

Renaming Blaxploitation by Looking at Today's Film:
Black Heroes, White Villains, and Trump's America

A Thesis

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Introduction

White directors, producers, writers, actors, and film studios have, of course, dominated the American film industry since its inception. Early depictions of Black people, from the 19th century minstrel shows of White actors in Black face and offensive or stereotypical animated films to the narrow typecasting of Black actors from the late 1920s onward, have been produced for the White gaze by White men. The Black community had thus never established a popularized aesthetic of its own or been the owner of that gaze that was catered to by film.

It was not until the 1970s that Black film aesthetics were popularized with the creation of a genre referred to as blaxploitation. Blaxploitation has been recognized as beginning as early as 1966, but most critics mark its origin in the production of Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's BaadAsssss Song* (1971) and its decline in the mid-1970s. The genre includes approximately seventy feature-length films, which were typically action movies, created by Black casts and crews for a Black audience — marking the first time in history that Hollywood studios made use of Black production.

The naming of the genre separates these mainstream action movies that were backed and advertised by Hollywood studios and that garnered large Black audiences from Black independent films that were neither supported nor funded by Hollywood studios and did not have as large an audience. The origin of the term “blaxploitation” is a contentious one: film scholar Jesse Algeron Rhines attributes the term to a *Variety* magazine article in 1971 (later offering the more specific rumor that a White *Variety* film critic first wrote it), while documentarian Fred Williamson claims that the term was created and circulated by Black political groups like the NAACP (qtd in Koven 5). Regardless of who created it, however, it is an inartful term that harmfully characterized Black film during its prime, continues to taint its evaluation today, and

alters its impacts on contemporary Black film/representation. The term was based on the already-established commercial genre of filmmaking: exploitation film, which refers to films that feature sensational topics such as drug usage, sex, and violence (Kenna 205); however, rather than simply referring to exploitative film production done by Black filmmakers, the term accused films of exploiting Black audiences and Black culture (Kenna 201).

This thesis seeks to reframe the genre by evaluating its parallels to Black film of the last decade and analyzing the discrepancies in treatment between these two eras of Black film in terms of both economic exploitation and representational exploitation. Furthermore, I call for a recharacterization of the earlier grouping of films because the works were both popular among and culturally important to Black audiences. When referring to previous literature written about the genre, I will use those authors' language in an effort to be accurate and consistent in describing their ideas. For the purposes of my own original arguments, however, I will be referring to those "blaxploitation" films simply as Black films, Black films of the 1970s, or Black action films, dependent on the context of their use.

Blaxploitation has been a relatively unstudied genre compared to other genres of film, but when it has been discussed, critics have typically treated it as an important but misguided or even harmful area of film. It wasn't until the twenty-first century that a reframing of blaxploitation has arisen in critical scholarly works, calling for a more holistic look at the genre's socio-political context rather than simply its aesthetics. These reframings also criticize the implications of the term blaxploitation, but more work must be done to recharacterize the films entirely and end the association of "Black exploitation" with Black-made film of the 1970s. Furthermore, while studying modern film illuminates the way in which current works are predicated upon and have been influenced by those films of the '70s, much can be gained by analyzing how our treatment

of modern film models a different approach than the historical treatment of those older “blaxploitation” movies. To understand modern day film and Black film of the 1970s, however, we must first understand the long tradition of Black commodification in the United States. The relationship between Blacks and Whites begins, of course, with Americans selling and using Black people as tools and property. Even after the abolition of slavery, tumultuous race relations affected nearly every aspect of Black life and culture and continues to affect it today. Understanding the history of America’s relationship to Black people and Blackness itself is integral to understanding the history of Black film and the ways in which Black film aesthetics have always inherently been a response to the social and political restrictions White people placed on Black people.

Black Commodification: From Slavery to Advertising to Blackface

The cultural and sociopolitical history of the commodification of Blackness and Black people spans many centuries and contexts. The foundation of the practice extends back to slavery and colonialism, and, after slavery was outlawed, commodification has since taken forms such as appropriation and fetishization; however, because the historical background is so vast, I will discuss only a few particular aspects of slavery that have paved the way for this commodification, as well as the start of post-slavery commodification in the 1870s through advertisements and blackface (which began in the 1820s but persisted past the Civil War).

The institution of slavery ascribed a market value to human life. This practice established a long-held valuing of the Black body for what it could do for White people. The Black male body was objectified for its strength, which was useful in fieldwork and thus was profitable, while the Black female body was fetishized and objectified in a sexual manner, subject to sexual abuse by White masters, in addition to its use in the field and home.

While Africans and then African-Americans were treated as goods, they were not handled in the same way that *goods*, a term that connotes that an item is valued and intrinsically worthy, were. Early depictions of Black people in popular culture were portrayed by White actors in an overtly offensive way. Slaves were seen as beneficial possessions — property — but in looking at historical accounts of slave treatment, they were also demonized both by, paradoxically, separating the Black person from their body and by deeply relating the two. Slaves were seen as valuable for the work they were able to conduct with their physical bodies but were treated as intellectually, morally, and socially lesser, separating the body from the mind; slaves were also, however, dominated and punished through an abuse of the physical body in the form of rape, whipping, and other abhorrent treatment, asserting that the person is also reducible to the body. These two contradictory patterns of oppression and the solidification of Black as other/lesser would persist throughout popular culture both during and after slavery.

As early as the 1820s, White performers constructed acts that they referred to as “Ethiopian delineation,” which were overtly racist theatricals in which the White performers wore blackface and pretended to be slaves, literally taking away Black people’s bodily autonomy (Toll). One of the most famous acts appeared first in Kentucky in the late 1820s, wherein Thomas D. “Daddy” Rice performed blackface to imitate a Black crippled stable hand he had seen named Jim Crow. The act included a dance and song, “Jumping Jim Crow,” and was performed to crowds of thousands of people (Toll).

The success of “Jumping Jim Crow” led to the continuation of blackface performance throughout the 1830s and the first full-length show of blackface entertainment in 1842. The latter performance was created by four Ethiopian delineators who called themselves the Virginia Minstrels (and later performed for President John Tyler at the White House) and led to the rise of

the minstrel show, minstrel troupes, and minstrel houses around the nation throughout the 1840s-1870s (Toll). The institution of minstrelsy was yet another avenue for stereotyping Black individuals as lazy and of a lesser intelligence than Whites, demeaning them to a nearly subhuman level.

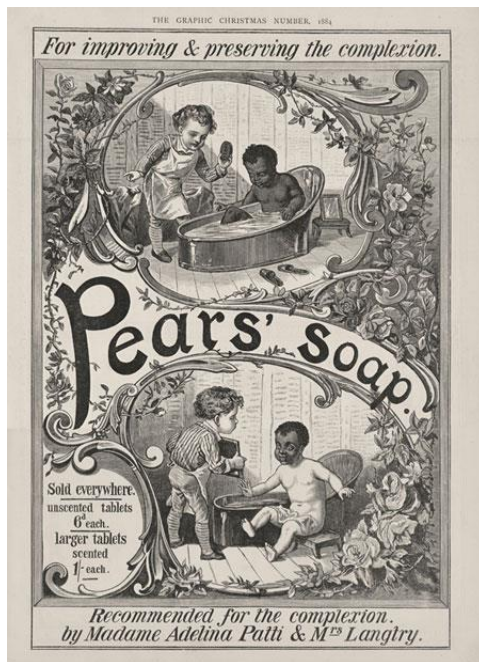


Figure 1

Blackness away. A Pear's soap ad (fig. 1) from 1884 exemplifies this theme with a young Black boy immersing himself in a tub and coming out with White skin everywhere that the water/soup had touched (Amato 53).

Similarly, advertisements for actual commodities like "Darkey in a Watermelon" (year unknown), which was a papier-mâché watermelon in which a "little pickaninny, southern darky with cloth diaper...and a small nursing bottle" could be found (fig. 2), not only sentimentalized Blackness and transformed it into a palatable, non-threatening characteristic but also used this now-acceptable Blackness to sell

In marketing campaigns for material goods, Black people were similarly depicted — the Black body was reduced to infantile or cartoonish imagery, which was then tied to the Black man or woman, portraying them as objects of laughter or othering for the purpose of legitimizing sales. African-Americans first appeared in advertisements in the 1870s (AdAge). Popular advertisements that used these tactics included several soap ads in which a Black child that wanted to be White or was ostracized by White children washed his

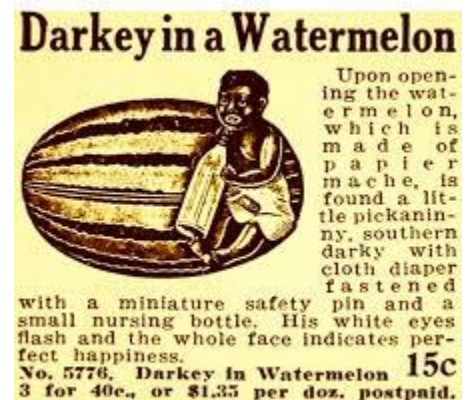


Figure 2

product (Barton 82). The advertisement goes on to say, “His White eyes flash and the whole face indicates perfect happiness.” While the “other” is portrayed as savage and primitive in minstrel shows, it is also viewed as exotic and interesting — something intriguing that the White man must own for himself.

Black faces, bodies, and stereotypical personalities of the mammy, Tom, or coon (which would later be seen in film) were comforting to White audiences, as they made them feel like they not only understood the “other” but that they were better than it. For example, Aunt Jemima, a character created in 1890s to sell pancake mix based on minstrel show portrayals of Black women (Davis 6), was played by Nancy Green, a former slave who was born into servitude (Davis 6). While Green would be freed in 1865 with the abolition of slavery, her image would essentially be owned by the company, selling thousands of pancakes with a catchy tune and a friendly personality. After Green’s death, the company hired several women to portray this mammy figure (Davis 7).

This informal and still legal ownership of Black individuals continued well into the 1900s with the creation of Uncle Ben in 1943 (Carney). Though Uncle Ben was an actual rice farmer named Ben, he was used as a marketing tactic by a White -owned company and given the name “Uncle.” The ugly truth behind the names Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima is that White slave owners and children would refer to house slaves by the title of Uncle or Aunt (Carney). Both characters are depicted as jovial, fat, and/or elderly (the typical depiction of the Tom or the mammy), connecting the Black individual to a non-threatening body. These palatable caretakers were a comfort to White consumers and still are to this day. In this manner, White America is able to control the image of Black people to maintain the social and political hierarchy that places White on top and to economically gain from that image.

Early Black Depictions in Film: Bogle's Stereotypes

In the same manner that Black people were depicted as naïve and innocent in early post-slavery advertisements to project the White fantasy of an acceptable racial hierarchy between Whites and Blacks, American film has often used these same tactics, whether consciously or unconsciously, to include Black people in film while maintaining a racial hierarchy. Donald Bogle, in his 1973 book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, posits that throughout the history of post-bellum American film, Black men and women have been portrayed in five stereotypical roles: The Tom as complicit and supportive of White people as well as his own oppression; the coon as the Black buffoon — lazy and unreliable; the mullato, or “tragic mullato,” as a mixed-raced character who struggles with identity; the mammy as an obedient Black woman who is often motherly, large, and/or loud and takes care of White families; and the Buck as a hyper-masculine Black man who is at best violent and at worst brutish and criminal. Bogle attributes the on-screen depiction of these five stereotypes in films to portrayals by actors such as (by years active) Ethel Waters, Hattie McDaniel, Stepin Fetchit, Sammy Davis Jr., Dorothy Dandridge, Sidney Poitier, Richard Pryor, Danny Glover, Eddie Murphy, and Whoopi Goldberg (Bogle 13).

Fetchit was the first Black male actor shown on screen, and he produced millions of dollars with his acting career, which was solidified by stereotypical roles that often fit the coon template; Fetchit's typical character trope was referred to as “the Laziest Man in the World,” such as in his role of Gummy in *Hearts in Dixie* (1929). Later, in the 1950s, Poitier tended to play the role of characters who “knew the White world meant him no real harm...He differed from the old servants only in that he was governed by a code of decency, duty, and moral intelligence” (Bogle 53). It is extremely important to note here that roles free of stereotyping did

not exist for Black actors, and Black people were forced to play in these five racist roles if they wanted an on-screen career, which is pertinent to the discussion of exploitation.

In fact, the first Academy-recognized Black actor/actress was Hattie McDaniel in 1940 for her portrayal of “Mammy” in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) (Abramovitch). McDaniel would later go on to only play these typecast roles of the Black maid, illustrating that Black actors had to comply with White Hollywood’s racist practices simply to make it on screen. Though roles were narrow and representation was comparatively sparse, Black actors were able to take those few opportunities and make their own changes to the industry. Although McDaniel’s only roles were the stereotypical Mammy, she gave greater legitimacy to Black actors and made her own positive contribution to the film: McDaniel’s refusal to say the N-word made it so that the racial slur never made it on screen for that film. Black actors during McDaniel’s time and thereafter took full advantage of what few opportunities they were afforded, leading circuitously to their very own Black visual culture decades later.

The New Genre: Blaxploitation and its Reception

From slavery to some of the first depictions of Blacks in popular culture via advertising, Black actors have always had to contend with a history of racism in representations. Accepting what roles they could was a necessity for making it on-screen, but the genre of blaxploitation¹ represents a breaking of these roles and a new addition to Black film. Whether that genre positively represents Black culture and Black aesthetic, however, is a matter of debate.

Critics argue that the rise of the genre came from the economic decline of Hollywood film studios in the 1960s due to an increased general interest in television (Ongiri 160), the civil

¹ [1] This section relies on research from Amy Abugo Ongiri’s *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*, Ed Guerrero’s *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, and Mark Reid’s *Redefining Black Film*

rights movement (Lawrence 1), and the growth of a Black middle class (Kraszeski 52); for the first time, Hollywood and other pop culture outlets were inclined to care about the Black consumer and her or his desires. As such, the genre reflects an era of Black filmmakers attempting to develop their own unique visual culture or aesthetic for an audience of people starving for their own representations and established gaze.

Gaze (the view of the audience or the spectator that is both catered to by the producers of the visuals themselves and dictates how that visual will be consumed and received) is important in evaluating the genre, as it is a genre geared toward a people who previously had been systematically neglected or prevented from being recognized as gazers. bell hooks, in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, defines the concept of the Black spectator's gaze through the term "oppositional gaze":

The politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied the right to gaze. I knew that the slaves had looked. The attempts to repress our/Black people's right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declare: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality. (116)

Similar to hooks' assertion that the historical denial of the Black gaze has foundationally colored Black gazes from then on, Manthia Diawara's "resistant spectatorship" argues that White and Black spectators have notably different experiences when acting as viewers; for the Black community, she argues, viewership or the act of witnessing is a tool for social change. Diawara contends that Black people have long since witnessed social and political injustices and documented them in whatever way they could, from storytelling to abolitionist papers and eventually film.

Situating blaxploitation within this type of cultural and consumerist oppression provides a way into understanding the genre through a sociological lens and as a response to previous depictions of Black people by and for White people. For hooks, the oppositional gaze “opens up possibility of agency itself” (289). Blaxploitation represents a time period wherein Black filmmakers seized upon a new opportunity for agency in their own visual culture (created by Hollywood’s financial difficulties) to create an image that combated previous depictions of Black culture, life, and people.

However, previous evaluations of blaxploitation, both during the genre’s active days and afterward, have criticized the films for their depictions of both Black people and class relations, attributing to the whole of blaxploitation as a genre the moniker of “false consciousness,” as Amy Abugo Ongiri calls it (164). In 1972, several civil rights organizations combined to create the Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB) and refused to recognize the genre as Black film (some cite CAB as coining the term “blaxploitation” itself), critiquing its reliance on sex, drugs, and criminality (Kenna 201). Film critics and Black nationalists alike considered the films to have a “false” Black aesthetic and to be demeaning or degrading to the community because of their stereotypical/one-dimensional roles of both Black men and women.

Black viewers of the ‘70s and critics today widely recognize that the appeal of blaxploitation lies in its reversals of stereotypes — born from films of the 1930s onward — for Black men and even women and plots that rely heavily on a Black lead who fights authority figures and systemic racism. Many critics cite these popular elements to suggest that blaxploitation films “provide a dangerously simplistic fantasy of African American masculine hyper empowerment, which has the effect of making American audiences more passive about the real injustices that African Americans face” (qtd in Ongiri 176). For the Black community —

filmmakers and viewers — however, the films are not reducible to a simple positive or negative depiction. From a critical race theory perspective, there are several ways to view the depictions of Black culture in blaxploitation movies, but they are not as mutually exclusive as they may first appear to be. While Black male leads that are reduced to their hypermasculine traits of violence and a voracious sexuality and Black women that are treated as sex symbols can create or reinforce negative stereotypes of Black people (as a reduction to only one or a few characteristics almost always does), these depictions, with consideration of the concept of hooks' oppositional gaze or Diawara's resistant spectatorship, also exhibit an intentional reversal of typical mainstream movies made for the White gaze.

Complicating our evaluations of blaxploitation further is the aspect of commodification that pervades the entire genre: though Black production teams were hired to write, direct, star in the films, these production teams were hired by White film studios to create and sell Blackness to a Black audience. Furthermore, Hollywood catered to an audience that was so lucrative precisely because it had previously been excluded by the very film studios that now sought not to *promote* nationalism but to *sell it* in order to survive film's declining economic state. An *Ebony* article on blaxploitation entitled, "The New Films: Culture of Con Game?" argued that while the films were made for Black audiences, White studios "[made] it difficult for Black artists to work with any degree of integrity" (qtd in Kenna 212). The question is, were these films themselves exploitative or were the studios simply exploitative? Could the answer be both or neither?

More recent critics such as Mikel J. Koven (2010), Yvonne D. Sims (2006), Novotny Lawrence & Gerald R. Butters, Jr. (2016), Jon Kraszewski (2002), and Ongiri (2010) have all sought to reframe the scholastic and critical view of blaxploitation pointing to the positive aspects of the genre and what it has done for both the Black community and Black film;

however, the term “blaxploitation” and the understanding that *all* films under this genre were Black, exploitative, and exploitatively Black still persist despite their work. This is not a criticism of their works — each of which have been influential to film criticism — so much as a way in which to highlight the need for more works of their nature and more defense of the genre itself.

The socio-political factors of the 1960s and 1970s such as Jim Crow laws and White culture’s processing of the civil rights movement, along with a history of oppression and forced oppositional gaze, audience reception, and the intentions of the film making hierarchy, are all integral in fairly evaluating blaxploitation’s contribution to Black film and its legacy — an evaluation that then becomes essential to the evaluation of Black film today. In the same manner that blaxploitation had to contend with a history of a suppressed Black visual culture or tradition and an offensive representation in White visual culture, film of the 2000s must contend with — on top of that more distant history — the dialogue surrounding the blaxploitation genre.

Culprits of Exploitation in Black film

I will discuss two types of exploitation in Black film: economic exploitation and representational exploitation. Opponents of Black action films of the 1970s generally argue that the films are exploitative for either one or both of these reasons. Economic exploitation, analyzed at length in Jon Kraszewski’s “Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation: Articulations of Class, Black Nationalism, and Anxiety in the Genre's Advertisements" in the context of Black film refers primarily to the exploitation of Black audiences through targeted, often manipulative advertising. Representational exploitation, however, refers to the content of the actual film and its representation of Black life and Black culture.

The most common arguments against blaxploitation films are that the films and their Black filmmakers were constricted and controlled by White-owned studios, preventing them from offering an authentic and truthful portrayal of Blacks to audiences, and that these audiences were targeted by cheap appeals to violent and sexual fantasies that undermine the Black power movements at the time. I seek to deconstruct and disprove both of these arguments through the analysis of today's Black film as well as a deeper consideration for the context in which Black action film in the 1970s was produced. In analyzing the distribution of contemporary Black film, it is apparent that the type of economic exploitation that was vilified in the 1970s by groups like the Coalition Against Blaxploitation exists today as well and has allowed for an increase in Black on-screen representation, and has enabled that representation and Black film aesthetics to reach a wider audience. With this knowledge in mind, it is important to revisit those Black action films of the 1970s and to analyze the ways in which their own distribution (while motivated by White studios' desires to make money) may have provided positive opportunities that furthered Black film as a whole. It is also important to review the critical treatment of the representation of those 1970s films and the way in which claims of *misrepresentation* may themselves be problematic. In doing so, we can not only reframe "blaxploitation" film but also relieve today's Black film of the unjust, inhibiting burden of always depicting a "positive" representation of Blackness.

Chapter 1: The Exploitative Advertising of Black Film

Black Narrative, White Audience

The 2010s mark a turning point for mainstream Black film from being confined to certain topical expectations to venturing into more fantastical realms. The 1990s and 2000s produced a long list of Black films — Black films that did well at the box office — but the topics, genre, and

audience for Black film has shifted from realism and historicism to social commentary through more fictionalized narratives. Late 20th century and early 21st century Black film was dominated by directors like John Singleton, Spike Lee, and Tyler Perry who all adopted and contributed to the Black film aesthetic that earlier films had begun. These films, such as *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *Juice* (1992), *Friday* (1995), and *Jungle Fever* (1991) dealt with racial issues such as police brutality, everyday racism, and interracial relationships as well as issues within the Black community including drug and gang culture, Black fatherhood, and Black toxic masculinity and were marketed almost exclusively to a Black audience.

In this manner, much of Black film has been reduced to film for a niche community — not simply by Black people and for Black people, but rather by Black people, only interesting to Black people. From the 1950s to today, the treatment of Black film has been divided into two seemingly large categories that will be discussed at length in chapter two: those that are socially uplifting and “complex” and those that are simple for the sake of entertainment. Those Black films that have been deemed more substantive are often more likely to be enjoyed by White audiences — to be advertised in spaces that are not predominantly Black — and to receive validation in the form of awards. Those Black films that are seen as simpler are often also regarded as less artistic, less innovative, less worthy of award. Advertising tactics flag these movies as B-rate films for entertainment rather than stimulation.

In 2011, however, with the releasing of *The Help*, movies about Black topics with Black casts began to shift more toward the latter category of Black film and were marketed toward White audiences as well. Socio-political factors like the Barack Obama presidency and the success of this Black-topic but primarily White-audience film promoted a shift in Black film advertising and Black film itself. The concept of advertising Black entertainment to White

audiences had been building since 1954, with *Carmen Jones* and 1961, with *A Raisin in the Sun*. A noteworthy Black production advertised to White audiences was the television mini-series *Roots* (1977). But it was after 2011 that both White and Black directors and writers ushered in the success of *several* Black films a year, often rooted in historical stories, that garnered attention from organizations such as The Academy and largely White audiences.

It is important to note that the term “Black film” is a contentious one. There is no consensus on the criteria that makes a film Black or earns it the label. Some critics regard Black film as any film with a Black aesthetic (another term which is ambiguous and frequently argued), while others regard Black film as films with primarily Black casts or Black directors. I define Black film primarily by its aesthetics, which, for the purposes of this essay, refers to its portrayal/inclusion of Black culture. To be a true Black film, it must feature Black characters as the main protagonists and must resonate with Black audiences. I concede that these are broad categorizations, but that is the point; Black film is often too strictly measured, asserting that a film cannot be Black if it is influenced by any White filmmakers or that it is not Black enough because it does not further the Black social movement popular at the time.

Some of those films regarded by both Black and White critics alike as the greatest Black films like *Raisin in the Sun* have presented a storyline, score, screenplay, etc. that resonate with a Black audience but have been developed by a White director. Likewise, some of the most financially successful Black films (thus exhibiting audience approval) have been denounced by both Black and White critics as problematic and simple.

That being said, *The Help* has been criticized by Viola Davis (who plays Aibileen, one of the main characters in the movie) herself for its mistreatment of Black struggle, citing its portrayal of the mammy character and its focus on the voice of its White protagonist, Skeeter. In

doing so, she argues, the movie undermined the theme of the book upon which it was based (which is narrated primarily by the two Black protagonists, Aibileen and Minny). Nonetheless, *The Help* was one of the first films that ushered in a slew of 2010s films dealing with historical Black issues and stories. This string of works is composed of many films that are directed or written by non-Black filmmakers. While those films perceived as “less simple” by critics were still being produced, a multitude of films considered intellectual, artistic, award-worthy, and racially critical flooded the category of Black film at higher rates (in proportion to simpler films) than from the 1970s-the 2000s.

The next two years (2012 to 2013) saw seven films based on the real stories of Black people and an increase in White viewership: *Red Tails* (2012), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *42* (2013), *1982* (2013), *The Butler* (2013), *Fruitvale Station* (2013). White moviegoers comprised 43 percent of the opening audience for *12 Years a Slave* and 55 percent for *The Butler* (McClintock). It’s no coincidence that audience numbers changed from the 7 percent White audience of *Red Tails*, the only movie of this list from 2012, to the 43 percent White audience of *12 Years a Slave* and the 55 percent of *The Butler*, both of which were released in 2013. Several of the top-performing theaters of *12 Years a Slave* and *The Butler* were located in White suburban areas, which were targeted for advertisement (McClintock). Distribution chief of The Weinstein Co., which released *Fruitvale Station* and *The Butler*, Erik Lomis said in an interview, “A quarter of a century ago, these movies wouldn’t have crossed over to a White audience” (qtd. in McClintock). In the following years to the present, White audiences have proved to be consistently interested in Black narratives, encouraging distributors to support Black films that

go beyond biographically-based stories², bringing us to the “trilogy” of new Black film as critics and fans are referring to them, which include *Get Out* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), and *Sorry to Bother You* (2018).

The New Genre: Race Fantasy

Branching out from historical film based on real people and real events, Hollywood has begun to support Black film that presents fictive narratives of race relations and Black life that are still marketed to White people in addition to Black people at increasing numbers since 2015, especially. Of a sizeable roster of these movies including *Dear White People* (2014), *Fences* (2016), and *Moonlight* (2016), I’ve chosen the three primary films of the 2010s because of box office popularity and overt themes of Black/White race relations.

The distribution of *Get Out*, *Black Panther*, and *Sorry to Bother You* exemplifies the monetary motivation Hollywood has in supporting Black film. Each movie of the trilogy was not only distributed after historically rooted Black films proved that Black film could be a financial success among large (and White) audiences but was also distributed following/during the new wave of social justice movements. Both factors established a context in which Black films commenting on race-relations through fantastical elements and fictional stories rather than historical stories with a realism aesthetic could prosper with White audiences.

In a climate of the Black Lives Matter movement, the Me Too movement, and #OscarsSoWhite, it is unsurprising that Hollywood has felt the pressure to support more Black films. In 2014, host of the Oscars Ellen DeGeneres stated, “Possibility number one: *12 Years a Slave* wins best picture. Possibility number two: You’re all racists” (Serwer). Though stated for

² Note: *The Help* was not based on a true story but was an aesthetically authentic period piece that was often treated like it was based on a true story and used the name of the nanny of the book author’s brother as the primary Black character, Aibileen (James)

humor, DeGeneres' statement represents the overtly public ways in which film institutions have been scrutinized for representation and political correctness.

Film scholars and Hollywood representatives often attribute the rise of Black film in the 2010s to Barack Obama's presidency, citing a growing awareness of representation in Hollywood and appeal to racially diverse audiences due to the impact of a Black president as the main factor of change. However, there is a difference between Hollywood becoming more aware of racial representation and thus addressing it for the sake of social equality versus Hollywood realizing that their racist image may harm their profits. While the former may be true in some cases, in all cases it is true that films will always be products in the eyes of profiteers. Therefore, Hollywood will always adapt to what is profitable and do so primarily for the sake of profit.

Targeted Marketing and Economic Interests: 1970s Black Film

The new Black film trilogy of 2017 to 2018 is similar to 1970s Black film deemed "blaxploitation" in the socio-political climate it was distributed in and its treatment by Hollywood film studios and distribution companies. Both eras of these Black films represent a time in which catering to a Black audience was perceived to be economically beneficial to the White-controlled industry. Ed Guerrero explains that Hollywood's economic decline in the late 1960s due to the rise of television coincided with the "rising political and social consciousness of Black people," which Guerrero describes as "taking the form of a broadly expressed Black nationalist impulse at the end of the civil rights movement" (69). I question Guerrero's argument here, proposing instead that the sentiments and consciousness of the civil rights movement of the 1960s may have always been present in the Black community but may have not been so public/apparent to White audiences and the media as it was once Blacks created radical and/or

large organizations like the Black Panther Party (created in 1966 and peaking in membership in 1968 [History.com]).

In any case, this public *display* of Black political and social consciousness and the simple knowledge that Black people made up some portion of potential movie goers were driving factors for Hollywood to distribute Black films and market them to Black audiences from 1970 to 1975. Opponents of the “blaxploitation” genre argued that Hollywood was exploiting Black audiences in this manner, marketing harmful yet appealing movies to audiences they did not care about for financial gain. Marketing to a target audience is a tactic that Hollywood continues to perfect today, distributing most of their poster and on-screen promotions to areas with the highest concentration of the audience projected to be most interested in the film and highlighting specific elements of the movie to appeal to that audience. The marketing of 1970s Black film epitomizes how distributors manipulate the framing and advertising of films based on intended audience.

Novotny Lawrence, in his article “A White Film for a Blaxploitation Audience? The Making and Marketing of *Detroit 9000*,” offers a case in point, exposing the racially targeted marketing practices of Hollywood through the case study of *Detroit 9000*’s marketing. The 1973 movie’s marketing team, General Film Corporation, originally “attempted to avoid gearing the picture toward [Black people] exclusively” and instead marketed the movie as a White film (Lawrence 130). Its box office success, however, was largely because of Black audiences, so the film company sold the film to movie houses located in Black communities, including the Chicago Theater.

General Film Corporation also altered its posters and trailers to appeal to a Black audience rather than a White one (Lawrence 129). In the original poster (fig. 3, right), the initial focal character of the movie (a White detective named Danny Bassett, played by Alex Rocco) is placed in the foreground

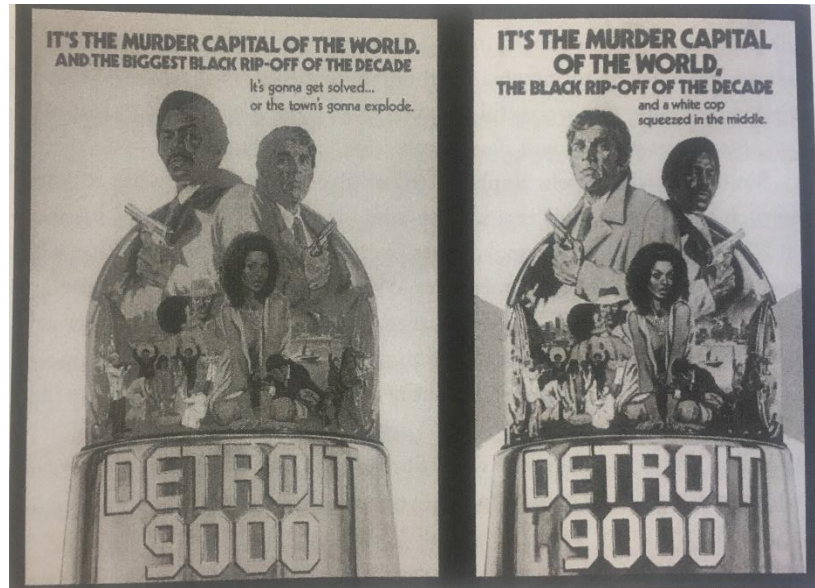


Figure 3

of the illustration in front of and above his Black partner, Sgt. Jesse Williams (Hari Rhodes). In this ad, the text reads, “It’s the murder capital of the world, the Black rip-off of the decade and a White cop squeezed in the middle.” In the revised poster (fig. 3, left), Sgt. Jesse Williams is promoted as the primary film protagonist with an implied superordination over his White counterpart, as he is the one foregrounded in the ad. Additionally, the last lines of the ad newly read “It’s gonna get solved...or the town’s gonna explode,” removing the focus from the White character. Another ad intended for the original White audience reads, “Who put a White cop on the biggest Black rip-off of the decade?” while a Black-targeted advertisement reads, “It’s the murder capital of the world Motortown—where the honkies are the minority race!” This last advertisement excludes the White detective entirely. Once sold to a Black audience, *Detroit 9000* was considered a blaxploitation film, but before, it was not considered a Black film at all.

Detroit 9000 falls into a specific category of 1970s Black film in which a movie created by a White film studio and White director for profit rather than to represent an authentic Black experience. While these goals are not always mutually exclusive, *Detroit 9000*’s original

marketing as a White film suggests that it was never specifically intended to resonate with Black audiences. What *Detroit 9000*'s advertising demonstrates that is important to understand for all Black film is Hollywood's practices in commodifying Blackness to financially benefit from its potential Black audience. What is exploitative about this is that it is marketed to Black audiences without offering them a movie that was truly and authentically made for their gaze. What I mean by this is that it was not made with the hopes, fantasies, and unique perspectives of the Black community in mind.

There was a representation issue in *Detroit 9000* because the Black character was not the true protagonist, but this was not true of all Black action films of the 1970s. But because all Black action films were treated the same in terms of distribution (appealing to Black audiences through targeting advertising and intentionally skewed framings), they were all hastily labeled with the same negative term: blaxploitation. What is so inartful about this term is that it does not point to where the exploitation lies or who is doing the exploiting. The term became a buzz word for critics to use when lumping in all depictions of Black violence and Black sexuality as negative and characterizing Black filmmakers as having no autonomy in the production of their own films when, realistically, these depictions of Blackness were more nuanced and complicated than a black and white description of positive and negative, and the only aspect of the film process the filmmakers did not have influence on was distribution.

This is true even today: Black films continue to depict Black sexuality and, to an even larger degree, violence, and Black filmmakers still do not have control over how their film is distributed and advertised by film studios, but these films are not and should not be labeled blaxploitations. I argue that in using the treatment of today's Black film as a template, the

exploitation in “blaxploitation” film should be reexamined with a more receptive mind and a keener eye.

Targeted Marketing and Political Interest: Today’s Black Film

Though the targeting of Black audiences continues (in those films that are attributed almost solely to Black people like the Tyler Perry movies, Wayans Bros. movies, and other comedies such as *Lottery Ticket* [2010] and *Christmas in Compton* [2012]), I want to turn toward a different aspect of commodification in relation to today’s film. As you may recall, Black film has become popular among White audiences as well. While this in itself is not problematic and is likely even positive for Black representation and the mainstream success of Black film and Black moviemakers and actors, that this phenomenon was a surprise to film studios and was subsequently monetized through the sale of those Black movies to predominantly White theaters is a form of economic exploitation. In advertising today’s Black film to a White audience, promoters have instead foregrounded Blackness in a way that appeals to White moviegoers by exoticizing it and reducing it to a palatable presentation of a minority culture.

A prime example of this reduction is the official trailer for *Hidden Figures* (2016). Released in 2016, the trailer diminishes the race relations and themes of the movie. Of the few times the trailer highlights race most involve some form of comedy and are set to the upbeat, inspirational music of Pharrell Williams, while others are simply made un-readily identifiable as racism to White viewers. Scenes that are extremely serious and dramatic in the movie and illustrate the main character, Katherine Johnson’s (Taraji P. Henson), mistreatment based on race are reduced to moments of humor — inside jokes that White viewers can also feel that they are in on — such as when a White police officer stops Katherine and her two friends and indignantly wonders how they are able to work at NASA being Black. Mary Jackson (Janelle Monae) says,

“Three Negro women are chasing a White police officer down a highway in 1961, that is a God ordained miracle,” which is stated for humor. Other moments of racial tension unpacked in the full movie are used as filler scenes to cut to in order to increase the movement of the trailer. One significant scene is when Katherine is approached by her White supervisor, Vivian Mitchell (Kristen Dunst), and is told to not “embarrass” her as Katherine moves to work for Vivian’s own superior. In the movie, the tension built in the scene is clearly racial, as a White woman expects to be embarrassed by a Black woman, which is later discussed in the full movie when Dorothy Vaught (Octavia Spencer) explains to Vivian that although she might not think of herself as racist, she is in ways she can’t see. But without the context of the full movie, Vivian’s ambiguous facial expression when she speaks to Katherine labels the interaction as innocuous rather than racist, suggesting that Vivian might be embarrassed by Katherine for any number of reasons.

The trailer also highlights gender more than it does race, characterizing the movie as a feminist film rather than a Black feminist film, likely in order to garner the attention of White women. The trailer introduces the first Black male character, Jim Johnson, who immediately asks Katherine, “You’re a computer at NASA. They let women handle that sort of—” until Katherine interrupts him with an incredulous look and replies with, “Yes, they let women do some things at NASA, Mr. Johnson” (20th Century Fox). The next scene presents a monologue from Mary. In Mary’s monologue, she discusses the life of girl/womanhood of always belonging to a man, further reinforcing a gendered message that traverses racial categories.

Through these devices, the 20th Century Fox trailer characterizes *Hidden Figures* as a feel-good movie for women. The trailer softens the villainy of White characters who constantly chastise and underestimate the main characters for their race and their gender (arguably more

their race than their gender because several female characters are also antagonistic toward the three Black women, Mary is initially denied higher education based on her race, and the most pivotal scene of the movie is based on the segregation of bathrooms), while portraying the real villain to be men in general through its reduction of Jim Johnson, who redeems himself from his first comment and marries Katherine in the end. While the trailer would have audiences believe that the movie is a lighthearted tale of three women climbing the ranks of NASA, the reality is that it is a positive yet painful film about the voicelessness of Black women and the way in which their identities are erased during their lives and in history books.

The *Hidden Figures* campaign is exemplary of Hollywood studios exploiting Black narratives and Black identity to pique the curiosity of White audiences. Hollywood is unlikely to hope that conservative White moviegoers will be the primary audiences of movies like *Birth of a Nation* (2016), *Fences*, and *Moonlight*, but they can hope to increase their liberal White viewership through those same targeted audience advertisement tactics.

Marketing Blackness to a White Audience: The Division of Trump's America

The divisive political climate the Donald Trump presidency has created has separated White voters into two general categories: those who voted for Trump and those who did not. The former includes but is not limited to the alt-right, neo-Nazis, and opponents of social movements like Black Lives Matter. Because of these divisions and associations, the latter category often wants to be as explicitly separate as possible from the former. The political climate has also fostered a greater display of social consciousness toward representation in film, due in part to the advent of social media that made the hashtag *OscarsSoWhite* possible, as well as the Black Lives Matter movement itself. Perhaps Hollywood hopes to benefit from the desire of non-Trump voters to be as separate from Trumpish ideas as possible.

Like in the 1970s, with formal organizations such as the Black Panther Party, an increase in the display of racial consciousness within the Black community leading up to the 2010s and throughout the decade have increased Black American narratives' value to Hollywood. Not only has Hollywood seen that the Black community is interested in more than the canonized Tyler Perry movies and their counterparts; it has also seen that White viewers are interested in these narratives. Because of this, an interesting trend has happened in Black film and its relationship to Hollywood. Films such as *Get Out*, *Black Panther*, and *Sorry to Bother You* are being advertised to viewers of all races across all areas of the nation regardless also of economic background, despite their overt themes of racial tension. I posit that movies explicitly and almost militantly focused on race have also become an economic goldmine for Hollywood. Hollywood has known since the 1970s that Black moviegoers have historically been an untapped resource, but the decline in frequency of 1970s Black film after Hollywood was no longer in an economic bind (Kraszewski) exposed the way in which White studios never treated Black film as a necessary product of the civil rights movement — by Black people, for Black people — but instead as a product. Hollywood, again, sees that Black film must be circulated, but White studios have distributed them in politically salient environments in which Black people are demanding artistic equality more visibly and liberal White people are backing them.

Unlike *Hidden Figures*, the racial elements of *Get Out*, *Black Panther*, and *Sorry to Bother You* are not diminished in their trailers but instead foregrounded. I argue that this, too, though counterintuitive, is a form of the commodification of Blackness. In *overemphasizing* the role of Black culture and race relation in certain movies, distributors continue to package films in a way that appeals to White audiences, which is just as much a marketing tactic as diminishing Blackness to be more palatable. Once watched fully, it is apparent that these movies were

specifically made for Black viewers. All three movies have Black directors and writers with Black protagonists. All three movies have jokes that play on experiences that only people of color (and some, specifically Black people) would have in America. All three movies have villains that, in some way, have been created due to White supremacy and Black oppression. Despite this incontrovertible Blackness (that cannot be curtailed as it was in *Hidden Figures*), White-owned studios still advertised these movies to predominantly White areas.

While no one can ever know the exact motive of those White-owned studios, I argue that the trilogy of new Black film (which is characterized as such specifically because of those overt Black cultural elements previously discussed) is a financial diamond to Hollywood in relation to White liberals because they reinforce their liberal identity and distance them from Trump and his supporters because, in a capitalistic system, film must and will always be advertised in a way that makes money. In advertising these movies to White viewers as Black films about racism (and here, I will exclude *Black Panther* simply because of the more accessible cultural context surrounding it because of its Marvel label), it seems that studios are saying, “watch this Black movie about social justice and the evil White man so that you can prove *you* are not the evil White man.”

The best example of this tactic is present in the promotional material for *Sorry to Bother You*. The movie itself, while at times a commentary on Black/White race relations and code switching, is primarily a critique of capitalism and the seemingly inescapable and totally harmful hierarchy of race that would exist still if Black people were not the subordinate group. Despite these other important themes, however, the promotional material for the movie offers the movie as the story of Cassius Green (Lakeith Stanfield) and offers Cassius as a Black victim of White racism, physically illustrated in his wounded head (fig. 4). The trailer immediately implies this

White-on-Black crime with a quick snapshot of armored policemen breaking up a riot wedged in between equally quick snapshots of White people hosting campy game shows and standing at a podium on the news. In reality, Cassius is himself the immoral villain for most of the movie, the head wound is from a liberal White protestor, and the police are breaking up a riot largely comprised of White people. Though race is a large discussion of the movie, it is not even the main argument of the film. Universal Pictures makes these elements of the movie appear more aggressively Black/White-issue based than they are and diminishes the critique of capitalism and of the hierarchy it necessitates with which the film ends.

With the examples of biographical movies like *Hidden Figures* and fantastical movies dealing with Black issues like *Sorry to Bother You*, I ask, is the packaging of Blackness by the promotion of these movies not similar to the promotion of those films deemed exploitative? Few would venture to say these movies are exploitative themselves, especially in reference to the latter, which was created by a Black director and writer and that overtly deals with Black issues such as codeswitching. No one would call these movies blaxploitation, mostly because that term is reserved for the 1970s. But why did that term die off? The only logical reason would be that either Black movies stopped being exploitative or the term was never appropriate. If promotion of both today's Black film and Black film of the 1970s is comparable, and today's Black film is not viewed as exploitative, then the source of exploitation for Black 1970s action film cannot lie in advertising as White and Black critics of the 1970s argued. It must lie instead in representation, but I argue that the representation of Black action film of the 1970s was also mislabeled as negative and that, when reconsidered, were actually positive and necessary representation of Black people in the context in which they were born.

Chapter 2: The Burden of Representational Responsibility

Representational Dichotomy of Black Film

It is no surprise that movie advertisement today is often exploitative, altering the images of movies by highlighting or tempering sex, violence, and certain identity categories like race. Movies have and will always be a product for Hollywood. In its nature, advertising is meant to increase the consumption of a movie. The goal of a studio is to advertise their movie in a way that leads to the largest possible consumption of it; it is a product and is therefore commodified.

While at best merely capitalistic and at worst morally problematic, the altering of Black movie images to garner the largest audience possible is expected and even necessary in the context of film as a business sector. For critics, that was never the sole problem with 1970s Black film. Leaders of the Black community, Black journalists, and White journalists alike criticized the movies for presenting harmful, one-dimensional images of Black people to Black filmgoers for profit. Inherent in this criticism is the argument of exploitative advertising, as it implies that an audience has been taken advantage of by Hollywood studios for monetary gain, but what is foregrounded most by some of the most widespread and memorable critiques of “blaxploitation” is its rejection of character portrayal.

Several Black figures from a variety of fields publicly spoke of the problems with those Black films of the 1970s. In the December 1974 issue of *Black World*, literary critic Addison Gayle wrote, "The best example of this kind of nihilism / irresponsibility are the Black films; here is freedom pushed to its most ridiculous limits; here are writers and actors who claim that freedom for the artist entails exploitation of the very people to whom they owe their artistic existence." Through this criticism, Gayle places the blame of “irresponsible” images on the creators of the film and the Black actors that starred in them rather than the advertising team or

film studio, arguing that the film's depiction of Black people and Black culture in itself is harmful.

Treatments of sex, violence, the Black body, and Black culture itself were viewed as hindrances to the civil rights movements of the 1970s. Movies deemed "blaxploitations" were viewed as so harmful that the Coalition Against blaxploitation was created by a branch president of the NAACP, Junius Griffin, and joined by other members of the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the National Urban League (Lawrence 3). Griffin was quoted in an August 1972 *Hollywood Reporter* article titled "NAACP Takes Militant Stand on Black Exploitation Films" having criticized the genre as "proliferating offenses" to the Black community through its stereotypical, often criminal characters. Griffin later states of the films: "The transformation from the stereotyped Stepin Fetchit to Super Nigger on the screen is just another form of cultural genocide" (qtd. in Field 159).

More contemporary films, from 1990s classics like *Juice* (1992), *Boyz n' The Hood* (1991), and *Friday* (1995) to 2000s Tyler Perry *Madea* installments have been criticized of a similar perpetuation of stereotypes of Black people connected to the coarse but maternal mammy figure to the aggressive buck figure, but none have been the subject of an equivalent-caliber critical fire as 1970s Black film. More recent films such as these have not been categorized under one derogatory umbrella term, as they weren't seen as as much of a threat to the Black community as those films in the short 1970-1975 window.

As mentioned previously, today's Black films that are looked to as more exemplary depictions of Black people in all mediums of criticism — reviews, magazine and newspaper articles, personal blogs, and scholarly research — include the trifecta (*Get Out*, *Black Panther*, and *Sorry to Bother You*), *Moonlight*, and *Fences* among others, all of which were written and

directed by Black filmmakers. Despite the violence that is in every one of these movies (here again, I will bar *Black Panther* simply because superhero films operate under different rules and expectations), the alcoholism, the criminal activity, the poverty, and the infidelity that are in several, they are still not seen as a reduction of Black life to stereotype. Most roles of each movie may be read as drawing on some stereotype, but the difference between these movies and the movies of the 1970s is largely what is often perceived as their quality. Between the above listed modern films, films deemed blaxploitation, and more contemporary films occasionally deemed problematic like the *Madea* movies, the films that have the most in common aesthetically are the latter two. There is an immediately noticeable difference between *Madea* movies and movies like *Get Out*, for example, that place them in completely different leagues.

But that difference is not in resources or funding, as one of the latest *Madea* movies, Tyler Perry's *Boo 2! A Madea Halloween* (2017) had a budget of \$20 million, while *Get Out* had only a \$4.5 million budget. The difference is also not in genre; both the highly regarded Black films of today and the critically problematic films span multiple genres including drama, comedy, and/or horror. So, what connects films that may be viewed as problematic or exploitative yet distances them from the Black movies today that have been nominated for numerous awards including the academy award for Best Original Screenplay, Best Director, and Best Picture? What often separates the two is the implicit labeling of intellectual/substantive versus entertaining by critics.

From the 1970s to today, Black films have been analyzed through a lens that relies on this dichotomy. In reviewing Tyler Perry's body of work alone, this binary of intellectual versus entertaining is apparent; Perry's work is often grouped into these categories, with the *Madea* movies lumped into the second. Brian McKoy establishes this divide among Black movies

specifically with his treatment of Perry's films in his article, "Tyler Perry and The Weight of Misrepresentation." McKoy states, "Tyler Perry is using the popular success of his comedic films to produce more serious material. His limited involvement with *Precious*...and his greater involvement with *For Colored Girls*...is an indication that Perry is truly attempting to go beyond the self-termed 'simple stories,' to the work of more complex artists" (145). As implied by the title, McKoy's opinion of Tyler Perry's work as of 2012 when the article was published (and primarily in reference to the *Madea* films) is that it neglects to consider its effects on its Black audience and portrays stereotypical images of Black life. McKoy's view of the film and Tyler Perry's own view, as indicated by his self-ascribing of "simple stories" to his films, convey that film is divided into two categories: films that are socially conscious and "serious" or "complex" and films that are "simple." McKoy's language places "comedic films" at odds with "serious content." The implication of this is that films that entertain for the purpose of entertaining rather than the purpose of asking audiences to think about more serious messages are somehow irresponsible.

Furthermore, this issue is also rooted in race. Spike Lee's commentary on elements of Tyler Perry's work, which include the words "coonery" and "buffoonery" (qtd. in McKoy 145) present the argument that Tyler Perry's history of producing "simple stories" rather than "complex" ones is a disservice to the Black community. This pressure on Black writers and directors to create movies of greater intellectual or social substance was also deeply present in the 1970s and arguably a result of those "blaxploitation" films.

The most public and widely referenced quotations in today's blaxploitation scholarship from critics and Black figures of the 1970s group all Black action film together, denouncing them as simple and focused on entertainment at the expense of positive Black imagery. In a 1978

interview with Sidney Poitier conducted by “Like It Is” host Gil Noble, Noble asks Poitier, “Why don’t we have more Black heroes on the screen? We produced many, you know. Why don’t we ever see an entertaining but substantial film about such heroes?” In reference to Poitier’s own 1972 film, *Buck and the Preacher*, Noble describes Poitier as at odds with other Black films, declaring that unlike other 1970s films, Poitier’s “had...substance. There was historic value...we need to see more positive films,” implying that 1970s Black action films lacked both substance and historical value and were not positive. In the same interview, after discussing *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972) and films of a similar nature, Noble asks was the response of the Black community to those films “not an opening, then, for the possibility of an entertaining, positive, informative kind of film?” again implying that most Black films of the ‘70s were not informative and that Poitier’s kind of Black film was more valuable and more necessary.

Another opponent of Black action films, Alvin Poussaint, psychologist and public Black intellectual, claimed that the movies were “cheap thrills that degrade Blacks” (qtd. in Ongiri 164) Adding to his condemnation of “blaxploitation” film, Poussaint argues that the films capitalized off the ignorance of its younger, less-affluent viewers:

“Mature adults may see the movie in the context of story-telling; and the average middle-class youth coming from a comfortable home that satisfies most of his physical and emotional needs also may regard them as fictitious. On the other hand, when poor young blacks view them, there is a potential for danger. Low income youngsters who have no real role models to emulate, and an impoverished home life, may mistake fiction for reality.” (26)

Poussaint’s argument that the exploitation of the movies lies in their taking advantage of audience members is a common one. Similarly, in a 20-page spread in the September 1971 issue

of *Ebony* magazine, Lerone Bennette writes of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) “For such a preposterous reversal of images could only happen in a community without a sure sense of the meaning of its experience and film media to distort and debase even the best artistic intentions” (106). Opinions such as these rejected the notion of agency and intention in both Black audiences and Black filmmakers.

From Noble, Poussaint, and Bennette’s critiques of Black action films of the 1970s to McKay’s critiques of Tyler Perry’s *Madea* films of the 2000s, critics have historically held Black films to a higher representational standard, and understandably so. Black film has always had and will always have to contend with the harmful misrepresentation of White-imagined Black images from minstrel shows to on-screen depictions. Combatting those pre-established, deeply rooted stereotypes and damaging images is a difficult, ongoing battle, and there is growing evidence that supports that these negative images can affect Black children’s self-perceptions, self-esteem, and view of the world³. But I argue that if a massive crowd of Black moviegoers supports a Black filmmaker’s image of Black people and of Black life and reviews a movie, which opponents denounce as problematic, positively, we as scholars and critics should examine those images more carefully and consider the views of those for which the movie was made.

Audience Approval of 1970s Black Action Film

It is easy to dismiss young or underprivileged viewers as ignorant or naïve and impressionable, but this a harmful practice upon which many misguided arguments against “problematic” Black film are made. While many opponents of 1970s Black action films were Black themselves, it was, according to Mark Reid, “Black cultural nationalists and [B]lacks who

³ A longitudinal study of 396 White and Black boys and girls found that television consumption increases self-esteem for White boys but decreases self-esteem for Black boys and girls as well as White girls. For more information read “Racial and Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Children’s Television Use and Self-Esteem: A Longitudinal Panel Study.”

espoused middle-class values and were the most adamant critics of Hollywood-produced black action films” (90). These two demographics of people represented views of race-relations that were not shared by the entire Black community but were often the faces of it. Voices seen as less organized or less “educated” were silenced or ignored. The fact of the matter is, non-organized, lower-class Black people comprised the majority of Black action film audiences and were the ones who made blaxploitation famous. MGM studios explicitly sought to exploit Black audiences, hiring African American marketing firms to specifically target Black audiences (Pierson 92). But while this did ensure Black audiences attending MGM’s test screenings of *Shaft*, it did not guarantee positive reviews or sustained sales. The popularity of the movie arose because Black audiences connected with the film and genuinely enjoyed it. Of 166 audience members to complete the post-viewing survey at the test screening, only 13 thought the film was just “fair” and only 3 rated it as “poor”; 130 participants said they would recommend it to a friend (Pierson 93). By its third week, *Shaft* — a cannon “blaxploitation” film — climbed its way to the 4th most viewed film shown in June of 1971 — a position it would hold for three consecutive weeks. According to Time magazine, the movie grossed an “astonishing” \$13 million.

Similarly, *Sweetback* grossed \$15.2 million, and *SuperFly* grossed more than \$30 million, all due to the sustained support of Black audiences. From this, critics questioned what the cause for this support was, and, instead of probing the movies for positive images or ways in which the movies may have finally authentically connected with a Black audience, they jumped to the conclusion that the cast members had been exploited and that the audience had been brainwashed and taken advantage of. In an interview published in an article entitled “Black-Owned firms Can Eliminate blaxploitation Films: Greenlee,” Sam Greenlee, screenwriter and producer of *The*

Spook Who Sat by the Door (1973) asserts that “Blackexploitation films are such that the tickets are bought by blacks, give an inaccurate impression of what appeals to blacks and the profits go back to Whites.” Greenlee goes on to say (as paraphrased by the article) that “Blackexploitation films will continue to be produced, giving inaccurate portrayals of blacks, until people start making and owning their own films.”

This type of language, which appears across many negative reviews of blaxploitation as a genre, strips both the Black audience and the Black filmmaker of autonomy and gives White executives and film houses more power over the direction of the film than they wielded and, therefore, more credit for the final product than they actually deserve. Though *Shaft* was written and produced by White men, the director, Gordon Parks, a Black man, had arguably the largest artistic influence over the movie. After reading the initial script of the movie by John D. F. Black, Parks demanded he alter it, stating in a memo to Black, “Fix the dialogue which is tasteless and perhaps cruel. Shaft should walk off into infinity at the end of the film. Shaft utters too many obscenities. Change the name of Knocks Person to Bumpy Jonas.” (qtd. in Pierson 87). Even after making Parks directed changes to the script, Black was told to revise twice more. Furthermore, Parks had a large role in auditioning the actors, and, alongside producer Joel Freeman, persuaded studio executives against hiring a higher-profile actor for Richard Roundtree who would go on to play the main character, John Shaft. Parks is also responsible for the setting of the film, which executives dictated would be in California because of its more ideal weather for filming. Parks advocated for New York instead, eventually tricking the executives by claiming that he had “a lens that can turn summer into winter and winter into summer” in order to fulfill the aesthetic for which he was aiming.

Some of the most successful Black action films of the 1970s that were labeled “exploitive” were a product of Black vision and Black work. These films provided jobs to Black crewmembers and Black actors trying to break into the business. Not only that, but they also provided another avenue through which Black music could be showcased. The soundtrack of *Shaft* was composed by Isaac Hayes, with help from the Bar-Kays (both Black artists). This opportunity earned Hayes an Oscar for “Theme from *Shaft*” and millions of copies sold. But for all the representation *Shaft* provided, it was still demonized as a Black exploitation film. What is interesting about that is that in order to separate himself and his movie from this label, Parks condemned other movies as being a separate category from *Shaft*. Parks states,

“I want to straighten something out which I firmly believe...*Shaft* was an action film, but it was not—it wasn’t full of drugs, it wasn’t full of any of that stuff. But following that, along comes *Across 110th Street* and the other bunches of porns, down and dirty, raunchy...*Shaft* had some class to it, let’s face it. Even though the subject matter was kind of simplified, it still had some... dignity. I mean, sure, the language in it, the characters, they were real” (qtd. in Pierson 97).

Again, in this quotation is the separation of movie subject matter into categories of simple and not. But beyond this, what is interesting about Parks’ quote is that it relies on the same “representation must be positive” argument as those negative reviewers. In her review for *Shaft* in a *Woman’s Wear Daily* article, Allan G. Mottus wrote, “A framework of jive Black dialogue makes the characters appear as stereotyped as if they were in traditional ‘Steppin Fetchit’ roles.” But Parks calls this language “real” and also points to a scale on which this descriptor is still in the realms of dignified, as he feels the need to defend the class of “real”

language. Furthermore, Parks creates a binary of real yet dignified film and films “full of drugs” and “that stuff.”

But who decides where a film falls on the scale of dignified to exploitative? Staunch critics of blaxploitation would argue that all Black action films of the 1970s from *Shaft* to *Sweetback to Across 110th street* (1972) should be included. I argue that this relies on the audience. A film’s continued success in the box office points to some resonance and/or enjoyment among audience members. Just as Mottus argues that *Shaft* relies on stereotypes and Parks argues that it is simply “real,” audience members supporting *Across 110th street* could argue that the drugs or “raunchy” imagery that Parks goes on to discuss were real to them.

That is one of the largest criticisms of Black action films: they portrayed an “inaccurate impression of Black culture,” as Greenlee stated. But because audience members were primarily Black themselves (as previously discussed, these movies were nearly if not completely solely marketed toward Black communities), would they not be able to discern for themselves if these images were accurate or inaccurate? After all, blaxploitation movies were R-rated and were not intended for impressionable young viewers. To say that these films are exploitative and harmful because they are not accurate to Black life is to say that adult Black audiences for which the movies were intended are not responsible enough to choose their own movies or aware enough to recognize what is or is not a realistic depiction of Black life. To say the films are problematic for depicting an “unrealistic” image of Black people that Black viewers enjoyed and were entertained by is also to say that all movies must be realistic to be unproblematic.

As exemplified by the “trilogy” of contemporary Black films, movies often dramatize real life and package messages in forms that are fantastical or even outrageous for the entertainment of audience members. It is just the same with Black action 1970s films. Black

action heroes such as John Shaft, Youngblood Priest, and Foxy Brown were embellished with flashy “pimp clothes” (as referred to in a 1973 *Newsweek* lifestyle article), overt African American Vernacular English talk laden with slang, and a large amount of sex and violence, but they were still rooted in the truth of systematic and institutional racism. Plotlines of most Black action films include a Black hero who fights “for the betterment of the black community” and does “so on their own terms,” as contemporary blaxploitation critic, Novotny Lawrence states (qtd. in Pierson 79).

Black Film’s Responsibility of Social Uplift

Black films are burdened with the responsibility of contending with decades of misrepresentation. From minstrel shows to Bogle’s six stereotypes, Black people have been painted by White writers and directors as one-dimensional characters from “savages” to docile appeasers. Black filmmakers even today must be aware of this and are often pressured from today’s moviegoers to be cognizant of how aggressive, unintelligent, lazy, or ignorant Black male character are; how aggressive, sexual, helpless, or serving Black female characters are. In many ways this is important. Positive representation is important, and subverting stereotypes is an integral tactic in altering how a community is viewed by society and the community itself. But this pressure also puts restraints on Black film that have never been placed on White films. In this manner, Black films experience stereotype threat.⁴

Contending with the fear of confirming a stereotype prevents films from depicting facets of Black life that may actually be a reality for many audience members. Barring aggressive or sexual characters that speak in a “jive black dialogue,” as Mottus had called it, actually further

⁴ Stereotype threat is defined as “When members of a stigmatized group find themselves in a situation where negative stereotypes provide a possible framework for interpreting their behavior, the risk of being judged in light of those stereotypes can elicit a disruptive state that undermines performance and aspirations in that domain” (Spencer, 415)

prevents Black individuals from viewing these marginalized characteristics in a more positive light. Because, though Black people do not break out in physical fights or threats as a rule, are not pimps or prostitutes who refer to sex frequently and crassly in their daily talk, and do not all constantly speak in such a strong vernacular dialogue, Black people are at times aggressive, they do get angry with race relations, they do have sex, and they do often speak differently than White people. Diminishing these qualities on-screen offers the message that, to be accepted in society, Black people must not be these things.

Watching Black heroes on screen that are at times problematically violent or sexual does not convey to Black people that they must aspire to be gangsters, crooked detectives, or sex workers; just as watching *Scarface* (1983) and *The Godfather* (1972) (movies that are thought of as worthy classics despite their own problematic natures) did not convey to Italians that they must be violent, murderous mobsters; and just as watching the large slew of American superhero movies does not convey to White men that they have superpowers and can ward off evil. What these Black action films did do, however, was depict Black protagonists that finally had agency and deliver Black audiences something that was finally made for them to consume.

Opposition like the Coalition Against blaxploitation wanted the genre to die, but this would require viewers to stop creating a demand for them — a demand that was a reaction to the history of silenced or impotent Black characters conceived by White people. Seeing Black characters militant in their actions, free of subordination, and even seeking revenge against White people in positions of power provided an image of Black people that was capable. While it wasn't always realistic and did not present a positive image of race relations wherein everyone was equal and peaceful, it was an image at a time of racial and economic anxiety among the Black community that presented Black people in a package that was closer to what they wanted

to see themselves as than the previous Stepin-Fetchit roles. Black people were finally provided with a kind of superhero for themselves that White audiences always had in *The Lone Ranger* (1956), *Captain America* (2011), and *Batman* (1943). In this manner, sex and violence were doing more in Black films (in terms of going beyond including these elements for cheap thrills) than in White films that were equal in their own depictions of sex and violence.

For example, *Superfly* has been criticized for its violence, inclusion of sex, language, and depictions of drug usage, but the movie's content and these elements themselves offer real representations of inner-city life that were, arguably, positive for Black viewers. The hero of the film, Youngblood Priest, is one of the biggest drug dealers in New York City. This central element of the film exemplifies one of the biggest criticisms of 1970s Black action films: the films protagonists were violent and immoral. But a closer analysis of Priest sees that his role does not glorify drug dealing but rather depicts its truth, just in dramatized ways. *Superfly* depicts the dangers of drug life in its frequent violence, but beyond this, the movie also emphasizes the reasons Black people often get involved in drug dealing. After a scene in which corrupt policeman interrogate one of Priest's partners, beat him several times, and "book" him based on no official charges, Priest is seen walking with his girlfriend as she tries to convince him to quit his drug dealing. Priest states, "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 gon' have to kill me cause that ain't enough." Priest's drug dealing is not depicted in an empty way simply for the sake of sensationalism but rather offers a dialogue about the motives of drug dealing that is not impeded by a critical, preaching source — the movie's purpose of entertainment and resonance rather than social uplift establishes a vessel for understated yet positive discussions about real issues.

Thus, the characters are rounder than they are often given credit for, and their violent or otherwise “immoral” actions are responses to their lives which are, in part, a result of the systematic oppression the characters experience for being Black men. This idea, though not explicit, is explored in the dialogue of the characters. Priest tells his girlfriend, “I made me a deal last night that’s gonna bring in enough money to get us both out of this whole scene,” and his partner, Eddie (Carl Lee), later tells him, “Man, people been using me all my life...I’m gonna make a piss pot full of money, and I’m gonna live like a prince, a fucking Black prince...I could be nothing nowhere else.” Both characters express the sentiment that their options are drug dealing or being nothing, and Eddie’s quotation racializes this idea. This feeling is what leads the Black men of the film to seek autonomy through “work[ing] independently,” as Eddie refers to it. What is positive about this representation, though it does rely on hypermasculinity, is that Priest is portrayed as in total control of his fate. When a policeman tells him, “You just want to be another two-bit Black junkie,” he spitefully takes a hit of cocaine in his face and says, “You don’t own me, pig, and no motherfucker tells me when I can split.” When another drug lord, who is also a policeman, points a gun at his head, Priest reveals that he has outsmarted him; Priest ensures that if he dies, the policeman and his whole family die as well. When the policeman motions his henchman to show Priest that they have stolen his money, they open a briefcase to reveal that Priest has taken his money back and filled the briefcase instead with his dirty laundry.

Though violent and, at times, crude, *Superfly* offers an image to Black viewers of smart, capable Black men that do what they must to not only survive but to escape their environments and be something greater than what they perceive to be “nothing.” In addition to this display of autonomy, Black women are depicted not just as sexual objects but rather as having their own desire and having control over their sexualities. In *Superfly*, the long four-minute sex scene of

Priest and his girlfriend, Georgia (Sheila Frazier) is initiated by Georgia. Such a long and explicit sex scene of Black bodies was groundbreaking for the time and was characteristic of 1970s Black action films. These images of autonomous Black people, though developed through violence, sex, and drugs were important images for Black audiences to see, and what critics of the time did not discuss were the ways in which White characters also engaged in the “negative” behaviors the films were criticized for attributing to Blacks. *Superfly* not only portrays police brutality and White racism but also shows White people doing and selling drugs. These images that combated White/Black images created by White films were present in those 1970s films, but because they were among what critics and oppositional Black organizations deemed as harmful images, the movies themselves were labeled as problematic and as “other” from socially uplifting films of the time such as *Buck and the Preacher* (1972) or *Souder* (1972).

Critics that call for more “positive” films for the Black community — both with Black exploitation films and with today’s *Madea*esque films — imply that Black film must sacrifice entertainment and the fulfillment of many Black audience’s desires or fantasies for the sake of fixing the damage done by White film. This, in itself, is allowing White filmmakers to dictate Black film aesthetics and content. In the same manner that Black filmmakers should not have to cater to the White gaze or revisions from a White studio, they should not have to carry the weight of former misrepresentations created by White people. Black movies should be able to appeal to a Black audience in the same manner as White movies appeal to a White audience: through entertainment not just more “substantive” or intellectual subject matters because they were necessarily empowering.

While today’s Black film is lauded for its progressive depictions of race relations through images of evil White people in both *Get Out* and *Sorry to Bother You* and the violence Black

people inflict upon them, Black action films of the 1970s are demonized for those same elements. In the socio-political context of these films, a violent, sexual, hypermasculine character was necessary for paving the way for these modern depictions of Black protagonists. Without the John Shaft and the Youngblood Priests, we would not have the Chris Washingtons dating White women and escaping horrific situations representative of cultural appropriation and fetishization nor the Cassius Greens navigating power structures based in part on race. While my generation is lucky enough to have the undeniably positive depiction of the Black Panther, previous generations were not afforded with such a superhero. Their superhero was the excessively violent and overtly sexual John Shaft, but in many ways, this was the image they needed and wanted to see.

Conclusion

Though the genre critics deemed blaxploitation existed over forty years ago, the language with which we discuss the films today matters for how we view Black film as a whole. Contemporary works must contend with the expectations opponents of blaxploitation have set for Black film, as it was with the inception of blaxploitation that scholars and Black leaders alike began to publicly highlight the division between social uplift films and entertainment flicks, placing blaxploitation in the latter category. This divide continues to exist today, and it is necessary that we as scholars look at the appeal and benefits of those entertainment films. Black film must not be held to higher standards of positive social messaging, and each film should not be made to speak for or represent an entire community of people simply because it is Black.

Movies that resonate with Black people and that Black people enjoy with narratives about Black protagonists were a social change in themselves for the 1970s. Though opponents viewed Black action films of the decade as lacking in substance, they were a form of Diawara's resistant

spectatorship by simply existing; those films provided Black audiences with the opportunity to be primary viewers for whom films were made.

Though the films were far from perfect in a political sense — the child exploitation (in the case of *Sweetback*), misogyny, frequent homophobia, and singular depiction of masculinity cannot and should not be defended — for the social context in which they were made, they were influential in changing on screen representations of Black people and in providing Black film with a larger foothold to continue breaking into Hollywood. Because, just as Black actors in the early and mid-twentieth century were forced to take harmfully stereotypical roles created by White people if they wished to be in the movie business, Black filmmakers had to abide by the conventions of 1970s action films if they wished to be funded by outside sources, as it was these types of films that made money. Neither those stereotypical, racist roles nor the imperfect 1970s Black films were the ideal for Black representation, but they were both necessary for Black film to arrive where it is today.

Today, Black film is afforded a larger box in which to exist: films that venture beyond narratives based on true stories and genres outside of the traditional drama movie are successful among both Black and White audiences. In scrutinizing the ways in which the language surrounding 1970s Black film has harmed those films and has created that false dichotomy of socially uplifting films and films simplistic for the sake of entertainment, we can continue to widen even further — and eventually break — those bounds within which Black film has always had to exist. We can recognize that *Tyler Perry's Boo 2! A Madea Halloween* may be just as important for Black film as Perry's "more serious" film, *For Colored Girls* — they simply may be important in different ways.

By asserting that Black representation must not always be devoid of negative images or stereotypes and that one Black movie should not be representative of all Black people, we also create a foundation for the assertion that representations of other people of color, of women, of the queer community, of disabled people, and of all other marginalized identities should also be relieved of those burdens.

Film is a worthy, serious art and study, but as scholars, we would do well to remember that it is first and foremost for the enjoyment of the audience. There is a great deal more work to be done surrounding Black film of the 1970s, including more specific studies on particular movies rather than the genre as a whole and on particular elements such as the treatment of Black women in the movies, but it is necessary that the responses of audience members are equally weighed as those of critics and previous scholars and that we don't erase the autonomy of Black filmgoers and filmmakers.

Black film and the Black gaze have come a long way from blackface to depictions of mammies and Uncle Toms to depictions of "jive-talking" Shafts. Today, dark-skinned young children are able to see themselves as superheroes. Black boys and girls alike see themselves fighting for their people, holding positions of power, challenging tradition, and embracing their natural hair and culture in Wakanda. Black audiences are able to see race relations portrayed on screen in ways that were clearly not engineered for White viewers in cross-genre horror films such as *Get Out* and *Sorry to Bother You*. We now have the luxury of not having to wait months on end (or years, for that matter) for a Black film made with us in mind. Directors such as Jordan Peele, with his movie *Us* (2019), are creating narratives about Black people that do not center around their race. Today, Black characters are allowed to exist in fantastical storylines such as in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) in which their race is not erased — in which their race

is a factor in some scenes just as it is often a factor in daily life — but also in which they are more than just a vessel for explicit social justice. Today also, those films deemed blaxploitation are resurging in remakes of *Superfly* (2018) and *Shaft* (2019), proving that audience interest in narratives of autonomy through violence and sexuality are still prevalent today.

Though lasting less than a decade, “blaxploitation” films altered everything for Black film. It is especially easy to criticize those films from the vantage point of living in a time in which Black representation has improved and in which more studies have been done on the actual effects of negative representation (or a lack of representation) on individuals, but we must remember that Black representation would not look the same today if it weren’t for 1970s film proving that Blacks were a lucrative demographic of viewers and that Black film was worthy of being funded. Because of 1970s Black film, Black film today can be both more selective and more creative with what representations they offer viewers. Blaxploitations were not exploitative; they were simply paving the way for today’s Black superheroes.

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