

“Rock-a-Bye, Baby!”: Black Women Disrupting Gangs and Constructing Hip-Hop Gangsta Films

by Beretta E. Smith-Shomade

This essay examines the cultural specificity of the gangster genre. In hip-hop gangsta films, the inclusion of black women as central to the gangster business not only transforms the gangster genre but, more important, adheres to black cultural norms. The films New Jack City, Sugar Hill, and Set It Off serve as case studies.

In the first third of the twentieth century, violence was largely visioned on screen through the rubric of gangsterism. Turf wars littered cinematic urban enclaves with bullets and bodies. Yet in the 1930s, organized crime was more than movie fiction; it actually happened. We identify this world through its *mise-en-scène*; as Thomas Schatz remarks, “Nature in the gangster film is conspicuous primarily in its absence. . . . There is no limitless horizon, no sunset in the distance for the urban renegade.”¹ Participants in this dangerous world, explicitly or implicitly, were strong European patriarchs in immigrant families, as in *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930) and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932). But these wannabe Americans were not the only ones wreaking havoc on the urban frontier. Nonimmigrant African Americans in the gang business operated under similar circumstances.

The filmic world of gangsters has received substantial critical attention over the last half-century. In particular, more recently, ideas about genre blending and revisionist histories have forced many to reconsider the gangster and the gangster film. These shifting discourses have opened a space for attention to black ethnic gangsters and their cinematic counterparts. As presented by African American filmmakers, the traditional organized crime structure has been reconstructed, creating a model particular to African Americans—one that includes black women.

Historically, crime films presented (white) women as ornaments and mothers who were consistently relegated to the periphery. These women were no more than objects and prizes, traded and acquired at the end of city warfare. As Carlos Clarens characterizes “the girl,” she is a “nagging, simpering mate trying to restrain the man from taking to the road or to crime or some such alternative, any of which were vastly more attractive and romantic than sex-denying domesticity and a nine-to-five job. This was an appeal that men could identify with.”² Black women were similarly constructed by black directors (and screenwriters), as in Oscar Micheaux’s *Underworld* (1937) and Ralph Cooper’s *Dark Manhattan* (1937).³ This changed during the

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1990s wave of black gangster films, when many African American women occupied positions and spaces previously reserved for men—mostly white—only.

By including African American women as subjects and participants, the traditional view of the gangster genre was complicated and changed. I call this new genre the hip-hop gangsta film. The hip-hop gangsta film differs from the traditional urban-crime movie and even from the popular “boyz-n-the-hood” type in that it centers crime as a business and defers to black cultural norms by including black women in critical roles. Because familial concerns are presented in a contemporary context, space is made for black female leadership.

While occupying spaces traditionally held by males, black women in hip-hop gangsta movies uniquely affirm and reconnect to certain African American cultural practices frequently absent in presentations of ethnic life. This essay explores this generic paradox and the roles, violent and otherwise, that African American women play in the 1990s hip-hop gangsta films *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991), *Sugar Hill* (Leon Ichaso, 1993), and *Set It Off* (F. Gary Gray, 1996). Excavating these portrayals of African American women offers an alternative reading of the traditional gangster genre. Further, it broadens notions of African American communities, black crime, and urban direction.

Early Crime/Crime Films. From its beginning, organized crime referred to the “organized vices”—illegal gambling, usurious loans, narcotics, and prostitution.⁴ The term gained widespread use at the height of 1930s gangsterism, when gang activity fueled movie displays of real-life mobsters such as Al Capone, Bugsy Siegel, and Lucky Luciano. In African American communities, similar activities occurred, leading to filmic depictions of real-life gangsters such as Bumpy Johnson. The activities of black gangsters took the form of policy gambling (numbers), prostitution, and craps (gambling with dice). Invariably, the lives of all these cinematic criminals ended in destitution, despair, and destruction, especially given the need for strict adherence with the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (Hays Code). Among many requirements, the Hays Code mandated that “crimes against the law . . . shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation.”⁵

Robert Warshow maintains that for the gangster on film, the danger comes from being alone. Yet “the very conditions of success make it impossible not to be alone, for success is always the establishment of an *individual* preeminence that must be imposed on others, in whom it automatically arouses hatred; the successful man is an outlaw.”⁶ African American male gangsters follow in this “cinema of loneliness” tradition through their paranoia and lower economic/political positioning. Yet, despite the similarity with their white immigrant counterparts, the business structures in which cinematic and real-life black gangsters operate differ because of the positioning of women in African American communities.

Unlike other crime families, black crime families often integrate women into their business affairs. In *Black Mafia*, Francis A. J. Ianni suggests that black women play an integral role in the structure of black crime: “The presence of women even in positions of some authority is as distinctive and important a feature of black

criminal organization today as we have seen it to be historically.”⁷ Drawing on Ianni’s findings, James Carey suggests that, unlike the Italian kinship pattern, the kinship pattern among blacks is organized around women rather than men.⁸ Further, Mark Winokur argues that in black organized-crime families concerns of the extended family take precedence over those of the nuclear unit. Winokur even insinuates that women cause the failures of blacks in organized crime because of their “ethnic dynamic” and attention to the “extended family . . . as a form of primitive communism.”⁹ These assessments situate the representation of the women portrayed in hip-hop gangsta films today.

Mad, Black, and Violent: Blaxploitation Films. Thirty years after the gangster film boom, Hollywood found itself in financial crisis. According to S. Craig Watkins, “The realities of ‘white flight’ from increasingly volatile cities altered the profile of moviegoers accessible to the owners of theaters located in many downtown districts. Demographic shifts in the population meant that theater owners had to appeal to a growing concentration of young, black, urban moviegoers.”¹⁰ Turning to the then-disenfranchised black audience, Hollywood produced a spate of films capitalizing on the racial unrest of the 1960s. From the sixty-plus films made for this black audience, a new distorted view of ghetto life and black women emerged.

Buoyed by the success of Melvin Van Peebles’s independent *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), the 1970s erupted with black men visually reincarnating white men’s nightmares. The “black stud,” personified by Sweetback, frequently became the hero for decaying inner-city communities. From *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971) to *Superfly* (Parks, 1972), blacks emerged as tough, angry, and vengeful. These action-adventure narratives revolved primarily around macho men who protected (and exploited) their communities, pride, and women.¹¹ Ed Guerrero situates these films’ hard edges against the then-proliferating Sidney Poitieresque construction of black masculinity and assimilation.¹²

The mythology created by this “good nigga/bad nigga” dichotomy lent fuel and profit to the makers of Hollywood product.¹³ Most of these blaxploitation films characterized all African descendants as monolithic balls of anger, trapped within urban jungles and forever banished to the margins of society. Ironically (or typically), most of these films were directed and produced by white men.

By the late 1970s, the term *blaxploitation* had come under attack in black communities as “white control and commercialization of the ghetto imagery, while from the white side of the fence it denigrated the idea of black creative control, since, though the bulk of the films were now written and directed by whites, they were still marketed and sold as the original and authentic product of black imaginations.”¹⁴ Moreover, the legitimate anger of black women—dually oppressed (within and without) through race and gender—was often belittled and ignored in all this cultural production.

Cleopatra Jones (Jack Starrett, 1973), *Coffy* (Jack Hill, 1973), and its sequel, *Foxy Brown* (Hill, 1974), each featured angry black women. The appearance of these films coincided not only with the black nationalistic and women’s movements but also with the box-office successes of their male-centered counterparts.

Donald Bogle believes that these "macho goddesses," whose fiery aggression equaled that of black men, served as an amalgamation of stereotypes: "They lived in a fantasy world—of violence, blood, guns, and gore—which pleased, rather than threatened, male audiences."¹⁵ For example, Cleopatra Jones (Tamara Dobson) uses karate and a scantily clad physique to foil Mommy's (Shelly Winters) drug scheme while still managing literally to service the male home front.

Though similar, women's roles in 1970s blaxploitation films differ from their characterizations in the 1990s. In the 1970s films, black women usually stood or fought on the side of the law or justice.¹⁶ Because of this positioning, their relationship to organized crime failed to surface. In 1990s hip-hop gangsta films, however, black women forge intimate and visible connections to organized crime.

1990s Black Cinema. Both critical and popular writing about the new black cinema focuses on the male maturation process and on the connection between black men and inner-city crime. Films like *Boyz-n-the-Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), *Straight out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991), *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson, 1992), *South Central* (Steve Anderson, 1992), *Menace II Society* (Alan and Albert Hughes, 1993), and *Clockers* (Spike Lee, 1995) all revolve around urban inhumanity—black-on-black violence. By showing black males who are involved in criminal activity and its consequences, these films focus on crime not as an organized, systematic business but as a sociological/pathological problem, expressly confined to and defined by a homogeneous black (male) community. Other films, such as *Rage in Harlem* (Bill Duke, 1991) and *Hoodlum* (Duke, 1997), foreground organized crime but reference prior decades.

The distinctiveness of hip-hop gangsta films lies in their culturally specific depictions of African American women and their integration of the contemporary hip-hop dynamic—a force that has completely revolutionized cinematic imagery and sound. These two elements, as cinematographer Arthur Jafa suggests, reflect "primal sites" or spaces that have shaped much of the African American community. In turn, these elements have altered "hegemonic norms into conventions and methodologies better suited to African American expressivity."¹⁷

In its commodified forms, hip-hop has energized nearly all aspects of American and world visual culture. Mike Phillips goes so far as to say that gangster rap has changed the imagery of film: "Unlike the fluent and sophisticated sound of Curtis Mayfield, rap was unsophisticated, or rather its sophistication was rooted in its deliberate countering of complex orchestral harmonies. It was crude, direct, and angry. Instead of pride, and love and success, its themes were murder, getting even, police harassment, drive-by shootings, and the incessant violence of gang warfare."¹⁸ All of the 1990s films cited feature rap music—frequently multilayered—as background and often as part of the narrative. In *Juice*, for example, the protagonist, Q (Omar Epps), is a promising new DJ who struggles to hone his craft while avoiding the pitfalls of black urban life. Club scenes, rapping, hip-hop music, and dance resonate concurrently and perpetually within and outside the diegesis.

However, as Jacquie Jones contends in "The New Ghetto Aesthetic," "unlike rap music that can be seen as a reformulation of popular music . . . homeboy

cinema does not threaten existing conventions. Instead, it exists as a modification of sensationalist Hollywood formulae.¹⁹ The 1990s films mentioned previously seem to support her argument. Further, these same exploitation tendencies can be seen outside “homeboy cinema” in such films as *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *Dangerous Minds* (John N. Smith, 1995), and *Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino, 1997). These films co-opt a ghetto aesthetic and display it across the bodies and screens of middle-class whites via music, language, location, and style. Yet, despite this commodification, the infusion of male-dominated hip-hop into the gangster genre provides a space for heretofore-unknown representations of black women.

Most “boyz-n-the-hood” movies situate black women as bitches and “hoes” while foregrounding the inhumanity of blacks and crime. Very few of these films distinguish organized crime from poverty-induced greed. In those films that do examine structured crime, however, progressive roles for and images of African American women emerge. *New Jack City*, *Sugar Hill*, and *Set It Off* offer multiple examples of black women’s work and roles. Even the stereotypical role of the mother is expanded. As shall be shown shortly in *Sugar Hill*, the mother figure, though not always explicitly and visually present, surfaces as an ominous, matriarchal spirit who haunts and directs both the men and the women. Thus, African American cultural specificities disrupt the generic white male conventions that permeate gangster films. I turn to *New Jack City* to support this assertion.

New Jack City. In 1991, *New Jack City* overturned black filmmaking traditions with its depictions of “real” inner-city life rocking to a hip-hop beat.²⁰ Although overt male bonding drives the narrative, the film opens with a soundtrack featuring Queen Latifah, rap artist supreme—thus thrusting women into a central space. Wesley Snipes plays Nino Brown, a self-created drug dealer elevated to the status of CEO. His success, fueled by the introduction of crack into the black community, relies on the notion that “you gotta rob to get rich in the Reagan era.”²¹ Typical of the gangster genre, Nino dies in the end. His death does not come at the hands of the legal system (always inept in black neighborhoods), though, but of a community member—someone whose frustration with the ineffectiveness of the police and the judicial process causes him to take matters into his own hands.

Van Peebles’s film received enthusiastic acclaim from critics and attracted an audience at the box office.²² Its tale of rags to illegal riches resounded as an old, familiar story. George Pelecanos argues, however, that “in the pulp plot and dealing, Van Peebles has all the makeup of a stylish action/exploitation film. . . . But the buildup that leads to the action sequences is never realized.”²³ Despite the criticism, *New Jack City*, self-consciously or not, fostered evolutionary moments in its positioning of African American women in terms of their roles and the depth of information provided about the female characters. In the traditional film world of gangsters, race and gender issues rarely converge. *New Jack City* turns that idea on its head.

Introduced as a ground-floor executive, Keisha (Vanessa Williams) acts as Nino’s co-chief of security. At a board meeting, she even names a new company product,

saying, "People goin' crazy over this? I mean . . . it look like *cracked-off* pieces of soap." But despite her obvious logical participation in the company's operations, it is her tote-wielding, macho style that causes Jacquie Jones to label her a psychopath.²⁴

At the same planning session, Nino decides to seize control of an apartment complex for the organization's headquarters. He also voices the need to get rid of Smitty, the neighborhood drug lord. Keisha agrees by saying, "Rock-a-bye, baby." The visual confirmation of her statement occurs in the next scene. While G-Money (Allen Payne) explains to Smitty that his community services are no longer needed, Keisha, dressed in a cream-colored unitard and black gloves, jumps from the back of her jeep and puts a bullet through his head—splattering his brains across the sidewalk in slow motion. G-Money narrates the event diegetically, while a feminine nondiegetic voice-over ominously repeats Keisha's earlier phrase, "Rock-a-bye, baby."

Jones questions whether this behavior represents progress. She believes that since African American women are usually represented as either bitches or whores, "One bitch" elevated to the status of psychopathic murderer hardly seems an achievement.²⁵ She argues further that although feminized, Keisha exists on the outside of the frame, waiting to kill again. But in spite of the status Jones claims for her, Keisha sits on the governing board of this self-constructed family. In physically defending Nino, she works on the front line and plays a crucial role in implementing all security systems.

Referencing Ianni again, women historically do not function in such a critical capacity in organized-crime families. In black organized-crime units, however, it seems that cultural specificity reigns. Near the end of *New Jack City*, the bond to organized crime is reinscribed with a tribute to Brian DePalma's remake of *Scarface* (1983). Thus, when the Italian mafia tries to gun down Nino, Keisha defends her employer by firing an uzi. In slow motion, her white pants suit becomes peppered with blood. Like men in similar circumstances, she dies in the line of duty.

Except for Keisha, though, *New Jack City* is filled with well-worn cinema stereotypes: the tragic mulatto and the "hoe." Uniqua (Tracy Camilla Johns) fulfills the latter role. Although she allies herself with the number-two man, G-Money, she pursues the power centered with Nino. Though standard generic fare, pitting her against another black woman presents an interesting dilemma. Contrary to images on the *Jerry Springer* TV show, cross-class cat fights happen infrequently and are ill advised in most black communities.

Nevertheless, Uniqua knows what she wants and does not concern herself with coming between friends (Nino and G-Money) or stepping on the toes of other women. In the presence of all, she exclaims that "a man like you, Nino, needs a son. A legacy. A mark to let the world know that he was here," as she strips down to her red lingerie before a big-screen scene of Montana's (Al Pacino) demise in *Scarface*. Audiences can understand the women's ensuing verbal exchange, although it is only through circulating myths that surround black women's sexuality that her character even appears believable. Van Peebles, however, validates this stereotype with the performance of Johns.²⁶ Uniqua answers the phone (a no-no in any man's home that is not one's own), gives Nino refuge, and tries to physically defend him



Figure 1. Director Mario Van Peebles and actress Michael Michele on the set of *New Jack City* (1991). Courtesy Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Materials Store.

from the police. In spite of her stereotypical role, this "hoe" occupies a substantial amount of screen time and provides a view, if skewed, of black women's relationships—a relationship that finds its counterpart in Selena.

Selena Thomas (Michael Michele) represents the other clichéd female figure in *New Jack City*—the kept woman with a twist. Educated and upper middle class, this tragic mulatto slums with the likes of Nino, seeking thrills. Yet she attends business meetings too and recommends personnel. Even her barrenness becomes an issue when played against Uniqua's claims to procreative power. Knowing this much about any woman in a gangster film already removes it from traditional offerings.

Eventually, Uniqua wins out, with her sexual charm and promises to bear Nino's child, forcing Selena to abandon Nino. Scorned, Selena aids in Nino's prosecution by testifying against him at his trial. Most "kept women" are denied such visual space and voice. Speech accords importance to female characters—another example of the difference between the hip-hop gangsta film and other gangster movies.

Paradoxically, the chief prosecuting attorney is portrayed by another black woman, Phyllis Yvonne Stickney. Although her character, Ms. Hawkins, is afforded limited screen time, her position in *New Jack City* reflects contemporary ideology that black women use their so-called new mainstream status to help the white legal system "bring down" black men. Although African American women receive community encouragement to excel in real-life situations, black men often attack them when they do. Consequently, Hawkins's role both fulfills and refutes antagonisms directed toward black women professionals. Paralleling black

Figure 2. Theresa Randall and Wesley Snipes in *Sugar Hill* (Leon Ichaso, 1993).

Courtesy Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Materials Store.



cultural norms, the black women in *New Jack City* function as gangsters, professionals, and “kept women.”

Sugar Hill. Now imagine this: A sepia-colored picture of a dapper African American couple in early Harlem. Cut to a black-and-white scene of a woman shooting up in an extreme close-up. This woman tells her eldest son to tie the syringe tight while she puts the needle into the “big vein.” In the background, a “sistah’s” moans fill the room—reminiscent of the wails of old, black church-going women. When the woman tries to walk, she falls into convulsions, literally taking down everything around her. Her two young sons scream and cry futilely. In the dreams of Roemello Skuggs (Wesley Snipes), this image—this woman—haunts him. The narrative of *Sugar Hill* reveals Skuggs’s inner dialogue with his mother about his life after her death.

Sugar Hill features Snipes again as a drug dealer but with a difference. Roemello values education but is trapped by the circumstances of his past and present, à la Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) in *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). Although the women in *Sugar Hill* generally behave in stereotypical gangster fashion, two female characters, Roemello’s girlfriend, Melissa (Theresa Randall), and his mother, Ella Skuggs (Khandi Alexander), make critical differences in Skuggs’s life, as Massara’s girl does in *Little Caesar*.

In *Little Caesar*, Massara's girlfriend convinces him to abandon his line of work. As Schatz writes, "Massara's change of heart is motivated, predictably enough, by the love of a good woman—a rare commodity in the gangster genre where women invariably are depicted as sexual ornaments, mere emblems of the gangster's socioeconomic status."²⁷ This scenario is updated in *Sugar Hill*. As a wannabe actress, Melissa enters the narrative as a lost middle-class young black woman. She and Roemello meet at a club presumably honored by Skuggs's patronage. From his glass perch, he peers down on her at the bar, asserting his authority, desire, and command of the male gaze. She returns his look and begins rhythmically to perform for him, adding a little bop to her pose.

Their initial contact becomes a mental tit-for-tat mating ritual. From that encounter, the spectator knows that Melissa will refuse to go quietly into the night and accept the confined role of passive girlfriend. Unlike Michael Corleone's Kay (Diane Keaton) in *The Godfather*, Melissa plans to assert herself into the thick of things or to excavate him from it. She forces him to choose between an upright way of life or a life filled with fear, death, and illegality. Eventually, through her support and insistence, and like Massara, Roemello decides to cease his criminal activity. Following the murder of virtually every male in the film, Melissa gets her man, although he is wheelchair bound. By getting Roemello and having him live, Melissa is an atypical female character in a gangster film—attesting to, perhaps, the strength and cultural resonance of black women.

The other novel female character in Ichaso's film is the black female phantom, Ella. Presented in flashback, Ella Skuggs reinscribes the bad black mother, even before her drug overdose. Dead since Roemello's youth, she haunts him in his dreams and business, condemning his wrongdoing and becoming his conscience. Only when he gives up the criminal lifestyle does his mother fade from his dreams. Schatz would contend that this is part of the natural order of the gangster world, in which "after all, even the most hard-bitten hoodlum loves his mother; even the most animalistic criminal is in some ways human."²⁸ Yet the link to the spirit world in *Sugar Hill* adds depth to the African American women characters, as well as a connection to the past. Ella's unseen presence fosters tension and conflict and harkens to African ideas about the role and presence of ancestors in the lives of the living.

As it presents an alternative to the conventional gangster genre through its inclusion of black women, *Sugar Hill* also proffers Third Cinema sensibilities. For example, Ella's role resembles one created in Bahram Beizai's *Bashu: The Little Stranger* (Iran, 1989), in which an illusory maternal presence guides and supports, disappearing only when her child makes peace with his new status.²⁹ Third Cinema calls for filmmaking that reflects the realities of marginalized and oppressed people. African Americans and especially black women fall into this category. Women's commanding insertion into this male-dominated genre makes palatable a film like *Set It Off*, in which women completely appropriate the gangster site.

Set It Off. Robert Warshaw insists that "the gangster is the man of the city, with the city's language and knowledge, with its queer and dishonest skills and its terrible daring, carrying his life in his hands like a placard, like a club."³⁰ In *Set It Off*, women,

street-wise and savvy, usurp this city space and hijack its alleged gendered certainty. The film features four young black women who conduct a series of bank robberies. They come to this profession through desperation rather than sustained criminality. Yet they approach their activity with a business acumen, à la organized crime. Like their cinematic male counterparts, however, almost no one survives in the end.

Queen Latifah plays Cleo, a butch lesbian, who performs masculinity in her dress, speech, work, and desire for women. She inhabits male space totally. She relishes the streets and the hoodlum culture so frequently glorified in male gangster rap and video imagery. Frankie (Vivica A. Fox) is a teller fired for knowing the perpetrators of the bank's robbery. Setting up the women's central paradox, she wonders, "What's the fuckin' procedure when you got a gun at your head?!"

The film introduces Kimberly Elise as Tisean, a timid unwed mother who hangs out with her friends. And, finally, Stony (Jada Pinkett Smith) embodies the ethos of the American dream. She meets a Harvard-educated banker "brotha" who wants to be her "genie." He wants her because she is "so fine." Only through planning and vision, he suggests, will she (and, by extension, the collective black underclass) overcome her background. Not surprisingly, Stony alone lives to record the gang's legacy and supposedly to achieve the better life toward which they all strived, or at least that America promises. Together the four form a family of male-identified (in their work) but women-occupied (in their construction) gangsters.

Early in the film, director F. Gary Gray shows the women recuperating from work and assessing their community. The camera slowly zooms out from a medium shot of them drinking and getting high to above and behind them. This scene poignantly visualizes the women's inability to affect and deal with the only community they know. The actresses insert their own commentary (rewriting the script), infusing the scene with real-life disenfranchised pain.³¹ As the women become smaller elements of their concrete neighborhood, the spectator begins to recognize criminality as a viable, and perhaps necessary, option.

Revealing their inexperience and lack of disposition to the profession, the women behave nervously during their first robbery. A jazzy nondiegetic tune makes the scene appear comical as the ladies, in 1970s flip wigs, wave their guns. But while acknowledging feminine proscriptions against violence, the gangsters take their jobs seriously. Cleo recognizes the need for firepower. Conferring and bargaining with Black Sam (Dr. Dre), she obtains the tools necessary to "set it off." The women show their tenacity in target practice at Black Sam's in-home firing range. By their second robbery, they storm the bank—confident, armed, and ready. Even Tisean astutely peeps out a potential problem as she lies on the floor with the other bank patrons.

This women's gang forms a community of friendship. Following African and African American kinship patterns, the women consider each other family. The kinship pattern becomes evident as they meet around a conference table to discuss their need for cooperation and agreement to execute their next heist, again following *The Godfather*. Frankie acts (and talks) as the Don who lays down the conditions for the rest of the dons as a parody of Nino Rota's *Godfather* music plays in the background. While the camera pans around the table, the women



Figure 3. The female gangsters in *Set It Off* (F. Gary Gray, 1996): Queen Latifah, Kimberly Elise, Vivica A. Fox, and Jada Pinkett Smith. Courtesy Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Materials Store.

posture and emote the feel of old-world Italy (or at least that of downtown Manhattan). And like male gangsters, the women hang.

As an organized-crime unit, the women position themselves casually in a parking lot hangout, not as enticements to men but as masters of their own space. In fact, they wear clothes that completely cover their bodies to fend off unwanted attention. Cleo's performance gives the most credence to their masculinized aesthetic. For example, when her lover, Ursula (Samantha MacLachlan), enters their male-oriented, woman-gangster space, she reflects the quintessential female with short skirt, pumps, and a crop-top hairdo. Cleo calls to Ursula and kisses her while, still uncomfortable with their lesbian affection, the gang turns away. Cleo's maleness counters Ursula's femininity. The scene enunciates the problem of power always being equated with maleness, reasserting E. Ann Kaplan's question, "When women are in the dominant position, are they in the *masculine* position?"³² The answer may be both yes and no, especially when it comes to contemporary hip-hop gangsta films.

Another poignant example of the use of this masculine aesthetic of power results when Cleo, surrounded and alone, lowers her hydraulic-intensified car, smokes a cigarette, and prepares to surrender. She then decides otherwise. Amid a slow-motion barrage of bullets and police lights, Cleo forges through the barricade. The *Up against the Wind* soundtrack intensifies as the aestheticized violence becomes part of a visual tranquility. As the car comes to a slow stop, Cleo refuses to concede defeat. She opens her door, firing. The bullets win out, but she

dies with one hand in a fist and a gun in the other, reminiscent of Pacino's finale in *Scarface*. Like her masculine counterparts and Keisha in *New Jack City*, she goes down fighting, like a man.

Although black women thrive in the current filmic gangster business and in assumed masculine roles, they have not escaped the bias associated with being gendered female. For example, in *Set It Off*, the women's boss refers to them all as bitches; Stony must trade her body to raise cash for her brother's college tuition; and Tisean faces hardship and condemnation for being a single mother. Furthermore, unlike their male counterparts, these women work at legal jobs. Also, as in *New Jack City*, the black women in *Set It Off* face the irony of representing the law and judicial system. Ella Joyce plays the sidekick police officer, who just happens to be female and black, while Anna Marie Horsford portrays Ms. Wells from Child Protective Services. Wells intervenes when Tisean's son poisons himself at the workplace. These government additions to the world of the gangster both solidify and reinscribe the positioning of African American women as crucial to the gangster world, the outside world, and the total narrative framework of the hip-hop gangsta film.

Conclusion: Twenty-First Century Gangsters. The contemporary inclusion of African American women in male-inflected, violent genres is not confined to the hip-hop gangsta film. Crime thriller *Deep Cover* (Bill Duke, 1992) presents three females whose characterizations are similar to those of the women in *New Jack City*. Protagonist Betty (Victoria Dillard) portrays a sophisticated money launderer. In cahoots with well-placed white attorney David (Jeff Goldblum), she falls for black undercover police officer John (Laurence Fishburne). Despite being a paranoid drug user, Betty runs an art gallery, which acts as a cover for the money-laundering business, and she personally handles most of the financial transactions. But while Betty's suaveness keeps the business operating smoothly, she recognizes her actual minor role in the overall business and the fragility of her position. Director Bill Duke seems to belittle her position by juxtaposing her with a black female prostitute, but her centrality to all the proceedings is maintained throughout.³³

In *Hoodlum* (1997), based on an actual 1930s event, Bill Duke takes the prominence of black women to its logical conclusion: a woman totally runs things. But although Queen Stephanie St. Clair (Cicely Tyson) has built a ten-year numbers business, she ultimately yields her power to up-and-coming gangster Bumpy Johnson (Laurence Fishburne). Nevertheless, she builds the business and "mans" it successfully for an extended period, solo. This connection to African diasporic cultural dynamics, aesthetics, and actualities deserves recognition—even if it is surrounded by formulaic, conventional, and worn characterizations and genre codes. Although small, the roles for black women in these films illustrate their ability to both commandeer (white) male space and display their centrality to black life.

Furthermore, for better or worse, the largest growing group of prison enrollees is black women. In the twenty-first century, says Earl Ofari Hutchinson, black women "fill jails and prisons in greater percentages than black men and are seven times more likely to be imprisoned than white women."³⁴ For some black women,



Figure 4. Cicely Tyson plays Queen Stephanie St. Clair in *Hoodlum* (Bill Duke, 1997), which is based on an actual 1930s story. Courtesy Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Materials Store.

the streets provide the clearest avenue for sustained survival in the face of layoffs, unemployment, discrimination, and perpetual poverty. African American women embody the suspicions that black communities harbor about the police. Yet Hollywood (and the television news) still squarely focus on the black male as the cause of crime in general and in African American communities in particular. While often unjustly accusing and condemning black men, the media relegate black women, equally unjustifiably, to the kitchen and the bedroom.

Hip-hop gangsta films have altered the cinematic landscape for black women, often against the intentions of their mostly male directors. Increased appearances by black women reside less in the directors' feminist impulses than in their appropriation of cultural norms that permeate the collective psyche and, thus, the screen of the directors' vision. When black women are acknowledged, the power they are given often becomes minutely or overtly sabotaged. For example, in *New Jack City*, the names of the actresses appear at the tail end of the credits. Even Russell Wong's credit precedes the credits for the women, although he has only six lines in the film. This subtly but poignantly reinforces the fact that even though women have more visible roles in hip-hop gangsta films—and in gangster films in general—these films still target males and remain male-centered and male-identified. Says Clarens, "Since women are generally excluded from aggressive groups like armies and gangs (though they may be nearby in the roles of whores or camp followers), the strength of the male bond supplies the real romanticism of war and gangster films."³⁵ Even when women are a part of the crime business, they most often are there to serve men.

Nonetheless, this blatant sexism is being challenged. Black women directors and producers, such as Julie Dash, Debbie Allen, Zeinabu Irene Davis, Tracey Edmonds, Kasi Lemmons, Cauleen Smith, Gina Prince-Bythewood, and Oprah Winfrey, present a multiplicity of images of African American women, including examples of black women who kill. From the cinematic representations of Vanessa Williams heading security to Cleo's last stand, black women are mastering the range of positions held by white male ethnics, thereby reflecting their historic placement in black America.

The gendered and racialized presence of African American women has recast the agenda of gangster films. In African American communities, black women have a say in all decision-making processes, both at work and at play. And, interestingly, recent studies show that even Italian organized crime has begun including women as media spokespersons, as negotiators, and as substitutes for their fathers, husbands, and brothers in the management of "family" affairs.³⁶ Perhaps as Davarian Baldwin argues, hip-hop's "representations of black women stand in for authentic blackness."³⁷ Clearly, as hip-hop directors and others continue to replicate Caucasian (classical) cinema, cultural principles may force them to look both to African American traditions and to spaces where black women challenge masculinized and white seats of power. With the gangster film making room for the hip-hop gangsta genre, the process has already begun.

Notes

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1. Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 83.
2. Carlos Clarens, *Crime Movies: An Illustrated History* (New York: Norton, 1980), 61.
3. One exception to this parody was Leo Popkin's *Gang Smashers* (1938), starring Nina Mae McKinney. McKinney plays an undercover detective who infiltrates the Dalton mob with the purpose of bringing it down.
4. James Carey, *Introduction to Criminology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 389.
5. The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (Hays Code), available at <<http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html>>.
6. Robert Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," in *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theater, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 133.
7. Francis A. J. Ianni, *Black Mafia: Ethnic Succession in Organized Crime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 122.
8. Carey, *Introduction to Criminology*, 408-9.
9. Mark Winokur, "Eating Children Is Wrong: Mob Movies from *Scarface* to *New Jack City*," *Sight and Sound* 1, no. 7 (November 1991): 12.
10. S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 95.

11. Highlighting 1970s films is not to deny a historical legacy of black crime films by black artists. Mark A. Reid discusses the history of African Americans and gangster film in Reid, "The Black Gangster Film," in Barry Keith Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 456–73. For more on this legacy, see Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Marilyn Yaquinto, *Pump 'em Full of Lead: A Look at Gangsters on Film* (New York: Twayne, 1998); and Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Sourcebook on Black Films*, 3rd ed. (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1995).
12. In his book *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), Ed Guerrero maintains that in films of the period, Poitier possessed no wife and no sweetheart. He lived in a white world as the "good boy" and helped the white man with his problems. Guerrero quotes Clifford Mason, who says, "Poitier will forever be condemned on the screen to reassuring white people of their innocence and superiority, 'good nigger that he is'" (73).
13. For more on the exploitation era in black film, see S. Craig Watkins, *Representing*, and Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*.
14. Mike Phillips, "Chic and Beyond," *Sight and Sound* 6 (August 1996): 26.
15. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 251.
16. One exception is Talya Ferro's role as a member of Biggie Smalls's (Calvin Lockhart) gang in Sidney Poitier's comedy *Let's Do It Again* (1975). Ferro represents the "strong silent" type who analyzes situations, participates in business matters, and threatens to kill if necessary.
17. Arthur Jafa, "Like *Rashomon* but Different: The New Black Cinema," *Artforum* 31, no. 10 (summer 1993): 11.
18. Phillips, "Chic and Beyond," 26.
19. Jacquie Jones, "The New Ghetto Aesthetic," *Wide Angle* 13, nos. 3–4 (1991): 33.
20. Unfortunately, violence equaled realness in the minds of theater owners and residents of their surrounding communities. With the openings of both *New Jack City* and *Boyz n the Hood*, some skirmishes occurred, but they were reported in disproportion to the actual incidents. As a result, many theaters refused to book the films or increased their security (read surveillance) accordingly. For an in-depth look at black gangster cinema and exhibition, see Laura Baker, "Screening Race: Responses to Theater Violence at *New Jack City* and *Boyz n the Hood*," *Velvet Light Trap* 44 (fall 1999): 4–19.
21. Videocassette box, *New Jack City*.
22. *Variety* reported that *New Jack City* was the most cost-effective film released during 1991. It grossed \$43.6 million in eleven weeks from domestic theatrical rentals alone. Watkins, *Representing*, 172.
23. George Pelecanos, review of *New Jack City*, *Cineaste* 28, no. 3 (1991): 49–50.
24. Jones, "The New Ghetto Aesthetic," 34.
25. *Ibid.*
26. As an actress, Johns represents an ongoing impasse in film. In her only other major role, in Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), she plays the sexually independent and promiscuous Nola Darling. Although some feminists hailed the role as a liberation of women's sexuality, Johns is characterized as a tramp who is unable to speak for herself. In an early 1990s television interview, however, the actress claims that she does not want to be typecast.
27. Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 87.
28. *Ibid.*, 93.

29. *Bashu*, *The Little Stranger* examines how a young southern Iranian boy learns to deal with the Iran of the north. As he grows, his deceased mother's spirit follows him. This spiritual action helps him adapt to his new life and family. Leon Ichaso's own cultural background, Cuban, informs this African American community.
30. Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," 131.
31. According to an interview conducted with the actresses of *Set It Off*, they had a free hand when it came to dialogue. Rebecca Ascher-Walsh, "Stealing Booty," *Entertainment Weekly*, November 15, 1996, 38–40.
32. E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," in *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 28. Interestingly, Ice Cube's *Players' Club* (1998) inverts misogyny and manipulation within the confines of a particularly male voyeuristic space—the dance/shake club. Ronnie (Chrystale Wilson) is a shake dancer/pimp whose lesbian power and prowess coerces and dominates spaces traditionally held by men. She performs not only femininity in her display for men, but masculinity, in her aggressive advances, power, and control of women. Her positioning as both masculine and feminine speaks to the contradictory and conflicting ways that the presence of black women is negotiated across gender, race, and seats of power.
33. A brief encounter between Betty and the prostitute Jacqueline (Paunita Nichols) illustrates this point. John meets David at Jacqueline's apartment. After much postcoital play between David and Jacqueline, the two men depart. David rants about his love for sexual encounters with black women. Although "happily" married to a blond woman with a daughter, David wants to have his cake and eat it too. He needs black women as part of the excess, the icing. When Duke juxtaposes Jacqueline with Betty in the next scene, this taste is elucidated. The measured positioning of the two women side by side illuminates their similarities. Their confluence reinforces the notion of black woman as concubine and sexually promiscuous. Thus, this sleight of hand shows that progressiveness comes in moderation.
34. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, "Hardest Hit by the Prison Craze: Oklahoma Executes Black Woman Wanda Jean Allen at a Time When Black Women Have Become the New Menace to Society," *Salon* [online magazine]; available at <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2001/01/12/black_women>.
35. Clarens, *Crime Movies*, 64.
36. Alessandra Dino, "Women, Mafia, and Ways of Communication," *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* 39, no. 4 (December 1998): 477–512.
37. Davarian L. Baldwin, "Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip Hop," *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 2, no. 2 (summer 1999): 140.

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