

Radically Reimagining Rebellion:
Historicity and Black Agency in *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973)

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Ivan Dixon's 1973 film *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (hereafter referred to as *Spook*), an adaptation of Sam Greenlee's novel of the same name, dramatizes the story of ex-CIA agent Dan Freeman (Lawrence Cook), who trains a gang of Chicago black youth, the Cobras, in guerilla warfare. The film is a politically and racially charged polemic that challenges Black middle-class sensibilities, illustrates the possibilities of urban insurrection, and engages with a multifaceted conceptualization of Black masquerade. Moving beyond what is just text-imminent in the film, or the film's representation of a singular narrative history, a historicity of *Spook* reveals the film's intricate, varied, and interpretive historical meanings and performances. To historicize the film, this essay rejects reading *Spook* as a singular or specific historical narrative, and it refuses to place the multiple historical narratives *Spook* offers within a hierarchal framework. Instead, this essay recognizes the historical contingency, conflicts, paradoxes, and tensions that these narratives yield when placed alongside and in conversation with each other. As a film with its own controversial and mythologized production history, *Spook's* diegetic narrative can be read productively against itself as a historiographical product of compounding social, economic, cultural, and political forces.

Using Leerom Medovoi's theoretical historicist approach to film studies in "Theorizing Historicity, or the Many Meanings of *Blacula*" and looking at *Spook's* historic positioning from the contemporaneous moment, the film reveals itself and its meanings to be unfixed. As Michel de Certeau states that history writing is "founded on the rupture between a past that is its object and a present that is the place of its practice," this theoretical history of *Spook* functions like de Certeau's methodology, "endlessly [finding] the present in its object and the past in its practice" (36). The "practice" in this case is not solely, as de Certeau is pointing towards, the unstable position of the historian's writing. The "practice" can be thought of also as an episteme of the

unstable historical position of the exhibition of the film text itself. The historical meanings of a film “[involve] not simply what is represented or referred to by the film, but what then happens when the film is negotiated by an actual viewer, who perhaps inhabits a completely different historical moment” (Medovoi 20). Recognizing the text’s many interfaces as a part of its historical becoming or meaning-production—inflecting the past in its present, speaking the unspeakable of its contemporaneous moment, and being read against the bearing of its future (re)consideration and placement—*Spook* presents alternative and transitive social realities of Black agency.¹ *Spook* can, thus, be constructively historicized within its own controversial production history, the blaxploitation genre, Black’s documentary-televisual image in the late 1960s, and the narrative origin of the Crips gang. As a result, a historicist approach to *Spook* elucidates the film’s complex sites of historical meaning that gives not only depth but ideological gravity to the narrative performances of Black agency.

Historicity and Theories of Black Agency: *Spook* Means and Signifies

As a form of historical analysis, Medovoi affirms that historicity exposes that “a film text constitutes a complex system of interlocking and overlapping historical meanings” (19). This interlocking system is not to say that films, including *Spook*, are direct reflections of their historical periods. Nor does this say that the text’s representation of a history in its diegesis is the film’s sole historical performance. Instead, historicizing a film is to engage with the past as well as the present, to theorize the textual presence of the unrepresented, and to recognize the negotiated positioning of spectators in different historical moments (Medovoi 2, 20, 15). Therefore, the discursively liminal space of *Spook*’s narrative is expanded by considering and theorizing the many historical meanings of the film and its formation. Theorizing the history of *Spook* from the vantage point of thirty-seven years of difference between the film’s initial

exhibition and my historical placement, this essay is aided by the many historical currents that have washed over the text's meaning, including various social and political movements, the film's festival premiere in 2004, and even other scholars' work on the film.² The historical tapestry created by the film's narrative, the film's production history, American history, and American film history offers a rich and complex historical constellation surrounding *Spook's* many meanings. Specifically, Medovoi writes that a film's historical meanings include: "its deployment of historically specific generic codes and conventions, its representation of particular histories as its narrative subject, its repression or erasure of other histories, and finally its performative meaning given a particular historical context of production, marketing and consumption" (19). By considering these historical sites of meaning, Medovoi states that theory becomes "indispensable" because a historicist agenda "[constructs] the complexly layered analyses that can successfully iterate the ideological stakes raised by the historicity of any particular film or film formation" (2).

A historicist approach to *Spook* can successfully be done through theorizing its historical meanings within the ideological stakes of Black agency. In Kara Keeling's *The Witch's Flight*, Keeling instructively and critically focuses on historicity and Black agency. Adeptly utilizing the historicist theories of the Black image by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Keeling relates that, for Fanon, historicity is the "set of past Black images that come to reside in each appearance of the Black" (Keeling 30). According to Keeling, "this appearance of the past in the present—what Fanon calls historicity—limits the present expression by binding it in a closed circuit with the colonial constructions of the past" (ibid). Drawing from the work of Gilles Deleuze, the historicity of the black image is constructed as a time-image in an interval

spatiotemporal position of waiting, where “to exist as one who waits is to exist in an interval”

(Keeling 36). More specifically:

Fanon thinks of the Black as a time-image in order to argue that change is imminent to the black’s existence. According to this tendency in Fanon’s argument, in any present perception of the black there exists the possibility for an alternative organization of sociality to appear, one that would not support the black’s appearance and that, therefore, would break the chains which bind the black to the past (as slave), freeing the black man from himself by revealing that one’s present perception of him (a perception of the past) is inconsistent with the black’s new situation. (Keeling 70)

We can productively draw from Fanon’s conception of the Black image a complex *site of sight*, where the Black time-image “might be best understood in terms of the spatiotemporal relations it makes visible” (Keeling 29). Therefore, this historical epistemology locates the Black image in a transitive state of Black perception or visibility that can hold the possibility for alternative Black existences apart from racist and colonial conceptions of the Black. Keeling and Fanon’s historicist theorizing of the Black image and viewing relations is useful in conceptualizing the images of Black agency in *Spook*. In this regard, *Spook*’s representation of Black agency—Freeman’s leadership of urban insurrection and guerilla warfare—functions as a historicist source that can be read productively against the histories of historical urban rebellions at the time. In other words, images of Black agency in *Spook* signify in meaningful ways the differing perceptions (blaxploitation versus Black empowerment; riot versus revolt; criminal versus revolutionary; gang versus freedom fighters, etc.) of African American’s aggressive struggles for racial equality in American society.

As a result, this essay merges Medovoi’s theoretical historicity with Keeling’s (vis-à-vis Fanon’s historicity) alternative Black social image to unpack the dense historical positioning and re-positioning of *Spook* and uncover the ideological ways in which the Black image presents alternative socialites and transitive states of Black agency. Both notions of historicity serve as

interventions into hegemonic notions of a singular, “documented” historical narrative and perception of the Black image. These documented histories range. On one hand, I am referring to film history texts that merely place *Spook* within the historical framework of 1970s blaxploitation films. They proffer *Spook*’s historical placement as neatly being situated; however this essay demonstrates how *Spook* is a cinematic (dis)rupture of history. Additionally, I am countering the documented histories in American mass media, especially television, of Black images that were issued contemporaneously with *Spook*. Moreover, I am speaking back to governmental documented histories, such as FBI files, that structure and record “factual” histories of Black agency and unrest. Therefore, this essay is not a complete explication of *Spook*’s diegetic and non-diegetic historical meanings. Instead, this essay elucidates on “crucial forms of partial and local systematic knowledge” that can counter singular, hegemonic documented histories (Medovoi 2).³ These local knowledges allow for a historical analysis of the fictive *Spook* against the reality of the American landscape, exposing spatiotemporal ruptures that re-frame and re-position the text in relation to shifting historical times.

Historicity and Producing “Radicalness”: *Spook*’s Controversial Release(s)

Spook’s production, marketing, and consumption are important sites to begin to unlock the historical meanings of the film. Medovoi explains that “[the] question of a text’s performativity—what it *means* in the sense of what it *does*—demands attention not only to its representational codes and conventions, but also to the actual sites of its production and consumption” (13). As a result, the controversial, conflicting, and unclear histories of *Spook*’s release(s) perform an important ideological function that allows for the film to remain “radical” in many different historical-temporal moments.

As previously mentioned, *Spook* is an adaptation of Greenlee's novel of the same name. Much like the film, the book's distribution history is steeped in its own legend. Unable to get the novel published in America, it was initially published in 1969 by UK publisher Allison & Busby. According to a 2004 interview between Greenlee and scholar Christine Acham, Greenlee believed the book was "a deliberate departure from traditional black protest novels. Those books were meant to appeal to the moral conscience of white America. I [Greenlee] don't do that. My book is for black people" (118). An underground sensation, the book wasn't published in the United States until 1973 by Bantam Press.⁴ A controversial book, the sentiment of contentiousness carried itself over to the production of the film.

Producing the film together, Greenlee co-wrote the screenplay and actor and television director Ivan Dixon (one of only a handful of working Black directors in Hollywood at the time) directed the film. While the film was made for roughly one-million dollars, Greenlee and Dixon had trouble finding investors for the film. According to Greenlee, "some investors were discouraged from putting their money into the film by various governmental agencies," including the FBI (ibid). According to Lottie Joiner of the *Crisis*, "Greenlee and producer/director Ivan Dixon estimate they raised between \$750,000 and \$850,000 from Black investors" ("After Thirty Years"). Filmed mostly in Gary, Indiana, a reviewer from the *Chicago Defender* in 1973 notes that Chicago's mayor, Richard J. Daley refused to have filming done in the city ("Spook Who Sat by the Door' has Benefit Premiere"). According to Dixon, "The mayor had read the book, or part of it, and hated it" (Nichols).⁵ Taking a cue from the film's narrative, where Freeman teaches the Cobras to "match technology with spontaneity and improvisation," the one scene filmed in Chicago—where Freeman teaches the gang how to use the city streets as markers for warfare—was shot guerilla style. "To get this memorable shot the actors and a crewmember

took a handheld camera onto the [Chicago L] platform. They filmed the scene, got on the L, took some images in the moving train and got off at the following stop before they could be questioned” (Acham 121). The rest of the film was shot in Gary, Indiana where African American Mayor Richard Hatcher “offered Dixon all of the support that he needed to complete the production,” including local police and a helicopter for an overhead crowd shot (ibid).

Distributed by United Artists (UA), there is quite a mystery around the film’s short release in 1973. According to *Spook*’s contemporary distributor, Tim Reid, the movie was pulled by United Artist early into its release—“It was out for a few days, was pulled, and stayed in a vault for 30 years... There was pressure on them, because it went against the grain, it was politically incorrect” (Beale). Joiner, whose article on the film “After 30 Years a Controversial Film Re-emerges,” continues this narrative. She states, “[the film] was released in theaters nationwide, but was often closed within two or three days of opening” (Joiner 41).⁶ According to Greenlee, the film did gross around a half-million dollars in its first week, and UA had planned to have Greenlee go on a twenty-one day tour with the film (Acham 123). However, many theaters closed the film early (ibid). Acham writes that, “African Americans across major American cities recall seeing the film when it opened and then upon return to the theater it was gone. Others remember hearing about the film and being unable to locate it” (ibid). According to Greenlee’s own investigation after the film’s disappearance in Chicago theaters, “exhibitors from across the country reported that men who identified themselves as members of the FBI ‘requested’ that the owners remove the film from the theaters” (Acham 124).

Another conspiracy theory offered by Dixon states that a “robbery of an armory in Compton, which mirrored an episode in the film, was so disturbing to UA the company quickly dropped ‘Spook’” (Beale). However, comments by Greenlee expressing that his radical book

and film “made him a human target” point to the role governmental agencies, such as the FBI, might have had in possibly silencing him and the film (Hall). Greenlee believes that the FBI “talked” with UA executives and the two *agreed* to take the film out of theaters. The forty to fifty prints of the film are presumed to have been lost or destroyed, with only Dixon and Greenlee’s negative copy surviving, hidden away in a vault (Acham 124). However, according to a 2004 review of the film’s re-release, “neither Dixon nor Greenlee could find another distributor. Nor could they cut a video deal; although Dixon says a stolen print of ‘Spook’ was released on VHS about 10 years ago” (Beale). The article continues, stating “it is now up to [Tim] Reid, known for producing and starring in the groundbreaking African American TV series ‘Linc’s’ and ‘Frank’s Place,’ to reintroduce ‘Spook’ to the American public” (Beale). The film theatrically re-premiered at the Los Angeles Film Festival in 2004 and on DVD. A film with a history of being un-locatable has found itself in a vastly differing temporal period. Therefore, the film’s historical meaning shifts to the contemporary space of the new millennium, making its re-presentation and representation of Black images of revolution seem almost new in some sense. Moreover, the festival premiere implicates Reid and his distribution company as active Black agents in releasing the historically marginalized *Spook* into a contemporary setting. While the history of the film is shrouded in these pontifications of the film’s release, *Spook* did not stay “locked in a vault” for thirty years.

To continue to complicate the performance of *Spook*’s releases, according to a 1976 article in the *Tri-State Defender*, *Spook* enjoyed a revival in Memphis in June of that year at the celebration of the Towne Cinema Theatres first anniversary.⁷ Moreover, the article calls *Spook* a “totally Black endeavor,” noting it “was produced by Bokari Ltd., a Black-owned company, [and] is being distributed by a newly formed Black effort, American Transcontinental Pictures”

(*Tri-State Defender*). Consequently, Reid is not the only Black company that “saved” *Spook* from obscurity. Additionally, the article explains *Spook* was originally “pulled out of theater after theater around the nation—in spite of tremendous demand by the public to see the movie” (ibid). Even more telling, the article points out the “wake of Watergate and recent disclosures about the country’s intelligence system” made *Spook* “more relevant than ever” (ibid). Melding the film’s diegetic narrative and its current (1976) exhibition, the article’s noting of *Spook*’s profound relevance in that contemporary moment of political controversy, cover-up, and FBI exposé are meaningfully ironic in regards to the film’s production, distribution, and exhibition. As this essay has described how *Spook* has emerged and re-emerged, the film’s historical discursive meanings not only shift in relation to its exhibition but are also expounded on by new potential social referents.

Most importantly, what is significant here is not the creation of a singular or “truthful” history of *Spook*’s release. The comments from Greenlee, Dixon, Reid, and the many newspaper sources dating from 1973 to 2004 can be read productively against the film in differing temporal landscapes. All of the aforementioned sources come from initial oral sources, and, as Alessandro Portelli writes of oral histories, “the discrepancy between fact and memory ultimately enhances the value of the oral sources as historical documents” (26). Thus, the reliability or accuracy of information from these sources on *Spook*’s controversial releases is not important here. The event of the film’s release and removal is secondary to the “real and significant historical fact which these [competing historical] narratives highlight is the memory itself” (ibid). Therefore, how this film is *remembered* as “controversial” throughout its historical displacement serves an important ideological function to *Spook*’s “radicalness” in multiple contexts. *Spook* is shown as

actively relevant to evolving time periods because its subject matter and exhibition history produces radical meanings of the past, the present, and even possibly the future.

Therefore, in going back to Reid's 2004 distribution of *Spook*, the film operates within a new cinematic climate of African American filmmaking. In many ways, *Spook* performs as a historical specter that makes one reevaluate the cinema of not just its temporal period but of the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, 1980s "cinema of recuperation" that proved "the caricatures and stereotypes of Hollywood's openly racist past proved to be resilient demons as they were subtly refashioned and resurfaced in a broad range of films" can be historically engaged with by *Spook* (Guerrero *Framing Blackness*, 113). Additionally, films of the 1990s, in particular the hood genre films that incorporate "the signs and symbols of urban youth culture and the rage at the core of the films often directed not only at the system but at an absent ideological father" can be put into dialogue with *Spook* (Massood 147). With the gains and losses of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Liberationist Movements weighed, *Spook* still articulates a freedom not yet realized and a dream not yet fulfilled within Hollywood and America. The middle-class sensibility criticism in *Spook* challenges the assimilationist films of the 1980s, and the liberation minded Black youth in *Spook* challenges the nihilism of the hood films in the 1990s. *Spook* still reads "radical" in relation to these cinematic periods of Black film just as much as it read radical at its own conception. The images in the film are given ideological import by re-articulating its narrative of Black agency, Black insurrection, and Black Nationalism within an evolving historical context. Functioning in many spatiotemporal settings, to view *Spook's* many historical meanings is to situate and locate a text that has been persistently displaced. Consequently, Black agency—as defined by the film's producers and distributors in their historical periods—operates

in a transitive state, allowing for *Spook* to be perceived as possibly subversive in different historical milieus.

Historicity and Urban Black Youth Audiencing: *Spook's* Generic Blaxploitation

Spook's historical meanings are impacted by its genre positioning, specifically that of Hollywood's blaxploitation cycle. Ed Guerrero defines Hollywood's blaxploitation period as "the film industry's targeting [of] the black audience with a specific product line of cheaply made, black-cast films shaped with the 'exploitation' strategies Hollywood routinely uses to make the majority of its films" (Framing Blackness, 69). As Medovoi states in his own historicist approach to *Blacula* (1972), one cannot discuss *Blacula's* "implicit representation of the Black Power and Afrocentric movements of the 1960s and 1970s" without "[making] a case for their latent narrative presence by appealing to the blaxploitational context of film production and consumption" (15). By understanding the historical meanings implicit in the blaxploitation context, theories of audiencing of *Spook* can be understood as a vexed site of transitive Black agency. I am drawing on the term audiencing from Sean Cubitt's The Cinema Effect, a critical theoretical work on not just what cinema means but what cinema *does*. According to Cubitt, "the entity 'audience' exists as the object of an activity whose purpose is in part simply to produce it;" and "viewers exists as only as viewers *of*" (333). Therefore, to consider *Spook's* historical meanings in the blaxploitation cycle is to re-consider what the urban Black youth audience means for Hollywood within this period.

According to Mark Reid, the Black action film of the 1970s is marked by Hollywood's financial crisis and corresponding social experiences of the Black community at the time, specifically a rejection of nonviolent strategies for civil rights to those of forceful aggression. Reid suggests that these films "are popularized versions of this discontent" (70). As a result, the

blaxploitation film cycle in Hollywood is predicated on a recuperation of Black discontent into a commoditized form that can be sold to the discontented. To analyze *Spook*'s historical placement during this time is to theorize how the Black audience, specifically the Black urban youth audience, functions within the genre. According to Cubitt, “[authorship] is never the property of an individual: it is an institutional and discursive function” and “[the] task of cinema is to deliver audiences to films, and the task of audience is to constitute films as objects of consumption” (333). Therefore, in understanding how the urban Black youth audience—the primary fiscal audience of blaxploitation—operates, we can see how audiencing elucidates *Spook*'s historical meanings in a genre that engenders and dis-engenders Black agency.

As aforementioned, much is historically noted about the importance of the Black urban youth market in the fierce, but short, history of blaxploitation films and their success. In fact, the genre is often foundationally marked by historians in regards to this audience. However, according to Keeling:

Theories of blaxploitation's conditions of possibility that posit the preexistence of a young, urban, black audience whose black nationalist sentiment is ripe for exploitation obscure the extent to which the audience itself is called into being for exploitation (meaning the films themselves, the critical theories and narratives crafted to consider them generically, and other discourses that inform the category) as a population that might be isolated as an audience that is in excess of the audience Hollywood assumes exists for its mainstream feature films. (103)

Keeling's insightful acknowledgement into the ways in which the audience is called into existence points to—as Cubitt also expresses—how audiences exist only in relation to their viewing of a text. However, Keeling notes the racialized ways in which audiencing functions, where the Black youth population is considered a “surplus population” that can and was “reabsorbed into the mass audience” at the end of the blaxploitation period (105). Again, Keeling's insights are compelling:

...the productive capacities gained by the characteristics young, urban, and black become redundant, or, from the point of view one must inhabit to produce analyses of cultural products, one might say that they simply retain a latent potential to disturb normative analyses of a blockbuster film's meaning. (ibid)

Therefore, Hollywood's own engagement with the Black youth audience is a historical performance of becoming where the Black youth market becomes visible for its own financial exploitation and is subsequently made invisible when no longer needed. Urban Black youth box-office agency is constructed as transitive where Black "interest" dictates the commodities of the market.

Taking into account *Spook*'s historical positioning in the genre, one must consider how the film operates in relationship to audiencing. *Spook*'s diegesis speaks in familiar, yet, differing ways to the urban Black youth market's generic conditioning of blaxploitation texts. The film is subversive within the genre because it undermines hegemonic notions of the production of blaxploitation films. For one thing, *Spook* is not a Hollywood produced text. The film's creators, Dixon and Greenlee, said that the film "is too political to be called a blaxploitation film" (Beale). While that statement is problematic because many films in the blaxploitation film cycle have complex politics, it is interesting to note that Dixon and Greenlee did not feel they were making a blaxploitation film. Moreover, *Spook* destabilizes its own historical analysis within the genre and its conventions, specifically that of fantastical violence, because the film both is and is not a blaxploitation text. According to Greenlee, the film's action scenes were only shown to UA, "which agreed to distribute the film thinking it would be the usual blaxploitation fare" (Nichols). The generic history in the making of blaxploitation engendered the film's national distribution, but the film's representation of violence is not the "usual blaxploitation fare." According to Greenlee, "[when UA] saw the final cut, they went up the wall" (Nichols). Greenlee continues that after the screening, "... a deathly silence descended

over the room ... So I told them, look we got a contract and in the first paragraph you ask for six copies of the script. Don't blame me if you don't have anybody over here who can read. You got a contract, put the damn thing out there" (Acham 123). What is interesting here is that the film was sold on its depiction of its violence scenes, but, in watching the scenes of violence, the images raise more questions than they give answers. As Guerrero notes, blaxploitation violence "referenced black sociality, or transcoded, however fancifully, black political struggles and aspirations of the times" (*Black Violence as Cinema*, 214). *Spook* not only references black sociality (urban rebellion) but draws its scenes of violence explicitly from them in a non-fantastical but rather documentary way. This technique accentuated the "documentary impulse" within the film (Smith 56). Many of the scenes of violence depict State/police brutality, such as the mass riot scenes, with hand held cameras, highlighting the immediacy and "realness" of the events. Thus, in UA's consideration of the film's violence as typical of the genre, the film presents its own paradoxically fictive-authentic representation of Black social violence.

The film makes a historical intervention into the individuated acts of violence against "the Man" in many blaxploitation films, such as *Superfly* (1972) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). *Spook* depicts its assault on "the Man" as a force by an organized coalition against identified forces of the State, including the police and the National Guard. Moreover, the film alludes to the State as historically violent aggressors against socially, racially, and politically fed up African American when Black police officer Dawson (J.A. Preston) rails against the police's use of dogs to control the angry Chicago residents, saying "you know how these people feel about dogs." Thus, in the film's securing of distribution and own temporal setting, *Spook* is almost too easily considered a generic blaxploitation text. However, the film's narrative use of violence subverts many generic codes and conventions of its own production and its relationship to other film's narratives,

showing an alternative perception of Black agency and liberation. The film is not about individual acts of “Black liberation” but is a formula for a collective revolution with an open-ended, not allowing for perfunctory pacification and closure to what should be a political re-awakening.

Historicity and (Re)visions of Rebellion: *Spook*’s Televisual Images and Imaginings

Spook is a film that has many textual messages and representational meanings. Medovoi states that “[if] representation invokes a text’s discursivity, while reference suggests its sociality, then meaning-production might be said to occur at the contingent interfaces of a text’s discursivity and sociality” (20). Expounding upon the historical meanings of *Spook* and its representation of and references to Black insurrection, the function of media, specifically television, within the film must be taken into account. In the diegesis, *Spook* engages with American mass media’s representation of Blacks by subverting the dominant narration of these representations through props of mediation, most noticeably television screens. The role of television in *Spook* functions as a tool of surveillance, mis-information, and mediation to reference, re-script, and re-imagine Blacks images of insurrection and rebellion. By focusing on television, a medium that purposefully “installed” itself within the domestic space of the home and the domestic gender and racial politics of the US, the mediums referential relationship to representational Black film images can be creatively grappled with (Spigel). Moreover, as “blacks drew from popular [television] culture a distorted image of themselves,” *Spook*’s engagement with re-conceptions of Black agency produces a fictive “rebellious” intervention into the historical performance of its subject matter of Black liberation (McDonald xv).⁸

In *Spook*, the television functions as a tool of surveillance. For example, when Freeman and other potential Black candidates meet for CIA training, they are unknowingly being watched

and listened to by two white CIA officials. The shot reveals a large television screen, and the audience becomes a voyeur like the officials. Viewing the Black candidates talk candidly about tokenism and integration, the white officials stare knowingly at the screen. The shot cuts back to the television to reveal four additional television screens monitoring the group and the building. In this regard, television is a function of the State, a Janus figure watching the comings and goings of the Black recruits. Additionally, television functions as a medium of mis-information. This function is evidenced, for example, in the scene where the National Guard General (Byron Morrow) holds a press conference. While a television is not a prop in the scene, the news media cameras (which are assumed to either be operating live or will be edited for television) are the interface between the event and the television screening process. At the press conference, the General states the falsehood that there has been no police brutality, something Freeman and the Freedom Fighters dispel via their radio broadcasts. While utilizing a medium that carries voices and not images is helpful to the underground revolutionaries, the fact that television is a place to hear about Blacks through the voices (and image manipulation) of whites reveals its superior medium capabilities.

Additionally, television's function as not only a middle-class aesthetic prop in Freeman's domestic double-life (it is located in his apartment and the room he uses during the CIA) but also as media of transmission must be attended to more carefully. The screen is *never* turned on; instead, Freeman's home television serves as an optic—a revolutionary lens, a site of mediation where discourse of the film flows through it to comment on social referents. The symbolization of this transmission, for example, is seen in the film's final scenes. As images of the violent insurrection of the Chicago Black Freedom Fighters are cut back and forth to, a voiceover of a broadcast reporter states: "The newest outbreak in the Black section of Oakland brings to a total

of 8 the number of uprisings by Black guerillas in cities across the nation. The President has declared a state of national emergency.” The shot slowly fades into Freeman’s apartment. Freeman is standing near a window and in front of the television. Both the vastness of the window and the structural placement of the television serve as looking glasses, and the disembodied voice of the broadcaster filters through this referent via a fading dissolve. For a brief moment viewers can see both images of Freeman’s apartment and images of the insurrection layered on top of each other. While the voice offers one narrative on the events, the content look on Freeman’s face as he looks out of the window and the cut to the African mask statues in his apartment subverts the dominant narrative of the newscaster with an alternative, masked meaning of the images of Black revolt.

Therefore, with these intertextual layers of double meaning of televised rebellion, what does *Spook* mean in relation to actual televised documentaries of urban revolts during this period? Historically, television and images of African American’s have, according to Sasha Torres in Black, White, and In Color: Television and Black Civil Rights, “collided at crucial moments in television history with industrial self-interest, cynicism, and even, on occasion, the desire to do the right thing, to produce not only the content of television’s programs, but their form and reception as well” (4). Torres explains how the Civil Rights movement used the television’s coded identification to “[ask] its viewers, black and white, to identify *with* nonviolent black protest and *against* the violent representatives of the southern state” (11). She notes that by the 1990s, television asked the viewers to perform the opposite of this identification, “*against* blacks, who are now generally associated with criminality, and *with* the state power of the police” (ibid). However, in the wake of the Watts Revolt in 1965, many nationally broadcast television programs began to depict Blacks in very circumscribed and

stereotyped ways. As Reid notes, “Destruction and the destructive seemed to define the black community. The combination of televised news coverage of the urban uprisings and the militant rhetoric of black armed resistance intensified white middle-class American’s opinion of blacks as a violent people” (74).

Spook’s representation of revolt informs and challenges images of urban rebellion, specifically Watts, and the film should be put in dialogue with televised images of Watts in order to learn about the past and in its present.⁹ According to Greenlee, the novel was inspired in part by the Watts Rebellion:

...“I was also inspired by the Watts rebellion. Because of my experience in revolutionary and post revolutionary situations in the Middle East, I knew not only because of the outbreak, but because of the rage I found everywhere among Blacks, that it would be only the first in a series of rebellions that might lead to organized armed struggle.” (Acham 117)

Therefore, it is productive to read the film’s images of revolt against the documentary images of the Watts rebellion that circulated on the national news. The Watts Rebellion began on August 11, 1965, after the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) stopped and arrested Marquette Frye. The event was the tipping point in a struggle against racial injustices in Watts, lasting until August 15, 1965. Sixteen thousand members of the National Guard were brought in to stop the rebellion; thirty-four people died (all but five were Black), four-thousands were arrested, and there was over two-hundred million dollars in property damage (Horne 3). *Spook* offers a visual media revision of “Watts” history and imagery in the news. Specifically, for this essay I will focus on the television documentary news programs “Watts: Riots or Revolt?” and “Hell in the City of Angels,” which circulated and continues to circulate (through footage taken from these programs for use in other programs) images of the rebellion nationally.

In the CBS program “Watts: Riots or Revolt?” which aired four months after the Watts Rebellion, Watts is positioned as a wasteland. The documentary seeks to answer a series of questions about Watts: “Was it a local riot or the beginning of a national revolt? What started it? Will it happen again?” (“Watts: Riots or Revolt?”). The dominant (white) narrative of the program focuses disproportionately on white agency in explicating the meaning, both historically and contemporaneously, of the event. White authorial voices, including the broadcasters, LAPD Chief William Parker, the McCone Commission, and Daniel P. Moynihan, narrate the images of the rebellion. And, while there are interviews with Watts residents and African American leaders, these moments of agency are edited against a hegemonic White narrative that structurally discredits (through editing) Black voices of dissent. For example, after a group of Black leaders attempt to point to the reasons for the revolt—blaming it on police brutality, bad schools, poor conditions, etc—the narratives are undercut by the news reporter. The narrative shifts to not only saying that the mobs hated authority, but they generally hated white people. In language that codes the victim as the one at fault and constructs a tone of *us* versus *them*, the documentary situates the African American subjects as ignorant, stupid, and less civilized than their white counterparts.

“Watts: Riots or Revolt?” depicts the city as land of destruction and places the blame on the African American residents. Moreover, then the broadcaster states that Watts is “a ghetto but not a slum.” Over images of the “ghetto,” a voiceover states:

[Most] of the residents are newcomers who joined the modern gold rush to California of the last 25 years; many are newcomers from the most backwards parts of the deep south, poor and ignorant negroes who have no skills to offer a big city employer, no desire for classroom learning, not even the knowledge of how to live in urban surroundings, not even the knowledge of how to use plumbing. (ibid)

African Americans are called “back country refugees” in a “land of golden promise” (ibid). The documentary functions to relay televised images of Blacks as lawless residents of beautiful

Southern California. In many respects, the documentary functions like a Hollywood film, weaving a “based on true events” story about the *drama* that was the Watts Revolt. Its Hollywood filmic narrative is structured with a dark villain (Black people), a white hero (the State), and happy ending where the white hero successfully saves (and by “save” I mean contains) the city from its pesky, dark predators. Interestingly, the “sequel to this film” would come out in 1992 after another “alleged” moment of police racial injustice/brutality. Additionally, in a press conference shown in the documentary, LAPD Chief Parker states “We didn’t ask *these* people to come here” [my emphasis] (ibid). Overall, the television documentary puts no blame or fault on the conduct of the officers in the arrest that served as the catalyst of the rebellion. White agency to quell the rebellion and, more importantly, to explain its significance of the revolt is privileged. The latter point here is quite important. Not only does the documentary attempt to understand the “principal events and causes of the nightmare of Watts,” but it does so for the historical benefit and pacification of its non-Black viewers (ibid). In the end, the documentary answers its questions about whether Watts was a riot or revolt, stating: “revolt, yes, as it was a formless striking out” (ibid). By discrediting the rebellion as a failure, the historical meaning of the televised images of Black uprising is not only depoliticized but is also pathologized. This pathological narrative is most evident in the documentary’s interview of Daniel P. Moynihan, discussing the deviance and self-destructive problems of the Black community as a fault of the “Negro family condition in America” (ibid).

Similar to “Watts: Riot or Revolt?” the KTLA program “Hell in the City of Angels” is a documentary program about the events of August 11, 1965. A “special program” that aired at end of the riots, “Hell in the City of Angels” paints an even more harrowing picture of Watts. Filled with many vast images of Los Angeles taken from a helicopter, the documentary, like the

aforementioned one, operates as Hollywood-esque narrative. Images of Los Angeles are narrated over by a broadcaster expounding on the beauty of the environment, calling the area “not an abject slum” like New York City and Detroit (“Hell in the City of Angels”). This rhetorical maneuver, also used in the other documentary, is interesting. In creating a narrative against the Black residents, the documentary reassures its non-Black viewers that, while a ghetto, Watts is a community that was a “harmonious environment” (ibid). In other words, if Watts is a ghetto then it is just a place that *happens* to be poor, eschewing the systematic disinvestment by major industrial employers, the government, banks, and savings and loans, and racial discrimination that would make it a “slum.” Therefore, the documentaries’ potent images of Black insurrection are coded as the nonsensical antics of Blacks destroying their own city.

These images of destruction in “Hell in the City of Angels” are substantial to the tone of the program. As the aforementioned helicopter shot of Los Angeles surveys the city, the camera zooms in on footage of the city, displaying burned and charred buildings. The voiceover states: “Then with the suddenness of a lightning bolt and fury of an internal Holocaust...There was hell in the city of Angels!” The title of the program takes over the screen with loud, syncopated horror-inducing noises, aurally marking the images of a city ablaze. Much of the images in the documentary, which attempts to give an informative chronology of the events, are detached (from a camera in a helicopter) images of Watts’ burned buildings, cars, etc. In one instance, there is an image of a car on fire, and a reporter states that while the camera did not see who started the fire “we must assume that rioters turned the car over and started the fire.” Evidenced in the example, the only agency given to the Watts residents is that of prescribed destruction. Most of the documentary centers on White pontifications of why the Watts Revolt had happened, allowing images of Black bodies to be narrated by White voices. The images produced by “Hell

in the City of Angels” add to the national imagery of African American resistance, constructing Blacks as violent reactors to a misunderstanding of the LAPD’s law abiding actions. With Watts positioned as a “hell” on earth, its Black occupants are depicted as being its suitable inhabitants due to their “unjust” sins and “lawless” transgressions.

What does it mean to consider *Spook*’s images of rebellion in relationship to “Watts: Riot or Revolt?” and “Hell in the City of Angels”? The documentary impulse in the scene is crucial because it points to a dialectical form of “documentary excess” between *Spook* and the television documentaries. In Representing Reality, Bill Nichols states that documentary excess is:

...the impossibility of perfect congruence between text and history stems from the impasse between discourse and referent, between the signification of things and things signified... Explanation, like ideology, provides strategies of containment designed to account for historical reality... In every case, excess remains. (143)

Spook’s aforementioned fade from the scene of insurrection to Freeman’s apartment operates as a form of discursive and social documentary excess. In this scene of the film, the *reality* of the uprising, Freeman’s training of the urban youth, does not comply with the *narrative reality* of the broadcaster. What one sees and hears on the television about the warfare is not necessarily the truth, and the cinematic fade destabilizes the boundary of the television’s images of insurrection with the imagining of Freeman. The imagining of Freeman is the insurrection, the “American nightmare” he has orchestrated. This scene in *Spook* operates as an intervention between its referent (rebellion and televised programming on Black insurrection) and its own discourse, liberating the “containment designed to account for historical reality” to expose the “excess remains” of Black agency (ibid). These excess remains are not solely the images of Black rebellion told through the eyes of African Americans but also the politics of such rebellion. The dissipation of political meaning of Black collective unrest in “Watts: Riot or Revolt?” and “Hell in the City of Angels” through the hegemonic narrative forces is accumulated in *Spook*.

Spook recodes the “nightmare” of Watts as the first step in Black liberation. Breaking the containment of the history of Watts and the documented historical accounts on television, *Spook*’s revolutionary warfare produces a narrative that sees fire and the rhetoric of “explosion”—like those so vividly manipulated in “Hell in the City of Angels—as the precursor to liberation. As an unknown reviewer in *Sacramento Observer* wrote in 1973, the film may address “itself to the question posed by the late Black bard Langston Hughes: What happens to a dream deferred... does it explode?” The film’s literal explosions and Black urban warfare not only have historical meaning in relation to American’s urban rebellions but also illustrate how Black agency functions to recode urban unrest as necessary to freedom. For example, the first riot scene in *Spook*, which used local Gary, Indiana, police and residents, allowed for the residents “[to take] out their actual and fictional aggression toward the police force within the scene” (Acham 120). The documentary impulse of this scene challenges the signification of riot scenes such as those from the television documentaries. Blending their own experiences within the fictional narrative, the rioters in the scene are active Black agents, *acting out* a history of racial uprising.

Speaking back to television images such as those produced in “Watts: Riot or Revolt?” and “Hell in the City of Angel,” *Spook* signifies. The first and final images of the film, the African mask statues, symbolize this signification. What is seen on the surface is not what lies beneath. The film functions as the opposite side of the same coin of visual representations of Black rebellion, exposing the “two-ness/double consciousness” of Black existence—“two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body...” (Du Bois 2). In some respects, *Spook* illustrates the possibilities of successful insurrection and does not allow for the politics of such insurrection to be filtered out of the image by televisual mediums that co-

opt these voices and images for hegemonic purposes. Thus, while *Spook* is not explicitly referencing “Watts: Riot or Revolt?” and “Hell in the City of Angels,” the film cinematically disrupts these documentary’s narratives by diegetically engaging with the historical meanings of Black rebellion and circulating within the national imagination the uncontainable politics of Black agency.¹⁰

Historicity and Utopia under Destruction: Seeing the Crips in the Cobras

Spook’s historical meanings are not always lucid or even fully represented. Medovoi notes, many Black film critics “point to a mode of historical criticism concerned with the inscription of film texts by a racial history precisely through the history’s apparent absence” (16). Thus, a historicist mode of analyzing *Spook* must look at what goes represented and unrepresented in the text. Through this form of analysis, theories of interpretive possibility allow for a historical critic “to explain how a text might possibly refer to history without ever representing it” (ibid). Therefore, *Spook*’s potential interpretive meaning must take into account discursive presences and absences. In this instance, the narrative presence of the Black urban gang, the Cobras, speaks to a historical bastardization of Black male youth in America.

Similar to the aforementioned documentary programs, television images of Black male discontent youth circulated. For example, in 1969 there was a news special in Seattle titled “Young, Black and Explosive.” Focusing on the Central Area youth in Seattle, Washington, the program structures Black students as under a tremendous amount of social pressure. Unlike the other television programs mentioned, “Young, Black and Explosive” does attempt to allow Blacks to speak for themselves; however, these voices are extremely contained and marginalized. The anchor states: “[While you] may disagree with the way these kids perceive the world, we think it’s of desperate importance that we understand that valid or not this is the way they

perceive things” (“Young, Black and Explosive”). Moreover, the lack of guidance and disconnect expressed in the program—from parents to Civil Rights organizations to the Black Panthers—makes the violent actions of the Central Area youth appear reckless and causeless. While the program fails to really understand much of anything about these Black youth because of its disjointed narrative, what is important here is that the sentiments of youthful-unrest and potential “explosiveness” produced in this local television narrative. Moreover, how this sentiment circulates a media image of a national issue for Black youth during this time period is quite telling. Rebellious and defiant Black youth are the future in *Spook*, and in reading *Spook* in referent to the most defiant urban Black youth males in America’s history—the Crips—there is the possibility that the film refers to this history in illuminating and revolutionary ways. In reading *Spook*’s depiction of the indoctrination of the Cobra gang against the origin of the Crips gang, the film offers an alternative generational social experience. Moreover, in considering the violence and self-destruction of the Crips gang from this historical moment, *Spook*’s use of a Black urban gang as potential sites of Black liberation and resistance offers discursive space to interpretive possibility. This interpretive possibility expands the many historical meanings of the film to see utopia under destruction.

In the film, the Cobras are a street gang in Chicago that Freeman trains for guerilla warfare. However, other gang violence is alluded to in the film. For instance, when Dawson is introduced in the film, Freeman and the spectator learn that he was at a seminar on gang violence in Los Angeles. The Crips gang, which was founded in 1971 by Stanley Tookie Williams and Raymond Washington in South Central, Los Angeles, functions as possible diegetic-excess in the hidden margins of the film’s historical meaning. Additionally, the Cobras are shown as the perfect group for Freeman to indoctrinate. Teaching them how to “mess with whitey,” Freeman

operates as a paternal and mentor figure, giving purpose, discipline, and knowledge to the Cobra gang. Moreover, *Spook* makes it a point to show the importance of the Cobra gang as a youth gang. For example in the scene where Dawson holds Freeman at gunpoint, Dawson is disgusted that Freeman is using kids. Freeman replies: “Who else am I going to involve, people like you and me, uh uh. The kids are our only hope and I got to them before they got jailed or killed or turned into Dawsons and now they do anything to be free.” Thus, the Cobras are positioned as being in the perfect interval space for Black collective resistance; the potential possibility for Freeman and others to become the “Free-men” that his name alludes to. In addition to being located in Chicago, the film points to proliferation of gangs throughout the nation. As the narrative points out, Daddy (Paul Butler) refers to the training of groups “like the Cobras” in other cities, including Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. The spatiotemporal location of the final city, Los Angeles, is striking because it is the origin site of one of the most deadly gangs in America. Therefore, in looking at the interpretive possibilities of *Spook*’s historical meanings in the use of the Cobra gang and allusions to Los Angeles gangs, the Crips are a historicist source that can be critically evaluated in relation to the film’s narrative use of gangs.

This essay is not positing that *Spook* is the story of the Crips gang. The book and film’s production do not support that claim. However, my current historical positioning and the parallelisms between the Cobras in *Spook* and the Crips allow me to ponder what it might mean for *Spook* to be a repressed history of gang formation/potential and re-script the potential of the Crips gang. Stanley Tookie William’s memoir Blue Rage, Black Redemption offers an insightful and instructive history into the origin of the Crips gang.¹¹ I additionally recognize the use of a memoir can be problematic because of the author’s distanced position from the past they

are writing about. And specifically, I recognize the legal position of Williams, who wrote the book while on death-row. However, overlooking the agency of William's re-telling of his own story in his own words would be unwarranted because he may or may not chart the historical development of the Crips with imagination. Using the memoir allows me to understand a point of view of the Crips' past history that is *reflected* upon in the present (2005). It is this reflection that is productive as I reflect on *Spook*'s many interpretive historical meanings within the past and the present.

As mentioned, the Crips were founded in 1971, with mostly members that were seventeen years of age.¹² Additionally, the gang was not tied to any political or Black liberationist movement.¹³ Not a new phenomenon, as older gangs had been in South Central at the time, the importance of this collective Black youth was that they came together and “fought and often died for a causeless cause” (Williams xviii).¹⁴ The Crips' history of Black fighters given nothing to fight for is affecting when one considers Freeman's use of the Cobras and the gang's Freeman-revised-mission of Black resistance and liberation. Greenlee stated that his choice to use of the Cobras for Freeman's strategy was specific because “they cannot be infiltrated, unlike the Black Panthers. The Panthers told anybody who showed up with a good rap to come on and join... You have to grow up into the street gang. You can't just show up one day and say you want to join” (Hall). Thus, the Cobras underground operation and youthful rage made them perfect for Freeman's indoctrination. Moreover, Black liberation is not tied to any movement in particular. While there are posters of Malcolm X and a graffiti proclamation of “Black Power” in the bar the Cobras frequent in *Spook*, the politics of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers are not elicited directly, except for the subject matters conciliation of change “by any means necessary” and the recognition that “black visibility [i.e. Black tokenism] is not Black

power” (Hamilton and Ture 46). Despite the iconography of resistance, the Cobras function as a pedestrian, undisciplined, and unorganized street gang. The film shows that under the tutelage of Freeman, the Cobras’ potential power for change is magnified because he teaches them it is necessary to use their means (environment, skills, race, etc) in deliberate, calculated, and liberating ways.

Going back to Greenlee’s comment on the importance of the Cobras as a gang is important in regards to the notion of indoctrination. The historical meaning of *Spook’s* narrative of indoctrination and guidance is one that echoes the founding of the Crips:

It would have been a police photographer’s Kodak moment to have captured all of us on film that day. Standing and sitting around on the bleachers was the largest body of black pariahs ever assembled. I’m convinced that had the Black Panther party still been recruiting....Huey Newton and Bobby Seales would have salivated over the untapped youthful potential we represented. Throughout this state and country, we embodied only a small division within a multitude of reckless, energetic, fearless, and explosive young black warriors. Though we were often seen as social dynamite, I believe we were the perfect entity to be indoctrinated in cultural awareness and trained as disciplined soldiers for the black struggle. Nevertheless, this opportunity to mold us as a valuable resource was never seen in its true potential by society, schools, churches, community programs, civil rights movements, or other black organizations. (Williams 89)

I quote this passage at length because the spectacle and language used to recall this event is enlightening. Described as the “perfect entity to be indoctrinated,” Williams’ description of the members as possible soldiers for the Black struggle is quite revealing. However, lacking discipline, and more specifically, guidance, the Crips are labeled as a “lost generation... forgotten prodigies who disappeared, children buried alive in a sandlot” (Williams 85). Williams writes: “We did what was necessary to exhume ourselves. Though we must share the blame, we were products of a culture that bastardized us” (ibid). Therefore, as bastards of a generation, this nascent Black youth gang would rise to be one of the most deadly forces *against* and not *for* the Black community in American history. Unlike *Spook’s* Cobra gang who are given a symbolic

father figure and leader through Freeman, the Crips gang created a parentless family that preyed on its own community instead of helping the community.

In reading *Spook* against this history of the Crips gang, *Spook* becomes impregnated with possible interpretive meanings. Does *Spook* represent the alternative sociality of gangs, like the Crips, who given direction and discipline could have continued the fight for Black liberation? Moreover, in reading the scene after Freeman kills Dawson and says to the Cobras “don’t tell me who I killed and what it cost me to do it,” *Spook* implies a certain kind of “freedom dues” that are paid in having to kill one’s own Black brother. However, the perversion of these dues historically and currently by Black gangs, marked by the enormous collateral damage of young Black lives, is a tragic reality of the growing violence of Black-on-Black crime. *Spook* presents a harrowing alternative social reality of a radical re-inscription of American gang warfare, where their insurgency not only facilitates but begins a revolution for Black freedom. Thus, in the film, the representation of gangs and the reference to Los Angeles gangs allows for a possible interpretive reading of the history of Black urban gangs in America as reservoirs of Black potential “hoodwinked by South Central’s terminal conditions, its broad and deadly template for failure” (Williams xviii). *Spook* presents gangs as the future for Black liberation, not marginalizing their potential or bastardizing their existence within American culture.

Historicity and Non-Conclusions: *Spook* and Transitive Agency

Spook’s many historical performances show the transitivity of Black agency, best illustrated by poet Amir Sulaiman’s: “I am not angry, I am anger. I am not dangerous, I am danger” (“Danger”). To be angry and dangerous is to be prescribed a position that is likely or possible, to be viewed as a threat. On the other hand, to be anger or danger is an act of agency, going from a threatening object to a self-defining subject. Thus, transitive Black agency is the

evolution of an individual or collective will to be self-determining. *Spook*'s narrative and many historical meanings engage with this transitive agency. Specifically, Freeman and the Cobras become agents of their own will in the film, going from being considered angry and dangerous to the personification of anger and danger. The film itself also functions as an act of becoming, having many historical meanings for viewers in different temporal periods. These many historical meanings make *Spook* a transitive filmic text of Black agency, interacting and reshaping history and its own historical and contemporary value.

In looking at the many historical meanings of *Spook*, a few things are evident. First, history is always being shaped and re-shaped, which makes *Spook*'s narrative meanings constantly influx. Secondly, the historicist approach to *Spook* reveals that a historical critic's theorizing of a film must recognize the shifts and bending arcs of history. By relating the past and present, like Medovoi, a historicity of *Spook* enables a greater theoretical engagement with criticism of the film as a dynamic, rather than static or textually subjective, text. A historicist methodology demonstrates how a cultural object—a film—changes as a subject of an evolving history in ways that offer new insights, revisions, and promises. In other words, it this methodology offers a chance to see a past film anew. As a result, a historicist approach to *Spook* substantiates that the film, its narrative, and its relationship to the past, present, and future, produce historical meanings that are significant and open for critical and historical interpretation.

Endnotes:

¹ In this essay, agency is defined as “an individual or group’s will to be self-defining and self-determining” (Collins 298). A historicist approach to *Spook* reveals many moments of Black agency in front of, behind, and beyond the camera.

² While the film is mentioned in several histories of African American film, *Spook* is rarely given specific historical and textual analysis. However, in her chapter “What’s Sex and Women Got to Do with It? Sexual Politics and Revolution in *Sweetback* and *The Spook*” in “Baad Bitches” & Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films

(2008), Stephanie Dunn devotes a half of a chapter to the film. Additionally, Christine Acham's "Subverting the System: The Politics and Production of *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*" in *Screening Noir*, Vol. 1 No. 1 offers a production history of the film.

³ Medovoi's use of "situated knowledges" draws on Donna Haraway's essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*.

⁴ According to an interview with Greenlee, "Very few newspapers reviewed 'The Spook Who Sat by the Door' upon its release, Greenlee said. The novel's success happened mostly through word of mouth. A review on 'Soul,' a Black-oriented, syndicated television show, also helped generate attention. Because 'Soul' had such a unique schedule, it caused the novel's success to baffle its American publisher. I got a call from Bantam, saying, 'What's going on, Sam? Every week we get a flood of orders, but there's no pattern to it. It's hip-hopping across the country,' Greenlee recalled. 'I said, 'That's because "Soul" is screened at different times across the country'" (Hall). The 1973 release of the book in the United States correlated with the same year the film premiered in American theaters. The interplay between the novel's exposure via television and the film's theatrical release produce a conflated media history. Both the novel and the film's historical meanings inflect on each other, shaping both texts' reception in the United States. This history is has many insights to understanding how the book's release shaped the view of the film and how the film shaped the views of the book.

⁵ The article also notes that the mayor of Gary, Richard Hatcher, was in attendance at the film's opening night in Gary, Indiana, which was a benefit "jointly sponsored by The Woodlawn Organization, The Community Film Workshop of Chicago and the Midwest Association for Sickle Cell Anemia" (*Chicago Defender* 18 Aug 1973). Hatcher was the first African-American mayor of Gary, Indiana.

⁶ The film was able to garner critical reviews from major newspaper outlets at the time of its opening. The film was reviewed in the *New York Times* in 1973 by Vincent Canby, who wrote a rather scathing review. Canby writes that the film's makers and producers "couldn't care less about convincing white audiences of anything except black anger" and that "it raises black consciousness by trivializing several hundred years of black neglect." I would argue that both Greenlee and Dixon were not very concerned with convincing white audiences of anything at all. Moreover, the film won Greenlee and Dixon a NAACP award for best producer (Calloway 13).

⁷The article states that the stars Lawrence Cook and J.A. Preston, Greenlee, Rep. Harold Ford, and other city officials were to attend the ceremony. This 1976 screening may have been a singular one. However, the film's circulation is, while cursory, still evident.

⁸ While this section is about documentary-television images, this period is also important for the representation of Blacks on primetime television. Described as the Lear Era, television programs from 1972-1983 depicted African Americans in new and exciting and, simultaneously, old and denigrating ways. This television era is illustrated in contradictory ways. On one hand, this era had programming that ridiculed Black subjectivity. On the other hand, the programs of the era gave Blacks more screen time and finally dealt with relevant social issues for Blacks. These issues included the racial, political, economic, and social problems that were plaguing American society. Examples of programs during this time are: *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), *Get Christie Love!* (1974-1975) *Good Times* (1974-1979), *That's My Mama* (1974-1979), *What's Happening!!* (1976-1979), and *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977). Even with such programming, there was a lack of diverse character portrayals of both Black men and women on the television screen. In addition, the lack of diversity refers back to the limitations of the genre of situation comedies that disallow African Americans to be taken seriously and regurgitates familiar stereotypes. So while trying to strike a balance between the African American image and White television, the synthesis that occurred showed Blacks in higher numbers but even more stereotyped. Even though the Lear Era brought a resurgence of Black images onto the screen, they did so at the expense of the complexities, completeness, and competence of African Americans. The Lear Era is important to African American television history because of the high volume of Black

representations placed onto the screen. These “representations were a direct response to social protest and petitions by blacks against American society for relevancy and authenticity” (Gray 77).

⁹ It is important to note that Medovoi, also, considers *Blacula* in relation to the 1965 Watts Riots. He ponders the question: “What might it mean for *Blacula*’s tale of terror to echo, yet never speak, the social moment most deeply associated with black rage, the Watts Riots?” (Medovoi 17). Part of Medovoi’s consideration of Watts comes from the fact that the film takes place in modern day Watts. Additionally, the African American rage and victimization (by Blacks to Blacks) is negotiated in the film. Medovoi comes to the conclusion that “[the] case of *Blacula* and the Watts Riots attests how certain historical meanings may only emerge if the history to which they refer has itself been repressed” (18). However, my argument regarding *Spook*’s historical engagement with Watts is not one of a repressed history. Instead, *Spook* is explicitly engaging with urban rebellion, and as Medovoi notes, “Watts remains the code word for that entire period [uprisings in American cities through the late 1960s] of urban unrest in recent historical memory” (17). Therefore, this section deals with *Spook*’s contemporary engagement with media circulated images of rebellion, exploring how *Spook* as a media/cultural entity challenges the conceptualization of Black desires and agency during these rebellions. The section on “Historicity and Utopia Under Destruction” offers a historical theorizing of a repressed history in *Spook*, notably the role of gangs and the connection to the Los Angeles based Crips gang.

¹⁰ While this is beyond the scope of this essay, *Spook* can also productively serve as a historicist source against documentary television images in other periods about the Watts Rebellion and even the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion. For example, the Los Angeles Channel 2 News program “Watts 1956-1980” is an interesting program that attempts to forecast whether another rebellion will happen. The program exposes the need for news media to act as police, surveying the urban landscape for any social unrest. The broadcaster explains that “the rage against White people is gone... people are still suspicious of Whites but no one is talking trouble” (“Watts 1956-1980”). While the narrative focuses on the deprivation of the community post the 1965-rebellion, there is another focus to reassure (non-Black) viewers that there is “no militancy on the street or showing [of] any civil rights activities at all” (ibid). There is a need to depoliticize Blacks, specifically Black Muslims, whom are “no longer nationalist” (ibid). *Spook*’s historical displacement and (re)appearances within the American landscape challenges this narrative of diffused militancy, where what one sees on television does not capture the historical legacy of the event. In *Spook*’s narrative, Freeman is presumed to be mortally wounded at the film’s end. However, unlike most “kill the head and the body withers” regimes, Freeman is confident of the foundation he has laid. And while the FBI in the film believe if the “head is gone” everything will end, *Spook* recognizes Freeman’s death as the beginning and not the end of the film’s engagement with revolt. The fight continues. Thus, how this cinematic fight speaks to televisual images of later day rebellions, specifically the 1992 Los Angeles Riot, is also a productive point of study. For example, Los Angeles KABC program “Watts: Then and Now” narrates the story of the “children of the Watts Riots [who] took to the Street.” *Spook*’s historical meanings and engagement with Black rebellion is unsettled by this new history and functions as an unsettling force to this new history.

¹¹ Stanley Tookie Williams wrote his memoir while on death row for a crime he all the way to his death denied to have committed. On December 13, 2005, Williams was executed by lethal injection in the state of California. William’s memoir is interesting for many reasons. As this paper uses a historicist approach, a memoir’s re-memory of the past in the present is a discursive tool that allows for a remembering of the past not removed from the present. Moreover, his memoir offers historical meaning and information outside of documented “official” histories such as the FBI files on the organization. Not all of the FBI files have been fully released on the Crips.

¹²Williams writes: “In 1971, I met Raymond Lee Washington (may he rest in peace) and we ultimately decided to unite our homeboys from the west and east sides of South Central to combat neighboring street gangs. (An erroneous grapevine suggests that the Crips formed in 1969, or even as early as the 1950s). Most Crips themselves are unaware that the original name for our alliance was “Cribs,” a name selected from a list of many options. But the

short-lived label of “Crips” was carelessly mispronounced by many of us and morphed into the name “Crips,” our permanent identity. Most of us were seventeen years of age” (xviii). I quote this origins story at length because sources such as the FBI’s documentation on the Crips gang in their file “Crips and Blood Drug Gangs” incorrectly give the history of the gang. Specifically, the FBI file uses a report produced by Paula Marie McKibbin that states: “The Crips were the first to form in 1969. Contrary to popular belief, these early Crips were comprised of black male youth from the upper middle class of society. They attended Washington High School in South Central Los Angeles.” McKibbin’s citation of this false-fact is from the Office of the Attorney General, State of California Department of Justice. Williams decries all of the false and incorrect histories of the Crips, pointing to the fact that many academics, sociologist, and opportunists fail to do their basic research into the gang’s history. While my bias in belief about Crips’ origins leans towards Williams’ account, the “truth” here is not really the focus here. Instead, the investment in a particular history by each individual/group is interesting. Moreover, the agency for Williams’ to define the Crips is compelling in relation to his own understanding of the role he played in the gang (as leader, founder, etc) during a period where there is no locus power structure or fully unified Crips gang in America and abroad. For example, Stacy Peralata’s 2008 documentary *Crips and Bloods: Made in America* offers a slightly different history of the Crips’ gang that barely mentions Washington and Williams. However, it is interesting to note that the film begins with images of the 1965 Watts Riots. The legacy of these histories must be put into conversation with each other.

¹³ For more clarity, Williams’ notes: “Another version incorrectly documents the Crips as an offshoot of the Black Panther Party. No Panther Party member ever mentioned the Crips (or Cribs) as being a spin-off of the Panthers. It is also fiction that the Crips functioned under the acronym C.R.I.P., for Community Resource Inner-City Project or Community Revolutionary Inner City Project. (Words such as “revolutionary agenda” were alien to our thuggish, uniformed teenage consciousness). We did not untie to protect the community; our motive was to protect ourselves and our families” (xviii).

¹⁴ Williams’ explains: “Contrary to popular belief, black gangs were not a phenomenon but rather a commonality that existed long before I was born. The older gangs—the notorious Slausons, Gladiators, and the Business Men—had become ethnicity-conscious and were absorbed into the Black Panther Party or other active political groups. A few remaining other black gangs were still hanging on: the Chain Gang, Low Riders, Avenues, Brims, Figueroa Boys, and the Van Ness Boys. These gangs gave rise to newer, more predatory gangs such as the Sportsman Park Boys, Denker Boys, Manchester Park Boys, Hustler Mob, New House Boys, and many other street cliques” (79).

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