Melvin Donalson

Inside Men

Black Masculinity in the Films of Spike Lee and John Singleton

The debates about the images of black men in American cinema have a lengthy and controversial history, as issues of race and class complicate the already problematic concept of masculinity. The contradictory bind often associated with black men in America connects historical, economic, political, and psychological dynamics that have imposed themselves from the seventeenth century to the present. Social scientists Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson capsulize that dilemma as black men having been rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated. Black men learned long ago that the classic American virtues of thrift, perseverance, and hard work did not give the same tangible rewards that accrued to whites. Yet African-American men have defined manhood in terms familiar to white men. . . . Unlike white men, however, black have not had consistent access to the same means to fulfill their dreams of masculinity and success.1

The ability to negotiate the American capitalistic patriarchy is indeed challenging for many men across racial lines, but Majors and Billson underscore formidable barriers that exist for African American males. Some black males indeed slip the shackles of this stratification, assuming individual success in spite of the obstacles. However, the truth is that the majority of African American males are bombarded and wounded by daily assaults that result in a noticeably uneven rate of individual and collective success.
American cinema has played an ongoing role in distorting and oversimplifying the experiences and participation of African American men within American society. As film scholar Ed Guerrero observes, “Missing from Hollywood’s flat, binary view of Black manhood is the cultural, political, intellectual complexity and humanity of Black men. . . . Consequently there’s much work to be done on an expanded, heterogeneous range of complex portrayals of Black males that transcends the misshapen characters caught within Hollywood’s formulaic narratives and habitual strategies for representing Blackness.”

Over the decades, African American male directors have responded to those “formulaic narratives,” utilizing their films to comment upon and explore extensively numerous threatening issues and hurdles faced by African American men. With a number of black independent filmmakers between 1918 and the late 1940s and with the breakthrough Hollywood appearance of black male directors in the late 1960s to early 1970s, black masculinity and black manhood have been recurring themes and plot points in numerous films. The early efforts of Gordon Parks (The Learning Tree [1969], Shaft [1971]), Melvin Van Peebles (Watermelon Man [1970], Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song [1971]), Ossie Davis (Cotton Comes to Harlem [1970], Gordon’s War [1973]), and Sidney Poitier (Buck and the Preacher [1969], A Warm December [1973]) resonate the importance of screen representations of black men as they respond to the political, economic, and social dynamics of the post–civil rights era. As the blaxploitation era of Superfly (1972), Trouble Man (1972), Willie Dynamite (1973), and Three the Hard Way (1974) came to an end, leaving a legacy of black male characters presented as supercool, supersexual, and superblack, by the mid-1970s Michael Schultz began his noteworthy career with a sensitive, realistic examination of young black males in the urban drama, Cooley High (1975).

However, with the emergence of Spike Lee in the 1980s and the meteoric rise of John Singleton in the 1990s, the exploration and construction of black male images earmark the works of these two directors. Individually, the directors display their own visual expressions: Lee an independent, quirky, and elliptical style and Singleton, a mainstream, slick, and linear narrative style. Collectively, Lee and Singleton create a cinema of black masculinity that disturbs, transforms, and occasionally sustains conventional black male images. The limitations of space in this essay preempts an exhaustive analysis of both filmmakers, but a sampling of four films across the decades by each director reveals the range and nature of their depictions of black masculinity.

Coming out of the New York University film school, Spike Lee completed seventeen films between 1986 and 2011. In a visual signature identified by
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idiosyncratic camera techniques as well as story lines exposing the many levels of racism in the United States, Lee focused on the black male’s political challenges, economic obstacles, and sexuality. These screen delineations of black men of various ages are as groundbreaking as they were controversial. For a number of critics, Lee often pursued the elevation of black male characters at the expense of narrow depictions of black women characters. Despite the emphasis on female protagonists Nola Darling in *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), Girl 6 in *Girl 6* (1996), and Troy in *Crooklyn* (1994), black male characters dominate Lee’s cinematic landscape with more complexity and self-actualization. With the films *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Malcolm X* (1992), *Clockers* (1995), *He Got Game* (1998), and *Bamboozled* (2000), the director delivered black male protagonists whose circumstances, professions, and relationships bring them into a reflection upon their personal perspectives on manhood. As critics Kirkham and Thumin suggest in their assessment, “Being a man implies acceding to (symbolic) patriarchal power but, precisely because this is a symbolic structure, it cannot take account of the contingencies of actual experience which may appear to deny this possibility.” The actual experiences for black men, Lee contends in his films, result from the intersection of race and economics, usurping black men’s access into the power structure. Cognizant of the historical cinematic images of black masculinity that consistently assert what critic Charlene Regester calls “despicable portrayals” of “drawling speech, slow and lazy movements as well as scatter-brained and shiftless demeanour,” Lee commits to rendering a complexity absent from earlier Hollywood depictions. In addition to those films mentioned above, four specific films—*Mo’ Better Blues* (1990), *Get on the Bus* (1996), *She Hate Me* (2004), and *Inside Man* (2006)—place the crisis of masculinity at the forefront of the films’ story lines, forcing viewers to encounter the collision of gender notions and race relations.

The director’s fourth feature, *Mo’ Better Blues*, contains gender contours that were perhaps lost on the popular audience at the time of its release. With a protagonist named Bleek and a title referencing the black cultural musical form of the blues, the tone of the film is established within the opening sequence: a busy Brooklyn street and the young black protagonist forced to practice his trumpet rather than cavorting outside with the neighborhood kids. As the film jumps forward to the adult Bleek (Denzel Washington), he still lives for his music, now both his purpose and survival tool. For Bleek, manhood is inextricably linked to his identity as a jazz musician. In that identity he possesses control and creativity. In his solipsistic existence, Bleek refuses to surrender his manhood—that is, his music—to any relationship that threatens that music. With his manager-friend, Giant
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(Spike Lee), and his with fellow band members, their relationships as heterosexual men are all connected to the world of Bleek’s music, and even when arguing, the world of men edifies his music and creativity. Conversely, the intimate relationships with two women—Indigo (Joie Lee) and Clarke (Cynda Williams)—seek to destroy the sanctity of Bleek’s music and his manhood. By vying to be the primary love in Bleek’s life, each woman wants him to deny his commitment to his music. When Clarke criticizes Bleek for refusing to choose between the two women, she urges him to “Make up your mind. Be a man. Don’t be wishy-washy on me.” Bleek assures her that “I know what I want. My music! Everything else is secondary.”

Limiting his connection to both women as just a physical escape, Bleek excludes emotions, relying on the popular male-player attitude to frame his interaction with the women. His assumed indifference to either his or their emotional needs allows him to step outside of expectations of a romantic alliance, keeping his fidelity to his music. In the latter section of the film, Bleek maintains the relationship borders when he has a man-to-man chat with Shadow (Wesley Snipes), a fellow band member who strategizes his way into Clarke’s affections. Establishing clarity regarding territorial rights to Clarke, Bleek tells Shadow, “Y’know, the last time I looked on Clarke’s

In *Mo’ Better Blues*, Denzel Washington plays a jazz musician named Bleek, whose very name portends the torments that surround him in his quests for success, respect, and love.

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naked body, I didn’t see my name, Bleek, on her. Not on her butt, her legs, her breast, nowhere. Nobody owns nobody.” By acknowledging, or conceding, his rights to Clarke’s body, Bleek dismisses the male privilege inherent in intimate relationships within the heterosexual patriarchal system: ownership of the woman’s body. However, this concession is more for display, as later after hearing of the sexual liaison between Clarke and Shadow, Bleek initiates a physical fight with Shadow. The polysemic battle underscores Bleek’s inner conflict regarding his music and his women. He openly displays his passion for his music but assumes a cold indifference toward the women, a position ultimately revealed as more fragile than he previously admits.

Another aspect to Bleek’s manhood—the loyalty to his close male friend, Giant—sinks the musician into the nadir of his life. Defending Giant in an alley brawl, Bleek suffers a beating himself: his lips, gums, and teeth are damaged beyond repair. Unable to play and perform at his previous level, Bleek runs to Indigo for salvation and purpose. He steps into the conforming mode of manhood, becoming a husband and then a father in succeeding sequences. The very life and relationship that Bleek avoided because it threatened his version of masculinity as linked to his music now functions as the only way to save him as a man. With this ending, the director promotes the dimensions and expectations of the middle-class life as the proper role for black men.

Whether intentional or not, Mo’ Better Blues plays as a celebration of the customary relationships between men and women, and with the ethnic accent, the message for black men appears emphatic. In order to be fulfilled, black men should pursue and sustain the conventional paradigm of the heterosexual male-female relationship, with marriage and fatherhood as the crowning results. However, in a notable contrast, Get on the Bus finds the director considering a variety of concerns regarding black masculine expressions. Using the factual 1995 Million Man March in Washington, D.C., as the framing device for the story, the film follows twenty fictional black male characters who take a chartered bus from Los Angeles across the country to the Capitol.

The opening film credits roll over the image of a black man in chains, evoking the weight of slavery upon the development of black masculinity in an exploitative system. This image becomes juxtaposed with the opening segment as a black father, Evan Thomas (Thomas Jefferson Byrd), is literally chained to his adolescent son, Junior (De’Aundre Bonds), due to a court order. Forcing his reluctant son to make the journey to Washington, this pair operates as a crucial symbol of generational clashing and father-son dynamics. However, other characters in this ensemble piece contribute

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to the heated discourse about the variety of shapes of contemporary black manhood, among them Jeremiah (Ossie Davis), the elder with wisdom and compassion; George (Charles S. Dutton), the conscientious bus driver; Flip (Andre Braugher), the arrogant, homophobic actor; Kyle (Isaiah Washington), the gay Republican; Randall (Harry Lennix), the educated former lover to Kyle; Gary (Roger Guenveur Smith), the biracial Los Angeles police officer; Jamal (Gabriel Casseus), a former gang member turned Muslim; Jay (Bernie Mac), a small business man; and Xavier (Hill Harper), a university film student. These characters, across class and political lines, underscore the varied perspectives, lifestyles, and desires among black men. In an interview the director emphasized this objective: “The drama would come from what happens to this unique mix of individuals, this diversity of men who . . . represent African-Americans at this time. . . . [A] lot of people think we’re this monolithic group, but we chose to show this isn’t the case.”

Of the many significant issues raised within the film, the topic of homophobia receives an extended treatment by the director. Flip, a self-proclaimed ladies’ man, delivers his incessant antigay statements, and at first the men collectively share a detachment from the openly gay Randall and Kyle. Kyle’s patience expires as he physically confronts Flip, beating the tough-talking heterosexual. The beating demonstrates that some gay men are indeed men by the time-honored standard of physical prowess and, at the same time, implies the inevitable destruction of intolerance and bigotry. The fight also underscores the “double bind” for Randall and Kyle, who as black men are “discriminated against due to their race and their sexual orientation.”

Another salient message delivered in the film occurs when the bus finally reaches Washington, D.C., and senior citizen Jeremiah dies of a heart attack. Jeremiah’s death and his handwritten prayer that George later reads aloud crystallize the importance of the gathering of one million black men. Walking the aisle of the bus, George, prior to finding Jeremiah’s prayer, states to everyone: “The real million man march won’t start ’til we black men take charge of our own lives and start dealing with crime, drugs, guns, and gangs. And children having children, and children killing children all across this country. So if . . . y’all are ready to quit your apathetic and unsympathetic ways as I am . . . if you’re ready to stop being the boys that started to Washington on this bus and be the men that our wives and our mothers and our children are waiting for back home and . . . stand up against all the evils lined up against the black man back home. . . . If you’re ready to do that . . . , then we got work to do. We got a lot of work to do!” In George’s emotional plea for committed activism, the attitude of self-determination

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reflects upon the men’s faces. Then in the final scene as the men gather at the Lincoln Memorial, they deliver Jeremiah’s prayer, leaving behind at the site the chains that shackled Evan and Junior, father and son, there at the feet of Lincoln.

Get on the Bus displays Lee’s most penetrating exploration of black manhood, connecting the issues of male responsibility, leadership, and sexual orientation to the larger event of the Million Man March. Balancing its romantic perspectives about Africa with the characters’ personal stories about urban violence, economic struggles, ambitions and disappointments, and parenting and fatherhood, the film reflects a serious and skilled handling of dramatic materials. Following that accomplished representation, eight years later Lee helms a regressive presentation of black masculinity in the convoluted film She Hate Me.

She Hate Me juggles numerous topics but fails to merge those areas into a unified film. Ambitious to a fault, the “movie covers sexual politics, whistle-blowers, corporate corruption, race, the scourge of AIDS and its accompanying politics, family responsibilities, The Godfather and Watergate.” As with Mo’ Better Blues, the protagonist bears a symbolic name, John “Jack” Armstrong, that links him to black culture and notions of masculinity. “John” stirs up both the mythical John Henry, a strong black laborer who competes with the machinery of the system and the African American folktale hero John, who, like Brer Rabbit, manages to survive and triumph over insurmountable challenges.

The film’s protagonist, at age thirty-one, is a vice president of a pharmaceutical company that has been developing a drug to cure AIDS. Smart, sexy, single, and affluent, John (Anthony Mackie) is also a black man with ethics; consequently, he phones the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) following the suicide of the company’s leading scientist, who leaves a video journal detailing corruption and illegal practices by corporation executive Leland Powell (Woody Harrelson). Losing his job, John becomes blacklisted at other companies and endures the lock on his assets and bank accounts by the SEC. With John facing the inversion of his career and life, his situation is likened to whistle-blower Frank Wills, who exposed the Watergate break-in.

Unfortunately, after constructing such a noble protagonist, the director introduces a subplot involving John’s ex-fiancée, Fatima (Kerry Washington), who is a lesbian or perhaps bisexual. Hearing of John’s financial woes, Fatima and her partner, Alex (Dania Ramirez), propose a deal: to have John impregnate the two of them for $5,000 each with no legal responsibilities to their children. John, needing the money, consents, which sparks Fatima’s entrepreneurial spirit to arrange contractual couplings between John and
her other lesbian friends wanting children, paying $10,000 per woman, with Fatima taking a 10 percent finder’s fee.

With the insertion of this story line, Lee moves John from a heroic black male figure to a contemporary version of an old black male stereotype. Similar to the objectionable practices that John disdains in corporate America, he displays his own disreputable behavior to gain quick profit for sexual accommodations. Lee’s political and moral messages evaporate against the simmering sexual and gender stereotypes precluding the character development in the film’s opening act. Similar to the problematic message that Melvin Van Peebles extolled in Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song, Lee amplifies the myth of the sexually proficient and phallically gifted black male who satisfies all women, including lesbians in this film.

During John’s meeting with the first five women, Lee presents a scene with contradictory messages. Before giving their money, the women request that John stand nude and display his body to them. Here, the traditional cinematic male gaze at the female body is supplanted by the female gaze at the male body, as John is required to complete a 360-degree spin for their pleasure. As John turns, the shadowed interior prevents a view of his penis, but the power of the scene disturbs the standard ogling of the nude woman. However, the potency of that very scene crumbles under the weight of black sexual stereotypes. As John moves, the reluctant white woman in the group views his groin area and shouts “Sold!” as she quickly writes a check. This line and action from the white lesbian confirms John’s large penis, which promises his superior sexual skills. As John completes his turn, the low-angle camera peels through his opened legs as the lines of his inner limbs frame a black lesbian with blond hair. From that angle, the black woman’s head appears locked within his groin, suggesting that she is the most sexualized of all the women there. In this one scene, Lee deconstructs the legitimacy of male voyeurism but at the same time preserves the sexual myths about the black man and the black woman.

Augmenting John’s hypersexuality and the blurring of lesbian sexuality, a lengthy sequence shows John’s intimacy with the women. With the first five women, who are so-called lipstick lesbians in their mainstream feminine features, makeup, hairstyles, and body types, John demonstrates his ability to have intercourse with five women in one night. Despite their lesbian orientation, the women all appear to experience a rapturous coupling with John, as the director edits their orgasmic cries in a montage of sexual satisfaction. Showing John coupling with black, biracial, Asian, and white women in a sequence of successive shots returns to an imposed male gaze as the black male stud gives extreme pleasure to all the women.
Fortunately, two years later with *Inside Man*, Lee regained his bearings, presenting a more defined black male protagonist in the director’s most commercial film in regard to the visual style, genre elements, and story line. The protagonist, Detective Keith Frazier (Denzel Washington), is a hostage negotiator with the New York City Police Department, and in that position and in the glimpses of his personal life, Frazier emerges as a black man of authority, confidence, vulnerability, and sensuality. Teamed with his black partner Detective Bill Mitchell (Chiwitel Ejiofor), the partnership becomes noteworthy, considering that two black male characters rarely share the lead except in an all-black cast film marketed as a comedy. However, in this production that includes characters representing an array of racial and ethnic groups, the targeted mainstream audience observes black male characters operating in a professional and supportive manner in the story beyond the limited roles of comic relief, sidekick, buddy to the white star, homicidal killer, or drug dealer.

Responding to a foiled bank robbery by several masked robbers, who are led by the icy Dalton Russell (Clive Owen), and facing the threat to kill fifty hostages, Frazier falls into the expected call-and-response between perpetrator and negotiator. Eventually Frazier, perceptive and cunning, realizes that the situation, with the unrealistic demands by Russell and his group, strikes an inauthentic note. Frazier’s suspicions increase when a mysterious businesswoman, Madeleine White (Jodie Foster), uses her powerful connections with political leaders to gain access into the bank for a private conversation with Russell. Frazier and the audience eventually discover the link between Russell, the bank’s philanthropic owner Arthur Case (Christopher Plummer), the Jewish Holocaust, and the Nazi looting of Jewish victims.

Frazier, however, deduces his evidence without being a larger-than-life character. As one critic remarks, "Frazier . . . is not the superstar cop you might be expecting. He is a veteran detective second grade with the slightest hint of a paunch who got the assignment only because the department’s top guy was on vacation." In addition, Frazier’s professional reputation faces censure because suspicion of stolen money is an active case looming over him. Compounding the work pressures, he struggles with proposing to his live-in lover, Sylvia (Cassandra Freeman) while tolerating her brother sharing their apartment. Frazier manages the stress both on and off the job, but his commitment to being the best detective possible motivates his actions. He resonates as a man of virtue and compassion without being infallible. He shows street smarts, but he is not from the hood. He displays confidence with white supervisors and elite business types, but he refuses to genuflect to power. In one sequence, Frazier rejects backing down to
prominent white power brokers, including the city mayor, despite a promotion and job security given to him. Frazier knows how to navigate the system but not at the cost of his moral perspectives and professional duties.

Just as important, Frazier embraces his ethnicity as illustrated through his shifting language with other black characters, but he doesn’t wear his race as a weapon of intimidation or an emblem of entitlement. In many ways, Frazier slips out of the expected protagonist for such an action-suspense genre piece, showing dimensions that suggest a fuller characterization than traditionally fills such films and modeling a black masculinity that transforms previous cinematic stereotypes.

When juxtaposed with Bleek Gilliam (Mo’ Better Blues) and John Armstrong (She Hate Me), Keith Frazier emanates as a balanced character displaying attributes usually scarce in black male images. Frazier appears to be the kind of man who would have traveled to Washington, D.C., for the Million Man March and carried home the convictions that George urged near the end of Get on the Bus. With Inside Man, director Spike Lee plays off of several meanings in the title to render a black male protagonist who possesses an interior self-esteem, ambition, and mental toughness that allows him to mediate the exterior challenges in his professional life.

Following the success of Inside Man, Lee journeyed into black masculinity in a wartime setting with the World War II drama Miracle at St. Anna (2008). The feature excels in its battle scenes, but with a supernatural element imposed, the uneven film reduces the courageous exploits of the black soldiers to a fuzzy and elusive message. After that film, Lee most recently returned to producing and directing various television projects, with critical attention given to his documentaries, including When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006) and If God Is Willing and da Creek Don’t Rise (2010).

With a comparable cinematic passion to Spike Lee, John Singleton has been productive as a filmmaker, directing nine feature films for the big screen between 1991 and 2011. Unlike Lee, Singleton grew up on the West Coast, raised in Los Angeles where he studied filmmaking at the University of Southern California. He won internships while still in school and eventually landed a position at Columbia Pictures, where he was able to get his screenplay for Boyz N the Hood (1991) to studio executive Frank Price. In juxtaposing Lee and Singleton, who completed their first films only five years apart, rushing to generalizations and psychoanalyzing their backgrounds would be problematic at best. However, Lee, born in 1957 during the civil rights era, delivered his first feature when he was twenty-nine years old, and Singleton, born in 1968 and having grown up during the hip-hop era beginning in the late 1970s, completed his first feature at...
twenty-three years of age. Lee’s New York University environment fostered a more independent cinematic style, while Singleton’s University of Southern California environment allowed him to enter more mainstream sensibilities through his network television and Hollywood studio internships. The cultivation of their stylistic tastes and the targeting of their respective audiences informed the manner in which each director explored black masculinity.

Intent upon showing a younger generation of male characters, Singleton often frames his stories in genres that accentuate the urban landscape as the hostile territory where black males, in particular, negotiate personal growth. His films provide perspectives on the attitudes of an early hip-hop generation, those young people who, according to cultural critic Bakari Kitwana, were born between 1965 and 1984. For Kitwana, black males of that generation have developed, due to numerous socializing factors, some general attitudes that shape their definitions of manhood: “black male group loyalty” and bonding, a “lack of interest in or understanding of feminism,” “the objectification of women,” an “intense focus on materialism,” sustaining sexist attitudes, and a “disregard” for “the dark side of their heroes.”

These attributes prompt a particular ethos that results in a hypermasculinity (often read as violence), sexism (often leaning toward misogyny), and a fixation on present creature pleasures at the expense of future goals (often read as living for the moment). Of his films rendered in the contemporary setting, Singleton configures young black manhood around this ethos while highlighting the environmental influences shaping that worldview.

With a collection of films that have been mainstream hits and disappointments, Singleton has consistently scrutinized male behavior in films such as *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Higher Learning* (1999), *Shaft* (2000), and *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003). In those films, Singleton showed the formidable pressures that confront men and the ways, both successfully and unsuccessfully, that these men rally to deal with those forces. Despite the racial identity of his characters, Singleton’s movie masculinity conforms a “toughness” that author James L. Neibaur describes distinctly: “Tough guys are men who don’t back down, no matter how intimidating the circumstances may be. They are omnipotent, all-powerful. They are winners in a world of losers.”


With the much-celebrated *Boyz N the Hood*, Singleton earned critical praise, box office success, and the inevitable comparisons to Spike Lee. For example, critic Janet Maslin wraps her comparison within an assessment...
of the film: “Boy ’n the Hood, John Singleton’s terrifically confident first feature, places Mr. Singleton on a footing with Spike Lee as a chronicler of the frustrations faced by young black men growing up in urban settings. . . . Unlike Mr. Lee’s New York stories, which give their neighborhoods the finiteness and theatricality of stage sets, Mr. Singleton examines a more sprawling form of claustrophobia and a more adolescent angst.”

Singleton admits that the father figure of Furious Styles (Laurence Fishburne) replicated his own father. This important element of fatherhood functions as the key message in the film, the factor that determines the divergent pathways taken by three childhood friends: Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.), Ricky (Morris Chesnut), and Doughboy (Ice Cube). Within inner-city Los Angeles, where dead bodies, police sirens, police helicopters, dilapidated buildings, and gang conflict serve as the daily ingredients to their lives, young black men survive successfully through the visibility and presence of a father, the tough man needed to respond to the challenges of the hood and to enforce the codes of conduct for growing boys. Without question, “the film . . . insists on the necessity of a male authority, a father figure, to teach and reinforce responsible behavior in young men.”

Tre, though closely tied to his homeboys, retains a particular discipline and ambition that result from his sustained relationship with his father, Furious. In their clashes and their playful moments, the bond between Tre and Furious not only creates a nurturing home but also instills within the son the worthiness, drive, and pride necessary to navigate the urban streets. Furious cautions about personal behavior and decision making as he steers Tre through the pitfalls of adolescence. Never an easy day in the hood, “Tre’s life is a balancing act of adhering to his father’s teachings, hanging out with his friends, and attempting to be intimate with his girlfriend, Brandi (Nia Long).”

Through his diligent nurturing of Tre, Furious models the statement that he shares with the younger Tre: “any fool . . . can make a baby, but only a real man can raise children.” The director highlights the uniqueness of Furious and Tre’s relationship in the hood while underscoring its positive results. The elevation of the father-son union receives further emphasis in the film as the women, as single parents, lack the skills to disseminate the elusive but recognizable qualities of manhood. Tre’s mother, Reva (Angela Bassett), recognizes this deficiency, and even though she is a professional woman and is divorced from Furious, she entreats Furious to take the young Tre under his roof and tutelage. This paradigm of in-home father equals male success adheres to the masculinity mantra often recited by hip-hop performers, including Tupac Shakur, Eminem, Game, and Lil Wayne. These rappers and others through lyrics and interviews proclaim the destructive results of dysfunctional and remote relationships with their fathers.
However, Singleton’s emphasis on the father figure governing male wholeness oversimplifies the complexities of manhood and minimizes the forces of the economic and political factor. After all, Ricky’s death to gang violence might have happened even if he had a father in the home. The feminist argument could certainly be made that strength, resilience, and motivation that mothers empower to their sons have been just as valuable and essential for maturity and success. To assume that women are incapable of parenting their sons erases the historical evidence to the contrary.

Yet despite the story’s endorsement of patriarchy, the film must be credited for indicting American society for ignoring the circumstances that contribute to young black male nihilism but then blaming those same black males for behavior assumed to be inherent to them. Six years after Boyz N the Hood, Singleton abandoned the contemporary urban milieu and examined the historical factors that challenged black masculinity. Through the period piece Rosewood, the director focuses on older black male protagonists as he returns to the tragic events involving the Florida community of Rosewood and the nearby town of Sumner that took place in 1923.

Into the prospering rural community of Rosewood, a black World War I veteran named Mann (Ving Rhames) appears and decides to buy land and settle in the close-knit black community that extends its hospitality. In particular, Sylvester Carrier (Don Cheadle) welcomes the stranger, as does the young, attractive Scrappie (Elise Neal), who catches Mann’s romantic eye. At the same time, in the white township of Sumner a young married white woman attempts to hide an affair with a white lover by claiming that she was beaten and raped by a black man. Mob violence erupts as groups of whites maraud the black community, burning property and lynching blacks.

With the character of Mann, the director inserts the Western-genre model of the lone, quiet stranger who rides a horse into town, bringing his physical skills, courage, and deadliness. Adhering to that concept of movie toughness, Mann—whose allegorical name carries political and cultural importance—serves as the merging of the Western genre type with the so-called New Negro of the early 20th century. With the legacy of slavery, economic hardships, and lynching weighing upon the segregated South, Mann’s presence—both physically and spiritually—represents that determined attitude celebrated in artistic expressions of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Mann’s participation in the war denotes his belief in the American system and his willingness to sacrifice his life, and his decision to use his military experience and his leadership skills to help black residents to survive mob violence underscore his commitment to the black community.

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Mann embodies the valorous black *man*—as opposed to the racist term “boy”—whose strength, insight, and aggression emerge as ideal masculine traits. Equipped with money, guns, and a self-assurance, Mann battles his white enemies and champions the black community’s right to exist. In one sequence as he is being chased by the white mob through the woods on horseback, Mann stops, turns, and single-handedly makes a defiant stand, drawing and firing his two guns and scaring away numerous white men.
who cower at his courage. In another scene when Mann is caught, hanged, and left for dead, his physical strength and mastery of his horse allow him to escape death. In a final action sequence of a rushing train, Mann protects the black women and children in his charge, fighting and shooting the white mob attempting to stop the train.

In addition to Mann, the director presents an additional formidable black male figure in Sylvester Carrier, who functions as the intellectual counterpart to Mann’s brawn. In short, Sylvester functions as the carrier of black culture in his capacity as a teacher and musician as well as in his relationship to his wife, children, and extended family. Sylvester—also a man, not a “boy”—directly confronts those whites who cross his path, steadily pronouncing his intent to protect his property and family. He is an Afrocentric capitalist who embraces and defends the same aspects of the system as whites do. After the murder of his mother, Sylvester orders his wife and the children into the refuge of the swamps as he and his male cousin defend Sylvester’s home and possessions, even though they are outnumbered by a large mob led by the Sheriff. Using a clever plan to escape the mob, Sylvester later joins Mann to formulate a strategy to protect the women and children and to mount a resistance against the mob.

Together Mann and Sylvester represent a black brotherhood that connects on a level of pride and community consciousness. These are black men of the new century who, when faced with the old aspects of oppression, respond individually and in partnership to defy racism in its myriad forms. These are inside men, possessing interior, resilient qualities rooted in their core strength while living by codes of manhood that require a sustained integrity and stern resolve. Rosewood serves as Singleton’s most accomplished cinematic achievement in regard to his depiction of black masculinity and his effective writing and directing. In a striking contrast, on an opposite end of the manhood spectrum, Jody, the protagonist of Baby Boy, is a twenty-year-old “boy,” a work in progress who agonizes to find his sense of wholeness.

Traveling back to the hood of Los Angeles in Baby Boy, Singleton exposes the deficient personality that results from growing up as a black male in an environment of emotional, intellectual, and economic drought. Jody (Tyrese Gibson) “is at the crossroads in his life, haunted by nightmares of his own demise and unable to take the next step into adulthood.” Similar to characters in Boyz N the Hood, Jody grows up without a father in the home and has “fathered two children by two different women”; unmotivated, he “spends a lot of time hanging out with his best friend Sweetpea (Omar Gooding), a similarly situated man who is unemployed and spends his idle moments playing video games or cruising the streets.”

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In the opening sequence the director shows Jody as an embryo within the womb, beneath the sounds of a heartbeat and bubbling amniotic fluids. Jody’s voice-over states that a psychiatrist theorized that “because of the system of racism, the black man in this country has been made to think of himself as a baby, a not yet fully formed being who has not realized his full potential.” Jody personifies that theoretical premise. Enduring premonitions of his own death, engaging in various sexual trysts, straddling the needs of two children, and dealing with the demands by the women in his life to “be a man,” he locks himself within his selfishness, insecurities, and fears. With his only self-proclaimed talent being able to “make beautiful babies,” Jody sinks into a routine of juvenile behavior and restless moments. Vacillating between his spoiled treatment when at home with his mother, Juanita (A. J. Johnson), and his romantic treatment when lounging at the home of his “baby mama,” Yvette (Taraji P. Henson), Jody avoids decisive actions and responsibilities in his life. When he finally chooses to be an entrepreneur and to sell women’s clothing, he hustles merchandise stolen from delivery trucks in the garment district.

Increasing the film’s tension, the character Melvin (Ving Rhames) becomes romantically involved with Jody’s mother. Melvin, a former gangsta and abuser, acknowledges his previous life and asserts his intentions to establish a positive relationship with Juanita as he maintains a self-owned landscaping business. In one scene as Melvin extends himself to Jody, the former confesses: “I was like you, Jody. Young, dumb, and out of control. I did a dime, man. Ten years straight in San Quentin and Folsom. All over some dumb shit. But you ... you smarter than I was when I was your age. . . . You ain’t no killer like me, and that’s good. I was bad. . . . I seen it all, and I’ve done it all.” Melvin, having transcended his gangsta past, reinvents himself and, seeing himself in Jody, attempts in his own manner to encourage Jody. However, Melvin’s physical presence and his winning of Juanita’s affections only anger Jody, leading to a physical confrontation between the two males.

Echoing the messages from Boyz N the Hood, Jody’s dilemma results from growing up without a nurturing male presence and being surrounded by a deathly environment that smothers hope. Jody’s salvation comes not from religion, education, or a profession but instead from the intervention of an adult black male who, though flawed, shows his concern and attention for Jody’s life. With that intercession, in the final sequence under the closing credits, a montage presents Jody, his son, and a pregnant Yvette together as a family.

As a film, Baby Boy contains flaws as salient as the ones in its protagonist: awkward pacing, repetitive dialogue, and tedious scenes of profanity-laced
anger and sexuality between Jody and Yvette. However, given the film's ending, Singleton's intentions are admirable, although he forces the audience to reach that finale along a laborious path. Four years later, opting for more visceral action, the film *Four Brothers*, framed within the action genre, unfolds within the urban jungle of inner-city Detroit.

When well-known community activist Evelyn Mercer (Fionnula Flanagan) is gunned down during a convenience store robbery, her adult adopted sons—two white, two African American—come home for her funeral and to find answers regarding her death. Evelyn saved the four troubled boys from a foster home system that failed them: Bobby (Mark Wahlberg), a quick-tempered bruiser; Jack (Garrett Hedlund), a timid fledgling musician; Angel (Tyrese Gibson), an impatient ex-military troublemaker; and Jeremiah (Andre Benjamin), a rational, sensitive spirit. Angel and Jeremiah are the two African American members of this brotherhood, and they possess overtly different personalities.

Angel, like Bobby, is a hothead who confronts the world through a tough no-nonsense veneer. Angel's experiences in the Navy leave him bereft of a purpose in life but unmistakably aggressive and confrontational. Rather than thinking through a situation, Angel acts out, sometimes contradicting what he says. He denies his emotions yet is unable to control them when it comes to his girlfriend Sofi (Sofia Vergara). On the other hand, Jeremiah emerges as the most stable of all the brothers. He has a wife and children, owns a home, and runs a business. Even as he openly confesses that he's "happy to see my brothers," his approach to discovering his mother's killers leans toward methodical efforts within legal parameters. Jeremiah refuses to succumb to his troubled past, but he prefers to utilize his brains and business networking to construct a life for him and his family. Despite his professed love for his brothers, he remains responsible to his family first. At one point when urged by his brothers to join them in following a possible suspect, Jeremiah declines, indicating that he has to take his daughters to gymnastics class. Later when Bobby and Angel accuse Jeremiah of capitalizing on their mother's death through an insurance policy, Jeremiah erupts and declares that he was the only brother who remained in the city and helped to take care of their mother. He resents their lack of understanding of the pressures and responsibilities of staying in the hood and taking care of a family, their mother, and two homes.

As the film presents the bond among the four brothers, it spends time showing the four following the "trail of evidence [that] leads to gang goons, drug scum, rotten cops, crooked politicians, whorish women, Neanderthal contract killers, a whack Detroit gangster in a poufy fur jacket." This African American gangster boss, Victor Sweet (Chiwetel Ejiofor), appears to be
an homage to the 1970s’ blaxploitation cycle in his dress and misanthropic attitudes. To the credit of actor Chiwetel Ejiofor, Sweet doesn’t descend into the snarling, mumbling image viewed in earlier films, yet he is indeed a type. Devoid of any compassion or much business savvy, Sweet falls victim to his ego long before he meets his demise at the end of the film. The excesses in violence and profane histrionics by Sweet contrast blatantly with the righteous and legitimate behavior expressed by Angel and Jeremiah. Although they didn’t have a father in the home, Angel and Jeremiah received a caring and instructive home that helped them reach adulthood and independence, unlike Sweet who, it must be assumed, crawled from a fatherless home within the bowels of the hood.

After Four Brothers, Singleton steps away from directing and spends more time producing features, including Hustle & Flow (2005), Black Snake Moan (2006), and Illegal Tender (2007). The sabbatical from helming films appears to have been the result of Hollywood politics. Participating on a panel organized by the Screen Actors Guild in February 2011, Singleton asserted that he was blacklisted by studios because he refused to direct mainstream projects that he felt were demeaning to black people. Rather than acquiescing to corporate demands on his vision, he opted to stand his ground.18 This insider information is revealing, but it does open up the discussion about the objectionable black images that some critics saw in films that he produced. Singleton returns to his mainstream directing with the 2011 release of Abduction, a thriller following a white male protagonist who seeks the truth about his past identity.

When juxtaposing the films of Spike Lee and John Singleton, the recurring focus upon black masculinity emerges as a shared auteurist theme. In doing that, the two directors continued a concern reflected in the works of earlier black directors. The pursuit of significant and complex black male images did not begin with Lee and Singleton, but the legitimacy of that pursuit has been galvanized by the two. Lee and Singleton give visibility to the world of black men often excluded from mainstream viewers. Lee politicizes race and black masculinity, while Singleton renders black images within the cinematic genres proven to be marketable to a popular viewership. Lee prefers a wider canvas of age, class, and sexual orientation, while Singleton leans more toward a city landscape of younger characters.

The black male images fashioned by both directors between the late 1980s and the first decade of the new millennium invite a consideration of the emergence of Barack Obama as president of the United States in 2008. In some conspicuous ways, President Obama reflects those admirable
traits that the two filmmakers sought to depict on-screen. Obama represents the black man who succeeds in the capitalistic system: gaining a law degree from Harvard, becoming a millionaire, and citing billionaires as his friends and supporters. He is intellectual yet takes pride in his athletic skills on the basketball court. Obama describes himself as a religious man who offers supportive, if sometimes guarded, positions regarding gay and lesbian rights. Importantly, he publicly displays affection and respect for black women through his actions and words regarding his wife, daughters, and mother-in-law. Consequently, Obama consolidates numerous black male qualities that both directors affirmed in their cinematic works. In this comparison, the relevance of American cinema as a popular art expression that can inform and reflect significant social, cultural, and political dynamics surfaces in a discernible way. However, even as both directors would appreciate the model of black masculinity that President Obama typifies, he offers but one example of black masculinity.

Displaying both triumphs and weaknesses in their filmmaking, Spike Lee and John Singleton remind audiences that there can be many configurations of black masculinity. In addition to lawyers, politicians, and celebrities, black manhood is reflected in those individuals who are factory workers, educators, and skilled craftsmen, among many professions. Given the variety of talents, professionalism, achievements, and struggles in society, a divergent cinematic representation of black masculinity will remain crucial. For their part in contributing to the discourse and icons of black masculinity, Lee and Singleton deserve credit because without their films, a substantial void would exist in American cinema regarding black male images. The need remains for Lee and Singleton as well as other directors to continue to initiate visual stories that will show black men in an even more progressive manner. As discussed by scholar Mark Anthony Neal, the goal should be to move forward from images of the "strong black male" to the "new black man." The "strong black male," often associated with patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia, merely positions black masculinity in traditional thinking and behavior that has been shown to be problematic; the "new black man," both fluid and complex, embraces personal growth while respecting the difference and dignity of others, regardless of their gender, orientation, and race.19 Certainly, at this point in their careers Lee and Singleton have provoked reflection and conversation about black masculinity beyond conventional traits. Together, the directors demonstrate that the cinematic artist can also serve as cinematic activist who brings truths that must be assessed on emotional, cultural, and political levels.
NOTES


16. Ibid.

