

[The Importance of Location in Black Film]

Zachary Eugene Truesdale

University of Texas at San Antonio

For decades, film has been a vital source of entertainment and representation in the black community¹. Of course, there are many factors that come into the film-making process, but one that is often overlooked is the concept of setting in film. There is a small amount of research conducted on locations used to create films, but many do not look into the cultural impact that it creates. The way in which we live is affected by where we live. Black people take great pride in where they come from, and it is shown both in reality and on the screen. Black filmmakers have made videos from all over the world covering different scenarios, lifestyles, cultures, and much more. Filmmakers aim to achieve how various regions are represented based on the aspect of the setting in their film. The importance of location in film has regional and cultural layers that provide character creation as well as character development that needs to be explored to truly understand its significance. In this essay, I emphasize the importance of location in film first by explaining the benefits of pride and career opportunities that come with recording in various cities, then by discussing different black experiences and people represented in film, and finally by showing how these settings help break the black community stereotype.

Location, Pride, and Opportunity

The first layer of setting is the idea of informing people on the area. De Witt Douglas Kilgore, a Professor of English at Indiana University Bloomington, has been fascinated by independent film director and screenwriter Kevin Wilmott's work (*C.S.A; Jayhawkers*) and

¹ The coverage of location was big to me because I never considered its importance until it was brought to my attention. As someone who has movies that revolve around their location, it's a part of film that makes me appreciate it that much more and I want to bring this to other's attention as well and hope to sway them to think the same way in which I do.

decided to conduct an interview with him. In his journal article covering the interview, Kilgore (2016) states:

During the past two decades Kevin Willmott has occupied a unique place in independent film making, as an African American writer and director. His work is guided by the idea that cinema can inform as well as entertain, illuminating our world in ways that are both unexpected and pleasurable. He believes that film making can do good by allowing us to remember what we may have forgotten, changing how we see the world, and making it a better place in which to live.

Here, Kilgore is arguing that Willmott fights for the remembrance of our past and what has happened in the world. His message is that one should never forget where he/she come from. This is huge for African American cinema and a major driving factor for themes in African American film. We are beginning to see various themes and outfits of African culture in movies now. A prime and relevant example for today is *Black Panther*, A futuristic, superhero movie with outfits and characters based from African culture and traditions. Though the location is created, it still shows the importance of place in film. People are beginning to be represented where they are from in movies from all over now.

African Americans in all sorts of media have been making it big in the past few years whether it be through comedy, television, or movies. It has not always been like this, however. The rise of technology has also played a key role in African Americans getting better access to collaborate together to make some very interesting, creative ideas. Catherine Squires is a Professor of Journalism, Diversity, and Equality at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. In her book *African Americans and the Media*, she writes about how African Americans begin to

get more access to film and production, which leads to getting more creative for representation and making characters. Squires (2009) states:

As the film industry confronts challenges from the independent movie industry, the digital revolution, and convergence of film, TV, and computer screens, Black filmmakers in and outside of Hollywood are finding new niches in which to work. Through their star power or ability to get independent or creative financing, by working in digital formats or going straight to DVD, Black directors and writers are creating ways to tell new stories, introduce a wider range of actors and actresses, and envision Black worlds on screen that Oscar Micheaux could have only dreamed of making.

Squires' input on this layout that began the biggest progress for Black Film tells us a few things. There are now more jobs for black actors and actresses, new worlds being explored, and new ways to construct stories. Adding to this, Simon Hudson and Vincent Wing Sun Tung published an article covering marketing and advertising in Hollywood. Hudson and Wing Sun Tung (2010) explain:

Overall, many countries view the film industry as a significant producer of quality jobs in the twenty-first century. Given the shift of the economy from a labor-oriented structure to a more creative and knowledge-integrated framework. It is not surprising, therefore, that many regions now actively seek film production, with the job of attracting filmmakers to a region usually being the responsibility of film commissions, organizations funded and affiliated with local government bureaucracy. There are hundreds of film commissions all over the world and one for each state in the USA. Despite the amount of literature recognizing the significance of the film industry on local economies, how film commissions, working in an increasingly competitive marketplace,

and often with extremely limited budgets, promote their locations to producers in Hollywood is an important topic, but is one that has yet to be addressed in the marketing literature.

Hudson and Wing Sun Tung go more in depth on the positive aspects of recording in certain cities around the globe. Cities are now recruiting writers and directors to come and record videos in their cities for more exposure. This is a win-win for both parties. Both directors and writers get a cheaper place to work and new experience to work in new scenery.

Sue Beeton (2008) wrote an article covering the relationship between cities and film companies. In this, she argues “film companies have a vested interest in maintaining a positive relationship with the location communities, particularly if they wish to continue filming there” (Beeton, 2008). For the most part, films portray the positive impacts that living in a certain city can offer allowing attraction for visitors to their cities. This leads to people wanting to move and live in these cities, resulting in the continuation and push for more representation in various cities within communities. Whatever the city is that people choose to work in creates an opportunity which offers more jobs for people in the area. The city also gets exposure in their film which results in more tourists and more money coming into the cities.

Location and Representation

Location not only benefits those directly working with the film, but, on the other hand, audiences benefit by getting to see characters of various archetypes in cities that people are able to relate to. For example, the city of San Francisco, which is the setting of the movie *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008), enables viewers to see the city along with some characters in the city that are affected by the culture around them. These different upbringings (liberal, conservative, rich,

poor, etc.) can mold a child into an adult, change how they view life, and many other scenarios. Michael Boyce Gillespie is an Associate Professor of Film in the Department of Media and Communication Arts and the Black Studies Program at the City College of New York, City University of New York. He recently published a book titled *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*, where he breaks down the history of some black film and delves into concepts revolving around African Americans in film. In this book, Gillespie discusses *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008) and how it is influenced by the culture that is San Francisco, California. Gillespie (2016) claims, “the narrative grows more significant with their increasing attachment and maneuverings through the city.” Gillespie (2016) adds, “the generative nature of black becoming and coupling across multiple temporalities is bounded by the film’s extended and mediation on blended losses, material (urbanism) and immaterial (black love).”

In Gillespie’s book, he introduces us to cultural theorist named Stuart Hall, who claims in his own book, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, that the history of a location is what molds people. Stuart (1993) establishes:

Cultural identity . . . is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being”. It belongs to the future as much as the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. . . . Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they [cultural identities] are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture, and power. Far from being grounded in mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

San Francisco is definitely not the only city to be represented in film. It is important to understand that many places around the world are affected by their location. With knowing the location in our movies, we are able to see the difference in a change of scenery and history in parts of the United States, and we are better able to understand people do not deal with the same obstacles as others may. One example of this is in Western films. Richard Butler (2011) argues:

In other genres [as opposed to sci-fi], the setting can be of more significance. For many decades, Westerns (cowboy films) were filmed only in the USA and mostly in the south west of the country, with Monument Valley being the archetypical setting for several classic Westerns such as *Stagecoach*, *The Searchers* and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. The inspiring backdrop location was integral to the films, with the natural features providing the setting for ambushes, chases and battles.

The ability to show how the region in which you are located also shows different kinds of struggles/challenges that people face on a daily basis. These different kinds of people and their everyday lives are not restricted to the United States, but can be found all over the world.

Ying Xiao is an Assistant Professor of Chinese Film and Media at New York University. Though she does not discuss Black Film in her piece, it is still important to understand how location is viewed in film from different views. In her piece for *World Film Locations: Shanghai*, she covers the importance of location in China. Throughout articles from the *World Film Locations* series, “the key term *location* continues to resonate resoundingly throughout these vivid accounts. Each gives an overview of film as a whole, with attention quickly directed to the place where the film was shot or that the film sought to portray” (Xiao, 2016). Of additional importance is how location affects various parts of the world, as shown in these articles. Xiao (2016) writes that “Shanghai has long received accolades as the ‘Oriental Paris’

and ‘Hollywood of the East’ for its pivotal role in Chinese film history and furthermore its symbolic standing at the forefront of East–West exchange and modernization since the early twentieth century”. Because of this, viewers see a mix of some Chinese history-based media as well as western-influenced films in Shanghai, and we see the same in America. The audience can see American history-based films as well as Chinese-influenced videos around the United States. Thus, Xiao’s discussion shows, other countries have a great influence on cinema.

Location and Removing Stereotypes

In terms of film in the United States, another form of film people do not necessarily consider are documentaries. Documentaries also play another role for showing the coverage of African Americans from all over the country. In her article, Samantha Sheppard writes about a documentary by Deborah Morales called *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Story of the Greatest Team You’ve Never Heard of* covering the first all-black professional basketball team in America. This article covers the documentary’s importance of hearing from these players, coaches, analysts, and fans who are come from all over the world from this era. Sheppard (2017) states:

On the Shoulders of Giants’s recuperative narrative reflects an impulse to historicize Black athletes’ experiences to inform, shape, and challenge popular history and cultural memory related to and exceeding the world of sports. Significantly, by highlighting the history of segregation in professional basketball, the documentary critiques the contemporary politics surrounding the NBA’s anti-Black racism.

This documentary highlights another aspect of location that is overlooked: African American’s from all around the world coming together and working together to reach a goal. As

they challenged the racial barrier of segregated basketball, we see various personalities and backgrounds of people collaborating. Various people coming together and working together is a unique story in itself, something that society is being exposed to more and more; something that people are able to relate with.

Michael T. Martin wrote an article supporting the importance of location in documentaries in African American film. In his article (2013), he writes about film maker Madeline Anderson and what she aimed for in her documentaries. Anderson was a rising star in her films from the 1960s and 1970s. Her goals were “first, that film must have utility and social purpose; second, it must endeavor to give voice to protagonists who otherwise are marginalized and silenced; and third, it must resist and debunk the received view that African Americans are unable to manage their own affairs” (Martin, 2013). This helps subvert the stereotype some people may have on African Americans.

Prominent film director, Spike Lee, also aims to remove stereotypes through the location of film in settings. In the 1995 film *Clockers*, Lee recreated the Richard Price novel and moved it from fictional Dempsey, New Jersey to real-life Brooklyn, New York. Scholar Paula J. Massood (2001) argues in her piece:

Most studies of urban African American migration as it pertains to metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and even New York City, where discussion is often limited to Harlem... Harlem, in particular played a crucial role as a black city within a city- a “promised land”- for many rural migrants.

Spike Lee’s films are monumental for putting black New York on the map. Places such as Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and many other New York City boroughs were pivotal in

molding Spike Lee into who he is today. He has always been proud of where he is from and it shows both in his films and his fashion. Lee shows his audience what black New York is really like in his works, which has resulted in one of the greatest cinema careers to date.

African Americans want to destroy the negative stereotype that has been placed on them for centuries. One major way to destroy this stereotype is through representation in film. We have the chance to show that black people are from all over and deal with a vast amount of things. We have all types of film in the world: vlogs, YouTube videos, movies, short films, and even documentaries. Film is a major part of entertainment that everyone in some shape or form enjoys. Seeing how location can be used in film can make people appreciate this form of art on another level. Moreover, the implementation of location in African American film makes people appreciate the representation on cultural and regional aspects. Movies such as *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) help show the positive and negative parts of the black community as well as the various people that walk amongst us every day. Representation through location in African American film is a pivotal for understanding black culture and is a topic that will continue to grow as people begin to take notice.

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