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Urban Influence and Degradation in Contemporary African American Gangster Cinema

Many people critique race relations in America today with a focus on African American contributions and representations in popular culture. While some argue that slavery is long-extinct and African Americans are an equal participant in America's professional and social environment, it is apparent through their filmic depiction in 1990s gangster films that African Americans are facing incredible oppression and temptation that hinder them from taking advantage of full equality and rights within our country's system. Through analysis of *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991), *Juice* (1992), and *Menace II Society* (1993), I found **the severe urban setting of New York City and Los Angeles intensifies race relations, specifically among African Americans, in early 1990s gangster films**. The harsh urban setting is what contributed to the economic and social struggles faced and their ultimate demise of the characters. Additionally, these films share many of the same themes to the films discussed in class like *Killer of Sheep*, *LUV*, and *Precious* including drug abuse, racial profiling by law enforcement, lack of education, gun violence, and broken families.

People teach others (specifically their children) what they have been taught. For African Americans, this becomes a vicious cycle of African American discontent in a bureaucratic white-dominated society. African American culture is littered with ignorance, violence, criminality, and gang mentality. And this vicious cycle is catalyzed by the fact that ignorance breeds ignorance. The African American situation is indicative to the "Boomerang of History" trope of communal self-destruction. Cinema depicts the African American situation as hopeless and never-ending because African Americans are uneducated and corrupted by their urban ghetto surroundings. The aspect of African American cinema I chose to analyze was motion pictures of the gangster paradigm in the 1990s, specifically the connection between how the city corrupts the black protagonist into a black urban youth on a rampage. No matter how hard the protagonists tried to escape the past of their relatives and friends indicative of crime and pre-mature death, it is imminent in every film that this fate is inescapable. In fact, there is always a character in the film that tries to dissent against this lifestyle but fell prey to a negative influential character that glamorized a life of crime and the constant need to obtain 'street credibility.'

In all the films, African Americans were signified in a negative light with the exception of the few who were trying to escape the typical stereotypes the city imposed on them. The cause and effect relationship between black gangster cinema and the city is depicted through the violence in the motion pictures. African Americans are influenced by the violence of the "hood" as much as the violence of the

“hood” ensues because of the presence of the dense population of African Americans. The execution and structure of the films are very similar as well. They were all released within a two year period from 1991-1993; have African American directors; include the storyline of a coming-of-age of an African American male in the hood and the struggles that entails; and, of course, the setting of a ghetto urban landscape, specifically Los Angeles, Brooklyn, and Harlem. The characters of these films are also influenced by hood rap and hip hop music as well as drug dealing and gang affiliations among their familial influences. Their hood origins and urban roots are firmly engrained in the African American creative experience in not just film but music, literature, and art as well.

The 1990s was a time that Hollywood released an abundance of African American films because they realized that black cinema was an incredibly profitable genre. The popularity of black filmmaking coincides with the unity of black representations in films. “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). There are a lot of similarities among films released in this decade based on the conflicts and the way the characters are portrayed. They all include a majority of the same themes and urban settings. The films take place in mostly LA and New York because they are not only the most popular artistic arenas in America but the cities with the highest concentration of black urban poor. In the nineties black media represented African Americans youth as uneducated and chaotic with a reliance on criminality. Many poor blacks had to come to the realization that there was no escape from the slums and that the only future ahead of them was jail or death. *Boyz n the Hood* begins with the powerful quotation that flashes onscreen with the sounds of urban violence reverberating in the background: “One out of every twenty-one black American males will be murdered in their lifetime. Most will die at the hands of another black male.”

Before delving into the themes and motifs of nineties gangster films, it is important to examine *why* the African American community are represented by mass media in this way at this time, and still today. The Urban Gangster trope is spurred from the historical oppression of African Americans since this country's inception. Many argue that the black predicament in our society and the reason they have such high mortality, murder, and poverty rates is based on their past of enslavement and discrimination. Their history is rooted in inferiority; however, many people also argue that they play the victim to the oppression and prejudice of the past and they are simply living up to their stereotypes. Positive role models and authority figures are rare in the films but Caine's grandfather in *Menace II Society* and Tre's father in *Boyz n the Hood* begged the protagonist not to follow the examples of their friends and to not become another statistic. Tre's father Furious encouraged him to use education to escape from the hood whereas Caine's grandfather focused on the avenue of religion.

Boyz n the Hood, *New Jack City*, *Juice*, and *Menace II Society* share the same common themes based on the corruption of the cities the characters inhabit. They are a product of their setting and that is apparent through their struggles to overcome popular standards of contemporary Hollywood black cinema: gang affiliation, gun violence, drug dealing, hip hop music, teenage pregnancy, lack of education, racial profiling of law enforcement, poverty, lack of respect for women, broken families, profanity, misguidance from their parents or peers, unemployment, and glamorization of crime. Primarily, gun violence is the most intense element in the films. In every film the main character obtained a gun, whether he approved of the violence or not. Reliance of guns in the city is based on either gang affiliations that drove the characters to murder or protection from the people around them. They were constantly living in fear that a gang member was going to “roll up on you.” In *Juice*, Tupac’s character, Bishop, gains access to a gun and soon after he becomes addicted to a life of crime, especially the power and intoxication he would develop after murdering someone. Not only did he murder a rival Puerto Rican gang member Radames, but he killed his friends for threatening to snitch on him. When he was trying to convince his gang, “The Wrecking Crew,” that participation in crime and owning a gun was necessary, he utilizes their oppression from the police and fear of their enemies as the reason: “We run from the cops, we run from Radames, we run from security guards, we run from Old Man Quiles and his bullshit store when he come with that bullshit gun. All we do is fuckin’ run! I feel like I’m on the god damn track team.” The reason black culture is so littered with gang violence is due to the urban origins of cities like Los Angeles and New York. Those cities have rich, tumultuous cultures in which gang mentality is the original and dominate mentality among their community. The Bloods and the Crips, two of the most notorious gangs in America, were founded in Los Angeles. The Watts Riots also contributed to a gang mentality in California. *Menace II Society* begins with footage of the Watts Riots in Los Angeles in 1965. The violence was caused by racial residential segregation and police discrimination, specifically after an incident with Marquette Frye and his pregnant mother. In the 1960s there was an influx of minority residents to Los Angeles especially after World War II. The discrimination of housing barred African American and Latino residents from profitable jobs, affordable housing, a voice in politics, and societal equality. Their exclusion from the suburbs spawned a poor urban community of mostly minorities gathered South Los Angeles in places like Watts and Compton which is where *Boyz n the Hood* and *Menace II Society* take place (Antonio). After the riots, the voiceover of Caine in films states that “when the riots stopped, the drugs started.”

Drug dealing influences are prevalent in all the films. Caine is a product drug dealing father and heroin addicted mother and is exposed to a fast life at a young age. Drug dealing is synonymous with violence and these images of violence, drug abuse, and loss of innocence are jarring and incredibly upsetting. No child should ever have to witness that level of ignorance, drug trade, and hate at such a

young age. In fact, he said that the only thing his father ever taught him was how to cut up cocaine and heroin. This reminded me of the young boy in *LUV* who goes on an adventure with his uncle and is exposed to the perilous activities of the drug trade when he is convinced by Uncle V to make a deal with an established dealer in a dark alley only to have guns pulled out on him at a sickeningly young age. Furthermore, *New Jack City* features the deadly crack trade which was at a climax in New York City during that time because of Nixon and Reagan's War on Drugs. The War on Drugs was a campaign to reduce and ban the illegal drug trade. The initiative was intended to end the manufacture, dispersal, and use of recreational drugs. Instead, the CIA revealed that the government financed the purchase of intoxicants abroad in order to get the country to support the war once they saw for themselves that the country had a problem. However, through this backward and fraudulent scheme the poor African American community was negatively affected. The government gambled with the health and well-being of real human lives to fuel America's battle with drugs that ravaged the cities and still continues to perpetuate the African American population today (Winokur). In *New Jack City*, the protagonist, Nino Brown, is a drug overlord who violently uplifts many people from their homes when he invades and takes over an entire apartment building for his crack dealing headquarters. Subsequently, he gets the majority of the community appallingly addicted to crack and reliant on his business. As the leading drug dealer in the city, he then becomes dangerously addicted to power becoming disgracefully rich and murdering any and all competition. In *Boyz n the Hood* the existence of drug addiction is prevalent in Los Angeles when Tre encounters a drug-addicted mother who offers him oral sex for money for drugs and is unable or unwilling to take care of her poorly clothed and poorly nourished baby.

Next, the presence of rap and hip hop musical influences is a prevailing theme in the films. Hip hop is an important genre because the ideals that the songs uphold are synonymous with urban culture such as gang violence, misogyny through constantly referring to women as "bitches", and glorification of crime. "It can be argued that the recent increase in the production of hood films, coupled with the growing popularity of gangsta' rap to crossover audiences, has resulted in a concurrent rise in mainstream media interest devoted to the problems of the 'inner city'" (Massood 85). The soundtrack for the films features many musical montages from rap artists and groups including Tupac, Run DMC, and NWA. For example, in *Juice* GQ is an aspiring hip hop DJ which he hopes to be an escape from the slums of New York City. However, his involvement in a robbery of a convenience store and the murder of the owner inhibits him from participating in a DJ competition hosted by Queen Latifah when he is brought into the police station for questioning. It is ironic that he is so close to escaping his urban confines but it is a violent criminal act, something he is trying to escape, that hinders him. A similar situation hinders Caine from escaping LA when he is shot in a drive-by shooting by Ilana's cousin. This vehement act is a product of Caine's inability to step up as a father after Ilana informs him that she is pregnant after a one-

night stand. Caine is literally packing the car to escape the city and move to Atlanta with Ronnie when he and his friend are fatally wounded. The irony and detrimental effects of gun violence and teenage pregnancy are evident in the majority of nineties gangster films.

Finally, the most prevalent thematic model in black cinema is the lack of accessibility to and/or drive to pursue education. Not only is this prevalent but it is the most important driving factor for the hardships of African Americans in the ghetto. In many densely populated areas of the city, African Americans are denied equal access to education. In addition, their culture does not glorify the importance of going to school. Instead, it glorifies owning a gun and obtaining Welfare from the government. The popularity of underachievement is driven by the fact that it is easier and faster to obtain money through crime, especially because the characters live in squalor and poverty in which many parents are involved in similar illegal activities and do not have the means to send their children to college. The lack of education promotes low literacy rates and ignorance. Also improving the education system is an incredible societal upheaval because it transcends political, economic, social, and psychological structures of America in which the white group holds the majority of the power and influence. However, obtaining an education is the single most important factor for the black population in order to speed up the progress. "The educational challenge reflects a social oxymoron: seeking to advance the status of a population that the larger society has systematically oppressed. On one hand, society espouses rhetoric of concern and desire to elevate Black males, but on the other hand, society practices a policy of oppression, prejudice, and disregard" (Jenkins 128). The high school drop-out rates and lack of enrollment in higher educational institutions are at an all-time high in these areas. For example, in *Menace II Society* the white high school teacher is speaking to the class and mentions "for those of you who are coming back" like it is optional to return for senior year. It is almost as if she expects that many of them will not return and will drop out to pursue illegal activities or minimum wage work.

The "coming of age" story structure is the basis of all four films in this category in which the protagonist is struggling to escape corrupt, unfavorable urban settings that lead to intense conflicts and consequences. "A focus on the city, the cinema and African American representation ... tells us much about the mythology of transformation that is so integral to American life. In their often conflicted attitudes toward the city as either promised land or dystopian hell, African American texts ... explore themes of hope, mobility, and escape" (Fuchs). As mentioned previously, Caine and Q come extremely close to escaping their lowly status in society but that is interrupted by gun violence. Nino Brown and his corrupt drug ring also face devastation at the influence of a gun when his obsession with power drives him to kill his best friend and right-hand man Gee Money. On the other hand, *Boyz n the Hood* is an example of Tre's successful escape through education. Precious is able to escape her illiteracy and urban confines as well; however, she does overcome incredible odds with enrollment in a special schooling

program and the help of a positive teacher and mentor that provides her a place to stay. These are both factors that are not realistically available to many black urban youth. At the end of *Boyz n the Hood*, Tre leaves Los Angeles for Morehouse College. There are really two ways to escape the urban sphere and that is through academics or athletics. Ricky from *Boyz n the Hood* is also planning his escape because he is the starting running back for Crenshaw high school with a scholarship to USC. His story is also riddled with irony because he is murdered by members of the Crips right after he receives the SAT score high enough to pursue the scholarship. In every gangster film the protagonists are faced with the decision whether or not to partake in criminal activities in order to make money and create a status for themselves in their neighborhood. Many black males felt like they had no other option based on their class roles and financial situations. If they left gang life they would have no alternative income because of the lack of education and unemployment rates. The social expectations of American popular thought is that the African American man will deal drugs, carry weapons, and traffic women in order to provide for himself and his family.

This idea that black Americans only have these daunting and unappealing options coincides with the “Boomerang of History” trope, or the notion that no matter how hard African Americans try to escape stereotypical and racist representations in art and life, they cannot because they are affected by their culture, education, and peers. For example, Tre, Precious, and Stan from *Killer of Sheep* go against the traditional black stereotypes and rebel against what is culturally acceptable in the ghetto. Stan’s character also rebels against the aggressive black buck archetype that is obsessed with violence and driven by sexual urges. Stan is not violent, even though his family is struggling for money, and he maintains his calm exterior and rejects his neighbors’ advances to get involved in a criminal scheme. In this way, these films depict a realistic representation of an African American man who was not a criminal but just trying to survive. Alternatively, it seems like negative influences in the protagonist’s lives are represented by the antagonists that inhabit the brutal black buck archetype. In nineties gangster films these are the characters, often the protagonists friend, that become obsessed with obtaining street credibility through murder. Both O-Dog from *Menace to Society* and Bishop from *Juice* try to convince the main character to get involved in criminal activity and in both instances murder is involved. “‘O’Dog was America’s worst nightmare...young, black and didn’t give a fuck” (Gormley 99). In *Boyz n the Hood* Doughboy tries to get Tre to come avenge the Ricky’s murderer, but he is influenced by his dad’s advice that it is not worth it. He relies on the influence of his education and good positive role model as to not engage in a dangerous murder. Because he makes this decision he is able to escape the city in the culmination of the film. Conversely, Nino Brown in *New Jack City* is the aggressive character that instigates the violence and controls the situations and actions of others in his group of drug pushing minions. This is only film that is not a coming-of-age story because Nino is a firmly established drug dealer in his mid to late

twenties. Tre was the only character in the nineties gangster films that did not fall victim to the urban influences while all the other protagonists succumbed to their atrocities. “The film was interpreted as an African-American version of the American Dream because of the central narrative of Tre’s self-improvement and escape from the ghetto” (Gormley 99).

The juxtaposition of the brutal black buck character archetype with the hardworking, struggling protagonist who transcends his stereotype and beats the odds corresponds to the juxtaposition of New Black Realism films (1990s) and LA Rebellion films to Blaxploitation films (1970s). The creation of New Black Realism films came from the need for new character archetypes and adjustment to black cultural ideals. Hollywood films and Blaxploitation films share some similarities but mostly are based on differences in terms of character development and filming techniques. The difference between these genres was based on the different time periods of their release and that there were different societal things occurring at those times which affected the cinema of that time. “Film critic Gladstone Yearwood (1982), in his definition of Black cinema, believes that new paradigms must be established and old paradigms must be broken to create a cinema that is truly based in the African American cultural tradition. Black filmmakers need not use Hollywood traditional narrative that generally presents the underside of Black lives, but focus on their relationships, situations, and experiences that represent the total African American experience” (Merritt 111). Films like *Killer of Sheep* were very progressive for their time. They were distributed by the Theater Arts Department of UCLA, an independent film movement known as the LA Rebellion or LA School of Filmmakers. The purpose of the films was to espouse a new perspective of the African American experience and portray a different side of African American life. They revealed that not all urban African Americans upheld the same values of crime, lack of education, and respect for authority. Burnett, the director of *Killer of Sheep*, utilized different filming techniques indicative to documentary and fictional styles to express a political agenda for African Americans and glamorize the often unpopular route which is to work hard and maintain positive and healthy family life. Hollywood gangster cinema of the nineties stayed true to some of the ideals of the violent and aggressive and hypersexualized stereotypes of the black male while also transcending them through the presence of good parental influences and brave, educated protagonists who proved that not all African Americans followed this same path. The characters that found success and happiness in the end were the ones who chose to stand up to the antagonists and listen to their parents or grandparents while the ones who chose the life of violence and crime were forced to deal with death upon them or close loved ones. In some situations, the negative influences of robbery and guns that were brought by their closest friends posed the biggest threat to their future and symbolized the biggest enemy and oppressive influence. For example, Bishop becomes the enemy after becoming involved in street life and convincing Q to join him in theft and murder. New Black Realism or the Black Urban Neo-Realism movement suggests a new perspective even though they

use similar aggressive archetypes. The LA Rebellion came about after protesting against Blaxploitation films of the seventies and the genre's reliance on the criminal and the aggressive to portray the black population. "New black cinema" and contemporary Hollywood films are, for example, responses to such influences as the end of the broad-based militant civil-rights advocacy and Blaxploitation films (Winokur 23).

There is a cause and effect relationship between the anti-utopian urban sphere and black representations in the media. African American culture has affected black representation in nineties gangster films and nineties gangster films contributed to ideals and actions of the African American population. There is an interesting relationship in regard to modern black films of this caliber. The history of the African American subject and the history of the film industry as a whole have a huge effect on the reception and analysis of films like *Boyz n the Hood*, *New Jack City*, *Juice*, and *Menace II Society*. "It is commonly recognized that the ongoing process of media (mis)representation and devaluation is inflicted most harshly, and now perhaps paradoxically, on African Americans. The paradox resides in the fact that black people produce so much of the nation's popular language, culture and youth fashion, along with many of its sports stars, music and media celebrities... For at the same time, despite the tentative expansion of a black middle class, for the vast majority of blacks, the indexes of African American material progress and standards for education, health and psychic well-being have remained stagnant, and in many cases regressed to the abysmal levels before the civil rights movement" (Guerrero 113). I believe the thematic ideals and character development of the films was almost like a call-to-arms for the black population and an awakening for the white population as to how urban black youth are living in our American cities. The films of New Urban Realism beg the youth to see the detriments of their actions while also glamorizing the crime of their favorite pop culture role models like Tupac and Ice Cube. Many of the same issues that are plaguing the black urban society at this time still exist today and are consistent with contemporary films like *The Interrupters* released in 2010 about the harsh South Side of Chicago. Our urban infrastructure seems to be a home to our minority populations and this place becomes a breeding ground of ignorance, hate, and violence and the people are plagued with a constant desire to escape the hell of the urban dystopia.

Annotated Bibliography

Thesis: The severe urban setting of New York City and Los Angeles intensifies the race relations, specifically African American representations, in early 1990s gangster films.

Films: *Boyz n the Hood*, *New Jack City*, *Juice*, *Menace II Society*; *Killer of Sheep*, *Precious*, *LUV*

Articles from class: Paula J. Massod "An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions," Michelle Alexander "Introduction to The New Jim Crow," Bruce Baum "Hollywood on Race in the Age of Obama: Invictus, Precious, and Avatar," Ed Guerrero "Bamboozled: In the Mirror of Abjection"

Films:

Boyz N the Hood. Dir. John Singleton. Perf. Cuba Gooding Jr., Ice Cube, and Larry Fishburne. Columbia Pictures, 1991. DVD.

Juice. Dir. Ernest R. Dickerson. Perf. Tupac Shakur, Omar Epps, and Samuel L. Jackson. Paramount Pictures, 1992. DVD.

Menace II Society. Dir. The Hughes Brothers. Perf. Tyrin Turner, Jada Pinkett-Smith, and Bill Duke. New Line Cinema, 1993. DVD.

New Jack City. Dir. Mario Van Peebles. Perf. Wesley Snipes, Ice T, and Chris Rock. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1991. DVD.

Articles:

Antonio, Sheril Dawn, and University New York. Contemporary African American Cinema. n.p.: Dissertation Abstracts International, 1999. Art Source. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

This article was written as the authors' dissertation for their studies of African American Cinema. The conclusions they found seemed to coincide with the ideals of black film and urban degradation that I was exploring. The 1990s was a time that Hollywood released abundant African American films because they realized that black cinema was an incredibly profitable genre, especially during the immense popularity of hip-hop music and culture. The films that Hollywood released as "black cinema," especially in the 1990s, almost always included gangster elements, corruption from a city, and gun violence. The dissertation discussed six films that are included in the African American cinema, all of which my thesis supports. In my essay I am only including three out of the six films that were explored, but the insight I gained about the other films only made my understanding of the gangster paradigm stronger. The six films included are *New Jack City* (1991); *Boyz n the Hood* (1991); *Juice* (1992); *Just Another Girl On The IRT* (1993); *Menace II Society* (1994); and *Clockers* (1995). All of these films are unique and special to the African American genre because they use different filmmaking techniques to set them apart, reflect the situation for black people during the nineties and provide a consistent image of mass media representations of black culture in the city at that time. All of the films depict the characters struggling to escape corrupt, unfavorable urban settings that lead to intense conflicts and consequences. I chose to include this text in my research paper because it had deep, insightful analysis and did not just focus on one aspect of film but included the style, aesthetics, themes, and perspectives of contemporary African American cinema.

Fuchs, Cynthia. "Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film." Cineaste Fall 2004: 63+. Academic OneFile. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

This article published in the film magazine *Cineaste* was one of the most helpful magazine articles I found on the Temple library online database. The article featured a lyric from Tupac's song "Me Against the World" and how city life affects the urban black man: "Can you picture my prophecy? Stress in the city, the cops is hot for me. The projects is full of bullets, the bodies is droppin'. There ain't no stoppin' me." The oppression that African Americans face due to a city setting is intensified by racial profiling from law enforcement, gun violence, and murder. Fuchs also examined the city as a place of mobility and resistance. She also associated urban life with images of bullets, bodies, and heat. This article specifically examined the relationship and experience between black cinematic artists with the city which is what my essay is focused on. The aspect of her article that I found to be most interesting was that the city is a place of contradiction. She described it as a place of dreams and despair, opposition and opportunity, myth and history, and inspiration and limitation. I really enjoyed her analysis of the city because the idea of the city is the motif that I focused on in my essay to describe the functionality of nineties gangster cinema. The city setting is what shaped these characters and drove the violent plots and mob mentality. It was a place that most of the characters were trying to escape from and while some were successful many fell victim to the experience of their surroundings.

Gormley, Paul. "Chapter Three: Gangsters And Gangstas Part Two: Menace II Society And The Cinema Of Rage." *New Brutality Film*. 99-136. n.p.: Intellect Ltd., 2005. *Film & Television Literature Index with Full Text*. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

This is a book source that I found through the Library database EBSCO Host. The chapter was so insightful that I utilized many of the ideas that I read to reformulate my thesis to include the films *Menace II Society* and *Boyz 'n the Hood* because they are iconic examples of black gangster cinema. The text compares and contrasts the two films while describing the violence in motion pictures and how that violence is influenced by the "hood" or ghetto of the cities that African Americans reside. Gormley's analysis of how city-life catalyzes gang affiliation and violence reaffirms my 'boomerang of history' trope: a notion that no matter how hard blacks try to escape stereotypical and racist reputations in art and life they cannot. The text also explored a more in-depth discussion about New Black Realism emerging out of the Civil Rights Movement which is an important genre because it includes the ideals of violence, criminality, and dependency on guns due to corrupt city influences.

Guerrero, Ed. "Framing Blackness: The African-American Image In The Cinema Of The Nineties." *Cineaste* 20.2 (1994): 24. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

This magazine article featured in *Cineaste* in 1993 revealed the perspective of African Americans in the motion picture industry in connection to the article *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Guerrero focused on the African American evolution through film which I included in my essay when I described why almost all African American motion pictures followed the urban gangster trope in the nineties. The reason has a lot to do with their oppressed predicament in society at that time (which is consistent with how they are treated today). The article also included the popularity of black filmmaking and popularity of black representation in films. I chose to use this magazine article also because it was published by Temple University Press which had a series called "Race in Contemporary American Cinema." Guerrero attributes the reason black culture is so littered with gang violence to urban influence in like Los Angeles and New York. Those cities have rich cultures in which gang mentality was the original and dominate mentality among their community. In all of the films I analyzed, the black protagonists were exposed to guns, gangs, and violence and faced with the decision of whether or not to partake in those activities in order to make money or create a status for themselves in their neighborhoods. Black males felt like they had no other option in their current situation; if they left gang life they would have no other alternative to make money because of their lack education. The social expectations of American popular thought is that the African American man will deal drugs, carry

weapons, and traffic women in order to provide for themselves and their families. Guerrero also explored the comparison between nineties gangster films and Blaxploitation films. The ideals of 1990s cinema are comparable to that of Blaxploitation films, but they also stand in ironic disparity because of the differing race relations between black and whites in the 1970s as opposed to 1990s, almost three decades later.

Jenkins, Toby S. "Mr. Nigger: The Challenges of Educating Black Males within American Society." *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 37, No. 1 (Sep., 2006), pp. 127-155. Sage Publications Inc. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40034376>

A very important aspect of my thesis is *Why* the black American are depicted in this manner in film and why he acts the way he does. Corruption from their urban setting, misguidance from their parents, and the backward and regressive nature of glamorized African American culture were points that stood out to me in the article that I included in my essay. I found this journal article on JSTOR from the *Journal of Black Studies* written by Toby S. Jenkins. It explains the effects of lack of accessibility to or drive for education, which I believe, is the most important and prevalent driving factor for their hardships. African Americans are not only denied equal access to education, but their culture does not glorify the importance of going to school; it glorifies owning a gun and obtaining Welfare. Jenkins attributes their lack of education, underachievement, and backwardness as trends that need serious and immediate attention. Additionally, many of their problems stem from their illiteracy and ignorance. He admits that alleviating the problem would entail an enormous societal upheaval because it transcends all spheres: the political, economic, social, and psychological structures of America in which the white group holds the power and influence. Also, African Americans have to come to terms with the fact that their historical roots rely on inferiority. He describes the experience of the black man to be a struggle of constantly playing a victim of oppression and prejudice. The article is a call to action of some sorts for African Americans to take responsibility for their lot and no longer accept underachievement as the only viable option. The theme of negative educational trends in the African American population is a very important concept in the study of how they are depicted in film because one cannot fully understand the corruption of the city and the violence that inspires unless they take into account their lack of education. Specifically films like *Precious* and *Menace II Society* portray this lack of education and how it has negative consequences in the lives of characters.

Massood, Paula J. "Mapping The Hood: The Genealogy Of City Space In *Boyz N The Hood* And *Menace II Society*." *Cinema Journal* 35.2 (1996): 85-97. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

"Mapping The Hood: The Genealogy Of City Space In *Boyz N The Hood* And *Menace II Society*" was an incredibly helpful source in the formulation of my essay. Not only was it written by Paula Massood, who also wrote "An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions" that we read in class which analyzed Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, but it went deeper into the analysis of the treatment of the city and its relationship to the African American experience. The films she chose to analyze in the essay included *Boyz 'n the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, *New Jack City*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Straight out of Brooklyn*, *Juice*, and *Just Another Girl on the IRT*. Massood reflected on the image of the city as both a utopia and dystopia which is an overall metaphor for the African American experience in film. African Americans are living up to their traditional stereotypes, but this is due to the fact that they are in an area that celebrates their stereotypes. Nineties gangster films rely on cultural stereotypes but then also work to expose to a white and black audience how detrimental these stereotypes can be in a world of consumption of mass media. All of the films Massood examined have: young African American directors, with the exception *New Jack City*; the metaphor of a coming-of-age story in the hood and the struggles that involves; and the setting of a "ghetto" urban landscape, specifically Los Angeles, Brooklyn, and Harlem. African Americans are influenced by "hood rap" and gang involvement of their familial influences. Hood origins are firmly

engrained in the African American artistic experience whether it be through music, literature, or film and this is impossible to ignore when studying nineties African American cinema.

Merritt, Bishetta D. "Charles Burnett: Creator of African American Culture on Film." *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 39, No. 1 (Sep., 2008) , pp. 109-128. Sage Publications, Inc.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40282551>

I found the *Journal of Black Studies* to be an incredibly helpful online resource for this project. Merritt's article specifically investigated the effects of African American film on their culture and vice versa. A very important aspect that I noted is that these affect each other consecutively; it's not just a one-way relationship. Burnett's film *Killer of Sheep* is important to my thesis because it is a prime example of the boomerang trope of the vicious cycle of the African American situation. However, the film challenges my thesis in one extreme way and that is the fact that Stan, the protagonist in *Killer of Sheep*, rebelled against the aggressive black buck male character who is obsessed with violence, criminality, and gang affiliation that is prevalent in the 1990s black gangster films and succeeded while all the other protagonists (except Tre from *Boys n the Hood*) fell victim to the atrocities of the slum. Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, released in 1979, rebels against gangster films like *New Jack City* and *Menace II Society*. At the time of *Killer of Sheep*'s release, the film was progressive for a black audience. I chose this article because it offered another studio avenue of African American film, not that which was controlled and released by Hollywood but the independent film movement of the LA Rebellion. Burnett utilized different filming techniques to express a political agenda for African Americans and also to determine mood and characteristics of his protagonist. This film, and others made by the Theater Arts Department at UCLA (also called the LA Rebellion and LA School of Filmmakers), gave birth to the neo-realism or black urban realism movement. This group came about after people protested Blaxploitation films (which share a lot of similar characteristics to gangster films) and their reliance on criminal and aggressive elements to portray the black population. The films made by the LA School of Filmmakers were so unique because they used documentary and fictional-filmmaking techniques to portray the black character as not so violent, but as the typical, struggling American family, which is why Stan was a calm, family man who rejected his neighbors advances to get involved in a criminal scheme. The style of film also included rhythmic and repetitious shots which parallel the rhythmic hip hop sequences in films like *Juice*. This movement moved away from the common aggressive African American stereotypes and generic film techniques of long scenes with little movement of the camera, and evolved the cinematic depiction of the African American man into a realistic and struggling American who was not a criminal, but just trying to survive. It was important that I included that aspect of the African American in my research paper because I can contrast it with the Blaxploitation films and gangster films that depict the African American protagonist as violent and corrupted by the city.

Winokur, Mark. "Marginal Marginalia: The African-American Voice In The Nouvelle Gangster Film." *The Velvet Light Trap* 35.(1995): 19-32. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

This article is a journal entry from the database FIAF: International Index to Film Periodicals Plus. The information I read supports my thesis in its analysis of gangster films and their effect on and treatment of African American culture. It recognizes the existence of other genres of African American cinema but focuses on the tremendous, detrimental experience of black and Latino representation in *New Jack City*, *Boyz 'N the Hood*, *Rage in Harlem*, and *American Me*. The thesis of the article is the relationship between the revisionary gangster film, the history of the audience and subject, and the history of the film industry as a whole. Most importantly the fact that African American culture, most specifically their residences in the urban ghettos, is the reason they are reliant on violence, gangs, and lack of education. It also juxtaposed New Black Cinema and contemporary Hollywood films to the militant inspired films of the Blaxploitation era. I utilized this article in my essay to better explore the difference between these three film genres and the affect they had in terms of African American representations.

