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Towards the Gendering of Blaxploitation and Black Power

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Depictions of race in American popular culture and media have been the focus for countless scholars of all races working from a variety of perspectives. For many black writers, activists, and artists, it is clear that white-dominated political, social, and educational institutions are fundamentally racist and have done more to hinder black cultural production than abet it. There has also been a long tradition of leveling criticism at these institutions from W.E.B. Dubois to Richard Wright to Cornel West to bell hooks to Robin Kelley. As a variety of factors, personal choice foremost among them, conspired to lead black Americans out of the South, cultural production began to expand beyond the rich literary and musical traditions of black life. Already by the 1930's, one could speak of a Harlem Renaissance and a New Negro Movement/Moment, and several black artists such as Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, were critiquing the restrictions on black cultural production – such as racist publishing, film, and distribution industries – but were engaged in a growing debate, with long historical roots, over the ways in which black people were represented in white media.

Film is one of the industries in which black people sought greater employment and demanded positive depictions and, as an art form and industry, is extremely valuable as a point of analysis for cultural history. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, film has been as ubiquitous as the novel (who hasn't heard of someone skipping the novel and going straight to the movie?), but it also has been particularly restrictive for marginalized people. In order to reach a mass audience, people of color, women, and the queer community have had to work through an almost exclusively hetero, white male industry in order to secure funds for production and to ensure distribution. In this context, many actors and actresses of color have often had to make the difficult choice between playing roles that confirmed or perpetrated common stereotypes or not working at all. Parallels could be drawn with music and other arts, but the

abundance of stereotypical film portrayals, and cinema's unique role as a cultural arbiter, have made it a target of criticism for scholars in fields as diverse as anthropology, economics, and queer theory.

The purpose of this article is to analyze a particular style of film from a particular era, Blaxploitation cinema, in the context of the black power movements of the late 1960s. Many critics and scholars have scrutinized the genre questioning its status as "revolutionary" or "counter-revolutionary" in its presentation of race and themes of urban black life. Huey Newton, Ed Guerrero, Lerone Bennett, Don Lee, Thomas Cripps, Jon Kraszewski and various others have weighed in on this debate.<sup>1</sup> Others, such as Mia Mask, Cederic Robinson, Chris Holmlund, and Daniel Leab, have engaged in this debate over representations of race but from a critical feminist perspective.<sup>2</sup>

Within both the black community and academia, there has been much debate over the role of these films. Most would admit that Blaxploitation films, for a time, eradicated previous stereotypes of the submissive black character and provided some opportunities for black actors and black people working within the film industry more broadly. Others would counter, stating that studios controlled by whites profited the most off of the genre and that Blaxploitation replaced old stereotypes of submissive blacks with new stereotypes of hyper-sexualized, violent, anti-social blacks living in a fictionalized ghetto world characterized by vice and lawlessness.

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<sup>1</sup> Huey P. Newton, "He Won't Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,'" *The Black Panther*, June 17, 1971; Lerone Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," *Ebony*, September, 1971; Don Lee, "The Bittersweet of Sweet Sweetback/ or, Shake Yo Money Maker," *Back World*, November, 1971; Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow, *Split Image*, (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990); Jon Kraszewski, "Recontextualizing The Historical Reception of Blaxploitation," *Velvet Light Trap* 50 (2002): 48-61.

<sup>2</sup> Mia Mask, *Divas on Screen*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Cederic J. Robinson, "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," *Race and Class* 40, no. 1 (1998): 1-20; Chris Holmlund, "Wham! Bam! Pam!" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22, no. 2 (2005); Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975).

Most of these arguments take for granted that the abundance of Blaxploitation films was in part a result of black power movements of the late 1960s and that as “black power” began to lose strength as an organizing concept and an ideology the genre became less profitable.

Many who have written about Blaxploitation have employed very limited concepts of black power even as they explicitly link the genre to the ideology. In general, this has caused scholars to misjudge black power’s apparent decline. Black power should be defined simply as self-determination within the black community based on a sense of group solidarity and the valuation of blackness and black cultural products. Scholars such as Eddie Glaude, William Van Deburg, Adolph Reed, Jr. and others have delineated the different aspects of Black Nationalism (economic, religious, revolutionary, territorial, cultural) that make up more specific black power ideologies.<sup>3</sup> There is much overlap between these distinctions but some are, in the case of economic and revolutionary black nationalisms, either mutually exclusive or contradictory. The biggest problems with these definitions are not their specificity or contradictory nature, but that they fail to account for the gender dynamics of black power and the marginalization of women that ended up alienating allies and crippling some of the most visible strands of the movement.

This problem has carried over into studies of Blaxploitation. Scholars studying the genre have generally attempted to fit their analysis of these films into a one-dimensional, static vision of black power. To better understand the genre’s popularity among its primarily young, male, black audience we need to understand the competing gendered visions of black power. Despite women’s roles in the movement, male standards for black liberation dominated not only the Blaxploitation genre but other pop-cultural and mass-mediated perceptions as well. For groups such as the Black Panthers, CORE, and the Black Muslims, “liberation” was a goal that was

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<sup>3</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr., ed, *Is it Nation Time?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002); Adolph Reed, Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); William L. Van Deburg, ed, *Modern Black Nationalism*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

maintained even as these groups actively marginalized black women. Black power is often remembered as something that was violent, male-dominated, and unreasonable – a black fantasy – when in fact it was a dynamic form of race consciousness resulting from constant negotiations of gender, class status, friendships, community affiliations, religious and political preferences, notions of freedom, and concerns about the position of black people in the United States and the world. It was a political act and even a way of life to some, for others, it was one ideology among others and to many it was something with which they rarely concerned themselves. Black power is recognizable in protest, film, rhetoric, literature, music, poetry, revolutionary posturing, etc. The important thing to recognize is that the term meant different things to different people and drew differing levels of commitment.

Blaxploitation films most often fit a very specific, almost cartoonish version of black power that emphasized the rhetorical posture of would be liberators, in many cases strong black men and women who assisted the black community through singular acts of violence or revenge. That filmmakers would parrot this type of black power for profit is not surprising. The most prominent (or at least the loudest and most visible) black power advocates often defined – through their appearance, rhetoric, and ubiquity in the media – the term for movie makers and audience members. Many critics realized that Blaxploitation films were, in almost every respect, counter-revolutionary and counter to the liberation of black people. However, even the harshest critics of the violence and stereotypes found in Blaxploitation remained quiet about one of the genre's most salient features: the marginalization of women deriving from the genre's insistence on maintaining rigid gender hierarchies, even as women played central roles in some of its most popular films.<sup>4</sup> Through an examination what are widely considered representative

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<sup>4</sup> Pam Greer in *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* is a prominent example, but also Tamara Dobson in *Cleopatra Jones* and Teresa Graves in *Get Christie Love!* come to mind.

Blaxploitation films, it is possible to see how these movies promoted and adhered to a hierarchical, male version of black power and hence contributed to the overall decline of the movement by popularizing a dangerous stereotype of liberation as violent, individual acts of revenge against whites.

### **Blaxploitation and Black Power:**

The term “Blaxploitation”, if taken literally to imply the exploitation of black culture, could refer to any number of examples in America history in which black music, sports, fashion, style, and art have been commodified or repackaged by white artists to be sold to white audiences. I am using the term in its most narrow sense, to describe films that, as Ed Guerrero would have it, target “the black audience with a specific product line of cheaply made, black-cast films shaped with the ‘exploitation’ strategies Hollywood routinely uses to make a majority of its films.”

Guerrero further refines the term to refer to the various action-adventure films set primarily in sensationalized ghetto environments that were released from roughly 1969 to 1974.<sup>5</sup> Although scholars are increasingly making arguments to extend the term to various other black films, especially “gangsta” films of the late 1980s and the 1990s<sup>6</sup>, there seems to be general scholarly agreement that the term “Blaxploitation” properly refers to this era and this type of film.<sup>7</sup>

Most of these films were released through large production companies owned and operated by whites. American International Pictures, for example, produced *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*. These companies invested very few dollars for very large returns. Despite the fact that many of these films often did not see wide releases, they made “huge sums” of money. *Super*

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<sup>5</sup> Guerrero, 69.

<sup>6</sup> See Kraszewski; Joe Bob Briggs, “Who Dat Man?” *Cineaste* 28, no. 2 (2003): 24-29; Holmlund; Robinson.

<sup>7</sup> With very minor modification, Dates and Barlow; Mask; Catherine Silk and John Silk, *Racism and anti-racism in American Popular Culture*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990); David Walker, Andrew J. Rausch, and Chris Watson, *Reflections on Blaxploitation*, (Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, 2009); Brian Ward, ed., *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*. (Miami: University Press of Florida, 2001) use this definition as a starting point.

*Fly*, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, and *Shaft* were filmed by black directors but all of them were financed by white production companies and *Shaft* was actually distributed through Hollywood giant, MGM. *Super Fly* was directed by a black man, Gordon Parks, but it was the "vision" of Sig Shore, a white man, who conceived of it and produced it. He made the film for less than \$150,000 and it grossed nearly \$30 million. A *Chicago Reporter* article looked at statistics for 52 black films over a 20-month period. They concluded that the films grossed an average of \$8 million and that 95 percent of the money from production and distribution "fell into white hands." For the film, *Nigger Charlie*, lead actor Fred Williamson was paid \$14,000 while the producer made \$14 million. According to the same study, blacks not only failed to receive money but also had little to do with writing and production. Only 4 of the 52 films in the study were produced, written, or directed by blacks. The study pointed to the inability of blacks to secure financing, marketing problems for independent black films, and nepotism in movie production unions.<sup>8</sup> Even though it was whites making the money off of the genre, the films were offering a version of black power to black audiences.

Many prominent women were active in black power movements, giving speeches, writing articles, becoming willing victims of violence, and suffering arrest. This does not change the fact that black power has traditionally been defined and articulated in the media, popular culture, and the arts by men. Many groups employed patriarchal and hierarchical organizing structures characterized by male leadership. This notion of black power fits several Blaxploitation pictures quite well. According to Thomas Cripps the archetypal Blaxploitation film was characterized by the "legendary black outlaw" who wore the clothes and sported the

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<sup>8</sup> Gene Robertson, "On the Beam," *Sun Reporter*, 28 August 1976, 41; David Mills, "Blaxploitation 101," *The Washington Post*, 4 November 1990; "Blaxploitation Increases Self Hate," *Bay State Banner* 11 January 1973; Terrele Shumake, "Black Films Net Big \$, Headaches" *Chicago Defender*, 6 January 1975.

attitude (read chauvinism) of the movement.<sup>9</sup> William Van Deburg, defending the genre, adds that Blaxploitation was predicated on “self-reliant individuals” who “confronted racist stereotypes”; the heroes were “bad, in a good sense.”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to state that the male black heroes “radiated the activist ethic that coursed throughout the land” and that it was the black male who “fought tenaciously – by any means necessary – to consign black invisibility and all-too-recognizable stereotypes like Mammy and Little Black Sambo to oblivion.”<sup>11</sup> These remarks, true to the genre, reveal the gendered notions of black power the films express. One set of stereotypes was challenged but another damaging set of stereotypes was created. These scholars attribute the decline of black power movements to changing national politics, harassment from the state, black apathy, and a conservative backlash. The decline of the genre is explained in the same context: these same changes deterred black audiences. Undoubtedly, these factors contributed to national cultural changes, but this explanation fails to assess one of the biggest problems fracturing the movement, the marginalization of women and the undue cultural emphasis on self-reliant, male individuals in positions of power and leadership.

Before an analysis of films, it is necessary to look at the ways in which men defined and articulated black power through their rhetoric of liberation and/or revolution, the ways in which these visions marginalized women in the movement, and the ways in which women responded with their own vision of black power and liberation. There is only room for a brief breakdown of these different visions here and these men and women are not entirely representative, but they identify well enough the ways in which men contradicted their own rhetoric of group solidarity and liberation through their organizing structures which marginalized those who did not fit the stereotype that was most prevalent in Blaxploitation.

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<sup>9</sup> Dates and Barlow, 162.

<sup>10</sup> Ward, 205.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

Stokely Carmichael is credited with coining the phrase “black power”, which on some levels make him a natural place to start. His most important work, co-written with Charles Hamilton in 1967, should, however, be viewed as a kind of culmination of ideologies of black empowerment that could be traced to Nat Turner, slave-turned-rebellion-leader in the early-19<sup>th</sup> century, or perhaps even the first Africans who were enslaved for life in the United States. There is no doubt that influential blacks, such as Marcus Garvey and A. Phillip Randolph, not only embodied black power, but acted on it, despite the credit given to Carmichael for the term. Carmichael advocated community action directed at liberation: black people must “respond [to white oppression] in our own way, on our own terms, in a manner which befits our temperaments. The definitions of ourselves, the roles we pursue, the goals we seek are *our* responsibility.”<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that the community Carmichael had in mind was that of a patriarchy: “the only position for women in SNCC [a black power group under the leadership of Carmichael for a time],” he reportedly said in jest, “is prone.”<sup>13</sup>

Carmichael’s definition fits well with the rhetoric of other male figures in the movement. This position can be seen in a variety of position papers, articles, interviews, etc. coming from influential black power advocates. Malcolm X acknowledged the importance of grassroots, non-hierarchical organizing, but did so for most of his adult life from a position in a hierarchical religious organization that explicitly advocated male domination of women in the guise of “defense.”<sup>14</sup> Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panthers, went so far as to urge coalitions with the women’s movement and the burgeoning gay rights movement, yet he considered these struggles as something apart from the revolutionary struggle to liberate black people. His involvement in an extremely hierarchical group that marginalized women, and sometimes

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<sup>12</sup> Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power*, (New York: Random House, 1967), ix.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Evans, *Personal Politics*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 87.

<sup>14</sup> See George Brietman, ed, *By Any Mean s Necessary*, (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), especially chapters 1 and 12.

violently suppressed them, betrays his revolutionary rhetoric. He states, speaking of the Black Panthers, “we recognize the women’s right to be free,” at a time women were already members of the BPP. One wonders who he meant by “we” or how women may have felt marginalized by this type of comment that was intended to be liberatory.<sup>15</sup> Although Panther women spoke at rallies, were the victims and perpetrators of violence, and were jailed along with men, their position within the group was defined primarily by their relationship to men, and the liberation of black men did not necessarily imply that women would be relinquished of the type of labor that white society had defined for women.<sup>16</sup>

Eldridge Cleaver is probably most representative of the contradictory positions of male black power advocates. In *Soul on Ice* he apologizes to black women for the emasculation of black males, basically arguing that what black women need is strong black men to protect them. In the same book he actually argues that the rape of white women, after he had practiced a bit on black women, was “an insurrectionary act” and delighted him in that he was “defying and trampling upon the white man’s law.”<sup>17</sup> This sampling of male notions of black power, narrow but in many ways representative, revealed that liberation, revolution, and cultural or economic separatism would do little to change gendered notions of labor or women’s position within the struggle. The rhetoric of liberation called men to mind; the way to liberation was through hierarchical organizations dominated by men (although women played important roles), and based on the appeal of charismatic males. Women were aware of the problems inherent in these organizations and confronted their marginalization to the point of fracturing the movement.

Elaine Brown, Angela Davis, Sarah Evans, Mary King, and countless others presented a challenge to the rhetoric of liberation and revolution deriving from male notions of black power.

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<sup>15</sup> Toni Morrison, ed., *To Die for the People*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009), 154.

<sup>16</sup> See Philip Foner, ed, *Black Panthers Speak*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 145-164.

<sup>17</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968), 205-210, 14.

In fact, they embodied the movement's inherent contradictions. They were beaten, shot, and jailed along with males, and, even though they were granted roles that could be considered liberatory on some levels, they were at the same time marginalized by internal hierarchies and the media which privileged male opinions. Black women have faced a variety of challenges distinct from, although intimately tied to, the struggle for the liberation of all black people. What characterizes black feminist struggle is the "multiple oppressions" they have faced which have been "missing from analyses of oppression and exploitation in traditional feminism, Black Studies and mainstream academic disciplines."<sup>18</sup> These multiple levels of oppression are explicated when one considers women involved in, on one hand, a struggle for liberation of black people, and, on the other hand, a struggle to liberate black women. These struggles were inseparable and, for women, it was essential that they were seen as one and the same.

Kathleen Cleaver, a former Panther, notes the ways in which a liberation struggle for black women was not served by the type of consciousness raisings and other strategies that appealed to white women. Liberation of women without the liberation of black people was "not something we could obtain separately."<sup>19</sup> However, many men failed to make this connection and were convinced that liberation of black women could only come after the liberation of black men. Whereas these goals were inseparable to black women, men saw the former as something that could only begin after the completion of the latter. This view was prevalent in structure of many black groups that privileged male leaders even while depending on female labor.

Too many women have articulated the problem of sexism within black power groups to mention in detail here, but it is worthwhile to examine some examples of the pressures put on women by the double standard of black liberation. Reflecting on her time in the Black Panthers,

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<sup>18</sup> Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia, *Theorizing Black Feminisms*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Adrien Wing, *Critical Race Feminism*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 37.

Regina Jennings indicated clearly that while women were expected to face violence along with men, the leadership structure made it nearly impossible for women to articulate their special concerns. She was raised accepting “male dominance” and considered herself a “helpmate of men.” Drawn to the Panthers because of their militancy and liberatory rhetoric, she soon encountered the “double standard for women” since many “brothers in leadership positions were sexist.”<sup>20</sup> Jennings was eventually forced out of the party due to the sexism that she faced. The Panther men that supported her were ostracized as well. After “repeatedly” refusing “the advances” of an officer, he decided to make her life miserable. There was no democratic way of challenging officers within the party so she was neutralized. This was at a time when the Panthers were facing some of their greatest challenges nationwide. According to Jennings “sexism was a significant factor in weakening the structure of the Black Panther Party.” More to the point she stated: “if women are disrespected, so goes the nation.”<sup>21</sup> Trayce Matthews argued similarly that the “politics of gender” affected the party’s “ability to function as an effective political organization.” She noted how women in groups like SNCC were in similar positions.

Although many black women did not readily identify with the growing white, middle-class women’s movement, they articulated their own brand of feminist liberation that also addressed racial liberation. In various black power groups these internal conflicts were crippling.<sup>22</sup> Despite the fact that many cultural nationalists felt that black women were not fit for leadership, Panther women challenged this, Elaine Brown, who served as the leader of the group for a time, is a prime example.<sup>23</sup> However, Angela LeBlanc-Earnest is also careful to point a bitter irony (one reflected in scholarly perceptions of Blaxploitation films): while women

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Jones, *The Black Panther Party*, (Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1998), 257.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 267-273.

<sup>23</sup> See Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992)

suffered the same types of abuse and went to the same extremes in defense of their liberties as males – even though they faced oppression on multiple levels, including from men within their own group – black power is remembered as distinctly male, distinctly violent, and distinctly hierarchical. This version of black power has been cemented in popular memory.<sup>24</sup> The predominance of a one-dimensional version of black power has left most scholars at a loss to explain the decline of the movement in terms other than a decline in strong male leadership. This is the framework adopted by many studying Blaxploitation. Much of the debate centers upon the revolutionary status of the genre, or its connection to black power.

Most middle- and upper-class blacks rejected Blaxploitation outright for portraying negative stereotypes, but this rejection reflected the feelings of the black middle class regarding black power in general. Much of this can be attributed to a generational divide in the black community. Younger male audiences, the majority of the audience for these films, liked the idea of black characters killing whites, especially politicians and police. The same folks who were against militant protests were often against the violent content of these films. However, it seems the class divide was most prominent in the reception of Blaxploitation. Many middle- to upper-class groups of artists, doctors, lawyers, etc. rallied against Blaxploitation claiming that it degraded the black community and contributed to stereotypes. Groups like KUUMBA and FORUM, along with the NAACP and Jesse Jackson staged boycotts and even demanded that scripts for new black films be read in advance for approval by those opposed to Blaxploitation. Black psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint issued a report on the impacts that black films were having on the children and cited examples of them picking up on the fashions of Blaxploitation, the language, and a certain attitude. He also thought it dangerous that young black male audience

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<sup>24</sup> Jones, 327.

members seemed to cheer every time a white person was beaten or killed in these films.<sup>25</sup>

Much of the anger over Blaxploitation came from the middle class, black actors who considered themselves “serious” and above Blaxploitation, and from other blacks working in the arts and entertainment industries. It is clear that there was a fear for the middle class that young black men would be impacted by the films, but it is hard to tell just exactly who made up the audiences. While young men make up the majority of all film audiences, many Blaxploitation films saw limited release, usually in theaters in black neighborhoods or cities, such as Chicago and New Jersey, with large black populations. For films to gross so much in such a limited space suggests that more than just working-class black youths were going to these theaters. From the perspective of the untrained black actor trying to get into films, they represented an opportunity. Outspoken actor Fred Williamson argued that the NAACP, CORE, and “uppity” blacks prematurely attacked Blaxploitation, and did not give the genre a chance to develop into more serious entertainment. Williamson also argued that no one seemed worried when white kids were watching the crime movies of the 1940s and 1950s. He criticized intellectuals who read too much into his films. He stated that Blaxploitation was about entertainment, the films were not supposed to provide role models, the role models were supposed to be black actors who had carved out a space to entertain and found a way to be successful in an area dominated by whites.<sup>26</sup> On top of this debate was the question of the films being revolutionary or not revolutionary enough.

Nearly all of the criticism directed at black film’s revolutionary capacity, or lack thereof, is distorted in that it takes for granted that black power is inherently male and is directly

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<sup>25</sup> Junius Griffin, “Black Movie Boom – Good or Bad” *New York Times*, December 17, 1972; Michael Culbert, “New Group Joins Super Fly Fray,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 7, 1972; Monroe Anderson, “Film’s Image Assailed”, *Chicago Tribune*, August 29, 1976; *Chicago Defender*, “Black Crime Films Degrading”, February 6, 1974.

<sup>26</sup> Judy Klemesrud, “Fred – ‘Don’t Compare Me with Sidney”, *New York Times*, March 18, 1973.

connected to Blaxploitation. Under this paradigm, Blaxploitation can be considered empowering, or even revolutionary, but this treatment also reinforces the type of structural problems that weakened the black power movement. Re-examining these films in light of a more complex understanding of black power helps us to re-examine the problems inherent in this paradigmatic conception of black life in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

***Sweet Sweetback Baadasssss, Shaft, and Super Fly:***

*Shaft*, *Super Fly*, and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* have been the focus of both praise and ire within the black community for forty years. With what some would call a return to the genre (more properly these films should be viewed on a continuum) in the late 1990's, culminating in a remake of *Shaft*, scholars have renewed their interest. The following section will explore these films and some of the prominent criticisms/praises in order to place them into the context of black power. I have selected these three films for several reasons. They are, by all accounts, representative of the range of Blaxploitation: *Sweet Sweetback* was independently financed and written, directed, and produced by one man, *Super Fly* was cheaply made but highly profitable for distribution and production companies, and *Shaft* which was a bigger budget, major release.

The films were highly successful in terms of their gross profits and they established many aspects of the character types that followed in black films throughout the rest of the decade, setting the tone in terms of narrative, plots, and styles. They were all the focus of much media attention and debate whenever the value of black pictures was discussed. These films fit the male-centric vision of black power that challenged stereotypical portrayal of black men as subservient and submissive, ignorant and powerless, while simultaneously offering a false, though extremely popular, ideal of liberation with stereotypes that prevented a long-term,

sustainable black power movement that could have embraced more elements of the black community at large.

Although *Shaft* may have been more popular and *Super Fly* may have been more controversial, many view *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) as the archetypal Blaxploitation film. A brief look at some of the praise and criticism of the film reveals contemporary views concerning black power. Whether criticized for not being revolutionary or liberatory enough, or being hailed as the quintessential revolutionary film, responses also reveal the gender dynamics of the film's critical reception. Some of the most prominent praise for the film came from the director himself, Martin Van Peebles, dubbed by Spike Lee as "the Godfather of Black Cinema."<sup>27</sup> According to Van Peebles, his idea was that his movie was going to be about taking "another step in getting the Man's foot out of my ass" which meant getting "the Man's foot out of all of our black asses." Writing in 1975, he positioned his film as radical and revolutionary arguing that "the biggest obstacle to the black revolution in America is our conditioned susceptibility to the white man's program." "In short," he continues, "the fact is that the white man has colonized our minds."<sup>28</sup> *Sweet Sweetback* was an attempt to end the colonization of the white mind, and, on some levels, does just that, but it does so by portraying a very specific type of revolutionary.

Huey Newton commented at length about the picture in his revolutionary analysis of *Sweet Sweetback* and further cemented stereotypical notions of revolutionary heroes that were good for the black community. For Newton this was "the first truly revolutionary black film" and his analysis was designed to make the revolutionary elements contained in the picture clear to black people. He began by discussing the roles of women, who nurse a young Sweetback in

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<sup>27</sup> Walker, Rausch, and Watson, 168.

<sup>28</sup> Lindsay Patterson, *Black Films and Film-Makers*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975), 225.

the opening of a picture. Commenting on the large breasts of the women, he argued that they were representative of a woman's duty to "raise their liberator" for the boy "is the future of the women, of Black people, liberation." He went on to describe the ways in which Sweetback's sexual acts were revolutionary, that the sex act represents a transition to manhood which is necessary for the revolutionary. Certain other elements emerge in Newton's analysis: Sweetback turns the technology of the oppressors (handcuffs) against them, he relies on his feet, the technology of the oppressed, to evade law enforcement, and he recognizes a young black revolutionary's role as the future of the movement, allowing the young man to escape rather than escaping himself. Newton's analysis boils down to applauding Sweetback for his individualism (he escapes on his own, with little help from the black community), his sexuality (males liberate, they need to experience the sex act to become men), and his ability to challenge the system (he kills white police men and evades white law enforcement).<sup>29</sup> This represents a form of liberation dependent on the type of marginalization of women that was disastrous to the movement. Although the movie was heavily criticized, most critics missed the inherent privileging of the "independent-male-as-revolutionary" which characterizes the film.

Most critics focused on the formal elements of the film that undermined its revolutionary potential without looking deeper at the ways the picture determined a gender hierarchy detrimental to revolutionary goals. It is true that Sweetback represented a new kind of role for black characters, to finally be in control of the action, lashing out or striking back against oppression, however, the "white establishment over which" he "triumphs is one dimensional."<sup>30</sup> The "Man" is represented by a couple of police officers. Lerone Bennett famously lambasted the film. He claimed it was not "revolutionary or Black," it was about "individual acts of resistance,

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<sup>29</sup> Huey P. Newton, "He Won't Bleed Me."

<sup>30</sup> Gene Siskel, "Sweet Sweetback," *The Movies*, *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1971.

conceived in confusion and executed in panic.” He also questions the revolutionary capacity of sexual intercourse. “Fucking will not set you free,” he argued, “if fucking freed, black people would have celebrated the millennium 400 years ago.”<sup>31</sup> Don Lee echoed these criticisms, complaining that Van Peebles portrayed an impoverished black community plagued by white police officers without commenting on the structures that created poverty and shaped policing. While both pointed out that the director’s views on women were problematic (according to Lee, Van Peebles advice to potential revolutionary film makers to secure financing for their films was to “Put a couple of chicks on the block, raise the money, and make a film.”<sup>32</sup>), neither challenged the notion that a black revolution was predicated on the ability of male black leaders to organize and fight. This type of criticism can be found in abundance: the film was panned for the stereotypes it promoted (a black community of “dope pushers, pimps, and prostitutes”), and challenged for the way the sex act was portrayed, but its fundamental problem, that it helped to paint black liberation as “male” was never an object of concern. The biggest problem for most was that the film turned the stereotype of the “shuffling, menial black” into an “equally unreal and demeaning ‘supernigger’ who has vast physical powers but no cognitive skills.”<sup>33</sup> Cultural nationalist groups such as KUUMBA, from Van Peebles’ native Chicago, echoed the sentiments exactly, disparaging the film for its “overwhelmingly negative influences and distortions” of the black community with no concern over their own rigid, gendered notions of black power.<sup>34</sup>

This same type of criticism can be found in relation to the entire genre. Both *Shaft* and *Super Fly* center their action on an independent black male who challenges the system by killing whites while having sex with several white women along the way. The problems that scholars

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<sup>31</sup> Lerone Bennett, “The Emancipation Orgasm.”

<sup>32</sup> Don Lee, “The Bittersweet of Sweet Sweetback/ or, Shake Yo Money Maker.”

<sup>33</sup> “Rising Complaints Shake Film Truce with Blacks.” *New York Times*, September 27, 1972.

<sup>34</sup> Tony Griggs, “Anti-‘Sweetback’ Movement Grows,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, July 13, 1971.

and critics identified had to do with the lack of a structural critique and the trumpeting of negative stereotypes. According to Daniel Leab, writing in 1975, although the protagonists in these films represented new types of roles for black actors the “film image of the black is as condescending and defamatory as it has ever been.”<sup>35</sup> Even while addressing the negativity of the stereotype of the hyper-sexual black male (*Shaft* deals with a “stud” image,<sup>36</sup> *Super Fly* “glorifies the life of dope dealers and of pimps”<sup>37</sup>), criticisms ignore the gendered notions of black empowerment put forward in these films. Again the criticisms of these pictures are valid (*Super Fly* glamorized the dope dealer, “one of the cruelest immediate enemies confronting the black community”<sup>38</sup>, and black people associated with these films “didn’t benefit that much from the smashing of the color bar”<sup>39</sup>) but are based on limited awareness of the damage that gender stereotypes caused in the broader black community. The emphasis on a lack of structural critiques was contradictory if gender structures were left off the table entirely.

### ***Coffy and Foxy Brown:***

Certain elements of this contradictory critique become even more alarming when we analyze the Blaxploitation films starring Pam Grier, such as *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*. Most criticisms of these films have come from feminists concerned over the ways in which Grier represents womanhood. The scholarly treatments concerned with the negative stereotypes found in male-oriented films within the genre tend to dismiss these films completely. It is my argument that these films, while challenging stereotypical roles assigned to black women and providing work (for a select few), still fit a very “male” notion of liberation and empowerment. Grier’s characters “wore afros and revealing attire; toted pistols, revolvers, and shotguns; kickboxed, mutilated, and ‘smoked’

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<sup>35</sup> Leab, 263.

<sup>36</sup> Carol Kramer, “The Great Chase for the Black Market,” *Movies*, *Chicago Tribune*, April 2, 1972.

<sup>37</sup> “‘Superfly’ is Ron O’Neal’s Biggest Starring Role,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 23, 1972.

<sup>38</sup> Vernon Jarrett, “Cocaine Cinema Exploits Blacks,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 13, 1972.

<sup>39</sup> Briggs, 28.

[their] antagonists... and eventually resorted to vigilantism.” Her characters “as lone avengers against drug pushers, corrupt politicians and cops and Black and ethnic gangsters” were “estranged from community or political organizations and, when they infrequently required a posse, it was only for the ultimate dispatching of the villains.”<sup>40</sup> As with male characters, this portrayal effectively turned liberation into a story of revenge against whites rather than an affront to systematized oppression. Criticism parallels that of films with male leads: there is a lack of emphasis on the systematic nature of oppression, the structures creating poverty are left untouched, and liberation is predicated on individual action. Grier’s characters represented the woman found in the rhetoric of black power but whose existence internal group structures prevented. This exposed the gulf between the rhetoric and reality of the movement for women.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a feminist critique of Pam Grier’s films but it is important to mention some relevant problems inherent in these films, also the ways in which the criticism and promotion of these films differed from their very similar male helmed-counterparts. Critical receptions of Grier’s films nearly always commented on her sexuality and were often more forgiving than those commentaries directed at her male contemporaries. An advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* labeled her “Sex Queen” under a banner headline “Sex Stars Draw Fans.”<sup>41</sup> Another article concerning *Coffy* focused on Grier’s upbringing and beauty, there was no mention of the stereotypical conceptions of the black community the film put forward.<sup>42</sup> A similar review placed *Coffy* on a continuum of the “obviously sexy” Grier’s “sexy shoot-em-ups” and then mentioned the copious nudity in the picture before wrapping up.<sup>43</sup> An article commenting on Grier’s role in *Foxy Brown* was entitled “Pretty Pam Packs a Punch” and

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<sup>40</sup> Robinson, “Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation.”

<sup>41</sup> “Sex Stars Draw Fans,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 1, 1973.

<sup>42</sup> “Pam Grier Has New Role as ‘Coffy,’” *Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1973.

<sup>43</sup> A.H. Weiler, “‘Coffy,’ Black Oriented Film, Arrives,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1973.

did not bother with commentary on the violent subject matter of the film that was highlighted in the article's tagline.<sup>44</sup> The *New York Times* ran an article summing up the typical roles that Grier was playing in the early 1970s. According to the article the "well-endowed black beauty" was "fast becoming a bore in her pictures despite all the sex" and her ability to "handle a lover."<sup>45</sup> All of these articles rightly point to the fact that Grier's sexuality was the selling point for her films. Although films with male leads contained the same amount, or more, of nudity and sex scenes, critics tended to make it the focus of their critique of Grier's films. Grier's characters were as violent, or more violent, than her male contemporaries, her films portrayed the same types of stereotypical characters within the black community (dope pushers, pimps, prostitutes), and the resolution also centered on violently ridding the black community of corrupt whites, yet reviewers failed to comment on these problematic aspects of the film.

Although *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* contain some elements that could be considered progressive from a feminist standpoint, women's actions are nearly always carried out in relationship to men and can only be considered liberatory from a perspective that already accepted an ideal of black power that depended on individualized, violent action against particular whites rather than against systematic oppression. She is strong enough to beat up men and she is independent, in both films she castrates and leaves alive male villains and uses her sexuality for her own ends. However, she mostly beats up white women, she longs for a stable relationship with a man in each film, and the action in both movies basically unfolds around the exposure of her breasts. Grier undoubtedly was doing something unique as a black woman in a starring role, but both films were produced by whites and in both films her sexuality is paramount. Mia Mask argues that Grier's characters "fused feminist sensibilities, camp "bitch-

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<sup>44</sup> "Pretty Pam Packs a Punch," *Chicago Defender*, April 6, 1974.

<sup>45</sup> A.H. Weiler, "Pam Grier Typed as 'Foxy Brown'," *New York Times*, April 6, 1974.

femme” aesthetics, black nationalist radicalism, and women’s subjectivity,” but even a cursory glance at either film challenges these claims.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Grier represented a nearly impossible standard of beauty at the same time that she was becoming the model woman for many black radicals and revolutionaries. Mask said that “Foxy Brown was every woman: able to be assertive, yet feminine” but the assertiveness of Foxy Brown was displayed by her ability to shoot and kill and her femininity was represented by the near constant exposure of her breasts.<sup>47</sup>

Although Grier’s films have often been considered apart from films such as *Sweet Sweetback*, *Shaft*, and *Super Fly* they fit the same notions of black power that these films project and the same type of idealized black power that has been accepted by most critics studying the genre. Ironically, Grier’s roles represent the kind of machismo that was largely responsible for marginalizing women within broader black power movements. They also confirmed that a woman involved in the movement was expected to be able to beat and kill at will, while still playing the role of the sex object who was defined in relationship to the men she encountered. John and Catherine Silk, briefly summing up the genesis and impact of the genre, noted that there “was a strong emphasis on violence and explicit sex” and went on to argue that:

For a short period in the early seventies, films made primarily by blacks for blacks were also the most lucrative films backed by Hollywood. New stereotypes appeared which emphasized the macho qualities of black male characters and their defiance of whites. Young black audiences, who were now increasingly important economically to the industry, expected to see forceful black characters on the screen. This expressed a change of mood associated with the success of Civil Rights in the South, the riots and rise of black power and Black Nationalism in the ghettos.<sup>48</sup>

This analysis could be extended to the characters portrayed by Grier as well. The above quote is indicative of scholarly efforts to link the genre to black power, yet still misses the point: this is a

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<sup>46</sup> Mask, 98.

<sup>47</sup> Chris Holmlund, “Wham! Bam! Pam!”

<sup>48</sup> Caroline and John Silk, 175.

certain kind of black power predicated on an ignorance or marginalization of women's issues.

**Conclusion:**

Blaxploitation films catered to a new black consciousness. Loosely defined as black power, this consciousness was associated with black control of black communities and predicated on group solidarity. However, the black power sentiments to which these films catered was explicitly gendered "male" and contributed to the larger problems plaguing the movement. Young black men, the target audience for these films, consumed a new kind of hero and a new kind of stereotype. The archetype was often male – and, if not, carried dual qualities of the violent agent characterized by physicality and the feminine object characterized by sexuality – always acting as an individual, attacking whites while failing to attack the structures that created urban and racial problems. The hero lived and acted in a fictionalized ghetto environment plagued by pimps, pushers, prostitutes, and police. For many, especially men organizing around radical philosophies of black power, this was an appropriate role model. Others realized that no revolutionary could act alone and were critical of the trumpeting of drug dealers and sexual predators as heroes. These environments depicted stereotypes that, although indicative of realities in the black community, were not authentic depictions of that community. Few realized that these movies represented one type of black power consciousness while women were articulating a vision of black power that addressed their own concerns. Scholars look at black power as a movement and Blaxploitation as a genre and blame the simultaneous decline on political apathy, frustrations with the slow rate of progress, law-and-order conservatism, and repression coming from state entities. Few note that the marginalization of women undermined the movement's strength at the time that women were needed most. Blaxploitation perfectly displays this version of black power and should be considered a starting point for analysis for the

decline of both, rather than as a tangential phenomenon that hardly merits comment.

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