SIBLINGS IN SYNC:
BLACK SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CINEMA 1970s-1990s

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes how siblingship operates in African American film narratives in the genres of Blaxploitation and New Black Realism. I am interested in siblingship as a *lateral* relationship (unlike vertical or hierarchical parent/child relationships) because of its relation to identification, similarity, and difference. This dissertation explores the psychological concepts of attachment-identification and individuation-deidentification as key siblingship themes, and it considers fictive kinship—relationships that are neither marital nor consanguineal—as an important mode of siblingship in these films. The sibling relationships in Blaxploitation emphasize likeness; this likeness and the genre in general offer a romanticized view of Black Power, which is comforting if illusory. Films analyzed extensively in this chapter are *Coffy* (Hill, 1973) and *Brotherhood of Death* (Berry, 1976). New Black Realism illustrates that the performativity of sibling and social relationships is often at odds with true depth of care or concern for individuals. Key films analyzed in this chapter are *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) and *New Jack City* (Van Peebles, 1991). Research questions include: How do African American sibling relationships manifest onscreen? How does film allow us to immerse ourselves in different realities that may be more appealing than our own? How might these different realities fulfill a need for respite from the challenges of everyday life, and also a model for real-world activism? What are the specific needs of African American communities and individuals in these respects? This study primarily uses the work of Gilles Deleuze but also draws on psychoanalysis, psychology and related disciplines, critical race theory, and historical materialism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Setting the Scene: An Exploration of Black Sibling Dynamics

Imagine the intricate dance of identity and difference played out on the cinematic stage—this is the essence of siblingship in African American films. From the gritty streets of Blaxploitation to the poignant scenes of New Black Realism, films featuring Black siblings offer a unique lens through which to explore lateral relationships. Unlike the hierarchical dynamics of parent-child interactions, siblingship provides a rich terrain for examining themes of attachment, identification, and the journey from shared roots to individual paths. This dissertation delves into these narratives of attachment-identification—the emotional bonds and identification processes that siblings undergo during their development and maintain in adulthood—and individuation-deidentification—the process of establishing one's own identity while simultaneously distinguishing oneself from one's siblings. I also consider fictive kinship as an important mode of siblingship. Fictive kinships are relationships that exist outside the traditional bounds of marital or consanguineal ties yet hold substantial importance in shaping the dynamics and experiences within sibling networks. Research questions include: How do African American sibling relationships manifest onscreen? How does film allow us to immerse ourselves in different realities that may be more appealing than our own? How might these different realities fulfill a need for respite from the challenges of everyday life, and also reflect real-world activism? What are the specific needs of African American communities and individuals in these respects?

Through an analysis of legal and fictive forms of siblingship, I demonstrate how these are shaped by Blackness, praxis, and positionality. The sibling relationships in Blaxploitation emphasize likeness. This likeness and the genre in general offer a romanticized and comforting if illusory view of Black Power: emancipatory and empowering possibilities which are centered on achieving racial equality, social justice, and community self-determination, seeking to dismantle systemic oppression and empower Black individuals and communities. Key films analyzed include *Coffy* (Hill, 1973) and *Brotherhood of Death* (Berry, 1976). *Coffy* depicts its eponymous character's quest for vengeance as she singlehandedly takes down a drug ring responsible for her sister's heroin addiction.

Brotherhood of Death sees African American brothers in arms use their military training to overcome the Klansmen who terrorize their town. In contrast, New Black Realism illustrates that the performativity of sibling and social relationships is often at odds with true depth of care or concern for individuals. In this chapter, I analyze *New Jack City* (Van Peebles, 1991) and *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) in depth. *New Jack City* features undercover cops who infiltrate and subvert the ranks within a gang in the hood, in which loyalties are fostered and reinforced by fictive siblingship. *Boyz N the Hood* follows three young men, two of whom are brothers by parentage and all of whom have known and lived with or close to one another since early childhood and idolize similar paternal figures. Siblings in all four of these films are African American pairs, triads, and tetrads; they are working- and lower-middle-class; and they are amata-cis-heteronormative and thus normalize the pursuit of heterosexual love between cisgender people.[1] This dissertation provides a nuanced and complex interpretation of the ways in which African American filmmakers have depicted and explored sibling relationships. In the examples discussed in depth in this dissertation, there is an emphasis on brotherhood and sisterhood; that is, the chosen films look at same-sex sibling relationships between men or between women, rather than brother-sister relations.

I analyze onscreen realities created by African American cinema and the ways in which these realities both reflect and challenge the dominant cultural narratives of our time. Drawing on Deleuze's idea of assemblage—the coming together of diverse elements to form a complex and dynamic whole—I argue that anti-Blackness can be seen as an assemblage composed of a wide range of different social, cultural, and political factors that work together to perpetuate the oppression of Black people.[2] This assemblage

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[1] While it is uncommon, I use "amata" to convey that the idea of romantic love or affection between people of different genders is considered the norm or ideal in society (Moorhouse, 1951). Additionally, the sexual health and gender expansive communities of which I am a member note that "amata" refers to love or affection that is deemed socially acceptable or desirable, as opposed to non-heteronormative forms of love or affection.

[2] While I include discussion of the collaborative works between Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I mainly refer throughout this thesis to Deleuze alone. I acknowledge that Guattari made significant contributions to their collaborative works; I do not mean to discredit or obscure his contributions. Although the concept of assemblage is indeed jointly developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, my analysis specifically draws on

includes historical legacies of enslavement, economic exploitation, cultural stereotyping, and systemic discrimination, among other elements. Furthermore, as Deleuze argues that assemblages are neither fixed nor permanent but exist in a constant state of flux and transformation, I note that anti-Blackness has evolved and adapted over time, taking on new forms and adapting to changing contexts in accordance with the historical moments of the film genres I will speak to in the following sections.

1.1 Praxis, Positionality, and Deleuze

My journey into the world of Gilles Deleuze began with a curiosity about the intersections of philosophy, art, and social justice. It was during my comprehensive exams when I first encountered his works in a directed study and subsequent texts that explored poststructuralism and critical film theory. I found that he, more than other authors, had an ability to bridge the abstract with the tangible, which immediately captivated me. His philosophy offers a unique lens through which I can examine the complex issues of power, subjectivity, and the dynamics of cultural production. As I delved deeper his work—partly in awe, partly to make sense of what he was saying, given his often obfuscatory writing style—I realized the immense potential of his concepts to illuminate the intricate structures of social oppression, including racial injustice.

Moreover, Deleuze's work represented an opportunity to engage critically with the colonialist, empiricist hegemonic traditions that have long dominated academic

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Deleuze's interpretation of how diverse elements combine to form a complex whole, as it applies particularly well to understanding the multifaceted nature of anti-Blackness. This approach highlights Deleuze's unique perspective within the collaborative framework he established with Guattari. The nature of their collaboration is peripheral to my own theoretical framework and Deleuze is its primary subject; specifically, I am most interested in and draw most extensively on Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1994) and his two books of film theory (1986 and 1989), all of which he wrote alone. Therefore, I refer to joint works under the authorship of "Deleuze and Guattari" but generally refer to "Deleuze's theory" for the sake of clarity and simplicity.

discourse.[3] His distinctive philosophical approach, characterized by concepts like rhizomes, assemblages, territorialization, and difference and repetition, offers a departure from traditional philosophical frameworks. His work not only defies categorization but also encourages interdisciplinary engagement of history and film studies as it speaks to historical and sociopolitical distinctions. This resonated with me as an interdisciplinary scholar whose research incorporates several fields and objects of study to cultivate new insights and applications. The interdisciplinarity of his critical considerations enabled me to counter tropes and disparities within contemporary frameworks of film studies, while seeking alternative paths of thought and analysis that could confront colonialist legacies.

This then led me to critically consider African American film, wherein I saw an opportunity to apply Deleuze's abstract concepts to the concrete realities of racial representation, identity, and resistance. I began my PhD program with a plan to conduct a psychoanalytic examination of siblingship on screen, focusing exclusively on the intricate dynamics of sibling relationships in cinema, without emphasis on race or racial contexts. Deleuze's work draws to some degree on psychoanalytic theory but challenges conventional psychoanalytic notions of subjectivity and desire, offering a more complex perspective that speaks to how identity and power are interconnected which I found valuable in analyzing race and identity. The decision to address African American film emerged organically from my own lived experience, praxis, commitment to antiracist activism, and the desire to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable academic landscape. My project has been shaped by a personal and scholarly formation as I genuinely desire—and work towards—inclusion, and I am committed to dismantling systems of oppression and advocating for social justice. It is within this context that Deleuze's work has significance for me as a tool for critical analysis and transformation within an academy that still grapples with colonialist legacies.

However, Deleuze warrants critique in the context of race. By operating primarily in the realm of abstraction and metaphor, his framework tends to prioritize universal and

[3] For comprehensive explorations of the colonialist and empiricist legacy in academic discourse, see Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2003) and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004).

decontextualized concepts (Spivak, 2010, p. 23, p. 27). While his ideas are valuable for exploring various aspects of culture and subjectivity, they often remain detached from the concrete realities of racialized experiences and systemic racism (Bonnet, 2009, p. 48). Philosopher Alberto R. Bonnet (2009) writes that Deleuze is less concerned with the requirement that concepts or philosophical ideas should correspond directly to reality or address real-world issues before being emancipated in thought (p. 48). He seeks to celebrate and explore difference in its purest philosophical form, without being tied down by the negative aspects associated with it in terms of reality (p. 48). This distinction is significant because it speaks to oversights in Deleuze's emphasis on pure thought, proffering the view that his position lacks a direct engagement with practical and ethical dimensions of philosophy as well as reality (p. 49). For example, in his discussions of black holes and white walls, he never truly elaborates upon specific subjects or identities, nor does he engage with issues of race. In the context of the white wall in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari mention in passing that the "white face"—and whiteness therein—is abstracted, libidinally amalgamated, and partial, a semblance of the "White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of his eyes" (p. 176). This is the only reference to race in relation to the "white wall" throughout Deleuze's oeuvre, and he does not follow it up. The face is not some neutral or natural phenomenon; it is a politics of signification and subjectification. The white wall can also be understood as a metaphor for the dominant and normative perspectives that structure our understanding of the world. Conversely, Deleuze describes black holes as malformations—"pores, little spots, little scars"—and insatiably greedy "occlusions striving to seize whatever comes within their reach" (p. 27, p. 40). The black hole is a lack or emptiness that is characterized by an absence of information or meaning and represents a kind of nothingness or void that is associated with a lack of creativity or the inability to generate new ideas and experiences (p. 40). The omission of race within this conceptualization is conspicuous.

One of the advantages of Deleuze's complexity and obfuscation is that it can leave a lot of room for interpretation. For example, the concepts of the white wall and black hole are primarily philosophical in nature and developed as part of a larger project of critiquing and reconceiving the nature of thought and perception. Nonetheless, Deleuze's concepts

of multiplicity and difference have been employed by scholars and theorists in the context of racial analysis to explore and challenge traditional binary and hierarchical notions of race, offering a more nuanced and fluid understanding of racial identity and oppression (Ibrahim, 2015, 2022; Saldanha, 2017; Swiboda, 2004). I also connect these concepts to issues of race. The white wall can be related to whiteness, which constructs itself as a neutral or universal standard against which other identities and experiences are measured and evaluated. Deleuze associates authority with whiteness quite uncritically. However, if we take a more critical and self-conscious stance, his concept can be used to expose the ways that whiteness operates as a form of power and privilege, and how it often serves to erase and marginalize other perspectives and experiences. Similarly, the black hole can be seen as a metaphor for a situation in which one is denied access to information or knowledge, or in which one is excluded from participating in the dominant cultural or political discourse. These concepts can be used to understand the ways in which people of colour are excluded from dominant cultural and political discourse and are denied access to knowledge and power. Seen critically, the black hole is a pertinent metaphor for the unnerving positionality of Blackness as constructed by modern thought and political practice. Constructed as Other within white supremacist narratives, Blackness (whether consciously or not) challenges these narratives by virtue of difference. This does not need to be a direct, overt challenge; the mere existence of Blackness is a challenge. By centring Black positionalities, we can challenge these narratives. I look at the binary relationship of the white wall and black hole as they affect African Americans, in the context of the historical enslavement and dehumanization of Black people which underlays systemic anti-Blackness of today. Blackness impacts and poses a challenge to white cis-amata-heteronormative understandings of history and modernity. Anti-Blackness possesses a particularity akin to Deleuze's concept of the black hole, as it engulfs and distorts the sociocultural landscape, creating unique and oppressive conditions that demand critical examination and resistance.

Some of these ideas and my approach in this thesis overlap with the important contemporary critical lenses of Afropessimism and Black optimism. Both see Blackness to be a form of dehumanization in a way that other forms of marginalization—sexual, gender, ability, etc.—are not. While I do not directly apply Afropessimism and Black

optimism as analytical frameworks, they provide crucial contextual background for understanding the unique dehumanization associated with Blackness. By discussing these theories, I highlight their importance in critically considering Blackness and set the stage for exploring sibling dynamics within African American cinema. This discussion serves to enrich the thematic exploration of my dissertation by positioning the narratives within a broader discourse on racial identity and marginalization. Frank B. Wilderson III articulated the view influentially in *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010) and has more recently expanded it in *Afropessimism* (2020b). Patrice Douglass, Selamawit D. Terrefe, and Wilderson (2018) explain that Afropessimism challenges conventional notions of identity and human subjectivity by framing Blackness not as a cultural identity, but as a position characterized by fungibility, which means being interchangeable or replaceable as commodities within a system of racialized oppression. This position of Black individuals is associated with ontological death, a condition where we are denied full recognition of our humanity and subjected to systemic devaluation. This perspective contends that Black people exist as a perpetual enemy within contemporary society, subjected to violence that cannot be analogized with the experiences of other marginalized groups. Afropessimism speaks to the intractable nature of anti-Blackness; how anti-Blackness permeates all aspects of society, including institutions, culture, and representation.

Critics of Afropessimism argue that it can sometimes appear overly deterministic, framing Blackness as a fixed position of ontological death without room for agency or resistance. These critics include Fred Moten (2008) who, without denying that Blackness is dehumanized, counters Afropessimism with Black optimism, which encapsulates the resilience, creativity, and collective joy that can emerge within Black communities despite the persistent challenges and oppressions they face. This offers a contrast to Afropessimism's emphasis on the intractable nature of anti-Blackness and the perpetual state of violence faced by Black individuals, which leads to a sense of hopelessness or resignation among its proponents and readers (p. 1745). Other limitations of Afropessimism include what African diaspora scholar Gloria Wekker (2021) refers to as its "implicit biological, essentialist conception of being Black." She states that it "is essentially an ethnocentric, African American analysis of being Black that applies to all

others classified as Slaves" (p. 89). Her point is valid in that essentialist views of Blackness articulated by Afropessimism are limiting and potentially disempowering. The dehumanization of Blackness is experienced by a variety of people. For example, the Aboriginal people of New Zealand and Australia and the people of Southern India, darker-skinned than their northern neighbors, experience anti-Blackness without being of African descent (Asante, 2007 p. 69, p. 162). This example underscores the global dimensions of anti-Blackness beyond specific ethnic or geographic boundaries. Analysis of the systemic devaluation of darker skin highlights how anti-Blackness is a pervasive component of colorism and colonial legacies worldwide. These parallels enrich our understanding of anti-Blackness as a dimensional phenomenon that intersects with various forms of racial prejudice and oppression, providing a broader context for exploring its impact on identity and societal structures. Thus, referring to these instances helps illuminate the stakes involved in recognizing and addressing anti-Blackness as a critical global issue, which enhances the analytical depth and relevance of this study.

While I hold a generally negative outlook on life and identify as a pessimist, I do not see myself as an Afropessimist. This negative view is understandable given my lived experience—predominantly defined by anguish arising from trauma and inequities—as a queer, disabled, and lower-classed Afro-L'nu demigirl.[4] I am often right to expect unfavorable outcomes, noting how institutionalized oppressions are insurmountable, and I have a bleak overall perspective as I find myself increasingly alienated amongst the amata-cis-heteronormative majority and mainstream. Yet I cannot identify with Afropessimism because, while I do anticipate and accept adversities, I do not give up or resign myself to failure. Like some of the protagonists of the films discussed in this thesis, I actively work towards fulfillment through belonging, cultivating some sense of requited acceptance in interpersonal relationships—family, romance, friendship, acquaintanceship—and in academia through gainful employment in full-time

[4] The term "demigirl" is a gender identity that falls under the broader umbrella of non-binary identities. It is not intended to be infantilizing but is used by individuals to express a complex and nuanced understanding of their gender, often signifying a partial connection to femininity or a fluid gender experience (Zimman, 2021, p. 69).

professorship. Furthermore, I find in Afropessimism a lack of discursive and practical courses of action to address or amend anti-Black violence and oppression. While critique is important, it alone does not offer a clear path forward for social justice or change. Like the protagonists of the films in this thesis, I know that loss and pain are inevitable; but I also know that loss and pain parallel gain and pleasure, that neither could exist or be appreciated without the other, and that I am bound to have positive experiences despite the negatives even if I am powerless to change outcomes. In the same way, the relationships portrayed in these films, as well as my own lived experience as a sibling, demonstrate that bonds of love and support can be forged even amidst adversity, providing a resilient foundation for navigating both the trials and triumphs of life.

On the other hand, Moten's Black optimism resonates with me less than Deleuze because I find Moten's concept of "fugitive" resistance to be too strongly linked to the dehumanization of Blackness and to lead to quite limited or finite outcomes. Moten's concept of the "fugitive" relates to the idea of escape and resistance, particularly within the context of Blackness, where the fugitive embodies a desire to elude oppressive systems and create alternative modes of existence. To my mind, Deleuze's discussion of "immanence" is similar to Moten's but offers a broader framework that accommodates a wider spectrum of experiences, strategies, and potential outcomes within the discussion of race and cinema (Deleuze, 1986, p. 59). Immanence refers to a philosophical perspective where reality and meaning are seen as inherent within the world itself, rather than transcending it through external or hierarchical structures; Deleuze does not reify resistance or change as a magical or transcendent process. For me, fugitivity and immanence resonate because they emphasize a decentralized and resistant approach to understanding race and existence, but Deleuze's philosophy provides an especially expansive lens for understanding the complexities of racial representation and resistance in cinema. It also emphasizes time and change, and my focus on kinship leads me to look for a range of modes of resistance in the context of *evolving* conditions. African American kinship evolves; it is informed by its predecessors but fluidly adapts to

particular circumstances (Miller, 2018, p. 1590).[5] Deleuze's concept of territorialization, which I address in relation to New Black Realism, also emphasizes change. Both Black optimism and Afropessimism present fairly narrow descriptions of how anti-Blackness can manifest and offer a fairly narrow spectrum of ways that things might unfold. While they both provide valuable lenses for understanding the enduring violence and oppression faced by Black individuals within a white supremacist hegemony and colonialism, I incline more to Deleuze, whose approach allows for a broad exploration of the complexities, conditions, and contingencies of anti-Blackness in the context of cinematic representation.

Indeed, cinematic representation is another area in which the relevance of Deleuze's ideas to racial politics can be explored. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (1994) contends that representation is not a neutral process but is shaped by power relations and ideologies; and as such, it can often conceal more than it reveals (p. 244). Representations such as we find in mainstream American film rely on binary oppositions and fixed identities that are used to organize and classify the world (p. 241). These oppositions create fixed categories and identities that limit our ability to understand the complexity and multiplicity of human experience (p. 226, p. 227). Representation reflects the status quo unthinkingly, unchangingly, and is unable to accommodate anything new (p. 234). As a result, representation can be seen as a form of domination that reinforces existing power structures and marginalizes those who do not fit into established categories (p. 228, p. 238). Deleuze also critiques representation for its inaccuracy. It is largely idealized and rhetorical, and thereby cannot actually capture the truth of a real situation in the world (p. 235). I extend this critique to show how colonialist, ethnocentric, and antiquated Western representations are weaponized to produce knowledge that is deeply problematic. These ideas are important to my research because white supremacist, hegemonic representation arrests creativity, interest, novelty, and reality: the failure to comprise or conform to whiteness prohibits and casts suspicion on any difference.

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[5] Miller (2018) provides a literature review that includes many additional sources that address this issue.

The fact that Deleuze's philosophy has been influential in various discussions about race demonstrates its malleability; these discussions particularly draw on Deleuze's ways of breaking down hierarchical or totalizing thinking and his attention to power dynamics. In his article "Blackness and Nothingness: Mysticism in the Flesh," Moten (2013) uses Deleuze to explore the intersections of Blackness, mysticism, and embodiment (p. 742). Moten draws upon Deleuze's ideas of multiplicity and becoming to articulate the complex nature of Black subjectivity and resistance to traditional categorizations (p. 744, p. 754). Other critical race scholars have also drawn on Deleuze's concepts of the rhizome and assemblage, which will be discussed below. Saldanha and Adams's edited collection, *Deleuze and Race* (2013), engages with assemblages, deterritorialization, and non-hierarchal power relations and identifications in the context of racial identity, racialization processes, and racial politics. Of particular interest are Simone Bigall's (2012) incisive analysis of how whiteness is a matter of difference, defined by what it is not; and John E. Drabinski's critical examination of Afro-Caribbean racialization using Deleuze's engagement with the politics of racial passing (p. 75, p. 290). Elsewhere, Saldanha (2015, 2017) cites Deleuze's concept of assemblages and multiplicities to deconstruct and examine the complexities of racial dynamics; she emphasizes how, in America during the time period addressed in this dissertation, race operates as an assemblage within broader systems of power and representation. Awad Ibrahim (2022) uses the concept of the rhizome to analyze the fluidity and dynamic nature of racial identities during the period of enslavement in the USA up to the 1970s (p. 77). Colin Patrick Ashley and Michelle Billies (2017) note the ways in which racial identities resist fixed and hierarchical structures in the 19th through 21st centuries (p. 64). Postcolonial studies scholar Dan Swanton (2016) writes more broadly about how Deleuze's emphasis on difference and the rejection of totalizing systems aligns with the anti-essentialist perspectives often found in critical race theory, allowing scholars to engage critically with issues of racial representation, identity, and power dynamics (p. 306). Swanton concludes that Deleuze's philosophy provides a fruitful theoretical framework for scholars to explore the nuances of race, challenging established paradigms and opening new avenues for understanding the complexities of racialized experiences and resistance (p. 311). This exploration of Afropessimism, Black optimism, and Deleuze's relevance

provides the theoretical backdrop against which this dissertation investigates sibling relationships in African American cinema and illuminates how these relationships both reflect and contest the broader narratives of racial identity and resilience.

1.2 Deleuze ≠ Delusional

An important reason Deleuze is inspiring is because of his methodological emphasis on *description* rather than *prescription*. Many philosophers are concerned with proving that their view is *correct*, either factually or ethically. Deleuze, however, *describes* space and time and how we as subjects inhabit space and time. He is not concerned with truth or proving things right; he is concerned with the characteristics of thought and maintains that we need to pay attention to the *qualities* of things. In this, Deleuze is influenced by phenomenology which does not see phenomena to be merely coincidental but acknowledges the roles of certain structures, such as authority, to be central influences (Hughes, 2008, p. 3, p. 47).

I find a phenomenological outlook profoundly useful for this thesis because it is compatible with decolonization. First, it does not set out to "discover" anything. For Deleuze, it is impossible to "discover" anything because everything is constantly being created and recreated. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), he and Guattari challenge the idea of discovery and argue that the identification of new phenomena is always relative to previously identified phenomena, emphasizing the interconnectedness and contextual nature of knowledge (p. 87). This approach is inherently decolonial because it works against *columbusing*. Columbusing means two things: one, to proclaim oneself to be a discoverer of something known and long existent to peoples; and two, to inaccurately claim knowledge about something unknown or theoretically nonexistent in order to assimilate it to empirical or colonialist standards (Sackey, 2019, p. 395; Salinas, 2014). Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari (1983) do not believe that one system of society or thought is superior to another; this is entirely different from a white supremacist imperial view based on a sense of the superiority of one system over another (p. 118). The second way Deleuze's descriptiveness is compatible with decolonization is that it is very different from a positivist or empiricist system that uses details and facts as evidence. In

Cinema 1: The Movement-Image (1986), he explores how an understanding of film is contingent upon processes of identification and an intuitive grasp of space as constructed in cinema rather than quantitative or empirical data (p. 234). Providing evidence implies objectivity, both in the sense that one claims to be objective and in the sense that one has an objective. Deleuze and his translators note that he does not provide a master narrative supported by descriptive evidence (p. xi). He does not use broad strokes but rather dwells on the specific and the particular. His contributions in themselves—the sheer act of contribution as valid—assert that any person or thing can be changed when it is described, and that description itself is also subject to transformation and addition (Deleuze, 1989, p. 166). In other words, neither the identity nor the description of a thing is fixed or finite.

1.2.1 Assembling Identities: How Assemblages Shape Relationship

This approach appears in the central Deleuzian concept of the assemblage. Deleuze does not describe things in isolation; he describes them in relation to other things and understands the basis of these relations as "assemblages." He develops the concept of the assemblage both in his work with Guattari and beyond. This concept refers to the idea that everything in the world is composed of various components or "parts" that come together to form a complex whole (Nail, 2017, p. 22). An assemblage is comprised of "machinic…bodies, actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to each other; on the other hand, it is a collective…of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations" (Mullarkey, 2009, p. 88). Deleuze and Guattari provide various examples of assemblage in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987); these include language, social institutions, the body, and even art forms like the novel (p. 140, p. 179). They write that assemblages are dynamic and contingent arrangements of heterogeneous elements that come together to form a functional unity (p. 109). They do not provide exhaustive lists of what is included in assemblages because the components of assemblages are context-specific and can vary widely (p. 4, p. 23). They also use the term "rhizome" to illustrate the decentralized nature of assemblages. Within the rhizomatic structure, the elements are interconnected laterally, emphasizing their non-hierarchical relationships

and the absence of a central authority. Crucially, elements within the assemblage or rhizome are related non-hierarchically to one another.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) contrast the concept of the assemblage with traditional notions of fixed structures and linear causality, encouraging a more fluid and interconnected perspective on reality (p. 71). Assemblages are complex and dynamic systems that defy fixed categories (p. 22). They emphasize the contingent and everchanging relationships amongst elements and the importance of understanding how various components interact to produce emergent properties (p. 23). Elements in an assemblage are "layered" together, dynamically assembled and reassembled (p. 5); they are not simply stacked one upon another but interact and overlap, creating complex strata of meaning and function (p. 53). Elements are also related laterally, meaning that they are interconnected-within the same plane. While layered and lateral connections differ in focus, they both contribute to the understanding of the complexity and dynamics of assemblages in Deleuze and Guattari's framework. In this view, change in the assemblage comes from decentralized and interconnected interactions. New qualities and possibilities emerge as different components interact within the assemblage (p. 60). Changes can originate from any point within a network, not from a centralized authority or from predetermined structures; connections can be made or severed without following a predetermined path, which challenges conventional notions of causality and fixed identities (p. 58). Here and elsewhere, Deleuze believes that assemblages are capable of generating new modes of thought and action, as well as opening up new possibilities for social and political change (Nail, 2017, p. 36).

Deleuze does acknowledge that people and things can be positioned hierarchically—which leads to the distinction between systems and assemblages. He uses the term "systems" inconsistently—at times he refers to assemblages as systems—but it is useful to distinguish between the two types of organization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 116). Deleuze and Guattari refer to systems as ordered, hierarchical structures; they often critique these for their separation of thought and society into discrete ranks or classes (p. 146, p. 147). In systems, certain elements hold more authority or influence over others. While they can also exhibit interconnections, systems typically aim for stability and

maintenance of a particular order or function. Systems and assemblages have different approaches to organization and emergence. Systems tend to impose a more structured order on their components, whereas assemblages allow the contingent and dynamic nature of these arrangements to flourish. In Deleuze and Guattari's critique of the representational system, for example, they challenge its fixed and stratified modes of thought and organization (p. 151, p. 152). Understanding the distinction between systems and assemblages allows me to appreciate how the latter offers a fluid perspective for analyzing complex phenomena, especially in contexts like film, art, society, and beyond, wherein multiple elements interact in arbitrary ways to produce outcomes. Deleuze and Guattari propose the concept of the assemblage as a more flexible, interconnected arrangement, advocating for more open and adaptable models of understanding and organization.

I identify anti-Blackness as an assemblage: it is layered, and its elements are related non-hierarchically. It is not just a singular entity but a complex arrangement of various components such as institutional practices, discursive representations, cultural norms, and individual attitudes and behaviors. These things are interconnected and interdependent, creating a system that perpetuates the subjugation and marginalization of Black people. The assemblage of anti-Blackness also shapes and is shaped by other social assemblages such as capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism. Thus, although it includes individual prejudices, anti-Blackness is a systemic and structural issue that requires a comprehensive and intersectional analysis to dismantle it. Its components are layered or stratified; for example, the history of enslavement is layered with the past and current disproportionate conscription of Black men to the military (Graham, 2003, p. 15, p. 16). Laterally, similar elements relate to one another on the same plane; systems of policing and the prison system are connected in this way. The dispersed and interconnected nature of the assemblage means that a single policy cannot change everything; if one element is changed but the others remain the same, change will not be as broad. For example, an affirmative action policy in one institution does not change the *connected* racism in other institutions, in media representation, and so on. There are multiple pathways for change, and transformations may arise spontaneously and collaboratively across various elements and contexts.

The concept of assemblages in Deleuze's philosophy is a versatile and extensive idea that transcends the boundaries of any specific field and can be applied to a wide range of contexts. For instance, artist and theorist Simon O'Sullivan (2010) says that in art and aesthetics, the concept of assemblages helps dissect how materials, techniques, and cultural contexts converge to give meaning to artworks (p. 189). Philosopher Paul Patton (2000) notes that the concept of assemblage sheds light politically on the complex interplay of actors, ideologies, and technologies in shaping social movements (p. 10, p. 83). Ecologist Mark Halsey (2006) posits that the concept of assemblage aids in ecology, helping to understand the intricate web of interactions among species within ecosystems (p. 34). This speaks to the multidisciplinary value in applying assemblage theory to unravel the interconnected components shaping their respective domains; and the versatility of this concept underscores the richness and adaptability of Deleuze's theory, making it a valuable analytical tool for exploring the complex and emergent nature of systems in many fields of inquiry. While I—a scholar whose specialty is cinema and media studies—focus on filmic assemblages and the assemblage of anti-Blackness, it is crucial to recognize that Deleuze's concept of assemblages has a broader and more expansive relevance across multiple disciplines and areas of inquiry.

1.2.2 Deleuze's Film Theory

Cinema is one of the assemblages Deleuze describes in detail. Deleuze's film theory—primarily conveyed in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1986) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989)—offers a distinctive and innovative perspective on cinema. Drawing inspiration from phenomenology and semiotics, Deleuze proffers the view that film holds philosophical implications. He seeks to reveal how cinema's unique temporal and spatial qualities create a dynamic interplay of images, movements, and time. In *Cinema 1* (1986), he discusses the classical "movement-image" cinema, where time is subordinate to action and movement (p. 31, p. 107). Towards the end of *Cinema 1*, he speaks to shifts from the classical movement-image to the more modern "time-image" cinema, which disrupts traditional narrative structures and invites contemplation (p. 127, p. 200). In *Cinema 2* (1989), he argues that cinema is not merely a representation of reality but a complex medium that generates its own forms of thought (p. 55). His prioritization of

time and exploration of forms of thought connect film theory to history and to social transformation (p. 172). In other words, his film theory is not simply about an artistic medium; through the concept of time, it is a theory about society and social change. Deleuze (1989) proposes that time is the defining attribute of the subject and object of cinema (p. 115). His core claim in these books and elsewhere is that in a world where things are subjective and uncertain, only change and duration are certain. In other words, the only thing that is real is time, and cinema is temporal by definition (Deleuze, 1986, p. 99, p. 109, p. 168, p. 177; Deleuze, 1989, p. 155, p. 160, p. 167). Cinematic images have a remarkable claim on reality because they move. They encompass the passage of time in memory of the past, assessment of the present, and projection towards the future. A movie can show time in different stages: a flashback, the current timeline, and a flash-forward. As audience members, our perception of regular time is suspended while we watch a movie and become absorbed by in its own historical setting and timeline. We can "visit" the year 1800, for example, without questioning how or why we got there. Years can pass while we spend two hours watching a movie.

Cinema, as a uniquely immersive and image-based art form, serves as a bridge between the realms of artistic representation and lived human experience. Deleuze does not conceive of images only as recorded images. Inspired by philosopher Henri Bergson, Deleuze sees images as "appearances" in the broadest sense, including ideas in the mind and material realities as well as recorded images (Mullarkey, 2009, p. 180). Cinema combines virtual and actual images. During filming, the images recorded are virtual; they are the potentialities captured in the process. These virtual images become actual when they are projected onto the screen, making them visible to the audience and bridging the realms of potentiality and realization. Furthermore, there is a layering of temporalities. The recorded moments of the filmmaking process are virtual images of the past, while virtual images of the future emerge, unfolding as the plot advances and as viewers anticipate the development of the story. During projection, the virtual images of past and future are present to audiences, in whose minds they become actual thought-images, which are transient, manifest in the present (p. 99, p. 100). This multiplicity allows cinema to offer a rich and multi-layered experience, where the virtual and the actual

intersect, engaging the audience's imagination and perception in a continuous interplay of thought-images with virtual images of the past and future.

Cinema connects the actual with the virtual non-hierarchically. For Deleuze, movies transcend our anthropocentric perspective by conveying their own perceptions of us; the cinematic mirror is two-way (Deleuze, 1989, p. 67, p. 70). While films are human creations, they also function as autonomous agents that reflect and shape cultural perceptions, actively engaging and altering the viewer's understanding of themselves and the world. Furthermore, cinema and reality are not independent of each other; instead, the visuality of cinema creates and comprises a true reality rather than an *imitation* of reality. Here, *true reality* refers to the concept that cinema does not merely mimic the external world, but rather constructs a perceptual reality of its own, one that viewers engage with and experience as a form of reality that is both distinct from and influential on their interpretation of the everyday world. In the intricate interplay between actual and virtual multiplicities, the virtual is not an unreal or secondary realm but an integral part of the actual. Viewers and images are laterally or non-hierarchically related to one another. They have distinct roles and functions within cinema, but Deleuze's emphasis is on their lateral relationship and interaction rather than their inherent differences or roles. This interaction is one of shared reality. This does not mean all viewers respond the same way to the images of a film. Individuals bring diverse perspectives and interpretations to the images; they have differing degrees of access to social and material capital, and they interpret cinematic images in ways that are influenced by these differences. This makes cinema a socially powerful medium, despite the fact that – and even because – its images are virtual and have no fixed meaning but exist always in relation to a larger context of assemblages (Deleuze, 1989, p. 69, p. 100). In the chapter on Blaxploitation, I will use Deleuze's concept of "fabulation" to explore the impact of cinema as a socially potent medium, underscored by the inherently virtual and context-dependent nature of its images.

The social potential of this time- and image-based medium comprehends both reproductive and productive forces. It reproduces the world in which cinema exists to create the elements and relationships within the film. As it captures and depicts facets of

the world it portrays, it makes real-life experiences and mental processes visible to the audience. Therefore, these reproductive forces of cinema encompass the very representational models Deleuze critiques – cultural, commercial, industrial, and homogenizing standards which resonate as they enter the mainstream (Deleuze, 1986, p. 49). Productive forces, on the other hand, facilitate connections within the viewership and with the world at large. These connections may be more individual or more collective, but in either case, they speak to the identifications that viewers make autonomously through cognition (p. 50). The reproductive forces allow audience members to concurrently recognize cultural references and social cues, and the productive forces allow them to react differently to the same film. Both reproductive and productive forces relate to the concept of cinematic repetition, which will be discussed in the third chapter.

These Deleuzian concepts—the intricate interplay of the reproductive and productive forces of cinema, and my use of assemblage to consider how anti-Blackness works—help me to critically consider the dynamics of Black kinship within the context of film narratives. Deleuze's cinema books do not engage with individual narratives through close readings; instead, he develops abstract concepts and frameworks that can be applied to a wide range of cinematic narratives. My approach to close reading connects his theoretical concepts to individual films by examining how these concepts operate within specific narratives, especially in relation to kinship and related themes. Analyzing the interplay between them can offer insights into how kinship and anti-Blackness function within larger social frameworks as seen in select movies about America from the 1960s to 1990s.

1.3 Kinship

Deleuze does not explicitly address kinship as an assemblage in his work, but his ideas on assemblages and the interconnected nature of elements within them can be applied to kinship structures. Like other social constructs, kinship can be seen as an assemblage composed of various elements, including gender identities, corporeal aspects, memory, and relationships—specifically, the performative dimensions of familial connections. While kinship and anti-Blackness do not share identical components, I analyze how they

intersect within the broader social assemblages of race, identity, and power. Kinship is crucial in a context of anti-Blackness as an endurant institution established by informal mutual aid and exchange. Kinship—including siblingship—is an aspect of being a "survivor" of anti-Blackness. The positive aspects of kin networks include the support they offer for Black people in the wake of crises like unemployment, illness, challenges in childrearing, natural disasters, accidents, and death (Mills et al., 1999, p. 28). They also keep harm at bay for people in at-risk or marginalized positionalities by providing protection, guidance, nurturance, and motivation (Jarrett et al., 2010, p. 301, p. 302). Moreover, many people perceived to be at risk are also entrenched in familial-kin support networks maintained across their life span (Herzfeld, 2007, p. 316; Ianni, 1972, p. 47; Mills et al., 1999, p. 32; Weston, 1991, p. 47; Whiteman et al., 2012, p. 267).

1.3.1 Fictive Kinship

These familial-kin support networks have a long history which, importantly, does not always prioritize *blood* kin. Enslaved Black people had various forms of family due to their being separated through sales; blood kin were often relocated to other plantations (Belgrave & Allison, 2019, p. 132). Enslavement underwrote the kinship in which African Americans refer to one another as "brother" or "sister" to reflect membership in the same "family" in those plantations to whom they were sold (Asante, 2004, p. 11). Enslaved African Americans were given the surnames of their masters. This created a form of siblingship predicated on something other than genetic kinship, while genetic brothers and sisters might have different surnames (p. 12). After the abolition of slavery, "Jim Crow" segregation emerged and solidified the national exclusion of Black rights, such as housing, education, employment, and voting rights. In this altered context of oppression, extended kin relations were upheld in technologically advanced urban societies despite the shifts in geography, municipal development, and a respective demand for mobility (Mills et al., 1999, p. 28). This substantiates the idea that extended kin relations, including sibling relations, have distinctive functions and continue to be viable.

Some of the forms of kinship that sustain African Americans are what social scientists call "fictive." While familiality and intimacy are often linked to bloodlines, trace descent, matrimony, or legal adoption, fictive kinship concerns close relations which are not based upon consanguineal or marital ties; it consists of interpersonal bonds which are chosen and socially accepted (Braithwaite et al., 2010, p. 389, p. 395). Sometimes fictive kinship bonds are developed when blood or legal family members are estranged or die (p. 398). What distinguishes fictive kinship is its recognition of people's social, particularly interpersonal, needs, and how people actively pursue and fulfil these needs beyond biological lineage or legal contracts (p. 391, p. 396). Fictive kinship can be rooted in material necessity but can also be a matter of choice or circumstance. Braithwaite et al. (2010) refer to fictive kinship as "voluntary kinship" in order to emphasize the intentional and active nature of chosen family relationships, highlighting the agency and authenticity involved in constructing these bonds (p. 390). In Chapter Two, I discuss *Brotherhood of Death*, in which characters form deep voluntary bonds akin to those of biological siblings. Braithwaite et al. categorize voluntary kinship into four main types: substitute families, supplementary families, convenience families, and extended families (p. 388, p. 395).[6] Substitute families serve as replacements for absent or unsatisfactory blood or legal family ties (p. 396). As discussed in Chapter Three, this form of voluntary kinship is central to *New Jack City*. Also discussed in Chapter Three, the supplementary kinships in *Boyz N the Hood* showcase how individuals navigate complex familial networks that encompass both biological and chosen connections.

While kinship can be seen as an assemblage, it is essential to differentiate between traditional and fictive kinships, as they entail distinct types of assemblages. The notion of traditional kinship can be fluid and contingent on cultural, social, and legal factors. In both Western sociology and psychology and broader Eurocentric cultural norms,

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[6] Margaret K. Nelson (2013) outlines additional forms of fictive kinship: situational, ritual, and intentional (p. 261). Situational kinship appears in different types of more or less organized institutions and other bodies (p. 266). Likewise, ritual fictive kinship arises from customary practices which include daily life, traditions, and special occasions (p. 266). Her concept of "intentional" kin is very similar to what Braithwaite et al. refer to as voluntary kin, although Nelson does not identify distinctive types of intentional kin (p.266).

traditional kinship is often associated with blood relations, although it also encompasses legal structures such as marriage and adoption that may or may not overlap with blood relations. Key elements in this assemblage include family members and prescribed roles (mother, daughter, etc.) as well as bodies, law, and religious ceremony (e.g., for marriage). This assemblage tends to be more hierarchical, rigid, and stratified, so it operates more as a system in Deleuze's terms.

On the other hand, the assemblage of fictive kinship—especially the voluntary form—is not bound by blood or legality. Its key elements are also people, but they come together based on shared affinities, values, and emotional bonds, highlighting how these relationships are fluid and decentralized. Fictive kinship emphasizes the interconnectedness of elements and the agency of individuals in constructing their chosen families (Laurie & Stark, 2012, p. 20). The relationships might draw from and be influenced by the prescribed roles in traditional family systems, but the assemblage overall may be less rigid. For instance, law is not an element of fictive kinships in the same way that it relates to traditional kinship systems; the bond does not legally ensure inheritance if someone dies intestate, for example. The assemblage of fictive kinship reflects the broader Deleuzian concept of assemblages as dynamic, interconnected systems that resist rigid categorization and encourage innovative approaches to understanding complex social phenomena. Musser (2012) draws on the concept of assemblages in order to investigate different ways of forming kinship bonds (p. 90). She argues that different kinship structures provide insights into the lived experiences and dynamics of marginalized peoples (p. 90). This approach challenges conventional notions of family and relationships and explores alternative forms of connection and belonging (p. 91). In examining fictive kinship through the lens of the assemblage, we can better appreciate the multifaceted nature of chosen family networks and their significance in challenging conventional notions of kinship and family.

Sociologist Margaret K. Nelson (2013) further notes that classifying kinship relationships as "fictive" highlights the fact that these can be seen as unconventional or challenging to societal norms (p. 261). Individuals involved in such relationships often need to engage in discourse and communication to justify and make sense of these chosen familial bonds

to others (p. 261). For example, a person may call someone their chosen mother or second mother, which may raise a question about what necessitated or prompted that choice in a way that the label of "mother" is not questioned in the system of traditional kinship (p. 261). This discursive effort is necessary to legitimize and convey the significance of voluntary kin relationships in a society where traditional criteria of family may not readily apply (p. 261). Nelson writes that voluntary kinship—which she calls "intentional" kinship—is prominent amongst marginalized communities in which families are disjointed by systemic violence (i.e. ageism, genocide, homophobia, racism, sexism, transphobia, legacies of enslavement and residential schools) (p. 266). For example, Black and Latina queer and transgender houses includes chosen mothers, fathers, and children (who have sibling relationships to one another) who support each other. Intentional kin are maintained in the interest of shared resources, socioemotional support, and mutual selection (p. 266). Examples of intentional kin also include enslaved, displaced, or otherwise marginalized peoples who choose people in similar situations as family members (p. 267, p. 271).

Both Nelson (2013) and Braithwaite et al. (2010) address fictive kinship in relation to the unique challenges and experiences faced by African Americans in constructing chosen family networks.[7] Nelson (2013) notes that historical and sociocultural factors have played a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of voluntary kinship among Black communities (p. 261). The historical legacy of slavery, racial segregation, and systemic anti-Blackness have profoundly influenced the ways in which Black individuals seek and create alternative familial bonds (p. 261, p. 262). Similarly, Braithwaite et al. (2010) recognize that Black people often navigate the complexities of race and kinship simultaneously (p. 391). For African Americans, seeking support and connection within communities that provide a profound sense of belonging and identity is not only a response to their personal needs but also a way to address the specific challenges associated with anti-Blackness (p. 391, p. 404). Voluntary kinship can serve as a means of creating spaces where Black people can find emotional, social, and even economic

[7] Nelson and Braithwaite et al. in turn cite the following on studies of African American kinship: Chatters et al., 1994; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1999; Fordham, 1986; and Stack, 1975.

support that may not always be readily available within mainstream societal structures (p. 404). In this sense, race becomes a significant element that informs the very nature and objectives of voluntary kinship networks among Black communities. Films like *Coffy* and *New Jack City* do not portray chosen family dynamics in a wholly positive light. Coffy is betrayed by her sexual partner, and the avowed brothers in *New Jack City* turn on one another. However, even in their portrayal of these disappointments or challenges, they shed light on the complexities and realities of constructing alternative familial bonds within the African American community. By examining moments where chosen family dynamics falter or are tested, one gains a deeper understanding of how historical and sociocultural factors have influenced the formation of such networks and the ways in which individuals navigate them. This ultimately contributes to a more nuanced analysis of the intricate intersections of race, kinship, and community in the late twentieth century African American context. It sheds light on the enduring strength and resilience of Black individuals in navigating complex familial networks rooted in choice and shared experiences.

Bearing this in mind, I utilize Deleuzian concepts to define African American kinship as a unique assemblage that is rooted in a specific historical context. Its elements include, as Nelson and Braithwaite et al. both note, the legacies of slavery and segregation as well as ongoing systemic anti-Blackness. The element of extended and voluntary family networks is particularly important because of the precarious nature of kinship due to separation from blood family in enslavement (Asante, 2004, p. 12). Another important element is story-telling traditions for preserving knowledge; because many Black histories, even today, have not been legitimized by legal and cultural authorities, there may be no archive or records within colonial systems. African American kinship is also enriched by elements such as communal rituals, music, and religious practices (Mills et al., 1999, p. 28, p. 30). These elements collectively contribute to a rich tapestry of cultural memory and resilience within African American communities (p. 30). These elements often serve as forms of resistance, resilience, and continuity, reinforcing the significance of communal bonds and shared experiences in the absence of acknowledgment within colonial systems.

1.3.2 Psychoanalysis and Critical Race Studies

While sources I have cited note that Blackness informs kinship, they do not address all the structures within that kinship. To address this gap in terms of siblingship structures, I draw upon existing taxonomies and theories of interpersonal relationships in psychoanalysis, psychology, and sociology. These explore themes of identification, attachment, and more. By applying these to the African American context portrayed in the films I analyze, it becomes possible to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced examination of how siblingship dynamics operate within Black communities. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a richer exploration of the films' representations of kinship and offers insights into the specific ways in which African American sibling relationships are constructed and portrayed.

Although I draw on psychoanalytic theory in my understanding of siblingship, I acknowledge that psychoanalytic theory has been challenged by many anti-racist scholars. For example, Razia Aziz (1997) argues that psychoanalytic theory contributes to the specific forms of misogyny experienced by Black women by universalizing the psyche while occluding lived experiences of race and gender (p.72). In their anthology, *Unsettling Ourselves: Reflections and Resources for Deconstructing Colonial Mentality* (2011), which calls for solidarity and allyship to support Indigenous autonomy, feminist and activist scholars Claire, Lindsey, Tema Okun, and Denise C. Breton each note that the scope of psychoanalytic theory is often inadequate for BIPOC given its tendency to isolate the individual psyche from the wider sociopolitical, historical, and ongoing context; this privatizes the origins of trauma or stress wholly within an Oedipal theatre of familial relations, replicating a framework and methodology that favours colonialist and capitalist privatization of all things—including the psyche—rather than meaningful engagement or amendment (p. 95, p. 105, p. 165, p. 167, p. 186).[8] Additionally, performance and cultural studies scholar Ann Pellegrini (1997) posits that psychoanalytic theory is predominantly operant on an apparatus of parenthood and siblingship that

[8] Claire and Lindsey sign their work with single names only. This source was compiled by a collective that does not distinguish between editors and authors. It is listed in the Reference List under Jensen, D., Win, W., & Demuth, S.

superimposes an imperialist vanguard of enslavement and white supremacy, coding whiteness and amata-cis-heteronormativity as valid and pathologizing any deviation (p. 57, p. 109, p. 110, 119, p. 123).[9]

Despite such objections, psychoanalytic theory has and does yield invaluable insights relative to the topics that are relevant to my research: family, individuation, culture, politics, and race. An important model for this is Frantz Fanon, who explores psychoanalysis through anti-racist theory and action. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), Fanon argues that traditional psychoanalytic theory is fundamentally limited by its Eurocentric origins: its narrow definition of "normal" human behaviour creates and legitimizes a binary between the "normal" and the "abnormal," which is often used to justify the oppression of marginalized groups such as people of colour (p. 33, p. 53, p. 73, p. 121, p. 124, p. 136). He suggests that psychoanalytic theory can only be truly effective if it takes into account the social and historical context in which it is being applied and recognizes that all human behaviour is shaped by the larger cultural and political systems in which it occurs (p. 77, p. 80). He also argues that it is essential to acknowledge the impact of racism and colonialism on the psyche of people of colour, and to recognize the ways in which these systems have created specific psychological and emotional responses in those who have been oppressed (p. 16, p. 71). Fanon does not argue that we need to reject psychoanalysis completely; instead, he states that a more inclusive and contextualized approach to psychoanalytic theory is necessary to fully understand the experiences and behaviours of people of colour, and to address the root causes of their oppression (p. 27. P. 199, p. 205). Psychoanalytic theory is not outside of politics or history, as evidenced by cultural shifts within it.

David Marriott's (1998) discussion of psychopolitics in "Bonding Over Phobia" accounts for race in relation to representation and is thus relevant to the film narratives I discuss.[10]

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[9] For additional anti-racist critiques of psychoanalysis, see also Breines, 1996; Brewer & Dundes, 2018; Case, 1995; Cowan, 2005; Diamond, 2002; Marbley, 2005; McFadden, 2011; Roth, 2004; Smith, 2011; White, 2010.
[10] Psychopolitics, as described by David Marriott (1998), is the study of how individual and collective psychic experiences and traumas are intertwined with broader political structures and ideologies (p. 429).

Marriott uses psychoanalytic theory and critical race discourse to frame rifts in fantasy, fear, desire, and abjection (p. 417). One major force in psychopolitics is mimetic desire, which is the desire that makes us innately social beings as we copy and imitate behaviours (Antonello & Diazzi, 2019, p. 4). Marriott argues that mimetic desire depends on how representations are reinforced through repetition or the authority of the source of the representation. Furthermore, representations do not need to be reinforced by reality in order to work; mimetic desire works in the psyche if representations alone are present. As people consume media and see images of themselves, it invokes a mimetic mode of thinking (Marriott, 1998, p. 280). There is a common expression that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Even when the representations of ourselves are unflattering, we start to believe what we see. This does not mean that we will automatically act in the world in the same way that we see our likenesses onscreen behaving. However, if we see an ostensible representation of our likeness that is unflattering and otherwise very different from us, we internalize part of it nonetheless. There are also parallels between the concept of mimetic desire, which underscores the innate social aspect of human beings as they engage in the act of copying and imitation on an individual level, and Deleuze's exploration of cinema's reproductive forces, which operate on a broader, more dispersed, and less individually psychic scale. For me, this connection illuminates the interplay between individual and collective desires and underscores their profound impact on both psychic and cinematic dimensions, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human psychology and social dynamics with the forces at play in the realm of cinema. This is why representation is important on the levels of both the individual psyche and broader social assemblages.

My own intervention in psychoanalytic theory is, in part, to acknowledge the significance of fictive kinship alongside blood kinship. In this, I take my lead from Nancy Chodorow (1999), a prominent psychoanalyst and feminist scholar; she critiques Freud's emphasis on the Oedipal complex and the centrality of the mother-child relationship while emphasizing the importance of caregivers beyond biological mothers (p. 57, p. 58, p. 93). However, Chodorow's analysis does not address race and other distinctions of positionality. In order to depart from the white supremacist paradigms that often prioritize consanguineal and marital family structures, it is essential to recognize how

race and assemblages of anti-Blackness intersect with kinship systems and assemblages. Nonetheless, this is an intervention in psychoanalytic theory, not a rejection of it. Structures of individuation, identification, and attachment remain pertinent, especially when analyzing the representations of siblingship in the films themselves. By grounding the discussion in both the broader context of kinship and the specific examination of sibling dynamics within African American communities portrayed in the films, I note the complexities and nuances of how these structures interact and contribute to the narratives. This approach allows us to bridge the gap between general kinship considerations and the particular exploration of siblingship, illustrating their interconnectedness within the films' portrayal of Black familial relationships.

1.4 Siblingship Themes

1.4.1 Laterality

Within the broader framework of kinship, the concept of laterality emerges as a unique and important dimension when examining the dynamics of siblingship (Sweetser, 1970, p. 48). It is not separate from dimensions such as culturally specific constructions of gender and race, but it is distinct. Psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell (2013) argues that understanding the specificity of sibling relationships is crucial, as it challenges the traditional vertical model of family dynamics, where the focus is primarily on the relationship with the father (p. 29). She defines the lateral, sibling relationship as one of "minimal difference" (p. 28). Laterality does not imply sameness. Birth order is significant and differentiates siblings; the arrival of a younger sibling, which she described as a traumatic element of laterality, speaks to the importance of acknowledging differences and dynamics within lateral relationships (p. 17, p. 19). Thus, laterality involves processes of both identification—movement towards similarity—and deidentification—movement away from it—which emphasizes that these relationships are in a constant state of flux (p. 27, p. 28). The importance of birth order does not only influence identity formation in childhood; in *Coffy* and *Boyz N the Hood*, birth order assumes a significant role into adulthood as elder siblings shoulder distinct responsibilities and protective roles concerning their younger counterparts. Overall,

laterality speaks to the construction of identity and the distribution of roles within sibling relationships (Sweetser, 1970, p. 48). It underscores the idea that birth order can significantly influence an individual's experiences, responsibilities, and expectations within the family structure. It is definitive in the formation of sibling bonds and shapes how siblings perceive and interact with one another, as well as how parents, extended family, and society at large perceives and interacts with them (p. 48, p. 49).

Mitchell does not consider extensively how many forms of difference intersect with sibling laterality, but she connects gender to social distinctions. She writes that early childhood sibling differentiation between baby and toddler is foundational to the formation of the ego and creation of the social subject (p. 30); these processes look "forward to the diverse and manifold splittings that characterize the social world: friend/enemy, young/old, white/black, child/baby, boy/girl . . . superior/inferior" (p. 29). Furthermore, some social processes such as marriage and gendered labor have traditionally relied on lateral gender differentiation (p. 27). Recognizing the horizontal axis of sibling relationships, she writes, not only enriches our understanding of family dynamics, but also extends our understanding of broader social relationships. Although most of the scholarship on laterality is quite ahistorical, some includes ideas about connections between siblingship and cultural context that can be situated historically by studying specific examples such as films. This final section on siblingship outlines the ahistorical definitions and does not explore in detail how they intersect with Blackness, but the next two chapters aim to bring more nuance to these concepts by situating them historically and exploring their intersections with race.

1.4.2 Siblingship and Belonging

Theorists assert that siblingship can be one of the most enduring relationships across a lifespan, since siblings are at least as reciprocal as peer relations and more so than hierarchal relations with parents (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006; Conger & Little, 2010, Criss & Shaw, 2005; Dunn, 2007). As Deleuze teaches us, the only constant in life is change. Although he does not address siblingship, I think that siblingship gives us a sense of stability. Sibling relationships can meet the need for object constancy; this is the

understanding that an object is constant, stable, and enduring despite changes in conditions surrounding the object or one's perspective of it (Bremner, Slater, & Johnson, 2015, p. 8). Object constancy is often presented as a universal psychological or psychic concept that encompasses the capacity to trust that a relationship is consistent and complete, despite the existence of conflict, hostility, or disagreement (Blum, 2010, p. 37; Brandell, 2010, p. 144). Clinicians and theorists see the sibling relationship itself to be a constant object because it is lifelong (Edwards, 2006, p. 24). As some of the cinematic narratives of the next two chapters demonstrate, sibling relationships may face betrayals or challenges; however, the concept of object constancy within siblingship extends beyond individual actions or conflicts. Object constancy pertains to the *fact* of the sibling bond, which persists over time and remains a foundational aspect of the relationship, and as such has an element of trust and mutuality (p. 24). For instance, I have my sister: I know she is alive, well, and sympathetic to me even though she is not physically within my field of vision. Her location or worldview does not change who she is, our relationship, or what she means to me—although I am amenable to the idea that should we emulate *The Boondock Saints* (1999), our relationship could one day change.[11]

Despite the universalism of much scholarship on object constancy, some scholars acknowledge that the experience and interpretation of such concepts can be influenced by various factors, including race. Exploring how race intersects with psychological phenomena like object constancy offers a more comprehensive understanding of individual marginalized peoples experiences and perceptions within broader sociocultural contexts. Laura Melano Flanagan (2022), reflecting on the framework of psychoanalytic theory, writes that race can significantly influence one's experience and expression of object constancy as it intersects with socialization, identity formation, and interpersonal relationships (p. 95). The unique racialized experiences and sociocultural contexts that individuals navigate may shape their perceptions of self and others, thereby impacting the development and maintenance of object constancy (p. 96). Likewise, psychotherapist

[11] Troy Duffy's *Boondock Saints* follows a pair of brothers whose own religiosity—and values encoded therein, which is key to their identification with one another—and observation of the inefficacy of the judicial system and prompt them to become vigilantes. They annihilate organized crime figures in the name of God.

Gail Lewis (2020) observes that one's positionality in terms of race and gender inform how one consolidates objects and meaning; in the case of Black women, for example, this can inform a sense of sisterhood cultivated by a shared struggle against misogyny and white supremacy (p. 12, p. 13). The films analyzed in the following chapters also situate the object constancy of siblingship in a way that addresses race and historical context.

Theorists enumerate other components of the assemblage of siblingship in addition to birth order and object constancy. Shared living spaces and physical proximity, at least in childhood, are a major element, and shared experiences in these spaces are preserved in adulthood as memories. Another major element identified in the scientific literature, at least for biological siblings, is physical resemblances and genetic ties. Blood siblings share more genetic similarity with each other than with their parents, which may either prompt an urgency to find likeness or a desire to individuate in light of this likeness. Important institutional elements of the siblingship assemblage include family laws, customs, and expectations as well as religious beliefs. These may interact with such elements as birth order, age, and gender. For example, gendered roles in religious observance may give one sibling different duties from another in a process of grieving a parent, while the sibling whose gender bars them from these duties may experience them vicariously through the sibling who attends them. However, while the psychoanalytic and psychological literature offers valuable insights into interpersonal dynamics within the context of family assemblages, these sources often overlook the broader social, cultural, and historical elements that intersect with and influence them. By combining the insights from psychological literature with a broader understanding of assemblages—including the assemblage of anti-Blackness—we can gain a more holistic perspective on the complexities of kinship and its intersection with larger social forces.

One concept whose multiple applications span the familial and the social is "twinship." The term has been discussed in the context of sibling bereavement (Lichtenberg, 2012, p. 408). However, its broader and more common meaning in psychoanalytic theory does not refer to biological twins or even siblings. It was coined by psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1971, 1985), who derived the concept from Freud. He uses twinship as a metaphor for the desire for likeness or for the experience of recognizing oneself in another. Twinship

in contemporary psychoanalytic theory speaks to the inclination to seek likeness with others in addition to attempts to enact alikeness, most notably the mimicry of others' behaviours (Lichtenberg, 2012, p. 406). It can be equally experienced within the family and within social interactions as a mode of identity formation (Togashi & Kottler, 2012, p. 345). Thus, it is linked to Marriott's discussion of mimetic desire. Kohut states that family is widely seen as the basic unit of society, an agent of immediate socialization which influences societal development; whereas society forms identity through aspects of culture like wardrobe fashions, language, and behavioural norms (p. 346). Twinship is a process whereby family and society provide a sense of stability and anchor the psyche against afflictions which would arise due to the "destruction of the certainties that pattern…life" (Brothers, 2012, p. 392). The modes of familial and social "twinship, kinship, fellowship, and membership all contribute to…systematically emergent certainties" (p. 410, p. 411). The metaphorical siblingship in the term "twinship" suggests the importance of laterality in social contexts.

The link Kohut makes between metaphorical siblingship and the relation of the individual to society at large is less clear, however, if we consider the experiences of marginalized people. Insofar as settler colonialism and systemic racism dehumanize marginalized peoples, they cannot experience twinship in society because they cannot experience society as a simple extension of a family unit bound by likeness and eliciting mimicry. Therefore, the distinctions between family and society are significant and have an impact on the totality of the self obtained through human interaction in the family and society. Blaxploitation and New Black Realism demonstrate that the absence of social belonging can indeed make kinship, including fictive kinship, especially important. These films' Black protagonists do not experience white supremacist society as an extension of their kin networks, as Kohut's theory suggests; instead, their kin networks *compensate for* the lack of twinship they experience in relation to white supremacist society. These film genres often portray African American characters who highlight the significance of familial ties as a source of support, identity, and resilience in the face of societal challenges and systemic anti-Blackness. They underscore how kinship becomes a crucial element in mitigating the impact of social exclusion and shaping the totality of the self for African American individuals in these narratives.

1.4.3 Siblingship on Screen

As we look at how cinema creates sibling realities, there is little guidance from film theory and criticism. Existing film scholarship on siblingship is fairly sparse, but it suggests that most siblingship on screen is informed by rivalry. Indeed, in both psychoanalytic theory and research on popular culture, siblingship seems to be defined by rivalry (Coles, 2003, p. 22; Hart, 2018, p. 94; Whiteman, McHale, & Soli, 2011). Literature on onscreen sibling relationships tends to centre competition over limited resources or parental attention within the family unit. However, from my own observation of film narratives, it is evident that the cinematic portrayal of siblings is multifaceted. The influence of birth order and laterality—as seen in films like *Coffy* and *Boyz N the Hood*—adds depth to these dynamics. Even in *New Jack City*, where rivalry is a factor, the elder sibling assumes a role of protection as well as competition. Siblingship onscreen and in day-to-day realities is more varied than the existing film criticism suggests. I have chosen not to delve extensively into the analysis of rivalry in my film critiques, as this particular theme has already received wider scholarly attention.

I identify two prevalent themes in addition to rivalry: attachment-identification and individuation-deidentification. Identification and deidentification are the fundamental processes that relate siblings and through which siblings form their identities; they shape both relationships and individuals' views of themselves within the sibling relationship (Milevsky, 2011; Schachter, 1982; Watzlawik, 2009; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007). There is an interplay between developmental processes and sibling relationships because siblings realize the importance of maintaining familial bonds in addition to their progressive emotive and cognitive maturity, independence, and identity-formation (Aghi & Bhatia, 2014, p. 140). In its most specific psychoanalytic sense, identification is the process whereby the subject "assimilates an aspect, property or attribute" of another and "is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 205). More broadly, identification is the process whereby one person empathizes with and relates to another in whom they see themselves and whom they idealize as a behavioural model. Deidentification occurs when someone realizes that they are indeed an individual whose characteristics are revealed in comparison to another,

through likenesses and differences. In identification, one assimilates. In deidentification, one dissociates not only from external models but may also experience internal dissociation from aspects of oneself, leading to complex processes of self-discovery and self-recognition. In this way, identification is linked with self-approval, whereas deidentification is more linked with self-loathing. Although opposed, identification and deidentification often operate at the same time or in quick succession: one moment, you feel and express love for and connection with your sibling, and the next moment, you are shocked that you are related, given how different you are. Furthermore, although attachment-identification and individuation-deidentification are observed as developmental processes, they never truly end (Greif & Woolley, 2015, p. 8, p. 97, p. 224; Phillips & Schrodt, 2015, p. 61).

Psychoanalysts and psychologists use the terms “attachment” and “identification” to describe connections that are not only felt but enacted through the laterality of the sibling relationship. Siblings share an affinity, relating more as equals with one another in contrast to the authoritative associations (verticality) they have with parents or other relatives (Cicirelli, 1995, p. 2). Siblings can also be foundational points of reference for the self because they provide support throughout adolescence and beyond (Cicirelli, 1995, p. 117; Coles, 2009, p. 102, p. 108; Conger & Little, 2010, p. 89; Davidoff, 2006, p. 18; Milevsky, 2011, p. 44, p. 59). For example, their support may manifest in childrearing—through babysitting or alternative forms of caregiving—or forms of sociability and emotional bonds (Bank & Kahn, 1982, p. 15). Psychoanalytic theory conveys that siblingship can be a form of narcissism.-Narcissism pertains to the ideal self, the person you either want to be or imagine yourself to be. We cultivate ideal objects or targets of judgement in line with that ideal self (Higgins, 2012, p. 94). This relates to siblingship insofar as the lateral status and shared physical and cultural location—which are more similar than with any other relatives—inclines siblings to favourably see themselves in one another (Kieffer, 2014, p. 25). Identification, and the attachment that results, supports narcissism and self-approval. Although these general definitions do not take account of anti-Blackness and other assemblages, the next chapter will examine how attachment-identification operates in the historically specific context of Blaxploitation.

Universalist scholarship in psychoanalysis and psychology also examines key siblingship themes of "individuation" and "deidentification." These concern the development of a constant and consistent self-concept. Deidentification is a process in which the individual distances their self-concept from others around them. The image of the other is present as a *possibility* for their own self-concept; if they incorporate that image, this is a process of identification; if they reject it, then it is a process of deidentification. In the context of siblingship, deidentification can lead to individuality based on a comparison to siblings (Best & DeLone, 2015, p. 274; Milevsky, 2011, p. 36, p. 87, p. 88; Whiteman, Becerra, & Killoren, 2010, p. 30, p. 34, p. 40). While individuation-deidentification may involve rivalry, it is not contingent upon it. In a relationship marked by rivalry, enmity ensues because siblings individuate by identifying themselves as distinct from one another while trying to monopolize parental attention (Larmo, 2007, p. 23). Siblings can gain some sense of superiority, distinction, or parental favour regardless of what precipitates competition (Aghi & Bhatia, 2014, p. 164; Grieshaber, 2004, p. 182). However, rivalry does not always occur. In fact, Whiteman, McHale, and Crouter (2007) propose that deidentification can serve as a coping mechanism for siblings to *prevent* sibling rivalry and protect themselves from unfavourable comparisons to one another made by others (p. 644). Since laterality operates on mutuality and equivalency, deidentification is a means for siblings to discover unique traits and "create a distinct mark in comparison to other family members," rather than be seen to be identical to one another (Milevsky, 2011, p. 89).

In childhood, the desire to achieve independence coincides with a fear of abandonment from caregivers who are our primary resources (Howe & Recchia, 2008, p. 155). Theorists commonly assert that birth order is often associated with parental favouritism among siblings (Claxton, 1994; Zervas & Sherman, 1994). Older siblings may fear being abandoned emotionally or losing their place as the firstborn, while younger siblings might have concerns about receiving less attention or feeling neglected as a result of favouritism of other siblings (Tof, 1998). Antagonism is complicated by novelty and curiosity as the introduction of another sibling is initially understood as an intrusion, which earlier-born children register as a noticeable shift in parental focus (Grieshaber, 2004, p. 185). Clark (2017) posits that this shift elicits the individuation and separation of

siblings from one another and from their parents: “The urge to recognize our own individuality begins the process of differentiation from the sibling as well as other family members” (para 4), although sibling relationships become more egalitarian and symmetrical with age (Scharf & Shulman, 2016, p. 190). Siblings also differentiate themselves from their parents or guardians more than only children do, since their separation-individuation dynamic is ongoing in psychic development (Mitchell & Black, 1995; Vivona, 2010). Laterality in sibling relationships often punctuates the development of individual identities, enhancing the recognition of unique characteristics while maintaining the lateral dynamics of the sibling bond.

One must recognize, however, that these developmental dynamics and their associated fears, including those linked to birth order, exhibit distinct variations based on an individual’s socioeconomic, cultural, and historical context (Miller, 2018, p. 1588, p. 1589). While these concepts are often theorized psychoanalytically in universal terms, their real-world impact is defined by one’s specific positionality (p. 1589). For instance, within the context of enslaved communities, the quest for independence and the fear of abandonment was undoubtedly informed by the oppressive realities of slavery. This distinction is important to recognize because, while there may be shared traits within sibling relationships, the experiences of those in enslaved or marginalized positionalities were shaped by the unique and oppressive contexts in which they lived (p. 1588). Drawing this distinction not only honours the individuality of their experiences but also underscores the significance of acknowledging the specific challenges and dynamics that influenced their perceptions of life and family.

African American siblings in films may not always have the same types of conflicts or rivalries with one another as those portrayed by white siblings in films. Sibling rivalry is not a universal characteristic of African American sibling relationships depicted onscreen. Instead, a shared opposition to white supremacy can often prompt Black sibling groups onscreen to come together and unite against the white other. Some of these white others are also grouped as fictive siblings. In relation to one another, Black siblings tend to have a shared sense of identity and a common cause in their struggle against white supremacy even in the absence of biological or consanguineal relations. This opposition

to or rivalry with white supremacy reflects the complex dynamics of Black familiality in America. The portrayal of sibling relationships in these films speaks to broader issues of power, identity, and community, as well as to the challenges faced by African Americans in a society that is often hostile to their aspirations in the time periods in which they were made.

1.5 Summary of the Following Chapters

The next chapter investigates how, through their exploration of sibling relationships and other themes, Blaxploitation films provided a unique window into the social and cultural realities of urban Black life during the late 1960s and 1970s. These social and cultural realities included white flight to the suburbs (which began after World War II) and new forms of anti-Blackness despite Civil Rights gains (Saucier, 2013, p. 454). This chapter deploys the Deleuzian concept of fabulation to posit that Blaxploitation served as a cinematic platform for empowerment and resistance. It looks at siblingship in *Coffy* and *Brotherhood of Death* as a structure of attachment-identification; it analyzes the ways in Blaxploitation engaged with and subverted traditional ideas of family and kinship, both contesting and adjusting to the prevailing cultural norms of the time. By exploring the ways in which these films challenged conventional narrative structures, subverted dominant cinematic representations, and promoted a sense of agency and self-determination, this chapter demonstrates how Blaxploitation cinema reflected sociocultural change and self-empowerment by invoking kinship within the African American community.

The following chapter investigates how New Black Realism augmented Black authorship in the cinema and provided particularly complex and nuanced insights into the lived experiences of Black people in the early 1990s. They wrangled with the consequences of Reagan-era neoliberal policies and divestment of social welfare initiatives. This chapter uses the Deleuzian concepts of repetition and difference to discuss how *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* engage with capitalism, criminality. It relates these to family and kinship, and specifically to the sibling structure of individuation-deidentification. While Blaxploitation promoted agency and self-determination, New Black Realism portrayed a

somber and unvarnished view of African American experiences. Its power came from the belief that acknowledging these harsh realities was essential.

2. BLAXPLOITATION

In this chapter, I explore how Blaxploitation was informed by the coalescence of belief, desire, fiction, and reality in African American kinship in the late 1960s and 1970s. The Blaxploitation film genre is often criticized for its stereotypical and exploitative portrayals of African Americans. However, a closer examination of the genre reveals a more complex story. Blaxploitation encompasses a diverse range of Black characters, including those who betray their community and those who try to make a positive impact, which contributes to a multifaceted portrayal of Blackness. Through my analysis of *Coffy* (Jack Hill, 1973) and *Brotherhood of Death* (Bill Berry, 1976), I explore the ways in which Blaxploitation films were shaped by and responded to the cultural and political climate of the time, and particularly at how this climate relates to African American siblingship. Blaxploitation's resonance during this historical moment, as it depicted the realities of African American pain, disenfranchisement, and economic and sexual exploitation, reveals a connection between fiction and lived experience. I find the Deleuzian concept of fabulation—the transformative process through which fiction generates new realities, blurring the boundaries between imagination and lived experience—to be a powerful theoretical lens for understanding the social meanings of the genre and its depictions of siblingship. Blaxploitation not only reflected the lived experiences of African Americans, but also generated new, imaginative possibilities for understanding the significance of siblingship as a dynamic and transformative social construct within the context of Blackness.

2.1 The Historical Context of Blaxploitation

The Blaxploitation genre emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s against the backdrop of social and political upheaval in the United States, coinciding with the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, and urban decay in predominantly African American neighborhoods. Although the American Civil War had concluded with the ratification of the thirteenth amendment that marked the official abolition of slavery, Black people still faced violent systemic racism perpetuated by the Jim Crow laws in the American South which disenfranchised, discriminated, and segregated even after World

War II. A variety of national policies also maintained inequality, although they purported to promote equality. This section will look briefly at some of the activist responses to these injustices as well as the lesser-known policies that perpetuated conditions of inequality.

During the period from 1954 to 1968, the Civil Rights Movement reached its peak in its fight for legal rights although activism occurred both before and after this period, and the movement's impact extends beyond this timeframe. The Civil Rights Movement marked a significant and pivotal period of mobilization, advocacy, and legal advancements towards achieving equal rights for Black Americans within the United States (Dierenfield, 2013, p. 15, p. 19). It used civil disobedience and nonviolent mass protests and made significant strides towards its central objectives, culminating in the passage of key legislation such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which officially made segregation illegal, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act (Jeffries, 2019, p. 40, p. 45), which officially ensured an equal voice in the electoral process for all citizens. These landmark acts were important achievements resulting from the ongoing activism and advocacy of the movement (p. 46) and the culmination of years of persistent struggle and activism before it (p. 115).

The 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., however, exposed the limitations of the Civil Rights Movement by showing that non-violence and respectability did not guarantee protection or survival. This led to a shifting landscape that further strengthened the viability and influence of the Black Power Movement (Jeffries, 2019, p. 115, p. 116), which emphasized Black autonomy and self-determination rather than integration with non-Black populations. Another influential ideology during that time was Black Nationalism. This advocated for the creation of a separate Black nation, emphasizing self-determination, self-sufficiency, and independence from the white-dominated American society (p. 173). The Black Power Movement shared the goal of Black empowerment and envisioned new structures but primarily sought to challenge existing American social, political, and economic systems through civil rights activism, self-defence, and community empowerment (p. 115). This complex interplay between the achievements and limitations of the Civil Rights Movement and the simultaneous rise of

the Black Power Movement and Black Nationalism reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of the struggle for racial equality during that era (p. 5, p. 8, p. 20, p. 117).

It is important to acknowledge the diversity and complexities within the broader Black political landscape. Slogans like "Black is Beautiful" and "Black Power" resonated with a wide range of activists and organizations who sought to challenge systemic racism and uplift Black communities (Camp, 2015, p. 686). Figures such as Ann Moody, Fannie Lou Hamer, Mae Mallory, Kwame Ture, and Malcolm X, along with collectives like the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army, contributed to the revision and expansion of militant resistance and empowerment (p. 688). Conversely, figures like Clara Luper, Martin Luther King, Jr., and David Dennis along with groups like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took nonviolent stands often anchored in religious surety (Joseph, 2009, p. 751; Ogbar, 2019, p. 37, p. 47). While these movements and figures encompassed a range of political ideologies, including Pan-Africanism and other forms of activism, they all shared a common goal of challenging anti-Blackness and promoting the pride and dignity of Blackness.

It is also important to acknowledge the significant contributions of women within the Black Power movements of the era. Figures such as Angela Davis[12] played pivotal roles in advocating for racial equality and challenging the status quo (Farmer, 2017, p. 10, p. 82). Davis and other Black women activists embraced a distinctive aesthetic characterized by Afro hairstyles, colourful dashikis, and vibrant clothing (Brooks-Key, 2023, p. 117, p. 119; Farmer, 2017 p. 60, p. 62, p. 66). This visual expression symbolized a rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards and served as a powerful statement of cultural pride and identity within the broader context of the Black Power Movement (Brooks-Key, 2023, p. 121). Moreover, the activism and aesthetic of Black women in these

[12] Angela Davis is a renowned African American activist and scholar known for her significant role in the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Roman, 2020, p. 87). She gained prominence as a member of the Communist Party USA and her involvement with the Black Panther Party (p. 88, p. 90). Her significance lies in her tireless advocacy for racial equality and social justice, particularly in challenging systemic racism and advocating for the rights of Black prisoners (p. 91, p. 97).

movements not only highlighted the intersectionality of race and gender but also laid the foundation for the complex narratives seen in Blaxploitation films (Simms, 2006, p. 82). Characters like Coffy, emblematic of strong, independent Black women, embody the spirit of resilience and empowerment within a multifaceted sociopolitical landscape (p. 19). Their stories reflect not only the struggles against racial oppression but also the challenges of gender-based violence and inequality that were intricately woven into the fabric of the era's social and political upheaval.

One manifestation of anti-Blackness that is especially relevant to both Blaxploitation and the New Black Realism genre to be discussed in the next chapter is the way conditions of inequality were perpetuated in urban spaces before, during, and after the era of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Abernathy et al. emphasize that deliberate systemic racism shaped the exclusionary practices embedded in policies affecting urban planning and Black experiences in urban environments (2019, p. 288, 292). The Fair Housing Act of 1965 was one important contributor to these conditions. This Act prohibited prejudice in various realms, including advertisements, insurance, loans, homeownership, mortgages, and zoning, through legislation and policies aimed at combating racial discrimination (Zasloff, 2017, p. 87, p. 88). On paper, these new regulations appeared to represent an important step towards addressing housing discrimination. However, its impact was constrained by a variety of factors, including inadequate enforcement and ongoing socioeconomic disparities that rendered it largely ineffective in achieving substantial and lasting change (Joseph, 2009, p. 46, p. 86). Consequently, Black communities perceived the white supremacist state's legal changes to be insufficient and mere token gestures rather than genuine attempts to address systemic racial inequalities (Gross, 2017; Zasloff 2017, p.88). This disparity in homeownership and access to affordable housing was intertwined with systemic inequalities and limited economic opportunities, particularly for marginalized communities (Gross, 2017). The lack of affordable homes was just one aspect of a broader structural issue that limited upward mobility and entrenched the cycle of poverty through disparities in education, employment, healthcare and other socioeconomic factors.

These interrelated factors collectively reinforced the cycle of inequality and limited the intergenerational transmission of wealth and resources. Housing affordability continued to be a significant issue affecting marginalized people, which hindered their ability to accumulate equity to pass along to future generations. Meanwhile, white people's generational accumulation of wealth impeded the opportunities for African Americans through many systemic mechanisms, including but not limited to discriminatory practices in housing (Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 131, p. 151, p. 235). The accumulation of wealth was influenced by multifaceted dynamics, including wages, employment opportunities, access to education, and systemic racial inequalities (Taylor, 2016, p. 11, p. 28). An examination of the intersection of housing regulations, economic opportunities, and systemic racism provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by marginalized communities in accruing intergenerational wealth.

2.1.1 Overview of the Blaxploitation Genre

Blaxploitation emerged within this context of social and political upheaval, which also coincided with a period of crisis within the American film industry. Blaxploitation films played a significant role in challenging traditional Hollywood norms and introducing more diverse narratives and characters; they represented a notable shift within Hollywood, offering a new wave of stories that centered on Black experiences and attracted a broad audience. This section will delve into the beginnings of the Blaxploitation genre and its position within the film industry, highlighting its influence and significance. Additionally, it will explore several questions that surround the genre as a whole, such as its impact on representations of Blackness, its engagement with social and political themes, and its contributions to the broader landscape of American cinema.

Hollywood faced significant financial problems during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Classical Hollywood and New Hollywood had lavishly endowed productions that featured white celebrities, and its narratives favoured glamor and luxury. Media scholar Novotny Lawrence (2008) states that this extravagance was politically and culturally at odds with life during a period that spanned the devastation reaped by the Great Depression, World War II, the tensions of the Cold War, and the beginnings of the

Vietnam War (p. 17). In the post-World War II era, Hollywood rapidly lost profits. The fiscal nightmares of grandiose sets, costumes, and celebrity and creative personnel stipends compounded revenue loss (Shivers, 2018). Production, distribution, and marketing costs exceeded the revenue accrued during their theatrical runs (p. 16). Additionally, many people—especially white Americans—moved to the suburbs, whereas movie theatres were primarily located in urban centres which were inaccessible to these residents due to the lack of public transportation options (Saucier, 2013, p. 454). Television became the ideal medium as white people sought entertainment in their own homes (p. 454). Hollywood was subsequently on the verge of bankruptcy by 1968 (Lykidis, 2012, p. 16).[13]

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[13] These sources tend not to address race extensively, so my analysis predominantly relies on sources like Novotny Lawrence's Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s. For an overview of the financial challenges faced by Hollywood during the late 1960s and early 1970s, several sources within white, mainstream American film scholarship offer insights into the industry's economic struggles. In *History of Narrative Film* (2015), David A. Cook provides a general account of the industry's situation during this period in his chapter "Hollywood, 1965-1995" (p. 669-700). For more comprehensive analyses, consult the following works: the chapter "Technology and Spectacle" in *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959* (2003), Peter Lev surveys the evolving film industry of the 1950s, examining the impact of technological advancements, shifts in audience behavior, and the growing influence of television on cinema (p. 107-126); in *The Sixties: 1960-1969* (2001), Paul Monaco explores the American film industry during the tumultuous 1960s, noting its response to social and cultural changes through shifts in filmmaking styles, thematic explorations, and the emergence of new voices in his chapter "The Runaway Audience and the Changing World of Movie Exhibition" (p. 40-55); and the chapter "Genres II: Exploitation and Allusion" in *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (2000) by David A. Cook investigates how the film industry addressed the challenges of the post-Watergate and post-Vietnam era, discussing shifts in filmmaking styles, thematic concerns, and the industry's engagement with social and political issues (p. 159-258). These sources tend not to take race into account, so my analysis predominantly relies on sources like Novotny Lawrence's *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (2008) and Ed Guerrero's "The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation" (2012), which place Hollywood's financial challenges within broader political and cultural contexts and consider perspectives that encompass racial dynamics and social injustice. Another useful source is "Hollywood and Cinematic Representations of Far-Right Domestic Terrorism in the U.S.," in which Paul B. Rich (2020) gives an overview of the Hollywood industry from the 1920s to the present, considering how white domestic terrorism is portrayed as a lesser problem than racialized violence.

The Blaxploitation genre is not solely responsible for revitalizing an entire industry in decline, but it generated immense profit during this crisis. Mainstream Hollywood casting and narratives had previously intimated that Black people could be plausibly accepted into American society through piety and deference, which was divorced from the reality that nevertheless anti-Blackness prevails (Guerrero, 2012, p. 16). In the context of Civil Rights and Black Power movements, however, Black audiences grew dissatisfied with tropes of passive or placatory Black people onscreen (p. 13).[14] These hegemonic images had given African American audiences little or nothing to identify with, but Blaxploitation films offered a shift in cinematic representation that resonated more deeply with African American audiences (p. 16). These films became a more relevant and empowering form of cinematic expression that broke away from prior depictions and

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[14] Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (2003) serves as a vital resource for comprehending the historical context and representation of Black characters in Hollywood cinema. Bogle examines distinct stereotypes and tropes such as: Tom, a submissive and obedient Black character who seeks acceptance from white individuals or institutions; Coon, a Black character who exhibits buffoonery, often for comedic effect, reinforcing stereotypes of Black people as unintelligent and clownish; Mammy, a stereotype presents a nurturing and loyal Black woman, usually as a caregiver or domestic servant, perpetuating the idea of Black women as selfless and content in servitude; and Buck, a hypermasculine and sexually aggressive Black man and a trope that reinforced notions of Black male inferiority and dangerousness while also sexualizing and objectifying them (p. 9, p. 18, p. 27, p. 41, p. 208, p. 231, p. 241). Although Bogle does not directly mention the Sapphire trope in his book, Imani M. Cheers (2018) acknowledges in *The Evolution of Black Women in Television: Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses* that he alludes to it. The Sapphire figure is a hypersexualized, aggressive, assertive, and emasculating Black woman who perpetuates negative stereotypes that undermine their femininity and reinforce racial hierarchies (p. 3, p. 5, p. 6). Overall, Bogle expansively unveils the pervasive racial caricatures that have shaped cinematic portrayals. By tracing the evolution of these portrayals from the early 20th century to the present, he illustrates the persistence and transformation of these stereotypes. His analysis contextualizes these portrayals within broader socio-political frameworks, highlighting the role of Hollywood in both reflecting and shaping societal attitudes towards race. Other important scholarship on white mainstream representations of Blackness include bell hooks's *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) and Manthia Diawara's article "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" (1988). Diawara's article inspired Richard Dyer's *White* (2013) which, along with *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (2002), examines the construction and cultural implications of whiteness as a normative and often unexamined racial category in Western visual culture (Dyer, 2002, p. 126; Dyer, 2013, p. 41).

allowed Black viewers to connect with narratives of antiheroes and resistance that better reflected their own experiences and aspirations (p. 16). As such, Blaxploitation arose as a cinematic vehicle for Black people to see their realities reflected in film (p. 16). For me, this evinces the power of genre itself to create, retain, and fulfill expectations.

Blaxploitation films, as a distinct artistic movement, encompassed a range of stylistic and narrative elements that reflected the social and political climate of the time (Guerrero, 2012, p. 11). Overall, however, Blaxploitation was characterized by its dynamic portrayal of Black protagonists as powerful and resilient figures who challenged systemic oppression and fight against injustice. These films often featured strong, independent, and charismatic lead characters, intense action sequences, gritty urban settings, and storylines that explored themes of social unrest, crime, and the pursuit of justice outside the law (p. 13). The genre mediated its historical context through a range of stylistic conventions and narratives that celebrated Black agency, resilience, and resistance in the face of systemic barriers.

Although Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) is widely regarded as the seminal work that established the core conventions of the Blaxploitation genre, many scholars credit Ossie Davis' *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) with setting the stage by recognizing the strength and dignity of Black characters onscreen (Lawrence, 2008, p. 27). *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was based on Chester Himes' novel and follows a pair of Black detectives—Gravedigger Jones (Godfrey Cambridge) and Coffin Ed Johnson (Raymond St. Jacques)—who investigate the theft of a large sum of money during a rally for the Back-to-Africa movement, leading them on a wild and humorous journey through their inner-city neighborhood's vibrant and complex characters.[15] The detectives outwit white characters despite the latter being explicitly bolstered by systemic

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[15] The Back-to-Africa movement was championed by Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), a prominent Black leader in the early 20th century who was known for his Pan-African advocacy (Stephens & Ewing, 2019, p. 2). He founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914, aiming to unite people of African descent (p. 1, p. 2). He also encouraged Black individuals to return to Africa to escape racial discrimination and establish independent Black nations (p. 9, p. 80). While it faced challenges, the movement promoted Black pride, unity, and self-sufficiency during a critical period in the African diaspora (p. 182).

racism that has laid waste to the Black urban working-class community (Callahan, 2013). The pair encounters government-engineered residential segregation, voter suppression, and higher morbidity rates for African Americans in addition to the overall restriction of freedoms and opportunities for Black people due to the legacy of Black Codes and Jim Crow laws in both North and South. Eventually, they uncover the fact that the theft was orchestrated by the rally's Black organizers and expose the ruse, admonishing them for cheating their own community while peddling Black solidarity. *Cotton* does not merely acknowledge but demands recognition that institutional anti-Blackness underlays the status quo, which warrants the fury of Blaxploitation protagonists.

Sweet Sweetback's Badaaass Song went further. Its shrewd, confident Black protagonist, Sweetback (Van Peebles), violently challenges and triumphs over systemic racism, predominantly embodied by racist policemen. Sweetback becomes a fugitive after a confrontation with racist police officers. As he evades capture, he encounters various challenges and allies while symbolically embodying the resistance against systemic racism and oppression in 1970s America. Whereas the protagonists in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* are part of the establishment insofar as they are police officers, *Sweetback* is more militant; that is, its cultural and ideological orientation centers and celebrates African heritage, values, and perspectives (Asante, 2007, p. 2). Sweetback displays cultural pride by using American Vernacular English and saying repeatedly that he is Black and proud. He rejects white supremacist norms and aligns himself with movements advocating for Black self-determination and liberation. The film's characterization of its protagonist and everyday Black people who overcome anti-Blackness through wit, combat, and by any means necessary stands as the definitive element of Blaxploitation films (Terry, 2012, p. 85).[16] Its rave reviews and considerable profits—it made $15.2 million return on a budget of $150 000 ("Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song," 2003)—turned heads across the then-struggling American film industry. The subsequent

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[16] Frantz Fanon, a seminal anticolonial theorist, coined this phrase in "Why We Use Violence" for an Address to the Accra Positive Action Conference (1960) to denote Black peoples must employ any and all available means—including violence—to attain desired ends. This was subsequently widely popularized in a speech delivered by Malcolm X in 1964 (BlackPast, 2007).

financial success of Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Super Fly* (1972) truly shocked Hollywood. *Super Fly* was made on a budget of $500,000 and grossed over $12 million (Quinn, 2010, p. 99). *Super Fly* served as a template that identified Blaxploitation as a profitable channel in which modest budgets for film and accompanying R&B soundtracks yielded substantial gains (Guerrero, 2012, p. 2).

However, Blaxploitation as a genre aimed at—and purporting to represent—Black people was contentious within the Black community. Junius Griffin (1972), a film publicist and the President of the NAACP's Beverly Hills chapter, coined the term "Blaxploitation" as a blend of "Black" and "exploitation." This brought together the genre's narrative focus on Black people with principles attributed to exploitation films, low-budget and sometimes low-quality movies which attempt to profit by exploiting sensationalist trends, explicit content, or niches. Griffin believed the genre perpetuated offensive stereotypes which portrayed Black people as hypersexual gangsters and hustlers with an innate penchant for criminality or violence ("NAACP Takes Militant Stand on Black Exploitation Films," 1972, p. 9). He observed that even when Blaxploitation projects were headed by African American directors and writers, they were largely funded by white production companies with a vested interest in propagandizing stereotypes of African Americans as primarily drug dealers or addicts, pimps, sex workers, and gangsters (CBC Radio, 2021). Media scholar and historian Dr. Lerone Bennett Jr. (1971) said the protagonist of *Sweet Sweetback's Badaaass Song* was neither empowering or revolutionary but rather selfish and driven by fear and desperation (p. 108, p. 110, p. 112). He admonished *Sweetback* for ascribing violence, misery, and poverty to Blackness and romanticizing these qualities (p. 114). For example, although he noted that Sweetback cleverly weaponizes his sexual prowess, which one could infer to be sexually empowering, Bennett contended that "nobody ever f***ed [sic] his way to freedom" (p. 118, p. 119). Norma R. Jones (1976) summarized criticisms of the genre's failure to convey the aesthetic value of African American culture. For example, she followed Bennett's criticism that the genre failed to display the diversity of African American Vernacular English, experiences, and visual expression through wardrobe and hair styles (p. 561). Citing *Black Scholar* writer Charles Allan, she wrote that the omission of diversity reflected the broader social context in which the Blaxploitation movies were

produced, as they often reinforced anti-Black stereotypical paradigms such as pimps, drug dealers, gangsters, and hypersexualized Mandingoes; it also commodified African American experiences to align with the dominant cinematic framework, which white conglomerates continued to monopolize (p. 561, p. 562). For these writers, the limited representation of diverse African American cultural expressions within the Blaxploitation genre underscored the need for critical examination of the industry's limitations in authentically showcasing the richness and complexity of African American culture and experiences.

I recognize the validity of these critiques. However, as we will see below, Blaxploitation also provided representation and empowerment to Black audiences, reflecting the complex realities and aspirations of many Black people during a transformative period of American history. In addition, Blaxploitation conveyed the significance of intangible resources such as kinship in insolvent metropolises and segregated small towns. Below, I discuss how these films' representations of African American siblingship challenged the hegemony of conventional white notions of Black siblingship. Blaxploitation subverted traditional white notions of kinship by portraying diverse and complex familial structures within Black communities. The films analyzed de-emphasized parental roles and challenged the nuclear family; they highlighted chosen families as well as blood families, reflecting lateral solidarity and support both inside and outside of biological ties. By emphasizing self-reliance and empowerment, Blaxploitation narratives encouraged reimagining kinship beyond conventional norms, fostering a more inclusive perspective on relationships and community bonds. The character interactions, conflicts, and resolutions within sibling relationships contributed to a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted realities of Blackness in America during this historical moment. I aim to provide a deeper understanding of how the genre's depiction of familial and community dynamics has shaped both its positive and negative aspects, illuminating its impact and significance within the broader cultural landscape.

2.2 Stranger than Fiction

The legitimate controversy and historical context of Blaxploitation demand that we interrogate the relation of fiction to lived experience—to pain, to disenfranchisement, to economic and sexual exploitation. In this section, I look at Deleuze's concept of fabulation as a theoretical tool for understanding those consequences. This concept shows how fiction, including cinema, functions as a type of truth: fiction probes reality to understand what exists and hastens the groundwork of a future reality. I consider the social consequences of fabulation and relate these to the social significance of Blaxploitation.

Deleuze adapts his concept of fabulation from Henri Bergson. Bergson describes fabulation as something like mythmaking, whereby phantasmatic "representations" of the supernatural—gods, spirits, uncanny forces—are made (Bogue, 2010, p. 15; Crone, 2020, p. 12). Fabulation is a mental process that is necessary for action to happen. It functions conjointly with ideology to reinforce social cohesion (Bergson, 1974, p. 108). This idea emerges in the context of his broader argument that being itself is dynamic as opposed to universal or invariable, and that this dynamic nature of being should be the foremost point of philosophical focus (p. 15, p. 22, p. 92, p. 93). To be is not dependent upon on principles which are static or intransigent but rather on values of change, growth, and development (p. 72, p. 85).

While Bergson posits that fabulation is negative because it tends towards uncritical acquiescence and assimilation, Deleuze (1995) imagines that fabulation can be purposed to envision affirmative and optimistic prospects or "things to come" (p. 125). Deleuze writes:

> Artists can only invoke a people, their need for one goes to the very heart of what they're doing, it's not their job to create one, and they can't. Art is resistance: it resists death, slavery, infamy, shame. But a people can't worry about art. How is a people created, through what terrible suffering? When a people's created, it's through its own resources, but in a way that links up with something in art…or links up art to what it lacked. Utopia isn't the right concept: it's more a question

> of a "fabulation" in which a people and art both share. We ought to take up Bergson's notion of fabulation and give it a political meaning. (Deleuze, 1995, p. 174)

Deleuze's emphasis on the notion of "a people" underscores the collective nature of societal transformation in his definition of fabulation. In exploring how a people's creative processes intertwine with artistic expression, he illuminates the intricate connection between the imagination of a community and the artistic representation that helps fulfill its aspirations. This interplay not only shapes the trajectory of a people's evolution but also resonates with the broader theme of fabulation that aligns art and politics in a unique synergy.

As Deleuze adapts Bergson's ideas, he shows how fabulation partakes in both falsity and truth. With the concept of "the powers of the false," he argues that falsity exerts control to the extent that it affects the truth. Although Deleuze does not—and likely would not—give an example that directly addresses racism, we can imagine the situation of an enslaved Black person who fabulates that they escape to freedom through the Underground Railroad. For them, freedom is not tangible; they first have to imagine it. There may be no specific role model for them and nothing that tethers their vision to reality; their imagination is not predicated on someone else's freedom. Instead, they think of something that apparently cannot happen but that they can still imagine. The falsity in this scenario is the freedom itself; they do not experience freedom, nor is it feasible even if it is possible. The truth of this scenario is that nothing lasts forever—not their own lives, not the institution of slavery. This finitude can give a sense of hope about what could yet exist. Fabulation is necessary because if they do not imagine the unprecedented or unlikely, then their lives will stagnate and they will become defeatist.

Bergson talks about fabulation in relation to the mind alone, but Deleuze also uses it to understand art, including cinema, where the powers of the false are particularly active. While Bergson's concept of creativity primarily revolves around the notion of the "*élan vital*" and the continuous evolution of life, Deleuze extends this by expanding the idea of fabulation to involve the creation of fictional worlds and narratives that serve as a means

to explore and express various aspects of reality. This is a departure from Bergson's emphasis on organic, vitalist creativity, as Deleuze's notion of fabulation embraces a broader and more diverse understanding of how creativity operates in the realm of thought and culture. For example, when audiences step into the cinema, they suspend their disbelief and allow the truth onscreen to supplant their own truths. Cinema gives our minds shape through particular characters; it gives us someone to project our fabulist visions onto. A cinematic character is both a fabulation and a fabulist who creates and imparts a truth through storytelling, by way of expression, narrative, or worldview (Deleuze, 1995, p. 132, p. 135, p. 140). For Deleuze, fabulation can provide visions of possible futures. It is not simply fantasy; it is connected to reality. It shows what is attainable, and the film itself demonstrates this attainability.

Within the Blaxploitation genre, fabulation served as a fundamental mechanism that enabled it to resonate with audiences, particularly during the historical context of Black empowerment movements. Media scholar Tavia Nyong'o (2019) discusses the topic only briefly, but he writes that fabulation in this positive sense was demonstrable in Blaxploitation through the genre's representations of Black peoples as mighty, militant figures who resisted and sometimes even triumphed against anti-Black institutions (p. 81). Considering fabulation—the use of imaginative storytelling and mythology—as part of discussions about race and positionality provides a richer and more nuanced perspective on Blaxploitation's impact on Black audiences and its role in challenging racial stereotypes (p. 22). Blaxploitation depicted Black characters as empowered, defiant, and resistant, which offered a unique space for emotional release and camaraderie among those facing similar struggles (p. 44, p. 46). The fabulation in these films created a fictional yet affirming space where Black viewers could find connection and validation, exploring the possibilities of resisting oppressive systems and envisioning empowered Black figures on screen (p. 158). Similarly, although she does not discuss fabulation specifically, film scholar Mia Mask (2009) writes that Blaxploitation offered African American men and women a taste of both reality and fantasy, showing African American women as real individuals and showing institutional incidents of anti-Blackness along with the fantasy that audiences too could hit back like the militant protagonists (p. 60). The images of Black power on screen were resonant and lucrative

because they provided a way for Black people to “emancipate themselves from mental slavery,” as Bob Marley later sang in reference to a speech by Marcus Garvey (Hewitt, 2015, p. 180). Even though anti-Blackness was still materially effective, the fabulation of Blaxploitation provided a shared experience of a kind of emancipation.

The vision Blaxploitation provided was not perfect, which prompts me to think of Deleuze’s argument that fabulation is not utopian (Deleuze, 1995, p. 125, p. 173). What is important, for Deleuze, is the *fact* that one imagines something better rather than that one imagines something perfect. Blaxploitation’s representations, Mask (2009) says, “intersected directly with a wide array of highly capitalized culture industries and helped to define the cultural sensibility” of the times (p. 81). Hollywood capitalized on the social and economic malaise through disenfranchisement experienced by Black audiences during the era (p. 81). By exploiting the struggles and frustrations of Black audiences, Hollywood sought to profit from the cultural zeitgeist without necessarily addressing the underlying issues of racial injustice and inequality (p. 82). The visions of Blaxploitation also remain enmeshed with the legacies of racial stereotypes which benefitted the financial interests of the white hegemony. Nonetheless, Blaxploitation offered a platform for marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives and imagine alternative possibilities. Thus, the significance of Blaxploitation lay not in its perfection but in its ability to provide a space for resistance, empowerment, and the collective dreaming of a more equitable future.

In the Introduction, I described anti-Blackness as what Deleuze calls an “assemblage” of forces—legal, institutional, social, cultural, etc. Fabulation rewrites assemblages, and Blaxploitation rewrites the assemblage of anti-Blackness. Acknowledging the localized nature of Deleuzian assemblages, it is important to recognize that the notion of anti-Blackness can manifest in distinct yet interconnected assemblages across various domains of society, highlighting the complex and multifaceted character of these forces. Blaxploitation’s ability to rewrite assemblages of anti-Blackness spoke to its potential for challenging and subverting pervasive systems of oppression within specific cultural and historical contexts. Blaxploitation did not just imagine one particular thing such as Black freedom; it imagined many possible changes and imagined Black freedom in relation to

existing assemblages. It usually did this by subverting stereotypes or showing them in a light that was flattering to Black people. For example, Coffy is a lawless vigilante who commits criminal acts, but she is empowered and heroic. The genre presented the matrices of oppression in novel ways but was not entirely innovative; it did not invent Blackness out of nothing or in a way that was totally detached from existing stereotypes. As we will see in the next chapter, the tropes that Blaxploitation revised in empowering ways ceased to be even potentially empowering after the Reagan Era. However, in the 1970s, although the images were still rooted in anguish and anti-Blackness, and although they did not solve the issue of anti-Blackness, they could still be a source of pride and empowerment.

Deleuze's distinction between falsity and fiction is relevant to Blaxploitation's revisions and limitations. In *Difference & Repetition* (1994), Deleuze distinguishes between falsity and fiction (p. 153). In this context, fiction rather than falsity is more clearly related to the powers of the false (p. 59, p. 127, p. 145, p. 191). His critique of falsity is a critique of dualistic thinking about truth versus falsity (p. 153). Fiction, on the other hand, can underscore truth; it acknowledges the spectrum of possibility between current truth, potential or past truth, imagination, and so on. In Deleuzian terms, falsity is a product of representational thinking, which I discuss in the Introduction, that establishes rigid boundaries between true and false (p. 159). Fiction, on the other hand, is a creative and imaginative endeavor that challenges such boundaries and opens up new perspectives on reality (p. 159). Imagination is not the same thing as deception. It is simply thinking beyond what is real at the time. This is not always positive; Deleuze writes that villains such as Cesare di Borgia can imagine themselves to be heroic (p. 9). Although Deleuze does not discuss colonialism, his concept of imagination can be applied to the early sixteenth century European fiction of the Americas as the "New World" that Europeans "discovered" through their seafaring exploits—despite these regions' being inhabited by Indigenous peoples. During the Civil Rights Era, African American fiction writer and activist John Oliver Killens (1964) offered the view that a wider fiction was employed to justify the enslavement of Black peoples. While America was constructed as a New World defined by freedom, equality, and brotherhood, this also included the fiction that enslaved peoples were subhuman, and thus inherently inferior and unworthy of rights or

sympathy. This established three groups: those enslaved within the Americas, those who were not enslaved within the Americas, and the entire free world beyond. This fiction was exposed by marginalized peoples, their experiences, choices, and lack thereof, along with the knowledge they gain from these.

The fiction in Blaxploitation, conversely, afforded an introspective outlook on the positionalities, experiences, and choices of Black people. Blaxploitation films were works of fiction that resonated with Black audiences by tapping into shared emotions and experiences (Taubman, 2021). The audacious attitudes and challenges to white establishments depicted in these films may not have been realistically achievable, but they evoked a visceral rage and frustration that reflected the lived experiences of Black individuals facing systemic racism and oppression. In this sense, Blaxploitation served as a platform for catharsis and empowerment, allowing audiences to channel their collective frustration and desire for justice through the onscreen narratives. While recognizing the fictional nature of these films, as Ed Guerrero (2012) writes, many Black viewers found a connection and validation in the rebellious spirit and confrontational nature of the characters, providing a space for emotional release and a sense of camaraderie in the face of shared struggles (p. 5). Ultimately, Deleuze's work encourages us to think beyond conventional categories and explore the fluid and dynamic nature of the concepts of fiction within the context of our philosophical and artistic pursuits.

2.3 Sugar Instead of Smack!

This section focuses on the significance of *Coffy* in the film industry as well as the gender dynamics of the film that have been the main focus of scholarly analysis. In this film, the eponymous heroine navigates and challenges white supremacist institutions of organized crime. I explore how the film fabulates the complexities of Black female agency and the intersections of gender, race, and power in relation to (potential) socioeconomic change. Coffy's insurgent actions exemplify Black women's struggle for racial and gender equality within an oppressive America. As a fabulation, her individual insurgency is powerful and inspiring and can be seen as an illustration of the broader struggle for racial and gender equality; it also emphasizes the importance of collective agency for

marginalized communities. This section provides a backdrop for my analysis of how Coffy is specifically spurred on by the interest of kinship and community dynamics.

Coffy follows Nurse "Coffy" Coffin (Pam Grier), a Black woman striving to avenge her younger sister, Lubelle (Karen Williams), whose heroin addiction has left her bedridden. Coffy becomes a vigilante intent on quashing the organized crime outfit she blames for Lubelle's addiction and the broader threats to the Black community. This organized crime outfit deploys coercion, bribes, and police corruption in the urban setting that is most typical in the Blaxploitation genre. Initially, Coffy lures a pair of local drug dealers to their deaths, only to realize that their petty distribution racket is not the ultimate source of the supply. She enlists the help of Carter (William Elliott), a Black police officer, who resolves to challenge narcotics-related police misconduct and is consequently viciously beaten by his colleagues. The attack, which results in Carter's permanent brain damage, intensifies Coffy's desire for revenge. Going undercover to target what she deduces to be the crime ring responsible, she assumes the persona of Mystique, a Caribbean sex worker, harnessing tropes of exoticism and hypersexuality in order to optimize her chances of infiltrating the gang. This role grants her proximity to King George (Robert DoQui), a Black pimp and "big dealer" in league with the Italian mob, which runs the Black drug rackets and is led by Arturo Vitroni (Allan Arbus). When her cover is blown, she is captured by the mob but escapes. An important subplot reveals that Coffy's boyfriend, Councillor Howard Brunswick (Booker Bradshaw), is a conspirator in the very crime ring she aspires to destroy; Howard's hypocrisy is especially galling because, in his campaign for Congress—which centers on advocating for Black unity, empowerment, and political representation—he condemns organized crime and its connections to white supremacy. The final scene of the film takes place at his beach house where, having killed the other antagonists, Coffy shoots him.

In analyzing female-led Blaxploitation films, scholars have explored how these films envision empowerment, resistance, and the potential for change in relation to gender dynamics. *Coffy*, as one such film, stands as an important point of contrast with its immediate predecessor, *Cleopatra Jones* (Starrett, 1973). *Cleopatra Jones,* scripted by famed African American artist and Blaxploitation actor and writer Max Julien, depicted

"a new and different kind of image of the black woman for the screen" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 82). Warner Bros. won the project by offering more money than independent production company and distributor American International Pictures (AIP) (p. 82). Warner Bros. made $3.2 million in profits ("Big Rental Films of 1973," 1974, p. 19). Furious, AIP resolved to outdo Warner Bros. by making their own film with a Black woman in the central role, hiring white director Jack Hill to develop and direct the project which became *Coffy* (Lawrence, 2008, p. 82). However, Coffy goes further than *Cleopatra Jones*'s "law-abiding heroine" (p. 82); while Jones acts within the law as a police officer, using her combat training and espionage skills, Coffy engages in a vigilante campaign (p. 81). *Coffy* is all the more significant because it "served as the bridge from sexploitation to Blaxploitation" (Mask, 2009, p. 89).[17] This innovation paid off. Eithne Quinn (2012) says that *Coffy* is "the most successful full-blown exploitation film of the so-called 'Blaxploitation' period" (p. 266). Despite opening in only one cinema, *Coffy* made it into the box office top 20 in its first week and climbed to number 11 in three weeks upon being released at nine cinemas (p. 267). After 20 weeks, it garnered just under $10 million and went on to accrue over $12 million (p. 267)—a major profit considering its meager $500 thousand budget (p. 269).

Both the stars and heroines of *Coffy* and *Cleopatra Jones* personified contrasting modes of activism as their performances of gender reflected Coffy's independence in comparison to Jones's position within the structures of law enforcement. Tamara Dobson, who played Cleopatra, took pride in her character's comparatively modest yet attractive nature in contrast to the gaudier Coffy; Dobson did not identify with feminist readings of

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[17] As noted above, exploitation films refer to a diverse category of movies typically characterized by their low budgets, sensationalized content, and provocative themes aimed at attracting audiences through shock value (Waddell, 2018, p. 2, p. 32). These films often explore taboo subjects such as violence, sex, drugs, and other controversial topics, exploiting them for entertainment purposes (p. 32). Exploitation films may encompass various subgenres, including horror, action, erotica, and grindhouse cinema, and they frequently push the boundaries of societal norms and censorship regulations. Sexploitation is a subset of exploitation cinema focused primarily on exploiting sexual content and themes for entertainment purposes. These movies typically feature gratuitous nudity, sexual situations, and provocative imagery, often with little regard for plot or character development (p. 47, p. 50). Sexploitation also encompasses various subgenres, including softcore erotica (p. 52).

her character and believed that Black people needed to focus on "free[ing] our [Black] men" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 87). Her sentiment was a common one in that era. Feminism was often viewed with suspicion by African Americans, seen as a "white woman's movement" which "sought to exploit the spirit, the metaphor, and the rhetoric of the black movement" at the expense of Black men's patriarchal rights (p. 88). Grier, by contrast, identified as a feminist in interviews, citing her matriarchal upbringing and military training and embracing the principles of gender equality and empowerment within a broader framework of social justice activism (Bartyzel, 2015). Encounters with anti-Blackness and misogynoir were a driving force behind her characterizations and her determination to do her own stunts (Hassania, 2015). *Coffy* presented a world in which Black criminals are constructed not in opposition to but in tandem with the white patriarchal and capitalist society (Mask, 2009, p. 93, p. 94). The conflict of views between Dobson and Grier was one example of a much larger complexity of attitudes within the Blaxploitation genre and African American community about whiteness, integration, feminism, Black liberation, and activism. However, while Dobson and Grier, Jones and Coffy are very different, it is essential to recognize that *Cleopatra Jones* still empowered its female star and showcased her authorship. From a feminist or womanist perspective, this film could be seen as praiseworthy for challenging traditional gender norms by presenting a strong and capable Black woman in a position of power. Both films contributed to a larger conversation about feminism's intersection with Black liberation, providing multiple perspectives on female empowerment within the Blaxploitation genre.

The ongoing significance of Grier's sexuality as Coffy is often read as an appropriation and revision of Hollywood's stereotypes of Black women. Ingrid Banks (2008) writes that Coffy's strength is largely manifest in her emasculation of Black men, which relates to the Sapphire trope of domineering, aggressive matriarchs who berate and therefore emasculate Black boys and men—rather than aid them—for daily foibles (p. 80). However, she subverts this pervasive trope and others, such as the mammy and tragic mulatto (p. 79). Similarly, David Pilgrim (2000) writes that she presents an ironic version of the African American woman as a hypersexual figure with striking "states of anger." Shoniqua Roach (2018) contends that, in Coffy herself, Blackness and sexuality are

polymorphous, so she signifies beyond hegemonic gender and sexual syntax (p. 7, p. 9, p. 10, p. 11). Her performance allows her to affect erotic agency that is "otherwise denied to her" and to resist—rather than reinforce—objectification (p. 9, p. 10, p. 19). Her masquerade as Mystique is a case in point: as Quinn (2012) writes, she becomes a one-woman army who uses traditionally feminine "beauty products" such as a sharpened hairpin or razor blades hidden in her hair and who sabotages King George's drug stash by switching out the smack with the "kitchen staple" of sugar (p. 278). The masquerade as Mystique allows Coffy to navigate and disrupt the criminal underworld, utilizing her femininity and cunning intellect to dismantle the oppressive system from within. These appropriations of Black stereotypes and traditionally feminine props demonstrate a form of fabulation that is not entirely detached from previous images but rather subverts and recontextualizes them to empower the female protagonist. This complex interplay of stereotypes and empowerment showcases a unique form of fabulation that transcends traditional narratives and constructs a new space for Black women to assert their power and challenge prevailing norms.

2.3.1 Kinship and Action in Coffy

While the film's constructions of gender and race have been the object of considerable study, questions of class, community, and kinship have been less thoroughly discussed. Through the lens of fabulation, I connect aspects of gender and race in *Coffy* to class dynamics and the portrayal of kinship relations. Exploring these elements, I note the ways in which the film navigates intersections of power, agency, and societal structures which characterize the Blaxploitation genre. I look first at how African American kinship is invoked in negative ways. This provides a contrast that underlines how Coffy's resilience, strength, and determination are inspired and shaped by kinship bonds. Her character highlights the role of familial and communal support in navigating and resisting oppressive forces. It sheds light on the interconnectedness of individual agency, community bonds, and the pursuit of freedom within the larger societal framework. In connection to fabulation, the film's tragic ending reflects ambivalence about the extent to which action can make change, but we see how her actions both disrupt oppressive

systems and contribute to the imaginative reshaping of narratives, empowering marginalized voices and inspiring new possibilities for collective liberation.

One sign of corruption and injustice in Coffy's world is a negative construction or evocation of Black kinship. The clearest example is Howard, who cites kinship hypocritically as a way of soliciting votes as well as Coffy's respect, and finally as a way of exonerating himself for selling his community out. Publicly, in his political campaign, he makes speeches which emphasize themes of Black unity, empowerment, and representation in Congress; here, he uses terms like "brother" and "sister" to appeal to his predominantly Black audience and project a sense of solidarity. However, privately he admits to the white crime bosses that this rhetoric is a farce: "You know, you've been listening to my political speeches. I thought you'd be more intelligent than to listen to crap like that. Now, for Christ sake – black, brown, or yellow, I'm in it for the green. The green buck!" (Hill, 1976, 01:08:22) His hypocrisy is evident as he leverages the language of Black empowerment for political gain while secretly colluding with the white crime bosses for personal profit. When speaking to these mob bosses, Howard drops the rhetoric of Black kinship. He picks up the language of kinship again at the end of the film, once Coffy has discovered his involvement with the mob, to appeal to her sympathy: "I did what I did for my people, for our brothers and sisters" (01:24:58). He suggests that just as siblings may do things they do not want to do for each other, he too has had to make difficult decisions for the benefit of the community. This is a way of deflecting blame and responsibility for his actions and appealing to Coffy's sense of familial loyalty to gain her support. He suggests that by helping him, Coffy would be helping her own "family" and strengthening the bonds between members of the Black community (01:25:26, 01:25:57). His deceptive behaviour speaks to the film's exploration of duplicity and the complexities of power dynamics within the Black community as he perpetuates anti-Black violence. This is signalled by his manipulation of kinship language, which emphasizes the complex interplay between genuine solidarity and instrumental exploitation in his actions.

Howard's duplicity is not unlike Hollywood's adoption of Blaxploitation in an effort to monetize the malaise of Black audiences in the 1970s in response to policies and practices that underpinned inequity and discrimination. While the fabulation of Blaxploitation evoked the injustice and anguish of anti-Blackness and offered a site to create narratives that visualized prospects of vengeance for Black people, Blaxploitation and Black liberation speeches such as Howard's initial albeit duplicitous Black empowerment address to adoring Black masses reinforced the anti-Blackness of institutional economic and social frameworks (Haines, 2019, p. 84). Howard embodies a form of Black complacency in the face of institutional villainy wherein free enterprise is fundamentally anti-Black. All of the antagonists in *Coffy* perpetuate and thrive upon callous capital interests which manifest systemically through corruption, addiction, and objectification; all of these personally afflict Coffy and ravage the Black community.

While Howard invokes African American kinship hypocritically, the white mob invokes it as a mode of anti-Black homogenization. For example, when a mob boss's white bodyguard doubts Howard's loyalty to the mob due to his personal association with Coffy, he recalls the duplicity of King George, a Black pimp and dealer, by fabulating: "These people all stick together like brothers. You can't trust 'em. Those pushers that got killed last month that just come in with us. Then, King George double-crossing us like he did. All 'brothers,' remember? And he's one of 'em. No money or deals, or anything—don't make him one of us!" (Hill, 1973, 01:07:45) These lines speak to the prevalent white assumption of universal Black identity. Furthermore, the bodyguard homogenizes Blackness by invoking lateral kinship, using siblingship to represent Black universal identity. I discussed in the Introduction how fictive siblingship amongst African Americans ensued when blood families were separated through enslavement. Although the bodyguard in *Coffy* does not reference the transatlantic slave trade that informs Blackness within the Americas, he does not trust Black people because they are "brothers"—they are still beholden to Blackness, no matter how much they serve whiteness.

It is significant that these negative invocations of African American kinship come from patriarchal figures and consistently connect kinship with capitalist concerns. Eithne

Quinn (2012), one of the few scholars who considers socioeconomic issues in the film, sees Coffy, in contrast to the men, to be driven not only by the pursuit of financial capital but also respectability, social and cultural capital (p. 272, p. 274). Coffy says that she originates from and formerly resided within "the ghetto," where one of her sisters is still hustling and her brother is still "shooting up" (Hill, 1973, 00:12:03). Her movement away from this neighborhood, in conjunction with her occupation as a nurse, consigns her to a "liminal space between upper-working and lower-middle classes" (Quinn, 2012, p. 273). Quinn also notes that Coffy's past and present romantic partners include a policeman (Carter) and a councillor (Howard), both of whom symbolize aspirations of social mobility (p. 268, p. 272, p. 276, p. 278). Expanding on her observation, we can see how differences between the two men clarify Coffy's class mobility. Early in the film, Coffy has moved beyond Carter, who comes from the same neighborhood. He tells her: "We had a real good thing once, Coffy. I think there's still something there" (Hill, 1973, 00:13:44). She replies, "But we were kids then. Things are different now" (00:13:48). This suggests a shift in her priorities and aspirations towards great upward mobility, social standing and financial security, which reflects the complex role of social mobility in shaping her life and relationships.

A focus on sibling relationships makes it clear that, in this upward mobility, Coffy is not driven by selfish desires. Although Quinn does not discuss kinship extensively, she connects Coffy's pursuit of social and cultural capital to her aspirations for her family and community as well as herself (p. 273). She contrasts Coffy with many upwardly mobile male protagonists of Blaxploitation, who work mainly for individual gain; we will also see in the next chapter how some male protagonists of New Black Realism are similarly motivated by more personal and less community-minded aims (p. 274). Within *Coffy*, Quinn notes that the social mobility of Black *men* is, in contrast with Coffy's own, presented "in starkly pejorative terms," as Carter's is "ineffectual," and Howard's is "pernicious" (p. 276). Turning to the film itself, I argue that it puts a more admirable construction on Coffy's upward mobility. For example, Coffy's attraction to Howard could be interpreted not only as desire for social mobility but as a result of genuine emotional connection and a shared desire to enact positive change within their Black community. Furthermore, it is very clear that Coffy is motivated by concern for her

siblings. She states that her parents were absent, so she worked extra nursing shifts in an effort to pay for what she believed to be music classes for her sister Lubelle. This backstory shows that, despite the modesty of her income, she has aimed to support her family financially and uplift them socially. Her crusade against the drug dealers is prompted by the realization that the money she sent Lubelle was actually being used to fund a drug habit. It is also, to a lesser extent, driven by concern for her other sister and her brother. Most importantly, the fact that she pursues justice at the expense of her social position, professional achievements, and relationship with Howard shows that her priorities are ultimately not about social mobility for personal gain. Even though interactions between the siblings do not take up much screen time, they are integral to her motivation and character.

Coffy's relation to her siblings—especially Lubelle—can be described by what psychological and psychoanalytic discourses would call the attachment-identification structure of siblingship. Because these discourses often present concepts of attachment and identification in universal terms, it is useful to look at a representation of siblingship that takes account of race, class, and gender in a specific historical context. Coffy's attachment to and identification with Lubelle are evident in the fact that Coffy tries to give Lubelle the class mobility that she has pursued herself. Her actions, dialogue, and her sense of responsibility toward her siblings highlight the specific connection and shared experiences that siblings possess. Family Studies research that considers how race factors into the dynamics of sibling relationships claims that siblings can fulfill one another's social needs through "fun and playful interactions," while parents are typically characterized as the primary supports in times of distress; however, parental absence prompts siblings to enact support to relieve adversity for and amongst themselves (Woodward & Copp, 2016, p. 342). Coffy supports Lubelle through the music lessons in order to relieve adversity; her role encompasses elements of surrogate parenting within the lateral dynamics of attachment-identification in siblingship. While Coffy's devotion to Lubelle may not be explicitly expressed through joyful recollections or lines of dialogue about their past, to me, the absence of such references indeed suggests a deep identification between them that transcends past happiness or "fun and playful

interactions." Her commitment to Lubelle in the face of adversity reflects the depth of siblingship as a bond that persists—specifically, a testament to their shared traits and positionality as siblings. Coffy's identification with Lubelle is evident in the way she responds personally when Lubelle, as a poor, African American woman in the "ghetto," is preyed upon by drug dealers. Even though Coffy has not experienced this first-hand, because she identifies with her sister, Lubelle's experiences externalize and provide a mirror to Coffy's own positionality.

This attachment is supported by a strong sense of object constancy. As I discussed in the Introduction, object constancy is the understanding that an object is stable and enduring despite changes in conditions surrounding the object or one's perspective of it (Bremner, Slater, & Johnson, 2015, p. 8). As I also discussed, object constancy is often presented as a universal psychological concept, but some scholars acknowledge that the experience and interpretation of such concepts can be influenced by various factors, including race. For example, psychotherapist Gail Lewis (2020) writes that a shared struggle against misogyny and white supremacy informs how Black women consolidate objects and meaning, generating a sense of sisterhood with one another (p. 12, p. 13). The principle of object constancy is also enacted in *Coffy* in the heroine's unwavering attachment and commitment to Lubelle as a beloved sister, despite the profound transformation caused by addiction. Coffy is conscious of Lubelle's decline; she visits her bed-ridden sister in the rehab center, and the changes are visible to her. However, her actions and motives go beyond awareness of this decline. Coffy's vengeance is fuelled by the enduring image of her siblings before their lives were consumed by addiction. She reminisces to Carter about memories of playing together, enjoying each other's company, and talking about their futures and vocations. The image of Lubelle as she once was despite all else speaks to the object constancy that drives Coffy's resolve for revenge on the drug racketeers responsible for her sister's plight and, by extension, the destruction of the welfare of her other siblings and community. Sibling object constancy and attachment-identification motivate her as she pursues those responsible, in spite of the dangers to herself and those around her.

Coffy's object constancy and attachment-identification have both positive and negative effects in the context of her specific historical conditions. Within universalizing discourses, object constancy is often considered to be a positive structure insofar as a consistent and constant perception of an object or person enables individuals to sustain trust, stability, and healthy relationships even when the other person begins to look or act different (Agger, 1988, p. 3). While laterality may predispose siblings to tensions and disagreements spurred by rivalry or efforts to individuate-deidentify, object constancy ideally allows them to maintain a positive perception of one another as kin. Coffy consistently identifies with Lubelle and the other siblings as extensions and reflections of herself. However, her avid quest for vengeance prompts her to act and think in extremes; she overlooks her own welfare and the consequences of her actions. She pretends to be a sex worker, desperate and willing to do anything for drugs, to lure a local drug pusher and accomplice to their home to kill them; later, she assumes the persona of Mystique—a swankier, Caribbean sex worker—to infiltrate the drug racket's inner circle through King George. With both actions, Coffy puts herself directly in harm's way to gather crucial information and exact her revenge. This shows that object constancy can hinder or even prevent one's ability to put things into perspective. Coffy's actions are undeniably prompted by the ineffectiveness of a law enforcement system that does not value Black lives—including her own or her siblings' lives. The fact that her unwavering commitment to her siblings and family is a central driving force behind her decisions demonstrates how personal relationships and attachments can intertwine with broader societal factors to shape individuals' actions. Under the socioeconomic and legal conditions in which Coffy acts, object constancy enables siblings to maintain favourable or constructive views of one another due to their distinct likeness in positionality and shared traits, but it may also serve to entrap siblings through their imagination of a joyful time or likeness that *once* was—or *never* was. The film does not tell the audience whether Coffy's view of Lubelle was ever accurate, but her support of Lubelle's dance lessons show that she distinguishes Lubelle from their other siblings and has a strong—perhaps romanticized—belief in her potential. This constant image of Lubelle has not, however, kept her from being preyed upon. The object constancy is also a trap for both of them.

Sibling object constancy and attachment-identification are, for Coffy, both a source of tragedy and of strength. As she becomes consumed by her pursuit, the tragic consequences highlight the disconnect between her object constancy and the grim reality of her siblings' current conditions—conditions shaped not only by their individual choices but also by the effects of systemically racist policies on the USA in the 1970s. Her pursuit of revenge leads to a tragic outcome where she ends up alone. The siblings she sought to avenge are not with her. They never overcome their addictions, nor do they regain their abilities or recover what time or prospects they lost. On the other hand, siblingship is, throughout the film, a site of refuge and support for her against the systemic anti-Blackness and exclusionary hegemony that regulates her class mobility and respectability. Despite the tragic end result, the enduring bond of siblingship represents a source of mutual acceptance, emotional connection, and solace.

Through Coffy's role as a sibling, the film explores themes of commitment to community, modes of activism, and the potential for socioeconomic change. First, Coffy's attachment to and identification with her family is qualitatively similar to attachment to and identification with the African American and class community from which she comes. For example, she references the needs of the community at large, not just her siblings, when talking to Carter after they visit Lubelle at the rehab centre. She asks Carter if he would like to kill local drug dealers for the devastation wrought by substances they sell, and he replies: "What good would that do, Coffy? He's only part of a chain that reaches all the way back to some poor farmer in Turkey or Vietnam. What would you do, kill all of 'em?" Coffy replies, "Well, why not? Nothing else seems to do any good. You know who they are. Everybody knows who they are. You're a cop, why don't you just arrest them?" (Hill, 1973, 00:12:50-00:13:08). In response, Carter laments, "It's not that simple, Coffy. The law can't do that" (00:13:10). Her role as a nurse also demonstrates her compassion for and service to her wider community. She reminisces with Carter about a comical injury he had in his early days as a cop, which she tended to with fondness and humor; this provides a glimpse into her history of assisting and caring empathetically for other community members. Quinn (2013) sees the connection between family and community both in terms of the film's narrative and its production by looking

at Grier herself, an uncredited producer and writer as well as the lead actor, as a "positional producer" (p. 268) who invoked family and the broader marginalized community together. In interviews, Grier spoke of how she translated her family's shared struggles into her performance of Coffy, emphasizing both her "rough" childhood, in which narcotics had tragic effects on her family and community, and her family's strong emphasis on education (p. 275). This reinforces the significance of kinship as a vital bond in navigating life's challenges and striving for better opportunities, a theme that resonates throughout the film. In contrast to Howard's insincere concern for the "brothers and sisters" of his community, Coffy represents true kinship—not because she acts on behalf of *biological* siblings, but because she is motivated by genuine loyalty to them—and devotion to her community.

Second, by showing that Coffy's efforts to pursue respectability do not protect her sister, the film demonstrates the limitations on the conditions and circumstances that allowed a Black middle class to materialize and support itself in the USA in the 1970s. Not only does the film portray systemic barriers and societal inequalities that undermined efforts to attain and maintain middle class status within the Black community, but in its portrayal of drug addiction, it shows the desperation to escape from or forget about these adversities, even temporarily. Coffy's successful career and respectability as a nurse also do not, within the plot, substantially relate to her ability to affect change; the upward mobility she enjoys at the beginning of the film is inconsequential to her quest for justice and vengeance. While her professional background may provide her with certain resources and opportunities, her reliance on her sexuality and street smarts in her quest for justice highlights the limitations on the efficacy of traditional markers of success and social mobility within the Black community. The film also debunks the idea that hard work pays off—especially if you are Black. The end of the film recognizes that not only does hard work not solve everything—even revenge is not a solution. Even before this, the question of Coffy's socioeconomic mobility is ambiguous; it has not clearly been a matter of effort. Her crusade shows her to be strong and independent, not afraid to take risks or stand up for herself, and to be resourceful and quick-thinking, which allows her to navigate dangerous situations and overcome obstacles. One might assume that these

qualities enabled her to gain socioeconomic privilege—to “leave the ghetto”—and avoid the cycle of addiction that affected her siblings. However, the film does not provide a clear explanation for why Coffy was able to overcome these challenges while her siblings were not. This reflects the complexity and unpredictability of life and the fact that success or failure can depend on a wide variety of factors—systemic and personal—many of which are outside of a person’s control. The film thus confirms sociologist Benjamin P. Bowser’s (2007) view that a collective movement into the middle class is not solely determined by individual qualities but is also heavily influenced by pre-existing material and human resources, which are shaped by systemic racial inequalities and barriers that impact opportunities for marginalized communities striving for upward mobility (p. 42). While individual ambition may align with opportunities, it is essential to recognize that the absence of equitable opportunities can impede the sustainability of a Black middle class (p. 42).

Although Quinn sees Coffy’s upward mobility to be successful, *Coffy*’s fabulation also shows both how racism could limit this success and how it could be met with action. *Coffy*’s white population luxuriates in a sense of superiority, regardless of their wealth or poverty. Many white characters, such as the mob bodyguard cited above, avow anti-Blackness by characterizing all Black people as a monolith of untrustworthy “niggers,” regardless of class or vocation. Similarly, Coffy is harassed by a white cop at the hospital who sees her as sexually available. Her professional success, which gives her a degree of social capital as represented by the nurse’s uniform she wears in this scene, does not protect her. These images of the limitations of class mobility exemplify W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, the “sense of always looking at one’s [Black] self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 3). Du Bois argued that this dual awareness could lead to feelings of alienation but could also contribute to a strong sense of collective identity and the pursuit of civil rights and social justice (p. 14, p. 26). Coffy’s double consciousness is evident in her awareness of her racial identity and the systemic injustices faced by her community. As a nurse, she inhabits the world of the Black lower-middle-class but also witnesses firsthand the devastating toll of drugs on her patients and

her sister Lubelle. Despite her aspirations for her own and her sister's upward mobility, Coffy does not abandon her community; instead, she seeks revenge against those responsible for exploiting and destroying it. Her double consciousness is grounded in both her individual situation and aspirations and her commitment to the collective struggle against oppression.

The way *Coffy* ends carries important implications within the Blaxploitation genre, siblingship dynamics, and fabulation. As Coffy walks along the beach, the lack of a definitive happy ending speaks to how Blaxploitation depicted the complex and often unresolved realities of Black life. On one hand, despite her triumph over the organized crime syndicate, the sad state of Coffy's siblings reflected the impact of systemic issues such as addiction and societal inequalities that persisted beyond individual victories. The film underscored the interconnectedness of siblingship with the wider community, as the tragic fate of one sibling is intertwined with collective experiences. However, it also spoke to the potential for ongoing change and transformation. The song "Shining Symbol" by Wayne Garfield plays non-diegetically, underlining this prospect (Ayers, 1973). "It's not the end," Garfield sings, "It's the beginning" (Hill, 1973: 01:28:10). This aligns with the concept of fabulation, inviting viewers to envision a future in which systemic anti-Blackness can be challenged and overcome. The new dawn further reinforces this idea, symbolizing a new day and the endless possibilities for reparation and resistance. Moreover, the fact that Coffy walks away from the camera signifies her movement away from the immediate conflict and towards an uncertain future, suggesting that her journey is far from over. This lack of resolution invited 1970s viewers to imagine and engage with the potential for transformative change and continued resistance against systemic oppression. It called for a critical examination of the broader societal structures that perpetuated the challenges faced by Black communities, highlighting the ongoing struggle for agency, liberation, and the pursuit of justice within a challenging sociopolitical climate. As Coffy's object constancy prioritized the shared narratives of siblingship and her ability to hold on to a certain image of Lubelle despite major visible changes, Blaxploitation's fabulation of narratives and mythologies offered a framework that took account of social and cultural factors as it shaped individual and collective subjectivities and realities.

2.4 The Brothers' War

In examining *Brotherhood of Death* through the lens of fabulation, I explore how the protagonists of the film are able to transcend the confines of their circumstances and imagine transformative possibilities. Fabulation can serves as a tool for marginalized communities to envision and strive towards liberation and reckoning with oppressive systems. To its original audiences, *Brotherhood of Death* presented a powerful narrative space, enabled by fabulation, that showcased the transformative potential of Blaxploitation's storytelling and its capacity to inspire power and resistance. Siblingship is a central pillar of the narrative's transformative power, illuminating how the shared stories and experiences among these brothers foster unity, resilience, and a collective vision for a brighter future, uniquely emphasizing the role of kinship within the Blaxploitation genre.

Bill Berry's *Brotherhood of Death* (1976) is set during the 1960s. Three African American men—Ned Tiese (Le Tari), Junior Moffat (Haskell V. Anderson III), and Raymond Moffat (Roy Jefferson)—enlist in the United States Army and embark for Vietnam after clashing with Leroy Winnifred (Ron David), a notorious Klansman. While in Vietnam, they learn about various booby traps—hidden bamboo stakes, grenades, tripwires, and improvised explosive and projectile devices. Although they lament the grievous harm these traps cause, they also marvel at the ingenuity of the Viet Cong to fashion such lethal mechanisms from crude materials—a methodology they ultimately imitate in their fights against the Klan. Shortly after their return to their Dixie hometown, Klansman Leroy viciously rapes an African American woman; two of his pals attack and then implicate her boyfriend in the sexual assault. Raymond beats up Leroy, but the white sheriff (Bryan Clark), who knows of the rape, advises Leroy not to press charges. Meanwhile, the trio of veterans politically mobilize the local Black community, encouraging them to register to vote in the upcoming campaign and defeat anti-Black incumbents. The Klan burns down a local church and Black community hub while local police murder an African American townsman and then abduct, torture, and attempt to frame Raymond for the killing. When the sheriff attempts to investigate and catch the

actual perpetrators, Leroy murders him. In the film's final act, Ned, Raymond, and Junior employ techniques against the murderous Klan that they learned fighting the Viet Cong. They kidnap Leroy and county attorney Harold Turner (Rick Ellis). The kidnappings incite panic amongst other Klansmen, who try to recover their bigoted brethren; most are slain by punji sticks[18], Venus fly traps[19], a snake pit[20], and a grenade, and the Brothers even trick the Klansmen into killing Leroy and Turner. The film ends with the Brothers' departure from their hometown.

Production, budget, and box office figures are unavailable for *Brotherhood of Death*; however, producer Ronald K. Goldman thought the film would be profitable at the time because of its low budget and its production outside of Hollywood (McKenna, 2005). He saved money by hiring Berry, a fellow white artist and first-time director, with whom he co-wrote the screenplay. Paul B. Rich (2020) observes that Berry utilized the Blaxploitation genre to explore themes of resistance and anti-Black injustice typically "avoided in the mainstream genres" (p. 171). Goldman also saved money by shooting almost entirely in Montgomery County in Washington, D.C., which did not require costly permits (Kring-Schreifels, 2015). The only other location was in North Carolina, near an actual KKK recruitment billboard that appears in the film (Sims, 1996, p. 29). In addition to Roy Jefferson, who plays one of the main protagonists, Goldman convinced other players for the Washington Redskins football team to appear briefly in the film. This freed him from paying a high salary to experienced union actors and also garnered public interest (McKenna, 2005). The film's trailer indicates how widely the film cast its publicity net. On the whole, it centred Black audiences by showing the Brotherhood to be

[18] Sharpened bamboo stakes, usually covered with substances (often urine or feces) that spur infection in whomever they strike. They may be used independently, manually, or triggered by corded mechanisms in which they can pierce or enclose victims; also carved into or affixed upon surfaces (Lanning & Cragg, 2008, p. 110; Stillwell, 2021).
[19] Underground spiked box trap. What marks this as distinct is that the spikes point downwards so injury is not likely to be inflicted upon falling in, but when the victim attempts to extract themselves from therein (Kikoy, 2018).
[20] Vietcong carried bamboo pit vipers (*trimeresurus gramineus*) in their bags as a means to thwart, if not outright kill enemies who searched them. They additionally tied these snakes to bamboo and hid them throughout trenches, tunnels, and pits to strike their enemies (Thorne, 2021; Uetz & Hallermann, n.d.).

the main characters avenging wronged community members. It also potentially appealed to white audiences by playing up the role of the white sheriff, who is labelled the Brotherhood's "honky friend"; this may have been intended to interest liberal white audiences who could see themselves as allies to "cool" Black people. The inaccuracy of the trailer is also seen in the fact that it claimed erroneously that the other main actors, in addition to Jefferson, were NFL players.

2.4.1 State of Union

In *Brotherhood of Death*, the very essence of the Brotherhood—the film's central kinship unit—is partially shaped by the Vietnam War. In this section, I explore the interplay between transnationalism and African American identity during the Vietnam Era. This historical moment saw a convergence of global events and cultural shifts that significantly shaped the African American experience. I discuss how the Vietnam War played a crucial role in reshaping perceptions of race, justice, and activism among African Americans on both national and international scales, and how Blaxploitation in general and *Brotherhood of Death* in particular translated some of these topics to the screen.

There has been very little scholarly attention given to *Brotherhood of Death* in comparison to other Blaxploitation films, but I believe the film made a significant contribution to the genre. Brian Locke (2009) is the only scholar who addresses it at length. He writes that *Brotherhood of Death* reflected the shifting interracial relations and politics of the Vietnam era by depicting Black people (both Black Africans and African Americans) in solidarity with "yellow" people (East or Southeast Asian or Asian American) (p. 59). This and other movies showed that Black people demanded fairness and freedoms in the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement at home, and that anti-war sentiment spawned cultural and political solidarity between Asian Americans and African Americans who shared a "common enemy of white supremacy" (p. 59, p. 61). This interpretation takes note of the fact that Blaxploitation coexisted alongside other exploitation subgenres where people in different marginalized positionalities pursued justice or vengeance, or expressed carnality. These subgenres

included "Bruceploitation,"[21] martial arts films[22], and ninja films[23] which centralized Asian Americans. In addition, the Blaxploitation buddy subset was "an offshoot of the larger Blaxploitation genre of the 1970s," that, Locke says, "features black and yellow joining forces to defeat a racist white villain… an epithet or an association with slavery or both" (p. 60). One variation of this Blaxploitation buddy subset unified Black-Asian identities within a single protagonist, a Black martial artist whose "mode of violence…[is] Asian" and who embodied the "kung fu craze"[24] of the 1970s (p. 66). An example of this is Al Adamson's *Black Samurai* (1977) whose protagonist uses his prowess as a martial artist to overcome white mobsters (p. 67). Another variation of the Blaxploitation buddy subset, of which *Brotherhood of Death* is a prime example, portrayed Black Vietnam veterans who return to the United States and deployed their militant combat techniques against white racists (p. 67). Paul B. Rich (2020) similarly notes the film's ingenuity in offering a perspective entrenched in Blackness, active military service, and veteranship with protagonists who resist the Klan using Viet Cong techniques they have gained abroad. This variation is ironic, given that Black soldiers were conscripted to fight the Viet Cong in a war that pretended to promote rights abroad while being denied these rights in America (Locke, 2009, p. 67; Lucks, 2017, p. 1).

This irony created a dialogue with a transnational sense of kinship among marginalized communities during the Vietnam era. The Brothers initially enlist in the Vietnam war because they clash with Leroy, a prominent KKK member; they would rather take their chances in a war overseas, which shows their belief that the Viet Cong, despite being an

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[21] Films which profit off of Bruce Lee's death [in 1973] with onscreen character lookalikes and offscreen actor monikers which resembled Lee's name; e.g., Bruce Le and Bruce Li (Carter & Barber, 2017, p. 161, p. 162).
[22] Defined by exhaustive martial arts fights, all of which serve as a storytelling device to convey character development and expression (Willis, 2000).
[23] Sub-genre of martial arts films which focus on historically inaccurate stereotypes of ninjas. Although ninjas were mercenaries or covert agents in feudal Japan famed for deception, espionage, and surprise attacks—they were neither cowled black-clad, heavily armed, or innately magic. These movies are edited by splicing stock footage of sparring ninjas with footage from extraneous film protects (Gustafsson & Kääpä, 2021, p. 152).
[24] Reference to the mass popularity of action films which featured martial arts (Yip, 2017, p. 145).

enemy force, poses a lesser threat to their welfare than the white supremacists who oversee and terrorize their community. This is a calculated choice, a strategic escape from immediate danger that also aligned them with BIPOC movements against oppressive forces abroad as well as at home. This echoed Muhammad Ali's refusal to be conscripted into the American military for the Vietnam War: "My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America… And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, [the Viet Cong] never lynched me, they didn't put no dogs on me, they didn't rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father" (Brown, 2018). Ali's assertion invoked worldwide oppression, exemplifying the interconnectedness of BIPOC resistance movements and how marginalized peoples' solidarity went beyond national boundaries. Ali's stance highlighted the shared struggles of marginalized communities worldwide, which we see in the Brothers' alignment with the Viet Cong. This reflected the broader transnational solidarity that was a defining feature of anti-colonial and resistance movements during that era.

While Locke (2009) and Rich (2020) note that the protagonists use the guerrilla warfare tactics of the Viet Cong against white supremacists, they do not acknowledge how this parallels the guerilla warfare cultivated and employed by enslaved African Americans and subsequent generations of African Americans. One important example was the organization of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) in 1961/62, which advocated the use of guerrilla tactics as necessary for Black liberation.[25] Muhammed Ahmad, associate of Malcolm X and co-founder of RAM, spoke to the global interest of resisting white supremacist hegemony.[26] RAM asserted that the liberation from white supremacy entailed a joint effort of all people in marginalized positionalities to depose pan-European racism and the capitalist exploitation of laboring classes (Kelley & Esch, 2008, p. 108; Stanford, 1986, p. 3). Ahmad said that African Americans were the "vanguard of the world revolution" and that Black rebellions inspired by Black Power ideologies and gathering momentum in the Americas were not covered in mainstream

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[25] There are conflicting reports about the date of foundation.
[26] Formerly known as Maxwell C. Stanford.

media either because they were overlooked by white supremacist hegemony or because Black people akin to RAM chose not to "project…publicly…using the oppressor's mass media" (Revolutionary Action Movement, 2017). Ahmad also said that, unlike prior African American methods of guerilla warfare based in rural areas such as countryside plantations—methods that sought to utilize *literal* camouflage, blending into landscape—the new African American guerilla warfare enacted a *figurative* camouflage of hiding in plain sight where they could be protected by fellow Black community members, just as rebels against white supremacy outside of North America were hidden in proximity to enemies (p. 32).

In *Brotherhood of Death*, Black townspeople hide in plain sight. Their white malefactors hold positions of power and authority in various aspects of society, such as employers, adjudicators, and politicians. As they perform services as domestic and hospitality employees, Black workers obtain information from these oppressors that they weaponize. For example, Rose (Vacountess E. Payne), an elderly Black woman, is cleaning a parlor when she overhears three Klansmen—including the district attorney—saying that the KKK is on the lookout for the Brotherhood. Also, a Black butler (actor not specified in the credits) overhears one of the Klansman caution his racist brethren to be "more careful" and resolve to target the Black preacher in order to quash local African American dissent (Berry, 1976, 01:00:39). The Brotherhood use this information obtained by the townspeople in conjunction with military self-defence and guerilla fighting systems. The other Black townspeople also use the information strategically, understanding the complexities of power dynamics and the need to navigate the system while also seeking to challenge and confront those who perpetuate racism and oppression. Meanwhile, the whites—whose actions show that they take their superiority for granted—assume their Black employees to be harmless and unintelligent. This understanding of the roles of white oppressors and the Black community's plan to utilize their knowledge are essential elements in the film's exploration of resistance and agency within the context of systemic racism and oppression. These tactics are made possible by information systems shared across the world by marginalized peoples engaged in contemporary armed conflicts underwritten by postcolonial tensions.

2.4.2 Signs of the Times

In the following section, I introduce and critically consider Deleuze's analysis of the state as well as the Deleuzian concepts of despotic signification, machinic enslavement and war-machines. I note their relevance to both *Brotherhood of Death* and the multifaceted dynamics of the transformative period in history in which it appeared and its impact on African American identity. Although Deleuze does not address race, these concepts are useful in an analysis of anti-Blackness because they allow us to see different components of this assemblage more clearly.

The white supremacist hegemony materializes in *Brotherhood of Death* in part through the state, which can be elucidated by Deleuzian theory. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write about the state as a distinct institutional regime created from a series of social relations; these social relations are derivatives of constructed representations but endowed with a sense of permanence (p. 359, p. 360). The state exists as a process rather than an immutable or stationary entity (p. 133). Despite differences amongst particular states, for Deleuze, there is a basic form of the state that is characterized by two developments or systems: despotic signification and machinic enslavement (Jordan, 1995, p. 133; Robinson, 2010). Despotic signification is the mass belief that certain signifiers represent the whole state ideal whereas those that contrast with them are radically excluded (Rae, 2013, p. 13). In the context of the American state, it is crucial to acknowledge the deeply ingrained racial hierarchies and structures of white supremacy that shape its functioning and evolution. Deleuze, while insightful, does not adequately address the ways in which race intersects with the dynamics of state power and oppression in the United States, but *Brotherhood of Death* can elucidate these. The film's white supremacists belief in Black people's lack of intelligence is a form of despotic signification that fails to recognize the Brotherhood and the other Black townspeople's organization and militancy. The Brotherhood can hide in plain sight because of the white supremacist regime's despotically signifying fabulations. In addition, the Klan sees Black people as subservient and feels entitled to eliminate anyone who does not conform to

these ideas. Both the Brotherhood and the white sheriff are therefore targets who must be radically excluded.

The relationship between the KKK and the state can be understood as one of entanglement and complicity. The KKK, as an organization, is not explicitly and overtly the official state power, although some of its members hold official state positions. It also operates within the larger framework of the state's power structures by representing a violent and white supremacist ideology. While the narrative often shows the KKK to be outside of the social order as they meet secretly and do not sport their hoods in everyday life, the group's influence is deeply rooted within the very institutions that should counter its actions. For example, most of the police officers are members of the KKK and thus directly obstruct justice and equality. Similarly, the voting registrar is a part of the KKK; although he registers the Black members of the community to vote, he also notifies the KKK that they are registering in large numbers, which leads the KKK to burn down the church where the Black citizens meet. This suggests that the state which claims in the American Constitution to safeguard justice and equality, is thoroughly entangled with the KKK's agenda.[27] This reveals a disturbing collusion between racial hate groups and the very mechanisms meant to maintain societal order. This concept highlights how the oppressive machinery of power operates on multiple levels, intertwining systemic racism with state apparatuses.

[27] The American Constitution's preamble outlines its dedication to justice and equality with: "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America" (U.S. Const. pmbl). Additionally, the 14th Amendment expressly asserts the principle of equal protection under the law, stating: "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws" (U.S. Const. amend. XIV). These constitutional references underscore the state's commitment to ensuring justice and equality for all its citizens.

At its core, *Brotherhood of Death* exemplifies the other aspect of Deleuze's concept of the state: machinic enslavement. Deleuze defines a "machine" as merely a combination of elements or energies; it is not intrinsically a mechanism, which may be automatic or instrumentalized (Swiboda, 2004, p. 114). A machine is a specific type of assemblage designed to perform a specific function or produce a specific outcome. The overall concept of assemblage itself is more loosely defined and open-ended; assemblages are composed of a variety of elements that come together in unexpected and often unpredictable ways, and they do not necessarily have a fixed or predetermined goal (p. 114). Machines are a type of assemblage that are highly organized and tightly regulated, with interconnected parts that work together to achieve a common goal. In a discussion of global and economic relations, political theorist Andrew Robinson (2010) says the concept of machinic enslavement spans "the entire history of alienation of dehumanization that makes the individual part of the machine." In this context, enslavement does not refer to literal ownership or chattel slavery; it refers to the process by which individuals are subsumed into societal mechanisms and power structures. This concept speaks to how individuals become integrated into systems of control and exploitation, losing autonomy and agency within larger societal assemblages. Machinic enslavement occurs when people become pieces of a machine composed of all human members of society and other, reified entities; together, they are governed by a "higher power" or authority such as white supremacist logic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975, p. 601; Robinson, 2010). Each slave is interconnected to other bodies and is part of a greater mechanism that carries sufficient energy to generate orders (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975, p. 603). Those enslaved are not subjects, just bodies—energy streams, affects (Lazzarato, 2006). While Deleuze's use of the term "enslavement" may not directly address the specific historical context of chattel slavery in the USA, it provides a framework for understanding broader forms of oppression and control that persist beyond legalized slavery. By conceptualizing enslavement as a process of subsuming individuals into societal mechanisms and power structures, Deleuze's theory offers insight into how systemic oppression, including anti-Blackness, can manifest and evolve over time.

The film shows machinic enslavement at work in the town's white supremacist hegemony, in which African Americans are disproportionately conscripted and recruited, consumed, and assimilated to colonialist institutions which they encounter. Although the Brothers voluntarily enlist as opposed to being recruited or conscripted, the military is their only viable means to escape the Klan because the anti-Black judicial system prevents any legal recourse, and they cannot afford to flee elsewhere. The KKK members are also enslaved by the machine. Junior conveys this when he has been captured by KKK members. He says: "Do you actually believe that you can put on evil spirit costumes and call yourself dragons, and burn crosses, and all the darkies will shake in their shoes and afraid [sic] to fight your white supremacy? All these darkies are about to do you in!" (Berry, 1976, 01:05:03) He mocks their conformity and uncritical reverence of white supremacy. In this way, the film portrays the town as a machine with a dynamic interplay of forces, where the Black townspeople recognize the intricate connections between their white malefactors' roles as employers, adjudicators, and politicians, revealing a complex system of power relations that influences and shapes their actions and strategies. In this way, the concept of machinic enslavement is manifested through the entanglement of various social forces and how individuals navigate them to resist and combat oppression.

The film also represents war-machines (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 352, p. 354). In Deleuze and Guattari's relatively generalized account, a war-machine is a "machine of differentiation" in the realm of warfare, wherein forces ritually clash or diverge (Robinson, 2010). Combatants themselves are not war-machines; the war-machine is the difference that assembles the combatants. The combatants themselves are at once enslaved by the machine of war and are pieces of it. Furthermore, there are different types of war-machines. In state-form war-machines, states seize others or incorporate independent peoples (Patton, 1984, p. 79). Autonomous war-machines, on the other hand, are assemblages purposed against the state and imperial sovereignty (Deleuze, 1980, p. 13). Autonomous war-machines subvert state-forms by employing diffuse powers to divide fixed power. People in marginalized positionalities, whom Deleuze terms "minorities," tend to unify as autonomous war-machines since the colonial state-form is

incongruous with their praxes and ideologies (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 25). For example, those who use nonviolent civil disobedience pursue spatial and temporal arrangements which afford equality and justice to the people in marginalized positionalities for whom they advocate (p. 15). They do not seek conflict, but conflict is part of the machinic difference between them and the state, and they are often forced into conflict with state-form war-machines.

Brotherhood of Death shows how race intersects with various other factors such as socioeconomic status, nationality, and political affiliations to play a significant role in differentiating combatants in both state-form and autonomous war-machines. The film relates and contrasts two types of war-machines. While the Brothers are caught within the structures of the war-machine, their autonomy manifests through resistance and collective action aimed at challenging and subverting oppressive state-forms, thereby asserting agency within the broader struggle for liberation and social justice. Their participation in the Vietnam War is a classic example of a state-form war machine which, in part, shapes the decisions to become an autonomous war-machine against white supremacists upon their return. Furthermore, as discussed above, racial identity differentiated African American from white American combatants in terms of conscription rates during the Vietnam War, while transnational BIPOC solidarity aligned African Americans—such as the Brothers—with those whom the state-form war-machine constructed as their opponents. The film shows how the war-machine encompasses the multifaceted ways in which these differentiating factors intersect and shape the dynamics of conflict and warfare, including but not limited to racial distinctions.

2.4.3 True Brotherhood in Brotherhood of Death

Both the state-form and autonomous war-machines in *Brotherhood of Death* operate through the assemblage of kinship. On the state-form side, the KKK members relate to each other as fictive siblings, while Ned, Raymond, and Junior establish an autonomous war-machine to act against established state-form machines, and their success depends on the strength of their sibling bonds. Both sibling groups are structured around the principles that discourses of psychology and psychoanalysis classify as attachment-

identification. As discussed in the introduction, siblings who identify with each other can be “points of reference” for the self because they provide support throughout adolescence and beyond (Cicirelli, 1995, p. 117; Coles, 2009, p. 102, p. 108; Conger & Little, 2010, p. 89; Davidoff, 2006, p. 18; Milevsky, 2011, p. 44, p. 59). In this section, I discuss how *Brotherhood of Death* grounds this universalizing principle in the white supremacist American South in the 1960s and explores the relation between sibling groups and the state structure.

In relation to the Brothers’ autonomous war-machine, there is ambiguity about the nature of the “Brotherhood.” Some viewers interpret Junior and Raymond as brothers, and the surnames of the characters in the film’s credits support this; others interpret them all as friends rather than blood kin (“Brotherhood of Death User Reviews,” n.d.). In any case, although there are no lines of dialogue that confirm a blood relationship, the title of the film constructs Ned, Raymond, and Junior as siblings, whether biological or fictive, and their interactions throughout the film bear this out. First, their interactions are marked by familiarity and a sense of camaraderie that shows they know one another deeply. They share jokes, such as when Ned and Raymond banter to console each other amidst enemy fire in Vietnam (00:07:53). Mutual understanding is evident in their dialogue, which often references past shared experiences and insider knowledge unique to their group. For example, when they return home from Vietnam, their conversation at their local hangout is punctuated by leisurely cutaway shots that trace their conversation as it strays from thoughtful musings on their experience in the war to quips about themselves, their alcohol tolerance—or lack thereof—and the gaudy regalia of their uniforms (00:17:49-00:19:34). Moments like this reinforce their bond, rooted in shared humour, hardship, and survival.

Furthermore, they are bonded in their resistance to the state-form war machine and capitalism which, together, beget anti-Blackness. In several instances, members of the Brotherhood step in to protect one another from threats; for example, at the beginning of the film, Klansman Leroy first targets Ned for racial profiling and assault, but Raymond steps in to help Ned overcome him (Berry, 1976, 00:05:28). Their group decision to enlist in the war together demonstrates the strength of their bond (00:06:13), and they continue

to identify with each other in the army; they cultivate their combat skills in the context of fraternity and later use these against the white supremacists. Their sense of brotherhood is shown in scenes where they plan to combat the racial injustices in their hometown, intent to avenge the rape of a local Black woman by Klansmen (00:24:52). Another instance of this is when, as a trio, they approach the reverend to urge him to discuss hearten the Black congregation by informing them about political issues (00:29:40). The penultimate scenes where they employ their combat training to ambush and undo the local Klan are underscored by the Brotherhood's ability to quickly devise strategies and anticipate each other's thoughts, conveying an intimate trust and understanding forged through their siblingship. Their kinship, and specifically siblingship—or a sense of such—builds an autonomous war-machine that offers a reprieve from the impunity of oppressive power structures. The fictive kinship bonds strengthened in the forge of war are repurposed in America to achieve very different ends.

Like Coffy, the Brothers identify with each other as siblings but also extend this identification to the community, which they treat as a larger kinship network that is defined in opposition to the state structure. The local African American townspeople and the Brotherhood confirm this kinship by frequently addressing each other using familial terms, such as "brother" and "sister." This siblingship is described as a force of resistance in the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the film's poster taglines, which advertise: "See them revenge a sister's rape!" and "See them revenge a brother's murder!" (Black Film History, 2014). The Brotherhood initially leave town because they feel that Leroy's racial slur reflects on the whole community. This means that the Brothers view the local Black community, *their* community, as an extended family unit where insults or threats to one may be perceived as affronts to all. When they return from Vietnam, they see the effects of the Klan's anti-Black assaults on their kinship network and commit to safeguarding their community's dignity, just as they would defend their own family. The sheriff's murder shows them that the judicial system is unable to address racial injustices which is part of their grounds for identification amongst African American community members, and this further solidifies the opposition between their familiality and the state structure.

Brotherhood of Death also shows through the KKK how the universalized principle of attachment-identification emerges in this specific social, political, and racial landscape. Klan members address each other explicitly as brothers when they meet. Their camaraderie is evident when they join hands during a racist rally; this reflects their loyalty to each other, their internal bond based on their common commitment to promoting white supremacy and maintaining the racial hierarchy they believe in. Their militancy draws a twisted analogy to the solidarity of wartime brotherhood as they refer to themselves as brothers in arms striving to conserve segregationist power over Black people. Their racism itself is an effect of object constancy, which identificatory siblingship supports. The object shared amongst the Klansmen is white supremacy; they share a need for the constancy of white supremacy, and this sense of constancy comprises their sense of righteousness in maintaining the status quo. That is why they go so far as to murder the white sheriff; he disrupts their sense of object constancy, so his whiteness cannot protect him from the Klan. His death demonstrates that whiteness is a construct; he does not perform whiteness "correctly" and is therefore a target of the KKK. On the other hand, the sheriff is not part of the Brotherhood, which is also delineated by racial lines. Although he shares judicious and equitable perspectives with the Brotherhood, he is described in trailers as "their only honky friend" (Black Film History, 2014). He cannot be part of the Brotherhood because he is not Black, but he is also not part of the white brotherhood, which is shaped by object constancy and attachment-identification.

The differences between the results of the Klan's and the Brotherhood's identifications—both attachment-identification based on fictive kinship—highlight the contrasting ideals and values at play in society. The Brotherhood's identification prompts them to seek justice, equality, and community solidarity. While the Klan may foster a sense of camaraderie and solidarity among its white membership, it simultaneously perpetuates racism and maintains the oppressive structures of white supremacy, ultimately undermining genuine community solidarity by excluding and targeting marginalized groups in addition to its own members. Exploring this difference offers an insight into the ways attachment-identification is inflected by social affiliations, how it may work for or against transformative change and challenges to oppressive systems, and the potential power of fostering inclusive kinship networks.

What I derive from *Brotherhood of Death* is that kinship amongst Black people in the Americas is not only strengthened by the very anti-Blackness which embattles us by default but is also a requisite for survival. White supremacist hegemony delegitimizes our very essence, which means we are definitively illegible to its concepts of kinship defined exclusively through consanguinity, marriage, or adjudication. This is why the trio of veterans and their community find that organizing in accordance with bureaucratic channels is ineffective: our selves and methods are innately incompatible with the white supremacist hegemony or state-form machine. Black resistance is designed to counter our exclusion from state welfare provisions with our own community service programs which afford public access to resources such as food, healthcare, education, senior care, and ambulance provisions. Individual or selective favor or valor do not create these things; the collectivity of our people does. Consequently, African American kinship assumes an anti-hegemonic nature wherein siblingship is likeliest to prevail because it is premised on laterality which is more relatable, equitable, and identifiable than hierarchy or verticality.

2.5 Fabulation Nation

The endings of *Coffy* and *Brotherhood of Death* present two different but overlapping forms of the Blaxploitation's fabulation. Both drive home the illusory aspect of fabulation; rather than exemplify or catalyze change, as Bergson writes, it tends to supplant change altogether by displacing reality with its own imagery (Stenner, 2018, p. 12). Deleuze's insights (2001b) include a similar concession in respect to the contrivances of public memory; he writes that the way societies remember and commemorate historical events can sometimes serve as a mechanism to displace change (p. 16, p. 17). His insights prompt the question of how the selective framing and interpretation of history can reinforce existing power structures, potentially hindering the possibilities for social transformation. *Coffy* and *Brotherhood of Death* offer moments of empowerment through fabulated narratives, but they also emphasize the limitations of individual or partial actions against deeply rooted societal structures. They show that fabulation may impede freedom when it is consonant with supremacy or acquiescence. Coffy's journey provides her a measure of justice and vengeance for Lubelle, but it leaves intact the existing system that ensures other pimps and other drug dealers will soon

take the place of their slain predecessors. *Brotherhood of Death* also ends with the system intact. The Brotherhood eliminates the people who are responsible for many local grievances, but the larger system is still in place, exemplified by the fact that they need to leave town. In this sense, though, the films' conclusions underscore the importance of collective efforts and systemic change for lasting progress. Their fabulation of change is limited, but it also reveals its limitations.

However, *Brotherhood of Death* ends on a happier note than *Coffy*, which speaks to several differences between them. First, the means to activism connects differently to the protagonists' education. The Brothers' military training aids them in their pursuit of justice whereas Coffy does not employ her professional skills as a nurse to attain her vengeance. While this difference may not be inherently significant, it reflects the diverse strategies and resources available to individuals in their pursuit of justice within the societal contexts portrayed in each film. The Brothers also go into the mission knowing that they will need to flee at the end, but they leave behind them a united Black community. The Brothers catalyze the action, and their community collectively aspires to justice. Coffy, on the other hand, improvises many of her actions, not because she is inexperienced but because she is isolated and discovers betrayal by Black community representatives along the way. In *Coffy*, the community is broken. Other African Americans are consumed by the perils caused by organized crime and are eager to flock around figures like Howard. This underpins Coffy's hopelessness. The films' settings also contribute to the differences in their outcomes, which demonstrates how fabulation incorporates concrete reality. In *Brotherhood of Death*, the Black community lives in a small town, where the Brothers' military training and collective action foster a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. On the other hand, *Coffy* takes place in a larger urban environment, where isolation and betrayal fragment the community, resulting in a more pessimistic and despondent atmosphere. Finally, the contrast between the films is seen in their representations of siblingship. The active siblingship of the Brotherhood, working together as a group, contrasts with Coffy's one-sided siblingship, which is predicated mainly on object constancy rather than day-to-day contact. She fights alone and discovers estrangement from her siblings and within her community due to the impact of white supremacy and capitalism. Coffy's end is ultimately pessimistic and despondent even

though she herself gets her personal revenge. The Brotherhood, on the other hand, drive off together into the figurative sunset.

Despite these mixed outcomes, fabulation also underscores potential. This emphasis complements the crystalline quality Deleuze sees in film: the time-image of cinema refracts time, allowing past states to become present to viewers and enabling them to anticipate potential future states. Virtuality materializes in cinematic and human technologies through "lines of flight"—flows, forces, speeds, juxtapositions—conveyed by imagery and modes of production which proffer a new reality (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 54, p. 202; Fournier, 2014, p. 121). For example, new lines of thought or action may be introduced through jump cuts and montages that create novel ways to understand reality (Flaxman, 2000, p. 6, p. 15). Movies engage my imagination and prompt me to expand beyond the everyday with storytelling that is also offers perspectives and possibilities that may motivate change, which is what Deleuze esoterically speaks to. In *Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2006), Claire Colebrook simplifies what is key to a Deleuzian stance, that our deepest thoughts occur when we encounter difference, not likeness: "Life's power is best expressed and evidenced, not in the general and everyday, nor in the normative, but in the perverse, singular and aberrant" (p. 20). Life is profound, creative, incongruous—therefore, difference undermines the mirage of uniformity or objectivity through which impersonal institutions function (p. 21). This contradicts the white supremacist hegemony which is also present in Blaxploitation, and which exemplifies a systemic anti-Blackness. While the system marginalizes and outright fails Black people, their resolve endures and succeeds. This is evinced by their survival.

Both *Coffy* and *Brotherhood of Death* exemplify the Blaxploitation genre, showcasing African American protagonists who confront systemic corruption and anti-Black violence prevalent in their communities. The leads of these films uniquely take matters into their own hands. These issues are deeply intertwined with the films' narrative structures, ultimately shaping the audience's engagement with these critical themes. Their narratives addressed criminality, empowering marginalized positionalities, and served as a platform for African American representation. They investigated and fought to emerge as victors or attain vengeance against anti-Black, non-Black antagonists or contemptible Black

sellouts. Blaxploitation films fabulated African American protagonists who fought back against injustice, providing a sense of empowerment and hope. These films showcased characters who took matters into their own hands, seeking retribution and defending their communities. They served as a form of empowerment through escapism, where Black audiences could see themselves as heroes overcoming adversity and fighting for justice. Blaxploitation films embodied a spirit of resilience and optimism, instilling a belief that change and empowerment were possible which contrasts with the grim and realistic portrayals of later film genres like New Black Realism that depicted harsh prolonged, ultimately irreconcilable realities and systemic oppression of African American communities.

3. NEW BLACK REALISM

New Black Realism emerges as a significant genre in African American cinema following the era of Blaxploitation, highlighting a shift towards more nuanced and realistic portrayals of Black experiences. In greater detail than Blaxploitation, New Black Realism explores the adversities African Americans face due to anti-Black policies and grim mortality rates in these urban environments. The genre is related to the high visibility of the ’hood in the media at large. News programs often featured stories of teen parenthood, social welfare dependency, gang violence amidst substance addiction and trafficking, and an immunodeficiency pandemic with dismal mortality rates (Howell, 2015, p. 9, p. 84; Sanders, 1994, p. 37, p. 174). These characterized the Black urban underclass, a marginalized and economically disadvantaged part of African American populace that predominantly lived in lower-income inner-city residential districts or “hoods” (Diawara, 1993, p. 22; Taylor, 1993, p. 66). These grim statistics, along with the popularity of African American vernaculars in music and television, precipitated an expansion of African American film authorship as filmmakers strove to convey the complexities of Black lived experience in the ’hood. While Blaxploitation often subverted anti-Black caricatures by presenting Black characters as empowered and in control of their own destinies, New Black Realism focused on more nuanced, authentic portrayals of Black life in urban settings using a more realist cinematic language and showcasing a broader range of emotions, situations, and character motivations. In *New Jack City* (van Peebles, 1991) and *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991), this breadth of characterization is developed in large part by differences between and amongst brothers.

A key element that characterizes New Black Realism is its analysis of so-called Black-on-Black crime. This phrase refers to crime in predominantly Black urban communities, often constructs African Americans as inherently criminal, and legitimates systemic victimization and disparities such as disproportionate rates of poverty, conviction, incarceration, and mortality among African Americans (Cross, 2003, p. 69. p. 78, p. 79). New Black Realist films show how the concept of Black-on-Black crime essentializes and oversimplifies African Americans’ lived experiences, particularly in terms of socioeconomic immobility and exclusion. Without denying the presence of violence and

crime in the ’hood, New Black Realism includes highly complex analyses of the ’hood and its effects on behaviors. While Blaxploitation conveyed empowerment through characters who revenged injustices of systemic and communal anti-Blackness, New Black Realism offers a more pessimistic view of those injustices in which people seldom attain justice or vengeance because their Blackness in itself ensures that they must contend with disparity in perpetuity.

The political and aesthetic distinctions between Blaxploitation and New Black Realism are also borne out in their approaches to kinship. Kinship in Blaxploitation draws upon a sense of attachment and identification amongst characters who aid one another in overcoming anti-Black violence; it is also reflected in audience solidarity with these characters. Kinship in New Black Realism is primarily structured by deidentification that is exacerbated by institutional failures in education and wealth; these arise from systemic anti-Blackness and are translated into a lack of personal and communal welfare, which was also felt by audiences of the time. New Black Realist films evoke a sense of laterality and posit siblingship as a refuge and a means to overcome socioeconomic and interpersonal adversity, but they also demonstrate the fragility of sibling attachment in the context of anti-Blackness. *New Jack City* reveals how the relentless pursuit of capital ultimately fractures the bonds of siblingship as the main criminal gang, the Cash Money Brothers, become ensnared in a capitalistic system that relies on exploitation and dominance. As they strive for power and wealth, siblings grow vulnerable and alienated from one another, emphasizing their distinct paths and identities through individuation and deidentification. They come to realize their inability to support one another, leading to self-destructive behaviors. *Boyz N the Hood* presents siblingship amongst teens and young adults as the sole reprieve from anti-Blackness and abject living conditions in the ’hood; however, ultimately upward mobility is shown to be the only means of escape and is contingent upon individualized narratives of success through academic, athletic, or professional merit.

3.1 The Historical Context of New Black Realism

3.1.1 The 1980s Film Industry

During the 1980s, representations of African Americans were scarce but present on cinema screens and were more common on smaller screens. Superstars like Arsenio Hall, Bill Cosby, Michael Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, Prince, and Whitney Houston became prominent in music and television. Hall's groundbreaking late-night talk show, *The Arsenio Hall Show*, provided a platform for diverse voices and was celebrated for its cultural impact (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009, p. 206, p. 211). Michael Jackson's popularity transcended borders and cultures, making him a global superstar; he achieved unparalleled success in the music industry with his record-breaking album, *Thriller* (p. 206). Prince and Whitney Houston were also iconic musicians who made an indelible mark on the music scene with their chart-topping hits and distinctive styles (p. 210). Oprah Winfrey's talk show premiered in the 1980s, and she remains one of the most influential media personalities of all time, tackling important social issues and promoting diversity and inclusion (p. 210). Bill Cosby's popular sitcom, *The Cosby Show*, premiered in 1984 on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC); it ranked number one in TV ratings from 1985 to 1990 (Fearn-Banks, 2009, p. xxxii). *The Cosby Show* followed an affluent, Brooklyn-based African American nuclear family parented by an obstetrician (Bill Cosby) and lawyer (Phylicia Rashad) with a son and four daughters. Media scholars note that the show functioned to celebrate successful Black families while shedding little light on the majority of African Americans who suffered due to emerging neoliberal social policies (Fearn-Banks, 2009, p. 4; Griffith, 2014). The Huxtable family was widely represented as the ideal Black family whose affluence and respectability overrode critical considerations of how the Reagan era dismantled socioeconomic welfare initiatives and programs. These representations in general prioritize respectability.

Black actors occupied positions of respectability and authority on cinema screens as well. Eddie Murphy and Danny Glover found niches as cops in films like *48 Hrs.* (Hill, 1982), *Beverly Hills Cop* (Molloy, 1984), and *Lethal Weapon* (Donner, 1987) respectively, even though Murphy's foul language was criticized by artists who claimed the mantle of

respectability, such as Cosby. Film scholars note that buddy films—a subgenre of action and comedy where two people are paired together to achieve a shared objective, despite contrasting traits or personalities—had long been successful in Hollywood. This form proved lucrative with interracial pairings onscreen (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009, p. 211). Although Blaxploitation had been an avenue for monetizing Black audiences, Hollywood still hesitated to finance larger Black productions unless studios were assured an appeal to white audiences (Ross, 1987, p. 23). Biracial casting—with white leads alongside Black ones—was thought to attract both white and Black audiences (p. 23). Through these films came a new cohort of African American actors: Denzel Washington, Laurence Fishburne, Morgan Freeman, Wesley Snipes, and the aforementioned Glover and Murphy (Guerrero, 1993, p. 24, p. 31). Although Hollywood generally balked at putting larger budgets into Black directors' hands, certain Black performers thrived.

One exception to Hollywood's reluctance to fund productions with mostly Black casts was *The Color Purple* (1985). Directed by Hollywood mogul Steven Spielberg, it was commercially and critically successful. It was based on the eponymous Pulitzer-winning novel by Alice Walker about Black women struggling to survive in the early decades of the 20th century. The film starred Glover and Winfrey, both already stars. *The Color Purple* elicited critiques for its direction by a white man who presumed to depict African American experience and for its portrayal of Black men—who psychologically, sexually, and physically abuse the protagonists—as Black women's greatest adversaries (Bobo, 1989, p. 333, p. 334). *The Color Purple* sparked ongoing debates about cinematic representation within the African American community, highlighting the importance of diverse voices and perspectives in the portrayal of complex narratives. While it was important to acknowledge the contributions of various storytellers, the debate showed that it was crucial for African American authors and creators to play a central role in shaping and telling their own stories, ensuring a more nuanced depiction of their experiences and identities.

These critiques inspired contemporary African American independent filmmakers. Although there had been African American independent films in the 1970s and 1980s which addressed experiences of marginalized Black people, they received minimal

distribution and remain difficult to access (Field et al., 2015, p. 48). However, *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), Spike Lee's first feature film, did well amongst Black audiences and on independent film circuits. The film follows Nola Darling (Tracy Camilla Johns), a young, independent Black woman living in Brooklyn and navigating relationships with different men; it explores her polyamorous approach to relationships and sexuality. This narrative—its very premise—challenges monogamous amata-normative ideas of romance and offers a candid portrayal of Nola's sexual experiences.[28] The film's success prompted Columbia Pictures, a major Hollywood studio, to offer Lee a distribution deal for *School Daze* (1988), his next feature film (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009, p. 212; Rhines, 1996, p. 108).

Moving into the early 1990s, other independent films broke new ground. *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash, 1991) garnered acclaim for its unique portrayal of the Gullah, a distinct African American ethnic group which developed in the Lowcountry regions of South Carolina and Georgia in the United States, particularly on the Sea Islands (Bambara, 1993, p. 124). Set in the early 20th century, the film offers a visually stunning portrayal of ancestral traditions such as the Gullah language and Geechee heritage (p. 124, p. 125). Viewers and scholars stated that the impact of *Daughters of the Dust* extended beyond the screen, contributing to discussions about heritage, identity, and the importance of cultural preservation (p. 127, p. 128). To me, this speaks to the power of cinema to foster appreciation for underrepresented cultures. Another significant film was Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991), although it was not directed by an African American. It revolves around the romance between an African American man, Demetrius (Denzel Washington), and a Ugandan Indian woman, Mina (Sarita Choudhury), as they face social and cultural challenges in a small Mississippi town. Their love story explores themes of interracial relationships, identity, and the complexities of racial prejudice

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[28] Some critics have raised concerns about Spike Lee's portrayal of women in *She's Gotta Have It*. bell hooks (2009) argues that the film objectifies of women, posits Black hypersexuality to be sexual liberation, and reinforces the stereotypes of Black women being hypersexualized with an "insatiable female sexual desire" akin to the Sapphire trope (p. 22, p. 295). Thelma Wills Foote (2007) also notes that the film's main character, Nola Darling, embodies liberal modernism through an individualism which overlooks the systemic racism and historical injustices faced by Black communities (p. 215).

within both the African American and Indian communities (Muir, 2006, p. 75, p. 76). Nair fought hard for the inclusion of a Black protagonist, and the fact that Washington's participation in the project helped secure funding demonstrates that he was viewed as a marketable presence (p. 78). Many of these screen representations—especially *Daughters of the Dust, Mississippi Masala, The Cosby Show* and *The Color Purple*—explore kinship within Black and racially diverse communities as they contribute to the New Black Realism genre's nuanced focus on realistic and complex portrayals of Black life.

3.1.2 The Context and Genre of New Black Realism

The term *New Black Realism* was coined by Manthia Diawara (1993) to describe the surge in films by African American creators that began in the early 1990s and that shifted towards more authentic and community-focused narratives (p. 23, p. 24). This genre marks a rise in African Americans' writing and directing in the mainstream film industry with works that included *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* (Rhines, 1996, p. 104, p. 124). Many makers of New Black Realism took on multiple roles, serving as writers, directors, and sometimes even actors in their own films. This creative control allowed them to bring their unique perspectives and insights into their work, challenging prevailing stereotypes and narratives about Black life. The narratives of New Black Realism express the disenfranchisement, abject poverty, and hustle that afflicted African American youth and adults within the urban space formed by economic restructuring before and during the Reagan era. These films also reflected the decline of radical political organizations, which contributed to a sense of disillusionment and made it increasingly challenging for African American communities to envision a profound transformation of America. The films serve as a critical departure from the narratives of Blaxploitation, exploring the multifaceted aspects of the African American experience and offering a more socially conscious commentary on issues of race, identity, and urban life. This section first explores the genre's socioeconomic context and then its aesthetics and narrative approaches, its representation of urban space, and its representation of gangsters.

The adversities that New Black Realist films depict tend to be the legacy of various factors. The high unemployment rates experienced by African Americans in the 1970s resulted from deindustrialization. This shift in labour demands, locations, and industries—such as agriculture and commercial fishing, in which Black workers were traditionally prominent—fed into discrimination and untenable minimum wages, making it difficult for them to secure employment in growing economic sectors (Fairlie & Sundstorm, 1999, p. 253). Meanwhile, there was a reduction and elimination of social welfare programs that had been put in place after World War II and as late as the 1960s (Hinton, 2016, p. 20, p. 36, p. 255). Neoliberal economic policies that emphasized deregulation and tax cuts, such as the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, favoured the wealthy and corporations and immensely reduced government revenue for social programs (Prasad, 2012, p. 351, p. 352). The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 included significant cuts to social programs, including food assistance and Medicaid, which affected low-income individuals and families (Crafton, 2014, p. 29, p. 40). The deregulation of industries such as banking and finance led to economic instability and reduced access to affordable financial services in marginalized communities (Prasad, 2012, p. 352). African Americans in the inner cities felt the brunt of economic marginalization as the Reagan administration significantly reduced funding for public housing, contributing to the deterioration of housing conditions in inner-city neighborhoods wherein job opportunities dwindled and poverty rates remained high (Rossinow, 2015, p. 140). The Reagan administration also made cuts to federal education spending, which impacted schools in these areas (p. 143). Reaganites took exception to labour unions and workers' rights, thereby reducing the bargaining power of workers in marginalized communities (p. 44, p. 86). Ironically, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, politicians played upon anti-Black sentiments by saying that "too much" money had been expended on efforts for racial equality, such as advertising campaigns, and had pushed white people "too far," coercing rather than convincing them to accept and respect Black people as equals (Kinder & Kam, 2010, p. 166, p. 233, p. 234, p. 248). A sense of nihilism arose from the low-wage stagnation, poverty, social exclusion, and systemic violence which ensued for people in marginalized positionalities in urban spaces during

this time (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1986; Geronimus & Thompson, 2004, p. 256; Tabb, 2007).

Many New Black Realist films also depict the effects of the crack cocaine epidemic and the state of the drug trade within the punitive context of the Reagan administration's War on Drugs. The crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and early 1990s was a devastating public health crisis marked by the rapid spread of crack cocaine, a potent and highly addictive form of the drug, particularly in urban communities (Rossinow, 2015, p. 122, p. 124). With the decline in other employment opportunities in inner cities, illegal drug markets thrived. The crack cocaine epidemic led to a surge in drug-related crime, violence, and social disruption that disproportionately affected low-income neighborhoods and African American communities (p. 124). This prompted nationwide concern and a series of harsh law enforcement measures. This "War on Drugs," launched by Richard Nixon in 1971, was expanded by Ronald Reagan. Policies included a federal system of mandatory minimum sentences and the forfeiture of civil assets by those accused of drug possession. The assets of a relative or someone else who had committed to supporting the accused could also be forfeited to the state, which could isolate the accused and undermine familial and communal ties (Bridy, 2014, p. 695, p. 698). Furthermore, because penalties were based on the *weight* of a drug in someone's possession and because more expensive drugs such as cocaine powder were lighter weight than crack cocaine, this effectively criminalized drug usage amongst the poor (Bondi, 1996, p. 351, p. 369, p. 377). Despite the international universality of drug dependency, law enforcement disproportionately targeted BIPOC communities in urban areas and lower-income neighbourhoods wherein substance abuse, trafficking, and addiction proliferated (p. 397, p. 484). Hence, racial disparities in incarceration rates surged and the very same federal and state policies which exacerbated class and residential segregation were never truly addressed well into the millennium.

The New Black Realist genre generally captures these conditions, but the genre's precise beginning and aesthetic character are not easy to pinpoint. Jonathan Munby (2007) writes that Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) inaugurated the 'hood genre (p. 167). Paula J. Massood (2013) agrees, stating that Lee's films—*She's Gotta Have It* and *Do the Right*

Thing—contributed to the nuanced portrayal of Black life and experiences and exemplified the genre's focus on authentic and often harsh realities faced by Black communities (p. 211). However, while New Black Realism is often associated with urban settings and the challenges faced by Black individuals in those environments, some scholars define it more broadly. *She's Gotta Have It* unfolds within the 'hood through its music, culture, and references, showcasing the importance of culture in shaping identities. Nonetheless, the narrative highlights the diversity of experiences within the 'hood as it does not revolve around escaping from this environment. *Daughters of the Dust,* on the other hand, is not set in the 'hood, but films scholars Manthia Diawara (1993) and Jennifer A. Machiorlatti (2005) classify it as New Black Realism in part for its attention to cultural syncretism and use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Diawara, 1993, p. 13; Machiorlatti, 2005, p. 97). This connection between a rural environment and elements associated with the 'hood underscores the complexity and richness of African American life, challenging narrow depictions often associated with New Black Realism. Collectively, these films contribute to a broader and more multifaceted understanding of the African American experience, emphasizing that New Black Realism transcends geographical boundaries to encompass a range of aspirations, desires, and cultural expressions.

One key film whose portrayal of raciality in the 'hood could also qualify it as an early instance of New Black Realism is Wendell B. Harris Jr.'s independent film, *Chameleon Street* (1989). Inspired by the true story of the enigmatic African American con artist William Douglas Street Jr. (played by Wendell B. Harris Jr.), it chronicles the life of a charming but morally complex African American man who skillfully assumed various identities and roles, including a surgeon, a lawyer, and even a French exchange student (Gillespie, 2016, p. 51, p. 53). The film defies conventional storytelling norms by presenting its narrative in a nonlinear way. It also offers a complex character study that investigates passing and shows how race impacts personality and action (p. 53). Street's assumption of various racial and social identities underscores the fluidity and contrived nature of race and demonstrates how social perceptions of race can be manipulated and deconstructed (p. 63). Unlike the traditional portrayal of passing as a means of survival, *Chameleon Street* shows that its main character is driven by aspirations to prosper and

thrive despite the barriers that persisted even after Civil Rights legislation. In the context of New Black Realism, in which characters often strive to escape the limitations imposed by their environments, *Chameleon Street* presents passing as a symbol of both agency and the relentless pursuit of success within a challenging and capitalist-driven climate. *Chameleon Street* is unlike many New Black Realist films insofar as it does not contain depictions of drug culture, and most of the story is not set in the 'hood, as the protagonist has been motivated by a desire to escape it. Overall, *Chameleon Street* resonates with the overarching themes of agency, ambition, and resistance that define New Black Realism, further highlighting the complex dynamics at play within African American communities striving for socioeconomic advancement.

New Black Realism exhibits a diverse range of aesthetics, often intricately linked to the varying budgets filmmakers had at their disposal. However, in general they share a realist approach to setting and character that links it with other cinematic realisms. For example, New Black Realism shares with Italian Neorealism the commitment to shooting on location and situating narratives in the contemporary moment, effectively grounding the films in the tangible realities of everyday life. The filming of *Boyz N the Hood* in the neighborhoods it portrays enhances its authenticity, immersing the audience in the raw realities of South Central Los Angeles. Likewise, *New Jack City* was filmed in the Bronx, Long Island, and New York City. Location shooting and contemporary settings contribute to New Black Realism's ability to capture African American life, paralleling the spirit of Italian Neorealism in its dedication to unearthing the human condition within the constraints of its production circumstances.

Although it is not exclusively a genre of the 'hood—as exceptions discussed above show—this realist approach usually places the urban setting at the forefront, showcasing how it informs and shapes the lives of its inhabitants. Characters grapple with the profound desire to either break free from their urban surroundings or to remain within them with the intention of catalyzing transformation. These aspirations, while pivotal to the storytelling, are often portrayed without the assurance of a happy resolution, mirroring the gritty and unpredictable nature of the urban landscape. In this respect, New

Black Realism shares commonalities with war films, with the city itself becoming a battleground, and the characters navigate the challenging terrain of urban America.

This is exemplified in the openings of both *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood*, which establish a strong connection between the urban space and the socioeconomic factors that shape the lives of their characters. *New Jack City* begins with an aerial shot in which concrete skyscrapers tower over bustling streets and alleys. This is accompanied by an audio collage of news soundbites about rising unemployment, an increase in Americans living below the poverty line, the increasing gap between rich and poor, and a drug-related shooting resulting in the death of a seven-year-old boy. The juxtaposition of the space of the city and the soundbite about the shooting of the boy creates logical or causal connections, suggesting that criminality is related to the city itself. These news bulletins play over a soundtrack of “For the Love of Money/Living for the City” by R&B groups Troop and LeVert with Queen Latifah, a medley which avows the perils of bureaucracy and greed and shows that the pursuit of capital is not victimless: “One hit for her, she’s pullin’ down your drawers. One hit for him, his welfare check is yours. It ain’t nothing but a small thing in a big city, see, you’re living for the money, G” (Gamble et al., 1991, track 7). These introductory visual and aural counterpoints comprise what Massood (2013) identifies as a “polyphony [that] suggests a domestic war zone… a connection made literal through the soundtrack’s references… and by the camera’s movement from the bottom to the top of the frame” (p. 152). The soaring skyscrapers juxtaposed with tenement streets and the audio collage of news soundbites create an atmosphere that evokes the urban landscape’s challenges and economic inequalities. While the visuals do not immediately bring the audience to street level, the aural elements, along with the report of the drug-related shooting, suggest that these issues are closely tied to the city environment.

Similarly, *Boyz N the Hood* opens with a black screen while rage, chaos, and brutality are articulated through a hoarse, atonal blend of sirens, revving engines, screeching tires, gunshots, and frantic voices. The soundscape creates a dissonant and distressing auditory experience that evokes the turbulent and violent nature of the neighborhood. The absence of visual imagery during this opening sequence highlights the power of sound to convey a

message. A few seconds later, when text appears, it delivers the grim statistic that "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" (Singleton, 1991, 00:00:32). This statistic is jarring, drawing attention to the stark reality of violence within this community. It underscores the challenges and dangers that young Black men face in this urban environment. Although we do not see the urban space, the harsh sounds and stark statistics convey a sense of the social and economic struggles inherent to the dilapidated South Central Los Angeles neighborhood that is revealed visually shortly afterwards. By starting the film with this disturbing statistic and a cacophony of urban sounds, John Singleton effectively sets the tone for the narrative that follows. The audience is immediately confronted with the harsh realities of inner-city life, where socioeconomic factors, violence, and systemic disparities intersect to shape the lives of the film's characters—particularly, Black boyz [sic] N [sic] this type of [neighbor]hood.

This harsh environment interacts with the highly individualized characterizations that also distinguish the New Black Realist genre. While Blaxploitation films of the 1970s often rely on sensational narratives and established—if subverted—stereotypes, New Black Realism deliberately departs from this with a concerted effort to present complex characters and nuanced depictions of African American experience. It does not always accomplish this by drawing on highly trained acting skills. Many New Black Realism films feature actors with limited prior acting experience, which is parallel to the Italian Neorealism movement's reliance on non-professional actors to convey authentic human experience. One of *Boyz N the Hood*'s stars, Ice Cube, was a seasoned performer in the music industry but lacked prior acting credits. His lived experience in the 'hood—marked by police brutality, violence, bullying, and socioeconomic struggle—lend legitimacy to his portrayal of a character who grapples with similar challenges. Ice Cube's contribution to the soundtrack of *Boyz N the Hood* serves as a reminder of his offscreen experience and demonstrates his multifaceted talents as an artist and actor, which enriches the portrayal of his character. This casting choice reflects director John Singleton's commitment to capturing genuine and unadulterated performances that resonate with the real-life experiences in this environment. Likewise, Ice T, renowned in the music industry as a pioneering rapper, brought his firsthand experiences of the inner-city

realities and the complexities of street culture to his role in *New Jack City*. His background provides authenticity to his portrayal of a character navigating the gritty landscape of drug trade and law enforcement in the film. Similarly, Christopher Williams—who plays Kareem in *New Jack City*—was a noted R&B singer with only a few acting credits to his name at the time. He and Ice T both contributed music to *New Jack City* that aligns with their on-screen personas. All of these performers' involvement through music and acting reinforces the authenticity of the characters they portray and the urban environments in which the stories unfold.

In a departure from the Blaxploitation films I discussed in the previous chapter, many protagonists of New Black Realism are gangsters who resist hegemony. They embrace street justice unequivocally in an effort to exercise control (Antonio 2002, p. 56). Street justice comes with codes that govern private and public behaviour (p. 57). These codes serve as a form of self-regulation within marginalized communities, managing conflicts among those who are inclined to violence (Williams Jr., 2015, p. 126). Whoever violates these codes faces penalties (Tyree, 2017, p. 118, p. 128, p. 140). In the midst of higher rates of substance abuse, violence, and criminality, the gangsters of New Black Realism seem more reckless and brutal than those of Blaxploitation. New Black Realist films are also more graphic in their representation of violence. This does not necessarily indicate that these characters are, morally and legally speaking, inherently worse than those depicted in the earlier genre. Instead, it reflects New Black Realism's nuanced exploration of how the broader, dysfunctional socioeconomic and cultural context impacts the characters' actions and choices. This dysfunction, compounded over the decades since Coffy battled drug dealers, underscores the incompleteness of her victory. The gangster in New Black Realism is painfully aware of how everyone, including themselves, is deprived, which is why they are distrustful, always on guard, and competitive in an effort to seize any scarce resources (Kitwana, 2002, p. 122, 123; Massood, 2013, p. 136). They are reckless and indulgent because precarity and premature mortality prevent them from seeing beyond their immediate adversities (Horrex, 2017, p. 1, p. 2; Massood, 2003, p. 58, p. 64; Murch, 2015, p. 169). Their recklessness resonates with Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007) definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature

death" (p. 28). In New Black Realism, the gangster's narrative examines the socioeconomic challenges faced by marginalized communities, offering a lens through which we can explore the depths of human resilience and vulnerability in the face of systemic adversity.

3.2 Deleuzian-on-Deleuzian Crime

The genre of New Black Realism exemplifies Gilles Deleuze's theory of difference and repetition by showing us that the more things change, the more they stay the same. In this section, I introduce Deleuzian concepts—repetition, difference, tessellation, verticality, and horizontality—related to the genre's realist reflections on pessimism, power, and the potential for change. The Civil Rights Movement primarily focused on ending segregation, securing voting rights, and dismantling legal forms of discrimination, but the living conditions of many African Americans did not substantially change. New Black Realism tells the story of this stagnation but does not stand outside it, as film itself is defined by repetition. In Blaxploitation, we see that people were aware of the repetition of systemic and historical anti-Blackness but possessed an air of hope as characterized by Black Power. In New Black Realism, anti-Blackness remains timeless and constant. Not *all* aspects of New Black Realism are uniformly nihilistic and hopeless; some films offer moments of hope, empowerment, and solidarity that constitute difference within the genre and reflect the multifaceted experiences of Black communities in America. However, most characters and narratives focus on the repetition of systemic anti-Blackness and do not fabulate radically different socioeconomic conditions.

Deleuze's concepts of difference and repetition are both based on likeness and dissimilarity. Difference, as understood in Deleuzian terms, signifies a departure from the norm or the dominant discourse. However, in *Difference and Repetition* (1994), he writes that difference does not pertain to a state of incommensurability (p. 21, p. 24). Breaking down this distinction, Stagoll (2010) notes that difference pertains to "difference from the same…[it] refers to a net variation between two states" (p. 74). In other words, likeness is the foundation from which variation may be seen or understood. Therefore, difference is "the product of comparison," a "relative measure" of likeness, that concerns relationships

between things (p. 74). One understands difference by grouping that which is similar and observing distinctions within this grouping. Repetition, on the other hand, denotes the recurrence of likeness in a series or in succession. Repetition does not connote causality; it means "sustained" over time. Furthermore, a product of repetition differs from its progenitor even if it is identical because it exists as a distinct, separate entity. As such, repetition is simultaneously comprised of likeness and variation, just as difference is visible in the context of comparability. The Deleuzian idea of repetition underscores how we are tethered to rules and norms, regardless of how much time passes. For example, two hundred years ago, fashions were different, but the underlying protocol to wear clothes still existed. The word "repetition" should not, however, prompt us to look for an origin. Deleuze critiques the idea that societal norms and rules have an "origin"; for him, the concept of "origin" in this context is elusive and reductive (p. 90). He argues that our understanding of these constructs should focus more on their functional and ongoing reiterations rather than seek a definitive historical beginning. This approach suggests that norms and rules are continuously reshaped and reinterpreted across time and space and highlights their dynamic nature rather than a fixed point of inception.

These concepts can be used to illuminate a range of deeply entrenched anti-Black ideologies that have shaped the American racial landscape. Drawing on Deleuze, critical race scholars explore how anti-Black ideologies create rigid categories and hierarchies, emphasizing the difference between Blackness and whiteness. As critical race scholars David Kline (2017) and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020) demonstrate, repetition also relates to this mode of difference, as anti-Blackness has been manifest through a *recurring* human-animal binary. This binary appears in animalistic stereotypes of Black people, animalizing racist slurs, and environmental racism; these dehumanize Black people through dynamics which are cisgendered and hierarchal in nature (Kline, 2017, p. 62, p. 63; Jackson, 2020, p. 123). Repetition and difference can be seen in additional anti-Black patterns. Opara et al. draw on Deleuze to discuss how scientific racism, which emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries and propagated pseudoscientific theories to legitimize racial hierarchies, depicted Black people as inherently inferior in terms of intelligence, morality, and overall capability (2022, p. 225, p. 226). Similarly, Edwards et al. use Deleuze to show how these unfounded notions rationalized the enslavement of

African Americans and were echoed in later forms of racial discrimination such as the Jim Crow laws of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which institutionalized racial segregation by mandating separate facilities for Black and white individuals in various public spaces (2010, p. 145). Redlining practices, which took hold in the mid-20th century, systematically denied Black Americans access to housing and loans in certain neighborhoods, perpetuating residential segregation and wealth disparities (Opara et al., 2022, p. 226). Furthermore, the eugenics movement in the early 20th century sought to "improve" the human race through selective breeding and sterilization, disproportionately targeting Black individuals based on the unfounded belief in their genetic inferiority (p. 226). The concept of repetition, as understood in Deleuzian terms, suggests that these assemblages were sustained and adapted across different historical periods, resulting in variations even within their continuity.

The sense of temporality that emerges from Deleuze's concepts of difference and repetition connect to his and Guattari's view in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) that reality is tessellated; this means that past, present, and future symbiotically coexist (p. 255, p. 266). Rather than construct a hierarchy of different temporal periods, he posits a lateral relationship amongst past, present, and future. As discussed in the introductory chapter, this is vividly illustrated in cinema as the virtual potentialities within a film are brought to life through the projection of actual images. This makes for cinema's unique ability to bridge the actual and the virtual and creates a tessellated reality, where the boundaries between the two are porous, allowing for a continuous flow of difference and repetition within the cinematic experience. One consequence of this is that cinematic repetition not only replicates or reproduces but *engineers* likeness. Cinema can incline viewers to glean a sense of likeness to other people through the work of cinematic identification. Identification does not need to rely on likeness; it can work across difference of positionality and/or time period. Furthermore, collective viewing can create a sense of community amongst disparate people as they occupy the same cinema space, and a film viewed at disparate times can provide points of reference for strangers or passing acquaintances as they discuss it.

Despite Deleuze's emphasis on lateral relationships, his concept of verticality is also important to New Black Realism. I have discussed his concept of assemblages, which are dynamic arrangements of various components characterized by their horizontal, non-hierarchical nature; each component contributes to the whole without one being inherently superior to the others. The films of New Black Realism, however, analyze how systems position people and things in vertical hierarchies. As I discussed in the introductory chapter, Deleuze (1989) does not use the concept of "systems" consistently, but the contrast with assemblages is useful. Systems are ordered and hierarchical, while assemblages emphasize flexibility and interconnectedness. Systems are stabilized by a vertical axis, a concept that encompasses material forms (p. 87). This axis represents the structural coherence and interdependence of the components and ensures that the various elements remain interconnected and reliant on each other for meaning. In a film, the vertical axis ensures that anything that departs from repeated patterns becomes disarticulated and illegible because nothing can exist or be understood in isolation (p. 88). For instance, in a scene where a character breaks the established pattern of behavior by acting out of character or making an unexpected decision, it disrupts the coherence of the narrative and may leave viewers feeling disoriented or confused. Additionally, the vertical axis concerns how new forms materialize by entering the system and cultivating new articulations within it. Systems tend to impose a more structured order on their components, whereas assemblages emphasize the contingent and dynamic nature of these arrangements.

Bearing these concepts in mind, one can also see why Deleuze sees cinema as a medium of both repetition and social power (Tweedie, 2018, p. 62). The continuity and linearity of cinematic narrative is not natural, but it is naturalized through its repetition from one film to another. We accept the teleological, linear timeline, even though people's lives do not unfold in this tidy way outside of cinematic images. However, linear film narratives *parallel* such ideological formations as the narrative of the American Dream, which is also a teleological, linear timeline that states that if any individual works hard enough, they can succeed (p. 62). Even films that subvert this belief can replicate its teleological structure. When Blaxploitation films subvert the American Dream narrative or challenge prevailing ideologies, they often do so within the framework of classical cinematic

storytelling, maintaining the linearity and continuity of the medium. This adherence to cinematic conventions itself can be seen as a form of repetition that reinforces the social power of traditional storytelling structures; such Blaxploitation films replicate the established cinematic language and structures, which is a form of vertical repetition. In New Black Realism, the interplay between verticality and horizontality in cinematic storytelling is particularly pronounced. In contrast to Blaxploitation, New Black Realism challenges the vertical structures and rejects the hierarchical narratives associated with traditional cinematic forms by emphasizing shared, lived experiences defined by institutional anti-Blackness; this is a more communal and collective approach to African American communities in place of the individual hero most common to Blaxploitation film (although *Brotherhood of Death* is an exception). Yet despite its efforts to subvert hierarchies, New Black Realism still operates within many established cinematic conventions, maintaining aspects of the prevailing power structures. This highlights the complex interplay between subversion and conformity within the realm of cinema, which, in turn, reflects the multifaceted relationship between film and society.

Vertical and horizontal repetition operate in New Black Realism to depict the challenges, aspirations, and social dynamics unique to African American urban life. Vertical or hierarchical repetition refers to the recurrence of specific themes, motifs, or narrative structures within the system of a film that generally emphasizes a linear progression or evolution. New Black Realism often revisits and represents, even reproduces societal hierarchies and power dynamics that affect Black communities, depicting the persistence of systemic racism, economic disparities, and political oppression over time. While the specific stories and characters vary, these shared experiences create a repetition of certain themes and struggles across the genre. In contrast, lateral repetition pertains to recurrent variations or differences within and between films. New Black Realist films have complex and fragmented narratives; their characters and personifications of the ’hood show individualized experiences, personal struggles, and unique perspectives within contemporary African American communities. They focus on the diversification of voices and narratives, highlighting the multidimensionality of Black life and the different ways in which individuals respond to and navigate their circumstances. These films’ unique and often underrepresented narratives of Black individuals and communities also

shed light on the aspects of their lives that differ from the dominant, mainstream narratives. Overall, I find that New Black Realism combines difference and both vertical and horizontal repetitions to convey layers which underscore a portrayal of Black lived experience, engaging with the historical legacies of oppression and disparity (vertical/hierarchical) that persist in perpetuity—void of prospects of empowerment, unlike in Blaxploitation—while also emphasizing the diversity of individual narratives and responses (horizontal/lateral). This approach allows New Black Realism to offer a comprehensive and authentic representation of contemporary Black life, challenging traditional cinematic stereotypes, established legal standards and societal perceptions; it offers a platform for a range of voices and perspectives within the Black community and urges viewers to recognize the ongoing struggles and diverse perspectives of marginalized individuals in a more empathetic and comprehensive manner.

3.3 A New Jack Swing of Things

New Jack City offers a compelling lens through which to explore the intersection of capitalism, kinship, and the pursuit of Black liberation. This crime drama, directed by Mario Van Peebles, delves deep into the lives of characters ensnared in the world of drug trafficking and organized crime. It portrays how the ruthless pursuit of capital within the context of a neoliberal capitalist system can fracture familial bonds and reshape the dynamics of kinship. However, this narrative goes beyond mere criminality; it addresses the broader struggles faced by Black communities in the face of systemic injustices and economic disparities. This section gives an overview of the film's narrative and production; then it turns to the film's reception, which emphasizes its representation of capitalism and provides the socioeconomic context for kinship bonds.

The plot of *New Jack City* is based upon the prevalence of crack cocaine trafficking in New York City. The film follows two narratives as they intersect: the rise of Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes) and his gang, the Cash Money Brothers (CMB), from small drug dealers to heads of an empire; and the undercover work of Detective Scotty Appleton (Ice-T), a detective who is part of a specialty narcotics unit trying to convict those involved drug trafficking and its effects—addiction, gun violence—in the community. Gee Money

(Alan Payne) is the Cash Money Brothers' second-in-command; he oversees production, distribution, hiring, and the security of their operations. He and Nino share a sense of brotherhood, declaring "I am my brother's keeper" to affirm their loyalty to one another. Conversely, Scotty is haunted by his mother's death due to gang violence and is unwillingly partnered with sullen Detective Nick Peretti (Judd Wilson), who joins the unit to fulfill a personal vow he made to clean up the narcotics trade after overcoming his own drug addiction. The film follows the CMB's expansion as drug traders and the deteriorating relationships within the gang. Following a sting operation led by Scotty, a shootout overwhelms the CMB. Nino executes Gee, who has become addicted and whose loyalty to the CMB is suspect because he has made side deals with the gang's Italian mob rivals. Then Nino is apprehended. During his prosecution, he invokes platitudes of the American Dream: capital accumulation, patronage, success, and—ironically—justice for the innocent. He declares that he will cooperate with law enforcement by incriminating the CMB. The prosecutor accepts a lesser charge, allowing Nino to walk free. Nino is then shot and killed by an enraged resident whose community was ravaged by addiction and violence wrought by the CMB. An epilogue states that Nino Brown is unremarkable and that there are many like him—everyday people who become organized criminals and amass wealth at others' devastating expense—and initiative must be taken to stop them.

New Jack City emerged as a significant studio film in 1991, capturing the zeitgeist of urban America and contributing to the dialogue on crime, drugs, and the socioeconomic challenges faced by marginalized communities (Wilmington, 1991). Produced with a relatively modest budget of $8 million, the film achieved considerable commercial success upon its release, grossing over $47 million at the box office ("New Jack City," n.d.). Gostin (2010) and Maslin (1991b) both note that its reception among audiences and critics was mixed, with some praising its gritty portrayal of inner-city life and unflinching examination of the crack cocaine epidemic, while others raised concerns about its portrayal of African American characters and its potential to perpetuate stereotypes. Nevertheless, *New Jack City* remains a notable entry in the genre of New Black Realism genre, showcasing the complexities of urban life and serving as a commentary on of the sociopolitical climate of the era.

The film creates/introduces to audiences the concept of the "new jack gangster" (Van Peebles, 1991, 00:19:56). The term "new jack" is African American urban slang from the late 1980s and early 1990s, popularized through hip-hop culture and music. It describes something or someone who is perceived as new, fresh, or modern but often inexperienced or untested (Leland, 1991). While "new jack gangsters" may not be a distinct category in real-life criminal terminology, they are a specific archetype within the context of New Black Realist films, representing a particular generation of urban criminals and the socioeconomic issues they embody. New jack gangsters adapt to the changing landscape of crime and are different from the more traditional or established criminals of previous eras who engaged in various criminal enterprises, including bootlegging, extortion, and prostitution. New jack gangsters are typically involved in crack cocaine manufacturing, distribution, and street-level dealing, demonstrating the lure of the drug trade as a means of economic advancement in the context of limited alternatives. They are also urban, modern, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They are depicted in these films as ruthless and willing to use extreme violence to protect their turf and expand their criminal enterprises, unafraid to engage in shootouts, confrontations with law enforcement, or acts of brutality. They flaunt their wealth, often wearing expensive clothing and jewelry, which contrasts with the economic struggles faced by many in their communities. In New Black Realism, the portrayal of new jack gangsters highlights the cycle of poverty, addiction, and violence that can result from their activities.

Most responses to *New Jack City* focus on politics and the positionalities the film represents. In particular, they explore how the prevalence of African American organized crime was begotten by the poverty of inner-city residents in addition to the crack and HIV-AIDS epidemics which accompanied economic decline in the Reagan era. For example, John Leland (1991) says that *New Jack City* is a timely piece that examines the "culture of greed" which defined Wall Street in the 1980s and subsequently bled into American ghettoes (Leland, 1991). While the drug trade operates within an illegal framework, its underlying logic is inherently capitalist. As the alienated labor of workers in traditional capitalist industries produces surplus value for employers, the drug trade generates profits for a select few at a significant human cost. It exploits both the misery of addicts and the labor of street-level dealers, who often earn less than they would from

stable industrial jobs that have disappeared due to deindustrialization. Thus, while the drug trade may bring some financial resources into neighbourhoods, the overwhelming suffering experienced by addicts outweighs any perceived benefits. *New Jack City* articulates how criminality and addiction intensified poverty and produced a new type of racketeer. The new jack gangster, who champions greed and believes that “life counts for little by comparison” to capital interest, much like the dapper, insatiable yuppies who personify Wall Street (Leland, 1991). “Crack is their junk-bond capital, a new source of seemingly unlimited—and carelessly destructive power,” journalist Leland (1991) writes, “Their game is mergers and acquisitions.” Like the Wall Street yuppie, the new jack gangster is defined by a flashy fashion sense, lavish lifestyles with high-end cars and upscale houses or penthouses, and modern technological literacy in advanced computer systems, mobile phones and—in the gangster’s case—high-tech weaponry. Their extravagant lifestyles are integral elements of the *mise-en-scène*, contributing to the overall image of opulence and success they project. These visual cues not only highlight their wealth but also emphasize their aspiration for dominance within the urban landscape.

Both the extravagances and their illegal provenance can be seen as a critique of the American Dream, but some scholars maintain that the film’s critique is limited. For Whylie (1999), *New Jack City* focuses on the commercial dimension of criminality as a capital enterprise without sufficiently showing the effects of this trade (p. 181). While *New Jack City* does include scenes depicting drug addiction—such as the struggle of Scotty’s informant, Pookie—the film’s glamorization and focus on the criminal exploits of the CMB may overshadow the detrimental effects of drugs on addicts (p. 185). However, the film does not entirely exonerate the CMB from their criminality, as it also portrays the consequences of their actions, including the devastation caused by drug addiction within the community (p. 185). Sheril D. Antonio’s (2002) interpretation of the film brings out its contradictions in relation to the American Dream, criminality, and the representation of Blackness (p. 23). On one hand, Nino articulates his ambition as an embodiment of the American Dream, underscoring an entrepreneurial spirit and a determination to rise above humble beginnings. This portrayal highlights the aspiration of economic mobility and success, which can resonate with African American communities

that have historically faced economic disparities and systemic barriers. For the gangster characters and viewers who identified with them, criminality is justified as a response to the institutional anti-Blackness which excludes Black people from economic security and prosperity (p. 23). On the other hand, the depiction of CMB's violence, moral flaws, and attacks on one another raises questions about the means by which success is pursued (p. 23). Furthermore, Antonio writes that *New Jack City* glorifies the police and "does not attend to the real and daily problems facing Black communities and a very problematic relationship with law enforcement" (p. 30). I agree that law enforcement officers are depicted as heroes without addressing the systemic issues—such as racial profiling, police brutality, and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system—that disproportionately affect Black communities. Furthermore, these idealized cops uphold individuals' right to pursue a better life through legal means, which constructs a certain idealized version of the American Dream that overlooks its darker aspects such as unequal access to opportunities, especially for marginalized communities. Overall, these scholars agree that the film only exposes the grim underbelly of the American Dream to a certain extent.

Kenneth Chan (1998) argues that the film's limited critique of capitalism extends to its complicity as a piece of commercial cinema. First, he describes the film's critique of capitalism in moral terms. On one hand, *New Jack City* depicts the relationship between the narcotics trade and gangsters who work "with the system [of capitalism] and acquire the riches that the system rewards" (p. 38). When Nino is subsequently arrested and tried for racketeering, he proclaims that he emulated an "American way [work ethic]" to overcome his humble beginnings, unlike the prosecutor, who was born with a "silver spoon" in her mouth (01:31:31, 01:32:14). Nonetheless, for Chan, the film presents Nino as an intemperate, iniquitous character who revels in gratuitous violence. His "evil" thus seems to suggest that he "deserves" to perish at the hands of the elderly man who "takes justice into his own hands" and executes him, in contrast to the tenuous judicial system that fails to punish him adequately once he agrees to testify and incriminate others (Chan, 1998, p. 39). Chan also expands the discussion of the socioeconomic conditions represented on screen to consider the cinema's role in these conditions. He argues that cinema may be employed by surveillance states to intensify disparities that favour elite

interests. Attributing criminality to Black people dehumanizes them, prompting their objectification through caricatures and relegating them to the domain of penal systems (p. 39). The film's characterization fails to acknowledge the veritable evils of capitalism and its connection to substance abuse, addiction, classism, and institutional anti-Blackness. Chan argues that, by focusing on individual malefactors, *New Jack City* narratively fails to consider critically the structures which encourage greed, ethnocentrism, and materialism (p. 38).

These analyses of the film's perspective on capitalism and the American Dream shed light on how economic adversity and social crises can impact not only individual lives but also the sense of kinship and community among African Americans in the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, as communities faced economic decline, poverty, and the devastating effects of drugs and disease, African American families and neighborhoods often had to band together for mutual support and survival. However, such mutual support did not negate the internal conflicts and challenges they faced, including involvement in the drug trade (Murch, 2015, p. 166). Solidarity coexisted with the reality of intra-community struggles (p. 168). *New Jack City* conveys the complexities of divergent ideas within the community of how to confront systemic issues and navigate relationships with the authorities; in the 1980s and 1990s, this could lead to debates and divisions within African American families and communities when addressing issues of racial justice and economic security. Some people emphasized the importance of seizing opportunities within the capitalist system, while others critiqued the compromises and moral dilemmas that arose in the process. *New Jack City* conveys divisions in the community most strongly through the character of the Old Man (Bill Cobbs) who ultimately kills Nino. Catching sight of Nino in the court, the Old Man clearly condemns Nino's choices with the words, "Idolator, your soul is required in Hell!" (Van Peebles, 1991, 01:34:52) At the level of the family, the film shows how internal disagreements and moral dilemmas can arise within families pursuing capitalist wealth and power through the tension between Nino and Gee. This is due to differing approaches to their criminal activities in addition to Nino's habit of taking credit for their collective success. The film's exploration of these themes underscores the multifaceted nature of kinship relationships and the debates

that can emerge within families and communities when confronting issues of capitalism and social mobility during a tumultuous era in American history.

The controversy over the film's use of violence also highlights its flaws and links it to anti-Blackness outside the cinema. Leland (1991) notes that real violence occasionally accompanied *New Jack City* screenings, ranging from skirmishes to fatalities at theatres which played the film. He reports that the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV) and a collective of Black Houston ministers argued that "*New Jack City* promotes violence," while others countered that many involved in the violent spates had not yet seen the film and that many sites of violence had "histories of trouble" in and of themselves. Van Peebles argues that this ascription of violence to Black people is in itself anti-Black and notes that *The Godfather* films were neither as vilified nor blacklisted by theatre owners when fatalities ensued at their screenings (Bates, 1991). The filmmakers contend that *New Jack City* in fact discourages violence since "the good guys win" in the end (Antonio, 2002, p. 23). Despite any negative correlations, the ascription of violence to African American cinema carries devastating consequences for the Black film industry, as theatres either refuse or cancel screenings of Black films lest they incite violence (Leland, 1991). This double standard suggests that there may be systemic biases at play, where violence is more readily attributed to Black individuals or communities, thereby undermining African American kinship and unity.

In another critique of its reproduction of anti-Blackness, Donald G. Whylie (1999) discusses how *New Jack City* uses *colorstruction,* which imbues the cinematic narrative with colorism. Colorstruction, a term coined by anthropologist Arthur K. Spears (1992)—derived from the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) term "color struck"—denotes Black people's favoritism of a lighter skinned or white-looking person over a darker-skinned one (p. 25). In *New Jack City*, righteousness is more clearly ascribed to the police officers, and Scotty and his commanding officer (played by Van Peebles himself) have fairer skin (p. 184, p. 189). Colorstruction also plays a role in distinguishing the brothers, Gee and Nino. Gee is light-skinned and depicted as more methodical and principled—despite his own subsequent crack addiction—than the darker-skinned Nino (p. 183). Whylie astutely notes that Gee is the one who recognizes

the monetary potential of drug trafficking and critically considered its financial possibilities, although Nino is the one who assumes leadership of the operation (p. 189). Gee oversees the bulk of CMB operations, and consoles Nino's girlfriend, Selina—who is also light-skinned—following Nino's infidelity and domestic violence. Unlike the vices of greed, wrath, and indulgence which characterize Nino, Gee's drug addiction and downfall come about as a result of Nino's excesses and ill treatment of him, which hurts his pride (p. 187). Although the film does not construct Gee as a hero, given his CMB affiliation, he is comparably the more honorable of the two. In short, although Whylie does not discuss kinship, he shows how the film constructs color as a mode of difference between the brothers.

3.3.1 I Am My Brother's Keeper

New Jack City presents siblingship as a structure that permeates the social order, upheld by neoliberal discourses and institutions which acknowledge distinctions between kinfolk and outliers. The film concerns the fictive kinship—a type of bond based on neither blood nor marital ties—amongst African American gangsters. The gang includes a biological brother and sister as minor characters; however, it is clearly focussed on constructed rather than consanguineal forms of kinship. It focuses on siblingship specifically, as characters call each other "brothers." While older relatives in *New Jack City*—mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, elders—are referenced by characters in passing, they are not typically onscreen, which emphasizes siblingship as the predominant, most meaningful form of kinship. Using the lens of deidentification-individuation, I analyze how the film's story of the volatile sibling bonds shows that liberation cannot—and never will—occur by either assimilating to the malignant institutions of Eurocentrism, capitalism, and criminality or by beating them at their own game.

In *New Jack City*, the term "brother" is introduced in a multifaceted manner, indicating both a sense of camaraderie and a potentially exploitative dynamic. In the lyrics of the film's opening non-diegetic music, the use of the term conveys a sense of unity and solidarity, evoking a feeling of collective identity and shared experience within the

African American community. As the film unfolds, the term takes on a more complex meaning. When Nino shakes someone down early in the film because, as he says, "The brothers don't wait to get paid!," it suggests a twisted form of solidarity, where the concept of brotherhood is invoked to justify criminal activities and the pursuit of wealth at the expense of others (Van Peebles, 1991, 00:02:58). Shortly thereafter, Gee collects money from men whom he calls "brothers" on a wager after successfully making a basketball shot. This usage of "brother" and the rivalry between Gee and Nino construct brotherhood as inherently competitive. The film reveals a darker side of siblingship wherein individuals exploit their supposed bond to further their personal interests, and underscores how the pursuit of wealth and power can corrupt the sense of kinship, turning it into a tool for manipulation and exploitation rather than genuine solidarity within the community.

The relationship between Nino and Gee Money serves as a pivotal brotherly dynamic throughout the film, forming both of them through a structure of individuation-deidentification. I note that psychoanalysis and psychology tend universalize, asserting that individuation and deidentification processes are fundamental across cultures. New Black Realist films enable us to critically consider the validity of these universalist assertions by observing whether they do manifest among people in marginalized positionalities. Nino and Gee Money are the key sibling pair in the film. In their first scene together, Gee Money addresses Nino as his brother. While they may not be biologically related, they are chosen kin. As discussed in the introduction, individuation can be related to birth order, and that plays out here. The lateral likeness is offset by the gap in their ages, as Nino is two years older. This shapes their interactions and decisions, with Nino often taking on a leadership role. He is the charismatic and influential figure who guides Gee Money into the criminal world. The film also explores individuation-deidentification in their personalities and approaches to criminal endeavours. Gee Money's desire for power and recognition is evident in his ambition to expand the Cash Money Brothers' drug empire. However, unlike Nino, Gee is portrayed as having a more strategic and cautious approach to their criminal activities. He questions Nino's excessive use of violence and its potential to attract police attention. Nino's approach, on the other hand, is marked by his willingness to use extreme violence as a means of asserting

dominance and control, even when it might lead to further complications. For example, he stabs a member of the Italian mob in the hand during a negotiation, leading to a shootout; he also stabs a CMB member to redirect his own anger and frustration when their drug operation is exposed by Pookie, Scotty's informant whom Gee Money has vouched for. These differences in their characters contribute to the tension and conflicts that drive the narrative. The repetition of the term "brother" throughout the film underscores their shared history and the continuity of their bond. However, this repetition also highlights the differences in their approaches. Furthermore, the repetition of criminal activities becomes a destructive pattern that ultimately leads to the dissolution of their siblingship.

Nino and the other gangsters are bound precariously even as they ardently avow their loyalty to each other through the phrase "my brother's keeper." The phrase is introduced in a New Year's Eve party scene and is significant in both the context of that scene and the broader narrative of the film. During the party, it is used as a call and response, with Nino asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" and the group responding with, "Yes, I am" (Van Peebles, 1991, 00:34:51). This contrasts with the biblical origin of the question. In the Book of Genesis, Cain kills his brother Abel out of jealousy; when God asks Cain where his brother is, he responds with this question. In the biblical context, the question conveys a sense of denial, evasion, and Cain's refusal to acknowledge his moral duty to protect and care for his brother. It signifies a lack of accountability for his actions and an attempt to distance himself from the consequences of his violence. In contrast, while Cain's answer to the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" is implicitly "no," the CMB's affirmative call and response represents a commitment to responsibility and care for one's brother. It is an acknowledgment of the moral duty to protect and watch over sibling kin, emphasizing the importance of communal bonds as essential elements of contentment and a productive operation. It affirms a collective sense of duty and honor that underscores the moral complexity of the characters' relationships, where loyalty exists within the challenging and morally ambiguous context of their criminal activities. The gangsters' use of "my brother's keeper" is consistent with the aforementioned biblical value of sibling responsibility and care but sets up a context in which these ideals

will be distorted and corrupted, highlighting the contrast between genuine altruism and the exploitation of kinship for selfish gains.

The following scene, which features only Nino and Gee, affirms the emotional bonds of siblingship. Instead of saying "my brother's keeper" to each other, they say "I love you, man" (Van Peebles, 1991, 00:35:48). This alteration is significant in that it represents a more personal and emotional expression of their bond. In the broader context of the New Year's Eve party sequence, these variations in language suggest a duality in their relationship. While they publicly assert their loyalty and brotherhood, privately, they express an emotional connection that is deeper than their connection to the other members of the CMB "family." This duality underscores the nuanced dynamics within their new jack gangster brotherhood, where loyalty, amity, and genuine affection coexist with the ruthlessness and violence of their criminal activities.

The question "Am I my brother's keeper?" serves as an archetype of moral evasion that has been explored in various cultural contexts and narratives. At first, the characters' affirmation of loyalty in *New Jack City* with "Yes, I am" represents difference through a departure from this historical pattern. However, a thematic repetition ultimately plays out as the fictive kinship of the gangsters inevitably devolves. Brothers project their own distrust and insecurities onto each other, which culminates in a sense of betrayal and ultimately violence and murder. Antonio analyzes a sequence that marks a turning point in the deterioration of Gee and Nino's relationship (2002, p. 24). In this sequence, the brothers watch segments from *Sweet Sweetback Baadasssss Song* (Van Peebles, 1971) and *Scarface* (De Palma, 1983) on Nino's home theatre. They are accompanied by Nino's longtime girlfriend, Selina, and Gee's new girlfriend, Uniqua. Nino mimics *Scarface*'s Tony Montana, declaring that the world is his. However, Gee reminds Nino not to forget about the "brothers" who aid the rise and organization of the CMB empire. Gee's response emphasizes that while one might initially root for the rise of someone like Montana, who started as an impoverished Cuban refugee, faced with systemic injustice, Montana's arrogance and unrelenting violence ultimately lead to his own downfall (Antonio, 2002, p. 32, p. 33). For me, this intertextual reference serves as a reminder of the consequences of hubris and violence in the gangster genre, as well as the tangled

dynamics of trust and betrayal within criminal organizations. Nino's emulation of this iconic character underscores his increasing disregard for loyalty within his own criminal enterprise, ultimately contributing to his own downfall.

Although Antonio does not draw attention to kinship in relation to *Scarface*, both lateral and vertical kinship relationships are central to the scene. Ironically, Montana's downfall in *Scarface* is linked to his overprotective and possessive attitude towards his sister, who falls in love with Montana's best friend and business associate. Amongst the CMB, however, vertical relationships intrude. It is significant that Uniqua attempts to seduce Nino by suggesting that he needs to have a son, which his girlfriend cannot provide. This situation highlights the tension between vertical and lateral relationships within the narrative. In this context, the vertical relationship of parenthood is associated with power, succession, and the future. Uniqua's suggestion plays into Nino's aspirations for greater power and influence within the drug trade. By fathering a son, he can secure his legacy and expand his control. Uniqua doubly challenges lateral connections, both by rejecting Gee, whom she is ostensibly dating, in favour of Nino, and by attempting to come between Nino and his girlfriend. She suggests that an heir has far-reaching consequences within the criminal organization as an heir would carry on his legacy and fulfill his narcissism. Implicitly, a sibling does not fulfill this narcissistic role, which shows that siblingship is conceived in terms of *individuation* as much as similarity. Ultimately, although Nino never has a child with anyone, this tension between vertical and lateral relationships adds depth to the film's exploration of power, loyalty, and the moral dilemmas faced by the characters. Uniqua's maneuvering underscores the complexity of Nino's decision-making and the blurred lines between personal and professional loyalties.

The phrase "my brother's keeper" returns in Gee and Nino's final scene together in a way that reveals the complexities of this siblingship. The police stage a successful raid on their center of operations. Although both escape, Nino blames Gee. He belittles Gee for his addiction—sucking "glass dick"—cynically musing that he is not honouring the commitment of "my brother's keeper," and likening Gee to "Cain" for betraying their brotherhood in a fruitless attempt to cut side deals with CMB enemies (Van Peebles,

1991, 01:23:02-01:23:32). However, when Nino asks Gee "Whatever happened to 'my brother's keeper'?," Gee echoes the words from *Scarface* to convey that Nino's selfishness has come between them, saying, "The world is mine! […] Everything, even my woman!" (01:23:32, 01:23:41). Nino jeers, "Is that what this is about, that fucking skeezer? You think I give a fuck about her? Fuck that ho bitch! I don't give a fuck about her!" (00:1:23:56). [29] Although Nino does not think that his sexual involvement with Uniqua infringed upon their brotherly bond, Gee interprets it as a breach of their fraternal loyalty, which illustrates differing perspectives on the boundaries of their relationship. Nonetheless, Gee looks for reconciliation by citing their fraternity. When he reiterates "I love you, man" and begs Nino to "be a family" again, he invokes their shared experiences to evince their likeness and loyalty to one another; he pleads for Nino to remember "all they've been through together," that they are brothers in the gang, and suggests that Nino's relationship with Uniqua is similar to Gee's own side deals (01:24:17, 01:25:00). However, Nino rejects his pleas and asserts that nothing should have ever come between them. Tearfully, Nino embraces Gee and insists that their relationship is irreparable, their siblingship forever compromised: "Nothing can ever be the same again." Both have their guns drawn, but Gee refuses to shoot. Instead, he falls apart and onto his knees. Nino levels his own gun to Gee's temple and shoots him. This pivotal exchange underscores the ultimate breakdown of their fraternal bond and speaks to the destructive impact of power and betrayal within close relationships, reflecting broader themes of trust and loyalty in the urban landscape portrayed in the film.

The siblingship in *New Jack City* warrants a psychoanalytic perspective, particularly in examining the implications of birth order on personality development and familial dynamics. Alfred Adler (1929), a psychoanalyst and contemporary of Freud, posited that birth order affects personality; notably, that elder children tend to assume responsibilities associated with guardianship over younger children in response to feeling displaced and devalued by the arrival of and rivalry of another sibling (p. 101). This is because one's *sibling,* as opposed to parents or peers, can be a distinctive threat to one's place in the

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[29] The term "skeezer" is slang for a woman with low morals and poor hygiene (Collins, 2013)

world (Ennis, 2010, p. 121). Although Adler does not account for cultural, historical, or socioeconomic variations, his theory does elucidate *New Jack City*, which explores threats to the brothers' perceived places in the world. While Adler's theory traditionally focuses on the displacement felt by elder children in the context of parental attention, its principles can be extended to any hierarchical social structure, including the criminal organization in *New Jack City*, wherein the rivalry and threats to status among the brothers are analogous to familial displacement. Therefore, Adler's insights into sibling rivalry and displacement help me make sense of the motivations and tensions between the characters as they vie for power and recognition within their group; this mirrors the emotional stakes of parental approval. First, Nino and Gee both act as though the other threatens his place in the world, whether sexually or in relation to CMB business. Gee's death scene also repeats the jealous fratricide of the biblical story, as Nino kills his younger brother. In the Book of Genesis, Cain is older (see New International Version), and the age difference between Nino and Gee illustrates the biblical story's implications for moral responsibility and the dynamics of care within familial and societal contexts. In *New Jack City*, the dynamics of fictive sibling relationships indeed illuminate how the threat to one's place in the world can be a central and complex theme.

On the other hand, this scene reimagines Greek tragedy through a new jack gangster code of ethics and brings out the complexity of the moral dilemmas at play within the narrative. The CMB's collective callousness towards customers and informants—and amongst themselves—contributes to the broader message that violence begets violence within the criminal underworld, and the cycle of violence ultimately culminates in the tragic confrontation between the brothers. The new jack gangster's ruthless decision, like the killing of a brother, is evidence of both his ability to adapt to the ever-evolving landscape of crime and his inability to turn back from the path he has chosen, despite deep emotions and loyalties. Nino's tearful embrace with Gee and his statement that "Nothing can ever be the same again" underscore the irreparable path both characters find themselves on, reminiscent of the tragic inevitability found in classic Greek dramas (Dimock, 2008, p. 80; Van Peebles, 1991, 01:25:32). Like Greek tragedy, *New Jack City* contains fatalistic elements similar to Oedipus's irreversible fate in *Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles, 1982) and the doomed familial bonds in *Antigone* (Sophocles, 2003). The

dissolution of Nino and Gee's brotherhood similarly unfolds with a sense of predetermined tragedy, where past actions set forth a chain of irrevocable consequences, emphasizing their assured downfall. This tragic element underscores the depth of their conflict, augmenting the narrative with a layer of classical resonance that speaks to the profound impact of betrayal and the hopeless path of their chosen lives.

Moreover, Nino's act of leveling his gun at Gee's temple and shooting him can be seen as a warrior's death (blacktreetv 2021), consistent with elements of the new jack gangster code. In this context, Nino's decision to end Gee's life can be interpreted as an attempt to spare him from the potential horrors and degradation of addiction, capture, trial, and imprisonment—horrors that represent a dishonour worse than death. The killing is a form of protection and loyalty, aligning with the code of honor that often governs such characters. This portrays Nino as a character who, despite his criminal actions, honours a sense of loyalty and duty to his "brother" Gee, even as he takes his life. In this view, Nino maintains responsibility for Gee even to the point of death. The interplay of Greek tragedy elements and the new jack gangster code adds depth to the narrative and underscores the moral ambiguities that define the world of *New Jack City*.

The structure of siblingship that shapes this new jack gangster code is what psychoanalytic discourse would call deidentification-individuation, the process by which siblings develop their unique identities by differentiating themselves from one another while maintaining a sense of belonging and connection within the sibling unit. *New Jack City* demonstrates how these dynamics can play out in the context of capitalism and systemic racism. It may seem at first as if the CMB members identify with one another due to their common experiences within marginalized communities. Their relationships stem from a pragmatic nihilism that lower social stratums assume in the context of socioeconomic marginalization. They form a group that commodifies goods, including addictive substances, transfers capital into their own pockets from ignoble judiciaries and insolvent people, and thus enlarges socioeconomic disparities. Over time, however, the characters assert their differences and pursue their personal interests, often at the expense of the collective. Gee's attempt to cut a side deal and Nino's decision to kill him are instances of individuation. This contrasts with the intensifying camaraderie and solidarity

among the cops over the course of the film, which highlights resilience and cohesion amidst adversity. For the CMB, siblingship is a source of strength and joy that allows them to rise to prominence, but it also magnifies perceived slights or disparities. In the absence of constancy in their relationships and within the context of neoliberal capitalism, siblingship turns into an accelerant for the erosion of boundaries and the unraveling of moral and ethical threads. This also exemplifies the broader theme of individuation in a capitalist society, where individuals often prioritize personal success and profit, sometimes at the expense of familial or communal ties. Essentially, Gee's death scene underscores the stark individualism and cutthroat nature of the capitalist environment in which the characters operate, in which Nino concluded that Gee was unable to survive. The scene does not undermine their deep emotional connection, as this is the only time Nino sheds tears or embraces someone. However, it reflects Nino's sense of deidentification with Gee's fate; it is not that Nino *must* live on, it is that he *can*, while Gee *cannot*. This scene underscores how the characters are torn between their individual pursuits of power and the emotional ties that bind them, exemplifying the tensions and complexities inherent in the processes of deidentification and individuation within sibling relationships.

The film, however, does not fabulate anything beyond such immediate needs—such as collective action in resistance to the status quo—and therefore does not sufficiently resist the ethos of capitalism that Nino later condemns—and whose cruelty he utilizes to appeal to jurors—when he argues that criminality was his only alternative. Criminality emerges as a natural consequence of systemic inequities, presenting itself as an inevitable path for those marginalized by an unjust socioeconomic structure. However, because the film offers no alternatives or remorse, it has a limited capacity to challenge the very capitalist ethos that Nino attempts to criticize. When Nino argues that criminality was his only viable mode of survival, he underscores the systemic cruelties of capitalism; however, he himself conforms to—and embodies—these iniquities.

Similarly, fictive kinship in *New Jack City* is a mechanism employed to cultivate and denote mutuality, but it does not produce or relate to any broader view of the systems that marginalize these "brothers" or genuine alternatives to it; it functions entirely within the

capitalist-criminal system. As the narrative unfolds, their sense of shared purpose and unity dissipates, giving way to the self-centered pursuit of individual goals. This transformation is important to understand how siblingship in *New Jack City* ultimately functions within the capitalist-criminal system, and it highlights the characters' failure to challenge the systems of domination they benefit from and reside within. While likeness is shown through shared positionalities to depict solidarity and reciprocity, siblingship itself arises through characters' failure to interrogate the systems of domination from which they benefit and in which they reside.

3.3.2 Difference, Repetition, and Siblingship

New Jack City's inability to imagine an alternative to capitalism does not undermine the concept of Black liberation as a whole, but instead presents a nuanced commentary on the moral complexities inherent in the pursuit of justice within marginalized kin networks and communities. In this section, I explore the convergence and divergence of siblingship and the Deleuzian elements of repetition and difference while considering the dynamics of likeness and deidentification-individuation within the film narrative.

The film's vision of street justice demonstrates its approach to repetition and difference. The producers and director of *New Jack City* set themselves in direct opposition street justice, saying that the film serves as a "vivid and informed warning, a stylish cautionary tale about the daily devastation caused by drugs and crime in many such communities throughout this country" (Antonio, 2002, p. 23). They assert that the new jack gangster's street justice serves to aid rather than subvert colonialist, institutional status quos (Antonio, 2002, p. 23). However, street justice may also be purposed to reflect BIPOC autonomy and empowerment in opposition to a colonial, hegemonic surveillance state. Street justice can include protest in the wake of discriminatory judicial sanctions that afflict people in marginalized positionalities worst, which is evinced in the pathologization of resistance for Black people whose adversities are born of and exacerbated by systemic oppression (Halpern & Dal Lago, 2002, p. 273; Matthews, 2018; Metzl, 2009). In *New Jack City*, however, we see the reverse. This appears in Nino's claims, while on trial, that his criminal activities constitute pursuit of the American

Dream despite being illegal. On one hand, a chimera of resistance and street justice is projected upon organized crime in *New Jack City*. On the other hand, the CMB engage in a form of colonial mimicry, a concept articulated by Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). They emulate, albeit on a localized scale, the very capitalist system that has historically marginalized them. Even when Nino gives money to children and hands out items for charity, he is not magnanimous in proportion to his profit and is only afforded the ability to do this through a socially destructive enterprise that entraps the community in addiction. This colonial mimicry becomes a powerful tool for the CMB. By replicating elements of the dominant capitalist system, such as the pursuit of wealth, power, and control, they establish their own underground empires. The CMB's emulation of the capitalist system is a form of repetition, although it differs from capitalism by operating on a localized scale, and through this repetition the CMB effectively challenge the established order and carve out their distinctive path to power and wealth within their marginalized community. This dynamic interplay between repetition and difference shows how individuals of marginalized positionalities and communities adapt to and resist systemic oppression by creatively reinterpreting and reshaping the familiar structures that surround them.

The film does not, however, set the police up as a genuine alternative to the CMB or the oppressive system of capitalism; both the CMB and the police officers embody repetitive patterns of behaviour without considering the underlying systemic issues. Police officers' actions often prioritize personal agendas and career advancement over addressing the systemic issues underlying crime and social inequality, just as the CMB's ultimate goal is to gain individual profit rather than to empower the community. Even when police officers exhibit loyalty to their collective, their means are often damaging to others and sometimes self-defeating. For example, as Scotty becomes increasingly obsessed with capturing Nino Brown, he pressures his informant, Pookie, not to blow his cover, which prompts Pookie's relapse into active addiction. Scotty also pummels Nino when capturing him. His reckless actions compromise his own moral principles and endanger not only himself, but also his colleagues. Deleuze (1994) argues that true difference arises when repetition is embraced as a creative force, allowing for the emergence of new possibilities (p. 53). In *New Jack City*, however, the lack of collective or community-

oriented approaches by both the CMB and the police officers hinders the potential for positive change within the African American community. Repetition is evinced in the closing text of the film, which states that there is a Nino Brown in every American city. This suggests that the destruction of the CMB will likely lead to the continuation of the drug trade through the rise of another gang doomed to a similar decline and replacement. Therefore, the repetition of individualistic actions by these characters underscores the need for a shift in perspective and a reconsideration of the systemic factors at play in addressing the complex issues depicted in the film.

While the repetition depicted in *New Jack City* does not generally lead to positive or constructive results—to true difference, as Deleuze says—the film itself intervenes in the repetition of anti-Blackness. It does so by deploying difference—specifically, by depicting a multiplicity of Black characters to disrupt and challenge prevalent narratives of anti-Blackness. That is, it constructs difference within Blackness: it does not simply cast Black people against anti-Black adversaries. Most of the police officers and legal representatives are Black, as are most bystanders and peripheral characters. The film depicts Black people as a multiplicity whose humanity allows audiences to sympathize regardless of their factions. It shows the distinct ways that African Americans take up positions of power rather than suggesting that they can be *completely* assimilated into the mainstream through the amassment of wealth or respectability or reputability. It represents a form of economic and judicial agency rooted in a contemporary, urban environment by portraying characters who achieve success and upward mobility through entrepreneurship within their own neighborhoods, such as the CMB and law enforcement, who adopt cunning, violent personae in efforts to incriminate adversaries. However, it also shows the limitations of such paths to success, as these characters become embroiled in destructive cycles of violence and moral compromise, ultimately challenging the notion of complete assimilation into a colorblind, mainstream society. By emphasizing the contrast between distinct ways and complete assimilation, I aim to highlight the misconception that Black people can achieve equity and overcome adversity by mirroring the same paths as non-Black individuals. This distinction underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of assimilation that recognizes and respects the

diversity of experiences and approaches within the Black community, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all expectation.

In light of the complexities explored within *New Jack City*, the film's social impact in terms of siblingship lies in its portrayal of the blurred lines between loyalty and betrayal within familial bonds, particularly in the context of criminality. It reimagines tragedy for a contemporary new jack context, illustrating how the pursuit of power, wealth, and dominance strains even the strongest of sibling relationships. To some extent, it conveys a positive view of new jack kinship. It is informed by fictive kinship, which arose in response to the destruction of familial, legal-rational, and consanguineal ties due to abuse, disownment, and enslavement. Unlike other archetypes of kinship based on biology, consanguinity, or social capital, new jack kinship is not precarious or impersonal. Instead, it is characterized by a complex web of relationships that extend beyond mere respectability or superficial alliances. This is a form of support and protection, reminiscent of the fictive kinship networks that historically emerged amongst enslaved African Americans to provide a sense of belonging and safety to those who had been marginalized or abandoned by traditional family structures. In this sense, new jack kinship is a response to the challenges and adversities New Black Realism characters face in their communities, emphasizing the importance of looking out for one another, even in the morally complex world of anti-Black disparities and organized crime. This kinship is not exclusively about mutual benefit but also a deep sense of loyalty and understanding, and it adds depth and complexity to the characters. However, film ultimately shows violence, betrayal, and individual ambitions or addictions to take precedence over familial connections. This serves as a stark reminder of the potential fractures that can occur within siblingship when placed in the crucible of a challenging social environment. *New Jack City* underscores the importance of understanding the delicate balance between individualism and kinship, offering a lesson in the fragility of sibling bonds amidst the pressures of a harsh and unforgiving world.

3.4 The Bilz on the Boyz

Boyz N the Hood was released in July 1991, five months after *New Jack City*. Despite its limited financial resources, the film's South Central Los Angeles locations and non-professional actors, its integration of music, and its unvarnished examination of the challenges faced by African Americans in the inner city collectively elevated *Boyz N the Hood* as a culturally resonant and impactful cinematic work. The film garnered widespread acclaim and stands as John Singleton's most significant film success. While multidisciplinary scholarship categorizes both *Boyz N the Hood* and *New Jack City* as examples of the 'hood genre, responses to *Boyz* focus most strongly on the urban space. For instance, film critic Kenneth Turan (2016) contends that it is the "peripheral sensations of 'Boyz N the Hood' rather than its plot that stay with us longest and make the strongest impression." He observes that the 'hood itself is often peripheral to the story, but the sorrow that defines the 'hood in popular imagination—squalor, substance abuse, gun violence, vagrancy—are hyper-visible. In contrast to *New Jack City*, whose narrative follows the new jack gangster and the judicial system (both law enforcement and court trial) which endeavors to redress them, *Boyz N the Hood* focuses on marginalized, impoverished African Americans who are directly located in the 'hood. The CMB's interpretation of the American Dream, characterized by power and wealth in the city gained through illicit means, contrasts sharply with the limited opportunities and bleak prospects faced by those entrenched in the cycle of poverty and violence within the 'hood of *Boyz*. In this section, I will give an overview of the film, its context, and its reception, considering the socioeconomic qualifiers which define the characters and conditions of their sibling relationships.

Boyz N the Hood follows Tre Styles from youth (Desi Arnez Hines III) to adulthood (Cuba Gooding Jr.). His increasing misbehavior prompts his mother, Reva (Angela Bassett), to believe that she cannot effectively discipline him, so she entrusts him to his father, Jason "Furious" Styles Jr. (Laurence Fishburne), from whom she is separated. Prospects are grim in the 'hood, but Reva thinks Furious, as a paternal figure, is better equipped to guide Tre. As the young Tre walks the streets, he sees bullet-ridden posters from Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign. Crime scenes and corpses are overlooked even as

they are eroded by vermin and the elements. Thieves burglarize residences, and police helicopters circle the skies. Furious manages to impart vital insights about responsibility, respect, safe sex, and the importance of maintaining a cool composure in the face of violence. Seven years later, these principles help an older Tre amidst the STI/STD outbreaks, teen pregnancy, drug addictions, and gun and gang violence which ravish the ’hood. He dates Brandi (Nia Long), a Catholic girl who intends to escape the ’hood by attending college, and is best friends with Ricky Baker (Morris Chestnut), a high school football star who strives to land an athletic scholarship for college. Ricky is already partnered to Shanice (Alysia Rogers), with whom he has a young son. Ricky’s elder brother, Darren “Dough Boy” Baker (Ice Cube), is a gang member and drug dealer whose cynicism is buttressed by his time in juvenile detention and adult penitentiaries. A scuffle with rival gang members at a party leads to Ricky’s murder. While Dough Boy seeks and attains bloody vengeance, Tre grasps that aiding in retribution will endanger his own future and undermine the dreams of happiness beyond the ’hood which he and Ricky shared.

One major element of the film’s realism and impact was Ice Cube’s career and persona. By the time *Boyz N the Hood* was released, Ice Cube had been on American screens for nearly four years. He was a founding member of N.W.A.—Niggaz Wit Attitudes—which pioneered gangsta rap, a subgenre of rap music that emerged in the mid to late 1980s and whose lyrics explicitly avow the values and cultures personified by street gangs and hustlers (Newton, 2008, p. 69). The group spoke about the reality of police brutality and gang violence, asserting that they would not succumb to injustice. It was an imperative response to the increasing marginalization resulting from the transformative politics of the Reagan era which devastated the inner cities. The group’s vicious resolve echoed the oppressions and fatalities which afflicted people in similar positionalities within and beyond the inner cities. Gangsta rap also appealed to nihilistic white teen suburbanites seeking an outlet for rebellion who idealized “the ’hood” despite lacking any real connection to it, not unlike their predecessors, who were inclined to the countercultural

ideals permeating rock music during the 1960s (Judy, 1994, p. 220, p. 221, p. 227).[30] Through their music and music videos, N.W.A. offered a harrowing portrayal of "urban nightmares" wrought by systemic anti-Blackness: the amoral carnage of gang violence; the institutional racism enacted in schools by lacklustre white teachers who demoralize Black pupils; law enforcement officers who disproportionately target and incriminate Black people; and material precarity that breeds and consequently justifies nihilism (Kennedy, 2017). N.W.A. spoke to the enduring violent, dehumanizing stereotype of Black people as raging savages to politicize that image and become unapologetic embodiments of the mean streets upon which they were raised. In several bridges and features off their platinum-selling debut, *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), Ice Cube asserted that he was a force to be reckoned with, strengthened rather than defeated by gun and gang violence ["Straight Outta Compton" (track 1)], police brutality ["Fuck tha Police" (track 2)], intemperate charlatans ["Gangsta Gangsta" (track 3)], and the crack and HIV-AIDS epidemics that ravaged the 'hood ["Dopeman" (track 11)] (Judy, 1994, p. 217). Their explicit lyrics made them both widely revered and condemned.

Most scholarship on *Boyz N the Hood* focuses on its representation of the 'hood, shaped by internal and external systemic racism, as a place of abject poverty, addiction, and pestilence which fosters bloodshed and toxic masculinity amongst residents. Law scholar Justin P. Brook (1997) notes that the experiences and figures depicted in *Boyz N the Hood*—bedraggled addicts, gun-toting individuals, and corpses—are often considered traumatic by mainstream society, particularly among white individuals and respectable members of the Black community (p. 5). However, within marginalized groups alienated from established legal standards, these experiences are normalized. Therefore, applying conventional legal standards—standards which are often shaped by and for mainstream society—to marginalized collectives can be considered unjust. These standards often fail to account for the unique socioeconomic and psychological challenges faced by these communities. As such, they not only protect these groups inadequately but also judge them unfairly according to criteria that disregard their lived realities of systemic

[30] Judy (1994) refers to nihilism in the context of white suburban youth as being characterized by a sense of disillusionment or rejection of traditional values and societal norms (p. 220).

oppression and trauma. This misalignment emphasizes the need for a legal framework that is sensitive and adaptive to the specific conditions within marginalized environments (p. 5). New Black Realist films often strive to depict the lived realities of Black individuals and communities that mainstream society may perceive as "other" or "different." Brook's analysis shows how such films normalize and humanize these experiences, challenging established legal standards that do not address the specific needs and challenges faced by these communities. His perspective aligns with the broader theme of difference and repetition in the context of New Black Realism, where these films seek to illuminate and empathize with the unique struggles and perspectives of marginalized individuals.

Boyz resonates with the Deleuzian concepts of repetition and difference in part through its investigation of white hegemony. Although white people are mostly visually absent, the presence of white supremacist hegemony manifests in the stagnancy of Black lives; this starkly illustrates the interplay between repetition and difference in societal structures. Those in the 'hood are restricted and dehumanized by a white supremacist hegemony that systemically devalues Black people through a lack of investment, dignity, and resources, and by the societal alienation and living conditions this hegemony breeds. The lack is explicit in the wealth disparities between inner-city 'hoods and prosperous suburbs, differences the characters reference. Difference parses white supremacist hegemony's anti-Blackness, which refuses to engage deeply, critically, and in a nuanced way with Black kin in these communities. The 'hood is out of sight and out of mind or exists only as a fantasy of crime and addiction for much of mainstream America, which makes it easy for injustices to continue. For example, it takes an hour for police to arrive when Furious calls them after a break-in; Tre and Ricky are demoralized when they are arbitrarily stopped and frisked; and Dough Boy is intermittently incarcerated for petty crimes. Everyone seems to realize that efforts to formally contest these injustices would likely lead nowhere. Outsiders—institutions, authorities, or individuals who exist apart from the 'hood—are thus counterproductive to Black imagination, liberation, and success. White supremacist hegemony denotes a hierarchy analogous to verticality.

Criticism is mixed on the degree to which *Boyz N the Hood* recognizes that this experience of the ’hood is gendered and inflected by familial structures. Michael Eric Dyson (1992) notes that the film dramatizes the stark reality of high rates of parental absence due to mass incarceration and domestic violence in this “catastrophic environment” (p. 122, p. 124, p. 125). Robyn Wiegman (1993) posits that criminality is a performative element of ’hood masculinity whose “overdetermination can be envied only in so far as one can ignore its deeper psychological vacuity” (p. 186). Janet Maslin (1991a) muses that the film eponymizes its focus on boys, which inexorably renders the girls to be peripheral. Likewise, Thomas Doherty (1991) laments that *Boyz* falls short in its attempt to encapsulate adversities as a “struggle…that must be played out between genders, falling into a…scenario of victimizing one to vindicate the other” wherein the women in the film simply compound male tribulations as unfit mothers (p. 17). First, we see Dough Boy and Ricky’s mother, Brenda, evaluating her sons respective to their absent fathers: she believes that Ricky’s is good and Dough Boy’s is bad, and treats their sons accordingly (p. 17). After Reva entrusts their son to Furious, Tre comes to resent her and Tre absconds from her maternal influence (p. 17). Additionally, the film indicates that women’s sexuality may hamper male prospects, as Shanice’s shared parenthood with Ricky threatens his football career due to the added responsibilities of fatherhood that divert his focus and resources away from his athletic pursuits (p. 17). Wiegman (1993) critiques the film for its “binary understandings of power relations,” which overlook the multiplicity of gender, how it is informed by colonial social relations, and how paternal absence is asserted to be a part of the pathologization of all gangsters as innately criminal (p. 174, p. 185). Similarly, Jacquie Jones (1991) observes how Tre—studious, polite, diligent, and virginal—is “held well in line” by his father (p. 16). She contrasts Tre with teen father Ricky as well as Dough Boy, who is routinely involved in gang activity and dealing drugs (p. 16). She concludes that the narrative logic in *Boyz* functions through a patriarchal imagination in which paternal presence is the principal determinant of welfare (p. 16, p. 19).

Glen Masato Mimura (1996) notes that while reviews critique the “affirmation of fathers and neglect of mothers” in terms of parental influence (p. 15), the film also speaks to the importance of siblingship; he is the only scholar who takes note of this. He writes that

“fraternal loyalty” motivates Dough Boy’s actions as an elder brother to Ricky, assuming a protective and avenging role. Siblingship represents an undisputed constancy despite the fact that the ’hood is a volatile milieu (p. 24). I think that Mimura effectively speaks to the significance of siblingship for Dough Boy. My own analysis builds upon Mimura’s argument by delving deeper into the significance of siblingship as a form of support and identity for Tre and Ricky as well as Dough Boy.

3.4.1 Don’t Know, Don’t Show

Although it is a fictional film, *Boyz in the Hood* is rooted in extratextual realities that shape its construction of kinship. Scholars have explored the film’s portrayal of the ’hood as a crucible of adversity and as a milieu commentary on systemic injustices. While these discussions have offered invaluable insights, I aim to carve a distinctive niche within this discourse by focusing on a pivotal and often overlooked element: the significance of siblingship. *Boyz N the Hood* presents a narrative in which sibling relationships play a central role, shedding light on the resilience, complexities, and unique dynamics of these bonds amidst the harsh realities of the urban capitalist environment. My analysis seeks to contribute a fresh perspective to the ongoing conversation surrounding this iconic work by analyzing how sibling relationships serve as both a source of strength and a reflection of the challenges faced by the characters within the ’hood.

Dough Boy, played by Ice Cube, is the character most clearly motived, as Mimura (1996) writes, by “fraternal loyalty” (p. 24). Ice Cube describes Dough Boy as “a guy [that] comes from a family with…just his mother and his brother. And, you know, it’s about a guy who went the wrong way” (Carr, 2018, p. 146). Dough Boy’s “wrong way” is steered by maternal abuse and bullying as well as the greater tendency for Black youth from underprivileged backgrounds to become incarcerated due to harsher school and civic policies and educational inequality (Mora & Christianakis, 2012). Viewers are introduced to the young Dough Boy (Baha Jackson) shortly after Reva sends Tre to live with Furious. A plump kid, the young Dough Boy responds to his mother’s verbal abuse with a nonchalance that indicates its normalcy; putting a Raiders cap onto his head is the only indication he gives that he needs to put on a persona of toughness. As an adult, his ex-

convict status underlines his toughness, but he also muses philosophically about God and the nature of the world, partly inspired by books he has read in prison; he humanizes the violent image of a gangster by paying attention to the deeply rooted socioeconomic factors that lead to his involvement in gang life. After he has committed murder to avenge his brother's death, Dough Boy is gruff but teary. In the film's final scene, he reflects on how he no longer has a family; how inconsequential his community is to the mainstream media and culture, which seems preoccupied by events happening in other countries or foreign places; how the relentless fury, injustice, bloodshed which define the 'hood and their lives are unacknowledged by the world at large. He says:

> I turned on the TV this morning, they had this shit on about… about living in a violent world. Showed all these foreign places... I started thinking, man, either they don't know, don't show, or don't care about what's going on in the hood. Man, all this foreign shit, and they didn't have shit on my brother, man… I ain't got no brother. Got no mother, either. She loved that fool more than she loved me (Singleton, 1991, 01:44:04).

With this reflection, Dough Boy states that he is a subject whom both the 'hood and his vertical familial relationships have rendered negligible, especially now that he can no longer be Ricky's protective elder brother. The visual medium of broadcast television conveys a world that is *beyond* the life Dough Boy knows, yet unreal *within* that which he knows and to which he is resigned. In the assemblages onscreen, he sees prospects far removed from the 'hood that, for him, affirm his insignificance and powerlessness.

This is driven home in an epilogue of text over the closing scene of the film, which reads that Dough Boy is murdered two weeks after Ricky's funeral, while Tre and Brandi abscond from the 'hood through their successful applications to universities. As the text conveys Dough Boy's death, the camera is at his eye level as he departs in silence with heavy strides and literally fades away. In contrast, as Tre stares pensively at Dough Boy's retreating form, he is shot from a low angle with a musical score whose bright, melodic, harmonious musical elements signify a sense of resolution or optimism. These musical cues work in concert with the visual composition to convey a contrasting emotional

atmosphere with Dough Boy's departure. While Dough Boy's exit is silent and somber, Tre's low angle shot and the optimistic score convey a sense of hope or positive resolution, underlining the diverging paths and emotions of the two characters in this pivotal moment. The difference between the characters' fates alludes to how Black men acquire a sense of identity, including masculinity, from other Black men and are consequently ill-equipped to understand themselves—or a cogent meaning of manhood—in the absence of positive Black male role models. These include paternal figures, as Mimura writes, but is not limited to fathers (1996, p. 15).

Moreover, Brenda's preference for Ricky is an extension of her preference for Ricky's father over Dough Boy's, despite the fact that both are equally absent. Dough Boy's friends remark upon this preference, and we see evidence of it throughout the film. This unequal maternal investment creates the conditions for sibling rivalry, so it is striking that Dough Boy exhibits no resentment towards Ricky. While *New Jack City* invokes and demonstrates the duplicity of Cain's murderous phrase, "my brother's keeper," Dough Boy adheres to Adler's observations about birth order and the responsibility of the elder for the welfare of the younger. In childhood, Dough Boy fights, albeit unsuccessfully, to recover Ricky's stolen football—a gift to Ricky from his father. Later, he supports the potential football career that defines Ricky's self-worth and promises him an escape from the 'hood. When a college recruiter arrives at the Baker household, Dough Boy grasps his significance for Ricky's future success and strives to help his little brother, prodding his friends aside to make way for the recruiter's entrance and urging them to hush: "Move, punk, move. Y'all be the fuck quiet" (Singleton, 1991, 00:54:56). Later, Dough Boy comes through for his brother once again by defending him in an accidental scuffle with the gang that ultimately kills him. This support is rewarded by the fact that Ricky earns sufficient aptitude test scores to get the college scholarship, although he dies before he can take it up. Dough Boy never thinks twice about stepping up to whomever or whatever may pose immediate or prospective dangers to his brother.

Like *New Jack City*, *Boyz N the Hood* demonstrates the applicability of psychoanalytic and psychological concepts of deidentification and individuation but situates them historically and culturally. Deidentification and individuation function as a means for

Dough Boy to distinguish himself from Ricky and cultivate his own self-awareness. It should be noted that, unlike *New Jack City*, in which colorism plays a discernible role, *Boyz N the Hood* does not prominently feature colorism as a thematic element. Instead, it focuses more broadly on character in the context of systemic socioeconomic challenges rather than intraracial nuances of skin color. The Baker brothers are depicted as having different paths in life despite growing up in the same neighborhood. While Ricky is a talented athlete with the potential for a college scholarship, Dough Boy is more intellectually curious and reflective but lacking in opportunities. This distinction between the brothers' paths reflects the broader context of white supremacy, which often finds Black athleticism less threatening and more acceptable within mainstream society than Black intellectualism (Harrison & Valdez, 2004, p. 193, p. 199). The systemic barriers that impede access to educational resources for intellectually curious Black youth like Dough Boy, while simultaneously promoting the success of Black athletes like Ricky, reveal a selective empowerment that aligns with white supremacist structures. This system favors visible, entertainment-based achievements over educational advancement for Black individuals, perpetuating a cycle of limited opportunities and reinforcing stereotypes. Despite his intellectualism, Dough Boy is unable to escape the cycle of poverty and violence that surrounds him, which challenges the idea that intelligence alone can lead to success. For himself, Dough Boy only sees the grim prospects of life in the 'hood, where metrics of irreverence, violence, and retribution define one's value and quality of life. However, through a process of deidentification, Dough Boy banks upon these same metrics in an effort to see his brother attain some hope of success. He understands the differences between them, noting that he was unlikely to prosper beyond the 'hood. This is explicit in the final scene when he laments the Ricky's death as a lost opportunity to escape the 'hood and build a future beyond it. While Dough Boy notes Ricky's potential for escape, despite the antipathetic judicial system and a news cycle obsessed with the foreign, Dough Boy sees himself to be negligible in every sense. I have to wonder if he gleans a sense of purpose—maybe his *only* sense of purpose—in being a brother, in watching out for Ricky, when he is not bouncing ideas and his own identity off of him in their more philosophical conversations.

Meanwhile, a combination of deidentification-individuation and identification-attachment shapes Tre's chosen or fictive fraternity with both Dough Boy and Ricky. Tre and Ricky are identified and are together most of the time. The pair are linked in their aspirations to thrive outside the 'hood. They seek to escape through post-secondary routes in professions afforded by degrees and campus-endorsed resources. When being interviewed by the college recruiter, Ricky is unprepared to choose a major, but then admits that he considers majoring in business, citing Tre as an influence. Tre and Ricky have a fictive fraternity as they demonstrate attachment to each other throughout the film, with Tre often looking out for Ricky and providing emotional support. They also identify with each other in terms of their shared experiences of growing up in the same neighborhood and facing similar challenges, although Tre is by far the more academically inclined and thus individuated from Ricky.

Tre's fictive kinship with Dough Boy, however, is structured much more by individuation. The film does not specify whether Tre stays in contact with Dough Boy during his frequent incarcerations, but Brenda acknowledges their fictive brotherhood when Dough Boy returns from his latest sentence. She asks Tre to talk to him: "Talk to him seriously, you hear? I am so sick and tired of him going in and out of there. Maybe some of what you got will rub off on him" (Singleton, 1991, 00:32:59). Tre affirms the relationship even more strongly after Dough Boy's final speech about his own sense of futility. Dough Boy concludes that he "ain't got no brother" given Ricky's death (01:45:00). Tre responds that he's "still got one brother left" (01:46:50). Reinforcing this kinship has two additional effects. First, this line reminds Dough Boy of the familial bond both he and Tre shared with Ricky, which is affirms a sense of community within their own 'hood. By emphasizing their bond as brothers, Tre encourages Dough Boy to find meaning and purpose in that connection, and to use it as a source of strength to move forward. Second, this line urges Dough Boy to persevere in his responsibility as a brother to another; it is an encouragement, in honour of Ricky's memory, not to take life for granted. Both these purposes speak to the recurring theme of siblingship a source of strength and underscore the importance of familial connection in the face of adversity. However, Dough Boy's death soon after this moment of mutual recognition is a tragic reflection of the harsh realities faced by the characters and a reminder of the precarity of

life in their environment. It conveys the brutal irony that even as familial bonds provide emotional support and a sense of purpose, they are often insufficient to shield against the systemic dangers surrounding them. Consequently, Dough Boy's death underscores the complex interplay of familial connection and the persistent threats that challenge its protective value.

Blood and fictive relationships within the 'hood highlight how repetition operates in this film. On the whole, characters enact performativity amidst an urban milieu shaped by white supremacist hegemony. Repetition is evident in the persistent cycles of violence, police brutality, and societal neglect that characterize daily life; these are the backdrop against which the characters navigate their existence. Kinship is produced in the African American 'hood as an effect of the hegemony's repetition; the awareness of marginalization can lead African Americans to a sense of shared identity, solidarity, and kinship in the face of systemic oppression. Tre, Ricky, and Dough Boy's sibling bonds are strengthened as they collectively navigate and resist the injustices perpetuated by the white supremacist system. These sibling bonds differentiate and disrupt the repetition through their unique qualities. Through their relationships, they inject a sense of humanity, compassion, and collective action into a landscape marked by nihilism and amorality. This contrast between the repetitive, bleak environment and the distinctive influence of siblingship underscores the film's exploration of how repetition operates within the context of the 'hood. This makes the loss of kin and the sense of belonging it provides even more tragic and painful.

Siblingship embodies the laterality that understands the humanity of its constituents while also acknowledging how verticality informs tessellated anti-Black forces of past, present, and future. Recurring and interconnected patterns of systemic oppression, discrimination, and anti-Black racism have persisted across different historical periods. These forces are a recurring pattern or tessellation in the fabric of society, impacting Black individuals and communities. While repetition guarantees that systemic anti-Blackness will be there, difference shows that humanity can adapt and adjust to that anti-Blackness in new ways, and kinship is one of the mechanisms through which we can adjust and adapt. The laterality of siblingship is a force of adaptation: it allows siblings to be aware of their

feelings and their own humanity, which allows them to gain a sense of self, solidarity, and survival. We see this in *Boyz* as the brothers support one another unconditionally. From the moment Tre arrives in the 'hood to live with Furious, he and the Boyz revel in one another's presence. Tre and Ricky grow to confide in and uplift one another in a shared ambition to leave the 'hood. Dough Boy never thinks twice about ensuring Ricky's safety. Tre consoles Dough Boy after Ricky's murder. Regardless of their differences, whether they are entertaining or antagonizing one another, they are unified in being shaped by the 'hood and in their understanding of how white supremacist hegemony codifies anti-Blackness, lays waste to their community, brutalizes them, and thereby incorrigibly arbitrates their humanity, rights, and lack thereof.

3.4.2 Images of the 'Hood

The tragedy of the Boyz lies in the fact that their siblingship, no matter how strong or wholesome, cannot render the characters impervious to the dismal cyclic violence and fatalities which characterize the 'hood. The characters are narrative agents of mobility and stasis that embody how neoliberalism reformulates subjectivity; they both reveal and reproach the Reaganite American Dream as a neoliberal nightmare. Despite their different responses to their environments—Dough Boy's apathy to the squalor around him, Ricky's avid yet uncertain prospects encouraged by those around him, Tre's more certain future—the adversarial milieu of the 'hood, rather than their own personalities and abilities, is the foremost determinant of survival. This landscape encompasses pervasive poverty, limited access to quality education and employment opportunities, systemic racism, and institutionalized violence. These conditions create a hostile environment where survival often depends on navigating through adversities of gang activity, police brutality, substance abuse, and an unremitting threat of harm. The lack of social infrastructure and support networks further exacerbates the challenges faced by people in the 'hood, making it difficult for them to break free from the cycle of poverty and violence that characterizes life therein. In this section, I explore some tragic aspects of kinship in the 'hood and how the characters' experiences relate to the Deleuzian concept of reterritorialization. The film suggests a prospect of positive reterritorialization in the face of the adversarial environment through siblingship, and the film itself

contributes to reterritorialization by shedding light on the challenges and systemic disparities that afflict the characters.

Boyz shows how the space of the 'hood is subject to forces of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization. "Territorialization" refers monopolization by individuals or groups through endowment or capital acquisition (p. 37, p. 41, p. 60, p. 209, p. 300, p. 303, p. 503). Territory may be corporeal or incorporeal and spans people, places, culture, society, policy, beliefs, and systems (p. 40, p. 327, p. 332). Acts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization are responses to territorialization (p. 327). Deterritorialization pertains to the significant transformation, separation and/or extension of territory from its origins (p. 52, p. 133, p. 134, p. 222, p. 345, p. 432, p. 453). Reterritorialization concerns restructuring what has been deterritorialized; it is the modelling and execution of new power (p. 5, p. 10, p. 53, p. 381, p. 384, p. 508, p. 509). Mass media has expedited deterritorialization and reterritorialization by summarily diffusing space through cinematic and communications technologies (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 81, p. 345; Massumi, 1992, p. 135). Propaganda also discursively reterritorializes audiences through dissemination and repetition of information. Reterritorialization may also apply to marginalized communities seeking to reclaim or redefine their territory in the face of oppressive systems of power or to the formation of new kinds of collective or individual identity through creative acts of resistance. However, the process of territorialization and reterritorialization is never complete, as new forms of resistance and deterritorialization are constantly emerging, necessitating ongoing processes of reterritorialization and the creation of new forms of territorialization.

Boyz identifies and criticizes capitalist forms of reterritorialization. In a scene that is the film's most overt analysis of socioeconomic racism, Furious, a mortgage broker, takes Tre and Ricky to a property site. He speaks to them and to a growing audience of locals, explaining gentrification: "It's what happens when the property value of a certain area is brought down… They bring the property value down, they can buy the land at a lower price, then they move all the people out, raise the property value and sell it at a profit." Gentrification is a form of reterritorialization as social institutions and structures seek to

impose order and control on a given space. Another form of reterritorialization that the film identifies is the presence of gangs and drug dealers. As these actors seek to impose their own forms of order and control on the community, the systemic barriers serve to reinforce the status quo—which a form of repetition—and limit the opportunities available to people. Both gentrification and gang presence impose order and attempt to control the ’hood as they perpetuate structures of inequality and marginalization.

The film also shows how forms of deterritorialization can intervene in the status quo. After explaining gentrification, Furious advocates for deterritorialization—a dismantling of entrenched norms and structures—to pave the way for innovative forms of creativity and expression. What the ’hood must do, he says, is to keep everything “Black-owned with Black money” just like other prosperous racial and ethnic minorities—“the Jews, the Italians, the Mexicans, and the Koreans”—have done. Similarly, Dough Boy’s pursuits in prison, as he reads and educates himself, enact resistance against a penal system deeply entrenched in systemic racism. This self-directed quest for knowledge subverts the repressive nature of incarceration, conveying a personal initiative in stark contrast to systemic failures to provide meaningful pathways for growth and rehabilitation. It illuminates a criminal justice system that perpetuates cycles of disenfranchisement and marginalization, underscoring the urgent need for a reimagined approach that genuinely fosters individual agency and transformative possibilities. When Dough Boy emerges from prison, he finds a sense of purpose in being an older brother. Ricky works hard at his athletics in order to support his partner, child, and perhaps his mother; he also finds joy in this pursuit. Tre works hard at his schoolwork alongside his equally studious girlfriend. Deterritorialization can be seen in the ways that people in the ’hood resist and challenge these systemic barriers, and in *Boyz,* these creative ways to navigate and subvert constraints often relate to kinship.

The way the neighborhood is discussed and represented in popular discourse also contributes to processes of reterritorialization and deterritorialization. For example, media portrayals of the ’hood as a violent and hopeless place can reinforce negative stereotypes and stigmatize the community, while alternative representations that emphasize the resilience and creativity of people in the ’hood can challenge these

stereotypes and open up new possibilities for imagining the space. Furious critiques these kinds of mass media representations when he astutely points out that while Black people are hyper-visible consumers of crack, they are not its proprietors. An elderly resident responds to Furious's condemnation of gentrification by pointing at local youth and saying, "Ain't nobody from outside bringin' down the property values, it's these folks shootin' each other and sellin' that crack and shit!" (Singleton, 1991, 01:05:01).

Furious responds:

> Well, how you think the crack rock gets into the country? We don't own any planes. We don't own no ships. We are not the people who are flyin' and floatin' that shit in here. I know every time you turn on the TV that's what you see: Black people, selling the rock, pushing the rock, pushing the rock. Yeah, I know. But that wasn't a problem as long as it was here; [that] wasn't a problem until it was in Iowa and it showed up on Wall Street where there are hardly any Black people. Now, if you want to talk about uh, guns, why is that there is a gun shop on almost every corner in this community? …Tell you why, for the same reason that there's a liquor store on almost every corner in the Black community. Why? They want us to kill ourselves. You go out to Beverly Hills, you don't see that shit. But they want us to kill ourselves. Yeah, the best way you can destroy a people, [is] you take away their ability to reproduce themselves. Who is it that dyin' out here on these streets every night? Y'all (Singleton, 1991, 01:05:13).

What marginal control Black people have over the domestic supply of cocaine is nullified by the overarching production, refinement, and international shipping of narcotics provisioned by anti-Black colonial distribution networks offscreen (Nadell, 1995, p. 452). Yet this reality, Furious says, is occluded by propaganda "every time you turn on the TV" that continues to ascribe penchants for criminality and substance retail and abuse to Black people. This propaganda is akin to and derived from historical caricatures of Black people and effectively shifts the onus from the hegemonic power structures which target

marginalized communities (p. 452). Furthermore, the ascription of criminality to Black people legitimates the practice of consigning their welfare—reform, recovery, education, etc.—to penal systems (Chan, 1998, p. 37). Furious' insight underscores the need for a more nuanced and comprehensive portrayal of American communities in the media—including American films—that takes into account the complexities of their experiences and challenges beyond stereotypes, as *Boyz* itself does.

Moreover, Furious' speech, in which he deidentifies with the systems of power and urges his listeners to do the same, is part of a larger tendency to deidentify with systems of power that, in turn, is connected to the discussion of siblingship within the film. While kinship—and specifically siblingship—can operate through *individuation*, the neoliberalism that Furious criticizes idealizes the *individual.* This contrast highlights how the neoliberal context of the film contributes to the ascription of criminality to Black people by promoting a culture of individualism and competition, which in turn leads to the stigmatization and marginalization of those who are deemed "unproductive" or "undesirable" in society, such as people with addictions. The idealized neoliberal individual is a lone figure whose pride and freedom necessitate the denigration of collectives that are deemed expendable (Nadell, 1995, p. 451). However, neoliberalism redefines and subsequently dehumanizes individuals themselves as elements of an economy whose purpose is to produce capital for only *some* individuals. This process of dehumanization contrasts with the individuation that allows Dough Boy to recognize his differences from Ricky and Tre without failing to support them. Dehumanization typically entails reducing others to stereotypes and often perpetuating harmful biases. Conversely, individuation is a process by which individuals develop a sense of their unique identities and agency within sibling relationships or a broader social context.

The process of individuation requires critical thinking insofar as it involves a deep and introspective examination of one's own values, beliefs, and aspirations, as well as an understanding of the structures and systems that shape one's existence. Critical thinking enables individuals to question and challenge prevailing norms, inequities, and power imbalances and to better advocate for their own welfare and that of their communities, leading to a more just and equitable society. Therefore, critical thinking is integral to the

process of individuation because it empowers individuals to navigate and transform their sociocultural contexts in ways that align with their values and aspirations, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and humane society. We see this in *Boyz* in Furious's speech; he is not being complacent but is analyzing the big picture. The boyz—Tre, Ricky, and Dough Boy—demonstrate critical thinking throughout as each character grapples with the socioeconomic challenges and systemic injustices he faces in the 'hood, showcasing their individuality and insight. Tre questions the patterns of territorialization and reterritorialization at work in the 'hood. He regularly discusses socioeconomic conditions with his father; for example, they talk about gentrification, military service, and economic empowerment on a fishing trip (Singleton, 1991, 00:25:01) and at home (00:38:31). These dialogues encourage Tre to analyze his environment critically and equip him to seek solutions beyond the immediate challenges of the 'hood. His inclination towards education and a life beyond the limitations of the 'hood is influenced by the guidance and values Furious instills in him; by emphasizing the importance of responsibility, education, and self-awareness, his father serves as a moral compass and provides Tre with the tools of critical thinking and the courage to envision a future that diverges from the paths proffered to young men in the 'hood. Ricky is characterized by his ambition to become a professional football player despite the challenges of local violence and teen parenthood; his aspirations and vulnerabilities humanize him and challenge stereotypes about young Black men in the 'hood. And while initially appearing as a stereotypical gang member, Dough Boy's critical thinking emerges as he navigates the consequences of his choices and associations. He takes a critical perspective on violence and—through his support for both Ricky and Tre—on the importance of family and education. He represents the complex nature of individuals who may be drawn into criminality due to circumstances beyond their control.

Despite its tragedy, *Boyz* provides analysis and a plan for resistance through critical thinking. It shows that resistance must be characterized by territoriality in order to be successful. Even when a territory is reclaimed through deterritorialization and subsequently redefined through reterritorialization, it must be actively acquired and repurposed, even though this acquisition may be accompanied by resistance from individuals or groups who are striving to assert their claim to the same territory. This is

why Furious asserts the need for Black ownership and capital—the retention of assets and resources of and by Black people. His assertion resonates with the FBI's intervention in and the justice system's drain on the assets of Black nationalist efforts by leaders like Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers (Nadell, 1995, p. 452). On a more personal level, Dough Boy's ongoing support of his brother shows that he understands his own positionality as one that traverses both the vertical plane of white supremacist hegemony and the horizontal plane of siblingship. He is given a raw deal and he makes do with the cards he is dealt, refusing to allow Ricky's position of relative privilege—at least in relation to their mother—to undermine his support of his brother. Dough Boy's decision to seek vengeance for Ricky's death can be understood as a manifestation of his resistance against the systemic forces that shape their lives. While seemingly reinforcing the cycle of violence within the 'hood, it symbolizes Dough Boy's rejection of the passive victimhood imposed by white supremacist hegemony and the territorialization of their community. By taking action, Dough Boy asserts both the depth of his commitment to his brother and a form of agency within the constraints of a system that frequently leaves individuals in marginalized communities with limited avenues for justice or expression of grief. His pursuit of vengeance, therefore, is not merely an act of personal retribution but a statement against the external forces that continuously deterritorialize their lives and reterritorialize their environment with violence and oppression. He cannot save Ricky, but it is an act of resistance within the processes of territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization of the 'hood.

3.5 Straight Outta Siblingship

As exemplars of New Black Realism, *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* represent early 1990s capitalism in America as an assemblage. Looking at capitalism as an assemblage reveals its pervasive influence, extending beyond material transactions to colonize the very essence of life and culture. Assemblages are fluid, flexible, and comprised of diverse components and (Deleuze, 1989, p. 82). They are characterized by their capacity for deterritorialization—moving away from a given territory or context—and reterritorialization—establishing in a new territory or context—which reflects their inherent openness and potential for transformation (p. 83). *New Jack City* presents an

assemblage where the drug trade acts as a microcosm of hyper-capitalist exploitation that transforms relationships and communities into commodified networks driven by power and profit. In contrast, *Boyz N the Hood* focuses on the socioeconomic conditions that underpin everyday life in the 'hood, portraying an assemblage of systemic neglect, racial injustice, and the struggle for personal agency. Together, they construct neoliberal capitalism as an assemblage of decentralized connections capable of interminable expansion that thrives on the very disparities it engenders. By nature, this assemblage exploits change and instability, molding individual behaviors to prioritize self-regulation and consumerism, transforming expressions of kinship into marketable commodities, commercializing culture, and altering both urban and natural environments for profit. This focus on the manifold effects of capitalism—embedded within narratives of race, class, and community struggle—exemplifies a central tenet of New Black Realism as it underscores systemic anti-Blackness and portrays the resolve of individuals who contend against it.

The films' portrayals of siblingship not only depict personal bonds but also serve as windows onto broader societal and economic forces and illustrate how capitalism affects African American familial and communal ties. Within the neoliberal context of the early 1990s, the assemblage of siblingship includes dynamics of loyalty, rivalry, and support against a milieu of institutionalized adversities. The endurance of siblingship is shown as a source of support and site of conflict amidst systemic anti-Black disparities. On one hand, siblingship proves foundational to identity and community. Siblings—blood and chosen—underscore the importance of solidarity, loyalty, and mutual support as vital components in the struggle against external pressures. The perpetuity of these sibling relationships, even when tested by the harshest realities of life within marginalized communities, symbolizes a continuous thread of hope and resistance, reinforcing the ties that bind African American communities together in the face of adversity. On the other hand, in both films, siblingship ultimately becomes less enacted and more rhetorical in the wake of deidentification and individuation. *New Jack City* is nihilistic in this sense as the CMB dissolves amidst interpersonal betrayals and fatalities; the 'hood snares people into a cycle of glamor and greed, which undermines their humanity as they come to distrust or objectify others. In contrast, *Boyz N the Hood* is tragic, as siblingship becomes

mainly emblematic. Ricky and Tre accept that they must leave their brothers in the ’hood just as Dough Boy is resigned to remaining there. In the end, Ricky never truly leaves, as he is murdered; Tre’s decision not to aid Dough Boy’s vengeance marks his own discursive departure. Overall, in *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood*, while siblingship evokes shared cultural experiences and values, it does not flourish, which demonstrates the complexities of familial and community relationships in the face of systemic oppression and violence. Nonetheless, these and other New Black Realist films are valuable for bringing to life the dialectic between resistance and adaptation, oppression and agency, within the capitalist assemblage. They offer a nuanced exploration of what challenges and complexities African American communities faced when navigating the landscapes of neoliberal capitalism.

4. CONCLUSION

I began this dissertation by asking, first, how film immerses us in different realities and what needs these realities might fulfill. Deleuze's theories of cinema and fabulation explain that film provides a captivating visual and emotional experience that enables audiences to temporarily escape into alternate realities, offering a respite from the challenges and limitations of their own lives. Through compelling storytelling and immersive audiovisuals, it allows viewers to vicariously explore more appealing or exciting worlds, providing a form of entertainment and emotional catharsis. Additionally, movies may serve as models for actual activism by showcasing narratives of empowerment, resistance, and collective agency. They may convey the idea that one may envision and strive for a more just society.

I also asked what the specific needs of African American communities and individuals might be in these respects. Black people may seek film narratives that reflect their diverse experiences and amplify their voices, addressing the need for authentic and inclusive representation, and I have discussed how two popular Black genres—Blaxploitation and New Black Realism—do so. These stories may inspire hope, resilience, and social change in addition to affirming shared experiences of anti-Black injustices—which thereafter function as sources of empowerment and models to tackle institutionalized violence and pursue social justice.

In order to understand the films' sociopolitical contexts and narratives, I have applied Deleuzian concepts of assemblages, machinic enslavement and war machines, repetition and difference, territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization. The application of Deleuze's theories, though fruitful, may also have constrained the exploration of other theoretical frameworks that could provide different or complementary understandings of these films. However, the Deleuzian concepts used in this study could be effectively applied to analyze other genres of African American film and could offer insights into the mechanisms there of identification and resonance in relation to Black positionality and kinship. For example, examining how these concepts

play out in other African American or Black diasporic cinemas may reveal new layers of meaning and show the versatility of Deleuzian analysis in film studies.

Finally, I have argued for the importance of siblingship—a *lateral* form of kinship—in relation to Blackness in these genres. Blaxploitation reclaims narratives and subverts oppressive norms as characters—often siblings or closely connected kin—embody lived, historical African American struggles and triumphs. Moreover, the fabulative nature of Blaxploitation allows for the creation of new realities and possibilities, coalescing fiction and lived experience. Fabulation has allowed me to gain deeper insights into how these cinematic narratives not only reflected but actively shaped the social meanings of African American siblingship, making it a powerful force in both cinematic and real-world contexts. New Black Realism, unlike Blaxploitation, emphasizes the subtleties and nuances of everyday life, which enables a deeper exploration of the differences within kinships. Through repetition, New Black Realism conveys recurring themes and experiences that shape the African American familial and communal landscape; however, siblingship—whether through fictive or consanguineous kinship—has the potential to disrupt this repetition and transform both cinematic and lived narratives. Its fluidity and adaptability can deterritorialize or challenge existing power structures and social norms. It also has a role in creating unique narratives that differentiate the African American experience from colonial, hegemonic mainstreams. Reterritorialization is inherent in the experiences of Black siblingship, as it can simultaneously reclaim and redefine territory or states—particularly, states of being—in the face of systemic oppression. Throughout, I have argued that Black siblingship serves as a site of resistance, identity formation, and narrative reclamation within the broader context of Black experiences and struggles, making it an essential and progressive aspect of the African American sociopolitical landscape.

This research could—and will—be extended in multiple ways. While this dissertation offers insights into the sociopolitical implications of Black cinematic narratives, its focus on Blaxploitation and New Black Realism does not capture the entire spectrum of African American film genres. Further research will explore how the themes identified in Blaxploitation and New Black Realism are treated in postmodern films of the early

2000s, and other genres, such as recent horror film, could also be analyzed. Comparative studies with global Black cinemas could also illuminate cross-cultural parallels and distinctions in narrative strategies and their impacts.

The overall aim of my research is to augment an understanding of African American cinematic expression and its role in societal change. Exploring how films within Blaxploitation and New Black Realism serve as mediums for cultural resistance and identity formation, this dissertation underscores the importance of cinematic narrative strategies in shaping perceptions and actions concerning issues respective to peoples of marginalized positionalities. It conveys the powerful role of film in both reflecting and influencing the lived experiences of African American communities.

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