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Locating Blackness: The ‘Township Aesthetic’ and representations of black identity in contemporary South African Cinema

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2007-02-16T10:49:04Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/2023

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CHAPTER 3
TOWNSHIP MASCULINITY

The previous chapter analysed the manner in which the 'township space' was constructed as 'an alternate geography of modernity' through Afrikaner Nationalist ideologies. It became clearer that the 'township space' was developed through a process of 'othering' and was constructed as a space of containment for *black people*. This space was developed as a means of 'fixing' black identity into perpetual 'otherness'. The previous chapter also made explicit the manner in which space and place are deeply intertwined with notions of cultural identity and a sense of belongingness. The cinematic representation of the 'township space' is increasingly becoming an aesthetic representation that has become fetishised in the collective memory of South Africans.

This chapter is concerned with analysing the articulation of black masculinity within the 'township space'. It is important to understand that notions of black masculinities are implicated by notions of space. For the purposes of this report I am interested in the manner in which the 'township space' articulates black identity and sexuality, especially black masculinity. By providing a theoretical context that analyses the construction of black identity through the process of 'othering' and contextualising the study of masculinities in South Africa, I will analyse the different types of masculinities that have been instrumental in constructing contemporary black masculinity. This chapter then analyses the cinematic representations of black masculinity articulated within the 'township space'.

Constructing Black Identity

The cinematic representation of *black identity and culture* in contemporary South African cinema is a product of the historical and political climate of this country that operated through language and other systems of representation to

produce a specific set of "knowledge's about race and sex" (Young, 1996: 38). Race is constructed and is not an uncontested, predetermined entity. The manner in which race is determined occurs through the institutionalisation of specific knowledge's about race and decades of instilling this knowledge onto subjects. Race is then performed by subjects and is strictly controlled and monitored through the ideologies of those in power. Specific 'knowledge's about race and sex' were mobilised through constructing stereotypes about blackness that overdetermined the construction of black identity. Race should be thought of as a performance of identity and it is important to understand how specific knowledge's constitute and construct 'raced' bodies. The construction of 'raced' bodies occurs through the process of stereotyping that result in 'fixity' of identities. Such 'fixity' is usually based on establishing and maintaining the position of the 'other'. According to Bhabha, in colonial discourse, the ideological construction of 'otherness' is based on the concept of 'fixity' (Bhabha, 1992). The stereotype fixes the other as known and at the same time anxiously repeats and reinforces the boundaries of this supposedly natural and real fixity. This ambivalence in colonial discourse functions through networks of power that produce the 'other' as a social reality that is visible and known.

The construction of *blackness* as a stereotype against which whiteness is able to reify and assert its prominent position in society can be traced back to the eighteenth century. During this time, European science was concerned and preoccupied with the codification of bodies according to certain scientific assumptions. Scientists developed a 'precise vocabulary' to talk about racial difference and this vocabulary set out to differentiate the black (male) body from the white (male) body, and the focus on the supposed biological difference of the black (male) body set the tone through which society constructed the black (male) body as an 'other', clearly distinguishable from the white (male) body. Scientific racism was based on the fundamental differences between black and white people, and essentialised blackness and whiteness on particular psychological, physical and intellectual characteristics (Young, 1996: 39):

> Eighteenth century science set out to illustrate natural law by establishing biological differences between different (i.e., black

> and white) bodies and by proving that these "natural" differences explain the differences between races and between the civilised and the uncivilised (Saint-Aubin, 2005: 23).

Eighteenth century scientific racism was based on stereotyping the black body into perpetual otherness through anatomical difference, in order to establish a regime of power based on 'natural' differences. Natural differences could not be contested and because the differences were natural it was assumed that the black body was naturally inferior to the white (male) body. Eighteenth and nineteenth century medico-scientific discourse had been obsessed with categorising the black (male) body with the sexual, based on European's obsession with black male (and female) genitalia. The myth about black male hypersexuality was already a widespread belief in Europe. When explorers first set their eyes on African people, what dazzled them were their relatively exposed bodies. This became associated with a certain freedom of sexuality and the conclusion was that Africans were on par with animals in their inability to control their sexual desires and therefore they were inferior (Young, 1996; Saint-Aubin, 2005). Films such as *The Zulu's Heart* (1908) and *Siliwa the Zulu* (1927) made in the early nineteen hundreds constructed black identity as sexually lecherous by foregrounding the 'image of the oversexed native' (Magogodi, 2002).

Eighteenth century European science became obsessed with 'fixing' boundaries between different races (and different types of bodies) because of the perceived 'anxiety and fear of loss of self or loss of identity that occurs when boundaries are deemed fluid' (Saint-Aubin, 2005: 25). In order to sustain the self and a coherent identity stereotypes and myths about black sexuality emerged as a defence mechanism which became a means of controlling the black body by casting it into perpetual and natural 'otherness':

> However, from the times of the earliest contact with dark-skinned peoples, Europeans had been obsessed with the sexuality of dark men (and women); moreover, fear coupled with desire generated cultural narratives, in the form of myths and stereotypes, as mechanisms of defence, as means of compensation (in the

> psychoanalytic sense) and as a means of social and political control (Saint-Aubin, 2005: 25).

Bhabha argues that the stereotype should be read in terms of Freud's fetish; as a site of phobia and fantasy that threatens the colonial subject. In colonial discourse the stereotype offers a secure point of identification by constructing the other (usually the black body) as a 'population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction' (Bhabha, 1992: 133). If the stereotype is read in terms of Freud's 'fetish' the stereotype is at once a point of fear and desire. Desire for the 'other' results in the stricter control of the 'other' because it threatens the coherent self of the coloniser. This fear generates narratives and myths about 'otherness' that become established in society[1] as a means of distinguishing the self from the other.

The key fetish in colonial discourse is the skin. The skin is the visible marker of difference and this difference (mobilised through eighteenth and nineteenth century medico-scientific discourse) is constructed as natural. Because this difference is constructed as natural, discrimination becomes justifiable. Young notes that:

> The African's skin colour became the defining characteristic of 'black', from operating at a connotative level shifted to a denotative plane: to be black was to be evil, to be hypersexual, to be morally debased, to be inferior (1996: 40).

The black subject is overdetermined and his identity and experiences of the world are 'fixed' because of hypervisibility of his skin colour. According to Fanon the black man experiences himself through the gaze of his other – the white man. Fanon reworks Lacan's mirror phase which is regarded as a crucial stage in subject formation. For Lacan when the child first sees itself in the

[1] Young (1992) notes that the binary opposites of good/evil, clean/unclean, civilized/uncivilized where already entrenched in British society before the fifteenth century, largely based on myth and fantasy about the 'other'.

mirror, "it sees a reflection more smoother, more coordinated and stable than itself" (Loomba, 1998:144). Fanon appropriates Lacan's mirror phase, and according to him the black colonial subject knows himself in relation to the presence of the white man. The 'other' for the white man will be the black man. The white man defines the black man in relation to his skin colour and his "supposed limitless sexuality" (Loomba, 1998: 144). However for the black man the white man represents everything that he desires to be. Fanon argues strongly that the psychological problems that the black man encounters results from his encounter with white racism, and this structures his experience of the world (Young, 1996: 25). According to Fanon as long as the:

> Black man is among his own people, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others' (1986: 109).

Through the gaze of the white man Fanon states that he (a black man), discovered his blackness and his 'ethnic characteristics' were reduced to 'tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects…' (Fanon, 1986: 112). The black man is created by the white man, through myths and fantasies about the black man. More importantly 'blackness confirms the white self, but empties the black subject' (Loomba, 1998:144). According to Fanon the colonial subject undergoes a psychic trauma when he realises that he "can never attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire, or shed the blackness he has learnt to devalue" (Loomba, 1998: 176).

The construction of the other in colonial discourse should not be understood as totally excluding the responses and reaction of those who were being represented, but rather misrepresentation functions upon certain situations at hand (Loomba, 1998: 110). Loomba suggests that representation of the 'other' varies according to the desired aim of the colonial rule. However racial ideologies do not simply function as 'reflecting economic and material forces'. Stereotypes of Africans were in place even before slavery and colonisation of Africa and these stereotypes "provided an ideological justification for … exploitation" (Loomba, 1998: 113). The relationship between racial ideologies

and exploitation should be understood as a dialectical one, where racial assumptions arose out of economic exploitation and were structured by exploitation (Loomba, 1998).

Fanon's work on the psychoanalysis of the colonial subject has probably received the most attention in post-colonial studies. He has been described by Albert Memmi as 'a prophet of the Third World, a romantic hero of decolonisation' (quoted in Loomba, 1997: 143). Loomba like many other critics of Fanon criticises him as his 'subjects' are always male, reinforcing "gender hierarchies even as it challenges racial ones" (1998: 148). Loomba also cautions against Fanon's universalising tendency, as she notes that Fanon's discourse on the colonial subject, 'the black man' and 'the Negro' are based on several individual neuroses which he generalised[2]. She suggests that class and gender considerations are important aspects which also shape the colonial subject and that the experiences for the colonised subject are different in various colonial and postcolonial societies. "We cannot forge a template of a split colonised subject and then apply it to all colonised subjects" (Loomba, 1998: 150). Although Loomba cautions against a universalising template in order to understand the colonised subject, Fanon's insights are important in analysing the conditions of colonisation for the colonised subject if one historically and geographically locates one's argument so that the context becomes a determining factor when appropriating Fanon's discourse on the psyche of the colonised subject. In this report I have located apartheid as an invention of Afrikaner Nationalism whose main purpose was to construct black identity as 'other' in relation to white identity. For a very long time blacks were marginalised in South African society and were inundated with the idea that in order to be accepted within South African society one had to be 'white' or able to 'pass' as white. Skin colour became a determining factor in locating identity in South Africa and in the sixties skin-lightening creams became very popular[3].

[2] It is important to note that Fanon's 'generalisations' are no different from Freud's generalisations and conclusions that he ascertained from the psychoanalytic readings relating to the individual neuroses of his subjects.

[3] Refer to Nakedi Ribane's (2006) book *Beauty… A Black Perspective* for an analysis of the skin-lightening cream industry in South Africa during apartheid and its impact on beauty from a black perspective during this period.

Black South Africans yearned for the cultural and social privileges whiteness offered and in the process blackness was devalued. In South Africa blackness was constructed in relation to whiteness. Blackness resembled a 'lack' whereas whiteness reasserted power, hegemony and dominance in society.

South African Afrikaner Nationalist ideologies were based on constructing and representing black identity as a site of otherness. Black identity was stereotyped and mobilised through Afrikaner Nationalist ideologies to create a discourse that 'fixed' and reinscribed black identity as 'other'. This discourse of racism mobilised the 'fetish' of the skin as a marker of difference that distinguished white identity from black identity. Placing black South Africans within clearly demarcated geographic zones attests to the ambivalence of the stereotyped (black) subject. The colonial (and apartheid) condition is characterised by both liminality and hybridity. For Bhabha, colonial identities are never stable, and Bhabha writes that '*it is always in relation to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated*' (own emphasis Bhabha quoted in Loomba, 1998: 176). The stereotyped black subject is at once feared and desired by the white subject. It was desired because it represents all that the whiteness is not; the uncivilised, the untamed, the sexually lecherous and exotic. Blackness was feared because of its perceived threat to the purity of whiteness. Miscegenation was a constant threat and therefore separating the black man became a means of not only controlling and monitoring the movement and behaviour of the black subject, but also a means of ensuring that racial purity was maintained. In 1949 mixed marriages were banned and the Immorality Act of 1950 banned any sexual relations between black and white South Africans.

In the history of filmmaking in South African cinema there has either been the negation of black bodies or the black subject has been consistently represented as deviant, aggressive, uncivilised, contaminatory, hypersexual and backward. The 'fixation' of the black body in apartheid cinema and television became a means of anxiously repeating and reinforcing the boundaries that creates a secure point of identification between white identity and black identity. However in post-apartheid television and film production the 'otherness' of black identity is reinscribed. This is more apparent through the articulation of

black masculinity within the 'township space'. Through South Africa's political history black masculinity was the greatest perceived threat to white masculinity. This resulted in the oppression of black masculinity (and other masculinities) through the hegemony of white masculinity. Contemporary cinematic representations of black masculinity has homogenised the black experience as one of poverty, violence, phallic gun and gang culture, laziness, unemployment, drug abuse and a sexual license. These characteristics of black identity in cinema have become a symbolic sign system that has relegated black masculinity (and identity) to the terrain of 'otherness'. Stereotyped images of black identity in South African television and film reiterate notions of black subjects as 'other' and reiterate a colonial mentality. This is achieved through visually constructing black identity that marks and labels the black body in as deviant, uncivilised, violent, aggressive and unable to negotiate the modern landscape.

Contextualising Masculinities in South Africa

The landscape of South African society is identifiable through the numerous race and gender identities that have informed the fabric of this society for a number of years. The history of South African society is a one of separation. It has been determined for a long time through a political policy framework that aimed at separating and keeping separate the different races, ethnicities and identities of the people who constitute the 'Rainbow Nation' in post-apartheid South Africa. The separation of races into separate groups, with clearly demarcated geographic boundaries, aimed at 'fixing' identities within different geographic zones. The identities of men and women were determined through the zone or space that they inhabited and for many identities were inherited as Afrikaner Nationalist ideologies were based on homogenising populations and fixing specific identities onto specific geographical regions. The strict separation of races in South Africa was accompanied by the strict demarcation of masculine identities between white men[4] and black men. Black masculinity was

[4] Robert Morrell (1998) *Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern Africa* (605-630) provides a detailed analysis of the manner through which white masculinities were homogenized to form one white masculine identity.

constructed as deviant and projected as 'other' through the dominance of white masculinity. White masculinity exerted hegemony over other forms of masculinities and was especially concerned with controlling, monitoring and surveying the masculine identities of black South Africans.

Although it is understood that there are numerous versions of masculinities in any society, it should also be noted that not all masculinities are equally powerful. Within the South African landscape there has always been a hierarchy of masculinities in operation. The masculine identity that is at the apex of the hierarchy provides a site of domination and oppression for alternate masculinities, given the particular socio-historic and political situation. In this hierarchy of patriarchy four different categories of masculinities have been identified. These are the dominant, complicit, submissive and oppositional or protest masculinities (Morrell, 1998). This hierarchy of masculinities determines and defines the relationship between different groups of men in society. Although there are different recognisable versions of masculinities in any society the dominant version of masculinity exerts hegemony over other forms of masculinities. The dominant form of masculinity has been identified as a 'hegemonic masculinity' (Morrell, 1998; Hanke, 1992). The privileges of hegemonic masculinity is that it bestows 'power and privilege on men who [adopt] it and claim it as their own' (Morrell, 1998: 608).

The term hegemonic masculinity derives from cultural hegemony giving particular attention to "questions of relations between television and gender, to analyse the expression of patriarchal ideology and gender/sexual politics on its own terms" (Hanke, 1992: 186). Hegemonic masculinity is a powerful force that is responsible for constructing other masculinities as deviant either by silencing them or subordinating them. In the process hegemonic masculinity represents a version of masculinity 'real men' subscribe to and constructs this version of masculinity as the 'cultural ideal' (Morrell, 1998). Hegemonic masculinity should be understood as a particular variety of masculinity which subordinates women and 'young, effeminate or homosexual men' (Hanke, 1992: 189). Historically hegemonic masculinity has also being responsible for subordinating black masculinity and relegating it to the terrain of 'otherness'. For a long time

white masculinity has enjoyed the uncontested position of 'hegemonic masculinity' and has always been capable of securing a position of dominance over other alternate masculinities:

> White power secures its position of dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular, whiteness is constructed as the norm against which non-dominant groups are defined as "other" (Hanke, 1992: 186).

Historically white masculinity has often been essentialised and ontologised as given and privileged, as an unproblematic and an incontestable category. Masculinity and whiteness share the following commonality:

> "Masculinity", like "whiteness," does not appear to be cultural/historical category at all, thus rendering invisible the privileged position from which (white) men in general are able to articulate their interests to the exclusion of the interests of women, men and women of colour, and children (Hanke, 1992: 186).

Within the gender matrix of intelligibility (sex/gender system) hegemonic masculinity is the form of masculinity that has socially ascended and is accepted and defines what it means to be a 'man'. Hanke, like Saco, recognises that the media, especially television programmes and films, reinscribes a dominant gender ideology by articulating the binary oppositions of gender differences by employing men as tough, professional, articulate and active and women as sensitive, domesticated, passive and subordinate (Hanke: 1992: 188). More importantly television and film reinscribes the dominance of 'hegemonic masculinity' by constructing other masculinities, especially black masculinity (gay and effeminate masculinities) as 'other' that threatens the *status quo.* Therefore 'other' masculinities are excluded or constructed as deviant, reinscribing the dominance of the 'hegemonic masculinity'. Defining features of hegemonic masculinity are 'misogyny, homophobia, racism and compulsory heterosexuality' (Morrell, 1998: 607).

Media representations of masculinity have often negated masculinities that offer an alternate view of 'what it means to be a man'. Often alternate views of masculinity that threaten to destabilise the sex/gender system are rendered invisible. The study of masculinities increasingly recognises that masculinities, as a category, are not static and stable, but are 'socially constructed and fluid' (Morrell, 1998: 607; Hanke, 1992). The different versions of masculinity will have their own 'characteristic shape and set of features' (Morrell, 1998: 607) that change over time and are affected by changes in society.

'Hegemonic masculinity' is important as it helps to locate the different play of masculinities in South African society and the processes through which black masculinity was constructed as 'deviant' through the dominance of white masculinity. White masculinity enjoyed the privileges of being 'hegemonic' and dominated the landscape of South African society until democracy in 1994. This dominant or hegemonic masculinity was also responsible for the oppression of gay and alternate masculinities (black masculinity) that did not fit into the exclusive politics of the ruling party. This version of masculinity, reinforced through the ideologies of Afrikaner Nationalism, can be traced as far back to the late nineteenth century, set out to construct black masculinities and other versions of masculinities as 'deviant' (Morrell, 1998).

Constructing Black Masculinity in South Africa

The construction of black masculinities in South Africa relates strongly to a sense of place (or placelessness) that informed the manner in which the black body was subjected to rules and regulations of apartheid ideological discourses. In 1936 the Native Trust and Land Act formalised the separation of white and black rural areas and African people where confined to the reserves. The reserves were characterised as places of 'homesteads, chiefs, kinship networks, burial grounds, 'communal land' and represented a social and political systems that was analogous with pre-colonial structures and systems (Morrell, 1998: 615). By the 1950's after World War II and rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, the reserves did not prove to be effective in their function and

purpose and this led to a rapid influx of rural Africans into urban areas (Morrell, 1998). The apartheid government enforced stricter influx control measures with the aim of allowing a "skilled, urban African population to stabilise while keeping the 'surplus' population in the reserves cut off from the urban labour opportunities" (Morrell, 1998: 624). The increased influx of rural Africans was a cause for anxiety and the apartheid government needed another policy framework that separated the increasing black populations from the white populations. The Group Areas Act of 1950 led to the development of the township. With the development of townships government policy aimed to keep separate rural African workers, mainly migrant workers who returned home after their contracts ended. Migrant workers were usually housed in single sex hostels, separated from the urban black populations who were housed in match-box houses that became identifiable with township housing projects.

Rural black populations and urban black populations gave rise to two different types of black masculinity within the South African landscape – an African masculinity and an urban *black* masculinity. Morrell identifies that African masculinity refers to a rural black masculinity. African masculinity was the hegemonic form of masculinity in the 'reserves' and in pre-colonial society (Morrell, 1998). This type of masculinity was maintained in the reserves. Rural reserves "were viewed as the most appropriate places for salvaging a threatened African cultural identity and heritage" (Robins, 1998). African masculinity became synonymous with African identity characterised by close ancestral and tribal ties. Discourses about African masculinity were based on essentialising Africanness through "representations of timeless African cultures" (Robins, 1998).

Within the urban environment a new version of black masculinity emerged which informed black urban culture characterised by the culturally diverse and racially inclusive areas of Sophiatown and District 6. Although urban masculinity rejected the traditionalist and submissive values of rural African masculinity, they were never totally 'devoid of rural experiences' (Morrell, 1998: 625). The black male subject constantly moved between the urban and rural areas as many wives, children and parents still remained in the rural

villages. Urban black masculinity was redefined through 'new styles of dress, (violent) modes of behaviour and an open scorn of country simplicity' (Morrell, 1998: 625). Within this new vibrant urban population *Drum* magazine was a vital source of information which "recreated the voices, images and values of a black urban culture" (Morrell, 1998) and in the process helped to redefine and recuperate the position of black identity within a society separated by apartheid.

With the rapid increase in mining in the urban areas there was a demand for black labour. When black men came to the cities in search of jobs majority of men worked on the mines. This work was characterised by 'hard and dangerous work, demanding endurance and physical strength' (Morrell, 1998: 622). In the urban areas work became a mark of masculinity for the black body. The other option for men was to undertake 'women's work' which resulted in the emasculation of black men (Morrell, 1998: 623). In South African society the emasculation of black men occurred on many levels and in many contradictory ways - from the infantilisation to the hypermasculinisation of black masculinity. The hypermasculinisation of black male bodies are important because stereotypes of black masculinity have become:

> Fixed on the body, on physicality, physical strength, and as a site for European fantasies about black male sexuality (Morrell, 1998: 611).

Emphasis on physicality and muscularity of the black male body is a common cinematic trope that focuses on the power and strength of the black male body, reducing black masculinity to the experiences and actions of the bodily level. Early Hollywood cinematic representations of black males emasculated and infantilised black masculinity by portraying men as servants undertaking menial house work. Black men have always been dominated by a white male figure and the black man's purpose was to reassert the white man's dominance by foregrounding the oppression and subordination of the black male body. However early stereotypes of the 'happy, carefree slave' were mobilised as a means of countering fears of 'slave revolt and black male empowerment' (Saint-Aubin, 2005: 28).

Dividing the identities of black men into African and urban masculinities represents an inherent contradiction in the way black identity is played out in the South African landscape. The division of black masculinities into an African and an urban masculinity results in essentialising black identity. An African masculinity is about the nostalgia for a past period, before Africa's colonisation and when Africa and African societies were ruled through complex tribal configurations. Urban black masculinity is about modernity and the position the black subject occupies within a modern (urban) landscape. Urban blacks were often represented as those blacks who were from the cities and as Morrell mentions, this distinction was maintained and enforced in order to identify those black men and women who had lost touch with their rural and ancestral ties (Morrell, 1998). Urban masculinity represented blacks who had embraced technologies of modernity in some form. But more importantly these blacks were often represented as tainted and contaminated through this modernity. The rhetoric of African masculinity fitted within the parameters of Afrikaner Nationalism because those blacks who were defined as such, usually lived on reserves in a 'pre-colonial' state that essentialised black identity as incapable of negotiating the modern landscape.

This distinction has proven to be important as cinematic representations of blackness often conform to notions of black identity and African identity (especially in relation to masculinity). In *Wooden Camera* and *Tsotsi* Sipho and Tsotsi are represented as urban black youth but this representation comes with a price. These young black men are also represented as dangerous, criminal and in a state of decay. Sipho sniffs glue and Tsotsi kills in order to survive and maintain his gangster lifestyle. In the riveting film *Yesterday* about HIV/AIDS in South Africa, city Johannesburg is portrayed as a space of contamination and infection. Yesterday's husband contracts HIV/AIDS from the city space and infects Yesterday on one of his visits to the rural space. In *Max and Mona* Max leaves the country side for Johannesburg to study medicine. Max is represented as a country 'bumpkin' who brings along a goat called Mona. Max gives his uncle his university tuition money in order to help him out of trouble and very soon he is seduced by city life and all dreams of becoming a doctor disappear. These films construct the city space as a space of contamination, infection and

destruction, whereas the rural or country space is constructed as the ideal space for black identity. These films celebrate the essentialism of black identity by suggesting that the black psyche is unable to negotiate modernity. Modernity is represented through the city space. The destruction of the black psyche within an urban space is literally conveyed through the destruction of the black body. Cinematically this destruction and contamination of black bodies is represented either through infection of the body with diseases like HIV/AIDS or through involvement in crime, violence and drugs (bodily and social decay). These films suggest that the black psyche functions best when it is confined to the rural space. The rural space is represented as a space connected with ancestral roots and a timeless African culture. Ultimately there is an essentialism of blackness occurring that dangerously positions black identity as pre-modern and not fully capable of penetrating the modern moment.

After South Africa attained democracy in 1994 reconfiguration of the hierarchy of patriarchy in South African society became inevitable. The 'other' had to be redefined, and the operation of power had to be re-constructed. For centuries white masculinity enjoyed the position and privilege of being 'hegemonic', but the crisis in South African society was how to incorporate black masculinity as the 'hegemonic masculinity' and more importantly what was to become of 'white masculinity'. Post-apartheid South African society does not only have to redefine the centre, but also has to locate 'African whiteness' within the new political landscape. The broader issue was how to correct the injustices of the past by positioning black masculinity as the dominant form of masculinity in South African society. This issue needs immediate rectification as South African society[5] and government is now controlled by a black majority. The position of hegemony changed with a changing socio-political climate. This attests to the

[5] Although the political situation in South Africa was very similar to the USA and the UK one major difference exits which makes the position of the black man in South Africa relatively unique to those of black population elsewhere. In the United States of America and the United Kingdom, black masculinity is located as an oppositional masculinity. Although one can draw many similarities between the USA/UK and South Africa in relation to black masculinity, the most obvious difference is that the black population in South Africa comprises the majority of the population as compared to the USA/UK where the black populations are the minority populations.

fact that hegemonic or dominant masculinity is never stable or fixed but is continuously in flux, reasserting the *status quo* of the contemporary period.

The history of black masculinity in South Africa evokes the manner in which race is performed through the institutionalisation of discourses that determine appropriate behaviours for different bodies according to skin colour and also highlights the manner in which space has been strategically used to determine identity and sexuality, especially through mobilisation of stereotypes that informed black identity.

The Black Body on celluloid

I suggest that the cinematic representation of black (male) identity has been historically constructed through a symbolic sign system that has encoded black identity with certain characteristics that have become naturalised, acceptable and legitimate over time. The 'masculinity-as-sign'[6] approach is concerned with deconstructing the symbolic sign system which makes masculinity appear as an ontological given. I assert that one needs to apply the same principle to deconstruct the cinematic representation of black masculinities. Black masculinity has been created and re-created through the process of 'othering' and ascribing an 'otherness' onto the black body. These symbolic signs carry

[6] This is a poststructuralist approach to the study of gender (in this case masculinity) and is concerned with the manner in which masculinity is constructed within a system of signs. "These signs (e.g. style of clothing, mannerisms, and so on) are coded as either feminine or masculine, and they help to mark a human being as a gendered subject" (Saco, 1992: 25). A poststructuralist approach to the study of gender identifies the manner in which masculinity and femininity are coded opposites in and through the sign system. A set of signs within the sign system, carries a set of meanings which become ritualized and we learn to read them as naturalised. A good example of this is the manner in which the signs of masculinity (e.g. muscular, active, sexual, and aggressive) are encoded in displays and constructions of masculinity on television, film and other media. Saco (1992: 25) argues that the masculinity-as-signs approach 'assumes that film, television, and other media help to constitute gender difference, rather than simply reflect or represent that difference'. According to this approach to the study of gender, identity is not essential or eminent to human beings. The (re)presentations of gender through television, film and other media, is actually a construction of gender through a symbolic sign system that ascribes characteristics onto human beings which are recognisable and acknowledged as natural, legitimate, acceptable and common-sensical (Saco, 1992).

specific meanings which become ritualised and audiences learn to read them as natural.

Black identity especially black masculinity has historically been stereotyped in cinematic representations. The stereotype is achieved by fixing a simplified characterisation onto a particular object or subject that is repeated constantly in order to construct the stereotype as natural and an essential characteristic of a particular person or object. Stereotypes are usually recognisable by exaggerated features or characteristics. "Stereotypes become signs that act as signifiers of difference and inferiority" (Goldberg, 2000) and usually represent characters as one-dimensional, exaggerating a particular characteristic of a person and totally investing the character with this characteristic. Ultimately audiences understand characters only through the stereotype that has been perpetuated. I suggest that the manner in which black identity is represented today is the result of a historically constructed sign system that invested black identity with particular characteristics.

Black masculinity is constructed as being deviant, hypersexual, aggressive, violent and criminal through a symbolic sign system that ascribes [these] characteristics onto [black bodies] which are recognisable and acknowledged as "natural, legitimate, acceptable and common-sensical" (Saco, 1992). By stereotyping black identity in this manner the cinematic image has been responsible for constructing blackness as inferior and different to whiteness.

To unravel this symbolic sign system one needs to understand the manner in which *black identity* has been constructed in the history of filmmaking. Diawara (1993) has suggested that D.W.Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* is responsible for 'fixing' the manner in which black identity was to be cinematically constructed in the United States of America. This film provided a limited set of representations for the manner in which black identity was to be constructed. *The Birth of a Nation* has been recognised as one of the first films that stereotyped black identity cinematically and was responsible for constructing black identity as inferior and deviant.

To illustrate this point I draw from the history of filmmaking in the United States of America and South Africa. The essentialism of black identity and the construction of images of blackness that are denigrating to a global black population are historically rooted in the subordination and suppression of black populations globally.

The construction of images in South Africa follows a trajectory similar to image making in the United States of America and Britain. However this parallel is more obvious with the history of filmmaking in the United States of America. In the 1970's Blaxploitation films in the United States became very popular amongst African-American audiences. These films were characterised by a blatant exploitation of blacks (African-Americans) and marketed itself "into an emerging African-American film market with promises of ample sex and violence, and draws on contemporary anxieties and fears that, one assumes, have a direct relevance for black communities" (Koven, 2001: 9). Simultaneously one can trace the rise and development of 'Bantu Films' produced in South Africa. Bantu films were very similar to Blaxploitation films as they exploited black people by portraying them as exhibiting a 'colonial mentality' (Koven, 2001). Many of these films were also sponsored by the apartheid government and to a large extent reinforced the apartheid mission of 'separate developments' as many of these films located black people in rural areas.

In the United States Blaxploitation films were followed by a genre referred to as 'Hood Films'[7]. General characteristics of the Hood Films were their 'ghetto' locations, a loyalty to an 'authentic black experience', 'keeping it real' and locating the 'real' black man in the Ghetto. Hood films obviously derived from Blaxploitation films, but more importantly these films were responding to a history of stereotypes associated with blackness in the United States. Similarly contemporary South African cinema appears to also be responding to a history of stereotypes associated with the history of filmmaking in South Africa.

[7] Some films that fall into the genre of Hood Films are John Singletons *Boyz in da Hood(1991), The Harder they Come* (Perry Henzell, 1972). *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles, 2002), has also been characterized as a Hood Film as it draws strongly on the signs and iconography of this genre – the ghetto setting, male centered narratives, anti heroes, to name just a few.

Representation of black identity in post-apartheid South African cinema also appear to be drawing from Hood Films as representations of blackness largely subscribes to notions of locating an authentic black identity within the township, 'keeping it real' and operating outside the legal framework. Such representation speaks to attempts to re-create and recuperate black masculinity, but in the process there is the essentialising of black masculinity. The majority of films produced in South Africa are located in township spaces which has become a cinematic trope of Blackness. The 'township space' like the ghetto is a geographic location characterised by underclass, poverty, violence, lawlessness, disorder and decay. There is also a sense that South African filmmakers want to represent an authentic black experience and there is also the continued suggestion that a 'real' black masculinity is to be found (and represented) within the township space. One common thread that runs through Blaxploitation, Bantu films and Hood films and the majority of contemporary South African films is the representation of black masculinity as deviant, aggressive, violent and unable to assimilate into a modern society. These films represent black masculinity through a performance of racial identity that subscribes to 'place-myths' of township and ghetto spaces. This highlights the extent to which space concretises identity and determines filmmaker's points-of-view.

In post-apartheid South Africa it is essential to consider how to 'Reframe black identity'. In this report I argue that at the expense of redefining and reframing black identity cinematically, there appears to be a re-inscribing of the 'otherness' of black identity. In contemporary South African cinema there appears to be a 'strategic-essentialism' of black identity occurring. This is discussed further in the section below.

Township Masculinity

Between the periods 1949 and 1959 three films produced in South Africa appear to have set the tone for the manner in which blackness is represented in contemporary South African cinema. These films are *Jim comes to Joburg* (1949), *Cry the Beloved Country* (1952) and *Come Back Africa* (1959). All three

films 'reflect on the urban through its relationship with the rural' (Smith, 2000:1), and all three deal with a black male protagonist who is new to the city. These films were South African/foreign collaborations and one could argue strongly that the images constructed in these films resonate strongly with the images constructed in post-apartheid South African cinema. Contemporary South African films (like *Yesterday* and *Max and Mona*) and television series (like *Yizo Yizo* and *Gazlam)* are often concerned with the tension between the urban and the rural areas, constructing the urban area as a site of destruction, alienation and contamination. The black body represents the 'suffering body of the city' (Le Marcis, 2004:454). The urban (city) space is represented as a space where *black identity* is out of place.

The rural area is essentialised in its construction as the pristine, pure, archaic space for the black subject, a space characteristic of traditional values and a timeless African culture. Contemporary South African cinema is preoccupied with the manner in which the black body negotiates modernity (represented by the urban space) and also draws on the tensions encountered by the black subject between the rural and urban. There is a strong suggestion that the black body is still incapable of fully inhabiting modernity and therefore the black subject is relegated to the space of the township. The 'township space' is represented as the manageable space of modernity for the black subject. The 'township space' articulates black masculinity that is infused with notions of 'otherness'.

In contemporary South African cinema the 'township space' has become a means of locating an authentic black masculinity. An urban black masculinity is strongly related to the township as it was this space that black identity had been confined to for so many years during the dark days of apartheid. The township became a zone of black culture and has since become strongly related to black identity. In *Wooden Camera* there are many different layers of black masculinity evident in the township space. Madiba's father is symbolic of the apartheid regime that castrated and infantilised the black man. Madiba's father bears the marks of apartheid through his broken dreams of becoming an actor. Black men were marginalised during apartheid and the types of jobs that they had access to were restricted. Madiba's father thus resorts to alcohol as a means of escaping.

Madiba in stark contrast to his father and Sipho, is symbolic of the transformative potential of the 'township space'. Madiba is able to re-imagine this space through the lens of his camera. He is also symbolic of the new South African dispensation where he can fall in love with a white girl quite freely without punishment from the State. This is something his father was never able to accomplish. On the other hand the filmmaker inscribes Sipho with an 'otherness' that reminds one of Hollywood's Hood films. As soon as Sipho takes ownership of the gun from the dead man's body, his actions and motives are determined through the power he can display because of the gun. Sipho becomes a stereotype that resonates very strongly with the 'township space'. In *Tsotsi*, Tsotsi is also represented as criminal and deviant. Tsotsi does not provide alternate notions of black masculinity. Tsotsi is inscribed with an otherness from the opening sequence when he kills a man on the train. The filmmaker makes it obvious that the train is travelling from the township to the city center and the criminal youth on the train are from the 'township space'.

In both films the township's marginality is reflected through its located on the periphery of society and highlights it position as "an alternate geography of modernity" (Shields, 1991). The township was constructed as a contested space, and its inhabitants were also constructed as marginal. Black masculinity within this space was represented as being criminal, violent and deviant. Contemporary South African cinema employs similar tropes in its attempt to redefine black masculinity in the post-apartheid context. The contradiction in contemporary South African cinema is that by trying to redefine black masculinity, the filmmakers re-iterate the 'otherness' of black identity.

A common feature of films that locate black masculinity within the 'township space' is the representation of gang cultures. Urban gang cultures can erupt in any environment characterised by a 'substantial population of poor city-bred youth with limited employment (Glaser, 1998: 720). According to Glaser, there is a similarity between African male grade systems (or the process through which young black males are socialised into becoming men in the rural areas) and black urban youth gangs. Glaser argues that because there is a loss of rural roots and adult supervision in the urban environment, youngsters are left to their

own devises often unsupervised which leads to the formation of gang cultures that are highly territorial. Gang cultures are supposedly representative of the process of socialisation and 'becoming a man' in an urban environment that is constructed as foreign or alien to the black body. One characteristic of gang culture that Glaser highlights is that women are subjected to high levels of sexual violence by gang members and women are constantly threatened by rape (Glaser, 1998: 723).

Contemporary cinematic representations of black masculinity subscribes to the tendency of locating an *authentic black masculinity* within the 'township space' and articulated through violent 'township gangs'. Cinematically gang cultures are translated as cultures of violence, sexually potent spaces that characterises what it means to be a 'man'. Gang cultures are cinematic representations as male dominated spaces where women are submissive and subordinated by gang members. *Yizo Yizo, Tsotsi* and *Wooden Camera* articulate black masculinity through gang cultures. In *Wooden Camera*, Sipho becomes a member of an urban gang located in Cape Town. The other gang members (who are all male) form a closely knit kinship most probably because of the similar circumstances that have brought them together. The gang members live on the street and engage in prostitution as a means of survival. Sipho is also represented as a petty criminal, stealing from the more upper class white males in Cape Town. In *Tsosti,* gang affiliations are also obvious. Tsotsi is the central protagonist of the film and he is respected as a gang leader. His actions prove disastrous when he steals a car with a baby in the back seat. Both Sipho and Tsotsi are cinematically represented as violent, underprivileged and dangerous to society. Both films suggest that young men become dangerous and involved in gang activities because of their strong association with the 'township space'. In both films the township is represented as a space of underdevelopment, poverty and for the underprivileged. These two films suggest that the township influences the type of individuals that will emerge from this space. Both films also represent their main characters as stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. In *Wooden Camera* Sipho robs a white man at gunpoint and distributes the money between his friends – Madiba, Madiba's sister Louise and their other friend. Cinematically black masculinity and 'township culture' has become

synonymous with a gang culture that constructs a distorted view of black masculinity. In these films black masculinity is constructed as violent, oppressive, and a threat to the *status quo*. Glaser notes that 'symbolically and materially the masculine identity of these ghetto youth was linked to their control of space' (Glaser, 1998: 725).

The 'township space' has become conflated with the notion of an *authentic* black masculinity and the location of *authentic blackness*. The cinematic representations of the township space and its control by gang cultures, has resulted in the essentialism of the township as a space of violence, oppression, dominated and ruled by violent gang cultures. This cinematic representation reinscribes black identity with an 'otherness' and articulates the otherness of 'township spaces'. Cinematic representations of black masculinity appear to suggest that authentic black masculinity is one that is fixed within the 'township space' and characterised through an otherness by representing black men as violent, lazy, unemployed, intoxicated and threatening to society at large.

Although Morrell's position and deconstruction of black urban youth gangs are useful to think through the constructedness of masculinity in South Africa (both before and after apartheid) one explicit limitation in his analysis is that he reinscribes the notion of an inherent violence on the black body. The association made between stick fighting in rural areas as a means of teaching fighting skills and socialisation into the community, with a violent gang culture in urban areas, associated with fighting, loyalty and belonging, essentialises the black man and the black experience as being one that is inherently violent. This analysis is inadequate as it fails to recognise the manner in which the black body was constructed through a process of 'othering' whose function was to reinscribe an inherent violence and deviancy. *Wooden Camera* and *Tsotsi* essentially reinscribe the black body as inherently violent. Both films deal with gang cultures as a means of socialisation and spaces of belonging and loyalty. However both films are also refracted through a colonial lens which subscribes to the inherently violent, *undifferentiated* black body. This echoes the colonial and apartheid discourse in the manner in which the black body was constructed

as the ‘other’. Deviancy is inscribed on the black body, relegating blackness to the terrain of ‘otherness’.

Contemporary South African cinema is in the process of negotiating and ‘locating’ black identity in a post-apartheid society. This process of negotiation speaks to the rearticulation of black identity and re-defining or ‘re-locating’ the centre to negate the colonial and apartheid gaze. The irony is that through this process of ‘re-locating’ black identity cinematically, filmmakers ‘fixed’ or ‘frozen’ blackness within the ‘township space’. Post-apartheid South African filmmakers have also infused the ‘township space’ with stereotypes and notions of otherness that resonate with the project of the township during Afrikaner Nationalism. The fixing or freezing of black identity is problematic as the black experience has been conflated into only one type of experience. Cinematic representations of black identity do not recognise that there are different experiences of being black. The different experiences of class and sexuality within the framework of black identity have been subsumed by constructions of black masculinity as violent, deviant, criminal and problematic. In post-apartheid cinema there is an inherent reworking of black masculinity but this masculinity is being subverted at the cost of reinscribing black identity as ‘other’. The suggestion is that black identity is incapable of inhabiting the modern landscape of the urban environment and therefore blackness is subjected to the space of the township. This space is an interstitial space, an in-between space, one that is not fully modern yet also not fully rural. This interstitial space is characterised by its hybridity (a mix of the rural and the urban), a space that is represented as the manageable portion of modernity that black identity (and black psyche) is capable of negotiating. A result of the colonial encounter was the production of identities that were fluid and not fixed (Loomba, 1996; Bhabha, 1992). However the ideological framework of the Afrikaner nationalist party was based on constructing black identity as being ‘fixed’ in its deviancy, aggression, violence and uncivilised manner, and it appears as though this ‘fixity’ has been translated cinematically on screen. This contradiction in the apartheid experience is reflected through the lives of Sipho and Tsotsi who are cinematically represented as frozen in their deviancy, criminality and social

decay. Although these characters are represented as stereotypes they do have heroic overtones.

Although I have evoked similarities in cinematic representations of black identity from different parts of the world I would like to suggest that geographic location is an important factor in determining the different ways in which these representations are constructed and represented. Hood films, Blaxploitation and Bantu films all share common characteristics. Cinematically black identity and subjectivity have been constructed through a system of stereotyping that draws on a limited 'sign-system' that has overdetermined and represented black identity as deviant, destructive, violence and uncivilised. By locating authentic black identity within 'township spaces' filmmakers exaggerate and misrepresent the experiences of people who live there. Cinematically all black experiences within this space are conflated and have become associated with criminality, violence, decay and death. This stereotype in cinema suggests that the construction of black identity as deviant serves to normalise white masculinity. Blackness and whiteness share a dichotomous relationship that maintains the position of blackness and whiteness. The 'other' for the white man is the black man. According to Loomba (1998: 144) the white man defines the black man in relation to his skin colour and his 'supposed limitless sexuality'. For the black man the white man represents everything that he desires to be. In *Wooden Camera* the white male music teacher is significant because his character suggests that whiteness is needed in order to save the inhabitants of the township. The white music teacher is portrayed as a voice of reason. He advises Madiba to distance himself from Sipho because Sipho is criminal and violent. This teacher is represented as rational and it is only through his rationality, that Madiba will be able to save himself from meeting a similar fate like Sipho's. In post-apartheid South African society the redefinition of the centre is important because of the changes within the political landscape. Cinematically the marginal position of black identity also needs to be reconsidered so that there is a shift in the marginalisation of black identity. Although there is an attempt to 'relocate' the centre from hegemonic white masculinity to hegemonic black masculinity, whiteness remains the normative, invisible signifier through which black identity is defined and recuperated in post-apartheid South African

society. Even if there is a reconstruction of black masculinity this is achieved in relation to an invisible white masculinity. In chapter four I develop this notion further in relation to the positions of the white music teacher in *Wooden Camera* and the gaze of the white filmmaker that permeates the film *Tsotsi*.

Chapter four provides an analysis and critique of *Wooden Camera* and *Tsotsi* by appropriating the theoretical framework set up in Chapters one, two and three. In the following chapter I critically analyse the 'Cinematic Township' and then analyse the articulation of black masculinity within this space. I argue that South African filmmakers emphasise the liminality of the 'township space' and marginality of black identity. Although post-apartheid South African filmmakers have embarked on a project to re-construct black identity there is the tendency to re-inscribe notions of otherness that have not changed with the shifting historic and political landscape in South Africa.