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"He's a Complicated Man": Representations of black masculinity in Blaxploitation Films

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“He’s a Complicated Man”: Representations of Black
Masculinity in Blaxploitation Films

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Sociology and Women & Gender Studies
Professor Valocchi
Professor Corber
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Chapter 1: Literature Review

Research Question:

In the social, political, and economic context of the 1960's and 1970's, in what ways did blaxploitation films construct/perpetuate images of black masculinity?

Introduction:

The 1960s and 1970s were a crucial time for black Americans. With the rise of the civil rights struggle and the formation of black power groups such as the Black Panthers, black men and women all over the country were becoming visible in their fight for equality. While the 1960s made blacks visible in the public sphere in the form of protests and marches, the 1970s brought about another visible representation of black men and women through the media with the rise of blaxploitation films. Although Blaxploitation films are widely debated about, a basic definition of the genre can be found in David Walker's book, *Reflections on Blaxploitation*, as "a genre of film that includes action, comedy, drama, romance, and even documentary— made and marketed to a predominantly black audience— as well as the era in which these films were made" (2009:ix). The rise of blaxploitation films, while complicated and fraught with problems, marked an important development in 1960s and 1970s American Culture. It was the first time that black men and women were displayed as icons and heroes on the big screen. In order to further understand this genre, this thesis will examine how black masculinities were constructed in blaxploitation films. However, before moving into a discussion of blaxploitation films, this section will assess the sociological literature that exists on masculinity, and more specifically, black masculinity, in order to recognize the ways that masculinities are raced, classed and sexed.

Masculinity:

One important book which will inform the analysis of masculinities throughout this thesis is R.W. Connell's, *Masculinities*. In Chapter three, "The Social Organization of Masculinity", Connell argues that masculinity as a part of the system of gender, is part of a larger structure, and is used to maintain a certain social order. "Masculinity', to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture" (Connell, 1995:71). To better understand this definition of masculinity Connell then moves into a discussion of gender as a social practice, arguing that gender is not a biological fact, but rather a social practice which uses bodies to organize society. "Gender relations, the relations among people and groups organized through the reproductive arena, form one of the major structures of all documented societies" (Connell, 1995:72). Connell's explanation of masculinity as a social practice will be important to the discussion of the ways blaxploitation films use gender to produce certain forms of masculinity in order to maintain a certain gender order.

Another key argument in Chapter Three of *Masculinities*, comes from Connell citing Juliet Mitchell and Gayle Rubin. "Gender is an internally complex structure, where a number of different logics are superimposed... Accordingly masculinity, like femininity, is always liable to internal contradiction and historical disruption" (Connell, 1995:73). This conception of masculinity is important because it highlights the fact that gender identity is not fixed, instead there are numerous masculinities and femininities, and they change throughout history. In addition, gender does not act in isolation, instead there are many other social structures that gender interacts with. "Because gender is a way of structuring

social practice in general, not a special type of practice, it is unavoidably involved with other social structures. It is now common to say that gender intersects- better, interacts- with race and class” (Connell, 1995:75). This definition of gender as a complex structure which interacts with other structures, such as race and class, will be important in examining the ways that history, race, and class interact with masculinity to create the types of masculinities represented in blaxploitation films.

Finally, Connell stresses the opposition of hegemonic masculinity versus subordinated or marginalized masculinities. Borrowing from Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as the form of ideological control held by the dominant group in society, Connell applies hegemony to masculinity defining hegemonic masculinity as, “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995:77). This hegemonic masculinity is maintained both through individuals and collectively, through institutions. “Hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual. So the top levels of business, the military and government provide a fairly convincing corporate display of masculinity, still very little shaken by feminist women or dissenting men” (Connell, 1995:77). For the purpose of this thesis, the hegemonic masculinity promoted by institutions, such as the government, will be understood as white masculinity. White masculinity dominates society and therefore subordinates or marginalizes other types of masculinities, such as black masculinity and female masculinity. “Hegemonic masculinity among whites sustains the institutional oppression and physical terror that have framed the making of masculinities in black

communities” (Connell, 1995:80). Connell’s explanation of hegemonic masculinity vs. marginalized masculinity will be useful when discussing the ways blaxploitation films were influenced by hegemonic white masculinity to produce the marginalized masculinities portrayed in the films.

The next piece of literature on masculinity which builds on and complicates Connell’s conceptions of masculinity is Judith Halberstam’s, *Female Masculinity*. In her introduction Halberstam argues that the discussion of masculinity must include a discussion of female masculinity. “The widespread indifference to female masculinity, I suggest, has clearly ideological motivations and has sustained the complex social structures that wed masculinity to maleness and to power and domination. I firmly believe that a sustained examination of female masculinity can make crucial interventions within gender studies, cultural studies, queer studies, and mainstream discourses of gender in general” (Halberstam, 1998:2). Halberstam is complicating Connell’s definition of masculinity here by arguing that current discussions of masculinity that only view masculinity as attached to male bodies work to reinscribe the patriarchy. Instead, Halberstam argues that we need a discussion of masculinities that are disarticulated from the male body, especially the white male body. The disarticulation of masculinity from the male body will be important for two reasons. First, it will be important to our understanding of black masculinities as detached from the male body. That is to say, black males are detached from the male body in the sense that they do not have access to the privileges and powers of the patriarchy because they are not white. Second, the disarticulation of masculinity from the male body is essential to this thesis’ discussion of female masculinity within blaxploitation films.

Halberstam takes a similar stance to Connell when she claims that “heroic masculinities’ depend absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities” (Halberstam, 1998:1). While Connell argues that hegemonic white masculinity maintains its dominance by subordinating black masculinities, Halberstam applies this same concept to masculinity and female masculinity. “Female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” (Halberstam, 1998:1). Both Connell’s and Halberstam’s definitions of subordinated masculinities will inform the understanding of the representations of masculinity in blaxploitation films. First, by following Connell’s notion of black masculinities as subordinate to hegemonic white masculinities this thesis will examine the ways blaxploitation films created black masculinities in opposition to white masculinities. Second, by following Halberstam’s conception of female masculinity this thesis will look at the ways that blaxploitation films produced female masculinity, showing that masculinity does not only belong to male bodies. Ultimately, following the arguments of both Connell and Halberstam, this thesis will show that dominant masculinities can’t exist or be recognized without alternative masculinities.

The next point raised by Halberstam works to complicate Connell’s definition of masculinity by introducing alternative masculinities to the picture. Using a queer methodology, Halberstam argues that masculinity must move out of the realm of only being applied to men to acknowledge that masculinity exists among females as well as males. “I believe it is both helpful and important to contextualize a discussion of female and lesbian masculinities in direct opposition to a more generalized discussion of masculinity within cultural studies that seems intent on insisting that masculinity remain the property of male

bodies” (Halberstam, 1998:14). Acknowledging alternative masculinities, especially female masculinities, is an important development to our discussion of masculinity. As Halberstam points out, legitimating these alternative masculinities works to challenge the dominant masculinity. “Minority masculinities and femininities destabilize binary gender systems in many different locations. As many feminist and anti-racist critics have commented, femininity and masculinity signify as normative within and through white middle-class heterosexual bodies” (Halberstam, 1998:29). Following Halberstam's notion of minority masculinities that destabilizes the gender binary, this thesis will examine the ways blaxploitation films produce black male and female masculinities which rely on stereotypical perceptions of blackness at the same time that they disrupt and transform these stereotypes.

Black Masculinities:

Now that the variety and hierarchy of masculinities have been established, we can turn to the ways that race and masculinity intersect in the United States to form the spectrum of black masculinities that blaxploitation films perpetuate and construct. Robert Staples book, *Black Masculinity*, offers a detailed explanation of the ways black masculinities have been influenced throughout history. Drawing from conflict theory, one of Staples first important points is the black man's contradictory place in society. “Black men have always had to confront the contradiction between the normative expectations attached to being male in this society and the proscriptions on their behavior and achievement of goals” (Staples, 1982:2). Staples argues that since slavery, black men in the United States have not earned the patriarchal privileges allotted to their status as male because of their racial identity. “Black men face certain problems related to institutional

racism and environments which often do not prepare them very well for the fulfillment of masculine roles. In addition to the problems created by institutional and overt discrimination, they encounter negative stereotyping that exists on all levels about them: being socially castrated, insecure in their male identity, and lacking in a positive self-concept” (Staples, 1982:8). Staples’ conception of the problems black males face will help account for the ways that blaxploitation films worked to perpetuate stereotypical images of black men.

Building on Connell’s and Halberstam’s discussion of the ways hegemonic masculinities shape marginalized masculinities is Staples characterization of the influence of white America and the media on black masculinities in the 70s. The struggle of black men to constantly try and prove their masculinity is what Staples calls the masculine mystique and he argues that it emerged in the 1970’s with mass media. “In the 1970’s that image began to change due to the shift in socialization from the family to the mass media. The image conveyed of black men on television can best be characterized as irresponsible, hypersexualized, hustlers and violent” (Staples, 1982:143). For the first time, with the rise of blaxploitation films and other mass media outlets, black men were represented on the screen as the protagonists. Although they may have been stereotypical representations, it was the first time that black men were shown with any real power and possessions. “What this led to was an individualism and materialism that had been heretofore alien to the black community” (Staples, 1982:144). Staples discussion of the influence of mass media on black masculinity in the 1970’s will be important to exploring how blaxploitation films constructed black masculinity in ways that wavered between a black masculinity that embraced the community rhetoric of black power to one that embraced a more

individualistic mentality. This individualistic shift parallels a change in black leadership from leaders such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X who truly advocated for black rights, to black leaders who were controlled by white elite. “The black leaders of today were installed by the media and ruling class. Their leadership is based on a pragmatic adaptation to white institutions and values” (Staples, 1982:144). White control of black leadership coupled with the shift in the black community towards a more individualistic mentality had a crucial impact on the ways blaxploitation films created certain kinds of black masculinities that would help maintain white hegemonic masculinities.

To further grasp the influence of white control on black masculinities, especially in the 1960's and 1970's, one can turn to Robert Allen's book, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*. Chapter 4: “Black Power and Bourgeois Black Nationalism” and Chapter 5: “Corporate Imperialism vs. Black Liberation”, offer important insight into what Allen calls neocolonialism. Neocolonialism can be understood as the ways whites, and white corporations, used the rhetoric of nationalism along with the creation of a black elite to further entrench blacks into the capitalist system of America in order to maintain white control over black cities. “This reformist or bourgeois nationalism- through its chosen vehicle of black capitalism- may line the pockets and boost the intelligentsia, but it will not ease the oppression of the ordinary ghetto dweller” (Allen, 1969:161). These chapters will be extremely important in situating blaxploitation films within the political and economic context of the 1960's and 1970's.

Joane Nagel's, *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers*, adds to Staples' arguments about black masculinity by tracing the construction of black masculinity and sexuality in the United States throughout history. In Chapter 4: “Sex

and *Race: The Color of Sex in America*” Nagel traces the construction of black sexualities as the other all the way back to slavery in the United States. “Similar characterizations of Africans as oversexed, immoral, and uncivilized served to defend slavery and to camouflage its associated excess” (Nagel, 2003:97). One way that whites were able to justify slavery and the horrible treatment of black men and women was through the othering and exoticizing of their sexualities. However, the use of othering to control blacks did not stop after slavery, instead it took on new forms and shapes in order to maintain white control of the political and economic spheres. “The end of slavery also opened the door to black economic, social, cultural, and sexual world of whites. Something had to be done to stop this overturning of the moral order” (Nagel, 2003:112). In order to maintain white control, new stereotypes and threats of black sexuality, such as the black male threat to the white woman, had to be created. “This bugaboo of white female vulnerability to black male sexuality provided cover for white efforts to stop political and economic competition between whites and blacks, and served as a convenient excuse for white men to reassert their control over black men” (Nagel, 2003: 112). Nagel’s explanation of the creation of black sexuality as hypersexual in order to maintain white hegemony will be useful in accounting for the reasons some blaxploitation films perpetuate the stereotype of black men as hypersexual.

Nagel also offers a brief discussion of the ways the Black Panthers reclaimed masculinity in the 60’s and 70’s. “Looking beyond the gaze of the white observers to the words of the Panthers themselves, their reinvention and reassertion of black masculinity valorized heterosexuality and racial pride” (Nagel, 2003:122). This view of the Panthers will be important when it comes to looking at the ways that blaxploitation films borrowed

complicated ideas of masculinity from the Panthers. While some blaxploitation films portrayed stereotypical images of black men, other blaxploitation films follow the Black Panther rhetoric and therefore aim to reclaim and repurpose these stereotypical images of black masculinity.

Extravagant Abjection, by Darieck Scott is important because it challenges ideas of black masculinity as a patriarchal masculinity, building on Halberstam's understanding of the black male body as disarticulated from the patriarchal male body. "To speak, then, of black sexuality is to do so unaccompanied by the pleasurable illusion of choice or self-mastery, but again to find ourselves instead ... in the arsenal that makes being black a "problem" rather than the easily assumed mantle of yet another heritage" (Scott, 2010:7). Here Scott is adding to Halberstam by highlighting that black sexuality instead of providing choices and freedoms that white sexuality is allotted, is used to maintain the notion that blacks are a problem. However, Scott takes this even further, considering that blacks may be able to reclaim their sexuality in ways that disrupt and challenge white hegemony. "The twinning of blackness and the sexual- the relentless, repetitive, sexualization of black bodies, the blackening of sexualized bodies- also fails always fully to contain the forces that articulation works to control: eruptions occur or can be provoked" (Scott, 2010:7). Acknowledging that disruptions to the system do occur is important for two reasons. First, it highlights that current gender systems which privilege white males are not stable, and can be challenged and even destabilized by alternative masculinities. Second, notions of disruption will be important when looking at the ways that blaxploitation films challenge stereotypical images of black masculinity.

The next point, which Scott borrows from Fanon, is the notion of blackness as abjection, “the defeat suffered by African peoples in a distant past, a past from which we as their descendants are at once thoroughly cut off and yet bound to, in the persistence of the economic and political systems and their cultural concomitants that resulted from ancestral failure” (Scott, 2010:14). This definition of blackness as abjection will be important in discussing the ways that blaxploitation films work to recreate images of blackness that have existed since slavery. Stereotypes which since slavery have worked to keep black men excluded from the patriarchy and thus the privileges attached to being male.

Scott’s conception of black masculinity and the black man as an unstable figure highlight the many paradoxes found in representations of black masculinity in both the Black Panther Party, and Blaxploitation films. “In this body of work , the de rigeur application of the concept of double-consciousness to the objects of knowledge assigned to the category of “black,” “male,” and “African American” generally finds the “black male” to be a self-contradicting and self-reinforcing position at once hypermasculine and feminine, exemplifying an erection/castration paradox” (Scott, 2010:19). Viewing black masculinity as a paradox will be important to our discussion of the complicated depictions of black men and black women found in blaxploitation films.

The final piece of literature that expands our discussion of black masculinities represented in blaxploitation films is Frank Cooper, *Against Bipolar Black Masculinity: Intersectionality, Assimilation, Identity Performance, and Hierarchy*. Cooper defines current representations of black men as a binary, Bad black man: Good black man. “The Bad Black Man image warrants surveillance and containment of the masses; the Good Black Man

image conditions inclusion upon affirming white norms. Jointly, these bipolar representations provide a mechanism for resolving the white mainstream's "post-civil rights anxiety" (Cooper, 2006:7). This notion of bipolar masculinity will be useful in looking at the reasons blaxploitation films tend to portray the bad black man.

Conclusion:

The literature cited above will help inform this thesis' understanding of masculinity, and black masculinity, and black female masculinity, as complicated, varied, and constantly changing. While it is impossible to identify a single black masculinity, this thesis will aim to explore the ways that black male and female masculinities are constructed in blaxploitation films. Acknowledging that blackness and black masculinities are always understood in opposition to the hegemonic white-middle class masculinity, even when detached from the male body, this thesis will aim to explore how black masculinities are constructed in blaxploitation films. While some aspects of blaxploitation films construct masculinities in ways that perpetuate white control over black bodies, other aspects of blaxploitation films work to reclaim blackness and black masculinities in ways that challenge the hegemonic white masculinity.

Chapter 2: Historical Context

Creating The Climate for Blaxploitation:

In order to understand blaxploitation films, it is first crucial to examine the political, social and economic factors of the 1960s and 70s that influenced the rise of this type of cinema. A variety of factors come into play when discussing the representations of black masculinity in blaxploitation film. First is the publication of the 1965 Moynihan Report, which was frequently cited and extremely influential. Next, is the rise and fall of the Black Panther Party and representations of black masculinity within the party. Third is white influence and control over economics in cities, at the same time that whites were largely migrating out of the cities into the suburbs. These events all worked together, influencing one another, to create the market for blaxploitation films. The Moynihan Report and the Black Panther Party would influence complicated constructions of black masculinity in blaxploitation films, while white control over economics coupled with the migration of whites to the suburbs would create a need for a new cinematic audience, the urban black community.

1965:

The representations of black masculinity in blaxploitation films were influenced by the tumultuous events of the 1960s. Led by Martin Luther King Jr. of the civil rights struggle, and Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam, blacks all over the country were joining together to fight the hundreds of years of racism and oppression endured in the United States. While the early 60s were extremely important in establishing the cause, the years from 1965-1970 are the most crucial to look at when discussing blaxploitation films. 1965 was an incredibly important year for two reasons. First, it was the year that the United

States Department of Labor published The Moynihan Report. Second, was the assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965. These two events would have a large impact on the emerging Black Panther Party, which was established in 1966. While the racist analysis found in the Moynihan Report would influence the Panthers representations of masculinity, the loss of Malcolm X would ignite the flame in other black activists to fight harder and carry on his message, eventually forming the Panther Party.

Before turning to a discussion of Malcolm X and his influence on the Black Panther Party, I first want to address the Moynihan Report and its consequences. The Moynihan Report, published by the United States Department of Labor, aimed to explain the social ills that black Americans, specifically those living in the inner city, faced. Unfortunately, instead of looking at the structural forces which left black urban communities impoverished and crime ridden, The Moynihan Report blamed all the issues the black community faced on the supposedly matriarchal structure of the black family. "In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male" (Moynihan Report, 1965:15). For example, instead of examining the political and economic structures that kept black men impoverished and out of the work force, the report blames black women for taking black men's jobs. "This dependence on the mother's income undermines the position of the father and deprives the children of the kind of attention, particularly in school matters, which is now a standard feature of middle-class upbringing" (Moynihan Report, 1965:14). Instead of acknowledging that black men and women in inner cities were so impoverished and cut off from the rest of society that both parents often needed to work to support their families, this report blames

the women for working and in turn emasculating their men. The conclusion that the matriarchal family structure was the problem in black communities not only demonized black people, but would also work to maintain and justify the regulatory practices of the state. As Ron Ferguson highlights, “Moynihan’s text helped authorize a hegemonic discourse about black matriarchy and enabled a nationalist discourse that understood nonheteronormative racial difference as deviant” (Ferguson, 2004:111). By creating a discourse which viewed blacks as the problem, whites were able to exploit blacks and continue to maintain economic control. Since the problems of blacks were located in the family structure, there was no need to address the structural racism found in employment, housing, education, politics etc.

The Moynihan Report changed the discourse of race by othering and exoticizing the black community. As Ferguson highlights, “Such discourses suggested that ‘the problems facing communities of color no longer stem from discrimination but from the characteristics of these communities themselves, from unrestrained sexual behavior and childbirths out of wedlock, crime, welfare dependency, and a perverse sense of group identity’” (Ferguson, 2004:123). The use of stereotypes about blacks as hypersexual, criminal, and deviant, have existed since the days of slavery in the United States in order to justify white treatment of blacks. The Moynihan Report repackaged these stereotypes under the guise of the black matriarch in order to continue to maintain control over black bodies. These same stereotypical images of blacks would resurface in blaxploitation films through the badass black male and the bad black female figures.

The Moynihan Report also influenced the rising Black Panther Party. Although the black nationalists dismissed the report as racist, the masculinist/patriarchal shift in the

Black Panther Party ideology can be directly linked to The Moynihan Report. Even though black nationalists could see the report as racist, the conclusions of the report still threatened the black man's masculinity. Benita Roth explains, "The Moynihan Report was seized upon by many black male activists as both a manifestation of white racism *and* proof that black women out of their traditional place were abetting that racism" (Roth, 2004: 86). As we will see, in order to combat the stereotypes produced by the Moynihan Report, the Black Panther Party took a more masculinist approach to their politics. Using theatrics the Black Panther Party created a militant and visible masculinity, which relied on phallic symbolism such as the use guns and the threat of violence to promote black power.

1965 was marked not only by publication of the Moynihan report, but also by the assassination of one of the most prominent black nationalist leaders, Malcolm X. Although Malcolm X was not a direct founder of the Black Panther Party, his words and ideologies are at the base of many of the Black Panther Party's ideas and actions. "Malcolm X, seen as 'one of the great prophets of black liberation' at the time of his 1965 assassination, so deeply inspired Huey P. Newton that he would refer to the Black Panther Party as the 'heirs of Malcolm'" (Abu-Jamal, 1999:40). It is important to highlight that the Moynihan Report and Malcolm X's assassination occurred in the same year because they mark a very important turning point in the 60s and the civil rights struggle. The publishing of the report and the loss of such an important leader can both help explain the shift in the civil rights struggle towards the Black Panthers and a more confrontational approach from both black activists and the state. The last five years of the 60s were an increasingly turbulent time, which saw an increase in riots and police brutality, and the year of 1965 marks the turning point.

The Rise of the Black Panther Party:

The Black Panther Party was active from 1966 to 1982; however, its peak years and the year's most important to our discussion were 1966 to 1971. In contrast to the civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King which was largely focused in the south around issues of desegregation, the Black Panther Party, was largely an urban, northern male movement which through the rhetoric of black nationalism aimed to create a society where blacks had political and economic power. Drawing from ideologies proposed by Malcolm X, and led by Huey Newton, Stokely Carmichael, and Bobby Seale, the black power movement aimed to address issues facing the urban communities. As Reed highlights, "the issue was systemic degradation through a thousand deprivations- poverty, demeaning jobs or unemployment, police brutality, everyday racist insults, inadequate schools, substandard health care" (Reed, 2005:46). The black power movement aimed to address these issues by empowering the urban north community, inviting black men to transform their anger into action. While the first Black Panther chapter was formed in Oakland, CA by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the organization would quickly spread to cities all over the country, totaling 40 chapters by 1969. While the Black Panthers are most widely known for their theatrical protests, which is something we will return to, they also had in place several programs all aimed at improving the lives of blacks.

I would like to first discuss these programs because they are too often overlooked in mainstream discussions of the Black Panthers. Many blaxploitation films failed to incorporate the community action and rhetoric of the Black Panthers. The Black Panthers were very involved in the communities where their chapters were located, and implemented several programs dedicated to improving the lives of community members.

One of the important programs implemented by the Black Panthers was their education programs. “The BPP took its responsibilities to educate the black and working class masses quite seriously, and expressed this commitment through several of its programs, among them the establishment of liberation schools, the regular publication of a radical and independent newspaper, and the erection of its Intercommunal Youth Institute, later renamed the Oakland Community School” (Abu-Jamal, 1999:47). These education programs were beneficial to both the community and the Black Panthers. For the community, these education programs were a place for people to come together and learn the truth about their history and the struggles that they faced. For the Black Panthers this was a way to spread their message and recruit people to their cause. “The political education program was an important party vehicle for the dissemination of the BPP message, ideology, and outlook” (Abu-Jamal, 1999:47). By providing these educational programs the Black Panthers were able to spread the black power movement, empowering black men, women, and children to join the fight and take back their communities.

The educational programs were only one of many other programs started by the Black Panthers. Another important cause the Black Panthers took up was protecting the children in these communities. In addition to educational programs, the Black Panthers also started the “Free Breakfast for Children” program, the “Free Clothing for Children” and “Free Food and Shoes” Program. These programs existed in chapters all over the country and worked to improve the lives of children in these communities. “Party chapters ... offered breakfast at multiple sites. Teams of Panthers served a no frill breakfast consisting of eggs, grits, toast, and bacon to children before the school day started...Panther members solicited financial contributions from community residents and food donations from local

businesses” (Tyner, 2006:110). The Panthers used their connections within these communities to bring about positive change and implement programs that helped people. Additionally, as is highlighted in the documentary, *The Black Power Mixtape*, these programs also challenged the capitalist system, by providing free services. It is important to acknowledge these programs because they highlight the positive community work the Black Panthers did. Unfortunately, as we will see with blaxploitation films, often times the Black Panthers are only remembered for their more theatrical and militant actions. While those actions are important and valuable to the Black Panther Party, the tendency to only focus on the theatrics has worked to undermine the extremely valuable community work they did. It is also important to discuss their community work because it highlights the complexities of the Black Panther Party, on the one hand they were a community organization, while on the other they were a militant and masculine group. Acknowledging the complexities within the Party will be useful when looking at the complexities represented within blaxploitation films.

However, it is impossible to talk about the Black Panther Party without talking about the importance of theatrics to their activism. In contrast to the white liberal hippie masculinities of the late sixties, which embraced a more feminine look with long hair, and a nonviolent approach to political action, the Black Panthers adopted a masculinist, leather clad, fist raised, guns in hand approach in order to combat the violent racist policies imposed on blacks all over the country. Following the line, “black is beautiful”, the black power movement aimed to reclaim and make visible blackness in direct opposition to white America. Whether through dramatic protests or political plays and drawings, the Black Panthers created a visible image that threatened the white ruling class. “Panther

members, armed with rifles and law books, would follow police officers around Oakland, patrolling for police brutality and other violations of the rights of black citizens of the city” (Reed, 2005:53). By policing the police, the Black Panthers created a theatric spectacle that not only challenged the violence of the state, but that made visible the masculine and powerful Panthers. The use of guns is important to the image of the Panthers for two reasons. First, carrying guns alerted to the white officers that blacks would no longer stand idly by when violence was done to them. Second, the militant style clothing and the carrying of guns marks the Panther’s as phallic and therefore masculine. This is important because the militant masculinity of the Panthers was a direct reaction to the Moynihan Report. In order to reclaim their masculinity, the Panthers adopted a hyper masculine approach which relied on military style clothing and large guns, and which largely denied black women any positions of power within the party.

Three important figures in the Black Panther Party worked to establish the dramatic element of the Black Panther Party. The first is Malcolm X, who through his rhetoric and speeches encouraged the black community to take action and reclaim their identity. The second is the playwright Leroi Jones who became Amiri Baraka when he began writing plays. Baraka used theatre to build on Malcolm X’s speeches, further promoting black power and the revolution. Finally, Ed Bullins, a playwright and minister of culture for the Panthers, is credited with incorporating the theatrics of Baraka into the political revolutions inspired by Malcolm X. “He is a key link along this line of moving theatricality ever more fully into the movement itself” (Reed, 2005:49). The discussion of theatrics in the Black Panther Party is essential because it was precisely this sense of drama that made the Black Panthers visible and successful. “To lesser and greater degrees,

dramatic images of the Panthers ... awakened countless numbers of Negroes into African Americanness” (Reed, 2005:51). It was through the use of theatrics: the sporting of militant clothing, carrying of guns, and raised fists, that the Black Panthers all marching together were able to create a sense of community and pride among blacks. “Images of proud black men and women in black berets facing down cops gave evidence of a new kind of black person in the world, one who would not bow down to racism any more” (Reed, 2005:55). By using theatrics, the Black Panthers were able to create a visible masculine presence, which used the threat of violence and guns to show that the black community would no longer tolerate the racism and violence imposed on them by white America. However, underlying this fight against racism, was an anxiety among black men about their masculinity brought to the fore by the Moynihan Report. “It was not equality that was primarily being pursued but a kind of superiority – black manhood, black macho- which would combine the ghetto cunning, cool, and unrestrained sexuality of black survival with the unchecked authority, control, and wealth of white power” (Wallace, 1979:35). The Panther’s focus on masculinity would not only influence the militant style of theatrics they adopted, it would also have large impacts on the gender relations between men and women within the party.

Sexism in the Black Panther Party:

As previously mentioned, the adoption of a militant masculinity while threatening to white America, was contradictory in that it also largely denied black women a space in the Black Panther Party. While there were a few women leaders in the party, such as Elaine Brown, Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver, these women were exposed to misogynistic and sexist treatment because of the militant masculine ideology that guided the party. Unlike

their male counterparts, if black women wanted to be a part of the movement they had to forgo their gender politics. Conversely, if black women wanted to be a part of the women's liberation movement of the time they had to dismiss its racist foundations. "She grumbled quietly to herself about the black man and the white woman. The Women's Movement came along, and she went right on trimming her Afro, having her babies for the revolution" (Wallace, 1979:11). Operating in a space where they were forced to choose between their gender and their race, many black women of the time joined the black power struggle, despite the sexism that existed.

One of the larger and perhaps most problematic aspect of the Black Panthers was the treatment of women in the party. Although women played a role in the party, and were crucial to the party's continuance when many of the male leaders were arrested in the late 60s, women were subject to sexual violence, as well as physical and verbal abuse by many male party members. Elaine Brown, who was appointed Chairwoman by Huey Newton, her boyfriend of the time, was a powerful female leader who was subjected to secondary treatment and abuse by male party members. "It is significant that Brown chronicles her sexual encounters with BPP members including Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, and a member referred to as Steve. Each of these men subject Brown to verbal and/or physical abuse after their sexual encounters" (Smith, 2009:73). Although Elaine Brown was able to achieve a top position in the Black Panther Party, her journey to the top was filled with sexism, abuse, and misogyny. This is an important point to highlight because these same contradictions will surface in blaxploitation films through the bad black woman figure. While the bad black woman is independent and powerful, the sexualized treatment of her

body reminds us that she is still a woman operating in a man's world, much like the women of the black power movement.

White Control, Black Cities:

By 1967 with the Black Panthers on the rise, and black power movements gaining momentum across the country, tensions between whites and blacks rose. "It was a year of unprecedentedly massive and widespread urban revolts. It was the year that so-called riots became an institutionalized form of black protest" (Allen, 1969:108). With the increase in riots and an increasingly militant and powerful Black Panther Party, whites began to fear that blacks might actually gain political and economic power. In order to maintain control whites had to increase their tactics. "When the Black Panther comes' says Anthony Imperiale, 'the White Hunter will be waiting'" (Allen, 1969:119). Racist reports like the Moynihan report would no longer cut it, now white control took the form of neocolonialism and FBI infiltration, and it would not stop until whites had dismantled most of the Black Panther Party.

One of the ways white America would make sure to maintain their power was through neocolonial practices that would further exploit and embed blacks, especially lower class blacks in urban areas, into the capitalist system. These neocolonial practices took several forms, ranging from creating an elite black class who were granted access and power in the current system, to an increase in militaristic police forces. While these practices allowed whites to maintain their power, they are also important to understanding the militant theatrics of the Black Panthers. "Carrying guns was meant to challenge symbolically the state's monopoly on the use of violence, and to give notice that guns used to enforce white supremacy would be met by black self-defense" (Reed, 2005:53). The

militaristic attitude of the police forces was another large influence on the Party's adoption of militaristic dress and the carrying of weapons as a counter to the white militaristic police forces. Even though by 1967 a majority of whites had migrated out of the cities into the suburbs, all of these practices instituted by white America would allow whites to maintain their power in these cities. In addition, these practices would work to weaken the more militant actions and actors of the Black Panthers.

The creation of an elite black class in many cities across the country may have appeared as a stride for the black community, but a closer look tells a very different story. "In these machinations there is no intention of effecting a transfer of real power- although Newark, like Gary and Cleveland, may someday boast of a black mayor. The intent is to create the impression of real movement while actual movement is too limited to be significant" (Allen, 1969:117-118). The blacks that were chosen by white politicians and white business owners were not selected at random, but rather carefully chosen. "And by making suitable overtures to the "reasonable" militants, convincing them that a nonviolent transfer of power is possible, white leaders could hope to use these militants to isolate the "extremists" and pacify the angry and unpredictable ghetto youths" (Allen, 1996:117). The goal of electing blacks into official positions was not to help the black community, it was to strip the power from black militants who were outwardly fighting the racist, capitalist system, by establishing a class of blacks who buy into the capitalist system. "They call themselves nationalists and exploit legitimate nationalist feelings of black people in order to advance their own interests as a class. And chief among those interests is their desire to become brokers between the white rulers and the black ruled" (Allen, 1996:161). Instead

of easing oppression in the cities, the establishment of a new black class would only add a new burden.

In addition to the establishment of a white controlled black elite class, the formation of militaristic police forces in cities all across the country was another important development. "Cities across the country were stockpiling arms, buying tank-like armored vehicles, building up huge caches of ammunition and tear gas, arming their policemen with helmets and high powered rifles and shotguns" (Allen, 1996: 166). The increase in military gear and weaponry in cities ranging from Newark to Los Angeles was a sign to the black community that white America was prepared to go to war before they would give any real power to black America. While the increase in anti-riot gear and weaponry was an enormous threat to the black community, it provided a new capitalist gain for white America. "After the 1967 rebellions, the development and production of anti-riot and exotic weaponry became a booming business" (Allen, 1996:166). By increasing police control in these cities white America managed to instill fear in black communities and make a profit off of it.

The final and perhaps most damaging action to the Black Panthers was the infiltration of the party by the FBI. "FBI director J. Edgar Hoover declared the Panthers the 'most dangerous extremist group in America'" (Reed, 2005:59). This declaration from Hoover led to an infiltration of the Black Panthers by the FBI under the counterintelligence program COINTELPRO, which eventually led to a battle between the Panthers and the State, where the State won. "By the end of 1969, 30 Panthers faced capital punishment charges, 40 faced life imprisonment, 55 faced terms of up to thirty years, and another 155 were in jail or being pursued by the law" (Reed, 2005: 62). These events left the Black Panther

Party in disarray by 1970, around the same time that blaxploitation films would come onto the scene. The FBI under the leadership of Hoover would take extreme measures to dismantle the Black Panthers. “The Party was simultaneously infiltrated at every level by agents provocateurs, all of them harnessed to the task of disrupting its internal functioning. Completing the package was a torrent of disinformation planted in the media to discredit the Panthers before the public, both personally and organizationally, thus isolating them from potential support” (Churchill, 2001:78). The FBI attacked the Panthers on all levels, leaving them with little to no options, resources, or leaders, a tragic ending which allowed the state to transform the Panthers from activists to gangsters.

All of these events are important because they can help account for the failure of blaxploitation films to incorporate the community rhetoric of the Black Panther Party. As Reed points out, “the decline of the party is a sad tale indeed, not just on its own terms but for the ways in which it mirrors the decline in the wider black community from activism to despair to a gangster culture that for many was all that was left when radical resistance was suppressed” (Reed, 2005:64). With the decline of the Black Panther Party, the rhetoric of black power was lost. Blaxploitation films helped to transform the black power rhetoric of the 1960s into the gangster culture of the 1970s, where the militant, masculine black man instead of fighting for the community turns to an individualistic lifestyle of crimes, drugs, and sex.

Elements of the Blaxploitation Genre:

There is one more significant factor that would play into the rise of blaxploitation films. This comes in the form of economics and Hollywood’s need for a new market. At the same time that the Black Panther Party was on its decline, the United States saw a massive

migration of whites from the cities to the suburbs, meaning that the inner city movie theatres were lacking in attendance, and thus profit. Here is where blaxploitation films come in. Walker points out, “for the studios, which had been suffering financially for several years ... blaxploitation represented a form of salvation” (Walker, 2009: ix). In order to make up for the financial losses of the previous years, Hollywood began to see the value in the black market, thus giving rise to the blaxploitation era.

It is important to note the three characteristics of all exploitation films. “Doherty argues, the three elements of ‘controversial content, bottom line bookkeeping, and demographic targeting- remain characteristic of any exploitation movie’” (Harris, 2006: 71). These elements are important to the discussion of blaxploitation films because they help situate the representations of blackness within the market. “Blaxploitation is seen not only as the exploitation of the black audience and market, but also the exploitation of the symbolic meanings of blackness, the symbolic meanings of race” (Harris, 2006:72). In order to make money, Hollywood targeted a black demographic, and for the first time portrayed black men and women as the protagonists of the story.

These portrayals of black men and women would serve as visual representations of blackness. Constructions of blackness would take on new forms in blaxploitation film. As David Walker highlights, “Gone were the old negative stereotypes that had dominated films for over 70 years. Replacing them were new archetypes, including drug dealers, pimps, and hardened criminals” (Walker, 2009:ix). These archetypes, ranging from drug dealers to law breakers, all fit into the bad ass black man type, introduced by blaxploitation films to the category of filmic black masculinities. As discussed earlier, the bad ass black man type was influenced by the Black Panther Party. The bad ass black man “though hypersexual as the

macho, displays a retaliatory and accusatory race and gender ideal which is at odds with, indeed inassimilable to, the ideal of white masculinity because it renders whiteness unredeemable in the visibility of whiteness as contradiction and oppression” (Harris, 2006:70). The bad ass black man type represents the anti-white establishment rhetoric of the Black Panther Party. However, as is evident in the way the bad ass black man sleeps with women of both races, and overall does whatever he wants, this representation of black men often failed to properly incorporate black power rhetoric, instead perpetuating stereotypes of black men as hypersexual and aggressive.

In addition to being the first representations of black men and women, blaxploitation films are important in that they addressed issues of the urban black community previously ignored in mainstream Hollywood. Usually set in the black urban ghetto, blaxploitation films addressed issues such as crime, drugs, and police brutality. However, these representations must also be understood critically. “The narrative of revenge and the black urban ghetto allows for the popular tenet of self-determination in the then current discourse of black power to be exploited in the narrative of retaliatory violence, at the same time that black power, and blackness, is signified as criminality and marginality” (Harris, 2006: 73). While blaxploitation films offered a representation of the inner city, this representation is ultimately problematic.

First, through the bad ass black man type, blaxploitation films transformed the self-determination rhetoric of black power, from the self-determination of the entire black community, to an individualistic self-determination. The bad ass black man in blaxploitation films, often uses violence, sex and aggression, not to fight for the whole black community, but to advance his own agenda. This works to mark the black man as violent,

aggressive and criminal. In addition, blaxploitation films overall glamorize issues of crime and violence in urban black communities, both through the bad ass black man, as well as the failure of blaxploitation film to include other positive aspects of the urban black community and culture. Finally, although some films offer a leading role for black women in the bad black woman figure, these films still fall into stereotypical treatment of women as sexual objects, and of black women as exotic.

It is important to note that although blaxploitation films are questionable in many ways, our understanding of blaxploitation films needs to also consider the positive aspects of blaxploitation film. First and foremost, blaxploitation films are important because for the first time in Hollywood black men and women were not only the main characters, they were the writers, directors, crew and sometimes producers of these films. While blaxploitation films may have created new stereotypes or fantasies about blackness, they are nevertheless important because they provided an entry into Hollywood for blacks that had not previously existed.

Unfortunately, even this fact needs to be critically examined. In the documentary, *Black Hollywood*, Jim Brown discusses that blaxploitation films that were under white control and production took advantage of the black audience and black actors, in order to create cheaply produced films which often perpetuated stereotypical images of black men and women. As will be evident in the difference between the independently produced, *Sweetback*, versus the white produced, *Shaft* and *Superfly*, the blaxploitation films that were under white control and production exploited and took advantage of blacks, in ways that the independently produced, *Sweetback*, did not. All three movies promoted the bad ass black man, in certain ways reinforcing stereotypical images of black men as

hypermasculine, hypersexual, and aggressive. However, *Sweetback*, is the only one of these films to properly invoke the black power rhetoric, while *Shaft* and *Superfly* with “their subject matter of sex, violence, and “super-cool” individualism was the antithesis of what contemporaneous black political organizations ... supported for Black people” (Rhines, 1996:46). Looking at the shift from the independently produced, *Sweetback*, to the white produced, *Shaft* and *Superfly*, marks the shift in the potential for blaxploitation films to provide a representation of blackness which resists the white establishment, to blaxploitation films which produced stereotypical perceptions of black men and women under white control. Additionally, when looking at female masculinity in blaxploitation films, the issue of ownership and production will again resurface. All three films, *Cleopatra Jones*, *Foxy Brown*, and *Coffy*, were produced by white men, and therefore in many ways reproduce stereotypical representations of femininity and blackness.

In conclusion, all of these events from the Moynihan Report to the rise and fall of the Black Panther Party, to an increase in white repression of blacks in inner cities, would all influence the ways blaxploitation films represented black masculinity, and black urban life in general. “While liberatory visions of justice and the possibilities of a transformative political culture largely evaporated, the visualization of black patriarchal power that the Black Panther Party promoted in the late 1960s and early 1970s spread” (Doss, 1999:187). As we will see by the early 1970s, largely due to the destruction of the Black Panthers by the FBI, much of the black power and community rhetoric of the party was lost, leaving behind the patriarchal/masculine figures repurposed in blaxploitation films. However, especially with the emergence of the bad black woman, there are moments in these films

that offer positive interpretations of blackness, reinforcing the complexities of the Black Panthers and the times in general that helped bring about this interesting genre of film.

Chapter Three: Black Masculinity and the Badass Black Man Figure

Now that we have addressed the complex political, social, and economic landscape of the late 60s and early 70s, we can turn our discussion to the films that make up the blaxploitation genre. Focusing on three of the first blaxploitation films, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Shaft* (1971), and *Superfly* (1972), this chapter will explore the complex ways that black masculinity is constructed through the figure of the badass black man. While the bad black man works to perpetuate stereotypical images of black masculinity as hypersexual, hypermasculine, criminal, and violent, I am also interested in looking for instances where these films disrupt these archetypes. All three of these movies construct black masculinities in stereotypical ways. At the same time, some of these films contain moments that interrupt these representations and create space for a more positive reading of blackness. In this chapter I will argue that the independently directed and produced, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), is the least problematic. While all three movies borrow notions of hypermasculinity and visibility from the Black Panther Party to construct the badass black man type, *Sweetback* is the only movie to also represent the black power and community rhetoric of the Black Panther Party. In contrast, *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972), produced under white control, borrow notions of hypermasculinity from the Black Panther Party, while simultaneously promoting an individualistic mentality in the protagonist, working to ignore the community values instilled in the Black Panther ideology.

Unfortunately, the shift from independently produced blaxploitation to mainstream produced blaxploitation films, marks the shift from the badass black man who fights for the black community, to the badass black man who does whatever he needs to do to further his

own agenda. While all three of these films are complicated because they only present one type of black masculinity as hypersexual, hyper masculine, and violent, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, must be viewed differently than *Shaft*, and *Superfly*. *Sweetback* is the only one of these films to properly depict the black power rhetoric of the Black Panther Party. However, while *Sweetback*, *Shaft* and *Superfly* are ultimately troubling in their representations, they still need to be critically examined in order to shed light on the moments when these films positively reclaim images of black masculinity.

***Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and the Making of the Bad Ass Black Man:**

Melvin Van Peebles', *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), as arguably the first in the series of films that were to be coined blaxploitation, was the first film to introduce the badass black man archetype to filmic black masculinities. "As Van Peebles puts it, the film tells the story of a "bad nigger" who challenges the oppressive white system and wins, thus articulating the main feature of the Blaxploitation formula" (Guerrero, 1993: 86). The hero of this film fits all of the badass black man characteristics. As a sex worker, *Sweetback* embodies the hyper sexual aspect of the badass black man. In addition, *Sweetback* spends most of the movie fighting the white man, embodying both the anti-white establishment aspect of the badass black man, as well as the aggressive and violent aspects. While *Sweetback* is problematic, specifically in that it works to perpetuate stereotypes of black men as hypersexual, this section will critically examine *Sweetback*, arguing that *Sweetback*, as an independently produced blaxploitation film correctly portrays aspects of the Black Panther Party, such as the importance of community.

Before moving into the discussion of the positive and negative ways *Sweetback* portrayed the black man, it is important to note the benefits Van Peebles had, that white

produced blaxploitation films did not. "Van Peebles was able to vary his crew and further economize by using black and nonunion personnel. Van Peebles wrote and directed the film, scored the music, and played the leading role, all of which reduced total costs for salaries" (Guerrero, 1993: 86). As an independently produced film, Van Peebles had more control over all aspects of his film. This is important for several reasons. First, because it was an independently produced film, Van Peebles had the ability to choose his cast and crew, creating opportunities for black men and women to be a part of the film. Second, because it was independently produced, Van Peebles had full control over every aspect of the film, meaning that he, as a black man, could incorporate his understandings of blackness without white scrutiny. This last point is extremely important, and helps account for the ways that, *Sweetback*, unlike many other blaxploitation films, incorporated black power rhetoric throughout the film.

The opening credits of the film read, "This film is dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the man" (*Sweetback*, 1971). Immediately, Van Peebles is invoking the black power rhetoric of community. By addressing all the Brothers and Sisters, Van Peebles is dedicating this movie to the black community and the black struggle. We are then introduced to Sweetback, a sex worker who grew up in a whorehouse in South-Central Los Angeles. The film follows Sweetback through his transformation from a sex worker to a black man who comes into consciousness when he sees two white cops beat up a black revolutionary, Moo Moo. "This is too much for Sweetback to take; he has a sudden leap in consciousness, turns on the police, and hacks them nearly to death with a pair of handcuffs" (Guerrero, 1993:87). Sweetback therefore becomes the vehicle for promoting black power throughout the film. While Sweetback is only one man, his beating

of the police marks Sweetback as the symbol of black power: a badass black man dedicated to fighting the white man for his brothers and sisters.

After Sweetback comes to consciousness, he spends the rest of the film running from the white man. It is the scenes preceding Sweetback's rise to consciousness that offer a powerful look into the influence of black power and the importance of community represented in the film. Yet in many ways *Sweetback* is still a troublesome portrayal of the black man as hypersexual. Looking at scenes in the film will show how this film could promote black power at the same time that it reinforces the stereotypical bad ass black man.

While the first and obvious marker of the influence of black power ideology is the scene where Sweetback beats up the white cops, there are several other scenes throughout the movie that highlight the importance of community. Once on the run from the white cops, Sweetback finds himself in need of assistance from his community. "The flight of Sweetback through the crumbling cityscape of the black community, with children, preachers, gamblers, pimps, and whores in the community aiding Sweetback" (Guerrero, 1993:87). The fact that Sweetback turns to his community is important for two reasons. First, while Sweetback was the first to act out for his community, he is in turn protected by his community. This directly invokes black power rhetoric, which aimed to create a powerful black community. Second, Van Peebles does an excellent job of showing all aspects of the black city scape, including children, prostitutes, as well as preachers. By doing this, Van Peebles acknowledges, unlike most blaxploitation films, that there are other figures in the urban landscape besides the drug dealers and hustlers. Black Panther Party leader, Huey Newton, praised *Sweetback*, arguing that "it presents the need for unity among

all members and institutions within the community of victims” (Guerrero, 1993: 88). By incorporating the community into the storyline of *Sweetback*, Van Peebles invoked the Black Panther rhetoric of the importance of solidarity and community among blacks.

However, while Van Peebles must be praised for his incorporation of the community and black power rhetoric, *Sweetback* is still complicated in the way it works to perpetuate the black man as overtly sexual. While Sweetback spends the film fighting the white establishment, half of his fighting is done through sex. This is extremely problematic for a few reasons. First the film works to perpetuate the belief that the black man is not a man until he is sexually active. This is evident in the opening scene when Sweetback transforms from boy to man through his sexual encounter with a female prostitute. Immediately, Sweetback’s sexual prowess becomes a defining factor of his masculinity.

This becomes even more prominent later on in the movie, when Sweetback uses sex to fight the white female biker gang, and then again to evade the white cops. The use of Sweetback’s penis to combat white authority is questionable because it reinforces the myth that sexual liberation could lead to the black man’s liberation in general. Lerone Bennett strongly criticized this aspect of *Sweetback*, “It is necessary to say frankly that nobody ever fucked his way to freedom. And it is mischievous and reactionary finally for anyone to suggest to black people in 1971 that they are going to be able to screw their way across the Red Sea. Fucking will not set you free. If fucking freed, black people would have celebrated the millennium 400 years ago” (Guerrero, 1993: 90). This linking of sexuality, manhood, and freedom, found in *Sweetback* works to perpetuate stereotypical images of black men. The equation of sex with freedom works to reinforce Sweetback as hypersexual.

***Shaft* and the Shift of Blaxploitation Film to Mainstream Hollywood:**

While *Sweetback* needs to be understood as a complex depiction of blackness and black masculinity, it is also important in that it marked the genre of blaxploitation as a viable genre of film. The success of *Sweetback*, alerted Hollywood to the benefits of blaxploitation films and shortly after *Sweetback*, *Shaft* (1971), the first industry produced blaxploitation film came out. Borrowing the badass black man type from *Sweetback*, *Shaft* would perpetuate the hypersexual, aggressive, and violent stereotype through the private eye figure of John Shaft. While *Sweetback* used the badass black man to promote the community rhetoric of the Black Panthers, *Shaft* would take the badass black man and promote an individualistic mentality, failing to properly invoke the rhetoric of the Black Panther Party, at the same time that it borrowed notions of masculinity from the Black Panther Party. This is an important distinction between *Sweetback* and *Shaft*, because it shows how industry produced films, often under white control, failed to truly understand the ideology of black power. The effect of this was that without the politics behind the masculinity promoted by the Black Panthers, the bad ass black man in industry produced films like, *Shaft*, became nothing more than a stereotypical representation of black men as hypersexual, hypermasculine, criminal and violent.

Although the director of *Shaft*, Gordon Parks, was a black director, he was more limited in his ability to portray the black man as revolutionary than Van Peebles because *Shaft* was an industry backed film. The result of this was the creation of John Shaft, a private detective who operates in his own space, sleeping with women of both races, talking back to white cops, and fighting black gangsters when necessary. While John Shaft embodies the sexual, aggressive, hyper masculine image of the badass black man, he does

not embody any of the black power rhetoric found in the badass black man figure of Sweetback. “Blacks in these new films are no more than thematic templates reworked with black casts and updated stereotypes that reconfirm white expectations of blacks and serve to repress and delay the awakening of any real political consciousness” (Guerrero, 1993: 93). This is important because it shows how the shift from independently produced blaxploitation films to industry produced blaxploitation films worked to hide the politics behind the influence of the Black Panther Party, instead promoting individualistic and stereotypical images of black men.

Without the politics of the Black Panther Party, what is left in the character of Shaft is a hypersexual, aggressive, violent, and individualistic detective who resists the white establishment, yet at the same time does not belong to the black community. Instead, Shaft operates in his own space, with his own rules, working for whoever gives him money or power. This is perhaps the biggest distinction between the badass black man found in *Sweetback*, and the badass black man found in *Shaft*. Although, Sweetback possessed the hypersexuality and aggression of the badass black man, his ultimate goal was to fight for black power and community. In contrast, by placing Shaft somewhere between the black community and white community, Shaft does not represent the black power rhetoric, even though he resembles the militant masculinity of the Black Panthers. “Shaft has no civil rights views at all; he dislikes black people as much as white ones” (Briggs, 2003: 25). This is important because it shows, how under white control, blaxploitation films by removing the hero from the black community remove him from the politics of race. What is left behind, is a militant black man with no community and no cause but his own to fight for.

By placing Shaft somewhere between the white and black community, Shaft is left with only himself, and therefore can only promote his own individualistic agenda, unlike Sweetback who fought for the black community. "This individualist stance, free from any political taint while manipulating the superficial trappings and signs of black militancy, is also revealed in the construction of Shaft's sexuality. While he has a black girlfriend, which would satisfy the expectations of cultural nationalism, he is not above sleeping around and having random sex with attractive white women" (Guerrero, 1993: 93). The fact that Shaft sleeps with both white women and black women throughout the film works to perpetuate stereotypes of hypersexual black men. Additionally, by showing Shaft sleeping with multiple women, his sexual escapades become a defining feature of his masculinity.

However, while Shaft does sleep with women of both races, his interactions with these women offer a potential reworking of the hypersexual black man. Although his sex life is a defining feature of his masculinity, his treatment of the women in these sex scenes complicates our understanding of him as hypersexual. Instead of treating these women like sexual objects, Shaft is shown caring for them and focusing on them and their pleasures, especially in the scenes with his black girlfriend. This is important, because although Shaft is seen with women of both races, his positive treatment of both women offers a potential reworking of both black masculinity, and male to female relationships. Although Shaft is hypersexual in the sense that he sleeps around, he challenges the sexist, controlling, male dominated aspect of sex that many of the other bad black figures possess, offering a new more compassionate version of the hypersexual black man.

In addition to his hypersexuality, Shaft also represents the aggressive side of the badass black man type. Throughout the movie Shaft is seen using violence and aggression

whenever he feels necessary. One specific scene, which works to perpetuate images of black men as aggressive, is the scene where Shaft throws a black gangster out the window, resulting in his death. This scene is important for a few reasons. First, it marks Shaft as the aggressive badass black man. Second, it denies the black power rhetoric of community, because Shaft kills this black man without any hesitation. Finally, it brings up issues of white control over black bodies. "Throughout the story, he has a love-hate relationship with a white police detective who constantly enables Shaft to do things like withhold evidence and kill people and then walk free - because supposedly the NYPD needs Shaft on the streets, where he can go places they can't" (Briggs, 2003: 25). This is perhaps the most important part of the representation of Shaft's aggression, because it highlights the notion that if the black man uses aggression in a way that will benefit the white man it is okay. However, if the roles were reversed and Shaft had killed a white man, his aggression would have been shut down immediately. This point needs to be stressed, because while Shaft works to perpetuate stereotypes of black men as aggressive, it also highlights the ways white control over black bodies determines what kind of aggression is acceptable and what kind of aggression is dangerous in black men.

***Superfly* and the Shortcomings of Blaxploitation:**

Arguably the most problematic of the three films, *Superfly* (1972), directed by Gordon Parks Jr., perpetuates all the stereotypical trappings of the badass black man, through the ever glamorous coke dealer, Priest. "*Superfly's* cocaine dealer was a more romantic, conflicted figure whose slang and clothes cut deeper than *Shaft* into the black community's psyche" (Rhines, 1996:44). While *Shaft* borrowed the militant masculinity of the Black Panther Party without including the black power rhetoric behind the masculinity,

Superfly flat out rejected the Black Panthers, creating a badass black man looking to save himself. "The film's celebration of black entrepreneurial individualism served to undermine communal action" (Quinn, 2010:18). The black power rhetoric and militant masculinity inspired by the Black Panther Party found in *Sweetback*, had completely lost the black power influence by the time *Superfly* came out. Out of the three blaxploitation films discussed, *Superfly* is the most dubious for two reasons. First, the badass black man figure of Priest perpetuates all of the stereotypes about black men as hypersexual, hypermasculine, violent and criminal, through his glamorized drug dealing life style. Second, in one very important scene, Priest rejects three black militant activists, assumed to be members of the Black Panther Party. This scene is extremely important because it is a visible representation of the ways that blaxploitation films borrowed ideas of masculinity from the Black Panthers, at the same time that they undermine the politics of black nationalism.

The badass black man archetype is brought to new and complex levels in the character, Priest. *Superfly* follows Priest, a coke dealer, as he tries to make one last big drug deal in order to get out of the game. From the beginning of the movie, Priest works to perpetuate stereotypical images of black men. First of all, the fact that this badass drug dealer is named Priest is extremely problematic. The equation of a priest to a drug dealer works to reinforce and glamorize the black man as criminal. At the same time, it also works to hide the importance of religion to urban black communities, instead implying that in those communities' drugs are religion.

Other ways that Priest perpetuates the badass black man stereotype is through his sexual escapades with both his black girlfriend, and the white girl on the side who helps

him sell coke. By sleeping with both black and white women Priest furthers the notion of black men as hypersexual by implying that he needs both to be satisfied. In addition, “through a series of drug deals and violent encounters with stereotypical ghetto junkies, crap shooters, and corrupt white, top-level police officials” (Guerrero, 1993:95) Priest embodies the aggressive and violent masculinity of the badass black man.

However, what is most problematic about Priest and the way his character perpetuates stereotypes of black masculinity, is through his deliberate rejection of the Black Panthers, and therefore the black power rhetoric. This is done in two ways in *Superfly*. First, the narrative of the story only allows for Priest to get out of the game on his own, this means that Priest spends the whole movie looking to change his situation, without changing the reality for anyone else. “Priest outsmarts the corrupt policeman who is trying to prevent his getting out of the drug business, but he does so without disrupting the prevailing system” (Lyne, 2000:5). Instead of fighting for his community, Priest is actually causing extreme damage to his community by bringing in a large shipment of drugs to sell so that he can make enough money to save himself. While he may have outsmarted the white police officer, his character ultimately does nothing to upset the system or help his fellow community members. This is an issue because it shows how the badass black man transformed from the community oriented Sweetback, to the individualistic Priest.

Second, in one important scene in the movie Priest flat out rejects three black militants, assumed to be Black Panther Party members. In this scene, three militant men confront Priest, asking him to join the cause. It is Priest’s response to them that completely severs the badass black man masculinity from the Black Panther influence. “Priest's

response comes off as far more virile, eloquent, and even militant, as he offers his allegiance only when they start "killing whitey": "until you can do that, go sing your marching songs somewhere else" (Quinn, 2010:17). This scene is so important because it shows how under white industry control the badass black man is separated from the politics that initially inspired this masculinity. "By constructing the militants as just another interest group on the take, the film is deeply undermining of black power politics" (Quinn, 2010:17). By deflating the representation of the Black Panthers, Priest is not only separated from the very politics that first inspired the badass black man type, he also reinforces stereotypical notions of black men as aggressive and violent without purpose.

Conclusion: The Dangers of the Badass Black Man

In conclusion, blaxploitation films are crucial to the discussion of representations of black masculinity, and representations of blackness in general. The period from roughly 1969-1974 was the first time that black men and women were represented on the big screen as the main characters, the heroes or anti-heroes. However, blaxploitation films need to be examined with a critical eye. While they are important because they brought attention to the black community, and the issues facing the black community, they are ultimately problematic. Blaxploitation films worked to glamorize and fantasize the inner city, often ignoring more positive aspects of the black community and black aesthetic. Instead blaxploitation films through the trope of the badass black man, created stereotypical representations of black men as hypersexual, hypermasculine, aggressive, violent and criminal.

Beginning on the heels of the civil rights and black power struggle of the 1960's, blaxploitation films both borrowed and rejected ideas from the Black Panthers to

reconstruct black masculinity through the figure of the badass black man. Unfortunately, while the independently produced *Sweetback*, offered a badass black man willing to fight for black power, the industry produced *Shaft* and *Superfly*, and many other blaxploitation films to follow, would reject the black power ideology, leaving behind a self-centered badass black man.

This stereotypical image of the badass black man is extremely problematic because it was the only visual representation black men, specifically black young men, had. As the only visual representation, the badass black man becomes the ideal, what young boys try to emulate. "*Superfly* was widely recognized for making fashionable the gold necklace with attached coke spoon, and, as critics have noted, for contributing to the dramatic increase in cocaine use among inner-city black youth" (Guerrero, 1993:97). Therefore, the badass black man is a precarious depiction, not only does it perpetuate stereotypical images of black men, as the only real visible representation of black men, many black men began to emulate the badass black man. "These changes trace a dominant cinema's implicit contribution to a destructive shift in the black community away from collective political struggle of the 1960s and toward such individualist, self-indulgent activities as drug consumption and the single minded pursuit of material gain" (Guerrero, 1993:97). The shift in militant black men dedicated to fighting for black power, to militant black men pursuing their own interests through the world of drugs was in many ways influenced by the creation of the bad ass black man figure.

While blaxploitation films are important and must be acknowledged, it is important to be critical of blaxploitation films. While they may have introduced black men and women as the main characters, these depictions were often stereotypical. Overall, blaxploitation

films through the badass black man type worked to transform the militant black man and his black power rhetoric of the 60s into a still militant but individualistic black man of the 70s whose main concerns were sex and drugs. By only providing this one type of masculinity, blaxploitation films ultimately fail by reproducing stereotypical images of black men. However, as we saw in both, *Sweetback* and *Shaft*, these films also hold moments that offer positive visions of black solidarity. While we should never forget the stereotypical aspects of these films, we should also be aware of the moments these films offer positive visions of blackness, ultimately understanding blaxploitation films as complex representations influenced by the social and political landscape of the late 60s and early 70s.

Chapter 4: Female Masculinity and the Bad Black Woman

Now that we have examined the complex ways that black masculinity is constructed through male bodies in blaxploitation films, let us turn our attention to the female stars of blaxploitation. As we saw in chapter three most women in blaxploitation films are there to serve one purpose, to serve as a sexual object for the bad ass black man in order to legitimate and enhance his hypersexual masculinity. However, a handful of blaxploitation movies that were produced shed a new light on black women, casting them as the sassy, independent, and strong heroines of the story. While these women are often overlooked in the discussion of blaxploitation films, this chapter will take a critical look at these films in order to examine the ways that these heroines interact, both positively and negatively, with racial and gender structures. Looking at three films, and two Blaxploitation actresses, Tamara Dobson in *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), and Pam Grier in both *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974), this chapter will investigate what happens when masculine characteristics usually applied to the badass black man are attached to female heroines. While the reconfiguring of the hero into a heroine is a positive envisioning of the black female in many ways, these films still interact with racial and gender lines in negative ways.

These films are extremely important to our discussion of blaxploitation films because for the first time they brought to the big screen a representation of a powerful, independent black woman who mixed masculine characteristics, such as carrying a gun, with feminine characteristics, such as her revealing clothing. However, even this aspect of the black female heroine, or bad black woman figure, needs to be critically addressed. “These women paradoxically performed hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity within cinematic spaces, simultaneously acting as lethal action heroines and sex objects” (Seifert,

2012:7). The strong black woman figure is subject to being sexualized in a way that her male counterpart, the bad ass black man figure, is not. The discussion of who was in control of these films can help account for the overt sexualization of these female characters. All three of these films were produced by white men, and thus in the end work to reinforce a white, patriarchal reading of the black heroine. While the black heroine in these films is independent, strong, and arguably masculine as is evident by her use of guns, which we should understand as phallic, she is ultimately still problematic in the ways she is sexualized, and often has to use her body to get what she needs.

Much like their male counterparts, the female heroine, otherwise known as the bad black woman, was influenced and created based on the political, cultural, and economic events of the late 1960's and early 1970's. As we saw in chapter 2, black women occupied a unique and often difficult position in society, for not only were they marginalized by the hegemonic white patriarchy, they were repeatedly silenced and oppressed by black men, and were completely ignored in the women's liberation movement of the time. "Black women struggled with both race and gender expectations in the 1960s and 1970s. The simultaneous timing of the Black Power and women's liberation movements allowed black men, and some women, to treat race and gender as two mutually exclusive categories so that race was privileged over gender" (Seifert, 2012:7). This idea that black women had to choose their race over their gender is a common thread found in all three of the Blaxploitation films discussed below. This is the most evident in the ways that each one of these films pits the black heterosexual female heroine against a white, masculine, (typically) lesbian villain. This is an important feature to examine in these films because it is the film's reliance on binaries such as, black/white, heterosexual/homosexual, good/bad,

that worked to reinforce the very real divide that existed between black and white women in the women's liberation movement of the time.

Ultimately, each of these films offer a new vision of black female masculinity that is at once positive and problematic. Much like their male hero counterparts, the black heroine fails to radically transform gender and racial politics. First, each of these women acts individually and therefore instead of disrupting current racial and gender boundaries, work to implant herself within the system. Second, the male directed and produced aspect of these films work to undermine the feminist potential of these films by maintaining gender norms which view women as sexual objects, instead of subjects. Third, the troubling relationships between women in these films works to undermine the potential for solidarity between black and white women. As we examine each one of these films, we will see that each film interacts with the gender and racial boundaries of the time in varying degrees, providing us with an array of complex yet important and interesting bad black woman figures.

Tamara Dobson as Cleopatra Jones:

I believe it is important to talk about Tamara Jones in *Cleopatra Jones*, separately from Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy*, because in certain ways *Cleopatra Jones* is the least problematic. "*Cleopatra Jones* differs substantially from the two other major 1970s tough black woman vehicles, *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, in its less pornographic treatment of Dobson" (Dunn, 2008: 87). In contrast to Grier's bad black woman characters, Dobson is never shown naked or exposed in *Cleopatra Jones*. In addition to her less sexualized treatment, Dobson's character is also unique in comparison to Grier's two characters because her motivation throughout the movie is connected to a larger issue. In that she is "a "legitimate"

crime fighter motivated by her black-identified personal commitment to save the B & S House from being wrongly shut down rather than by stereotypical “female” passion born out of the loss of a lover or revenge for rape” (Dunn, 2008:89). For these reasons, Cleopatra Jones needs to be understood separately from Grier’s bad black woman roles. However, while *Cleopatra Jones* offers many positive aspects of black femininity, the film still works to reinforce other gender and racial norms of the time.

Knowing the plot will help us understand better the positive and negative aspects of this film’s representation of the bad black woman. Cleopatra Jones is a CIA agent who travels the world destroying poppy fields, and fighting the corrupt drug dealer, Mommy, in an effort to combat the infiltration of drugs into her community. In addition to her role as a CIA agent, Cleopatra is also involved with the B & S house, a home in her black community which aims to help eradicate drug use and crime. I wanted to draw attention to the plot of the film, because the plot itself highlights some of the contradictions found within this film. One of the divergences being Cleopatra’s interesting position of fighting with her black community against the perils of drugs, at the same time that she works for the white government.

One of the major complexities of Cleopatra is her role as a special agent. As such, Cleopatra is a unique and new role for a black woman. In some ways Cleopatra’s role allows for a proper representation of the scope and magnitude of the capitalistic venture of drug dealing, as is evident by the first scene when she arrives in a desert to destroy a poppy field, which shows the global scope of drugs. In other ways her expert use of guns, her incredible driving skills, and her ability to go anywhere, signify her as not only masculine, but powerful. “Cleo’s authority and sexuality dominate the screen and represent a

significant redefinition of racial and gender roles because her occupation is one that has been traditionally reserved for white men” (Sims, 2006:96). By occupying this role as a special agent Cleopatra challenges the hegemonic white patriarchal structure of the government.

However, the film ultimately fails to disrupt these traditional roles. “The narrowing of the black liberation struggle to one hero against a drug underworld figure and two minor cops leaves the hegemony intact while offering the entertaining fantasy of white supremacist defeat. Cleopatra Jones, a certainly unique presence in her occupation as “special agent” for the U.S. government, is still an agent for, not against the government” (Dunn, 2008:96). This critique of Cleopatra as a government agent is important. Although her character highlights the predominately white makeup of U.S. government agencies, the movie does little to critique this point. “In the depiction of Cleopatra as a lone, uniquely empowered black female agent with international jurisdiction, the Black Power ethos of radical transformation of the institutional power does not register” (Dunn, 2008:96). Thus, instead of offering a disruption to the system, Cleopatra actually reinforces the structure of the government by participating in it.

While Cleopatra’s presence in a white male institution is important to upsetting the the role of predominately white, male heroes in film, we need to be critical of the ways she is represented as exotic. Unlike Grier, Dobson as Cleopatra Jones is not overtly sexualized and never appears nude. However, her representation as exotic invokes stereotypes about black women as exotic and animalistic. Additionally, by marking her as exotic the film is able to reinforce the notion that Cleopatra operates in a unique position as a black female special agent. Before we even see Cleopatra we can draw the connection between her name

and the ancient Egyptian queen Cleopatra, which immediately connects her character to a queen like and foreign status. The opening scene of the movie also marks Cleo as mysterious and exotic, as she descends off the plane into the desert. “Swathed in a hooded, long fur animal-print cape, she glides forcefully between two lines of male Turkish officers as the music fades. The incongruities of patriarchal authority, feminine glamour, and “blackness” in the primitive patriarchal setting signify the relationship between power and exoticism that we see projected in Cleopatra’s image throughout” (Dunn, 2008:90). The visual contrast between the 6-foot-tall Dobson clad in animal print and fur against the shorter plainly dressed male officers works to mark the racial and gender differences of Dobson’s character as exotic and unique.

However, despite the exoticization of Cleopatra, her character is powerful in the ways she plays with masculine attributes, offering a potential reworking of gender roles, at the same time that she evokes anxiety about those roles. “On sight, Cleopatra renders other female bodies more traditionally feminine while at the same time she feminizes white and black males” (Dunn, 2008:96). Throughout the film Cleo’s masculine characteristics, such as her ability to karate kick her way out of a fight, or her gun wielding abilities, work to emasculate the men she encounters. However, her glamorous and striking appearance mark her as feminine and therefore desirable. This combination of masculine and feminine characteristics is important to understanding the ways Cleopatra interacts with the male characters in the film, evoking in them a strange mixture of desire for her and fear of castration-emasculatation by her.

One example of this can be seen in Cleopatra’s relationship with the white police officer, Lou. In this scene, Cleopatra proves to Lou that one of his fellow cops is corrupt. As

she is walking away, Lou turns to a different white police man and asks him if he ever feels inadequate. It is obvious that Lou is referring to feeling inadequate in comparison to Cleopatra. "On the surface, of course, the statement alludes to her efficiency, but in a larger sense it hints at the male anxiety that Cleopatra's atypical empowerment or female superiority – physique, ability, and status- motivates. Lou, a middle-aged man of medium height, appears vulnerable or fragile when standing beside Cleopatra, suggesting effeminacy brought to the fore by her" (Dunn, 2008:97). This scene is important because while it highlights the white male fear of a strong black woman, it also emphasizes the potential for the bad black woman to reclaim masculinity in a way that grants her power over the white man, reversing the typical gender and racial roles.

A crucial positive dimension to Cleopatra's character is her relationship with her black boyfriend, Reuben. Throughout the movie their interactions serve as important and positive representations of black male – black female relationships. Reuben works for the B & S house and is presented as an intelligent and caring black man who is committed to helping the youth at the house. Reuben, unlike many other black male characters throughout the Blaxploitation genre, does not fall into the binary of good black man or bad black man, instead he stands out as a unique and positive representation of black men. "The depiction underscores the rarity of such black male imagery within the genre and American popular action cinema" (Dunn, 2008:99). This is important because his character offers a new and more positive representation of black men in cinema.

Additionally, Reuben and Cleopatra are portrayed as equals throughout the film, which works to emphasize the importance of black male and black female solidarity. "Reuben is not presented as the emasculated or effeminate black male due to his ladylove's

untraditional gender role. Instead, they share a social as well as romantic bond. Reuben is not threatened by or antagonistic to Cleopatra's status" (Dunn, 2008:100). Instead of being threatened by Cleopatra's strength, and unconventional masculine characteristics, Reuben appreciates and respects Cleo, offering a positive representation of black male – black female relationships, as well as a positive interpretation of Cleo's female masculinity.

One positive representation of Cleo and Reuben's relationship is their sexual encounter, which is important because it is so drastically different than majority of the sex scenes found in blaxploitation films. "The most "graphic" aspect is the long, sensual kiss between the two before the scene fades to black. Cleopatra's body is not situated as being in service to her lover's sexual pleasure or control" (Dunn, 2008:100). While sex scenes in blaxploitation films usually show a lot of nudity and are generally from the perspective of the black male, this scene challenges that by not sexualizing Cleopatra, instead showing a soft and gentle kiss between two equal partners. This again works to reinforce a positive depiction of black male – black female relationships.

However, while Cleopatra's relationship with Reuben offers a positive reworking of gender and racial roles, her relationship with the white lesbian, drug dealer works to undermine the feminist potential of the film. The pitting of the black heterosexual heroine against the white lesbian villain is significant because it works to highlight their differences, ultimately reinforcing the divide between white and black women. "Directors sold a racialized lesbianism that was inherently linked to the binary between good and evil that categorized white women as lesbians and black women as straight" (Seifert, 2012:8). The reliance on these binaries is directly connected to the fact that *Cleopatra Jones* was directed and produced by the white male director, Jack Starrett. The white male gaze that

influences the representations in this film destabilize the progressive aspects of Cleopatra by utilizing binaries that eliminate the potential for solidarity among female characters in the film. "In *Cleopatra Jones*, Mommy is represented as evil, sadistic, and sexually rampant; she is constantly flirting and making crude remarks to her female servants. She acts as the perfect anti-hero to Jones; her exaggerated gender transgressions serve to further legitimate a separation between the characters" (Seifert, 2012:9). By over exaggerating the differences between these two characters, the film ultimately reinforces the patriarchy by denying positive female to female relationships.

Although tensions between black and white women were real at this time, we still need to be critical of the reasons the director chose to emphasize these differences and conflicts in such drastic ways. "While female tensions did already exist between Black Power and women's liberation activists, I posit that female relationships in these films were purposefully constructed to please a male audience anxious that female solidarities would threaten male domination" (Seifert, 2012:12). While Cleopatra Jones is a strong, independent and in many ways powerful representation of a black woman, her failure to have any positive relationships with women, especially Mommy, undermine the feminist power of the film, and instead reinforce the racialized, patriarchal gaze. "The film posits them as warring "baad bitches," creating an exotic spectacle of racial femininities that resolves the tensions their female power provokes" (Dunn, 2008:102). In the end, we are left with a complicated heroine, and an equally complex villain, who because she was created by a white male, fails to really disrupt the gender and racial boundaries even though she takes on masculine qualities.

Pam Grier, The Queen of Blaxploitation:

I would now like to address Pam Grier, often called the Queen of Blaxploitation, and the bad black woman roles she took on during her career. While Grier's characters offer many of the same positive and more masculine aspects that Dobson's character did, such as her independence, skill with a gun, strength, and ability to outsmart the bad guys, these two actresses also varied greatly in the ways they were depicted on screen. One of the larger differences, and more problematic aspects of Grier's characters, is the overt and almost pornographic sexualization of Grier's body. In both *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, Grier's breasts are shown multiple times, and she is also seen using her body and sexuality to gain access to information and people. "Her grit, sass, and skill at manipulating prescribed notions of sexualized racial femininities are weapons she utilizes, but it is "pussy power" that proves her ultimate resource" (Dunn, 2008:108). In contrast to Cleopatra, *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* are seen using their bodies to get what they need in these male dominated spaces. This works to reinforce the white male gaze, as well as stereotypes about black women as hypersexual. "The films perpetuate the historical white supremacists construct of black women as "sluts" and "prostitutes" who are "objects of open sexual lust" (Dunn, 2008:111). By sexualizing Grier in this way, both of these films work to problematize her positive masculine aspects, and ultimately work to reinforce the white male perception of black female bodies.

Another major difference between Grier and Dobson is the motivation behind their character's battles. While Cleopatra fights for her whole community and in many ways offers a positive representation of the Black Power movement and black solidarity, Grier's two characters are motivated by personal reasons and revenge, and because of this, both

characters act individually and in many ways hurt the black community more than they help. Coffy is a nurse, who in her free time kills drug dealers in the community, to get revenge for her little sister, who is addicted to drugs and in a treatment center. While Foxy Brown is ultimately on a mission to get revenge for her black boyfriend, a cop, who is killed by the white drug dealers. This emphasis on revenge works to undermine the feminist and Black Power potential of these films because it reinforces the notion that a woman is only strong and capable of doing things when it is for her man, or family member. "It reinforces her as a woman with a familiar type of female motivation rather than one who shatters our notions of woman's nature" (Dunn, 2003:83). Secondly, because Grier's characters operate out of revenge they are only thinking of themselves and in both films this causes her characters to interact problematically with racial and gender boundaries.

One of the most important reasons that Grier's characters are so complicated is because they were shaped and created by the white male director/producer, Jack Hill. "Grier became AIP's and Hill's black cinema muse, helping to establish Grier's sex goddess screen imagery. His pornographic treatment of her and the gleeful trash quality of the films posits Grier as a black ghettocentric version of the white female Hollywood sex symbol model" (Dunn, 2008: 110). While there are still positive aspects of Grier's characters to take away, such as her confidence, intelligence, and strength, many of the sexist and racist tropes that her characters fall into are largely because of the white male gaze that created these films. In addition to the pornographic treatment of Grier's body, these films are also disappointing in the ways they interact with real and historical racist practices such as the lynching and murdering of black men, and white male rape of black women. In each film we

are confronted by at least one of these issues highlighting the white hegemonic gaze that heavily influenced these films.

***Coffy*:**

Now that we have highlighted the complicated aspects of Grier's bad black woman characters, I would like to turn to each film, starting with *Coffy*, to provide specific examples of the ways each film interacts with the gender and racial politics of the 1970s. As previously stated, this film follows Coffy on her mission to get revenge for her drug addicted sister, by shooting any drug dealers she comes across. The opening scene of the movie not only establishes Coffy's cause, but also highlights many of the convoluted aspects of Coffy's character. In this scene we see Coffy go to a bar and uses her desirability as a woman to convince a drug dealer to leave with her. By offering sex she is able to lure this man into a cab and then into an apartment. Once in the apartment, she pulls out a shotgun and kills him, she then uses a needle filled with heroine to kill the other man who accompanied them. On the one hand, the opening scene marks Coffy's character as masculine because of her use of guns, as well as her fearlessness and determination. "In the first scene of *Coffy*, audiences see a woman who will stop at nothing to exact revenge on people who hurt her family" (Sims, 2006: 76). However, on the other hand the use of sex to get what she needs highlights the sexualized and racialized treatment of her character. "By adhering to the historical sex object archetype of black women in film, Coffy's construction as a sex object subverts her role as a powerful action heroine" (Smith, 2009: 68). Ultimately, the first scene sets up the depiction of Coffy as both a heroine and a sex object.

The troubling treatment of Grier as a sex object is a recurring theme throughout *Coffy*. However, this representation of her becomes even more problematic when she shifts

from nurse to her alternate role as Mystique, a prostitute, in order to infiltrate the main drug dealer's operation. As Mystique, Coffy uses sex to get closer to the information she needs, starting with the black pimp/dealer King George, in order to get access to the head of the operation Vitroni, a white Italian male. While disguising herself as a prostitute perpetuates the stereotype of black women as prostitutes and overly sexual, I would like to draw specific attention to the sex scene between Mystique and Vitroni because in addition to marking her as a prostitute, this scene also relies heavily on the exoticization of Mystique. "Once Coffy obtains access to Vitroni for a sexual encounter he spits on her, calls her a "no-good dirty nigger bitch" and screams at her, demanding that she crawl" (Smith, 2009:69). This scene is disturbing because it reinforces the exoticization and animalistic treatment of Grier's body.

Additionally, this scene also works to reinforce traditional racial and gender boundaries, where white men have control over black women, because although Coffy pulls out her gun and tries to kill Vitroni, she is quickly beaten and taken away by two of Vitroni's men. "To Vitroni, the idea of a black woman cunningly plotting to kill him is beyond belief or comprehension." (Smith, 2009:69). This scene works to undermine the positive potential of *Coffy* in several ways. Firstly, the overt sexualization and exoticization of Coffy works to reinforce stereotypical notions of black women that have existed since slavery. Second, by not letting Coffy beat Vitroni in this scene, it works to reinforce the white male patriarchy and white male power over black bodies. Third, because Vitroni does not believe that a black woman is operating on her own, and instead demands to know what man sent her to kill him, he is reinforcing gender roles which view women as incapable of making a decision without a man.

However, in addition to reinforcing gender stereotypes, Coffy's answer that King George, a black pimp, sent her to kill Vitroni leads the film in a direction that results in the lynching of King George. "Her answer leads to a plot twist that offers a disturbing depiction of black female - black male relations in the racial patriarchal status quo" (Dunn, 2008:122). While Coffy doesn't actually kill King George herself, it is important that she is the reason he is killed. For starters, this scene works to undermine the Black Power potential of the film by reinforcing the idea that black women were dangerous to black men. "The mythology of the black woman as a castrator of men, black men in particular, hovers over such scenes" (Dunn, 2008: 122). Additionally, this scene relies on historical realities such as the lynching of black men, which works to reinforce the white male patriarchy. Instead of upsetting Vitroni's white patriarchal power, these scenes work to reinforce it. At the same time, these scenes also work to further divide black women and black men.

Another place in the film that reveals a problematic relationship between a black woman and a black man is Coffy's relationship with her boyfriend, Howard. This is especially evident in the scene where Howard is brought to Vitroni to be asked if he sent Coffy to kill him. It is in this scene that Howard's corruption is revealed to Coffy. "In a final betrayal to black political collective unity and black women specifically, Howard completes the relegation of Coffy to expendable hot black pussy by asserting that she is merely "some broad that I fuck" whom they can take out and kill" (Dunn, 2008:123). This scene is important because it works to undermine black political unity, especially between black men and women. Instead of emphasizing black power, this scene works to perpetuate the individualistic, oversexed image of black men.

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of this film is Coffy's relationships or lack thereof with women in the film. While the film does not pit Coffy against a white lesbian villain like in *Cleopatra Jones*, there is still a sense of division between women in the film. One example of this is the scene where Coffy gets into a fight with the other prostitutes. "Her relationships with other women in the film are characterized by hatred and jealousy, as evinced in a vicious catfight that develops between the prostitutes where Coffy reveals the razor blades hidden in her Afro" (Seifert, 2012:9). In this scene Coffy fights and undresses a handful of prostitutes. This scene works to undermine the feminist potential of this film in a few ways. First, Coffy fights women of all races, suggesting that there isn't even race based female solidarity in the film. Second, by derobing the women Coffy works to sexualize these women, also reinforcing the white male gaze that informed this film. "These spaces also constricted black and white female identities by offering limited and contested relationships between women, exaggerating their distinctive qualities, to devalue the formation of gender-based solidarities" (Seifert, 2012:12). Instead of offering a positive representation of female relationships, this scene works to reinforce the divide between black and white women, resolving the white male anxiety of female solidarity, and reinforcing the white male gaze of the film.

Foxy Brown:

Like *Coffy* *Foxy Brown*, which was also directed and produced by Jack Hill, also reinforces racial and gender stereotypes. Similar to her role as Coffy, Foxy Brown is on a mission for revenge, however this time her revenge is for her black policeman boyfriend, who is attacked and later killed by white drug dealers. Grier's role as Foxy features many of the positive and powerful aspects that her role as Coffy entailed. "She is a tough woman,

outwitting and outfighting the evil forces” (Dunn, 2003:74). Foxy Brown’s intelligence, fearlessness, and ability to operate a gun mark her as a bad black woman, but, much like Coffy, Foxy is still treated as an object to be looked at. Additionally, her motivation for revenge rests on her connection to men, which also undermines the feminist potential of this film.

From the moment the film begins we are reminded of the erotic and sexualized treatment of Foxy. “Against a shifting colored backdrop, Grier dances around provocatively, posing in a variety of sexy outfits. In one particularly long sequence, the camera moves in to present a close-up of Grier in skimpy black bra and panties, next zooming to the center of her breasts, cutting her face off” (Dunn, 2008:113). The focus on Grier’s body, especially on certain parts such as her breasts, work to fetishize her body. Moreover, the fact that this is how the movie opens works to emphasize the sexualized treatment of her body throughout the film. We are again reminded of this after the credit roll, when we first see Grier get out of bed in her nightgown with her breasts exposed. However, we are also made aware of her masculine characteristics when she sticks a small gun into her bra. “The juxtaposition of her sexual femininity and the phallic or masculine symbol, the gun, highlights the sexual framing of Grier’s body” (Dunn, 2008:113). It is important that we see Grier nude before we see her with a gun because it emphasizes the unique position of sex object and heroine that Foxy operates in. It also works to undermine the masculine power of the gun, by showing her nude first the male audience is more focused on her body and therefore less threatened by the image of a female with a gun.

Similar to *Coffy*, Foxy Brown also takes on an alter ego as a prostitute in order to gain access to the drug dealers she is after. However, while in some ways the

representation of her as a prostitute is problematic and reinforces racialized stereotypes of black women, there is one scene which offers a potential reworking of these representations. This scene is the sex scene with Foxy and another black prostitute and the white male judge, Fenton. In this scene, the typical hierarchy of white male control over black females is flipped. The two prostitutes make the judge vulnerable by mocking the size of his penis, and then throw him half-dressed out into the hallway of the hotel to be mocked by a crowd of white women. This scene is important because instead of Fenton being in control, the two black women are in control. "In perhaps the most radical – but brief – moment in the film, the gaze is directed through the women and turned on the voyeuristic white paternal figure" (Dunn, 2008:120). By emasculating the white man this scene offers a brief moment of black female power and control. However, this type of control is still troubling because it relies on Foxy's use of her body and sexuality to gain such power, something that the male hero's in Blaxploitation films generally do not have to do, with the exception of Sweetback.

However, while Foxy has control over her body and sexuality in the scene with the judge, this is not always the case throughout the film. This is the most evident in the horrific rape scene which in many ways recreates the historical rape of black slave women by white men. "Nowhere does the film reinvest more definitely in the historical sexualization and devaluation of the black female than in the scene in which Brown's enemies punish her by sending her to "the ranch" obviously "plantation" in disguise" (Dunn, 2003:80). The scene opens with Foxy on a bed, bruised and battered and breasts exposed. The film then takes the master slave narrative to a new level when Foxy tries to escape and is captured by one of the white men throwing a rope around her neck, who then

takes her and ties her to the bed, and again drugs and rapes her. “The scene represents a glaring reminder that as a woman, a *black woman*, Foxy Brown can be put in her place if she tries to shake the status quo of power too much” (Dunn, 2003:80). Ultimately, this scene serves as a reminder that although Foxy Brown is tough she is still a black woman operating in a white patriarchal world.

While she ends up escaping the ranch and killing both of the men who raped her, this scene does not disrupt the master slave narrative. One of the reasons it does not challenge the narrative is that we never see Foxy show any signs of pain or any real emotional response to the horrific things that just happened to her. “The film reinforces the historic white supremacist notion that as a black woman she cannot really be horrifically brutalized or raped” (Dunn, 2003:81). Instead of addressing the horrors of this scene, Foxy immediately goes back to get revenge for her lover, working to deny the violent treatment of her body and reinforcing the subordination of black women by both white and black men.

The final aspect of Foxy Brown that I would like to discuss is the relationship between Foxy and the white drug dealer Katherine. Although Katherine is not coded as a lesbian, she still serves as the counterpart to Foxy Brown. While Foxy is a black, heterosexual, curvaceous woman, Katherine is a white, heterosexual, small and almost boyish looking woman. Similar to Cleopatra and Mommy, Foxy and Katherine are understood as a threat to the white patriarchy, and therefore are pitted against each other to resolve white male anxiety about female power. Additionally, the fact that these women are fighting each other for their men undermines the feminist potential of this film. Although, Katherine is portrayed as powerful throughout the film her possessive obsession

of her boyfriend, Steve, works to undermine her bad woman figure. Similarly, Foxy's motivation for revenge stems from her loss of her boyfriend. "Brown wants Katherine to suffer as she is suffering, and that is why she chooses to castrate Steve rather than just killing them both. Hence, the movie's ending message tells us that the worst lot Katherine can suffer is not the demise of her successful illegal capitalistic enterprise or her life, but rather to be permanently cut off from Steve's sexual power" (Dunn, 2003:82). Here the film undermines its feminist potential by making both powerful female characters reliant on a man.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the bad black woman figure, much like the badass black man figure, is a complex representation of blackness. As we saw, both Dobson's and Grier's characters offered a new image of black women as powerful, independent, and strong. However, at the same time, these new representations often relied on stereotypical notions of black women as prostitutes, exotic, or overly sexualized. Additionally, all of these films are problematic in the ways they interact with the racial and gender politics of the time. All of these films worked to further perpetuate the divide between black and white women by enhancing their differences and not allowing for any moments of female solidarity in the films. Finally, these films are also disappointing in the ways they reinforce the white, patriarchal gaze that informed these films.

However, although these representations are perplexing, we must commend Dobson and Grier for bringing in moments of transformation and positive representation throughout the films. One example of this can be seen in Grier's *Foxy Brown*. "In *Foxy Brown* Grier intentionally changed her hairstyle frequently, reflecting the changing

definitions of beauty associated with African American women” (Sims, 2006:83). This is important, because Dobson and Grier were operating in a predominately white male world, and although they had little control over the film, they still managed to bring positive aspects of black femininity into their roles.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In conclusion, blaxploitation films cannot easily be summed up. As a genre, blaxploitation films range from action to comedy to thriller, and each film interacts with racial and gender politics of the time in varying degrees. Although this thesis did not cover every blaxploitation film, I believe that the six films I chose to look at provided us with a good understanding of both the positive and negative portrayals of black men and women found throughout the genre. In many ways these films worked to perpetuate and recreate stereotypes about black masculinity and female masculinity that have existed since slavery. As we saw the bad ass black man figure works to further the archetype of black men as hypersexual, criminal, violent, and deviant, while the bad black woman figure perpetuates images of black women as overtly sexual, and exotic. However, while these problematic aspects of the movies need to be examined, we must also view these films from multiple lenses in order to acknowledge the more positive aspects found throughout the genre. For example, the community aspect of *Sweetback* is an important dimension of the film, which positively utilized the rhetoric of the Black Panthers. Additionally, although the bad black woman figure is full of contradictions, these roles were extremely important in giving black women a powerful space in film that previously did not exist. Therefore, while it is crucial to be critical of these films, we need to understand them as complex and complicated depictions of blackness that were influenced and shaped by the tumultuous and chaotic events of the civil rights and black power struggles of the 1960s.

As we saw, the Black Panthers and black power movements awakened the black consciousness of black men and women in urban areas all over the country, giving rise to theatrical protests and the “black is beautiful” slogan. While the Black Panthers were

extremely important to the civil rights struggle, and in many ways brought about positive changes in their community, they were not without their own contradictions, such as the sexism which existed in the party. The militant masculinity created by the Black Panthers became a staple of the party, and in many ways hindered the process of equality by subordinating black women. These contradictions, coupled with the infiltration of the party by the FBI can help account for the complex and paradoxical masculinities represented in blaxploitation films. While the militant masculinities found in the films can be linked to the Black Panthers, the failure of the films to fully incorporate the black power rhetoric can be linked to the FBI infiltration and the FBI's role in transforming the Panthers from activists into gangsters.

In addition to the social and political events that influenced the rise of the blaxploitation genre is the issue of ownership and production. The fact that most of the films we looked at were produced and owned by white men had a crucial impact on the ways black men and women were presented. As we learned in chapter one, black masculinities have been shaped in opposition to the dominant white masculinity, and blaxploitation films were no exception. Many of the stereotypical representations of blackness found in these films can be linked to the white production of these films. Much like the stereotypes used during slavery to justify white domination of blacks, the stereotypes reproduced in blaxploitation films work to maintain the white/black binary, where whites have control and blacks are seen as criminals. The reliance on these stereotypes not only work to perpetuate false images of blackness, they also help maintain the white hegemonic patriarchy.

Conclusively, I believe it is important to look at blaxploitation films in the context of the social, political and economic landscape for a few reasons. First, blaxploitation films were the first genre of films to give black actors, actresses, and directors a place in Hollywood. For the first time, black men and women were the heroes and the stories revolved around them. This is an important point to stress because blaxploitation films are often overlooked in many film history discussions. Second, these films are more complicated than just stereotypical representations, and it is impossible to discuss their importance without acknowledging the contradictions that exist within each film. On the one hand, the exaggerated representations of the inner city and the reliance on clichés about black masculinity in the genre mark these films as troublesome. On the other hand, there are moments in these films that shed a positive light on the power of community, and the strength of solidarity among black men and women. Third, these films interact with gender, racial, and class lines in important and various ways, reminding us that there is not one black masculinity or black female masculinity, but that they are diverse, complex, and shaped by the social conditions of the time. Fourth, these films are important in the ways they interact with and reproduce cultural representations of black masculinities, influencing both black and white perceptions of blackness. Overall, blaxploitation films cannot be ignored because they play a crucial role in understanding representations of blackness in the media. As the first real representations of black protagonists this genre would not only influence understandings of black masculinity in the 70s, but continues to inspire representations of black masculinity and black female masculinity in the media today.

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