The Blackness of Blaxploitation: Race, Respectability, and African American Popular Culture in the 1970s

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Introduction

On August 5, 1972, the day after the premiere of *Super Fly*, *New York Times* writer Roger Greenspun proclaimed that the film belonged alongside "all those crime movies that have had as their subject the one big last job."[1] Starring classically trained actor Ron O'Neal as the slick and cunning drug dealer Youngblood Priest, the film became an instant success earning more than $30 million on a budget of less than $500,000. Audiences flocked to the theatres with one young woman, who had seen the flick three times, proclaiming that O'Neal made "Shaft look like Little Jack Horner."[2] Directed by Gordon Parks Jr. and solely financed by African Americans, *Super Fly* exposed the profitability of the burgeoning sub-genre of Black-centered action films.[3] For at least a few days, African American filmmakers received the respect and critical acclaim of their white counterparts in Hollywood. But the tides soon changed against the film. *Variety* countered the *New York Times* stating, "It's strictly action-adventure, alternating, like clockwork, drugs-sex-violence for its duration with hardly a plot line to hold it together."[4] *Time*'s reviewer, Jay Cocks, irritated by the Black stereotypes and slapshot production quality, criticized it as exploitive, offensive, and shoddily made declaring: "What makes a crummy little movie like *Super Fly* worth getting angry about is the implication behind it: that movies made for black audiences have to be, or can easily be, so casually and contemptuously awful."[5]

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[1] Roger Greenspun, "'Super Fly': O'Neal Has Lead as Narcotics Dealer," *New York Times*, August 5, 1972.
[2] Maurice Peterson, "Ron was too Light for Shaft But…" *New York Times*, September 17, 1972.
[3] "Super Fly," AFI Catalog of Feature Films, https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/54432
[4] Variety Staff, "Extract from a Review of Super Fly," Variety, September 1972, https://variety.com/1971/film/reviews/superfly-1200422705/
[5] Jay Cocks, "Cinema: Racial Slur," *Time Magazine*, September 11, 1972.

Soon after the film's release Junius Griffin, then head of the Beverly Hills chapter of the NAACP referred to the film and all other made in a similar vein as "black exploitation," and demanded that Warner Bros. recall prints of the film from distribution and reshoot the ending so that Priest would be killed or otherwise punished for his drug usage and dealing. The National Catholic Office gave the film a "C" for condemned, stating: "This kind of black liberation serves only to deceive the brothers and play upon the fears of black audiences." Within months of its initial release several African-American groups formed specifically to fight the film and others like it, among them being BANG (Blacks Against Narcotics and Genocide) and CAB (Coalition Against Blaxploitation).[6] Not since the inception of the Black Panther Party had a movement been so feared and loathed in the eyes of the African American establishment.

Most of that fear stemmed from the significant position popular culture took with the rise of film and television in the twentieth century. Though popular culture has long existed as the ideological and material apparatus on which all social life is based, the moving image proved far superior to the still image or written word in arousing emotions, stirring curiosity, communicating important ideas and prompting its audience to consider significant questions about society.[7] Despite its questionable creative license, production biases, and its

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[6] Junius Griffin, "Black Movie Boom – Good or Bad?" *New York Times*, December 17, 1972. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, *Culture, and the Moving Image* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 101-102.

[7] Film may utilize interpretive license more than academia, but that license is used to express hidden thoughts and actions that are rarely found in most sources. With that in mind, we must consider how both the mimetic and creative nature of filmmaking become clouded when confronting race and representation, in which both the formal/aesthetic aspects of filmmaking and the social and cultural exchanges that take place between the audience and the film industry must be considered. See Danielle Dirks and Jennifer C. Mueller, "Racism and Popular Culture," *Relational Formations of Race* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 116. Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 12. Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 9.

decentralism of causation, many African-Americans believed that cinema would allow them to more accurately portray Black identity and move away from blackface representations.[8] Film had the potential to become an enormous force of social change, creating a space to voice dissent and a forum in which to propagate Black ideas, culture, values, talent, literature, thought, and analysis. But the power of popular culture rested with its centuries-old ability to "distort, shape, and produce reality, dictating the ways in which people think, feel, and operate in the social world" and to reinforce the "lessons" that defined racial politics and kept structural inequalities in place.[9] The monopoly

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[8] In the early twentieth century, the film camera was considered on par with other scientific apparatuses which claimed empirical verifiability, and early cinematic narratives reified and popularized political, social and cultural White supremacy. See Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 13. Also see Katharine Bausch, "Superflies into Superkillers: Black Masculinity in Film from Blaxploitation to New Black Realism," *Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 2 (2013), 257-76. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 5th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2016). Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992). Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2008). Mark A. Reid, *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). Shoniqua Roach and Jennifer C Nash, "Black Pussy Power: Performing Acts of Black Eroticism in Pam Grier's Blaxploitation Films," *Feminist Theory* 19, no. 1 (2018), 7-22. Christopher Sieving, *Soul-Searching: Black-Themes Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011). Shawan M. Worsley, *Audience, Agency and Identity in Black Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010). Joshua K Wright, "Black Outlaws and the Struggle for Empowerment in Blaxploitation Cinema," *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 2, no. 2 (2014), 63-86.

[9] Before the genre's birth in 1970, the typical depiction of African Americans in television and film was as domestic servants, sidekick, or victim. The dawn, however, of this new cinematic movement would seek to put an end to that. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1981). Dirks and Mueller, "Racism and Popular Culture". bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996). bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on*

White Hollywood and middle-class, conservative African Americans had over dictating the way that the American people "knew" Blackness meant that films like *Super Fly* became new and dangerous form of artistic expression in American popular culture.[10]

Blaxploitation films represented a rare unification of mainstream Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the twentieth century that emphasized resistance to victimization but still adhered to assimilationists views. Though many scholars have focused on the perceived "black-lash" against the Black movie boom of the 1970s, none have looked at how

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Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1992).

[10] Blaxploitation appeared during a pivotal moment in American history. By the early 1970s the "public relation" face of both the Civil Rights' and Black Power movements were in visible decline with the assassinations of Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King in 1968. Other prominent Civil Rights groups like NAACP and SNCC were going through mass changes in leadership with Thurgood and Stokely Carmichael ex-patriating to Ghana in 1968 a mere two years after abandoning non-violent resistance. By 1971, the political foundations of the Black Panther Party had collapsed. Blaxploitation reimagined these "lost Black heroes," injecting them into urban, working-class setting that were wholly black. In a larger sense, Blaxploitation redefined the fight for social justice as an individual struggle rather than a collective one. It repositioned the economic and political disadvantage of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban, North. More importantly, these films imbued their black working-class viewers with a set of fashions, attitudes, aspirations and grievances that were seemingly detached from but whole related to both white America and the black freedom struggle. See Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2018). Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016). Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights - Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Steve Estes, *I am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997). Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002). Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

Blaxploitation's use of victimization, deviance, and righteous uplift spoke to urban Black audiences of the time. Rather than concentrating on how the mainstream (White) depicted African Americans or how critics or middle-class Blacks understood them, my work strives to understand how the symbols of respectability, white supremacy and Black power took on new and more complex meanings. Blaxploitation seemingly emphasized the ideologies of counterculture movements like Black Power over mainstream Civil Rights, reflecting the growing dissatisfaction with the police and moving away from an unquestioned white male authority. The settings of these film often represented spaces where White people either lacked control or met significant resistance to that control and where White supremacy constituted a peripheral concern. The victimization of African Americans by other African Americans illustrated this best. The films also highlighted personal justice or revenge over social justice or criminal reform. Economics to politics. At the same time, the films often contained formulaic storylines. These formulas involved a pattern of victimization, deviance, and eventual righteous uplift featured in earlier versions of Black-centered films.[11] Blaxploitation films, however, reworked the symbols of these patterns by exploiting their audiences' built-in set of expectations surrounding respectability, assimilation, defiance, and deviance, confounding them with an unfamiliar situation, and then eventually subverting those original expectations. Blaxploitation reworked the symbols of the Black experience in way that authentically spoke audiences of the 1970s.

Film and mass media in the twentieth century changed the way people perceived themselves and the world around us by transforming them from participants to spectators. The power of film and television allowed people to scrutinize the world through the safety of the looking glass. And because they could now see the world beyond their villages, towns and cities, they began to feel like they knew the world, effectively transforming a radical and highly skeptical culture into the "seeing is believing" culture. By the 1960s the push for civil and economic rights for African Americans had become an overtly visual one. For most Americans, images of sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, black

[11] Sieving, *Soul-Searching,* 5.

children being viciously attacked by police dogs, freedom riders, and Martin Luther King's famous "March on Washington" connected a movement, which had begun in the Southern United States, to a larger struggle for freedom and equality throughout the nation. From Stokely Carmichael's call for "Black Power" in Greenwood, Mississippi in 1966 to Tommie Jones and John Carlos holding up black-gloved fists during the playing of the national anthem at the 1968 Olympics, "blackness" and what it meant to *be black* in a modern sense was increasingly created, disseminated and understood through the moving image and an increasingly eclectic cast of "black heroes."

The sub-genre, which focused on Black centered themes and often starred all Black casts, arguably reached its peak with the premiere of *Super Fly* and a majority of Blaxploitation films ended up as critical and commercial failures. Yet, according to Lyrics.com, twenty-two songs reference *Black Caesar,* thirty-five songs reference *Dolemite*, one hundred and thirty-eight reference *Foxy Brown*, one hundred and eighty-six reference *Super Fly*, and more than two hundred reference *Shaft*. *Super Fly*'s title character "Youngblood", in particular, became one of the most coveted rap names in the industry. Despite its low production quality and Hollywood's fleeting interest, Blaxploitation somehow cemented itself as an essential component American popular culture.[12] But the films have often been accused of dismissing the issues facing Blacks and Whites in America in favor of sex and violence, creating unreal universes which glossed over those issues (if not ignored completely) or left them for blacks to hash out amongst themselves off screen. The performances of Blackness in Blaxploitation merely represented white interpretations of the Black experience created for mass consumption which lacked any type of authenticity to the experiences of most African American. Thus, Black characters became tools which "white visitors" used to create their own vision of racial idealism: the idea that African Americans inherently wanted to be White, not that they strived for White opportunities. Blaxploitation compelled its audiences to turn away from images that might compel militancy by internalizing White supremacist narratives about themselves and

[12] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness.* Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s.* Reid, *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now.*

the Black experience in America. This speaks more to how White audiences or middle to upper-class African Americans viewed the films, as a false rebuke of White culture and white power structures. And while these films depended on internalized White supremacist narratives they often used as the foil to the radical idea of an internalized Black supremacy. Audiences of the 1970s, in particular, were familiar with the various tropes and stereotypes that had long existed in Hollywood, making the ways in which Blaxploitation used its cultural repertoire of symbols extremely unique.[13]

The "bad men" of 1970s had just as many positive attributes as negative ones, often serving as metaphors for the struggle to achieve power, agency and define themselves in a society which has historically disenfranchised and emasculated them. Blaxploitation reworked Black sexuality and eroticism as tools of black survival. Owning one's sexuality, as opposed to having it monitored by whites embodied some of the main ideals for the Black Power movement. Various academics investigated the various ways and means Blaxploitation mitigated racialized sexual subjugation through its use of hyper-eroticism and sexual liberation. [14] Blaxploitation, however, did not simply glorify the Black Power Movement. As an atypical integration of mainstream and radical civil rights ideologies that emphasized impersonal forces, the films often concentrated on the important factors to the changing dynamics of society taking place in the late 1960s such as crime, poverty, inequality, and integration. The films showcased and highlighted the street people, cops, junkies, entertainers, grifters, and black nationalists, essentially opening up the urban Black community for the world to see.

This reimaging of Black artistic expression both reinforced and challenged cultural, social, racial, sexual and gender norms by modifying formulaic traditions and embracing production biases.

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[13] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*. Hooks, *Black Looks*. Sieving, *Soul-Searching*. Worsley, *Audience, Agency and Identity in Black Popular Culture*.

[14] Bausch, "Superflies into Superkillers: Black Masculinity in Film from Blaxploitation to New Black Realism,". Roach and Jennifer C Nash, "Black Pussy Power: Performing Acts of Black Eroticism in Pam Grier's Blaxploitation Films". Wright, "Black Outlaws and the Struggle for Empowerment in Blaxploitation Cinema."

Filmmakers most often responded, not to the rapidly changing social conditions, but potential audience appeal. This meant that filmmakers attempted to get into the minds of their audiences. These films addressed important questions about society and attached its audiences' emotions to the issues under exploration, revealing the cultural and societal attitudes grounded in both a filmmaker's truth and an audiences' belief in that truth. Thus, directors and producers made films with a degree of, what Thomas Schatz calls, "active but indirect audience participation."[15] Similar to Roland Barthes' thoughts on the reception of Victorian novels, meaning in Blaxploitation was produced through the process of viewing, not creating. The audience, as viewers, created meaning through the process of spectatorship. And those created meanings did not always convey what the filmmaker intended.[16]

You Can't Cover Up Oppression with Respectability

Blaxploitation's use of victimization shifted artistic depictions of African-Americans in popular culture from assimilation to a separate, self-defined black culture. By the mid 1960s, Black pride, before only expressed privately, became public, visible and performable through a shared repertoire of cultural symbols that expanded identification with Blackness past that of a shared bloodline or history of oppression.[17] Hollywood found it particularly difficult in the 1960s to respond to America's evolving social attitudes on race, gender and authority. The films of the 1960s offered audiences lofty representations of black middle-class respectability and colorblind racial discourse that drastically contradicted the political climate. James Baldwin noted this contradiction in 1968 writing that while "white Americans appear to be under the compulsion to dream, whereas black Americans are under the compulsion to awaken."[18] Blaxploitation

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[15] Schatz, *Hollywood Genres,* 23.

[16] James A. Berlin, "Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice," *Rhetoric Review* 11, no. 1 (1992), 19.

[17] Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?,* 78. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 126.

[18] James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 225.

played into the Black need to "awaken" by restructuring ideas surrounding "respectability". Earlier films like *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) were commercial successes, others like *Gone Are the Days (1963), The Cool World (1963), and Uptight (1968)* failed to illicit critical and commercial support from Black audiences due to their overly sentimental treatment of racial experiences.[19] These films mainly downplayed Black-specific concerns in favor of more neutral and universal themes of humility in the face of oppression and spiritual uplift over materialism. Blaxploitation films freed their audience from the parochial confines of their lives and placed them in a position both like and unlike their own. These films mangled the symbols and stereotypes that had governed Black audience participation since *Birth of a Nation*. Rather than portray the harsh realities of racism through the stoic lens of acceptance and decorum, Blaxploitation's use of fashion, language, and Black/White relations completely reworked the ideas of respectability.

The politics of respectability in Blaxploitation hardly differed from the ones that had governed African Americans for nearly one hundred years prior. The leadership of a majority of Civil Rights organizations formed a distinctive class of school administrators, journalists, businesspeople, and reformers who felt duty bound to promote the values of religion, education, and hard work. Stemming from their belief that adherence to these values ensured the dual goals of racial self-help and respect from White America. The politics of respectability equated public behavior with individual self-respect and the advancement of the African American community as a whole. In that effort, educators, church leaders, lawyers and other leaders encouraged all Black people, regardless of class, to embrace the ideals of temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners and Victorian sexual morals.[20] Blaxploitation equated public behavior with self-respect and commended the goal of racial self-help but likened it more to one's personal advancement over that of the community. While rejecting a majority of middle-class ideals, the films often

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[19] Sieving, *Soul-Searching,* 9.

[20] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement In the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14-15.

highlighted the industriousness of the African American community and celebrated expressive culture of the poor, the uneducated and, more importantly, the unassimilated men and women of America's urban centers. Blaxploitation distinctly went against the dominate assimilationist view of respectability which sought to eliminate rural folkways of dress, speech, and other distinct cultural patterns. The films embraced "gaudy" colors, profane language, drinking, smoking and other forms of improper decorum.

Blaxploitation's distortion of respectability rejected African American middle-class ideals, instead embracing a mixture of cultural naturalism and Black nationalism. This distortion of symbols was best illustrated through the Blaxploitation's use of fashion. In early Hollywood, White bodies represented culture and civilization while Black bodies were seen as uncivilized and incapable of truly appreciating culture.[21] This can be seen in early Civil War films such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Huckleberry Finn* (1931), and *The Little Colonel* (1935). In addition, fashion in the African American community delineated class distinction, distinguishing the upwardly mobile from the poor masses.[22] Given the growing importance of film in mass consumer culture, strict adherence to the politics of respectability became the dominant strategy of African Americans by the 1950s and early 1960s.[23] African American leaders believed that suitable attire, muted and modest dresses and pearl necklaces for women and dark, proper fitting suits for men, challenged negative stereotypes about Black people as unclean, unruly and undeserving of respect.[24] However, the rise of department stores, mass advertisement, extended credit, and other materialistic values (originally aimed at White middle-

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[21] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks,* 7-8.

[22] Pamela E. Klassen, "The Robes of Womanhood: Dress and Authenticity among African American Methodist Women in the Nineteenth Century," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 14, no. 1 (2004), 44.

[23] Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 31. Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?,* 89. Estes, *I am a Man!*, 105.

[24] Tanisha C. Ford, "SNCC Women, Demin, and the Politics of Dress," *The Journal of Southern History* 79, (August 2013), 632. Abena L. Moon, "Dressing For Freedom" *Black History Bulletin* 67, no. 1 (2004), 27.

class consumers) dramatically eroded older nineteenth century ideals of thrift and self-sacrifice.[25]

Blaxploitation continued this erosion by flipping the rules of respectability on their head and challenging that strategy in popular culture. Much like the Black cultural naturalists of the 1960s and 1970s, films like *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Shaft*, *Super Fly*, and *Dolemite* fashioned Black cultural revitalization as a more important step against racial domination than ending legal segregation. [26] In *Dolemite,* the titular character exits prison wearing a humble but ill-fitting suit. After being met by his 1973 Cadillac Fleetwood, he exclaims that he does not want to get into his car with such drab attire on. Flanked by a gaggle of beautiful women Dolemite proceeds to change from his simple prison issued suit into a flamboyant powder blue three-piece suit complete with matching fedora and oversized bowtie.[27] Shaft and Priest similarly eschewed middle-class respectability through their preference of turtlenecks, leather jackets, and floor length overcoats to drab gray suits of the police and old school Black gangsters.[28] The films celebrated and championed a form of respect separate from earlier generations, but never went as far as cultural naturalists in embracing African culture specifically as the source of renewed Blackness in America.

Blaxploitation often mocked the embrace of an overtly generalized African culture. While a majority of protagonists wore naturals, or "Afros", few to none embraced African fashion or adopted African names. Black urban America inspired its fashion, which only occasionally incorporated African imagery.[29] In *Cotton Comes to Harlem,* a film about two detectives trying to return the Harlem communities $87,000 stolen at a Back-to-Africa rally led by spiritual leader/con man and antagonist Deacon O'Malley, he and his mistress frequently wears dashikis, head

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[25] Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 210.
[26] Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?,* 95.
[27] Rudy Ray Moore, prod., *Dolemite* (Los Angeles: Dimensions Pictures, 1975).
[28] Joel Freeman, prod., *Shaft* (Los Angeles: MGM, 1971). Sig Shore, prod., *Super Fly* (Los Angeles: Superfly, 1972).
[29] Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?,* 96.

wraps and other forms of Africanized clothing. In another scene, protagonist Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones come upon a drug addled Swahili lesson in progress. *Dolemite* also portrays generalized Africanism as problematic.[30] The character of Reverend Gibbs, a dashiki clad, self-avowed Black separatist, buys and sells weapons for the corrupt White mayor of Los Angeles.[31] This was not to say that the films criticized any and all Black expressions of African culture. In *Cotton*, as Jones and Johnson exit the Swahili lesson, Jones surprises the entire class by speaking in perfect Swahili. Blaxploitation disdain of overt pan-Africanism attempted to convey a subtle but important message to its audiences: The heart of racism was not the suppression of African culture by European culture nor the political oppression of Jim Crow, but the economic and societal barriers that had existed since Reconstruction.

Dialectal expression and repression also became an important part of Blaxploitation's appeal. African American literacy and language power had always been a central artistic concern. Earlier educational pioneers understood that being able to construct textual knowledge for oneself was the core of Black liberation.[32] African American creativity often centered on vernacular, recasting it as "survival technology."[33] The re-conception of phrases like "The Man," "cold blooded," and "solid" took on new and complex meanings and new words "honky" and "cracker" became a form of resistance by the 1970s. Despite the dominant belief about the sub-genre's overtly violent message, brute force rarely saved the day in most films. Blaxploitation structured Black literacy not as Black elitism but as a form of Black cunning and

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[30] Samuel Goldwyn Jr., prod., *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Los Angeles: Formosa Productions, 1970).

[31] Rudy Ray Moore, prod., *Dolemite* (Los Angeles: Dimensions Pictures, 1975).

[32] Keith Gilyard, *Let's Flip the Script: An African American Discourse on Language, Literature and Learning* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 107.

[33] Rayvon Fouché, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technology Creativity," American Quarterly 58, no. 3 (2006), 641.

cleverness. Take Rudy Ray Moore's poem "Signifying Monkey," recited in *Dolemite*:

> Now the monkey lived in the jungle in an old oak tree
> Bullshitting the lion every day of the week
> Well every day before the sun go down
> The lion would kick his ass all through the jungle town
> But the monkey got wise and started using his wit
> Said, "I'm going to put a stop to this old ass kicking shit!"[34]

In the film, Moore's poem eludes to his rivalry with Willie Green. But given the circumstance of Green's alliance with the White mayor of Los Angeles, audiences clearly would have associated the "lion" with White society and the "monkey" with Black society. Dolemite creator, Rudy Ray Moore began his rise to stardom as a comedian, and the film and a majority of its characters are based on his lyrical poetry. Despite the obscene amount of violence displayed throughout the film, Dolemite used *his wits* (employing an army of Kung-Fu fighting prostitutes, teaming up with the FBI, and Black separatists) in order to defeat Green and his powerful White allies to retake his territory. In fact, Dolemite, prior to be incarcerated, planned for his own downfall and saved a substantial amount of money allowing him to rebuy his club (the base of his territory) from Green before the final show down. In many ways, *Dolemite* can be consider one of the first parodies of the Blaxploitation sub-genre, born out of the lyrical language of Rudy Ray Moore. The entire film can be construed as one long visual poem. The cleverness and cunning of Black language often prevailed alongside brute force in a number of films.

Blaxploitation employed the mastery of European language in addition to slang quite frequently in order to reflect its Black characters as equal to, if not better than, its White characters. In *Black Caesar,* the fictional story of the rise and fall of Harlem kingpin Tommy Gibbs, Italian mob boss Cardoza is convinced to turn over to him a plot of territory in Harlem to Gibbs after he

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[34] Rudy Ray Moore, prod., *Dolemite* (Los Angeles: Dimensions Pictures, 1975).

orders a traditional Italian dish in perfect accent-free Sicilian. Gibbs speaks Sicilian as a second language so well that it confounds the native speaker sitting in front of him.[35] *Black Caesar* disrupted the racist binaries found in earlier films by making its White characters look wildly uncivilized in comparison. In contrast, in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* after coming to the realization that the cotton bale containing $87,000 has been unwittingly picked up by Bud the junk man, O'Malley's White accomplice Calhoun (named for one of the most famous pro slavery politicians) goes to Bud's home in order to intimidate him into returning it and is instead met by a Black nationalist named Barry who asks "Ain't you a long way from where you live?"[36] *Cotton* reconceives racial binaries by making its White characters look weak in comparison. In Blaxploitation, "power" entailed a mixture of language and method. Calhoun's response to the language originated through the delivery of the language, a mixture of brains and brawn. Blaxploitation reframed victimization into a game of wits, in which fashion and language became more important tools than brute strength.

Blaxploitation's reimagining of Black/White relations best illustrated of this distortion of symbols. The films portrayed a world in which Blackness existed in cultural parity (if not dominance) to White society, and dramatically modified the real-life victimization of the Black community by law enforcement and the carceral state. Blaxploitation films, both studio productions, played up both integrationists' and separatists' narratives that focused on Black/White racial cooperation while immersing their characters in exclusively Black spaces. African Americans in political spaces could only have meaningful political power in two circumstances: when they formed coalitions with Whites in which serious compromises needed to be made (traditional) or by creating completely separate political spheres in which Blacks constitute a majority (radical).[37] Blaxploitation subverted the notion of Black victimization by portraying worlds in which

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[35] Larry Cohen, Benjamin Fisz, Kenneth Rive, prod., *Black Caesar* (Los Angeles: Larco, 1973).
[36] Samuel Goldwyn Jr., prod., *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Los Angeles: Formosa Productions, 1970).
[37] Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent,* 358.

coalescing with Whites took place without compromise. They refocused racial tensions as disagreements and confrontations between individuals, not communities. The best example of this is the film *Shaft*. John Shaft is tasked with locating the kidnapped daughter of notorious Harlem crime lord Bumpy Jonas. The police, desperate to prevent a brewing race war, implore Shaft to be their eyes and ears on the ground.[38] By the 1970s, Black neighborhoods within urban centers like Harlem, Oakland, Los Angeles among others had come to represent spaces where Whites wielded less control over Blacks after a series of rebellions had rocked America less than a decade earlier.[39] Despite threatening to revoke Shaft's private detective license, effectively leaving him destitute and at the mercy of gangsters, the film goes out of its way to show that Police Captain Vic Androzzi lacked any type of authority in Harlem. His threats are tinged with desperation as he beseeches Shaft to "just tell [him] the name of the game so [he] know[s] the rules."[40] Even independent films such as *Dolemite* played to these integrationist fantasies with the initial plot hinging on an alliance between the titular character and the FBI.[41] Blaxploitation reworked this trope by placing emphasis on Black cooperation over White. While African Americans rarely relied on the White detectives for protection from the system, Black cooperation in navigating Black spaces and displaying dominance within them proved far more crucial.

In contrast, most real and consequential compromises faced in Blaxploitation involved "good" Blacks teaming up with "deviant" Blacks for the betterment of the community. Blaxploitation's heroes often made conciliations when working with gangsters, drug dealers, drug addicts and militant Black nationals. In Shaft's introductory meeting with Bumpy Jonas, after demanding that the

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[38] Joel Freeman, prod., *Shaft* (Los Angeles: MGM, 1971).
[39] Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black against Empire*, 62-67, 148, 210-213. Hansi Lo Wang. "50 Years Before Ferguson, A Summer of Riots Wracked the U.S." *NPR*, August 24, 2014. https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/08/24/342170766/50-years-before-ferguson-a-summer-of-riots-racked-the-u-s.
[40] Joel Freeman, prod., *Shaft* (Los Angeles: MGM, 1971).
[41] Rudy Ray Moore, prod., *Dolemite* (Los Angeles: Dimensions Pictures, 1975).

kingpin get out of his chair, he initially believes that Jonas wants him to aid in pushing narcotics. Jonas' reasoning for hiring Shaft had nothing to do with drugs, nor respect. He hired him because he was a "Black spade detective" who had "his other foot whitey's crawl."[42] He then teams up with Black nationalists wanted by the police. Similarly, in *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, detectives Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson rely on various street people in order to locate the Harlem community's missing $87,000.[43] In *Black Caesar*, after coming upon a ledger detailing all of the city's illegal dealings with the mafia and blackmailing the cop that injured him as child in to full compliance, he becomes the kingpin of Harlem. Despite reservations, his two childhood friends, Joe Washington and Reverend Rufus, agree to aid him under the false promise that the gains made by their criminal enterprise will go to improving Harlem.[44] Blaxploitation mangled the meanings and symbols of victimization in Black/White relations by highlighting the acts of defiance that often took place within them. African American relations with other African Americans in popular culture (rather than Black/White relations), however, now came to represent spaces where moral and ethical compromises would need to be made.

"He's a Bad Motha": Black Deviance in Blaxploitation

Blaxploitation's use of deviance transformed cinematic depictions of African-American defiance in popular culture from emasculation by a hostile white society to the "bad mothas" that would define African Americans for the next four decades. The films reconstructed race relations in urban America by creating a world where White domination was met with Black defiance. In a larger sense, they skewed the symbols of law and order that postwar order and the Civil Rights Movement had been built on. The image of pimps, drug dealers, con man and prostitutes in Blaxploitation portrayed them not as aberrations from the norm

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[42] Joel Freeman, prod., *Shaft* (Los Angeles: MGM, 1971).
[43] Samuel Goldwyn Jr., prod., *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Los Angeles: Formosa Productions, 1970).
[44] Larry Cohen, Benjamin Fisz, Kenneth Rive, prod., *Black Caesar* (Los Angeles: Larco, 1973).

nor as inherent products of African American society, but as direct consequences of a society that idealized the esoteric concept of the American Dream while ignoring the harsh realities of economic inequality.[45] The films explored that dichotomy of those ideals by exploring urban Black America as a tale of two cities: a world of excess and abundance, and another of suffering and hardship. Blaxploitation reworked the idea of Black "power", contorting the notions of consumerism in 1970s America.

As the wealth disparity between the rich and the poor became more prevalent in the 1970s, many Blaxploitation films came to represent the insidious and pervasive problems with the American dream, quickly becoming familiar to urban audiences. A world of excess and vice best illustrated the American Dream in Blaxploitation films. Films like *Super Fly* and *Black Caesar* all relied on a gritty essentialism in depicting the Black experience, seemingly hailing resistance and violent revolt against White society as a necessary to achieve desired social and economic change. Activists like Ethel Mae Mathews and Eva Davis had long decried the assimilationist view that all African Americans could achieve the American Dream regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into.[46] In reality, most films misrepresented Black Power through their use of excessive crime and violence as a means of achieving individualistic and materialistic goals. In *Super Fly*, Priest obtains the American Dream through his life as a drug pusher. He owns a luxurious apartment, drives an impressive car, dresses in the hippest fashion, and commands a small army of dealers. His partner, Eddie, described the American Dream as an "eight-track stereo, a color television in every room and [the ability to] snort a half piece of dope every day."[47] Dolemite, in addition to all his material wealth, easily bought back his club from Willie Green using a nest egg saved from his years as a pimp.[48] Despite the widespread belief that talent and hard work laid the key to success in America,

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[45] Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent, 7,* 22.
[46] Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 426-429.
[47] Sig Shore, prod., *Super Fly* (Los Angeles: Superfly, 1972).
[48] Rudy Ray Moore, prod., *Dolemite* (Los Angeles: Dimensions Pictures, 1975).

economic and social inequality presented a major roadblock for Black upward mobility even after legislative gains of the 1960s.[49] Blaxploitation reworked a core pop culture myth about the American Dream and African Americans: respectable behavior would earn Black people respect from White society. In a number of films, very "unrespectable" people enjoyed very respectable existences, much to the chagrin a number of Civil Rights organizations.

This is not to say that Blaxploitation advocated for consumerism via illegal activity. Quite the opposite. In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Black Caesar* and *Dolemite* humiliation, destitution and in most cases, death usually followed over-indulgence in excess and illegal activity. These states of being would not have confused urban Black audiences as they were common critiques of consumerism. In *Black Caesar* Gibbs' refusal to honor his promises to invest in legitimate programs to improve Harlem leaves his business partner disillusioned and resentful.[50] The allure of the American Dream leaves Gibbs with no allies, and his broken promises leaves him with no community as well. Yet while highly critiquing consumerism on the one hand, Blaxploitation refused to condemn it completely. Films like *Shaft* played into more human emotions in dealing with Black deviance and consumerism. Bumpy Jonas might be a crime lord, but he also a concerned father who would pay anything for the safe return of his daughter and who happens to have very deep pockets thanks to his criminal activity. Similarly, with *Super Fly*, Priest comes to realize that his life of excess is a one-way street to humiliation, destitution and death and decides to get out while he still can. Of course, this involves a ludicrous plan in which Priest will be able to walk away for the business with all of his drug money. Tommy Gibbs in *Black Caesar* gained his power and respectability by buying into the system. Priest, on the other hand, transcends the system in its entirety. Through his cunning and wit, Priest is able to walk away, not humbly but triumphantly. This system is left intact but exposed. By the end of the movie, the audience probably believed he deserved the money. Consumerism won they day in

[49] Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 427.
[50] Larry Cohen, Benjamin Fisz, Kenneth Rive, prod., *Black Caesar* (Los Angeles: Larco, 1973).

Blaxploitation by highlighting by making its audiences distorted their own preconceived notions up respectability and root for a drug lord to win.

Blaxploitation's portrayal of suffering and hardship of African American communities contrasted its portrayal of excess by the 1970s. After World War II, many African American communities fell into to ruin as industries began laying off African American workers due the labor surplus, especially in the 1970s. Civil Rights organizations like the NAACP often disregarded the social and economic causes of inequality in favor of fighting the legal and political barriers that oppressed African Americans.[51] *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Super Fly* highlighted the disparity between Black poverty and excess in their opening scenes. In *Cotton* as spiritual leader/con man Deacon O'Malley's Bentley, flanked by broken down buildings, burnt out cars and junkies in the streets, drives through Harlem followed by a golden armored truck containing $87,000.[52] In *Super Fly*, after leaving his white girlfriend's Manhattan apartment, a junkie immediately robs Priest upon returning to Harlem. After chasing the thief back to what we presume his apartment, the audience comes to realization that the robber stole the money to feed his family.[53] A significant number of films centered on the deviance of African Americans, particularly ones who victimized *other, less fortunate* African Americans. Blaxploitation moved away from the previous decades focus on White supremacy by repositioning the roles of victim and victimizer. Because films like *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Superfly*, *Black Caesar*, and *Dolemite* respectively concentrated the individualistic and often material causes of oppression over the societal and political causes, their immediate conflicts often revolved Black victimizers. "The Man", the nameless and faceless apparition whose soul existence within Blaxploitation represented the underlined White supremacy that permeated across the African American experience, was rarely the true antagonist. Black on Black victimization became a new way

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[51] See Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black against Empire*. Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent.*

[52] Samuel Goldwyn Jr., prod., *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Los Angeles: Formosa Productions, 1970).

[53] Sig Shore, prod., *Super Fly* (Los Angeles: Superfly, 1972).

of illustrating the failures of Civil Rights in obtaining economic equality. In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Deke has no intention of using the money for the community. Secretly working with a White partner, he plans on bamboozling the poor devoted residents. Despite the fact that O'Malley teams up with a White man, he is not written as a stereotypical "Uncle Tom".[54] Rather than a "Tom" or race traitor, terms steeped in political and historical implications, Deacon O'Malley is simply presented as a selfish asshole. This is evident in detective Coffin Ed Johnson's declaration, "How the hell did he get a permit for this?"[55]

Characters like Deacon O'Malley, Tommy Gibbs, Youngblood Priest and Willie Green showed that most African Americans in the 1970s strove for White opportunities, like money and power. Blaxploitation never downplayed the structural inequalities that existed, which often compelled unsuspecting African Americans to fall O'Malley's con, and often emphasized the individualistic and material reasons behind the con. Similarly, in *Black Caesar* Tommy Gibbs' road to the top of the Harlem crime world is paved with broken promises of revitalizing the community.[56] Blaxploitation plots usually played off of the growing break with the pragmatist wing of the Civil Rights movement that emphasized a limited form of sociopolitical activism born out of a life of negotiating under White supremacy.[57] Blaxploitation inadvertently underscored the real-life roadblocks that hindered upward mobility and made success by any means necessary an essential component of societal respect. Priest best illustrated this when his Black girlfriend begs him to leave the life without attempting his "big score", retorting: "If I quit now then I took all this chance for nothing, and I go back to being nothing, working some jive job for chump change day after day. Look, if that's all I'm supposed to do, then they gonna

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[54] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks,* 2-3.
[55] Samuel Goldwyn Jr., prod., *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Los Angeles: Formosa Productions, 1970).
[56] Larry Cohen, Benjamin Fisz, Kenneth Rive, prod., *Black Caesar* (Los Angeles: Larco, 1973).
[57] Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 19.

have to kill me, because that ain't nothing."[58] Blaxploitation's use of consumerism dramatized the growing belief that economic self-sufficiency constituted the ideological soul of the market.[59] Films like *Black Caesar* and to a lesser extent *Dolemite* and *Super Fly* not only valorize the opulence and excess of the criminal lifestyle they, more than any other film movement that preceded it, continually asked the question "What exactly is the American Dream?"

Conclusion: Uplift in Blaxploitation

Blaxploitation's use of righteous uplift emphasized the continued struggle, deviant behavior and the means African-Americans used to overcome them both. The films reworked the ideas around social uplift and social uncertainty in Black-oriented films. Despite the negative portrayals of the Black experience often featured, Blaxploitation emphasized an innovative form of Black strength that emphasized a rejection of Black responsibility in racial oppression. Unlike previous films Blaxploitation films often ended with subtle yet blistering commentary about White culpability in social unrest. Though endings in Blaxploitation never resulted in systematic change, the social commentaries they made often resonated more with urban audiences than previous saccharine and predictable endings of the previous generation.[60]

In earlier films like *A Raisin in the Sun*, commercially successful with White audiences, seemingly mocked those who were too scared to stand up for their rights and accepted racial oppression as the unchallenged status quo. Following the Younger family from south Chicago as they attempt to improve their financial circumstances after the death of the family patriarch leads to a large insurance payout, the film begins and ends with the family a spot of social and financial uncertainty. The film's main character Walter loses the insurance money that was

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[58] Sig Shore, prod., *Super Fly* (Los Angeles: Superfly, 1972).
[59] Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 121-127. Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working-Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 219.
[60] Sieving, *Soul-Searching,* 2-3.

supposed to be used to purchase a house in a White neighborhood after his business partner skips town with the money. In addition, the family meets extreme resistance from the soon-to-be neighbors who eschew the idea of having a Black family in the neighborhood. In the end the Youngers decide to fulfill their uncertain and slightly dangerous dream of escaping their urban working-class lives, at least residentially.[61] Films like *A Raisin in the Sun* relied on the middle-class belief that optimism, hard work and family would overcome anything.[62]

While Hollywood interference watered down most of the verbose meaning of Hansberry's stage play, the ambiguous ending of her play reflected the dramatic differences between Blaxploitation and earlier forms of African American expression. Blaxploitation films abhorred any type of ambiguity. Sentimentality was one thing. The audience needed to feel connected to the (often deviant) characters that Blaxploitation featured. The films restructured racial uplift around personal success, reframing racial oppression as a "White problem", not a Black one. Uplift in *Shaft* revolved around him solving the case. After safely returning Bumpy Jonas' kidnapped daughter, Shaft calls Lieutenant Androzzi to inform him that he "busted his case wide open". When Androzzi asks him to close it for him, clearly confused to who he is talking to, Shaft quickly reminds him that it is not his job to prevent unrest in Harlem. [63] Similarly, in *Dolemite*, after the successful take down of Willie Green and the corrupt Los Angeles city officials, Dolemite returns to his life of deviance completely shunning anything further role in the uplift of the Black community than he has already given.[64] Escaping twenty years in prison and regaining his nightclub from Willie Green was his success. In *Super Fly*, Priest faces no consequences for the destruction his drug pushing has caused the Harlem

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[61] Philip Rose, David Susskind, prod. *A Raisin in the Sun (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1961).*

[62] See Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire*. Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent.* Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*. Steve Estes, *I am a Man!*.

[63] Joel Freeman, prod., *Shaft* (Los Angeles: MGM, 1971).

[64] Moore, Rudy Ray, prod., *Dolemite* (Los Angeles: Dimensions Pictures, 1975).

community.[65] In an interview with Ron O'Neal shortly before he died, he stated that cocaine (the drug sold by Priest), was a White people drug, and that Priest illegal activities most likely had little effect on the Harlem community in reality.[66] This is not to say that structural and racial inequality no longer affected Black characters. Racial animosity reverberates through the films like a tuning fork. It just no longer defined them. Unlike in earlier films, characters and their stories were no longer chained to larger struggle for racial equality.

Though Blaxploitation incorporated various strains African American ideologies coming out the 1960s, emphasizing resistance to victimization but still adhering to assimilationists views. Still, it radically changed they African American stereotypes and symbols in popular culture and, more importantly, the way African Americans viewed themselves and each other. Blaxploitation restructured Black America into a succinct and identifiable second American culture by downplaying the African-American community's continued struggles in White society and distorting the cultural material produced by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Blaxploitation allowed its audience to be emotionally involved with the characters, active with them, and aware of their own personal relationship to racial oppression while still distancing them from the personal biases that often hinder their real-deliberations. The audience did not merely feel bad for them. From the safety of theater, the audience was allowed to feel bad with them. Blaxploitation acted against the dominant ideology of respectability, victimization, deviance and uplift not by simply try to escape those ideas or assimilate with in it. Rather, the films took the cultural logic of each and mangled their symbols from within because the cultural material was so easily relatable. Focusing on these often-denigrated portrayals of black experiences can shed light on how various groups of people shaped cultural practices in their own interests while strengthening an outward sense of collective group identity.

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[65] Sig Shore, prod., *Superfly* (Los Angeles: Superfly, 1972).

[66] David Waker, Andrew J. Rausch and Chris Watson, "An Interview with Ron O'Neal" from *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2009), 137.