

# The Centrality of the City in the African American Experience - the 1980s to Today

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## DIPLOMSKI RAD

The Centrality of the City in the African American Experience – the  
1980s to Today

(Smjer: Književno-kulturološki: amerikanistika)

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## Introduction

Following the abolition of slavery in 1865 and subsequent developments in industrial capitalism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans and their experience in the USA became closely linked with two connected notions: migration and the city. Having been freed from servitude, African Americans abandoned the rural South and plantations they had been tied to in order to find better life and better job prospects in the industrial North. A large number of African Americans sought out jobs in the newly opened factories in cities such as Detroit, Chicago and New York City (Gregory 12). Soon after, new industrial plants were opened in the cities of the western seaboard, mainly Los Angeles, San Francisco and Oakland, to support the US war effort in the Second World War. As a consequence, large numbers of African Americans again migrated to these cities looking for jobs (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1688). This meant that over the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans have largely become urban dwellers, with majority of them living in inner-city neighborhoods of large industrial cities – an image that is still relevant to this day. Naturally, this reflected on the African American cultural production. Stories of slavery and the rural South were replaced with stories, songs and poems celebrating their newfound utopia in the city. There, they did not have to worry about the Jim Crow laws of the South, they could find better paid jobs and they were able to live among their own people. However, this utopia of the African American city soon became dystopia: representation of poor living conditions, racial segregation, inequality between white and African American workers and police brutality became the dominant image of the urban African American experience (Massood 1996, 86). These images of the ghetto, as it is often being referred to, have remained ever-present in the African American cultural production. While some aspects of life and representation of the ghetto have certainly changed over time, problems such as racial segregation and police brutality can still be found in much of the urban African

American cultural production. Following the introduction of Ronald Reagan's neoliberal policies, deindustrialization of American cities and War on Drugs in the 1980s, there was a rapid rise in black urban unemployment, especially among young black men (Wilson 30). Furthermore, budget cuts were made on social welfare programs and police surveillance intensified. The rising unemployment and cuts in welfare programs led to a portion of African American population finding another way of making ends meet – dealing drugs. Consequently, there has been an increase in addiction, crime and violence. This postindustrial variation of the ghetto was first chronicled by gangsta rap artists such as Ice Cube, Dr. Dre and Eazy-E. By rapping about his everyday life in the ghetto on his debut single *Boyz-n-the-Hood* (1987), Eazy-E was the first one to signal this transition from the industrial to the postindustrial variation of the ghetto. Thus, the ghetto became the hood.

Drugs, gang violence, black-on-black crime, police helicopters flying over and drive-by shootings became everyday life for African American residents of the hood. Therefore, the main goal of African American city dwellers, especially the young ones, was to survive the hood. That is why this paper will be focused on the ways in which the city, i.e. the hood, has influenced lives of African Americans living in the U.S. cities. More specifically, the main argument of this paper is the idea that the city has played a key part in formation of the contemporary African American identity. Since this development of the ghetto into the hood occurred during the 1980s, when the socioeconomic conditions of the ghetto turned for the worse as a consequence of deindustrialization of American cities and demonization of African Americans by the Reagan administration, the main focus of this analysis will be on the period between the second part of the 1980s and early 2010s. In terms of the African American population living in the hood, the young black male will be at the center of this analysis due to the fact that most texts from this period are coming-of-age narratives about young black men as they navigate trials and tribulations of life in the hood.

This paper will analyze four such texts. To be more precise, this paper will analyze two movies – John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and the Hughes Brothers’ *Menace II Society* (1993), a novel – Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) and a music album – Kendrick Lamar’s *good kid m.A.A.d city* (2012). Besides the fact that these four texts are coming-of-age narratives, they also have something else in common: all of them take place in the city of Los Angeles. Specifically, they take place in neighborhoods and cities such as South Central, Watts and Compton, which have become synonymous with the notion of the hood as a consequence of the gangsta rap culture which emerged during the 1980s on the West Coast. It must be noted though that *The White Boy Shuffle* takes place in Hillside, a West Los Angeles neighborhood. However, the way Paul Beatty describes Hillside in the novel links it to the familiar notion of the hood, which has already been established by the time Beatty’s novel was published.

Before turning the attention to the four texts which are at the heart of this paper, one must consider the historical, political and socioeconomic details that have led to the development of the hood. Given the complexity of the task at hand, this paper will rely on numerous studies from several different fields of study in its analysis. Besides film and literary studies, such as Massood’s analysis of African American cinema and Stallings’ debate on black masculinity in *The White Boy Shuffle*, the paper will also consult works from the fields of urban geography, political economy and sociology, with most of it being urban sociology<sup>1</sup>. These studies provide a much needed clarification on the causes as well as the consequences of the ghetto’s socioeconomic conditions. Aside from these, the paper will also turn to works of history in order to adequately frame the broader developments in African American life, especially when it comes to their urban life. It is precisely these historical developments which will be detailed in the following segment of the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> For Example Robert Park’s *The City: Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment* (1925) and David Wilson’s *Cities and Race: America’s New Black Ghetto* (2007)

# From the Ghetto to the Hood: A Historical Overview of the African American Urban Life

Migration has always been emblematic of the American way of life. Be it a simple move to a nearby city looking for better job opportunities or the westward expansion, migration has had a huge impact on the average American throughout the history of their nation. Following the abolition of slavery in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the same could be said about the African American way of life as well. Having realized that the Emancipation Proclamation will not change the quality of their lives overnight, many African Americans of the rural South decided to migrate to the Northern industrial cities that were directly located on the main rail lines: Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and New York. Thus, the Great Migration commenced (Massood 2003, 12). This long-lasting process that saw an estimated 1.2 million African Americans migrating to the North within its first twenty years<sup>2</sup> nearly reversed the ratio of urban and rural residents.

At first, these new urban African Americans celebrated the city as a promised land. They were free from the discriminatory Jim Crow laws of the South and they were working for better wages than they were in the South<sup>3</sup>. However, over time they realized that the city had problems of its own. The main problem African Americans faced in the city was racial segregation – separating individuals and groups in space based on their race-ethnicity. According to Hise, such organization of the city space was the “signature aspect of the modern city under industrial capitalism” (549). This meant that every industrial city of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the cities in which African Americans migrated, segregated its residents based on their race. The final destination of their migration did not matter. Racial

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<sup>2</sup> From around 1910 to 1940 (National Archives).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that while the northern wages were higher than the southern ones, white workers of the North were better paid than the African American ones (Massood 2003, 12).

segregation was a universal experience for all African Americans migrating to American industrial cities. To make things worse, Goldfield argues that “since urban life created greater opportunities for racial interaction, urban whites were as vigilant as, if not more vigilant than, their rural counterparts in maintaining the biracial society” (1025). Not only were the urban African Americans cut off from the rest of the city by virtue of being black, the white residents were even more eager than their rural counterparts to preserve that separation between black and white population.

In order to ensure that this demarcation line between the white and black city space was laid down precisely where they wanted it to be, the authorities, i.e. the white majority, essentially institutionalized racial segregation. They have done so through various zoning ordinances<sup>4</sup> which allowed the city authority to plan and control which land is used for what. In doing so, the realtors were granted power to confine poor African Americans to undesirable pieces of land in the city, which later became known as the ghetto (Wilson 21). This is best exemplified by an article from the National Association of Real Estate Boards’ code of ethics from 1924: “a Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood...members for [*sic*] any race or nationality...whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood” (National Association of Realtors, qtd. in Wilson, 23). In their ethics code, officially recognized realtors association explicitly claims that realtors are able to prohibit certain races from buying and/or building properties in certain areas of the city. To put it differently, by preventing African Americans from entering primarily white neighborhoods, realtors and city authorities successfully created ghettos within their cities. Thusly created ghettos could be characterized as an achievement of industrial capitalism. Related to this, Wilson asserts: “cities could efficiently extract black

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<sup>4</sup> While zoning was initiated in 1916 in New York City (see Grgas), its usage rapidly increased after a controversial ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1926. This ruling gave city authorities the right to restrict one's ability to determine what they want to do with their land. Instead, the city decides what is best for the general public interest (Wilson 21).



labor while ‘the civic contaminating influence’ of black bodies could be isolated” (Wilson 20). In essence, factories were provided with cheap black labor that powered the American industrial capitalism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century while keeping the property values of middle and upper class whites from sinking due to “contaminating influence” of urban African American population. Living in these ghettos implied that one is undesirable and harmful to other, non-black residents of the city. Yet, at the same time they were still useful to the system as they were working in factories for tiny salaries. The ghetto life was also characterized by “substandard housing [and] going to separate and unequal schools (Wilson 20). This claim goes hand in hand with another sociologist’s claim: Robert Park states that these ghettos, or slums as he sometimes calls them, are “areas of deteriorated houses, of poverty, vice, and crime” (Park and Burgess 109). These two quotes allude to the fact that the ghetto has been defined by these traditional images linked to the ghetto ever since its inception in the U.S. And while that may be true, Robert Park had a rather different reasoning behind it, as opposed to the institutionalized racial segregation and exploitation of underpaid black labor.

While not its founder, Robert E. Park was one of the most influential representatives of the Chicago school of urban sociology (Popovski 104). His famous book titled *The City: Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment* (1925) had a great influence on sociology of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like many other sociologists from the Chicago school, his studies focused on social integration of immigrants into the city (Popovski 103). More precisely, he focused on the way minority races, mainly African Americans, adapted to the life in the city. And while some of the conclusions Park and his colleagues reached were logically sound<sup>5</sup>, his reasoning behind the social delinquency and poor quality of life Park ascribed to the ghetto was problematic, to say the least. Firstly, he redefined the term “ghetto” to refer to poor urban areas inhabited by minority races (Massood

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, Park and his colleagues believed that if one were to improve living conditions of a certain area, social delinquency would disappear from said area (Popovski 110).

2003, 84). Park referred to these neighborhoods as “ghettos” early on in the aforementioned book (on p. 9, to be precise), after which he illustrated them as rundown, seedy areas whose only residents are poor, criminal and/or homeless minorities. Secondly, and most importantly, Park quite explicitly states that minorities, mostly African Americans, living in the ghetto deserve to reside in such areas of the city. He argues that they “would not show such a persistent and distressing uniformity of vice, crime, and poverty unless they were peculiarly fit for the environment in which they are condemned to exist” (Park and Burgess 45). In other words, Park claims that the black ghetto culture of poverty and crime is not connected to institutionalized racial segregation and underpaid black labor, but that it is pathological. He attributes poverty of African Americans living in the ghetto to their genetics and not the political and socioeconomic circumstances that largely contributed to the creation of the ghetto. In order to further drive this point, in later chapters of *The City* he refers to the inner city neighborhoods in which minorities live as “areas of social junk” (Park and Burgess 109). Moreover, he alleges that there were one thousand gangs operating in Chicago in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that most of them were located in the ghetto (Park and Burgess 111). So while Park concludes that living conditions of poverty stricken neighborhoods can be improved, he believes that African Americans are solely responsible for that poverty. As such, Park’s social theory on the ghetto is outdated and, for the most part, not relevant for the contemporary ghetto, i.e. the hood.

Nevertheless, while Park’s conceptual models are outdated when it comes to the research of the contemporary city, his work is still important to an extent. As Čaldarović states, the Chicago school of urban sociology essentially did not have one set conceptual/theoretical model that every member of the school followed, but several. That is why their importance lies in the fact that they introduced many new areas of research as well as approaches to research – the city as an environment that influences lives of its inhabitants

had not been the subject of any studies before the Chicago school (Čaldarović 24-35, 173-174). They were the first academics to examine in what way the city impacts lives of its residents, especially when it comes to its minority residents. So in a way, they introduced virtually every topic which deals with the relationship between an American city and its people, including the topic of this paper. Having mentioned the Chicago school of urban sociology and its importance, it is time to turn the attention to the second part of the Great Migration and the further developments in the ghetto's transition to its postindustrial variation – the hood.

The next big development that happened in the life of urban African Americans occurred during World War II. As mentioned earlier, the U.S. government opened new defense plants to support their war effort. According to Massood, this second surge of African American migration was just as large and just as important as the first one (2003, 31-32). This claim can be further backed up by the fact that 600,000 African Americans moved into Los Angeles County alone between 1942 and 1965 (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1688). Similar to the first wave of migrations, African Americans migrated to the West Coast looking for profitable employment. Be it the rural African Americans of the South or the urban ones from the North, they thought that working in these new military-related factories would improve their living conditions. However, while the final destination<sup>6</sup> of all these African Americans was different than before, they were still met with racial segregation, zoning ordinances, poverty and so on. To add fuel to the fire, that very same arms industry that offered employment to African Americans soon left them even more vulnerable to poverty than the East Coast based African Americans. In relation to this, Coquery-Vidrovitch claims the following: “With the coming of World War II, the region's entire manufacturing became

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<sup>6</sup> Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco and Oakland were the most popular destinations in this second wave of African American movement across the United States (National Archives).

heavily dependent on military spending. As a result, L.A.'s postwar economy has been highly vulnerable to national political funding cycles" (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1685).

So, while newly migrated African Americans enjoyed stable employment during the war, once the war was over they were left at mercy of sporadic federal funding. To put it differently, since majority of African Americans living on the West Coast worked at those military factories, their only source of income was at jeopardy following the end of the war in 1945. It was in this post-war period that the West Coast ghettos came to be. Alongside all the problems that have already been mentioned, one must also highlight police brutality that plagued inner-city neighborhoods of the West Coast ghettos. In that regard, the Los Angeles Police Department was quite notorious, especially after the 1965 civil unrest in Watts. Police brutality is closely linked to increased police control and in the aftermath of those riots, Lyndon B. Johnson, then president of the United States, essentially replaced social programs designed to fight poverty, majority of which he implemented as a part of his Great Society program, with heightened police surveillance and militarization of police departments. There are several examples from Johnson's presidency that attest to this. Elizabeth Hinton mentions the fact that Los Angeles Sheriff's Department received \$200,000 of federal money to fund the purchase of helicopters for their air-surveillance program. She also states that by early 1970s the federal government purchased helicopters for departments in fifty cities (Hinton 105). This policing via helicopters program was extremely popular in the Los Angeles ghettos due to vast areas that the LAPD had to control – in essence, they policed entire cities like Watts, Compton, etc. This increased surveillance of ghettos also went hand in hand with militarization of police departments that were financially incentivized and even ordered to increase surveillance of already-targeted black neighborhoods (Hinton 109). Johnson

militarized the police by covering up to 90 percent of the costs of riot-prevention gear<sup>7</sup> (Hinton 110). Instead of fighting poverty, which was the root cause of crime, Johnson decided to militarize the police in order to prevent crime before it even happened. Essentially, this meant that Johnson had to backtrack on many of his social programs and either replace or merge them with programs designed to increase police surveillance and control over African Americans following the 1965 civil unrest in Watts (Hinton 100-102). These policies were then inherited by Nixon who continued and even intensified this militarization of the police, which can be seen from Hinton's claim that by early 1970s the federal government acquired police helicopters in fifty different U.S. cities, as mentioned earlier. Naturally, these policies spawned even more animosity between African Americans and the police. Consequently, police brutality skyrocketed in the years following the 1965 Watts riots.

While the brutality of the Los Angeles Police Department was widely known, it was not paid much attention until the 1991 beating of Rodney King. It caught the attention of the public only after a recording of the beating had been leaked to the media. Following the publication of said video, a thorough investigation within the LAPD had been conducted and the results were astonishing. For instance, Los Angeles paid \$8 million in 'verdicts and settlements' against its police department in 1990 alone (Solomon 26). These absurd amounts of money had to be provided for police brutality complaints that the Police Misconduct Lawyers Referral Service received "on a weekly basis, if not on a daily basis" (Mydans, qtd. in Solomon, 31). This meant that over time police brutality turned into one of the biggest issues urban African Americans faced in the ghetto and as such, it will be a prominent factor in each text that will be analyzed. Nonetheless, it was during the Reagan presidency that the ghetto would receive the final blow which transformed it from the ghetto to the hood.

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<sup>7</sup> Due to its broad definition, riot-prevention gear included M-1 military carbines, bulletproof vests, walkie-talkies and even army tanks in this case (Hinton 110).

While the institutionalized racial segregation and the ever-present police brutality were definitely detrimental to urban life of African Americans, it was Ronald Reagan who quite possibly dealt the most damage to the inner-city blacks by taking away the one thing that spurred their migration to the city in the first place – their jobs. Following the introduction of his neoliberal policies and the subsequent deindustrialization of the city, many African Americans lost their jobs since majority of them worked in the factories that during the 1980s relocated their businesses elsewhere (Dubey 25). As it has already been mentioned, it was the young black man who suffered from this deindustrialization the most: the only jobs available to them in this postindustrial world were the poorly paid service jobs. As a result, the already appalling living conditions in the ghetto became even worse. With no apparent solution to their problem, on the one hand many of the young urban African Americans turned to simply loitering about the neighborhood. Some, on the other hand, started dealing drugs as their source of income, which also negatively impacted local crime and violence statistics as gangs started battling over certain areas of the city space. In other words, the ghetto became the hood. After deindustrializing the city and consequently stripping many urban African Americans of their only source of income, Reagan effectively demonized the poor urban blacks by playing to the already established images of the ghetto residents as pathologically poor and criminal (Wilson 32). Having done so, he considerably shrunk poverty programs, which is best exemplified by the fact that he halved the Housing and Urban Development Budget from \$36 million in 1980 to \$18 million in 1987 (Wilson 33). Once again, instead of helping the poor black residents of the hood, the federal government decided to intensify the dire situation urban African Americans found themselves in. It was this environment of institutionalized racial segregation, police brutality, unemployment and violence in their own communities that substantially impacted identities of many black residents of the hood, which will be exemplified in the upcoming sections of this paper.

## *Boyz n the Hood*: Growing up in South Central L.A. ‘ain’t no fairy tale’

John Singleton’s directorial debut *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) is the first and quite possibly the most famous representative of the hood film genre. Majority of hood films have been released during the 1990s and more often than not they follow young black men as they navigate the life in the hood. *Boyz n the Hood* is centered on the lives of three young men in the Crenshaw Ghetto of South Central Los Angeles. Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding Jr.), the movie’s protagonist, lives there with Furious Styles (Laurence Fishburne), his father. His two best friends, Ricky (Morris Chestnut) and Doughboy (Ice Cube), live across the street with their mother. Tre is characterized as a smart and educated young man who plans to go to college after he finishes high school. He is also the only young character who has a job in the movie. As is to be expected in the postindustrial city of the 1990s, Tre holds a low-paid service position at a nearby Gap. Ricky is presented as a young father and a talented football player who attempts to escape the ghetto via college scholarship, but ultimately fails to do so as is murdered by a gang. As opposed to them, Doughboy has been in and out of juvenile detention centers and prisons since the age of ten. He is a drug dealer who has no job nor does he go to school. Following the murder of his brother Ricky, he goes on a quest to avenge his brother by killing the three men that murdered Ricky. Via text at the end of the movie, the audience finds out that Doughboy was murdered merely two weeks after executing his revenge. As opposed to him, Tre survives the hood by leaving for college in Atlanta.

Since the hood films of the 1990s are focused on these narratives about growing up in the hood and surviving all the crime, violence and police brutality that goes on there, hood films share many characteristics with the black action movies of the 1970s, which are also known as the Blaxploitation movies. As Massood states, Blaxploitation movies also focus on

“narratives structured around crime, drugs, prostitution, and the effects of poverty on urban lives to an urban audience who read these images as closer to their own situations” (1996, 87). This means that in contrast to previous generations of filmmakers, the directors behind Blaxploitation movies have focused on themes relevant to the urban audience and put the city and the problems city dwellers face at the center of its narrative. It is no wonder then that the hood films of the 1990s continued that tradition.

But it is not just the themes that these two genres of movies share. Firstly, Massood argues that the city plays a central role like any other character in the Blaxploitation movies and as such is introduced to the audience like any other important character in a film (2003, 86, 103). Here, Massood claims that the city is not merely a location where certain events occur. She claims that the city enables and influences the events of the narrative. Therefore, the city is a character of its own in the Blaxploitation movies, which is why they have to be introduced to the audience like every other relevant character. Blaxploitation movies achieve that in three different ways. They showcase one of the characters, usually the protagonist, as he navigates the streets of the city in which the movie takes place (Massood 2003, 96-97). In this fashion, the audience is introduced to the neighborhood which will play an important part in the movie. Alternatively, Blaxploitation films open with extreme high-angle long shots of the ghetto, in which they illustrate the poverty and the desperate situation in which the residents of the ghetto find themselves (Massood 2003, 102). By presenting the ghetto in such a way, Blaxploitation films attempt to familiarize the audience with the ghetto, the same way they attempt to do so with any other character. The final option introduces the city by presenting the audience with some of the monuments of the black ghetto life (Massood 2003, 85). In Blaxploitation movies, these scenes included famous Harlem locations, such as the Apollo Theater and the Cotton Club.



Similarly, *Boyz n the Hood* includes such a scene. The only difference is the location – *Boyz* displays the monuments of black urban life in L.A. such as the Crenshaw Boulevard (Singleton 1:06:54-1:11:41). Furthermore, the first two examples of introducing the city as a character in Blaxploitation films can also be found in both *Boyz* and *Menace*<sup>8</sup>. The first technique of introducing the city as a character is used by *Boyz* in the prologue of the movie, which is set in 1984. In this introductory scene of the movie, young Tre and his friends roam around an unspecified neighborhood of South Central in which he lives with his mother (Singleton 00:01:03-00:02:43). The audience is immediately presented with images of poverty and crime in the hood as Tre and his friends walk by abandoned and destroyed houses and buildings until they finally arrive to the location where a dead body of a murder victim has been left to decay. Soon after, the audience is presented with another such scene since Tre has moved houses in order to live with his father. In a similar fashion, Tre and his other group of friends walk around the neighborhood to showcase the environment which will impact their lives (Singleton 00:20:20-00:24:52). In this scene, Tre stumbles upon another dead body, as well as a group of young black men who do nothing but loiter in the streets and drink alcohol. To put it differently, Singleton uses these introductory scenes to expose the features of the postindustrial ghetto to the audience. Expectedly, there are also some differences between Blaxploitation and hood films. These differences can be attributed to that very same postindustrial ghetto. To be more precise, they can be ascribed to the changes from the industrial to the postindustrial ghetto that have happened during the Reagan presidency. In regards to this, Massood articulates that “the focal point of many blaxploitation films was an adult male, whereas hood films narrate the coming-of-age of a young male protagonist and the difficulties of such an undertaking in the dystopian

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<sup>8</sup> Since *Menace II Society* is not the main topic of this section, the scene which uses the aforementioned feature of Blaxploitation cinema is described here. In a high-angle bird shot of Watts, which is edited to represent a recording from a police helicopter as it surveys the hood, the Hughes brothers introduce both the city and another important factor of life in the hood – constant police surveillance (Hughes and Hughes 00:10:01-00:10:40).

environment of the inner city” (2003, 147). This change of focus from an adult male to black youth can be linked with the rapid rise of unemployment among young black men following the deindustrialization of the city. Instead of the adult male’s fight against the white man, a young black man’s mission to survive the hood turned into the main focus of African American cinema since surviving the hood has become harder in the neoliberal America of the 1990s. In other words, alongside the institutionalized segregation, heightened police surveillance and recurrent police brutality, black urban youth also has to face the violence of their environment in hood films.

This extremely violent environment which impacts the lives of urban black youth is illustrated in *Boyz n the Hood* from the very beginning of the movie. In fact, it is announced before it is illustrated. Before the audience sees the first images of the movie, it is presented with gunshots and screams, followed by a text that says “One out of every twenty-one Black American males will be murdered in their lifetime. Most will die at the hands of another Black male” (Singleton 00:00:24-00:00:44). Right at the start, Singleton reveals that violence, more specifically black-on-black violence, will be one of the major themes of the movie. He backs that claim by showing deceased young black males in the aforementioned two scenes. The movie implies the fact that their murders are gang or drug related incidents. While the film implies that the problem is violence in general, with scenes such as the one in which someone tries to rob Tre’s and Furious’ home (Singleton 00:14:05-00:14:45) and the one in which Brandi (Nia Long), Tre’s girlfriend, is startled by random gunshots while writing her homework (Singleton 1:12:10-1:12:25), the movie highlights the violence which results in deaths of young black men specifically.

The movie does that quite explicitly in one of the more prominent scenes of the movie. In this scene Furious Styles is trying to teach Tre and Ricky, as well as some bystanders, about gentrification and the idea that the white man is trying to make black

people kill each other by putting gun stores on every corner of the hood. At one point, he asks: “Who is it that is dying on these streets every night?” he continues, “Y’all [referring to a group of young black men], young brothers like yourselves” (Singleton 1:06:05-1:06:13). Furious, who is characterized as old and wise, explicitly states that one of the main problems in the hood is the fact that young black men are killing each other because in doing so they are preventing African Americans as a people from reproducing – they are helping the white man eradicate the black man from the United States. Furthermore, the fact that Furious is the ‘old and wise’ character of the movie points to the fact that the black-on-black violence has a severely destructive impact on the young black men of the hood. To be more precise, it “reinforces the expectation that black men die young and violently” (Boylorn 152).

Furious’ characterization of an old and wise character is problematic in itself due to the fact that Furious is twenty-seven years old in the movie’s prologue and is thirty-five at the end of the movie. Because Furious is considered to be old and wise at the age of thirty-five, which is relatively young by today’s standards, the audience is left to conclude that a lot of young black male residents of the hood don’t reach that age. In the previously mentioned scene, Furious himself alludes to the fact that this violent behavior by young black men leads to their own premature demise. Essentially, Furious condemns the behavior which is personified in the character of Doughboy: he is dealing drugs, proudly carries a gun to present himself as a threat, drives a flashy car, often refers to women as “bitches” and he shows no interest in them beyond sex. In connection to this, Boylorn states: “We see violent masculinity played out repeatedly in the film as each black man attempts to prove, salvage, and/or reinforce his masculinity. These performances are always necessarily public and require other black men as witnesses” (Boylorn 153). The movie showcases Doughboy as constantly guilty of this performance of violent masculinity – he is always with his friends and therefore must always maintain this vision of him as a ghetto thug. The best example of

such a performance is the scene in which he flashes his gun in front of everyone on the Crenshaw Boulevard to settle an altercation between Ricky and some man who has shoulder bumped him (Singleton 1:10:10-1:10:45). In this scene, he both flashes a gun and refers to a girl who tries to de-escalate the situation as a “bitch.”

While not to the same extent, every young black man from the hood, including Tre, performs this masculinity that they deem as necessary to survive. As opposed to Doughboy, whose performance of masculinity is tightly connected to violence, Tre maintains a cool persona that lends him a sense of invulnerability to all the issues of life in the hood. On one occasion, he even maintains this persona in front of his father, which is displayed in the scene in which he lies to Furious about the fact that he has never had sexual intercourse (Singleton 00:41:20-43:30). This scene exhibits how this performance of masculinity is deep-rooted to such an extent in young black urban men that even Tre, an educated, well-mannered young man who has had a responsible father to teach him how to be a man, believes he has to maintain his cool persona at all times. However, Tre drops this persona on rare occasions in order to present his “real” self, one that has been majorly influenced by his father’s lessons. He does so on three separate occasions: first he admits to Ricky that he has never had sexual intercourse because he is afraid of being a father<sup>9</sup> (Singleton 00:45:05-46:00); then he cries in front of his girlfriend after an incident in which he and Ricky were harassed by the police (Singleton 1:14:10-1:16:11); and finally he again bursts into tears in front of his father following the murder of his best friend (Singleton 1:34:20-1:35:10). In other words, Tre is in constant struggle between the persona which the hood forces upon him and his “real” self, a person who desires to escape the confines of his ghetto and not let others define his identity, but define it on his own. According to Massood, this dilemma, which is central to *Boyz n the Hood*, culminates when Tre joins Doughboy and his friends in their plan to avenge Ricky

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<sup>9</sup> Following his confession, Tre is met with ridicule from his best friend, which again points to the necessity of performing masculinity in the hood .

(2003, 157). In the end, Tre decides to abandon them and go home before they manage to execute the drive-by shooting. Thus, the movie conveys the message that the hood might be extremely influential in dictating lives and actions of young black men, but it is the strong father figure that is necessary so the hood's influence does not become too overwhelming.

While these themes of black-on-black violence and performing masculinity in accordance with the expectations of the hood are central themes of the movie, *Boyz* implies and even explicitly claims that the black-on-black violence, as well as all the other problems plaguing the hood are merely symptoms of a larger problem – racism that has been institutionalized through racial segregation, police surveillance and police brutality. Aside from the aforementioned scene in which Furious directly accuses the white majority of trying to get black people to kill each other, there are numerous scenes and signs, both aural and visual, that point to this. The audience does not have to wait long for such a sign since the very first images of the movie show the juxtaposition of a literal stop sign in the hood with a plane flying over it (Singleton 00:00:52-00:01:02). In relation to this, Massood articulates that this shot “symbolizes the desire for mobility both inside and outside the ghetto (2003, 154). More specifically, this scene represents the ambition of many African Americans to leave the hood and socioeconomic conditions connected to it, but that the institutions that put up that stop sign are preventing them from doing so. Moreover, in the following scene, young Tre and his friends visit a murder scene with a police line – a physical constraint of mobility. In that same scene, the movie makes a more direct accusation of the white man by connecting a face to the institutions that prevent them from leaving the hood.

To be more precise, there are a number of Reagan re-election posters on the wall next to the murder scene. Thusly, the movie connects the socioeconomic conditions of the hood to the Reagan administration (Massood 2003, 157). To put it differently, *Boyz* links transformation of the ghetto to the hood with the deindustrialization of the city and Reagan's

demonization of the ghetto residents, which are possibly the most prominent aspects of his presidency. However, the presence of the police is the key factor in the constraints of mobility that are forced upon the residents of the hood. The signs that signal this ubiquitous presence of the police are the sounds of police helicopters, which can be heard throughout the movie (Massood 2003, 156). As it has been mentioned, this method of policing the city has been adopted by the LAPD following the 1965 Watts riots and is emblematic of the ever-present control the department has over the city's inner-city neighborhoods.

Though they are symbolic, the police helicopter sounds are not the most significant example of constraints on mobility that the police place on young black men in the movie. That would be the scene in which the police stop and harass Tre and Ricky simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time (Singleton 1:11:55-1:13:40). After stopping the two simply for being two young black men in a different neighborhood, a police officer threatens Tre with a gun. Related to this, Massood claims that "...they become criminals by virtue of being outside the hood" (1996, 92). This criminality of Tre and Ricky leaving their neighborhood is linked to the power that the police have been granted to limit the mobility of urban African Americans. And when one considers the extent to which the police abuse that power, it is no wonder that these imaginary demarcation lines between the city space in which African Americans are allowed to exist and the space in which they are not are made real in Tre's and Ricky's mind. This is demonstrated in the already mentioned scene in which Furious talks about gentrification. In order to show them what gentrification is, Furious drives the boys to Compton, another predominantly black neighborhood of the L.A. County. Even though, as Massood states, Compton "appears to be the same as their own block...the social dynamics have completely changed" (2003, 155). Massood states that while Compton looks the same as Tre's and Ricky's hood, as a result of the imaginary lines that segregate the two neighborhoods – the lines that are controlled by the police, the social dynamics of the

city space are completely different to the dynamics of their neighborhood. Tre and Ricky recognize that, which is why they seem scared and extremely uncomfortable when Furious takes them there. These themes of racial segregation, police brutality, black-on-black violence and poverty that impact lives of urban African Americans are also present in *Menace II Society*, albeit from a different point of view and with a slightly different message. While *Boyz n the Hood* stresses the importance of a strong father figure in lives of black male residents of the hood, *Menace II Society* makes no such claims.

## ‘This is what’s real’: Documenting the Hood in *Menace II Society*

Allen and Albert Hughes’ directorial debut *Menace II Society* (1993) is often considered to be a follow-up to *Boyz n the Hood* by virtue of sharing main themes and location with *Boyz*. In a way, that is not too far from the truth. “Reportedly ‘outraged by the Hollywood sentimentality of Singleton’s film, Allen and Albert Hughes set out to capture what they felt was the ‘real’ situation in the hood” (Massood 2003, 162). Having seen the happy ending of *Boyz*, in which Tre escapes the hood with his girlfriend Brandi by leaving for college, the Hugheses’ decided to show what life in the hood was really like. Since crime and violence have been so prevalent in the hood, the movie follows Caine, a young drug dealer from Watts. Since the age of ten, Caine has lived with his grandparents because his father, also a drug dealer, is killed in a drug deal, while his mother is a drug addict who can’t take care of a child. On top of that, Pernell, the man whom Caine considers a replacement father figure is also a drug dealer. Essentially, the Hugheses’ contend that in the “real” hood, there is a higher chance that a young black man’s father will either be a criminal or out of the picture. Consequently, there is also a high chance that in such an environment, the young black man in question will also become a criminal of sorts. Over the course of the movie, the audience sees his criminal activity, which is coupled with voice-over narration through which the audience hears his perspective and thoughts about growing up in the hood. When he finally attempts to escape the hood with Ronnie (Jada Pinkett Smith), his girlfriend, he is murdered by a man that Caine has physically assaulted in the past. So, in short, the movie explores a lot of the themes *Boyz* explores as well, but it does so from a perspective of the ghetto thug archetype that Doughboy represents in *Boyz*.

Just like Singleton, the Hughes brothers focus on the role of a father figure in the movie. However, since *Menace II Society* can be observed as a sort of a counterstatement to



Singleton's movie, the role of the father figure is much different in this film. The audience is presented with this difference quite early into the film. In an introductory part of the movie, Caine explains his upbringing through voice-over narration: "Sometimes, Mom would use them [drugs] all up before he could even sell them. Then he'd have to beat her up. Growing up with parents like that; I heard a lot and I saw a lot. I caught onto the criminal life real quick. Instead of keeping me out of trouble, they turned me onto it" (Hughes and Hughes 00:05:28-00:05:50) Here, Caine describes what his first ten years of life looked like. He states that since he was completely surrounded by crime and violence, there was no other choice for him but to become a criminal, just like his parents. In relation to this, Massood states that "unlike Tre, who, with his father's influence, stays away from crime, Caine, with his father's influence, sees no other option..." (2003 165) So, while Singleton highlights the importance of a positive father figure in lives of young black men living in the hood, the Hughes' criticize that right from the beginning of the movie by implying that since these same fathers are also residents of the hood, it is more realistic that they would push their children towards the same life of drugs, crime and violence that they lead.

Moreover, the movie also suggests that even if their father figures have a positive influence on their lives, it may not be enough to overcome the socioeconomic conditions of the hood. While it is implied that Caine has no positive father figures in the early part of his life, in the latter part he most certainly does. Massood states that Caine's grandfather is one of them and that he tries to advise him not to lead the life of a criminal (2003, 168). Alongside his grandfather, Caine has a friend called Sharif whose father represents another positive father figure in his life. At one point, Sharif's father tries to persuade Caine to join Sharif in Kansas. In doing so, Sharif's father tries to save him from the hood (Hughes and Hughes 00:59:04-1:00:47). In a certain way, Pernell, the aforementioned drug dealer whom Caine looked up to when he was young, can also be described as a positive father figure by the end

of the movie because he also advises Caine to leave the hood (Hughes and Hughes 1:20:10-1:21:10). Having presented the audience with these three positive influences on Caine's life, the movie then completes its criticism of *Boyz n the Hood* by killing off both Caine and Sharif at the end of the movie. Despite positive father figures in both of their lives, they are murdered in a drive-by shooting just as Caine is about to leave the hood with Ronnie, thus declaring that the individual will simply is not enough to flee the harsh reality of life in the hood.

While this change in the way father figures influence young black men in *Menace* is an important one, the role of a father figure is the only question in which the two movies differ. When not discussing the influence of paternal figures on black urban youth, the Hughes brothers display the same problems of the hood Singleton showcases in his film. They differ only in the change of perspective (*Menace* is told from the perspective of a ghetto thug) and the fact that *Menace* presents these problems more explicitly: Caine's cousin gets killed in front of him during a car theft; Caine assaults a man for threatening him in front of his friend O-Dog; Caine steals a flashy car by holding the owner at gunpoint, etc. Beyond such scenes that can be attributed to the change of perspective, *Boyz* and *Menace* depict the same problems of poverty, crime, drug dealing, gang violence, as well as institutionalized racial segregation and police brutality.

Furthermore, just like *Boyz*, *Menace* highlights these problems, i.e. the life in the hood, as the key factor in defining identities of young African Americans. This is evident from the first ten minutes of the movie. In the very first scene of the movie, Caine's friend O-Dog murders and robs two Korean store owners. Caine comments that by saying: "Went into the store just to get a beer; came out an accessory to murder and armed robbery. It was funny like that in the hood sometimes" (Hughes and Hughes 00:00:18-00:03:28). This scene in which Caine's peer essentially makes him a criminal through no fault of his own is followed

up by a scene in which the audience is presented with documentary footage of the 1965 Watts riots. After this, the movie shows the aforementioned scene in which Caine describes his parents and the upbringing he had in the earlier part of his life. All of this is wrapped up by a bird-eye shot of Watts, as mentioned earlier.

Having introduced the city in such a manner before the narrative even starts properly, the directors essentially establish and frame Caine's story "by a mapping of the city space first...suggesting that he is a product of the urbanscape and of a particular set of urban conditions. The city defines Caine; he doesn't define the city" (Massood 2003, 163). In other words, through these scenes the movie showcases how characteristics of the hood on which Caine has no influence (actions of his friend, race riots and the subsequent police intervention, his parents' occupation) in return influence his life. As is the case in *Boyz n the Hood*, the police and their constant surveillance and brutality are one of the major influences on Caine. Aside from the fact that he has been arrested, questioned and incarcerated several times throughout the movie, there is also a scene in which Caine and Sharif are harassed by the police. This scene is similar to the one in which the police harasses Tre and Ricky. According to Wilson, this practice of pulling over and harassing black drivers for being outside their neighborhoods has been a practice in other cities as well, not just Los Angeles (Wilson 47). However, due to the directors' attempt to present the "real" hood, Caine and Sharif face graver consequences than the pair in *Boyz*. The police beat them up and leave them in a predominantly Mexican neighborhood, hoping that the Mexican youth or some local gang would do the same (Hughes and Hughes 1:01:50-1:04:10). Besides showing the police brutality the black urban youth face in the hood on a daily basis, the movie displays how the police maintain the imaginary demarcation lines that racially segregate the inner-city neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Just like Tre and Ricky upon entering Compton, Caine and Sharif are scared and uneasy when they find themselves, as Caine states, in "the wrong

hood.” But, unfortunately for the police, Caine and Sharif receive no further beating. Instead, the Latino minority takes them to the hospital.

In addition to these outside influences on urban black youth, the movie also depicts in what way influences from within the confines of the hood shape identities of young black men. *Menace* also accentuates the black-on-black violence and the necessity to perform the violent masculinity that Doughboy performs in *Boyz*. Naturally, since the narrative of *Menace* is told from the perspective of a ghetto thug, Caine performs this violent masculinity, unlike Tre. As it has already been mentioned, Caine commits grand theft auto, he physically assaults a man for threatening him, carries a gun and is a drug dealer. Moreover, the difference between Tre and Caine in performing the violent masculinity of the hood is most apparent in the scene in which Caine joins his friends for a drive-by shooting to avenge the death of his cousin (Hughes and Hughes 00:27:44-00:31:32). Caine does not give up his intent to avenge the death of a loved one. In doing so, he lets the rules of the hood define his identity, instead of defining it himself. However, in that same scene, the audience also sees a glimpse of a different Caine. During the drive to the scene of the drive-by shooting, he asserts that he is going to do it “as long as there ain’t no crowd. I’m not killing no kids or no old folks, all right?” (Hughes and Hughes 00:28:33-00:28:38) Here, Caine claims that he will kill only his cousin’s killers, the ones that he deems as deserving of death. He refuses to kill innocent children or old people. O-Dog responds to this by saying that Caine is “acting like a little bitch right now” and that, unlike Caine, he would “smoke anybody.” So, while Caine does succumb to the pressure that the hood and his friends impose on him, he attempts to maintain some integrity and separate himself from the ruthless immorality of his friend O-Dog.

Thus, the directors reveal that Caine, much like Tre, has a more positive side to him. But, as opposed to Tre, Caine’s positive side is not as prevalent due to his upbringing. Over time, that begins to change as the movie shows Caine spending more and more time with

Ronnie and Anthony, her son, while his friends are in the street, dealing drugs and fighting. Nevertheless, even when they are showing a more positive side of Caine, the directors do not want the audience to forget the influence that the hood has on him. In a scene in which Caine is bonding with Ronnie and her son, he shows Anthony his gun and teaches him how to shoot (Hughes and Hughes 00:33:32-00:36:30). To put it differently, just like Tre, Caine also has a positive side to him and he is also in a dilemma between the identity he is defining for himself and the identity forced upon him by the environment he resides in. But, unlike Tre, Caine fails to resist the authority of the hood due to the fact that Caine's father leads him to the criminal life, instead of saving him from it. Moreover, the positive father figures in Caine's life simply are not influential enough to overpower the immense influence the hood has on him, which in the end was the main message Allen and Albert Hughes set out to convey.

## Identity and the Hood in *The White Boy Shuffle*

Before turning the attention to the novel at hand, the representation of the city in African American literature must be briefly mentioned. Though it would be desirable to analyze the representation of urban spaces in black literature in general, such a daunting task far exceeds the scope of this research since the African American city literature dates back to W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Philadelphia Negro* from 1899 (Massood 1996, 86). Consequently, the focus of this brief overview will be the postmodern African American literature. Just like film, music, poetry and so on, postmodern literature depicts the city with all its faults and flaws that have defined the life of urban African Americans from the 1960s onwards: from race riots of the mid-1960s and the subsequent intensification of police control to strengthened racial segregation, deindustrialization of the city and Reagan's demonization of urban African Americans, mainly through his rhetoric of the Welfare Queen<sup>10</sup>. As is often the case with postmodernity, these themes have been explored in many different ways. For instance, there have been sci-fi novels that criticize racial segregation through dystopian, extreme visions of a segregated city in which every neighborhood is walled-off, while the poor fight to survive in the streets outside these areas (Dubey 57). There have also been novels that criticize the neoliberal development of the city by showing characters that are returning to a simple agrarian economy<sup>11</sup> because they are dissatisfied with these developments (Dubey 66). Moreover, there have been novels that in a more-or-less realistic approach attempt to criticize most of these developments, but focus on the impact that the hegemonic identity of the hood has on identities that differ from that norm.

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<sup>10</sup> This Welfare Queen rhetoric builds upon the well-established notion that the poverty in the predominantly black inner-city neighborhoods is pathological. It argues that due to the supposed death of the nuclear family in the ghetto, black urban women have many children with different fathers in order to collect social welfare so they do not have to work. Reagan has used this rhetoric to slash the federal social welfare budget (Wilson 30-33).

<sup>11</sup> Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* is one such example.

Paul Beatty's 1996 debut novel *The White Boy Shuffle* is one such text. This satirical novel is structured like a memoir of a self-proclaimed "Negro Demagogue" Gunnar Kaufman. In his memoirs, Gunnar details his life from his early teens to his late teens/early twenties, when he has unwillingly become the new race leader of African Americans. At the start of the novel, Gunnar lives with his mother and two sisters in suburban Santa Monica. After he and his sisters refuse to go to a summer camp for African Americans because they do not fit in, their mother decides to move them to Hillside, an inner-city neighborhood in West Los Angeles that Gunnar characterizes as the ghetto. Gunnar's adjustment to the Hillside life and his struggle to assimilate into the hegemonic identity of the hood are at the heart of this novel. Despite not fitting in properly, he befriends Nick Scoby, a well-regarded basketball player in the neighborhood, and Psycho Loco, a ghetto thug that lives near Gunnar. Over the course of the novel, it is revealed that Gunnar is a talented poet and an excellent basketball player, which makes him famous in both academic and sports circles of the U.S. Consequently, all the Ivy League schools fight for him during his senior year of high school. During that period in his life, Psycho Loco orders him a mail-order bride because Gunnar, as opposed to the hegemonic identity of the hood, is not overly sexual and therefore never attempts to find a girlfriend. Having gotten married, Gunnar leaves for Boston University with his wife Yoshiko and Nick. All three of them have trouble adjusting to the university life and life outside the hood. For Nick, this failure to adjust is fatal as he commits suicide, while Gunnar and Yoshiko return to Hillside. Before returning to Hillside, Gunnar publishes his poetry book titled *Watermelanin*, which becomes a critical and commercial success. This accidentally launches his career as the new race leader of black America. In the end, Gunnar and Yoshiko settle in Hillside and have a baby.

As a product of postindustrial, post-Reagan African American culture, *The White Boy Shuffle* addresses a lot of problems urban black residents face in their everyday lives. Similar

to the previously two analyzed texts, Beatty includes problems such as racial segregation and police harassment in his novel. Firstly, the issue of racial segregation is illustrated in the novel via a literal wall that separates Hillside from neighboring, much more affluent, areas of Los Angeles. In connection to this, Gunnar states:

...the city decided to pave over the neighboring mountainside, surrounding the community with a great concrete wall that spans its entire curved perimeter save for an arched gateway at the southwest entrance. At the summit of this cement precipice wealthy families live in an upper-middle-class hamlet known as Cheviot Heights. At the bottom of this great wall live hordes of impoverished American Mongols. (Beatty 55)

Here, Gunnar explains how the city authorities have made imaginary lines that separate races and classes in the city real by putting up a physical wall to confine the undesired African Americans within their poverty-stricken ghettos. To put it differently, the city segregated the affluent white population from the impoverished black population so the rich white population could quite literally look down on them. Related to this, Low claims: “Large mixed commercial and residential development projects reinforce the segregation of the divided city, further cutting off communities by visual boundaries, growing distances, and ultimately, walls” (397). So, the city’s development projects, like the one Gunnar visualizes above, further segregate the already segregated cities of the U.S. by putting physical boundaries between the desired (white) and the undesired (black) population. Furthermore, Beatty is also quite explicit in his critique of police harassment. Having just moved to Hillside, the Kaufmans are visited by the police and among other things, they question Gunnar. Even though he is in his early teens at the time, they ask him whether he has any gang affiliations, marking him as a potential criminal simply because he lives in the hood. During this scene, Gunnar states: “...and she [his mother] deserted me with a satisfied smirk,



happy that I was finally getting a bitter taste of her vaunted ‘traditional black experience’” (Beatty 56). By classifying such an experience in which young Gunnar is labeled as a potential criminal simply because he is a part of a certain city space as “traditional black experience,” Beatty highlights the ubiquitous presence of police control in the hood.

While Beatty does stress these problems as influential in Gunnar’s life, just like *Boyz* and *Menace*, this text is mainly focused on the power struggle between Gunnar’s individual identity/masculinity and the hegemonic identity/masculinity that the environment forces upon Gunnar and other African Americans in the hood. In relation to this, Stallings defines the novel as a “literary appraisal of the complex fate of black masculinity and black masculine culture as it risks succumbing to hegemonic masculinities. The novel’s satirical tone enables Beatty to offer a precise deconstruction of existing masculine paradigms” (100). In other words, Beatty deconstructs the existing hegemonic identity of black urban men and displays in what ways such identity impacts identities of individual members of the hood.

This is achieved through mainly Gunnar’s, but also Nick’s characterization: they are both presented as different from the norm, but also as forced to adapt to the rules of the hood in order to survive. Having lived in Santa Monica the entirety of his early life, Gunnar does not identify with his peers from the hood: he likes to read and write, watch cowboy movies and TV shows and does not play basketball. But, he is forced to change if he is to survive in the hood. To prove this, Gunnar claims: “My sisters and I had no idea how to navigate our way around this hardscrabble dystopia. Each of us had already been beaten up at least once just for trying to make friends” (Beatty 59). Gunnar asserts that he and his sisters are physically assaulted upon their arrival in the hood because the behavior they have been taught in Santa Monica does not function in Hillside, thus implying that they will have to change it. Related to these events, Gunnar shares his feelings with the reader – he considers himself an “Oreo” (a slang word connoting a black person whose identity is closer to what is

traditionally perceived as white – an Oreo cookie personifies such a person because it is black on the outside, but white on the inside).

As the novel progresses, Gunnar learns more and more about the hood etiquette: it is never allowed to cry in public (Beatty 62); eye contact is frowned upon (Beatty 64); and most importantly, he starts playing basketball and he attains the look of a young black man from the hood (Beatty 106-111). With time, Gunnar appropriates the look and behavior of the hegemonic ghetto identity. However, despite all of those changes, Gunnar still feels as if he needs to prove to everyone in his environment that he truly is black. In a chapter that takes place during the 1992 L.A. riots, he claims: “I looked out the window and saw a store owner spray-paint BLACK OWNED across her boarded-up beauty salon. I wanted to dig out my heart and have her do the same to it, certifying my identity in big block letters across both ventricles” (Beatty 155). In this scene, which happens almost a decade after Gunnar moves to Hillside, he is still trying to verify his blackness – he wishes he could convince both himself and everyone around him that he is black on the inside, just as much as on the outside. Through this scene, Beatty attempts to visualize the influence that the dominant identity has over young black men in the hood – just because Gunnar enjoys different things as opposed to most of his peers, he feels as if he is betraying his race.

Similar to Gunnar, Nick’s identity differs from the hegemonic one to some extent, despite being accustomed to the expectations of the hood. Since Nick is a secondary character, the reader does not spend enough time with him to recognize a lot of differences between his identity and the norm. The two differences that the reader can notice are his uncanny ability to simply never miss a shot in basketball, as well as his intense enthusiasm for jazz music. Having presented the reader with these differences between Gunnar’s/Nick’s identity and the hegemonic identity of young black men living in the hood, as well as their struggles to adjust to life both in the hood and outside of it, Beatty communicates his ultimate

message in regards to this problem of the influence that the prevailing identity of the hood has on young black men. As Stallings argues: “[Nick’s] dream has already been mentioned in relation to the conversation about the Brocken specter: to realize one’s identity in a group without losing the community of the group” (Stallings 115). To put it differently, Beatty first showcases the importance of the identity that the hood forces upon young black men. Then, he asserts that in an ideal world a young black man would be able to define his own identity without the pressure of his community and still remain a part of said community. However, Beatty also illustrates that such a feat may not be achievable since Nick commits suicide, unwilling to settle for a life in which he cannot achieve his dream, while Gunnar states in the epilogue of the novel that he “mostly...stay[s] at home” (Beatty 266), thus showing that by realizing his own identity, Gunnar alienates himself from the community to an extent. So, just like filmmakers behind the previously mentioned hood films, Beatty stresses the importance that the environment has on black young male residents of the hood. Nevertheless, Beatty does so with one important difference – given that Gunnar comes from suburban Santa Monica and struggles to adjust to the hegemonic identity of the hood, Beatty hints at the existence of alternative experiences of African American urban life other than the hood one. Despite that, the author also shows that such alternative experiences (suburban ones) are in the minority and that the hood experience is still the dominant one. This is evident in the fact that before moving to Hillside Gunnar was the only black student in “Santa Monica’s all-white multicultural school” (Beatty 35) and that his mom described him being harassed by the police as “traditional black experience.” This importance that the environment has on urban young black males will continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well, which will be exemplified by Kendrick Lamar’s 2012 rap album *good kid m.A.A.d city*.

## ‘Seem like the whole city go against me’: Surviving the Hood in *good kid m.A.A.d city*

While not his first studio album, Kendrick Lamar’s *good kid m.A.A.d city* is his major label debut since *Section.80*, his first studio album, has been released independently. *Good kid m.A.A.d city* is yet another coming-of-age narrative about a young black man (being his own coming-of-age story) facing trials and tribulations of life in the hood. In this album’s case, the hood in question is the city of Compton – a predominantly black city within the L.A. County. By rapping about the life in Compton, Kendrick Lamar continues the tradition of Compton-based rappers such as Ice Cube and Eazy-E who, as it has been mentioned already, were the first to chronicle the life in the hood. Aside from continuing this tradition, Lamar also continues the tradition of the 1990s hood films, especially *Boyz n the Hood*.

There are multiple signs that attest to this. Just like Singleton, Lamar explores themes of poverty, crime, gang violence, police control, racial segregation and racial profiling, as well as the influence his environment has on his identity. In most cases, he labels this influence of the hegemonic identity of the hood as peer pressure. Furthermore, he quite apparently announces that the city’s influence on his life will be the main theme of this album – he describes himself as a good kid living in a mad city. However, the most conspicuous connection between *good kid m.A.A.d city* and *Boyz n the Hood* is a line he raps on track 10 of the album”: “I’m like Tre, that’s Cuba Gooding” (“Sing About Me” 08:07-08:09). By comparing himself to the protagonist of *Boyz n the Hood*, Lamar creates an intertextual reference to the Singleton movie. In doing so, he asserts that his coming-of-age story is similar to Tre’s growing up in the hood. Having said this, Lamar himself confirms that in *good kid m.A.A.d city* he examines the same themes Singleton tackles with in *Boyz*, albeit in a more contemporary setting. Since Lamar was born in 1987 and the album came out in 2012,

it can be concluded that the album's narrative takes place in the 2000s. Nevertheless, it seems that not much has changed since Lamar highlights a lot of issues that Tre has to deal with, implying that the socioeconomic conditions in the hood have not improved during the time period which separates the two narratives.

Lamar begins the narrative by providing the audience with what is essentially a performance of the violent hegemonic masculinity that is prevalent in the hood. Similar to Doughboy and Caine from the previously analyzed movies, he brags about having sexual intercourse with his first girlfriend Sherane on the first song of the album; he raps about doing drugs in front of his friends and in a freestyle rap on the chorus of the album's third song he asserts: "All my life I want money and power/respect my mind or die from lead shower" ("Backseat Freestyle" 00:24-00:31). So, similar to Doughboy and Caine, Lamar performs this violent masculinity in front of his friends with the difference being that Lamar only raps about these things. He does not necessarily shoot people as he brags about in his performance. Be that as it may, in the following song, he does admit to doing some criminal and/or socially frowned upon activities: he admits to drinking alcohol, doing drugs, being violent, breaking into someone's home and stealing their property. He explains these acts, as well as the previously mentioned performance of violent masculinity, as "The Art of Peer Pressure," which is the title of said song. Throughout the song, having admitted to one of these offences, Lamar follows it up with the excuse that he is "with the homies right now" ("The Art of Peer Pressure 00:39-00:43). In essence, Lamar claims that while he is doing all of these immoral/criminal activities, the pressure that his peers put on him leaves him with no other choice but to join them in their criminal activities. He doubles down on the idea at the end of the song, following the execution of their plan to break into someone's home and steal their property. He states: "My mama called: 'Hello? What you doin'? – 'Kickin' it./I shoulda told her I'm probably 'bout to catch my first offense/with the homies" ("The Art of Peer

Pressure” 04:10-04:16). Just like in case of drinking alcohol and doing drugs, he blames the peer pressure for committing a home invasion. In other words, he alleges that just like Caine, he becomes a criminal by virtue of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Additionally, in the continuation of the album he further examines this notion that it is his environment which forces him to behave as a ghetto thug. On “good kid,” one of the two titular tracks of the album, he demonstrates how even though he is a “good kid,” the police still harasses him. He claims: “No better picture to paint than me walkin’ from bible study/and called his homies because he had said he noticed my face/from a function that taken place, they was wonderin’ if I bang” (“good kid” 00:54-01:02). Here, Lamar states that even though he is a good kid, which he explains with the fact that he attends Bible study, the police harasses him and considers him a gang member because of his appearance. This echoes the examples of police harassment from all three previously mentioned texts. Another interesting thing to note about this song is the fact that it is the only song on the album that contains no profanity. Lamar uses this to further drive this idea of him being a good kid living in a mad city.

Finally, as opposed to “good kid,” which focuses on the negative influence of police harassment, the next song – “m.A.A.d city” – focuses on the influence of Compton’s gang violence. In the first example of such violence, Lamar states: “A wall of bullets comin’ from AKs, ARs, ‘Ayy y’all duck!/that’s what Momma said when we was eatin’ that free lunch” (m.A.A.d city 01:22-01:29). Through these lines, Lamar depicts his everyday life as gangs would often get in gun fights in front of his house. While in the second example, the listener can hear a line that is chanted numerous times throughout the song: “Fuck who you know, where you from, my nigga?” (m.A.A.d city 00:14-00:19). In the context of this song, this line is used by gang members to decide whether they will assault someone or not, stressing that the most important factor in their decision is geography – the key question is where someone

is from. Lamar uses this line to articulate the importance that the city or better yet, belonging to a certain part of a city, has on lives of young black men. So, just like the three texts analyzed before it, *good kid m.A.A.d city* attempts to illustrate the influence that the urban environment has on young black men in their lives. It does so through exploration of the same themes that are explored in other coming-of-age narratives situated in the hood. Lamar presents the listener with the idea that he is a good person who just happens to live in a violent and dangerous environment in which peer pressure makes him do things he would not usually do. Thus, he presents the listener with the same dilemma that is present in all the previously analyzed texts.

## Conclusion

While the lives of African Americans were largely connected to rural and pastoral images of the South in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century African Americans largely became city dwellers. Due to the Great Migration, which lasted for more than a half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, millions of African Americans abandoned their lives in the South and migrated to the industrial cities of the North. They have done so in an attempt to find better job opportunities so they can have better living conditions. Unfortunately, majority of the newly migrated African Americans were met with a pushback. In order to prevent African Americans from settling into neighborhoods of the white majority, city authorities and realtors introduced zoning ordinances which essentially allowed them to confine urban blacks within poor and undesirable inner-city neighborhoods. Urban sociologist Robert E. Park labeled these poor, predominantly black neighborhoods as ghettos. The ghetto was characterized by its poverty, violence and high crime rates, which Park deemed as pathological in African Americans.

This idea would follow urban African Americans for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then, in World War II, a lot of African Americans migrated west so they could find employment in newly opened military factories. However, this meant that in the post-war period their jobs were dependent on sporadic federal funding. This situation was made worse during the Johnson presidency which introduced intensified police surveillance and militarized police departments. This resulted in increased police brutality, for which the Los Angeles Police Department is quite notorious. The final blow was dealt to the ghetto during the Reagan presidency. Following the deindustrialization of the city, a lot of urban black people lost jobs, especially young black men. Reagan used this development to demonize residents of the ghetto so he could cut the social welfare funds. All of these actions made by



the Reagan administration worsened the socioeconomic conditions of the ghetto; thusly transforming it to its postindustrial variation which under the influence of rap music became known as the hood. These developments were then naturally represented in various texts of African American cultural production: first in rap music and then in hood films as well as postmodern literature.

The four texts analyzed in this paper – John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood*, the Hughes brothers’ *Menace II Society*, Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle* and Kendrick Lamar’s *good kid m.A.A.d city* – present these issues of the hood as key in identity formation of young black men growing up in the hood. Aside from these institutional problems of racial segregation, police surveillance and police brutality, they also argue that other factors of life in the hood, such as gang violence, drugs and crime in general, impact their lives. To be more specific, they argue that such an environment forces a singular hegemonic identity/masculinity on its residents, which young black men must then perform in the hood in order to survive. Otherwise, they are ridiculed or worse. This dilemma between performing hegemonic masculinity of the hood and defining one’s own identity is central to all of the analyzed texts.

In Singleton’s movie, Tre does not succumb to it due to the positive influence of his father, a strong paternal figure. In contrast, the Hugheses’ argue in *Menace* that a strong father figure is not enough to escape the socioeconomic conditions of the hood. That is why the hegemonic masculinity of the hood is successfully forced upon Caine, which ends in his premature death. Beatty finds a middle ground between *Boyz* and *Menace* in a way, arguing that while the influence of the environment and its community is overpowering, one can still realize their own identity. But, to do so, they must alienate or completely remove themselves from the community. Gunnar alienates himself from the community by mostly staying at home following the birth of his daughter. Unlike Gunnar, his friend Nick refuses to both leave the community and not realize his own identity. Thus, he commits suicide. Finally, in

*good kid m.A.A.d city*, Lamar retreads the ideas that the three previously mentioned texts explore. On the album, he argues that he is a good person whose actions have been under the influence of his environment and his peers. Thus, these four coming-of-age narratives illustrate how the city is a crucial element in formation of African American identity in post-Reagan, postindustrial America.

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## Abstract

The paper's main argument is the idea that the city plays a key role in formation of contemporary African American identity. To be more specific, the paper argues that the city is crucial in the experience of young black men living in the postindustrial variation of inner-city neighborhoods, i.e. the hood, since the paper presents its main argument through a reading of four different coming-of-age narratives: John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), Allen and Albert Hughes' *Menace II Society* (1993), Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) and Kendrick Lamar's *good kid m.A.A.d city* (2012). Each of the four texts follows young black men as they navigate the issues that are emblematic of life in the hood – institutionalized racial segregation, police surveillance, police brutality, poverty, gang violence, crime, peer pressure, the lure of drugs and drug dealing, etc. The paper argues that these issues are so prevalent in the hood that protagonists of these narratives are forced to modify their identities in accordance with the identity that such an environment expects from them. As part of its analysis, the paper first provides a historical overview of African American life in the city. Then, it provides a reading of each of the texts mentioned above in terms of their depiction of issues that plague contemporary inner-city neighborhoods and how these issues influence lives of young black men.

Keywords: The city, *Boyz n the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, *The White Boy Shuffle*, *good kid m.A.A.d city*, the hood, identity

