets, she makes the difficult decision to send him to live with his father. Furious Styles (Lawrence Fishburn.) Young Tre reluctantly moves in with Furious where he is reunited with Ricky, Doughboy, and a few of his other friends whom he knew from visits with his father. The story traces the lives of these young boys into adolescence, but after many dangerous and trying situations only Tre survives the gang warfare and makes it to manhood. Eventually he escapes from the ghetto when he is accepted into college.

Despite the violence that surrounded the film's opening, *Boyz N' The Hood* is a cautionary tale which warns against such violence.⁽¹⁾ The anti-violence message may come across as somewhat contradictory in that, the film derives much of its visual strength from the whirlwind of violence that the protagonist and his friends reluctantly confront and even engage in. Nonetheless, as the film attempts to move away from glorifying violence, its intent is on getting a message of peace across and insists that black America "Increase the Peace."

Ice Cube's gangster character Doughboy is part of the problem in the inner city, therefore, his death in the film is imminent. Ricky on the other hand, seems to have a better chance of survival, but according to

the narrative both he and his brother do not have the one thing that will guarantee their success and survival in this film, and that is responsible parents, particularly moral and responsible father figures, who will save them.

Boyz N' The Hood like other black films of the early 1990's came at a time when black America was responding with a new rage with regards to its distressing social and economic situation. Even though black rage is not confined to the inner cities, the early 90's became a period when many black film makers, particularly young males, channeled this rage to redefine black identity and self-representation in their films. Ed Guerrero explains that "the black movie boom of the 1990s has materialized out of a climate of long-muted black frustration and anger over the worsening political and economic conditions that African-Americans continue to endure in the nation's decaying urban centers." (Guerrero. 1993:159)

During the early 90's, the media focused narrowly on the increasing and alarming statistics in relation to black males. In turn, these statistics became associated with specific stereotypes which continue to deteriorate relations between black and white Americans, and also between black men and women. For instance, in an article titled "America's Most Feared" Sylvester Monroe reports that "there is an image that black men are threatening, that they're dangerous and that

people would rather not come into contact with them.” (Monroe.

1995:24) Andrew Hacker takes this line of thought even further when he writes: “to the minds of most Americans, the mere presence of black people is associated with a high incidence of crime, residential deterioration, and lower educational attainment.” (Hacker. 1992:43)

As stated in chapter two, *Boyz N' The Hood* is significant in this analysis because it updates the plight of inner-city black America in the 1990's. Unlike *Malcolm X* and *Panther* which focus on the black liberation movement of the 1960's and 1970's, the violence associated with the narrative in this film is self-destructive as far as the black community is concerned.

Boyz articulates a nihilism which many inner-city residents express as part of their everyday reality. According to Cornel West, black America is now being faced with a:

“*nihilistic* threat to its very existence. This threat is not simply a matter of relative economic deprivation and political powerlessness-though economic well-being and political clout are requisites for meaningful black progress. It is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America.” (West. 1992:38)

In effect the attitudes associated with this nihilism have produced and nurtured a sense of extreme rage that is inwardly directed. *Boyz N' The Hood* introduces the spectator with a view of a ghetto-centric world which presents violence that is self-defeating and aimless, this rage is

unlike that exhibited in *Malcolm X* and *Panther* which is motivated by a political agenda.

Guerrero explains this anger best when he says "for the most part, black rage has lost its political focus in this violent *apartheid* environment; it has become an internalized form of self-destruction expressed as gang and drug warfare." (Guerrero. 1993:159) This in no way suggests that violence is endemic solely to the inner-cities. In the context of LA however, the violence is extremely charged. Furthermore, the tragedy that is revealed in the narrative of this film is used to seduce the viewer into becoming an insider in a ghetto-centric world.

Although the violence and sense of hopelessness portrayed in *Boyz N' The Hood* affect all those living in the inner-cities, for the most part the film concerns itself with the male characters who assert their manhood with guns. Black women in this film are portrayed with very little depth and appear as cut out characters who are simply included in the narrative as part of the background. As mothers, they are assigned the role of delinquent single parents who are responsible for raising children that are directly associated with the devastation that the spectator is presented with. The film implies that the responsibility of rectifying the wrongs of a group of misguided young men lies in the hands of black fathers.

Boyz N' The Hood succeeds on several levels in terms of the intended message it is trying to convey to young African-Americans. It promotes anti-violence, a sense of morals and responsibility, and a need to aspire to one's full potential through education. These are all positive messages which are meant to subvert Hollywood stereotypes of black men, as well as appeal to them to take up the challenge of living their lives according to these standards. The moral of *Boyz*, as well as that of Spike Lee's *Get On The Bus* echoes Louis Farrakhan's rhetoric and pro-family discourse. *Boyz N' The Hood's* main theme stresses the importance of black male responsibility in the redefinition of black identity, particularly in terms of fatherhood. The first mention of this comes early on in the narrative when an argument ensues between young Tre and another boy. When threatened by the boy Tre says "I'll get my daddy, at least I got one."

Soon after this scene Tre's mother Reeva (Bassett), discusses the incident with his teacher who is a white woman. The teacher recommends "therapy" or "child psychology" for what she assesses as delinquent and insubordinate behavior on Tre's part. In the conversation that follows, the teacher asks if there is a problem in the home and whether or not Reeva is employed. The narrative implies that she has already made assumptions in terms of the dynamics of Tre's family. The stereotype of the single black mother and the absent

black father is also strongly suggested in this scene. Reeva informs the teacher that not only is she employed, but she is also working toward getting a Master's degree. The teacher's response is one of shock at the fact that Reeva is both employed and educated, and that Tre's father plays an active role in his upbringing. When told that Tre would not be returning to school because he will be moving to live with his father, the teacher repeats somewhat surprised, "his father?" Reeva responds "yes his father, or did you think we made babies by ourselves?"

Furious Styles has been constructed as the sole paternal figure whose influence and constant didacticism will eventually save his son. He represents the responsible, educated role model, whose status as the sensitive father figure also represents black nationhood. Meanwhile, black mothers in *Boyz* are rendered powerless and void of agency, in order to enhance the representation of the sole patriarch in this film. This is not explicit at first glance, however, the black woman's visibility in this film does not automatically eliminate her marginalization/subordination. Her presence is regulated in a manner which maintains her inequality and her role strategically defines the role of the leading men, emphasizing his experiences and reinforcing his limited space of dominance. Black women in *Boyz* are therefore placed in a position that does not threaten the black man's space.

3.2 DESCRIBING THE HOOD IN *BOYZ*

The geographical space referred to as “the hood” in the film *Boyz n’ The Hood* is the urban setting known as South Central Los Angeles. Inner city locations such as this one often become synonymous with the plight of black life in America. Paula Massood says that the hood in African-American cultural production, “encompasses a range of possible metaphorical meanings as an urbanscape, meanings which, extend beyond the domain of the contemporary hood-film genre and are informed by a rich history of African-American urban representation.” (Massood. 1996:85)

The hood or ghetto is a location which allows for the exploration of narratives involving violence, drugs and gang warfare. The socio-economic and political status of this urban area is an integral part of the lives of those who inhabit it. Therefore, this location is significant in the examination of the lives of the people who are ultimately affected by these conditions.

Massood goes on to say that the urban area involves a “duality” or “two-ness” and has also been mythologized as both a “utopia” and “dystopia.”⁽²⁾ Los Angeles best exemplifies this duality because throughout time it has promoted itself as a haven for attaining the

American dream, this dream however, does not take into consideration the reality of the inner cities. In this way the hood is often represented as a world unto its own. Cities like South Central and Crenshaw are completely made invisible from the manufactured perfection of Hollywood. Furthermore, these areas all seem to be demarcated by invisible borders, and have their own set of unwritten rules of conduct.

From its opening scenes *Boyz N' The Hood* conveys the limitations and boundaries of the ghetto. The feeling of confinement and immobility is made apparent by visual markers and scenes which are scattered throughout the film's narrative. Manthia Diawara agrees, he says that these visual markers or "signs" "play an important role in limiting the movement of people in South Central Los Angeles."³ *Boyz* opens with a "Stop" sign and the intrusive sound of a helicopter, which the spectator later learns is present for the purpose of surveying the residents of this area. The Los Angeles Police Department's helicopter flying overhead is a constant presence heard at different times throughout the film and even making its aural presence visual in various night scenes when a search-light surveys the area.

This pervasive police presence serves to remind the residents of the unofficial borders that have been established. They are there to limit movement and to make their presence felt more so than to protect and serve those in need. But, there are other signifiers which serve the

same purpose. In earlier scenes in the film young Tre and his friends walk along the streets of their neighborhood. They walk toward a secluded and litter strewn road whose sign reads "One Way." This sign symbolizes both the literal and figurative path that the children are about to embark on. They continue along this road which leads to another where the sign reads "Wrong Way." Again, this sign has both a literal and a metaphorical meaning.

At the end of this road they are greeted by a political campaign poster of a smiling Ronald Reagan who begs for "four more years." One child makes an obscene gesture toward the poster as they proceed further down the "wrong way" road. Their final destination leads them to a restrictive police tape with the words "Do Not Enter." The children cross the line all the same and arrive upon a bloody scene which they examine with a sense of familiarity and resignation.

Through these visual elements, the continuous presence of the police helicopter hovering above the ghetto, and the intermittent sound of gunshots, the film creates a *mise-en-scene* that places dangerous obstacles in the way of black youth who live in this urban war-zone. The watchful eye of the police do very little to discourage the violence in the inner-city, in fact, they contribute to it as they maintain their position of power from every possible vantage point.

As they grow older Tre, Ricky and Doughboy continuously

confront limitations and obstacles in their path. It becomes obvious that at almost every turn there are figurative "Stop" signs placed in their way. If they choose the wrong path ("Wrong Way") or continue in the direction of the "One Way" road they will ultimately face violence or death, which is what greets them at the end of the road in the opening scenes of the film. In another early scene, the walls of Tre's classroom are covered by drawings which reflect for most of the children, the daily reality of life in the inner-cities. Almost every illustration contains references to the Los Angeles Police, (cars and helicopters) violence and death. The spectator can infer from the portrayal of the police in this film, which is either with indifference or a self-hatred of blacks, that they are viewed by these children as a threat rather than as protectors of black life.

One example of this occurs when Tre's home is broken into. In an attempt to defend his home, and simply intending to scare the intruder, Tre's father Furious fires a gun at the young man. The thief escapes unharmed losing a sneaker in the process. In the chilly night air Tre and Furious sit in front of their home for almost an hour before the police make an appearance. When they finally arrive they show very little concern for the father and son, and proceed to treat them like criminals. When the black police officer learns that Furious had not shot the burglar he says: "It's too bad you didn't get him, that'd be one less nigger out in the streets we'd have to worry about." In a later scene, the

same officer threatens Tre's life when he holds a gun to the teenagers head. Explicit in this scene is the fact that Tre had left the boundaries of his own neighborhood and had entered another. The officer's actions indicate that this is just cause for such a threat. What this film illustrates is that even though each of the leading characters choose a different path in life, within the confines and structures of the ghetto there are no guarantees that they will survive. Tre barely escapes by being able to go off to college. His friend Ricky who is portrayed as the dumb athlete manages to pass the college entrance examination, but before he could realize his dream of playing professional football and getting an education he is murdered in a drive by shooting.

Doughboy on the other hand is enveloped in a life of crime. His progression from engaging in misdemeanors to murder occurs when he kills rival gang members in retaliation for Ricky's death. Doughboy's views on life and death in the ghetto are somewhat fatalistic. As he reflects on his own short life, he seems to predict his death. Toward the end of the film he walks away with his head bent, the spectator sees his image slowly fade from the screen and learns that he is killed two weeks after his brother. The technique used to represent his death serves as a sort of memorabilia.

Despite the fact that the leading male characters in *Boyz N' The Hood* are assigned different roles, their paths are very closely linked to

one another, and their choices do not guarantee their survival in the inner-city. Tre is reminded of this when he is threatened by the police and later on when he finds himself in the middle of a drive-by shooting which takes his friend's life. The tensions and violence exhibited in this film are presented as daily realities that force these black males to live their lives for the moment. According to Ice Cube this film is so very close to his own reality that "it's more like a documentary."⁽⁴⁾

Boyz N' The Hood encourages young black men to aspire to find constructive avenues which will enable them to escape life in the ghetto. It attempts to break the limitations and boundaries set by the narrative and makes the inner-city a visible site of struggle. This film places itself at the center of the political discourse by making those "invisible" and "excluded" urban spaces visible. Paula Massood describes this distinction as "work(ing) toward a re-representation in which the specificity of South Central L.A., Watts, Bed-Stuy, Red Hook, and Harlem undergo a process of rearticulation, a making visible-from city to the hood." (Massood. 1996:88)

Black film makers are demanding that Hollywood recognize the urban settings as being part of the American reality. Massood contends that "these "other" spaces are becoming increasingly hard to contain," which is evident in the proliferation of hood films and "in the images of Rodney King's beating and footage from the rebellion following the

verdict for the LAPD officers involved.” (Massood. 1996:89)

Toward the end of *Boyz N' The Hood* Doughboy relays his feelings of grief and resignation. He acknowledges his own contribution to the violence but he cannot come to terms with the manner in which America as a whole chooses to deal with the situation. He says the media in particular concentrate on a world of terror that is outside of the ghetto, and outside of the United States for that matter. He believes that the country has turned its back on the state of affairs that is destroying the inner-cities and its citizens. Echoing the thoughts of many black Americans Doughboy says: “either they don't know, don't show, or don't care about what's going on in the hood.” In many ways it is clear that *Boyz N' The Hood* blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality.

3.3 DEMONIZING BLACK WOMEN

As stated previously the violence and sense of hopelessness portrayed in *Boyz N' The Hood* concerns itself exclusively with the plight of its male characters. Lawrence Fishburn's character is constructed as the sole patriarch who encourages black men to own up to their personal responsibilities as parents. His message however, is didactic

and conveyed in binary terms which manages to completely negate the responsibilities of black mothers. *Boyz* appears to be saying that black fathers are the sole saviors of their young sons and that they are all that is needed to overcome the social and economic conditions of the inner cities.

The film explicitly polarizes black men and women and establishes them as “good” fathers and “bad” mothers, which encourages the spectator to view these characters solely in binary terms. Jacqueline Bobo warns however, that the spectator must avoid this tendency, “rather than simply say a representation is negative or positive, the historical and cultural impetus that give rise to the images needs to be analyzed.”⁽⁵⁾

The women in this film are positioned in what Patricia Hill-Collins refers to as “controlling images.” She claims that “these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life.”⁽⁶⁾ Jacquie Jones takes this reasoning further, she insists that this positioning is functional. “It assigns the accusatory space from which representation in the media, and more generally in society, can continually be reprogrammed along gender lines.”⁽⁷⁾ The representation of black women in *Boyz* forces the female spectator to establish an oppositional stance and critically question the woman’s position in a film which explicitly

sacrifices her in an effort to uplift black males.

Angela Bassett's character is the single mother who escapes the ghetto and establishes a comfortable life for herself. However, she is of the belief that she must give up her son to his father in order for him to be an enabling male influence on his son. When Tre reaches adolescence Reeva decides that it is time for him to move back with her. Furious says that the decision should be Tre's to make but he does not understand why Reeva wants to be responsible for Tre when he is almost an adult. In an accusing tone Furious asks, "You want to play the mommy now? That time has passed, you missed it."

Furious insinuates that Reeva willingly relinquished her responsibilities and rights as a parent when Tre was a child, but as she tells Tre when she makes the decision to have him live with his father, "I just don't want to see you end up dead or in jail. A drunk standing in front of one of these liquor stores." These seem to be the only options that both mother and son are presented with, meanwhile Furious chooses to ignore this fact. He discredits Reeva's genuine concern for her son by saying that she now wants to "play" the role of mother, and insinuates that she is trying to buy Tre's affections.

Reeva's response is one that has been strongly articulated by critics throughout history, when they assert that black women have never given up their duties of raising their families and keeping their

families intact. She retorts, "most men aren't man to do what you did. What you did is no different from what mothers have been doing from the beginning of time. It's too bad more brothers won't do the same thing, but don't think you're special." In this sense, Reeva's position echoes what Angela Davis adamantly condemned about the Million Man March.

The film claims that the active role that Furious takes in his son's life is one which many black men have abandoned, and for this reason there is an emphasis on presenting the spectator with an image of the responsible paternal figure. This fact however should not assign Furious "special status." He takes a great interest in Tre's upbringing and welfare but this role is by no means unique, because not only do many black men taken responsibility for their children but black mothers, single or not, raise children with the same conviction exhibited here by Styles.

What is interesting is that although Reeva makes the point that women have been raising their sons single-handedly throughout history, in relation to her own son she concedes that "I can't teach him how to be a man, that's your job." The film fails to acknowledge those women who have raised sons to be successful, moral and responsible black men. Instead it contends that women, particularly those represented in this narrative, are not capable of fulfilling this role particularly where their

sons are concerned.

In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote a report titled *"The Negro Family: A Case For National Action."* (Moynihan. 1965) In this report the author contends that poverty amongst blacks is a direct result of the absence of fathers in the home, and the fact that many households are headed by single mothers. In effect, he determines that the black family is the sole source of their own destitution.⁽⁸⁾ Moynihan's views on black impoverishment in the United States deflects attention away from the social, historical, economic and political sources which contribute to the condition, and infers that white privilege is in no way culpable. His claims also succeed at demonizing black parents, specifically single mothers.

Patricia Hill-Collins agrees with this view. She acknowledges that in this case, the black mother is the person who is held accountable for the state of the family. She strongly believes that,

"the image of the matriarch also supports racial oppression. Much social science research implicitly uses gender relations in African-American communities as one putative measure of Black cultural disadvantage. For example, the Moynihan Report (1965) contends that slavery destroyed Black families by creating reversed roles for men and women. Black family structures are seen as being deviant because they challenge the patriarchal assumptions underpinning the construct of the ideal "family." (Hill-Collins. 1991:75)

Slavery did indeed destroy traditional patriarchal black families, but to assume that this was as a result of role reversal is to also make

assumptions about the kind of power relations that existed between black men and women even before slavery.

The point here is not to go back in history so as to trace the origins of sexual politics in the African-American community. The Moynihan report is mentioned here simply to illustrate that, despite opposition to the assumptions that were made about black family life, and the role of men and women, some of the author's claims are still being promoted and circulate in contemporary discourses like *Boyz N' The Hood*.

Another contemporary view that reflects the tendency to demonize black women and essentialize their families appears in an article by Jeff Jacoby titled "It takes a man-not a single mother-to be a good dad." In it he makes assumptions about "many unwed mothers" as being poor and on welfare. Jacoby proposes that "fatherlessness is not good for children," he also goes on to state that "the best predictor for infant mortality is not poverty or race or lack of insurance. It is fatherlessness."⁹ Jacoby not only infers that single mothers are unfit, but he also seems to blame them for the absence of the fathers.

Boyz N' The Hood attempts to glorify the position of the solitary father figure (Furious) while it demonizes and blames black mothers. In fact, the narrative goes beyond explicitly polarizing the "good" father and "bad" mothers and implies that young black males whose fathers are

present are more likely to succeed, as opposed to those whose fathers have abandoned them. In effect, black mothers in this film lack agency and are rendered powerless.

The manner in which Ricky and Doughboy's mother, Brenda Baker (Tyra Ferrell) is portrayed makes it apparent that she is not a fit mother. This, along with the fact that her sons have no father figures to teach them how to be responsible men ensures their failure. The film goes so far as to predict their failure early on when Furious explains to his son that, " I'm trying to teach you how to be responsible. Your little friends across the street, they don't have anybody to show them how to do that. You'll see how they end up too." As he is saying this, young Doughboy is arrested, handcuffed and taken into police custody. Meanwhile his mother simply slams the door in disgust as Doughboy, obviously abandoned, is taken away in the police car. The gang members in *Boyz* represent a constant and unpredictable threat. However, although it is the gang members who pull the trigger, in the case of Doughboy, the film insinuates that it is Brenda who is ultimately responsible for his demise. While she is extremely protective and loving of her son Ricky, she is cruel and malicious toward her older son Doughboy. Brenda has high expectations for Ricky while she tells Doughboy that he is like his delinquent father and will not amount to much. Given the fact that the spectator is encouraged to identify with

Ice Cube's character, there is also the tendency to believe that it is Brenda's abuse of him that leads him to a life of crime and violence.

The film makes the point that it is Miss Baker and all the other single mothers who place their children at risk on the streets, who are responsible for the crime and nihilism in the ghetto. Therefore, they must also take responsibility for all the dead young males who are murdered by their peers. Brenda Baker is one of a series of "Welfare Queens." Another being the drug addict who is so consumed by the addiction that she literally puts her babies in danger on the streets. In this particular scene, an infant is rescued by the black man (Tre) who delivers both the child and some accusatory words of advice to the child's negligent mother. Again, this scene relates to the narrative's main underlying theme. It extols the position that the black man occupies by creating a subaltern space for the black woman which serves to silence and demonize her. Furthermore, these symbolic representations of the black woman come to represent all black mothers living in the inner-cities.

Almost all of the women in *Boyz* are characterized in a negative light. There are the generic "home-girls," who are all referred to at one point or another in the film as "bitch." In addition, there are those women like Brenda Baker who are represented as the stereotypical welfare dependant single mother. For the most part, all the women in

the film are included for the purpose of reinforcing the film's narrative theme, are more or less constructed as being at the root of the social decay and devastation that is overwhelming the inner-cities.

The world depicted in *Boyz N' The Hood* revolves around black males, and reinforces the polarization of the sexes. Women in this film are portrayed as accomplices in the destruction of the black community. They do nothing to break the cycle of nihilism and serve no real purpose in the empowerment of the black community as a whole.

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CONCLUSION

GET ON THE BUS

The Million Man March of October 16, 1995, organized by Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam was touted as a day of atonement and reconciliation for African-American men. According to Farrakhan the march was organized for black men in particular to

“stand in unity to declare to the world that we are ready to shoulder our responsibility as the heads of our families and leaders in our community...we feel that we need to atone, to repent, as men, for what we’ve done to our women. For the way we positioned our women. For the burden that we have put on our women to carry us, as well as themselves.”(Farrakhan. 1995:65/66)

Spike Lee's film *Get On The Bus* (1996) was released on the one year anniversary of the Million Man March in recognition of the event. It was decided early on that the film would be financed entirely with money from private investors from the black community. Lee asserts that “there are going to be projects that Hollywood just doesn't want to make, but just because they don't want to make them doesn't mean that those films shouldn't be made.”⁽¹⁾ As a result, fifteen black men of the investment community took up the challenge and financed the project. Lee defends his choice of soliciting black men specifically saying that, “if we really want to stay true to the spirit of the march this film should be financed by African-American people, specifically African-

American men.”⁽²⁾

Many critics assert that the Million Man March was an opportunity to demonstrate support for Farrakhan.⁽³⁾ The film however, refrains from discussing both his role in the march, and the “Message vs Messenger” controversy that is still associated with the event. Apart from recognizing that Farrakhan has been at the forefront of the black struggle for the past forty years, his involvement in the march itself is barely acknowledged in *The Bus*.

To some degree Farrakhan's message is revered but to place any amount of attention on the leader would be to divert attention away from some of the more important issues that the film attempts to address. In the film Rick (Richard Belzer) a Jewish bus driver voices his own condemnation of Farrakhan's brand of leadership, but this white character seems to be included in the narrative simply for the purpose of reminding the spectator that the Muslim leader is a controversial and oftentimes, objectionable figure. George (Charles Dutton) the trip's organizer and part time bus driver uses this opportunity to point out that the Million Man March is not so much about the messenger as it is about the message.

Get on The Bus attempts to counter what many blacks see as a major problem with white America. Spike Lee insists that this has to do with the distorted impression that “African-Americans are one monolithic

group- that we all talk the same, that we all listen to the same music, that we all come from the same socioeconomic background. We don't. We're just as diverse as anybody else."⁽⁴⁾ And so the twelve men on board become spokesmen or representatives of this diversity.

The characters on this trip include George (Dutton); Xavier (Hill Harper) a film student who introduces the spectator to the other characters through his video camera's view-finder, and is teased as being "a young Spike Lee." Other characters are Gary (Roger Guenveur Smith) a Los Angeles police officer who is grappling with issues involving his biracial background; Flip (Andre Braugher) a conceited young actor, and Jamal (Gabriel Casseus) an ex-gang member and former prison inmate, now a recent convert to the Islamic religion.

Also along for the ride are Randall (Harry Lennox) and Kyle (Isaiah Washington) a gay couple whose relationship is in jeopardy due to their opposing views on being open about their sexuality. When Flip refers to the men as "faggots," another character asks: "don't gays have a role in the black community?" According to many people in the black community, authentic masculinity does not include homosexuality. *Get On The Bus* concedes that the issue is one that cannot easily be avoided, and proceeds to confront it in a manner that comes across as being overtly didactic.

Evan Thomas Sr., (Thomas Jefferson Byrd) and his teenage son,

Junior (DeAundre Bonds) are forced to make the entire trip shackled to each other due to a 72 hour court order. The son has apparently engaged in some minor offense and forced bondage is the court's way of ensuring that the father discipline his child. In the final shot of the film Junior is allowed to cast off his shackles. The journey has liberated the young man, and the father is able to take full credit for redeeming his delinquent son and setting him on the right path. By all accounts Junior has been held accountable for his actions, but more importantly, he has atoned for his wrong doings. In addition, he has been saved by a dutiful father figure who has also accepted responsibility for his child.

Father and son have actualized the discourse that Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam have been promoting for this march. Furthermore, like the relationship between Tre and his father Furious Styles in *Boyz n' The Hood*, and to a great extent the relationship between Malcolm and Baines in *Malcolm X*, the portrayal of the father and son relationship in *Get On The Bus* is in keeping with the theme that each of the films in this analysis have been trying to foster. This has to do with the role of the responsible patriarchal figure standing for the younger male's salvation.

The final major character discussed in this analysis is Jeremiah (Ossie Davis) or "Pop," an elderly gentleman who spent his entire life working for a company which would later lay him off. He soothes the

betrayal with alcohol and eventually loses everything. Having missed the 1963 march on Washington for fear of losing his job, Pop is left with nothing except his determination to be a part of the Million Man March. A sudden heart attack cuts Jeremiah's dream short as he dies before reaching the event. His character symbolizes the economic dilemma that many older Americans are faced with in a period of economic instability. Stuart Klawans maintains that the point of Jeremiah's story in *Get On The Bus* is

“not that heartless profit-seekers tossed him out in his old age, as they've tossed out millions of others; not that workers, whether wage-earning or salaried, must live without secure rights in an age of rampaging capital. No, the point is that integration doesn't work. A story about economics becomes a story of skin color.”⁽⁵⁾

The fifteen black men on the bus travel from Los Angeles to Washington in order to be part of an historic moment, but as Lee points out “We all *know* what happened at the March.”⁽⁶⁾ For this reason, the narrative focuses on the journey and the various issues that each man represents, as opposed to the bus's final destination. James Palmer argues that “*Get On The Bus*” is more concerned with the group as a metaphor for black men all over America learning to put aside their individual differences in favor of a community spirit that ends up surpassing the importance of even the march itself.”⁽⁷⁾ Jet magazine contends that the film is about unity. “Differences aside, the men who board the bus as strangers emerge thousands of miles later as brothers.

The spirit of the Million Man March is ignited on the bus before the actual event begins.”⁽⁸⁾

Despite the theme of unity and fraternity promoted in *Get On The Bus*, the Million Man March encouraged division and animosity within the race by deliberately excluding black women. What could have been seized as an opportunity for black men and women to unify as an influential and transforming presence, proved to be yet another occasion for the black community to “vindicate” black manhood. In response to the deliberate exclusion of black women at the march Donna Franklin warns that, “the creation of a new black patriarchy is the last thing that African-American women need.”⁽⁹⁾ James Wall is quick to respond that

“the occasional critic who deplored the male-only nature of the gathering missed the point: the focus was on men because men needed what the march offered. This was not an event that excluded women; it was an occasion for men to assert that the black community needs their presence, their atonement and their leadership.” (Wall. 1995:1003)

Like *Panther* and *Malcolm X*, *Get On The Bus* romanticizes expressions of solidarity and promotes a community ideal that is exclusive to black men. This is particularly true of the ways in which the film addresses the “diversity” of the African-American community. The narrative focuses on issues concerning the economic, social, political and cultural well being of black males in the community .

However, neither the Million Man March nor the film take into account the plight of black females, which also affect the character of the black community. As Michael Eric Dyson puts it,

“even as we list the litany of ills that befall black males, we must be mindful of those that plague black women. Single females who head households experience economic trauma. Teen mothers struggle under emotional and financial hardships. Black women have an extraordinarily high incidence of breast and cervical cancer. Sexism and racism deliver a powerful one-two punch to the social aspirations of black women. The sexual and domestic abuse of black females receives less attention than that of white women.” (Dyson. 1995:1101)

Despite Farrakhan's earlier call for black men to atone for their positioning and mistreatment of black women, there was absolutely no attempt made to address these issues at the gathering. Dyson maintains that “missing from the march was a strong note of repentance for misogyny, patriarchy and homophobia.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Instead, the Million Man March served to further marginalize black women, and actualized the discourse put forth in *Malcolm X*, *Panther* and *Boyz N' The Hood*.

Black manhood is constantly being reaffirmed through symbolic representations in the films, and the lack of female representation at the march. In *Get On The Bus* black women themselves question their invisibility at the march and in effect, on the bus. The response is that the men are staying true to the march's call for black men to atone and accept responsibility for their families and the community at large. It is

inferred that black women should be willing to respect this call. However, for many black women the matter is not so much one of respect, as it has to do with black men asserting control and a patriarchal standard, at the black woman's expense. Responding to the marginalization and subaltern positioning of these females by black men at the march, Angela Davis comments that, "the march was flawed by "retrograde politics" and outmoded models of male-dominated approaches to rebuilding black families and communities." She goes on to argue that "justice cannot be served by countering a distorted racist view of black manhood with a narrow sexist vision of men standing 'a degree above women.'" (11)

Agreeing with Davis, Paula Giddings adds that Farrakhan "represents 19th-century solutions to 21st-century problems." (12) Other feminist responses to the Million Man March have cautioned that it has the potential to further marginalize black women and their legitimate concerns, "which include mounting poverty, drug addiction and violence." These women say that "the anticipated bravado of an all-male march may also come to drown out any meaningful dialogue about black men and women's sharing leadership." (13)

Malcolm X, Panther, Boyz N' The Hood and *Get On The Bus* are original in terms of the different periods of black history that they each attempt to reconstruct, however each film informs the other. Malcolm

X's philosophy and political agenda lay the groundwork for the Black Panther Party. *Panther's* assertion that the United States government was directly responsible for the vulnerable and devastating state of the inner-cities is carried over into the narrative portrayed in *Boyz N' The Hood*. *Boyz* focuses on the current state of affairs in the inner city, and reveals the changed face of black militancy. *Get On The Bus* is a symbolic representation of the Million Man March's core meaning and intentions, relayed to the spectator in the form of a road movie, but the film also addresses the state of black America.

The films are also similar in terms of their representation of the black community, black militancy and the manner in which black women are either marginalized or negated altogether. In the process of validating black masculinity the narratives manage to undermine black women. In effect, they function to elevate the black man's position, maintaining what limited space of dominance he may hold while rendering black women powerless. This lack of power allows for the dominant black nationalist discourse to assert for example, that black women are blameworthy for the destruction of the black community.

In retrospect, it is somewhat astounding to see that where women are concerned, very little progress has been made on the part of recent black nationalist movements. As black women we tend to approach this subject with extreme caution. Nonetheless, if we are to

take control of our images and establish positions of power we must maintain a critical stance. It is quite evident that the Nation of Islam and its Million Man March bought into, and even created controlling images of black women which implied their culpability in the destruction of black manhood. By doing this, black men justify their domination of black women, which in turn helps to maintain those systems of oppression based on race, gender and class. Furthermore, by inviting only black men and their male children to the March served to direct attention toward the plight of this segment of the black community. This strategy not only mystifies the dilemma facing black women in the U.S. today, but it also says quite a lot about the Nation of Islam's definition of family.

It is interesting to note that Farrakhan idealized the March as a day for black men to atone for the wrongs they committed against both black women and black families. However, the event failed to address the black community's subordination of the women. In addition, the definition of family that the Nation adheres to is one which is patriarchal and does not include such issues as homosexuality and gender inequality. Therefore, there are definite tensions existing between the images that are portrayed in *Get On The Bus* and how the story is ultimately told.

This analysis may give the general impression that the

representation of black women in film is hopelessly doomed to the creation of controlling images. Although many contemporary narratives continue to stereotype, marginalize and construct the black woman as the Other, in many instances black women themselves have shown that they are willing and able to challenge those narratives by constructing stories of their own as is the case with Julie Dash's *Daughters Of The Dust*, and later on in Kaci Lemmons' 1997 film *Eve's Bayou*.

In fact, strong and affirmative black female images are increasingly being created by both black male and female film makers. Although these narratives continue to be problematic on many levels, there is a new tendency to confront those representations and discourses which negate black women. Interrogation of these kinds of portrayals not only allows for a transformation, but more importantly, it may bring about some degree of political consciousness of the role this negation plays in maintaining the black woman's inequality on every front.

The film industry for example is an obvious site where power struggles exist between the Studios (which, for the most part are controlled by white males) and black film makers who are trying to get their narratives produced and distributed. It is an important part of the process of consciousness to realize that internal power struggles also

exist between black males and females in this business. There are several factors which contribute to black film makers not getting their stories made, one of them being financial constraints. However, when these film makers are able to get the financial backing that is necessary there is no guarantee that they will do justice to everyone in the black community. Such is the case with *Get On The Bus* which was completely financed by the black community. In this instance however, black women were excluded from the film in almost every sense.

As far as representations of black identity are concerned, the larger issue at work has to do with the matter of control. Who benefits from these controlling images? How do black women react to them? How, if in any way, do they perpetuate relations of race, gender, class and sexual inequality?.

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FILMS

Title: *Boyz N' The Hood*
Director: John Singleton
Year: 1991
Columbia Pictures

Title: *New Jack City*
Director: Mario Van Peebles
Year: 1991
Warner Bros.

Title: *Malcolm X*
Director: Spike Lee
Year: 1992
Warner Bros.

Title: *Juice*
Director: Ernest Dickerson
Year: 1992
New Line Cinema.

Title: *Menace II Society*
Directors: Albert & Allen Hughes
Year: 1993
New Line Cinema.

Title: *Panther*

Directors: Melvin & Mario Van Peebles

Year: 1995

Polygram Filmed Entertainment & Gramercy Pictures.