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Black Audiences, Blaxploitation and Kung Fu Films, and Challenges to White Celluloid Masculinity

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Black Audiences, Blaxploitation and Kung Fu Films, and Challenges to White Celluloid Masculinity

SUNDIATA KEITA CHA-JUA

Introduction

African American interest in the martial arts is ubiquitous in the contemporary United States. It can be seen in the burgeoning numbers of black youths enrolled in self-defense classes and in hip-hop culture. African Americans' fascination with the martial arts cuts across artistic genres. The Wu Tang Clan, the rap group most responsible for bringing kung fu to the hip-hop community, markets classic films from Kung Fu Theater. The RZA, the founder of the Wu Tang Clan, for example, wrote the scores for Jim Jarmusch's crime drama *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999) and Quentin Tarantino's homage to Hong Kong kung fu films, *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* (2003) and *Kill Bill, Vol. 2* (2004). Perhaps most illustrative of African Americans' attraction to Chinese martial arts is Black Belt, an art exhibition that appeared at Harlem's Studio Museum during fall 2003. Curator Christine Kim presented forty-four pieces by a racially diverse group of nineteen artists that explored "the black urban fascination with Eastern martial arts and philosophy." The double meaning embodied in the exhibit's title, Black Belt, illustrates the complex relationship at the crux of the black-Asian connection. On the one hand, *a* black belt symbolizes excellence in the martial arts, rendering it the embodiment of "Asianness," according to Mosi Secret. On the other hand, *the* black belt refers to African American ghettos. Ironically, currently it is in the black belt that pursuit of a black belt finds its most ardent following.¹

African Americans' interest in the martial arts began with a fascination with kung fu films during the early 1970s. The roots of this attraction lay

both in Hong Kong and in the United States. In the mid-1960s, Shaw Brothers, soon to become the major Hong Kong movie studio, reconceptualized the martial arts movie, moving it from mysticism toward more realistic and more brutal action. The *wuxia pian* films of the mid-1960s, particularly Shaw Brothers' productions of King Hu's *Come Drink with Me* (1966), Zhang Cheh's *Du bei dao* or *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1966), and his *Dragon Gate Inn* (1967), initiated the transformation. The Shaws' production of Cheh's *Vengeance* and Wang Yu's *Longhu Dou* or *The Chinese Boxer* in 1970 completed the transformation by creating the formula for the kung fu or unarmed combat film. The winning formula called for an explosion of rage and retribution by a long-suffering protagonist who finally embarks on a journey of revenge against a vicious amoral antagonist. Shaw's *Tianxia diyi Quan* or *Five Fingers of Death*, one of the first kung fu classics and the first to play at mainstream U.S. movie houses, launched the kung fu invasion. Shaw Brothers and Warner Brothers, its U.S. distributor, launched the kung fu invasion while Hollywood was in the midst of a financial crisis. Viewed as B-action movies, U.S. distributors were attracted to the genre because its low cost reaped huge profits.²

According to film scholar David Desser, African Americans' interest in kung fu films "was a major factor in keeping the kung fu craze alive." The martial arts film audience, like the general action film's, is classed, gendered, and generational. The U.S. action film audience consists largely of young, white, working-class males. The black martial arts audience, however, complicates, if not transcends, the class, gender, and generational limitations of action films' traditional spectators. A broader cross-section of the black community is attracted to this film genre. Why have African Americans been so attracted to martial arts films, especially Hong Kong kung fu films? The simplest and most common answer comes from Desser. He advances two interconnected arguments: First, besides blaxploitation, kung fu films were the only films with nonwhite heroes and heroines; second, they concerned an "underdog of color, often fighting against the colonialist enemies, white culture, or the Japanese." Desser's answer is correct, but he does not provide an explanation. Following Desser's logic, I locate the genesis of African Americans' attraction to kung fu movies in the social relations of domination and resistance, specifically in the dialectical relationship between black racial oppression and the Black Freedom movement. To adequately answer the question, we need to interrogate four interrelated factors. First, we have to account for how the particularities and peculiarities of African American Pan-African nationalist political thought conditioned the black community's receptivity

for kung fu films. Second, we should locate African Americans' engagement with Hong Kong cinema—martial arts genre films—in the early 1970s, the sociohistorical context in which they first encountered them. Third, we should interrogate the dominant themes and tropes in blaxploitation films and investigate the multiple ways they articulated with the dominant narrative structures in kung fu films. Fourth, we should take stock of how the Shaw Brothers' reconceptualization of the martial arts movie was perfected by Bruce Lee, the kung fu films' first superstar. Through his dynamic personality, extraordinary martial arts skills, unique polycultural philosophy, and populist pro-working-class film vision, Lee anchored the kung fu formula developed at Shaw Brothers in even greater realism, Chinese nationalism, and a populist working sentiment.³

Derived Ideology: Pan-Africanist and Black Internationalist Antecedents

The roots of African Americans' attraction to kung fu films are deeply embedded in their sociohistorical experiences. Simply put, it is a product of blacks' political and cultural resistance to racial oppression. Although "repression breeds resistance," opposing oppression is never simple; it is always varied and complex. Resistance is as likely to include cross-cutting strategies and discourses as mutually reinforcing ones. Two different but overlapping ideological discourses, Pan-Africanism and Black Internationalism, help explain African Americans' fascination with kung fu films. Pan-Africanists view the diverse dispersed peoples of African descent as one family. And perhaps, more importantly, they locate black unity in similar, if not common, national experiences of racial domination, discrimination, and degradation. Pan-Africanists believe that until African-descended people coordinate their resources to create a United States of Africa, they will never experience freedom, justice, and self-determination. Black Internationalism is also a direct outgrowth of African Americans' meditation on and engagement in world affairs. According to Marc Gallicchio, "black internationalists believed that, as victims of racism and imperialism, the world's darker races, a term they employed to describe the non-European world, shared a common interest in overthrowing white supremacy and creating an international order based on racial equality." Although different in emphasis, both Pan-Africanism and Black Internationalism have their roots in Black Nationalist opposition to racial oppression.⁴

Black Nationalism is a complicated and multifarious ideology, which contemporary scholars have treated as a unitary dogma devoid of internal

differentiation and contestation. This misguided, narrow, and antagonistic approach toward Black Nationalism has been especially acute among cultural studies scholars. Consequently, Black Internationalism's and especially Pan-Africanism's influence on blacks' receptivity toward Hong Kong martial arts films has been obscured or maligned.⁵

Here I want to highlight three different instances in which Black Internationalist and/or Pan-Africanist activist intellectuals articulated African American and Asian solidarity. The first concerns W. E. B. DuBois, the seminal African American radical scholar-activist. The Nation of Islam, particularly the militant Malcolm X, represents the second. The brilliant, organic, intellectual Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party (BPP) constitute the third instance. DuBois, Malcolm X, and Newton came from different classes or class strata, and they reached political maturity during fundamentally different historical moments. By 1934, DuBois was undergoing his final political transformation, remaking himself into a race-conscious Pan-African Marxist. In his last year, 1965, Malcolm would sharply break with the racist millenarian ideology intrinsic to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. Twenty-one years after DuBois's articulation of a distinctive race-conscious Marxism, Malcolm, too, would reject capitalism, although by his death he had not yet embraced socialism. In the late 1960s, Newton and the BPP would reweave the radical threads left by DuBois, Malcolm X, and others who traversed the black radical tradition into a new Black Internationalism. By 1970, the BPP articulated a Black Internationalist policy that supported revolutionary movements around the world, not just in Africa. The ideas of DuBois, Malcolm X, and Huey P. Newton are united by a common antiracist, anti-imperialist, and anticolonialist policy.

Considered the "father of Pan-Africanism," DuBois was also a Black Internationalist, a humanist, and a committed socialist, who believed race and color made up the international fault line that divided the oppressed from the oppressor. He saw China, Japan, and Asia as part of the world majority of oppressed darker races. His famous 1903 statement on the color line expressed his basic interpretation, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the seas." DuBois expressed political solidarity with China in multiple literary modes: prose, fiction, and poetry. For DuBois, however, the connection between China and people of African descent was not simply rhetorical. He visited China three times, in 1936, in 1958–59, and a year before his death in 1962. During Japan's invasion, Michael T. Martin and Lamont H. Yeakley note that he "con-

tributed to several Chinese organizations” and in 1948 became “an honorary member” of Madam Sun Yat-sen’s China Welfare Fund. In his address to the All-African People’s Conference, DuBois told the delegates, “Your nearest friends and neighbors are the colored people of China and India, the rest of Asia, the Middle East and the sea Isles. . . . Your bond is not mere color of skin but the deeper experience of wage slavery and contempt.” China held a special place in DuBois’s heart; he saw China mainly through the ideological prisms of Pan-Africanism and Black Internationalism.⁶

Although not a race-conscious Marxist, or even a Black Internationalist of the DuBoisian variety, Malcolm X, too, articulated a worldview that linked the darker peoples in a common political struggle against white supremacy. Unlike DuBois, whose perspective was grounded in history and political economy, Malcolm’s initial understanding of Pan-Africanism and Black Internationalism was rooted in the Nation of Islam’s (NOI’s) mythology and millenarianism. Malcolm learned the NOI’s theology, which claimed African Americans were “the original Asiatic blackman,” “descendants of the Asian black nation and of the tribe of Shabazz” and whites were “created devils.” NOI eschatology asserted that Allah would destroy the world by unleashing the “Mother ship,” which W. D. Fard, the NOI’s founder, claimed was built by the Japanese during the 1930s! This is obviously not rational, but in the fiction of the Mother ship, the NOI combined a respect for modern technology and science fiction with biblical prophecy to suggest that Japan, a nation of “the darker peoples” was doing Allah’s work!⁷

Malcolm X skillfully recast the racial and religious conceptions in NOI mythology. In a late 1950s speech, he argued, “The God of Peace and Righteousness is about to set up his Kingdom of Peace and Righteousness here on this earth. Knowing that God is about to establish his righteous government, Mr. Muhammad is trying to clean up our morals and qualify us to enter into this new Righteous nation of God.” Here, Malcolm quickly shifts from religious metaphors to political analysis. Continuing, he argued, “The whole *dark* world wants peace. When I was in Africa last year I was deeply impressed by the desire of our African brothers for peace, but even they agree that there can be no peace without freedom from colonialism, foreign domination, oppression and exploitation.” Knowledgeable of world affairs, especially the struggle against colonialism, Malcolm transformed Fard’s and Muhammad’s religious mythologies into an anticolonial political analysis, thus giving the NOI’s theology a facade of relevance.⁸

Perhaps the most sophisticated articulation of Black Internationalism came from Huey P. Newton. As the BPP’s leading theorist, Newton struggled to

adapt the Panther's ideology to the dynamic global situation unfolding during the last third of the twentieth century. Anticipating the rise of global capitalism, Newton developed a political theory to challenge transnational capital and the U.S. empire. Newton's conception of revolutionary internationalism and, ultimately, revolutionary intercommunalism conformed to the main outlines of DuBois's and Malcolm X's articulations of Black Internationalism, with four exceptions. First, he eschewed an explicit racial analysis preferring to substitute the so-called Third World for racial designations. Second, Newton considered African Americans part of the colonized world. As a colonized people, blacks had a "moral right to nationhood," but according to Newton historical circumstances had conspired to negate that claim. Third, because enslavement eliminated that option, internationalism was African Americans' only viable political position. Newton contended, "We feel that Black people in America have a moral right to claim nationhood because we are a colonized people. But history won't allow us to claim nationhood, because it has bestowed an obligation upon us; to take socialist development to its final stage, to rid the world of the imperialist threat, the threat of the capitalist and the warmonger." This interpretation was not unique to Newton and the Panthers; Max Stanford/Ahmad Muhammad and the Revolutionary Action Movement, who were greatly influenced by Mao Zedong, also shared aspects of it. Finally, Newton argued the United States was not a nation-state but an empire! An empire whose world domination undermined other countries' independence, reducing them to oppressed communities. This formulation was at the crux of the Panther's shift from revolutionary internationalism to revolutionary intercommunalism. As Floyd W. Hayes III and Francis A. Kiene III contend, the move from revolutionary internationalism to revolutionary intercommunalism "was more of a change in emphasis rather than a complete departure from or break from the Party's earlier internationalist position." His commitment to revolutionary solidarity explains Newton's offer of support to the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam in its struggle against United States imperialism.⁹

Although largely derived ideologies—that is, coherent sets of ideas—which were produced by identifiable theorists, Black Internationalist and Pan-Africanist ideas were widely distributed in the African American popular press. Significantly, the three activist intellectuals discussed here all had access to widely read black newspapers and journals. From 1910 to 1934, DuBois edited *Crisis*, the organ of the National Association of Colored People, and from 1940 to 1944, he edited *Phylon*, at that time the premier U.S. social science journal on race at that time. Malcolm X was perhaps the most popular activist

intellectual of his time. A popular lecturer in the African American community, Malcolm was also a fixture on national and local radio and television talk shows and on the college lecture circuit. In addition, he founded and was the first editor of *Muhammad Speaks*, the NOI's newspaper. According to historian Claude Andrew Clegg, *Muhammad Speaks* "became the best selling black newspaper in the country," with a circulation of 600,000. In addition, Newton, the BPP's cofounder, had a regular column in the *Black Panther*, the party's influential newspaper, which, according to Charles Jones and Judson Jefferies, between 1968 and 1972 sold an average of 100,000 copies a week between 1968 and 1972. Black Internationalism and Pan-Africanism claimed a significant number of twentieth-century African American academics, activists, and artists as adherents. Included among this group were Hubert Harrison, A. Phillip Randolph, Cyril V. Briggs and the African Blood Brotherhood, Marcus Garvey, Amy Jacques Garvey, George Schuyler, C. L. R. James, Claudia Jones, Langston Hughes, Abram Harris, Rayford Logan, Ralph Bunche, Richard Wright, Paul Robeson and the Council on African Affairs, Lorraine Hansberry, Stokely Carmichael/Kwame Ture, Amiri Baraka, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and Assata Shakur.¹⁰

Corporate Liberalism and Judicious Repression: 1967–1975

The transformation from a movement for civil rights to a struggle for Black Power had contradictory effects. It produced a period that was simultaneously liberating and repressive. Black Power unleashed a previously latent black-nationalist consciousness. Under the influence of Black Power nationalism, African Americans constructed what philosopher Eddie Glaude Jr. called a "politics of transvaluation." Reassessing the meaning of "blackness," African Americans literally remade themselves from "Negroes" into "black people," a transformation that unleashed an unprecedented wave of creativity, desire, and assertiveness. The dominant tendency during the civil rights phase of the Black Freedom movement (BFM) had conformed to the strictures of U.S. liberal pluralism, but after 1966 the previously subordinated nationalist and radical tendencies gained the initiative and transformed the BFM from a struggle for civil rights into a battle for power—Black Power and Peoples' Power. Collectively, the Black Power nationalists, black radicals, and a radicalized Martin Luther King Jr. returned the BFM's concern with international affairs, which the Cold War had pushed to the periphery of African Americans' political agenda. The renewed emphasis on African

liberation and support for national liberation movements in the Third World, particularly in Vietnam, established the ideological and discursive contexts dominant in black communities during this period. Yet, on the other hand, the successes of the civil rights and Black Power phases of the BFM engendered a virulent racist backlash.¹¹

The government reacted to King's radicalization, the transformation of the BFM, and the urban rebellions in three ways: Contain the uprisings, crush the militants and radicals, and incorporate the liberals and moderates. Federal policy was mainly driven by the need to quell the urban rebellions that scorched more than 300 U.S. cities between the mid-1960s and 1970s. These annual conflagrations involved an estimated 500,000 blacks, destroyed tens of millions of dollars of property, and resulted in 250 deaths, 8,000 injuries, and 50,000 arrests. U.S. Army troops and national guardsmen occupied eight cities. In the two pivotal years, 1967 and 1968, 384 rebellions exploded in 298 cities. After the 1967 Detroit Rebellion, the Lyndon Johnson administration adopted a policy of containment toward the urban uprisings. Containment, similar to the international anticommunist policy from which it derived its name, sought to confine the uprisings to urban ghettos.¹²

According to *Newsweek* reporter Samuel F. Yette, the Richard Nixon administration used the uprisings to "usher in a substantial police state," which was used to *crush* the Black militants and radicals. Under the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, "preventive detention," "no-knock search and seizure" provision, and wiretapping with a court order were authorized. This paved the way for the FBI to unleash a massive campaign of terror on what they termed "black nationalist hate-type groups." The purpose of the Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) initiative was "to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities" of militant and radical African American individuals and organizations. The move toward a police state, the widespread policing of the black community, and the savage assault on black radicals are best understood as judicious repression. Judicious in that the repression was targeted, aimed at militants and radicals, rather than indiscriminate random violence. Repression of the radicals facilitated the success of the other policies.¹³

Great Society initiatives were a consequence of two decades of militant mass direct action and civil disobedience campaigns, urban rebellions, and the white American elite's stratagem of corporate liberalism, a policy that aimed at incorporating aspiring blacks into the lower and middle rungs of the U.S. political and economic structure. President Johnson's Great Society emphasized political incorporation, education, and job creation. By spring

1975, more than 3,500 blacks held elective office, up from 104 in 1964, a year before the passage of the Voting Rights Act. In four years, from 1969 to 1973, the percentage of African Americans enrolled in college rose 370 percent. The percentage of blacks in white-collar occupations doubled from 13 percent in 1960 to 26 percent in the early 1970s. The median income of black families had also doubled between 1964 and 1974. Education, employment, and electoral politics became the vehicles by which a select few blacks were incorporated in the U.S. capitalist system under the Democratic Party.¹⁴

In addition to unleashing massive repression against militants and radicals, President Nixon radically shifted federal policy. He did not abandon incorporative strategies, however, rather he shifted the emphasis toward economic incorporation. The Nixon administration established the Office of Minority Business Enterprise (OMBE), which offered low-cost loans for minority entrepreneurial ventures. Between 1969 and 1976, minority businesses quadrupled from 300,000 to 1.2 million and their sales increased from \$50 million in 1969 to \$12 billion in 1972. Meanwhile, it more than doubled the amount of grants, loans, and guarantees to minority enterprises from \$200 million to \$472 million. Not surprisingly, John Sibley Butler discovered that 47 percent of African American enterprises listed in *Black Enterprise's* top 100 black businesses in 1987 were started in the 1970s! Black capitalism was the incorporative, or carrot, aspect of Nixon's combined strategy of corporate liberalism and judicious repression.¹⁵

In the wake of systematic repression and co-optation, the Black Power nationalists shifted their focus from the United States toward Africa and the Third World. Articles focusing on Africa, Pan-Africanism, and the Third World dominated the movement's leading journals, the *Black Scholar* and *Black World*, during the early 1970s. The two distinctive features of 1970s Pan-Africanism were its mass base and the reversal of the transnational circuit of ideas. From the emigration movements of the nineteenth century through the World War II era, the development of Pan-Africanism had been dominated by ideas originating among Africans in the diaspora. This diaspora-centered perspective characterized DuBois's position before 1945. After the first wave of African independence, the circuit was quickly reversed. Heretofore, the ideas of African leaders had very little impact on the thinking of African American activists, but during the 1970s the political thought of African theorists such as Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, Julius Nyerere, and Amilcar Cabral began to influence the thinking of militant and radical African American intellectual activists.¹⁶

Black Internationalism and Pan-Africanism reappeared simultaneously.

And similarly to the new Pan-Africanism, 1970s Black Internationalism was shaped by the ideas of Third World revolutionary theorists. With the possible exception of Marx and Lenin, no nonblack theorist influenced black radicals as much as Mao Zedong. Mao's ideas played a major role in shaping the intellectual development of black radicals, particularly the members of the BPP and the Revolutionary Action Movement, later the African Peoples Party.¹⁷

Blaxploitation and the Contradictions of Cinematic Masculinist Militancy

It was in the sociohistorical context of massive urban rebellions, the transition from Black Power nationalism to Pan-Africanism and Black Internationalism, and the government's Machiavellian response—corporate liberalism and judicious repression, a the dialectical strategy of political repression and economic incorporation—that African Americans first encountered both blaxploitation and kung fu films. As a genre, blaxploitation films were constructed to appeal to the new nationalist consciousness surging through the black community. Blaxploitation films utilized Black Nationalist tropes and codes to appeal to the militant sentiment permeating black communities. The National Politics Study, the most comprehensive public opinion survey of African Americans' political attitudes, contains several items that tap into Black Nationalist ideologies. Many of these themes were incorporated into the narrative and visual structure of blaxploitation films. For instance: (1) the desire for black unity; (2) community service, especially support for youth programs; (3) support for black businesses; (4) participation in all-black organizations; (5) knowledge and practice of African and African American culture; and (6) support for efforts by blacks to gain governance of black communities.¹⁸

Violence, especially its different usages by protagonists and antagonists, was a central plot device in blaxploitation films. Specifically, white racist characters often engaged in torture, random murder, and other morally reprehensible acts, to which black heroes and heroines responded with defensive or justifiable retaliatory acts. Black violence in blaxploitation films acquired its justification from the sociohistorical context. Filmmakers played on the long history of racist violence against African Americans. The pervasiveness of racist violence is one of the defining characteristics of the black experience in the United States. Closer to the time period, black audiences were keenly aware of the unprovoked violence unleashed upon civil rights demonstrators. They were also cognizant of the governmental violence to contain the urban

insurrections and the repression of Black Power militants and radicals. Moreover, police brutality was routine in black communities. Finally, Malcolm X, Robert Williams, the Deacons for the Defense, and the BPP, among others, had legitimized black peoples' right to armed self-defense. The use of defensive or retaliatory violence reflected beliefs and practices that were endemic to Black Power nationalism, and as a central plot device in blaxploitation films it not only bequeathed morality to black protagonists' actions but also served to differentiate the new black films and their protagonists from the Sambo and mammy images of the cinematic past.¹⁹

Film scholar Ed Guerrero identified several developmental phases in the blaxploitation genre, all of which were "predicated on shifts in African American consciousness, politics, and the rising expectations of the black audience." Although he places the origin of blaxploitation films in 1967, Guerrero views Melvin Van Peebles's pioneering *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) as defining the genre's formula. The plot concerns an unlikely, and not wholly sympathetic, character, Sweetback, who works as a stud in a South Central Los Angeles brothel. Responding to unsolved murders, two police officers convince Beatle, Sweetback's boss, to let them arrest Sweetback to pacify their boss and an anxious public. In the course of taking Sweetback to the police station, the racist cops arrest and brutalize a young militant named Moo-Moo. The assault on Moo-Moo enrages Sweetback, who, overwhelmed by feelings of humiliation from years of abuse, explodes and literally hacks the cops to death with their own handcuffs. This is perhaps the most powerful scene in the film. It is the beginning of Sweetback's self-transformation. It is a case of using the master's tools to undo the master. That is, Van Peebles has Sweetback transform handcuffs, the modern symbol of slave chains, into a weapon for escape, if not liberation. Sweetback's action on behalf of the young revolutionary symbolizes self-defense but also black unity. His baptism in blood sets Sweetback on his journey, not only to escape arrest and certain death but also toward what proves to be an incomplete self-transformation. Along the way, Sweetback is aided and supported by large segments of the black community. In one scene, working-class and lumpen blacks burn a police car, enabling his escape. Weaponless, except, ironically, with a knife, Sweetback manages to escape across the Mexican border, mainly by exploiting his sexual prowess.²⁰

Explaining the significance of *Sweetback*, Van Peebles claimed, "All the films about black people up to now have been told through the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon majority. . . . In my film, the black audience finally gets a chance to see some their own fantasies acted out—about rising out of the mud and

kicking some ass.” Van Peebles’s film began and ended with potent political messages. The title card stated, “This film is dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who have had enough of The Man,” and the final frame declared, “A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES.” In a review that encompassed an entire issue of *Black Panther*, Newton declared *Sweetback* “the first truly revolutionary Black film.” *Sweetback*’s success—Van Peebles made *Sweetback* for \$500,000, but it grossed \$10 million—convinced Hollywood executives that huge profits could be made by targeting similar films at the African American community.²¹

The sentiments expressed by Van Peebles or what the Godfather of Soul, James Brown, called “the Big Payback” became the dominant formula for blaxploitation films, but with a significant twist: The explicit antisystem themes would be muted, but not wholly eliminated. Following *Sweetback*, the blaxploitation formula usually presented a simple plot in which white antagonists—usually organized crime figures, corrupt police, and/or mendacious politicians, literally the personification of the forces of exploitation and occupation—perform a heinous act against one of the hero’s or heroine’s significant others, thus forcing a reluctant black protagonist to take revenge and thereby symbolically gain retribution for the entire community. Directors inserted superfluous displays of flesh, sex, and drugs, which combined with extreme violence and exaggerated portrayals of whites roused interest in otherwise stale formulaic stories.

Blaxploitation films are greatly misunderstood. Most scholars have misread the class background of protagonists in blaxploitation films. First, they were drawn from a broader class array than is normally recognized. Film scholar Jon Kraszewski contended, “Class became a major way to sell blaxploitation to its audience.” Kraszewski was concerned with how class was used to market blaxploitation to its intended audience. According to Kraszewski, this was done mainly through two devices: the class background of the heroes and heroines and the anxiety engendered by increasing class stratification throughout the black community. Although much of his argument is problematic, Kraszewski does provide occasional insights, which are useful for this discussion. First, he is wrong about the protagonists often being “lower-class,” if by lower class he means lumpen (e.g., pimps, hustlers, and drug dealers). Lumpen characters are the protagonists in very few blaxploitation films. Whereas after Bruce Lee’s intervention, the protagonists in kung fu films were generally working-class figures, the protagonists in blaxploitation films are about evenly divided between working-class and lower-middle-class characters.²²

Four types of protagonists appeared in blaxploitation films. Unfortunately, the characters that have attracted the most critical attention and are seen as synonymous with the genre were the lumpen characters that initially preyed on the community, such as the protagonists in *The Mack* (1973), *Superfly* (1972), and *Willie Dynamite* (1973). In these films, the narrative involves a lumpen character, who for murky reasons has become ambivalent toward his criminal lifestyle. The protagonist's efforts to quit the "game" are usually opposed by "the Man," the major white criminal with whom they are in business. The second type of antihero featured in blaxploitation films were apparently working-class Vietnam War veterans, such as the protagonists in *The Bus Is Coming* (1971), *Gordon's War* (1973), *Slaughter* (1972), and its sequel, *Slaughter's Big Rip Off* (1973). Vietnam veterans also appear as secondary characters in several other blaxploitation films, often as members of militant nationalist organizations. The story line normally involves the central character returning home from the war to find his community overrun with drugs. The death of a relative, friend, or love interest via drug overdose or murder usually supplies the motivation to clean up the community. Another type of hero/heroine was the person with a working-class background who had risen into a middle-class occupation but whose friendship or kinship relations pull them into a conflict with malevolent white characters who are exploiting the black community. Jim Brown's nightclub owner in *Black Gunn* (1972), Pam Grier's nurse in *Coffy* (1973), or Calvin Lockhart's disc jockey in *Melinda* (1973) represent this character type. A variation of this type of middle-class protagonist is the black police officer or federal agent. Tamara Dobson's title character in *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975; note that it was a joint Warner Brothers and Shaw Brothers production) or Jim Kelly's in *Black Belt Jones* (1974) comes to mind. Often these characters were located in tension-filled, in-between positions, on the one side facing intense racism on the job while encountering skepticism, if not outright hostility, from sectors of the black community; for instance, Yaphet Koto's detective in *Across 110th Street* (1972).

Despite the diversity of class backgrounds, all four types of protagonists represented middle-class values. This partly explains why, except the *Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973), few blaxploitation films were revolutionary; that is, advocated fundamental social transformation. Blaxploitation protagonists exhibited self-reliance and African American cultural practices via their dress, handshakes, language, mannerism, and defiant attitude, which were coded to reflect Black Nationalist values. Pluralist protonationalism animated the categories and values articulated in blaxploitation films, not class. They

often moved between different classes and class strata, functioning as mediators whose negotiation of an increasingly class-differentiated intraracial landscape demonstrated the continued viability of black unity. *Shaft* is of course the quintessential example, but the same applies to Jim Brown's *Gunn* or Tamara Dobson's *Cleopatra Jones*. The role these characters played was to vitiate class tension in the black community.²³

Not only was the class background of blaxploitation's protagonists more diverse than generally acknowledged, but the characters also operated within a more collectivist framework than is commonly recognized. The lone avenging super stud hero is overstated. Many of these films drew on the communal elements in African American political culture in constructing their heroes and heroines. For instance, neither hero nor heroine in *Gunn*, *Melinda*, or *Cleopatra Jones* is capable of defeating their antagonists alone. Even *Shaft* had to recruit nationalist "soldiers"! What is interesting here is that blaxploitation film protagonists reflected mainstream ideals but had to recruit support from the only source then available in the black community: militant nationalist organizations. In *Gunn*, it is the Black Action Group, militant Vietnam veterans led by the protagonist's brother; in *Melinda*, Lockhart turns to his martial arts academy, led by Jim Kelly, which recalls the schools operated by the nationalist Black Karate Association; and *Cleopatra Jones* appealed to Mama Johnson's boys and her love interest, played by Bernie Casey. The sociohistorical context and African American cultural values pushed blaxploitation films to subtly challenge the individual superhero/heroine motif endemic in U.S. action and Hong Kong kung fu films. Even so, blaxploitation films could not jettison U.S. action film conventions, thus they substituted a small body of armed men for broad-based community organizing.

In blaxploitation films, the major villains were white. These characters were explicitly racist, the living embodiment of evil, the "created devils" of NOI mythology. As such, they were usually cardboard characters that were over-acted, thus making them cartoonish as well. Although the main villains were white, most of the minor antagonists were black. For instance, drugs provided by an African American dealer, a junior partner of the main white antagonist, killed Coffy's brother. These lumpen characters represented the internal forces of betrayal and were often pimps and hustlers. In their depiction of the complex relationships between the major white villain and the black community, between the major white villain and black underlings, and between the black junior partner and the black community, these films approximated the racial class hierarchies articulated in internal colonial theory.

Blaxploitation films were sensitive to black politics in other ways as well.

Historian Manning Marable reported, “In 1972–73, the popularity of Pan-Africanism among broad segments of the black population was manifested in the activities of the nationalist African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC).” In an effort to appeal to its audience’s Pan-African consciousness, both *Shaft* and *Superfly* created African-themed sequels. *Shaft in Africa* (1973) presented the contemporary plight of African migrant workers in Europe as analogous to the Atlantic slave trade. *Superfly T.N.T.* (1973) presented Priest as a confused, lost soul searching for the meaning of life. The opportunity to deliver weapons to a struggling African liberation movement is the plot device that snaps him out of his malaise.²⁴

Blaxploitation films were uneven, individually and as a genre. Most were poorly made, and several degraded women and glorified drug dealing, pimping, and other criminal behaviors. Nevertheless, despite poor craftsmanship, a significant minority, even in the action subgenre, often aspired toward something higher. The conversation in *Gunn* between the title character and the leaders of BAG is paradigmatic. Gunn comments, “Someone fingered my brother,” and an anonymous militant replies, “It was probably a pimp, hustler, or drug pusher; yeah, it was probably a pusher.” The dialogue is clear: Pimps, hustlers, and pushers were enemies of the black community. In some films, the visual imagery probably undermined the narrative interpretation, but with few exceptions the genre’s formula called for the death of the drug dealer or addict. Like Freddy in *Superfly* or Doodlebug in *Cleopatra Jones*, drug-addicted characters met a gruesome fate, usually murdered by white partners.²⁵

Like most U.S. actions films, the blaxploitation action subgenre focused on the immediate and obvious: mobsters, corrupt cops, and shady politicians. These characters, although important at the level of immediate experience, were not the major forces dominating and exploiting black communities. What was lacking in these films was a depiction of the structures of racial oppression. None of the films, except perhaps the *Spook Who Sat by the Door*, attempted to grapple with the more complex elements of racial oppression. In that sense, then, blaxploitation films were cathartic but eschewed a more complex analysis of racial oppression, self-transformation, and the politics of black liberation. Although overstated, some of the critique leveled against *wuxia pian* films can be applied to blaxploitation films. Of the *wuxia pian* genre, one critique argued, “the fantastic martial arts film emphasizes individual grievances in order to obscure the contradictions between the classes; it propagates . . . belief in retribution in order to dull the peoples’ determination to resist . . . to deflect the people from the path of struggle in reality.”²⁶

The Black Nationalist tropes and codes, resistance to oppression, and vio-

lent retribution themes embedded in blaxploitation films helped precondition the African American audience for the coming of what Desser called “the kung fu craze.” Not only did the kung fu craze not come out of nowhere, but its core audience, African Americans, were predisposed toward its narrative themes by a long history of Pan-Africanist and Black Internationalist discourses, a repressive sociohistorical moment, and the core themes of self-reliance and resistance, which were central to blaxploitation films.²⁷

Enter the Dragon: Bruce Lee and the Allure of Kung Fu Films

My nomination for the greatest blaxploitation hero of all time starred in the *Chinese Connection*.

—Darius James, *That’s Blaxploitation: Roots of the Baadasssss ‘Tude*

It is no secret that kung fu films overlapped with and then replaced blaxploitation films at inner-city theaters. Film scholar Stuart M. Kaminsky observed, “The strength of Kung Fu films for black urban audiences is clear in the choice of theaters in which the films are shown . . . show dates in 1973 indicate that kung fu films are consistently strong box office in the overwhelmingly black downtown audience theaters in Chicago.”²⁸ In an analysis of movies shown at the International Theater an inner-city venue in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Demetrius Cope discovered that between June 12, 1974, and May 13, 1975, thirty-two blaxploitation and twenty-seven martial arts films were shown. Racial segregation, the dominant spatial pattern in U.S. metropolitan areas, greatly contributed to this pattern. By 1967, African Americans composed a third of the moviegoing public. This was also a period of white flight from U.S. cities, and huge cineplexes were being built in suburban areas to accommodate white filmgoers.²⁹

Moreover, Desser noted that after 1973, Warner Brothers, which was extremely active in the distribution of both blaxploitation and kung fu films, began to double book blaxploitation and kung fu features at inner-city locations. In 1975, Warner Brothers and Shaw Brothers attempted to directly exploit this connection through the vehicle of a single film. With blaxploitation nearing its end, Warner Brothers and Shaw Brothers collaborated in producing *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*. The film teamed Tamara Dobson’s title character, an African American federal agent, with Mi Ling, who played an undercover Hong Kong police officer. The black and Chinese female team combined their martial arts skills to defeat the Dragon Lady, a white female drug lord played by Stella Stevens.³⁰

That movie distributors targeted martial arts films toward African Americans is clear from their placement in inner-city theaters. That does not explain why the audience responded favorably, however. As I have argued throughout this chapter, ideological discourses, sociohistorical context, and the similarities in the narrative structures of blaxploitation and kung fu films predisposed African Americans toward Hong Kong martial arts films. Strangely, although Shaw Brothers dominated the production of kung fu films and launched the U. S. kung fu craze, it was not Shaw Brothers films that captured African Americans' imagination. Rather it was films by Golden Harvest Productions, the new company started by Raymond Chow and Leonard Ho, two former Shaw Brothers executives. Golden Harvest was built by luring away Shaw Brothers' most talented directors and actors: King Hu, Wang Yu, and Lo Wei. It was also built by rectifying Run Run Shaw's mistakes, especially his unwillingness to offer Bruce Lee a contract worthy of his immense talent. Yet, more than any other factor, African American moviegoers were attracted to kung fu films by Bruce Lee's personal attributes.³¹

Four factors made Lee appealing to African American audiences. What differentiated Lee for the other cinematic martial artists were his exceptional athletic abilities and fighting skills. Second, the nationalist politics embedded in his films paralleled dominant trends in African American political culture and were a central theme in blaxploitation movies. Lee's third attribute that endeared him to African American audiences was his open, multiracial, and polycultural cultural politics. Fourth, his class politics also broadly mirrored a major theme in blaxploitation films.

As with Jet Li and Wesley Snipes today, speed was Bruce Lee's most impressive martial arts ability. Even by today's standards, Lee's speed was extraordinary. Bordwell described him as "preternaturally fast." During his screen test for the role of Kato in the *Green Hornet* the camera revealed that he could throw a punch in an eighth of a second! Lee was trained in Wing Chung, a southern style developed by Yin Win Chung, a Buddhist nun. Designed for women and small men, Wing Chung emphasized speed rather strength, it encouraged the use of series of rapid punches, not unlike combinations or flurries in boxing. The boxing analogy is apt partly because of Lee's eclectic approach to self-defense, but perhaps more germane to our purposes because of his study of Muhammad Ali's techniques. Lee devotes three pages to "Speed" in the *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*; he discusses five types of speed and exercises to increase it. African Americans, like other enthusiasts were attracted by his fighting skills, especially his speed.³²

In contrast to Wang Yu, the star of Shaw Brothers' the *Chinese Boxer* and the *One-Armed Swordsman*, Lee was a martial artist who could act, rather

than an actor performing martial arts; thus, the camera tricks and slick editing necessary when using actors who lacked real fighting skills were unnecessary with Lee. His skills allowed him to push the genre further toward realism. During the 1960s, a compromise referred to as *credible exaggeration* supplanted the mystical and unbelievable fight scenes prevalent in the *wuxia pian* tradition but retained elements of “weightless” combat techniques. This tradition can be found even in some 1970s films such as *Five Fingers of Death* (1972). Not often, but occasionally, and I must add only for brief moments, the combatants take flight. Lee pushed beyond the “credible exaggeration” of Shaw Brothers films and created Golden Harvest Productions’ “believable kung fu.” According to Raymond Chow, Bruce Lee’s popularity was rooted in the realism his martial arts talents conveyed on screen.³³

Lee was a renegade and a revolutionary martial artist who was dedicated to movement, growth, and flexibility. His dedication to flexibility led him to reject traditional martial arts styles as rigid and confining. Lee claimed, “In martial arts cultivation, there must be a sense of freedom. A conditioned mind is never a free mind. Conditioning limits a person within the framework of a particular system.” His quest for flexibility culminated in the creation of Jeet Kune Do, a synthesis of Wing Chun, Japanese jujitsu, and African American boxing. He trained with boxing equipment, and both the footwork and punches in Jeet Kune Do were based on boxing techniques. The origins, philosophy, and techniques of Jeet Kune Do reveal Lee’s preference for eclectic polycultural mixtures. According to Lee, “Jeet Kune Do favors formlessness so that it can assume all forms and since Jeet Kune Do has no style, it can fit in with all styles. As a result, utilizes all ways and is bound by none and, likewise, uses any techniques or means which serve its end.” Jeet Kune Do was not just a martial arts philosophy; for Lee it was a philosophy of life. Lee’s openness and polycultural approach was not limited to the martial arts.³⁴

Lee’s innovations transcended the physical, that is, his martial arts skills; he also transformed the narrative of kung fu films. He introduced themes of racial oppression and class exploitation. Chiao remarked, “The thematic emphases on race and class in Lee’s films also mark a departure from the martial arts films that preceded him.” Lee’s protagonists were working-class, transnational migrants. In one sense, they represented the particularities of working-class Chinese diasporic experiences; however, the labor migration backdrop served to universalize these experiences beyond the Chinese diaspora. By setting his characters outside of China and Hong Kong and in the aftermath of Japan’s Twenty-one Demands, Lee heightened the racial aspects of the conflicts his characters encountered. Lee’s films demonstrated how the particular can reflect the universal.³⁵

Herein lies the real key to understanding Bruce Lee's importance in the African American imagination. The nationalism of his films resonated beyond his Chinese audience; it appealed to African Americans and other racially oppressed peoples. The *Chinese Connection* (1971) is perhaps the best expression of Lee's cinematic nationalism, but it is also a dominant theme in *Fists of Fury* (1972) and *Return of the Dragon* (1972). It is important to note that Lee's nationalism was neither simple nor reactionary; it is not the nationalism of the bourgeoisie. His nationalism was anti-imperialist and was imbricated with racial and class consciousness. The intense nationalism of his films resonated beyond the Chinese and filmic contexts to recall the Asian and African national liberation movements fighting against real-world imperialism and white supremacy. *Return of the Dragon* readily comes to mind. Here, Lee's opponents are Italian gangsters and U.S. and Japanese mercenaries. The anti-imperialist character of his nationalism obtains a "formlessness" that allows it to "assume all forms," thus his anti-imperialist nationalism transcends Chinese particularity and speaks directly to African Americans, articulating with the Pan-Africanist and Black Internationalist discourses prevalent in the black community. The scene that most poignantly demonstrates the universal appeal of Lee's anti-imperialist nationalism occurs in the *Chinese Connection*. Set in Shanghai in the 1920s or 1930s, the film depicts the racism and viciousness of Japanese occupation. Lee's character, Chen, is prevented from entering a park by a police officer, who explains that he cannot enter by pointing to an overhanging sign that reads, "No dogs, or Chinese." Enraged, Chen leaps into the air and kicks and breaks the sign. The racial conflict expressed in this scene is signified throughout Lee's filmography via the race of his antagonists.³⁶

I began this section with a quote by Darius James, who considers Bruce Lee "the greatest blaxploitation hero." James may be right. After Bruce Lee's debut, the narrative structure of kung fu films mirrored blaxploitation's: Driven by the heinous violence of racial oppressors, often embodied by gangsters, protagonists are compelled to commit equally vicious acts of revenge and retribution, but the protagonist's actions are invested with moral righteousness by both the specificity of the murderous acts and the general context of racial oppression. As Chiao commented, Lee's films were "overtly political," as were many, if not most, blaxploitation films. More importantly, Lee and the formula he established for kung fu films were political in much the same way as blaxploitation films; that is, they were nationalist visions of self-defense or retaliatory violence against racial oppression, albeit fueled by individual grievances. The narrative of retribution and the use of anti-imperialist nationalist tropes and codes still register a deep emotional feeling

and ideological perspective among blacks, even removed from the sociohistorical context of the 1970s. After all, what does the current groundswell for reparations represent, if not a desire for retribution? But more than politics explains African Americans' passion for Bruce Lee's reworking of the Shaw Brothers' violent revenge sagas. There is an aesthetic appeal; his consummate skill as a martial artist, his style, and his attitude combine with the realism of his fight scenes to give him a unique place among black martial arts film aficionados. In one way, however, Bruce Lee and the heroes and heroines in kung fu films differ from those in blaxploitation films. Lee embodied the traditional lone hero, albeit, as Chiao maintained, acting on behalf of the people. As previously argued, the protagonists in blaxploitation films were more communal; they led a group, even if it was an unstable and tenuous coalition of circumstance. Blaxploitation films still required group action.

Conclusion

Kung fu films arrived in the United States in the early 1970s at an important and paradoxical historical moment. In *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963*, historian Gerald Horne described the black community of the 1940s as "a militant anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist community." This was even truer during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Pan-Africanist and Black Internationalist ideas were never more popular among African Americans. A broad sector of blacks not only opposed the Vietnam War but also wished for a Vietnamese victory. China and things Chinese were very popular in Afro-America. The little red book circulated widely along with Mao Zedong's two statements on the Black Freedom movement, in 1963 and 1968, respectively. More than anything, this was a time of struggle, perhaps even the term *war* is not inappropriate; after all, urban rebellions shook more than three hundred cities between 1963 and 1973. President Richard M. Nixon combined the policies of ghetto containment, crushing the militants and radicals, and co-optation into a strategy of judicious repression and corporate liberalism. The National Guard, U.S. Army, and local police forces cordoned off the black ghetto in many cities, often for as long as a week. Richard Nixon released the FBI on black militants and radicals. Using unconstitutional tactics, through COINTELPRO the FBI crushed the militant and radicals and thus broke the back of the black insurrection. At the same time, Nixon initiated a program of co-optation organized around the economic incorporation of a minute but strategically positioned minority of African American aspiring capitalists. Collectively,

the strategy of judicious repression and corporate liberalism transformed the social-political and ideological landscape of Afro-America.³⁷

Blaxploitation films more or less played out this drama on the screen, although in muted and distorted ways. Oversimplification, especially the substitution of heroic vigilantes for sustained community organizing, the collapsing of oppositional culture into criminal activity via occasional glorification of drug use, the exploitation of women, and ultimately the rehabilitation of the agents of repression, the police, and federal agents all served to not only weaken blaxploitation but also to make it at best a diversion and at worst a reactionary genre. Nevertheless, through its use of African American nationalist tropes and codes, blaxploitation did allude to real grievances and the need for individual and social transformation. Finally, the narrative structure of blaxploitation was so similar to that of kung fu films that it preconditioned African Americans for violent tales of retribution, especially the violent racial and class-based revenge sagas pioneered by Shaw Brothers but perfected by Bruce Lee at Golden Harvest.

Lee, his martial skills, especially speed, and his life philosophy and political vision were the final pieces that explain African Americans' attraction to kung fu films. Although his films were, as Ciao has stated, "blatant" exultations of Chinese nationalism, it was not a reactionary nationalism. Lee's polycultural politics subverted the extreme nationalism of his cinematic image, granting the films an anti-imperialist subtext, which was foreground in the African American imagination. The racial context of his films justified his nationalism and his violence, which merged wonderfully with the prevailing sentiment in black communities. His working-class persona also resonated with African Americans, a population which was 77.7 percent working class in 1970. Although black martial artist Jim Kelly had already appeared in *Melinda* (1972), it was his role as Williams in *Enter the Dragon* (1973) that propelled him into the pantheon of black cinematic heroes and heroines. Lee's promotion of Kelly and basketball superstar Kareem Abdul-Jabbar further endeared him to the black community. Finally, it is the transformation of the kung fu genre film's narrative to include race and class themes, a transformation attributed to Bruce Lee, that explains the underlying basis for African Americans attraction to Hong Kong kung fu films.³⁸

Notes

1. Inspired by Sun Tzu's classic military text, *The Art of War*, the plotline for Wesley Snipes's similarly named film is structured around deception, which is central to Sun Tzu's war manual. *Ghost Dog*, however, has a different relationship to Yama-

moto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure: A Code for Samurai*. Jim Jarmusch's film is not simply inspired by the *Hagakure*, it incorporates the text into the film's narrative by boldly presenting transcriptions directly on the screen.

2. According to David Bordwell, the thirty-eight kung fu films U.S. distributors purchased during 1973 grossed \$11 million dollars by the end of 1974; David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 84.

3. Desser also implicates the African American film audience for the genre's quick demise; see David Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception," in Poshek Fu and David Desser, eds., *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 25, 38.

4. Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 2. For a discussion of African American ideologies, see Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

5. Darren W. Davis and Ronald Brown, "The Antipathy of Black Nationalism: Behavioral and Attitudinal Implications of an African American Ideology," *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 2 (2002): pp. 239-53; Robert A. Brown and Todd C. Shaw, "Separate Nations: Two Attitudinal Dimensions of Black Nationalism," *Journal of Politics* 64, no. 1 (2003): pp. 22-44; Stuart M. Kaminsky, "Kung Fu Film as Ghetto Myth," *Journal of Popular Film* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1974): pp. 129-38; Jon Kraszewski, "Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation: Articulations of Class, Black Nationalism, and Anxiety in the Genre's Advertisements," *Velvet Light Trap* (Fall 2002): pp. 48-62. For an excellent critique of the postmodernist attack on Black Nationalism, see Madhu Dubey, "Postmodernism as Postnationalism?: Racial Representation in U.S. Black Cultural Studies," *Black Scholar* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2003): pp. 2-18.

6. W. E. B. DuBois's April 30, 1957, speech commemorating the second anniversary of the Bandung Conference, reprinted as "The American Negro and the Darker World," in Esther Cooper Jackson with Constance Pohl, eds., *The Freedomways Reader: Prophets in Their Own Country* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000), pp. 11-18; it originally appeared in *Freedomways*, no. 3 (1968). See also W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Modern Library, 1996), p. 15; W. E. B. DuBois, *Dusk to Dawn: An Essay toward An Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transition, 1995), p. 117. For works on DuBois and China and Japan, see David Levering Lewis, "Racism in the Service of Civil Rights: Du Bois in Germany, China, and Japan, 1936-37," *Black Renaissance Noire* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2002): pp. 8-25; Michael T. Martin and Lamont H. Yeakey, "Pan-American Asian Solidarity: A Central Theme in Du Bois' Conception of Racial Stratification and Struggle," *Phylon* 43, no. 3 (3rd Quarter, 1982): pp. 210, 216.

7. Elijah Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, vol. 2 (Newport News, Va.: United

Brothers Communications Systems, 1957), pp. 15, 30, 66. For critiques of the NOI's conception of the "Asiatic Blackman," see Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), especially pp. 41–73; Nathaniel Deutsch, "'The Asiatic Black Man': An African American Orientalism?" *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 3 (2001): pp. 193–208.

8. Louis E. Lomax, *When the Word Is Given . . . : A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and the Black Muslim World* (New York: Signet Books, New American Library of World Literature, 1964), pp. 130–31.

9. Huey P. Newton, *The Black Panther*, January 16, 1971, p. 10; quoted in Floyd W. Hayes III and Francis A. Kiene III, "'All Power to the People': The Political Thought of Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party," in Charles E. Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), pp. 169–70. See also Huey P. Newton, *To Die for the People: Selected Writings and Speeches* (New York: Writers and Readers, 1995; New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 171, 178–81, 207–14; Judson Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton: The Radical Theorist* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), especially pp. 74–82.

10. Clegg estimated that perhaps only half or 600,000 of *Muhammad Speaks* newspapers were actually in circulation. Nevertheless, a circulation of 300,000 biweekly newspapers provided a large audience for Malcolm and the NOI. See Clegg, *An Original Man*, pp. 160, 320, note 23. Francis Njubi Nesbitt discusses the prevalence of anticolonial and anti-imperialist rhetoric in African American newspapers before the Cold War; see Francis Njubi Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans against Apartheid, 1946–1994* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 11.

11. Kraszewski, "Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation," p. 51; Eddie Glaude Jr., *Is It Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 5.

12. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 71; Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), p. 127.

13. Samuel F. Yette, *The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America* (Silver Springs, Md.: Cottage Books; New York: Putnam, 1971), pp. 187, 266–72; Richard Quinney, *Class, State and Crime: On the Theory and Practice of Criminal Justice* (New York: McKay, 1977), pp. 109–13; Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret War against Domestic Dissent* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 124. See also Kenneth O'Reilly, "Racial Matters": *The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960–1972* (New York: Free Press, 1989), pp. 254–56, 258.

14. Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in America*, 2nd ed. (Jackson: University of Missouri Press, 1991), p. 119; Kraszewski, "Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation," pp. 51–53; Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "Providence, Patriarchy, Pathology: The Rise and Decline of Louis Farrakhan," *New Politics* 8 (Winter 1997): pp. 55–71.

15. Quoted in Robert E. Weems Jr. and Lewis A. Randolph, "The Ideological Origins of Richard M. Nixon's 'Black Capitalism' Initiative," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2001): p. 53. See also Dean Kotlowksi, "Black Power Nixon-Style: The Nixon Administration and Minority Business Enterprise," *Business History Review* 72 (1998): pp. 409–45.

16. Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, p. 4.

17. Robin Kelly, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), pp. 93–109.

18. The National Politics Study seeks to determine and analyze African Americans' "group identity, consciousness, ideological beliefs, policy preferences, and candidate evaluations"; see the 2004 National Politics Study, <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/nps>. See also Davis and Brown, "The Antipathy of Black Nationalism," p. 242.

19. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum), pp. 194–266; Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pp. 69–110; Lisa M. Anderson, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), pp. 116–31.

20. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pp. 70–71.

21. James Robert Parish and George H. Hill, eds., *Black Action Films: Plots, Critiques, Cast and Credits for 235 Theatrical and Made-for-Television Releases* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1989), pp. 296–97; Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, p. 253. Huey P. Newton endorses the hypermasculinist vision central to the film's plot. See Newton, "He Won't Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,'" in *To Die for the People*, p. 113; originally in *Black Panther* 6 (January 19, 1971). For a critique of *Sweetback*, see Lerone Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," *Ebony* 26 (September 1971): pp. 106–16. See also the movie *Baadasssss*, directed by Mario Van Peebles (2004).

22. Kraszewski, "Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation," p. 54.

23. In 2004, Obsidian Home Entertainment released a thirtieth anniversary edition of the movie *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, directed by Ivan Dixon (2004).

24. Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, p. 134.

25. *Black Gunn*, directed by Robert Hartford-Davis (2004).

26. Lau Shing-Hon, "Introduction," in *A Study of the Martial Arts Film* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1980), p. 3.

27. Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze," p. 19.

28. Kaminsky, "Kung Fu Film as Ghetto Myth," p. 30.

29. Twenty-seven general films were also shown during the period of Cope's investigation. Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze," p. 25; Demetrius Cope, "Anatomy of a Blaxploitation Theatre," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Cinema* no. 9 (October–December 1975): p. 22; Jacqueline Bobo, "'The Subject Is Money': Reconsidering the

Black Film Audience as Theoretical Paradigm,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 2, Black Film Issue (Summer 1991): p. 425.

30. Amy Abugo Ongiri, “He Wanted to Be Just Like Bruce Lee’: African Americans, Kung Fu Theater and Cultural Exchange at the Margins,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): pp. 31–40; Kaminsky, “Kung Fu Film as Ghetto Myth,” p. 130.

31. As a martial artist, Chow could appreciate Lee’s skill, so, unlike Run Run Shaw, he was willing to remunerate him fairly for his skills. Golden Harvest eventually surpassed Shaw Brothers and by 1986 pushed them from movies into mainly television production. See Fredric Dannen and Barry Long, *Hong Kong Babylon: An Insider’s Guide to the Hollywood of the East* (New York: Hyperion and Miramax Books, 1997), p. 12; David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 68.

32. Hsiung-Ping Chiao, “Bruce Lee: His Influence on the Evolution of the Kung Fu Genre,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 9 (Spring 1981): p. 33; Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, pp. 52, 53; Bruce Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (Santa Clara, Calif.: Ohara, 1975), pp. 56–59; Richard Meyers, Amy Harlib, Bill Palmer, and Karen Palmer, *From Bruce Lee to the Ninjas: Martial Arts Movies* (New York: Citadel Press, 1991), p. 65.

33. It is interesting that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Ang Lee’s homage to *wuxia pian* films, won four Academy Awards and drew massive crowds. Urban Council, *A Study of the Martial Arts Film* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1980), p. 31; Chiao, “Bruce Lee,” p. 32.

34. Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, pp. 12, 16.

35. Chiao, “Bruce Lee,” p. 37.

36. The titles to the *Chinese Connection* and *Fist of Fury* were switched when the films were transported to the United States, so what Hong Kong and Asian audiences know as *Fist of Fury*, we in the United States refer to as *The Chinese Connection*.

37. See Robin D. G. Kelly, “‘Roaring from the East’: Third World Dreaming,” in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), pp. 60–109; Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 19.

38. Haywood Derrick Horton, Beverlyn Lundy Allen, Cedric Herring, and Melvin E. Thomas, “Lost in the Storm: The Sociology of the Black Working Class, 1850 to 1990,” *American Sociological Review* 65, no. 1 (February 2000), table 1, p. 131.